

Louis Golding



The Dangerous Places

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THE
DANGEROUS
PLACES

By

LOUIS GOLDING

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who weave other patterns

The Dangerous Places

CHAPTER I

I

It's close and heavy, the woman said to herself. There's far too many blankets on the bed. It's not blankets. There's dust in my nostrils and in my mouth and in my ears. I can't move. There's dust and rubble all over me.

Who am I? What's my name? What's that rattle like pins on my ear-drum? The stuff's all over my hair. If Brauner shampoos me from now till next Friday, she won't get it out.

Brauner? Who on earth's Brauner? She's my maid. Then who am I? You've lost your papers, have you? Then you might as well call yourself Channah, he said. Who said? Where am I?

Boom! What's that? A gun? That's right! Or it's a bomb, maybe. It must have been a bomb that put me here. I'm alive. It's certainly not heaven, and I don't think it's hell, is it? No, it isn't. It's earth right enough. So I'm still alive. It would take more than a bomb to kill old. . . .

(A name winked like a firefly in the depth of the darkness. She shied away from it as a nose shies away from a sudden whiff of ammonia.)

I was in the Post. That's right. Post Sixteen. The air was stifling with the stench of wounds. Medical supplies were dwindling. The dead were piling up, for it was getting harder to bury them. Prr! Prr! Prr! Yes? That's machine-guns. It's cold! Air's coming in. (She licked her lips. There was the taste of blood under the dust.)

"Channah," said the young doctor in Post Sixteen, "they've just brought in a little girl in a dead faint. They've dumped her under the slope of the roof at the corner there. See if there's anything you can do."

Post Sixteen. In the cellars under the tall grey houses of Kupiecka, in the Warsaw ghetto. I was rolling and unrolling bandages. Then they let me swab the pus away and tie up the wounds. How did I get down here?

Hands dragged me down. I was going to tear their eyes out, but the hands pulled me away, down into the cellars and the sewers. There were two Germans in the street in black uniforms. One got hold of an iron spike and stood it upright on the pavement. Another got hold of a baby and lifted it and brought it down on the spike till the point stuck through. . . .

Then it was like an electric bulb exploding, light and darkness at the same time. I knew what a lump of filth I was all the time I was Frau General, Aryan and German, lawfully wedded wife of Willy von Brockenburg, Hitler's man, Goering's man. Pretending all those years I knew nothing of what was going on in the concentration camps and the extermination camps. But I knew all the time, of course. I knew all the time.

Just as I've known since the moment I came to myself down here that I'm Elsie Silver, Elsie Silver, Elsie Silver, the trollop who betrayed the Jews, her people, and England, her country.

Hands reached out for me and dragged me down into the cellars. Then the fighting started. I swabbed pus and did up wounds. But I never took myself in. I never thought I'd made up for what I'd done, and what I hadn't done. I was boiling a heap of bandages in a bucket when the young doctor called out to me and sent me to do what I could for a young girl they'd just brought into the Post. So I got up and went forward.

Then the bomb fell, I suppose.

If I tried hard, I think I could shake off this rubble and get clear. But I'm bone lazy. I've never tried hard at anything. Besides, I don't want to get clear. I'm afraid of the Jews. And the Germans. And Himmler. He's after me. He got Willy, my husband, and he'll get me too. I like it the way it is, this buzzing in my ears. The drowsiness creeping along my veins like luminal. What bad luck, to come up out of it a few minutes, just time enough to remember what a cow I am! Won't be long now. Not unpleasant, not bad at all. And safe, very safe. If only no grit in my hair. . . .

The sea's like glass all round. . . . Grey glass. Dark. Can't see through. . . .

Then a faint voice, a girl's voice, came through the grey glassy water, weak as the voice of a young bird fallen out of the nest. *Wasser* the word was, tiny and far-off and near at hand.

"No!" murmured a voice inside her skull. "I don't want to come back. Let

me go. It's good. It's like bees buzzing and droning. No more Himmler. No more Elsie Silver. No more Frau General. No more Channah. All over."

"Channah!" the young doctor said, a little more sharply than before. But it was a different sort of sound from the sound the girl made. For the girl was a living girl, and the young doctor was dead; she knew for certain he was dead. She was certain that the whole of Post Sixteen had been wiped out, excepting for herself, and, apparently, one small girl, calling for water. "Didn't you hear, Channah?" the dead doctor went on. "That little girl I sent you. . . . See what she wants."

The buzzing and droning thinned in the ears. Light spread through the grey glassy waters. It was not water now in the nostrils, but air, the hard smell of dust, like snuff. You might stop being Elsie Silver or the Frau General von Brockenburg, for you were those people entirely for your own sweet sake. It was different to stop being Channah. You were Channah for other people's sake.

"Yes, doctor, at once," said Elsie obediently to the voice in her brain. She made to move from under her bedclothes of rubble, but they were far heavier than she had thought. There was no strength in her. The effort almost made the slowed-down heart stop beating. She had succeeded in nothing more than moving her head a centimetre or two. She lay quite motionless for some time, feeling her blood to be as thin as water, and not knowing from what empty reservoir it could draw virtue to thicken again. It was not quite dark. Just enough light filtered into the place for her to see the rubble that covered her, some great slabs of masonry lying askew on her left, and on her right the sloping wall-section that had held death at arm's length from her and her companion. The girl lay in the deeper darkness, still beyond her eye's range. A second time she strained at the neck-tendons, skewing her neck round still further; then at last her eyes came to rest where the girl was. She, too, was almost covered by a bedding of dust and small chunks of lath and plaster, but at least the nose and mouth were free. You could just make out the profile, or thought you could, the delicate forehead, the fine cheek-bones, the delicate chin.

She tugged at her limbs again with increased urgency. You must get to the girl, not only because the dead doctor had given you charge of her but because she was so small and frail. The guns boomed from time to time. The machine-guns stuttered from far off and close at hand. Then, once again, a sound issued from the lips of the girl, this birdlike noise in its moral weight so much more resolute than the guns, though as sound it had hardly more lineament than the face from which it issued. A moment later, as if there were no other fitting

answer in Hitler's Warsaw to the last uttered breath of a trapped child, a smother of dust and plaster came down like a wry rain. While the air was still opaque with it, the inexpugnable determination came to the woman also trapped there that she must find somehow, from somewhere, the strength to free herself, thrust over to the girl, and lift her out of the tomb that was closing around them both. She tore at her nerves as with fingernails in the smooth walls of a crevasse. Somehow the broken and bleeding fingernails found lodgment in the smooth walls. Somehow she lifted herself from the vast inertia which lay on her like lead. She was over at the girl's side, sweeping the dust away from her mouth, tearing the rubble away from her lips.

"There now, little one, there now," she murmured, lifting the supine head to her bosom. "You're all right now, see." She bent her ear down upon the girl's mouth, waited in an agony of suspense, then became aware that a faintest movement of air touched the lobe of her ear.

"You see, doctor?" It was the dead young doctor from Post Sixteen she was addressing now. But the doctor's voice was silent. His last thought had been realized. Only his spectacles were glinting in the hole between the straddled wall-blocks. The rest was up to herself.

There was a little strength again in her fingertips. She got the girl clear, so that the whole frame was exposed. It did not seem there were any bones broken. She got her arms at last round the girl's body and pulled her up from the waist. She was not so small as she had seemed when most of her was invisible under dust. Eleven? Twelve? More? But in Elsie's profoundly enfeebled arms she might have been a mature woman, or a heavy piece of furniture. It felt, as Elsie tugged and pulled and tugged, that the veins in her forehead were standing out like cord; that the shoulder-blades might crack at any moment. Time was itself a heavy piece of furniture, that could be budged, maybe, by a gang of men in shirt-sleeves, with muscles like huge, smooth stones, but not, no, not by a corrupt woman, who had lain about for years on satin bed-sheets, her head resting on down pillows soft as water. Then at last she reached the jagged lumps that lay between them and the obliterated Post, only to find that there was no way out there; they were trapped. She laid the girl down, and scabbled in the debris below to see if there was any way out under; she sought to climb the desolate rocks. But the intact ceiling that had saved them now held them fast.

Suddenly, with whatever there was in her lungs, she gave tongue.

"No!" she protested. "No! No!" She had been ready, anxious, to die herself. But the girl must not die. She forgot the inexorable enemies that lay in wait inches beyond the barrier, starvation, disease, the enemy's guns and

bombs, the fire-engirdled city, the enemies crouched in all the vast fields that stretched beyond river and hill and wood to the limits of all the horizons. "Help!" she cried. "Help!" She spoke to the girl again, soothing her. "Klaninke, little one! Can you hear me?" There was no reply. She brought her mouth still closer towards the girl's ear. "Can you hear me?" She placed her finger under the young chin. Oh, the girl heard. She nodded. She felt the pressure of the chin once and still again on the side of her finger. A tear came into Elsie's eyes, and drew a warm line down to her trembling mouth. The girl was aware of her, of arms protecting her, and, maybe, of a brain scheming for her.

She had asked for water. "Are you thirsty?" Elsie went on. Again the girl nodded. "Poor little one. There'll be water soon. It will be possible to wait, yes?" The girl nodded again. She was trying to talk. It was not easy. It would probably not be easy for some time, after the horror of the interment in the bomb ruin, let alone the nameless horrors that must have gone before.

"Don't talk now. Just nod your head, or shake it. Are you in pain?" The girl nodded. "Is it much pain?" The girl shook her head. "I'm going to ask your name. If you feel you can talk, and would like to tell it me, say what your name is." She listened, her ear close against the child's lips. There was silence for some time, then at last the name came.

"Mila," she whispered. She tried to say something more. "*Der ta. . .*" But that was too much for the moment. The word was not finished.

"Mila! What a pretty name! There, don't think of anything more now."

II

"Help!" came a muffled cry from among the rubble that had been Kupiecka Street. "Help!" And a young man, dodging mortar-fire, making for cover, heard the desperate sound. In addition to the German arms he had looted, he now carried a message to the next man he met.

"Hallo, *chaver!*" a voice cried. "Oh, it's you, Feivel! That's a good haul you've made there! Let me have one of those rifles, will you?"

Another young man had come up out of some hole in the ground. The face was as black as smoke.

"Lend us a hand, Shmul!" the first said urgently. "There's a woman alive in the ruins of Post Sixteen!"

"The poor soul! I'm with you, Feivel!"

They picked their way back into Kupiečka, and into the jagged chaos that had been Post Sixteen, till they came up against the lumps of wall behind which the woman called so desperately. The young man called Shmul switched on his torch and thrust his arm through a gap. "Put your hand out to me! Can you reach?" He waited for some moments, then a hand rough as a cat's tongue seized his convulsively. "Wait! I've a drop of brandy here! Take a sip! Give some to your daughter!" He took a flask from his pocket and thrust it through.

But the outstretched hand did not move. It remained frozen there. The woman herself was suddenly rigid. Not a sound was on her lips. Some time passed.

"Do you hear, woman?" Feivel asked testily. "There's no time to lose."

Then he felt the gritty hand release his own. It fumbled till it found the flask in his other hand. Then the woman spoke. Her words came curiously slow and hushed.

"For my daughter," the woman whispered.

She had never felt herself so wildly, so gloriously flattered in all her life before. *Your daughter*, he said, *your daughter*. Princes and high statesmen had in her time uttered to her the most immoderate compliments. Her pulses had not quickened. There, in the stench and darkness, Elsie Silver blushed hot with joy. She had never wanted a child, and had been careful enough to see she had none. But she had not wanted a child because the concept Elsie Silver, mother, was just too silly, too farcically out of the question. It was against nature, as it is against nature for a homosexual, or a eunuch, to have a child. And yet, accredit either of these with maternity or paternity, though there may be an embarrassed snigger on the lips, in the heart the compliment rocks like a peal of bells.

"What a fool you are!" a voice whispered in Elsie Silver's head, while her heart rioted. "Any slut has a baby, any sow in a sty has ten. Besides, she's got nothing at all to do with me, this little homeless ghost from God knows where. Both of us homeless ghosts from God knows where."

"Don't worry," a voice within her countered. "If any two creatures ever were mother and daughter, it's you and this one." She placed the brandy to the girl's lips, a drop or two coursed down the throat. The girl coughed and shivered. She might live, if these men had them out in time.

"Won't you get on with it?" Elsie begged them.

"Give yourself a drop too," ordered Shmul. "Then you can both have a swig of water to wash your mouths." She lifted the brandy flask to her lips.

The brandy in her throat lit up a thought in her with a rush and a whistle, like a match flame at a gas jet.

“I’m going to take her away . . . outside, away from here,” she explained, as if the idea were to get the girl out of a stuffy cinema. “Thank you.” This was for the water. The girl’s lips nuzzled the bottle like a lamb at a sheep’s udder.

“Yes,” said Shmul quietly, “you’ll take her away.”

“Of course,” confirmed Feivel. “Outside, away from here.”

They both thought the idea farcical. At this stage one did not get away from the Warsaw ghetto, and certainly not very far. Shmul wanted to laugh. He had been on the verge of hysteria more than once during the last day or two. It was as if the sole of his foot were sticking out of bed and someone came up now and again to tickle it with a feather. His muscles twitched now, but he did not laugh.

It was the same with Feivel. He, too, thought the idea of this woman getting herself and her daughter out of the ghetto was chimerical. But there was another thought in his head. How wonderful it would be if the impossible happened and they got away somehow, to England, to America, perhaps even to Palestine! Hadn’t Israel’s God and the people of Israel always specialized in the impossible? So let us say the miracle happened. Perhaps the two women some day would remember him, and the *mitzvah*, the holy deed, he had done on their behalf. For to save life is a *mitzvah*, which has preference over all other *mitzvahs*. It would be good to think of someone remembering him over there in Eretz Israel, at the foot of Mount Zion, or against Rachel’s Tomb, maybe, among the silver olive-groves. His family had been wiped out a year, two years, ago. He had never married. There would never be children to light candles for him, for in a few days, if not sooner, he would be dead.

Perhaps this mother and this girl would light candles for him, Feivel. He looked round, flashing his torch. There was an iron bar sticking out of a heap of rubbish a few feet away. He tugged at it and it came loose.

“This will be useful, Feivel,” he said. He tapped a large block by his foot. “We’ll start here, eh?”

It was a curious business, sitting there in the darkness, with the girl in her arms, and the two men groaning and grunting as they heaved away, and the mortar shells popping and the siege-guns booming, and now and again a bomb dropping like a lump of a small planet. On the physical plane she knew that it was difficult for any female creature to be so wretched as she was. Despite the gulp of water, her mouth was again as dry as soot. She ached in every limb.

Above all, she detested the feeling of grit in her hair, biting on itself like teeth. She had always been one to keep her hair smooth as petals. Even lately, as Channah, down here amid the cellar damp and the sewers, she had kept her hair decent. She felt, she told herself, like hell.

Yet, despite all this, she was more happy and serene than she had been in all her life before. The girl lay in her arms, abandoned to her, as completely hers during these minutes, this half-hour, as a new-born child is completely its mother's and lies snuggling against the warmth of her breast. For this half-hour at least, or for a few hours, or for a half-day, she could say she was responsible for the breath of life in the girl exactly in the same degree as the mother could say it of the new-born child, torn from another kind of womb by another kind of doctor. She could tell herself before she died, as she was quite likely to do quite soon, that she had known once, for a brief time, the totally selfless love of motherhood.

“How does it go, young men?” she asked many minutes later.

“It will be well!” they said.

So she sat in the darkness, she and the strange daughter in her arms, till the stones at last were rolled away, and the young men took them out, with immense labour, to Post Four, which was still in some sort of going order.

III

The two young men entered the Post, Feivel holding the girl in his arms, Shmul supporting the woman, her head on his shoulder, his arm round her waist. There were still a couple of oil-lamps in the middle of the cellar, and there were a few candles burning in bottles. Shmul found room for the woman on the edge of a blood-soaked mattress. Feivel walked away a foot or two to find a more salubrious place for the girl.

“Where are you taking her?” cried Elsie. “Leave her!”

“All right, all right!” said Feivel. He put her down beside Elsie. He knew what a state of nerves the wretched woman must be in. Another woman turned sharply round from an arm she was dealing with.

“What's the matter?” she cried. She was tall, sallow, forbidding.

“Good God!” muttered Shmul. “Frau Cohen-Berger! They've brought her over here!” It was clear that he did not like Frau Cohen-Berger. He was gone, suddenly. He was good at that, coming and going suddenly, a talent quite a few Germans had had occasion to deplore.

Frau Cohen-Berger turned to her case again. She got busy fixing up a sling for the arm. Then she moved on to another case which looked like being a long job. Feivel strode up to Frau Cohen-Berger.

“You’re in charge here now?” he asked.

“I am. Who are you? What do you want?” She had no time for civilities.

“I’ve a flask of brandy here, the real stuff.” He uncorked it. She sniffed.

“You’ve no iodine? Well, thank you. It’ll help.”

“I could get some iodine too. Can you do with some German field-dressings?”

She took them from him reverently, as she might once have taken a rare manuscript, or an ivory.

“You’re a good man. We’re out of everything. It’s like baling a sinking ship with a thimble.” She turned round to get on with her work.

“Listen, doctor,” he said. “I want you to help me.”

She turned. Her face was hard and distrustful again.

“Yes?”

“My wife and child . . . they’re suffering badly from shock. A bomb buried them. Can you do something for them?” He felt terribly ashamed. He did not like bargaining at a time like this, and he did not like lying at any price.

“I see,” she replied. She had never felt herself Jewish. She did not like Jewish ways. She was German, from one of the good Frankfort families. It was just like an *Ostjude*, an Eastern Jew, to haggle and barter, as if life and death were a saddle or a roll of cloth. Nothing for nothing. “I’ll do my best,” she said bleakly. “But you realize, of course, we’re all trapped. It’ll be over soon.”

His ears burned. “Thank you,” he said humbly. “You’re a *lamed-voonik*, a holy one.” The doctor turned from him impatiently, and he came back to Elsie.

“How are you feeling now?” asked Feivel.

Elsie smiled wanly, and looked down at the girl, who was supported against the wall now, with her head on her shoulder. Mila’s eyes were still closed.

“I’ve been trying to get up,” Elsie said. “My legs won’t carry me. I’d like to wash her a little.”

“*Mishkosheh*,” he said, gesturing with his flat, outspread hands. “Don’t

worry, please. The doctor's coming. I'll see what I can find."

There was half a bucket of fairly clean water in the Post for the use of the doctor and her helpers, but it would be wise to fight shy of that. He found a few inches in a battered petrol tin in the passage outside.

"Come," he said. "I've got a cloth too."

She smiled at him.

"You've got other jobs to do. No, I'll manage." She took the cloth from him, soaked it in the water, and brought it close to the girl's face.

"Mila," she murmured. "Are you awake?" The girl nodded. "Could you open your eyes?" The girl opened her eyes. "I want you to see the face of the man who saved us."

There was a shadow of a smile on Mila's lips.

"Thank you, *chaver*," her lips went. Then she waited, as if to gather more strength before she spoke again.

"*Leshonoh habo beyerushalayim!* Next year in Jerusalem!"

"What's that? What's that?" asked Elsie. She stared from Mila's eyes to Feivel's and back again. It was not German, not Yiddish. It was Hebrew, wasn't it? She had heard Hebrew prayers down in the cellars. Often she had heard the younger folk converse in Hebrew. But the sound, the tune, perhaps the actual words, went back many years before that. . . to her girlhood in her father's kitchen in Doomington, in Oleander Street.

What was the matter with the man? His cheeks were burning. His eyes were all aglow. It seemed to Feivel that in those words, uttered by a girl half dead in a cellar of the Warsaw ghetto, there was something as astonishing as a rose growing out of a dry bone. There was miracle in it, like the burning of the Bush that was not consumed. For the first time he knew with holy certainty that the fighting against stupendous odds, the wounds, and the dying had not been in vain, not even if precisely not one single soul emerged from this gehenna.

"What did she say, man?" insisted Elsie, for the girl's eyes were closed again.

"Next year in Jerusalem!" breathed Feivel.

"Oh, I see," Elsie muttered. She said nothing for some moments. Then, a little querulously: "What did I say?" she asked, as if she and Feivel had been arguing and Feivel had insisted that they would stay here in Warsaw, all of

them, and all would die here. Jerusalem? The word shook fitfully across the lens of her mind, like the image of a swaying bough beyond a window. Jerusalem? It was a long way off.

“Please,” said Feivel. “Let me wipe her face with the cloth, then I’ll go.”

“Certainly,” said Elsie. She could afford to be generous. There would be a lot more than that to do for Mila. The young man got to it, and swabbed the girl’s face, delicately, carefully, as if it were something that had become inexpressibly precious.

“What’s your name?” asked Elsie. “We’d like to remember it.” He would be dead soon, very likely, but she and Mila would be getting away somewhere, somehow, if they only got some strength into their limbs.

He flashed a smile of extraordinary tenderness at her.

“Feivel Tumin,” he said. He was quite young. The mouth was working, as if he would break into tears any moment. Mila opened her eyes, as if she, too, were anxious to imprint his image on her mind.

“Thank you, comrade,” she said. “It feels better now.”

Feivel rose from his knees and handed the rag over to Elsie. He did not look back.

“*Shalom!*” he called out to them. “Peace!”

“*Shalom!*” they said as he disappeared into the passage beyond the cellar.

A moment or two later the doctor was beside them. A bargain was a bargain. She had traded some of the time she could ill afford from the desperate demands of the seriously wounded for a flask of brandy and a handful of field-dressings.

“Your husband’s gone?” she asked.

“He had to go,” replied Elsie. “He’s on patrol.”

A cursory examination indicated that the woman was suffering mainly from shock, hunger, and weakness, like almost everyone else. She turned her attention to the girl, an odd, peaky-faced little creature she seemed, her face old for her body.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Fifteen.”

(‘Oh, she’s fifteen,’ Elsie thought. ‘She’s quite a girl. I thought she wasn’t more than eleven or twelve. Not a mere child. Quite a pal.’)

There was a superficial wound on the flesh of the abdomen, and some abrasions above the ribs. She, too, was weak with shock and privation. She needed stimulants, hot-water bottles, blankets, good food. As well ask for the moon. Anyhow, she could spare them both a little of the brandy. There would be a bowl of watery soup in a minute, and a grey potato each. She went on poking away with her hard fingertips. A thin leather belt fastened round the girl's waist had some string suspended from it. She pulled on the string and drew up a small wash-leather bag which had been hanging between the thighs. Yes, of course. It was not the first time she had come across a bag like that.

"Precious stones?" she asked Elsie.

Elsie nodded. What else could it be?

"Very well." She replaced them, and shrugged her shoulders. Doubtless the mother had her load of jewels too. A fat lot of use they'd be to them, if they were as many and as large as the Shah of Persia's. "We'll do what we can for you," the doctor said, "and it's not much. Anyhow, you can have some clothes. There's no shortage of *those*."

"Thank you," muttered Elsie. Even the clothes of dead women would be preferable to garments that felt more like gravel than cloth.

Five hours, ten hours passed, and Mila did not awaken. There were moments when a sudden wild fear took possession of the older woman: the girl had stopped breathing, she was dead. But no. The breath still hovered above the lips like the odour above fruit. A trace of colour was coming back into the cheeks.

She herself was sleepy too. She needed desperately the refreshment of an hour or two's sleep. But she fought hard against it. Anything might happen to Mila while her vigilance was relaxed. She might die, or someone might spirit her away.

But fatigue claimed her. She slept. Then she awoke. She looked round and saw that Mila was still sleeping.

"I must get her out somehow. To-morrow, if possible," Elsie muttered. "She's not very strong yet, but time's getting short. They're blasting the place to powder. I must get her out." She looked round as if she expected to see a cavernous opening appear in the sweating walls.

"What did you say?" asked the woman by her side. The doctor had put Elsie with her earlier on, washing and sterilizing bandages, then rolling them ready for use again. The woman had come from Galicia with her husband and

two children, in a draft of Jews who had been told, like some millions of others by the time the tally was complete, that they were to go to a labour camp in the East. But something had happened on the way, and she had been separated from the draft. Elsie had heard the story a dozen times, her companion's mind was like a nipped gramophone record perpetually stuttering over its fracture.

“Did you say something?” the woman asked again, turning her head lethargically. Without waiting for a reply, she returned mechanically to her work. “It was terrible in that truck,” she went on. “We were packed so close, no one could move a finger. Avrom was carrying the baby. In the middle of the night the train stopped and the S.S. came with whips to drive us out.” She looked round as if she expected the S.S. might come into the cellar any moment with their whips. “It was so dark, and people were crying, and over the noise of the soldiers I heard Avrom. ‘Rochel!’ he was calling. ‘Rochel!’ ...”

Elsie no longer listened. The woman's voice was a thread in a tapestry of noises, the moan of the wounded, the sleepy buzz of conversation which sometimes sharpened into petulance, the clink of utensils, the voices of children crying with pain or hunger.

It was the third day in the cellar, but that was an arbitrary measurement of time. Every hour, every minute, every second was weighted with lethargy, so that while the battle, of which reports came through spasmodically, transpired in time, the atmosphere within thickened from layer to layer in a sort of cotton-wool eternity. Above was a city grown fabulous and remote, with a sky and stars for its roof and a wayward and unpredictable weather of disaster for its climate. In contrast, the cellar had the reassurance of a fixed cosmogony. It was larger and more rambling than the cellar which had housed Post Sixteen. One bay was screened off with hessian and served as an operating theatre, another, containing a large rusted boiler, was occupied by serious casualties, one or two lucky ones on camp-beds, but most lying on palliasses or the flagstones. The walls dripped, the air was fetid, reeking of sweat, dirty dressings, and urine. It was like a railway waiting-room crammed with travellers for whom there were no trains and no destination. They would move no further than they were, some having arrived at a stoical resignation which was the nadir of despair, some bitter or querulous, some filled with the hallucination of glory, their eyes shining with feverish happiness. There were also others who crawled out again to continue the fight with one arm or one leg—in any event, to die fighting. Elsie Silver did not see herself as a Boadicea brandishing a spear. But she felt that even she, the least combatant of females, might well have gone up to the fighting in some sudden fit of wild boredom,

hurling a stone, perhaps, as it was not likely any more lethal weapon would be assigned to her.

But she was not alone now. The time had gone when the order of the universe was shaped by the appetite or whim of Elsie Silver. There was Mila to think of. She thought of nothing else from moment to moment under the sweating roof. It was ridiculous to love this small girl so. Why? What claim on her love had she? The questions were as ridiculous as any possible answer. It was all making her head ache. Her eyes were heavy with sleep. The bandages they had given her to unravel slipped from her fingers. She closed her eyes, and was soon sleeping again. Then once more she awoke. She turned at once to Mila. The girl had a bowl of soup beside her to which she was helping herself quite happily. Elsie smiled with pleasure. Mila smiled back. They brought a bowl of soup over to her too. She ate greedily.

“Good, yes?” she asked Mila. Mila nodded. She sighed, and lay back, half-dozing. Then, it may have been ten minutes later, or half an hour later, she felt the touch of a hand on her own. The touch was very light, so as not to awaken her if she slept. She opened her eyes. The girl’s eyes were not far from her own, staring into them curiously.

“Who are you, please?” the girl asked.

“My name is Channah. Are you feeling better now?”

“Channah? Yes, Channah, I am feeling better.”

“Where are you from, Mila?” The girl turned her head away. Elsie reached for her hand and stroked it gently. “Say nothing. Only when you wish to. Rest now, you are very tired.”

The girl turned her head again.

“We were from Ploçk,” she whispered. That was the last she said for half an hour or more. Then at last she spoke again. “She was very beautiful. You are not so beautiful, but you are kind.” She was obviously speaking of her mother, and her mother obviously was dead.

“I want to look after you, because she isn’t here,” breathed Elsie. “Is there—were you with anyone else?”

Mila’s voice in answer was almost inaudible.

“My father . . . we heard that a friend from Ploçk was in the Post, a doctor. And we were finding our way. Then he cried out loudly. It was—it was his heart again. . . . He fell down. . . .”

“Mila, Mila, you must not speak of it, only when you are strong again.”

“I will be strong soon. I am not strong now.”

“Quiet. You must rest. Put your head on my shoulder again. There, there.” She felt the girl’s fingers tighten round her own.

So Mila had been down here in the labyrinth with her father. And he had had an attack of angina, probably, which had finished him off.

Elsie waited a little time till she felt the grief in the girl’s heart was a little less turbulent. Then she spoke.

“If they were here, would they want you to stay here—for ever?” The girl opened her eyes wide. “Would they?” Elsie insisted gently.

“No, they would not want me to die here. He did not want to die here, nor my mother either. But we shall all die here, of course.”

“No,” said Elsie. Her voice was quite harsh. “I am going to try and get you out. You must help me, Mila. You must be good.”

The girl’s mind tried to get to grips with the thought. It was not necessary to die here. It had not been ordained by God for people to die here. It was being said that it might be possible for people to get out of here . . . away from cellars, and people dying, and the smell of blood and bandages.

“I will be good, Channah,” murmured Mila. “I will try and help. How do we get out, Channah?”

How? That was only one question. Whither would they go? To do what? For the time being it was enough to answer the first question. How?

“I want to think now, Mila,” she said. “I want to think what can be done.” She took in hand the grubby bandages in her lap and started to straighten them out and roll them. The woman from Galicia was talking. She had been talking the whole time. It was like water dripping from a bad tap.

How to get out? She was no fool, and she knew that getting out was going to be inconceivably difficult, particularly now, when the ghetto was not merely sealed off but was being systematically pounded into rubble. Well, if they would be killed, they would be killed, but when you survive a direct hit, you feel from then on that bombs and shells may be for other people, but not for you.

She had got in, and somehow she would get out. She had been down here some two weeks, as far as she could make out. During that time she had been pretty prostrate, yet, despite herself, she had heard and seen things; she had

learned a great deal. She knew, for instance, that quite a number of young men and women had been steadily coming in and going out for months and months. Some of them had taken children out and carried them off to safety somewhere. But for the most part they had been smuggling in arms and supplies and money, and had then gone out for more. The traffic had not wholly ceased even during these recent days of the culminating onslaught.

But these people were connected with some organization or other, the Jewish Youth Fighters, the Polish or Russian underground movements, and with these the widow of General von Brockenburg had less than no contact. Was there anyone at all to whom she could address herself? Post Sixteen had gone, and with it the few acquaintances she had made in the ghetto. Then an answer suggested itself simply and at once. The answer was her one-time lover, Oskar von Straupitz-Kalmin, whom she had loved to distraction years ago in Berlin, and had chanced to meet again in Warsaw when she had come here to be with her husband during his last hours. It was he who, through the agency of a certain Wolff, a master-baker, had arranged for her disappearance underground in the ghetto. That was to be for a few days only, until the hounds of Himmler had stopped baying for her blood. But the Battle had broken out, and she had stayed down in the labyrinths for longer than that; she had hoped she would die down here.

It was Oskar von Straupitz-Kalmin who had got her down here. It was he who must get her out again, and with her the girl she had rescued under the pulverized pavements. But she realized at once that the job of contacting Oskar, if he still survived, was, in fact, exactly the job of getting out. If he survived, always assuming he still survived, he was beyond the circle of roaring fire that hemmed in the ghetto. He might as well be a thousand miles away as one mile.

Then the secondary figure of the agent, Wolff, superimposed itself upon that of Oskar, Wolff in his ubiquitous bowler hat and greeny-grey suit dusted with flour. Oskar had delegated her to Wolff; Wolff had provided false papers for her; it was to his own house in the ghetto Wolff had brought her, and from that house she had fled raving into the cellars. She had seen Wolff only once again, some five days later. He had called her aside and offered to take her out of the ghetto by a secret route. He thought it only fair he should try to restore to Oskar the woman friend he had confided to his charge. But Elsie had said she did not want to go; she saw no reason why she should not stay on and die there, in the ghetto cellars.

But, anyhow, where was Wolff now? He had seemed a curious sort of fellow, occupied with other more secret jobs than baking bread. He might be

dead. He might have left the place by his own secret route. But the chances were that, sooner or later, if he survived, he would find his way to this intact cellar. Then it occurred to her that there was one person, down there, in Post Four, who might conceivably help her, and that was Frau Cohen-Berger, the doctor-in-charge, who (she was certain) played a part in the Battle quite apart from her medical duties. Out of the corner of her eye Elsie noticed the curtains that screened the operating bay drawn apart. The doctor came out kneading her tired hands, and walked towards the far end of the cellar where the cook kept a cauldron of thin soup on the boil. Elsie got up from the heap of thread-bare bandages which she was rolling with the help of the woman from Galicia. The woman was telling her tale again. She went on telling her tale without realizing that Elsie was not beside her.

“Excuse me, doctor,” Elsie started, pulling at her sleeve.

“Yes,” said the doctor abruptly. Her eyes were grey and uncompromising. You might as well appeal to a lump of granite, they seemed to say. Things have gone too far for pity. Everyone must prepare to die with as much dignity as he can muster.

“There’s something I want to ask you,” Elsie began. But the woman stopped her.

“You want to know if there’s any chance of getting out of the ghetto?”

Elsie was conscious of a flare of resentment.

“Why do you say that?” she objected. “As a matter of fact, I was going to suggest. . . .” She tried to think out some technical matter she might bring up. But you could not deceive those level grey eyes.

“Quite right,” Elsie muttered. “I was.”

“Don’t worry,” the doctor said, a shade more kindly. “I’m asked that twenty times a day. Even the toughest ones have their moments. You’re thinking of your daughter, of course.”

“Yes.”

“You must try and face up to it. There isn’t a hope of surviving.” She looked round. She didn’t want to be overheard. It was a simple and obvious statement of fact, but it sounded a little harsh put into plain words. “Think of it from the girl’s point of view. Supposing it wasn’t impossible, and you got her out. You don’t want me to go on, do you?”

“We all know what it’s like out there.”

“At the best you’d just prolong her sufferings. For every Jew who survives, not merely in Warsaw but in Poland, God will have to enact a separate miracle. And there are no miracles.”

“I’m prepared to take a chance,” muttered Elsie.

The doctor turned away.

“I’m sorry. You know how it is. I must see what food’s left. There’s practically nothing coming in.”

“Please,” demanded Elsie. She tugged at her sleeve again. She looked very forbidding.

“What’s happened to Wolff, the master-baker?” Elsie whispered urgently.

The doctor’s lips tightened, as if to keep back some cutting answer. Then she thrust off without a word. Elsie returned to her mattress.

“Well, what happened?” a voice demanded eagerly. It was the woman from Galicia. “Did she let you have something? They say a whole sausage was brought in to-day. Sometimes I’ve begged her on my knees for a crust, but she wouldn’t drop you even a crumb. She’s just as bad as the Germans. Avrom was carrying the baby when we went off. Then, in the middle of the night, the train stopped. . . .”

It was some two hours later that Elsie saw Wolff. He had materialized so suddenly that for an instant she thought he was an hallucination. He was standing with a group by the hessian curtain in front of the operating-couch. His old-fashioned bowler hat was on his head, with such an architectural quality of permanence that it was the bowler hat rather than the flesh-and-blood man that made her realize he was substance, not shadow. The bowler hat had already survived tall churches, spacious warehouses, great blocks of flats. The man himself would probably die, but some day the bowler hat would turn up again, only slightly dented, in a hollow among the mounded rubble of the Warsaw ghetto, rimmed round with purple willow-weed. The greeny-grey suit had no superficial hoar-frost of flour; the greyness was from the dust of former bakings deeply impregnated into the fabric. In the short while since she had seen him his face had changed a good deal. His plump face was thinner, with a pinched look about the mouth. The clothes hung loosely on his frame. But when he saw who this woman was who strode towards him so urgently he smiled warmly as at an old friend.

“How are you, *Fräulein*? So you happened to be out of the way. Congratulations.” He hesitated a moment and smiled sadly. “If congratulations

are in order.”

“Herr Wolff, I want to speak to you.”

He inclined his head courteously, and gestured with his hand as if the entire cellar was his private office and it was at her service.

“By all means, *Fräulein*,” he murmured. He walked away with her a few paces, till they were out of earshot. She turned to him abruptly.

“Last time we met you asked me if I wanted to get out of here. I didn’t want to go then, but I do now. I’ve taken charge of that young girl there. She’s Polish, from Ploçk. You see her? She’s alone in the world. I want to know what are the chances of getting her out.”

He looked at her sadly.

“*Fräulein*, I was asked by your friend to do what I could for you. It’s all different now. I’m afraid. . . .”

“Yes?”

He said nothing. He shook his head.

“There’s no hope?”

“Hope’s just a word, and a word that means nothing any more. You’re asking the impossible. Things are getting more desperate every hour and the only route into the city is reserved for the few supplies we’re still receiving, at immense risk to the people concerned.” He looked at her as if to beg her not to press him further.

“Apart from this route you’ve mentioned—is there absolutely nothing else?”

“Nothing, *Fräulein*.”

“Are you sure?”

He shifted his glance from her face but did not answer. Suddenly he turned on his heel and was gone. Elsie stood for some moments, dazed and incredulous, as if she had to convince herself that he had not been an apparition after all. Why had he been forced to turn his eyes from her? Was it because he was ashamed he could do nothing for her? Or was he ashamed because he could and would not? Did he feel that he was letting Oskar down, Oskar the one-time Junker aristocrat, who still possessed so preposterous a charm that even a Jew enmeshed in the Warsaw ghetto could not gainsay it?

And what news, if any, had he of Oskar? He might at least have spared

time to answer that, however null the rest of his tale was. She shook her head miserably and shuffled back to her place against the wall. It was some half-hour later that, on raising her eyes from the job that had been assigned her, she saw the bowler hat move through the semi-darkness towards the exit from the cellar. She was not certain that it was not a product of her own despondent imagination until she saw the bowler hat enter once more and leave by the opposite exit. This time she was aware of a slight movement in Wolff's left hand. The hand raised itself from the wrist, the five fingers erect. She understood. Five minutes later she rose and went out after him. She came across him in a recess at the end of the passage.

"Go on if anyone comes," he whispered. "There's something I didn't tell you. There might be a way."

"You can trust me," she murmured. He stared at her hard. "I believe I can," he decided. "Listen. The time's up. The fact is"—there was an almost imperceptible hesitation—"I've been tidying up." He poked his head out from the recess and looked right and left.

She nodded. She understood. He proposed to make a getaway on his own. Well, who could blame who, for anything?

"If you can make it, it will cost money. I've got some zloty for you."

"That's all right," she assured him. "We've got one or two pieces of. . . ."

"Yes, of course," he interrupted her. Then he was silent for some moments. "You know it will be hard enough on your own. Having someone with you makes it ten times more difficult."

It was as if a lump of ice was pressed up against her heart's flesh. "She's the reason I'm trying to go," she said quietly.

"Very well." He shrugged his shoulders. "What's your idea? What do you hope to do?"

"I don't know. I want to take her away."

"You don't talk Polish, do you?" he asked suddenly.

"No. Just the few words I've picked up down here."

He slapped his thigh.

"You can't get away; not out of the town, I mean. Don't you see that?"

"I don't see."

"I mean, it doesn't matter what false papers are made out for you, you

daren't move more than a few yards if you don't talk Polish. Don't you see?" His voice sounded quite fretful. "You might go on for days, then one day you're stopped every five yards. Papers are not enough." Despair began to creep along her veins. Her eyelids twitched. "No." He shook his head decisively. "We could get you beyond the Wall. You could go to earth somewhere in Warsaw, though it's much harder for two than for one, as I've told you. And that's all. You'd probably have to separate, and wait in a cellar or a bricked-up room with a concealed door till it's all over. There are other people around the place doing exactly the same thing."

"Other people have got away from Warsaw," she muttered. "We'll do it."

"Yes, yes. But they were young and as hard as nails. People who could live in a cowshed for days and days. Or lie under a culvert, chewing grass. And they'd be *alone*. And they'd talk the language."

Then an idea tapped like a hammer against her forehead.

"The language? Of *course* I talk the language."

"But you just said. . . ." he stammered.

"The *Herrensprache*, Herr Wolff. I talk the language of the supermen. Listen." The ideas were flooding through her brain, almost too quickly for her tongue to keep pace with them. "You can arrange to get us out of the ghetto, you say? Well and good. Into some place on the other side of the Wall? Fine. Well, it's not enough. I've got to get away, for reasons of my own, away from Warsaw. It may be all right for some people to stay in here. Not for me; not for us. I shall be a *Volksdeutsche*. Do you understand? You can get papers for a *Volksdeutsche* as for anybody else?"

"I suppose so. If they're false, they're false."

"Well, I'll show them how to be a *Volksdeutsche*. I'll make the Germans themselves feel below standard. I've had experience, Herr Wolff. Do you understand?"

"I understand." He understood why Oskar von Straupitz-Kalmin set such store by her. She was certainly a woman of quality.

"Quick. Let's work out some story, here and now." She was feverish with inspiration. "I'm *volksdeutsche*, from some town not far from the German frontier. No. I'm not merely *volksdeutsche*. I'm *deutsche*. It was my husband who was *volksdeutsche*. My husband had a factory, a textile factory. Like my own father, in fact, Herr Wolff, for your private ear. Tell me a small manufacturing town near the frontier, will you? Quick."

“Bielsko,” said Wolff.

“Very well, Bielsko. My husband had to spend most of his time in Bielsko, where the business was. I loathed the place and the people. I lived most of my life in Germany, even after I got married. In Hamburg, say, or Berlin. That’s the sort of papers they’ll have to make up for me. You get it?”

“Yes, but. . . .”

She would not allow herself to be interrupted. “Then there’s Mila.”

“Yes,” he added grimly. “She’s in Warsaw, after all, not in Bielsko.”

Problems stood up against her no more than a match-stalk in a flooding gutter.

“Mila? She’s my niece, my husband’s niece, that is to say. Her mother and father were killed in Warsaw recently, somewhere in the outskirts. They thought they were fairly safe. The child’s in a bad state. So I’ve come up to Warsaw to take charge of her and give her a holiday somewhere. Have you any idea where? Somewhere up in the mountains.”

“Mountains? The only mountains are south, of course.”

“South? That’s perfect. That’s on the way, isn’t it?”

“On the way where?”

“To Hungary, the Balkans, the sea.”

“The sea,” he repeated. “The sea.” His voice was remote and impersonal as the sea itself. Silence fell between them. The light died slowly out of her eyes. The blood slackened in her pulses.

“My dear *Fräulein*,” Wolff murmured at length. “You are jumping. Like an antelope.” He sighed and shook his head. “It is a long way to the south. It is a long way even to Warsaw. Now please listen to me for a few moments. I don’t wish to discourage you. What for? You can build up in your own mind whatever story you like, for yourself and the girl. But papers are papers. They are not stories. They are just to show, in case somebody asks for them. If they are satisfied, and they give them back straight away, well and good. If they are not satisfied, and the papers are looked into—it is no good at all. The only thing I can say is they will be the best papers that can be found.”

“Yes, of course.” She felt deflated. She must keep her imagination in hand. She must not jump . . . like an antelope.

“The papers may be made specially for you,” Wolff was saying. “Or they may find real papers of two people who are dead. The girl speaks good

German, yes?”

“Yes.”

“It is perhaps simpler you should be mother and daughter. We will see.”

“Yes. Mother and daughter,” Elsie whispered. The words were like bubbles in wine.

“It is a strange thing with papers,” he went on. “The only thing is courage. Well, enough of words now.” He came out of the recess where they had been speaking. “I must have some time to work things out. Let me ask once more. You truly want to go?”

She repeated his words. “The only thing is courage. Isn’t that so?”

“Fine. We’ll meet here; five minutes after the young student goes off duty. That’s about three hours after midnight.” The bowler hat rolled on, as if there was no man beneath.

The hours went by. Down there it was always the same, the same dark twilight, mistily punctuated by lamplight and candlelight; the reverberation of gunfire, the coming and going, the muttering and moaning, the sudden sharp spurt of temper. When was daytime? When was night? Somehow the human creature knows, it is one of those things we retain knowledge of almost to the end.

Frau Doktor Cohen-Berger suspended her enormously protracted spell of duty. The young student took over from her. He, too, at length took himself to his palliase. If there was a dead hour in the Post it was now, with even Death a little more torpid than he had been. It was life obscurely striving to maintain itself till the unseen dawn broke, to receive through the ruin of wall and floor a last little wallet of light and air to carry beyond the threshold.

“It’s three o’clock now,” Elsie told herself. The girl was asleep beside her. She touched her gently on the shoulder. “Mila, come.” It was not easy to wake her. “Mila, come.”

“Yes, yes.” The girl awoke startled.

“We’re going out.” Elsie rose from the mattress. They had each been given a coat, but she thought it better to leave the two coats behind. It would look as if they were slipping out for a moment. Besides, they would certainly have to acquire some fresh clothing when they got beyond the Wall.

Mila rose. She understood. There may already have been a fair amount in her young life of rising and slipping away quietly.

Wolff was waiting for them in the recess, as arranged. “For the present, keep your distance,” he whispered. “Here’s a torch for you. If you’re challenged, say you can’t rest. You’re trying to find your husband.”

“Fine. Go forward. Remember the child’s still weak,” returned Elsie. Then she bent down and whispered into Mila’s ear: “You understand, Mila? We’re now going to try to get out.” Mila pressed her hand. “If it gets too much for you, we’ll rest. See?”

“Yes,” murmured Mila.

They set out. They moved for some time from passage to cellar, from cellar to tunnel. The journey was on several levels, up and down sloping ramps and flights of stone stairs, through trap-doors and lifted gratings. Once or twice, when they had penetrated deep down, and thick blankets of earth and masonry insulated them, they were plunged into a frightening silence. Sometimes the insulating layers were so thin that they could clearly hear the clatter of the Battle. The catacomb world was by no means unoccupied. Men and women with invisible faces overtook them or came towards them on errands, public or private. Once Wolff’s torch picked out two men some distance ahead of them, who suddenly ducked and hid as if they too were engaged in some secret occupation for which they wished no witnesses; perhaps, with no Wolff to aid them, they were searching for the end of the thread which might lead them out of the labyrinth. Their nerve, maybe, had failed; the will to die can snap, no less than the will to live. Or perhaps they had some urgent message to deliver, which they must keep hidden even from their leader. Like rats they scuttled, and were invisible.

Wolff took his time. He was aware that the two females he was conducting were not sturdy farm-girls. He stopped frequently.

“Are you all right? And the girl, too?”

“It’s a bit longer than I thought,” Elsie murmured. “When do we get into the sewers?”

“Oh no. We don’t get into the sewers this way, that’s why it takes longer. There’s only one sewer exit now, and they might be on to it any time. A part of the route has caved in. We’ve got to come above ground; a narrow passage that bears down upon Krochmalna Street. You remember it?”

“No, I’ve not been here long.”

“Of course not. Our boys overlook the passage from one side, the Germans from the other.” He stopped and looked at the girl. “We’re liable to be fired on from both sides if they see anything moving. But it’s dark. It ought to be all

right, if we take it carefully. Can the child make it?”

“I’m not a child,” asserted Mila quite vigorously. “I’m fifteen.” Her whole being was freshening up in the excitement of the adventure. “I’ll make it, if *you* will.”

“We know we’re not embarking on a school picnic,” said Elsie severely. Wolff grimaced and moved on. The way led, as before, across cellars, through trap-doors, up ladders; then suddenly, as they emerged from a coal-chute, air struck clean in their nostrils.

“Wait,” whispered Wolff. He stuck his head out cautiously, looked upward, and left and right. “It’s all right. Move slowly. Don’t make a sound.” There was a sudden pop-pop of mortar-fire. “That’s all right,” he assured them. “It’s not for us. Are you all right, both of you?”

“Yes, yes,” cried Mila.

“Of course we’re all right,” said Elsie, with less enthusiasm but with dignity. They thrust out on all fours.

At my time of life, thought Elsie. But of course it isn’t really happening.

Suddenly the whole sky lit up as if a furnace door were swung open, then shut again.

“Down!” said Wolff.

They threw themselves down and lay flat as lizards. Wolff removed his bowler hat and set it down before him, as if it were a fourth member of the party.

“There, on the right! Do you see it?” he whispered. “The Wall! We’re not far now!” The ghetto Wall swung, squat and dark, just above eye-level beyond a canyon sliced from the street buildings by a bomb. He spoke of it as if it were any wall that might shut off any recreation park. It had become a casual object in the landscape of his movements.

The Wall, thought Elsie. Yes, the Wall. Higher than mountains. Higher than the mountains where the Tibetan monasteries are. Not too high for Elsie with her blood up, she told herself with the ghost of a smile.

“Now!” ordered Wolff.

They scuttled forward again, crouched immobile once or twice again. At last they reached a hole in the left-hand wall hemmed round by a close of rubble. It must have been the egress from a sewer once, for the way was down an iron ladder encrusted with hard filth. A connecting passage led straight into

a large cellar.

“We’ll stop here,” said Wolff. “It’s fairly dry in this corner.” He shone his torch to show them where he meant. “I want you to sit down. There are a few things I must say to you. It’s fairly safe here. Nobody from the ghetto is likely to stumble upon us, and the Germans still don’t know about this way out,” He shone his torch on his watch. “We’ve made good time,” he stated. “I’ve started things moving since we spoke earlier on. In half an hour or so Sem will be here. He’s all right. He’s a Pole, from Warsaw. But he’s all right. He’ll take you to Marta, the old woman, and get your papers for you. Understand?”

She understood. She had not had any training in conspiracy, but she learned fast. If Wolff was a person of some importance in this obscure clandestine world, there must be a buffer between himself and the next contact to which they might be assigned.

“I’ll be leaving you after I’ve had a few words with Sem. After that it will be up to you. Had this happened when I first suggested it, I could have handed you over to your friend. Now. . . .” he shrugged his shoulders. “It’s different now.”

“Will you tell me,” she asked him. “Is he alive or dead?” Even as she spoke she knew what the answer was, and she knew that the answer caused no pang in her heart.

“I don’t know,” Wolff said shortly. For him, too, it was not a subject to dawdle over. “I’m not asking who you are. I’ve never asked anyone, of course, and no one told me.” He turned to the girl. “And you, Mila. Have you understood all we’ve said?”

“Everything, thank you.”

He held up his torch to her face, so that he could scrutinize it more carefully than he had been able to till now.

“An expert would know you’re both Jewish,” he observed. “With the girl he need not be an expert.”

Elsie reached her arm round Mila’s shoulders, and pressed her close.

“You are not right, I think.”

“If it’s better for Channah to go alone,” said Mila, “let her go alone.”

“Please,” exclaimed Elsie urgently. “You’re upsetting the child! Let the matter be.”

“When setting out on an adventure like this we must face all the facts.

Listen!” he cried suddenly. “That’s Sem! He’s coming! Quiet!” Elsie and Mila turned their heads sharply and heard the sound of stealthy feet approaching. Then a voice came, tense and low.

“Sem!” the voice announced.

“Lob!” returned Wolff. Doubtless Wolff had almost as many names as there were people he had dealings with. “It’s me! They’re both here!” He was speaking Polish. “Come through!”

A young man came through from the passage beyond the cellar. With one hand Wolff flashed the torch on him. In the other hand he held a pistol with which he covered him. It was Sem right enough. He replaced the pistol where it belonged.

“I will explain to him,” Wolff announced. “His German is not good, but you’ll be able to understand each other. And you’ll be able to help out, won’t you, Mila?”

“I think so.”

Herr Wolff and Sem talked for some minutes. Then the older man handed over a bundle of zloty. There was a movement from Elsie.

“Please, no!” Wolff insisted. “Whatever you have you will need. You have a long way to go. Well, I’ll be leaving you now. So, *junges Mädchen*”—he turned to Mila—“good luck to you!” Mila made the ghost of a curtsy in the darkness. She was a well-bred child.

“Thank you very much,” said Mila, a trifle primly.

“As for you, *Fräulein*—it seems fitting, doesn’t it? I brought you in here. I take you out again.” He paused a moment and shone his torch up against the clammy ceiling. “We’re in Warsaw now,” he said, “at Panska. The Wall was above our heads just back there.”

Elsie reached impulsively for his hands. “No,” he said. “Don’t thank me yet. You never know. They may have got wise to the old woman. Besides —” he hesitated.

“Yes?”

“You’ve not got very far, have you?” He answered the question himself. “Further than a great many others, anyway. In any case, it’s not *me* you’ve got to thank,” he added gravely. “You must thank your friend. It may be he won’t be in a position to do you any more kindnesses. Good-bye, *Fräulein*.” They shook hands. “I’ve still got one or two things to clear up. And you, Mila.

Good-bye to you both. You'll see them through, Sem. Good luck." He took off his bowler hat, replaced it, and moved towards the ghetto again, the whistling bombs, the hurtling shells.

"Come," requested Sem. "This way."

They followed. There was a descending ramp, another steel ladder, another passage, another cellar.

"We're almost there," said Sem. He pushed aside a clutter of old boxes, buckets, baskets, draining-boards. A tunnel gaped beyond. They entered and crawled along for some ten or twelve yards till they reached another clutter of boxes and baskets, also duly pushed aside. "We're there," Sem announced. They entered a small blind cellar, quite dark except for a faint hint of light low down in the wall ahead. He moved some boxes out of the jumble in the corners. "Please to sit," he said, then took up a length of rusted metal piping that lay against the wall. He lifted it and banged hard against the ceiling, twice, three times. Then he waited for some time, and banged again, twice, three times. Then, at last, after an equal interval, the response came twice, three times.

"Good," Sem said. "She's in. Not to hurry. We wait till she thinks it's all right."

Twenty, thirty minutes passed. Then they heard the sound of someone descending into the adjoining cellar-room. Feet flapped across the floor. Then some heavy piece of furniture was shoved aside. Chinks of light appeared round a trap-door on ground level.

"The Arc de Triomphe," murmured Elsie.

"Hopingly, not the Brandenburger Tor," Sem brought out.

"Or maybe David's Gate in Jerusalem," Mila piped up with startling shrillness.

Oh dear, oh dear, Elsie said to herself. A grown-up young woman, with clear ideas about things.

The trap-door was lifted out of a groove. A dim grey light drizzled through, a dim sour smell.

"All right," a woman's voice complained. "Don't hang about all day." She spoke Polish. A grizzled old head appeared. Wisps of grey hair hung from it like the tatters of a floor-cloth. "What have you got there?"

"A woman and a girl," Sem replied. He crawled through, to receive them.

“Now you, little one,” said Elsie.

Then suddenly the girl threw both arms round her, and hugged her as if she would never let her go. The frail body was trembling convulsively.

“Mila, Mila, what is it?”

She seemed to have relapsed into the condition of numb terror which had possessed her during the first night and day after the rescue.

“I don’t want to come! I don’t want to come!” she sobbed.

“All right, sweet one, all right.” Elsie patted her head. “It will be all right soon. I, too, am very tired. It has not been an easy journey.”

The girl’s frightened, Elsie realized, terrified out of her wits, here on the threshold of the huge, hostile, outside world. She has memories of German soldiers beating people with their rifle-butts and kicking them with big nailed boots. There in the ghetto it was wretched, but it had become familiar. People starved, people were killed, but they died among friends: and they had pride in what they were despite their sufferings. It was her father’s graveyard, but the child had for a time heard the word Jew uttered with pride and dignity. In the world beyond it was an obscenity and a death-word.

“Aren’t they coming?” scolded the old woman. “Do they think I’ve got nothing else to do?” She poked her head through again. “If you want to go back, you’re welcome to!”

“Mila,” whispered Elsie. “Listen, Mila, please. You said your folk would like you to try and get away. Well? Wouldn’t they, Mila? Wouldn’t they?”

Mila lifted her head. “I’m sorry, Channah. I’ll be good.” She got down on her knees and went through. Elsie followed.

They found themselves in a cellar-room just below pavement level. Daylight filtered through a narrow length of thick panes brown with dirt. There was enough light to see that the place was used for washing, obviously on a professional scale. It was evident that when Marta was engaged in her more public calling, a clothes-horse and mangle were drawn against the trap-door that led into the underground ghetto world.

“How much?” she was asking Sem. “I can’t risk my skin for nothing. If they catch me. . . .” She made a gesture as of a knife being drawn across her throat. Elsie understood hardly one word she said, but got the meaning.

“You know very well, you old crow,” said Sem. He was quite small, with a curious shock of hair starting upright from his skull, like a cock’s comb. He

might be a mechanic or a truck-driver.

“If you haven’t got enough,” Elsie murmured fearfully, “we could help out.”

“It’s good she not know you have something more,” advised Sem. “Perhaps she find it difficult resisting temptation. Not look frightened, now. If she do any bad thing, *she* know—bang!” He placed his forefinger at his head to show the sort of thing that would happen to her. “Is a fixed price,” he continued, chiding the old woman comically with his forefinger. “But she feel she is a good woman for business if we have an argument.” He took the wad of money from his breast-pocket and peeled off the due amount. The old woman stuck forth a skinny claw with a cry of pleasure, then went off to count up the notes on the flap of the mangle, like a dog going off to crack a bone at his leisure. “Please to listen, *Fräulein*,” Sem continued. “Soon I go. I get papers like Lob say, for you and girl. He also say you not want to stay in Warsaw.”

“No, no. We must get away.”

“But where? Is Germans everywhere. Town is more safe than country.”

“We want to go to a port somewhere, the sea.”

He looked doubtful. “You mean Gdynia? Dantzig?”

“We are going on a ship to Palestine!” Mila broke in urgently.

Sem looked at her compassionately, but said nothing. It was clear he thought Palestine as inaccessible as the moon.

“Whatever happens, we won’t stay in Warsaw,” insisted Elsie. “We’ll go south. We’ll be on our way. What’s the next big town south?”

“Cracow.”

“I was in Cracow,” said Mila, “a few times, before . . . before those people came.”

“You see,” said Elsie, as if that established some point or other. “So let it be Cracow.”

“Let it be Cracow,” Sem repeated. “You can hide in Cracow, like you hide in Warsaw. Then, maybe, something will happen.” It was clear that he did not think it in the least likely that anything propitious would happen. “But wherever you are and you are out in street, you must hold head like this.” He lifted his head to show the demeanour they must adopt. “If not”—he shrugged his shoulders—“is nothing no good.”

“We will do our best,” she told him, smiling. But her heart was knocking

as she remembered it knocking in the rarefied air on the high top of a Bavarian mountain. “Won’t we, Mila?” The girl nodded looking from one to the other.

“I come back in five days, six days,” said Sem. “Till then you must be here, not move anywhere.” He looked round. It was not an endearing place, but it was less distressing in most ways than the place they had just come from. “The old woman will bring you lady clothing, *für Dame*, and for girl, also.” He turned to the old woman, who had some time ago finished counting the money and found a place for it under her skirts. “I go. No monkey-business now. If anything goes wrong, the Big One will have you cut up into little pieces. Understand?”

“That’s all right,” she grinned. She patted the place under the skirts where the money was. So long as it was made worth her while, nothing would go wrong.

“Good-bye, *Fräulein*,” said Sem, “and you, young one. I come back when all is ready.” He inclined his head towards each in turn, then stooped to lift up a bundle under the wooden stairway. It was a bag of plumber’s tools. Presumably he was a plumber who had come to attend to the taps or something. He climbed into the upper room. They heard his feet over their heads. A door slammed.

“Hi you!” the old woman exclaimed, turning to her guests. “Jew-women! Push that back along here, will you?” She indicated the heavy mangle.

“She wants us to push this machine back,” translated Mila. She went over to it.

“Don’t you dare touch it, Mila!” commanded Elsie. “Come on, you!” She turned to the old woman. “Come on! Give me a hand!” She had, after all, been the wife of a great soldier. The woman chewed her own lips as if they were some sort of sticky toffee. Then she shrugged her shoulders, and came up to the machine. Between them the two women got it back where it belonged.

“Now something to eat and drink,” Elsie commanded, gesturing with her fingers at her mouth. The girl looked from one woman to the other with bright eyes.

“Shall I tell her what?” she asked.

“*She* understands!” said Elsie.

She understood right enough. Mumbling and bumbling away, she was already flopping in her loose slippers up the wooden stairway.

“Oh, my God!” Elsie cried suddenly, and clutched her heart.

“What’s the matter, Channah? What’s the matter?” Terror had jumped into Mila’s eyes.

“Nothing, nothing at all!” said Elsie quietly. “I’m sorry I frightened you. Nothing’s wrong here.” She tapped at her heart. It was better to reassure the girl on that score straight away.

“What was it then?”

“Oh, I was just thinking.”

Channah did not wish to say any more. Mila turned to see if there was anything she could do to make the place a bit more comfortable. Elsie stood a moment or two thinking. Her thoughts were that she had been till a few moments ago, a dim denizen of the Warsaw ghetto, Channah who had been doomed to die, if not from the bomb that had nearly dispatched her, then from one of the twenty deaths that lie waiting for a rat in a closed cellar.

And now, a few moments later, she was not merely Channah, she was already something a little more. Already she had jolted the teeth of this Polish harpy. Already she had shown that Elsie Silver was not dead yet, not wholly dead.

But her heart had turned over not because she was merely excited, she was frightened too. God knows what a devastatingly weak hand she had! Had she already overplayed it at the very outset of a game which would need not only infinite resource but infinite self-control? What was to prevent old Marta walking straight out and coming straight back with a Gestapo patrol? Well, what? You could go on turning the thing round and round in your head till the question creaked inside your skull, like one of those wooden rattles that demented enthusiasts nourish at football games.

“See we have something hot!” Elsie suddenly called up the staircase. “Tell her, Mila, what I said!” ordered Elsie imperiously.

“See we have something hot!” translated Mila.

“Yes, *pani*, soon! At once!” wheezed the old woman.

Elsie smiled. It didn’t matter how weak the cards were. You must *bluff* your way through the card-game that was to be played from now on, on a table-top that might cover lands and seas, or might be no bigger than this same rickety table in this same small room.

There was a tap in the cellar, and a bucket to carry water over to the copper. There were some thin gritty fragments of washing-soap around. They

washed and dried themselves on somebody else's towels. They even had the end of a comb between them. They washed and combed their hair, and felt better. Soon the old woman was down with two chunks of bread and a basin of some dark hot liquid which was probably soup, though it may have been an *ersatz* coffee. She kept her distance from Elsie, and the wrinkled mouth remained pursed in a frozen 'O', as if she felt that her client had some tie-up with a devil; for though the woman was a Jewess, she talked and held herself as if she were a Christian, a German for that matter. The small one seemed to have claws too.

"You can sleep if you want to, after you eat," declared Marta. "I don't suppose I'll have much time for washing. If anybody knocks, don't worry. It may be somebody with a basket of clothes, though usually I pick up the stuff myself. Anyhow, don't open the door, whoever it is. Stay down here."

Mila translated. They thanked her. She went off upstairs again. They ate; then they lay down. They had soft things under them and over them, and something to raise their heads.

"If we can sleep, Mila, well and good," murmured Elsie. "If not, we must just lie down and let time go by. Are you sleepy, Mila?"

The girl was silent for some moments. Then: "Please, Channah, will you tell me?" she whispered.

"Yes, Mila?"

"Where do you come from, Channah?"

She had known, of course, that questions must come. She knew that with this child there must be no duplicity; Mila must sooner or later know the exact truth, though she would be shocked by it, as any Jew, anywhere in the world, must be shocked by it.

"I want you to know everything, Mila," she said.

"You were not born in Germany, were you? You aren't like the other Jews from Germany."

"I was born in England, Mila, but I am not English now. I am German, I married a famous German, and you will have to know his name."

"But you're *Jewish*, Channah?"

"I am Jewish. But I have been a bad Jew. I forgot everything. I could have done something, perhaps a good deal. But I did nothing. Only once, there was an old Jew from England, and he came to Germany, and I helped him to get

away again. That was all I did. I have been bad.”

“You did not do anything to help *them*—the Germans, I mean? You didn’t help them in their wickedness? No, you did not, Channah. I am sure you did not.”

“No, I did nothing to help them.”

“But you helped *us*, Channah, down in the cellars of the ghetto. I saw with my own eyes.”

“It is a strange story, Mila. I think you’re tired now, and you ought to sleep. I’ll tell you the whole story, Mila, whenever you ask me. Go to sleep now, Mila.”

“Good night, Channah.”

“Good night, Mila.”

But they did not sleep. Soon the girl spoke again.

“Channah!”

“Yes, Mila?”

“Do you think it will be possible?”

“To get away, Mila? I don’t know. It will be good to try. You are young yet.”

“You are not old, Channah.”

“We shall have to be clever. We shall have to bluff our way.” She paused. “We won’t shuffle along, Mila, as if apologizing for something. We must walk with our heads in the air, like that young Pole said.”

“Yes, Channah. It isn’t *we* that should feel ashamed. It’s *them*.” Again there was a brief silence; then once more Mila was speaking. “Where will we try to get to, Channah?”

“I don’t know. Anywhere. You should try to sleep, Mila. To a port somewhere, to the quayside. We will get on to a ship.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know, Mila. I don’t know. It depends on where the ship goes to.”

“But surely you’d like to go to Eretz Israel? Where else can a Jew go to?”

“Why not, if the ship went there?”

“But if the ship did not go there, one would have to take another ship.”

“Yes, Mila. You’re shivering. Come closer. Are you warmer now?”

“Why would you not like to go to Eretz Israel?”

“I’m getting sleepy, Mila. We will talk again. Some day, perhaps, on a ship, with the sky sharp and blue overhead, and a white road of water behind us.”

“Yes, yes, Channah,” the girl said drowsily. “And there will be seagulls. I have never seen seagulls.”

“And porpoises,” whispered Elsie. “Good night, little one. It is morning, but we will say good night.”

They were very tired and were asleep soon. The German barrage had a fresh lease of life within a half-hour. The house shook over their heads like a rickety truck on a rough road, but it did not awaken them.

CHAPTER II

I

In the air above Marta's house, and in the tormented acres beyond the adjacent Wall, the Battle raged. That was the warp and woof of the fabric of things. It would have been more horrific if, suddenly, the shells had stopped screaming and the bombs thundering, for it would have meant total wilderness had been achieved, total death.

Twice a day the old woman brought their food down to her lodgers. Apart from that she made the pretence that there was no other furniture in her cellar than her washing equipment. Each day she would go out with a basket of clean linen, and come back with the dirty linen. It was strange how those confined odours of soiled clothes, bad soap, and thickening water became more nauseating than the odours of wounds and urine had been in the underground labyrinths of the ghetto. But so it was. Doubtless it was largely a subjective thing. The old woman's clientele included some detachments of German personnel, and the closeness to the soiled vests and underpants of the enemy had an intimate horror that their actual presence might not have provoked.

But despite the tumult without, and the strain of waiting within, in these odours hardly to be borne, the nights had a strange sweetness outside all previous experience. The woman and the girl were as close to each other as they had been when trapped in the cellar; but physical pain, at least, was gone. Mila talked. Suddenly the girl was possessed of the need to get her story uttered, exhumed out of the dark places of her heart. And Elsie listened, rapt. Though the whole picture of Mila's background did not build itself up during the next few days, a good deal of it was fairly clear by the time they went forth on the next stage of their journey. Certain terms of reference in Mila's world were outside Elsie's experience. It was only later that she saw them all in some sort of perspective, the town Mila was born in, her parents, the young friends here in Warsaw who had been so profound an influence upon her.

Mila had been born some fifteen years ago in the small town of Pločk, a few hours away north-westward on the Vistula. Her father, David Cossor, had come from a family at once prosperous and pious, the leading Jews in their community, importers of fine goods from Czechoslovakia, Bohemian glass, china, wrought iron. The business had taken him regularly to Prague, where he met Mimi, a creature angelic in her beauty, as she emerged from her daughter's spell-bound recollection of her. After Mila was born, the small

family regularly spent several months in Prague, both to escape the bleak Polish winter and for the sake of its cosmopolitan culture. During these years David became a devoted 'cultural Zionist', as they termed it, a follower of the principles of Achad Ha'am, who envisaged the Jewish Homeland as a large-scale Hebrew University, a torch of civilization lifted high over the desert wastes of the Near East, a beacon to all mankind, as in the centuries gone by. Both in Pločk and Prague, David Cossor had been punctilious about Mila's education, secular and Jewish. When the Germans fell on Poland like a thunderbolt, the Cossors, like many small-town Jews, fled to Warsaw, thinking there was more chance of safety there. Either something would happen to arrest the German advance, or they would be well placed for escape towards the southeast. It was not to be foreseen that the Germans and Russians would crack Poland in two, and that on one side of the line the Jews would be at once trapped like animals in cages. David Cossor had been reading the signs more accurately than many, for he had been for some time converting his possessions into jewels, as Jews had bitterly learned how to do for many generations. When he arrived in Warsaw, he lived in comfort for a little time in an apartment in the Jewish quarter, which only began to be so disastrously overcrowded when the Germans put their Jew schemes into operation late in 1940, as they occupied one country after another and siphoned off the Jewish communities into the ghettos they progressively walled-up and sealed off. At the same time the expropriation began, and the circumstances of people like the Cossors were sorely reduced. First, David got through his stock of currency, then he started selling up the jewels, though he always managed to maintain a reserve of diamonds for whatever desperate emergency might lie ahead. Further, he demanded that this reserve should be divided up and concealed on their three persons, for it was well known that with the flash of an axe the members of a family could be separated from each other, and for ever. Meanwhile, both food and housing conditions deteriorated dreadfully. The conditions were not such that a creature as delicate as Mimi Cossor could exist in them, and late in 1941 she died. Mila had adored her mother, with her delicacy and fragile grace, but also she loved her father, and probably came closer to him, now in the time of his bereavement, than she had hitherto. She did what she could to make up for her mother's loss, and thus brought out in herself certain qualities of resource and courage of which she was already to show evidence in the few days following Elsie's discovery of her, stricken numb though she was by a later calamity.

While his wife was alive in the ghetto, David Cossor had not been very active in the community. He had been on several committees, and had lectured on art and philosophy to students old and young, in whom a fantastic devotion

to the activities of mind and soul developed, the more insistently the trains hooted at the sidings, and the red glare of the ovens winked and flickered from the skies over Treblinka and Auschwitz. During this period Cossor had devoted most of his energies to the task of maintaining the physical and moral fibre of his wife and daughter. After Mimi's death he felt the necessity for manual labour to take his mind off his grief, and enrolled in the sanitary department, in good company, for a number of men distinguished in the arts and sciences were his colleagues. During this period Mila attended a ghetto school, fervidly Zionist in its outlook. Teachers and pupils filled their days and nights with the mystic dream of Zion, while, at the same time, as enlisted *chalutzim*, or pioneers, they studied the practical problems of colonization with the zeal of emigrants who might be receiving their permits and travel-warrants in a week or a month.

When the ghetto rising broke out towards the end of April, David Cossor and his daughter at once descended into the cellars, to do whatever might be asked of them. Cossor did not survive long. He had tried to hide his heart ailment even from himself, and then it destroyed him on the threshold of Post Sixteen, on the day the bomb fell leaving no survivors there, excepting Mila his daughter, and Elsie Silver, of whom neither would have survived if the other had not been by her side.

The days in the washing-cellar were not uneventful. On the third morning, there was a sound beyond the trap-door hidden by the mangle. After the due formalities a man emerged. He took no more notice of these two females already there than if they, too, were bundles of washing. His days and nights in the Warsaw ghetto were at an end. He disappeared. An hour later Sem arrived to take their passport photographs, his equipment hidden in his plumber's bag of tools. He seemed rather pleased with himself. There had been a useful haul of forms from the official printing-works in Cracow. The next day Wolff turned up. He acknowledged the presence of Elsie and Mila with the flicker of an eyelid. Then he disappeared at once. It could be deduced from various directions that the long agony of the Warsaw ghetto was almost over.

Next day another thing happened. This was a screwed-up piece of newspaper that fell out of a washing-basket that old Marta was emptying on to the floor.

"A newspaper!" Elsie said to herself. "Of course! There is an outside world!" She unscrewed the piece of print. Marta went on separating the linen. Mila was polishing the shoes with a piece of sacking, though they would undoubtedly be getting other shoes soon. *Der Krakauer Zeitung*, Elsie read at

the head of the sheet of paper. She read the date, too. May the third, 1943, the day the bomb had fallen. The newspaper was four days old now. Cracow. That was an interesting omen. The profusion of swastikas showed exactly the sort of paper it was. Then her heart started beating furiously. It seemed to her that that happened even before her eye consciously registered the man's name. The man's name was Heinrich Himmler.

At the head of the page there was a respectful paragraph regarding the celebrity's movements. Herr Reichskomissar Himmler had officially pronounced himself well satisfied with the results of his inspection of conditions in Warsaw, the seat of the *Gouvernement Général*. He was on his way to the secret Headquarters of the Führer himself, to deliver his report in person. He had left Warsaw yesterday, that is to say, some four days before Elsie's reading of the news item.

"That's terrific!" she proclaimed, in English. The old woman looked round dubiously, then looked away again. Mila looked up startled, perhaps even a shade frightened.

"Please, Channah!" she murmured under her breath.

Elsie blushed.

"Yes, of course, I know. Stupid of me. I'll be more careful in future."

"Good news?" asked Mila.

"A gentleman I know has left town. His friends will still be around, but it makes everything easier somehow."

"*Mazel tov!*" breathed Mila. "Good luck!" There was no harm in talking Hebrew. The old woman did not know one of them was English, but she must know they were both Jews right enough.

Elsie turned suddenly to Marta.

"When are you bringing us our clothes, old woman?" Her voice was firm and resonant as a schoolmistress. Marta turned her bleary eyes towards Mila.

"What did she say?" she quavered, her hand behind her ear. Mila translated. "Tell the Madame to-night or to-morrow!"

"Mila," requested Elsie. "Tell her that won't do. Tell her to leave her washing alone and go out at once and get our outfits for us!" Mila did as she was bid. The old woman was obviously raising objections. She was busy. She hadn't orders. What about the money? "Tell her we'll look after her!" Elsie exclaimed. She herself went up to the old woman, and turned her shoulders

round. "Do you hear, mother of light and sweetness, you'll be all right." She repeated the words, always in German: "You'll be all right." She made the universal money gesture, the rubbing of the thumb over the fingertips. "Understand?" She clapped the old woman on the back. She chucked her under the chin. The old woman's sooty resistance crumbled. She arched and bridled like a pleased kitten.

"At once?" she wanted to know.

"At once!"

Marta tittered, stooped down for the empty basket, then went off up the stairs, the soles of her boots flapping. She was back some hours later, grinning all over. This was a cup of conspiracy with cream on top. The lady must be no mere Jewish woman, like those wretched creatures you used to see until recently shuffling under the Wall, hollow-eyed, the yellow star on their arms and on their backs. Perhaps she was just political, perhaps even only criminal, nothing more serious than that.

The old woman removed a top layer of soiled linen, and there the stuff was: shoes, stockings, underclothes, a girl's felt hat, a modest hat for a grown-up, two outdoor outfits, a coat and skirt for the woman, a coat, dress, and jumper for the girl. There were two hand-bags, too, even some handkerchiefs, and a few articles for the toilet.

"The stuff doesn't look at all bad," murmured Elsie. "There've been so many people around," she said to herself, "who haven't any use for it any more." She picked up the coat and skirt. The style and material were good. The label was that of the Galeries Lafayette in Lyons. "Lyons!" she breathed. "Ah well, Lyons!" She shrugged her shoulders. One had learned a lot in three weeks of Warsaw. One had, for instance, bandaged a woman who had plaited a gold chain inside the leather handle of a cheap hand-bag. Another woman had sewn some jewels behind the buttons of her coat, covering them over with a little padding and lining. Elsie examined the buttons of the two coats. Her own were hollow, and could take a fair share of the jewels she now carried in the bag suspended from her waist. Mila's buttons could be adapted quite easily, too. "Altogether more convenient!" she murmured. "So long as we always remember to change buttons if ever we change coats!"

Then she reached for the underclothes. "What are they like?" she mused. But suddenly her fingertips recoiled. "That's all right! That's fine!" she said aloud. Mila opened her eyes.

"I've got to be a German woman of good class, my dear, till we get away. And to be it, I must *feel* it. You, too, must feel Polish, a well-bred little Polish

girl.”

“Yes, Channah, of course.”

“So we must get these things washed at once,” decided Elsie. “That’s one luxury we *can* allow ourselves in this guest-house. Tell her, Mila!” Mila told the old woman. The old woman nodded. It looked as if the old woman would stand on her head, if Elsie told her to stand on her head. “In the meantime, we must see how this stuff fits,” decided Elsie. “We’ll try it on.”

Mila nodded. She looked at her own things. They were too simple to go wrong. But the lining had come away from Elsie’s coat, a pocket was ripped, the skirt was too long, there were several bits and pieces that made it just not quite right, perhaps added by a later hand since it had been acquired from Lyons.

“It’s not *right!*” said Elsie. The suspicion of a tear was in her eye. She felt more helpless and frustrated than she had felt with a mile or two of the ghetto Wall around her, for then she felt nothing at all. “I can’t be a big-shot in this thing.”

“I can make it *right*,” said Mila. “She will give me a needle and cotton.”

For the next hour or two, Marta washed the underclothes, Mila worked away smartly with the needle and cotton, thimble and scissors. As soon as Marta had gone upstairs with her money, Mila set to work stowing away their jewels inside and behind the coat-buttons. She made a very neat job of it.

“You’re wonderful,” said Elsie. “Where did you learn it?”

“My mother had golden fingers,” breathed Mila.

Sem came once more, about eight o’clock on the morning of the seventh and last day in the washing-cellar. As ever, he had his bag of plumber’s tools with him. Beneath the tools, he carried the documents, inside a grubby envelope wrapped up with a sheaf of spanners and pliers in a dirty length of cloth. Elsie and Mila were wearing their new outfits. A slight deference of hand to heart indicated his awareness of their improved appearances. The Polish manners they talk of, thought Elsie, are not confined to lieutenant-colonels. He handed the papers over. They were made out in the names of Lydia Radbruch, of Frankfort, and Maria, her daughter, unimpeachably Aryan, doubtless, as far as the records went back.

“From now on you’re Maria,” said Elsie. “Understand, Maria?”

“Yes, mama, I understand. Some day I’ll be Mila again. . . .”

“Of course, my child.”

There was obviously something more Mila wanted to say. Elsie waited.

“But whatever I call you,” muttered Mila, “you’ll always be the second mama.” She had her eyes on the ground. She did not say easily things she felt deeply.

“Yes,” whispered Elsie. She wanted to say more than that; she wanted to say that no words anyone had ever said to her had made her feel happier and prouder. But she was tongue-tied. She turned at length to Sem. “Have you worked out the train?” she asked.

“Train to Cracow is ten o’clock,” he said. “You go straight to railway station, yes? Better that German ladies should not take tram, and taxis is only four in all Warsaw.” He ticked them off on his fingers, with a smile—one, two, three, four. “Better you take ricksha. In Cracow I have address for you, nice people, will look after you good.”

“You mean we go into hiding again? But why? We’re Germans, aren’t we? We’ve got our papers! Why can’t we go to a hotel till we work out the next stage of the journey?”

He looked at her curiously, and rather pitifully. The woman had some naïve ideas.

“Even with real papers, they take people away in a moment, like this”—he snapped his fingers—“if they want to take away. It is danger everywhere, but is most dangerous in hotel. You give papers to porter, porter take papers to police. And finish. Understand?”

“Yes, I understand.” She felt like a lump of wood. “You have an address, then, in Cracow?”

“Listen.” He put his hand to his mouth, and looked up the stairway, as if to make sure old Marta was not eavesdropping. “The address is St. Philipp Street, seven,” he whispered, “by St. Florian’s Church. Say again.” She repeated the words. “St. Philipp Street, seven.” “On ground floor. Door on right. Wait.” He thought a moment. “You not speak Polish, *pani*?”

“I speak Polish,” said Mila.

He turned to her. “Whoever comes to the door,” he said in Polish, “you ask if Mr. Antek Rangowski lives there. If he comes, he is a man with spectacles and a black beard with a point, like this. Then you say: ‘I have come in answer to advertisement to buy a fur coat.’ He will then ask you inside. You go in after him. Repeat all that, *prosze pani*.” She repeated the instructions.

“Excellent,” he said. He turned to Elsie again. “The girl will explain,” he said. “Is better you go now. And me”—he smiled—“I stay here to look at taps. Old woman!” he called up the stairs. “Make ready now!”

“It is ready!” the old woman called down the stairs. “They’re not going to be all day, are they?” She was getting impatient.

“Good-bye, Sem! And thank you!” Elsie said.

“*Dowidzenia, panu!*” said Mila. “Good-bye!”

They shook hands. “Good-bye! Good fortune!” said Sem. He turned and belaboured a tap with a hammer. If nothing was wrong with the tap now, there would be quite soon. Elsie and Mila climbed the stairs and entered Marta’s ground-floor for the first time. It was not dark, yet the things in the room were in a sort of dark haze, the unmade bed along the wall, the table, the chair, the plaster Madonna in a corner, the smudged bride and bridegroom in a frame. Their vision was directed to the window and the door and the things that might lie beyond them.

“Wait!” said the old woman. She picked up a basin of dirty water, went up to the window, opened it, and looked sharply left and right. Then she flung the water into the street. Then she turned again. “Now go!” Then the old crone’s voice softened. “The Mother of God go with you!”

“Good-bye!” they both said, went out along the front passage and for one moment stood framed in the threshold, hesitating, as one might hesitate on a beach before venturing a foot into the incalculable sea. Then Elsie banged the door behind her. They turned their heads sharp left, as by agreement, for on their right, not many yards away, was the Wall, the Wall of the ghetto, that dark and brilliant and timeless place. On their left stretched the city, which was like a gigantic time-bomb that might blow up in their faces if they made one false move.

They intended to walk warily.

The street was Lučka. The battle seemed to be holding its breath before a final horrific assault. But perhaps you could not call it a battle when only one side had the steel and fire, the other having not much more than their fingernails. There were not many people about. Apart from going to their jobs and coming back from them, and manœuvring on the daily scrounge for food on the furtive black-market corners, it was safer even for the ‘Aryan’ Pole to stay indoors. The Germans shot first and asked questions afterwards, and both police and soldiers were free with rifle-butts and hob-nailed boots.

A few doors away there was a couple of children on a doorstep, solemnly

snipping away at a piece of cloth; beyond, a lanky woman wheeled a barrow cluttered with valueless oddments, and two old men stared up listlessly following the reconnoitings of a plane in the middle sky. Lučka led into Wronia. There was more movement there. A tank waddled along the street like a hippopotamus that had emerged from a marsh and had gone out adventuring. A few blocks north an armoured car up against the pavement disgorged a crew of soldiers in grey-green. Now and again the siege guns boomed, like metal doors slamming. Nearer at hand machine-guns rattled. It was curious how slight a protection the coat from Lyons felt against all those things. The legs were hollow, Elsie realized with dismay, like cardboard cylinders. If something heavy suddenly pushed you in front or behind, the legs would give at the knee-joints. She looked sideways down at the girl. The head was up in the air. There was a flush in the pale cheeks. Her own words came back to her. "We won't shuffle along, Mila, as if we're apologizing for something." Her chin thrust up. She squared her shoulders. After all, as the Jewish wife of General von Brockenburg, she had had some training in coolness and courage.

The way was sharp left into Wronia. From round the corner of Panska an S.S. man appeared and approached them. His face was familiar, those eyes, that chin. Where had she met him before? The answer came to her at once. She had met him all over Germany, in the days when the word 'Nazi' and the thing 'Nazi' was on no one's tongue among all those turbulent millions, excepting for the tongues of a few beer-garden louts. She had loved that chin and those eyes, and for their sake had elected to stay on in Germany, forswearing all else. They had belonged to her lover and her husband. Then, one day, looking out from Herr Wolff's window into a street in the Warsaw ghetto, she had seen an S.S. man with those same features. . . .

At that moment the S.S. man reached them. Mila was not in his path, but he took a half side-step to send her flying against the wall. The blood roared in Elsie's temples. The S.S. man had become something more than all Nazis and all Germans in general, he had become a specific storm-trooper, the same who had impaled the Jewish baby upon the spike. The blood roared, the fingers arched like talons. In one moment, now as she stood in Wronia, she would have thrown herself upon the man, and clawed his eyes out, as she would have done upon that earlier occasion under Wolff's window, if two strangers had not hurled themselves from the darkness of an alley and snatched her away from the unspeakable and splendid folly.

Once again her hand stayed. Her wrist was grasped by a hand astonishingly strong, considering that it was a small girl's hand. She looked down into Mila's eyes, large with comprehension, severe with reproof. Her arm fell. The

sweat gushed from her forehead. No harm threatened, for the man was ignorantly swaggering along, and by now more than a block away.

“I’m sorry,” Elsie’s lips went. “It won’t happen again.” She meant from now on she would not let Germany havoc her, as it had done twice lately. The first time it would not have mattered, for she had been alone, accountable to no one. Now she had an overriding responsibility. She had come close now to destroying not only herself. She would *use* Germany, her knowledge of the place, the people, the speech. She and the girl might be captured and shot in less than half an hour; or their fantastic impossible adventure might have a successful issue months, or years, from now. But she would never again be shocked into panic by Germany. She would be impervious to it.

They walked on towards a main street down which the loaded trams clanged and crawled. She was doing well, she thought; she was putting up a fine show of casualness. But, after all, she had been an actress of a sort, sometimes better off the stage than on. Mila, however, had not; she was only fifteen; she had been through hell for several years. She felt proud of her, it was a first-rate performance. She had the feeling that a bald, middle-aged man nearby was eyeing them suspiciously. Was he thinking Mila, and even she herself, didn’t look as Aryan as they should? Was he a genuine *Volksdeutscher*, one of those who had sprung up like fungi overnight when the Germans had marched in, and had since then been more rabidly Nazi than the Nazis? Or perhaps he was merely one of those men who mentally undress every personable woman they meet? He blinked, and turned his face away. At the next corner a ricksha stood up against the pavement. A blear-eyed, elderly man sat behind the contraption, hunched over the pedals. “Come!” commanded Elsie. They strode up to the ricksha. “*Zum Hauptbahnhof!*” she demanded. “*Schnell!*” The man looked left and right. What was he looking around for? “All right! Get in, both of you!” he growled. He did not like Germans. Possibly, too, there was some restriction against taking more than one passenger. He clanged his bell, and the thing turned round into Jerozolimskie Allee. The railway tracks were on their left. On their right they trundled past bombed buildings, past buildings they were speedily putting up again, past seedy men in morning suits and smart German officers gleaming like furniture polish. Some ten minutes later they were at the station square. The station buildings, so much as had survived the bombing, were new and yellow and ornate. A large hotel in the same style faced it, the Hotel Polonia, firmly announcing itself as *Nur für Deutsche*. Elsie and Mila dismounted, and Elsie tipped the man lavishly. The man lifted his head, stared into Elsie’s eyes, the shoulders slumped again, and with one sharp twirl at his bell, the contraption was away.

There were a frightening number of Germans in various types of uniform in the station approach. Probably there were quite as many, at least as vigilant, not in uniform. The next few minutes were going to be a little hair-raising. Could anybody with half an eye see that these clothes weren't made for them? Didn't their bodies, impregnated with the odours of the ghetto cellars, carry about with them an odour they could never lose till their dying day, though they bathed in vats of scent? Could the Germans fail to see they both had that impalpable Jewish something . . . where is it, what is it? Is it a phantom curve of the nostrils? Didn't Willy say it was the way the skull fitted on the neck-bones?

She clenched her fists. "Bilge!" she said aloud, in English. "Smile, Maria!" she demanded, in German. "You funny little monkey, smile!" She tweaked Mila's ear. A wan smile spread over Mila's face. She could hardly be expected to smile quite so soon with all her teeth. "That's the way!" she encouraged her. "You remember when I came to little Jan's christening and Uncle Ignaz sat in the ghoulish?"

"It was not ghoulish, mama, it was *barszcz!*" Mila was warming to it.

"No! Ghoulish!"

"*Barszcz!*"

They were approaching the ticket office now. The discussion looked like becoming quite animated, when a German patrolman on railway duty came over to them. He was a big fellow in a big helmet, his tightly drawn belt making him look a little pregnant. His leggings shone like glass.

"Papers!" he demanded.

(This was the moment. Sweet and easy, now, like a kitten in a basket.)

"*Mit Vergnügen!*" she fluted. "With pleasure!" He looked up. She handed over both sets of papers.

"Are you from here?" he asked. The accent was Hamburg, wasn't it? There is such a thing as luck, after all.

"*Aber, bitte!*" she begged. He looked up inquiringly. "Frankfort," she corrected him. "But I've spent most of my life in Hamburg." (Carry the attack. Never wait for it.) She smiled charmingly. "That's where you're from, isn't it?"

"*Ja, gnädige Frau!*" (*Gnädige Frau!* Did you get that?) "And the little one? Your daughter?" (He wasn't even checking up on *her* papers.)

“Yes! A naughty young woman, too! She’s been arguing my head off! It was ghoulish, Herr Unteroffizier, not *barszcz*, wasn’t it? Come along now, Maria!” (Don’t overdo it. Enough is as good as a feast.) She reached her hand forward for the papers, replaced them in her hand-bag, and waited a moment, so that he should not suspect that he was being rushed into, or out of, anything.

“*Guten tag, gnädige Frau! Fräulein!*” The lower mouth dickered for a moment, then, he clicked his heels, bowed, and walked off. Elsie’s heart felt coiled and tense inside her, like a watch-spring; any moment it might kick and jump loose. She could not speak for a full minute. Then:

“We’ll get our tickets, Maria!” she brought out. “Then we’ll find some sort of meal.”

“Yes, mama,” agreed Mila dutifully. “And I won’t argue any more. It was ghoulish.” The tension hardly distressed Mila at all. That was fine. She had had three or four years of it. She had grown tough. They threaded their way through the mob of peasants, soldiers, and small officials that milled round and round the station. They went over to the ticket office.

“Two for Cracow,” demanded Elsie, with the hauteur that might be expected from a German lady, above all a German lady in Poland. “First Class.” The clerk handed the tickets over. So, in the old days, she might have bought two tickets for a movie on the Kurfürstendamm. “Now, Maria, dear,” she fluted. “We’ll go across and have a nice breakfast at the Polonia. Come, my dear.”

They went across. The commissaire opened the door for them respectfully. The *Herrenvolk* was buying its German papers at the bookstall, taking its ease in the chairs of the lobby. It was a rather faded place, billowy with brown plush. Aspidistras and palms gloomed disconsolately in large pots behind bamboo tables. There was a discreet gallery above the main dining-room.

“How charming!” murmured Elsie. “And look!” At a table close by a gentleman was helping himself to a dish of four fried eggs. They had fried eggs, quite tolerable coffee, and fairly white bread. A rich cream tart was being displayed. “Could we have that?” asked Mila incredulously. “All that, and another one!” Elsie assured her. “And I shall have cigarettes. Cigarettes, waiter!” she demanded, not at all sure it was her own voice making so peremptory a noise. He brought a packet of Mewy, the good sort. It was all very expensive, but money need not worry them, for the present, at least. There was no more serious a misadventure than a fit of hiccups, for it was a long time since Mila had had so princely a meal. “Keep the change!” demanded Elsie. The waiter almost touched the ground with his forehead. “*Danke, vielen Dank,*

gnädige Frau.” One might almost have thought the lady to be the wife of a high-ranking officer.

There was a cursory control at the ticket barrier, but Frau Radbruch and her daughter went through to the train without the slightest difficulty. The third-class carriages were crowded to suffocation; they contained nothing but Poles. On this train all the first-class carriages were labelled: for Germans only. She saw a carriage rather emptier than the others, though a large man lifting his luggage to the rack seemed to be big enough to take four places.

“Up here, Maria!” Elsie called through the open corridor window. Mila climbed the steps and moved along the corridor. By that time the large man had sat down, and the two people sitting facing each other in the further corners became visible. They were German officers sitting upright, hands on knees, like Karnak gods with eyeglasses. There was a moment of panic, but not more than that. German officers (she told herself). That’s one type of animal that need not frighten me. Not *me*, that is to say, the Frau General, the one-time Frau General, to be exact. She planked herself down in the empty corner-seat before someone else took it. There was room for Mila in the opposite corner. The time for departure came. The train tarried. There was a hold-up somewhere. Perhaps some Jew had been found trying to make a getaway.

“I’ll have my magazine, darling. It’s in your bag. Thank you.” She spoke in her most beautiful German. Mila took out her magazine. They settled down to while the minutes away till the train got off. The train lurched slightly, the couplings clanked, the wheels were turning. They were leaving Warsaw. She turned to look at Mila’s face. The eyes were distended wide with incredulity. The girl raised her hands to her stomach. Elsie knew what was going on inside her. The wheels were turning round and round, as they were turning inside her, too. She hoped they would not be sick. It was actually unwise to have that rich cream tart. They were out of the station now. That was the ghetto northward, whatever was left of it, a church or two, some warehouses, some blocks of flats not yet pulverized. She saw with dismay the large tear form in the corner of Mila’s eye. It was not to be wondered at that the child’s heart was stricken. There lay the adored mother with the golden fingers, her father, her friends, the burning pallid boys and girls, whose monument of loose brick grew higher, broader, more shapeless, from hour to hour.

But a little girl named Maria Radbruch, on a visit to Cracow, must not weep because she leaves the noisy city of Warsaw behind. Elsie took out her handkerchief, and screwed a corner into a point.

“These awful smuts!” said Elsie. “Let me take it out for you! There now!” That was fine. The smuts gave no more trouble after that. They were passing through the drab suburb of Wola now. The town dwindled behind them, the bombardment ceased like a rundown clock, the planes over the airfield at Okecie, like snuffed candles, died in the sky. The large man did accounts. One of the officers filed his fingernails. The other stared out of the window. Now and again they addressed a few words to each other, but they were not talkative.

One hour, two hours went by. The train chuffed and chugged over the flat green miles of young oats, barley, maize. On the edge of the scruffy villages the black swine rooted and charged in little inconsequent sorties. There had been rain. A hundred pools, running into each other like globules of mercury, reflected the drooping willows and the pale sky. Suddenly the landscape clotted into forest, league upon league of forest. Then as suddenly the train was out of forest again, leaving it behind like a wall of black mist. There was a restaurant-car on the train, *nur für Deutsche*, of course. Elsie thought it better they should go and have a meal, though their breakfast could have kept them going for days. The big man had finished his accounts and was taking a distressingly affable interest in Mila. It was doubtless only an approach to a *tête-à-tête* with the girl’s mother, who was really a pleasant handful of woman, now you had finished the accounts and you could sit back and give her the once-over. But it was a relief when the man came round and said luncheon was being served.

There was a pleasant *Moselle* on the list of wines. It was delightful. “You have a sip, too, Maria,” Elsie said. “It will do you no harm at all.” Then she lowered her voice. “We’ll stay over our coffee as long as possible,” she said. “And when we get back, we’ll be awfully drowsy, won’t we? There’s no need to encourage the gentleman, I think.”

“No, mama,” agreed Mila.

“We’re doing very well indeed, Maria. It will be all right even if there is a control. But I do not think there will be.”

“If there will be, there will be.” The girl had lived too long on a razor-edge of chance to worry overmuch. There was quite a vigorous control at Kielce, but it did not concern them. A larger consignment of food-smugglers than usual had boarded the train at preceding stations. There were, for instance, hefty lumps of lard stuck above the wheels; there were flitches of bacon hanging from string outside the windows, ready to be dropped or raised again as exigencies of inspection demanded. The excitement died down, and Elsie and Mila sank back into their seats.

“Sleepy, Maria?” murmured Elsie. “Close your eyes, darling. There now. I’ll have a nap myself.” Soon she was sound asleep. She did not awaken again till she felt Mila tugging at her sleeve. “It’s Cracow, mama!” the girl said. “We’re nearly there!” She blinked and yawned, and gazed on the panorama ahead of her as if she had seen it a hundred times before—the pyramid of the Kosciuszko memorial plateau on her right, straight ahead the spire of the Marianski Church, and on her left the great hulk of the Wawel Castle.

They had covered one stage of their journey. But the journey had been only in space. In terms of danger they might as well be nearer to it, as further away. Danger might fell them to earth five minutes from now, or they might, for any length of time, pass through and beyond it, as easily as you pass through the spray of a waterfall.

“Have you finished your magazine, darling?” Elsie asked. “Then bring it with you.”

“*Guten Abend*,” the three men in the carriage said respectfully, with a click of heels.

She flashed a smile to them.

“*Guten Abend*. Come, Maria.” They came down upon the platform and walked towards the station exit. The place was crowded, but nobody showed the least interest in them. “You see, Maria,” she said. “We’re in Cracow.” The suggestion was that things, after all, were not terribly difficult. Perhaps the next stage of the journey would not be so terribly difficult, either. Then suddenly she remembered that for Mila it was not the first time she had been in Cracow. Was the child remembering those earlier visits? Perhaps she was, perhaps she wasn’t. Mila’s next words were clearly designed to let her ‘mama’ know that her mind, too, was devoted to the solution of immediate problems.

“Are you looking forward to your new fur coat, mama?” she asked.

“I should like the squirrel,” murmured Elsie, “and bless you.”

II

The usual droves of drab motor-lorries were packed in the station square, and over against the south pavement was a shining magnificence of black Mercedes cars. It might almost have been the Wilhelmstrasse itself. I hope, Elsie said to herself wryly, that our friend, Heinrich Himmler, hasn’t taken it into his head to pay a state visit to Cracow again. No, no, she assured herself, a dozen Mercedes cars don’t make a Himmler. Then another name presented itself to her mind. Frank. Who had told her that he was the head of the

Gouvernement Général, here in Cracow? She suddenly realized that Herr Frank might well have told her so himself, for he had received the appointment quite early in the War, and she had met him once or twice in Berlin at musical parties after his appointment. He was very fond of music. He played the piano quite passably well himself. He was a tall, dark, cadaverous fellow, with a heavy jaw. She had not found him attractive in Berlin. They did not speak well of him in the Warsaw ghetto.

They had turned right into a street now. She looked up and saw its name. Pawia Street. She heard footsteps coming close and quick behind. It was all she could do to prevent herself switching her head round to see was it Karl Heinz Frank. The donkey she was! As if Herr Frank would be slouching up and around the station approach in case Elsie Brockenburg turned up at Cracow with false papers!

What had they turned right for? Perhaps St. Philipp Street was left? She suddenly realized how desperately urgent it was to get to St. Philipp Street, number seven, where the man with spectacles and a black pointed beard was waiting to give them a hand, the man Rangowski, a ghost, a shadow, with no feature except the black beard. But he was the *contact*, the next link in the chain. It was strange, here in this town. We must get to St. Philipp Street at once. The day was getting on. There was a tinge of pink in the clouds towards the west. A German soldier came round a corner, stalking towards them. No, no, you mustn't drag Mila into this doorway beside you. You mustn't! You mustn't! The soldier was passing them.

“*Bitte schon*,” she asked. “Can you tell me where St. Philipp Street is? Near St. Florian's Church, I think!”

He saluted respectfully.

“*Ja, gnädige Frau!*” He turned and gave exact instructions. “Go straight up Pawia till you get to Kurniki, then turn left into the Platz. Cross the square, and you can't miss it.”

“Thank you, *Junge!*” she said. The young man was quite flattered by the smile the nice German lady gave him. They went on their way. Ah yes, here was the Church, only a couple of minutes away. This was Kurniki Street. Turn left till you reach the square—across the square now, and this is St. Philipp Street. There, across the cobbled roadway, thirty yards away was number seven. “We're there,” Elsie whispered. “Do you see, Maria?” They crossed the street, entered the house, quite a good middle-class house, it seemed, up a few steps to the ground-floor. Here was the door, the one on the right. There was a neat little brass knocker. Elsie knocked. There was no reply. There was no

point in knocking so diffidently. She had only come to buy a fur coat. She knocked again, more loudly. This time she heard footsteps after a few seconds. A small dark man opened the door. He was wearing no jacket, but the rest of his attire was good and neat, well-polished shoes, well-pressed trousers, a good quality shirt.

“Yes?” he asked, opening his eyes. He had clearly not been expecting any visitors.

It was Mila who spoke, and in Polish, as arranged.

“Can you tell me, please, if Mr. Rangowski is at home, Mr. Antek Rangowski?” she said.

The man turned his eyes from Elsie to the girl.

“What?” He put his hand to his ear as if he had not heard properly.

“Can you tell me if Mr. Antek Rangowski is at home?”

He looked sharply from the girl to the woman.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “there must be some mistake. Excuse me.” He wasted no more time, and shut the door.

They stood there and gasped, as if a jugful of cold water had been thrown in their faces.

“We’ve got it right, haven’t we?” said Elsie. “He did say number seven, didn’t he, the ground floor, the door on the right?”

“Yes, yes,” Mila assured her.

“You said it after him. It was number seven, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, number seven.”

“What can have happened?” asked Elsie. She was speaking in as casual a voice as possible. She must not let the girl see how alarmed she was.

“Perhaps . . . Mr. Rangowski . . . has gone?” suggested Mila. Perhaps he had, in fact, been found out and taken away.

“Yes, he left,” agreed Elsie. She looked helplessly towards the other door, the door on the left.

“I don’t think we ought to stand about too long,” murmured Mila. The exigencies of underground behaviour seemed to come easy to her.

“Perhaps we’ll try the other door,” said Elsie. “Maybe he *did* make a mistake.”

Mila shook her head. "I don't think he'd make a mistake like that." Then she acted quickly. "All right! We'll ask!" Perhaps there *had* been a mistake, but clearly she thought it most unlikely. She walked over to the other door, and pressed a bell-push. The bell shrilled harshly. A woman came to the door, tall and severe, in black clothes. A pair of pince-nez bristled on her nose.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Can you tell me, please, if Mr. Rangowski lives here?"

"Not here," the woman said. Without an instant's delay she closed the door in Mila's face.

Mila turned. Elsie was beside her. "Let's go away at once," said Mila. They went through the front entrance and out into the street again. They turned right. They might as well turn right as left. Then they turned left. How narrow and winding the street was, like a village street. How old the houses were! The whole town seemed old and pious, like a nun. In every second house there was a niche holding a Madonna. Tower beyond church-tower rose above the steep roofs. How quiet it all was! No, it was not really quiet, it was only quiet in comparison with Warsaw. There were cars hooting as they approached corners. There were boys ringing bicycle-bells, horses and carts clanging over cobbles. Here was a tram coming trundling down behind them, the driver stamping his foot on the gong to get them to the pavement.

Where have we got to? How far have we travelled? Are we still in the same place, though we've moved from Warsaw to Cracow?

I mustn't let Mila become aware of this horrible emptiness at the pit of my stomach. I wonder how she's feeling? I wonder if she's feeling as lost as I am? (She looked sideways down into Mila's face.) If she is, she doesn't let it get her down. I hope my face doesn't give too much away. What a wonderful child it is! I could take her in my arms and hug her till she had no breath left, even here, in this street. I mustn't let myself get too emotional about her. It won't help either of us. What a first-rate little human creature it is! How infinitely more real and good and reliable she is than any other person I've ever cared for in all my life before. . . .

It was as if the girl had some idea of the pleasant words that were saying themselves in Elsie's mind. She looked up into Elsie's eyes and smiled.

It isn't very easy not to cry. . . . But of course we're both under a certain amount of strain, aren't we?

Elsie reached her hand out to Mila's and squeezed it; Mila's hand squeezed back. Then the hands went apart again. *Who is it that's helping who to get*

away? That's what I want to know. I suppose we can say we're both useful to each other. They had followed the tramlines into a large square. This was obviously the centre of the town. At one corner was a tall church with two towers. In the middle was a building with arches and arcades, which seemed to be a sort of market, overflowing in stalls and handcarts on to the cobbles. A great many cars and lorries were parked against walls and pavements and nosing their way towards the narrow exits from the square. Mila must remember this, thought Elsie, if she remembers anything. It was as if the girl heard her thoughts.

"This is the Rynek," she breathed. "She bought me a toy sledge on one of those stalls. I fed the pigeons just nearby. There are just as many pigeons here now as then." She stopped. Then suddenly the sound of a trumpet lifted itself high up above the roofs. "Look!" said Mila, "do you see him?" She pointed to one of the two towers of the church at the corner of the square. On a covered gallery a man stood, a trumpet at his lips. The melody lasted some thirty seconds, then ceased. Then the man turned and walked along the gallery and played the same melody again. Then he played it still once more. "I remember now," Mila said. She swallowed, then went on. "Daddy told me about it. For hundreds and hundreds of years, every hour of every day, a man has stood with a trumpet——" But she could not go further. "Shall we have some coffee now?" she asked.

"Of course we will. Why didn't we think of it before? No, not coffee, tea. You can have coffee. I'll have a nice cup of tea." (A nice cup of tea, she repeated to herself. I might be a Lancashire housewife, with a bit of a headache.) Not far off was a hotel, the Deutscher Hof, with a café attached. "That looks all right," said Elsie.

"It was called the *hejnal*," exclaimed Mila.

"What was?"

"That tune. Yes it looks a nice café." They went in and sat down and gave their order. There were newspapers around, stretched out on bamboo frames. The radio was blaring out the tale of German victories on all fronts. There were officers and business-men about, with their local girl-friends, presumably *volksdeutsche*. It looked like a *gemütlich* little place in Berlin, on the Nollendorfplatz. They sipped their cups, and Elsie smoked. For Germans only, she said to herself. How long were they going to get away with it? Was there a chance of going to a small hotel and spending at least one night there, till somehow they managed to achieve some sort of contact to make up for the one that had failed them? After all, there must be just as many people here as in Warsaw who hated the Germans—that is to say practically everybody,

excepting for these neither-fish-nor-flesh *volksdeutsche*. It seemed an even more religious town than Warsaw, that might mean the hatred was even deeper. But how did you get into touch with anyone? The moment you breathed a word into anyone's ear, you were totally in his hands. What was to prevent you choosing the one wrong person in twenty? So what happened if you went to a small hotel . . . it didn't matter whether it was a small one or a big one . . . you gave up your papers to the porter. What chance was there of your ever seeing them again?

You couldn't sit here all evening. You mustn't look as if you hadn't anything to do or anywhere to go. Besides, the day was drawing in fast. When was curfew? Above all, one must not be around after curfew. She observed Mila was looking at the clock and looking over to the sky. The same thought was in Mila's head. It might be another hour to curfew, hardly more. "*Herr ober!*" she called out. "*Zahlen bitte!*" The waiter came over, she paid. "Come, Maria!" she said. They were out in the square again. There were too many people in the square. They turned into a narrow street, Anna Street, the name was. Something must happen, God. Something must happen. Not for my sake, for Mila's. I don't chase you around often, God, but it would be a good thing if you did something for this child. She's had a pretty tough time. So have her parents, too, her family, her friends. So have all Jews. Make something happen.

The thing that happened within seconds was black and terrifying. It happened some twenty yards further down the street, on the opposite pavement. On both sides of the street pedestrians and traffic were moving this way and that. Elsie and Mila, on the right-hand pavement, were not aware of the black car cruising down the street, not till it made a sudden swerve over to the left side of the street with a loud squeal of brakes. Suddenly the rear left-hand door was flung open, two men, gleaming like pitch, sprang out and pounced upon a young man walking up the street, his arm in a girl's arm. In hardly two seconds more, the young man was bundled into the rear of the car, and it sprang forward with a roar. The effect was exactly as if an enormous spider had hurtled forth from its web, and with a terrifying flail of legs had pounced upon a wretched fly, and hurtled back into its web again, to squeeze the thing into juice at its leisure. Elsie stopped. The girl stopped. Everyone in the street stopped in their traces, as if they had been pulled up by a wire stretched taut across the street at knee-level.

Almost in that same moment, Elsie became aware of another young man isolated some two or three feet away from her. He was only about seventeen years old, but he was dark and needed a shave. She saw with startling clarity

the fuzz of hair on his cheeks. He had some textbooks and exercise books under his arm. He was obviously a student. His eyes were like small black pools over which burned a blue haze of flame, like methylated spirits. The flame was hatred. She had never seen hatred so desperate in all her life before.

The young man hated Nazis and all things Nazi with a passion perhaps greater than that with which he had ever loved God. If he so hated Nazis, surely there must be kindness in his heart for Jews, the people whom the Nazis so hated that they sought to wipe them from the face of the earth. She made up her mind, with something of the instantaneity with which the Gestapo men had swooped upon the youth on the other side of the street and carried him off.

In a moment she was by his side.

"I beg you," she whispered, with frightful urgency. "We're Jews, this little girl and I. We're alone here. Help us." Even as she started speaking, her own words ringing in her ears, she saw the mistake she had made. She did not need the young man's swift recoil, the suspicion thickening in his eyes. She was talking German, the hated speech. He took her for some sort of *provocateur*. She flung herself round to Mila.

"Maria," she said. "Speak Polish. Tell him."

"We're from Warsaw!" the girl said under her breath. "They've killed all my people. We've nowhere to go. Help us!"

He stared at Mila for some moments, his eyes burrowing, it seemed, into her skull. Then he turned away. "Follow!" he said, as he turned. They let him walk on several yards, turning their attention for some moments to a shop window, though they had not the faintest idea what was behind the glass. Then they turned their heads again. The young man had his hands behind him. One held a missal. With one finger of the other hand he summoned them to follow. They went after him to the bottom of the street, then he turned right into a broad, tree-lined boulevard. They followed. There was a church looking out on the trees, the Church of St. Anna. He turned in through the church portals. After a minute or so they entered. It was dark. The windows were small, the lamps had not been lit yet, only the sanctuary light shone at the high altar, a few candles gleamed at the side altars, a few tapers drooped before the images of saints. They looked round for the young man, but the darkness had swallowed him. There were two or three old women and a girl at the altar nearest the door.

"This way!" Elsie whispered. They walked down the central aisle towards a part of the church which was quite deserted. In the north transept was a leather curtain; doubtless, beyond the curtain was the vestry. They sat down

and waited, their heads bowed down upon the back of the bench in front of them. Five minutes later the curtain was pushed back and a priest emerged. He walked over into the nave, across to the high altar, where he genuflected, and stood for a few moments in meditation. Then he came slowly down the central aisle, seeking to make out the features of the strange woman and girl. He paused briefly alongside them, and scrutinized them; then he continued down the nave, till he came up to the cluster of worshippers at the side altar. There, once more, he paused for some moments, as if to make sure there was no one among them he distrusted. Then, finally, he returned to the chapel in the north transept, and stood by the side altar, half-turned to them. He waited, doing nothing at all. It was clear it was for them he waited. If they craved his help, they must go to him. Elsie touched Mila's arm. "Come!" she whispered. They moved slowly across the nave to the transept-chapel, and went up to him. This time she remembered the matter of languages.

"Tell the Father, Maria, I cannot speak Polish," she murmured. "Tell him we are Jewish, and we beg him to help us." Mila translated.

"Who is the lady then? What language does she speak?" the priest asked.

"She is German. I am Polish."

"Where have you come from?"

"We escaped from the Warsaw ghetto a week ago."

"The Warsaw ghetto!" the priest repeated. Already the words had a vibration of terror and splendour. They were a password. They exerted a claim. "Come!" He held back the *portière*, opened the door, and they entered. Yes, this was the vestry, with its smell of incense, its heaps of missals, its cupboards and chests, the church garments hanging on pegs. An electric lamp hung from the ceiling. Over against a large, carved chest the priest was standing, a tall man with deep-set eyes, cadaverous cheeks, a jaw at once strong and fine. "I am Father Josef," he said. He pointed to two chairs, and seated himself on the edge of the chest. Elsie and Mila sat down. Automatically Elsie's eyes turned towards the door, "No," the priest said. "Tell the lady we cannot be overheard in here. You are not related, are you?"

"No, Father. We have only known each other a week or ten days. But she is my mother, according to our papers."

"What sort of papers have you?"

"*Reichsdeutsche*, Father."

He thought a moment. "Yes, I see," he said. "It requires courage. But to be

Jewish, and not to die, requires courage. Where do you come from, my child?" He was weighing them both up carefully.

"I was born in Ploçk. We came to live in Warsaw after the War broke out. My mother and father died there. This lady is my only friend in all the world." She spoke gravely, giving the facts without pathos.

How did you come to be in Cracow? Were you given no address to go to?"

"These are our papers," she said. "They were given to us by a young man, Sem." She told him what had happened in St. Philipp Street.

"Saint Philipp Street," the priest took up at once, "number seven. Ah yes." He sighed deeply. "We are in God's hands. It can happen to anyone at any hour of the day or night." If he still had any doubts at all about the credibility of the strangers, the mention of the last contact at St. Philipp Street had finally dispelled them. "We might as well be dead at once, as falter in this work out of meanness and cowardice. Well, children"—his voice became brisk and practical—"there is no time to waste. We must think of something to do with you, for a day or two, at least. But there is one thing I must know. Why did you leave Warsaw? You could have hidden just as well in Warsaw as you could be hidden here—and Warsaw is a bigger town."

"We wanted to get on our way," said Mila. "We want to find our way to a port."

"A *port!*" repeated the priest. "My child, my child!" It was as if they wanted to get to the sun or the moon.

"Yes, we know it will be hard," the girl said. "But we hope God will be with us. He has been with us so far."

"Yes, my child. But the Lord's ways are inscrutable and He has formidable enemies. Let me say at once, I don't see what more you can do, both of you, than disappear for a time, somewhere in these parts. The reign of Antichrist will come to an end in God's good time."

"What does he say, Maria? He thinks we can't get away? He wants us to stop here till it's all over?"

"Yes, that was it," said Mila.

"Tell the Father we know how hard it is. But we've got so far, and we'll go further. Tell him all we want is to get across the frontier, to another country. We'll find our own way from there. We know the Germans will be there, too, but we'll be a stage further on our way."

Mila translated, then the priest spoke again.

“There’s no country in the world where the enemy’s more savage than in ours. Even Germany itself is not so horrible. It would be extremely difficult to get beyond the frontier into Germany, but supposing it would be possible. You’re already travelling on German papers. The lady knows the language and the people. We have contacts over there. If you must move further, perhaps it would be the best thing to go to Germany, and perhaps from there, in God’s good time, to Switzerland, say?”

“What does he say, Maria?” asked Elsie, her breath coming short and hard in the throat. She had heard the word ‘Germany’. She went so pale, the priest rose, filled a glass from a water-jug and took it to her. Her eyes thanked him. “But no,” she said, when Mila translated. “Tell him no. It’s impossible for me to go to Germany. If my foot touches the soil of Germany again, I shall die. I know that, Maria. Tell him that. And I think you wouldn’t want to go on without me, would you, Maria?”

“She must not distress herself,” said the priest, “nor you either, my child. Say I was only discussing what might be possible. Beyond the other frontier are Bohemia and Slovakia. The Germans are there, too—thick as lice.” His eyes darkened. He bit his lip, as if he reproved himself for speaking so, even of so odious an enemy. “But they say it is a little easier to move about there. Maybe——” Suddenly he looked up through the window to the darkening sky, then he looked at his watch. “We can talk about these things later,” he said. “You must be under a roof before curfew. Wait.” He started pacing to and fro across the room, his hands behind him, his head bent forward. He was muttering, but Mila could not make out what he was saying. Clearly the task he had set himself was not easy. Then he stopped. He had come to some sort of a decision.

“Listen,” he said. “Time’s getting short. We’ve got twenty to twenty-five minutes, at most. I have an idea what will have to be done, but we can’t stop to discuss that now.” He paused, while Mila translated. “The thing is to get you into safety for to-night, and probably to-morrow, too. You can’t stay here. The sacristan’s all right, but there’ll be a number of people coming in and out to-morrow. I’m going to take you to my brother’s flat in Koletek Street, beyond the Castle. I have the key. My brother’s a business-man, and I pick up his letters. He’s away for another two days, in Lvov. You’ll have to be out before he gets back.”

“Ask him, isn’t it dangerous for him?” said Elsie. “If he lets us have the key, and instructions how to get there, perhaps we can find our own way.”

“Tell the lady to be silent,” the priest said shortly. “She must do as she’s told, there’s no time for being heroic. There’s not much danger till after curfew. There’s no vehicle we can take, so we’ll go through the gardens. When there’s no one about, we’ll walk as quickly as we can. There are probably some tins in the apartment. Here’s a little bread.” He went up to a cupboard, took out half a loaf, and wrapped it in a cloth. “I’ll carry it,” he said. “I’ll come for the letters to-morrow, or the morning after. I may send for them. Come! We must be on our way!” Without another word, he went to the door and strode through. They left the church together, as if they were old parishioners of his, crossed into the gardens, and set off briskly to move left under the blossoming trees along the fringe of the old town. It was strange how bitter the air was, despite the dark richness of boughs and the odour of blossom. There were a few civilians about, who doubtless had good reason to be out so near curfew-time; but there were soldiers enough, sitting lonely on benches, or standing about in disconsolate groups. This was the time, and such was the sort of place, when you might expect young men to be winking at girls in parks, or clasping them tight in the thicker places of the boskage. But not German soldiers in Cracow; hatred seeped out towards them through the narrow streets, and wrapped them round under the may-blossom, as if their garments had been soaked in vats of worm-wood. As the three moved on, they saw to the south a hillside crowned with a great mass of masonry, a towered church and a many-windowed castle, stark against the evening sky sharp with the first stars. Beneath the hill, the gardens turned left. Behind them came, clear and sweet, the thin tune of the trumpet on the high spire. Closer at hand, a church bell tolled the hour.

“Cha!” muttered the priest. “It’s curfew-time! No! Don’t start running. It’s only two minutes from here.” They continued round the foot of the hill, passed one street, and came to a second. “Here we are,” the priest told them. “On this side. Four houses away.”

There was no one about, at the doorways, or on the stairs, of the house they came to. Doubtless only Poles lived there, and from now on it was time to stay at home. “Here,” said the priest. He had the key ready, and opened the door. The three of them glided in like cats. The priest pulled the door to silently, without closing it, and laid the half-loaf of bread down on a chair. “I must go at once,” he said. “There are two things you must remember. Don’t switch any lights on. Keep away from the windows during the daytime. Oh yes. There is a telephone. Don’t answer it if it rings. I will send for you as soon as I can. Good-bye, my children.” He raised his hand in blessing over them. “God be with you.” He opened the door again, pulled it to after him, the lock clicked. He was gone.

They stood there in the small dark lobby, quite silent for a minute or more. They were only a glimmer to each other, for the only light that came through was the pale afterglow of the evening sky, that had had a journey to make through an outside window, the room this side of it, and the half-opened door which gave upon the lobby. Suddenly Elsie felt Mila's hands go around her neck, bring her face down to the level of her own, then place a kiss upon her mouth, a kiss of gratitude, of warm comradeship, of profound affection.

"You dear child," said Elsie, pleased to find that the tears, which had been coming far too easily lately, stayed where they belonged. "Isn't he wonderful? Father Josef, I mean?" Mila was silent. "Isn't he, Maria?" She put her arm round her and patted her back affectionately.

"Channah," said Mila. "When we're alone like this, absolutely alone, won't it be nice not to have to play the lie?"

"But, of course, Mila," said Elsie. "Of course." She was conscious of a flicker of disappointment. It always embarrassed her slightly when the girl called her 'mama,' though she knew quite well it was merely part of a routine; yet it gave her a curious thrill of pleasure, almost physical, like stroking her hair, or her legs encased in sheer silk stockings. "But it's going to happen quite a lot, isn't it, my dear, while we're travelling on these papers? And the more automatic it is, the better."

"All right, mama," said Mila. She had taken it as a mild reproof. "So there are people like him in the world. And a Christian, too."

"We'd better find out where we are," said Elsie. "There's a door here on the left." She reverted to the conversation in progress. "The Nazis aren't Christian, Maria."

"No, of course not. But he's a *galluch*, a priest!" It was that, apparently, she found so unbelievable. Perhaps the priests in Płock had been less noble creatures. Or she had never come to close quarters with a priest before.

"This is the kitchen," said Elsie. "Do you see? Here's the sink. Here's a shelf with pots and pans. Here's a cupboard, with some tins in it. How hungry I am! Aren't you, Maria? What will the priest's brother say, when he comes back, to find his cupboard bare? Let's go on." There was another door, which led into the bathroom. There was only one more door, leading into the bed-sitting-room, with a single bed in an alcove. "No wonder the priest wants us out before his brother comes," smiled Elsie. "Where's that loaf? Ah, here it is, on the chair here. What a meal we're going to have, even if there's nothing but bread and tap-water."

Mila was away in the kitchen.

“Channah!” she called. “Here’s something soft in a bowl! It smells like heaven itself! It’s *strawberries!*”

“Quiet! Quiet!” enjoined Elsie. “Strawberries! It can’t be true! I knew we were dreaming. We’ll get up in a minute with the smell of dirty shirts in our noses!” There was also an egg, which they mixed with unsweetened milk from a tin; also a tin of dried beetroots. They had a meal which almost made them drunk. They drew no curtains. They lit no gas. They only drew water from the tap in so small a trickle that it made hardly any sound. If no one knew they were in the apartment, they would go on not knowing. The telephone rang once, but they ignored it, of course, and it stopped.

“And now——” Elsie said.

“It’s been a day, hasn’t it, Mila? We’d better get to bed, I think.”

They duly went into the bed-sitting-room, undressed, and got into bed.

“It’s very strange, Channah,” Mila murmured. “It’s like being all by ourselves in one of those tiny planets that go round and round, away from the earth and moon and everything.”

“Yes,” said Elsie. “It’s all very strange.” Her mind was in another bedroom, possibly in that big castle, only three minutes’ walk away. She wondered if His Excellency Herr Frank, the chief of the *Gouvernement Général*, when he went to bed that night, would feel himself in a happy little planet, going round and round.

“What are you thinking, Channah?”

“My heart’s a little planet, too, going round and round.”

“When will you tell me, Channah? The things you said you would tell me. We’re so together, yet I can’t see you. It’s as if a mist is in front of your face.”

“It’ll be many, many hours before the priest comes to tell us what he can do about us. There won’t be anything else to do, but talk. So we’ll talk, Mila. It’s better you should know what there is to know. Good night for now, Mila.”

“Good night. Good night. Thank you, Channah.”

About three o’clock next afternoon, the key turned in the door. Elsie Silver was in the middle of her tale. She sat in an easy chair, Mila was curled up in front of her. Elsie’s narrative broke off in mid-air. If someone had a key, it could not be anyone frightening. It was the young student who had led them to

St. Anna's the day before. He spent the minimum of time in the apartment. He carried a brief-case, which contained some salami, and a loaf of bread cut into three sections, so it did not bulge like a loaf of bread.

"Father Josef says he will like you to be at St. Anna's to-morrow," reported the young man, "at this same time. He thinks you could find the way."

"Yes," Elsie agreed.

He turned to the bookshelf and put three or four books into the brief-case, where the cut loaf had been. They were his ostensible reason for the visit to the apartment.

"Good day," the young man whispered. "May Our Lady guard you!" He closed the outside door, and was gone.

Elsie continued her interrupted tale. The tale was as follows.

"I was born a poor girl, Mila, in the city of Doomington, in England. We were five daughters. Our father was Sam Silver, a tailor. The sister just older than me was Susan. Now don't jump out of your skin, Mila dear. You've already met Susan's daughter, up in Warsaw. Or, at least, you've heard a lot about her. You see, we two girls, Susan and I, travelled around a good deal. I'll tell you about her soon. But I want to tell you about myself, first. When I was a girl your age, I had already sung and danced in public. That was the only thing I ever wanted to do, to sing and dance. In fact, I became quite a star."

"A star," repeated Mila, her eyes round with incredulity. "Can you still sing and dance? What sort of songs do you know? Perhaps, if we have luck and arrive somewhere. . . ."

"If we have luck and arrive somewhere, Mila, yes, I will clear my throat, and see if I can remember some of the songs I used to sing. But they weren't quite songs for young girls, you know."

"That's all right," said Mila. "I'm very grown-up really."

"I think you are in some ways. More grown-up than I am. Well, I was telling you. I went to London, and my name was 'in lights' as they say. Then once I went to France, and met an Englishman with a title, and married him. But he was rather soft, so I left him."

"So you were a *von*, Channah?"

"Yes, and I became a *von* again. Let me tell it you in order, Mila. From France I came back to England, and that wasn't a very lucky business, either. I was very unkind to one of my sisters, and it upset me a great deal, so I made

up my mind to go to Germany.”

“Yes, Channah?”

“I settled in Berlin, and I became very well known there. In Berlin I had a man-friend, he, also, was a man of family. I always seemed to go in for the aristocracy. I’ve got to tell you about him, because I met him again only three or four weeks ago. Yes, in Warsaw. Funny isn’t it, Mila, the way the threads of the story tie up together?”

“What was he? What did he do?”

“He did nothing. He was just good-looking. His name was Oskar von Straupitz-Kalmin.”

“That sounds a very noble name.”

“Yes, he was a Herr Graf, from an old family. I loved him very much indeed.”

“But you didn’t marry him?”

“No. I was still married to the Englishman. The years went by, and I stayed on in Berlin, because I wanted to be with Oskar, and because I wanted to be in Berlin, and because they liked me there. I was very popular. Then I met a man, the famous German I told you about. Do you remember, in Maria’s washing-cellar?”

“Yes, I remember. Do you think I would know his name?”

“Yes, I am sure you would know his name. This is the part of the story which it’s very hard for me to tell.”

“Channah!”

“Yes?”

“Please. You’ve only got to remember one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Where we met, Channah. So what can anything else matter, that happened before?”

“How old are you, Mila? Did you say you’re fifteen? You’re like a wise old woman. Bless you, Mila!”

“You see, I don’t think you’d be happy till you talked about it. Even if something goes wrong to-morrow, it would still be a good thing for you to talk to-day. Am I not right, Channah?”

“I can only say again what I’ve just said. Bless you, Mila! I liked this man a great deal, but I did not love him, as I loved the Herr Graf. He was one of the big men of the Nazi party, he was close to the Führer, and to Goering. I should have left Germany when the Nazi party came into power, but I didn’t. I stayed on. I liked it all too much, the excitement, and the rich food, and the danger, too, I suppose, and the way the Germans worshipped me.”

“Didn’t they know you were Jewish, Channah?”

“It was the big men in the Party who decided who was Jewish, and who wasn’t. Then the time came when I couldn’t go back to England and be Jewish again, not even if I wanted to. I stayed on. My soul got more and more rotten. Oh no, Mila. That’s the truth of it. I didn’t wipe it all out by looking after a few casualties in the Warsaw ghetto. By the time the War came, my husband had made me an Honorary Aryan. He was by that time an Army General.”

“What, Channah? Is this true?” Her eyes were wide with incredulity.

“I told you it would be painful to you. Yes, it is true, Mila. Perhaps I should have told you that in Warsaw, in the cellars, before we left.”

“But, Channah, how can you say such a thing? I was almost dead, and you saved me. What can it matter who you were married to? All that’s over now. We’re travelling towards a new life.”

“It was a very dull and lonely and bitter life being the Frau General. It was like being a white mouse in a gold cage, I used to say to myself. The Herr General loved me to the end, but after the War broke out, he had other things to think of. He had one great enemy, and that was Himmler, who had sworn to get rid of him. He did just that a month ago, when the Herr General was flying to the Russian front. Himmler arranged to have his aeroplane shot down when it was flying near Warsaw. He did not die straight away, so he sent me a message asking me to escape to Switzerland or Sweden. I thought I couldn’t do that, not while he was still alive. I flew up to Warsaw, to be with him. And then he died. I was in great danger from Himmler, and then I found out that my friend, the Herr Graf, thought the only thing I could do was to throw Himmler’s men off the scent, by disappearing inside the ghetto, where there were so many people without names or papers. This was arranged by Herr Wolff. You remember? That was how I met him, Mila. And while I was staying in Herr Wolff’s apartment, something happened. It happened in the street, as a matter of fact. I know now it was just an ordinary piece of Nazi *Schweinerei*. I saw two storm-troopers murder a Jewish baby by sticking it on a spike, but it was so horrible, and also so casual, I threw myself at them, and was going to claw their eyes out. I wouldn’t have gone very far, of course, but

before they could break my skull in, some people tore me away, and rushed me down into a cellar, where the storm-troopers were too frightened to follow. One of my rescuers was the Boy. You remember, the young leader of the underground fighting?”

“Yes, of course, the Boy.”

“And I have a feeling the other was my niece, the Raven. I didn’t find out she was my niece till later on. A Russian agent was brought into the Post, in a bad way. He called for the girl, and she was brought in. I was attending a wounded man at the time, but I overheard the messages that the Russian brought for the Raven. It was my sister’s daughter, right enough. Her father became quite a big person over there. Now he is a General on the Caucasus front, and he was doing very well, I gathered.”

“Your sister’s daughter, Channah? The daughter of a Red Army General?”

“Yes, Mila.”

“And you were married to. . . . to”

“To a Nazi general. Yes, Mila. You’re right. We are quite a family.”

“Would you like to see your family again, Channah?”

“I don’t think they’d very much like to see me, Mila.”

“I think they would have felt differently about you, if they’d seen you down in the cellars, like I did.”

“I don’t know the least thing about them. I don’t know who’s alive and who’s dead. There’s been bombing over there, too. There was only one of them who wrote to me after the New Order began; that was the one I treated so badly. After the War came, of course, I heard from nobody.”

“Perhaps some day we’ll find out all about them, after we get to Eretz Israel. Perhaps we’ll go to England on a visit. If you come from Eretz, they’ll feel different about you.”

“You’re a dear child, Mila. We’re a long way from anywhere still.”

“But we’ve started, Channah. We’re on our way. You said so yourself.”

“Yes, Mila, of course. We’ve started. We’re on our way.”

“Tell me more about your family.”

“All right, Mila, you little nuisance. There was mother and father, and they had five daughters, Esther, Sarah, Susan, me, and May.”

She talked that day, and she talked the day after, and there was a good deal to say still, for, as she talked, she was remembering things she thought she had long forgotten. The girl sat entranced. It was a stranger world to her than Tartary or Lilliput. It seemed to Elsie, as from time to time she looked sideways down on Mila where she sat curled up on a rug—it seemed this child was a Sixth Silver Daughter; or a daughter of the next generation, like Raven, Susan's daughter. You might well say this was her own daughter, she told herself, with a curious ache at the heart, with a joy that throbbed like a nagging tooth. It was a family affair, that was it, in a room where they dared not stand up for fear of someone seeing them through a window, whence they dared not move until they were given the word, lest they be hurled like carcasses on a truck, and carted off and asphyxiated and burned, like rubbish, in an incinerator.

At four o'clock on the second day, the key turned in the lock again. The student entered with his brief-case, took out the books he had borrowed yesterday, put some others in their places.

"Wait ten minutes," he said, "then come to the church." He went off. Ten minutes later they went after him, two German ladies strolling through the gardens of the old fortifications. The lads in grey-green winked at them from under the may-blossom.

III

Father Josef was in the vestry, seated at a table, wearing his spectacles. He removed the spectacles, laid them down sharply on the table, and rose. There seemed to be no time for civilities.

"Tell the lady arrangements have been made," he said. "A lady, Yanka, is waiting at the corner of the next street, Szewska Street. She is wearing a black felt hat, and has a red hand-bag under her arm. She speaks German. Translate, please." Mila translated. "When the lady leaves here, she will go up close to Yanka, and stoop down as if she has lost a ticket. Yanka will then take her through the town to her own house. The lady must not seem to be following her. Yanka will then go up to her apartment, which is number six, on the second floor. Repeat."

"Number six, on the second floor."

"She will leave the door on the latch. Five minutes later, the lady will go up after her. If there is no one about, she will push the door open and go through. If there is, she must try later. Will you say all that?"

Mila conveyed the information.

“Tell the Father how grateful we are to him,” said Elsie. The words did not need to be translated. Father Josef went on straight away.

“Yanka is a clerk in a builder’s office. She has a small extra room where a divan is fixed up for the lady.”

“The Father says,” explained Mila, “there will be a bed in the lady’s place for you.” Mila’s face was without expression.

Fright scratched at Elsie’s heart like fingernails.

“A bed for *me*?” she asked. “But of course, the Father said a bed for you *and me*?”

There was no mistaking the import of the expression in her voice and eyes. His manner softened. Probably he had not realized before that, though the woman and the girl had only met a week or so ago, they had already become immensely devoted to each other.

“I had hoped to hide you both together,” he explained. “But it is always much more difficult to hide two persons than one. It is not only space, it is food as well, and a great many other things. As for you, my child, you will work in the kitchen of the Convent School of St. Ursula. You will stay there until it is safe for you to join your friend. Tell her this.”

There was little colour yet in Mila’s cheeks, but there was none as she conveyed this plan.

“But tell him we wish to be together,” implored Elsie. “It is not right for us to be separated. It is not right.”

“The lady will understand that if it had been possible for you to be kept together, that would have been arranged.” Time was getting short. The way Father Josef was tapping his feet on the ground looked a bit ominous. “It is hoped that Yanka will find it possible to visit you, my child, from time to time, in the Convent. At all events, she will be able to give news. Nothing more than that can be done. The lady has come to me for help, and she must understand she is being given the only help, I say the *only* help, that is just now available. There have been arrests lately. We are dealing with matters of life and death, not choosing this way or that. Sister Carmela is waiting for you, my child, at the Chapel of Our Lady, near the West entrance.” Then a thought suddenly struck him. “Ask the lady if she is afraid that some sort of pressure will be exercised, to make you abandon your own faith.” Mila’s lips trembled. She clearly wished to say something now on her own account. But he gestured impatiently towards Elsie. It would be impossible if he found himself discussing the situation with the girl as well as the woman. “Ask her, my child,

will you?”

“No, Mila. Tell the Father that whatever happens in your soul is your own concern, not mine.” Elsie’s voice was grave and calm now. Mila was no stripling. She knew that they were both completely in the priest’s hands, and that he was risking his life to save theirs, as every single person was doing who was involved in the concealment.

“I want to say something to you, Channah,” said Mila slowly. For the moment it was as if they two were alone in the room, and she had whatever time she needed to say what she had to say. “I could have left the ghetto in Warsaw, more than once, if I had wished to go into a Convent. My father begged me to, but I thought I should stay on with the other young people. But it’s different now. I’ve begun my journey to Eretz Israel. I’ll stay where the Father puts me, and when the time comes, we’ll set out on the next stage of the journey.”

Time was pressing, but Father Josef did not ask Mila to translate into his own language the words she had just uttered. It was clearly something that lay between the girl and her friend. There was one thing he felt he must say to them both. His voice was quite gentle now.

“You will both remember, I hope, there are many Jewish children who are being looked after just now in the Convents and other Catholic institutions, and in the homes of priests.”

“Yes.”

“They will come to no harm, my children.”

Elsie smiled. “Please thank the Father, Mila,” she said. “What else can I do, but thank him, again and again.”

“It will be possible for messages to pass between you,” said Father Josef. “And then, when something is worked out, you will be told. Perhaps it will not be long.”

“We will not keep Father Josef waiting, nor Sister Carmela, nor the lady—what is her name? Yes, Yanka. It is disappointing, Mila, of course, that we should be separated so soon. But we may be together again before long, as the Father says.” There was a smile on Elsie’s face, but the eyes were misted. “Good-bye for the time being, Mila.” She held her arms out. Mila’s eyes were stone-dry. Not even a hint of tears came easily to those eyes, which had learned too young to weep for sorrows far more grievous than old men or women are normally acquainted with. She came over to Elsie. They kissed each other, the woman and the girl, not too fiercely, for that would have made

the moment less tolerable than it was.

“Thank you, Father Josef,” Mila said. “I shall find Sister Carmela. Good-bye.”

“One moment,” the priest said. “Tell the lady there is a way out of the church through this door here. It is better you should leave by separate ways. The lady will be on Szewska Street. She is to turn left again. You both understand, we will not be idle. We will do what we can do. God bless you, my children.” Again he raised his hand in a gesture of benediction.

“Good-bye, Father,” they both said, and walked their different ways.

CHAPTER III

I

A young woman with a black felt hat and a red hand-bag under her arm was duly waiting at the corner of Szewska Street. Elsie fumbled with her own bag, dropped a piece of paper, or seemed to, bent down, straightened up again. The young woman was already moving away northward, along the line of the gardens. Elsie followed. After a little time they turned to the right, then right again. They walked through the street of the town for some twenty or thirty minutes, but Elsie did not take much stock, either of time or place. If, during that passage through the town, a suspicious patrolman had asked her for her papers, she would not have carried off well the pretence of being a full-blooded German, mistress of the Universe.

To be separated from Mila, two or three days after the great adventure started, was heart-breaking. Yet, if Father Josef decided they must separate for the time being, surely it was the only sensible thing to do? Yes, of course. It was the *only* thing to do. Was there any chance, when the word 'Go' was given, that Mila might be less anxious to leave than she was now? If they got over into Slovakia, and beyond Slovakia into another country, there would still be endless dangers to overcome. Anywhere was still endless leagues from the sea-coast. Would Mila be less anxious to go? She did not believe it. It would not be the thought of danger that would hold the child back. What, then? What are you worrying about, Elsie?

She is a very impressionable child, you know. She probably always was. Father Josef gave his word that no attempt is made to win these children over to his faith. Some priests and nuns will be more fastidious about that than others. But the important thing is what happens *inside* these children, subjected to these influences . . . the deep peace, the incense, the music. . . .

That's Mila's affair, not mine. If that's the way her heart takes her, what right have I to say or do a thing? But if I am to go on without her, I won't want to go on. I know that. I might as well have gone out like a candle-end, down there in Post Sixteen.

I don't think it's going to happen. I don't think she can stop being a Jew, any more than I did, though God knows we're very different sorts of Jew. It will be all right, I think. But I hope something will happen soon. Yes, the good priest has it in hand. I'm sure there'll be news soon. It's a long way, isn't it?

The young woman's still walking ahead there. She's turning again. Oh, at last now, at last.

The young woman went through the doorway of a big house; not yet a slum house, but it would be in time. Elsie waited for five minutes, then she went up after her, to the door marked six, on the second floor. No one was about on the landing. Elsie pushed the door open, and went in. The lock clicked to behind her.

Yanka was waiting three or four yards up the lobby. She had taken off her black felt hat, and her dark hair stood up like two frozen waves on each side of the central parting. She was tall and thin, with large matt eyes like the black felt of her hat. Against her black dress her fingers twined and untwined, like the stalks of pale underwater plants. A thin gold cross hung on her breast.

"Pull the door, please," the woman whispered. "Is it shut properly?" She spoke in German, with a heavy Polish accent.

Elsie turned and tugged at the door.

"It's quite shut," she said.

Then the woman came forward. In a moment she had flung her arms round Elsie's neck and kissed her hard on both cheeks.

"You poor Jewish thing," she breathed. "I am so miserable for you all, you poor, poor, sad people. Come." She got hold of Elsie's hand, pulled her towards the room at the end of the passage, and opened the door. "This is your home," she said, "as long as you need it. God bless you! Sit down, please. I have some sort of coffee. That is the first thing I will do. I will make you a cup of coffee. No. First you must see your room. It is through this door." Once more she took Elsie's hand in hers, and led her to the inner room. "It is a little hard, I think." She was feeling the bed, under its old chintz counterpane. "Then you shall have my mattress. Yes, I am younger than you. Oh, you are looking at the holy pictures, and the crucifixes, and the little Madonna here?" The room was crowded with sacred objects. So was the first room, for that matter. "You are Jewish. If I had thought of it, I could have taken them into my room. Whenever poor Mr. Horowitz called me into his room, I used to put my little cross—this same one I'm wearing now, do you see?—I used to slip it inside my dress like this. After all, your religion is your religion, and if you are going to stay nobody knows how long in this room——"

It seemed to Elsie that now at least she must get in a word somehow.

"Please! You mustn't dream of touching a thing! No, no! This bed, too! You can't guess how wonderful it is, after the beds I've been sleeping on

lately! I must be as little trouble to you as possible, I beg you.”

“Really, you are so *kind*.” It was as if Elsie was conferring a great favour on her by not insisting that she should change the room about for her. “And now for a nice cup of coffee,” she said, as she returned to the other room. “Oh, by the way, what shall I call you? My underground name is Yanka, but I’m Tana Kapinski, as you’ll see from my letters. You have German papers, haven’t you? I should call you by the name on your papers.”

“I’m made out as Lydia Radbruch.”

“Thank you, Frau Radbruch. I wish I had a few grains of real coffee left.” She went over to a small sink and got busy with a percolator. “Whenever poor Mr. Horowitz had a heavy problem on his hands, he’d call me into his office, and get me to make him a brew of my special coffee.” She stopped and sighed deeply. “He used to say not even his wife could turn out a cup of coffee like mine. They’re both dead, done for, burned to ashes. And, I believe, their three children.”

“Excuse me,” asked Elsie somewhat diffidently, “I suppose Mr. Horowitz . . . he was your employer at one time?”

“Oh, how foolish of me,” said Yanka. “Of course, how should you know who Mr. Horowitz was? You’re not from Cracow, after all! He was the most wonderful man I ever met in all my life. That’s what he was. The most wonderful man, though he was only a Jew. And his eyes were so blue, like a saint’s. He had a small red beard. His skin was like silk.”

“Yes,” breathed Elsie. She felt a little embarrassed. The young woman was clearly hardly sane about Mr. Horowitz. And it was not very comforting to remember that the small red beard and the silk-like skin had been reduced to ashes in some incinerator somewhere.

“I had hopes that perhaps some day he might even see he must go further on the journey, and enter Holy Church. But no. It was not to be.” Her eyes filled with tears. She had for the moment forgotten that the poor creature to whom she was giving house-room was Jewish, too. “There’s not much pressure in the gas these days,” she said querulously. “But we must thank God for small mercies, mustn’t we, Frau Radbruch?”

“Lydia,” said Elsie faintly. To go on being Frau Radbruch for weeks, months, God knows how long, might become something of a strain . . . that among other things.

“Oh, thank you, *Lydia!*” said Yanka, with something of an effort. “And would you like a little meal now, or later?”

“Later, if you don’t mind.”

“I used to make special cakes for him,” said Yanka, “to eat with his coffee. *Ponczki*, we call them. You aren’t Polish, are you? You wouldn’t know them.”

“No.”

“He used to break them up and dip them in his coffee. He could sing like De Reszke himself. They asked me several times to their parties. He sang like a nightingale. He was very fond of the aria from *Bohème*: you know: ‘*O suave fanciulla*’. Do you know it?”

“Yes, I think I do.”

“It goes like this.” Suddenly Yanka broke into song. Her voice was high and shrill and sweet.

‘Good God!’ thought Elsie. ‘She’s supposed to be alone. And here she is doing a party piece. What will the neighbours think? I wonder how thick these walls are.’

The singing stopped.

“What’s the matter, Lydia? What are you looking so frightened about? Oh, my singing! Please don’t worry. I often sing when I’m alone. I can even sing when I’m typing.”

“Yes, I see,” muttered Elsie. “It’s like company, so to speak.”

“Yes, that’s right. But I’ve got *real* company now. It may be for months and months. I’m so proud I can be of some help to you. I’ve always loved Jews; even before I met Mr. Horowitz, I would never hear a word against them. Do you take sugar? Oh please, I’ve plenty. He was a terrible sweet tooth, you know. He used to suck bon-bons by the dozen. Mr. Horowitz . . . Mr. Horowitz . . . Mr. Horowitz. . . .”

II

Elsie Silver heard a great deal about Mr. Horowitz during the next three or four months. It was quite possible to get heartily sick of the name of Mr. Horowitz, though obviously he had been an estimable, probably even an attractive, man. One got so irritated sometimes, that one felt one could tear out the little pointed red beard by its roots, if it was anywhere handy. Until one remembered what had happened to the red beard, and the blue eyes, and the well-kept fingernails; and then one felt a little uncomfortable.

It was also possible to get irritated by Yanka herself; but one could not dislike her. She was an intensely religious woman, though there were times

when she seemed to be confusing the adored features of the dead Mr. Horowitz with the features of her Saviour, as portrayed in the highly coloured prints on the walls. She was brave and chivalrous. To risk her life for a complete stranger, as she was doing every hour of every day, needed formidable gallantry. It was to be gathered that Elsie was not the first person she had helped in this way, and helping Elsie was not the sum total of her present activities, though that was not to be gathered from a single word she let fall. Despite her desperate garrulity, on matters which concerned the safety of others she kept her counsel. There was no doubt she felt she owed a special debt of service to the Jews, whom so many Gentiles were treating so atrociously. She would have felt the same way, Elsie concluded, if there had been no Mr. Horowitz. But there *had* been a Mr. Horowitz, and she had adopted him, probably with more passion than she knew herself, and was proper for a Roman Catholic spinster to entertain for a middle-aged Jew, who was her employer, a husband, and the father of three children. But he was dead now, and the work she was engaged on was one way of lighting candles to his memory.

It was all very difficult, sometimes quite intolerable. The fact that, if Yanka had refused Elsie the shelter of her roof, Elsie would very likely within a day or two, or a week or two, have been shot or incinerated, did not make the situation any the less difficult. It was true that, whereas in Warsaw she had been living literally underground, here in Cracow she was only metaphorically underground. The physical circumstances were by no means disagreeable. She knew she would be lucky if, during her escape into freedom, she never faced greater hardships. So long as she was careful, but exceedingly careful, over such matters as drawing curtains and switching on lights, she had a fair freedom of movement between the two rooms and the bathroom. The view from the window of the street behind was not inspiring, but there was a certain amount of sky, and one could see what the sun and the moon were doing. The food was monotonous, but adequate. It was clear that Yanka's associates must be helping out with the rations.

But the boredom and the anxiety, these were difficult to bear, and the first would have been more tolerable, if not for the second. She had had a good deal of training in the endurance of boredom during the war-years in Germany, when she had been a very exalted lady, the wife of one of the leading figures in the Reich, and had had practically no dealings, apart from her domestic arrangements, with any of the many millions over whom she was exalted. She had had three residences, a town house in Berlin, a villa in Baden, a ch  let near Salzburg, and she ran around from one to another, as she often told herself, like a white mouse revolving in a cage. So she had played endless games of

patience, and had tended her hair, her skin, and her fingernails, with the desperate absorption with which some mystics contemplate their navels. But here in Cracow, in Yanka's apartment, though she had the equipment for one of these occupations, she lacked all but the most elementary equipment for the other, and both seemed infantile. The one occupation she was interested in was Mila, and that was removed from her. She tried to read books, a diversion she had rarely indulged in, but found she could not concentrate on them for long. And with Yanka's assistance of an evening, she began to acquire an odd talent or two. She learned Morse, which might be useful some time, and did surprisingly well at it. She also began to learn Polish. That brought Mila nearer, partly because it was Mila's language, and even more because it might be useful some day on the escape to the frontier. She also got some satisfaction from studying two elementary phrase-books in the Czech and Slovene languages, issued for the use of German soldiers doing garrison duty in Bohemia and Slovakia, for the next stage of the projected journey was definitely across the frontier into one or other of those regions. In fact, she often discussed with Yanka the general lines which an escape to the sea might follow, thus acquiring a knowledge of European geography in which she had hitherto been almost totally lacking. There was the route from Bohemia to Austria, and from Austria to any of three countries, Jugoslavia, Italy, and Switzerland. The first two countries had sea-coasts, but they were under the German heel. The third meant safety but there was still one German-occupied country or another, France, or Italy, before you reached a quayside and a ship. Then there was the route by way of Slovakia, to Hungary. Father Josef had had the idea that it might be easier to move about in Slovakia than in Poland. So you got to Hungary, which was still an unoccupied country, and then you might either make for Yugoslavia again, or for the free Turkish sea-coasts far off across vast regions of infested land. Any way the distances were fantastic. And how were they to be covered? By train, by car, by cart, on foot? Perhaps by a combination of some or all of these. It all seemed as fabulous and impossible as a journey in a rocket to the moon. But that was what they had set out to do. Others had done it already. Vaguely, rumours were coming through to Poland on the underground grape-vine, that people destined for the death chambers had escaped by one of these routes. But if there was any truth in the rumours, the escapers had been tough youngsters, playing a lonely hand.

Boredom was not only negative, but positive. The bones of Mr. Horowitz, encalcined though they were, sometimes rattled so excruciatingly that Elsie could have screamed with boredom. Yanka singing was something just a little more excruciating than that, and one went into one's own room, pleading migraine, for which, fortunately, nothing is a palliative, not aspirins, not cold

compresses, not massage of the temples. Boredom, then, during the next two months was acute, but it was not so desolating as anxiety, anxiety over Mila. Was Mila happy? Was anyone bullying Mila? What was the state of Mila's health? And, even more frightening, was Mila too happy? Had the incense-laden twilight starred with tapers, the august ceremonials, the beatific nuns at their labours, the priests erect and mysterious at the altar—had these subdued Mila as hunger and squalor and terror had not? The child had seemed confident, that day in St. Anna's, that nothing of the sort could happen. But she was faced with a confidence far more mountainous than her own.

If Mila found peace that way, how impertinent it was to grieve for it! But the grief did not lie in Mila's finding peace. It lay in the doubt, the anxiety. It lay in the thought that the superb game would then be over almost as soon as it was begun.

The superb game. It was that, too. It was a game that not many played, and very few won, and it was far easier, as she had been told, to play it single-handed. For herself, it did not interest her to play it alone, or with any other partner than Mila. Her partner, too, had high stakes to play for. Unless her heart was dreaming of another game.

As Father Josef had promised her, she kept in touch with Mila through Yanka, who went down to visit her every two or three weeks. The girl was in good health, Yanka reported. The food was better than she had had for a long time, and it was regular. The work was hard, but it made her tired enough at night to sleep well. And the release from tension was building up her nervous strength. But the apprehension that was uppermost in Elsie's mind could not be discussed with Yanka. Perhaps it could not be discussed with Mila herself, if it had been possible to see her. The girl sent her fondest love.

May became June, June slipped into July. At the end of July Yanka appeared one day with a set of Polish papers.

"You're talking Polish quite nicely," said Yanka. "These papers might be useful to you later on. We thought you'd better have them."

"And Maria?"

"She has them, too."

"Fine," said Elsie listlessly. German papers, Polish papers, Bolivian papers—it all seemed to be pretty academic. I'll become fat, she told herself, like a goose kept in a cellar. If they'd only let me go out for a brisk little walk now and again, it wouldn't be so bad. After all, whatever happens, when I make the jail-break, I'm still a high-class German. Perhaps that's what they're fattening

me up for; I have to put on another two or three stones, then I'll really look *reichsdeutsche*.

But she knew she was just getting peevish. There was nothing to be done about it. She could not possibly endanger Yanka more than she was already endangering her. She was a prisoner till the next link in the chain was forged. July would become August. Nineteen forty-three might become nineteen forty-four. At the worst, somebody, some time, would win the War. Then you could slip off the whole chain . . . if by that time Mr. Horowitz hadn't pushed you through the window on to the pavement below.

She read newspapers, both the secret newspapers that the underground printed on flimsy little squares of paper that you could slip in with your toothpaste, and the papers the Germans printed, particularly the local newspaper, the *Krakauer Zeitung*. It interested her to see cropping up from time to time the names of people, both civil and military, she had known at one time or another in Berlin. Herr Frank was keeping quite a court up in the Wawel, the ancient castle on the hill, where the Kings of Poland had lived for centuries. She was more than interested when one day she read a reference to a certain Colonel Otto von Umhausen, who had been for some time, it seemed, officer in charge of the Wawel garrison. She had known Otto quite well in the days before the War. At times it seemed as if he had it in mind to enter the running for her favours with his friend, Willy von Brockenburg. But in love, no less than in soldiering, he was an incurable dilettante. He had retired gracefully before the more vehement wooing of Brockenburg.

He was a dilettante in another art, too, the art of music. He was quite an accomplished violinist, and even something of a composer. It came back to her quite clearly now that, at a reception in a house on Unter den Linden, he had played a violin and piano sonata with the prominent lawyer, Karl Heinz Frank, who was obviously destined to high honours as the régime broadened its boundaries. She wondered idly whether it was a mere coincidence that Umhausen had been appointed to the Wawel, or if the Governor himself had not arranged an agreeable partner for the musical moments in which he sought relief from the arduous of his task.

She sighed sadly. It was a pity that, for various reasons, it would be difficult to have a word or two with Otto von Umhausen. He had really fallen for her heavily, and he had always been absolutely devoted to Willy. She knew quite well that it might be an embarrassment for him to be confronted with Elsie von Brockenburg. But all she wanted him to do was to arrange for Mila and herself to cross the frontier; not much for him, everything in the world for them. She had gathered that German officers on duty in Southern Poland made

frequent visits to Slovakia. Food was abundant there, particularly the fruit of the pig. “*Schweinland*”, they called it heartily. They took their own French wine with them, helped themselves to pork and women, and had a great time. Wouldn't it be possible for Otto to hand them over to one of his own trusties? Or he might even take them across himself, for that matter? An officer of his standing would have no more to do than wave his hand, and the frontier guard would line up at the salute, and the car would glide through, like a knife through butter.

She shook her head. Perhaps it wasn't so easy as all that. And how on earth was she to get through to Umhausen? And supposing she got through to him, would he recognize her? A lot had happened to her since she had seen him last, and latterly she had not been able to look after herself very assiduously. She looked into a mirror, and looked away quickly. The foundation was still there, but what a lot of immensely hard work and costly materials would have to be applied before it was the face of the woman to whom Otto had once paid court so ardently!

She let the newspaper drop to the floor, and picked up the Czech-German phrase-book. She must not allow herself to entertain such dangerous opium-dreams! The good priest had not forgotten her. When the time came, he would do what he could.

Then a few days later, the *Krakauer Zeitung* published an announcement which made Elsie throw back her head as if someone had suddenly struck her sharply under the chin. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting, had at last found it possible to fulfil its long-heralded engagement at the *Stary Teatr*, the Old Theatre. The performance would be given for the *Winterhilfe*, to provide comforts and warm clothes for our gallant soldiers on the Russian front. It would be heard under the distinguished patronage of His Excellency, the Governor, Herr Frank.

There could be no doubt at all that at that function, at least, Otto von Umhausen would be present, both because of its semi-official nature, and because Umhausen genuinely liked music. In that same moment, Elsie Silver determined that Elsie von Brockenburg would be present, too.

The idea sounded in the last degree difficult and frightening. But think yourself into the situation for a moment. You are a *reichsdeutsche*. You go up in your plain black dress, looking not excessively distinguished, but smart, and serious, and intelligent. You do not attract too much attention, because you are not the ravishing beauty you used to be, and for sufficient reasons you are not wearing the Brockenburg pearls and emeralds. Nobody thinks of asking who you are, for it is clear that no woman who is not unimpeachable would dare to

turn up at a function of this sort. One just did not look like a pistol-drawing, bomb-throwing assassin, with an arsenal in one's hand-bag. Umhausen would be there, that was certain. It should be possible to meet him in the foyer, before the concert started, or during the interval, or after the concert was over. He might be with the Governor, surrounded by a platoon of bodyguards. That would make it more difficult, that was all, though she believed that Hans Frank was unlikely to recognize her; they had met very rarely.

And when she met Otto, what happened then? She refused to work it out in advance. She was certain he would not, he could not, betray her, not only because of the affection he had always had for her, but because he had been devoted to Willy, who had helped him out of one or two serious scrapes.

The first thing to do was to get a ticket. It was unlikely there would be any left for sale at the ticket office on the night of the concert. But how on earth was she to go out and buy a ticket? Yanka would have to get one for her. But could she? The concert was for Germans only. How could Yanka get hold of a ticket? She bit her lip with anger. She would have to give up the idea.

But she couldn't and wouldn't. Her boredom suddenly rose up inside her in a great gust of nausea. She was going mad here. She must do something, however risky, to try and break out of it. Mila was slipping away. There might be no Mila by the time Father Josef came through with an escape-plan—if he ever did till the damned War was over.

There was only one thing to do. She must get round Yanka. She must get down on her knees, so to speak, and tell her if she didn't have a break, she would crack up—and that wasn't far from the truth, either. A concert by a great orchestra, under a great conductor, would just put her right; it would keep her right for months to come.

So that evening, when Yanka came home from the office, Elsie told her of the immense kindness she wished her to do for her. She put all the cajolery she knew into her voice. Her eyes swam large and lustrous and pathetic. To her surprise Yanka neither twittered with disapproval nor gibbered with alarm.

“For money you can buy anything from a German,” said Yanka contemptuously. “If a Pole chooses to go where he shouldn't go, it's his own look-out. But it's always dangerous being out on the streets. The concert itself will be packed with Gestapo.”

“If I'm *reichsdeutsche*, then I'm *reichsdeutsche*. I went into the station at Warsaw and came out of the station at Cracow. There'd be a lot more Gestapo there, wouldn't there?”

“I suppose you’re right, Lydia. The only thing I must ask you is to be very careful when you leave the house, and when you come back again. Oh, wait a moment.” Her lips tightened. She shook her head. “No, Lydia, no. There’s one thing you mustn’t do. You can’t be out on the streets after curfew. I’m afraid that settles it.”

“Where *is* the Old Theatre? Isn’t there a church close by I could slip into? Isn’t there somebody with a bed, just a few yards from the Theatre? I must get out for an hour or two. I *must*, Yanka. I’m sure Father Josef would understand. It would be worse if I suddenly started screaming in the middle of the night!”

“Hush now, Lydia, hush!” She patted Elsie’s knee. “Let’s think a moment. Let’s see who lives round there.” She shut her eyes and thought for some moments; then suddenly opened them again. “Let’s see the newspaper,” she demanded. “Where’s the advertisement? Ah, here it is! How silly we both are! It begins at six o’clock. The Germans themselves don’t like getting back late when it’s dark. You could get back well before the curfew, if you don’t mind coming out before the concert ends.”

“You’re a darling, Yanka!” Elsie sprang from her chair and hugged her. “You’ll have to help me wash my hair that night, and find some stuff for my fingernails.”

“I still have a lovely little manicure-set,” breathed Yanka reverently, “that Mr. Horowitz once gave me for Christmas. You can use that!”

For several minutes Elsie felt quite light-headed as she moved along the streets to the *Stary Teatr*. The sunlight would have gone to her head she told herself, if she had not had a nip of vodka to brace her up. (The quarter-bottle of vodka was only one of several specifics that Yanka had in reserve for urgent occasions.) She wasn’t at all certain she was walking quite straight, for when you suddenly start walking from street to street, instead of from room to room, your feet are a bit uncertain which goes in front of which. But she felt fine. She knew her face and figure could still hold their own with the next woman’s.

It’s really ridiculous, she thought. Nobody’s yet looked at these silly papers in my hand-bag, not since the moment I got them. It’s quite possible nobody’ll ever look at them, for I won’t be around at the sort of time and in the sort of place when people get curious about papers. So long as I keep my head up, that’s all that matters. So long as I stare people straight in the eye, like these three storm-troopers swaggering along towards me. I won’t get out of their way, *I won’t*. I’m not a Jew, not a Pole. I’m a high-class German lady. Break apart, scum! There you are, Elsie! Be tough!

The only doubt she had, as she got nearer to the theatre, was whether she would actually get those few moments with Otto von Umhausen. If he was in Cracow, he would probably be there. But he was quite possibly not in Cracow. And even if he was at the concert, was it likely he would be walking about in the public parts of the place? He was certainly very close to the Governor, who was more abominated, at all events in Poland, than anyone in human history, excepting the three arch-monsters whose names were more widely known. Wasn't it likely that His Excellency and his entourage would retire to a private room during the interval?

All these thoughts passed through Elsie's mind without distressing her unduly. She realized they had been there all the time, and that she had carefully suppressed them, lest they should endanger her outing. She would have her outing anyhow, and she would listen to some good music, excellently performed, even though she would have preferred Johann Strauss to Brahms, for her tastes in music were not solemn.

As she approached the theatre, she became aware that there were quite a number of people guarding the approaches, both in uniform and in plain clothes. There was the briefest moment of panic. But that passed at once. She had reached a point where it was as dangerous to turn back as to go on. There succeeded a mood of brilliant exhilaration. She sailed on along the pavement like a swan. The commissaires at the doors looked only curiously at her ticket. She passed through into the foyer, her eyes soft as wood-smoke, her heart bright and bitter with hatred for the people whose shoulders she touched. She took her time, and looked round, as if for a friend with whom she had a rendezvous. But though there were German officers in plenty, there was, as yet, no Otto von Umhausen. She got a programme, and was shown to her seat, which was towards the back of the stalls, and overhung, therefore, by the slope of the amphitheatre. She looked down the ramp of the stalls, but as far as she could see, Otto von Umhausen was not there. If he's come, he may well be up there, she told herself. She settled down to study her programme. The Seventh Symphony was not till after the interval. The concert began with the Brahms *Akademische Festouvertüre*. "Entschuldigen," a lady said. Elsie withdrew her knees. The lady passed on her way to her seat, a gentleman in attendance. The performance of Schubert's Great C. Major followed the Brahms. It was hot. She fanned herself for some moments with her programme, then opened it to study the programme notes, one eye cocked on the audience as it settled in its places. Quite a number of officers arrived, including a much decorated little group that provoked a patter of heel-clicking, like hail-drops. But Umhausen was not among them. The orchestra filed in, there was excitement and applause. The leader entered, to receive his special tribute. It was bountiful.

Then the great man entered. The place roared its welcome, even the officers put their decorum aside, and clapped, and shouted. The baton imposed silence. The *Festouvertüre* was launched upon its journey, a little solemn at first, but it got going happily very soon. It was all great fun, thought Elsie. Some day I must listen seriously to classical music. It's not such hard work as I used to think. Mila will have to take me in hand. There used to be a good deal of music at Ploçk, she said, didn't she? Ploçk! What a funny name! She realized with fright that, unless she held, herself well in hand, she would scream with laughter because Ploçk was such a funny name. Go easy, Elsie! I know that tune, don't I? *A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go!* How very odd! *A-hunting we will go*, here in Cracow! Shades of the playground in Doomington a long time ago! What was that teacher's name who took us for singing class? Miss Brodie, wasn't it? She would often go just off the note, and blush.

I don't suppose Otto's here at all. Come to think of it, I'd rather he weren't here. Aren't they *excited*, these people! Well, of course they are. It's the Berlin Philharmonic, and it's Furtwängler himself. The conductor pointed to the leader, the leader bowed to his own special acclamation, the orchestra rose at the maestro's bidding. The maestro went off, came back again, went off, all this several times. Then he returned, tapped the baton sharply, the Schubert Symphony took the deep waters. It will be the interval after this. What's this instrument full of mystery and twilight? Is it the horn?

The whole idea is absolutely ridiculous, as well as dangerous. It's not fair to Mila, or to Father Josef, or to Yanka. But in any case, Otto's not here, so the question doesn't arise. I suppose that's the horn again, like a soft bell tolling in the distance. I'll have to leave Beethoven till another time. The Salle Pleyel, in Paris, say. But I still have a fancy for Rio de Janeiro. This is the slow movement, I suppose. Slow? I'd like it to go on for ever. Well, not for ever. I'd rather it stopped before curfew, to give me good time to get back. Dear Mr. Horowitz, I'll run into his outstretched arms like a long-lost daughter.

The symphony is over. This man behind my left ear will break my eardrum. Sit tight, Elsie. You don't want to move before everybody else moves. They're overdoing it, four times, five times. Oh, at last. He refuses to come out again. He's worked hard, poor man. Give him a rest. The players followed. The platform was empty. The audience dispersed into the corridors and the foyer.

It was in the foyer she met him, on her way towards the exit-doors. It was, of course, Otto von Umhausen, the wavy fair hair, the long-drawn nose, the broad shoulders magnificent under the impeccable uniform. He was coming

straight towards her. He was alone, too, quite alone. It was as if somehow he had become aware she was there, and had contrived this opportunity to meet her face to face. He was within two yards of her. She advanced a yard towards him, and stopped him in his tracks.

“Otto,” she said, quite easily, as if this was the Adlon Bar, and they were meeting casually for a cocktail, as in the old days. “You recognize me?” Her voice was quite low, of course. First she saw the anger in his eyes at the impertinence of a woman who dared to waylay him thus; then a sudden spark of recognition; then in swift succession, the certainty that it could not be Elsie Brockenburg, then the certainty that it was. “You must help me,” she said, always with that easy smile. “Will you?”

There was a dead silence for some moments. There was no expression at all in Otto’s eyes. They might have been made of glass. Then he spoke. His voice, too, was low.

“If you don’t go straight on and out——” he said. He said no more. His eyes turned towards a storm-trooper three yards away.

Without a word, quite unhurried, she moved off towards the exit-doors. It was getting sultry. A lot of people were going out into the street to get some air. Moving along the street, her knees like papier mâché, it suddenly occurred to her it would look good if she smiled a good evening at someone. Two women who had walked beyond her, turned. She smiled, and bowed. They smiled, and bowed in return, though they were a little embarrassed that they could not recall who she was.

She turned the corner, and continued without haste on her journey. She was sick with humiliation. It was not Umhausen who had humiliated her, but she herself. How could she ask chivalry from a German soldier, an accomplice of the unspeakable Frank, a partner in the infamy which was further removed from chivalry than any act in the human chronicle? Was it possible Umhausen had dispatched an underling to go after her? Was it footsteps she heard on the pavement behind her and were they shadowing her? She kept herself under control. She did not once quicken her steps. She was nearly dead by the time she pushed Yanka’s door open.

“Well, Lydia, what was it like?” asked Yanka. “Was it wonderful?”

“It’s nearly killed me,” she replied. “You have a drop of that vodka left, haven’t you, dear? Oh, thank you, thank you!”

CHAPTER IV

I

It was some two months later, and coffee and *ponczki* time in Yanka's apartment, after the evening meal. Yanka looked up.

"You have not said one word, Lydia, since we sat down. You are miserable."

"It comes and goes," said Elsie.

"I saw the girl in my luncheon hour."

Elsie raised her head sharply.

"How is she?"

"She says, as she said before: 'How soon do we go off again?'"

"Yes," Elsie sighed. "How soon?"

Yanka said nothing. Her fingers made a drubbing on the table, so sharp Elsie felt it had a meaning.

"Yes?" she asked. "Do you know anything? Is there any news?"

Yanka still said nothing. But with her left forefinger she made a tiny gesture of reproof. It meant: We are conspirators. We must always keep our mouths shut until we are told to open them. But, of course, you silly thing, I know something. There will be news soon.

There was news a week later.

"Listen, Lydia. It is arranged. Please do not be excited. Let me give you your instructions. Maria is receiving hers. I will give you them again and again till you are word-perfect. As you know, nothing will be on paper."

"Of course not."

"First, I want to tell you this. We've had the idea for some time that there's a group of people in Slovakia that organize the escape of Jewish children from Poland. I believe they've helped grown-ups, too, but it's the children they work for mainly. They managed to establish contact with Palestine. Or probably it's the other way round."

"From Palestine? Then it's Jewish, of course?"

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

“I just asked.” She felt a blush steal across her cheeks, and wondered if Yanka could fail to notice it. The blush seemed to spread from her cheeks across the skin of her whole body, till it felt as if she was standing in the blast of a large open oven-door. It was only natural that Jews, from Palestine, and from other places, too, should help Jews. As Sem and Father Josef and Yanka proved, there were other people than Jews who were helping Jews.

The only Jew who had not helped Jews had been Elsie Silver, the wife of an illustrious Nazi warrior. When, on one occasion, mysterious voices had telephoned, asking her to help rescue Jews incarcerated in Hitler’s camps, she had let the voices die in vacancy. Now the mysterious voices addressed her again, but this time they *offered* her help, and, of course, she must take it. She could only tell herself, in the depths of her heart, that it was not for herself but for another she had first asked for it, and for that other she must go on taking it.

“You’re not listening, Lydia,” Yanka reproved her. Elsie blinked as if she were just awakened from sleep.

“Forgive me, Yanka. My thoughts wandered. You know how it is.”

“They mustn’t wander when things are being worked out for you,” said Yanka with a shade of severity. “What was I saying? Oh yes. It’s only now we’ve got confirmation the organization has managed to set itself up in Slovakia. There’s a Slovakian Jewess in charge of it. Miriam, they call her. It seems she’s a clever woman, and brave.”

“And brave,” echoed Elsie. It occurred to her that there was another brave woman in the picture, sitting hard by. “I’ve met a brave woman in Cracow, too,” she murmured.

“Please,” begged Yanka. She blushed down to her collar-bones. “When once you’re across the Tatras and in Slovakia, there’s more freedom of movement. The country’s not occupied by the Germans, like Poland is. You’ll make contact somewhere with Miriam, or one of her agents. I can’t tell you where, probably in Bratislava. They’ll send you on the next stage of the journey. In the meantime, you must first be smuggled across the Slovak frontier.”

“Of course.” That was very much the point. Bratislava was beyond the Slovakian frontier. It was, in fact, no distance from both the Austrian and the Hungarian frontiers. In Hungary the moral climate was different, she had been told. The Germans had not occupied the country, any more than in Slovakia.

Their influence there was far less pervasive. There was air. The sun shone. A Jew could breathe and move. Only one frontier away was a country with a sea-coast. But first you must be smuggled across the Slovak frontier.

“This time you mustn’t be so much of a high lady. You must look more like the wife of a *kleinbeamter*, a small official. You’ll wear one of my old hats and that dark grey overcoat over your costume, which doesn’t look like anything in particular. It’s going to be cold, too, up in the High Tatras. I’ve got some real country shoes for you as well. You’ll need them. There’ll be tough going. You’re to hand back your Polish papers. You’ll still travel on your German papers, but you’d better travel third class. Yes, yes. There’s third class also, reserved for Germans. You’ll meet Maria at ten o’clock to-morrow morning, in The Rynek, outside the Deutscher Hof, as they call it.”

“To-morrow morning?” Joy and fear sprang in her heart at once.

“You understand? When once the next link in the chain is made, it’s important to move quickly. Yes. The Deutscher Hof. You remember? Where you had coffee the day you came. At Tarnow you change for the branch line by Nowy Saż to the frontier village of Piwniczna. It’s quite a little spa, so you won’t attract any particular attention. Besides, they’re not particularly on the look-out for refugees in those parts. Why jump out of the frying pan into the fire? It’s smugglers they’re after. You’ll go out of the station and turn right for the road that leads north, away from the frontier-posts. You’ll go on for a kilometre or more. It’ll be all right. There are several small pensions up that way. Then you come to a smithy on your left hand, just where the woods come down to the road. If the train is more or less on time, there’ll be a girl hanging round the smithy, inside or outside. She’s about sixteen, with coal-black hair. Her name is Zosha. If she’s there, go up to her and ask here where Frau Pfeiffer’s pension is. She’ll ask you which Pfeiffer. You will say Anna. Then you’ll both know. If she isn’t around, go in and ask the blacksmith about Herr Pfeiffer. He’ll arrange for Zosha to come along. Is all that clear? I’m going to give you all these names again. Look, I’ll write them down, and you’ll memorize them. Then tear up the paper. Is that all right? Sure? Good. Zosha will take you up into the woods by a roundabout way to her own home, three or four kilometres away. Her father has a small farm, but her real job is smuggling. She’s been paid to smuggle you across. She has contacts on the other side. The journey over the mountains will be easier for the girl. She can move more quickly.”

Elsie looked up sharply.

“I hadn’t thought of it,” she said. “The success of the job might depend on the speed we can move at? Is that it? I had a vague idea we’d go across in a

haycart, covered with sacks. That sort of thing.”

Yanka shrugged her shoulders.

“Probably that sort of thing happens sometimes. But not often, I think. The frontier guards aren’t fools.”

“Then I’m likely to be a nuisance to Maria? If it came to running like a young person, I mean. I’m rather out of form.”

“Yes?” Yanka waited.

“Then, I suppose, I’ll make the attempt separately. I’m not going to get in the child’s way. Anything but that. If we both make it, we make it.”

“Well, that’s what they thought,” said Yanka. “Maria will go first. She’ll wait till you join her.”

“How long will it take before I see her again? Where will I join her?”

Yanka made no reply. There was a faint reproof in her eyes. Even if there are more details available, one does not burden oneself with one more than’s necessary to carry one to the next link in the chain.

“I trust all will go well with you,” said Yanka. “It is in the Lord’s hands.”

Yes, the road was dark ahead. Only a single light gleamed wanly from far off, a brave and clever woman beyond the frontier. And that light might be extinguished, at any moment in any day.

“Thank you,” murmured Elsie. “You, and Father Josef, and all of you.” She paused for a few moments, then spoke again, a little awkwardly, as if well aware that it was most unlikely that the thing she asked would be granted. “Is there any chance of my seeing Father Josef before I go? I would like to thank him. Perhaps I could slip in after Mass?”

“It is better that people should not meet each other again,” said Yanka. “Not while the Shadow’s still over us.”

“So that you and I won’t meet again, when once we leave you? Oh yes, Yanka. We will, some day.”

“You’ll need the help of many other people besides Father Josef and me,” Yanka said drily, “before you’re quite safe. You’ll have a long round of visits if you’ll want to see them all. I’ll say prayers for your safety.”

“If I could pray, I’d give thanks to God for you, Yanka. But prayer doesn’t come easily to me.”

“There are various ways of praying, Lydia. Would you like to get your

things together now, or in the morning?”

“There’s so little, it will take no time. I think I’ll wash my hair. I always feel better for that.”

II

There was a girl standing outside the doors of the Deutscher Hof as Elsie moved across the square at ten o’clock next morning. For a moment Elsie was not sure it was Mila, for this girl was heavier and bigger; her clothes were different, too, from those Mila had worn before. And then she realized, and with an odd pang, that it was, in fact, Mila. The child was growing up. At Mila’s age five months make a lot of difference.

It’s odd, isn’t it (she asked herself) that I should feel put out because the child’s growing up? Do real mothers feel this way when they see it happening?

“Hallo, mama!” said Mila, clear-eyed and smiling. You wouldn’t say, would you, they were the eyes of a girl who had been going through a period of spiritual torment? No. The religious light of candles burning before the images of saints did not glow there. There was no smell of incense in her hair.

“Hallo, Maria!” At that moment the silver trumpet sounded from the high balcony on the tower of Santa Maria. They both looked up.

“He’s clear to-day, isn’t he, mama?”

“Yes, isn’t he?” Above all, the conversation must be casual. It was a terrible strain not to throw your arms round the girl and hug her. There was so much to ask and to tell, yet it must seem as if they had last been together a half-hour ago. “Are you sure you’ve got all the things I asked you for?” She saw that Mila had not only her hand-bag, but a shopping-bag stuffed with food, which, doubtless, the good nuns had given her.

“Yes, mama. It’s all here.” They were already strolling towards the station. They had time. They got their tickets and took their seats, without any excitement, in their reserved German carriage. The train chugged off out of the station. The first frontier lay ahead. At every station more and more peasants got in, till the train was as full as a stocking with its leg. But nothing occurred to mar the comfort of Frau Radbruch and her daughter. No one wanted to see any documents. They had a little snack, and glued their eyes on their German papers and magazines.

Yet, to Elsie at least, the journey was a nightmare. She and Mila had been separated for nearly half a year. Before long they would be separated again. For how long, this time? Was it certain they would come together again? Of

course it was not. How could anything be certain on this adventure, when the air you breathed was compounded of uncertainty and danger, and time had no relation any more with signs on clocks or calendars, but was only the connecting element between contacts.

There was more than an hour to wait at Tarnow for the branchline train south, so they went into the German buffet, where they could at least have some sort of hot drink, and get a few things said, one thing above all, which had only clarified itself on the way to Tarnow during these few hours in the train.

“The days are getting quite short, Maria, aren’t they?” Elsie said in a natural voice, lifting her cup of ersatz coffee. Then, without a change of expression, and only slightly lower, she went on: *“It’s going to be easier for you to get away without me. I think you ought to keep on when you get across. Don’t you, Maria?”*

“But then there’s always the winter to look forward to,” said Mila pleasantly. “Skating and all that.” Then she, too, slightly lowered her voice. *“I’m going to wait till you come. I won’t move without you.”*

“No, it’s not so bad. I’ve tasted better coffee, but I’ve also tasted worse. *I won’t argue, Maria. Were you happy at that school? Didn’t you sometimes feel you’d like to stay on for ever?”*

“And we might get some eggs, too, mama. Scrambled eggs. *Never. Not for one moment. I was always thinking of the new school, night and day.”*

“Well, I feel much better now, don’t you? I think it’s time for us to take our places. Bill please, waitress! And don’t look at me as though you’d like to throw me under the engine. I can’t help being a superior German lady. Come along, Maria dear!”

They rose and got into the train. It was terribly crowded, but Elsie managed to sit down. Mila stood beside her, gazing out of the window. With a hiss and a lurch the train moved off. It was a pleasant journey through green meadowland, and woodland indigo and golden, rising slowly towards a line of hazy hills in the south. In the hollow places splashes of yellow leaves and red leaves bubbled over into a brew of berries. On the wooded slopes sycamore burned into brass, oak hardened into bronze. The train stopped at every tiny station, amid fields whence a clamour of geese and rooks rose louder than the train or its passengers.

They had agreed to say as little as possible to each other, but now and again they sought each other’s eyes and a message passed between them.

What luck we're having, Mila! Wouldn't it be splendid if it kept on like this?

We're in the country, Channah, the green fresh country! Whatever happens, I've seen grass again, and meadows, and cows, and the leaves rolling over and over in the wind, and birds not knowing which way they're going, and trees burning from the top downwards, and hills far-off.

What's the matter, Mila? What's the matter? She was aware that the messages were no longer passing between them. The girl was still looking out of the window, but you could feel she saw nothing of what she was looking at. Her eyes were looking inward now, not outward, and were sombre.

She's remembering the padlocked years in the ghetto, Elsie said to herself. It's not even her mother and father she's thinking of. It's the boys and girls who were her friends, the *habonim*, the builders, studying how to milk cows and breed poultry for the time to come in Palestine; the boys and girls who will never see a tree again, or hear a bird; the boys and girls who are probably dead already. *Please, God, save this one anyhow, if you're there, God. And if you'll let me come through with her, that'll be fine, too.*

The hills were becoming steeper now, the slopes covered for the most part with conifers. In the hollows of the rock outcroppings the pine-needles lay deep and soft. The streams ran ragged down the clefts they had carved for themselves. You were in frontier country now, in the High Tatra. At the last station three or four men of the *Grenzschutz*, the frontier police, had got into the train. You could recognize them by the massive binoculars they had. They had rifles slung over their shoulders, pistols at their hips, jackboots, and a couple of white enamel edelweiss-flowers stuck in the side of their caps as special insignia. Their cartridge-belts bristled like teeth. They were tough young men.

The train stopped and they got out with the remaining passengers. They were at Piwniczna, the frontier station. Beyond those wooded mountains, whose high points were grey spines of rock, lay the next country. Outside the station several more frontier guards were lounging about, but they took no notice of them. The clusters of pensions and small houses that made up the village lay on their left. As arranged, they themselves turned right, and walked on without haste. There were one or two small pensions on the road, a couple of cafés, a farmhouse or two. And then, at last, some two kilometres away, where the woods pressed in on the road again, there was the smithy they had been told of. Just beyond the smithy a cart and horse were drawn up against the grass verge, with a man and girl beside it. The man was busy, or pretending to be busy, at an axle-tree, fitting a nail in place of a missing linch-pin. The girl

was adjusting the horse's head-harness. She was about sixteen, a lean and rangy creature. Black hanks of hair escaped from under her dark green kerchief, sprawled over with faded print roses. She wore an old sleeveless jacket lined with sheep-skin, and a woollen home-spun skirt, longer at one side than the other. This could only be the girl they had been told of, the smuggler girl who was to lead them across the frontier. The man, doubtless, was her father.

They approached, and Mila spoke to her.

"Please can you tell us where Frau Pfeiffer's pension is?"

"Which Pfeiffer?" the girl brought out, screwing up her coal-black eyes.

"Anna," said Mila.

"Go on, both of you," the girl said, without further ado. Her words came harsh and staccato, as if speech was a skill she was not adept in. They continued for two or three minutes, then the girl came up beside them, still uttering no word, and went ahead. She moved for some hundreds of yards in long, loping strides, without effort, then turned right into a path that climbed into the woods. It was clear they were expected to follow. They went after her.

For a time it was fairly easy to keep her in sight, for the path cut a clear swathe through the pines. But she was moving at a pace which Elsie, at least, and probably Mila, too, would find it impossible to maintain for more than a few minutes. Elsie was not a young woman, and she was burdened with a case which already felt as if it was loaded with bricks.

"Give me that!" Mila demanded.

"No!" panted Elsie. "You've got your own!"

"Yes, yes!" She took it from her. The back-breaking climb continued. The ascent became steeper now, and the path wound through large outcrops of limestone. The girl was relentless. It was only for a minute at a time that she allowed herself to be visible. Then the eerie twilight swallowed her again. Elsie's heart was beating like a hammer. The blood flared in her face.

"No!" proclaimed Mila explosively. "It won't do!" Mobilizing all the strength she had in her lungs she thrust forward and overtook the guide. She pulled fiercely at her sleeve.

"My mama!" she brought out. "She is not young! Please! Slow down!"

Zosha turned and looked at the other girl contemptuously.

"Townpeople!" she sneered. "Maybe Jews! All right!" She waited till

Elsie overtook them, then moved on, her pace somewhat reduced. The journey continued, along the slope, down a gully, across a stream, up into the thick wood again. The general direction was away from the sun, eastward, along a line parallel with the frontier. It was hard going.

‘I’m not going to give in,’ Elsie swore. ‘I’m not. I suppose this is nothing compared with what’s ahead of us.’ The flesh between calf and heel-bone ached as if wasps had stung it. The silence was broken by the sudden harsh shriek of a jay. Then the silence spread again, absolute like engulfing water. Again the silence was broken. It was a sudden low whistle of alarm from Zosha. “Down!” the sound meant. She had heard something. She flung herself down behind a tree, and lay flat and invisible. The others followed suit. They strained their ears for the crack of a twig or the thresh of shifted pine-needles, but they could hear nothing, nothing at all. Then Zosha got on her feet again. Elsie and Mila rose, too. They went on. The back-breaking journey continued. At last they found themselves on a long descending slope that led down to the flat land again, where the wood cleared abruptly. It was getting dark now, but through the tree-trunks they caught a glimpse of fields, a dilapidated wooden farmhouse, one or two out-buildings. As they stood at length on the wood’s edge, a dog suddenly gave tongue, gazing out on a squalid farm-yard, hazed over with wood-smoke. A few scraggy chickens pecked at the hard earth, a tethered goat chewed and mumbled. Three geese turned towards them like one fowl and hissed loudly. A cat sat disconsolately on the wooden doorstep. Sharp in their nostrils, keener than other odours, came the nutty rank smell of goats.

The girl waited till her charges reached her. Then, her head averted, she looked sidelong at Elsie, weighing her up. For a moment the lips parted to show a white flicker of teeth. If that was a smile, it was not a kind one.

Then she talked. The words were like iron pellets.

“I’ll go in. If all’s well I’ll show myself at the door. Then go into the shed there. I’ll bring soup.” Then she went down, appeared again, and went back into the house. The two others went down after her. For some odd reason these last few yards were more desperately difficult for Elsie than all the ardours that had gone before. Her knees were like rubber. Her inside was pulsating like a valve. Then, at the door of the shed, she was violently sick. The spasm over, she leaned back against the shed, almost doubled over with weakness. She thrust back her dank hair from her forehead, and smiled.

“That’s fine now, Mila. She just wanted to get us into training. Don’t make such big eyes, girl.”

“Oh, poor Channah! I could have killed her!” She lifted the latch of the

stable door, took Elsie's arm, and led her in. "Sit down here," she said, "and I'll make it comfortable." There was a manger near the door, with some leather trappings on hooks. Towards the rear wall was a heap of straw and some empty sacks. "Here!" said Mila. "It will be warm, I think!"

"Yes," murmured Elsie. "It wouldn't make much difference if it were broken bottles." She laid herself down. Before Mila had smoothed the straw down and fitted up a stuffed sack for pillow, she was asleep, inert as a lump of clay. For quite a long time before she came to consciousness again, she had the sense of a hand tugging again and again at her shoulder, and of a voice going round and round in her ear-drum, like the dried pea that goes round in a rattle. Her fatigue fought hard to keep her anaesthetized, before at length it capitulated. She was aware it was Mila shaking her urgently, and Mila's voice.

"Channah, Channah, dear Channah! I must awaken you! I don't want to, but I've got to! Channah, Channah! Get up!"

Her eyes had already been open for some moments, and they registered things seen before her mind comprehended words heard. They saw the light of dawn coming in through great chinks in a double door, seeping round the haunches of a squatting horse shuffling and puffing not many feet away. There was a girl kneeling beside her, shaking her, a pack on her back, a kerchief round her head. There was a bowl with soup, and a bowl with none, two mugs, and a hunk of bread on the earth floor just beyond the straw bed she was lying on.

Then sound, images, associations fused. Complete awareness switched itself on, like an electric contrivance.

"Yes, Mila? What is it? Is anything wrong?" She tried to sit up, but was immediately almost felled by the spasm of pain in her back and thighs. "It's not a trap, is it?"

"No, Channah, no! Are you all right? I couldn't wait any more! I had to wake you up and say good morning to you before I go."

"Before you go, Mila? What are you talking about? You can't go *now*, not so soon! Oh, Mila!" Then at once she was in total possession of her senses. Why on earth shouldn't she go now, so soon, if everything was ready?

"She told me an hour ago, we'd go off at dawn. She'll be here any moment. I've held back from waking you till the last minute. Oh, Channah, if only you were coming, too! Why do they separate us like this all the time?"

"Have you had any food? A hot drink?"

“They brought in soup and bread last night. I had mine, but I didn’t want to waken you. It was better for you to sleep. When she called me this morning, she brought coffee. Here’s yours. It’s cold!”

“That’s all right. I could eat straw. So you’re going now, any minute?”

“Yes, Channah. What can I do?”

“You can do nothing but be a good girl and go. I’ll be with you soon.” She paused. “Did the girl give you an idea how soon?”

“She didn’t. It can’t be more than a day or two. It’s only a few miles to the frontier, after all. And then I suppose she has to . . . she has to pick up some stuff. Oh, Channah, it’s going to be so hard for you. It’ll kill you.”

“I take a lot of killing. We both do. We’re doing fine, Mila. When I next see you . . .” She could not permit herself to finish the sentence. When she next saw Mila, if she saw Mila again, the back of the journey would be anything but broken. Mila seemed to divine her thought. She reached for the cup beside her.

“Will you have this? It’s cold. There’ll be something hot soon, I’m sure.”

“Oh, Mila, what’s that pack on your back?”

“I don’t know. It’s bits of jewellery, I think. There was more than she could take, and she said she’d pay me if I took some. So I said yes, and she went off to the hide-away and got some more.”

“Doesn’t it make it all . . . a bit more dangerous?”

“No,” said Mila. “It’s worse being a Jew than a smuggler. We must keep out of their way, that’s all. Oh, she’s here!” They heard the click of the latch and one of the stable doors was pulled open. The girl, Zosha, stood outlined against the grey light, herself a thing black and grey, a shadow to flit imperceptibly from tree-trunk to tree-trunk, to lie on the woodland floor like a storm-broken bough. A heavy pack was slung from her shoulders.

“Ready?” asked Zosha.

“Yes,” breathed Mila. She threw her arms round Elsie and for a moment laid her cheek against hers. “*Shalom!*” she murmured.

“*Shalom!*” replied Elsie. Despite the sick pang at her heart, she was speculating whether that salutation had been on her lips in all her life before. It had not, she thought. It was better to hold on to nonsense-thoughts like that, she knew, than suddenly to start blubbering, as she knew she was going to the moment Mila had gone.

“Tell her she must keep inside all day,” Zosha said to Mila. “She can go

out at night.”

“She says you must keep inside all day. You can only go out at night.” Once more she bent down, then she lifted Elsie’s head and kissed her. “Keep well! *Shalom!*” she whispered. Then she straightened up, and went off. The door-latch clicked behind her. As she had known she would, Elsie started blubbering. “Let it go!” she told herself. “Buckets full! It’s the only sort of fun you’re going to have for a long time!” The attack over, a sharp stab in the stomach told her how hungry she was. She raised herself from the waist with immense care and betook herself to the cold soup, the cold coffee, the dry bread.

“*Horcher!*” she murmured. “*Fouquet!* Caviare! Pressed duck!”

Then, with as much care, she lowered herself to her straw palliasse again, and fell again at once into profound sleep.

III

Again she did not become awake through the natural process of waking from sleep, and it was first through the nutty rank smell of goat she became conscious that once more another person was involved in her awakening. The smell first; then, after an immeasurably slight interval, the feel of hard bristles on her cheek and of arms thrown round her back, blunt fingertips exploring the soft places under the shoulder-blades. Then total consciousness. Then, her mind working, proceeding from element to element, with the speed of lightning. A peasant, the man who had this squalid little farm; Zosha’s father, doubtless; the man who was fiddling about yesterday with the axle-tree of the cart, outside the smithy.

I mustn’t tear at his eyes. He’d knock me out, and get on with what he wants. Then he’d hand me over to the guards. No, he wouldn’t. It would draw the sort of attention to him he wants to avoid. I must think fast. He doesn’t know I’m awake yet. He’s warming up. He won’t stay at this point long. I can’t, no I can’t, not even for Mila, let him get on with it.

But before the minute arc of time was traversed during which these conclusions were succeeding one another, she was aware she was screaming at the top of her voice, and pummeling his horrible face with her weak fists.

“Quiet!” he boomed at her—that was the meaning of it, whatever the Polish word was—and put his hand over her mouth. That’s something done, she told herself. However deeply tucked away his farm is in the neck of darkness, he’s still afraid of people overhearing a woman screaming. Then he pulled his arm out from under her, and lurched to his feet, shaking his head,

and grumbling miserably. She had the feeling straight away she was not likely to be incommoded this way again. He was the sort of man who only believed in rape with consent.

“You might get me a hot cup of coffee!” she said. She had enough Polish for that. He went off grumbling and growling all the time, but he was back soon not only with hot coffee, but with bread and some eggs. He kept his eyes turned from her. They were red-rimmed and foolish. She felt quite sorry for him.

“But my dear!” she told him, in English: “That smell of goat!”

IV

Three days passed, and they were fairly uneventful. The cat came in and took a fancy to her, thus brightening things up. It was company, and it kept other creatures away. The horse was company, too, when the man brought her in of an evening and unharnessed her. The horse was a bit restless, but so was she. They got on well with each other. The man brought her enough to eat and drink, but otherwise treated her as if she had cholera, which did not upset her. She drowsed away the daylight hours, and gave her muscles the chance of recovering from the inordinate strain they had been subjected to. They would soon be subjected, she knew, to a more punishing one. She looked forward keenly to the brief stroll after dark, though the dog made a lunatic clamour when she issued forth. She had never known stars so large and bright as these, in a sky which seemed to fit tight as a cap over these mountains.

An unpleasant episode occurred on the second day. The dog had suddenly started one of his uproars, of which it was impossible, at least for Elsie, to say whether they meant something or nothing. On this occasion, apparently, it meant something. In a minute or two the man came in. “Get up at once!” he said. His thoughts and words were few, his gestures simple. It was always impossible to misunderstand him. She got up from the straw, her heart knocking painfully. “This way! Run!” He ran ahead of her into the wood. Some thirty or forty yards inside was a small hollow, thick with drifted leaves and fallen pine-needles and broken twigs. He thrust his arms inside and flung the stuff aside in great armfuls, like a dog burrowing with its fore-paws into the sandy scarp of a warren, till he revealed a criss-cross stretcher of branches laid over an opening cut into the woodland floor. He pulled the stretcher aside to give access to a shaft that descended some six feet or so. The shaft had a rough ladder clamped against one side. “Get down there!” the man demanded. She went down, though it was not easy, and she had not reached the bottom before the man had pulled the stretcher over the shaft and begun to cover it

with twigs and leaves. There was room enough to sit down, but hardly more, with her knees drawn up, and her back arched against the earth wall. She found there was some paper and sacks down there, and a square of tarpaulin, all materials, doubtless, for the wrapping of the smuggled goods. The darkness was not wholly darkness, it was like being under twenty feet of water. Through the roof of twigs and leaves air came down to live on.

It was uncomfortable, it was even horrible; yet it was not so bad as the time she had crawled along the sewer into the Warsaw ghetto. But the liability to an experience of this sort put the inquiry into her head, whether life at this price was quite worth it, seeing how speculative it all was. It was dreadfully uncertain that she would ever get anywhere, and beyond the furthest bound of guess-work what she would do when she got there.

But no. Sitting there with the crick in her neck, in the damp cold hole, she knew now that the impulse to take her own life, which she had once known, had gone for ever, and would not return in the most direful circumstances. They might kill her, enemies or even friends, but not she herself. And to be fair to herself, on that earlier occasion, when she had been brimful of the desire for death, and death had, in fact, taken control, the time when she had lain trapped under the bomb-wreckage in Warsaw, she had not herself summoned him; she had merely made no effort to bid him be gone. Till she heard the voice of Mila crying from the deeps. That had made the difference.

It accounted for a good deal now, but not all. She knew she would never sneak off in time to come, because it was dishonourable to incur a debt from life, and not to discharge it by dying the death life itself imposed on you. She knew that, whatever discomfort, pain, danger, boredom lay in wait for her, her brain would always stand aside, curious as to the pattern that was being evolved, and the finale that would round it off. It was *fun*. The word was ridiculous, but conclusive.

“So I hope he’ll be back soon,” she told herself, “my poor nasty he-man, and let me out of this.” A thought ambled through her mind. “I wonder whether anybody unpleasant *has* turned up. The dog barked like mad, but that means nothing. He’ll bark like that at a chicken pecking at a lump of potato-peel. Has he put me down here with the idea of softening me up? If I don’t say yes to him the next time he cocks an eye at me, am I to believe there’ll be another holiday in the hidey-hole?”

She did not have the opportunity of deciding this, for Zosha returned in the early morning of the fourth day. She came in. Elsie, as it happened, was awake. She was back in the stable now.

“It’s you, Zosha? How’s Mila?” She asked breathlessly. She had Polish enough for that.

“*Dobzhe!* Good!” That’s all she had to say on the matter. It was enough, and it was tremendous.

“Thank you! Thank you!” In her wild relief the mad thought occurred to her she must show her gratitude by presenting her with one of the jewels she still had hidden on her person. But she realized at once that would not be sensible, if she hoped to join Mila again.

Brief instructions followed. The dialect in these parts was thick, but, as always, the words were few and simple. Zosha and her father would be busy all day. Doubtless, Elsie thought, they had merchandise both to deliver and collect. She must be ready to leave early next morning, or the morning after, she was given to understand. There would be food for the day soon. On no account was Elsie to show herself during their absence. Then Zosha went off, the indefatigable creature, tough as hide, sinewy as a willow-sapling. The father brought the food in. It was not he who wore the trousers in that house, excepting for certain specialized functions. Elsie lifted her mug of coffee from the ground, her hand trembling and her eyes (she was irritated to discover) misted over.

“To you, Mila! You’ve made it!” she said aloud. “God bless you! See you soon, I hope!”

Two mornings after they left at cock-crow. Zosha once again carried a pack crammed with goods, bits and pieces of broken-up jewellery junk. There would be good Slovak cigarettes to come back later. Elsie carried a pack, too, in which were rolled up her heavy coat and one or two other objects of clothing. She knew that the journey ahead was going to be extremely strenuous and unpleasant, yet, at the moments of her maximum exhaustion, when she was quite convinced she would die if she had to climb any more of those frightful rocks, or crouch for two more minutes in a cave as cold as a refrigerator—even at those dreadful moments she could never quite make up her mind whether it was more, or less, unpleasant than she had anticipated. She was, however, certain that crossing did *not* seem so dangerous as she had imagined, though she realized that the journey did not seem so dangerous merely because Zosha’s skill and instinct were side-stepping the dangers. On two occasions she herself either saw or heard the patrols, but from Zosha’s behaviour it was quite clear they were close at hand more often than that. On each occasion they went to earth immediately and waited till the danger had passed by. Then Zosha took her off helter-skelter across the area left

comparatively safe for a short period. Only comparatively safe, she was to learn later from Mila. There were still animal-traps planted at strategic points, electrified wires or wires hung with bells, look-out posts planted on tree-tops and on commanding rocks. It was those wild scampers, after the patrol had passed by, that made the day most nightmarish. But it was all a nightmare, the miles of forest, the exposed scree, the plunging slopes. She was soon in a state of such exhaustion that she could only continue because all volition had gone out of her numbed faculties. She was a twitching automaton, putting one foot in front of the other, scrambling jerkily on hands and knees as if Zosha pulled the strings. Yet, despite this, certain of her faculties seemed to be living in an acute ether they had not known before. In the woods, from a tree far-off and down below, came the clack of the wings of a disturbed wood-pigeon settling into its nest. A weasel shifted a handful of light leaves. Between rocks and sky, hawks hovered. An eagle swooped out of the afternoon. From a hollow a wailing rose that made the blood freeze. A wailing went back to it over the cold leagues. What creatures were they, with voices so hateful and melancholy?

Woods began again. Wood-pigeons heeled over in the late light. From somewhere far below, thin and precise, came the tap of a woodpecker, like a spinster tapping at a typewriter. She was not conscious that their pace had slackened, but the slopes were descending now. The streams were making their way to the south, not the north. Surely melancholy Poland was behind them? They had crossed the frontier?

“Slovakia now?” she asked, pulling aside the matted hair from over her eyes.

“*Tak!*” the girl said. “Yes.” Quite casually, as though the journey had been to the village post office. At that moment Elsie only knew she would have liked to smash Zosha’s face in. How long ago could she have told her the patrolled area was behind them? The creature was hard and grey as flint, young as she was.

“Could I rest now? I must rest,” groaned Elsie.

“No.” The girl was implacable. Perhaps the danger was not over yet. The journey continued through thick pine-woods, with here and there a clearing, where timber was being felled. An animal barked, not a dog. A fox, wasn’t it? Where there’s a fox, there’s poultry. There were farms somewhere not far off. In some farm somewhere, in some barn or stable, Mila was awaiting her.

“My daughter?” she brought out. “How soon? Where is she?”

Zosha projected a thumb down the slope. That was all the information she

was going to give. They continued for another ten or fifteen minutes. Then she stopped.

“Wait here!” she said. “Sit!” She went off and returned some minutes later, the pack no longer on her shoulders. Somewhere, close at hand, was her Slovakian cache. “Come now!” Those were not words. They were a gesture of the head. It took Elsie a long time to rise, for all her body was like lead. When she at last staggered to her feet, the very eyelids seemed so heavy they were dragging her head down. She *had* to sleep, there was no getting away from it. She couldn’t go a step further. Slovakia didn’t matter, Bratislava didn’t matter, not even Mila mattered, she must sleep. The drowsiness of one bedded in a snow-drift must be like this, she mused dimly. Her feet were splaying under her, her head was bobbing from side to side like a tethered balloon.

Suddenly she felt a sharp hand-slap, first on the left cheek, then the right. The head settled with a crick on the neck-bones again. The legs tightened up.

“All right!” she said through her teeth. Both cheeks flamed, like plates where methylated spirit has been ignited. “Good girl, Zosha!”

Now at last was the last lap. The evening light, like a coloured mist, was scarfed round the trunks of pine and fir, of oak and beech. Beyond the woods a stretch of pasture rippled in great waves towards another line of hills. Some three hundred yards away a deep-gabled log-built farmhouse stood off from a fringe of meadows, protected from the east by a thicket of ragged elms. Far off in the plain beyond, flocks of sheep curled and floated, like handfuls of plucked feathers. A wing of light, like a swallow’s, glanced up from a coil of water.

“That house!” said Zosha. “Family Galbany lives there!”

“Is she there too?” whispered Elsie. “My daughter?” The girl nodded. Elsie clasped her hands and ran forward a yard or two, till her stiffness stopped her, like a rope stretched in front of her. She turned in a passion of gratitude, but her words were checked on her lips. Zosha was not there. She stumbled a few yards this way and that, back along the path, in among the trees. She was not there.

“Zosha!” she called out. There was no reply. “Zosha!” Silence. For a minute or two she stood there wondering whether the whole venture was a dream. But no, with these blistered feet and chafed shoulders, it was no dream. Zosha was being funny then, she had shown all the time a streak of rather savage humour. She leaned against a tree, waiting for Zosha to reappear, so as to conclude her job, and hand her charge over to the next contact. But Zosha did not reappear. Suddenly fright was added to all Elsie’s other discomforts.

She was in a country where she had never been before, where they spoke a strange uncouth language. She was in a frontier region, with its patrols and check-points. She opened her mouth to shout “Zosha! Zosha!” with all her lungs, then at once clamped her hand over her face. If trouble was lurking anywhere, what could be more idiotic than to draw attention to a foreign woman yelling a foreign name in a border-land wood?

Then suddenly a happier thought possessed her mind. This was Slovakia, not Poland. In Poland the Germans were in occupation. In Slovakia they were not. Perhaps they would never be. It was easier to move about in this country. She had entered the orbit of that brave and clever woman of whom Yanka had spoken to her in Cracow. What was her name? Miriam. That was it. She raised her aching hand in salute to the unincarnated wraith . . . tall or dark, lean or stocky, girl or old woman? She did not know. She might not ever know.

“Good-bye, Zosha,” she murmured. “That’s why you’ve gone off. Because there’s Miriam, now.”

How far was that house at the foot of the slope? Two, three hundred yards. There would be neither Zosha nor Miriam to guide her over that distance. But if she could not travel three hundred yards under her own steam, she was not likely to get far on her journey to Rio de Janeiro, or wherever she was headed for.

She turned her back again on Poland, and for the last time; then staggered down to the edge of the woodland on to the open path, and out to the lane beyond. A boy was coming up behind a pair of ambling oxen. He looked at her for a moment, then turned his eyes away. Perhaps he had seen other weary travellers descend out of those woods. She dragged herself on to an unlatched gate in a low fence bordering the lane, and walked through. The meadow beyond was beaten into farm-yard earth. Above the yard stood the farmhouse, with a name and date carved in florid letters out of the lintel over the door:

JANO GALBANY 1910

A woman was feeding chickens beside the house, a basin in the crook of her arm. She straightened up as Elsie came near, and stared into her eyes, but said no word. A dark-blue kerchief was bound round her forehead, its ends lying behind her neck. She wore a square-cut sheep-skin jacket over a white blouse with puffed sleeves.

“*Panni Galbaná*, you?” Elsie asked tremulously.

She nodded, then with her free arm signalled to a small window under the angle of the gable. A hand appeared and flickered an answering signal, pink

and swift like the tip of a cat's tongue. There could be no doubt whose hand that was. With a quick gesture the woman flung the remaining grain in a wide arc into the sun, so that they seemed rather like ash-berries than pellets of maize. Then she looked swiftly right and left along the lane. There was nothing to worry her anywhere. Through the scuffle and squawk of chickens she thrust over to Elsie, and took her arm.

“Good evening,” she said, in Polish, “God be with you!” The folk would have at least a few words of Polish in these frontier parts. “She awaits you! Come!” She saw how exhausted Elsie was, and put her arm round her shoulder, holding her up. “This way!”

“Good evening, *panni*,” Elsie mumbled. “Such a long. . . .”

“Please not to talk now!” They went up three wooden steps, and entered the main room of the house. The woman shut the door behind them. With the click of the latch there was a wild scramble of flying limbs down an exposed stairway at a corner of the room.

It was she.

“Mila! Mila!”

“Channah! You're come! You're here!”

This time, at least, they did not remember that those were not the names by which they should address each other. Their arms were round each other. They kissed each other. They kissed each other again and again.

Then Panni Galbaná broke in.

“Let her go, Marisha! Let her go up and rest!”

Between them they managed to get Elsie up into the low-hung gable room. There was no bed on legs there, but a beautiful couch had been made up in the sweet-smelling straw, spread out with clean coarse sheets and covered over with a gay embroidered counterpane. Almost at once there was a hot stone, wrapped in a blanket, to put into the bed. Soon after there was a huge bowl of hot soup and a glass of ice-cold milk. Panni Galbaná was kind.

CHAPTER V

I

It was late autumn, but there was a curious springtime feeling in the air. It was not due to the bright sun that shone all day, for they were high in the mountains and the nights were bitter. But the first stage of the journey was behind them. There was a sense of loosening, as when the piled ice-blocks of a river start cracking, and the water begins to run this way and that. There might be a frost later on, but for the time being the sun is upon the eyes.

They had found friends back there in Poland, but they had been gifts of fortune. Where would they have been now, if Wolff had not still been in the Warsaw ghetto? If the young student in St. Anna Street had not led them to Father Josef? But here, in Slovakia, not only did they have friends, but their friends had names. The farmer was named Jano Galbany, like his father before him; his wife was Zuzanna, his son Jozko. Those were real names. It was heartening to be dealing with names, and not the shadows of names. There was one other name known to them, Miriam, still only a shadow-name. But she was a woman, too, and an instrument so sensitive, she had received impulses all the desperate way from Palestine, and had transmitted them beyond the Polish frontiers. Perhaps at that very moment impulses towards their salvation were crossing and criss-crossing along invisible wires, over plains and rivers and hills.

It was true the danger was far from over yet. In a single instant the mechanism called Miriam might be as irretrievably smashed as a watch cracked by a hammer. Miriam or no Miriam, lands and seas stretched wide and far between them and the end of danger. But they had stepped out of the grave-cloths. They had come up out of the tomb.

It was true that they were still hedged round with secrecies. They kept to the one room all day, as before, but it was a room, not a stable. It was only Zuzanna, the woman, they had anything to do with. The husband and the son went on with their work as if Elsie and Mila were not there. They did not show their faces at the window by day, or light the room up by night. But all these were elementary precautions. They were not manacles.

"I wonder what she's like," murmured Mila from her straw couch, on the second night after Elsie's arrival. Elsie had been more or less unconscious till then.

“You mean Miriam?” asked Elsie. She was aware that in Cracow they had given Miriam’s name to Mila, too, as well as to herself, and the name of the town where she had her headquarters.

“Yes, Miriam.”

“Perhaps we’ll find out in Bratislava,” speculated Elsie.

“Perhaps yes, perhaps not,” mused Mila sadly. “Did they tell you she’s in touch with Palestine?”

“Yes, Yanka told me.”

“Sister Carmela told *me*. I wonder if she looks like Sister Carmela?”

“Why should she look like Sister Carmela?”

“Because Sister Carmela’s so tall and beautiful, and has such quiet eyes.” (“Ho-ho!” Elsie said to herself. “So she didn’t get through her convent days without her little schoolgirl pash!”)

“I think if Sister Carmela were Jewish, she’d do work like this Miriam, organizing escapes for . . . for people like us.”

“There’s a lot of people besides Jews who are risking their lives on this escape work. We’ve met some already. There’s Sem, and Father Josef, for instance, and Yanka, and your nuns.”

“Yes, it’s true. But what are the people outside doing? Surely they must know by now what’s going on? We often used to ask ourselves that question in the *kibbutz* discussions in Warsaw.”

“They know in Palestine. Yanka told me that Miriam is in touch with Palestine. They must be helping her with food and supplies.”

“Yes.” There was a silence for some time. Then: “If Miriam has connections with the outside world, she could have escaped to Eretz long ago if she’d wanted to.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I *wonder* what she’s like,” insisted Mila. She seemed quite exasperated that she could not build up a mental image of her. “I don’t think she can be like Sister Carmela, for she’s Jewish. She wouldn’t be like my mother, either. She must be tough and strong. My mother was always so delicate, like a flower.”

“One doesn’t know,” observed Elsie. “Sometimes people who are tough inside look like nothing in particular outside.”

“Anyhow, she’s wonderful, whatever she looks like.”

“And I hope she’s sleeping safe and warm, wherever she is. And you go to sleep, too. Good night, Mila.”

“Good night, Channah.” Then: “Good night, Miriam.” She was asleep soon.

There was a good deal of speculation about Miriam during the next few days and nights, though the woman was only a name, and nothing was known about her but the nature of her work. She seemed to have taken hold of Mila’s imagination much more powerfully than even Sister Carmela, though there was no shape to her hands, and no colour to her eyes.

Word came through on the fifth evening that they were to set out for Bratislava the following morning. A priest from those parts, by name Father Pekarek, had been on a visit to a dying relative in his native village not far off. He would come in a horse-and-cart a few kilometres out of his way to pick them up at eight next morning, and take them to the station at Podolinec, where the branch-railway into the mountains ended. From there the line went to the junction-station of Poprad, some two hours away, and they would reach Bratislava, all being well, about eight that evening. Father Pekarek would look after them the whole time. They were once again to look as nondescript as possible, say the wife and daughter of a small clerk or shopkeeper. Shepherded by Father Pekarek, it was highly unlikely that anyone would dream of asking them for papers. If they did, the priest would know how to tackle the situation.

At eight o’clock next morning Father Pekarek duly turned up, sitting alongside his driver. They were announced not only by the gay clip-clop of the horse’s hoofs, but by a hearty peal of laughter that set off the dog barking, the chickens cackling, the cows mooing. There was nothing conspiratorial about the priest or his driver.

“He’s here! The priest!” cried Zuzanna. “Have you got everything? Your food parcels? Your cases?” (There had been a metamorphosis of rucksacks into fibre suitcases.) “Come at once!” They tumbled down the steps and into the yard. The priest lumbered down out of the cart and came over. He wore a battered black felt hat, and a long soutane shiny with the grease-patches and wine-stains of many a year’s good feeding.

“The blessings of the Lord be on you!” he boomed, “and a good morning, too!” (He was speaking Slovak.) Then he turned to Elsie and Mila. “So you’re my babies, eh?” But he took all three into his arms, one after the other, and kissed them roundly. “Well, what are we waiting about for? We’ve a train to catch.”

“Whoa there, Pejko!” the driver called out to the horse, which was a bit fresh.

“Whoa there, Pejko!” repeated the priest. Then, not quite so loud: “You talk Polish? Good! Let it be Polish!” He lifted his charges into the rear end of the cart where there was a heap of straw and sacking, and a couple of old sheep-fleeces. Then it occurred to him that the youngster might prefer a seat in front with the driver; or, perhaps, he himself preferred a seat behind with the woman. “Come you, what’s your name? You’d rather go in front, wouldn’t you? What did you say your name was?”

“Maria, Father.”

“Marisha, eh? Fine! Come Mrs. Neighbour, kiss them good-bye!” They bent down and kissed Zuzanna warmly. Husband and son appeared at the door and waved. “Say good-bye to all of them! God bless you, children! Hup-la, Pejko, Ludvik! Off we go now! Hup!”

Ludvik cracked his whip and slewed the horse’s head round.

“Hup!” he shouted. They were off. It was an almost intoxicating air of comfort the priest radiated. Elsie had not closely studied priests before, but this one, she felt, despite his immense *bonhomie*, must be as saintly as priests are made. He was also, if anyone was, a countryman to the broad tips of his fingers, and the billiard-ball polish of his high Slav cheek-bones. As a priest performing his churchly functions, he doubtless carried about with him the faint smell that priests have of incense and tapers and mothballs in vestment-stored cupboards. But perched up beside her in the cart, his stubby legs stretched out before him, his smell was of the earth and farms, of milking and gelding, hay-tossing and potato-picking. Perhaps he had a bit of a farm on the outskirts of Bratislava, and he spent his evenings with his soutane tucked up round his waist, his feet stuffed into a pair of leggings, cocking a bland eye at his pigs and calves. It was a simple face, hardly fitted, you might have thought, to deal with the simple theological issues that present themselves in the training of a country priest. Except that the priest was clean-shaven, and Ludvik, the driver, had a burly red beard growing round his chin like a ruff, you felt they could have changed places with each other without doing each other violence. They both had the same stocky shoulders, broad hands, high cheek-bones, bright blue eyes.

“Hup! Hup!” shouted Ludvik.

“Hup! Hup!” shouted Father Pekarek back to him, and roared with laughter.

They were making good progress. The horse was in as good a temper as the two men, the two women also, for that matter. They had gone through the first village. They went up a fairly steep slope beyond. The down slope on the other side was somewhat steeper. They were coming slowly down from the High Tatra country. “Ye-ow! Ye-ow!” squealed the brakes. The scraggy chickens dithered and cackled across the road. The goats stared silently, with tufts of green-stuff dangling from their jaws. The dogs barked and chased their tails. It was a fine crisp morning. Elsie and Mila are one stage further on their way out of the charnel-house! Hallelujah!

Conversation, of course, was not brisk. Now and again Father Pekarek addressed a remark to Elsie in his own language, but rather by way of friendliness, than for the sake of exchanging thoughts. Once or twice when it seemed important for him to get a thought off his chest, he shouted it out to Mila, who gave it back to Elsie. The importance was not in the thoughts themselves. “Ask her doesn’t she think it’s a fine day?” “Tell her to look at that flight of geese!” “Ask her does she like Hungarian wine. They drink a lot in these parts.” But it was conversation. They were comrades. For the most part he sang songs. He had a rollicking baritone voice. And when he wasn’t singing, he was hallooing to the peasants chopping wood at their doors, or working out in their fields. The peasants touched their caps and smiled back to him. He clasped his hands over his stomach, and twiddled his thumbs with loving-kindness.

It was on a stretch of road that traversed the rolling plain, under the ruins of the Stara Zubovna castle, that the fairy-tale thing happened. Elsie was drowsing, for she had been up early, but in the curious and blissful sense of confidence that the priest gave off like warmth from a stove, her mind was wandering with an unusual freedom. She was at Juan-les-Pins, stretched out indolently beside her first husband on the tiger-coloured sands; she was playing draughts with dear, kind Yanka in the Cracow apartment; she was in the kitchen of her father’s small house in Doomington, where the anarchists came to drink tea-with-lemon, and make eyes over the rims of their tumblers at the Silver daughters. One of them was speaking,

“Zugt mir a mol, Yiddene. Fin vannet kimmt ir?”

The meaning of the words was clear enough: “Now, just tell me, Jewish woman, where do you come from?” But the accent? She wondered vaguely what sort of Yiddish accent that was. The anarchists came from widely scattered areas in the Eastern-European homelands. The Poles made fun of the Lithuanians for calling *fleisch* ‘*flaysh*.’ The Lithuanians made fun of the Poles for calling *flaysh* ‘*fleisch*.’

“Hijo! Pejko!” the carter called out to the horse, as he shied from a flock of sheep that came bleating up the road.

The words buzzed a little more loudly at her ear-drum again.

“*Zugt mir a mol, Yiddene. Fin vannet kimmt ir?*”

She gave no answer, for the words were not uttered on the North-Slovakian plateau, but in the Silver kitchen. They belonged not to now, but to a quarter of a century ago. And they were not addressed to her either; doubtless, to her mother, or Esther, her eldest sister.

Then she felt a nudge of an elbow in her ribs.

“*Ni, Yiddene?*” a voice asked behind the swish-swish of Pejko’s tail.

She turned her head imperceptibly, fearfully, because surely she was bewitched, she was hearing voices. When she had turned her head far enough, she saw the blue eyes of Father Pekarek staring into her own; or rather, she saw one blue eye, for the other was screwed up in a wink. Her mouth opened till it was a round hole. She felt her eyes goggling in their sockets, like old-time toffee-apples impaled on sticks. She tried to say something, but she could as soon at that moment have sung ‘*Ho-yo-lo-ho,*’ the Battle-cry of Brünnhilde.

So Father Pekarek spoke again, again in Yiddish, and louder this time:

“Well, *Yiddene*, what do you expect? A Jew has *saychel*, sense, hasn’t he?”

He spoke so loud, in fact, that alarm went rat-tat-tat at her head, like a door-knocker. Her eyes switched to Ludvik the driver, and back again to Father Pekarek, in an anguished appeal. For God’s sake, they said, what about *him*? Be careful!

Father Pekarek threw his head back, and roared till the cart rattled. She didn’t know what the joke was, but it was impossible not to laugh with him. Ludvik turned his head, and smiled broadly. Only Mila remained serious; not tragic, as she still was most of the time; but serious, deeply interested. What on earth was all this fantastic clatter about?

Then at last Father Pekarek stopped laughing. Taking a white-spotted red handkerchief from his sleeve, and wiping his eyes, he leaned forward towards Ludvik.

“*Sie hot moira fun dir, Laibel. Hast geherrt a za zach?* She’s frightened of you. Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

Ludvik also screwed up one blue eye in a wink, then turned and cracked his whip over the horse’s rump. “Hup, there! Hup!” he shouted.

“You see, *yiddene*,” explained Father Pekarek. “He’s my brother. We work together.”

“Yes, I see,” said Elsie weakly. “I thought I saw a family likeness. The Yiddish came to her more freely than it did all those years ago in her father’s kitchen. Then, it was merely a way of talking. Now it was a file smuggled in a loaf of bread into a prison cell. It was a rope for shinning down walls. The preposterousness of it all struck her, like a blow of the hand. “Two brothers, eh? Two Jews? It’s not true! How can it be true?”

“What does it matter?” asked Father Pekarek, shrugging his shoulders. “Is it better to go for a ride in a truck to a crematorium? So they might catch you, sooner or later? So let them catch you. But it’s been a nice life in between times, no?”

She was silent for some moments. Then admiration took the place of astonishment.

“It’s very clever, the way you do it,” she murmured, “and clever of you to think of it.”

“No,” he said shortly. “It wasn’t I who thought of it.”

“It was Miriam,” Elsie suddenly gave forth. She hardly knew the words were on her tongue.

He turned round swiftly.

“How do you know about her?”

“They told us in Cracow. I suppose, because——”

“That’s all right,” he said. He preferred not to pursue the subject. But she insisted.

“You see, when we got to Cracow, the man they sent us to wasn’t there. They’d caught him. They wanted us to have a line of advance in case . . . in case anybody fell out.”

He looked at her for some time out of the corners of his eyes.

“Of course,” he concluded. “I should have got that straight away.” Then suddenly an emotion, which had been dammed up behind his tongue, broke loose. “She’s wonderful,” he cried, “she’s a saint from heaven! We were already in line, my brother there and me, and she managed to steal us from under their very noses, him, and me, and six others. It was in Zilina, in the big stadium there, that they built with Jewish money. Any moment they could have knocked her down and smashed her to pulp with their rifles.”

“Is she . . . what sort of a woman is she?” asked Elsie. Then she drew back the words. “I’m sorry.” She knew one shouldn’t ask questions. “We’ve both been thinking about her a great deal. It’s only that she makes you feel . . . you’re not alone any more.”

“What sort of a woman should she be? An ordinary woman. A wife. A mother. Her man used to import coffee, or wine, or something. A woman like you—a *yiddene*. You could meet her at the grocer’s shop in the morning. She’d be in the synagogue for the *yomtovim*, the holy days.”

“A woman like me,” Elsie said to herself. “Like *me*? Oh no, I think not.” The lobes of her ears tingled as if a match had been held near them. Why did she suddenly feel so miserably, so frighteningly, small and silly, she, the fine lady, the husky-voiced flasher of bright eyes, who had once held enraptured audiences in her hand, and squeezed them till they wept?

“What did you say?” asked Father Pekarek.

“I didn’t say anything . . . er . . . er . . .” She was obviously searching for a name to address him by. It seemed rather odd to go on calling him Father Pekarek.

“Keep on with Father Pekarek in public,” he said. “In private, I’m Gerstl. And you?” He suddenly felt he had said enough. He had no call to start gabbing because he revered that other woman, because he idolized her. “I was asking you a question.”

“Where do I come from? From the ghetto in Warsaw. The girl and I escaped together while the fighting was still on. I didn’t know her before, but she’s like . . . she’s like my daughter now. She’s Polish.”

“A sweet girl, no evil befall her. And before Warsaw, what were you? Your Yiddish is so German.”

“I was from Germany. I married a German. But before that I was English.”

“English, eh? You’ve travelled around a bit. Oh, there’s an inn here. It’s a dreary road from here to Polodineç, flat and high and without trees. Let’s have a glass, yes? Hi, stop, Ludvik!”

The inn was as much a farmhouse as an inn. There was a glass of milk for Mila, and a glass of wine for Elsie. There was no trouble in getting either, for the wine was on a shelf, and the milk was in the cow, which shared the bar with the customers. The two men threw back a glass of *borovicka*, which is a liqueur half flame, half juniper. All this was accompanied by a good deal of blessing to-and-fro and hand-kissing. Then the cart clip-clopped off again

towards the station some three or four kilometres away on the windy plateau. Father Pekarek was obviously concerned about something. Then he gave voice to it.

“By the way,” he brought out. “There’s the matter of papers. “What papers have you got? Did they get out Czech papers for you?”

“We’ve got papers as *reichsdeutsche* mother and daughter. They’re in the bag here. Do you think . . . perhaps I ought to tear them up?”

“No. As you talk German so well, who knows when they might come in useful? They don’t check up often in the trains. If they do, I can tackle it. Remember. You’re from the Gora region on the frontier, where they use a lot of Polish words, and they talk with a strong Polish accent.”

“The girl talks Czech as well as Polish. Her mother was from Prague.”

“That’s fine. Then the girl may have Czech papers made out, too, while you’re in Bratislava. She’ll see to all that.” He meant Miriam, of course.

“Then we might separate again, when we cross the next frontier?”

“She’ll see to all that,” he repeated. “Grown-ups and youngsters are always different problems.”

“Yes, of course. We separated back there, on the Polish side, too.”

“You see? Don’t worry too much, *yiddene*, or you’ll get a headache. Perhaps it would be better if you *did* have a headache, I mean, for the journey. Just talk as little as possible. Better not talk at all. You understand?” She nodded. “In ten hours you’ll see the Danube. The Danube flows into the Black Sea. Do you hear, *yiddene*? The Black Sea.”

“What did you say?”

“I said in ten hours you’ll see the Danube, and the Danube flows into the Black Sea.” He puffed out his chest and extended his arms, as if to indicate to her the expanding horizons.

“The Black Sea,” she murmured dimly. It was as if her headache were already descending on her. “Where’s that?” He looked at her curiously. She shook her head and blinked. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was thinking of something else.” She reached out after some sort of visual image of a Black Sea, but her mind was flooded with mist, like a valley-bottom. The Black Sea, her lips went again. But all context had gone out of the words. Black Sea. Sargasso Sea. Veni, vidi, Vee Sea. Black Sea.

“Podolineć! The train’s in already! Over the lines, there. See? Come, my

babies, out! Whoa, Pejko! Whoa!”

II

Two hours to Poprad. The high, bleak, snow-dazzled mountains closing in on the right, in the valley the jade-green river, a lake black as pitch encompassed by black stone-pines. All change here for Bratislava. Keep close to Father Pekarek, and be a stone-dumb lady, you on one side, the girl on the other side. Due westward through the noontime hover peaks to right and left. The peasant women at the stations in the white-and-red embroidered things, their cheeks like polished apples; the men with their carved staves, their sheep-skin coats, the deep-set eyes in the weather-beaten faces. Talk as little as possible. Better not talk at all. You have a headache. Mila quite happy with her book. When the baby offers you a grubby lump of cake in his grubby fist, smile sickly, and screw up your face, and drowse again, your head on one side. *Ruzomberok*. Fancy living in a place called Ruzomberok. Ha! Ha! Oh, what's that? Left! Right! Left! Right! A sergeant and half a dozen men, left, right, along the platform, red bands about their caps. An inspection? No, they get into the train. The train goes on. They get out of the train at a place called Zilina. Way down the platform, a company of passengers, men, women, and children, all with suitcases. Jews. They have the yellow star sewn over the left breast. Guards in front, at the rear. There's a camp in this town. Or maybe they're moving on further somewhere. Thank God Mila's sitting with her back to that end of the platform. Control that jaw, Father Pekarek, or somebody might get wise to you. Of course. Of course. This is the place where Miriam rescued you and your brother. Move on, train, move on. The gap-toothed castles commanding the passes, perched up on the isolated sugar-cone hills. Those Jews with yellow stars and their suitcases. How pale they were, forlorn, frightened. My people. There, but for the love of God. . . . Don't take too much for granted. How much of the love of God have *you* in your banking account? The river broadens out into shallows, narrows between steep banks. Silence in the railway carriage. The baby asleep across the mother's lap, lying like a bale of cloth. Father Pekarek deep in the study of his missal. Was he a bit worried that I have so mixed-up a background? Yes, I was German. Before that, I was English. Why should it worry him? Naturally he was interested. It's getting dark. Trenčin. Castle outlined on the hill, against flaring streaks of sunset. Towers, steeples, pepper-box turrets, gathering the darkness round them. I suppose Father Pekarek will see this Miriam to-night. He'll have a report to hand over. *If she's in Bratislava*. She may be this peasant-woman in the corner, with the basket of green-stuff. Doing a good job, these people. Good. Mila has closed her book now. Too dark to read. What's she thinking of? Miriam,

Miriam. Quite captured Mila's imagination. I wonder what she's like? Piestany. Haven't I heard of this place? A spa? Mud-baths? The darkness thickening, the hills declining. Trnava. Old Father Pekarek gesturing with his thumb. We can't be far off now. A river, a broad river, in the valley below, and the low red moon reflected in it. The Danube. Beyond the Danube is another country. Poland in sight this morning. Yes, this morning. It seems like a hundred years ago. Hungary in sight to-night. It will be better in Hungary, much easier, *when* we get there. Houses, cafés, a petrol station, coming out to meet the train. A church, a cinema. The outskirts of a town. Below us, the town consolidating, descending in a gentle slope to the river.

Bratislava.

III

"Well, my child, how's the headache?" asked Father Pekarek, as he helped Elsie out of the train. He spoke in German. Then, with his voice at her ear. "It's all right. Everyone speaks it here. And you, Marisha? You'll be pleased to stretch your legs, eh?" They walked out into the station square, which stood well above the town. The world was bathed in moonlight. Beyond the station regions, left and right, the road extended, bordered with white houses that rose out of moon-dripping greenery. Beyond the town, to the west, a spur of hills came down to the mackerel-silver river, and continued northward beyond the broad valley. Between hills and woods a massive square citadel bore down towards the town below, from which churches and civic buildings thrust up towers that seemed sheeted in hammered silver.

"Come!" said Father Pekarek. "We'll take this." A tram in the square before them was a solid block of light. They went bowling off down the hill towards the river, along a broad main street, into a large square, till they reached a section of the city with older buildings, narrower streets. They got off at a corner where, on their right, the castle hung over them, and they turned left on a street called Szilagyi, that thrust back upward from the river region. The faint howl of zither music came out through the doorway of a café, as a customer pushed the door before him. Through the steamed windows showed the red-plush of padded walls and benches, the white gleam of marble table-tops. Some five minutes' walk away was a tall block of buildings on the right-hand side of the street, whose chromium-fitted doors and big plate-glass windows imposed a later mood on the yellow baroque town. Here, before crossing the road, Father Pekarek paused and looked up swiftly. Certain windows were lit up on the broad façade, others were not. He seemed satisfied.

"Cross the street," he said, "and enter the vestibule of the building opposite

us. Go up slowly to the fourth floor, and stop at the door marked *Udvardi: Modes*. I'll be with you a few minutes later."

They did as he told them, and four or five minutes later he was by their side. Then he took a key-ring out of his pocket and opened the door into Monsieur, or Madame, Udvardi's establishment. A passage led through an area cut up into small offices by glass partitions. Beyond this extended a large span of flooring, lined with cupboards and open wardrobes, from which countless women's frocks on hangers dripped limply, stood up stiffly, swirled foamily, according to the nature of the material and the trimmings.

"You're not going to be short of clothes," Father Pekarek said, "whatever you're going to look like when you leave this place." He stopped at the long parade of tailor-mades that defiled on his right side, thin, flat-chested ghosts with the moonlight falling aslant on their shoulders. "A lady from the town, maybe?" He walked on. "Maybe, a dairymaid from a country farm?" The peasant embroideries stood out, thick and firm, on bodice and sleeve. "Perhaps another time, Marisha, there'll be more chance to look at the *schayreh*, the goods. We'd better get you to bed now. It's been a long day." They entered a smaller room lined with cupboards at the further end, then he unlocked a cupboard-door and pulled it aside along a metal groove. Beyond the door hung a collection of fluffy marabout peignoirs. Thrusting both arms in, he pushed the hangers back left and right along the metal bar from which the garments were suspended. A door was revealed here. For this, too, Father Pekarek had a key. "A clever man, yes?" he smiled, as he turned the key and opened the door. "Come, step over." They entered the cupboard, passed through the door, and found themselves in a small passage, with another door at the end of it.

"Wait one moment," said Father Pekarek. He knocked three times, paused quite a long time, then knocked three times again. There was no sound beyond the door. "It's all right," he assured them. "He's not in. No light was showing, but I always like to make sure." Then he used another key, opened another door, and switched a light on. "Come in!" he smiled. "Come in! It's warm, eh? Central heating! You should be comfortable."

They entered, and both Elsie and Mila looked instinctively towards the windows. The blinds were not drawn. The light streamed through.

"The windows!" they both gasped, and started forward, as if to repair the error.

"*Mishkosheh!*" Father Pekarek assured them, with a reassuring wave of the hand from the wrist down. "There's no need for black-out till the alarm goes, and it doesn't often go—yet. All in good time!" he said with satisfaction.

“There’s a nice fat oil refinery just along there. And there’s the bridge, of course.”

“The bridge!” Elsie repeated. She walked up to the window and looked out. There it was, some half-mile over to the left, an iron bridge over the broad river, a small building on the quayside at the beginning of it, half a dozen cars nosing their lights across it, over into Hungary, where you could breathe quite freely, they said. She felt a hand in hers. Mila was standing beside her, her nose at the window, looking curiously like an urchin staring at a display of rich pastries or handsome toys through the window of a great store.

“You see, dear?” she murmured. “We’re moving. Those houses there, beyond the bridge—that’s Hungary! Isn’t it wonderful?”

The voice of Father Pekarek broke in.

“Excuse me, *yiddene*. Not yet.”

She turned.

“Not yet? What do you mean?”

“The Germans have the bridgehead for fifteen kilometres or more. You think they’d leave it nice and easy, like a garden-gate? They took it over before the War. Like a kennel with a big dangerous dog.”

“I see.” She felt rather flat.

“Don’t worry, *yiddene*. It’s only fifteen kilometres. And the Danube is a long river. And there’s other frontiers. Forget about it.” He changed the subject abruptly. “He often has friends here, sometimes for an hour or two, sometimes for longer.”

“He? Who?” Elsie’s eyes went, but not her tongue. She knew the tongue, at least, must not ask questions. The unspoken question went unanswered. Perhaps it was Mr. Udvardi, the merchant in Modes, perhaps not. Father Pekarek would tell them, if it was advisable.

“Sometimes we take the place over, maybe for quite some time, if necessary. He’s as good as gold, with a real Jewish heart. He doesn’t want a penny for it, either. Yes, yes, sit down, both of you. But he still likes to come back now and again. *You* know how it is?” Elsie knew how it is. There was for a moment or two a slight air of constraint, owing to Mila’s presence, but it was dispelled almost at once. Things had to get said, and arrangements made. Besides, young girls who, by the way of a war-time ghetto, had come so near the portals of the next world, had few illusions left about this one. “There’s another way in back there, from the street behind. I have that key, too. I must

tell you something. If he comes in sometimes with a friend, it will only be for a short time.” He shrugged his shoulders, as if hoping too much would not be made of the frailties of the flesh. “He may not be in for days. He knows some guests are expected to-night. He’ll knock like I did, three times, then wait, then knock three times again. When that happens, you just bolt the sitting-room door from this side. You see? The . . . other room’s beyond a short landing on that side.” He preferred not to speak of it as the bedroom.

Elsie looked round.

“Yes,” she agreed. “As you say, it’s most comfortable. Isn’t it, Mila? Very different from Zosha’s stable, yes?”

“Yes,” whispered Mila. “Very comfortable.” But Elsie, at least, knew that Mila preferred Zosha’s stable, because she was an austere young woman, and bosomy plush chairs, art-gallery nudes, grand pianos draped with embroidered Chinese shawls, Satsuma vases on mantelpieces, bear-skin rugs, fans stuck behind bright oil paintings of blue grottoes and smoking volcanoes—she knew that these things were not to Mila’s taste.

But certainly the place was comfortable. And certainly people were being kind to them in the last degree.

“It will be good,” said Mila, “for Channah to rest a little before we go further. And it’s beautiful to have all that sky to look on, too.” She went back to the window. “And the river!” she cried. “The Danube!” she marvelled, as if it had taken some time for the implications to sink in. “*Die schöne blaue Donau!*” Her voice trembled. “I never thought I’d see the lovely blue Danube!” She resumed control of herself. “Do people escape down the river, Father Pekarek, on log-rafts?”

“Doubtless, that happens, too, at the right season,” Father Pekarek assured her. “There are small cargo-steamers that go down the river regularly. Who knows?” He was far from committing himself. “Perhaps the young one will go first, *yiddene*. You’ll be ready for that?”

“Of course,” Elsie replied. “We both understand.”

“But when, which way, who knows?” He looked at his watch. “It’s getting late. I’ve still got things to do, but let me explain things here. The door there, it leads out to the bathroom. This is the little kitchen.” He went over and opened a door in the left-hand wall. “There’s everything here, you see. He looks after himself very nicely. And his friends, of course. The old woman comes in with bread and milk and anything else you want. She’s all right. Her name’s Ilonka. She’ll knock three times, too, twice over. They say she makes a plate of

chollent or *lockshen*-soup you'd think your own mother made it. *Ni, kinder*, is there anything else you want me to tell you?"

They sat looking at him with great eyes, dead silent. Probably they were afraid they could not prevent their voices misbehaving if they talked. He smiled, and shook his head, and came over to them.

"It's better for me to come in this way and go out that," he said, indicating the other room with his thumb. "The people on the other side of the street probably think that here's another priest who's no better than he should be. Well, it can't be helped." He took Elsie's hand in one of his own, Mila's in the other. "*Shalom*, children, *shalom*. Good luck to you. Yes, you want to say something, Channah?"

"I only wanted to say thank you for us to . . . to Miriam, in case we shan't see her. I don't suppose we shall."

"Yes, yes!" cried Mila ardently. "If we could only see her!"

He spread out his hands, and cocked his head to one side.

"Maybe," he said. "*Shalom*, children!"

"*Shalom!*"

"*Shalom!*"

He went out and slammed the door behind him. He was at once swallowed up, as into a roomful of cotton-wool.

"What are you crying for, Channah?" Mila wanted to know.

"Crying? Whoever heard of such a thing!" protested Elsie. "Crying, indeed! Come, let's see what there is in the pantry!"

Everything was better than they had hoped in the pantry. Everything so far was better than they had hoped in Bratislava. They could even sit before the window with the blind not drawn and look out upon the deep woods and the great sweep of the river that emerged from them. The moonlight glistening on the leaves endowed them with a phantom blossom, as if they were vast thickets of flowering hawthorn. The red lights and green lights of barges moved easily between the banks of Slovakia and Hungary, as if ghetto-walls and the barbed-wire palisades of extermination camps were a myth, and there were no bath-houses to strip in, and trucks to carry off agglutinated bodies, and ovens to consume them.

They sat there silent for one hour, two hours, then at last, hand in hand, went to their beds.

IV

Ilonka, the old woman, was wonderful. Her face was wrinkled like a crab-apple, so much of it as you could see peeping out of the kerchief tied round her head. Her hands were knobbly with age, like oak-roots, but were tough and efficient as a young woman's. She talked Czech, Slovak, German, Hungarian, and Yiddish, all equally unintelligibly, having been employed during various stages of her long career by ladies or gentlemen of all those races. Secrecy was the breath of her nostrils, whether she was helping her employer to pleasure with a light o' love, or a handful of Jewish children to get away from the Nazi furnaces. She was so old that she could no longer clearly get into perspective the ages of females younger than herself. For Mila, for instance, she brought a doll—Andulka, the name was—and crowed with pleasure as Andulka lowered and lifted her eyelids on being moved to the horizontal position and back to the vertical position. Mila was her usual well-mannered self about it. The moment Ilonka appeared on the scene, she would lift Andulka and nurse her in her arms, to the great delight of the old woman, who would start crooning a nursery rhyme in one or other of her languages. For Elsie she proposed another entertainment, to which, moreover, there could be payment attached. It seemed a pity to let the nights and days go by without gleaning occasional profit or pleasure out of them. She could arrange it easily, she said. As for Mila, she would present no problem. She would guarantee to occupy her attention in the salon.

It was vaguely flattering, thought Elsie, to be taken for a tart in her twenties by a lady in her late seventies, or in her eighties, perhaps; but for various reasons she thought the proposition unattractive. However, Ilonka did not remain entirely deprived of the thrill of vicarious love-making. In the afternoon of the second day, while Ilonka was washing clothes in the little kitchen, there was a triple knock on the outer door, followed by a pause, and the triple knock a second time. Without a word, Elsie rose and bolted the sitting-room door, then sat down to her book again. Ilonka in the kitchen heard the signal, and in a minute or two was singing chirpily as a kettle. Mila went on darning the stockings she had in hand. In due time, there was again a triple knock. This doubtless meant that the visitors were at the door, taking their departure. Elsie rose, and unbolted the sitting-room door. Not a word was said by anybody during or after the episode. But Elsie was aware that Mila must have both understood its nature, and that it had been to her no more than a spilth of muddy water running down a window pane, which is washed away, and the glass remains as clear and clean as before.

V

Four nights and four days had gone by. It was now the fifth night.

“What’s the matter, Channah? You must tell me. You’ve sat there for an hour without saying a word.”

“I’ve told you, Mila, dear. Nothing’s the matter, nothing. I mean nothing’s different. Sometimes waiting is harder work than crossing mountains. That’s all.”

Mila sighed and turned her attention to the doll, Andulka, again. She had developed quite a real devotion to Andulka, though at first she had only pretended to one, to give pleasure to old Ilonka. Perhaps making little Andulka like a princess was only something to do to while the time away. Perhaps, for a time, she was yielding to the child within her, whose existence had been cut so tragically short.

But something *was* the matter with Elsie. She had been obscurely aware, from the moment that Yanka in Cracow had told her of the existence of an escape organization, that sooner or later questions would be put to her to establish her *bona fides*. The idea had grown during the journey to Bratislava with Father Pekarek, following the two or three questions he had asked her on the drive to Podolineç. She was sure now that Father Pekarek would have reported to his associates the fact that there was something unusual about her. He had not been alarmed, but he had been puzzled. She had sensed that. And when an underground worker is puzzled, it is his duty to report the fact.

Someone, then, would put questions to her before she was helped across the next frontier. Who? Miriam? Probably not. The head person remains in the background when operations like these are undertaken. Whoever it was, the questions would seem quite harmless, but their sum total would be a cross-examination.

The tragic joke was that her *bona fides* was absolute. In the Warsaw ghetto no one had stood in more desperate danger of death than she. After the appearance of Mila, she had made up her mind, in the first place for Mila’s sake, to seek to escape the Warsaw death. She was not an innocent person; she had been a most disloyal one. Two weeks of wound-washing had not expunged her guilt. But as a hunted human being in deadliest danger, she had the right to accept whatever help might be extended towards her, whether from Gentiles like Yanka, or Jews like Father Pekarek or Miriam, all the more as Mila’s safety, for a time at least, had been tied up with her own. But now? Doubtless, Miriam and her associates would take Mila’s escape into their own hands. But she, too, wanted to live, for her own sake as well as Mila’s. The will-to-die had been ground to powder in her.

Was it likely that Miriam and her friends would wish to make themselves responsible for her deliverance, if she told them the whole truth of who she was, how she had got into the Warsaw ghetto? They must either believe her tale, or not believe it. If they believed it, what assurance was there they would feel themselves called upon to rescue the widow of a Nazi leader, merely because she had been kind and helpful to a small Jewish girl? Might they not take the view that she had seized the opportunity the association with Mila might provide her, to find out all she could about the escape organization? Might they not consider it possible that she would use the information she had gained to buy her way back into the favour of the Nazi hierarchy with whom she had for so long thrown in her fortunes?

Or, say, they would not believe her story that she was Elsie von Brockenburg. It was all a lie. Then manifestly she was a spy, charged with the duty of finding out all she could, and passing it on to her employers.

It was desperately manifest she must not tell the truth.

But she had already told the truth to Mila, practically the whole truth. It was only the name of Brockenburg that had been withheld from Mila, and that merely because Mila had not allowed her to tell it.

Did that affect the situation? It did not in any degree at all, though she had never by word or gesture indicated to Mila that she must keep her knowledge to herself. She knew that Mila believed in her totally. She also knew exactly how Mila would behave in case they took her aside and asked her to tell whatever she might know about the antecedents of her friend. Because Mila believed in her, Mila would say she knew nothing at all about her before the moment "Channah" released her from the bomb-rubble. She would therefore say nothing that could possibly throw any doubt on the veracity of any tale that she might be forced to tell these people in Bratislava, or anybody they might encounter later, should they get safely into Hungary.

So this emerged. Whenever they questioned her, as she was certain they must, she must lie to them. She could not tell the truth, because it would be equally fatal whether they believed her or whether they did not. If they did not believe her, she was merely a liar who went on lying. If they *did* believe her, clearly it was impossible for them to have any traffic with her, the woman who was Brockenburg's widow. She would be a shocking embarrassment. She could not be handed over to the authorities, even as a hostage for Jewish lives, for she knew too much. They would quite simply have to knock her on the head. And that was nonsense. There is no point in being knocked on the head, just when you are becoming, perhaps for the first time, a tolerably decent human being. She refused to be knocked on the head. She would face up to the

occasion, whenever it arose.

On the afternoon of the fifth day Ilonka announced that they were to expect a visitor in an hour or so. Ilonka was not very excited about it. It was only a woman. She got through her work as quickly as possible and made off towards the door.

“But to-morrow a gentleman, yes?” she wheedled.

“Good day,” said Elsie.

“Good day,” Ilonka said. “The Virgin in Heaven bless you both!”

The visitor appeared less than an hour later, coming in from the outside. There was the usual signal, then the sound of the key in the door, then a woman entered.

“*Shalom!*” she said. “How are you both? My name is Rivkah.” She came forward, and held out her hand, first to Elsie, then to Mila. But she seemed to think it a little formal to be holding out her hand to a young girl. She bent down and kissed her.

“*Shalom!*” replied Mila, her cheeks colouring with the delight the salutation gave her.

“*Shalom!*” said Elsie, conscious of that slight constraint which always beset her, when Jews treated her spontaneously, without qualification, as one of themselves.

“I’m going to talk Yiddish,” said Rivkah. “You talk Yiddish, both of you?” (For, of course, there were Jews herded into the Polish ghettos to whom Yiddish was a hardly more familiar language than Basque.)

“Yes, yes,” said Mila eagerly.

“Yiddish, with quite a lot of German,” admitted Elsie.

“Yes, of course, you’re German,” Rivkah said, with a smile. “Gerstl told me.” She took her hat and coat off. She was going to make herself comfortable. She was not a woman of striking appearance, or, rather, she would not have been in normal times. What was striking about her in present circumstances was that she looked unmistakably Jewish, with that jet-black hair of hers, built up above her skull in a rather old-fashioned Jewish-orthodox way, and the heavy black brows over the velvety dark brown eyes. You would not expect, in the Bratislava of 1943, a Jewish-looking woman to go up and down the place in so unconcerned a way. She could have thinned out the eyebrows, for instance, and done the hair differently. Well, one was on the

fringes of eastern Europe. Perhaps that was the way some Hungarian women looked; or women with some gypsy blood in their veins. For the rest, she looked rather neat and formal, with her black frock of good quality, and the double row of cultured pearls.

“The first thing I’ve got to do is to say *mazel tov* to you both,” Rivkah was saying. “Please, let’s sit down, shall we? A cigarette? It’s already something to get as far as Bratislava.”

“We’d have been still in Poland if not for you . . . and the others who are working with you,” said Elsie. “What’s the good of trying to thank you? What can one say?”

“*Mirzashem*; by the will of God. Good luck should continue.” She was fumbling in her hand-bag. “Ah, here it is! I’ve managed to get hold of some chocolates. Here’s a little packet for you.” She held them out towards Mila. Mila came over and thanked her. “By the way, what’s your name? You’ve only been a number so far.”

“The name on my papers?” asked Mila. “Or my real name?”

“Oh you can tell me your real name,” smiled Rivkah reassuringly. “What’s a name on papers? You’ll probably have a different name on different papers next week.”

“I’m Mila,” the girl said, “Mila Cossor.”

“*Shalom*, Mila. Tell me about yourself, will you? Perhaps, if it doesn’t hurt too much, you can tell me about your people?” She was clearly a woman of unusual delicacy and dexterity, despite the strength in the set of the lips, and the firmly moulded line of the jaw.

Mila told her story without faltering, till she came to the moment when she first reached consciousness in the bombed ruin of Post Sixteen. Then she turned her head and sought Elsie’s eyes; then she got up from her chair, went over to Elsie, and took her hand. “It was Channah here who saved me,” she said. “It was as if my mother herself sent her. I would have been dead if Channah had not come to me.”

“No, no,” murmured Elsie. She put her hand on Mila’s shoulder, and patted it.

“But of course it’s true,” said Mila.

“Sometimes God is there to reach out His hand,” said Rivkah quietly. “Sometimes it seems He is not there.” Then, a moment or two later: “Had you two met before, there in Warsaw?”

“No,” they both said. “No.”

“You’d been in Warsaw nearly two and a half years, yes, Mila?”

“Yes.”

“And you . . . Channah? Forgive me, it’s the only name I have.”

“Yes,” said Elsie. “That’s the name one of the leaders gave me down in the cellars. I’d lost my papers.” The moment had come. The first lie lay waiting on the tip of the tongue. There would be other lies. “My real name was Bieber. Hilda Bieber. But that’s not the name on my papers, of course.”

“No, of course not. Gerstl told me you travelled from Warsaw as a *reichsdeutsche*. It must have been frightening sometimes.”

“Yes,” Elsie agreed. “It was, from time to time. But I hope I didn’t show it.”

“She didn’t,” said Mila, “not once.”

“But what could have been worse than being trapped month in, month out, behind that Wall?” mused Rivkah. “Just waiting, waiting. How long was it, Channah?”

“A couple of years,” said Elsie.

“A couple of years!” Rivkah sympathized. “It must have seemed like two centuries. Well, thank God, it’s a long way behind you now.”

“It’s like a dream,” said Elsie. “It’s as if it had never happened.”

“And, please God, if you ever get to Eretz Israel, that will be like a dream, too. Another sort of dream.”

“Oh, it will be wonderful!” cried Mila. “We dreamed of it night and day in Warsaw, in our group, our *kibbutz*. And to think that some day it might still be true! Have they made ghettos in this country, too? Are the girls and boys in *kibbutzim*?”

“Yes,” said Rivkah, “we managed to get some of them away before they were sent across the frontier.” She turned again to Elsie.

“You were from Germany, weren’t you? Gerstl told us. You know—Father Pekarek.”

“Yes, I’m from Hamburg.”

“I met a lot of boys and girls from Hamburg,” Mila broke in. “Did you know the Liepmanns? I knew Karl and Lotte. Their father was a jeweller.” It

was quite clear what Mila was up to. She was normally much more silent than this, she was not the sort of girl that liked to take the centre of the floor. But she knew exactly what was going on. She knew that Elsie had told two lies already. She was trying to get in the way of the examination. But, of course, she could only hold it up for a minute or two at most.

“The Liepmanns?” Elsie repeated. “Jewellers? The name’s familiar. No, I don’t think we knew them.”

“Bieber, did you say, Channah?” Rivkah broke in. “We had some Biebers in Bratislava. Things could have been worse for them. The three boys got away. Would they be any connection of yours, Channah?”

“No. My husband was from Hamburg. My own family was English.”

“Yes, of course. So Gerstl said. Hamburg, did you say? Hamburg.” She was apparently piecing things together in her mind. “I’m sure you’re connected with our Bratislava Biebers. What line of business was he in? Your husband, I mean?”

(What line of business was my husband in? For Heaven’s sake, don’t hesitate. Say the first thing that comes into your head.)

“He was a coffee importer,” said Elsie.

“Now isn’t that a coincidence!” cried Rivkah. “Didn’t I tell you? Where were his offices?”

But it wasn’t a coincidence! And Elsie realized the mistake she had made, in the very moment of making it. She knew exactly why the profession of coffee importing happened to be lodged in her head. It was Father Pekarek, Rivkah’s colleague, who had planted it there. They had been talking about Miriam. *What sort of woman was she? An ordinary woman, just a Jewess like you or the next woman. Her husband used to import wine, or coffee, or something.*

You couldn’t go back on your husband’s profession, now. You couldn’t suddenly remember he had really been a diamond merchant. To hell with these Bratislava Biebers, who had probably never existed, anyhow. The only thing to do was to go on with your lying as casually as you know how. His offices in Hamburg . . .

“Oh, An der Alster. One hundred and fourteen.”

“Such a beautiful street!” sighed Rivkah. “I knew it at one time.” She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another. “The white sails, and the cafés among the willows by the waterside!”

“Yes, beautiful,” murmured Elsie. She knew there was grimness to come, the air was already tense with it, but she dreaded it for Mila’s sake more than her own.

Rivkah’s next words showed that she was not the least sensitive person there.

“Oh, Mila,” she said. “There are one or two things I’d like to discuss with Channah. They don’t concern you at all. I’d like to be alone with her. Will that be all right?”

Mila got up from her chair, deathly pale.

“Yes, Rivkah, of course,” she said. “I’ll go into the bedroom.” But she stood there and hesitated.

“Yes, Mila?” said Rivkah. “I think you’re upset. You are, aren’t you? It happens like this sometimes. There are things to talk over.”

“Rivkah,” said the girl. “I’d like to see Miriam. I’d like to talk to her.” What she meant, of course, was this: “You are suspicious of my dear, wonderful Channah. It is shameful. Isn’t it enough to have been through hell in Warsaw, and since then? Haven’t you got any imagination, any sympathy? If you’d seen her in the ghetto, as I did, you wouldn’t have dared to suspect her. But you’re only one of the lesser people. I wish to see Miriam herself. She couldn’t possibly make so terrible a mistake.”

Elsie’s eyes were fixed on Rivkah. She saw the colour steal across her dark cheeks as Mila addressed her. She realized at once what it meant. Rivkah felt self-conscious and guilty. For Rivkah *was* Miriam. And Miriam could engage in prodigies of deceit with her enemies, the Nazis and the Slovak Fascists, but she could not but be ashamed to be caught out deceiving, though for the most correct of reasons, a young Jewish girl.

“We’ll have to think about it,” the woman said. “It isn’t always easy.” Without another word Mila opened the door and went out.

“I’m sorry about the child,” said Rivkah. It was the strength rather than the sweetness that showed now in the lines of jaw and mouth.

“You *are* Miriam,” said Elsie. Rivkah said no word. She gazed steadily into Elsie’s eyes. “It was in your face when the girl spoke to you, just now,” Elsie went on.

“Why did you tell me that tale about your husband?” asked the other. “My own husband was a coffee importer before they took him in. I used to do his accounts. We had connections with all the coffee-importing firms in the

German ports. There was no Bieber in Hamburg who imported coffee. There was no coffee firm there with an office in An der Alster. What are you hiding? Who are you?"

The moment had come, the moment of supreme danger. As a Jewess among the highly placed Nazis, she had known desperate moments. None was as desperate as this, now that she was a Jew surrounded by Jews fighting not for their own lives, but for the lives of their kinsfolk. There was only one hope of deliverance. She must act with a brilliance and mastery beyond anything she had ever attempted, during the many years in which she had been some sort of an actress.

She acted the dewy uprising of tears into her eyes, and the evanescence of the colour from her cheeks. She induced the trembling in her lips and the hands that raised themselves slowly towards her face, then fell inertly to her lap again. She acted superbly well, because she was acting truth and not merely lies. And it was the truth that subdued Miriam and saved Elsie Silver.

She raised her head and looked Miriam straight in the eyes.

"I was a Nazi's whore," she said. "A long time ago the man asked me was I Jewish, and I lied, and said no. I lived with him for years, and thought I loved him, and that he loved me. A few weeks ago he found out I was Jewish, and told them. They arrested me and thrust me into a contingent of Western Jews bound for the Polish death camps. I was in the last group unloaded in Warsaw before the uprising.

"I could not tell you the truth, because I was so ashamed. I was ashamed because I had betrayed the country where I was born, and I had betrayed my people. I was ashamed because I had loved a Nazi, and believed in him." She stopped for a moment, as actors do, to get the *feel* of the audience, when sound and sight reveal nothing, for the audience is as silent and immobile as stone. There is no saying whether the audience is rigid with embarrassment and disbelief, or is swept completely off its feet into the illusion. And if the first, there is still time to retrieve failure by one final assault with the whole battery of art. She continued very quietly:

"I found my way into the cellars before the fighting started, and then I helped a little, when the wounded were brought in. But I did not want to live. There was nothing to look forward to except the shameful memories. After a week or two, a bomb destroyed the First Aid Post I worked in. I was knocked unconscious, and then recovered some time later. I was passing out of myself again into complete darkness, and this time I should not have come back again. Then I heard this girl, Mila, calling from the wreckage. I freed her, and

determined to get her away from Warsaw to safety somewhere.” Again there was a small pause. Then: “I’ve helped to get her here to Bratislava. I know she’s now in good hands. You can do what you like with me. Whatever you do will be better than I deserve. I have nothing more to say.” She let her head fall forward on to her chest. Her hands lay in her lap like peeled twigs. A number of minutes went by, three, five, ten. Rivkah smoked one cigarette, then another. She got up from her chair and paced the room, forward, backward, again and yet again. Then she went over to Elsie, and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

“I didn’t know,” she said. “We’ll see. I would like a word or two with Mila.”

“Yes, of course.”

She went across to the other door, and twenty minutes went by, and more. It was quite clear what was going on inside there. It’s rather odd, Elsie told herself. My life hangs on the way that girl is answering the questions that Miriam’s putting to her. I know I can trust Mila’s love and intelligence. But Miriam’s a clever woman. Should I have told Mila in advance what she must say if they questioned her? I don’t know. I’ll see soon.

In due course, Mila came into the room. Her eyes were happy. There was colour in her cheeks.

“She told me to say ‘*Shalom*’ to you,” said Mila. “She was sorry she couldn’t come back to say it herself. She didn’t know it was so late.”

“Yes, it was rather a long time,” said Elsie.

“The silly woman!” Mila burst out impetuously. “As if I didn’t know what she was up to! She’s nice. I like her. But I’m certain Miriam wouldn’t have been so silly.”

“You never know,” said Elsie. “Anyhow she asked you to say ‘*Shalom*’ to me? She may have meant that as a sort of message. Do you think so, Mila?”

“That’s the way Jews talk to each other these days, Channah.”

“That’s what I mean, my dear. Come, let’s have a hot drink of something.”

A few days later Gerstl reappeared at the flat. He had abandoned the church, and was clearly some sort of professional man, with that wing-collar, that black coat, the attaché-case, the herring-bone trousers.

“*Shalom, yiddene,*” he said. “You also, *maidélé!*”

“*Shalom!*” they replied.

“Don’t make such big eyes,” he requested. “I’m a doctor.” A stethoscope suddenly shot up from behind his waistcoat, like a conjuror’s trick. “You see? Don’t be upset,” he went on. “I’ve come to take the little one away.”

“Yes,” said Elsie. “So my heart told me the moment you came in.”

“Isn’t Channah coming, too?” asked Mila, her jaw jutting forward.

“Not on this journey. There’s only room for one.”

“How soon will she follow?”

“Who knows?” he shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe a few days. Maybe more.”

“Can I ask where?” asked Elsie. “Where are you taking her to? Where shall I join her?”

“You know how it is,” said Gerstl.

“I know, but I forget each time.”

“What can I do, Channah?” asked Mila, suddenly breaking down. “I’d rather stay till we can both go together. I don’t want to leave you. I don’t!”

“So maybe neither of you would be able to go,” Gerstl pointed out. “You should be packing your things already, Mila.”

“Yes, Mila, at once, now!”

“All right, like you say,” muttered Mila. She moved off, dragging her feet along the floor.

“You should be dancing and singing,” insisted Gerstl severely.

“I’ll be with you soon, Mila dear, wherever it is,” Elsie declared.

“Please God!” affirmed Gerstl. He turned to Elsie. “She’ll be coming to see you soon, in a day or two. She knew. She told me to tell you.”

“You mean Rivkah? Or perhaps Miriam?” she added innocently.

“One of the women,” he said. It was impossible to say whether he had been told to be as secretive as this. “Will you give the girl a hand? We should be off as soon as possible.”

“Come, Mila dear. Cheer up. We shall be one frontier further forward soon, both of us. All right, cry, Mila. Will you let her cry for just five minutes, Gerstl?”

“Just five,” said the doctor, taking out his watch.

It was very lonely during the next two days. The loneliness was all the acuter because of the windowful of sky, and the people you could see through the window, on foot and in vehicles, talking to each other, laughing with each other, parents, children, sweethearts, friends. The great river rolling by and the great bridge across the river, made you feel that you had chains round both feet.

And everything was in a state of suspense. How was Mila faring? What was Miriam thinking? It was a difficult time.

Then, on the third evening, there was a triple knock on the outer door. As usual, she bolted her own inner door. If it was somebody who wanted to see her, she would soon unbolt it. The knock on the inner door did not come till ten minutes later. She opened it, and there stood a strange young man, with pince-nez, a receding chin, sloping shoulders, and a sandy drooping moustache. He held by the hand a thin emaciated boy with a greatcoat over him. But there was a third person with him, for he looked back and kept calling: "Dorrit! Dorrit!" before he turned and greeted Elsie.

"My name's Petr," the young man said. He talked German. "She wants you to look after them, till they're ready to be taken over. There's a little girl inside there, her name is Dorrit. This is Ruvven. Dorrit will come in soon. She's frightened."

"I'll do my best," Elsie whispered. Her eyes were on the boy's face. She had never seen a face more utterly desolate, not even down in the ghetto cellars. "What's happened to him? What's he been through?"

"He was in . . . a place in Poland," said Petr. "He's Polish. The girl's named Henka. She's Czech. They both talk Yiddish. She was in one of the local places." He was obviously avoiding naming the camps from which, somehow, the young people had been rescued. "They mustn't be allowed to remember what they've been through. Everything starts from to-night." A movement in a mirror caught his eye. He lowered his voice. "She's come in. Don't take any notice of her for a minute or two."

Elsie turned to the boy.

"Well, Ruvven, won't you take your coat off? It's warm in here."

The boy made no response. He stood leaning against the table, his head drooping. It was as if no one had addressed him. Petr took the coat off; the suit the boy wore was tattered and mud-stained. Through a hole in one leg the knee showed bruised and blue.

She turned to the girl, but the girl was invisible again.

“She’s behind that armchair,” said Petr. “She likes to get behind things. She feels safer.”

Suddenly, piercingly, the girl broke out: “I’m not going back! I won’t!”

Petr advanced a few inches towards the armchair. “No, Dorrit! Of course not! This kind lady’s going to look after you! You’re going to another country, with trees, and dogs, and horses.” Then the girl’s face thrust out from behind the chair for a moment. The dark eyes burned. As Elsie advanced towards her, the face disappeared again.

“There’ll be clothes for them to-morrow, and more food,” Petr said. “You’ll make do with what you have to-night.”

“I’ll do all I can,” said Elsie. “Tell her when you see her. I’ll do all I can.”

“*Gute Nacht!*” said Petr. Not *Shalom*.

“*Gute Nacht!*” she replied. She looked after him for a moment as he went off. What a woman that must be, she thought, to gather such an assortment of helpers round her! This Petr was probably not a Jew. He certainly looked no hero, with that receding chin and those sloping shoulders. That must be his strength, she realized, in this topsy-turvy underground world, that he looks anything in the world but a hero. Then another thought presented itself to her. Was it merely a coincidence that these two youngsters had been entrusted to her care at this moment? Or was it intended as a test of her ability and loyalty? She did not find the question hard to answer. Miriam would not have jeopardized the recovery of the young people, merely to carry out an experiment. It would have been inept and cruel. She, Elsie, happened to be here, and the youngsters happened to arrive. That was all there was to it.

One thing, however, was certain; she was going to have her hands so full, there was not going to be much time to worry over Mila. For that, at least, she was grateful to them all.

So she set herself to the task of winning the youngsters back to some degree of serenity, aware though she was that it might well have appalled an expert, and there were few amateurs so shamefully inexperienced as she. It was not often that Ruvven and Henka were both asleep at the same time, and even then Elsie did her best to keep herself awake, she was afraid that one or the other, or both, if they awoke while she slept, might do something which would draw attention to their hiding-place. She wondered how they had got so far as Bratislava in their present condition, from whatever hell-hole they might have been delivered. Of the two, the lad must have been easier for his rescuers to handle, for so long as it had been physically possible to keep him more or less

out of sight, he must have given little trouble, for he was in a sort of dream, from which at all times it was difficult to rouse him, even to give him his meals. The spoon of broth, half-way between the bowl and his mouth, would start shaking and would slip from between his fingers. Or he would crumble his bread, and go on crumbling it, without raising a crumb to his lips. But there were moments in which he seemed to come completely to himself. His face would contort with grief, and tears flow in streams down his cheeks. His eyes would settle upon the window, or upon a knife on the table, with a fixity which terrified her. But soon the mist would come down again, and the eyes grow grey as frozen puddles. As for the girl, she was in a state of such twitching terror, it was difficult to see how she could have been handled on her way to Bratislava, unless she had been kept under by some sort of soporific. She was capable, for no ascertainable reason, of giving way to sharp spasms of fury. She would knock the chairs down and throw things about the room, and it was only by luck that she failed to smash the window, once with a candlestick, once with a heavy book-end, performances which might have entailed disastrous repercussions.

It was a hard job that had fallen to Elsie, much harder than the bandage-washing and wound-wiping that she had been entrusted with in the Warsaw Casualty Post. For the most part, those others were merely physical casualties. These two were sick with more subtle disorders, and each needed entirely different treatment. She must be gentle with the one, firm with the other. The boy must be compelled to eat, the girl was sometimes as voracious as a pariah-dog. Sometimes a song would soothe the boy and make the girl fractious. But somehow, by infinitely hard work, she smoothed them out and began to make almost normal human beings of them.

During these weeks, Petr visited her from time to time, bringing sweets for the youngsters, bon-bons and sugared biscuits and blocks of *halva*. Probably he was also charged with seeing how the woman from Germany was standing up to the task assigned her. On his third visit he brought a message from Miriam.

“She’d have been here before,” he said, “but she has been away up country. She is a very busy person.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Elsie. “Henka, you must have your soup at once, or you’ll have no *halva*.”

“Don’t you want to hear what the message is?”

“Of course I do. What is it?”

“She’s sorry, she says.”

“Sorry? What about? Oh yes, of course.” She was sorry she had doubted her. She turned and smiled at him. His knees suddenly felt soft and his lips trembled, she looked so beautiful at that moment. He had not realized before she was so beautiful a woman. “Tell her I’m happy about it, will you? I’ve not had much time to think about anything, of course. No, Ruvven, no. You must finish off your plate, or you’ll never be a strong young *chaltz* over there in Eretz.”

“I’ll tell her as soon as I see her,” said Petr. “Is there anything else you want? The shoes are all right, eh? Ilonka is behaving properly?”

“Everything’s fine. There’s only one thing I want to know. You said you might be able to tell me next time.”

“As soon as there’s news, it will be brought to you.”

“Is Mila well? Do you know that?”

“It’s not the region I work in, but I think you’d have been told if anything had gone wrong.”

“It’s a long time ago now, too long. Oh well, I must start on their baths. I don’t know how I’d have managed without that evening bath. It’s your turn first to-night, Ruvven. Get ready.”

“My turn,” proclaimed Henka.

“I’ll comb your hair till it’s like silk, Henka. But it’s Ruvven’s turn.”

“All right,” the girl said sulkily. “Ruvven’s turn.”

A week later there was news of Mila. It was Miriam herself who brought it late at night, coming in from the office side of the apartment. The young people were asleep in the other room. Elsie saw at once the nature of Miriam’s news. Her heart was suddenly a lump of lead.

“What’s happened? Have they caught her? Is she dead?”

Miriam went up to her and put her arm round her shoulder. “Please,” she said. “I want you to sit down. I’ll tell you what I know.”

But Elsie did not sit down. She thrust her shoulder from under Miriam’s hand.

“What can you tell me? Is she alive or dead? They’ve not got hold of her? Oh no! Not that!”

“Channah, this isn’t easy for me! I know how much the girl meant to you. I

can only tell you what has been told me. As far as we know, they haven't captured her. We don't even know whether she's dead or alive. She might be either."

Elsie was suddenly aware of a strange to-do going on with her fingers, and looked down to see them opening and shutting with incredible speed on the palms of her hands. This won't do, she told herself, and extended her fingers till they were as rigid as sticks. Then the wretchedness broke out through her lips.

"You should have let me go with her!" she cried. "I'd have looked after her."

"I beg you," said Miriam quietly. "There must be no reproaches! We're all of us, always, in danger every moment of the night and day. Some are lucky. Some aren't. You could not have looked after her better than Gerstl—Father Pekarek. You don't even know the language."

"I'm sorry. You must forgive me." She sat down on the chair Miriam pushed towards her. "It's a dreadful blow. It makes everything so . . . so pointless. It's been *such* hard work."

"I tell you, Channah, nobody can say what happened. Who knows? Some day, perhaps——" She stopped. She did not think it wise or kind to bolster the woman up with pink words. "I'll tell you all I know. That's the best thing, I think."

"Yes," Elsie whispered.

"It was with Gerstl she left you here, wasn't it? Gerstl had already become Dr. Suchon, I think. At the station they met one of our Polish couriers, a young woman named Sorra, dressed as a nurse. They took the train to the east, and got off at Nemçe, not far from the new Hungarian frontier. You realize that they watch the river-frontier like hawks, don't you?"

"I should have thought so."

"They remained in hiding in Nemçe for some time, because they heard that there was new personnel at the control posts. It took some time to buy over a few new contacts. Then, at last, they thought they could try it. It was arranged that an accident should take place on the road between Nemçe and Sahy, a village on the frontier. Mila was run over by a passing motor-car. That was part of the plan, you understand. It wasn't the first time that one of our children has been run over on one of these roads, and a doctor happened to be driving by at the time of the accident. So Dr. Suchon examined the case, gave it first-aid, and decided it was imperative to get the victim into the hands of a first-rate

surgeon in Budapest as soon as possible. He had no trouble in getting an ambulance, for one was awaiting his call, and the ambulance turned up with Sorra already inside it, and another girl on a stretcher, another refugee, of course. Mila was then loaded into the ambulance, and the five of them, including the driver, made off for the frontier. The guards had been tipped off, of course, on the Slovak side. The trouble occurred on the Hungarian side, where a new sergeant had been put in charge at the last moment. They were challenged, and the whole thing went wrong. The driver tried to make a getaway. He and Gerstl and the other child were killed. Sorra and Mila ran off into the woods, Sorra quite badly hurt. She was captured half an hour later. Nothing has been heard of Mila since. She may be in hiding somewhere, or she may be dead. You must face it. The child was wounded, and it's mid-winter. You must make up your mind what you wish to believe."

A silence fell. Neither woman did anything to disturb it for many minutes. It would be a good thing if I could die now, Elsie Silver said to herself, sitting in this chair. Can it all have been so pointless, the small girl crying out from the rubble, and all that went after? If she had not cried out, she would have been dead many months ago, and I would have been dead. It's been hard going, and to what end? If I stay a moment longer in this chair I'll start howling like a bereaved bitch in a kennel. I can't do that. I'd be ashamed before this woman who's had blows and knows how to take them.

She got up from her chair, and walked over to the window, and stood gazing over the river into Hungary. Once more a long time passed. A greyness, a dimness washed down over her eyes, like a twilight rain condensing on a car's windscreen, when the wipers are not functioning. Behind her was the warm room and the watching woman, in front of her was vacancy. Then she was conscious of a slight prickling at the base of her scalp, not unlike that produced by one of the electrical appliances at the hairdresser's. As the tiny needles jiggled and danced, she remembered she had experienced the same sensation many years ago, not once, but on a series of related occasions. They were the occasions on which, before even her physical eyes beheld him, she had foreseen the man whom she was to love more than any man she had ever known, her lover, Oskar von Straupitz-Kalmin. On just such a disc of darkness, she had apprehended his curling hair slightly receding from the temples, his blue eyes, the scar running down from beside his nostril to his chin. Now the image was multiple. It was a room with a table in it. Seated on a wooden chair, with her back against the table, was Mila. She was talking. There were several other young people sitting about on the floor listening to her. It was there, across there, beyond the river, the plains, the villages; beyond the suburbs of a great town, down the narrow streets of an old quarter, in a

high house, up the stairs, beyond a door.

The images were faint. They did not endure long. The grey dimness faded. It was real river, real fields, real lights, bordering the high-roads and clustered in villages.

She turned and came back to Miriam.

“I know that all the chances are that Mila’s dead,” she said. “But something happened just now as I stood at that window that makes me believe she’s not dead and that I’ll see her again. I need not tell you more about it. It would sound foolish to you. But you are a kind woman, and I thought I should tell you this.”

“It must be a great comfort to you,” said Miriam softly, “to have such experiences at a time like this. I’ve met one or two other people—”

“No,” Elsie interrupted. “I’m not that sort of person at all. It’s happened to me only once before, I mean in connection with one other person. I know quite well it may be only a trick of the heart. Because it happened once before, my heart made it seem to happen again. We’ll not talk about it, please. We’ll try not to think about it. We must talk of something else. What do you wish to do with me, Miriam?” She paused. “Forgive me. Perhaps I shouldn’t take it for granted you really are Miriam. If you are——”

“Yes, Channah, I’m Miriam. You see, I trust you. If I hadn’t trusted you, I couldn’t have told you the story you’ve just heard.”

“Thank you again. I got your message from Petr.”

“I’m called Miriam,” the other went on. “But my real name is Fleishmann, Gisi Fleishmann. That’s the name by which I’m known to the authorities. So long as they permitted emigration to Palestine, I was in charge of that. On one level I still work with them. I look after welfare in the assembly camps.” She opened her hand-bag and removed a small yellow bakelite brooch in the form of the Shield of David, and pinned it on her breast. “I usually wear this,” she pointed out, “when I move around. You see these letters: H.Z.? That stands for *Hospodársky Zid*. I’m one of the privileged ones. That’s on one level. On another level . . . you know the work I do on that level. You see, Channah? All the cards are on the table. Although——” she paused.

“Although what?”

“Although you didn’t tell me the whole truth. You didn’t tell me, for instance, who your husband was. No, no.” She raised her hand. “I know all I want to know. I say again, I trust you. There are times when instinct must be

enough. You ask what we wish to do with you, Channah. We have no claim on you. We've helped you, because it's our duty. We'll go on helping you till you reach the next link in the chain."

"What about those children?" Elsie asked suddenly, looking towards the other room. "I hadn't any idea I could be of any use in that way at all. But they're better than when they came."

"When you leave them, there'll be someone to take your place. I think, from now on, your heart's in Hungary." Elsie was silent. She did not want anything she said to affect Miriam's deliberations. If Miriam wished her to stay, she would stay. When these children went, there might be other children. But sooner or later she would be in Hungary.

"That's true, isn't it?" repeated Miriam. "Your heart's in Hungary from now on. It was somewhere over there you saw her, not here, this side of the river." Elsie nodded. "Listen, Channah!" Her eyes stared hard and deep into Elsie's eyes. "It works in with a plan we have for you." The voice was firm and terse. "It involves a good deal of risk."

A sad smile alit on Elsie's face.

"It's just as risky to take risks as not to take risks," she murmured. "Besides, what do I care now what risks I take?"

"It's riskier not to take risks, we think," said Miriam quietly. "If our people could have been made to believe that, there'd have been much less fuel at this moment piled up for the ovens. Listen, Channah! We have a plan for you! Can I talk to you, or shall I come back another time?"

"I'd much rather you gave me something to think of, something besides _____"

"Yes. I understand. You're an attractive woman. You know that. You don't look particularly Jewish. With good makeup and good clothes, you could get anywhere and do anything."

"I see the idea," said Elsie quietly. "It's interesting, and I don't think it would be too much for me. You want me to vamp some Nazi officer, do you? That would be all right, if you didn't want me to go back to Germany to do it."

"We don't."

"Or a high-up civilian, maybe?" Miriam was silent. She preferred to let Elsie talk, it seemed. "It's a very flattering suggestion, of course, and I'm going to try anything you ask me to. It'll be a bit distasteful, of course, the way I feel about those people now. In some ways it was a cleaner job crawling

through the Warsaw sewers. The only thing is——”

“Yes?”

“My husband was quite influential, as I told you. He introduced me to some really highly placed Nazis from time to time. It would be too idiotic if by some chance the man you have in mind——”

“Let me tell you at once, he’s not a German. He’s a Hungarian. The work lies on the other side of the river.”

“I see.” She thought a moment. “If I come up to the light of day, I’ll be using my German papers, I suppose?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m to be a *deutsche Dame* again?”

“Not exactly a *Dame*. You’re to be picked up in a hotel lounge by a Hungarian officer.”

“A real Hungarian officer, or one of your . . . colleagues?”

Miriam did not answer the question, at least, not directly.

“You’ll be able to recognize each other,” she said, not more than that. There was never any point in breaking the rule about not saying one word more than was for the moment necessary. “It’ll all be worked out. He’ll be returning from Berlin to Budapest, and spending a day or two here. I might say it’s not unusual for him to find a good-looking woman to relax with in Bratislava.”

“How far does all this go? It would be helpful to have some idea.”

“The personal aspect doesn’t concern me in the least. That, too, will work itself out. This would be a job like any other.”

Elsie got up without a word, and went to the cupboard where she kept her coat. Then she took a pair of scissors from a small table nearby.

“I’ll probably have a new outfit?” she asked.

“You must look smart. It will be the Five o’clock at the big hotel here, the Savoy-Carlton. There will be serious competition. But you won’t need to fear it, of course. He’ll be expecting you.”

“Am I to have his name?”

“Do women who pick up officers in hotel lounges usually have their clients’ names in advance?”

“I’m sorry. If I ever had much experience, I’m rather out of practice now. These buttons,” she pointed out, “I’d like to hand them over to you.” She attached the threads that held the top button.

“Stop, please! They contain jewels, I take it?”

“They’re Mila’s, not mine. They were her father’s. I think they’d both prefer you to have them. You must need a lot of money for the work you do.”

“You’d better hang on to them. You’ve still a long way to go.”

“I take it the Hungarian gentleman is in easy circumstances?”

Again Miriam did not reply. “I’d rather you transferred your buttons to another garment. We need money in Hungary, too.”

“You must take this one, at least. If I remember rightly, it was a sapphire.”

“Very well, Channah. Thank you.” She looked at her watch. “I must leave you soon. There are a few details we ought to fix up. I’ll need your passport, too.”

Elsie brought out her passport, and handed it over.

“It’s like handing over a false limb,” said Elsie.

“You get attached to a false limb, very nearly as much,” the other woman smiled.

CHAPTER VI

I

It was about five to five on a frosty mid-January day that Elsie Silver approached the swing doors that opened on to the lounge of the Savoy-Carlton Hotel. The encounter with the Hungarian officer was to take place soon after five, but it seemed a good thing to Elsie to reconnoitre the territory first. The commissionaire thrust the door before her, and she passed through. The place was comfortable, without splendour. There was an air of discretion about it, the black-coated male staff, the rosy-cheeked women in embroidered peasant blouses. She went straight up to the desk, and asked whether the Graf von Felsenburg had arrived. It was a name which would do as well as any other.

“Is he staying here, madame?” asked the porter, passing a finger down his list of bookings. The name was apparently unfamiliar to him. He spoke, tentatively, in Hungarian. The lady had a Hungarian chic.

“*Deutsch sprechen, bitte!*” requested Elsie. The porter repeated the question in German.

“No, we are to meet here,” said Elsie.

“Doubtless he will be in the salon there,” the porter indicated, with a respectful wave of the hand. “That’s a good-looking one,” he said to himself. “A year or two older than some of them, but she could knock most of them sideways!”

Elsie descended two broad steps to a tea-room and cocktail lounge. There were quite a few people around, but the place was so big it still looked fairly empty. There were two young women drinking a cocktail at the bar, very soignée, both of them. There was another young woman at a tea-table, smoking. It was hard to say whether they were just respectable women, or just not. Perhaps, in the case of the smoking lady, the length of the cigarette holder decided the issue. There were more nondescript groups round about, civilians and officers, with or without women.

Elsie advanced, looking towards the pillar at the left-hand rear of the lounge, where she was to seat herself at a small table beside a palm planted in a large blue urn. Apart from the black spot of grief which danced perpetually before her just beyond eye-range, she felt more keenly tuned up than she had felt for years. She felt clean and sharp in all her pores, excepting that she had

smoothed rather more rouge on her cheeks than she liked, and the bow of the lips was defined a trifle too voluptuously. She knew that she was well dressed, if a thought too brightly. The style of the best garments of *Udvardi: Modes* was exactly suited to her purpose. Her scalp tingled as if each hair had been separately drawn through glacier-water.

There was another reason for her satisfaction. She was aware that she had done things with her hair, eyebrows, and the shape of her mouth, which had already made her quite a different woman, unless you had known her well, from the Elsie Silver once celebrated in the Berlin cabarets, and well known in the English-style glossy journals. There was no knowing how sly the transformation might be, if ever she got herself into the hands of an accomplished beauty expert.

She advanced slowly. There was the pillar, there was the palm in the blue urn, there was the glass-topped table beside it. And, on her line of advance, between the table and herself, were a pair of shoulders. The head set upon them was turned away, but the moment the shoulders focused her eye, the way they were set back towards the spine and supported the well-shaped head, she knew who the man was. She would have known him even if his wavy fair hair had been covered, or if he had been wearing civilian clothes. He was Otto von Umhausen, whom she had last seen in the foyer of the *Stary Teatr* in Cracow on the night of the Furtwängler concert, the man who had turned her down when she had asked for his help.

She did not slow down her leisurely progress. Not the faintest tick of panic quickened her heart-beat. She knew that Umhausen would not betray her, though he had not chosen to help her. If he had wished to set the hounds of the Gestapo upon her, he could have done that in Cracow, and they would have rooted her out in a few hours. She was now passing within a few inches of the well-shaped shoulders. There was an empty chair in front of him; he was presumably waiting for his Slovak doxy. Hadn't they told her in Cracow that the higher officers stationed in South Poland had a weakness for Slovak pork and Slovak women?

She did not ask herself whether it was wise or foolish. One moment she was on her way to the table by the blue urn. The next moment she was seated facing von Umhausen.

“*Ach, du, Lisl!*” Otto exclaimed, coming out of a haze. “But why——” Then the words stopped in his mouth, as he perceived, first that this was not Lisl, and secondly who, astoundingly, she was. She smiled at him easily.

“You see, Otto, I got across the frontier without you!”

“What do you mean? . . .” Then curiosity got the better of his anger. “How on earth did you manage——” Then once more he checked himself. “What on earth do you want? She’s a devil! She’ll give me hell!”

“If you could order me a *crème de menthe*,” Elsie said, her eyes languishing. She was certain that *crème de menthe* was the drink to order.

He looked down at his watch, then round to the entrance.

“There’s no time,” he said. “She can’t be more than another minute now. You must go away!” His voice was getting shrill. There had always been something a little babyish about him.

“At least,” she said, opening her hand-bag, “you can let me have a cigarette.” She, too, had a long cigarette holder, a useful property.

“Certainly,” he stammered. He opened up the packet before him, his fingers shaking.

“And if you could let me have just a few *Kronen*,” she murmured, “it would help.” She saw his face blush deep-red as he felt for his wallet.

“Here you are!” he brought out under his breath, shuffling over a few notes. Her hands closed expertly over them. “Go away, now! Go away!” Elsie Silver reduced to this! Elsie von Brockenburg, a cheap whore! He looked as if he would burst into tears any moment. She smiled sweetly, stuffed the notes into her new red leather bag, got up, and left him. Then she seated herself at the table by the blue urn. As she sat down, she saw the woman Otto had been waiting for sweep flouncing over to him. The woman had obviously come in on the end of their little *tête-à-tête*. It took quite a lot of pressure on Otto’s part before the woman consented to sit down, and the simmering went on for some time.

‘Poor Otto!’ Elsie thought. ‘He could have done better for himself!’ She could almost forgive him for his behaviour in Cracow, she was so sorry for him. Then she looked at her watch, and tapped the floor a little impatiently. I wonder what that man looks like, she said to herself. She still knew no more about him than that he was a Hungarian officer. There were already one or two Hungarian officers in the place, as well as several Germans and Slovaks. He was to station himself close to her, remove a handkerchief from his sleeve, wipe his chin, and drop the handkerchief as he was replacing it. She hoped that the wrong man would not drop a handkerchief, for that was a trivial mishap that could happen to anybody. But the wrong man would not expect to see a woman with a red hand-bag, sitting at that particular table, she realized. At all events there was one good thing. The presence of Umhausen, which might

have been awkward, was certainly not going to complicate things. She knew that her request for money made it impossible for him to imagine that she was anything else but a café harlot. He had never been a very subtle creature.

Then at last a man entered the lounge, in the uniform of a Hungarian colonel, she judged it to be. He was the sort of man whose presence imposes itself wherever he goes, in a bus, a hotel lounge, even a railway station. One sensed an awareness of him, hotel staff sidling forward to see if there was anything they could do for him, people sitting at tables pointing him out, women losing the thread of conversation with their men, as their eyes fell on him and followed his movements. He was about thirty-six or thirty-seven, some years younger than she was. He was tall and his *tenue* was impeccable. His uniform might have been a tailor's show-piece, his leather shone like mahogany. He was lean, with a ruddy-dark complexion, and coal-black hair. The nose was high-pitched, the cheek-bones finely moulded, the chin lean as a blade. There was race in all his bone-structure. The eyes and mouth were far less ascetic, the eyes having a dark brilliance, the mouth being slightly protruded, making the lips full and sensuous. He was, Elsie told herself, a handsome devil. This was the man. It did not occur to her to doubt it for one instant. The newcomer hesitated a moment, and surveyed the field, like an old-time commander with field-glasses on a hill-top; then he sauntered towards the bar, where two women sat, sipping their cocktails. He examined them without rudeness, almost impersonally, then apparently made up his mind that neither was satisfactory, and strolled back through the lounge, examining the several other ladies who were by this time available. Then, at length, he came towards the table where Elsie was sitting, expertly assessed her style, and incidentally assured himself that the hand-bag she had on the table before her was red leather. Satisfied on both the public and private counts, he sat himself down at the next table, one shoulder slightly, only slightly, turned towards her.

“*Die Dame wünsht?*” a voice wanted to know. “The lady would like?” It was a waiter. It was easy to be unaware of a waiter's approach, with that black-eyed danger sidling along the territory.

“A cup of tea,” she said, both because that was lady-like, and because it would be proper to let a stronger drink be ordered for her.

The waiter bowed, and went over to the next table. His demeanour was now almost abject.

“*Und der Herr Graf, bitte?*” (So it was a gentleman of title, was it? But wasn't it difficult to be a Hungarian gentleman, and have no title?) “A glass of cognac,” the Herr Graf demanded. The waiter went off. The Herr Graf removed the handkerchief stuck a little foppishly into his sleeve, wiped his

chin, then dropped his handkerchief as he sought to replace it.

“Yes, of course,” said Elsie to herself. “But it was a little superfluous.”

The little comedy was about to begin. It had begun already. The man turned his head an inch towards hers. She turned hers an inch towards his. He caught her eye, she turned her eye away. He took out his cigarette case, removed a cigarette and dallied a moment, as if there might be someone in the neighbourhood who might also approve a cigarette. But no. The lady hard by, for instance, the lady with the red leather hand-bag, might be a genuine lady awaiting a late-comer. He closed the cigarette case and replaced it in his pocket. The lady was probably getting a little impatient for her tea. She opened her hand-bag, looked through its contents, held up the little mirror to her nose, put it back in the bag. His eyes sought hers, found them, and held them rather longer than before. A smile came to her lips, a smile subtle and disturbing. He tugged at his lapels, and cleared his throat. She opened her bag once more and brought out her own cigarette case. Before she could open it, he had risen from his chair, and was standing by her side, bent forward from the waist, his cigarette case held out to her.

“*Gnädige Frau, darf ich?* May I?”

“*Charmant!*” she said, her eyes delicious under the curled lashes, as she helped herself. The head was slightly to one side.

He flicked his lighter.

“Does madame mind if I sit down beside her?” Tone and manner were still diffident, as if, even now, at this last moment, he might have found out his luck was too good to be true.

She shrugged her shoulders because one does not show too much enthusiasm. But the words were:

“Why not? It would be delightful.”

The waiter was approaching. He had sized up the situation. Without a word he set down both tea and cognac at the one table.

“Please,” asked the Herr Graf. “Won’t madame take a little something with her tea?”

“Most kind, Herr Graf! Would there be a glass of Danziger Goldwasser?”

“But yes, madame!” the waiter informed her, and was away. She looked through the corner of her eye towards the table where her old-time friend, Otto von Umhausen, had been sitting with his *petite amie*. Otto was just leaving.

She had a feeling he would not be able to resist giving one last look in her direction. She was right. She winked. He turned his head away hastily, and went off, the woman on his arm.

Well, for the time being, at least, that was the end of Germany. Hungary, perhaps, lay ahead.

The Herr Graf lifted his glass to wish her good health. First in Hungarian, then in German:

“*Zum wohle!*”

“*Zum wohle!*” she said, smiling over the rim of her glass. “My Hungarian is rather limited.”

“I must teach you,” he insisted. Then he lowered his voice, for there were people now sitting at tables quite close at hand. “You’re travelling on German papers, aren’t you?” he asked. “You have them with you?” The words were matter-of-fact, the manner remained debonair and mischievous.

“Yes, they’re here. The name’s Lydia Radbruch.” You might have thought, if she had had a fan, she would have tapped him on the arm with it.

“Try me!” he dared her. “Try me!” Then again in the lower voice: “Have you a case or anything? Is it . . . at that place?”

“No, no,” she assured him, with the air of one saying: “Now, now, naughty!” She went on: “It’s at the station. They gave me the ticket.”

“Good. We’ll send my chauffeur, István, for it. No, not now. Soon. What sort of a head for drink have you? We must have quite a few.

“I’m out of practice.”

“That’s all right,” He signalled for the waiter. “Same again?”

“No, Herr Graf. Please. At *this* time of day!” she objected coyly.

“Waiter! Another Danziger Goldwasser!” He drained his glass. “And for me another brandy. Make it a large one.” The waiter clicked his heels in imitation of the German manner and went off. “It’s all right, Frau Radbruch,” he said. “You can pass it along to me when you feel you’ve had enough. You’ll get a little girlish and silly over the fourth or fifth.”

“Yes, certainly.” He had it all well in hand. “And then?”

“I’ll take you outside to the car. While István makes you comfortable, I’ll book a room for you adjoining mine. They like a certain decorum in this place. Then we’ll go for a drive into the fields behind the town, while the man gets

your case at the station. Then we'll have a little dinner in my own suite." The waiter was coming back now. His tone changed. "No, I won't believe it," he vowed. "Not a day over thirty."

"Flatterer!" she reproached him. "Very well, then, thirty-two." The waiter put the drinks down, and made to go off, a handsome interim *pourboire* on his plate.

"Ober!" exclaimed the Herr Graf. "This is ridiculous! Bring the bottles!"

"Mit Vergnügen, Herr Graf!" said the waiter. "With pleasure!" He was off again.

"What was the Christian name? Lydia? No! You must be Mimi!"

"As you please!"

"After the next drink call me 'Pali.' 'Count' and 'Pali' will see you through."

"May I ask when you intend to leave Bratislava?"

"That's not decided yet." (You never get anywhere by asking a direct question.) "Here he is, with the bottles." The waiter filled their glasses. "To your beautiful eyes . . . Mimi!"

"Happy days . . . Pali!"

They had quite a good deal more to drink before at last they rose from the table. They were both on top of the world. She giggled and stumbled a little, and he caught her arm.

"Are you all right?" he asked her, under his breath.

"Of course I am!" She was quite short about it. He was not giving her credit for the merit of the act she was putting on. The staff were jumping to attention all round the vestibule. They were near the swing doors now.

"You've been on the stage, have you?"

"What a lovely evening!" she said. "What a lot of stars are out already!" Nobody was under any obligation to answer irrelevant questions, whoever asked them. He led her round through the swing doors and to the left, where a superb Mercedes was parked. The chauffeur saluted them, then opened a rear door. He was in civilian uniform, and not a young man. He was obviously a personal retainer.

"No, István, in front! I'll drive!" said the Herr Graf. He himself insisted on making her comfortable under the rugs. "Bring madame's bag from the

station!” he demanded. “Here’s the ticket!”

“*Szolgálatára, Gróf Ur.* At your service, Herr Graf!”

“I’ll be back in a moment, Mimi dear.”

“Don’t be long, Pali.”

He was back a minute later, a happy smile on his face, and got into the driving seat beside her. A moment later, he pressed her thigh. She knew what that meant. Obediently, she laid her head on his shoulder, while he put his arm round hers. Then he started up the engine and drove off.

“Holy saints!” murmured István as the car turned towards the river. “Doesn’t he know how to pick them, my Herr Graf. Like his dear father before him, bless him! What an eyeful! What an apricot!”

The Count and the lady were out of view of the hotel a few yards down the street. At the end of the street was the embankment, with the bridge some seven hundred yards away on the left. The car turned right. Elsie was already sitting upright in her seat, the Count had both hands on the steering wheel. They travelled in complete silence for some time under the castle and the sloping woods beyond the castle; then, some ten or fifteen minutes later, they turned inland again into the low hills.

What is all this about? Elsie asked herself. Who is he? He must be a hundred-per-cent person or Miriam would not have stage-managed this meeting. Am I still being tried out? That’s idiotic. I’ve already been told too much. Excepting about my silent friend on my left here. Do you realize, woman? If I were a really bad hat, I’ve got absolutely nothing on the gentleman. Nothing. Excepting, by arrangement, he dropped a handkerchief. But there’s only my word for that. I’m a pick-up, just a plain straight forward pick-up.

But for God’s sake, I’m beyond the trying-out stage. He’s the real thing, like Miriam. What is he running this frightful danger for? Miriam is at least a Jew. Is he? Or is he part Jewish? Is that it? If anything’s idiotic, that is. A Hungarian Count, an officer in the Hungarian Army! But *anybody* can be part Jewish. No. It’s not that. He loves excitement, is it that? Or he’s in the pay of the Allies? Or maybe he’s a saint, like Miriam? Oh Hell! Perhaps some day I’ll find out. Perhaps not.

The fur rug had slipped to one side. She adjusted it round her knees again. “Pardon me!” he said, and helped with his right hand. He was at least aware of her, but no more than that. The night was fine, the air clear. Below the woods the Danube wound out of hills, and making a great loop, disappeared south-

eastward into the plain. At the further end of the bridge lights clustered like a swarm of bees. The lights of villages further away twinkled frostily among the blank Hungarian fields.

She might some day, perhaps even soon, get an answer to the questions that beset her. Or she might not, if it did not suit the plans in which, among others, Gisi Fleishmann and the Hungarian Count were partners. At all events he would work out for her, perhaps with her, the crossing into Hungary, probably quite soon. She would fulfil, to the utmost of her ability, the plan designed for her of which Gisi had spoken. But she would not leave Hungary until she had found out about Mila all there was to be found out.

“You were in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, weren’t you?” The words broke sudden and sharp into the silence in which they had both been immersed.

“Yes, for over two weeks. It was difficult to keep track of time.”

“You were not long in the ghetto before that?”

“Only a matter of days.”

“What were conditions like in the ghetto?”

“They were horrible beyond words. I could see that, though I was there so short a time.”

“Tell me about the German attempt to wipe out the ghetto. They used siege-guns and bombers, didn’t they? And flame-throwers for close work?”

“I was working the whole time in a First Aid Post, in a cellar. It wasn’t easy to get a picture of what was going on above. But I worked on some of the casualties.”

“The nightmare of the death camps had a good deal to do with the rising?”

“Yes, a good deal.”

The inquisition stopped as suddenly as it started. Why had it started? There was none of his questions to which by now the answer was not well known. Was he testing her out, as, earlier, Gisi had tested her out? But the questions did not go far or deep. Was it a response to some sporadic impulse which impelled him, from time to time, to transfer his imagination to those tormented realms of fire and darkness? The silence was as complete as before. They were turning right now, into the city. The comfortable white villas, set in their sparkling gardens of evergreens, were behind them. The tyres were hissing along tramlines. Tall steeples soared above them over baroque church-façades. It seemed to her a good idea to put a dab of rouge on her cheeks and a film of

lip-stick on her mouth, as if both had been undergoing heavy attention. At the end of the street she saw the square where the hotel stood, and the lights of the verandah. Then, once more, she felt the pressure of his thigh against hers. Dutifully, she once more laid her head upon his shoulder, once more he clasped her body to his.

“We’re here, Mimi darling,” he said, as they drove up to the hotel.

“It’s been wonderful, Pali dear,” she breathed. He kissed her cheek swiftly, as if it were the colophon to a crowded page of kissing.

István was waiting under the glass verandah, as he would have been waiting if the car had not returned for another six hours. He stepped forward and opened the door.

“It’s even more wonderful to be back,” cooed the Count, as amorous as any turtle-dove. She looked even more radiant than before the drive and the night air. A few tresses that had escaped from under her hat curled like vine-tendrils over the ivory forehead. The mouth flared like poinsettia.

Down on the pavement, quite openly, he put his arm round her waist, and led her through the doorway, across the entrance hall and over to the lift. In the lift they smiled at each other, outlined kisses to each other, as if they were youngsters on honeymoon. “This way, sweetheart!” he murmured, and led her along the passage, past the door of his own room, to the door of hers.

“When shall I ask them to bring up dinner, sweet?” (One of the floor-maids was passing at that moment.)

“I’m famished. Shall we say half an hour? I’ll have a quick bath.” She smiled, and sighed, and went in.

They were together again half an hour later, in the sitting-room that lay between their suites. The table was delightfully arrayed with good linen and shining silver and vases of hothouse flowers. As the waiters came in and out, the conversation was romantic and amorous. In the absence of the waiters the conversation was more business-like.

“We go through formalities at both ends of the bridge,” he pointed out. “You’ll be expecting that.”

“Of course.”

“It should be fairly simple on the Slovakian side. The Germans will be more business-like at the other end.”

“I’d be expecting that, too.”

"It's impossible to anticipate any questions they might ask. I'm sure you'd have an answer for them."

"I believe so."

"I'm told your passport covers your former movements?"

"Yes, that's so."

"We must see what happens. I'll do my best in any event. I hope you have confidence in me, madame."

"I have confidence in you because of the woman who sent me to you. I'd like to know a little more about you than I'm allowed to."

"You know all that's necessary to know to get across the Danube to-morrow morning." A waiter entered. There was the prompt change of tone and manner. "I'll never forgive him, honey-sweet," he languished. "You should have waited for me."

"Well, darling, we've met at last, haven't we?"

When dinner was over, the waiters cleared away with the expeditiousness indicated on such occasions, while the love-birds drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, toasted each other rapturously over the brims of their brandy-glasses. Then, when the last waiter had gone, the Count and his guest rose from their chairs.

"I hope, Frau Radbruch," he said, with the stiffness he reverted to as soon as they were alone, "you won't find eight o'clock to-morrow morning too early to get up?"

"As early as you like, Herr Graf," observed Elsie remotely.

"I'll come into your room and waken you. Then please come over here again in your peignoir. We'll breakfast together. The maid will pack for you. We'll leave at nine."

"I'll be ready, Herr Graf."

"One more thing. Please let me have your passport, in case there's an inquiry to-night. I believe there will not be."

"By all means. Here it is." She removed it from her red bag.

"The chances are one in a hundred," he went on, "but it's better to be prepared. If there's a knock at either of our doors, you'll come straight over to my bedroom."

"Certainly."

“Thank you. Goodnight, Frau Radbruch.”

“Goodnight, Herr Graf.”

He bowed. She inclined her head. They each went to their own rooms.

II

The vestibule next morning was like an Italian peasant’s feast-day, with smiles and paper money fluttering like bannerets.

“*Auf wiedersehen*, Herr Graf!”

“Come soon again, Herr Oberst!”

“*Bon voyage!*”

“*Glückliche Reise!*”

“*Do videnia!*”

Elsie stood smiling by, like the wife of a Governor-General on a state occasion.

“Good-bye,” she fluttered to the last cohorts of staff assembled outside the glass verandah.

“Come soon again, *gnädige Frau!*” they beamed. It was really a very affectionate, as well as ceremonious, send-off for a lady from the Warsaw sewers.

The car turned left along the embankment towards the bridge. It was only a half-mile away, and they were there in two or three minutes. Half a dozen cars were ahead of them waiting to go through passport and customs examinations. The control buildings were on their right hand, just this side of the bridge. Under the bridge the river ran green and bright. Beyond the white-washed houses, the bare trees, was Hungary.

The car braked, and István waited a moment.

“Here!” said the Count. He held out a sheaf of papers. István got out and walked over with them to the control buildings.

“You’re all right, madame?” asked the Count. It was the first time he had uttered a word of genuine concern outside the framework of the masquerade.

“Perfectly,” she said. She felt hollow, as if there were nothing inside her ribs. His arm tenderly slid round her waist. She turned her head and looked languishingly into his eyes. His fingertips smoothed her eyebrows.

“It’s going to be so wonderful,” he mooned.

“Heavenly!”

“What have I done all these years without you?”

“Darling, I mustn’t think. I couldn’t bear it.”

The patter continued for some minutes. It was hard work, with the tongue having a tendency to stick to the palate, and the heart dropping several beats at a time. Then at last István reappeared. Behind him were three officials, two wearing the red cap-band of the police, the other the green band of the customs. The Count turned down the window beside him. He still had his left hand round Elsie’s waist.

“Yes, what is it?” he asked sharply, in the voice of one who is not accustomed to being held up at frontiers.

“Your papers, Herr Oberst,” he said, handing them over. “Thank you, Herr Oberst.” The Radbruch passport was still in his hand. He cleared his throat, he looked at the passport photograph, he compared the photograph with the original. But he did it all respectfully, as one who has a slightly ridiculous duty to perform.

“*Gnädige Frau* is with you, Herr Oberst?” It was a rather rhetorical question. She was very much with him at that moment.

“That is so,” conceded the Count. The policeman addressed Elsie:

“*Gnädige Frau* intends to spend how long in Hungary?”

She looked up at her companion through her lashes, and smiled with faint embarrassment.

“A week, perhaps two weeks,” she said.

“Oh, much longer,” said the Count, with conviction.

“I don’t know,” she pouted.

The senior policeman took the passport in hand. He was probably from headquarters. It was up to him to treat the matter a little more heavily. First he looked at the passport from close to, then from a little further away; then, still without a word, he stared for some seconds into Elsie’s face. Then he blinked, and turned towards the Count.

“*Entschuldigen!* Excuse me!” he said. “*Gut!*” he assured his colleague. “Stamp it.” He handed it over. Then, a little flat-footedly, he went back to the control building.

“One moment, please! Excuse me, *die Herrschaften!*” begged the younger policeman, and he, too, went off.

“Excuse me,” pleaded the customs-man in the red band. “The luggage. Is this all?” Two suitcases were in front beside the driver.

“There’s a big case back there,” said István.

“Ah, let it be.” He scribbled a mark on the two suitcases, saluted, begged again to be excused, and went off. A minute later, the junior policeman was back with Elsie’s passport.

“Excuse me,” he murmured, and handed it over.

The Count excused him. Frau Radbruch excused him. István excused him. There cannot have been many crossings of frontiers at that epoch with so much excusing going on hither and thither.

A few minutes later that barrier across the bridge was drawn up, and the clot of cars loosened and drove slowly across.

“Your people may take things a little more seriously, darling,” he murmured, “over at the German station.”

“I’ll know how to deal with them, precious,” she assured him. She felt very frightened indeed.

He repeated the routine at the German passport-control. He left the bags in the car, and sent István out with the two sets of papers. Several minutes passed and István did not return. Her heart was beating fast. He saw her fingers drumming a tattoo upon her lap, and pressed his own fingertips down on them.

“Gently! Gently!” he reassured her. “It will be all right!”

How clever he was, she said to herself. How clever they both were, he and Miriam! Isn’t it a good thing I know absolutely nothing about them! Nothing!

“Here they come! Smile!”

It was István, and three German frontier-men. They handed the Count’s papers over with a salute and a click of heels, then turned to the lady.

“Are you Frau Radbruch?” a sergeant asked. There was only the click of heels.

“Yes, sergeant,” she said, smiling sweetly.

“The Herr Leutnant would like a word with you.”

“Certainly,” she murmured. “Where is he? In that funny house?” Showing

not the slightest hesitation, she prepared to get out of the car.

“Ask the Herr Leutnant to come here, sergeant!” the Count demanded. He took out his wallet and allowed the sergeant’s eye to rest a moment on a folded document in a mica case.

Perhaps Elsie knew the mentality of the people they were dealing with rather better than he.

“No, darling!” she pouted. “The dear man! It’s his duty! Of course I’ll go!”

“Very well! I’ll come with you.”

The Herr Leutnant was sitting at a deal table with his back to a coke stove. There was a fly-blown portrait of the Führer on the wall behind him. He got up as he sighted the Count, and saluted.

“*Heil, Hitler!*” he proclaimed. “*Heil, Hitler!*” responded the two others. “The Herr Oberst will excuse me, I must make an inquiry or two about the lady,” explained the Herr Leutnant. He was tapping the Radbruch passport on the table before him.

There was a minute pause, then:

“Of course you will, Herr Leutnant,” the Count said agreeably. “It is in order for me to be present with my” . . . again there was a pause . . . “with my friend?”

The atmosphere was easier.

“But, of course. Unless, maybe, the lady would prefer it otherwise?”

“How kind you are, Herr Leutnant!” she said softly. “It’s as you choose.”

“German?”

“But certainly.”

“When did the lady arrive in Bratislava?”

“Yesterday.”

“Coming from?”

“I was in Cracow for a time.” He referred to the passport again. The entries seemed satisfactory.

“What was the lady doing in Cracow? On holiday?” he gallantly hastened to suggest.

“Yes. I was on holiday.”

“Could the lady give any reference to a respectable German . . . friend in Cracow?”

“Indeed yes. You could refer to Herr Oberst Otto von Umhausen. He is Officer in Charge of the Wawel Garrison, and a close friend of his Excellency. He could answer all inquiries.” The voice had the suggestion that if there were any inquiry about her talents in bed, Herr von Umhausen could deal with that, too.

The Herr Leutnant for a moment looked as if he would collapse into his jackboots.

“Yes, of course!” he muttered. “Of course! Much displeasure to have disturbed you, madame!” He reached for the rubber stamp and well and truly stamped it home.

“Thank you, Herr Leutnant!” she said, her eyelids fluttering. “What a dear you are!” The Count took up the passport and they returned to the car. Nobody was interested in the luggage. The barrier was raised. The car passed through. István wound up the screen, then turned to the right.

“Permit me to congratulate you, madame,” the Count said. “You give me confidence.” A dingy workers’ suburb was opening out before them. “This is the Vienna road, the old Imperial Highway, but soon——”

She heard no more than that. Her eyes were fixed on a lamp post. The lamp post detached itself from its moorings and heeled over in an arc towards a grocer’s shop. The shop swung over and round towards a tree. Then the tree came loose and swung round and over. Two or three times the three objects revolved slowly round each other in a great circle. Then darkness took them.

She came to herself some time, and some distance, later, with a blinking and a spluttering, and a trickle of fire down her gullet. They were outside a frame-shack café among grey fields and grey waters, and a grey road ahead, and tall reeds and grey-green willows. A woman stood on the steps of the café, and a man beside her. Beside the car was István with a bottle of grey-green liquor on a tin tray. Leaning over towards her was the Count, holding a glass to her mouth.

“You’re all right, now?” he asked. “Would you like to get out and walk a bit?”

“Where are we? Is this Hungary?” she asked, looking round on the cold, dank fields lying under the roadway, and the sharp reeds massed like swords.

There was the faintest pressure of his thigh against hers. He was reminding

her that now she had come to herself the first duty was to remember there was a part to maintain. He waited till the pressure might have conveyed his meaning. Then he spoke again, his voice tender as a mother's.

"Yes, my sweet, this is my country. We've left the German bridgehead behind a long time ago. Don't talk now. So long as you're yourself again. Another drop of *slivovitz*? Yes, darling, it's terribly strong, isn't it? That's right. Close your eyes for a minute or two." He addressed a word or two to István in Hungarian. István addressed a word or two to the café people behind him. She closed her eyes.

This was Hungary, where Mila was. That thought for a moment expelled the other thought, even of the tense minute at the control post; Mila was somewhere in a room high up, sitting on a wooden chair, with her back against a table talking; young people on the floor listening. She tried to cajole the vision into her brain, as if her brain were the room high up. But there was no prickling of the skin at the base of the scalp. The vision would not spread itself out on the brain's floor. Another thought was there instead. Those two peasant people on the steps of their sorry little café in the wilderness, the knowingness, the solicitude, in their eyes. They clearly thought her Excellency was feeling the baby-stirrings in the womb. She smiled. It occurred to her that, in fact, she was. She had felt them for some time now. But it was not the usual type of foetus.

She opened her eyes. The café people were back indoors.

"I'm feeling quite all right now, Pali dear," she said. "Let's go on."

"At once, sweetheart." He made a sign to István. István got into his seat. "We'll wind the screen up," murmured Pali, "it'll be cosier." She gave him a grateful glance. She had not noticed before that the car was a limousine. It meant that they could for some time now drop the 'sweetheart' and the 'darling' business, which was, after all, just a bit exhausting.

They started off, and were away again. The Count removed himself from the close contact with the passenger. He did not address a word to her for some minutes. It would be kindly to let her come to herself in her own time. Then he spoke.

"It must have been rather a strain, Frau Radbruch. I'm sorry."

She turned and smiled.

"Well, for just a moment or two," she admitted. "But it's odd. It wasn't the tension that did it. Exactly the opposite. It's because it was all over so quickly. It was all so different, getting away from the other places, such a gruelling

job.” She heard a voice chattering away so affably, and wondered for a moment whether the voice was her own. It was probably the release from the tension, helped out by the shot of *slivovitz*. The stuff was burning behind the base of her breast-bone, hot and round, like a light-bulb. She went chattering on. “I don’t suppose it was more than half a mile,” she went on, “from the cellar in Warsaw to old Marta’s laundry, just beyond the Wall. But it felt like . . . like an area defended in depth. You know, the Siegfried Line. Or crossing the Tatras with Zosha. I haven’t told you about Zosha, the smuggler-girl? Oh that was work, that was! Those ravines! Those stones that went slithering down under you! That was something! Ha! Ha!” She tittered like a factory girl in a bar parlour. She looked helplessly to see what effect all this was having on him, and was certain she noted a *frisson* of distaste. “I really must beg you —” she started desperately. Then she passed out again, completely, as if she had fallen into the hold of a merchant ship stuffed with black featherbeds. She recovered in due time, there was no way of seeing how much later. The landscape was still all river, and stumpy willows, and a wild goose flying ahead with long neck outstretched. She felt refreshed and vigorous, completely herself again. She turned her head.

“Herr Graf!”

“Yes?”

“You must forgive me! I think that’s what I was going to say to you when I passed out. That’s the second time, isn’t it? Please don’t think I’m an hysterical woman.”

“Frau Radbruch, I assure you.” He inclined his head. “I think I understand.”

“It’s happened once or twice, lately,” she told him. “I’m not so young as I used to be.”

“I don’t suppose you had experiences like these . . . till lately?”

“There were other dangers from time to time. But on the whole I lived a very sheltered life, too sheltered.”

“Wouldn’t you like to get back to peace and safety as soon as possible?”

She paused a moment, choosing her words.

“I think there are a few things to be done first.”

“I was given to understand,” he said, “that that is how you feel.” There was a slight note of satisfaction in his voice. “It is exactly how I feel. You will have gathered that.”

“Yes. I’m told I might be of use to you. If I can be, I will be very happy. That’s why I wanted you to understand I don’t usually behave like a little schoolgirl. I believe I can be relied upon.”

“I would be glad to think so,” he said. The relationship was quite professional again. For some time they travelled on in silence. The river was not only on their left hand. It seemed to have split up into a hundred small rivers, nosing darkly through cold and shining meadows. It was a strange, water-logged world, with no towns and few villages. Here and there, on the edge of a reedy lagoon, a farm or mill sought to buttress itself against the prevailing water, or a pale church lifted its bulbous spire to a heaven that seemed as watery. The sun was warm for January, but the sheath of ice in the backwaters was often unbroken. Sometimes, into the clumps of reeds, a chunk of forwandered ice, brought down by the main stream, thrust its snout like a grey-ribbed tapir.

“This isn’t a bright countryside,” murmured Elsie.

“It’s not a bright world,” the other said bleakly. “But we must do what we can do.” He turned upon her suddenly, as if she were responsible for sustaining this play-acting for too long a time. “It’s about time you knew something about me, isn’t it?”

A faint flicker of temper darted along her tongue.

“I should have thought——” she started. But she broke off. “I’m at your service,” she said.

“What should you have thought?” he insisted. “What?”

“It’s about time we both knew something about each other.”

“I beg your pardon. I know something about you already. I have the advantage over you.” His voice gleamed like a blade with a fine edge to it. “Perhaps, Frau Radbruch, you will permit me?” He took an oblong leather wallet out of his pocket, like certain cigarette cases by Asprey. She noticed an embossed coronet on the top left-hand corner, and below it the initials A.P. He opened it and took out a printed card about the size of a small post-card. This, too, had the coronet on the top left-hand corner. She read the name: Gróf Apor Pál, followed by certain qualifications. But they were in Hungarian, and were meaningless to her.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured.

“No,” he said. “I hardly thought you did. Let me introduce myself then. I am Count Pali Apor. I’m a Colonel in the Debreczen Hussars, seconded to

military intelligence at the War Office. That is about as much as you need know.”

“If you forbid me to ask any questions, I will, of course, refrain from doing so. Excepting that I must have a clear idea what is expected from me.”

“I propose to give you that without delay. It is not simple, and far from easy. You will be expected——” Then he stopped. The next words came from him as if he had tried to repress them, and failed. “What question did you want to ask me? What was it?” He was, after all, human enough to have some curiosity. She would gratify it.

“There’s one question I find it impossible not to ask you, though, of course, if for some reason you prefer not to answer it—you won’t.”

“I am quite certain I know what the question is.”

She shrugged her shoulders. If he was as clever as all that, working for him would be difficult at times.

“You are wondering why a man of my background is operating in a Jewish underground movement? Isn’t that so?”

“That’s so.” But perhaps it wasn’t so dazzlingly clever a piece of divination.

“I’ll tell you at once, as much as you need know. My family has ranked among the bitterest anti-Semites in Hungary. I was as bitter as any of them till . . . three or four years ago. That was partly due to the fact that I’m half a Jew. My mother was Jewish.”

“There, at least, I have the advantage over you,” Elsie informed him. “Both my parents were Jewish.”

“That makes it simpler,” he observed, with tightened lips.

“But I think I know exactly what it’s all about. I’ve lived in Germany a good many years.”

“Do I answer your question? Would you like to inquire further?”

She looked coldly into his eyes for some moments. She was not going to be bullied by him, neither because he was half a Jew, nor, still less, because he was half a Gentile.

“As I said before, I would like to know what you have in mind for me.”

“Very well.” His lips were tight-drawn. She knew they would have to walk carefully with each other, if work of any value was to be done. And nothing

else mattered.

“No!” he shouted suddenly. “No! I’m sorry! You will have to hear the story! I have only met you a few hours ago, but it’s likely we’ll meet a good deal in the months ahead of us, if nothing goes wrong. If anything does—then we’ll meet in front of a firing squad!” She wanted to let him know that, having extricated herself from the débris of her Warsaw bomb, she preferred to die of old age. She certainly preferred to die no death at all, until she knew exactly what had happened to Mila. But it would be unwise to interrupt the strange man now. How very good-looking he was at this moment! The eyes were like huge purple grapes, with firelight glinting over their surfaces.

He went on.

“There is only one other human being who has heard the story. She, also, is a woman. You know her.” She nodded. It was evident he meant Miriam. “A noble creature,” he said. “A mouse of a woman to look at, until she fixes her eyes on you. Then she is anything at all. A gazelle. A lion.” He relapsed into silence, though a moment ago he had been full of his own tale. It was extraordinary, she said to herself, what happened to people the moment they started speaking of that woman, even to a man like this tortured Hungarian aristocrat in whose veins the mixed blood seethed like chemicals in a retort over a burner. But no, it was not extraordinary. It was she, Miriam, who was extraordinary. She was the stuff that heroes and martyrs are made of. Yet she, too, was not extraordinary. She was one of a nameless company, and only by a freak of fate would one name or another be remembered, excepting by those who had been close to them, for even those who had been delivered by them would not know their names.

There was a small town on the other side of the river. Were there Jews there, too? How soon would the hideous rake start combing those houses that looked like a dream beyond the still water, combing the streets, the adjacent woods and fields? Would that small town, too, in the hour of need, discover a Gisi Fleishmann, who would give up all hope of her own safety, like the Gisi Fleishmann of Bratislava, so that two, twelve, twenty Jews might be smuggled into safety, while she herself stayed on, to board with a smile the train that, at the end of it all, rumbled off to the inevitable crematorium?

“That’s Komárion,” he said. “There’s an inn on this side of the river. Or we can eat a little later at Esztergom.”

“Later, if you wish. I could hardly eat now.” She knew that it was now imperative for him to speak, though probably, when they had set out, nothing had been further from his mind than to tell the story that so tormented him to

this total stranger.

He bent his head, as if to acknowledge her sensitiveness, and started to speak. He spoke with extraordinary restraint, with a sort of deliberate dullness, as if he knew that, if he let his emotion burst through the protecting slag, he would be a mass of flame.

“I have told you already, madame, that on my father’s side I am descended from one of the oldest of the Hungarian noble families. We stem from the Lake Balaton region, in Transdanubia. The founder of our family is on record as having led the first revolution against St. Stephen’s christianization of the territory. To come down to more recent times, my father was an extremely extravagant man who, while still young, squandered most of his substance in the over-zealous pursuit of pleasure. He also committed the unpardonable sin of falling hopelessly in love with a Jewess, the daughter of a neighbour’s bailiff. It is a fact that she, too, belonged to an ancient family. They were Transdanubian Jews who were settled in the country long before the time of the Magyar invaders, more than a thousand years ago. Despite this, to my grandfather, as to most Hungarians with similar antecedents, a Jewess was a plain clot of filth; he was, in fact, one of the most malignant anti-Semites of his time. His disgust and fury were beyond bounds when my father brought my mother to the family residence in a state of advanced pregnancy. It was my father’s idea of a joke. It took a good deal of money and ingenuity to hush up the affair, but the situation was simplified when Mother committed suicide soon after I was born, and my father died some months later.

“My grandfather then took over the responsibility of educating me in the way a Hungarian nobleman should go. The strong affection he undoubtedly had for me was complicated. He was never able to forget the abhorred strain that ran through my blood, and marred the perfect blue of our Magyar ancestry. In many ways there was a good deal, there was too much, similarity, between us. I was as fierce, proud and high-spirited as he was, and clashes were frequent. If it had not been for those, I might well have grown up in complete ignorance of my Jewish ancestry, but the increasingly irascible old man would often lose all restraint and damn the Jewish poison in his grandson’s veins, that made him so stiff-necked and arrogant.

“One day the old man went too far.” The Count turned his head away. She was conscious of the vast effort he was making to maintain the even tenor of his narrative. He went on again. “In the height of a quarrel my grandfather called me the son of a Jewish whore. I told him I loathed him and wished he was dead. He looked at me with startled eyes, and tried to speak, but was unable to, his lips were completely out of control. Then, as if in direct response

to my words, he dropped to the floor with a haemorrhage caused by a burst blood-vessel. I watched him die, with a composure which terrified myself no less than him. My silence and impassivity were the last things he was conscious of.

“In due course I entered the Royal Hungarian Army, and assumed the rôle natural to a young man of my class. I was always, however, a man divided against myself. The knowledge that I was half a Jew was a perpetual torment. At one time I joined the anti-Semitic agrarian party, but very soon was overcome with a feeling of self-loathing, and left. I found it impossible, however, not to continue taking a morbid interest in Jewish affairs. Some years after the Nazis acceded to power in Germany, I manœuvred myself on a military mission to Berlin. The Nazis were not averse from allowing the right kind of visitor, particularly when he was a Hungarian nobleman with a good anti-Semitic history, an insight into the Third Reich’s methods of dealing with the Jewish vermin. They cannot have been unaware of my mixed blood, but they must have calculated that that very condition would produce an exceptional zeal.” He paused. “They were right,” he said. She was not looking at his face, and was glad she was not, for she knew there was a smile on his lips, at that moment, not easy to bear.

“It was on that visit to Berlin that I realized that the thing involved has nothing to do with a man’s being Jewish, or half-Jewish, or not Jewish at all. It is a simple issue, madame, and I don’t need to expound it. The struggle inside me continued, none the less. I called myself a neurotic, a Jewish decadent. It was one man who decided the issue for me, absolutely and for ever. That was also in Berlin. One man in one moment, the smile on his face.”

He relapsed into silence again, and she did nothing to break it. She was aware that in the little pit of space between the back of the car and the wound-up glass screen that separated them from the driver, a third passenger had installed himself. She did not know whether the Count would give her the name of the third passenger, and if she would recognize it, if he gave it. She thought she probably would not; it would be, so to speak, a nameless name, the distillation of the infinitely diffused evil, featureless, without odour, without light or shade.

“The name is not generally known,” he said, as if in comment on the unuttered thought. “Indeed, he shuns the radio talks or the newspapers, as an owl or a bat shuns the sunlight. I believe he is in Budapest at this moment. He has been officially granted unlimited powers, independent of frontiers, and Budapest is one of the chief stations of his *tournée*. He has still things left to do in Budapest, which he has succeeded in doing in Warsaw, Prague,

Bratislava, and elsewhere. He sometimes contacts me, for though we are officially in different fields, he hopes I might help him to establish Auschwitz in Hungary. It would save so much rolling stock. I don't need to tell you, it's a hope in which I encourage him. It might be useful for you, too, to meet him sometime."

"His name?" He had perhaps forgotten he had not mentioned it.

"Yes. Eichmann, Adolf Eichmann, an Austrian. He is about thirty-six years old now, a good husband, a good father, a one-time oil-salesman." The voice rasped like a file. "He is tall, but not tall enough to attract attention, slight and long, like a reptile that can disappear into a fissure at the shake of a stick. His hair and eyes are colourless, like a louse. I met him in May 1942, soon after Himmler had given him absolute powers to work out the practical details for the Jewish mass-murder. He had blue-prints and models before him, models of the bath-houses in which the victims were to be asphyxiated, and the incinerators to which they would be carted off. He removed a tiny trap-door in the roof of the model bath-house, and dropped a pinch of green crystals through, the crystals which give off the lethal gas in which the naked victims splutter and choke till they die. He smiled as he dropped the crystals through. That smile decided all the issues for me." He turned suddenly on his companion as if she had sought to remonstrate with him. "It was the Fiend's smile, madame. Through the chink in his face all the fires of Hell glared, as they still glare, for he is alive still. He decided my life for me, and my death. He smiled on you, no less than on me, and all Jews. He smiles, and you and I are both here, in this car. We will get to Budapest soon, but it may not be the end of the journey. We may get as far as the bath-house, where he sits perched on the roof, to drop the green crystals through the trap-door. I hope the prospect does not depress you, madame."

She shook her head. She very much wanted to stroke the back of his hand, and tell him not to be so Hungarian and romantic and silly. He looked quite a pathetic boy at that moment. But she remembered there would be enough hand-stroking, in the way of duty, before long.

"I'll do all I can to avoid it," she said. "And so will you, I hope, Count Apor."

The unecstatic sentiment was like a spray of cold water flung in his face. There was almost an audible intake of breath.

"Why, of course," he said. "I'm not an idiot!" he added irascibly.

That was manifest, and called for no comment. But she still had only the haziest idea of the job that had been assigned to her. She hoped he would come

round to it at this point, but he seemed merely to have fallen into one of his silences.

“I’m hoping you’ll let me know what is expected of me in Budapest,” she said. “It is Budapest, I take it?”

“Yes, it is Budapest. You’re to carry on from the point reached last night in the hotel at Pozony.” She raised her eyes. “I beg your pardon, Bratislava, Pressburg, as you will. You will be installed as my *Freundin* in a small apartment I have . . . for my friends, in Belváros, on the Pest side of the river. It will be made as little embarrassing as possible for you. A Hungarian officer, even in Military Intelligence, will not attract undue attention when he visits, or is visited by, his mistress, when she is a woman”—he hesitated a moment—“a woman who is presentable, and carries herself well.” She inclined her head a little to acknowledge the tribute. “The intention is to facilitate contacts between myself and certain individuals in the city. There may be other individuals regarding whom you will receive instructions as the time arises. There is, first of all, Clothilde. She is a beauty expert in Luigino’s establishment, on the Vaczi Utca. An appointment will be made for you by telephone, and this Clothilde will be asked for. That will arouse no suspicions, for the woman is excellent at her job, and it is customary, I understand, for a client to insist on the services of her own expert. Then there is Ferencz Kollar, a young assistant at the Csanady bookshop on the Eskü Utca. He is a Hungarian, and an expert on foreign fiction. That is all you need to know about him. You will have a good deal of leisure time, and will doubtless want to occupy part of it with some entertaining light reading. You read French as well as German, I take it?”

“And English. My French is a little rusty.”

“You will browse among M. Csanady’s bookshelves from time to time, and Kollar will be happy to choose your books for you. You understand?”

She understood perfectly. There would be messages to transmit both ways between the Count and Kollar, and, of course, between the Count and Clothilde.

“I understand.”

“It would seem fairly safe, but there are no guarantees.”

“Of course not.”

“The previous arrangements were less satisfactory.”

She made no comment, for she did not know what he wished to convey. He

might have meant exactly what he said: the previous arrangements were not satisfactory and it had been necessary to improve on them. Or he might have meant something drastic had happened to the people previously involved. There was no point in pursuing the matter further.

“I will arrange an appointment for you with Clothilde to-morrow after lunch. She will perform her normal duties, and that’s all. You have to get to know each other. You will visit the bookshop the next day. You will not think you are being rushed into your duties and you will produce, it is hoped, a sense of leisure and luxury. But there is no time to lose. If they had realized years earlier that there is no time to lose, the enemy would not have been so hideously strong now, and myriads of lives might have been saved.”

“They?” she murmured. She would have liked to know exactly what he meant. Were “they” the Allies, the Jews? But he had stopped. It seemed that that was all he chose to tell her for the moment. He had said nothing about the nature of the messages she was to transmit. But there was one thing she herself wanted to say to him, while they were, so to speak, discussing first principles.

“There’s one more thing——” she started.

He turned his head.

“Yes?”

It was, of course, the matter of Mila; She wanted to tell him that though it was ridiculous to believe that the young girl she loved was still alive, she *knew* she was, and there was to be no argument about it. She hoped that she would get him to understand that, although she welcomed her job, in fact, found it glorious, she could not be totally dedicated to it till she had found Mila, or, at the worst, was given definite proof she was dead. (Which would not happen, for she was *not* dead.) She wanted to discuss with him the possibility of setting up some inquiry in the frontier region at Sahy.

And then she realized it was quite impossible to talk to this man about Mila. His perspective of the situation was masculine, abstract, impersonal, hers was feminine, intensely personal. The catalytic agent of her conversion had been a stark and simple act of horror, the splitting of a baby on a spike in the Warsaw street; with him it had been the trivial sprinkling of a pinch of crystals through a hole, by a creature almost as invisible and featureless as an electric current. He would despise her for what would seem to him the obsessive pseudo-maternity of a middle-aged woman. If, among his other activities, he was involved in the rescue of the entombed Jews, as doubtless he was, he would conceive his operations in terms, not of the loved individual, but of numbers on lists, whether tens or thousands. He would, in fact, consider her

preoccupation with Mila foolish and dangerous. She could not, at least at this stage, discuss it with him.

He repeated his question, for she had not replied.

“Yes? What’s that one thing?”

“Excuse me,” she said. “I would rather not discuss the matter now.”

“Come! What is it?” There was a note of impatience in his voice.

She looked him squarely in the eyes.

“Please. I would rather not discuss it.”

A muscle started twitching at the left corner of his mouth. He was a man who did not like to be thwarted.

“Well?”

She said nothing. She had a right to say nothing. Even if he were a Gestapo inquisitor, she had the right to say nothing, whether or not she had the strength to resist him.

He turned his eyes from her at length. The country on their right hand was fairly hilly now. There was rising ground on the opposite bank, too, beyond a welter of marshes. Some minutes later, where the road forked left towards the river, István slowed down, as if awaiting orders. The Count tapped at the window. István turned his head. Left, the Count gestured. Soon they were in the outskirts of a small town, dominated by a massive church built on a steep bluff over the river.

“This is Esztergom,” the Count said. “It will be simpler if we lunch here.” A patrol of soldiers was approaching. Automatically his arm was round her waist again, her head on his shoulder. The patrol saluted, and marched on.

They ate in the hotel-restaurant in the cathedral square. There was a soup, and a *gulyás*, and a platter of *almásrétes*. “*Apfel-strudel!*” she proclaimed delightedly. Everything was delightful to these two calf-eyed lovers, mooning and murmuring over the paprika.

CHAPTER VII

I

Beyond Esztergom the river makes its first great right-angled turn southward, the road goes criss-cross through wooded hills to meet it again, among birch and pine, oak and chestnut, marching from slope to slope.

Suddenly, on the crest of a hill, Elsie saw the noble prospect for the first time—the wide river, the sinuous islands—Buda, the high town on the hills, Pest, the broad town in the plains. The splendid bridges still spanned the river.

“How beautiful!” she murmured. He made no comment, but there was a lover’s pride in his eyes. Then, later, indifferently, he said: “You’ve been here before, madame, of course?”

“No,” she told him. “Alas, no.” It occurred to her how little of this shattered Europe she had seen, while it still had glory. There was England where she was born, an England restricted to her native Doomington, the capital where she had had her first success, and the provincial towns where she had gone on tour. Then, in the twenties, there had been the South of France, and just one gilded strip of that. Then it was Germany, marvellous, malignant Germany—and Germany was Berlin, Berlin, Berlin, monomaniac Berlin, pig’s knuckles, Danziger Goldwasser, scent behind the ears, sulphur spitting up from between the paving stones. Then, when Hitler’s war had come, and she was the wife of one of Hitler’s first generals, there had been the triple treadmill: apartment in Berlin, villa in Baden, ch[^]alet in Salzburg, round and round and round again, a white mouse in a cage, round and round from Berlin, to Berlin.

She had been no traveller these many years. No Budapest, no Vienna, even.

“You will find it necessary to know the city well,” he told her. “That will be seen to.”

The process of learning the city began the moment they had come through the suburbs and swung out upon the great embankment which, like its fellow on the left bank, sweeps splendidly downstream for two miles or more. On the Buda side, here was the Var, the Fortress, on its great hill. That was the Bastion there, with its pepper-box towers. That was the bridge the Englishman built, the Lancziid, and next lower down, the Erzsébet bridge. Across the river, there was the long façade of the Parliament buildings and the great hotels;

then, beyond, the domes of the Basilica, the spires, the warehouses, the chimneys, of Pest.

Then, suddenly, there was a detour in the road, where a bomb had fallen not long ago. A few minutes later they were held up by a convoy of tight-packed German lorries en route for the eastern fronts. The War was back with them again.

The job on hand was back with them again. There was a pressure of his knee against her thigh. Apparently a familiar face had showed up on the pavement, or in a passing vehicle. Good day, he smiled. He bowed. He waved a friendly hand. He was showing off his new mistress. She nestled up to him, and was becomingly self-conscious. How well dressed the men were, how smart the women! What a lot of nice things in the shops! There were German troops about, of course there were, but far less than in the Polish or Slovakian cities. My God, those two men on the opposite pavement there, with beards and stooped shoulders, and gesturing hands—they were *Jews!* Could it be possible? No yellow star on the breast, no arm-band on the sleeve? No corporal chivvying them along with the butt-end of a rifle or the point of a bayonet? Could it be possible? Rubbing shoulders on the pavements with Gentiles, and not pitch-forked into the gutter?

There it was. The blight had not spread yet over the face of this country. Perhaps it would never reach here, or, at least, it would not eat down the whole way to the bone? Alas, little Mila, that you're not with me to see this sight! Your heart would have danced with joy.

They had crossed the bridge now. They were on the Pest side of the river. Northward along the embankment extended the line of great hotels like palaces.

"This is the Belváros quarter," the Count said. "I think you'll find it quite as chic, madame, as the Tiergarten, or Mayfair." He had the defensive arrogance about his city which all metropolitans show east of Vienna. They drove up the Eskü Square for three blocks to Zólófa Street, and turned right. The houses were somewhat heavy and pompous, in the Munich manner of the early twentieth century.

"I hope you'll find the apartment comfortable," he ventured, with the implication that till then there had been no complaints. "There's a first-rate shelter, too," he assured her, "though we're not often troubled, so far." They stopped at number twelve, and climbed one floor. It was an odd feeling, walking into a house, not slipping into it like a burglar; an odd feeling to have a front door patently held open for you, and to enter without looking furtively

right and left. And Lotte was an odd feeling, too, Lotte the cook-maid, waiting for you at the end of a passage, with a smile of complicity on her lips and eyes, with the bosom of a nursing mother, the neatness of a nun. Lotte's name in Bratislava yesterday had been Ilonka. She had met Lotte in Grünewald, and she was Teresl; she was Jeannette in Antibes, Ada in London. She was a good soul.

The apartment, too, was curiously familiar, though she had not made a special study of the apartments of kept women. On the contrary, she had been far more familiar with the apartment of a kept man, her own Oskar, that is to say. But she knew it all, the easy chairs upholstered in aubergine silk, the white rugs, the mirror-backed cocktail-bar, the bathroom with all the bottles and douches and sprays, the broad low bed, the mirrors, the shaded lights, the perfumes of bygone women, that pattered like ghosts, the perfumes of women yet to be, that mewed like unborn babies.

“Are you going to be happy here, darling?” asked the Count. (Lotte was in attendance.)

“How clever of you to have everything ready in time! How very thoughtful of you!” He had evidently telephoned from Esztergom. He smiled, slightly flattered. They had a dear little tea-party, with cakes from Gerbeaud, sticky as a vat of molasses and dainty as a Fabergé box. Lotte had lain in a staggering quantity of them. The ladies resident from time to time in the apartment evidently had a great addiction to them. You ate them with a spoon.

“From Gerbeaud!” said the Count.

“Really?” asked Elsie, fingering the delicate little napkin. “How pretty!”

“I mean the cakes!” he pointed out, shocked. It's as if one had said of a pair of shoes that they were Lob, and the name meant just nothing.

“Oh, of course. The *cakes!*” she said. “From Gerbeaud! Just fancy!”

She had a bath. Even if one had a napkin as large as a bath-towel one felt one would like a bath after a plateful of Gerbeaud cakes. He telephoned. He was all cock-a-hoop. His friends had not heard him so enthusiastic for some time. Such a bundle! Such an eye-filler! Such curves! When can I see her, Pali? Keep your hands off her, Adam! Poor old Pali, he's got it badly this time! I hope *this* one doesn't run off with the silver! They were talking about Pali's new bit of comfort that evening all along the Corso.

She came out of her bath looking like a Gloire-de-Dijon rose, and smelling like a bank of night-scented stock. Lotte had usefully supplemented Elsie's equipment. The Count seemed to remember the dark-red snood in which the

hair was so charmingly assembled in the Florentine manner; also the scarlet velvet mules. The peach-coloured marabout-trimmed peignoir, and the peach pyjamas, had an independent history. A little distance away Lotte hovered, like a lesser acolyte not too close to the altar, in case either celebrant required further ministrations.

He nodded.

“Come back in two hours with more flowers. There’s not enough.” She curtsied and went off. He turned to Elsie. “A routine will work itself out,” he said. “Probably you’d like to rest. You don’t begin till to-morrow.”

“I’d be grateful for a little rest,” she admitted. “Most agreeable after a bath.”

“Very well. There’s a great deal I can do here. I’ll have a bath, too, and write letters, and will be leaving the apartment just when Lotte arrives here. Then I’ll go to my own place and change. We’ll dine late at the Duna Palota.”

“It sounds enchanting,” she said. “Au revoir, Count.”

“Oh just one or two technicalities. You’ll be careful with your black-out, madame. They’re rather strict. Further, I’ll attend to your arrival-report at the local police station. I’ll have your papers. Au revoir, madame.”

She went into her bedroom and closed the door. He went into the bathroom and turned on the taps.

II

The Duna Palota was one of the chain of de luxe hotels on the Pest Embankment. The white-and-gold room was the most crowded and fashionable of its dining-rooms. It was evident that Count Apor did not intend to hide his light o’ love under a bushel. They were ushered by the *maître d’hôtel*, the celebrated Mario himself, with that ostentatious intimacy which is held to be so flattering, to a table in an open alcove. The orchestra was Harlem, for this was Budapest, where negroes are smarter than gypsies. The food was Tour d’Argent, for pressed duck in Budapest is smarter than *gulyás*. It was quite evident that they were attracting a good deal of attention, and that was flattering, for her outfit was Udvardi, Bratislava, which is not high chic. She believed the results would be more spectacular when she visited Fleurot, the dressmaker on the Vaczi Utca, with whom the Count had fixed an appointment for the next day.

They gazed earnestly into each other’s eyes, and uttered sweetnesses at each other. They could do that automatically now, as you blow your nose,

without thinking about it. They also danced. That was different. They both danced beautifully, though he was much more in practice than she was. There were moments when she felt the earth curiously hollow under her feet, and the thought of her kinsfolk too tightly packed for dancing, in the pens by the abattoirs, tapped short and hard like a tack-hammer on her skull. But she and Apor were engaged on a job of work, and she knew they were both doing it well.

How well her companion was doing it she perceived for the first time as they returned to the table after their second dance. Their progress carried them by a table which had not been occupied some minutes earlier, when they passed it on their way towards the dance floor. She was aware of the handsome young man even before she set eyes on him, through that instinct she had which made her aware that handsome young men were around. She was aware, too, that it was not herself he was looking at, which might have been expected, but her companion; and he was looking at the Count with an extraordinary fixity.

They sat down and she took stock of the table the young man was sitting at. It consisted of the young man himself, a middle-aged man and woman, presumably his parents, and a fair young woman, possibly his fiancée. The three were Jews, the girl was not. She could see that at a glance. She could see the young man was already flushed with drink. She sensed there was going to be trouble. The father was a comfortable paterfamilias of the upper bourgeoisie, a type familiar to her from bygone Kurfürstendamm days; a type which, after feeding well but excessively at Toepfer's, or the Kaiserhof, with almost impeccable Gentile friends, would go naughtily slumming to the cabaret where Elsie Silver was putting her latest numbers across. He did not look so self-assured as he would have done then. The same was true of his wife, dressed quite austerely in a simple black dress; she was a woman of ample proportions, yet, without the jewels she doubtless owned, and, in deference to the spirit of the time, was not wearing, she looked curiously reduced and naked, like a clipped wire-haired terrier. The young woman was pretty, and worried. She might have been worried because she was out in public with her Jewish friends, in a time when such friendships were more embarrassing than they had ever been; she was more worried about the young man. His attention was riveted on Count Apor. It was impossible to doubt he knew exactly who the Count was. His hand trembled, not only with alcohol, as he lifted his wineglass to his mouth. He was muttering now quite audibly. There was no mistaking the hatred that glared in his eyes.

“Tell me, Count,” she asked under her breath. “Who’s that young man

there? Do you know each other? Is there going to be any awkwardness?"

"They're Jews, of course," he said. "I don't know them. The young man's probably in the Army." She looked up, surprised. Jews did not usually serve in the Army in Hitler's Europe. "That's all right. I mean the labour corps. He probably hates it like poison. If he's got to be a soldier, he'd rather have a gun in his hand. There's a lot of Jews sweeping up mines on the Russian front."

"Look at him. I don't like it."

"You see, now? You begin to get some idea of my reputation? That's all that's wrong with him. He loathes me. All the Jews do. They think I'm one of the most dangerous enemies they have in this country."

She looked at him with admiration and a little fear.

"How well you do it!" she murmured. "How filthy it must be for you!"

"For half of me," he reminded her grimly. "If he gets more offensive, I'll have to do something about it. I'll have to call a waiter and have him thrown out. The waiters are already sitting up and taking notice. Do you see? Beside that screen there."

"Let's dance," she begged. "I'd hate anything to happen."

"Certainly." They rose, and he took her to the dance floor. They danced, and, instead of returning, stood clapping with the enthusiasts a moment or two, then danced again. They could see that at the young man's table matters had now reached a crisis. Mario had been summoned to the scene. Another waiter, with the physique of a public-house chucker-out, was in attendance. The girl rose first, on the verge of tears. The father was pale with anger, the mother pale with fright. At last the young man rose, and went off uncertainly, his mother following him. The father did what he could to repair the damage, then he, too, left. The incident was over. Two minutes later, Elsie and Apor were back at their table again.

"You'd better finish that glass. Come close. We're too serious. Darling, you dance like an angel!"

"What a heavenly night we're having! If it could only go on for ever and ever!" And then to herself: 'The poor devil! Did anyone ever take on so hard a job before? Look! You'd think he had a coal burning inside him!'

And he to himself: 'Shall I send her packing now? How long can I go on playing this game before it stops being a game? For God's sake, Pali! You've other jobs in hand now! Have some self-control!'

He turned to her.

“Can you drive a car, madame?”

“I’m not good, but I get by.”

“You can have István to-morrow. But I shall need him after that. I’ve a lot of work to catch up with. It will be useful for you to get the hang of the town, and I’ll put my little Opel at your disposal.”

“Most useful.”

“I’ll ask young Vilmos Ulgay to show you round a bit.” She raised her eyes. “It’s all right. He’s not at all a ladies’ man. There’ll be no complications. One more dance, shall we?”

“One more dance.”

How tenderly he embraced her as they floated over the polished floor, like wisps of mist over still water.

III

It was convenient to have the little Opel to buzz around in. It took a day or two to get used to the feel of gears and pedals again, but that was to be expected. It was a long time since she had sat behind a steering wheel. Young Vilmos Ulgay was convenient, too. He had been asked to have a drink with them on the second day, and she saw at once, as the fingers and eyelashes fluttered into the room, why it was felt he could so safely be trusted to be her cicerone. The fair crimped hair, not less the fingernails, seemed to have been treated with as much devotion as Clothilde applied to her clients. But Elsie had met his like often enough before in various places, and she was not surprised to learn that he had fought with singular ferocity at the battle of Voronezh, where the Russian troops had inflicted a crushing blow on the Hungarians. His anti-Semitism was a little maniacal. There were no Russians, only Jews. They were all Jews, the Georgians, the Kalmouks, the Uzbeks. When their sight-seeing peregrinations through the city carried them to the fringes of one of the Jewish quarters in Terézváros and Erzsébetváros, he would take his handkerchief from his pocket and hold it to his nose.

“The smell!” he protested. “Oh, my dear, the *smell!* I can smell them a mile off, dear lady, can’t you?”

“It depends on the wind,” she conceded with a smile.

They took turns at driving. “Fair’s fair, my dear!” he insisted. “Share and share alike!” She was strongly tempted, once or twice when she was at the

wheel, to crash head-on into an oncoming lorry, only to hear him scream. But she resisted the temptation. He was witty, and he was useful.

Clothilde, on the other hand, was not witty. But she was adept, in more senses than one, Elsie discovered as the weeks went by. She was brilliant in the manipulation of hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, eyelids and mouth, to such a degree that Lydia Radbruch began to look quite startlingly unlike the woman she once had been. Clothilde did not seem to apply to herself the treatments she applied to her clients, for she had a strong moustache and her hair was like a wind-swept tree-top. Probably she was tired of beauty treatments by the time the day was over. The first visit was purely professional, except for the interchange of two words. Elsie was lying recumbent on a long chair with a mud-pack on her face. The red hand-bag, which had helped to identify her before, hung from a hook. A red hat hung beside it.

Clothilde leaned close to Elsie's ear.

"Channah," she whispered. It was an affirmation, not a question. Elsie nodded. "Malkeh," said Clothilde. That was all. Her underground name was Malkeh. On the next visit there was a note from the Count to convey to Clothilde. She opened the red bag and handed it over, stuck between two pieces of paper money. Clothilde read the note, memorized it, then reduced it to ashes.

"You take so much trouble with me, Clothilde," said Elsie.

"Not at all, madame. Enchanted." Then the language changed.

"Shalom!"

"Shalom!"

The method was similar at the Csanady bookshop, though Ferencz Kollar, the young man who was the contact there, was not Jewish. He was Gentile, and Communist, as she was to discover later. The shop specialized in foreign books, and she was browsing among the shelves where French fiction was kept when the young man came up to her. He had flat feet, which was probably why he was not in the Army, but for the rest, he was trim and dapper; he had a mud-splash moustache in the Chaplin and Hitler mode. He looked from the red hat to the red hand-bag, and addressed her. He spoke Hungarian first, but she smiled and shook her head. Then he talked French.

"Has madame read this novel by Colette? It is the last one to come in. I can recommend it to madame."

She examined the title.

“No, I’ve not read it. Is it amusing?”

The young man chuckled, and gestured with joined thumb and forefinger.

“Oh, *madame!*” The implication was that it was not only amusing, it was *risqué*, just the thing for a lady of leisure to read in bed, after breakfast, with a box of chocolates beside the tray. There was no more intimate interchange than that, for it was a public place.

On her next visit, a Cocteau novel was recommended.

“Shall I wrap it up for you?” the young man asked. But imperceptibly he shook his head, answering the question, his eyes said no.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll take it with me.” Perhaps a message had been slipped in between the uncut pages, she thought. Perhaps a message had been written in invisible ink. It was better to take no risks.

There was one more contact during these early months. His public name was Károli, and he was a waiter. His underground name was Leon, and he was Jewish, as Clothilde had been. In fact, as far as she could see, he took Clothilde’s place. There was no Clothilde any more.

So the Count told her, quite clearly, one evening.

“You will go to Luigino’s as usual to-morrow morning,” he said, “for your hair-do, or your facial, or whatever it is. You will go as before to Clothilde’s cubicle, but they will tell you there will be another assistant to look after you. You will express your annoyance, and say you will return when Clothilde is back again. They will then probably tell you that Clothilde has been dismissed. But she has not been dismissed. They have caught her. If they make her talk, the consequences may be uncomfortable. You realize that?”

“That is one of the risks we run. I’ve always understood that.”

“Another contact has already installed himself. It would be necessary, in any case, for you to meet him, even if Clothilde had not passed out of the picture. He is a waiter in the Café Flora on the Andrassy Utca. You will transfer to the Café Flora to-morrow for your mid-morning coffee and afternoon tea. You will see what tables he serves, and the day after transfer yourself to one of his tables. He is broad, with grey eyes, a snub nose, and a shock of chestnut-brown hair. He is Hungarian by origin, and for all you know he is still Hungarian. He has a small nick in the flesh above his right cheek-bone. You will wear that red hat again, and carry the red hand-bag. As soon as you have established contact, you can store away the hat again, if you choose. When he sees you, he will say: ‘*Cacao, madame?*’ and you will say, in

German: *'Kann es nicht leiden.'* From that point the rest is routine. You will ask for a newspaper, and he will some time later take the newspaper from you. Or you will ask for pen and ink and notepaper, and the notepaper will be more interesting than it seems. As I have said, the man's name as a waiter is Károli. He is also Leon."

"Károli, Leon," she repeated.

"It is about time we were seen out in the Mercedes together," he said. "Will you call for me, here?"

"That will be pleasant, Count. I need not wear the red hat till to-morrow?"

"Not till to-morrow."

IV

A picture gradually built itself up in Elsie's mind of the activities in which Count Apor was engaged, though he never again spoke with the shattering candour he had displayed on the journey between Bratislava and Budapest. From time to time he allowed her to become aware of certain details. Others came from other sources. The picture only gradually attained any sort of completeness, like a landscape shrouded in mist, from which the mist lifts only capriciously, revealing now this tree, that stack, and the rest is still invisible. Then a moment comes, and all the major elements are clear. One knows in that same moment that certain details will be obscure till time's end.

The Magyars have long memories, and in the years preceding the War they had not forgotten that only two or three decades ago they had been ruled from Vienna. An army always prepares to fight the last enemy, and the Hungarian intelligence section on Austria was so complete that Apor could give the precise number of buttons sewn on the tunics of its soldiers up to the time of the Anschluss. When he was seconded from his regiment to military intelligence, he was one of those who realized that Magyars were not the only people who remember. Hitler, too, had a strong feeling for the past, and it was probable that, besides taking over Austria, he would take over her old responsibilities, of which Hungary, according to certain views, was one. Apor decided it might be profitable to interest himself in the number of buttons worn by the Reichswehr, too. In fact, he had managed to make himself an expert on the subject, from buttons to Panzers. It was only recently that he had been able to put his knowledge to good account. The fact that Germany, gently till now, had compelled Hungary to become her ally, had only increased the scope of his usefulness. His most valuable achievement so far had been his assignment to liaison between the Hungarian divisions on the Russian front and German

Intelligence, which had meant the continuance of those journeys to Vienna, Berlin, and elsewhere, of which Elsie had already heard. He had been given the opportunity of meeting certain important gentlemen, who did not always bother to be discreet in the presence of a well-wisher and a vitriolic anti-Semite. Moreover, for some time now they had been pressing him to persuade the Hungarian General Staff to allocate more troops for the Russian front. By keeping the bargaining open, he had managed to learn much. It was on one of these journeys that the Count had met Miriam in Bratislava, though he had earlier learned of her existence in Budapest.

He told Elsie, one day, how that had happened. She had assumed that somehow Miriam's name had come into his possession during the course of his duties at Military Intelligence, though the connection between Intelligence in Budapest and underground rescue work in Bratislava seemed difficult to establish. Further, it was difficult to see, if her name was in Apor's files, how it could be excluded from the files of his colleagues in another department, who could hardly fail to initiate some action against Miriam and her associates. But, in fact, it was not in any such way at all that he had learned of Miriam's existence. He told the story, and in a few words, for it was not easy to talk of. Elsie was aware that his mother had been Jewish, and had committed suicide soon after her son's birth. His father had died broken-hearted soon after her death. Only one scion of that ancient family survived, Apor's uncle. He, too, had died, leaving behind him a son and daughter, Apor's first cousins. Not long after the entry of Hungary into the war against Russia, the young man had been beaten up and killed by some Fascist hooligans of the Arrow Cross gang. The girl, left alone in the world except for her notoriously anti-Semitic cousin, sought out the Jewish underground, who realized the value of her courage and her burning hatred. Apor in his turn proceeded to seek out his cousin. His motives were complex and profound. She was his only relative on his mother's side, and towards his dead mother, and by extension to her, his attitude was one of immedicable guilt. He had long been possessed of a sense of personal responsibility for his mother's suicide. He now developed a similar sense regarding his cousin's murder, for it was in the behaviour and utterances of people like himself that the Arrow Cross hoodlums found their inspiration. He felt it imperative for him to abase himself before the girl, and show himself ready to make atonement by any means open to him, however tortuous and dangerous. Intuitively convinced that the girl would be involved in just such activities as those to which he felt he must devote himself, he at length established contact with her. It had been a task of surpassing difficulty to beat down her suspicions, but he had succeeded. It was, in the first place, through her that he had at last found his way to the extraordinary woman in Bratislava,

Gisi Fleishmann, or Miriam, and through her to the organization called “Kusta.”

Some time later, Elsie Silver, too, was to meet “Kusta” in action, in the person of Miriam. But, reflecting on the matter there in Budapest, Elsie knew that she had long been aware of “Kusta”, but only as an activity, a benevolence, to which she had not been able to attach a name. For she had been one of its beneficiaries, like Mila, like others whose numbers she could not guess. Already, in Cracow, she had been given a certain amount of information by Yanka, the typist, whose guest she had been for so long. The information was, according to rule, given in barest outline, no more than was necessary for Elsie to know to carry her forward on the next stage of the journey. There was a group of people in Slovakia, she had been told, that organized escapes from Poland, chiefly of children. Probably it fulfilled other functions, too, but she had not been told about them. Yanka had implied that contact existed between the group in Slovakia and a central agency in Palestine. There was an immense distance between those two points, not merely in space. How was contact established and maintained between them, by people of what resource, daring, and intelligence? Yanka herself had told her of one, Miriam, of course. Now things were beginning to settle into a pattern. The chain led from Miriam to Apor, from Apor to Clothilde. When Clothilde had fallen out of the chain, it led back to Apor, then from Apor to Károli-Leon, the waiter. From Károli-Leon it led through Palestine, probably, to the ends of the earth.

“Kusta” described itself, on its business cards and stationery, as an import-and-export firm, with offices in Istambul. Its offices were probably one dingy little room, with a number of files and folders, and a handful of “clerks.” It did not seem probable that it did any actual importing or exporting of goods, for it was only a commercial bureau as far as the notepaper was concerned. It was, in fact, a secret resistance and rescue headquarters set up by Palestine Jews in neutral Turkey. By dint of immense effort and with the assistance of agents both unpaid and paid, it had managed to establish a chain of contacts between various Jewish communities in Europe. The chain was not strong. It often broke down. But one way and another it linked Palestine to Istambul, Istambul to Sofia, to Bucharest, to Budapest. “Kusta” in Budapest extended contact to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany. Money and helpers were transmitted from one link to the next. Information and refugees were passed back. In this way, at least a trickle of survivors was smuggled from the beleaguered ghettos of Europe to the Black Sea coast of Rumania, and from there shipped to Turkey. “Kusta” arranged their final journey to Palestine. It also tried to arrange other points of departure, and sometimes succeeded.

Count Apor's importance to "Kusta" was, of course, immense. Advance knowledge came to him, from time to time, of details of the "definitive" extermination policy in neighbouring countries. The time involved might be slight, but it gave a margin to work in, to stimulate certain bargaining policies which more than once had kept whole train-loads from the furnaces, at least temporarily. The more time was saved in that way, the greater was the likelihood that Himmler, Eichmann, and their men, would not have got round to total extermination of all available Jews by the time the Nazi power was crushed under the hammers forged for its destruction.

There was no doubt that sooner or later the Germans would occupy Hungary, exactly as they had previously occupied the neighbouring countries. There were still some eight hundred thousand Jews in Hungary. To them, too, the "definitive" policy would be applied, the moment the Germans were in possession. For Apor and his associates the period in which their work was potentially of the maximum value was approaching. It was also the period of maximum danger.

First, then, the young woman, Clothilde, disappeared, going the way of Father Pekarek and she could not guess how many others, the way she herself might go any day, any moment. As far as Elsie was ever able to determine, Clothilde was a straightforward agent of "Kusta." She was Austrian Jewish, though her papers declared her to be French, and she was entirely occupied with rescue work and transmission of funds. There was a certain tension apparent in Count Apor's demeanour for some days after her disappearance. But it was presumed they had not been able to make her talk. Moreover, all communications, excepting very rarely, were memorized and immediately destroyed. It was most unlikely any compromising documents had been found on Clothilde's person, or in her room. The tension passed.

The bookseller's assistant, Ferencz Kollar, was a native Hungarian, and a Communist. He had other affiliations. Count Apor detested Communism, and was not enthusiastic about Russians. He had not had personal experience of the Bela Kun regime that had been established in Budapest after the First World War, for he had been eleven years old at the time, and lived deep in the country with his formidable grandfather. But he regarded the episode with the horror usual in his class. None the less, he did not scruple to transmit information to the Russians through the flat-footed, sleek-haired bookseller. There was only one enemy. "I wonder what my respected grandfather is thinking," he confided to Elsie during one of his rare bursts of confidence, "of my association with this choice piece of Communist sewage!" She could not but be aware of how relieved he was when a new area of operations swung into his lens. The area

was Yugoslavia. The contact man between Kusta and Yugoslavia, and between Apor and Yugoslavia, was Károli-Leon, the waiter.

For some time now Apor had had tentative connections with the guerillas there, but contact had been difficult to maintain. It came later to Apor's knowledge that Allied Military Intelligence proposed to explore more intensively the possibilities for espionage in that region. After making considerable difficulties, the British had been induced to commission and train young Jews from Palestine—"shlichim," or messengers, they were called—to be dropped into Hungary and the Balkans. In each country young men and women were to be used who had been originally native to that country. They would be chosen, as far as possible, because they looked "Aryan" enough for the job. One or more of these *schlichim* would establish contact with Count Apor in Budapest. (In this context Apor's name was Shimmun.) Shimmun, through Frau Radbruch (whose name was also Channah), and through Channah to the next link in the chain, Károli-Leon, would transmit information to the British Military Mission in Yugoslavia, working in association with Marshal Tito in his mountain headquarters. The Palestinians, as British agents, would assist in the escape of Allied prisoners of war. As Jews, working in liaison with "Kusta," they would assist in Jewish rescue work, and exert themselves to the utmost to create resistance cells among the cowed masses of Hungarian Jewry, in association with whatever foci of resistance the Hungarian Zionists had already set up. A great deal of work was at hand for them to do. They were not to be found wanting.

V

This conversation took place about a month after Elsie's arrival in Budapest.

"Count Apor, there's a matter I want to talk to you about. I can't postpone it any longer."

"Yes?"

"I've been on the point several times of bringing it up, and each time I've failed. I know why. You think in terms of broad issues. Your operations are on a large scale. The matter in my mind concerns one small girl, a Polish orphan I met in the Warsaw ghetto. I don't see how you can fail to think it contemptible that she should take up so large a place in my thoughts."

"Your thoughts are your own affair, Frau Radbruch."

She bit her lip.

“You see? You talk exactly as I expected you to.”

“What do you want from me? How is it my affair? I know about the girl. They told me in Bratislava that you and she appeared on the scene together, and that the girl was killed when she was being taken across the frontier by one of Kusta’s men. It’s regrettable. But there have been thousands and thousands of young people killed, and there will be many more.”

“I don’t propose to tell you what this child meant to me from the moment I found her in Warsaw. I don’t expect you to understand that, and there’s no reason why you should. It’s strictly my affair. I was definitely assured in Bratislava that while the others were definitely killed or captured, nothing was found out about Mila. Mila is her name. I must find out what happened to Mila.”

“You expect me to help you, Frau Radbruch?”

“I don’t expect you to. I beg you to.” It was all she could do to keep her emotion out of her voice.

“I am committing myself to nothing. How do you imagine I could possibly help you?”

“You’ve not had me much in your confidence, Count Apor, and that’s as it should be. But I know the connections your office have with the Secret Police, and the Secret Police work hand in hand with the Frontier Police. I suggest that inquiries could be set afoot to find out from them what really happened near Sahy on the day they intercepted the ambulance in which Mila was being smuggled across. Yes, an ambulance was being used. I’ll tell you all I know. You can check up with Bratislava for any further information.” She turned her eyes to examine his face, and turned them swiftly away. There was no evidence of anger, or impatience, even. His face was quite impassive. “If Mila was killed,” she went on, “her body should have been found by now; also, if she was wounded, and died somewhere of exposure later.” She would match his composure with her own. “If there’s no trace of her, several things might have happened. Are you interested, Count Apor? May I go on?”

“If you will.”

“She might have been captured, and will now be in their hands, if she’s alive. It should be possible to ascertain that. If friendly people have sheltered her, people friendly to us should be able to trace her. Finally, she may have got away to Budapest. She knew that that was, for both of us, the next stage on our journey. She may at this moment be in this town somewhere, waiting for me to contact her.”

“I should like to point out,” he said drily, “that the rescue organization might have picked her up in their net. She may, by this time, be in a Black Sea port waiting for transport to Palestine.”

“If the organization had found her, she would have asked about me. I don’t believe that she would have moved on before she knew what had happened to me.”

“You are confident of that?”

“Absolutely.”

“Supposing I decide that it would be indiscreet and dangerous to set inquiries afoot, Frau Radbruch?”

“If you decide that, Count Apor, I will have to do what I can on my own account.”

“On your own account?” He raised his eyes.

“I know perfectly well what could happen to me if I crossed you. But I also know you won’t permit yourself to behave as our enemies behave.”

“There’s not much you can do on your own account, is there, Frau Radbruch?”

“I’ve always kept away from the Jews in this city. Most of them are dreadfully frightened. They see the cloud coming up over the horizon. But some are not. I’d put myself in their hands. I don’t see how the rescue organization could fail to do for us whatever was in its power. But above all, Count Apor . . . please permit me to say that, as far as I can see, the task would not be indiscreet or dangerous . . . not for *Shimmun*.”

He rose, and went over to his desk, and got out some papers.

“You have a golden tongue, Frau Radbruch,” he said, without turning his head. “I’ll see what can be done.” Then he turned and smiled. “Channah was in good form to-day,” he said. “And I think it’s about time Count Apor and her friend, Frau Radbruch, were seen out in the Mercedes again. Don’t you?”

“That would be delightful,” she agreed. “Frau Radbruch and Channah are both deeply grateful.”

Five, six weeks went by, and it seemed he had no report to give her on the matter of Mila. She did not herself raise it. She did not believe he could have forgotten, and an inquiry of this sort probably needed careful handling. When he had something to report, he would report it.

During these weeks the tension in the capital increased. Those who hated the Russians more than the Nazis grew more fearful from day to day, as the failure of German arms on the Russian front grew more apparent. Those who hated the Nazis more than the Russians, had reason to fear that unpredictable terror would be unleashed in their city, before the day of deliverance. There were many who feared the deliverance as much as the servitude from which it must deliver them. The vast multitude of Jews had most of all to fear. Whatever happened, defeat to anybody, victory to anybody, in their ears already the drums of doom were thudding.

Apor and Elsie were in the Count's apartment.

"The town's looking very festive to-day," she said lightly. "What's happening?"

"It's March the fifteenth."

"Yes?"

"The big day in our country, the anniversary of the 'forty-eight Revolution. You may have heard about it."

"Vaguely. That's what all the flags are about?"

"That's right. They should be at half mast."

She raised her eyes.

"Indeed?"

"Hitler has summoned the Regent to Berchtesgaden. He flew this morning. Quite a lot of people know about it, but they think he's just making another demand or two—more rolling-stock, more troops for the Russian front. It's more than that. The Germans will occupy Hungary to-day, or to-morrow, or the day after. Didn't you see a lot of German troops about?"

"More than usual?"

"Yes. More than usual. It's going to make things harder for us than they've ever been before."

"We carry on, I suppose."

"We carry on. Though in one way it can hardly make any difference. It will be the same if we're caught out next week, as it would have been last week."

"Of course."

"I'd like you to lose that Radbruch passport you've got. The fellow who let

it by on the German side of the Bratislava bridge was a nitwit.”

“You were pretty convincing.”

“So were you. But the passport wasn’t. It had holes as big as a cartwheel. I’ll ring up Security and get them to make out fresh papers for you. In case anything happens any time.”

“Good.”

“If anything does, there’s only one thing that matters. You understand?”

“I understood from the beginning.”

“I want to say a word about your girl.”

There was a catch at her heart.

“Yes?”

“Nothing has been found out. Nothing.”

She swallowed her chagrin.

“I hardly dared hope there would be, after all this time.”

“If by any chance she’s still alive, and in the frontier region, it’s going to be tough for her. The Germans will be in force along the frontier.”

“She’s still alive, Count, and she’s not on the frontier. She’s in Budapest.”

“How do you know?” There was swift suspicion in his voice. “Who told you?”

“Nobody told me. I know. Please don’t ask me how I know. The knowledge is here.” She laid her hand on her heart. “It sounds ridiculous, but I *know*.”

“Very well. If that’s how you feel about it, that concludes the matter.” He stopped, and thought for some moments. “Listen, Frau Radbruch,” he started again. “You’re not going to start poking round the Jewish districts looking for her? If she’s alive and in Budapest, she’s presumably living among Jews. Otherwise she’s living as a Christian with false Aryan papers. That means she’s still the wrong sort of person for you to meet. The police might be tipped off about her at any moment. They may even now be keeping an eye on her. We can’t take risks. I forbid it.”

“I have some sense of responsibility,” she assured him quietly. “We’ll see what will happen.”

“Very well. I want you to take tea at the Flora. Take this newspaper to the

young man there. He'll find it interesting."

"Delighted. I like that young man. How good-looking he is!"

VI

It was true that Admiral Horthy had been summoned to Berchtesgaden. As the formula was well known, and it was realized that occupation was imminent, there was a sporadic rising among the population, chiefly in the country districts, but it was quickly put down. The Germans occupied on the nineteenth of March. They were in possession of a list of opposition Hungarians, including the Jews who had refused to hide behind the wainscoting like mice, and they carried out an immediate purge. In the first week of April, all Jews were ordered to put on the yellow star. Thereafter, from week to week, almost from day to day, new discriminatory laws were introduced, so that within a few months all the Jews in Hungary ran through the whole gamut of misery and shame which, in Germany, was extended across several years. Soon the Jews of Budapest were all herded into blocks of Jewish houses, each signalized by a yellow star over the main doorway, painted on a black shield. They were not allowed out of their homes before eleven in the morning, and after five in the evening. During those hours, all parks and public places of entertainment were barred to them. Their cafés had a great star daubed on their front windows. The deportations began, too, as had been anticipated, but for some reason these did not proceed as quickly as had been hoped by Herr Eichmann, Herr Himmler's supreme plenipotentiary in these matters, and his friends in Budapest, of whom Count Apor was one. They were pleased to note that the rate of deportation was quicker among Jews who lived outside the capital, where they were beyond the protection of certain sinister obscurantist influences who, in good time, would be uncovered and ruthlessly extirpated. But even during the first months of the occupation, a certain innocent pleasure was to be derived from the spectacle of large congregations of Jews routed from their homes in the provincial towns and villages, and herded into disused brick factories, actually sometimes even in the firing kilns. There were no disused brick factories in the capital, and only one prison of the fortress kind; and for the most part the metropolitan Jews, numbering at this time some quarter of a million, were ordered to remain in the quarters of the city they infested, chiefly in the eastern quarters of Pest, duly stigmatized by the yellow star. It was possible, however, to establish several detention barracks in the city, *tolontchaz*, as they were called, of which the principal one was situated at Misonyi Utca, which adjoins the Keleti railway station. The Eichmann battalions did not get going till quite late, and, by the same token, there was no vigorous action on the part of the forces of

resistance, which were loosely grouped together into the Hungarian Independence Front, as they called it. But it was convenient to all right-thinking men to have a goodly number of Jews assembled in the *tolontchaz*. Trains could start rolling into the Keleti railway station, and roll out again. And in due time the firing squads would crack their sharp whips.

VII

It was an afternoon of mid-May and Elsie, having finished her morning cup of coffee, was waiting with her note-case open, to pay her bill.

“Thank you,” she said, as Károli-Leon handed the bill to her. Then: “Excuse me,” Leon said, rubbing, in a way he had, the small scar of nicked flesh above his left cheek-bone. “Did madame have a brioche with her tea?” She had not had a brioche. “Excuse me,” he said again, “I’ll make out a new bill, and cancel this one.” But instead of destroying the cancelled bill, he handed it over with the amended one. She had no doubt he was attempting to convey a message to her, and she was right. He had scribbled two words on the cancelled bill. They were

LIEBE MILOS.

The colour left her cheeks. With trembling fingers she lifted to her lips one of the glasses of water on her table, and gulped it down. Then she stuffed the piece of paper into her bag, settled her bill, and rose. Then, with all the self-control she was capable of, she walked to the café door, and out into the street. She did not see the group of German officers on the pavement, or the traffic in the road, or the bright clouds in the sky. She saw nothing, heard nothing. She was only conscious that a well-dressed woman at any hour of the day, and least of all at that hour of the day, must not start carolling like a skylark if she is not to attract attention.

Mila is alive, alive, alive! Mila is alive, alive!

For, of course, Milos was Mila, just as much as Julius was Caesar. How clever of Leon to make the name masculine! For, if something had gone wrong by any chance, and someone for whom the two words had not been intended had seen the slip of paper, no harm would have been done. It could be expected that a kept woman might occasionally receive messages from other men than her patron.

Mila is alive, alive! the skylark went on singing, *Mila is alive, alive!* There was nothing to stop the skylark singing *inside* your head. But keep heel and toe down on the pavement, woman! Don’t run! It would be as conspicuous to run as to sing! Heel, toe! Heel, toe! Besides, where would you run to? Where is

she?

Where I always thought she was. Somewhere in the city here. Up in a high building. Sitting in a chair, her back against a table, with boys and girls sitting on the floor in front of her, and she's talking, talking, telling her adventures.

But where, exactly, where? I must see her at once, as soon as it's safe for both of us. She might be over there in the Jewish quarter behind the Erzsébet bridge, or in one of the Jewish houses scattered up and down the place. My own little Mila with a great horrid yellow star on her dress again. As if she hadn't had enough of it during those hideous years in Warsaw.

Perhaps she's putting a brave face on it, with false Aryan papers, and anything's liable to happen to her at any moment. I must get her out of it. It's time we went further, to the quayside, where there's a boat, and the sea beyond. Apor will get himself another contact woman. The air-raids are becoming unpleasant, too. We must both get away. We've had enough.

She found she had walked round the block and come back on the street again where her car was parked. Her steps quickened. She fumbled in her bag for the key, as if she would just get down to the wheel and drive off to Mila. Then she stopped. She remembered she hadn't the faintest idea where Mila was. She might, or might not, be in the quarter behind the bridge. She might be over in Buda, or out in the country. Only one person could tell her, Leon, the waiter at the café.

And how on earth had Mila known she was still alive, to be found in Budapest, at the Café Flora? Of course. Leon again.

She must go back to the café and arrange for a meeting at another café in his time off, where, like any other customer, he could sit down beside a woman, and order two glasses of beer, and things could get said.

She did not go back to the café, after all. It might look a little strange to somebody that she should go out and come back so soon again. One sticks to a routine. She walked the whole way up to the Millenium Monument and the Park beyond, and walked and walked till she was tired. She was not seeing Apor till next day. She went back to her apartment, had a small meal, and a good deal of Tokay, partly because it was a celebration, and partly because sweet white wine always made her sleepy. She almost fell asleep dragging her limbs to the bedroom, passed out completely the moment her head touched the pillow, and got up a couple of hours later, for, to her immense astonishment, she found herself singing at the top of her voice. It was evidently the impulse to sing fulfilling itself, the impulse which she had repressed earlier in the day. There was an air-raid in progress, but she was much too comfortable to think

of going down into the cellar. Soon she was asleep again, a cherubic smile on her face, like a small girl.

It did not occur to her to withhold her news from Count Apor. He would have perceived, anyway, that she was racked with excitement. She closed the door behind her, and spoke at once.

“I’ve heard from Mila, Count! She’s alive! I always knew she was!”

He looked up, startled.

“How do you know? Who told you?”

She was almost as startled as he was, to see the expression in his eyes, a swift flicker of displeasure, quickly gone as soon. Why? Why should he be annoyed? Was the annoyance for a professional reason? Because he disliked and distrusted the idea of any secret activity not passing through his fingers? Because he himself had failed to glean any information about Mila, and someone else had succeeded? It could not be for a *personal* reason, because, for some farcical reason, he was jealous? Farcical was the word. The annoyance was purely professional.

She handed over the bill that Leon had made out.

“You see,” she said. “He wrote down these two words.”

He took the bill in his hands and examined it for some time.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t like it. Messages should be destroyed as soon as read. There shouldn’t be anything on paper at all, if it’s possible to avoid it. I don’t like it.”

“But, Count,” she protested, “look how innocent it is.” She tore the slip across, and then across again. The timbre of her voice softened.

“Aren’t you glad for me, Count? It’s the only thing in the world I wanted!”

He did not look up.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I should be soundly kicked! It can’t be from anybody but her, and I congratulate you warmly.”

“I’m going to make a date with Leon, to meet me in another café, less smart, a café of the people. I’ll want him to tell me everything he knows. I’ll want to meet her, too, at the first possible moment.”

“Very well,” he agreed. “It would be impertinent to ask you to be careful. You’re both capable people.”

She thanked him.

“I’ll let you know everything I learn. If you’re interested, I mean.”

“I assure you I’m extremely interested. Would you like a game of draughts to-day, or backgammon?” They often played one game or the other, to while away the time during which he would be expected to make love to her. They played chess sometimes, but she found it tiring, excepting during an air-raid, when it kept the mind off things quite pleasantly.

Elsie and Leon met by arrangement in the Café Szolna, on Leon’s evening off two days later. It was an easier place to be in than the elegant Café Flora. The waiters still wore the regulation uniform of full-dress coat, but the coat was greasier, the mirrors were more fly-blown, the air was smokier, the marble-topped tables were grubbier, the gypsy band was noisier. It was more *gemütlich*, as they said in another country.

She did not yet know much about Leon, little beyond the few things that Apor had told her, namely that he was a Hungarian Palestinian who worked for “Kusta” and had especial connections with the *schlichim*, the messengers, that were dropped in Jugoslavia, and smuggled through into Hungary. The information that Count Apor transmitted through Elsie Silver to Károli-Leon at the Café Flora, set out upon a devious journey to unimaginable termini.

‘And is this the sort of work my little Mila’s been doing, too?’ Elsie asked herself as she swung open the doors of the Café Szolna. ‘She must have been, or she wouldn’t be in touch with this Leon. She couldn’t have started it yesterday, or the day before, so she must have been in Budapest some time. How long’s it been, then? Is she well now? She is, or she’d not be on a job like this. Did she bring back no injury from the frontier excitement?’ Yes, Elsie had a good deal of information to get from Leon, and there was no reason for him to withhold it. She stood inside the café and looked for him in the corner where he had indicated he would meet her. There he was, with his broad shoulders, his grey eyes, and the heap of chestnut-brown hair, subdued with grease and comb. He was rubbing the dead-white scar above his left cheek-bone to bring the blood into the skin, as if it were better to blur any mark of identification.

He got up as she approached, a pleasant grin on his face. It was a strong chin and the hand he extended to her, for he was not a waiter now, was a good hand. His lips outlined the Hebrew word “*Shalom*” before they said, in German, “good evening.” Her lips, then her voice, responded. Then she sat down. It was an easy place. It was in too much of a side-street for the Germans to have found it. With ordinary care, one could talk. She plunged straight into

it.

“Is she well? That first.”

“Strong as a horse. I’ve seen her again. I told her you got the message and it nearly broke her heart that she couldn’t come, too. It wouldn’t do, would it?”

She knew what he meant. Every effort must be made to prevent any contact which might compromise her.

“So she’s here, in Budapest? Where? Is she wearing the star again?”

“She was for a time, after the occupation. Then she tore it off. The youngsters she’s working with are living as Christians. It’s more dangerous in one way, but they’re freer to go on with their work.”

“How do you mean?”

“If you’re wearing the star, and you’re out because you’ve got orders to be out, it’s a sort of passport. Nobody touches you. Otherwise . . . there are frequent raids and so on. You know that.”

“Yes, of course. How did she know I was here? You didn’t tell her, did you?”

He looked at her quizzically.

“Come, come, *liebe Dame*. How would I have the faintest idea that either of you was interested in the other?”

“Of course. How silly of me. How *did* she know then?”

“The simplest thing in the world. She saw you out in the big car with . . . that one.”

“Good Lord!” She blushed, she felt such a fool. Obviously if you go out in a rather showy car, in rather showy clothes with a very handsome officer, in order to be seen, all sorts of people are likely to see you. “She saw us, did she? Of course she did! Why on earth shouldn’t she?” She turned full on him, with a note of real plaintiveness in her voice. “Why on earth didn’t the little horror wave at us, and try and stop the car, or something? Just for that once, anyhow. It would have saved me endless misery! When did you say it was she saw us? How long ago?”

He did not answer that last question.

“*Aber bitte!*” he pleaded. “Really!”

“Really what?”

“Please, please, just think a moment!”

She thought a moment, and did not see what he was getting at.

“What are you getting at, Leon?”

He shook his head, as if she were a small girl who just refused to get the hang of a lesson in arithmetic.

“Madame, madame! Just think of the company you were in!”

Then it came to her, like the smack of a pool into which you take a high dive. Really, she had never felt such a dunce in all her life. For, obviously, Mila was not going to start yodelling at a grand motor-car in which her beloved, her one-time beloved, Channah was lolling and strumpeting with a big-time Hungarian officer!

“What can she have thought?” she asked, her eyes big with scare.

“Exactly what your heart tells you. She thought you were a whore, who’d sold out to the enemy in order to get yourself a good time. And please, don’t look so startled! Some of it is exactly what you wanted people to think. Not all of it, some of it. You wanted everyone to think you his whore!”

“So she thought that, too! For God’s sake, what effect did it have on her?”

“Can’t you guess? She was broken-hearted!”

There was half a pint of beer in her mug, and she gulped it down like a sailor. “Some more! At once!” she demanded. “But she doesn’t think that now, does she?”

“*Ruhe! Ruhe!* Take it easy! You remember the message she sent you?”

Yes, yes. She remembered the message. *Love, Milos*. She would have sent no love, if she had not been given an idea of the true set-up.

“Who told her? You told her, of course?”

“I told her.”

“But . . . but . . .” she stammered. It was all very obscure. “How did she know you knew . . . that horrible woman . . . I mean me?” She had a sudden vision of an appalled and furious Apor. “You didn’t tell her you knew me, did you?”

Leon felt, if he had been having fun, he had had fun enough. It was about time he took things in hand.

“I’ve known her for two or three months,” he explained. “She’s the

organizer and leader of a group of *habonim*, builders, that is, which is doing first-rate work. She's quite one of the best youngsters at the job I've met, inside or outside Palestine. Yes, I've been to Palestine, too." He talked as if he was an old man, and in some ways he was. But he was only a few years Mila's senior, four or five at most. "She's been carrying on where she left off in Warsaw. You see . . . I know quite a lot about her; and about you, too, for that matter."

"Well?" It wasn't the subject of *habonim* she was interested in.

"I had a feeling she had something on her mind. Everybody has, of course. But everybody else is only too ready to talk about things. She wasn't. She would start brooding, and look thoroughly wretched. I asked her once or twice what was biting her; so did some of the others. But she shut up like an oyster. I determined I'd say nothing more about it. If she ever wanted to talk, she'd talk.

"Then one day last week she called me aside, and spoke to me. It was the day, in fact, before you got your little message, the third of May, to be exact. Does the date mean anything to you?"

She thought, not for long. The memory came back to her like a shot.

May the third. The date on a newspaper which had fixed for all time for her the date of the bomb that had destroyed Post Sixteen.

"It was the day I found her. Yes, the day of the bomb. May the third." Her eyes glittered. "That was it, wasn't it? It was the day I found her a year ago, and she remembered, and she felt sick and awful? Was that it?"

"Yes, madame, exactly that. She was so miserable that day, that she simply had to talk to someone, or burst. So she talked to me. She wasn't very nice about you, of course. Not at first. She said she'd met a woman whom she'd thought to be the most marvellous creature in all the world—after her mother and father, of course. She'd met her in Warsaw. She told me all about what you did for her. I don't need to go into all that. Then she let fly."

"I see. She told you she'd seen me with a Hungarian officer? She didn't know how it could be possible? She said I was a rat."

"Really, you might have been there!" he marvelled. "Those were her exact words!"

"A rat, eh? Then you told her?"

"I suppose I shouldn't have told her. I *know* I shouldn't! But there you are!" he exclaimed defiantly. "I did!"

A tear went plop into her beer-glass.

“Never mind,” she said, sniffing slightly. “You didn’t do any harm!” She groped for his hand under the table, and squeezed it hard. One had to express one’s thanks, somehow, and one hadn’t established a kissing basis. Besides, he was only a boy. “Oh dear! Oh dear!” she said, and pretended to wipe the smoke out of her eyes. It was very smoky in there. “You don’t think you’ve finished, do you? Oh no, you’re not. You know how she got away from the frontier, do you? Did she tell you? Now tell me!”

He told her.

The girl had learned to be quick as an eel. For a moment or two after the ambulance had been stopped, she lay thin and flat on the floor of the vehicle, one of her own blankets drawn over her. In the murky half-moonlight she perceived a ditch alongside the road ahead, and at the moment she judged the excitement to be at its height, she slithered down out of the ambulance and streaked for the ditch, her belly still close to the ground. There was firing and yelling, but somehow, with the abrupt movements of an animal, she managed to get away a distance of two or three fields along the drainage ditches, till she spotted a low culvert to crawl into. There she lay concealed, while the patrol ran round roaring and shooting for some time, and then left. She nearly died of cold, but had the tenacity to remain hidden all that night, and most of next day. In the evening, she crawled out and unstiffened, and set out, as she put it simply, to the south, for Budapest. A few days of extreme hardship followed, but she managed to survive these, too. She lived on roots in the fields, and found some dropped trifles on the outskirts of farms, crusts of bread and animal mash. She helped herself to some eggs once or twice, and managed to get some milk from a cow. She found savage dogs did not bark at her, they merely shook their rumps, and wagged their tails.

When she judged herself to be a safe distance from the frontier, she came out into the open. A farmer and his wife were kind to her, but she did not trust them enough to ask them to let her have some new clothes in exchange for one of the jewels sewn up into the buttons of her coat. She went on again, trudging southwards. One day she was mooching disconsolately along a road where a gang of pioneer soldiers was engaged in road-building, in charge of a sergeant. As she passed by, trying to attract as little attention as possible, she heard the sergeant let fly at one of the men. The language was Hungarian, of course, but she recognized one word, which he ejected like a clot of black spittle. “*Zsido!* Jew!” the sergeant yelled. She turned her eyes swiftly, and became aware that the man he was abusing was Jewish, for he wore a yellow arm-band. The other members of the road-gang were Jewish, too, with yellow arm-bands for the

straight Jews, and white for the proselytes. The Hungarian army, she realized, was using Jews for its rough jobs. She hung about for some time, hoping the opportunity might present itself to have a word with one or other of the men. An hour or two later, they knocked off for a roadside meal of black bread and salami, and, holding out her hand, she came sidling up to the man the sergeant had shouted at, who sat a little apart, fuming and miserable. She looked pitiful enough with her mud-stained clothes and torn shoes and her black wisps of hair hanging over her eyes.

“*Zie redden Yiddish?*” she muttered. “You talk Yiddish?”

He looked up swiftly.

“Who are you?”

“A *yiddische madel*. A Jewish girl. I’ve run away from Poland. Please, Jew, help me.”

He broke off a chunk of bread and handed it to her.

“Take!” he ordered. “Eat! What do you want?”

“I want to get to Budapest. I have a friend who’ll join me there.”

“I’ll give you what I’ve got. It’s only a few *fillérs*, a few farthings. It won’t get you far. Wait. These others are Jews, too.”

“No, I don’t want money,” she said. “I’ll get there. Give me a name. Some good family to go to.”

“Of course, *madel*. It should be with luck. Go to my own mother. Listen.” He gave her a name and address in the Dob Utca. She repeated it. “Say it again.” She said it again. “*Shalom!*” they said to each other, and she shuffled off, throwing the hair out of her eyes, and munching the black bread.

So Mila went further on her way to Budapest. It was child’s play, she told Leon, compared with travelling in Poland, even though she did not know the language. And at last she arrived in the Dob Utca, and presented herself to the mother of the Jewish soldier who had been breaking stones. She was a kind woman, but poor, with several children sleeping in each of two beds, so some days later she was taken over to another family, smaller and more prosperous, a master tailor, who lived not far off in the Király Utca. She was given the genuine papers of a Jewish girl from Kassa, a town in Slovakian Hungary, and duly reported to the police. Everything was still very easy-going, in those days before the March occupation. But after March the restrictions got very much in the way of her work, so she went to live in a non-Jewish house, with Christian papers found for her by friends in the *kibbutz*. It was a dangerous freedom, but

for the present she was carrying on.

“She is a girl of great character,” said Leon. “You would think her a *sabra*, a girl born in Eretz, that is the kind of girl she is. Even in Eretz there are not too many with spirit and character like hers. Some weeks after I met her for the first time, the opportunity came for her to be taken across the Roumanian frontier, to join a small convoy of refugee boys and girls that was waiting there. But she would not go, she said. She was waiting for that dear friend of hers, with whom she had escaped from the Warsaw ghetto. Without her, she would not go. Besides, she knew there was good work to be done by her in this city, among the young people. She told them there was no doubt that some day the same thing would happen to them as had happened to all the other Jews in these countries. She said how shameful it was to be led off in trucks, like cattle, to be slaughtered, when death is less certain when you have a gun in your hand, and far more pleasant. She had many tales to tell them, about the way arms were smuggled into the Warsaw ghetto, and even made by hand. She would make them pale with excitement as she told tales of the young leaders in the rising, the Boy, and Sonia the Raven, and others.” He stopped, and looked at his watch.

“No,” begged Elsie. “You must not go so soon.”

“It’s not that,” said Leon. “This is my night off. I was thinking that this is one of the evenings in the week, and at this time, that she talks to the *kibbutz*, air-raids permitting. She is like a bottle of wine to them.”

“Tell me,” said Elsie. “The room where they meet, is it at the top of a high house?”

He looked at her, puzzled.

“Yes. They are high houses in that street. Why do you ask? Are they being spied on? Please say at once.”

“And she sits there on a chair, a table behind her, and the boys and girls sit on the floor, listening?”

“I say again. How do you know this?”

She smiled at him.

“Sometimes I am a *macheshafeh*, a witch. Don’t be alarmed, Leon. It does not happen often. In a lifetime, once or twice. And that is how I saw her, when I was still in Bratislava, on the other side of the Danube.”

“There’s nothing more to it than that?”

“Isn’t that enough? Listen. I must see my girl. You know that. I can’t possibly go on unless I see her. You must fix it up somehow.”

“She said the same thing.”

“Blessings on her! Of course she did!”

“It won’t be easy, will it? Not very safe, either.”

“It wasn’t easy getting out of the Warsaw ghetto.”

“Of course not.” He coloured, as if his ingenuity, perhaps even his courage, had been brought into question. “You are both doing good work,” he said. He meant that unnecessary risks should not be taken, but it was not the sort of sentiment he liked to give voice to.

“We must meet,” she said firmly. “If something happened to you, I’d find some other way to meet her. Can you arrange it, then?”

“I can arrange anything,” he said. And he meant it. To arrange a meeting between these two would be simple.

“I’ll let you know, over your pastries, when we next meet,” he assured her. “I’m dry. I’m not used to talking so much. How about another litre?”

“My figure,” she reproached him. “Half a litre will do.”

She told Count Apor of the agreement she had reached with Leon, that he was to bring Mila and herself together somewhere. She had anticipated he would not be pleased, and he was not. But she had also anticipated he would not try and oppose her, and he did not. He merely said: “I don’t need to remind you that there are more people on the look-out than there have ever been before.”

“No, Count,” she assured him, “you do not. I also want to tell you this. I’m going to try and persuade this girl to get out of Hungary with me. I don’t think she’ll be persuaded, but I think it’s my duty to try.”

“You say Leon tells you she’s doing good work. But so are you. Do you think so, or don’t you?”

“I do. If I were alone, I’d stay on till . . . till one thing or the other happened. But I’m not alone now. I must think of Mila.” She saw the odd smile on his face. “You smile,” she said. “We’ve had this discussion before. The girl is merely a unit to you in an arithmetical sum. I think it would be the same if the girl were your own sister. That’s so, I think?”

He looked at her coolly. “That’s so.”

“Mila is not that to me. I feel it my duty to persuade her to get away.”

“Why? There are two hundred and fifty thousand Jews in Budapest. There are still hundreds of thousands left elsewhere in Hungary. I told you of the detachment that was marched off from Szeged last week? There’s no transport for them. They will be literally marched, on foot. Their destination is Poland. It’s not very likely that more than a fraction will get there.”

“I ought to point out that Mila has *left* Poland. She’s managed to get away. You know the sort of time she had before she got away, don’t you, more than three years of it? It hasn’t been a holiday for her since then.”

“We’re all soldiers, old men and women, small boys and girls.”

“It’s about time she had some leave then,” she said coldly.

“Very well.” He shrugged his shoulders. “You’ll take the utmost care, all three of you.”

“I think you can rely on us.”

It had been arranged that she was to make her way to number fourteen Pál Utca, at nine o’clock one evening. Though the district abuts on a Jewish section in the Erzsebetvaros quarter, it is not one where suspects loiter in dark doorways, with cloaks and broad-brimmed hats. It is a respectable, antiseptic region, like Marylebone in London, where the doctors live, not far from their nursing-homes. She went on foot, and had to restrain herself from running, for at the end of the journey was Mila, who had so long been so far off, with doubt and danger and terror between. But there was no point in running, for she had to be at the indicated house punctually, and leave exactly half an hour later. She reached the house, and found the brass plates of doctors and other professional men fixed on either side of the door. She pressed the second left-hand bell, as she had been told to, and almost at once the door was opened by a servant in a tail coat. He bent his head respectfully.

“Frau Thalberg,” she told him, as instructed. He ushered her in, closed the door behind her, and with a movement of the hand requested her to follow him. He led the way up a well-carpeted staircase, past a landing half-covered with a glass conservatory, and round to the next passage above.

What sort of house is this? she asked herself. Are they medical people? Are they secret Jews, secret Communists? Are they wild zealots under their morning coats and striped trousers, manufacturers of hand grenades, assemblers of an arms cache?

She was at the door. The man opened it for her. She entered. The door was

pulled to behind her.

Mila. There she was, held in a pool of lamplight thrown down by a central chandelier. A blue Chinese carpet rippled away from her, wave beyond woven wave. Mila, but what a different Mila! What a big girl she had become in the half-year since her departure from Bratislava! A big and lovely girl, her eyes glowing like agates, her hair black and lustrous, flat on each side of the parting, her chest full and firm, a young woman.

“Mila! Darling Mila! How you’ve grown!”

“Oh, Channah! Channah!”

They ran towards each other and embraced and kissed. Then they stood apart and stared and stared into each other’s eyes. It was Mila who spoke first:

“To think that I could have such thoughts about you! Channah! I’m ashamed!”

“But, my dear, what else could you think?” she raised a hand and stroked the girl’s eyebrows with the tips of two fingers. “Your eyebrows were only this high when you left me.” She traced a line under Mila’s chin. “Let’s sit down and talk. I’m a bit tired. I’ve been so excited all day, I’ve been walking and walking like mad.” She sat down on a chaise longue over against the heavy brocade curtains, Mila drew up a chair close to her. “We are safe here, aren’t we?” she asked, as if it were an afterthought.

“We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t,” Mila replied a little complacently. “I came in another way, ages before you did, and we won’t go out at the same time, either. They’re nice people,” she added. She obviously meant the people who lived in this apartment. It would have been interesting to know who they were, but one didn’t ask unnecessary questions. Probably Mila knew as little as she did. They were people of quite pleasant taste. There was a handsome tiled oven in one corner. Opposite them extended a long refectory table, from some old monastery in the country. Modern pictures, not French but still good, were on the walls. It might well be a doctor’s waiting-room, which he also used as his dining-room.

“You see,” Mila explained. “Leon arranged it.”

“What a grand young man he seems to be,” Elsie commented.

“He’s fine. That’s how they are, over in Eretz. I’ve learned a lot about them.”

“You’ll be wanting to move on soon yourself, won’t you, Mila?”

“I want to, Channah, of course I do. But I mustn’t. There’s so much to do here. He’s given you an idea, has he?”

“Leon? Oh yes. But, Mila, it’s going to get worse and worse in Hungary.”

“Maybe. That’s why I can’t go away and leave my friends. I know so much more than they do, because I’ve been through so much more. It’s my place here, among the other young folk. It’s different for you, Channah. You’re older than I am. Why don’t you go away? It wouldn’t be hard to fix it up, through Roumania to one of the Black Sea ports.”

“I’m doing a job, too,” Elsie pointed out.

“Oh yes, of course. Leon told me. He had to. Naturally he didn’t tell me the name of . . . of your employer.” She didn’t sound as if she was very impressed by the job. Now and again one carried a message, and the rest of the time one dined in fine restaurants, and lolled about in grand cars. That is, when the air-raids didn’t upset the picnic.

“The air-raids are rather tiresome, too, from time to time,” Elsie went on. “I’d like you to get away from them. You’ve had your share.”

“The *air-raids!*” said Mila. “They’ll have to get a lot worse before they worry *us*. But they can’t be good for your nerves, not at your age.” Elsie grimaced. Not at your age. You had to put up with it from the young. “We can join up later on, when it’s all over. You know where.” Elsie knew where. The child meant Palestine. They had never seen eye to eye on that point. It was no good going on with *that* discussion till their whole half-hour was used up.

“I knew you wouldn’t leave Hungary, Mila,” she summed up. “I won’t go, either, without you, that’s all there is to it.”

“So we stay. If I only knew——” Mila started. Then she stopped. She was not at her ease.

“Yes?”

“If I only knew you were happy in the work you’re doing.”

“It’s worth while,” Elsie assured her. “It’s certainly more comfortable than Zosha’s stable. But what about yourself, Mila? What a terrible time you must have had, getting away from the frontier!”

“It was exciting!” Mila insisted.

“I want to know everything about everything, from the moment you left me. Do you get proper things to eat? Have you got a nice cellar where you’re living? How much time have we got?” She looked at her watch. “Oh dear! Oh

dear! How silly they allow us just half an hour when there's so terribly much to tell each other! Have you got light summer things to wear? How are you off for money? Have you got any of those jewels left? Those are the same buttons, aren't they, on a new coat?"

"They're the same buttons," said Mila, smiling. "But there's nothing in them. We want all the money we can lay hands on. You know what for?"

"Fine, Mila. Most of my buttons are still loaded. They're all yours."

"My daddy would have been pleased to know what happened to them. They've travelled a long way, haven't they? From Pločk to Budapest." Then suddenly she rose from the chair, sat down beside Elsie, and laid her head on her shoulder, once again the small girl she had been only a year ago.

"I just want us to sit like this. Let's not talk. We'll talk next time. It's wonderful being together again, Channah. I only want to say . . . please, I'm sorry about the thoughts I had."

Elsie said nothing more. She merely sat stroking the girl's hair till the time came to leave.

VIII

The weeks went by, and became months. There were times when Elsie found the strain she was living under so intolerable, she had to run for the nearest place of refuge, washroom or whatever else it might be, and stuff her mouth with a handkerchief, to prevent herself crying out. And she felt the strain not only on her own account, but much more acutely on Mila's. First there was the private strain of the double life each was leading. But there was the strain of public events, the ever increasing threat of danger. Danger was manifold. There was the nagging misery of the progressively more unpleasant air-raids in which everyone was involved; for every night the British raided with fleets of bombers and carpeted the industrial parts of the city, while by day the American planes made precision raids on specified targets. There was the intensive anti-Jewish campaign in the city, which grew more foul from week to week. There was the far-flung campaign against the advancing Russians, who first reached the borders of the country, then like a tide swept beyond the borders in ever charging waves, till finally, in the first weeks of October, they stood compact in a great arc beyond Budapest, like a massive block of hot air sucking all the natural moistness from the space between, till the whole city felt brittle, a heap of bone-dry timber that might burst into flame at any moment, and fill the sky with its roaring.

But life went on as before. There was a job to do, sometimes harder, never

easier, than before. Difficulties developed in the maintenance of her contact with Leon, and there were times when he had to ask leave from his job at the Café Flora, pleading the fictitious heart trouble which kept him out of the army. She had no doubt he was away working for “Kusta,” perhaps northward in Slovakia, perhaps eastward in Roumania; or it might be that he had been summoned to Marshal Tito’s headquarters in the Yugoslav mountains to hand in a personal report, supplementing the reports he had sent by other means. She learned that he had increasing difficulty in reinstating himself at the Flora, and that finally they had dismissed him. He took employment at another café, the Poprad, but it was much less suitable for their purpose.

A difficulty developed with Count Apor, also, and this was graver. She kept an assignation with him one afternoon in his apartment and found him moody, silent, and restless. When he did speak, his words were laboured and intermittent, and he tended to lose the thread of conversation as though his mind was elsewhere.

At first, Elsie thought he had wind of something. Something had gone wrong. In the climate of tension in which they both lived even a single word stressed unduly, a name written on a piece of paper where there should be no name, a shadow in a doorway, these could spell danger. But if something had happened he would have told her. She could not ask him. Between them there were no superfluous questions, particularly questions that betrayed fear.

“Have you got the thing ready?” she said. They did not refer to the messages she carried more explicitly than that.

“Your diligence is commendable,” he said bitterly. “You never forget your work.” He avoided her eyes.

“Thank you,” she replied drily. “That is the idea, I believe.”

Suddenly she knew what it was. As instinctively as one is aware that somebody is walking in one’s footsteps, so as a woman she knew that he wanted her. He had, indeed, wanted her for a long time now but it had not been in the contract and he had scrupulously respected the terms of their association. The sometimes elaborate formality of his behaviour when they were alone was expressly designed to put her at a distance from him and so exorcize temptation. Now the strain on his nerves was telling. She felt compassion for him.

“I think I should go now,” she suggested quietly. “I’ll wait for you to phone me.”

He intercepted her at the door and his hand on her arm gripped with

unnecessary violence.

“I didn’t say you could go,” he said harshly.

“It would be better, wouldn’t it?”

He did not reply but pulled her close to him. His body trembled and his voice was hoarse and reluctant. “Why aren’t I good enough for you?” he demanded angrily, and held her against him with a savage violence, as if he was afraid of what she might reply and wished to stifle it.

Suddenly he relinquished his grasp of her and walked to the window. “I have some idea of the life you lived in Berlin, the people in Bratislava had to tell me,” he went on, each word thin and separate as pellets of lead. “If your patrons were good enough for you in Berlin, what’s wrong with me? Tell me that, will you?”

“They didn’t have all the facts in Bratislava,” she said quietly. “Of course you’re good enough for me. Any shoeblack is good enough for me, and too good. I could go to bed with you very easily, and have a good deal of pleasure out of it. But will you believe me, Count?” He was not looking at her, and she sought to draw his eyes to hers. “Will you believe me, Count?” she repeated. But his eyes remained fixed on the carpet. “If I went to bed with you, it would be the first time in my life I went to bed with a man I didn’t love, in one way or another. Please forgive me that I’m speaking so frankly.” He said nothing. What was there for him to say, but one thing?

He turned on her furiously.

“How dare you humiliate me in this way? How dare you?”

“Because I’m not afraid of you. And because I think it would turn out to be a bad thing for the work we’re doing. I beg you, Count. I’m not so strong as I seem to be.”

He got up and flung himself towards a further door.

“Come back!” he hurled at her. “Come back an hour from now!”

She duly returned an hour later. His behaviour was quite impeccable. The episode of an hour ago might have been merely a dream. The conversation remained throughout on a political level, excepting for one moment, when it concerned another woman than herself.

“I have bad news regarding Gisi Fleishmann,” he told her.

“What’s happened? Have they got her at last?”

“They shot her as she was jumping out of a train that was taking her to

Ausschwitz. It was a pleasanter death to die. She was a brave woman.”

“Yes, she was a brave woman,” breathed Elsie. “May she rest in peace.”

The sense of tension and danger was somewhat eased by a crepuscular social existence she managed to conduct. There was, for instance, a certain Mlle. Inesia she met at the Café Flora. It was on a day when something had prevented the Count from meeting her for cocktails, as had been arranged, at the Duna Palota. It might have been a bomb, of course, in the morning’s air-raid. There was a woman sitting at the next table, who obviously was in the same situation as herself, judging from the way she kept on looking at her watch, and peering outside to the pavements of the Corso. From the style of clothes the woman wore, her jewellery, and the amount of makeup she had on, Elsie could not help concluding they had something else in common. She, too, was probably a “kept” woman, with different terms of service.

The time passed, and still neither man came. “Tut-tut!” Elsie went. “These men!” said the other. Then they turned to each other and smiled. One preferred to think it was not a bomb that had dislocated the rendezvous. “French?” asked the other woman. She used the Hungarian word. “No!” said Elsie. “German!” “I’m Roumanian!” the other pointed out, this time using the German word. They exchanged cards punctiliously, with the formality only achieved by people in dubious positions. “Frau Radbruch.” “Mademoiselle Inesia.” A little friendship convenient to them both had begun. They did not exchange confidences about the lives they had lived before they came to Budapest, or the men to whom they now ministered. But there was a good deal they could do together, air-raids permitting. They went for little outings in Elsie’s car in the warm summer afternoons. They crossed the river and took the bright yellow funicular up to the Fortress Square. On their evenings “off” they would go to a cinema together. The films were not very exciting, largely Goebbels films from the Neubabelsberg Studios, before the Allied bombing flattened them. Once there was a film, and a pre-Nazi film, a good deal more exciting than it set out to be, at least to one member of the audience, for the actress who played the part of brunette confidante to the blonde Brigitte Helm was a certain Elsie Silver. Frau Radbruch sweated with apprehension as she sat beside her friend, Mademoiselle Inesia, in the dark movie-house, but there were no complications. Now and again an American film might pop up somewhere, not too ostentatiously, but there it was, almost a manifesto, an avowal that the Admiral and M. Szálasy, the leader of the Hungarian Fascist Party, the Arrow Cross, had between them not quite tied up the Hungarian soul in a brown-paper parcel and handed it over for indefinite keeping in the Wilhelmstrasse cellars.

So there was a film now and again, once or twice a play, but no concerts. The last concert Elsie had been to was the Furtwängler concert in Cracow, and she had not enjoyed it. The two women went to each other's flats, too, on occasions when it was certain their men would not descend upon them. They played little card games, and drank tea, and ate Gerbeaud cakes. It was a nice change. Once or twice Mlle. Inesia even organized a "bridge" at her own apartment. But the two other ladies were not so well-mannered as Mlle. Inesia, and one betrayed a rather penetrating interest in Elsie's connections and background. Elsie was sure it was nothing but female curiosity, but thought it more prudent not to accept an invitation to a third "bridge." Mlle. Inesia might have been an agent like herself, or she may have been merely what she seemed. Elsie was not curious, and did not find out. One day in September she should have come to Elsie's apartment for tea. She did not arrive. That was the last of her.

There was a certain amount of social activity in the company of Count Apor, too. He did not often take her to shows or movies, which he tended to despise as time-wasting frivolities fit for Pest boulevardiers but not for Magyar aristocrats. And, of course, she did not accompany him to the formal parties which he attended either in his dynastic or military capacity. But there were border-line parties on which he thought it wise to have her company, where the married women felt themselves broad-minded, and some of the other women lived in the same sort of twilight as herself. There was one party, however, which he suggested she might go to, from which she preferred to be absent.

"There's going to be an interesting woman to-night," he told her, "at the Abonyi party. You remember?"

"Yes, I remember, I was to come, too."

"I learn that Ingrid von Ihume's going to be there. She's found out I've accepted the invitation."

"Have I met her?"

"No. She's been in Berlin. She's a lady of the very bluest blood."

"Then, of course," she said without expression, "I've not met her."

"She's coming because she heard I'll be there. She adores me." He said this with pardonable vanity. "She's a most beautiful woman." She waited. This was not her world, and she had no comments to offer. She wondered whether he wanted her to be there so that one woman might be played off against the other, but decided that that was not so. His body might go up in fire from time to time, but his heart remained aloof and icy.

“And because Ingrid is coming, another distinguished guest has invited himself. I shouldn’t say he’s distinguished exactly. But he’s important. He’s particularly important in Budapest at the present moment. Practically nobody knows his name, at all events, in the world at large. They’re talking about him here more than he’s ever been talked about before, but that’s only because of the Ingrid von Ihume affair. He’s gone quite insane about her . . . if he’s not always been insane.”

“Who are you talking about? Have you talked about him to me before?” But even as she asked, she saw once more the look of unspeakable loathing in his eyes which had been there on the drive from Bratislava to Budapest, when he had talked to her about Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Jewish extermination. “You mean Adolf Eichmann?” she said.

“He’s been able to send millions of people to the ovens, and he’s not turned a hair. Now a pretty woman is leading him on a string, and he’s pulling out his hair in handfuls. He suspects everything and everybody. He’s smoking and drinking himself sick. He won’t travel by air for fear someone has put grit into the bearings. He has an arsenal in his car like a Chicago gangster. A posse of guards is with him night and day.” Apor banged his fist on the table. “It’s ridiculous!” he shouted. “As if any hell he goes through could make up for one millionth of the agony he’s been responsible for! At all events”—his voice calmed down—“Ingrid is doing what *she* can.” He turned to her. “Well, Frau Radbruch? Would you like to come to the party?”

“No,” she said quietly. “No. As we’ve always agreed, it’s not wise for me to turn up when we suspect that high-ranking German officers might be present. I saw a gentleman loaded down with iron crosses in the café yesterday, and he looked at me in a very interested way, which I didn’t like at all.”

“What happened? Was anybody with him?” He was evidently uneasy.

“I tried the frontal attack,” she said. “I smiled at him, then I picked my teeth with my hand over my mouth. He looked uncomfortable, and got his head down into a newspaper.”

“So you won’t come?”

“No. With your permission I won’t come.”

But she hadn’t given him the real reason, which was that she did not dare to imagine how she would behave if she found herself in the same room as the ineffable assassin. Perhaps she would suddenly find herself trying to claw his eyes out, as had happened to her with German soldiers once or twice before.

Perhaps in the extremity of her revulsion her heart would simply stop beating, and she would fall dead. It was better to keep away from Adolf Eichmann.

It should be said, however, she did not succeed entirely in keeping away from old friends. At one of the permitted parties she was presented to Otto von Umhausen. “Herr Baron, may I present Frau Radbruch . . . ?” She smiled at him in the most well-bred manner. “We’ve met before, haven’t we, Herr Baron?” she said lightly. “What a gadabout you are!” There was not the least nervousness in her heart. The time for Otto von Umhausen to betray Elsie Silver had long gone by. He could hardly betray her now, without betraying himself. Besides (Elsie realized) he is not among the most noxious of his kind.

Otto von Umhausen bowed, and looked a little yellow about the gills. Then he promptly turned his attention to the plump little soprano he had brought with him. Or that is what she called herself in that artistic atmosphere.

She saw Mila, also, several times during this period of intense excitement.

“Hallo, Channah, darling! I’m a Swede!”

“You’re what, darling?” She held her at arm’s length and examined her. “You don’t eat enough! I’ve brought a big steak for you, here, in my bag!”

“I tell you, I’m a Swede! Look at my blonde pig-tails! Haven’t you heard?”

Then Elsie remembered. She certainly had heard. The town had been full of it for some weeks. Some of the people she had heard talking about it had been livid with fury, but more had welcomed the news. The news was that three neutral embassies, the Swedish, the Swiss, and the Vatican, had made arrangements with the Hungarian authorities to issue protective passes, or *Schutzpässe*, to Jews, the holders of which were recognized as being under the protection of the issuing government. That meant that those Jews, at least, for the time being, would not be press-ganged into “Operation Ausschwitz,” for which rolling-stock kept rumbling ominously into the stations.

“Oh, Mila!” she cried. “How wonderful! So that means you’re safe now, does it?” Then she stopped. She knew how foolish it was to suggest that any Jew could be safe, in this time. “You’re not wearing a yellow star,” she said, a little awkwardly. “Do these passes mean you don’t need to?”

“Oh no.” But she was not interested in these matters of wearing yellow stars. “You know,” she pointed out, “the world’s really beginning to believe those things happened, after all, in Treblinka and Maidenek.”

“It looks like it, Mila. Yes, it does. The Government here’s scared stiff, I think. They know the Germans are going to lose.”

“Of course. That’s why they’ve made these arrangements with the neutrals. But I don’t believe in it, somehow. It’s all too good to be true.” She shook her head doubtfully.

“What do you mean? It’ll be worse before it’s better? Well, then. . . .” She examined Mila anxiously out of the corner of her eye. “Are you still quite determined to stay on here? Do answer me, Mila dear! Are you? It’s not too late, you know.”

“It’s hard work knocking sense into them.”

“Who?”

“The Jews in this town. They’re dazed. They’re going about like people who’ve been beaten up with truncheons every day for a week. I can’t go. If anything would happen they’d be like a flock of sheep.”

“Mila. Do you know how old you are? You’re sixteen. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Channah. Well?”

“You can’t take all the cares of the world on you.”

“I’m not. I just *can’t* go, that’s all.”

“I don’t like the way you look. You’re as pale as a sheet.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. I wish I could take you out in my little car some time. Now that you’re tied up, she’s my best friend. But we can’t. And that’s that. Well, one way or the other, it’s bound to be over before long.”

Suddenly the girl was a-quiver with excitement.

“Why not, Channah? Why not? I’d love a breath of air! Why shouldn’t we?”

“But it was silly of me to suggest it, Mila dear. I wasn’t thinking. You mustn’t be out without a star, and I mustn’t be seen with anyone wearing a star. It can’t be done.”

“I often don’t,” she said, just a shade surlily. “They’re not so watchful as all that.”

“But, Mila——”

“Very well, Channah.” Mila lowered her eyes. “If you think we oughtn’t to, we won’t!”

“Don’t look so miserable, Mila dear. If you’re really sure it would be all

right, perhaps we *could* have a spin round the park a few times. You ought to know.”

The girl looked up again.

“I won’t go unless Leon says it’s all right. He knows how to get in and out of places like a mouse in the floorboards.”

“Is Leon back?”

“Yes, he’s back for a time. He’s been telling me about these *schlichim*—you know—the messengers from Palestine. They’re like poems, these people. They’re so brave and beautiful. One of them’s in prison now, a girl, here in Budapest. They say she’s a young saint.” Mila had gone off into a dream. It was necessary to bring her to earth again.

“Listen, Mila, I’ll tell you.” She had been thinking of the risks involved in taking Mila out for a spin, and decided Leon was the one to estimate them. “You’ll ask Leon to bring you to the park to meet me,” said Elsie. “If he thinks it’s all right—I say again—if he thinks it’s all right. Now, let me think where. Yes, the bridge between the two artificial lakes, the further end. You know where that is? Good. Suppose we make it next Thursday morning, at eleven o’clock. That’s six days from now. Will you remember? Thursday, at eleven o’clock, unless there’s a raid on, of course. If you’re there, you’re there. If not, I’ll understand. We’ll fix something up later. Is that all right, Mila?”

“It’s wonderful, Channah, wonderful! I’ll be there!”

She was there. And it was a mistake.

It was a day in mid-September, some three or four days later. There was anxiety on the faces of the German troops. The Russians had cut clean through a wide swathe of country and had reached the Polish-Czechoslovak frontier. In Budapest as in Warsaw, in Cracow as in Bratislava, there was a vigorous flurry of troop movements in the streets, but doubt was beginning to settle like a fog on the faces of the Germans and their friends. They were as men might look who carry palisades to stop the incoming tide.

On that day, over in Budapest, Elsie Silver returned to her apartment about a quarter to three, having lunched late, for the air-raid had lasted longer than usual. She went to her room straight away, to have one of those afternoon naps, which, she was convinced, kept her looking a decade younger than her years. At four-thirty she was to go to the Café Poprád for a cup of coffee, and any message that Leon might have for her. For Leon was back from his recent indisposition. He had found work at the Café Poprád, where they were more

sympathetic for some reason, with the occasional absences caused by his asthma. At six o'clock Elsie was due at the Count's apartment.

Not long after she got in to her place, soon after three, in fact, the telephone rang, and she answered it. It was a call of no consequence. She lay down, had her nap, and proceeded to put herself to rights. Then suddenly she remembered she had a call to make to M. Fleurot, her modiste. She rang him up, said she was sorry she could not go for her fitting, and put down the receiver. It was now about a quarter to four. At that moment the door-bell rang. She was expecting no one, but she saw no reason why she should not open it. If anyone who had a right to knock knocked and there was no answer, he did not merely go away. He either forced the door open, or went away and came back.

There was a young man at the door, with a small leather bag in his hand, and a coil of telephone-flex over one arm.

"I've come to see to your telephone, madame," he said. He talked Hungarian, but the word *telefon* was clear. So were the bag and the coil of flex. She let the young man in and closed the door behind him. He waited about for a moment, as if to ask her where the instrument was. Then he spotted the socket in the wainscoting, and the flex leading into her room.

"May I go in, madame?" he asked. She understood. She was getting the hang of the language.

"Yes, in there," she said. Then suddenly her heart leapt. She remembered that only two or three minutes ago she had rung M. Fleurot and the telephone had been perfectly all right. Less than an hour ago, she had received a call herself. The telephone worked perfectly both for incoming and outgoing calls. "Young man!" she called out. But the young man was already in her room. She followed him. She was not a coward and her instinct was to defend by attack. If the young man was up to no good, at least she could scream her head off; she was useful, too, with an electric lamp in her hand. Perhaps he was no criminal. Perhaps he was a police agent. Maybe it was only a routine telephone check-up. The young man faced her as she entered. She allowed words to pour from her in an incoherent mixture of Hungarian and German, with a word or two of Polish or Slovak thrusting in when the Hungarian failed.

"Who are you? The telephone's perfectly all right. I've only just rung up somebody. What's it all about?" She had by this time stationed herself by the bedside table, where a reading lamp with a soapstone base was within reach.

As she spoke, a grin widened slowly across the young man's face, and it was all she could do to prevent herself from reaching out for the lamp, and hurling it against his mouth. She was furious. She was furious because she was

an idiot, and he was an idiot. That's all he was. An idiot. No crook could have a grin like that, and eyes like those. He was, of course, as much a telephone engineer as her foot was. He was laughing at her fright, he was also laughing at her compôte of languages. And if anybody deserved to be laughed at, it was he, thinking himself a secret agent, and trying on the ancient tired dodge of being a telephone engineer. He wanted to have his face soundly slapped. He was talking Yiddish to her now. *Yiddish!* Suppose Lotte had been in the next room!

"Don't take on so, *yiddene!*" he was saying. He put his bag down on the ground, and slipped the coil of flex from his arm, like a wooden hoop at a fairground stall.

"How are you? Are you well? So you're Channah, eh? I'm Baruch. You do talk Yiddish, eh?"

"More or less," she said severely. She was going to find it hard not to grin back into his face. It was pleasant, open, grey-eyed, anything in the world but conspiratorial. It had a good chin. They all had good chins, these agents.

"I'll talk Hebrew," he said, "if you like." That's what she judged it to be.

"Thank you," she said. "I don't talk Hebrew. Yiddish, please. And just drop your voice."

He was from Palestine, then, he must be; another of these *schlichim*, these messengers, was he? What happened to the sallow faces of the ghettos when they got to Palestine, the dark wistful eyes?

"How did you get my address?" she had at him. "You had no right to come here!"

"Oh, *yiddene,*" he pleaded. "Have a heart! Where *should* I get your address? Don't *you* always have the next link, in case something happens to the one before, the one you've got?"

"Has anything happened to Leon?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know! I don't know! He's as clever as a barrel-load of monkeys, that one! But it's *you* I've come about. Don't you see? I'll tell you what happened. You've got a date with Leon at the Café Poprad to-day at four-thirty, haven't you?"

"I have."

"Well, so had I, at three. The idea was that I'd read the papers and write my letters till you came, and then we'd meet each other. I don't mean meet.

We'd each get to know what the other looked like. See?"

"I see."

"But I got to the café at two. I always think it's a good idea to turn up early in a public place, if you can. You get the lie of the land. Leon wasn't there yet. I thought he was having his lunch, or maybe his shift didn't begin till later. Well, this is what happened. There were three men sitting two or three tables away. They were quite ordinary-looking, clerks or insurance agents or something. But I had a feeling about them. You know how it is? Please, Channah, sit down. Make yourself comfortable. I'll sit down, too." She thanked him. "It's not anything you can lay hands on. I just didn't like them. Well, about half an hour later, two of the men got up and went over to another table, where a young man had been sitting since before I came in. He wasn't anything to look at, either. He was writing away busily, a journalist, I suppose. Once or twice the waiter brought him some fresh 'dogs' tongues,' the long slips of paper they have. So the two men sat down beside him and talked to the journalist for a little time, some three or four minutes, not more than that. There was no excitement of any sort. I could only see the way all the colour left the young man's cheeks, and his hand trembled just a little as he smoothed out the 'dog's tongues' in front of him. Then, still very quietly, they got up, all three of them. They made no sign to the waiter or anybody. They just walked out, the young man in the middle.

"I tell you, I didn't like it at all. I didn't like the thought that the third man was waiting behind, as if he expected something else to happen that might interest him. Somehow, I'd have to warn Leon. I wasn't sure I could intercept him in the street outside, because he may have been in the back all the time, or, if he was out, he might come into the building by another entrance. So I waited. I expected him at three o'clock, as I said, but he didn't come. I waited till halfpast three, and then I thought I'd better get moving. There may be nothing in it, but I felt it important to contact you and prevent you from going over to the café. We'll have to fix up some other meeting place. So I went off, and got my telephone-kit and—here I am, Channah. And don't blow my head off, auntie, will you? I did the right thing."

"Yes, yes," she muttered. "I'm sure you did the right thing. I hope nothing's happened to Leon?" she asked anxiously. There were several reasons why she hoped nothing had happened to Leon, of which Mila was one. He was her link with Mila.

"Do you know Mila, Baruch?" she asked.

"No. I only got here last night. Who is she? One of our girls?" She told him

who Mila was. “A good girl!” his comment was. “It’s a good thing she hadn’t reached Eretz yet. She’d have been shouting to get back here.”

“I’ve arranged to take her out for a drive the day after to-morrow. She was going to arrange it through Leon. I wish I hadn’t suggested it.”

“Does she wear the yellow star?” He was suddenly grave. “You couldn’t go riding about with a girl wearing the yellow star.”

“Of course not,” she reproved him. “Don’t be ridiculous? She won’t be wearing it if she turns up. I’m sorry Leon isn’t around. She’s going to fix it up with him.”

“He’ll turn up. He’s probably been out on some sort of a job—everybody likes to do a bit of sabotage on the side—and he couldn’t get back in time. I’ll look them both up for you.”

“Suppose it isn’t all right. How am I to know?”

“That’s simple,” he said, and smiled. “She just won’t be there. Look. I ought to be going. We must fix up a place where we can get in touch with each other. You see . . . there’s always a chance that Leon may be detained somewhere.”

“Yes,” she murmured. “There’s always a chance. Have they told you of Feri, the shoemaker?”

“No.” She gave him the address. He memorized it, then stooped and picked up his equipment.

“Won’t you stay,” she asked him uncertainly, “and have a cup of coffee, or a glass of wine, or something?”

“That’s all right,” he smiled at her reassuringly. “I’ll make off. Don’t look so worried, auntie, nothing’s happened to any of us. We’re all right. Listen. Wasn’t that one of the Russian guns? The whole window-frame shook! Oh boy! They’ve got it coming to them. Good-bye, auntie!” He put his arms round her shoulders and kissed her, like a schoolboy going back to school after a half-term holiday. Then he went off.

It was a few minutes to eleven, on the morning Elsie was going to take Mila out for a drive. There were folk around in the streets, wearing the yellow star. In a way, wearing the yellow star was a protection. There you were, you were branded a pariah, nothing more need be done about you, for the time being, at least. The trouble was when you were not wearing it, and you looked like the sort of person who should be. It was for you the *razzias* were designed.

It was you who went off, the sweat of death glistening on your forehead. You might never be heard of again.

She hoped devoutly Mila would not come, even though it was a fine day, and Mila had been so pathetically keen on the outing. If she did come, it would be only because Leon had said it was all right. She wouldn't be wearing her yellow star, but she ran less danger than most people. It was only alongside other Jews you saw the child looked Jewish, too. She reached the end of the Andrassy Utca and drove through the grandiose Millenium Monument. Beyond the tall pillar the park began, with the two artificial lakes at its threshold, the broad bridge between the lakes, the banks of trees beyond, transmuted by the first alchemies of autumn. Sure enough, there the girl was on the further side of the bridge, leaning on the parapet, looking down on the black ducks with red beaks, and the skimming moor-hens, and the gliding skiffs. She touched the horn lightly. Mila turned and smiled. She slowed down and flung the car door open.

"Jump in!" she cried. The girl jumped in with a chuckle of delight.

"Oh, Frau Radbruch," she said, grinning in complicity. "How awfully sweet of you to take me for a drive! What a darling mummy you are! I'm sorry, no," she babbled on, as they swept into the green spaces of the park. "I'm not your daughter any more. I'm the daughter of the King of Sweden. You must call me Ingeborg."

"Listen, child! How long have you been here?" She put her left arm round Mila's shoulder for a moment, and squeezed her affectionately.

"I've only just got here, only two minutes ago."

"Did Leon bring you here?"

She did not answer the question. "I must tell you about the brain wave," she said. "It was all Leon's idea." Whatever Leon's idea was, she was bubbling over with it.

"But first, tell me. Did Leon bring you here?"

"No." She was like a small girl found tip-toeing away from the pantry.

"You *did* promise to talk it over with Leon," Elsie insisted.

"But, Channah, I've been moving about for weeks without that horrible star. I've got it here, in my little bag, in case. It's got sticky stuff on. I could clap it on in a second."

"But it's dangerous, Mila. You shouldn't do it. I once saw a policeman

pass his pen behind a young fellow's star, to see if it was sewn on properly, or just pinned on. You said, if Leon——”

“Leon hasn't come back yet.”

“Ah well,” Elsie muttered. She had better resign herself to it. “Did you see that other young fellow, Baruch? He said he'd try and get hold of you.”

“Well, I haven't,” she said miserably, “and he didn't.” She snuggled up to her. “Oh, Channah, if you knew what a break it is, to get away from it all! And how lovely it is to be with you again! Do you know, it's the first time we've been together, without hiding like rats in a drain? Let's enjoy it, Channah! I'll be all right! I *know* how to move around. I've had practice.”

“Forgive me, Mila dear,” Elsie sighed. “It's only because one get's worried. I'm *out* of practice, you know. I'm on eiderdown. All right, darling, we'll forget about everything. We'll just have a good look at the sky and the trees and the grass and the water. Then we'll go round again. Then we'll have a *Kapuziner*, with lots of cream and cakes.”

“Could I have an ice-cream, please? Do you think there is any?” But before Elsie had time to tell her whether or not there was ice-cream, Mila was off again. “I was telling you about the brain wave. You know, don't you, what's been going on at the Swiss Consulate?” she broke out.

Elsie's mind was not quite so supple as Mila's. She jerked herself back again with an effort.

“The Swiss Consulate? Oh, the Swiss *Consulate!* Yes, I know. You mean those *Schutzpässe* they've been issuing. Of course I know. I've heard about it from several sources. You told me so yourself. I've seen the crowds.”

“Oh, you've seen the crowds, have you?” Mila's eyes were full of mischief. But everyone in Budapest had seen the crowds. For days and weeks now, the scene outside the Swiss Consulate had been unbelievable. It was known among the Jews of Budapest that the Hungarians had agreed to let the Swiss cover no less than five thousand Jews with their protection passes. The Swiss Consulate was not open till eleven o'clock in the morning. The queue started the night before, with non-Jews, paid for their services, squatting on the pavement, as if to ensure a seat in a theatre for the appearance of a world-famous tenor. A few minutes after eleven o'clock, that is, the time the Jews were allowed to issue from their houses, a madly running crowd started charging down the street in all directions, knowing full well that their lives might depend on whether they got to the Swiss Consulate in time for the coveted paper. Soon the street was packed tight with thousands of Jews

fighting for the gates, and Hungarian police lashing out left and right with their truncheons. It was not a pretty sight, but that was how they felt about the incinerators, too.

“It was Leon’s idea,” Mila was saying, a little smugly.

“Leon?” asked Elsie, with astonishment. It seemed rather a high-level diplomatic achievement for a young waiter in an obscure café.

“Silly!” Mila reproached her. “I mean Leon had the idea of getting us boys and girls to manufacture the passes on a big scale. Nobody knows where they are, neither the Swiss, nor the Hungarians. But what can they do about it? We’re making a first-rate job of it. The Swiss don’t mind, of course.”

“No, of course not.”

“Don’t you think we’re clever, Channah? I do! You *did* say ice-cream, didn’t you?”

“I *did* say ice-cream,” admitted Elsie, a little helplessly. “I *did*. You’ll have an ice-cream as big as your head. Hallo, here’s the lakes again!” She hoped the conversation might flow in less exciting channels. “Look at those swans! How silly they look out of water! There’s a café just up the road there, I think. Come, young woman, you’ll have your ice-cream. We’ll *both* have an ice-cream! Then we’ll have our cakes.”

It was a jolly outing, all in all. It had to come to an end far too soon.

“Good-bye, Frau Radbruch. Thanks for the nice time given me!”

“A pleasure, to be sure. See you soon again, Ingeborg.”

She put the girl down some distance along the Adrassy Utca, and went on her way home with a heavy heart. It was a mistake, she said to herself.

CHAPTER VIII

I

It was a mistake, Elsie said to herself again, as the noise identified itself as a knocking. It was not bombs dropping, or machine-guns rattling. The Americans had done their night's raid. It was a knocking on the door of her apartment. It was the secret police.

She switched on her bedside lamp, got up from her bed, and put on her slippers and dressing-gown. There was a taste of bitter aloes in her mouth. What has put them on to me, she asked herself, as she moved out of the room towards her front door. Where did I go wrong? Was it the young man, Baruch, who came to mend the telephone? I could do nothing about that. Was it because I took Mila for the drive? Is it some slip-up somewhere I know nothing about? Have they found Mila, too? Have they found Mila, too? The question kept on repeating itself the whole time till she got to the front door. It was only when she slipped the bolt, and her hand was turning the door handle that a further question presented itself: Have they got a line on Count Apor? She opened the door, and it was, of course, the police, a man in plain clothes and two men in uniform.

"Are you Frau Radbruch?" the plain-clothes man asked. He spoke in Hungarian.

"I speak no Hungarian," she said, in German. "What is the meaning of all this?" She had not had the experience of being arrested before, and she did not know if this method of handling it would be followed by a brisk slap in the teeth. But she believed it was always worth while to stand with your head up.

The man was quite polite.

"We have been requested to take you to police headquarters," he said. "Will you please put your clothes on. You are permitted to pack a small bag."

"Please come in," she said. The man nodded his head towards one of his attendants. The attendant and he crossed the threshold. The third stayed outside.

"We are very sorry, to be sure," said the man. They entered the living-room, and sat down. "Don't take too long about it. Hand over your papers, please."

Is this the moment to invoke the name of Count Apor? she asked herself.

She could not see how it could do harm, and it might do good. His association with her was well known, and the invocation of him as her protector could not compromise him. She would know sooner or later whether their more secret associations had been discovered.

“My friend, Count Apor, will be interested in this impertinence,” she said. “I insist on telephoning him at once.”

“I’m sorry, madame. Any telephoning will have to be done from police headquarters. That’s my orders.” Then he unbent somewhat. “Besides, the telephones aren’t working yet. To-night’s raid was a bad one.

“Very well.” She handed over her papers. One does not try to throw any weight around with people on that level. She went in and dressed, and packed a small bag as she had been told. It did not take her many minutes. Have they found Mila, too? Have they found Mila, too? The question still kept on rotating like some process in a machine. Then, as she came back into the sitting-room, the words changed. I won’t see Mila again. How can I? I won’t see Mila again. How can I? The men rose from their chairs.

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” the man in plain clothes said. It was not a nice face, she told herself. In the nature of things, a man engaged in work like this would not have a nice face. (I won’t see Mila again. How can I?) She was convinced that he was behaving especially well, and that he had been given instructions to that effect. She was, after all, the woman of a redoubtable nobleman. She smiled on the two men.

“Orders are orders,” she said. “Perhaps one of you will take my bag?” (How can I? How can I?)

They opened the door and walked along the passage. The house-porter’s face was like a large pale cabbage growing from the darkness at the end of the basement stairway. A closed black car was waiting by the kerbside. (I won’t see Mila again. I won’t see Mila again.) Police headquarters were not far off, she seemed to remember. But it took some time to get there, for several streets were impassable with bomb craters. They got there at last, and were bundled in through a side doorway. She was taken at once along a complex of blue-lit passages, to a room with a narrow bed, and a chair and table. It was not prison-cell furniture, but the barred window was high up in a blank wall.

Have they taken Mila, too? I won’t see Mila again. Have they taken Mila, too? I won’t see Mila again. The phrases wove in and out of her thoughts, like themes in a piece of music. As for myself, I really am a bit tired. It’s been hard work breaking through to safety, and I won’t make it now. The end can’t be far

off, and in one way I won't mind that. I've felt rather like this just once before, remember? That time when the bomb trapped me, and I was quite happy about it, going out to sea on a warm current. The end won't be anything like so pleasant now. I don't see how they can fail to shoot me, whether or not they beat me up first, to try and get what they can out of me. If they do, I hope I'll last out. There's only a certain amount of pain you can stand. And after that, it's darkness.

But there *is* a difference, Elsie. Those moments in the cellar hadn't any Mila yet; there *is* a Mila now. That's why I'd rather come through, somehow, if it can be managed. Why do I love that girl so much, outside all sense or meaning? I love her more than I ever loved poor Oskar, and infinitely more than this unhappy split-into-two Apor, though I now see I've become quite fond of him. Could I have loved her more if she really had been my own child? I don't see how. Well, I've had this thing, before I've died, and that's something. See Mila again? See Mila again? How can I? She in one whirlpool, I in another? The chances against us are like the blank millions in the drum of a lottery.

Who dares hope, who doesn't hope, that the winning number will have his name on?

Then suddenly her blood was cold with terror. She saw a black-gloved hand slide into the drum's aperture, and bring out a slip with a name on, and the name was her own. Elsie von Brockenburg, Elsie von Brockenburg. No, no! she cried aloud. No! They would take me to Germany. That is the death I cannot die.

One way or another, that will not happen.

II

They did not go out of their way to treat her unpleasantly, as two days, three days, passed. The food was adequate, they gave her exercise in the courtyard, and when the air-raids came, they took her down into a shelter. There could only be one explanation for this temperate treatment. Suspicion did not extend to Count Apor, at least not yet. Their complicated and protracted masquerade had been as successful as they dared hope. His position and reputation still extended over her like a cloak.

There was another fact from which she deduced that they were treating her as a special prisoner, for she was all on her own when they marched her round and round the courtyard for her half-hour's exercise in the morning. On the first two mornings she saw nobody but her own warder, but something

apparently went wrong with the timing on the third morning, for she was only taken out when the other prisoners were being marched in. There was a subdued cat-calling as she went by, a ghost of the sort of noise that is least inhibited when marching soldiers register the passing by of a female, almost any female. She kept her head averted, for she was a bit uncomfortable about it one way and another, and then, when she had proceeded some ten or fifteen yards, she heard a quick vigorous “Tsst! Tsst!” She turned her head and saw a young man smiling and winking at her. The smile was, in fact, a smile, though the three or four teeth missing from the upper jaw made it a rather distressing one. Then, almost at once, she perceived that the wink was not a wink at all, but a black eye. There was something vaguely familiar about the face, and the young man was certainly convinced he knew her. Then, a minute or two after the cortège had re-entered the prison, she remembered who it was. It was Baruch, the *shliach*, the messenger from Palestine. Her first emotion was fury because he had compromised both himself and her by letting everybody there see they knew each other; then suddenly she realized it was probably the poor stupid young man, and no one else, who was responsible for her arrest and imprisonment. Her instinct had been sound. It had been unfortunate that he had sought her out, though his intention had been of the best. He should have been cleverer about it. One does not pretend in the mid-nineteen-forties one is a telephone engineer if one is a secret agent. He had presumably been a marked man from the beginning.

Well, it was unfortunate. Here she was, and there he was, somewhere beyond the bars of one of those cells. They had not let *him* down lightly. They had “rubbed him up” good and proper.

Then suddenly a thought tore at her like the thorns of a briar. Baruch was in this prison. She herself was in this prison. It was evidently a prison for political prisoners, as well as the usual sort. If they had captured Mila, weren't the chances that she was here, too? Wasn't it likely that they had passed within a foot or two of each other a minute ago? She must find out somehow, at the first possible moment. What chance was there of contacting Baruch? Was he as likely as anyone to know? Or was he? He might not even have met Mila before they arrested him.

Then it came to her. She must have a word with one of the warders. They had already shown themselves friendly. Yes, the day-warder, at the very next meal time.

Mid-day was three hours away, but it came at last. There was a rattle of tin plates and mugs as the trolley was wheeled along the corridor. First one cell door was unlocked, then the next cell door, the food delivered at this cell, then

the next cell. Then her own turn came.

“Listen, you, quick,” she whispered. “You talk German?”

The warder put his head out into the corridor and looked left and right.

“A little. What then?”

Somehow she would get him to understand.

“*Gelt*,” she said. “For you, later. *Gelt*, money. Count Apor.”

“Yes? You want?”

“Is there a girl, a young girl, so high, here also in prison?”

“Yes, girl, Jewish girl.”

Her heart flared and flickered. They *had* got hold of her. She was here. Not many yards away. Alas, alas, they were together again.

“How long here?” it suddenly occurred to her to ask.

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“Three months. Four months.” He was at the door again. The heart jumped inside her like a bounding puppy. For it could not be Mila. Whoever the poor Jewish girl was, here in the prison with her, it could *not* be Mila. Mila was clever! Mila was still free! “She wears British uniform,” the warder added. Then there was not a vestige of doubt. “British uniform?” The words suddenly hit back at Elsie’s face like a released bough. “Who can that be? An English girl? No!” she said to herself. “No! One of the paratroopers, the *schlichim* from Palestine. Poor kid! I hope they don’t knock her about! But she’s in uniform! They can’t touch her!”

That all happened on the third day. Her first interview with the authorities took place on the fourth. There were two officers in plain clothes at a table, one with spectacles and no hair, one with protruding grey eyes and hair sparse and sandy. The man with spectacles sat at the centre of the table and seemed to be the senior. At a smaller table on one side sat a policeman in uniform, with a paper and pad before him. Beside her stood the warder who had brought her in. On the wall behind the officers hung portraits of Admiral Horthy and Herr Hitler.

“Your name is Lydia Radbruch?” asked the officer with the spectacles. He removed them to examine the document on the table before him.

“No,” she said.

“No?” asked the officer with the spectacles.

“No?” repeated his colleague. The sandy hair stuck close to the scalp ran in parallel lines like the strings of a fiddle. “Then these are false papers?”

“Yes.”

“What is your name, then?”

“Marie Louise Ostier.” (This is the moment, is it? The moment they raise Brockenburg from the grave?) There was a pause, while the name was spelled out and written down. “You are French, then?” (Do they know? Are they playing with me like a mouse?)

“I am French.”

“How is it you speak German so well?” (Are they on to it?)

“I have known many Germans during my career.”

“Where were you born?”

“Bordeaux.”

“In what year?”

“Nineteen hundred and five.”

“And you repeat your name is Marie Louise Ostier?” (They don’t know. I’m sure they don’t know.)

“Yes.”

“I suggest you are lying?” said the officer with the spectacles. (What? It is the cat-and-mouse game, after all?)

“I am Jewish.”

“You admit that, eh?” The question called for no reply. The man with sandy hair licked his lips over the admission. Then suddenly a gust of fury seized him. He turned on the policeman by her side. “Then why isn’t she wearing the Jew-star, eh? Why isn’t she?”

The policeman reddened and stuttered, but there was really nothing he could say, for the woman’s liability to the Jew-star had only that very moment been established.

The moment was resolved by the man with the spectacles, who was less choleric.

“You’ll see to it, Mr. Policeman, that the woman puts on the star?” he

demanded.

“Yes, Mr. Captain!”

“Very well,” He turned to Elsie. “You talked of your career. What was it?”

“I had lovers.”

“You were a prostitute?” He made no bones about it.

She did not answer. The two officers put their heads together and pursued certain facts on the paper before them with the point of a pencil.

“You entered this country on the sixteenth of January?” asked the Captain.

“Yes.”

“What is your real name?”

(Was it possible they knew? Could inquiries have gone through to Germany by this time? Could there have been time for an exchange of photographs across the frontiers?)

“My name is Marie Louise Ostier.”

“Pah!” exclaimed the man with sandy hair. That was not the exclamation nor the demeanour of a man who knew much. “But you are Jewish?” he said.

“Yes.”

“You came alone?”

“No.”

“In whose company?”

“Count Apor.”

“How did you come to meet Count Apor?”

“In the lounge of the Savoy-Carlton Hotel in Bratislava.”

“How did you come to meet him?”

“He suggested I should take a drink with him.”

“You picked him up? Then you spent the night together?”

“That is so.”

“Who instructed you to try and make his acquaintance?”

“No one. I hadn’t any idea who he was.”

“How did you get to Bratislava?”

“I crossed the Polish frontier.”

“At what point?”

“I have no idea. We went over the mountains. It was wild country. There were no villages.”

“We? Who is we?”

“The two men with whom I escaped.”

“Where from?”

“The Warsaw ghetto.”

“Ah, you were in the Warsaw ghetto? How did you come to be there?”

“I had been in Paris for some time, and there was a round-up.”

“So. These two men with whom you escaped—what are their names?”

“I only knew them as Shmul and Jan.”

“Where are they now?”

“They disappeared when we crossed the Slovakian frontier.”

“Have you been engaged in espionage or sabotage since you came to this country?” This was again the man with the sandy hair.

“No.”

He banged his fist on the table.

“I say again you’re a dirty Jewish whore, and you’re lying.”

She said nothing. There was an air of tension in the small room. She did not see it, but she was quite certain there was a going-on under the table, a shin kicked, or a thigh pommelled with a fist. The man with the sandy hair had exceeded the role that had been assigned to him.

The man with the spectacles brought his hand palm downward on the papers before him.

“That will do,” he said, addressing the policeman at her side. “Take her away.” Then he turned to Elsie. “We’ll see you again soon, madame.”

Two days later she had her second interview. Count Apor was also present this time. He rose to his feet as the warder brought her in, clicked his heels, bowed, and remained standing. After a slight hesitation, the man with the spectacles followed suit. Then some seconds later the man with the sandy hair

rose too. It obviously was very much against the grain with him. The warder pushed a chair towards her, and she sat down. The others followed.

Then suddenly Count Apor broke loose, as if it had been all he could manage to preserve his self-control till now.

“I take the utmost exception to this behaviour, Captain,” he exclaimed. “You must have known this lady was under my protection!”

“We regret any discomfort that has been caused you, Count Apor!” said the man with the spectacles. “We will prove to you we had no alternative!” They spoke Hungarian, but she knew enough to get the gist of the matter.

“The least you could have done was to get into touch with me immediately. This lady is a close friend of mine. I haven’t known what to think with all this bombing. I’ve been haunting the hospitals; the morgue, too. I’ve been wild with anxiety. I’ll have to report the matter to higher authority.”

“They already are well acquainted with the situation,” the man said drily. “The woman is an enemy agent.” He turned to her and repeated the assertion in German. “Is it not true that you are an enemy agent?”

“If you have already made up your mind, Captain, there is no point in my denying it.”

“You have already admitted the name on your documents is false. You say you are not Lydia Radbruch, a German. You assert you are a Frenchwoman. What name did you give yourself?” He consulted his notes. “Marie Louise Ostier. Is that right?”

“There you are, Count Apor! See?” This was the man with the sandy hair talking. “The woman’s a whore and a spy.”

“You will remember who you’re talking to!” demanded the Count icily. “The matter will be conducted by your superior officer.” The man spluttered and said no more for the time being.

“You were, of course, unaware, Count,” said the Captain, “that the lady gave false information when you asked Security for a duplicate set?”

“I saw Frau Radbruch’s papers in Bratislava,” replied Apor frigidly. “I had no reason to doubt their bona fides. Otherwise I would not have approved the application for an emergency set.” He turned towards Elsie. “I regret the necessity that compelled you to lie, madame. But in the circumstances I can well understand it. Can’t you, Captain?” He turned to the spectacles. “If madame is really a Frenchwoman, is it likely she would put that on record?”

The Captain again made a pretence of consulting his notes. Then, with a flourish, he brought out the further, and more serious, accusation.

“The woman also admits she is a Jew. Before her encounter with yourself in Bratislava she was a refugee from the Warsaw ghetto.”

“You said nothing of this to me, Frau Radbruch,” Apor said bleakly.

“You did not ask, Count. And it did not seem relevant.”

“I suggest to you, Count Apor,” the Captain continued, “that everything the woman said to you was a tissue of lies.”

“There were no discussions on abstract matters,” Apor said. “It is odious to think the woman may have been Jewish. But she did what was expected of her satisfactorily.”

“It is necessary for me to inform you categorically the woman is an enemy agent.”

“No!” said Count Apor, “No!” His lips became a thin line. “I refuse to believe it. You are suggesting that Frau Radbruch, or whatever the name is, deliberately set out to make my acquaintance in Bratislava in order to use me as a cover for her underground activities? I would ask you to be extremely careful, Captain. You are accusing me of the utmost negligence and stupidity. I refuse to be insulted in this way. If I find that you are proceeding on a series of assumptions, irrespective of the odium in which you must necessarily involve me, I will spare no efforts to have you dealt with in a proper fashion. And I assure you, it will be extremely uncomfortable for you.”

“I can’t stand this any more!” yelled the man with the sandy hair suddenly. “I don’t care who he is! We have our evidence, and nobody’s going to treat us this way! Nobody!”

The Captain loosened his collar from his neck. Runnels of sweat were running down on each side of his Adam’s apple.

“Lieutenant!” he barked. “You will speak when I ask you to! Or I will continue this interview alone! Do you understand?” He turned to Count Apor. It was becoming increasingly evident that he was finding it almost insuperably difficult to retain his calmness. “Count Apor,” he said. “With the utmost respect, I submit to you that it is not the first time that a clever woman has led—you must forgive me—has led an able and distinguished man by the nose. Yes, Count, I say again! By the nose!”

“Are you going to tell me that you have actual evidence that this woman was conducting espionage activities while I was maintaining her in the lap of

luxury?”

The Captain took a deep breath, then breathed out again slowly. “I think it will not be difficult to convince you, Count.”

“This is extremely distasteful to me. As a Hungarian and an officer, you will understand when I say that I have become extremely attached to Frau . . . permit me to go on calling her Frau Radbruch. If I have been stupid, I will do my best to make amends, though, of course, that would be difficult.” He turned suddenly to Elsie, as if his grief had suddenly sent his heart shuddering like a drumstick on a drum. “I beg you, Lydia, tell me all this is a pack of lies. Tell me that, for some reason, somebody’s trying to compromise you.” He clenched his fists. “I’ll seek the man out if he’s ringed round with machine-guns. I . . . I . . . Tell me, Lydia, is all this true . . . or not?”

“There is no reason to believe these people will listen to any denials of mine, Count Apor,” she said. “They have told you they have their evidence. It is up to you to believe them, or not, as you choose.”

“But for God’s sake, Lydia, if you’d only deny it. . . . Is it true, or isn’t it?”

“You will excuse me if I interrupt,” said the Captain. “You have your duties, Count Apor, and I have mine, and this farce has gone on long enough.” He removed his spectacles and proceeded to shuffle through his notes again. “There is the record here of an individual who paid a visit to the woman’s apartment on the afternoon of September the fifteenth, pretending to be a telephone engineer. The individual is now undergoing examination in this place. He asserts he is a British officer. He does not deny having been dropped by parachute in Yugoslavia. One of the smugglers who helped him cross the Hungarian frontier was one of our own agents. The alleged British officer was kept under observation and led us, on his arrival at Budapest, straight to this woman’s apartment. Another spy crossed the frontier with him, a young woman. She also is in custody here. She has been very communicative.”

Count Apor put his hand to his forehead. He spoke so low it was hardly possible to hear him.

“Is this true, Lydia?”

She did not answer.

“I will continue,” resumed the Captain. “You will realize this so-called Ostier woman was, in her turn, kept under observation. Three days later, on the eighteenth she met in the park, obviously by pre-arrangement, another member of the spy-ring, also a young woman.” (Ah, here it was. Here was Mila. Her heart leapt forward like a hound from its kennel.) “Radbruch, or Ostier, took

the young woman for a drive round the park, then dropped her in the Andrassy Ut. The young woman was followed to a house in the Jozsef Utca. What has happened to the young woman and her associates does not concern us at this moment.” (He’s bluffing. She’s escaped them. If he knew more, he’d say more. He’s bluffing.) “I can, however, state that a cache of small-arms and home-made hand grenades were found under the floorboards in one of the rooms in the Jozsef Utca.” He opened a drawer, took out a pistol, and laid it on the table. “This is one of the objects found. It is of British manufacture. Would you care to examine it, Count Apor?”

Count Apor uttered no words for two minutes, or more. The hand was still before his forehead. Then he spoke.

“Have you anything to say to me, Frau Radbruch? I beg you, speak!”

It was almost as if a handkerchief had been dropped, or the conductor had raised his baton, as a signal to the soloist. She rose from her chair, turned full on her employer, and let loose, as it had always been understood she would, when the moment came, and the event needed it.

“Have I anything to say?” she yelled. “You’re a damn fool, Count Apor! Of course I’ve been making use of you, and you’ve been easy meat! Hungarians, are you! You’re just a bunch of German lackeys!” From word to word, as she uttered them, she stood outside herself, listening to herself, watching the four men in the room, wondering which syllable it was going to be which would be pushed back into her mouth, like a gob of spittle among teeth and blood. She was aware of Apor sitting with his head bowed, the man with the sandy hair reduced to a pulp of incredulity because the woman still went on, without any signal given to the policeman by her side to bring his poised fist down on her skull. She was aware of the Captain sitting at the table, his eyes holding the fist suspended like the weight in a window-cord. “I hate you! You’ll come to a bad end, the whole lot of you! You wait——”

But she had been allowed to go on far enough.

“Take her out!” the Captain shouted. “To the cells!” Then, even louder, his voice totally beyond control: “You fool! Don’t touch her!”

The fist hurtled downward beside her with the clatter of a big owl’s wings. A moment later hands got hold of her and swivelled her round.

“I hope they court-martial you and shoot you, you lump!” she screamed over her shoulder, as they pitch-forked her out of the room.

Count Apor sat sombre in his chair, like a stone image.

III

They took her back to her barred room, flung her in, and locked the door. It had been an exhausting experience, and she lay flat on her back for several hours, unmoving. She only got up when the evening meal was brought in, for she found she was extremely hungry. She knew it might be a matter of some importance whether the food remained the same as it had been these last evenings, namely a chunk of bread and a bowl of soup. If it was a chunk of bread and mug of water, it would quite likely mean they would shoot her next day.

It was soup, not water. She was pleased, partly because she was hungry, and partly because she was certain that the hand of Count Apor was still extended in protection over her. She could not guess what sort of pressure the Count was bringing to bear. Was it political? Was it sheer bribery? Had they, between them, managed to capture the romantic Hungarian heart by their touching enactment of a *grand amour*? Whatever it was, it seemed probable that so long as the Hungarians remained in control of the prison, she was reasonably safe.

And so long as the secret of her identity remained undisclosed. For it was certain that if it somehow came out she was Brockenburg's widow, she would be handed over forthwith to the Gestapo. It might still be found out, but it did not seem likely, for the prison authorities had so many things to think about now. From the way they had handled her case from the beginning it was clear they were scared stiff, like all the Hungarians on all levels. They could read the writing on the sky, writ in league-long letters of fire. It was better to take things easy, while in every direction you could hear the creaking and cracking in the fabric of the Nazi machine.

Her sleep was deep and dreamless that night, for, above all, she had now reason to believe that Mila had not been arrested. First, she was not in this prison, and this seemed to be the prison for political offenders. Further, if they had caught her, she was certain that one way or the other her examiners would have betrayed the fact. They might even have confronted them with each other. Next day they took her from her room on an upper floor to a cell on the ground floor, but even that had its advantages in a time of intensive bombing. The food and bed were definitely inferior now, but discomforts of that sort were not frightening to a graduate of the Warsaw ghetto who had done a brief course in Marta's laundry and Zosha's stable. She saw at once the warder was inclined to be friendly. For instance, within an hour he had let her have a cigarette, a lit cigarette, which he must have drawn at his own lips. At other times, she would doubtless have been a bit squeamish, because he did not seem

a nice, or even a clean, man, but she was thankful now. She was certain that the apple she found on her plate one night was a special mark of favour. Once there was a piece of cake, too. In fact, no one in the prison knew where they were with her. It was known that she was the mistress of the powerful Count Apor. How long Count Apor was going to remain powerful was open to question, but it had obviously been concluded it was a good thing, for the time being, to show favour to the woman he adored, even though she had tricked him so outrageously. On the other hand, she was an enemy agent. That was what she was there for. Nobody quite knew who she was. She said she was French, but she might turn out to be anybody or anything. She had the looks and the breeding of a high lady. Perhaps she might turn out to be an English lord's daughter. Some English lords had had daughters affectionately disposed towards the German Führer. Others might have daughters just as hostile to him. If she was an English high-born one, it might be not at all a bad thing to be remembered in her good books, now that the German armies were beginning to crumble at the edges, like an ice-floe in spring.

One day she saw not only Baruch taking exercise in the courtyard, but Leon, too, his face almost hidden behind a mask of bruises and swollen lips. She was aware that Leon had spotted her, from a faint lift of eyebrow and tilt of head. But it was elementary common sense to them both that they should not publicly acknowledge there had been any contact between them, so long as they were unaware whether or not the authorities connected them with each other. There were also several prisoners in British and American officers' uniform, of whom one was a girl. Clearly this was the girl to whom reference had been made both by the warder and the official who had examined her. She was a slight creature, about Mila's build, but probably a year or two older. This was the sort of girl, that Mila already was, pledged to the sort of service for which Mila, too, would have volunteered if by this time she had been translated to the land she dreamed of. It was no light service, voluntarily to abandon a land in which one still lived in safety, to undergo the training of a paratrooper, as arduous as any in the whole book of war, so that one might be dropped in a land occupied by malignant hosts, where a false step might mean death by firing squad, or in the gas chamber.

This girl was a slight creature, but she had an air of breeding and authority, which were not mitigated by the signs of recent manhandlings, the eye which was one large bruise, the gap where a tooth had been knocked out. During the course of Elsie's second examination, the Captain had said of this girl that she had been communicative. That's an obvious lie, said Elsie to herself, seeing the Palestinian girl for the first time that morning at exercise in the courtyard. The imbecile wanted to shake me. The girl could no more blab than a lump of

stone . . . or my own Mila. . . .

She hastily switched her mind off at an angle. She did not want to dwell on the thought of Mila being cross-examined and having teeth knocked out.

I wonder where this girl comes from, she asked herself, and what her name is. I must try and find out.

They could not, there in the prison, answer the first question. But they could answer the second. The girl's name was Hanna Senesch. In days to come, long after she was dead, her name was to blossom like a flower, out of the gravel of the prison yard. As already was the case with Gisi Fleishmann, called also Miriam, of Bratislava. The odour of their names was to be carried far and wide, over land and sea.

On the day following Elsie's first glimpse of Baruch, Leon, and Hanna Senesch, the irrepressible Baruch somehow got himself the job of scrubbing the floor outside Elsie's cell. It was not difficult, for discipline in the prison was getting easier from day to day. He also got the warder to leave the door of her cell open for a few minutes, so that they might have a few words with each other over the scrubbing-bucket.

"*Ni, yiddene,*" he muttered, "so they've got you, too. I think it was my fault. I'm sorry."

"Who knows? May be not. Tell me. Did they get hold of . . . my girl . . . you remember, I asked you?"

"No. I was told they got away over the roof tops. Are they treating you all right?"

"Yes. And you?"

"Could be worse."

"Give greetings!"

"Come on, now!" the warder shouted, judging the conversation at an end. "Keep moving! Get on with your job, you!"

"O.K.!" said Baruch. There was a tinny clatter as he pushed his bucket away. "*Shalom!*" he whispered, winking with his good eye. "I'll meet you for coffee at the Herzlia!" He had time to see the puzzled look on her face. "Tel Aviv!" he explained. Then the door was shut on her.

Yes, there was no doubt the prison discipline was getting easier all the time, as the Russians were getting closer and closer. Two or three weeks ago

they had crossed the Czechoslovak frontier. Day by day, and from several directions, they were approaching the Hungarian frontiers. At last, on October the ninth, they crossed them. Day by day they captured more towns and cut through fresh swathes of territory. The rumour was brought into the prison that the Regent was going to try to come to terms with the Russians. In the town itself the regulations in restraint of the Jews began to be lifted. When the High Festivals came round, the Jews were allowed out on the streets all day so that they could go and pray at the synagogue services. Many hundreds threw their yellow stars away; many displayed them with pride and defiance, convinced that the badge of shame would shortly be converted into a talisman of safety. On the tenth the Russians swept over the Carpathians on a wide front. All Hungary lay flat and easy before them, like a bowling green. In the hotels, the offices, the shops, people not hitherto notorious for their left-wing sympathies hailed each other with the sign of the raised fist. The next day the towns of Clij and Szeged were way behind the Russian front. The march on Budapest was beginning. A shudder of terror and delight ran across the whole land like the wind across the tops of a field of corn. In the prisons the warders called each other *Tovarish*, and entered the cells of prisoners with one fist saluting Moscow and the other fist crammed with matches and sweets and cigarettes.

“Your tea, *gnädige Frau!*” announced Elsie Silver’s warder, as he entered her cell with a tray. He had got quite a nice tea-pot and teacups from somewhere, probably from one of the high officials. “Some toast, also, please!” he pointed out.

“Thank you!” she fluted. “*Mit Vergnügen.*” As she raised her teacup to her lips, she crooked her little finger, like a vicar’s wife at a rectory tea-party.

And then, a couple of hours later, the warder again entered her cell, bearing another sort of gift.

“Hi, madame,” he said. “Pack up your things you’ve got here, will you? The warden, he wants to see you in his room.” Then he winked at her broadly.

“What’s it all about?” she wanted to ask. But she held back. It was not likely he actually knew anything, but the wink indicated what he thought. She passed a comb through her hair, collected what she had, hardly more than would go into a sponge-bag, and went off after the warder.

“Listen,” the warder said, as they moved towards the stone staircase. “I’ve treated you all right, haven’t I?”

“Indeed.”

“You’ll put in a good word for me, won’t you, if anything happens?”

She pounced on the moment.

“I have one or two friends here. If you can lend them a hand. . . .”

“Which ones?” They were up the staircase now, round on the next corridor.

“The one who was cleaning the passage, remember? And we talked a few words. It’s him and *his* friend, really. And that girl in British uniform.”

“That girl in British uniform? Oh yes. Hanna Senesch, they call her. Her proper name’s got out. Her mother’s in here too. They’re keeping a sharp eye on that Senesch girl, I can tell you. She’s big stuff. The same goes for her pal, the one you’re talking about. As for *his* pal—he don’t need helping.”

“Why? What have they done to him?” Elsie asked anxiously.

The warder winked again. “Jumped through the window,” he said. “Cost a pretty penny, too. That’s why they’ve shoved the two others out of harm’s way. It’s what all the row’s about.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. They were at the office door now.

It was not the Governor who awaited her. She had not seen the Governor, who seemed to prefer to act through an assistant, so that if anything was found to have been ill-done, it was the assistant who would get the blame.

“Good morning, Madame Ostier.” It was the spectacled Captain who had conducted her examination.

Ostier? Yes, of course. Ostier.

“Good morning, Captain.”

“It’s been decided to transfer you to another establishment. Your bag’s there, by the wall.”

“If I may ask, where is this other institution? Is it far off?”

He hesitated a moment, then decided not much harm could be done by a civil answer.

“It’s at Buda,” he said. “Under the Fortress.”

“It sounds a little grim,” she said. “If I may ask one more question, what is the necessity for this move?”

He looked at her through the sides of his spectacles.

“We’re not in the habit of answering questions. Nor of allowing them to be asked.” Then he softened again. “It’s a bit old-fashioned, but you’ll be all right.”

“But why——”

“Listen, madame. You can stay if you like. It’s not a regular order.” An odd phrase. What could that mean? Nothing meant anything any more. Everything was topsy-turvy.

She looked him straight in the eyes, trying to get some clarification out of him. He stared back, then, after a few seconds, dropped his eyes.

“Well?” she asked him at length.

“Everything’s a chance,” he said. “I’d take it.”

“Thank you,” she said. “If I come through, who knows——”

“Who knows?” he repeated. “Your bag’s there. The bridges are still passable. They dropped two good ones last night.”

“Captain!”

“Yes?”

“There are one or two other people here. If this move is really a good thing _____”

His mouth shut like a clamp.

“You’d better push off, now.”

“Good-bye, Captain.” She knew she was lucky. It could have been a lot worse than that.

“Good-bye.” He turned to the papers on his desk.

They bundled her off into a Black Maria, and she settled herself on the hard slatted bench against the hard side. It was quite cold. It’s a bit like being a chop inside a refrigerator, she told herself. Or being a corpse in a hearse. It was rather a gruesome thought. She smiled to the attendant beside her, to get the chill out of the air.

“A bit like a corpse in a hearse,” she said gaily, in German. “No?”

The man answered in Hungarian.

“Hold your snout!” he barked. The orders from higher up hadn’t gone down to his level.

That’s *that*, she said to herself. He just doesn’t *know*, poor dear. He doesn’t know I’m Beatrice and Isolde and everything. He’s probably quite a nice husband to his little wife. A Black Maria! Me! Elsie of the Rolls-Royces and the Isotta Fraschinis. I wonder what they’d say, all my little Silver sisters, if

they saw me trundling along in a Black Maria? That's exactly where I thought she'd end up, they'd say, most of them. But apparently I'm not quite finished yet. What's it all about? Why did he want to shift me? I mean, Apor. Nothing will ever convince me Count Apor isn't at the bottom of this. What's he up to? He smells something in the wind. What can it be, then? I've got a bit of an idea. (There was a resonance beneath them. They were crossing one of the bridges. They were going over to Buda, as the Captain had said.) Apor's got wind, somehow, the Germans are going to take over the place I've just come from. The Germans are much more efficient at this sort of thing. Is that it? It won't be quite such a picnic in a German-run prison.

We'll know all about it quite soon, she promised herself.

The Fortress prison was certainly more old-fashioned as the Captain had said. The gates were very forbidding, indeed. The bell reverberated frighteningly. The gates closed to behind the Black Maria with a horrible clangour. The unpleasantness didn't stop short there in the cobbled entrance. It was a military prison, with military personnel. A couple of soldiers in a dingy office took a few particulars. One wiped his nose on his sleeve. The other explored his ear with the point of a pencil. Then they took her off to a cell, and forgot about her for a good many hours. The plumbing was inferior; so was the food, when it came at last, and it had not been very hearty in the Pest prison.

Oh dear, oh dear, she said to herself. I'm quite homesick for the other place. A home from home, that's what it was. And one had friends up and around.

She didn't realize till next morning that there was one really attractive feature about her new residence, which was worth any amount of chintz curtains and brass warming-pans. Her cell door wasn't locked. She was free to go in and out when she liked, and talk to people, and play hop-scotch in the prison courtyard, if she felt like it. There was even a sort of running buffet in the prison kitchen. When one was hungry one could at least get a chunk of bread and something out of a big basin, a sort of thin gruel like paper-hanger's paste.

"Yes, yes, Count Apor" (she said to herself). "I'm beginning to get the point."

In this new prison the company was rather morose. There was quite a fair proportion of Jews, who, for the most part, had committed various offences against the anti-Jewish laws. They had been seen out with a Gentile girl, or been out-of-doors in the forbidden hours, or tried to get away with not wearing the yellow star. Now and again, some miserable Jew would be pounced on for

no particular reason and taken out to the little blind yard behind the laundry. A shot would ring out, and that was the last of him. That was unnerving, because it was quite capricious, it didn't make sense at all. But this was a prison, after all, not a Holiday Hotel, even though the Russians were getting so close you could almost feel their hot breath on your face.

A number of people in Budapest, outside the walls as well as inside, were feeling rather like that during the tense days that now piled themselves on each other like sacks of hot ash. Not so much the working-classes and the soldiers, of whom some had political ideas of their own. It was on the more prosperous levels that they remembered glumly the communist revolution of Bela Kun that followed the First World War. Of course, they too, wanted to be liberated from the Germans and the Gestapo and the bombing by night and day; but they would have preferred the liberating to come from another quarter.

Up in his suite of rooms in the Fortress that overhung the prison, Admiral Horthy was going through exactly this mental ordeal. There was nobody down there in the prison courtyard more morose than he. The soldiers on guard duty brought bulletins down to the prisoners from hour to hour. He's going to surrender. He's not going to surrender. This afternoon. No, not this afternoon, to-morrow. The Germans are bringing up twenty fresh divisions. Where from? Stalingrad? It's on the wireless. It's not on the wireless. He'd rather shoot himself first.

Admiral Horthy did not shoot himself. On the morning of October the fifteenth he made a broadcast to the nation, announcing that he was asking the Russians for an armistice. Everybody was to remain quietly in their homes, or go on quietly with their jobs. Nothing would happen to anybody so long as everybody behaved themselves. Long live the Hungarian Monarchy!

There was about as much sparkle in the Regent's voice as there was in the voice of the British Prime Minister on the morning when this other statesman announced the formal beginning, as opposed to the formal ending, of a war. But it was a fine day, the sun shone, a warm wind blew. Late flowers bloomed brightly on the lips of bomb craters. It was Sunday, and the church-bells rang out noisily. If anything went wrong, the bell-ringers could always maintain the bells had an ecclesiastical, rather than a political, significance. A great number of people were in a similar state of mind that day. The Hungarians did not like the Germans, and though the town was thick with them, it was expected the Germans would withdraw overnight. It was inconceivable that they would want to fight for the city which, apart from the heights of Buda, was quite indefensible. Besides, it was such a beautiful city, with such splendid buildings and bridges and lovely hotels and jolly cafés and gay gypsy bands and

delightful dark-eyed women. One does not let the hot pumice of war shower on such a city. So the Germans would go and the Russians would come. To some that also was unpleasant. But it was all a matter of the geopolitics of war. This happened to be the Russian area of war-making. Soon the Jugoslavs would come rolling up from the South, along with the British detachments there had been so much tittle-tattle about over the coffee-cups. And after the British, the Americans. . . . One had so many relatives in the U.S.A.

So the sensible thing to do was to put a good face on it, that day of the surrender. The Germans would go, the Gestapo would go, the bombing would stop. And, as a matter of fact, the bombing *did* stop. There was no daylight raid, no night raid. So let's tie posies of flowers on to the headlamps of tramcars, and the handle-bars of bicycles. Let's go strolling out along the embankments of the Corso, and ask for a bottle of Tokay, and see if we can get Magyary Czermak to strike up the glad strains of "Ho, Czinka! Hi, Czinka!"

And the whole thing was done with so little trouble and excitement. The German troops were hardly to be seen on the streets all day long. The same was true of the Arrow Cross boys. It was obvious that the Regent had anticipated that there might be a little fracas here and there, for he had his patrols out in the streets. But the odd thing was that the patrols consisted exclusively of officers. You would see a colonel commanding a captain and two or three lieutenants, all with sub-machine-guns held at the ready. Perhaps he was afraid to send the ordinary soldiers out, for fear they set up a little Soviet of their own, to welcome the advancing Russians. All in all, these Horthy patrols only added to the gaiety of the occasion.

The intellectuals and working-men of Budapest, who preferred the doctrines of the Kremlin to the doctrines of the Var, were in especially good temper. So, of course, were the Jews. There was a light in the Jews' eyes, and a song on their lips. There was also a curious air of I-told-you-so in their demeanour. They had known that something was going to save them at the last moment. "Treblinka and Ausschwitz can't possibly happen here," they had said from the very beginning. The sombre death-trains were, of course, still piled up in the sidings, but they would rust there. So yellow cloth stars were ripped off clothing, and yellow stars on paper placards torn down from over the main entrances of the Jewish houses. Old folk stuck out their chests like youngsters and paraded the streets with an incredulous joy in their eyes. The Jewish lads working in the town's labour-battalions simply dropped their picks and shovels and went back crowing to their families. Here and there, in certain house-blocks, one or two sour faces uttered a word of warning. The Germans aren't finished yet, they said. The Arrow Cross is stronger than it's ever been

before. There's going to be trouble. There'll be attacks on Jewish houses. Let's get arms together, while the going's good—buy them, borrow them, steal them. Let's keep a day and a night guard. There's going to be trouble. But nobody took the least notice of them. It was surrender. It was armistice. It was peace. Now and again, from some front far-off, the wind brought the muffled boom of shell-fire. But the fighting would not concern them any more, Jews or Gentiles. The river of war would roll on towards Prague, Vienna, Berlin, leaving Budapest high and dry like the Margaret Island, with tables out on the pavements, and gypsy bands plunking away under the vine trellises. And you'd soon be leaving these hideously cramped Jewish homes, where you were herded twenty in a room with Polish Jews and Roumanian Jews and all sorts of foreign riff-raff; and you'd have your own nice, airy apartment given back to you, with compensation. And you'd go back where you started, the baker to his oven, the accountant to his ledgers. The Lord does not desert his own. Probably those Treblinka and Ausschwitz figures were just a *little* bit exaggerated. You know what people are like when they get excited.

But it did not turn out that way.

There were great goings-on that day in the Fortress prison, too, not so much among the regular criminals, who hardly expected these new developments to affect their situation, as among the political and racial prisoners. The Communist prisoners were very cock-a-hoop. They immediately got together and appointed a sort of Soviet, which sent a deputation to the Governor demanding instant liberation. The Governor was polite, but pointed out that the offer to surrender had not yet been accepted by the Russians, and it would only lead to confusion if action was taken too precipitately.

The Jews were hardly less jubilant. The warders behaved as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. All gave the Moscow salute, because there was no equivalent, in manual gesture, of the five-pointed Star of David. Suddenly a radio appeared in the cell of one, Sandor Otthon, a rich Jewish grain-merchant, who had been arrested for contumaciously refusing to give up his little Gentile sweetheart, a blonde little "bundle" from Szolnok. It is possible he had had his radio hidden in his blankets for some time, for he was still in a position to have useful little presents circulated this way and that. At all events, it was only a few minutes after Admiral Horthy's announcement on the radio that Otthon was out in the courtyard announcing the news of the surrender to all and sundry. As a Jew, of course, he was immensely relieved. As a business-man he was rather apprehensive. "The Russians won't touch my flour mills, will they? They couldn't do that, could they? I built them up myself. I came to Budapest

from Jasry with four *fillérs* in my pocket. Just four.” He held up four fingers to emphasize the point. “What do you think?” No one having any clear views on the matter, he went to discuss it with the Governor, and to suggest that he be allowed to leave the prison forthwith to give the matter of his flour mills his immediate attention. The Governor was not helpful. The Russians had armies, the Jews had not.

In the meantime, the radio was carried out into the courtyard for the general enlightenment and entertainment of the prisoners. The political and racial prisoners gathered round it with beaming faces, not so much because of the news they heard—there was singularly little comment on the Regent’s proclamation—as because it was so wonderful to be listening to a radio at all, as if they were ordinary citizens in their own homes. Which they would be quite soon, of course. The criminals had rather more freedom that day than they were used to. But they were rather snobbish, and preferred to keep themselves to themselves. Messages kept on coming in all day, brought in by warders off duty, or motor-drivers, or laundresses. There was nothing actually confirmed on the wireless, but the most sensational news was flying around. The Regent had committed suicide. Ferenc Szálasy, the Führer of the Arrow Cross, had taken over, and been shot. Hitler had ordered a great convergence of his armies to push the Russians back from Budapest. There had been still another conspiracy against Hitler, and this time they had got him. At the same time, a couple of bottles of *slivovitz* had turned up from somewhere. It did not go a long way, because the first people to get their hands on the bottles had hogged a cupful each, and lay in a stupor in a corner. But a couple of baskets of white rolls, and a yard or two of sausage, had been brought in. Those who were on hand were lucky. The others thought of the white rolls and the sausages they would eat next day, or the day after.

Everybody went to bed as happy as sand-boys. And there was no air-raid, either.

I don’t suppose Apor will turn up personally to get me out, Elsie Silver said to herself, as she lay back musing happily on her bed, watching the smoke-rings curl up into the air. That’s not the Count’s way. I wonder whom he’ll send for me? That little pansy friend of his in the Army, who showed me round the city when I first came? No, I don’t think so. It’s the Russians, after all, to whom the old Admiral has surrendered. Little Vilmost will be lying on his bed-spread, biting pillows, kicking and screaming. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if my Mila were waiting on the other side of those horrible gates? Wouldn’t it be wonderful? Oh no. It would be too good to be true.

Too good to be true. . . .

IV

But it was not easy to get to sleep that night. There was some sort of military action going on in the immediate neighbourhood, up there in the Var. It sounded as if big guns and tanks were involved, but that was probably because it was so close. It was impossible to tell what was going on, but it was very likely some castle intrigue, one of the factions trying to get in first with the new set-up. The action died down, and some of the prisoners fell asleep at last. But most remained awake. They were restless. It was as if there were electric needles in the harsh blankets they lay on.

So at length they rose, and, finding that the cell doors remained unlocked, they went out into the corridors, and walked up and down, talking to each other. Then they got down and squatted on their haunches. Mr. Sandor Otthon had his radio out, and it was quite cheerful with all those American dance records blaring away. You could not help keeping time with your foot on the stone pavement, or your finger wagging in the air. Mr. Otthon himself was looking doubtful, as if he felt there ought to be some little fee paid over to him on the side. Elsie Silver sat alone, her eyes shut, her face lifted in the wan electric glare, trying to convince herself, perhaps, that that was sunlight. She felt herself a bit of a new girl, and didn't feel like speaking unless she was spoken to. It was pleasant listening to that music. She thought it was something out of one of the pre-war Irving Berlin musicals, which she had had in Berlin on a record. It was "Jew" music, of course, and for that reason it had not officially existed. But the best people always had the "Jew" records, just as they had coffee, or bananas.

Then, suddenly, in the middle of a bar, the dance music stopped. It might have been a failure of the set, or a technical breakdown at the radio station. Yet it was too abrupt for that. The silence which followed now, and lasted for about one minute, was not really a silence. If you were close to the set, you could make out a hurried whisper, someone clearing his throat, the reverberation of a stamped heel. But even if you were some distance away, you knew that something had happened. That silence, that suspension rather, was as frightening as any words that might follow. There had been several such radio suspensions in recent years in the history of European countries, and most of them had been ominous in the extreme. The groups and couples strolling in the corridor stopped and looked towards the little box. The warders that had been lounging around, propping up the walls, stiffened suddenly. Elsie Silver remained inert. Only her head moved a fraction of an inch towards the instrument.

Then there was a loud click. A voice took command of the ether, sharp,

decisive.

“Attention! Attention all Hungarians! The Regent, Admiral Horthy, has requested Mr. Ferenc Szálasy to take over his duties. The offer of an armistice has been withdrawn. We fight on till victory crowns our arms over the Red Murderers! Long Live the Hungarian Monarchy! Heil Hitler!”

The address ceased. Again there was silence for some moments, the uneasy silence of the live, unfed microphone, then there was the unmistakable hiss of a needle set in the grooves of a gramophone record. Then suddenly, the volume at its maximum, the *Horstwessellied* battered the air. The Jewish prisoners shivered though no wind entered from any open window. Those who had been walking about in small groups turned their backs on each other, and desultorily walked away. Each felt he could not bear his companion’s eyes. They were aware of a curious shame, as if they had been found out in some contemptible foolishness, the foolishness of feeling that things, after all, could go well for them, being Jews. It was not so with the Communists. They remained together, for the most part, discussing this latest development in undertones. They did not take things personally, as the Jews did. It was a game, a conspiracy, on a vast planetary scale. They had thought they were one move ahead. They realized they were not. They were several moves behind. They would very likely be shot now by the Fascist hyenas. There were others, in the secret cells of fields and factories who would sit down to the chessboard and plan the later moves that would lead to the Socialist triumph. Then the Communists, too, separated, and went off, a little more purposefully, for the habit of keeping apart so that they did not compromise each other, quickly re-established itself. Elsie Silver rose from where she squatted against the wall. They all went back to their cells.

“Get along there! Move on!” roared the warders, thrusting with their shoulders and pommelling with their fists. They were pretending to themselves and the prisoners and the Governor and Szálasy, the new head of the government, that this was the end of a normal recreation period, and that at most a minute late the prisoners were being shoved back where they belonged. “At the double, Jew-swine!” they roared. With heavy feet, the Jews dragged themselves back to their cells again. Those who remembered the sound of heavy fighting close by now realized that it must have been the Regent himself in his castle that Szálasy had been attacking. Perhaps at this moment the Regent, like Dolfuss on an earlier occasion, lay weltering in his own blood. Perhaps he was high in ether at this moment, being flown to some residence designated by the German Führer, an involuntary guest. It was all one to them.

As for the rich Jewish miller, Mr. Sandor Otthon, he saw the chutes and

stacks of his flour mills fade against a shimmer of blood, like the palm trees of an oasis against the desert haze.

It was an hour or so later. Elsie sat on her bed, and pondered. She had heard the warder with his clanging bunch of keys come heavy-footed up the corridor to her cell and lock her in. That was some minutes ago.

What was to happen now? That depended, so far as she could see, on two things. One was the present situation of Count Apor. Had they got wise to him yet? There was no particular reason why anybody should get wise to him now, any more than at any time during the last few years. On general grounds, if there had been no dreadful accident, he should be riding high with Szálasy and the rest of the gang. He might even have the audacity to demand the immediate release of the woman who had stolen his heart away.

But it would be really crazy, wouldn't it, to ask the Szálasy gang to release an enemy agent, who was also a Jew-sow? Wouldn't that be the same thing as making a noose and asking them to hang him up in it? Besides, would the Szálasy boys be their own masters to any degree at all? From now on, the Germans pulled the strings, and they were no romantics.

There was another element in the situation. She was sure that the invisible arm of Apor had been operating to save her all this time, from the moment of her arrest. It had operated to make things easier for her in both prisons, and to have her transferred, for some reason known to himself, from one prison to the other. But the situation was developing now, from hour to hour, in unforeseeable directions. How far could the warrant of Apor be expected to extend now? Anything could happen now, at any moment, anything at all.

Well, she would not moan and bang her head against the wall. If anything ugly was to happen, it would be soon over. She had a confidence, outside all common sense, that Mila was alive somewhere, and Mila would weather the storm. Bless the girl! Did she want to go to Palestine? She would go, sooner or later, to Palestine. She was clever and she was lucky.

Then the key turned in the door. It was the warder again. He had come up much more silently than last time. She had not heard him. He opened the door and locked it.

That answers one or two questions, Elsie Silver said to herself.

V

The warder—Peterdy, his name was—brought her a good deal of news during the next day or two, and there was a good deal to bring; excepting for

the renewed air-raids, which announced themselves. What he told her chiefly related to the Jews. He did not treat her as a Jew herself. First, she was French, perhaps even American, which made things easier. Then she was the girlfriend of the famous Jew-baiter, Pali Apor, so it was probably all a joke that she was Jewish.

As far as she could gather there was hardly a faint spurt of the Warsaw spirit, here among the Budapest Jews. The rot had eaten in too far; things had been too easy for too long. On the morning of the Szálasy proclamation, the S.S. took things in hand, for they knew how to handle Jews. The Arrow Cross boys insisted on tagging on to them, but many of them were teenagers carrying museum-piece rifles. They did not get properly organized for several days. So the S.S. men in the foreground and the Arrow Cross boys in the rear went roaring round the town, putting the Jews where they belonged. A number of Jews were shot out of hand for appearing in the streets without their yellow stars. They happened to include a few impeccable Gentiles of a slightly swarthy appearance, such as are not uncommon in those regions, but that was bad luck. Back went the yellow star on clothing and over the entrances into the Jewish houses. Back went the firemen and the mechanics to the death trains in the sidings. They would be getting up steam soon enough. In the meantime, permanent imprisonment in the Jewish houses was decreed. It was decided to get on with the job of building a wall round the central Jewish area on the Polish pattern. There was not enough material or labour for a brick wall, so it would have to be a wooden one. But a wooden wall was better than none at all.

VI

The atmosphere in the Fortress prison during the next three days, as in every similar institution in Budapest, military and civil, was gloomy in the extreme. It was as if the personnel were violently trying to make up for whatever grace they had lost during the brief spell of amiability that followed the Regent's proclamation. The food, where it was dished out at all, was shocking. The behaviour of the warders was odious. With a terrifying frequency, the shots rang out in the blind yard beyond the laundry. There was a sort of inverted kindness in that black programme. If the misery was to last for long, it was far more attractive to die quickly than to live.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that the climax came, at about ten o'clock. The prisoners should have been out taking exercise in the prison-yard, but that indulgence had been remitted during these last three days. So Elsie Silver was in her cell when the hubbub spread like the smell of a fire. First there was shouting and the thump of feet, then the noise of cell doors being unlocked and thrown open. Then there were orders given, and voices raised, in

protest, and shock, and fear.

Then the key turned in the lock of her own door. It was Peterdy, the warder who until so lately had treated her with some kindness. There were two other warders with him, and a sergeant, as well as three prisoners who had been picked up along the corridor.

“Come on! Out you get!” yelled the sergeant. He had a list in his hand. “Yes, you! Ostier, as you call yourself!”

“Out, you sow!” screamed Peterdy. He was a transformed man.

“Can I——” Elsie asked, looking round the cell towards the two or three small personal things she had with her.

“No, Jew-bitch!” yelled another warder. “Just as you are!”

“You won’t need nothing where you’re going to!” added Peterdy. It was odd how totally transformed he was. The sally was followed by a roar of laughter.

“Very well!” her lips went. She looked pale, and very beautiful, as she walked out through the doorway. Peterdy’s hand was lifted to clout her across the face as she passed by, as a sort of expiation for the contemptible weakening he had lately been guilty of. But the hand wavered and fell. It was as if such beauty carried around it a protective zone of air, from which wickedness fell away like a shot crow.

The group continued round the corner, while several more cells were unlocked and the prisoners ordered out. Out in the front court, a parade of prisoners was assembled, some forty or fifty, mainly men. They were mainly Jews, too, as if the people who had been charged with selecting them had decided that to choose Jews for such a party as this seemed likely to be would be most satisfactory all round.

“Get along there, you lot!” Elsie and her group were told. They were pushed towards the end of the line near the huge entrance-gates. A few yards away from them, a group of two civilians and four men in uniform were conferring, though it was hardly correct to call it a conference. The men in uniform were quite clearly dictating the course of events, if only by force of the pistols that each man had at his belt, and the Sten guns with which two jackbooted youths in the arch of the prison-entrance were covering the whole proceedings. The two civilians were the prison Governor, hatless, extremely ill at ease, and his Secretary, a small man with a small pointed beard and extremely frightened eyes. The Secretary had a ledger in one hand, and a pencil in the other, to mark down the names of the chosen prisoners as they

were brought into the courtyard. The four men in uniform were one German officer in the S.S., typically crop-headed and bull-necked, very matter-of-fact, for there was nothing new to him in all this, and three officers of Arrow Cross formations, much younger than the Germans, full of fun and swagger, enjoying it all like a picnic, having the time of their lives. The S.S. man had a roll of names in his hand.

“Yes?” shouted the S.S. man, as the group with Elsie took up its place. “Names!” The names were called out and were checked, both on the list and on the ledger. Another small group was brought in from a further block, and their names checked. Then:

“Halt!” cried the S.S. officer. He turned to the Governor. “That will do!” he said. “That’s as many as we’ve room for!”

“I insist on one thing,” demanded the Governor. In the sharp clear air the voices were audible to everyone. “I insist on all your signatures! Most irregular!” he complained. “All most irregular!”

“Very well!” growled the German, feeling for a pen. “Come on, you! Give me that ledger!”

“Yes, yes,” piped the Secretary. “Here sir. Here it is!”

The German wrote his name on the page, then handed ledger and pen over to his colleagues.

“Put yours down, too!” he exclaimed. “Seeing he wants it!” The three Arrow Cross names were duly inscribed, and the ledger handed back to the Secretary.

“Thank you,” the Secretary murmured. There was real pleasure in his voice and eyes. Everything was regular now, almost regular. There were signatures.

There was a pause for a brief moment, as if everyone there needed to fill his lungs with breath, everyone but the S.S. man, who seemed to function upon other than normal principles. There was a shuffle of scuffling feet some yards away, as an old man, his cheeks grey as cobwebs, sagged towards his boots. Everyone turned.

“Hold up that Jew!” yelled the S.S. man. The prisoners on both sides of him raised him, and held him more or less erect between them.

Everyone turned, excepting Elsie. Her eyes were fixed upon the face of one of the three Arrow Cross young men, a broad-shouldered youngster, with a chin firmer than his fellows had. But it was a small white scar above his left cheek-bone which riveted her attention, a scar of nicked flesh. It looked

startlingly white set in those ruddy cheeks; and, as if the young man had become subconsciously aware that it was serving to identify him, he raised his fingers with an almost hypnotic action to his cheek to bring the blood into the white skin.

“Dear, dear Leon!” she said to herself. “And all the rest of you! And that means Count Apor, too!” She realized now why he had been at such pains, for it must have been he, to get her moved from the Pest prison to the Fortress prison at Buda. The Pest prison must have been taken over by the Germans straight away, and it would have been infinitely more difficult to hoodwink the Germans there with a ruse like this, straight out of melodrama. As for the Fortress prison, Apor must have calculated that it might be days, even weeks, before the Germans ventured to eject the Hungarians from the stronghold of their traditions.

Then she became aware that the little woman beside her was in dire straits. How pale she was under that jet-black hair! Her nose was as white as chalk. Elsie reached her hand for the younger woman’s hand, and squeezed it. Perhaps she would get a little comfort out of that. “Hold on, you poor dear!” she whispered under her breath.

The S.S. man was at them. He was screaming like a ship’s siren.

“Now listen, Bolshevik Jew-scum!” he yelled. “You’re going for a drive, all of you! We’ve asked for special permission to give you a picnic! There’s a couple of lorries out there, in front! Left turn! Quick march! If I get so much as a single squeak out of any of you, I’ll shoot you down like a row of rats!”

“Is this the Count’s last will and testament?” Elsie was asking herself. “Will I ever find out? Was I ever frightened, from the moment they turned the key in the lock? Didn’t I feel there was just a touch of *ham* in the performance? Is this imitation S.S. man overdoing it a bit?”

“Like a row of rats!” repeated the S.S. man, making sure the point had been taken. “Shot while trying to escape! Did you hear what I said, you lumps of filth? Left turn, I said! Quick march!” His voice rose to a shrill scream. The hand flickered towards the pistol. He stood there, as the file turned and shuffled off towards the gates, his eyes protruding like balls of grey glass. The Arrow Cross lads looked on, and tittered, and giggled. The dreadful gates pulled back. Two large German lorries, marked with neat swastikas, stood waiting there on the cobbled roadway, their engines running.

“Pile in there! Pile in!” yelled the Hungarians, prodding the prisoners with the butts of their weapons.

“Clout them!” roared the German. “Smash their brain-pans!”

The loading operation was performed with immense dispatch, as if it were urgently important to slaughter this particular cargo of Bolshevik Jew-scum five minutes earlier, rather than five minutes later. By Elsie’s side a woman slumped to the ground between the wheels. The hair was jet-black, and the little bitten-off nose was as white as chalk. It was the little woman whose hand she had comforted in the yard.

She bent down, and lifted her. It would be sad beyond words if the little woman were left behind, to be picked up and thrown on the dust-heap like prison garbage.

“Here you! Give me a hand!” she said to the man beside her. Between them the woman was lifted safe into the lorry.

“It’s all right,” the woman was saying. “I can manage.” She was game right enough, but she was trembling, like a freezing kitten. “Don’t worry!” Elsie murmured. “Perhaps it will be all right!”

Everybody had now been shoved into the lorries. The gears moved from neutral, the lorries leapt forward like released bulls. The engines roared, the brakes squealed, as they tore along the narrow streets, down steep hills, round sharp corners, till they came out on the broad esplanade of the Margit Rakpart, and so across the great Lancziid bridge into the broad streets of Pest. It was not till then that the Fascists suddenly gave tongue, where they sat nursing their guns among their passengers, some of whom were trembling like leaves and whimpering, some stone-still and staring-eyed. It was a song of the *chalutzim* that came crashing from their lips, a song of the Hebrew pioneers of Palestine.

Im ain ani li mi li . . .

If I am not for myself,

Who will be for me, and being for my own self,

What am I, and if not now, when?

The passengers behaved in oddly different ways. Some took no notice at all, as if it obviously was not happening; and if it *was* happening, then they were all dead; it was happening in the next world in fact, and they hadn’t shaken down to it yet. Others, realizing, with an inner noise like a thunder-clap, that everybody had been fooled, switched over from dreadful fear to violent anger, and started beating the pseudo-Fascists with their fists; then, coming to themselves, burst into tears and hurled themselves ecstatically upon the cheeks of their captors, and at length joined in the chorus, if they were familiar with it.

As for Elsie Silver, she sat there quiet, one thought only in her mind. Leon was sitting almost opposite her, letting go with all his lungs. She was certain, quite certain, he had recognized her, as she had recognized him, but for some reason he refrained from showing the least awareness of her existence, not even with the flicker of an eyelid.

“Why is this?” she asked herself. “What is he afraid of? Doesn’t he *want* to recognize me?” The pang of fear that was eternally present, and from time to time came back to plague her, sprang in her heart. “He’s found out! He knows I was a woman of one of the big Nazis! He won’t even soil his eyes by looking at me!” But on second thoughts, she was convinced that that was idiocy. How could he possibly have come upon a secret buried in Warsaw, under such masses of burned flesh and bombed concrete? What could it be, then? Another explanation occurred to her. It was tied up with her work for Count Apor. The Count was still on the Hungarian scene. They had not got wise to him even yet. There might be a part for Count Apor to play, under the Szálasy dispensation, more grandiose, and more terrifying, than any he had played yet. And if he was still on the scene, it was essential that he should not be compromised, even among people like her fellow-passengers, by any sign of recognition passing between his ex-mistress and a lusty young leader in the Jewish Underground.

Yes, perhaps that was it. Then, suddenly, she became aware that she was looking full into his eyes, and that she held them fast in the sockets, as if she had glued them there. Then she was aware of her own lips moving, forming two syllables. They omitted no sound, and it would have been impossible to hear it, if they had.

“Mi-la?” her lips went.

There was a delay for a fraction of a moment. Then he raised his hands in the gesture of one saying: “I don’t know.” The hands were confirmed by a shrug of the shoulders. He did not know. She inclined her head minutely to acknowledge his kindness. He did not know. The search must begin. The *chaltz* song was still blaring from Leon’s lips.

Then: “Silence!” yelled the man at the wheel. The song had gone on long enough. Perhaps some pedestrian had recognized the melody, and shown his astonishment on hearing a Hebrew ballad pour from the bowels of a Nazi lorry? But the astonishment would not have lasted, surely, if the same pedestrian had perceived that the Nazi lorry was crammed with Jews. What were they there for if it was not intended to shoot them out of hand in some schoolyard or cemetery within the next half-hour? (For there had been several such beanfeasts in the city during the last two or three days.) And if they were on their way to the slaughter was it not likely they would sing just such a

song?

But the driver had something else on his mind.

“The passes!” he called out. “We’re nearly there!”

“*Tov, chaver!*” responded Leon, in Hebrew. “O.K. comrade!” There was a brief-case under his feet, and he lifted it on to his lap. “Pass these along!” he said. “They’re Swiss passes, most of them. Some are genuine,” he added with a grin. “Take one, everybody! They’ll do to be going on with!” They had reached the Stahly Utca, a street with a number of houses marked with a Jewish star, and drew up at one in the centre. The second truck drew up behind them. “Get out, all of you! Scatter! They’re expecting you! *Shalom!*”

“*Shalom!*” repeated the reprieved Jews, as they tumbled out of the two lorries, the younger ones helping the older. “*Shalom!*”

“Let me!” said Elsie to the little woman with jet-black hair and the odd, little, blunted nose. The woman smiled, showing good teeth. The colour was back in her cheeks again, and even on the tip of her nose, so that her hair did not look so shining black as before.

“I’m all right now,” she explained, as she jumped down. “Come!” It was she who had Elsie’s hand in hers. They ran, hand-in-hand, up the stairs into the courtyard beyond. Within two minutes they had all disappeared into the houses, and the cellars beneath, and the network of passages beyond the cellars. They were safe—if it could be called safety to be Jews, and to live at that time in that city. From the hooters scattered among the districts the air-raided sirens gave tongue. High on the Var two flags fluttered side by side, the red, white, and green of the Hungarian monarchy, with the crown cresting the royal arms upon the middle band, and another red, white and green flag, this one with the middle band marked by the arrowed cross. It was satisfactory to know that everything was for the most legal in the most legal of all possible worlds.

CHAPTER IX

I

A hole had been knocked into the thick wall between one cellar and the next, and been filled up with a thin wall one brick in depth. This, too, had been laid flat recently, to allow free passage between the cellars.

“We’ll go on, yes?” panted the little woman.

“We’ll go on,” said Elsie. There did not seem much point in staying or going on. “Let me just catch my breath.”

“Phew!” the little woman said. “Are you quite sure?”

“Sure what?”

“Whether we’re dead or alive?”

Elsie smiled. If somebody else could take all this with a smile, so could she.

“Alive, I suppose. For a time, anyhow.”

They had their breath again. They moved towards the next cellar.

“Close this time, wasn’t it?” said the little woman. She talked as if hair-breadth escapes were a regular routine with her. “The *devils!* They quite took me in!”

“Yes,” agreed Elsie.

The woman suddenly changed the subject.

“This is the Stahly Utca,” she said. “Did you see?”

“I’m a stranger in Budapest,” observed Elsie.

“Polish?”

“For a time.”

“Excuse me!” This was to a couple of men who were pushing in from the cellar beyond. “That’s my foot.” There was a good deal of pushing both ways, though it did not seem likely that one cellar was much safer than the other. “Anybody would think they’d never been in an air-raid before.”

They were in the passage beyond now. Candles glowed in the cellar it led to.

“There’s always something new in every air-raid,” murmured Elsie.

The little woman suddenly stopped.

“You must think I was an awful baby,” she said.

“Why?”

“Making an exhibition of myself like that.” She obviously meant when she slumped outside the prison gates. They were in the further cellar now. The place was crowded with people and bedding and cooking utensils and anything at all. “Many of them don’t go upstairs at all now,” she explained.

“I didn’t think you a baby,” Elsie said. “It was a bit upsetting.”

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

“We prefer not to carry on like that,” she said primly. Who is “we”? Elsie asked herself. It was perhaps better not to ask. “I’m feeling all right now,” the woman went on. She banged her chest with her fist. “See?” She was a bantam of a little woman. “What’s your name?” she asked. “Unless you’d rather not tell me.”

“Why not?” said Elsie. “I’m Channah.”

“Do you know many people in Budapest? Maybe I can help you? I’m Kevehazi, Margit. Better say Margit.”

“Thank you, Margit. The only person I know’s just a young girl from Warsaw. A great friend. I must find her.

“You never know these days. She may be in this cellar. Oh, Sandor!” She had spotted a young man trying to get a flame out of the choked jets of a primus stove.

“Katya!” said the young man. (People had different names according to the world they were for the moment inhabiting.) “So they let you go?”

She turned, smiling, to Elsie.

“I’m Katya, too,” she explained. “Yes, they let me out. There came an order from Winston Churchill. Auntie! Auntie!” This time it was an old woman she had spotted, just beyond Sandor. She had had her back turned away while untying the cord on a rolled mattress. “Still young and beautiful, auntie!” She threw her arms round the old woman and kissed her warmly.

“So they didn’t finish you off this time?” said the old woman. “They will next time. Who’s this?” (She meant Elsie.) “Another of your lot?”

“Maybe,” said Margit shortly. “Ah, that’s better!” The primus was going

now. “A cup of tea, yes, Channah?”

Suddenly Elsie was aware her throat was so unspeakably in need of a cup of tea, she couldn't even say: yes, thank you.

Thank you, her head nodded.

“Next week with Pravchenko!” muttered the young man. The primus was threatening to go out again, and he was thrusting away fiercely with the plunger.

“Pravchenko?” Elsie said to herself. “Pravchenko?” She had heard the name somewhere.

“Maybe?” said Margit. She looked quickly at Elsie, and looked quickly away again. “You won't tell them what a fool I made of myself up there, will you?”

“No,” promised Elsie. “I won't.”

“There'd be a scandal. They'd tell all the friends and relatives. They'd say I was going to have a baby. You know what people are like in Budapest, don't you?”

“I can guess,” Elsie murmured. *Pravchenko*. Where had she heard the name?

“Sit down everybody already,” said the old woman. “You make me tired, talk, talk, talk!”

They sat down. The cup of tea was ready after a time. It was one of the best cups of tea there had ever been. It was good to have friends, when you didn't even have a toothbrush in all the world. *Pravchenko*? Who on earth could Pravchenko be?

Then it came to her.

It was an evening in the First Aid Post in the cellars of the Warsaw ghetto, and a badly wounded Russian agent had been brought in. While she was tending his wounds, he demanded that Raven be brought in, the young Russian girl who played so gallant a part in the ghetto uprising. He had proceeded to give the girl news of events in Russia, and news of her own folk, speaking in Russian, a language Elsie did not understand. It was during this account that Elsie had first heard the name, *Pravchenko*, closely coupled with the name, Boris Polednik. At the moment, the name, Pravchenko, meant nothing to her, but the name, Boris Polednik, meant a great deal, for it was the name of a man who, many years ago, had married her own sister, Susan. Then, comparing the

image of Susan in her mind, with the image before her of Raven in the flesh, the hair, the nose, the eyes, the lanky frame, she perceived the girl was her own niece, the daughter of Polednik and Susan. During the next day or two, Elsie had learned more. She learned that the name Boris Polednik had been closely coupled with the name of Pravchenko, for they were one and the same person. He was a soldier of extraordinary strategic intelligence, and if there was one man to whom the arrest of the enemy's onslaught on the Caucasus had been due, it was this same Pravchenko, her brother-in-law, Polednik.

It was over a year and a half ago that, down in the Warsaw cellars, Elsie had heard the name, Pravchenko, so far as she knew, for the first and only time. And now, down in the cellars of Budapest, she heard the name again. The cellars of Warsaw, the cellars of Budapest—those had been the two poles between which her life had swung.

“*Next week with Pravchenko,*” the young man had muttered, over the hissing jets of his primus stove. It was clear that Pravchenko-Polednik was the General in charge of the armies now sweeping towards Budapest. *Bang-Crash!* That was one of Polednik's bombs that had fallen, maybe a hundred yards away, and the whole block had trembled to its foundations.

She smiled. They were a notable lot, these Silver girls. They married the most entertaining men.

“Why do you smile, Channah?” Margit was very much herself again. She had eyes like a hawk.

“Because the world's a small place,” said Elsie, “and because this tea is so good.”

II

It was not next week, nor even next month that General Pravchenko had a dish of tea in Budapest. The Germans turned and bit fiercely. On the whole, the Russians were beyond their reach. So they fastened their teeth on the Jews, and chewed their flesh and ground their bones into powder.

Pravchenko had moved fast, and cut off the railroad to Germany. But he could not for some time swing his armies round to the south-west, while the Germans retained the railway stations in Pest, and the heights of Buda; so the Budapest-Vienna road remained open for many tragic weeks. There were other things to do, for the time being, with the rolling stock accumulated in the yards, and the order was given that the pedestrian march to the crematorium, which had already emptied most of the Hungarian countryside of its Jews, should now drain off the capital's Jews from the houses in which they were

herded.

The Arrow Cross, under the general supervision of the S.S., put their shoulders to the wheel. For a week or more, they worked themselves to the bone, emptying one Jewish house after another, and driving their inhabitants to the assembly points from which the great trek began. They took no notice whatsoever of the *Schutzpasse*, the passes which gave their holders the protection of the Vatican, and of the governments of Sweden and Switzerland. A Jew? Off you go.

The purge was on the highest, as well as the lowest, levels, political as well as racial. The immediate stimulus to the top-level purge occurred only a day after the Szálasy putsch, when General Miklos, the Hungarian Commander-in-Chief, deserted to the Russian forces. All troops were at once confined to barracks. All officers and political leaders who were in any way suspect, whether because they had at any time been heard to utter liberal sentiments or because the taint of Jewish blood was traceable in their veins, were arrested, however distinguished their families and valuable their services. A number of the most eminent were at once dispatched to Sopronköhida, a village on the Austro-Hungarian frontier, court-martialled, and shot. This was the fate even of the envenomed anti-Semite, Count Pali Apor, who (it was suddenly remembered) had had a Jewish mother.

“That’s no loss, anyhow,” said Margit to Elsie Silver, as the news was announced on the radio furtively stuffed under a heap of sacks.

“What’s no loss?” asked Elsie. There had been an enumeration of names, and they had had no meaning for her, so she had gone on again with the effort to wash her hair in half-an-inch of water at the bottom of a rusty basin.

“They’ve shot Count Apor,” Margit explained. “You wouldn’t know about him. He was about the most virulent of the lot. A mad dog. They say he had a Jewish mother. Those are the worst sometimes.”

“No,” said Elsie, “I wouldn’t know about him,” and went on washing her hair.

It was a queer business, waiting in a “Jewish House,” as they called it, with a yellow star over its front door and a yellow star on your own breast—waiting for your brother-in-law to come and get you out of it. Your brother-in-law was, at least, a Russian. He always had been a Russian (so far as you could remember) in the incredibly long ago days before the First World War. And you? What were you? You had been born English. Then you had married a German, and you had become a German. And then you had gone down into the Warsaw ghetto, nameless, less than nothing. And you had gone out again with

false German papers, and got so far as Budapest. And then they asked you: Who are you? And you said, French. And now you were under the protection of the Swiss Government, with a paper that as likely as not had been forged by a gay young band of nondescript Zionists yearning for Israel.

So what are you?

There was one thing you were beyond the shadow of argument. You had a yellow star on your breast to prove it for all the world, and you were waiting for your brother-in-law to come and tear it off for you. You were a Jew at last. There were quite a number of people up and down the world who would be interested in the attestation—that is, if they were alive. There were your father and mother, bless them. “Jewish parents?” they would say. “A Jewish daughter. Well, what do you expect? She has been naughty. Well, she has been naughty. She is good now.” And there was Esther, her eldest sister, stout bastion of the Jewish virtues. “A Jewish woman? Spit on her! Break her up with stones! Nothing is too bad for her.” And there were certain girls who had been colleagues of hers in the Berlin cabarets, and had sung and danced with her. They were in the Party now. “Jewish? Of course she’s Jewish. A Jewish whore. She had as much talent as my backside.” And there was old Mr. Emmanuel, of Magnolia Street, who had come blundering into Germany, and if she hadn’t nagged poor old Willy, perhaps literally, into his grave, Mr. Emmanuel might have been there still, under a little quicklime. “She has a Jewish heart, that girl, I don’t care what you say. That’s what counts. The heart. The body is *shmay-dray*. She had a heart innocent like a new-born lamb.”

And there was Mila.

Was there? Was there a Mila any more? She refused to subject herself to a computation of mathematical probabilities. According to mathematics there could hardly be a Mila now. But according to mathematics there could hardly be an Elsie Silver, either, and here she was, with a star on her breast. She believed Mila was alive still, with the numb obstinacy that a tooth believes itself alive still. She was herself alive. They would meet somewhere, sooner or later. And whether she wore a yellow star or did not wear a yellow star, whether Mila wore one, or did not wear one, would not matter then.

But the brother-in-law would have to hurry, on his advance to Budapest. It looked like being a race between Pravchenko-Polednik and Ferenc Szálasy, with the odds heavily against the incarcerated Jews, whoever won. For really there were a great many deaths to die at your disposal. You could die very easily of malnutrition, for there was very little to eat, and what there was tasted of sawdust. There was a house-committee that gave out daily a bowl of soup

and a hunk of bread, but that did not go far. Elsie was luckier than other waifs and strays, for through Margit and Sandor she had a ready-made group of friends, and now and again one or the other pulled out an astonishing tit-bit from the rucksack that went about with them as inseparably as the hump with its camel. There might be a tin of sardines or a chunk of garlic sausage. Once even, on a famous day, there was a whole cold roast chicken. But, on the whole, when one was not frightened, one was hungry.

And one was frightened a good deal of the time, one had to face it, and became increasingly frightened as the weeks went by. Budapest was being defended by the Germans. It had, therefore, to be attacked by the Russians. The enemy had to be rooted out, however painful the process might be for beleaguered citizens. The bombing and shelling became continuous and intensive. To these was added the machine-gunning from the low-flying Russian Ratas, which raked the streets mercilessly night and day, for if you killed one German at the price of five civilians, whether well or ill disposed, it was still a good bargain.

And Operation Auschwitz continued in good earnest. Special attention was paid to the men, but it was the women's turn soon enough, and Elsie Silver had her own special agony one fine Sabbath morning. At about ten o'clock a group of bright-eyed bill-posters went round the Jewish houses in the Stahly Utca, posting bills that requested all the women between the ages of seventeen and forty-five to collect forthwith in the courtyard of number six, whence they would proceed on foot, at *nine-thirty*, to the race-course. Backed by a posse of youths, who went clanking along the passages and into every room, and by others stationed at all the exits and entrances, the back-timing was a deliberate manoeuvre, designed to produce an hysterical panic in which the victims would be immediately and irretrievably captured, like fish in a net. The proceedings were in the hands of the Arrow Cross, who burned to show their S.S. masters how well they had learned their lessons.

Elsie was curled up asleep in a corner of a small room she had been sharing with three families, when the dreadful clamour filled the place. She was still not quite awake when she found herself waiting in the street outside with a vast cortège of women, unkempt, unwashed, without food, without even the simplest objects tied up in a kerchief. It was cold. The bitter dust of bomb-damage was riding the air. The multitude of women set out along the tottering streets, attracting no attention whatsoever from the passers-by, neither triumph nor pity. If there was any expression at all in their eyes, as they pulled their fur-collared coats tighter, it was: Things might have been even worse with us. We might have been Jews.

The journey was to Tattersall's, in the western suburbs, and there on the bleak grey-green turf the women were requested to stand and wait for orders. Nothing happened. Nothing was said. Everyone was still numb with the shock of the morning and the terror of what lay ahead. After an hour or two the older women could no longer stand on their feet, so they fell down, or ventured to sit down. With beatings and buffetings the guards sought to get them to their feet again, but they fell as soon as they raised themselves, and others drooped and sank all round them in such numbers that the guards at last left them where they lay. So at last the women all sat down, back to back, to get what chill warmth and comfort they could from their huddled bodies, as numb with apprehension as a caravanserai of captured desert women awaiting, in a shadeless oasis square, the biddings of their new lords.

Then at last in the middle afternoon the proceedings started in earnest. A group of about fifty to a hundred women was scooped out from one side of the crowd and marched away, everyone knew whither only too well. Then half an hour later another group from another part of the crowd was ordered to its feet and marched off. So it continued till the freezing twilight came and went, no one knowing in each raid how many women would be chosen, and from which part of the assembly. Then it was night at last, and the surviving women were ordered to get to their feet and form into cortège to return to the Stahly Utca. And so they staggered off with quick oblique lunges of their frozen limbs, like puppets in the hands of an inept puppeteer.

For Elsie Silver, as it may have been for many others there, it was the nadir of all her sufferings. She was conscious of an abysmal humiliation, totally impersonal, disrelated from any recollection of what poor success she might at any time have scored as artist or as woman. She had lived, she was alive, and now her life was at the mercy of lurching yokels, like a soused fly trickling along a table, that a small child might, or might not, crush with a spoon.

She was humiliated, and, of course, she was afraid. She did not know if her fears would be lightened if she found in herself the capacity to pray for deliverance. She thought that was likely, for certain of the orthodox women around her were muttering Hebrew prayers to themselves, more especially at the set praying-time, and there was no doubt they, at least, were comforted, or, at least, the prayers took the sharp edge of frenzy from the long anguish of waiting.

But she could not suddenly build up a God to pray to in the grey Hungarian air, because she so sorely needed Him. If He was there, in the way believing folk said of Him, she hoped He would give her some awareness He was there. But if He *was* there, He gave her no such sign, and the endless hours passed,

and certain folk went to their doom, most of whom were women more deserving of salvation than she was, and certain other folk did not go. For the organization broke down. It was in the hands of the Hungarians, she told herself, with a smile stiff as a grin on a corpse. Had it been in the hands of Germans, the organization would have been more efficient.

As if to make up for the Arrow Cross's contemptible performance in the female operation at Tattersall's, the S.S., a few days later, in one single coup, emptied Budapest of tens of thousands of its adult Jews, and launched them with clock-like precision on the trek to Vienna. The neutral legations who had issued the *Schutzpasse* immediately protested at the tops of their voices over this latest monstrous violation of the protecting rights that had been accorded them. In a fit of nerves Szálasy for a moment recanted. Convoys of legation cars raced up the high-road along the endless columns of refugees hobbling towards the Austro-Hungarian border, and everybody who could show a *Schutzpass* was picked out and carried back to Budapest. Szálasy now realized that a good many more Jews possessed these passes than the few thousands to whom they had been issued, and the order was given to stop the deportations for a time while the situation was straightened out. All Jews with neutral passes were therefore moved into a few selected house-blocks along the Ujpesti Rakpart, the northern section of the Pest Embankment, according to the nationality of the passes they held; but the numbers were still so fantastically much larger than anyone had an idea of, chiefly in the Swiss houses, that people were crowded into rooms like passengers in underground trains at rush hours. There followed a swift series of raids on one house or another by the police and the Arrow Cross, in the attempt to root out those Jews with forged passes. The attempt to distinguish between forged and genuine was not very serious, but the issuing legations were helpless. After a time the Swedish and Vatican houses were left alone, and the raids were concentrated on the Swiss houses. It was to a Swiss house that Elsie had been taken, for it had been a Swiss pass that had been handed out to her in Leon's lorry. During the next few weeks, therefore, she was to be spared no ordeal of anxiety and terror. There were times when she said to herself that the Powers that were, *if* They were, had determined that for her transgressions there was no possible expiation, unless the heart were totally and irrevocably broken. And not yet, at least, did They castigate her with the one calamity which would so have broken it. Mila was alive somewhere, and was well. Until she knew this was not so, she could continue alive somehow, still sentient.

Moreover, the Powers did not seem to discriminate between the outrageously, and the normally, sinful, the normally, and the abnormally,

virtuous. All alike were bathed in lakes of howling fire. Whether and how they survived seemed to have no relation with their sin or their virtue.

On the morning of the third day of her immurement occurred the first *razzia*. A detachment of policemen under an Arrow Cross officer was seen through the outer windows, marching along the Embankment to the house. They marched into the courtyard, and there, through the inner windows, they were seen to disperse. In a minute or two one of the policemen knocked at the door of the apartment where in three small rooms Elsie was lodged with seventy others. "Get them to collect in the passage!" the order came. "He'll be along soon!" "He" was evidently the officer. The officer seemed to like his job, because it was three hours before he turned up, rosy-cheeked, and hiccuping softly. "Passes please!" he demanded, in the friendliest manner. The man nearest the officer showed his pass. The officer was so drunk he could not focus his eyes on the document. "Humph!" said the officer. He had given the matter his consideration. "To the kitchen!" he said. The man was somehow pushed off into the kitchen. "Next!" the officer demanded. It was a woman. Once more the eyes slid hopelessly above and below the object presented to them. "To the salon!" he said. The woman was somehow pushed off into the salon. So it went on, with a horrifying capaciousness. To the salon. To the kitchen. To the salon. It was clear that one group was to be assumed as having legitimate passes, and would therefore be spared, while the other group, having forged passes, would be led off upon the Vienna march. It was not known till the operation was all over, which fate was to befall which group. It was a particularly delicious refinement of torture, and an interesting time was had by all.

That day it was the kitchen which was the Fortunate Island. Elsie Silver was in the kitchen, and lived to endure, and to survive, two similar *razzias*. On the conclusion of the third *razzia* she could not help saying to herself somewhat dizzily that perhaps there was a special Providence which had her in its care. But she preferred not to be too sanguine about it, for the event might turn out differently on the occasion of the fourth *razzia*. She was, however, not present at the fourth *razzia*.

A fresh element entered the situation on December the ninth, when the Russians finally encircled the city and cut off the Vienna road. At once the order was given that a wooden wall was to be built, and a compact ghetto consisting of some ten street-blocks was to be set up in the heart of the principal Jewish region in Pest. Here the inmates of all the Jewish houses were to be concentrated, including those holders of valid passes till now confined in the houses along the northern embankment. Those declared, in the manner just

described, as having invalid passes were, for the most part, taken outside, shot out of hand, and dumped into the river.

Elsie Silver was once more among the fortunate ones, though it is easy to concede that it is no sort of good fortune that spares a human creature for such horrors as Budapest was to witness in these final weeks of the agony. For now the siege really began. The shelling, bombing, machine-gunning attained an unprecedented intensity. The whole population now betook itself to the cellars, excepting the Jews in the shrunken ghetto, where the cellars were so crowded it was almost impossible to sit down or stand up, so that many preferred the upper floors, where death might come a little more easily, but life was a shade less obstreperous. On New Year's Eve, the Arrow Cross gave itself a real holiday. The junketings were loud and long in the central ghetto, but they attained a pitch of historic frenzy in the houses on the northern embankment which had not yet been emptied. There a detachment set to work with gun and knife so lustily that, before dawn broke, two thousand bodies had been dragged down on to the embankment and chucked over the parapet into the frozen river. The corpses lay about for weeks till slowly the ice broke up and the eyeless, mouthless things slid into the dark water and were carried away and seen no more. Within a few days the last twitching hollow-eyed survivors from the houses on the embankment were led down, house by house, to the ghetto, through the stricken streets of the city, where not a soul was to be seen, excepting soldiers building barricades, and rescue troops digging in the ruins. As they moved feebly under a hail of shells and in the shadow of bombed buildings threatening momentarily to fall and entomb them, it was only the guards who were afraid, for by this time their charges did not feel that life held anything worth retaining. At the wooden wall of the ghetto, once more there was a nightmarish time of waiting, till houses were allocated where there was still a cubic foot or two of air to breathe.

So the ghosts from the river houses added themselves to the ghosts from the city houses, and waited till one death or another released them, so that they might take their passage across a mistier river to the river bank where they now felt they rightfully belonged. The house-committees still functioned with a chess-like accuracy, so many spectral mouths to feed, so many gallons of soup, so many pounds of corn-cake, the insubstantial banquets of the Cimmerian fields. There were funeral games, also. For though the rations were there, correctly portioned out in the communal kitchens, and though water was not lacking for the lustration of corpses, the element of sport was introduced by the hazards of going out into the open to fetch those things (hazards rewarded by the gift of an extra bowl of soup with which you might sustain your loved one for an extra day). Out in the streets and courtyards, behind safe cairns of

masonry, the Arrow Cross boys got a kick out of taking pot-shots at the volunteers, and each time they hit a target: “Ha! Ha! Ha!” they laughed robustly, and “Ha! Ha! Ha!” a thin echo came back, from the Jews watching and waiting.

Not much to watch and wait for. It was mid-January, and intensely cold. There was a single square in the constricted ghetto, and it was decreed that this place should be the cemetery. But the ground beneath the paving-sets was far too hard for digging, so the corpses were stripped and piled row upon row in the empty shops. When the shops were choked with dead, the corpses were stacked in the streets under sheets of newspaper kept down by broken bricks.

“He takes his time!” muttered Elsie Silver in her cellar, with cracked lips. “My brother-in-law takes his time!” She did not know whether the words left her mouth, or revolved in her mind like motes in a beam. But, in fact, her brother-in-law’s advance was steady and firm. Pravchenko was now at last at certain points half a mile away from the centre of the city. Then once more, and for the last time, the Germans turned at bay and held him back for one more week, and shot several more housefuls of Jews, absent-mindedly, through force of habit.

But it was not Pravchenko, not Polednik, who held the forefront of her mind, now as ever. Polednik was a giant fantasy, a big-scale joke, in the familiar Silver pattern and on the Silver scale. He would come to Budapest and go further on his way, like a god wrapped in flame and thunder. So far as she was concerned, in her capacity as his wife’s sister, and a German general’s widow, there would be as much contact between them as between a twig in the roadway, and the track of a tank which might go over it, or might not.

It was Mila, of course, who held the forefront of her mind. First she questioned everyone in the house where they had placed her, in each room, in each cellar. Then, whenever it was possible to move, she combed the whole ghetto. She kept a sharp eye open for Leon, too, for if anyone knew of Mila’s whereabouts, it would be Leon. But he, like Mila, was nowhere to be seen.

“I’m looking for my daughter,” she would say. “Her name’s Mila. Mila Cossor. She’s sixteen, nearly seventeen. She’s Polish. She’s slim, and has beautiful eyes. She worked for a *kibbutz* here. She was a keen Zionist.”

“What name did you say?” they would ask indifferently, for there were other things to think of.

“Mila,” she muttered. “Family name, Cossor.” But she remembered it was unlikely Mila would give her real name to anyone, even her fellow-workers. The same was true of Leon, too, of course. She herself did not know Leon’s

real name. So long as you live an underground existence, you try to keep your real name dark. You do not have a real name any more.

“No, I don’t remember the name,” they said. There were, after all, many strange girls in Budapest, who might have come from Poland or Austria or Bohemia or anywhere. And there were far fewer than there had been. As for the *kibbutzniks*, they were not in evidence any more. For the most part, they had been living in Gentile houses, with Gentile papers, and it was said that most of them had been caught by the police and wiped out. In the first days after the Szálasy coup they had been wonderful. With the help of certain young people from a secret organization called “Kusta” they had gone round in Arrow Cross uniforms, and rescued large groups of Jews who were being marched off to be shot, pretending they wanted to have the fun themselves. They had even penetrated the prisons once or twice with forged lists and pulled out shoals of prisoners from under the very noses of the prison staffs. But that couldn’t last very long. Most of them were caught after a day or two of high jinks, and put against a wall. There were few survivors, and these still refused to lie down and die in cellars. There had been a certain amount of organized resistance in one or two of the Jewish houses, after the ghetto wall had been set up, and undoubtedly these last forlorn *kibbutzniks* were at the bottom of it. But the resistance petered out, for most of their concealed arms had been discovered, and the Budapest Jews at large did not have the guts of the Jews in Warsaw, and could not see themselves fighting tanks with ink bottles. So the *kibbutzniks* were doubtless all dead, and everyone would be dead soon, so why go on making a nuisance of yourself?

So she went on from house to house, and cellar to cellar, asking for Mila Cossor, sometimes talking of her as her daughter, sometimes her niece, sometimes her friend, for it was hard to keep a grip on things. And then it became almost impossible to move about, and she lay there hungry and thirsty, thinking of the girl, never allowing herself to believe she would not see her again. As for Leon, he was probably dead by now. How could you carry on for long like that young man, and live?

Then the early morning of January the eighteenth came to the ghetto. It seemed no different from any other day or any other time. There was shelling. There was the dull thud of bombs. There was the stuttering of machine-gun fire out in the street. There was a sudden thrust of Germans into the cellar, with sub-machine-guns held before them.

“This time! Oh, surely this time!” Elsie Silver thought, and raised her forehead, thinking that way death might come soonest. But the Germans did not shoot. They went plunging on, treading on outstretched hands and supine

faces, towards the knocked-down one-brick wall which led from one cellar to the next. They were not out to kill this time. Someone was out to kill *them*. They were running away, running away.

There was an intense hush in the cellar. No one, if he had the strength to raise his head at all, dared look into his neighbour's eyes.

Then a few moments later, the first Russians came, also with machine-guns at the ready. One or two had lamps with which they illumined both the hollow faces in the cellar, and their own tough, stubby, wind-chopped faces, Ukrainian faces, Kalmouk faces.

"Which way?" one cried in Russian.

"There!" another answered, pointing to the gap in the wall.

"*Shalom!*" a third said. Doubtless, that one was a Jew. A moment later, they were gone.

"*Shalom!*" called out two or three who had the strength to speak. "*Shalom! Shalom!*" Others took up soon, a sound like the pattering of rain on leaves. A minute later there was a sound like the breaking of a window, muted, it might have been any distance away. Then another crack. Then silence. It might have been anything at all, two Russians shooting two Germans, or two windows being smashed in. It might have been just nothing. Perhaps the spectacle of Germans fleeing and Russians pursuing was mere hallucination. Someone struck a match and lit the stub of a candle, as if to determine the issue by that flickering beam. But no one dared turn his head to seek the eyes of his neighbour. No one dared believe that liberation had come. Any moment now, flesh-and-blood Germans might hurl themselves into the cellar to prove that those others were mere phantoms pursued by phantoms.

Then a murmur was heard, out in the courtyard. The murmur grew. A shot rang out near at hand and further away. Single voices established themselves above the thickening clamour, but you could not hear what words they said. Then quick feet came hurling down the basement stairs and along the passage. A young man thrust his head round the lintel of the cellar-opening, his hair tousled, his eyes shining in their pale sockets, like ceremonial wine in silver wine-beakers.

"*Es iss emmes!* It's true, you fools," he cried out in Yiddish. It was as if, with those dilated nostrils, he somehow smelled the doubts that narcotized the people there. "Get out! We're saved!" Then he turned and fled towards the open again. Everyone there blinked their eyes and shook their heads and grinned foolishly. Then tongues started clacking.

“They’ve come! We’re saved! There’ll be something to eat!”

“Come, get up! Let’s go out!”

“Mother! Mother! Why are you crying?”

“Malkeh, my little Malkeh!” the woman was moaning, wringing her hands. “Why shouldn’t she have lived to see this day?”

“*Yiddene!*” said an old man who had been sitting by Elsie’s side. He had a small academic beard, and wore pince-nez. “Come! Dance!” He rose, and put his arms round Elsie’s waist, then, with a force which in that scarecrow frame seemed ludicrous, pulled her to her feet and started turning her round and round, till her stomach heaved, and she had to cry out to him, pommelling his chest: “Stop! Stop! I faint!”

Some feet away there was a scuffle over a ruck-sack whose contents had been emptied on to a mattress. Two women had their hands on a lump of sausage, and were tugging at it this way and that.

“Give it me back! It’s mine!”

“It’s not! You sold it to me! I gave you that pair of shoes!”

“They were too big! I told you they were! It’s mine!”

Then one woman got the better of it, and shoved the lump of sausage in her mouth. Her eyes shone with triumph as she worked her back teeth on it. “Boo-hoo! Boo-hoo!” wept the other woman like a small child.

“Come!” someone said. “There’ll be sausage for all! There’ll be food kitchens!”

“And the Joint will be here soon!”

“Maybe the Red Cross, with parcels! Maybe to-day!”

Everybody was moving out now. The place was emptying. Only the woman stayed behind who bewailed Malkeh. She was not interested in the light of day, and the breath of safety, because Malkeh was dead, and would not share it with her.

“Malkeh! Malkeh!” she moaned, swaying from side to side.

Elsie Silver paused on the threshold and looked back. Then she retraced her steps.

“Are you coming, *yiddene?*” she said. “It is another day. It will be different out in the air. And you will see smiling faces.” She would have liked to say also that there might be good news of Malkeh out there, as sooner or later there

would be good news of her own Mila. But that would be a rash thing to say. The woman might have seen Malkeh dead at her feet. That was more likely than not. With Mila it was different, of course.

“I’m coming! Wait! Don’t leave me alone here!” the woman called out after her, for Elsie was already hurrying away, as if she might miss Mila if she lost more time.

“Come!” said Elsie. “Come!” Out they went into the courtyard, then through the main entrance into the street. From every direction out of cellars and holes in the ground people were emerging and running this way and that, like animals that suddenly find themselves in the glare of day when an ill-built haystack which has been sheltering them falls apart. At both ends of the street the flimsy wooden ghetto-wall blocked the way. Beyond the wall there was the sound of rifle-fire and machine-guns stuttering, and the deep boom of big guns further off. Then a more continuous sound was heard, the roaring of invisible tanks coming closer and closer towards the wooden barrier. Then suddenly there was the crack of rending timbers as the blunt noses of tanks split the wall apart and the machines came waddling through into the ghetto that was a ghetto no more. In the turrets soldiers stood and waved. On the pavements men and women stood weeping silently.

“I’m hungry!” cried a small boy suddenly at the top of his voice.

“Take!” cried a soldier, removing a haversack from his shoulder, and flinging it towards him. The boy had talked Hungarian, a language which the soldier probably did not understand. But there was no mistaking the meaning of that shrill cry.

III

It was not possible to go more than a few blocks northward and westward from the breached ghetto, for the fighting was still raging, and was for some days to go on raging, in those parts of the city. The parts eastward and southward were more or less free, though there were pockets of resistance there, too; so the people who had had homes there went back, hoping to install themselves in their own places again, but found either that their homes were mounds of rubble, or, if they were still inhabitable, that Gentile families had moved there, having no homes of their own.

So towards evening there was a dispirited trek back towards the cellars again. It was a glum world, with no gas, no electricity, no transport, no water-pressure, no food. There had been a certain lifting of the spirits earlier that day, but that was mostly dispersed now. People remembered too clearly the hideous

Szálasy anticlimax that followed so swiftly on the heels of the Horthy surrender. It was not doubted that final victory lay with the Russians, and that meant at least physical salvation for the ultimate survivors of ghettos. But what guarantee was there, here in Budapest, that the Germans might not strike back and reoccupy the city for a time, all the more as the fortified heights of Buda were entirely in their hands? And what would happen then? Everyone knew well enough what would happen then. These were early days for chanting songs of jubilee.

One of the last to return to the cellars that evening, her face and hands blue with cold, was Elsie Silver. The area of her operations was enlarged now, and block by block she had gone among the unjoyful hosts searching for Mila, to the very limit of the fighting. She had been sure all along (she told herself) that probably Mila was not living in a Jewish house at all, she was in a Gentile house, with Gentile papers, for she was clever at getting herself the right sort of documents as she needed them.

But she did not find Mila that day. Nor the day after. Nor the day after that. She was hungry most of the time, for she was putting out a great deal of effort, and the rations in the communal kitchen were still very exiguous. But she found she managed to carry on extraordinarily well on next to nothing, for solid eating is, after all, a habit. Things did not improve very quickly, though the Russians set up a Provisional Government after only three days. You could only eke out your miserable ration if you still had a ring, say, or a wristlet watch. Sometimes, too, you had a body which someone took a fancy to . . . Sometimes, on the other hand, they took the ring or wristlet watch or the body, whether you wanted to barter it or not. A fair amount of looting took place on both sides, but the liberators were in better shape, and did it more vigorously. Once, on the fifth day, a wild rumour went round that great stocks of food had suddenly been unearthed in the dock-side warehouses, and people of all ages ran out of the ruins for all they were worth, hobbling, pushing, grunting, sweating. But the treasure-trove was just a hoard of dried peas, the sort used for planting. None the less, dried peas were better than no peas at all. They helped to keep you going till the Red Cross, and the Friends' Ambulance Unit, and the Joint Distribution Committee, set up their emergency stations.

It was at a field kitchen run by the Friends that Elsie Silver heard the English language spoken again, having not heard it for a long time. She was standing in a line holding a bowl, and was only two away from the small man and tall woman who were dishing out stew, when the small man spilled some on his hand. It was hot.

“Christ!” said the small man, and blushed deeply.

The tall woman turned her head and glared.

“Really, Mr. Carruthers!” she reproved him. That was all they said between them. But it was English, it was even Cheltenham, and it was music.

A moment later Elsie was holding out her bowl and mug. She, too, addressed the small man. She could at that moment no more have held her tongue than do a double cartwheel.

“Really, Mr. Carruthers!” she said, in exactly the same voice as the tall woman.

The man and woman both looked at her, startled. That was not the way any Hungarian or Pole could pronounce that name.

“English?” they both said.

She had not mimicked the woman in order to provoke the question, or with the idea that any reaction might be provoked at all. It was no more than a stirring of the woman she had once been, the not quite dead pulse of a heart. But something had happened. A question about herself had happened. Who was she? The true answer might help, might injure. She was on guard.

“*Also weiter!*” came from behind her. “Get a move on!” The grey-eyed, sunken-chapped ones wanted their stew.

“Please!” she replied. “May I see you later?”

“By all means,” the man and woman both said. “Next, *bitte!*”

She ate her stew, and in due course, when the queue had been attended to, came back. The man and woman were waiting for her. They were pleasant.

“You seem to have had a bad time,” the woman said. “I’m sorry. You are English, are you?”

“No,” she said. One must go on lying, one could not tell the truth, lest one thing led to another, and suddenly you were an enemy, a German, with an extremely interesting name. “I’m French, but I lived a long time in London.”

“How did you get here, madame?” asked the tall woman. (It was clear she was saying to herself the creature had possibly been a lady once.) “What a time you must have had!”

Elsie shrugged her shoulders.

“Like some millions of others, I was deported to the East. I got to Warsaw. Then I escaped, with my niece. It’s about her I want to ask you. Her name’s Mila Cossor. She’s been missing since October. Please,” she begged, “is there

any chance that you can help me to find her?”

They took as many particulars as she could supply them with. They told her that the Red Cross always set up a special office to deal with inquiries of this sort. They promised they would do all they could to help her. But it turned out they could do nothing for her, though she came back to them day after day, sometimes morning and evening. She also haunted the offices of the Red Cross and the Joint Distribution Committee, without success.

Then, one day, at last, there was news. She was dragging herself wearily along to the Joint Committee's premises, where they were issuing shoes that day, when suddenly she saw a young man she knew, running down the steps of the building towards a jeep drawn up beyond the pavement. He was evidently in a hurry, for he had left his engine running. But before he had time to swing himself into his driving-seat, she saw white and clear the nicked flesh above the left cheek-bone by which she had often identified him, most recently on the day he had put on the Arrow Cross uniform and helped rescue her from the Fortress Prison. It was Leon! Leon was still alive!

The young man was sitting at his wheel. His foot was on the clutch-pedal, when suddenly he felt a hand clawing at his coat.

“Leon! Leon!” a woman's voice called out. “It's me! Don't drive off!”

He looked down. He saw a woman with dark and piercing eyes, a skin smooth and pale as alabaster, with tracts of greying hair above her ears. Her clothes were torn and old, but the effort had been made to keep them decent. She could not be a stranger, for there were few living who could call out to him by that name. He screwed up his eyes, trying to remember who she was.

Then she told him.

“Channah,” she whispered. “Don't you remember?” It came back to him. The lovely woman he had seen and served so often in the Café Flora, the soignée woman whose duty it was to play the mistress of Count Apor, the woman who had so dearly loved the girl from Poland, the poor girl from Poland. He knew what she wanted from him. The question and, alas, the answer, would not be long delayed.

“Remember? Of course I remember.” He reached and took her hand. How stiff and creased it had become, like a discarded glove. He well remembered how dainty it had been, how elegantly shaped the lacquered fingernails. “So you're going strong, eh? That's fine! Can I give you a lift? Which way are you going?”

The words sounded inconceivably banal in his own ears. He knew he was

trying to stave off the question which at this very moment came trembling from her lips.

“Please, have you seen Mila anywhere? You remember my girl, Mila? Have you any news of her?”

The question was already posed in his mind: Shall I give her the news I have? Shall I withhold it? But I can’t lie to this woman. Those eyes would see through me. I’ll tell her the truth. I’m busy. I must get away.

“Oh, Mila?” he said. “Oh yes. The nice little *kibbutz*nik. I saw her three days ago. Over on the other side, in Buda.”

“You saw her?” the woman’s breath came short in her throat. The blood came pumping into her sallow cheeks. “My Mila? She’s well? How is she?”

“Well, after a time like this”—Leon hesitated—“nobody looks well, you know that.”

“But she’s all right? Nothing’s happened to her? What are you hiding?” A hideous thought came to her. “She’s not been wounded, or anything? She’s not maimed?”

“No, it’s not that. She looked very miserable.”

“Of course she’d look miserable,” she censured him. “After a time like this what do you expect?” She was repeating his own words. He breathed more easily. She had taken the bulk of the weight off his shoulders. “Where did you see her? Buda, you say? Where?”

“I was driving down the Gellertrakt, down near the Polytechnikum, what’s left of it. I saw her quite clearly, though she looked so pale and ill. I’m sure it was her. I called out to her, and she looked at me. But she gave no sign of recognition, and looked away at once. I was in a stream of traffic, so I had to move on. I looked back when the traffic loosened, but she’d gone.”

“The Gellertrakt?” the woman repeated. “Near the Polytechnikum?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. I hope I’ll see you again soon. I hope we’ll both see you. Good day.” She turned and shuffled off in the direction of the river. He saw how worn down her heels were.

“Channah!” he called out after her. She turned her head and smiled fleetingly, and went on. He got out of the jeep and strode after her. “Look!” he said. “Those shoes will be gone if you don’t apply for a pair now.”

“I’ll manage,” she assured him. “She’ll need a pair, too.”

“If you’ll just wait, I’ll just go and do what I have to do, then I’ll come back for you.”

“Thank you, Leon,” she said. “I’ve waited long enough. You’re a good boy,” and moved off again.

“It’s a big place,” he told her, walking beside her. “There’s a lot of people there.”

“I’m *sure* I’ll find her,” she said, walking on.

“You’ll get me through the Joint offices when you want me,” he said, and got back into his jeep, and drove away. It was an important appointment, and he must get off to it. It was not until he was several blocks away that he remembered that she would not be allowed to cross the river. The Germans had blown up all the bridges when they pulled out into Buda, and the Russians so far had only had time to put up a single wooden bridge. Civilians were not allowed to cross from either side without a permit.

“Damn!” he said to himself. He had no time to turn back, and he would probably have trouble finding her if he did. If he *did* find her, he could only tell her she had to get a permit from the Russian authorities, and they’d tell her that in any case at the bridge.

That was just what happened. She reached the embankment and made her way to the Pest end of the temporary bridge.

“Pass!” the Russian sentry said.

“No pass!” she told him. “Want to see daughter, there, in Buda.” She struggled desperately to get him to understand her. Her Polish was no use to either of them.

“Pass!” said the sentry again, and kept on shaking his head. A pedestrian saw she was in difficulties, and helped her out.

“It will not be difficult to get a pass,” he assured her. “Ask at the Russian Army Headquarters in the Park, just beyond the Millenium Monument.”

She thanked him, and shuffled off in the direction of the Andrassy Ut. The trams had just begun running again. She might get one if she was lucky.

IV

She crossed the bridge that separates the two artificial lakes in the Park, the Varos Liget, and stood for a moment against the parapet on the right-hand side. It was here she had met Mila on that ill-omened day when they had gone

driving round the Park together. Here. She placed her hand on the cold stone. It was here the girl was leaning, looking down on the marsh-fowl feathering their way in and out busily through these tangles of reeds. The water was grey and dirty now, scummy with rubbish blown by air-raid blast. But it was not frozen any more. Her own heart, too, was unfreezing, for springtime news had come to her. Mila was alive still, on the other side of the broad river.

The Russian Army Headquarters were based at the Museum of Agriculture, which was of so solid a construction that it had remained more or less intact. There were subsidiary makeshift offices distributed here and there on the lawns and under the trees. More offices were being put up all the time, and there were a great many people around, both civilian and military. There were not only Russian soldiers, there were Jugoslavs and Roumanians, and one or two formations she could not identify. It was confusing. Which was the office you should apply to? What language ought you to speak? She had no Russian. Her Polish did not seem helpful. Yiddish was the *lingua franca* in all these territories, but which were Jews among all these folk, the snub-nosed, the long-nosed, the black-haired, the red-haired? She tried out both her Yiddish and her Polish, then, in desperation, her limping Hungarian, but she did not seem to get anywhere. She paused and looked round unhappily.

“If only Polednik, my dear brother-in-law, were around,” she said to herself. “I’d have no difficulty at all. Two such masters of the Yiddish language!” she smiled wryly. “You’d lead me straight there, Boris dear! Straight to the firing squad!”

Then, at a distance of some fifty yards or more, she saw an American officer turn from a narrower alley into an avenue of beeches and move towards a hut at the end of the vista. An American officer! Her difficulty was at an end. She hastened after him, and had gone some twenty yards or more when suddenly a Russian soldier had thrust up before her, an officer. A large heavy man he was, blotting out the American soldier and the avenue of beeches and the hut at the end of it. A moment before, he had not been there. Now he was. There was nothing else but the Russian officer, the smile on his lips. He must have been observing her for some time, from the shelter of the trees whence he had emerged.

“Good day, Channah,” the man said. “I thought it was you. It is you, isn’t it?”

She stared, not into the man’s face, but into the vacancy immediately above his forehead. It was not by his grey nondescript eyes, the full cheeks, the somewhat formless mouth, she recognized him. The voice, familiar as it was, would have slid off into the grey air, and dispersed like blown foam. It was the

outline of something not there that fixed him in time and place, the outline of the black bowler hat he had worn day in, day out, in the Warsaw ghetto. He had seemed to sleep in it. When he led her forth from the labyrinths, it had seemed to float before him, more palpable, more substantial, than he.

He wore no black bowler hat now. He was a Russian army captain, properly accoutred.

“Herr Wolff!” she whispered. “You!”

“Not any more!” He smiled at her. “Captain”—he stopped—“an old friend. So you got through?”

“As you see.”

“It’s been tough going. You’ve been here, all through the siege?”

“All through the siege. People survive. *You* know, Captain, don’t you?”

“And now?” he asked.

“And now?” she asked herself. There was a good deal interposed between then and now. Now he was a Russian officer, here in Budapest. Surely, then, in Warsaw, he had been a Soviet agent? There could be no doubt of that, no doubt at all. He was saying something. It was Mila, yes, it was Mila he was talking of.

“That girl you went away with?” he asked. “She was in bad shape. Did she die soon after?”

“No! She became well. She was plucky. You should have seen her. Her own parents wouldn’t have recognized her.”

“So?” He was not very interested. “Is she here with you?”

“That’s what I’m here for,” she exclaimed urgently. “You must forgive me, Herr . . . Captain . . .”

“Captain Smolenski,” he informed her, and saluted, with not too soldierly a gesture. There was, after all, no reason why she should not know the name he had now.

“Captain Smolenski,” she said. “She’s in Buda, on the other side of the river. I can’t get across to her. One needs a permit for the bridge. She’s ill. She needs me. I’m told one has to go to the Town Major’s Office. Please, will you tell me where it is? Perhaps you could help me get the permit?”

He looked at her, and smiled. It was a curious smile, spread all across his face, like an ointment. Several seconds passed. Her heart slowed down and

quicken. She saw the phantasm of a black bowler hat float in the air between the level of her eyes and his.

“Not so fast,” he said softly. “Not so fast.”

She felt the tongue suddenly large and dry in her mouth, like the tongue of a shoe. There was a smell in the air, of mischief, of danger. She said nothing. Whatever she had to say to him was said. Why did he wait? Why was he smiling at her so?

“I know.” His voice was almost inaudible. “I know just who you are, Frau General.”

The air was full of darkness, with a dazzle of running sparks that did not illumine. There was the noise of a wind whistling. In the nostrils the smell of danger, of defeat, coming up like a black puma out of the jungle. She knew now why the thought of Boris Polednik had edged from nowhere into her mind. It was the same nowhere that had disgorged this Smolenski, this Smolenski that was not Wolff any more. For there was no more Wolff. Wolff had been an aspect, a mask.

“It would be interesting to my people,” resumed Captain Smolenski. “The wife of one of the major war-criminals.”

She must force words through the shelf of dust at the base of her throat, or she would die, here beside the ash-grey willow drooping over her.

“My husband is dead,” she brought out, with a voice lightless as soot. “I have suffered a great deal.”

“We found out,” the Captain said. He seemed not to have heard her. “Your lover talked. They were too much for him.”

It was Oskar he was speaking of. The Gestapo had broken his bones; but one of their own men, the men of the Russians, must have been placed among them, and he had brought back tales to those who had placed him there.

She knew that she was poised on a razor’s edge. She knew that silence or speech, either of them, might provide the touch which would send her hurtling into the abyss. What could she say? she asked herself. She remembered it was because of some indebtedness to Oskar that Wolff had found himself impelled to show her the way out of the ghetto. But did he not consider that the obligation had been fulfilled there in Warsaw? She must find out. She could lose nothing.

“I was in the Warsaw ghetto,” she said. “There’s no harm in me. Let me go on.”

Suddenly, brusquely, he turned his back. He walked away from her, his hands folded behind him. It was an unsoldierly figure. He walked for twenty or thirty yards, then came back, his head low on his chest, his hands still folded behind him. Then he turned again, and still again, three or four times more. Then at last he came back to her. He kept his eyes averted, as if he were ashamed. Then he spoke.

“You have a relative over there in Buda, yes? You want a permit to cross the bridge? Come. I’ll take you to the Town Major’s Office. Walk behind me.”

She walked behind him, as if she were a total stranger, a beggar woman from the ghetto for whom this Russian officer was doing a routine service. There was no difficulty at all about getting the permit. When they had given it her, he moved off. Not another word passed between them.

CHAPTER X

I

It was more difficult to move around in Buda, because that part of the town had been besieged longer and the damage was more serious. Also the whole place is up hill and down dale. But it was in Buda that Leon had glimpsed Mila, on the Gellertrakt, near the Polytechnikum, and it was to that point that Elsie came back again and again, though she knew the information was not much to go by, for Mila, in fact, might just have been wandering along on her way from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular. But that was where she had been seen. That was enough.

For two days she crossed over to Buda in the morning and returned to Pest in the evening. Then it occurred to her she might just as well stay over in Buda, for it was most unlikely that Mila had sought a permit to cross over to the Pest side. So she packed up her carton box—she travelled light these days—and went across the river, to a corner of a room found for her by the Joint. It was just as easy to pick up the rations assigned to you on one side of the river as on the other.

Ten days passed by in this fashion. She knew that the family with whom she lodged thought her crazy. She knew that everyone, both official and unofficial, whose assistance she solicited now thought her crazy. She was quite aware what a woe-begone figure she presented when she came home of an evening, and then, an hour later, found herself once again impelled to beat the bitter streets. But it would be time enough to spruce herself up later on, when she had found Mila. Let them for the time being think her an old woman with bats in the belfry.

It was on a day in mid-March that Elsie found her. The place could hardly be more than fifty yards this way or that from the place where Leon had seen her for a brief moment, and she had disappeared. She tried to do the same trick on Elsie. Elsie was on the Embankment, where they were building up the parapet again, just near the exploded bastions of the Ferencz Jozsef bridge. Then suddenly Elsie saw her. She was on the other side of the road, where the tramway used to run into the Áttlos Ut. Her shoulders were stooped, her cheeks fallen in, her hair was all over the place. But it was Mila. It was no one else but Mila in all the world. There was a good deal of noise in the clear air. Already they were hard at work, rebuilding, carting stuff in, carting it away. There was the clang of hammers, the hoot of traffic. There were workmen

calling to each other, there were already the shrill shouts of children at their play. But when Elsie filled her lungs and shouted “Mila! Mila! Mila!” the girl heard the cry above all these noises. She turned her head sharply on her neck like a frightened animal, she saw that there was a woman who called her name. It was impossible to say whether or not she knew who it was. All that Elsie saw was Mila turn away, her head slanted as if to dodge a hand that sought to slap her cheek. She saw the girl run off in a sort of teetering shuffle, her arms floating helplessly around her, and her dark hair swinging to and fro.

“But no, Mila darling, no!” Elsie was saying to herself, her heart wild with joy and fear, as she ran desperately across the road, amid a sharp tooting of horns and screeching of brakes and cursing of drivers. She was now on the other side of the Embankment. She was now running up the Áttlos Ut, under the lee of the great hill. There was no sight of Mila. “Mila! Mila!” she cried. The child could not be far. She was too weak to have gone any distance at all. She must be hiding in some shattered doorway, or behind some lump of wall. She would find her if she had to tear every ruin apart till she had bared her fingers to the stumps. She found her soon, no distance away, lying behind a cairn of tumbled bricks, her back turned away like a small animal who thinks in that way to elude its pursuer. She had her hands to her ears as if to shut out the cry that went searching for her: “Mila! Mila! Where are you?” Her eyes were closed as if to keep out of her mind every memory of what had been, the days of her childhood, the mother and father she had loved so dearly, the woman she had hardly loved less.

Elsie was on her knees beside her, and had the girl in her bosom. With gentle fingertips she slid the dank hair from her forehead and stroked the shut eyelids. She felt the girl’s heart fluttering like a puppy’s.

“Mila, darling! It’s me! It’s Channah! I’ve been looking for you so long! And you’re here, my sweet girl! You’re here in my arms! You’ve been ill! I’m going to make you better! I’m going to take you away!”

The girl said not a word. The body was inert, like a bundle of clothes. There was hardly any weight to her. It seemed, if a wind blew up, it could lift her and blow her away over dust and rubble, to fall when the wind fell into the grey river or the depths of a cellar.

“You know who I am, don’t you, Mila dear? It’s me, it’s Channah. I love you so much. I’m going to make you better. Say you know who I am. Just move your head, Mila.”

She did not raise her head, but she spoke. The voice was faint, the syllables came out at intervals, one by one.

“It’s . . . you. It’s . . . Chan . . . nah.”

“See, Mila, dear? We’re together again. . . . After all that’s been. You tired yourself out just now. You’ll rest a few minutes, and then you’ll come with me, and we’ll have a lovely cup of hot coffee. I know where they make the most wonderful coffee. Real beans. It’s American. And then . . . you wait, Mila, I’ll tell you over the coffee. Just rest now, rest, rest.”

The girl still did not speak. The minutes passed. Elsie did not speak either. Her fingertips moved gently from eyelids to mouth, back to the eyelids again. The fluttering breath calmed down.

“You’re rested now, Mila dear?” The eyes still were not open. “If you are, just nod your head.” The girl nodded. Elsie half rose, then put an arm round her shoulder. “Come now, Mila dear, yes?”

Then suddenly the girl gave tongue. Again it was like a puppy, the yelp of a puppy when somebody suddenly kicks it out of the void.

“No!” she cried. “No! No!”

Elsie was down on her knees beside her again.

“Mila, dear! You know I can’t leave you here. You know what I’m saying, I know you do. I can’t leave you here. I’ll stay all day, if necessary, and all night, and all to-morrow, and then you’ll have to come away. So come now, darling, and I’ll look after you. Come now, Mila.”

“No!” The protest was less sharp.

“I’m doing what your mummy would do. She’d *want* me to. You don’t need to tell me, darling, I know something terrible’s happened. I *know*.” (She was watching the girl’s face like a doctor watching a patient’s reactions on a couch. She perceived the pucker of pain at the corner of the girl’s mouth, gone almost as soon as seen, like breath on a mirror.) “Terrible things happened to everyone. We’ll never talk of it, whatever it is. We’ll never think of it. It’s over and gone. It’s never happened. Never, never, never. I don’t know where you’ve been living lately. Perhaps in a cellar. I don’t know. Perhaps with people. I don’t know if you’ve got anything there. We’ll forget it. You’ve got nothing here. You’re with me from now on. I’ll get clothes for you. Your face will be shining again. Open your eyes, Mila. Dear little Mila, open your eyes. There now. Your eyes will be happy again. Come, Mila. Will you come? Say yes, Mila.” She brought her ear near to the girl’s mouth. There was no response.

Suddenly an inspiration seized her. She realized with a startling and

overwhelming certainty that there was only one hope of blowing life into the almost-dead embers. The mainspring of the girl's existence had been her passion for Zion. If that could be set working within her again, she might live; if not, she would survive as a phantom, and for a time only. Sooner or later she would fall apart, like a dead flower into dust.

“Mila, dear! I want to tell you something. I've already been making inquiries about going to Palestine. Yes, Mila, Palestine. Eretz Israel. The way's wide open now, by way of Roumania and the Black Sea. Are you listening, darling? We'll go to a port, and take a boat, and go to Palestine. All those lovely orange-groves . . . and . . . and the beautiful blue sea . . . and the hills . . . and the lovely orange-groves.” (She was singularly ill-informed on the subject, and those were all the elements in the situation she could for the time being evoke.) “You'll have to get better first. You'll have to get fit for the journey. Won't that be lovely, Mila? The sea, and the sea-birds, and the wind blowing from the fruit-trees . . . Yes, Mila, yes?”

The girl's lips quivered. It seemed that she was trying to say something, but the word in her mouth died.

Then Elsie put her arms round her shoulders. There was no more resistance than if she were a coat. Then she raised her and had her standing on her feet. “Steady, darling! There now!” she murmured. Then she led her away, her arm supporting her.

No one paid any particular attention to them. A spectacle of that sort was not uncommon those days in Budapest.

II

Buda and Pest are parts of the same city, and the Danube is only a river, if a broad river. But there was a vast sea spread out between the Mila that had been in Pest, and the Mila that was now in Buda. It was of the first importance to get Mila away from Buda to Pest with the least possible delay, and then, as soon as the broken girl was as much mended as might be, the journey must begin again. It would be easier now.

Another thing was as urgent. She must not permit herself to speculate on what had happened, any more than Mila must be allowed to remember it. What hideous nightmares must torment the child's night slumbers, and her own, would remain beyond control. But by day, for her own sanity as well as Mila's, their minds must be deflected from the thought of the massed onslaught of sexual brutality, the refined rapier of sadistic degradation, whatever it was that had caused this mortal hurt.

That night she had Mila with her in the corner of the crowded room where lodging had been found for them. The next day she demanded a permit for the transference of Mila to the other side of the river, where, as she truthfully said, Mila had friends. It was granted without trouble. The second night they were in Pest together. She applied for house-room with one of the families whose acquaintance she had made in the cellars. The woman was kind to her. A box-room was assigned to them which let in the rain and wind both through walls and ceiling, but it was habitable. The trouble with the girl was exactly that she was no trouble at all, she was less than no trouble. There was no resistance in her, no initiative of any sort. What little chores Elsie would permit her to do in the effort to occupy her mind she did with a listless orderliness which suggested that she had been spending some time of late as a drudge in someone's house. From time to time, whether she sat doing nothing, or whether she had some small task on hand, her fingers would start opening and shutting helplessly. She would stand or sit staring straight before her. Tears would form in her eyes and drop down her cheeks, characterless, griefless, like the condensation down a wall.

From the Joint (as many beneficiaries called the American Joint Distribution Committee in many a smitten country) Elsie received extra supplies, so that the girl might be put on her feet again. There she contacted Leon once more and gave him a more complete account of the episode than she had felt called upon to give hitherto. She had rarely seen a human being more furious. His cheeks flared red as coals. The nicked flesh above the left cheek-bone was white as salt.

"Who did it?" he brought out through his teeth. "What sort of bastards were they?" He felt for his hidden revolver, then remembered it was better not to make it plain he went around armed. "I'll bash their skulls against the wall!"

"Please, Leon!" she begged him. "I don't know anything. I don't want to know anything. All I know is we mustn't poke about in the girl's mind to try and find things out. Maybe, later, years later; not now. It would destroy her completely."

"I suppose you're right," he said, chastened. There was a quiet authority about this woman that made discussion impertinent. "The best of the bunch, that girl was! She, and Hanna Senesch!"

Even in the welter of her wretchedness, the name twanged like a plucked string.

"Hanna Senesch? Yes? And what happened to *her*?"

His chin thrust out like a lump of rock.

“They shot her!” he said. “The brave boys! The same day as they shot Baruch. Gisi Fleishmann, too! You heard what happened to Gisi Fleishmann?”

“I was told,” she said. He looked up. He wondered who could have told her. Then he remembered. It must have been Count Apor, her employer.

“Yes, he told me. I know they’ve shot him since.”

“He was a brave man. It was hard for him.” That was all they said of him, then, or at any other time.

She put the dead out of her mind. They were dead. Nothing could be done for *them*.

“We’ve got to get the girl away!” she exclaimed fiercely. “There’s only one place that can put her right again. You know where that is?”

“Eretz,” he said. “Of course. But it’s not easy,” he went on despondently. He stretched out his hands as if to indicate the myriads that were waiting throughout the city, and beyond the city, in all the liberated regions, and the regions that were now being liberated as the tides of war rolled west and north. He changed the subject. “Two or three of the *habonim* have turned up, the builders, the boys and girls she used to know. Do you think it would be a good idea if they came to see her? I might come with them.”

“Please. Not now,” she said. “When’s she’s more herself again. Isn’t that right, Leon?”

“Yes, Channah. It’s right.”

“I’ve been away too long, Leon. I must hurry back to Mila. But there’s one more thing. I must have some sort of a job, to help me get the extra things Mila needs, food and clothes. I’m quite good with languages.”

He fixed a part-time job for her as an interpreter. It was very helpful.

III

The days went by, and became weeks. It was April and high spring in Hungary. The flowers came out in the gardens, the trees blossomed, there was light on the river and in the sky. But there was no light in the eyes of Mila. She was like the brittle wick of a lamp from which all the oil has gone. It did not really seem a matter of importance to anyone anywhere whether she was alive or dead.

Excepting to Elsie Silver. The love that had shone in her for the daughter she had never borne, now glowed with so pure and bright a flame that people coming into the office where she worked were warmed by her though they

came in chilled to the bone. In earlier years men had said of her she was beautiful. It would not occur to them to say it now, if their eyes happened to fall on her when hers were closed, for her skin was sallow and her cheeks pinched. But if her eyes were open, they would ask themselves: Who is this lovely woman? Who was she in her hey-day? It was better that they did not know.

The first part of the task that lay before Elsie was to restore the physical basis of Mila's well-being. During the first week or two, that had seemed, in these conditions, almost impossibly difficult; but it turned out less hopeless than it had seemed. It is likely that the fabric she was made of was tougher than one would suspect, as she had proved by the way she had recovered from the unparalleled rigours of the Warsaw time. It is possible, also, that, whatever her occupation had been in Buda, she had been better fed than others. On the physical plane, then, she had not given cause for the acutest anxiety. Moreover, Elsie nursed her with real skill, the skill she had surprisingly achieved while nursing in Bratislava the two tragic children who had been confided to her care. But it was on the moral and spiritual plane, where the girl's love for Zion had blazed like a torch, that the damage had been done, and it was there that Elsie realized she must work with a mother's devotion, a doctor's skill, and the assiduity of a slave in a swamp. She must rekindle the flame.

It was an ironical spectacle, though she alone was aware of the irony of it. Like many other Jews who have not been involved in the Jewish dream, she could see the value of Palestine as a refuge for the persecuted; it might equally be Uganda or a desert tract in Queensland. Indeed, she had had certain experiences during the last two years which had impressed that value on her with especial vigour. But she had no views on the political or transcendental aspects of the Jewish aspiration for Zion, she was no Zionist, because such ideas as those were totally beyond her scope. She had known of Mila's passion from the earliest days of her association with her. She had also known that if they escaped from Europe at all, which so often had seemed extremely unlikely, it was almost inevitable that they should end up on the shores of Palestine. The whole mechanism of the escape from Europe was geared up to the "illegal" immigration to Eretz Israel, the Land of Israel.

What would happen after that was beyond speculation. For Elsie Silver, Palestine would be extremely dangerous. There were tens of thousands of German refugees in Palestine, who had fled from the Hitler persecutions. Amongst them might well be large numbers who had seen her disport herself behind the Berlin footlights, and all these knew that Elsie Silver had become Elsie von Brockenburg. Yes, Palestine would be dangerous, but where, for her,

was danger absent this side of the New World? The Jews, the Western Allies, the Russians, the Germans, for one reason or another they would all be happy to see her head on a charger.

But she was used to danger now. If she could get by in Budapest, she could get by in Jerusalem. It was not the danger that mortified her, it was the embarrassment. She did not belong to Palestine, whether they spotted her or not. She could not wave blue-and-white flags and sing *chaltz* songs, the songs of the pioneers. She had not earned those things, and she had not craved for them, and she did not crave for them now. She had not earned her place among the Jews, even if she wanted it, by doing a spell of amateur nursing in the cellars of the Warsaw ghetto. There had been moments in Warsaw when she had thrilled with pride to know that their blood flowed in her veins. But even then her heart was an embarrassed stranger. How would she feel among the zealots on the concrete boulevards of Tel Aviv?

She had hoped that by the time Mila had been led into a larger world, and the new horizons unrolled before her; when, further, it had been possible to talk to her of these dangers and embarrassments—she had hoped that Mila would treat Palestine merely as a stage on a journey. Or, at the worst, Mila might insist on spending half a year, a year, in Palestine, while she herself might mark time in Cairo, for example. Then, the fever having worked itself out of Mila's system, and the war being safely over, they could get down to guide-books and steamship offices, Mexico City or Rio de Janeiro. Or why not one of the islands in the West Indies, the East Indies? The world was wide.

That was the way that Elsie Silver had felt about the dream of Zion; but it was not the way that Mila had felt. Unless the dream was restored to her, the girl would fade and die.

So Elsie set to work upon her, pretending a conversion that had not taken place, a vision she had not seen, cajoling, rhapsodizing, day in, day out. Leon, as ever, was of great use to her; so were some of the young people who were actively engaged on the reanimation of the Zionist groups, in the teeth of considerable opposition, (for the new authorities that had been set up regarded the Zionist idea with anything but a friendly eye). A cache of Zionist literature that had been found in the ruins of the Zionist offices was handed over to her and she got her teeth into it like a youth sitting for a scholarship, who digests and transmutes a few key books on the subject with such skill that the dazzled examiners are convinced that here is a top-rank expert.

Day and night, like a tree-top full of doves, she murmured tales of Zion: the waters of the falls of Yarmuk turning the humming dynamos, the golden

lamps of the orange-groves along the Mediterranean shore, the tractors turning the revived earth under the leas of the Carmel, the rosy-cheeked children asleep under the netting in the crèches of Deganieh, the wind-swept grasses of Galilee, the young men and women with linked arms dancing the Hora during the Feast of Tabernacles. She remembered how Mila had once gloried in the tales of the Zionist heroes, that went back as far as the Maccabees and forward to the man Trumpeldor beleaguered on his northern hill, and the nameless guardians of the outposts, the watchers of the wells. She talked of these, and she talked also of the young *shlichim*, the messengers, who had been dropped from the sky into the Hitler Fortress. She reminded her of her own words: "They are so brave and beautiful. Like poems"; and told her how she had seen the lovely youngster, Hanna Senesch, with her own eyes, (for within the half year that had elapsed since her execution Hanna Senesch had already become a legend, a Joan of Arc given no armies to fight with, her sole equipment a map and a radio-set against half an embattled world).

It was uphill work and so exhausting that sometimes after several hours the sweat was pouring down Elsie's cheeks. On every dimension she was living in a world of make-believe. She was pretending to be anybody in the world but herself, Elsie von Brockenburg. She was pretending a burning ardour for Zion that she did not feel. Even the currency notes in her purse were pretending, for an inflation more fabulous than the one which had so entranced her in the Berlin of the twenties now filled the air with clouds of paper like white rose-petals in a Riviera carnival.

But it was all worth while if even for a few minutes at a time she engaged Mila's attention, which she did sometimes, or seemed to do. Until suddenly, dropping her descant, she would become aware that Mila was once more staring straight before her into a void out of a void. There was nothing to do then, but remain utterly silent, at most chafing the girl's hands or stroking her forehead with fingertips gentle as snow-flakes. Then sometimes awareness would come again into the girl's eyes, with a tear that never quite formed, and a most piteous twist on the lips.

"No, Channah," she would whisper then. "It's no good. It's all over. You must go on without me."

"I would rather die, Mila. But I won't. And you won't. We've been through too much, Mila. We're not going to give up just now. Not just *now*, Mila. Not when we might get news any day that a party is being made up to go to the Black Sea, because a ship will be waiting there. Do you hear, Mila? A ship waiting to take us to Eretz, the Land!"

It was when Elsie talked for the first time of a ship actually waiting, and a

ship actually setting out, that a faint flush came into the girl's cheeks, and a light flickered in her eyes; or so Elsie told herself.

"I must talk to Leon," she vowed. "The idea of a ship is the one thing that seems to get through to her. Leon will know when a ship leaves. I must see we get on to the next ship!" She sought out Leon, and demanded his help. He was silent for a considerable time after she had finished speaking, which was unlike him.

"What's the matter?" she asked fiercely. "Don't you think the girl's done enough to deserve it? Me, too, for that matter? Haven't we been on our way long enough?"

"Do you know what those refugee boats are like?" he asked awkwardly. "Have you ever heard what happened to some of those ships? The *Patria*, for instance, and the *Struma*? There's not only the danger of submarines——"

"Danger!" she cried. "How dare you talk to *us* of danger! Well, what is it? What are you hiding?"

"There's something I'm going to tell you. I won't insult you by insisting that it is in confidence!"

"I should think not!" she thrust at him.

"A boat is due to leave from a certain port six days from now. Instructions came through a few days ago that a party of ten was to be made up here in Budapest. They're to be taken on as members of the crew, and dropped somewhere off the Palestine coast. The choice of personnel is not in my hands, but I told the organizer about the work you did, both of you, and suggested your names. He refused to take you on. He said his instructions were that only people valuable to the cause were to be chosen, not merely people who'd played some part in the Resistance movement. He said a middle-aged woman and a sick girl——"

She was now simmering with anger. Her face was deathly white.

"What is this man's name?" she demanded. "I have the right to know. What is this man's name?"

"He's that American, at the Joint. You may have met him. His name's Greenberg, Milt Greenberg. Part of the time he's a relief-worker, like anyone else. The rest of the time he . . . he's one of us boys."

"Kusta?" she asked.

He hesitated a fraction of a moment. Then he nodded. "Yes, Kusta. You

must forgive me.”

“What for?”

“I was forgetting.”

“Greenberg,” she repeated. “Kusta. What were you forgetting?”

“The sort of work you were doing a short time ago.”

“Tell me more about this Greenberg,” she insisted.

“He’s been in Istanbul. He has the overall picture as regards movement of ships and the *aliyah*, the ‘illegal’ immigration, as they call it. Illegal! Those English!” There was bitterness and anger in his voice.

“Is he in the office now, your Greenberg?”

“I can find him.”

“Good. Now, please.”

He smiled. “I have an idea you’ll be with us.”

“Is it you taking the party?”

“I believe so——”

“We’ll be with you, Mila and I. Thank you, Leon.” She smiled one of her most enchanting smiles at him, as radiant as it was rare. He knew Milt Greenberg would blow him sky-high. But it was worth it, he told himself.

She knocked at the door that Leon had pointed out to her.

“In there!” he said. “I’ll go!”

“*Herein!*” a voice called from within. She entered. The young man at the desk did not look at all a formidable creature. He had red cheeks, a small nose, broad shoulders, and elks running across a hand-knitted sweater. His black hair lay wet and flat as if he had just emerged from a dip in the baths of the Brooklyn Y.M.H.A.

“I’m sorry.” He talked a sort of German-Yiddish. “All that arrived to-day is a few score boxes of red pencils. Any use? Who sent you?”

She replied in English.

“No, Mr. Greenberg. They’d be no use at all. I want you to see that there’s places for me and my daughter on that next boat.”

He jumped as if someone had put a firework under his seat.

“For crying out loud! Who are you? A limey?”

“You mean am I English? No, I’m not. I’m French. My name’s Ostier.” (Keep to the one name. It’s easy to remember.) “I’ve lived in England a lot, and in Germany, too. My daughter’s Mila Cossor. She’s really my adopted daughter. I found her in the Warsaw ghetto.”

“But . . . but . . . I mean . . .” It was taking the young man quite a time to get his breath back. “Who told you?” He burst out suddenly. “It must have been Leon! He had no right to! How the hell can I do my job——”

“I know that your orders are to organize a party of ten people who are going to be useful in Eretz. That’s so, isn’t it?”

“That’s so,” he glared. “You must be the woman with the sick daughter Leon told me about. I’m sorry. You know the orders already. I don’t need to tell you.”

“They must also be Resistance personnel,” she continued grimly, “because Monsieur Tito has more respect for fighters than sufferers. Well, listen, I’ll tell you a thing or two about my own work first. Does the name ‘Miriam’ mean anything to you?”

He looked up guardedly.

“Miriam? What Miriam?”

“We won’t play around,” she said shortly. “I mean Gisi Fleishmann, of Bratislava.”

“You worked for Gisi?” he said. “Did you?” He stopped. “What a woman! My god, what a woman!”

“If she’d been alive still, you could have asked her about Channah.”

“She’s not alive. They got wise to her. Listen!” he said. “How do I know you’ve not just heard of her? The names of these people are beginning to get around.” He began to get tough with himself. “How do I know you’re not pulling a fast one on me, huh?”

“Young man,” she said. “You must be intelligent. How would I know Gisi Fleishmann was Miriam, if I didn’t work for her? Anyhow, you can always ask Leon, can’t you?”

He considered the matter. “I suppose you’re right,” he admitted. “Well, what about it?”

“As I said, I’m going to tell you a thing or two about my own work,” she informed him grimly. “It’ll help you to make up your mind how useful I might

be. Then I'll go on to Mila."

"Mila?"

"That's the girl from Warsaw. I'll tell you first about my own work with Count Apor." She told him. His eyes got round with excitement. "Gee!" he interposed from time to time. He was beginning to look smaller, his face less self-confident, from minute to minute.

"Didn't Leon give you some idea of all this?" she wanted to know. "There's somebody else besides Leon in this town who could confirm it, too. There's a bookseller called Kollar in the Eskü Ut. He's opened up the shop again. I saw him only yesterday. Yes? What do you want to say?"

"Leon tried to give me some idea," Milt said peevishly, "in a roundabout sort of way. I told him it was no good. The party's been made up."

"It will have to be unmade," she said. "I don't care which two you turn out."

"But honestly, Mrs. Ostier, they all know they're going. I've told them. I couldn't do such a thing."

"I'll tell you why you must, and will. I'll tell you first the sort of girl Mila is. Listen now. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening, Mrs. Ostier."

She first told him a few things about the fit Mila. Then she told him as much as she thought necessary about the unfit Mila.

"If I can assure her she'll get away at the first possible moment," she concluded, "there's some hope for her. If not, she's done for. The tale would make very unpleasant reading in New York. Please. You won't imagine I'm threatening you, will you?" She paused. "Though I would if it were necessary," she assured him. "However, it isn't necessary, is it, Mr. Greenberg?"

"I don't know. I don't know." He was, after all, a naïve young man from Brooklyn. Or at least he was naïve compared with her. He looked as if he might burst into tears at any moment. "It would have to be all right with the Russians," he said, a shade sulkily.

"I shouldn't worry about that," she said, and smiled brightly at him. "I have quite distinguished acquaintances among high-ranking Russian officers. I would rather not put the thing on a political level, but there it is." Her heart was cold with terror as she spoke. What made her yield to this stupid impulse

of boasting? Wasn't her victory palpable enough already? Supposing he took up with her the business of her high-ranking Russian officer friends?

She saw him raise his eyes and examine her a little more closely. She saw with his eyes the creature she was, half-starved, haggard, dressed in clothes that had come out of the bottom of a bale.

In these cases there is only one thing to do. You go on bluffing. The way she had done in Bratislava, for instance, on the German side of the Danube bridge. You go on bluffing, using the truth as the substance of your bluff.

"Yes," she continued easily. "You might like to refer to Captain Smolenski. I met him first in the Warsaw ghetto. He could tell you quite a lot about me. He was one of their agents. You could locate him at the Town Major's office."

"Not at all, not at all," said Milt hastily. It had the smell of a pie he did not want to stick his fingers into.

"As you please," she said. "As for myself, I have only one interest. Mila and I want to get to Palestine. We love Palestine with all our heart and soul. One last thing. They need us there. Well, Mr. Greenberg?" She did not say anything for some time. Then: "It'll be all right, of course, won't it, Mr. Greenberg?"

"Of course it will," he said, with tears in his voice. "On one condition." He raised both his head and his voice.

"Yes?"

"That you'll take a few boxes of these goddam red pencils off my hands! Will you?"

"Who's doing the threatening now?" she said jovially. "You're a nice young man," she said. "Where are you from? Chicago? Brooklyn?"

"Brooklyn!" he said firmly. "Now give me all the instructions you can about your adopted daughter and yourself." He held a pencil poised above a pad. "We'll have to put things right with both the Russians and the Yugoslavs. We'll have to see the Hungarian people, too, but that's a matter of form. I'll have to rush about like crazy. As for the other end——"

"Yes?"

"Kusta arranges all that for you."

"Blessings on Kusta!" she breathed.

"You've said it," he agreed. "Shoot!" She gave him the details he asked

for, then, in his turn, he gave her certain instructions. "Be back to-morrow for your papers. Yes, I said to-morrow. The party leaves three days from now, the morning of the twenty-fourth. You'll have three days and nights to make the boat. That should get you there in good time."

As she made her way home to Mila, it was as if the broken roadway beneath her were paved with pneumatic cushions.

Her thoughts had begun to clarify by the time she reached home. She realized she could do one of two things regarding the journey. She could either tell Mila straight away, in the hope that the news might immediately shake her out of her torpor, and the ameliorative process begin at once. Or she could postpone it till the morning of the departure; in fact, not say a word till half an hour, or at most an hour, before they set off for the bridge. There were no preparations to make, absolutely none. They might have a rather more thorough wash than usual, and tie the hair back. They would be travelling very light indeed. Whatever clothes they had could easily go into a bundle. The same went for the small stock of provisions they had accumulated. There would be a further haversack of food for each of them in the lorry.

It would require a lot of self-restraint to keep total silence for three whole days, for the news was bound to give a lift to the girl's spirits, if only for a short time. If not, she was sadly out in her calculations. But three days are only three days. Mila's condition could not seriously deteriorate during that time. If Elsie managed to remain silent, the effect of dramatically springing the news on Mila within a few minutes of the actual departure might be the equivalent of one of those new-fangled shock treatments which had been strongly recommended to her. It was a gamble, and she decided to take it.

Actually the time of the departure had to be pushed back by a day, for the papers were not all quite such easy sailing as Milt Greenberg had hoped. That left only two days and nights for the journey, but the lorry was said to be in good shape, and there were three or four people who could share the driving.

On the morning of the twenty-fifth, then, Elsie left the apartment for her job, as usual. That was at nine o'clock. Half an hour later she was back. Her hair was all over the place. Her breath was labouring as if she had been running hard. And, in fact, she had been running hard, for it is an unnecessary strain on the technique of any sort of actress to pretend to be out of breath when she is not.

"Mila!" she cried, tearing up the stairs for all she was worth. "Mila!" The name reverberated in the passages. She flung the door open. "Good news!" she

cried. “Quick! Get your things together! There’s not a moment to lose!” She collapsed on to the floor-mattress with an exhaustion both feigned and real.

“What is it, Channah?” the girl cried. “What is it?” She was over by Elsie’s side, soothing her, calming her down.

“Good news!” Elsie panted. “A lorry’s waiting at the Margit Bridge! There’s a party going to a port in Yugoslavia! We’ve got our papers! The lorry leaves in half an hour! We’re in it! There’ll be a ship there to take us to Eretz Israel! Oh Mila! Mila! At last! Isn’t it marvellous!”

A faint flush came into the girl’s cheeks. The breath fluttered in her throat.

“Eretz Israel!” she breathed. “We’re to go, too? Oh no! Oh no! It can’t be true! It’s a joke!” She had not spoken so many words at one time for weeks and weeks.

Elsie got up from the mattress.

“At once!” she said. “There’s less than half an hour! Have a quick wash, darling! Comb your hair! I’ll get our things together! I don’t know whether I’m on my head or my heels!”

“Quiet!” Mila counselled, as she went for her towel and her piece of soap. “You must not get so excited! You’ll make yourself ill!” There was an enamel ewer and basin in the room. She poured out some water. “Eretz Israel has been there for two thousand years,” she said gravely.

“Yes, yes,” stormed Elsie, bundling up their blankets. “But the lorry’s leaving prompt at ten. Hurry, darling, hurry!”

As she turned away to pick up the odd things they had, she had the sort of smile on her face with which mothers look down on their new-born infants.

“It was just like this in Warsaw, I remember,” she said to herself. “No midwife. No anaesthetics.”

“Don’t hurry like that!” panted Mila, as they went racing along the Eskü Ut to the Embankment. “You’ve got a long journey ahead of you! They’ll wait for us!”

“I don’t know!” gasped Elsie. “I don’t know! They didn’t particularly want to take us at all! They said: ‘Just a couple of women! They’re bound to keep us waiting!’ Are you all right, Mila? Are you sure you can manage it? Give me your bundle, will you?”

“Of course I can. And I won’t give you my bundle. You’ve got as much as

you can manage. Take it easy, Channah! Take it easy!”

Elsie smiled. Her heart was filled with joy. She was conscious of considerable self-satisfaction too. She had been clever. There was no doubt of that. There was, however, still one hurdle to get over. In not many minutes Mila would see that Leon was a member of the party. What effect would that have on her? Would she suddenly turn tail, as she had done on an earlier occasion; as she had done a second time, in fact, when she had glimpsed Elsie herself? She determined it would be better to convey the information now, while they were so strenuously occupied with the job of getting to the bridge. They were just turning on to the Embankment, when she said, as it were casually:

“By the way, Mila. You know who’s taking the party? An old friend of yours. Leon. You remember him?”

Mila stopped. Her jaw fell. For one instant it looked as if she would drop her bundle and run. But Elsie was too quick for her. “Look!” she cried. “There’s the lorry! Do you see it? Just this side of the bridge.” They had skirted the danger. The danger was now behind them. They approached the bridge. There were four people sitting near the lorry, their backs against the parapet. A young man and woman were gazing at the bridge, which had just been put into commission, and in quick time, for it was only the arch on this side of the Margit Island that had been sprung by the Germans. They had handled the other bridges more efficiently. One or two other passengers could be glimpsed under the tarpaulin in the half-light inside the lorry. At that moment a man put his leg over the tail board, preparing to descend, a man with broad shoulders, tousled chestnut-brown hair, a snub-nose, the familiar white scar over the cheek-bone. It was Leon. He glimpsed the two women in the same moment as they glimpsed him, and he leapt down into the roadway like an antelope.

“Channah! Mila! *Shalom!* How wonderful to see you!” He took their hands and shook them energetically. “I heard you’d made it! That’s grand!” He turned to Mila. “Channah tells me you’ve not been too well lately. The motor trip will do you all the good in the world. Then the sea-air after that. Just what the doctor ordered!”

Elsie smiled at him gratefully. That’s the way to do it, she thought. No secrets. Take the bull by the horns.

“*Shalom*, Leon! I wish they hadn’t rushed us like this,” complained Elsie, pressing her hand to her heart. “We nearly passed out getting ready in five minutes. Just like you men! And here you are sitting about, waiting!”

“We won’t be more than a few minutes now. There’s just one or two other people to come. That one with the map there, that’s Itzik, the driver! Hi, Itzik! Put that map down! Here’s Channah! Here’s Mila! You must meet the others. Hallo! Willi! Hinda!” He was calling out to the group sitting on the pavement. “Here’s Channah and Mila!” Willi and Hinda got up. They were quite young people. Hinda had dark flashing eyes, a broad brow, full lips. She was easy to look at. They were followed by an older man in spectacles, and a middle-aged man. “This is Mischa Fasan! Yes, himself! We managed to hide him away!” He was obviously a person of importance. “And this is Julius Vastagh, the food-chemist! Have you any straw? He’ll knock you up a couple of beef-steaks!” Julius Vastagh got up smiling from the newspaper he had spread out under himself. His teeth were dazzling. He obviously knew exactly what to eat and what not to eat in order to keep them so.

“*Shalom! Shalom!*” There was a brisk interchange of *Shaloms* on every hand. Two people who had been busy inside the lorry came out. One was introduced as Karl Berger. He was an “Agronome,” whatever that was. His pockets were stuffed with papers. He was about forty. The other was some years younger, his name Chaim, and he was an engineer. He wore one of those Russian caps in which political leaders are photographed on the top of Lenin’s tomb during ceremonial occasions. “*Shalom! Shalom!*” Then more handshakes and greetings and inquiries about this and that. Had they been in Budapest long? Had they any relatives in Palestine? Had they been on a sea-voyage before? Everybody talked in Yiddish or German. Elsie observed with relief that most of the questions were addressed to her. She was certain that the others had been advised, obviously by Leon, that the girl was not in good shape. She thought they were handling the situation with tact and kindness. She could have kissed them all, one after the other. They all seemed to be people of intelligence, even of distinction, though it was evident that all of them or nearly all of them, had been through the mill lately. But they were sensitive people, too. It was going to make the journey ahead easier than it might have been, whatever experiences were in store for them.

Leon started counting heads. “Five-six-seven-eight-nine. With Itzik, ten. That’s one missing. Who’s missing? Oh yes, Ludwig Neumann. What do you expect? A lawyer. He’d better hurry.”

“That’s him, isn’t it?” somebody asked. A tall man with spindly legs, dressed in a black coat and grey trousers and, fantastically, in a starched butterfly collar and formal grey tie, was loping along the embankment. His clothes did not accord well with the black American-cloth shopping-bag he held. There was a string hanging down at his shoulder, from which a small

cushion was suspended, wrapped round in a couple of rugs.

“Ludwig Neumann,” muttered Willi to Elsie. “You know. The Austrian. The international lawyer.”

“Yes, of course,” muttered Elsie in return. “It’s like the staff of a University,” she thought to herself. “You can see they’re going to be pretty valuable people one way or another when they get to Palestine. But you wouldn’t guess they’ve all been leading lights in the Resistance movement. Well, I don’t suppose I look as if I could say Boo to a goose. Anyhow, the conversation’s going to be on a high level.” She looked at Ludwig Neumann again. He looked rather a forlorn spectacle really, this Austrian international lawyer. Out of all his deed boxes and ledgers and calf-bound law volumes this was all he had salvaged, a pillow, two blankets, and a small shopping-bag. The sole of his left boot was loose and flapped on the roadway as he ran, which made the snow-white starched collar look all the more fabulous. Where had he kept that collar during the discomforts to which, in the nature of things, he had been subjected for a long time? Or had he at the last moment got some kind woman to wash it, as a symbol of jubilation, like a building flying a flag?

“Please, excuse me!” he gasped as he spotted Leon. There was no make-believe in *that* gasping, thought Elsie. “I went to the wrong bridge,” he explained.

Leon smiled, and not Leon only. Ludwig Neumann was exactly the sort of man who would be incredibly meticulous about a syllable in a document, and confuse a bridge which was standing with a bridge that was a welter of broken blocks and twisted steel rods.

“Well, we’re all here now,” said Leon. “We’ll get going. Your documents, all of you.” He handed them round.

“What about the American?” asked someone.

“Yes, what about the American?” asked several others.

They obviously meant Milt Greenberg. They seemed to like the pleasant young man from Brooklyn.

“He’s heard of a store of grain in Szolnok,” said Leon. “He’s had to go after it. He told me to wish you all a good journey. *Mirzashem*, he’ll meet us all in Eretz.”

The party turned to Itzik, the driver, who was climbing into his seat.

“You’ll give him a greeting when you get back, yes, Itzik?”

“Yes, yes, sure, sure.” He talked to them as to a party of schoolchildren, though some looked tough, and most looked wise. “To your places, boys and girls! Mind the step! Be careful of the carpet!” Itzik was evidently a funny man. “Who’s coming up beside me? Room for one!” he called out. Leon looked tentatively at Elsie and Mila, but obviously they could not be separated. Then Mischa Fasan, the oldest person in the party, was the right man. “Up, Dr. Fasan!” The old man grinned like a schoolboy as he climbed in beside Itzik. He was quite spry for his sixty years. Leon let the tail board down, and Willi handed up the bits of luggage the travellers had brought with them. Inside there were rugs and sacks and other oddments to sit on. In one corner were some parcels that evidently contained food. Over in another corner were some petrol and a spare tyre. The passengers being all aboard, Willi vaulted into the lorry, and lifted the tail board again. Itzik started up the engine and got into gear. They charged off, with the noise of a low-flying Rata machine-gunning a barracks.

Suddenly everyone started singing—at least, all those who knew the song. It was one of the songs of the Palestinian pioneers:

*Al atzevet bachurim, bachurim,
harabi tsiva bismoach kol chayenu. . . .
Don't be sad, lads, don't be sad,
The Rebbe says we must have fun.
All our lives are full of darkness
For God's sake let in the sun!
Let's have rhythm, let's get moving.
There's lots of beer and wine to hand.
Let old man and young lad dance
The Hora in a foreign land.*

Elsie Silver did not know the song. But if it was not on her lips, it was in her heart, pealing like a bell. For Mila was singing away like a schoolchild on a treat. So were the others. They were all like youngsters. The years had fallen from them. Their chests were flung out as they sang, their heads moved from side to side:

*Don't be sad, lads, don't be sad,
The Rebbe says we must have fun.*

They were roaring along over the bridge, and under them the springtime waters bore down swirling and chuckling round the piers, and joined again and went rushing on towards the sea. Ahead of them loomed the massive bastions of the Var. They had crossed the river now. The long journey to the river and across the river was over.

“I’m going to cry!” said Elsie. “This is dreadful! My handkerchief’s like a bit of old table-cloth!” But she was crying. The lorry had turned left. It was thrusting along the Áttlos Ut now, under the green slopes of the *Gellert* hill. The river was at their backs now, the river they had been so close to, for so long, since the evening they had both glimpsed it together from a window in Bratislava.

She turned impulsively to Mila. “Do you remember——” she was going to say. But she did not say it. The girl must forget the past. Gellert hill was on their right hand. Soon it would be behind them. Buda would be behind them. Budapest, Bratislava, Cracow, Warsaw, cities of danger and grief, they would all be behind them. Away southward and westward were the great plains, and one more frontier, that of Yugoslavia, a frontier where they would not have to steal at dead of night under the imminent danger of a jangling of alarm wires and a crack of rifles. And beyond the hills of Yugoslavia was the sea, and beyond the sea was Eretz, the Land. Listen to the girl now! Listen to her, saluting the land, with a song on her lips and a light in her eyes:

All our lives are full of darkness.

For God’s sake let in the sun.

CHAPTER XI

I

The singing ceased. The passion was too intense to last. The travellers proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as they could with the rugs and sacks and the mattress or two that someone had thrown in. There was a long day ahead of them, and it would probably be made longer by the state of the roads. They might make the frontier by nightfall, or they might not.

Mila was lying stretched out, her back against Elsie's knees. The animation had suddenly fallen from her, like a load of snow from a steep roof.

"You must rest now," murmured Elsie, stroking the girl's forehead. "We must both rest." The girl was sound asleep, before the hills of Buda had faded from view. Soon the hills on the north and the river on the east were invisible. The broken suburbs dwindled and disappeared. They were rattling and roaring across the verge of the Great Plain.

It was the sweet time of the year. Though from time to time a wrecked bridge, a burned station, a rusty train lying under an embankment with its back broken, an irrelevant farmhouse gutted to its cellars, told the sharp tale of the bombing planes that had recently flown under these skies, and the masses of troops that had manoeuvred over these fields—yet the young maize and wheat and clover, the shrill green early vines in the red vineyards, the far-scattered acacia, the thrusting buds, did all they knew to annul the indecency. All the fruit trees were gay with blossom, the late white blossom of apple trees, pink-tipped, ranged in vast orchards, milk-white of plum, ivory white of pear, the famous apricots. Now and again one of the travellers would rise to his feet, and, holding by the tail board, gaze out over the broad expanse, as if he needed to assure himself that he was truly no longer crouched in a cellar or incarcerated in a prison. The millstones of war had not wholly ground into powder the droves of pigs on the edge of the villages, the flocks of sheep, the troops of horses and oxen, and as the lorry rattled by, pursued sometimes, where the road had not been tended for several years, by clouds of dust like cattle pursued by clouds of gnats, a horseman or a shepherd would stand gazing impassively after them as they disappeared into the south-west, his hand to his eyes, as his ancestors stood gazing a thousand years ago, and his progeny would stand gazing a thousand years hence.

An hour passed, two hours. Elsie dropped off to sleep. Her eyes were open

again. Someone was touching her on the shoulder.

“Yes?” It was the small man, the food-chemist. What was his name? Yes, Julius Vastagh. He had a felt-covered military water-bottle in his hand.

“Take some!” he said. “It’s a sort of orangeade. I made it myself.” One got the impression he had been mixing powders and distilling waters somewhere in a corner of the lorry. She was thirsty. She took the flask from him and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls. At that moment Mila opened her eyes, and reached her hand out into the air. It was as if the smell had struck her nostrils. Elsie looked inquiringly at Julius. “Of course!” he murmured. She put the bottle to Mila’s lips. The girl drank. The hand settled again. The eyes closed. It was exactly the way a baby briefly opens its eyes, smelling the milk in the breast, and the breast is brought to its lips, and the child sucks a moment or two, and then the lips relax, the baby is asleep again.

“*Mishkosheh!*” breathed the dapper little chemist. One saw he had kind eyes. “She is going to be well soon.”

Then young Willi spoke.

“I’m getting hungry,” he said.

“Me, too,” said the girl Hinda.

They sat there holding hands, like schoolchildren.

“You wouldn’t think”—Leon leaned over to Elsie—“they’d been partisans, both of them. She was specially good with a knife. Used to creep up on them at dead of night, like the Ghurkas.” No, one wouldn’t think so.

“When do we eat, Leon?” Hinda called out. “He bites when he’s hungry.” It was obvious that the two young folk were on the best of terms with each other. From the way each caught the other gazing on him when he thought himself unobserved, and smiled, and looked away—it seemed likely a pair of lovers would be added soon to the joy of the journey.

“You can eat when you like,” returned Leon. “You’ve each got your own little parcel. We hoped to get as far as Kaposvar and knock back a litre of wine.”

“The wine’s on me,” said Willi. “Look!” He brought out his wallet and removed a crumpled dollar note. “I got it from a dead *Piefke* in a wood near Tarnow.”

“Fine!” said Leon. “But you could get a whole barrel for that, and a sack of corn. Or how would you like a nice fat hog?”

“How far’s this place?” asked Willi.

“Another hundred kilometres. More, I think.”

“Ooh!” groaned Willi and Hinda.

“What’s the hurry, Leon?” asked Chaim. That was the man in the cloth cap. He was an engineer, one learned, who had worked in the Soviet Union on dam projects.

“Because the ship won’t hang around in Zara more than a couple of days, at most.”

“Zara?” There was a general chorus. “Oh, *Zara!*” “So that’s where we’re going! Zara!” “Where on earth’s Zara?”

“On the Dalmatian coast,” said Leon, for the benefit of those who seemed hazy about it. He was grinning with pleasure. There was now no particular reason to keep routes and destinations secret, but he was evidently a born mystifier. He must have been like that long before he became an underground worker. “Itzik will show you where it is on his map. The British are building a new airfield near Zara. That’s why there’s a cargo ship or two about. Don’t get excited! It’s still a long way off.”

The flat leagues followed each other, the few far villages, that turned on the street their windowless unwelcoming walls. The onion-bulb towers of the churches, surmounted by a cross when they were Catholic, by a cock when they were Calvinist, summoned no worshippers to prayer. There was very little traffic about, beyond the immemorial traffic of that countryside, a low-slung country-cart carrying fodder, a huge barrel on a four-wheeled plank stretcher, an occasional bicycle in a village. Once or twice a lorry-load of Yugoslav soldiers drove by, once or twice a motor car with Russian personnel. The war had swung over far to the north and west.

They were well north of Kaposvar when at length they alighted, but not because there was wine to drink. The engine was boiling, and from far off Itzik had noticed one of those weighted T-square contraptions that work the ancient cattle-wells. So everyone got out, and dug into his rations, and had to be content with the slightly brackish water with which they filled their bottles and dixie-cans from the wooden troughs. While they were there a herd of large horned cattle came plodding forward to be watered. Not a word passed between the men of the lorry and the men of the herd. The peasants stood by motionless, their long whips in their hands, their cherry-wood pipes dark in their mouths. Two small boys squatted on their haunches and proceeded to spit with extraordinary precision into a small rusty tin six feet away. But one

person there was quick with excitement, the man from Dresden, Karl Berger. “*Ich bin Agronom,*” he said half a dozen times, as if to explain it, peering down into the well, tugging at the weight on the cross-beam, turning the water over in the hollow of his tongue. “*Hoch interessant, nicht?*”

Then once more the party started off, and the long flat leagues unrolled again under the wheels. It was late afternoon. The country was greener now, and the declining sun blew a red flare upon the tops of trees. Now and again pheasants ran squawking out from between the half-grown stalks of maize, or a flock of wild geese went honking over to their breeding-places. There were rivulets now and swampy places starred with forget-me-nots. They were approaching the river that marked the frontier country.

“Csurgó!” Leon proclaimed suddenly. He was staring out over the country ahead between the shoulders of the driver and old Fasan. It sounded like some mysterious password.

“What’s that? Where?” asked several voices.

“The frontier village!” he explained. As he spoke, the outlying farms showed up behind the advancing vehicle. The village thickened. Itzik reduced his speed. There was a building that looked like a schoolhouse on the left, a derelict petrol station on the right. They were in a street now. That was the church. That was the village store. Itzik turned his head and gestured. “Get ready, everyone!” Leon ordered. “Take everything with you!” A minute later Itzik braked. Everybody got down carrying their belongings and came round to the front of the lorry. They were at the western end of the village. A customs barrier was slung across the road. On one side were a couple of small huts and sheds. A handful of customs men and soldiers, in both Hungarian and Russian uniforms, were awaiting the next step. A mile or so away a double line of trees meandered over the plain, along the two banks of a river. Beyond the river was a new country. A line of hills quivered and glowed there, made so diaphanous by the large red ball of the sun, it was hard to say whether they were hills or cloud. The air was full of a shrill twitter of swallows, as busy as grasshoppers.

“Come along, all of you! Bring your papers!” Leon ordered. His most fetching grin on his face, he went ahead to the group by the barrier, with the special quittances he had been given. He was holding his fist up in the Russian way. Political gestures came easy to him. He had once, at least, given a creditable imitation of a Szálasy guard out on a firing-squad spree. The Russians and Hungarians raised their fists too, and grinned back. It was not going to be a difficult passage.

The consultations with the Hungarian officials in the Hungarian shed were

over quickly. One had the feeling that they were there merely as a matter of form. The examination by the Russians was not quite so cursory. In each case the scrutiny was close, but after several minutes the documents were returned to all the holders, with one exception, Ludwig Neumann, the Austrian expert on international law. For some reason the Russians were more diffident about Herr Neumann than they were about the others. They made him turn out all the scraps of paper with which his pockets were stuffed, and a good deal of discussion went on about him in the small inner office at the back of the shed. Then at last a telephone-call was put through, presumably to Budapest.

“That might take some time,” said Leon glumly. “Let’s see what we can get at that inn.” The party went over, and ate well, against the payment of a dollar note. No one made the slightest attempt to find out from anyone else, least of all from Ludwig Neumann himself, what bee was buzzing in the Russian bonnet. He seemed to be about as politically minded as the scrubbed table on which the wine and sausage and bread were set before them.

“Sleepy again, Mila?” asked Elsie softly.

The girl nodded.

“This wine,” she murmured.

It was not the wine only. Night after night, week after week, if she had slept at all it had been anything but healing sleep that had filled the dark long hours. She had a good deal of leeway to make up.

The party lounged around for a long time without being called and then went back to the lorry. Some disposed themselves inside. Others waited around. Still no word had come through from Budapest. Still Ludwig Neumann remained suspended in a limbo.

It was getting dark now. Itzik, the driver, was walking about like a caged animal. He had hoped to be well on his way to Zagheb by the end of the day’s journey. Now it seemed likely they would be held up all night in this God-forsaken village.

Then Ludwig Neumann took a hand in the matter. He asked Leon to step aside.

“You must go,” he said. “If there is difficulty now, there will be difficulty later. I refuse to hold you up. It would be terrible if you missed the ship because of me.”

“*Tovarich!*” the Russian in charge called out. Leon turned and went back to the office. By the light of an oil-lamp you could see them tidying up their

papers. They were shutting up for the night. Leon returned a minute later.

“We stay the night, or we go now,” he said.

“You go now,” said Ludwig Neumann. He went up to the heap of bundles in the lorry and took out his black shopping-bag and his little cushion tied up in two rugs.

“*Shalom!*” said Leon.

“*Shalom!*” “*Shalom!*” “*Shalom!*” everyone called out.

Leon took out a wad of notes from his pocket, peeled off one or two and handed them over to Ludwig Neumann.

“No,” said the lawyer. “I thank you. You have further than I to go. I’ll find a way.”

“Well, Itzik, well,” Leon was genuinely distressed.

“The decision’s up to you,” said Itzik. “It’s a long way.”

“Supposing they don’t allow him to go on?”

Itzik shrugged his shoulders, and remained silent.

“You’re coming back with the lorry, aren’t you?” asked Ludwig Neumann.

“Yes.”

“You may come back this way?”

“If it’s possible.”

“If not, not,” said Ludwig Neumann. “Perhaps I will even find a way to join the others. If not now, later.” When someone speaks in such a tone one knows argument is vain. Leon got up into the driver’s seat for the night spell of driving, and started up the lorry. Old Fasan lay down in the lorry, and Chaim, the engineer, got up beside Leon. Both slewed their heads round the sides of the cab.

“*Shalom, Ludwig Neumann!*” they cried out.

“*Shalom!*” went the lips of the famous international lawyer. You could not hear the word in the noise the engine made. The lorry jerked off. From the back of the lorry you could make out Ludwig Neumann’s stiff white butterfly-collar, neither stiff nor white any more, hovering pale and forlorn five and a half feet above the roadway, like a large hurt moth.

“A pity!” said Itzik. “I believe they wanted him at the Hebrew University. Well, there it is!” He was not one for shedding tears when things went wrong,

and there was nothing to be done about it. "They'd better not settle down yet! We'll be out once or twice again!"

First it was the river itself, the Drave. There was a Russian sentry on both ends of the bridge. Everyone got out and there was a quick scrutiny.

"Pass!" the sentry said. The lorry rumbled across. The travellers went over on foot. The lights probed into the night inquisitively. "Climb up again!" Itzik called. They climbed up.

"We're in another country," breathed Elsie in Mila's ear. "The last country. And then we reach the sea." She placed her mouth softly against Mila's cheek. "It's been a long time, Mila."

"If not for you . . ." Mila brought out. "If not for you . . ."

"If not for both of us," Elsie corrected her. Nothing was said for ten minutes, twenty minutes. It was a strange land, a blind world, there, under the dark vault of the lorry. Slowly a dimness suffused the air. There was a farm, a house or two. They were approaching the frontier village on the Yugoslav side of the river. The lorry ground to a stop.

"Out!" called Itzik. "It should be quick this time." He was right. The Russian imprimatur had already been given at Csurgó. The travellers got back into the lorry and started forward. They were on their way to Zaghreb, to Zaghreb and the sea.

II

But whoever else was aware of Zaghreb, Elsie Silver was not. At Zaghreb, and for many miles beyond, she, at least, was fast asleep. It may have been the keenness of the air in her nostrils that awakened her, or it may have been the shrillness of Mila's voice in her eardrums.

"Stop!" she heard Mila shout. "Tell him to stop!" On the instant she was awake.

"What is it, Mila? What?" she cried. But there was no panic in the sound of Mila's voice. It was bright daylight.

"Look, Channah!" Mila cried. She was standing up on the left-hand side of the lorry against the tail board, grasping the tarpaulin rope to balance herself. "Look! Here's more!"

Elsie scrambled to her feet. She was aching in all her limbs. It had been a long night, and a hard bed. She stumbled and young Willi caught hold of her with his free hand. The other hand was round Hinda's shoulder. They also

were standing and looking out.

“Those flowers! Look!” Mila was nearly distraught with excitement. “Those red ones! What are they?”

They were up in the hills, hard white hills outlined against a pale blue-green sky. There were dark trees thrusting up against the skyline, trees Elsie had not seen for years, cypress, ilex, holm-oak. In the hollows among rocks, great drifts of scarlet anemones flickered like an underfoot fire.

“Anemones!” said Elsie.

“Yes, yes!” cried Mila. “Anemones! Those trees! What are they?” She did not wait for an answer. “Oh, Channah! I saw an eagle! I saw the sun come out! There was a waterfall! You were sleeping! I didn’t waken you! Anemones! Anemones!”

The girl was enraptured. She clapped her hands. The rapture extended to everyone in the lorry. It was as if a small fragment of the sun had been broken off and been suspended from the roof of the lorry, the way that apples and oranges are suspended by devout Jews from the crossed laths that cover their makeshift booths on the Feast of Tabernacles. Everyone smiled. One after another they got on to their feet to join Mila in her delight. You could hear their joints creaking as they rose.

But the wonder was not over. At the top of a steep climb Leon suddenly braked the lorry, and got out. The goggles were thrust up on his forehead. He had the familiar grin on his face. Although he had been driving all night, and must have been driving through mountainous country for some time, he looked quite fresh.

“Get out, all of you!” he ordered. “There’s something over there you must see!” He pointed westward.

Everybody got out, and came round to the front of the lorry to look where he pointed. All were deeply moved, but they were even more conscious of Mila’s exaltation than of the sight they saw. The girl was transfigured. She stood there for one minute, two minutes, as if she were afraid that if she did not hold tight with her eyes, the thing would disappear like smoke or a promise. At last she turned round. Her cheeks were blazing like the scarlet anemones. It was to Elsie she spoke, and to no one else, as if no one else were with her, there on the mountain tops.

“Channah!” she brought out. “Channah! Look!” You could not hear her words. You could only deduce them from the shape of her lips as they moved. “Look! *The sea!*”

“Up here!” proclaimed Leon. “In front! There’s room for both of you.”

“But . . .” started Elsie.

“Chaim would like to stretch his legs inside. Isn’t that so, Chaim?”

The engineer smiled, handed his maps over, and went round to the back of the lorry. Mila got in between Leon and Elsie. Rugs were lifted up to them for their knees and shoulders. Someone handed up half a bottle of wine, someone else some bread and a hunk of cheese. There was no doubt everyone was spoiling Mila. The heavenly day went ahead like a band of musicians under flying flags. The sea did not last long. It let itself be seen for only a moment or two across one range of hills, through another range of hills. Then it folded itself around, like a bride, or a secret, to offer itself when the due moment was come. But there was everything else in a day that, even as it proceeded, seemed to put its ends before its beginnings, and its middle anywhere at all. Now it was orange trees and aloes. But how *could* it be, at the top of the sharp white hills? Now it was vultures and waterfalls. But how *could* it be in the green meadow? Olives in the middle distances, striped orange awning in a café under an ilex-grove, a moving haystack propelled by the four dainty invisible legs of a donkey, trailing roots of fig trees, tiny walled cities stuck like posters on grey rock slopes, pink blossom of oleander, white blossom of oleander, round red jaunty peasant-caps moving by themselves like red moons and red planets, swallows making the sky a music-sheet, scarlet blossom of pomegranate, rock-rose and myrtle, cold freshet smothered by forget-me-nots, blue forget-me-nots blue as the sea . . . and at last the sea itself, firm-fixed as a slab of lapis lazuli between the base of the mountains and the long islands beyond.

III

It was about five o’clock that evening that the lorry climbed to the crest of a hill, and, turning sharp on a hair-pin bend, they saw the panorama of Zara and the adjacent region lying stretched below them: nearest, a long and narrow indentation of the sea; beyond, a small plain; then, stretching north and west from the plain, a lump of land like the blunt snout of a lizard. There was a sea-town there. The town was Zara. Beyond, a line of islands was strung out against the west, disappearing north and south in the blue Illyrian haze.

It was Itzik who was driving again now. He had taken over from Chaim some hours earlier. It had been tough going. He removed his right hand from the wheel.

“Do you see it, Mila?” he asked. “Up against the quayside?”

“See what?” she asked. “It’s too far.”

“You’re younger than me,” he said. “I thought you might see it. The ship. *Your ship!*”

“You’re teasing me,” she said. “Oh yes. Of course I can see it.” She put her hand to her eyes and gazed intently. “*Q-U-E-E-N M-A-R-Y.*” She spelled out the English letters awkwardly.

“Who’s being funny now?” growled Itzik, twinkling. (“Mila’s being funny!” sang Elsie’s heart. “Mila’s being funny!”) “Then they must have changed its name,” Itzik went on. “They told us in Budapest the ship’s name’s the *Estrella.*”

“The *Estrella!*” Mila cried. “The *Estrella!* What a lovely, lovely name! What language is that?”

“Spanish, I think,” ventured Elsie.

“Spanish! Is it a Spanish ship?”

“Or South American, perhaps?”

“It’ll fly the Panamanian flag,” said Itzik. “They mostly do. Blue and white quarterings, with blue stars on the white ground.” He sounded quite an authority on flags.

“The *Estrella!* The *Estrella!* Like a nightingale!” carolled Mila. She had probably never heard a nightingale in all her life. Certainly not, thought Elsie, in the groves and woods of Warsaw.

The vision of Zara was soon hidden from sight by the turn of the roadway, to reappear fitfully in the twists and turns of the descending landscape till they almost reached sea-level. Then there was a narrow river to cross that came helter-skelter down from the hills; then they turned westward, and there was less than an hour to go before they were at journey’s end. They had advanced some eight or nine miles when suddenly a loud roar drowned the roar of their own engine as an aeroplane became air-borne and thundered straight towards them.

“Channah!” cried Mila in terror, and ducked her head.

“It’s all *right*, darling,” Elsie assured her. “It’s all *right!*” There had been very few aeroplanes in Mila’s experience that had been all right. The plane climbed steeply, showing its markings. “It’s British!” she said. “Look! They don’t drop bombs any more!”

“Oh, British!” repeated Mila, as she raised her head, and followed the

machine's flight.

"That's why we're here," said Itzik. "They're building an airfield here. The *Estrella* has brought cement, or something."

British, thought Elsie. It was a queer world. The only British planes she had ever known anything about had always been engaged in dropping bombs on her—or so it had usually seemed. British planes sent out specially by the Air Ministry to drop bombs on Elsie Silver, who had once been a Lancashire lass, and had become a high-up Nazi lady. Perhaps the British boy piloting that plane was from Lancashire, too. She put her arm round Mila's shoulder.

"All right now, darling?"

"Yes, Channah. Look at the donkey!" A donkey was trotting ahead of them with four wooden sugar-boxes suspended for panniers, two on each side. It touched the ground with extraordinary delicacy, like a cat. "And those trousers!" The trouser-seat of the peasant with the donkey was an enormous bag swinging heavily left and right. "What's he carrying there? It looks like loaves of bread. What a funny place for the groceries!" There was little the girl missed. The eyes, the voice, the mind, were becoming clear and keen again, like a rusted knife ground on a whetstone. A little distance further along the spectacle was less archaic. Two or three aeroplanes were lying around. Workmen were turning up the soil and putting in stakes. There was a handful of men sitting about on barrels in their shirt-sleeves. They had khaki trousers and red faces. They were aware that a couple of females were approaching in the driving-seat of a lorry, and the hot drink steamed up unregarded from their soot-encrusted cans.

"Hi-di-ho!" they shouted with one voice.

"A cup of char?" demanded one.

Elsie did not know the word, but she knew what drink it was they must be drinking, being English. Tea! Black as syrup with buckets of milk and boulders of sugar! English tea! Tea in theatrical lodging-houses, road-menders' tea by English road-sides, Blackpool tea, Clacton tea! Have a nice cup of tea, miss?

'Oh dear, oh dear!' her heart wailed. 'What's there been in all these years that's made up for the nice cups of tea I haven't drunk?'

"Channah!" cried Mila. "Look! Zara! Where the ship is!" There was the small town, its towers and chimneys and roofs lifted against the evening light. Zara! Where the ship was! The ship was for Palestine, where there would be another sort of tea—tea-with-lemon in tumblers, sucked through cubes of

sugar wedged between the teeth. Tea for Mila! It was Mila's day.

They were in Zara. The little roadstead might have been as enchanting as Paris or as disenchanting as Wolverhampton. To those Jews in Itzik's lorry, who had undergone many tribulations and might very easily have died a hundred times before at last they reached the inconceivably unreachable sea, Zara was a thing against which the small ship, *Estrella*, was anchored, and in the hold of the *Estrella* all their dreams were tied up in bales.

A main street. A public garden on one hand, a marine basin on the other, with small fishing-boats riding at anchor, bobbing and dipping. Italian names, Italian doorways, Italian wares in shops. The sea gleaming like blue steel at the end of the vista, both left and right.

"The port?" demanded Itzik of a pedestrian. It might be this way or the other. A curious frightening haste was upon them all. It communicated itself like an electric impulse through the dividing partition of the lorry. To the port. To the ship. Everybody was dog-tired, dirty, hungry, thirsty. A sluice of cold water, a gulp of cold beer, how wonderful they would be! Not yet! To the port! To the ship! The ship might melt like a snow-flake. It might be a dream, a lie. There have been so many dreams and lies before.

The pedestrian gestured with head and thumb to the left, and Itzik slewed round to the left on the next corner. The way was clear. They reached the sea-front, and for one moment Itzik braked while he looked left and right. There was no ship to be seen, beyond a few fishing-boats and skiffs, the routine small craft of a small harbour. Somewhat to the south, and half-way between Zara here and the long low island opposite, a wrecked boat thrust its bow up at an acute angle from the water. The heart failed a moment. That's not the *Estrella*, is it? It can't be. There was a mole some way up on the right. Perhaps the *Estrella* was somewhere beyond there. You should see its smoke-stack, of course.

Itzik swung his wheel over to the right and drove along the promenade. There were youths and pretty girls sauntering in the cool of the evening, citified men in dark suits, peasant men and women in garments like baskets of cottage flowers; but Itzik had no more awareness of them than if they were match-stalks in the gutter. He reached the mole now, and then drove beyond it. There was no sign of a tramp-steamer. A dreadful anxiety now took hold of everybody staring through the partition window, screwing their heads round the tarpaulin frame. Is the *Estrella* a myth? Has it always been a myth? Or were they too late? Has the *Estrella* come and gone?

But why panic? There was sea on the other side of the town, only a short distance away. There was undoubtedly harbourage on that side, too. Itzik, at least, did not go into a dither for more than a few seconds. Reversing the lorry, he drove back till he could make a left-hand turn. In a few minutes they had driven across the width of the town to the sea-front. Hallelujah! There it was, some four hundred metres away, a tramp-steamer, stern on, red with rust, grimy with soot! The boat that would take them out of the House of Bondage to the Promised Land! For good measure, there was another tramp steamer alongside, a little further on; but this could not be *their* ship. She was much too large for that. Neither boat had steam up. No smoke was rising from either smoke-stack. They were in good time, thank God! They need not have broken their backs to get here.

A minute or two later they could make out the flag flying from the stern of the *Estrella*. Yes, it was as it should be. The blue-and-white quartered flag, white-starred, of the Panama Republic. But a few moments later those with the sharpest eyes could see that all was *not* as it should be. The name of the tramp was not *Estrella*. It was *Cleanthis*.

“No! That’s not it!” cried Leon at the rear. “Can it be the other one, after all?”

But even as he spoke he realized that it could not be. They did not need to drive up alongside to establish that. This second ship was not only too large; it flew the Red Ensign. It was a British ship, in fair trim, not at all the grubby tramp they had been booked for. The British ship was something between two and three thousand tons. Its name was *Peggy Rawlings*, and hailed from Liverpool. It would not be hospitable to Jewish refugees assaying the illegal passage to Palestine.

Now at last Itzik put his brake on, midway between the two ships. He got down. Everybody else got down after him. He stood scratching his head. Everybody stood and looked at everybody else. What on earth had happened? Surely the *Estrella* could not have come and gone? Then suddenly a loud babble went up. Everybody in the same moment arrived at the same explanation.

But of course! What a lot of idiots they were! The *Estrella* had had to change its name. There was a war on, at sea as on land. In war-time, everybody, everything, sooner or later, changes its name. *They* knew.

“So what now? You just go aboard?” asked Itzik. He addressed Leon. He handed over to him now. Itzik had brought them safely to the ship, and in time. He had done his job.

“But, of course, we just go aboard,” said Leon. “That’s why they’ve not got steam up. They’re waiting for us.”

But there was no particular air of anybody waiting for anybody on board the *Cleanthis*. A paunchy middle-aged man sat against the galley aft, wearing old dungarees and a dirty vest. He had a bucket between his knees, and was peeling potatoes as if the meal they were intended for was a week next Wednesday. He was doubtless the cook. A younger man in a torn sweater was hanging clothes on a line. The holes at his armpits gaped as he lifted his arms to peg down a pair of mottled grey underpants. On the aft deck, a few feet from the cook, a cabin-boy sat with his knees drawn up to his chin, doing nothing at all. His eyes were matt-black, without lustre.

“Hi!” shouted Leon. He was addressing the cook, who was the oldest man of the three. He would probably know something. Then he stopped. What language do you use when talking to the cook of a Panamanian ship in a Dalmatian port recently taken over from the Italians by the Yugoslav partisans? He remembered this was the sea, after all. He went on in English. “Where’s the Captain? Is he aboard?” The cook looked up from his bucket. He seemed supremely uninterested in the question and the questioner, in the breathless group below on the quayside, in the lorry which clearly had recently come a long distance. The deck-hand turned his head from his washing, then turned it back again. The cabin-boy sat and stared and did not move.

“You understand?” Leon called again.

The cook shrugged his shoulders. Presumably he did not understand. What language to use now? *Cleanthis*. A Greek name. But names meant nothing and Leon knew no Greek. Then Italian, perhaps. He had enough Italian for that.

“*Il Capitano? Sta a bordo?* The Captain? Is he aboard?”

The cook raised his eyebrows, and let the potato he was peeling fall into the bucket. He answered with his forefinger, not his tongue. He had, at all events, understood. “Below decks!” the forefinger went. He went back to his potato-peeling, though very little seemed to interest him, not even his potatoes.

“Fine!” said Leon. He turned to the others. “I’ll go below and tell him we’ve come!” He was very quick in movement. A moment later he was climbing the gang-plank that sloped between the quayside and the well-deck. The galley was aft. Just forrard were the bridge and superstructure, below these were two cabin doors. Leon hesitated a moment. “*Quale?*” he asked. “Which?” The cook, again with a forefinger, indicated the door on the port side. “Good!” He walked forrard along the well-deck. As he moved, a roaring rattle from somewhere close by became louder, then diminished. The sound came from

the port-hole in the bulkhead in front of him. The port-hole was open, with a curtain drawn across behind it. The captain was obviously taking his ease, like the rest of his ship. It sounded a thoroughly drunken snore.

Leon knocked at the door. There was no reply. He knocked again. There was still no reply. He was about to try the door-handle and just walk in, when a man appeared from the port passage-way leading forrard. He was dirty and dishevelled, with slightly bloodshot eyes and a three-day beard. But he was evidently a ship's officer, with that battered peaked cap on his head, and the blue reefer jacket, bespattered with grease, which he was just buttoning up. There was a faded gold ring round his sleeve. Perhaps he was an engineer.

"*Chi siete?*" So Italian was the language here. "Who are you?"

"I want to see the Captain," said Leon. "He's expecting us." He turned his head towards his companions on the quayside. The officer did not turn his head. He had presumably seen them already.

"Oh, he's expecting you, is he?" asked the officer. "I see." It was evident that *he*, at least, was not expecting them. He cleared his throat, and straightened the tie he was not wearing. "Well, you'd better wait, hadn't you? The Captain's . . . busy." There was the faintest tremor of a wink. The Captain's snoring that moment reached one of its more robust climaxes.

"I think not," said Leon. His brain was working hard. The crew of the *Estrella*, that is to say, the *Cleanthis*, certainly seemed to have no inkling of the fact that a number of Jews were going to be taken on as extra hands, and shipped to Palestine. But this was not the sort of merchandise that anybody was likely to know about, excepting the Captain himself. The crew's job, from the First Mate downwards, was, he presumed, to get the ship there. "It's urgent," Leon went on. "I want to see him now." He turned his head again in the direction of his friends below. "They're tired," he said. "They need a rest."

"He's a little difficult," the officer point out, "when he's disturbed."

"That's all right!" Leon knocked once more at the Captain's door, then turned the handle, and entered. The officer faded into the passage-way from which he had emerged. In the half-light that came through the drawn curtain a displeasing sight was visible. The cabin was small, and a good deal of it seemed to be occupied by the Captain, and a good deal of the Captain was the Captain's head. He lay there, on an iron bed clamped to the floor, obviously deep in a drunken slumber. He wore a grubby white shirt and trousers rucked up like a concertina. A big toe thrust massively from a hole in one of his socks. Against the port bulkhead was a chest-of-drawers with a basin from which the dirty water had not been thrown away. A table with a radio was in the right-

hand corner. There was a cupboard in the left corner, near the bed, with several empty bottles on it, and three glasses. Above it were photographs of several young ladies in extreme décolleté. One had no clothes on at all. There were several indications around the place that the Captain had recently been entertaining one, or more than one, of the ladies of Zara.

Leon stood and pondered. Was this the sort of ship, and the sort of ship's Captain, to which Kusta, back at Istanbul, would entrust a handful of valuable emigrants to Palestine? They had made quite a point of it that the members of the party should be carefully chosen. He beat down his misgivings. All that Kusta, and anybody else, was interested in was that the ship should be seaworthy and get them to their destination. If the captain wanted to go on the booze in port, and have an orgy with some girl friends, why shouldn't he? More distinguished captains of more imposing vessels get drunk in port and have orgies.

The snoring filled the cabin like the growl of a puma. As the man breathed, one corner of his mouth came curiously away from the teeth on that side. His face was red as a raw steak.

"Hi, *Capitano!*" shouted Leon, shaking him vigorously by the shoulder. "Hi, get up! Sorry to disturb you, but I must talk to you!" The shaking went on for some time, without result. He brought his mouth closer to the boskage that sprouted from the captain's ear. "Hi, *Capitano!* Get up, will you?" Still no result. Leon looked round desperately. The fellow had to be roused. Would you bang him on the head with that clothes brush? There seemed no other use for it in this place. There was a sponge on the dressing table. Would you soak the sponge and squeeze it on the fellow's face? Would it be dangerous? Leon was not impressed by the danger. He went up to the basin and had just plunged the sponge into it, when a voice hurled itself at him like thunder. The import of the words was clear. It was: "Who the bloody hell are you?" But the language was not among those Leon spoke. It sounded like Greek.

Leon turned. The captain's eyes were wide open. He seemed to be one of those rare mortals who can swing themselves up from drunkenness into sobriety in one swift tremendous arc, like an ape swinging over from one tree to another a considerable distance off. The pupils of the eyes were pale-grey. They seemed to have scarlet rims, but that was doubtless an illusion.

"*No capito,*" said Leon. "I don't understand. Talk Italian."

The Captain seemed inclined to talk a more international language. He was reaching under his pillow, and the thing he was reaching for was a gun.

"*Venga! Venga!*" complained Leon, reaching his arms vertically into the

air, like a schoolboy doing exercises. “Come, come! I’m a friend!”

“Well, who the bloody hell are you?” This time the question was in Italian.

“We’re the passengers!” said Leon. “You’re expecting us, aren’t you?”

“Passengers? What passengers?” The Captain had risen, and had his stockings feet on the floor. His eyes seemed to have come a quarter of an inch forward in their sockets. It was beginning to be fairly clear to Leon that there was some frightful mistake.

“Kusta!” said Leon, as it were casually. If the word meant anything to the Captain, he would react. If it meant nothing, no harm was done.

“Who?”

The word clearly meant not a thing. There was nothing to do but get down to it.

“You’ve changed your ship’s name, haven’t you?”

“Who says I have? And what the hell has it to do with you?”

“We were told to contact the *Estrella*. Are you——”

But Leon was not allowed to get any further. The fellow started yelling like a market full of fish porters. He yelled, ranted, roared, shaking his fists in the air, grunting and sweating and drooling. The small cabin was like a submarine cave into which a huge octopus squirts its whole load of ink. He raved in Greek, Italian, Arabic, English, Turkish, in all the languages he knew and those of which he had picked up smatterings on his sea-farings. One language had not foulness enough for him to express his sentiments about the *Estrella*, and more particularly, its Captain, its Captain’s mother, and all its Captain’s mother’s maternal forbears. Out of the black plethora certain facts emerged. The most important was that the *Cleanthis* was, in fact, *not* the *Estrella*, whatever other names it might have had in other phases of its history. The *Estrella* had weighed anchor and sailed only yesterday. The bastard toad of a Captain, the syphilitic pariah-dog, the reeking lump of ordure, had twisted him, *him*, the Captain of the *Cleanthis*, out of a load of maraschino he had come to pick up here in Zara. He would come up, he, Captain Aghnides, of the *Cleanthis*, would come up sooner or later with the so-called Captain of the rat-infested toilet-can of a ship allegedly called the *Estrella*, and get his hands round that assassin’s wind-pipe and squeeze it till his eye-balls popped. He would kick the guts out of his tripes till they lay steaming on the floor. He would . . .

For a moment even that brass-lunged Captain, with the breath-control of a

Wagnerian tenor, was compelled to stop for breath. Leon saw his opportunity.

“So this is not the *Estrella*, Captain Aghnides?” he summed up.

The simplicity of the question, and the calm tone in which it was uttered, were as deflating as a pin in a balloon.

“No, this is not the *Estrella*,” Captain Aghnides meekly confirmed.

“Well, what are we going to do about it?”

“Do about what?” asked the Captain crossly. He had picked up a grubby towel from the floor and was mopping the sweat that was running down his neck in streams.

“How long are you staying here? Where are you sailing to?”

“What’s that got to do with you? Who are you, anyhow?” The smell of possible business rose in the Captain’s nostrils at that moment like incense in the nostrils of an almswoman. “Have a drink!” He reached a huge hand forward to the bottles on the cupboard. “All empty!” he registered. “Sorry! What can I get you? Who *are* you, for Christ’s sake?” His voice rose shrilly.

“I’ll tell you exactly,” said Leon. “We’ve got nothing to hide. Listen. We’re a party of Jews from Central Europe who want to get to Palestine. I’m in charge. Matyas is the name.” He reached his hand out. The Captain rose and reached his hand out, too.

“*Piacere!*” he said. “Captain Aghnides!” It was very formal. Then he sat down.

“Our central office had made arrangements with the *Estrella* that she was to take us to Palestine from this port. We’re a day late. That may or may not be the reason she’s gone without us.”

“She’s gone,” Captain Aghnides said a little sanctimoniously, “because that man is devil’s spawn, and would cut his own mother’s throat for half a lepta.”

“I don’t wish to dispute it. *Estrella*’s gone. *Cleanthis* is here. A fine ship. An honourable Captain. What about it? Which way were you going from here?” Leon made the immemorial gesture of rubbing the fingertips together, which meant: “And, of course, there’s good money in it, too.”

“That’s as may be,” said the Captain. It was extraordinary how completely sober he had become. The eyes had gone back into their sockets, and seemed to be lurking just inside there, like mice in their holes. “Actually there was a job my owner had in mind way back in Rio.”

“How much?” asked Leon again. “Half here, half on safe arrival in Palestine.”

“It’s dangerous,” Captain Aghnides pointed out. “You know what the British Navy thinks about all this.” It was clear he knew a thing or two about landing illegal immigrants. “How many are you?”

“Nine.”

“Any hot ones among you?”

“What do you mean by ‘hot’? And if there were, do you think I’d tell you? No, just plain Jews who want to get to Palestine.”

The Captain considered the situation.

“It would be very inconvenient,” he said.

“Cut it short,” said Leon. It was fine, the way he stood up to the formidable man, in his own territory.

“Two thousand dollars each,” said the Captain.

“We’ll swim,” said Leon. “Five hundred.”

“Seventeen hundred and fifty.”

“Seven hundred and fifty.”

“Seventeen hundred and fifty,” the Captain insisted for quite a long time. Then at last he came down to fifteen hundred.

“Quite impossible. One thousand. That’s final. There’s no good arguing about it. The *Estrella* was taking us for a lot less. Two hundred pounds a head. You know quite well that covers it.”

“Very well.” The Captain reached around for his shoes. “You’d better book passages on the *Estrella*. They could take you for five hundred, too, on the *Estrella*. On the *Estrella* they’d cut your throats and chuck you overboard.”

It did not seem to Leon there was any cast-iron guarantee that they wouldn’t do exactly the same thing on the *Cleanthis*. Such thoughts were better out than in. It was nice to know these were the terms in which the minds of these sea-captains worked.

“Can’t you tell when a man’s down to brass tacks?” said Leon quietly. “I’m telling you a thousand dollars per head is the most it can be. Five hundred dollars down and five hundred on a bank in Alexandria. Forty-five hundred dollars, and you may have to go a few dollars short. That includes every penny our driver’s got with him to buy stocks of food for starving Jews back in

Hungary.”

“What about increasing it the other end?” asked the Captain.

“Can’t be done. The cheques are made out. Well, what about it? We don’t mind trying somewhere else down the coast, you know. Split or Dubrovnik.”

The Captain was tying his shoes.

“Five thousand,” he said, and got up. There was an air of resolution in the set of his jaw. “Anything might happen. I might lose my ship. Yes or no?”

Leon got up. His face was very grim.

“I told you I was down to brass tacks. You probably wouldn’t know the difference between a man lying and a man telling the truth. Good-bye, Captain Aghnides.” He turned and made for the door, then, in the moment that his hand was turning the handle, he remembered that one intended member of the party was missing from among them, Ludwig Neumann, the lawyer. They were exactly five hundred dollars to the good. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I’ve just remembered. One of our party was held up at the frontier. We can pay you your extra blood-money. I know the procedure. I rely on you to make the party as comfortable as possible.”

The Captain’s face broadened like a balloon being blown up by a child. The blood seemed to flow along the blood-vessels like the current in neon lighting tubes.

“*Magnifico! Incantevole!*” He knew some long words in Italian. He smacked Leon on the back, seized his hand and shook it vigorously. “I shall treat them as if they were my own children.” His eyes unconsciously travelled to the décolletée lady on the wall beside him.

“Yes,” said Leon. “There are females in the party. You’d better keep your hands off them.” He was in a furious temper. “I take it you’ll sign us on as members of your crew, in case——”

“In case anybody stops us, and there’s any inquiries. *Perfettamente*. It is in my power to sign on new members of my crew in any port where the necessity arises and the company has no office.” He talked with the grandeur of a prince, who has rich bishoprics in his giving.

“You’d better let me have some idea of the accommodation you’ve got for us.”

“Willingly.” The Captain reached round for his cap and jacket. “You said there were ladies. May I ask how many?”

“Three. There’s a middle-aged woman and her niece. The niece has not been well, and must have whatever comfort is going on this . . . on this *ship*.” He stressed the word contemptuously. “And there’s another young woman.”

“Oh, *Madonna mia!*” said the Captain, and clasped his hands. “For two there is accommodation in the cabin here, beside mine. It is similar to this one”—he waved his hand as if he were displaying the excellencies of a de luxe suite in a first-class liner—“but, of course, two bunks. That is the spare cabin, you understand, if ever a director of our company wishes to come on a little sea-cruise with us.”

Leon was getting impatient. The others would be waiting on the quayside below in a state of considerable anxiety.

“And then?” he asked shortly.

“There are two other cabins, here behind us, one for the mate, one for the first and second engineers. It would be impossible to ask them to give them up.”

“We’re used to roughing it. That goes for the other young woman. She can come in with us wherever you put us.”

“As you please.” There was the faintest suggestion of a wink. It was evident the Captain had concluded that there was a special reason for the suggested arrangement, beyond that of convenience. “As for yourselves—you are six, you say?”

“Yes, six.”

“We can clear out one of the magazines for you on the deck below. We can put up a spare mattress or two. It will be, as it were, a picnic. Good food, sea air . . . you will be very comfortable . . . like birds in a nest.”

“When can we leave?”

The Captain contemplated the matter.

“Well, we’ve got to get the whole crew aboard first, haven’t we? The poor boys! They deserve a bit of fun when they can get it. By the time we get up steam . . . and let me see . . . there’s the tide to think of.” He closed his eyes for a few moments. “I should say about eleven-thirty in the morning. That’ll give us time to fix up a few details with the port authorities, too. Yes. About eleven-thirty. How’s that?”

“I’ll go down and tell them,” said Leon.

“Will you give us an hour or so to get things ready for you?”

“We’ll have a wash and a meal,” added Leon. “We’ll meet later. Thank you.”

“*Grazie a lei*,” insisted Captain Aghnides. “Thanks to you.” It seemed almost more than he could do not to throw his arms round Leon’s shoulders and hug him to his bosom.

In the very moment that Leon walked out of the cabin on to the well-deck he realized that he was filled with so profound a distrust of the Captain’s integrity, so strong a premonition of treachery, that he could not on his own responsibility commit the fortunes of his party to the *Cleanthis*. He realized, too, the reason for his extraordinary bad temper. He felt profoundly humiliated for himself and for all Jews that during these times, at all events, and more than most men, their fate should lie in the hands of such trashy scoundrels as Captain Aghnides.

“Ho, there you are, Leon!” It was the voice of Itzik calling up from below.

“What have you been up to? A little drink on the side?” That was young Willi.

Leon paused a moment before descending. The sun had gone down, the first stars were out in a peacock sky. A sizeable crowd had collected on the quayside, attracted by the uncouth people with dust in their hair, and the mud-plastered lorry: there were gaping children, wizened fishermen, leggy youths, tittering girls arm in arm; there was a handful of soldiers in shapeless khaki, doubtless members of one of Marshal Tito’s partisan groups; there was a young man in a motley uniform, including a shako and a belted sword, presumably a gendarme. A handful of seamen in blue sweaters and dungarees were lounging hard by, their deportment marked by that subtle air of superiority which invests the most unimpressive Briton the moment his soles touch foreign ground. They were presumably members of the crew of the nearby *Peggy Rawlings*.

“Sorry I’ve been so long about it,” said Leon, as he stepped down from the gang-plank on to the quayside. “It was a bit sticky!”

“Something’s wrong!” someone said. Leon’s face was not reassuring.

“We’re not going! What’s happened?” asked someone else. “We’ll have to go back?”

This certainly was not the moment to give expression to any misgivings. These people were almost hysterical with fatigue. They could panic at the flick of a handkerchief like a pack of schoolgirls.

“It’s all right!” said Leon. “We leave to-morrow!”

Everybody scattered in the opposite direction. They shouted with joy.

“To-morrow? Splendid! Wonderful! *To-morrow!*”

“So this ship *is* the *Estrella*, after all,” said Itzik. “What are you looking so grim about?”

Leon parted his teeth in a smile.

“I’m on top of the world! Come on, everybody! We’ll talk things over later. We’re going to find a good restaurant and have a wash and drink wine and eat till we’re sick! Yes, who are you?” The gendarme in the shako had come over, notebook in hand.

“It’s the gendarmerie,” said Itzik. “I’ve explained everything. He just wants to shake hands, I think.”

“Fine, fine!” said Leon. He shook the gendarme’s hand. Two small girls solemnly put their hands out to have them shaken. “*Dove mangiare bene?*” Leon wanted to know. “Where does one eat well?” The small town looked Italian. It had, in fact, been Italian till a month or two ago, when the partisans had taken it over. Italian, clearly, was the language to take you round. They told him where one ate well and drank well. No distance at all. Just along the Riva Vecchia here. At the Bristol. *Magnifico!* They moved off. Itzik got into the lorry to drive up close to the restaurant. Then suddenly Leon stopped. His heart plunged like a lead weight. “Itzik!” he called out. “Listen. We’re broke! The old skinflint has got every penny out of me. I’ve had to use up all we’ve got, including your reserve. If we go to-morrow, we’re broke.”

“What do you mean *if* we go to-morrow?” Julius Vastagh cried in alarm. Elsie felt Mila’s hand tighten on her own.

“Money?” Elsie said. “Money? There’s always ways and means.” She had a hazy recollection that she was possibly a millionaire in one or two neutral banks.

“That’s all right,” said Itzik. “Eretz comes first. We’ve got bread. We’ll buy wine. We can rake up enough for that. Why worry?”

“Excuse me,” said Karl Berger, dropping his voice. He sounded nervous, and a little ashamed.

“Yes?”

“I hope you don’t mind. I kept a little something for an emergency. You never know, do you? There’s a small sapphire in my left suspender, under a

little brass cup.”

“*Tov! Tov!*” Everybody was thrilled. “You’re a *zaddik*, a holy man!” They smacked Karl Berger’s back till he coughed. There would be a Passover festival after all, on the eve of the departure from the House of Bondage.

The restaurant was only a couple of hundred yards away. They washed; they combed their hair, they looked fine and spruce. Then they went to the tables. The tables had tablecloths. There were napkins. Some of those present had not eaten off linen for several years. *Antipasti* were put before them, wine was poured out. There were some among them who remembered exactly such tables, such waiters, such food, such wine bottles, in small Italian restaurants behind the Riva degli Schiavoni, in Venice, and along Old Compton Street, in Soho.

“*Lechayim!*” said Itzik, lifting his glass. “And *mazel tov!* Good luck on your journey!”

“*Lechayim!*”

“*Lechayim!*”

“*Leshonim tovim!*”

They drank. The wine was nectar.

“To you, Itzik, for bringing us this long journey!”

“To you, Mila!” Their thoughts always turned quickly to Mila. They treated her with tenderness. The girl’s eyes were sparkling. “She looks like an ox!” said Chaim, “no evil befall her! To you, Channah!” he went on. “When I’m not well, I’ll send for you. I refuse to be ill without you! Am I right, Mila?”

“She’s been like . . . like a mother, and ten sisters!” vowed Mila, then was suddenly overcome with shyness, and hid her face behind her wineglass.

“Nonsense!” said Elsie. “Sometimes she looks after me, sometimes I look after her!”

“*Lechayim! Lechayim! Lechayim!*” went round, from Karl Berger, the Agronome, to Julius Vastagh, the food-chemist, from Mischa Fasan, the Zionist leader, to Chaim, the Czech engineer. “*Lechayim, Hinda!*” “*Lechayim, Willi!*” From the way those two younger folk looked at each other, there would have been a wedding then and there, if there had been a Rabbi on hand. Or perhaps they needed no Rabbi. They had been living in a tough school.

“No! No!” cried Mischa Fasan. “Kosher is Kosher, but this I cannot eat!”

He referred to the tentacles of squid that squirmed in a *zuppa di pesce* that had been laid before them.

“Did not God make also these?” Julius Vastagh wanted to know. He turned the fish stew over with his fork. “There are more complex organisms here, if you prefer them.”

There was a sudden loud clatter of fork and knife on plate. Everybody jumped. It was Itzik.

“Now, Leon!” He thrust forward his stubbly chin. “Something’s biting you. What is it?”

“First another glass,” Leon demanded. “Thank you, Channah!” He drained it. “I’m beginning to feel better about it already.”

“About what?”

“About that Captain. Maybe I’m doing him an injustice. Aghnides is his name. He’s a Greek.”

“Perhaps he’s not good-looking. Well? That cook did not look pretty either. But they waited for us.”

“The ship is not the *Estrella*. The *Estrella* left yesterday. They were both after a cargo of something or other, some liqueur I think, and the *Estrella* beat the *Cleanthis* to it.”

“But you managed to fix us up on the *Cleanthis*, you say? The captain’s lucky. He’s got a cargo. We’re lucky. We’ve got a ship. So it’s costing more money than we reckoned for. Well, we’ll pay it back to somebody some day. Drink *lechayim* to Leon, everybody!”

“*Lechayim*, Leon!”

“*Lechayim!*”

“*Lechayim!*”

The toasting died down. It was roast lamb on the table, with fennel and green salad.

“I want you to listen to me carefully, all of you!” Leon’s face was suddenly serious. “Please go easy on the wine—for the time being, anyhow. I’ve got to tell you exactly what I think about this Captain, and about his ship. I may be wrong. I believe I *am* wrong. I don’t see what advantage the fellow can get out of doing dirt on us. But my feeling is—he’s a scoundrel. I can’t accept the responsibility of taking the party on that ship, not without talking it over with you first. Perhaps you ought to see the man for yourselves.”

There was a silence, except for the drumming of Karl Berger's fingers on the table. Elsie imperceptibly turned her head to look at Mila. There was apprehension in the girl's eyes. Her jaw had dropped. Elsie perceived with more blinding clarity than ever before, of what paramount importance to Mila's mental stability this voyage was. She, Elsie, would have to be abundantly certain there was some substance in Leon's apprehensions before she beat down within her the resolution to fight tooth and nail against any tampering with the plans.

"Tell us," asked Julius Vastagh, "what precise *reason* have you to imagine this Captain of ours is a bad man? There must be a *reason*."

Leon shrugged his shoulders.

"You're a scientist, Julius. A scientist works on hunches, too, doesn't he? That's all there is to it. I don't trust him."

"But, Leon," objected Itzik. "You've only given him half the money, haven't you? All right, more than half. We've always guaranteed ourselves against villains, ever since we went into business. Isn't that true? He doesn't get the rest of his money till you're all landed safely in *Eretz*, please God."

"You say he's a scoundrel," said Mischa Fasan softly. "But I've heard accounts of other voyages arranged by Kusta. There were other captains. They were also scoundrels—or some, at least. But the Jews got to *Eretz*."

"Perhaps you're right," muttered Leon. "I just had to say what I said, that's all. Perhaps, if you see the man for yourself——"

"But would it make any difference at all," asked Elsie, "however much we disliked and mistrusted him? Wouldn't we be exactly where we were before we saw him?"

"Yes, Leon, that's true, isn't it?" Mila broke in. "We are going to go, aren't we? Do say we are, Leon!"

Leon spread out his hands to include the whole party.

"You see, Mila, don't you? Of course, we're going."

"That doesn't mean we won't be on our guard!" insisted Karl Berger.

"Well, I suppose, that's really what I wanted to get over," said Leon. "We must be on our guard."

"But that's elementary common sense," said the chemist, a little severely.

"Yes, I suppose it is," admitted Leon. "We must be on our guard." He

repeated the words slowly and firmly. To emphasize them he brought his fist down on the table, and pushed a glass over on to the floor. “Damn!” he cried.

“No,” protested Hinda. “That’s good luck!”

“Did you rely on good luck when you were ambushing the Nazis in the hills?” he asked sharply.

“Well, no!” said Hinda, looking rather small.

“Let’s get down to it, then!” He waited a second, and looked round. “Any ideas?”

“Any ideas about *what?*” asked Willi seriously. “I think we could deal with situations as they arise, *if* they arise. Things don’t turn out the way you anticipate.” Coming from Willi, the partisan, this seemed to make sense.

“Tell me,” said Elsie. “Have you any idea what the accommodation’s like?”

“That’s all fixed. The Captain’s at this moment cleaning out one of the magazines. That’ll take most of us. Seven of us, in fact. The six men, and Hinda.”

“And we two?”

“There’s four cabins on board. The officers occupy three, and one’s empty, for occasional passengers. It has two bunks. I think you and Mila ought to have that one.”

“Oh, Leon!” cried Mila. “Can’t I go with you others?” She blushed. “And Channah, too, of course!”

“Yes, of course,” said Elsie promptly. Where Mila went, she went.

“You’ll obey orders, children,” said Leon. “You two will be in the cabin, and you’ll damn well lock yourselves in. Later on in the voyage, perhaps somebody else can have a spell.”

“Don’t look at me,” requested Mischa Fasan. “I’ve lived for ten months at a stretch in a hole dug out of the soft mould in a wood.”

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing if you squeezed another cabin or two out of him,” complained Itzik. “It’s going to be a long voyage, and God knows, you’re paying enough.”

“He’s right,” said Elsie. “It’s not fair Mila and I should be the only ones with a cabin. Hinda should have one, too.”

“Or may be Hinda and Willi,” said Itzik mischievously.

“And why not?” Willi wanted to know.

“I’ll show you why not,” exclaimed Hinda with real, or affected, indignation.

“Tell me,” said Elsie slowly, lifting her glass of wine and holding it to the light. “What impression did you get of this Captain? I mean, would you say he’s interested in women?”

Leon nearly choked.

“Interested!” he spluttered. The wine had gone down the wrong way. “As interested as a swine in rut!”

“Nice gentleman!” said Julius Vastagh.

“I see! I see!” murmured Elsie, her eyes closed. She opened them again. “Did you get any feeling about his type? Sometimes it’s the only thing they talk about. Some like them young. Some like them not so young.”

Everybody knew exactly what she was getting at. Their hearts warmed to this woman who had said so little till now, being so totally taken up with the girl whose aunt she was, or adopted mother, or something of that sort.

“Young!” said Leon decisively. “Judging from the pretty pictures on his wall, early twenties at the most!”

“Pity!” she said.

“Why?”

“Forgive me if I sound . . . a bit self-confident. I think I could have got an extra cabin out of him, if . . . if . . .”

“Listen!” proclaimed Hinda suddenly. “It seems to be up to Mila or me! Forgive me, Channah, will you?”

Elsie smiled.

“I forgive you.”

“And Mila’s not been too well, lately. A man like that might get rough.” She flexed her arms, to show the contours of her brachial muscles. “I’ll work it out,” she said.

“It’s not enough,” said Leon.

“What isn’t enough?” Hinda wanted to know.

“That!” He meant the brachial muscle.

“You know quite well I’ve got a . . . I’ve got a little friend with me,” she pointed out. She meant the revolver in her bag.

“Good thing, too. We’ve got a few friends between us. We could give a good account of ourselves.”

“Fine,” said Chaim. “After all, what more do we want? We’ll keep an eye open.”

There was silence for some moments. It was fruit on the table now, and white goat-cheese. The waiters were hanging round rather lugubriously. It had looked as if this party was going to develop into a real *fiesta*, with the wine-bottles piling up in stacks, and the *slivovitz* and the maraschino flowing in streams. Ah well. Perhaps the party would pick up again later.

“Whoop! Whoop!” It was an odd sound to break in on the party from so close at hand. It sounded like a ship’s hooter, but it came from Hinda. She was waving her glass in the air. “My glass is empty!” she proclaimed. “I’ll need lots!” She had deliberately flung the masses of her black hair down over her forehead. “How do I look?” she asked.

“You’ll do!” said Elsie admiringly. “You clever girl! Perhaps one of the women in the kitchen has some makeup? Let’s find out! It might be helpful!”

“What are you women up to?” asked Julius Vastagh.

“Up to no good,” said Willi.

“Another bottle!” cried Leon. “Maybe I’m a bit of a fool! And maybe it wouldn’t do us any harm if that man thought us a bit more foolish than we really are! Bring out the liqueurs, waiter! And perhaps, cigars! Do you think the suspender would run to a cigar all round, Dr. Berger?”

The waiters were, after all, not disappointed. The wine bottles heaped up in stacks. The lovely maraschino flowed like streams of lava. It was a good party.

“*Lechayim!*”

“*Lechayim!*”

“*Lechayim!*”

For nearly two thousand years the ancestors of those Jews, till lately herded in the Central European ghettos, had raised their beakers and drunk the toast: “Next year in Jerusalem!” To-night the toast was: “Next *week* in Jerusalem! Next *week!*”

Or, maybe, it would be the week after.

IV

They were a merry party as they went singing back along the Riva Vecchia, with Itzik on the lorry driving slowly ahead of them, tooting his horn like mad. It was quite a reception committee that hastily formed itself on the well-decks fore and aft, as they reached the *Cleanthis*. The upper deck was ranged forrard, the cook, the cabin-boy, and another, perhaps a deck-hand. The officers were aft, the Captain himself, the mate, one of the engineers. A deck-hand stood in attendance. The rest of the engine-room personnel were already below. The ship was getting up steam.

“*Saluti!*” shouted the Captain enthusiastically. He stretched out his arms, as if he would have liked to hug them all. There were corroborative sounds of welcome from his associates, correctly aligned one foot, and two feet, at his rear. Similar, but more uncouth, sounds came from the upper deck personnel. The two deck-hands were evidently dead-drunk. “Ra-ra-ra!” They cried raucously, exactly like cheer-leaders on an American campus.

“You first, Channah!” muttered Leon. Honours were due to her as the senior lady present. The Captain with his own hands threw her a rope-end.

“Bravo! Bravo!” he encouraged her. She went up. He leaned towards her, helped her up on to the deck, then, with immense gallantry, kissed her hand. Leon and two of the men came next. Then came Hinda, and this held up the proceedings delightfully. She squealed with fear as she placed her foot on the gang-plank, which was broad and steady enough to take a horse, she tittered as he kissed her hand, then she fell all of a heap into his arms. She was, apparently, shockingly, deliriously, drunk. She had made good use of the makeup materials she had acquired from the hotel kitchen-maid. She stank like a little whore in a Marseilles brothel. Her smell went up overpoweringly into the Captain’s nostrils. He let Mila and the others get up on the deck without the benefit of his amiable assistance.

“Well, *Capitano!*” Leon exclaimed. “What have you done with us, eh? The deal isn’t fixed yet, you know.”

“What? What’s that you’re saying?” It was clear the Captain had something else on his mind, and that something else was Hinda. Hinda at that moment was playing engagingly with Chaim’s nose, pushing it now to one side now to the other, with the tip of her finger, now hitting it, now missing it. “Lovely nosey-pose!” she was saying between hiccups. “Lovely nosey-pose!” Chaim was grinning with tippy pleasure.

“I said we’d like to get our heads down, Captain,” explained Leon. “Where are you going to put us?”

“Yes, yes,” said the Captain. “Of course. Where you sleep. Yes. At once.” He did not seem to have his mind on the matter at all. It was all he could do to cope with one thing at a time, when that thing was Hinda, with one delicious shoulder bare and shining. It was all he could do to keep his hands off her. “Atlas!” He turned to the deck-hand close by.

“Yes, sir?”

“Take these people below!” The language was Greek. “You, George!”

There was a shout from forrard.

“Yes, sir!”

“Help with the kit!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Come on, everybody,” said Leon. “Let’s look where they’re putting us. Come on, Channah, Mila! You, Hinda!”

The Captain was desolated.

“But there is a cabin for ladies. It is arranged.” He turned to Hinda, and laid his hand on her forearm. “Come, it is here! I will show you!”

“Of course,” said Leon. “You said you could spare a cabin for two of our women. Two bunks you said, didn’t you? Fine. This girl has not been well.” He pointed to Mila. “And her mother will be with her.”

“Yes, certainly, two bunks.” The Captain was very flustered. He turned to the mate. “Show them, please, Mr. Volos.” He did not have much time to spare for the two other women at the moment. The mate took them in hand and led them to the spare cabin.

“Come now, Hinda!” directed Leon. “You’ll have to put up with it! We’ll try and get as comfortable as possible in our quarters.”

Hinda tittered and swayed.

“Yes, Leon.” She hiccuped. “Coming.” The Captain followed her mournfully with his eyes. Things were not working out as he would have liked them to. Leon and Hinda descended a companionway and walked along the next deck below, where the ship’s magazines were disposed to port and starboard. On the port side a large metal door was hooked back against a bulkhead. A naked white light streamed out through the open doorway.

“You’re doing fine!” whispered Leon. “You’ve got him! Now keep your eyes open.”

There was a heavy smell of paint, hemp, and paraffin in the magazine, and there was exactly no furniture at all. But that was all right. No one had expected a suite of Cunarder state-rooms. The sole permanent fitting was a tap that ran into a zinc runnel. They would be able to wash in their own quarters, anyway. Beyond that there were a number of mats to keep them off the metal floor, a few mattresses and blankets, some coils of rope and heaps of tarpaulin, and two pillows which looked quite sybaritic in this carbolic welter.

“It’ll do,” said Leon.

“I could kiss every foot of rope,” said Karl Berger. He had had a very thin time during the last year or two. So had they all.

“Well, boys,” said Itzik. “It looks as if you’re all fixed up after all.”

“Please God, you should be on the next ship!” exclaimed Mischa Fasan.

“*Allevei!*” breathed Itzik.

“Get down here, Hinda!” said Willi. He was fixing up a mattress beside the tarpaulin bed he had made for himself. “Look what I’ve found!” It was a sort of canvas slip to take one of the pillows.

“I have a feeling,” ventured Hinda, “I’ll be sleeping in other quarters tonight.”

She was right. A minute or two later, the deck-hand, Atlas, came down with a message from Mr. Volos, the Mate. Adas talked in a sort of pudding Italian spotted with English and French phrases, like raisins and currants. Mr. Volos would be very pleased if the third lady would accept his cabin for the duration of the voyage. There had obviously been some ardent representations on the part of Captain Aghnides, presumably backed up by a dollar note or two on the side. And if the gentleman who was in charge would be pleased to call on the Captain, the Captain would be very pleased to receive him in his cabin. It was all a little formal, like the invitations and receptions that go on at the beginning of voyages in de luxe liners.

“Good,” said Leon. “Tell the Captain I’ll be along soon.” Atlas went off. Leon turned to Hinda.

“Well. What are you going to do, Hinda?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to keep your door well bolted, anyhow.”

“I’ll do that all right.”

“I’ll take a blanket,” said Willi, “and camp outside her door.”

“You haven’t got the idea,” said Hinda.

“No,” Leon confirmed. “He hasn’t. Leave her to it, Willi.”

“All right.” He was not very happy about it.

“I’ll go then?” the girl asked. “I can always kick him in the teeth.”

“Not through a bolted door, Hinda. Don’t play any tricks. Go now, Hinda.”

“Don’t be upset, Willi,” she adjured him. “I don’t really *like* him. It’s just the call of duty!” She picked up her things and went.

“Well, everybody. Have you all got your kit?” asked Itzik. The kit was assembled by now. “I’ll let you have the rest of the rations to-morrow. You never know what the food will be like on this rat-trap. I’ll see you off to-morrow. I want to be able to tell them you’ve gone off safely.”

“Thank you, Itzik. Good night.”

“Good night, Leon, Dr. Fasan, Willi, all of you.”

“Thank you, good night.”

“Thank you, good night.”

Itzik went off.

“Well, everybody. You’re all dog-tired,” said Leon. “Get your heads down to it, will you? I’ll just have a word or two with the Captain. Don’t worry about the women. They can look after themselves. Good night, boys.”

“Good night, Leon. Turn that light out, if it goes out. Fine. Good night.”

“Good night.”

The Captain’s cabin was much more palatable than it had been earlier that day. It was as if the Captain hoped to be entertaining his passengers, though there would hardly be room for more than one or two at a time. As for the purport of the summons, Leon was right. There were certain financial matters that the Captain wished to have settled. These were attended to over a friendly glass of wine. Leon also desired to thank the Captain and Mr. Volos for their courtesy in respect of *Fräulein* Markus—that was Hinda. They appreciated it deeply, though they regretted the inconvenience. Not at all, not at all, the Captain assured him. Mr. Volos could do very nicely for himself on a nice soft couch in the wheel-house. Leon then excused himself. He had had a long day. By all means, by all means. The Captain understood completely. Before turning in, Leon paid a visit to the two cabins occupied by the three women,

Hinda in the one alongside the Captain's, Elsie and Mila in the one immediately behind Hinda's. He tried the doors and was happy to find they were both safely bolted. Elsie and Mila gave him no reply when he called out good night to them. They were sound asleep. Hinda was not.

"Are you all right, Hinda?"

"I'm fine. It's wonderful. I won't want to get up for five days and nights."

"You've got your little friend with you?"

"Trust me. Let him try something. Straight through the guts. Such a year upon him!"

Leon smiled.

"Sleep well, Hinda. Good night."

"Give my love to Willi, if he's awake still. Good night, Leon."

V

It was an enchanted morning. There had been a brief shower, and the soft wind that blew like a broom from the south along the narrow plain under the mountains brought the gentle odours of young wheat and maize and vines, the heavier odours of syringa and orange and tobacco-blossom. Beyond the breakwater that stood south-westward from the opposite bank at Barcagno, the sea was like cornflowers touched with a faint scud of daisies. Within the breakwater it was merely cornflowers.

The three women had slept like logs. So had the six men. They were ravenous for breakfast, and it was ample. Even the cook, a saturnine fellow, smiled from within his lustrous ringlets, as he filled the plates the passengers handed to him with a primrose mash of beaten-up eggs sheltering chestnut lumps of fried sausage. The coffee was hot and savoury. The seagulls squawked. The swallows dipped and tittered.

Half Zara was collected below them on the quayside, as they sat on the after deck between the stern flag and the galley, viewing these outlanders, who had come in from a country more tortuous than any South African jungle, where creatures lurked beyond all imagination dangerous and unaccountable. It had gone round that the strangers had all been heroes one way and another, one or two even had been involved in their own partisan activities. There were three gendarmes now, to control the crowds. The travellers looked at each other with sadness, as well as delight, in their eyes. The crowds they had been used to for long years had had no gentle speech on their lips. The police were

armed with truncheons and guns, but not to protect them from children who reached flowers up to them, and men who called out in half-a-dozen languages: "What about a drink, friends, before you go?"

"Well, Leon, well?" His friends looked at him humorously, as he drained his huge tin mug of hot coffee.

"Perhaps it will be all right," he muttered. But it was obvious in the light of the lovely morning he felt his misgivings had been a little silly. "We've got a bit of paper-work, yet, all of us. Come. We'll do that, then we'll buy a few things. Yes?" He addressed Karl Berger, the keeper of the suspender. Karl Berger approved.

They went down into the charming town. It did not seem possible. You walked along a street, and there were nowhere any bomb craters. You went round a corner, and there were still no bomb craters. No smell of sickness and death came up from the gratings of cellars. The buildings were solid, so to speak, all through. There were great heaps of flowers on barrows under umbrellas striped orange and black. There were loads of fish shimmering under arcades as gay and bright as flowers. There was a little fuss and bother, not much, at one office and another. Leon had a way with him. He also had a recent history which was approved. So had his companions. Things were not sticky. Formalities over, they went wandering. They passed through the sunny portals of churches and in dark interiors were pictures gleaming golden behind tapers. There were fountains in bright piazzas playing their diamond water-music. And several times again children thrust flowers into their hands, and once a barber requested them to sit in his chair and be his guests, and an old goat-herd milked his goats for them and made them drink out of his two battered tin mugs.

"Happy, Mila?" whispered Elsie in the girl's ear.

The girl tried to speak, but could not. Elsie looked away. Then, a minute or two later, she felt Mila take her hand.

"Channah! Channah!" She could say no more than that.

Only one brief dark episode marred the fresh sweetness of that morning. It was a very mixed crowd that wandered up and down the streets, and went around the cafés, drinking coffee and beer and wine as it suited them. In addition to the natives, there were Russian soldiers who were attached to some mission, American and British personnel connected with the airfield, and a handful of British seamen from the *Peggy Rawlings*. It was one of these last who put a brief darkness over the blue morning. The travellers had gone into a café for a mid-morning drink, and there were two British seamen lounging

against the bar. One of these was much more drunk than he seemed. He was evidently one of those drinkers who begin early and never look drunk, however drunk they are. When Mila went up to a show-plate on which a number of creamy pastries were displayed, it brought her to within a couple of feet of the seaman. The man must have seen her approaching, in a mirror. Turning, he put his huge arms round her, and kissed her. "Sweetie-pie!" he said. "Wot abart a quick 'arf-'our?"

Elsie had time to observe the terror that started in Mila's eyes, like a frightened antelope. It was the terror that had lurked there during the desolate months in Budapest, the terror of the hideous Thing that had befallen her. In a moment she was at Mila's side, and was thrusting the man away with both fists, though he was a large man, with heavy shoulders.

"How dare you! You filthy creature!" she cried out. "Get out! I'll have the police on you!"

She talked English. It was that that deflated the man even more than the severity of her words.

"I beg your pardon, mam!" he muttered. "I didn't know she were English!" He shambled off. His friend settled up, and went off after him, red-faced.

"Shall I show him what for?" asked Willi, clenching his fists. It would not have gone well with the seaman, despite his size.

"No! No!" said Elsie. "It was just his idea of a joke! You're all right, Mila darling, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes," said Mila. "I was just frightened a moment. That's all." The colour was coming back into her cheeks. Her breath quietened in her throat.

Everybody did everything in the half hour that was left to them to keep the episode out of Mila's mind. Whenever there was an interesting doorway, or a view down to the sea, or a bit of gay costume, a leather girdle, a jacket embroidered with silver and filigree buttons, they hastened to point it out to her. Elsie looked from one to the other gratefully. They were kind people, and intelligent. The smile was back on Mila's lips again, and the excitement in her eyes.

Then suddenly a ship's hooter sounded, from no distance away, four streets, three churches, eight cafés.

The ship was calling them, the sea beyond the land, the Land beyond the sea.

"The time's come, all of you!" said Itzik. He had been wandering round

with them this magical morning. Leon, too, had been with them this last hour. “Come!” They were back on the Riva Vecchia in three or four minutes. There was the good dear ship waiting for them, with the good dear scoundrel of a Captain, and the good dear scoundrels he had for crew. As they approached, someone on the bridge of the *Cleanthis*, either Captain or Mate, expressed his pleasure at the sight of them by sounding the hooter two or three times again.

“Good-bye!” said Itzik, as they reached the gang-plank. “Oh, you’d better have the coast map to see which way you’re going. I know my way back. Good-bye, all of you!” The women kissed him. The men shook his hands. “Give those messages,” he reminded Leon, “to that girl in Rehoboth. I’ve not forgotten, tell her!”

They climbed the gangway, which now, at high tide, was steeper than it had been, and ranged themselves along the deck-railing aft.

“Good-bye, Itzik!” The men’s eyes were wet, too. They had known him for only three days, but he was a good lad. It was a happiness to know that there were lads like him that lived on. There were hand-wavings and valedictions in several languages from the crowd at the quayside. It was a royal send-off. Two old men in blue sweaters loosed the hawsers from the bollards on the quay, fore and aft. There was a chuffing from the donkey-engine in the bows as it coiled in the forrard rope. A bell rang sharply on the bridge. The propeller in the stern began to revolve, threshing the water into an oily turbulence. Slowly the ship slid forward, inclining on the starboard bow. The space between ship and quayside widened. The voyage had begun.

CHAPTER XII

I

The travellers stood about on the aft well-deck, between bridge and galley. "Good-bye, Zara!" they waved. "Good-bye, Zara!" It was a place which would always be inexpressibly dear to them, the escape-hole from a burning building which had a hundred times threatened to burn them alive, or crush them as it caved in on them. The flames were still blazing in the central parts of the building, in Northern Italy, in Czechoslovakia, in Austria, Germany, but they were at last being quenched. For these travellers the day of liberation was come. Behind them the crowd stood cheering on the quayside. Even the seamen leaning against the rail of the British ship, *Annabelle*, waved a friendly hand as they steamed by. Soon both ship and harbour became small and unreal behind them in the noonday haze. The Zara Canal stretched north-west ahead.

Leon was sitting with his back against a stanchion, the map stretched out on his lap. The travellers, some seated, some on their knees, were gathered excitedly round him, comparing map with island, island with map.

"Ugljan!" cried Hinda. "This island on our left! It's not true!"

"Ugljan! Ha! Ha! Ha!" A silvery peal of laughter from Mila. "I don't believe it! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

The men were stripped to the waist, the women wearing as little as they might.

"You see? On that hill-top?" Chaim pointed out. "A castle!"

"No! A castle!" It sounded quite impossibly picturesque and romantic. A castle! Northward ahead the great limestone mass of the Velebit Mountains thrust against the dim blue day. The Canal was opening up. The odours of salt sea from all about them, of savoury cooking from close at hand, filled their nostrils.

"Oh! I'm hungry!" said Willi. "I could eat the cook!"

That didn't seem necessary. At that moment the cook came to the cabin door, banging the back of a plate loudly with the back of a spoon.

"*Si mangia!*" he cried. "*Si mangia!*"

That was splendid. The men went forward and brought back for the women huge bowls of macaroni *al sugo*, rich with tomato, hot with garlic. There were

also olives, and raw fennel, and green salad, and fresh bread, and a couple of bottles of resinated wine, which tasted a little odd at first, but you got used to it in no time. The cabin-boy, too, less lackadaisical than yesterday, gave a hand. The women preened themselves, with the sun on their faces, and the smell of macaroni in their nostrils. It was a long time since they had enjoyed the little courtesies that men extend to women.

“*Si sta bene?*” It was the Captain who had come out of the wheel-house, and stood leaning over the railings of the bridge. “Everything all right?” He addressed them all, but his eyes were fixed on Hinda, that fine forehead of hers, those full lips, a towel over her bare shoulders. The towel had slipped. She put it round her bare shoulders again.

“*Benissimo!*” returned Leon. He made the gesture of approbation with hooked thumb and forefinger. “Couldn’t be better!” That went for the wine, the grapes and almonds, the seagulls, the porpoises rolling in their wake, the islands, the mountains, the sun, the sea.

“*Mi piace!*” said the Captain, and went back into the wheel-house. The navigation was doubtless tricky in these islanded waters. Both Captain and Mate were on the job together.

One o’clock went by. Two o’clock came and went. The travellers had moved over to the forrard well-deck, where they had a better view of things. The engines were drumming steadily. The waters had opened up northward but they were coming close to the islands again straight ahead.

“Do you remember——” Elsie turned to Mila. The memory had come up into her mind like a fish flying up out of the depths of the sea. It was the memory of a vision she and Mila had evoked at the outset of their journeyings, long ago, far away, in Warsaw, among the sour odours of the old woman’s washing-cellar, under the lee of the ghetto wall.

Some day, perhaps, on a ship, with the sky sharp and blue overhead, a white road of water behind us.

There will be seagulls, Channah. I have never seen seagulls.

Yes, Mila, seagulls. And porpoises.

But Mila had not heard her. Her head was filled with the sounds and sights of the ship and the sea. Let it go! It was better not to remember words spoken in that Warsaw darkness—here in the bright blue Illyrian light. It was better not to recall the brave men and women who had led them from one stage to another of the long journey—Sem, Yanka, Pekarek, Miriam, Apor. And there had been other helpers. The time and place would come to talk of them. Some

were dead now. Perhaps all were dead.

“Look! Do you see?” Leon was saying. He had the map. “Between those two islands? That’s where the exit from the Canal is.” The steamer-route was marked by a thin red dotted line. He raised his eyes from the map and looked straight ahead, screwing up his eyes, for both sea and sky were bright. “That’s right!” he confirmed. “That must be the island of Isto straight ahead, and the island of Selve north of that. When we’ve gone between—yes, that’s the point we turn south.”

“I wonder . . .” started Julius Vastagh, the food-chemist. Then he stopped. “Oh yes, I remember now.”

“You remember what?”

“I was wondering why we didn’t turn south after we’d rounded the Zara point. Then I remembered. That bombed ship. You remember? We saw it when we first got to the quayside, the wrong quayside.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“The ship must be blocking the channel.”

“Of course,” said Leon. “Quite right. Well, in half an hour we change course.”

They sailed quite close to the small island of Isto. They could hear the sound of a dog barking beyond a thicket of cypresses. Out of a stony field by the sea great clumps of grey-green aloes spread their broad spears. “Coo-ee!” cried Mila, popping her head from behind a ventilator. “Coo-ee!” replied Hinda, from behind another. They were running about all over the place like a pair of schoolgirls. “Don’t tire yourselves out, you two girls!” said Elsie indulgently. Hinda looked as capable of tiring herself out as a young buffalo. Beyond Isto another small island, Premuda, lean as a rake, held the port bow. The island of Selve was two or three knots away north-east. Both islands were now at last behind them. The engines drummed steadily. Still the bow of the ship faced north-west. The minutes passed, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. They were heading, always north-west, always into the open sea.

“It’s a funny way to turn south!” said Willi suddenly. “Isn’t it?”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking,” said Leon. “But he must have some reason for it.”

“Of course he must,” said Mischa Fasan. “*He’s* sailing the ship, not us.”

“There may be mines on the line due south,” ventured Chaim.

“Or wrecks which are a danger to navigation,” suggested Karl Berger.

“Yes, I suppose so,” muttered Willi. “It must be something like that.”

The minutes went by. It was getting on for three-thirty. Mila had closed her eyes, and Elsie, too. One or two of the men were dropping off, almost stupefied by the sea-air which most of them were breathing for the first time for years. Some had never breathed it before. A faint wisp of smoke smudged the horizon due north. A British destroyer, someone hazarded. It might be, it might not.

“I don’t get it!” Leon exclaimed suddenly. “Why north-west all the time?”

“Yes,” Willi said. “West, I can understand. But why north? Is he up to anything?”

“Well,” said Mischa Fasan. “It’s easy to find out.”

Leon was up on his feet already. He walked aft under the wheel-house and climbed the companionway to the bridge. Then he hesitated a moment. He was aware that ships’ Captains look with a sour eye on passengers who come up to the bridge without invitation. But this, after all, was not a very formal ship. And they were paying a very large amount for the passage. He climbed the companionway on to the bridge. At that moment the Captain emerged from the wheel-house. Seeing Leon there, a wave of purple, the shade of permanganate of potash, spread across his ruddy cheeks. His lower lip quivered. It took several seconds before he could get it in check enough to speak.

“What are you doing up here?” he shouted. It was a different Captain from the one who had so amiably signed on nine new members of his crew in Zara. Leon waited a moment in case the Captain wanted to ask any more questions. Apparently that was not so.

“I find it rather strange, Captain, that’s all. Shouldn’t we be steaming south now?”

“South?” roared the Captain. “South?” He turned and walked a step or two towards the wheel-house and shouted out to his first officer within. “Do you hear that, Mr. Volos? This passenger wants us to turn south?” There was an answering yell from within. It was impossible to make out whether the sound was to indicate mirth or contempt. The Captain turned to Leon again. “Who’s Captain of this ship, you or me? Do you want me to blow my ship sky-high? I know what I’m doing! Get back down there, will you? I’ve enough on my mind!” He thrust back into the wheel-house again.

Leon was deathly white as he descended the companionway and came

forrard again to join the others.

“Well?” they asked.

“What you said. There’s mines or something, on the regular course.”

“Well, what are you looking so black about?” asked Chaim.

“I don’t like being talked to like that,” he muttered, as he sat down again. “I’ve had to take it a few times from them”—presumably he meant people like the S.S. or the Gestapo—“but I’m not standing for it from a greasy lying crook of a Greek sea-captain, or whatever he is.”

“But he *is* the Captain,” Mischa Fasan pointed out mildly. “We’re in his hands!”

“Exactly!” snapped Leon. He got up again, and walked the length of the ship aft, stood a moment with his hand on the flag-pole, walked forrard again, and climbed up into the bows. He leaned his back against the winch, and looked as if he might settle down, when once more he rose, and came down the short companionway to the well-deck.

“Chaim!” he said. “Willi!”

“Yes?”

“I’ve said already. We’ve got to be prepared.”

“We know that,” said Chaim.

“You’ve got your pal with you?” He had lowered his voice. He meant his gun, of course.

“Yes,” Chaim answered.

Willi rose.

“I’ve left mine stowed away,” he muttered. “It’s uncomfortable on a hard deck. I’ll go and get it . . . if it’s still there. . . .”

Then Mischa Fasan spoke.

“I think, if those people see us muttering to each other, it won’t be very healthy. Smile, for Heaven’s sake, smile, Julius. You also, Karl. You’re looking as if somebody’s going to cut your throat.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” observed Karl Berger, lugubriously.

“Well, don’t ask for it,” said Mischa Fasan sharply. “And you mustn’t frighten the women. Let them sleep. If you talk like that you’ll waken them.” Mila certainly was asleep. Elsie may have been. Hinda was leaning up against

Willi, her head pillowed on his thigh, her eyes closed. She was not asleep. She raised her head, opened her eyes, winked, then let her head rest on Willi's thigh again.

"The point is," Mischa Fasan continued, "you can always talk Hebrew and say what you like. But don't let them think we're hatching plots."

"Just the same," said Willi rising, "can't somebody go to the toilet?"

"You're crazy, you men," snorted Hinda. "What a fuss you're making!"

Willi went, and came back.

"Feel better now?" Hinda grinned.

"Yes," said Willi, settling down again. "I feel better when you're *both* with me. Where's yours, Hinda?"

"In my cabin," she replied.

"The door doesn't lock, does it?"

"No. I don't suppose so."

"Then it may have gone by now."

"No. I haven't hidden it, so it may still be there. It's with my toothpaste in that little waterproof bag."

There was a deep sigh from Mila. She stretched out her arms as if she might get up from her sleep in a moment.

"Please!" begged Elsie. She may have been asleep, but she was awake to Mila's least movement. They knew what she meant. It was wrong to frighten the girl, who had been so ill lately.

"Sorry!" said Hinda.

"Me, too!" said Willi.

"And me," said Karl Berger.

"Thank you." Elsie opened her eyes, smiled her thanks, and closed them again.

The minutes passed, fifteen, twenty. Mila awoke now. They were all awake. The course was always north-west. At a few minutes to four there was the sound of voices on the bridge. Both Captain Aghnides and Mr. Volos had come out of the wheel-house and were leaning over the bridge-rail, each with a pair of binoculars at his eyes, scanning the sea on the port bow.

“What is it?” asked Karl Berger. “A submarine?” Leon came down from the bows and joined the others. They got up and stared out into the water.

“Do you think it could be a submarine?” Karl Berger wanted to know.

“Why not?” said Leon. “There must be dozens of British submarines in these waters. I don’t suppose we’d interest them much.”

“I hope not,” said Mischa Fasan shortly. “It could be very inconvenient.”

“Perhaps not,” suggested Leon. “We’re members of the crew. Legally signed on by the Captain.” He snorted faintly. “Do you see anything? It might be a loose mine.”

“Exactly,” said Julius Vastagh. “There are probably huge mine-fields all over the place.”

“Maybe,” conceded Leon. “They’ve gone back, those two. Perhaps it’s a false alarm.”

“Maybe,” said Julius Vastagh.

Five minutes later there was a sound from the bridge again. The Captain appeared, then went down the companionway and disappeared towards his cabin.

“I suppose the worst part is over,” suggested Karl Berger.

“The worst part of what?” asked Leon.

“The mine-field,” Karl Berger said vaguely.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Leon admitted.

If the worst part was over, then the course would be changing before long, necessarily. They would *have* to slew round towards the south, or they’d be fetching up against the coast of Italy. Well, not soon, but sooner or later, if this damned course to the north-west was continued indefinitely.

A minute or two later, the Second Engineer was seen to emerge from the engineers’ cabin. He made his way towards the engine-room aft. A few minutes after that the First Engineer appeared, making his way forrard. His duty was evidently over. Then he, too, passed out of view. He had obviously gone to have a word with the Captain.

“They’re together, those two,” said Karl Berger. “What can they be talking about?”

“Come, come!” said Julius Vastagh testily. “You mustn’t let your nerves run away with you.”

“He might, for instance, have something to say about the engines,” suggested Chaim, the engineer, a shade ironically.

“Or they might have a game of cards, and a drink,” suggested Elsie.

“Some of you men make me sick!” observed Hinda, and shifted her position from one haunch to the other.

“You might be a lot more sick without that friend of yours in the little bag,” said Willi. “I’m going to get it!”

“Like hell you will!” said Hinda, stretching her legs out, and wriggling her toes. “It’s happy where it is. Hallo! What’s that?”

It was the sound of an aeroplane flying straight towards them from the west.

“British, I think,” said Leon. “Yes, British. A Blenheim, I think.”

“From some airfield in Italy, I suppose,” suggested Willi. “What’s that place they took? Foggia, isn’t it?”

“Oh, that’s ages ago. It must be miles north of that.”

The plane came lower, banked, then climbed again, and flew off northward. It was not interested. The ship went on. The waters swished at the bows. The engines drummed in the stern. The seagulls mewed in their wake. It was five o’clock. The course was not changed. If anything, it was a point or two more northerly than it had been.

The silence was broken by a sudden loud fish-market yell from the after quarters of the ship. The travellers jumped to their feet. It was nothing serious. The cook was having a row with someone in the galley. A moment later the cabin-boy dumped a large bucket on the deck. The vituperation continued for a minute or two. The cabin-boy seemed to be used to it. He made no reply, but got down on his haunches, took a knife from the bucket, and got down to his job. It was potato-peeling time. A deck-hand appeared out of the foc’s’le, a mop in his hand, and nonchalantly rubbed it along the deck. After a minute or two, feeling he had earned his pay, he went back into the foc’s’le. There was silence once more, except for the hissing water, the thudding engines, the calling gulls. There was no change in course. Leon looked at his watch. It was six o’clock.

“Look!” said Chaim. Everybody looked up. “That way!” Everybody had been looking to starboard, where a school of porpoises were disporting themselves. He was pointing southward and westward. A small tramp-steamer was ploughing the water *southward*. That ship, at least, did not seem to

anticipate navigational danger. Chaim looked at Leon. Leon's face was grey and rigid as a rock. The nicked flesh above the cheek-bone was like a small wedge of white marble inserted there. He turned on his heel sharply.

"Be careful, for God's sake!" begged Mischa Fasan. Leon ignored him. He strode straight aft, from the well-deck to the officers' quarters, and turned from their sight. Then they heard a sharp rap on the Captain's door. There was a brief silence; then, loud and clear, came the Captain's summons: "*Avanti!*"

"*Avanti!*" cried the Captain.

Leon turned the handle and entered. The Captain was sitting on his bed in his shirt-sleeves. Facing him sat the First Engineer in the green wicker chair, a little more formally attired in the presence of his superior officer, for he had his coat on. A game of cards was in progress on the Captain's up-ended tin trunk. On the small table by the bedhead was an almost empty bottle of whisky. Below it was a quite empty bottle. The Captain and his officer were quick drinkers.

"Ha! It's you, *signore!*" cried the Captain. The drink was affecting him very differently to-day from yesterday. But the foul trick that the Captain of the *Estrella* had played on him was a day older. Besides, he had brought off a good stroke of business for himself. "Yes, what is it? Any complaints? Any thing we can do for your comfort? Oh, by the way. Have you met my First Engineer, Sr. Triggiani? You have? Not only a competent officer, a good friend. You must get to know each other better."

Leon stared at the Captain in astonishment. This did not seem at all the same man who had blackguarded him up on the bridge, two or three hours ago. Perhaps the astonishment showed too clearly in his face.

"I wanted to ask you——" he started. "The fact is, we can't begin to understand——"

The Captain interrupted him:

"Of course, *caro signore*. How stupid I am!" He seized his head between his hands and shook it comically from side to side. "You have come to ask me why we have not changed course yet? Of course you have! *Per favore*, let me explain! But, please, one thing I beg you——" He paused.

"Yes?" asked Leon.

"You must forgive me. I was ill-educated. I was discourteous."

"Up there?" asked Leon. "Well, I must say——"

“*Signore*, you do not understand the responsibility of sailing a ship through these perilous waters! If you had any idea of the danger that surrounded us at the very moment you came up on my bridge . . . and you will forgive me, without invitation. . . .”

“I am sorry,” muttered Leon.

“If you had understood, you and your ladies . . .” The Captain shrugged his shoulders.

“But surely, Captain, by this time the danger must be over. Only just now we saw a ship steaming harmlessly southward at no great distance. My friends are getting very restless, and frankly so am I.”

“I think the only thing we can do, *signore*, is to ask your friends—not more than one or two at a time, if you please—into the wheel-house. Mr. Volos and I will spread out the charts before you.” He raised his glass to his lips, then banged it down on the table again. “*Mamma mia!*” he cried out. “And you, too, Sr. Triggiani! What are we thinking of? Each of us sitting here, like peasants, a glass in our hands! I beg you, *signore*. You must have a drink with us. You will find a glass there, on the table behind you!”

“Really, I think I’d rather not!” Leon was distrustful of the Captain, not less distrustful than before. It was important for him to keep a clear head. Above all, not whisky. He was never good on whisky.

“No! No!” protested the Captain. “That would be insupportable! Not to have a drink with us, not even a little one! I appeal to you, Sr. Triggiani!”

It would be easier to take a thimbleful of whisky, Leon decided, than to stand up against the torrent of protest which a refusal was certain to unloose. He could drown the stuff with water, anyhow. He turned and reached for the glass. His fingers closed round it.

Then the Captain spoke again. The voice was lower, and the tone very different.

“If you utter one sound, Jew, you’re a dead man!”

Leon’s fingers relaxed from round the tumbler. He turned his head, knowing that he would find himself gazing into the barrel of a gun.

“Please get up, Sr. Triggiani, will you? Sit down, Jew! It will be more convenient for us all that way. Take that gun from him, Sr. Triggiani. That’s fine. Are we right? He has one there?” The Engineer removed the Lüger. “Yes, of course, he has.”

“A beautiful thing!” murmured the Engineer. He balanced it on the palm of his hand, he gazed along the barrel. “Beautiful!”

“You would like to know about the course we are taking, Jew?” asked the Captain. It was extraordinary how so small and dulcet a voice could emerge from so large a frame. “I will tell you.” He paused for some moments, as if he had a particularly pleasant chocolate in his mouth with a soft centre, and he wanted to cherish the taste of the coating before he punctured it and the juice squirted on his palate. Leon’s eyes were staring straight in front of him, avoiding the eyes of Captain Aghnides. He was still young, and the direct sight of such iniquity was more than he could bear.

“Are you listening, Jew?”

The dryness in Leon’s mouth was like the dryness round a tooth upon which the dentist blows his little blast of hot air. But it was necessary to speak. It might even be, at some cost, necessary to shout. He brought the words out.

“I’m listening, Captain Aghnides.”

“Good. I’m not going to waste much time talking to you. Your friends might get anxious and come along to find out what’s going on.”

Think quickly, Leon. Shall I shout out now, at once, though in the same moment a bullet will be in my brain? I don’t much mind dying. I’ve been close to it often enough. But I must be sensible. What good will it do? Will it save the others? The moment the shot is fired, men will swarm over them like a load of apes. It’s grim, very grim indeed. But we are cleverer than he is, and his thugs. We’ve made fools of more deadly creatures than this one. The only hope is in guile.

“You’re very stupid, Captain Aghnides,” he said. “You don’t understand the type of people who are with me, and the type of people who are behind us.”

“I’ve been around,” said Captain Aghnides drily. “We are not bound for Palestine,” he added, as if casually.

“Where then?” asked Leon.

“I have no hesitation in telling you. I have a cargo to pick up in Mestre.”

For the moment the location of the place eluded Leon. “Mestre?” he asked. “Mestre?”

The Captain smiled.

“The port of Venice,” he said lightly.

“Venice? But that’s . . . that’s . . .”

“It’s in Fascist Italy. At least it will still be in Fascist Italy during the next few days. The Gestapo is still functioning there.”

Leon licked his lips with the tip of his tongue, though his tongue felt not less dry. It was again the *humiliation* of it that so abysmally desolated him. He had risked death a hundred times, but it had been his lot to risk a gallant death, for the most part, a death of derring-do. And though his antagonists had been men certainly not less wicked than this Captain, there had been a certain diabolic distinction about them, a dark splendour. But to be trapped in this sewer, to be handed over to the exterminators exactly like a rat in a rat-trap. Oh how ignoble it was!

“You know, of course, the rest of your money will not be handed over to you,” Leon said, with an affectation of ease which the white lips and the drops of sweat on the forehead belied, “unless we give instructions ourselves, after our safe arrival. You know that? *After*, not before.”

Captain Aghnides puffed out his lips.

“Pooh! Chicken-feed! I told you I have a cargo to pick up in Mestre. Not a cargo, exactly. A new crew, an honorary crew. Aristocrats, princes. Not a load of stinking Jews!” The Captain said no more than that. He made a gesture with his free hand. The butt-end of a gun, Leon’s own gun, came down smoothly on the back of Leon’s skull like the shaft of an engine.

A minute later the First Engineer came out of the Captain’s cabin, turned right, and right again, and made his way forrard. Ahead of him the remaining passengers sat and lay around on the hatches of the well-deck. They looked a poor lot, he thought. They would shortly be looking more down in the mouth still. He sauntered along easily. He had time.

“*Bon jour, messieurs, mesdames,*” he said, as he came from under the superstructure. He was proud of his French. “*Agréable, non?*” He made a gesture towards the sea, which now had barely a ripple on it, and the sky, which had not a cloud in it. Then his gaze stiffened. Alongside the well-deck on the starboard side there was a line of spilled tomato-gravy leading to the foc’s’le door, where one of the deck-hands had carelessly swung the brimming pail of the foc’s’le dinner. It was not strictly the First Engineer’s duty to busy himself with the cleanliness of the deck, but it was impossible to have such amiable passengers subjected to such filth.

“*Sporceria!*” he yelled at the top of his voice. “*Voi, Angela, dove siete?*” There was no reply for a moment. Then the First Engineer raised his voice

again. “*Porco Madonna! Non sentite?*” At that moment the foc’s’le door opened and the deck-hand, Angelo, appeared, yawning, rubbing his fists into his eyes.

“*Che cosa?*” asked Angelo.

“Look there!” shouted the First Engineer. “Look! The *sporceria!* Go at once! Get a bucket! Scrub it clean!”

“*Piano! Piano!*” objected Angelo, and turned grunting back into the foc’s’le.

“You will forgive, I hope!” begged Sr. Triggiani, returning to French, the language of good manners. “These lazy do-nothings, they should be whipped!”

“Excuse me,” said Mischa Fasan, politely returning French with French. “I take it that our friend, the young gentleman who just left us to see the Captain _____”

At that moment Angelo reappeared, his dungarees turned up about his calves. He carried a pail with brushes and damp cloths, and looked about, as if the spilled gravy had hidden itself in the scuppers somewhere, like beads shed from a necklace.

“There, there, imbecile!” the First Engineer pointed out. The deck-hand advanced a yard or two along the well-deck and laid the pail down with a clatter. He got down on his knees and fumbled about in the pail as if to find a favourite scrubbing-brush. But it was not a brush he lifted from the pail. It was a gun. He turned and covered the group on the hatches. Another gun covered them from the rear. This was in the hand of Sr. Triggiani.

“Get up, all of you!” demanded Sr. Triggiani. “Hands up!” The passengers rose. “Along the deck there!” They lined up along the port rail. At that moment a burly and cheerful figure emerged from under the wheel-house. It was the Captain. He, too, had a gun in his hand. The cook and the cabin-boy aft were interested spectators. There was an air of ease about the proceedings which seemed to indicate that the crew of the *Cleanthis* had had similar experience on previous occasions, or that they had a fine talent for improvisation. Probably there had been conversations beforehand.

“Take their guns from them, Angelo,” said the Captain. He talked Greek, but it was impossible not to guess the meaning of the brief instructions he issued. “That’s one. That’s two. That’s fine.” The guns of Chaim and Willi were handed over to him. “Take them down to the magazine!” he ordered.

“Very good, Captain,” said Sr. Triggiani.

“Wait!” the Captain said. He was in an amiable, even a courteous mood. The party included three women. Two were young. One was a real eyeful.

“The women might as well keep their cabins,” he grunted. “Take them along, Angelo!” he ordered. “Lock them in!” He turned to the men. His expression changed. The lips drew away from the teeth on the left side, in the rather frightening way they had. “*Si marcia!*” he said. “Get going!”

They moved off, their hands in the air. It was not the first time in their lives that one or two of those men had gone marching forward, their hands in the air, and guns at their backs. Two minutes later they were back in the magazine where they had spent the night before. It looked like being a less pleasant night than that had been. The heavy metal doors clanged to. The great bolts were thrust into their sockets.

II

“Another little glass of whisky, Sr. Triggiani?” asked the Captain, as they made their way up to their own quarters. “Or would you prefer some nice Barbados rum?”

“A little more whisky, I think,” said the First Mate, as they entered the Captain’s cabin. “But we had better get rid of this first, of course?” He referred to Leon, who still lay slumped over the green wicker chair.

“Of course,” the Captain said. “I take it that Angelo’s just below, is he? They always expect a bit of their bonus straight away. I don’t blame them.”

The First Mate went to the door, and looked out. Yes, there was Angelo, hovering around just below, on the well-deck. One of the greasers had somehow learned of the excitement. He had come up from the engine-room, and was leaning over the rail by the galley. The cook and cabin-boy were there, too. The potato-fatigue was suspended. Fewer potatoes than had been expected would be needed to-night.

“Angelo,” called the First Mate. “Get somebody to give you a hand. There’s another passenger to go down into the magazine. Be careful as you open the door. Then come back a moment.”

Angelo smiled.

“Yes, sir.” He would be careful. He would come back. He was back some five minutes later.

The Captain and the First Mate had a drink or two, both before he came, and after he went. Then the Captain put the cork back into the bottle. He was

yawning.

“Well, that was nice work,” he said. He made no other reference to recent events. “I’ll turn in for a couple of hours.” He looked at his watch. “Yes. It’s six o’clock. Get someone to give me a shake at eight o’clock, will you? I’ll take over till midnight.”

“Certainly, sir,” said the First Mate.

The Captain slipped off his shoes, stretched his legs out along his bunk, and laid his head on the pillow. He was asleep immediately. He was one of those lucky adults who, like almost all babies, can do that.

III

It was pitch-dark inside the magazine. The light could only be switched on from outside. The men felt their way to the beds they had made for themselves, and stretched out.

“We are not very clever, after all,” said Julius Vastagh.

“There was only one clever one among us,” said Chaim sadly, “and we laughed at him.” He meant Leon.

“What’s going to happen to Hinda?” asked Willi, furiously. He thumped his fist on the metal bulkhead beside him. “And the two other women?” he asked, ashamed that he had for a moment only thought of the girl he loved.

“It will do you no good to bang the ship,” Mischa Fasan reproved him. He was a gentle creature, as well as intelligent. You could not resent his habit of lecturing you, though he was at it quite a lot. “And it will do the ship no harm, either,” added Mischa. You could almost delude yourself into thinking that you could see his spectacles twinkling in the darkness.

“Yes,” repeated Chaim, “only one clever one among us. And we laughed at him because we thought him too clever. Listen. That’s him. That’s Leon. He’s coming to himself again.” There was a groan and the sound of someone stirring on the mattress close by, where they had laid him after he had been flung in to them. Chaim reached over and fumbled with his fingers and found Leon’s face. “The handkerchief is warm,” he said. “Soak another one, will you, Willi?” Willi found his way to the tap and soaked another handkerchief, then fumbled his way back to Leon.

“Here you are, *chaver!*” he said. “A little cold water.”

“Water,” asked Leon. “Any water to drink?”

“There’s an orange, here. Suck it. That’s fine.”

“All right now, Leon?” asked someone.

“Don’t talk of it. Hush,” bade someone else. “There’s time.”

“Not very much,” said Leon. “Wait.” He felt the back of his head. “Oh, you’ve bandaged it. How long have I been here?”

“Not long. Ten minutes. Can you tell us what happened?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you. Oh!”

“What is it?”

“Where’s Mila? Is she here?”

“No. He let the women go back to their cabins. They’re probably locked in from the outside.”

“Then we must get them out.”

He was clearly still light-headed.

“Yes, of course, of course,” Chaim soothed him. “First tell us what happened.”

He told them. He gave them as clear an account as he was capable of for the moment.

“A clever man,” murmured Mischa Fasan bitterly.

“Yes,” said Karl Berger. “You would not have thought him so clever to look at him.” Unless they admitted that the Captain was clever, they would be forced to think themselves even more stupid than they did already.

“You were right, Leon,” said Chaim. “I am sorry. We are all sorry.”

“What about?”

“You told us how you felt about that Captain, and we didn’t listen to you.”

“Tcha!” said Leon. That ejaculation pricked the back of his brain like a needle. “If you, or Mischa, or anyone had seen the swine first, you’d have felt about him as I did. And I’d have told you not to be so childish—just as you told me——”

“Maybe,” they agreed. There was a silence for some time. Everyone was thinking furiously. To Leon the effort of thinking furiously was intolerably painful. The thinking didn’t seem to get anything very far. The only movement was in the progress of the *Cleanthis*, which was steadily making for the cellars of the Gestapo in Venice at a round eight knots per hour. And the cellars of the

Gestapo were neither to be thought about nor to be talked about. They had all thought and talked enough about them already.

The voice that broke the silence was Willi's.

"The women! The women!" he moaned.

There was nothing useful that could be said by anyone on that subject. If they could do anything to save themselves, the women would be saved. But what could they do, locked up in a metal magazine, in a ship manned by armed and iniquitous men? The silence continued. The throbbing became slowly less intolerable in Leon's skull.

It was Mischa Fasan's voice that spoke now.

"We are *all* wrong," he said.

"Wrong? What wrong?"

"There is only one clever one on board this ship. Perhaps two. No, not that Captain. I don't mean that Captain."

"Who then? Puzzles he talks," said Karl Berger fretfully.

"The women are the clever ones. But, Channah, what can *she* do? Her hands are tied, like ours. I mean Hinda."

"Hinda?"

"Yes. She is clever, because she has a gun."

"A gun! She is in a locked cabin, and he says she has a gun. She has also toothpaste."

"I do not think," said Mischa Fasan quietly, "that that cabin will remain locked—to-night."

There was intense silence as the words sank in; then, from Willi's throat, a growl. Then:

"Herr Doktor! No! Oh please God, no!" he pleaded.

"I have said already that Hinda is a clever girl," said Mischa Fasan. "She is lucky, but she is also clever."

"Tell me," said Julius Vastagh. "You talk of these things as if there were a plan laid down, and you knew all about it in advance."

"I know nothing," said Mischa Fasan. "I believe in God."

It was dark inside Elsie's cabin, too. They had left the bulb in the socket,

and for a short time Elsie had played with the idea of flashing the light on and off with the switch in the hope of attracting attention from some craft at sea. But she realized she was very much more likely to attract the attention of some member of the crew, and that would mean extreme unpleasantness for them both.

Mila was sitting on the lower bunk, with Elsie's arms around her.

"All right, Mila darling?"

"I'm all right, Channah dear."

"Not frightened?"

"No, I'm not frightened."

She knew Mila was not saying this merely to comfort her. Mila was simply not frightened. Danger had never frightened her, and though she had been so terribly ill till lately, she was not frightened now. She had been far more frightened that morning—yes, it was the morning of that same day—when the British seaman in the café at Zara had put his arms round her. It was impossible that it should not be so.

"You lie down on this bunk, won't you, Mila? I'll sit here, and we'll just talk. We might get sleepy later on."

"No, Channah. You lie down. I'll sit here."

"Very well. We won't argue." She stretched her legs out, and felt with her hand for Mila's. There was silence for some moments, and Elsie did not want silence. But for the moment she could not think what was the right direction to steer the conversation.

It was Mila who spoke.

"You know, *Liebling*——"

"Yes?" Elsie's heart turned over curiously. It was not often Mila called her "*Liebling*." *Liebling! Darling!* She rolled the sweet word over on her tongue.

"You know where they're taking us?" asked Mila.

"I can guess." (The girl was wanting her to face up to it, so that there could be no hideous surprises in store for her. The lovely, kindly, intelligent child!) "To Italy, I suppose."

"There's still a part the Fascists have, isn't there?"

"Yes, I think so. In the North, though the Allies are chasing them out fast."

“Not fast enough for us, I’m afraid,” said Mila ruefully. “When do you think we’ll arrive?”

“To-morrow, I suppose.”

“You won’t be frightened, Channah?”

“No, Mila. I don’t think we’ll ever get there, either.”

“What do you mean? Do you mean Leon will save us?”

“Leon, or someone else.” She did not say that she was not at all sure that Leon was alive at that moment. It had not occurred to Mila, apparently, that something might have happened to him.

“Who’s someone else?” asked Mila.

“I’ll tell you.” But then a thought occurred to her. “You understand the Morse code, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“So do I. It’s a lucky thing I was so bored in Cracow with that poor dear creature . . . do you remember? What was her name?”

“Yanka, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right. Yanka. She so bored me, the poor thing, that when she offered to teach me the Morse code, I jumped at the chance. Remember? I told you. Hallo, hallo!” She stopped and raised her head. “Do you hear anything, Mila?”

“Yes, I do. I’m sure I do. There it is again. Dot—dot—dash.”

“But this is too idiotic. Tap back again. Perhaps it’s just a creaking in the joints. Gently, now, gently, in case anybody hears.”

“Dot—dot—dash,” went Mila’s knuckles, very gently indeed, but loud enough to be heard on the other side, for there was an immediate response, just as gentle, and quite decisive. Dot—dot—dash, dot—dot—dash.

“Talk about telepathy, Mila!” whispered Elsie. “Never say you don’t believe in it from now on. There she is again. Help me spell it out. Yes, what’s that?”

“You both O.K.?” This from Hinda’s side of the bulkhead.

“O.K.” This from their side.

“Me, too. You locked in?”

“Yes.”

“Me, too.”

“Keep cheerful.”

“You also.”

“I have idea.”

“What?”

“He may pay visit later. If yes, O.K.”

“Take care.”

“O.K.”

There was silence for a time, then Elsie and Mila talked again. They had various little snatches of conversation with each other from time to time during the next two hours. It helped to pass the time away.

IV

At eight o'clock, as arranged, Captain Aghnides was given a shake. He yawned, belched, and got up. First he gave himself a good shot of whisky to start him off on his four-hour watch. Then he poured out a little water in his basin, and dipped his head in it. Then he slipped his coat on, and went up on the bridge, and relieved Mr. Volos. There was some food on the table in the wheel-house, bread, olives, cheese, half a bottle of wine. That would see him through. The second deck-hand came up to relieve the first. The Captain and the hand got down to their work.

Time passed. The engines drummed away peacefully. They were making good progress. At this rate they should arrive at Mestre well before dawn. They would probably have to stand off for a couple of hours. Everything was going nicely. It did not seem as if there were any Allied patrols about. If anyone stopped him, he had every answer pat. The prisoners were a lot of Jews who were trying to make the illegal journey to Palestine. When told he was going to put them ashore, they had tried to seize the ship. He would be all right. No one had got him down yet. He was Captain Aghnides, Xenophon Aghnides. He walked up and down the bridge, and stuck out his chest. He felt fine. There was only one thing lacking. He felt like it now, but he knew of a little piece in Mestre. He would have to wait for it till to-morrow.

God damn it, she was a good-looking little wench, well-stacked, the one below. He liked them like that, with those firm thighs, and those inviting eyes. She had winked at him more than once during the day, each time she had

caught his eye. She knew what was good for her. She knew he had a nice well-lined wallet, too, the little Jew-bitch. Oh well, he'd get it for a few liras tomorrow. Maybe, just for love. Women liked what he had to give them.

The jaunty way she swung those little buttocks of hers! Something to get hold of! The erotic images chased each other across the starry canvas of the night. He tried to think of other things. His wife in Smyrna. The miserable treacherous faggot! She was probably in the arms of some lecherous circumcised Turk at that very moment, wallowing in it! He swivelled his mind violently round to Corfu, and his mother there, his poor dear mother, in the small farm among the olive-trees, by Lake Calichipoulo. But his mind came round again and again to the little Jew-bitch. She was never out of it for more than a minute or two at a time. It got him like this sometimes. He was immensely relieved when at long last Mr. Volos came up to take over at midnight.

He knew what he would do. He would go down and start drinking and go on drinking till he passed out. There would be only time for an hour or two's sleep, but that would be all right. He never needed more than that. He would be as right as rain by the time they got to Mestre.

But it did not work out like that. He drank more than enough to stupefy most men, but his itch merely became more and more intolerable. He knew, he had known all along, why he had had the bitch put back into her cabin. Because he wanted her to be there when he felt like having her. And if he wanted the two others, by God, he would have them, too! Was he not Captain Aghnides, the terror of the brothels of the whole Levant?

He threw back one more large shot of whisky, and rose to his feet, swaying no more than an inch or two this way and that. He was extraordinarily steady for one who had drunk so much. He put his coat on, for he was, after all, a ship's Captain and a gentleman. One does not go to pay one's respects to a woman in one's shirt-sleeves. This was the S.S. *Cleanthis*, not a five-piastre-a-time brothel in Alexandria. He tapped his pocket to assure himself his wallet was there. It was there, and it bulged healthily.

"If she wants pay," he muttered, "she'll get pay. Why not? Nice girl. Well-stacked. Good value." He opened his door and moved along the two or three yards to the next cabin, where she was lying in her bunk, the poppet, damn her eyes. He knocked. There was no reply. He knocked again. There was a sudden startled cry from within. You could hear quite plainly through the door-grille.

"Who's that?" She talked her own language, German.

"Speak *francese, français?*" he whispered. "*Moi, Capitaine.*"

“Ah, *le Capitaine. Allez-vous-en.*” He could talk to her. They had a language in common. “Bad man. Me frightened.” The little bitch was playing coy, hard to make.

“Let me come in. Beaucoup dollars. *Belle. Très belle. Bellissima.*” The languages were getting mixed up a bit.

There was a faint titter on the other side of the door. God, how provoking she was. He could smell her. Though the door was between, he could *see* her, stretched out naked, firm, ravishing. If she wasn’t careful, he’d break the door down. And then where would she be?

“*Apri. Ouvrez.* Please!” he begged piteously. It was always better when they worked with you.

“Shush!” she bade him. “Now! I get up! Bad man!” She unbolted the door from within, and turned the handle. But the door, of course, was bolted outside, too. “Silly! Silly!” she reproved him. “Open from your side!”

“Yes, yes!” he whispered. He fumbled with the bolt and pulled it back. Then she opened the door.

“Come in!” she whispered. “Hush! Not to waken anybody!” He entered.

“*Chérie! Ragazzina mia!*” he mouthed. As he reached his arms forward to hug her to his chest, he felt the hard impact of a steel rod against his belly. He heard a sharp click at the same moment, a sound he knew well. He knew it well, however drunk he was. It was the click of a gun’s safety-catch being jerked out of place.

“Hands up! Get out!” Hinda said. It did not occur to him to argue. He was not brave—as who is!—with an automatic thrust against his belly. The door was open. He got out. “Turn round! Go left! To the other cabin!” She was enjoying herself, but she had had good times like this before. “Open that door!” He pulled the bolt from the outside, the two women inside pulled it from theirs. The door opened. “Let him in!” ordered Hinda. They led him in, then closed the door and switched on the light. “Sit down in that chair,” bade Hinda. He sat down. He was as docile as a child. “Now tie him up and gag him. Use the sheets.” Elsie and Mila did as she told them. Mila’s eyes were sparkling with excitement. Elsie, too, was having a good time. For the first time for several months her attention was focused on another creature than Mila. A quick memory flickered across her mind—the last time she was tying bandages round a body. A long way off. In another world. The tying and gagging took some time, but it had to be done well, and it was done well. The Captain himself offered no difficulty at all. His eyes rolled in their sockets like

golden brandy-balls. Every now and again a gurgle emerged from him, like a crooning wood-pigeon. That was all.

“I’ll stay here,” said Hinda, “unless he wriggles free, with all those rolls of fat.” She looked dispassionately at the revolver, now off duty for the moment in the palm of her hand. “I don’t think I could knock him out with this,” she speculated. “Do you? This sort of man usually has a thick skull.” The eyes rolled terribly in the Captain’s head. “We can’t shoot him now, either. It would wake people up. No, I’ll stay here. Channah, one of the Engineers is in the next cabin. I heard him go in. He’s dead asleep, or he’d have been in by now. Bolt his door, Channah. Do it quietly. Then come back here. You, Mila——”

“Yes?” Mila was as tense as a child playing Cowboys and Indians.

“See if there’s a guard on the magazine below, where the men are. I shouldn’t think there is. They were so sure of everything. If there is, come back. We’ll have to get a knife from the galley, and do him in. If there’s no guard, it should be easy. I suppose that door will be bolted, too. It’s not likely to be locked. If it is locked, the key would be in this fellow’s cabin. We’d soon find out where it is.” She fondled the revolver. “Off you go, girls.” The tone was almost that of a girl-guide mistress to her two best girl-guides. Channah went off and slid the bolt on the outside of the engineer’s cabin. He was snoring inside there like the engine of a motor-boat. She came back at once to share Hinda’s vigil. She felt quite sorry for the miserable trussed creature with the rolling eyes. It is not a nice thing for a Captain to be trussed like a turkey by three females in his own ship. But she knew he had been a naughty Captain one way and another.

Like a shadow, like the good little Underground girl she was, Mila crept down the companionway to the deck below, and paused, waiting to make quite sure there was no one on guard. There was not. She crept forward and passed her fingertips over the outside of the store-room door. The door was bolted, with large bolts above and below. There was a padlock-hasp but no padlock. She grinned with delight, and it suddenly occurred to her that it would be pleasant to give them a sign inside. They were not likely to be sleeping.

Dot—dot—dot—dash, she went, with her knuckles, very softly. The V sign. There was a silence for several charged seconds, then the sign came back: dot—dot—dot—dash. Then she slid the bolts. Someone within turned the handle. Someone drew the door inwards. Then there was a babble of whispers: “Thank God!” “God be praised!” “Thank God!” “Thank God!” Then:

“*Towda rabbah*, many thanks! Who are you?”

“It’s me, Mila! Let me in!”

A hand drew her inside, then closed the door to behind her.

“No! No!” cried someone. She recognized Leon’s voice. “Don’t close it! Anyone could bolt it again!”

“Of course! Fool that I am!” It was Willi. He opened the door and wedged his shoulder there.

“Leon!” Mila cried. “Are you all right?”

“Fine! Look!” He lit a torch, and moved the beam round. “We’re all all right. What happened? How did you do it?” He addressed the others. “Isn’t she marvellous?”

“It was easy,” Mila whispered. “The Captain came to Hinda’s cabin, and she held him up. Then she made him open our door, and they came in. Then we tied him up.” It sounded a pedestrian narration of facts.

“She’s all right, is she?” This was from Willi, and it meant Hinda.

“We’re all all right,” Mila assured him.

“I told you so,” said Mischa Fasan, a little unctuously.

“Told us what?” asked Karl Berger.

“You know very well what I told you.”

They could not express the enormity of their relief by shouting and dancing, so they were irritable with each other instead.

“For God’s sake, let’s get out of this hole,” exclaimed Willi. “Let’s start doing things: I must get to Hinda!”

“Quiet!” ordered Leon. He was at once very much in command. “We’ve got to work to plan, otherwise we’re done for. Does anyone seem to be around, Mila? Did you see anyone?”

“No.”

“We never know when people may start moving to take over from each other,” Leon continued. “They may start moving now.”

“What time is it?” asked Chaim.

“A quarter to three.”

“It’s not the sort of time people change watch,” said Chaim.

“We know roughly where everyone is?” asked Leon.

“Not just roughly,” observed Chaim. “There are four men in the foc’s’le,

probably fast asleep. There's two men on the bridge, and two in the engine-room. That leaves just the Captain, and one more, the engineer off duty. He'll be asleep, too."

"Yes," said Mila. "Channah locked him in."

"There we are, then," Leon summed up. "Four forward, four amidships, two of whom are out of the way, and two aft, in the engine-room. We've got to account for them all." He thought hard for some moments. "That means three separate operations. The four men in the foc's'le are easy. All we have to do with them is bolt them in. That's right, isn't it, Chaim? There'd be outside bolts on that door?"

"I think so."

"But we can't deal with them till we've dealt with the two men on the bridge. The foc's'le door's under observation from the wheel-house, I think."

"It is."

"So we've got to work that out—the two men on the bridge. When those two operations are over, we can deal with the two men in the engine-room. We'll need rope. What's more—we don't want to kill anybody, but if we have to, we have to. So we'll need guns. Our guns can't be far away."

"How many do we need?"

"As many as we can lay hands on. We know we've got *one*, Hinda's. We can knock the Captain on the head, if necessary, and take that one. Mila!"

"Yes?"

"Did the Captain have his gun on him?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"We tied him round and round like a mummy."

"Then his own gun must be in his cabin. So's mine, I should think. Perhaps Willi's, too. Go and see what you can find, Willi, and come back at once. Here, take this torch."

Willi disappeared, a streak of darkness. He was back four minutes later, bristling with guns. He had four.

"No trouble at all," he said. "This one was under his pillow."

"The one he used on me, I suppose."

“Your own gun, and mine, were locked in the drawer. So was this one, the one the deck-hand used. The keys were under his pillow, too.”

“Four, an arsenal. We could have managed with less. The first thing we’ve got to do is overpower the two men on the bridge. There are two doors into the wheel-house. You take this on with me, Willi. You go up one side, I’ll go up the other. We’ll have a gun apiece.”

“Fine,” said Willi.

“We’ll need some rope to tie them, and some stuff to gag them with. There’s any amount around here. Have you got your jack-knife, Chaim? They took mine. Yes? Julius, Karl, find some rope of the right sort, and cut it into even lengths to tie round the waist. Also, someone, cut up this blanket.”

“Yes, Leon, I will,” said Mila.

“Another thing, Leon!” observed Chaim. “When we’ve tied up the mate and the other man——”

“Please God!” interjected Mischa Fasan.

“Please God!” conceded Chaim, “we’d better lash the wheel. Otherwise the ship might go dancing around a bit, and they’d start thinking things in the engine-room.”

“All right. You do that, Chaim. You, Karl——”

“Yes?”

“You’ll come up to the wheel-house just behind us. The moment you see we’ve got them safe, go down to the main deck. You’ll be waiting for him, Julius, under the bridge. You’d better have a gun, too, though I don’t think you’ll need it. You go forrard, both of you, and bolt the foc’s’le door. If you do it quickly enough, it doesn’t matter if you wake them. They can yell their lungs out. The people amidships won’t be any use to them, and nobody’ll be able to hear them back in the engine-room. It’s a long way off, and there’s a lot of noise down there. That’s the last job, the engine-room. What’ll be going on down there, Chaim?”

“I suppose the engineer will be attending to the gauges. Or he might be just having a smoke. The greaser will be moving around with a rag, I suppose. Or he may be having a smoke, too.”

“They sound easy meat. What do you suggest, Chaim?”

Chaim thought a moment or two, then: “I’ll be on the galley deck,” he said, “outside the door leading down into the engine-room. As soon as you and

Willi are ready, you can come and join me.”

“Good.”

“I’ll go down first. You know there’s a cat-walk, half-way down?”

“Yes?”

“I can cover them from there. You two can go down and tie them up.”

“Or tap them on the head, if they’re funny,” said Leon. “That disposes of all of them, doesn’t it, the whole lot?”

“That’s right.”

“No,” said Leon. “No. It can’t be as simple as all that.”

“It’s not so simple,” suggested Karl Berger.

“Does anybody see any snags anywhere? I’ll go through it again quickly.” He went through it. “Well? Anything to say, anybody?”

Nobody had anything to say. Everything was clear and straightforward, so long as everybody moved quickly and silently, and there was no fumbling.

Then suddenly Karl Berger found his tongue.

“What happens afterwards?” he asked. “Do we sail the ship instead? I suppose I could do the cooking.”

“No,” said Leon shortly. “We lower one of the boats and make off.”

“Where to?”

“Oh shut him up somebody, for God’s sake!” Leon broke out. “Let’s get cracking!” He adjusted a length of rope round his waist and tucked the end in. “You and me first, Willi. To the bridge.”

They went out. The others followed to the places assigned them. Mischa Fasan was the last to go.

“God bless you,” he murmured after them. No special job had been assigned to him and he felt his sixty years at that moment keenly and for the first time. This was a young man’s business, he knew. But the young men would be no worse off if God blessed them, he thought.

Karl Berger was right. The operation was not so simple as all that. It was three separate operations, and something might have gone wrong with each, though each mishap would have been progressively less serious than the one before.

As it happened, something *did* go wrong, and, at the very outset. It happened up on the bridge, when Leon and Willi simultaneously crept up into the wheel-house, one by the port entrance, the other the starboard. It was Leon's job to deal with the man actually at the wheel. Willi was to deal with the other man, whether he was standing by, or whatever he was doing. Willi mistimed by the fraction of a second. His man let out a yell, not a yell to warn his ship-mates, but a yell of utter fright. It did not last long, for Willi immediately clouted him with his gun on the side of the temple. Then he perceived it was Angelo, a fact which increased his pleasure in the performance. The noise was probably loud enough to awaken the men in the foc's'le, even though there was a metal door in between. It accelerated everything, like the speeding-up of a film in a movie projector.

"Quick, both of you!" shouted Leon, as he, too, cracked his gun down on the helmsman's head. The helmsman was Mr. Volos. "I'm with you!" It was safe to leave the two men up there with Willi. They were not likely to come round for quite a little time. He tore down after Karl Berger and Julius Vastagh, but by the time he reached the foc's'le door, they had already bolted it. For two men of science, not in the first flush of youth, they had put on an amazing burst of speed.

"They're all right!" Julius Vastagh said, his white food-chemist teeth shining in the first dimness of the just-rising moon. "You don't hear anything, do you?"

All three stood and listened. There was only the sound of the water whispering at the bows and the engines throbbing aft.

"They probably had a drink or two to celebrate last night," said Leon. "That's fine! Just one more job to do!"

He ran aft, along the well-deck, between the cabins, on to the aft well-deck, and up the companionway.

There was Chaim, lurking behind the galley as arranged.

"Is that you, Leon?" Chaim whispered. "What happened? Who let out that yell?"

"The deck-hand on the bridge. We had to knock him out. We had to knock them both out. I suppose Willi's tying them up to make sure. You don't think they can have heard down here?"

"Impossible. Anyhow, there's nothing they could do. They're like rats in a stopped drain."

“Shall we wait for Willi?”

“Best to make sure. He’ll be here in a moment. There he is.” A few moments later he was with them.

“O.K.?” asked Leon.

“Sound asleep,” said Willi.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

They went off, Chaim leading.

This last operation was flawless. It was like something out of a text-book. They did not need to knock out either the engineer or the greaser. All they needed to do down there was to stop the engines. The two men were, in fact, most co-operative. Their faces looked very yellow, partly because they were very frightened, partly because there was so much smoke and grease on the electric-light bulbs. It did not seem necessary even to tie them up, because there was only one way out of the engine-room, and the door there could be bolted, like the other doors. But it was thought better to tie them up, after all. They had not deserved any better than their ship-mates.

“That accounts for them all, doesn’t it?” said Leon, as they made for the ladder leading to the cat-walk.

“That’s right,” grinned Willi. “All ten. Dead easy.”

“Excuse me,” said Chaim. He was coming down to the deck below.

“Yes. What is it?”

Chaim looked round, found what he wanted, and picked it up. It was a heavy wrench.

“I could cry,” he said. “I am an engineer. But I like to be thorough.” He went round and smashed a few of the more delicate controls and gauges. “That’s all right,” he said. “Now she’ll stay put after we’re gone, for quite a long time. Hallo, we’ve got visitors!”

“Everything all right down there?” It was Hinda. Her face grinned down at them like a blown poppy.

“Is that you, Hinda?” Willi called out. “I love you!”

“Leave that for another time!” she reproved him. “Come up, all of you!” They came up. Channah and Mila were close behind Hinda.

“Where are the others?” asked Leon.

“They looked down and saw everything was under control, so Mischa Fasan is sorting out our things in the magazine, and Julius and Karl are up on the boat-deck. I suppose they’re trying to launch a boat, or something.”

“Listen, everybody!” Leon suddenly roared with all his lungs. “Everybody, I mean! You also!” He lifted his head. He might have meant the two men up there, he might have meant the stars, he might have meant God. His friends wondered if he had gone mad.

“We’ve done it!” Leon roared. “We’ve done it! We’ve beat them to it! The dirty old bag of tripe!” He took the three women in his arms, one after the other, Channah, Mila, Hinda, and kissed them. Then solemnly he shook hands with the men. “Now let’s get on with it! Oh, my God!” He slapped his forehead. “My dollars! We’ll use them again some time!”

“That’s all right,” said Mila demurely. “I went over to the Captain’s cabin. They were in the tin trunk. I unlocked it. They’re here, in your brief-case.”

“Well, I’ll be——” Leon started. But he didn’t know what he would be, so he gave it up. “You’ve brought her up very nicely, Channah.”

“Yes,” Channah agreed. “I don’t think I’ve done so badly. Wait a minute, everybody. Stop talking.”

“Why? Do you hear anything?”

“Has someone broken loose? Where?”

“No.” She stood there, and raised her head to the night sky and closed her eyes. The ascending moon seemed to swim up towards her forehead and bathe it with a benediction. “Listen to the silence,” she said softly. “Smell it. It’s like a field of flowers.” Everyone was silent. One or two, who had not uttered a prayer for many years, sought in their memories for a prayer out of their childhood, and repeated it, whatever irrelevant prayer it was, under their breath.

It was Julius Vastagh on the boat-deck who broke the silence.

“Hi, you, down there!” he cried. “We don’t know where to start. How do you lower these things?”

“Wait!” cried Leon. “We’ll be up in a minute. No. Come down!” They came down and, in the same moment Mischa appeared, laden with coats, blankets, and various oddments. The moonlight caught his spectacles and they twinkled like mackerel.

“I couldn’t carry everything,” he said.

“Have you got my cap?” asked Chaim. “I’m not going anywhere without my cap.”

“I don’t remember picking up a cap.”

“And there’s my bag, with the toothpaste,” remembered Hinda. “I might need that bag again some time.”

“Be quick, everybody. Have a last look round,” ordered Leon. “You might pick up a few odd things in the galley, girls. We don’t know how long we’ll be in that boat. As for me—I just want to say good night to somebody.” He strode forward, and went down by the companionway to the well-deck. They saw him disappear, and they knew exactly where he had gone to. They waited tensely, wondering what horrid sound they might any moment hear.

But they heard no sound. Captain Aghnides was gagged and could utter none. Leon did no more than switch the light on, and stand glaring for twenty seconds, thirty seconds, a full minute, into the Captain’s eyes. It was the longest minute by far that that man had ever endured, all his life long. Then Leon turned and left the place.

Two minutes later everybody was assembled on the boat-deck.

“We’re all here?” asked Leon. They were all there. “We’d all better know what we’re up to. I’ve not been able to tell you women yet what that old fiend was doing with us. I suppose you guessed.”

“It wasn’t hard,” said Hinda.

“Yes. His idea was to dump us in Fascist Italy, and get some blood-money for us. I say, everybody. Aren’t we letting him off lightly?” The tone was quite anxious. “Well—I don’t suppose you can do anything to a man who’s tied up like that, can you?”

“I suppose not,” it was regretfully agreed.

“He was going to pick up a gang of Fascist big-shots in Mestre—that’s the port of Venice—and cart them off to South America, I suppose, somewhere like that. He let me in on that. Well, they may have to find some other transport. The fact is that he was heading for Venice as fast as he could make it.”

“Nice place, too,” murmured Willi. He was thinking, perhaps of honeymoons in gondolas.

“Well, another time,” Leon agreed. “We were still going north and west before we stopped the ship. In fact, that’s the way the bows are facing now, the

direction they were facing when we tied up the wheel.”

“By the way, Leon,” said Chaim. “Have you seen that the boat on the port side has an engine? Look at the propeller back here.”

“That’s fine. We’ll get there earlier.”

“Where?” asked Karl Berger.

Leon was beginning to get just a little irritated with Karl Berger, who as an Agronome doubtless had great distinction. It was hard for him not to reply Timbuctoo.

“Italy,” he said. “However, the trouble is we don’t know exactly where we are. What’s the name of that river that flows into the sea below Venice? Does anyone remember?”

“There are two,” said Mischa Fasan. “There’s the Adige and the Po.”

“As far as I can see that’s about where we are. Over there somewhere.” He pointed east to the invisible land. “How long do you think it will take us to get there, Chaim, supposing that boat’s all right?”

“It ought to be all right,” said Chaim, “they probably keep it in good trim for smuggling. I don’t know. Two hours. Three hours. About dawn, or just after.”

“The sooner we get started the better. If anyone sights a ship standing dead-still on the sea, they’ll come up and ask questions. There’s one thing we must face—two things.”

“Yes?”

“We just don’t know who’ll be in possession at the point we land. The Allies may have got there by this time. Or the Fascists might still be there. If so _____”

“Yes?”

“We’ll have to go carefully, of course. We’ll have to go underground. That won’t be anything new for any of us. It shouldn’t be hard to find a friendly priest, or some fishermen, or maybe, a farmer, who’ll look after us. We’ve got money, too.”

“And if it’s the Allies?” asked Mischa Fasan. “It won’t be too good, I think.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Leon. “If it’s the British, that is to say. Those politicians they have there. . . .” It was too sore a subject, and he did not

pursue it. "So again we go underground. Yes?"

"Yes."

"So now we've only got to get ashore. All right, Chaim. *You* know what to do with this?" He pointed to the boat slung up between the davits.

"Yes," said Chaim. He got to work. "One of you, help me cut these ropes." He meant the ropes which lashed down the tarpaulin. "Good. We'll keep the tarpaulin. Stow it in the boat. We might need it. Put all your things in. Fine. Now, everybody, climb in. You, too, Leon. Take it easy for a bit. Fuel O.K.? Fine. Stay with me, Willi."

The others scrambled in. "Leave the stern free for us. Put your coats on, you might as well. Now, Willi, help me to wind these handles, see?" They wound the handles attached to the davit, so that in a minute or so the davits were straightened up and the boat hung over the water. "O.K. everybody? Fine." He bent down to the small electric winch just below the aft davit, started up the engine, and got into gear. Then he pulled down the operating handle on the winch to the position marked "Lower" and the boat went gently down into the water. "All well, down there? Comfortable, Mila?"

She smiled up at him.

"Lovely," she said.

"O.K. now, Willi?" He switched off the winch motor. "Up we go now. Like this." He got up on the deck-rails, balancing on the aft davit. Willi did the same. "Down now." They slipped down the lifelines into the boat.

"Bravo!" cried everybody. "Bravo!"

"Here we are," said Chaim. "Unhook this tackle! Good! It's all ours!" He meant the boat, the sea, the lives that so recently had again been endangered, the dreams that might well still be realized. "All ours!" That was an unusual outburst for Chaim. "Will you steer, Willi? Fine. Here it is!" That was the starting handle. The motor spat and turned over. Chaim got into gear. Willi leaned on the tiller. The boat slid off like a sea-bird on the silk-smooth water.

There was dead silence among the travellers, dead silence on the ship receding behind them. It seemed like a ship of the dead.

"More to port, Willi!" said Chaim. "That's right!" Those were the only words said for many minutes. There was no sound in the universe but the sharp chug-chug of the motor, and the splash of the water against the sides. It was quite chilly. The women pulled the blankets up over their knees.

At last Mischa Fasan spoke.

“It was as if He wanted us to live, after all,” he said. They knew who “He” was. To some the sentiment was congenial. To others it was not. The thought was not uttered in order that it should be discussed.

“Happy, Mila?” murmured Elsie. “Fasten your coat at the neck, darling!” Mila did as she was told.

“Did you think it could happen, Channah?” She paused. “I didn’t.”

“I didn’t, either,” Elsie conceded. “No.”

They were both thinking back over these strange and dreadful years. But they had been less dreadful than they might have been, assuming that there could have been any years at all—for Mila had there been no Channah, for Channah had there been no Mila. The woman who had been no mother had found a daughter. The daughter who had lost a mother had found one. As for the girl, in her backward scrutiny she was contemplating even the culminating nightmare in Budapest—and she did not flinch. It could be said, there in that small boat puttering forward through the moonlit water to Italy, it could be said that the child was healed of her sickness.

“Oh, God,” Elsie Silver said to herself. “I’d like to know you’re up there, somewhere. There’s somebody ought to be thanked—and if not You, who else?”

Forward ahead of them the moon was rising higher into the night-sky. The night-sky? In an hour or so a stronger light would be coming up behind them over their shoulders. In the moonrise the stars shone with reduced fire.

“Hallo!” Willi said. “Do you see?” He pointed. The others turned their heads. A light flickered some distance off, ahead and on the port bow. It was like a firefly, like someone walking through a garden unsteadily, a lamp in his hand.

“A fishing boat,” said Chaim. “We’re not far from land.”

“Squid, I suppose,” said Julius Vastagh. “Good stuff. Of course, they wouldn’t stand for it in Eretz. A pity.”

“A point to starboard, Willi,” said Chaim. “We might as well keep clear for the time being.”

“There’s more lights over there, round to north. Three or four,” said Leon. Yes, they were fast getting nearer land.

“Listen!” said Leon. He had ears like a night-bird. “Voices! Do you hear

anything?”

Everyone strained their ears.

“No!” they said. “No!” There was only the chug of the engine and the splash of the water. Behind them the wake was like the cream of a freshly drawn pail of milk.

“I suppose they were in my own head,” said Leon. “Hush! There they are again!”

“It happens like that at night, on the sea,” said Mischa. “Sound travels great distances over water. It’s very capricious.”

“Look!” cried Hinda, pointing to the east. “It’s getting light over there. It’ll be dawn soon.”

“A new day,” murmured Mischa Fasan.

“I wonder what it will bring for us,” ruminated Karl Berger. “You never know.” He remained acutely conscious that the day that had just gone, or the day before, had brought Captain Aghnides.

“Italy!” said Mila. “Italy!” It was enough for Mila that it would bring Italy. Channah looked at the girl curiously. Mila had never delivered herself of any enthusiasm for Italy. But then Channah remembered that ever since she had known Mila Italy had always been as remote from their thoughts as Bolivia, or the Mountains of the Moon.

“That’s not land, is it?” cried Willi suddenly. “Look, against the skyline!” A seagull came over and turned on his wing-tip and cried and flew off.

“Or is it mist?” asked Leon. “I think it’s mist. There’s a swell on the water, isn’t there? Do you feel it? We can’t be far from land.”

From minute to minute the moon was getting fainter and fainter as the sun came nearer to the moment of his rising. Soon a horizontal lance of fire thrust up from under the eastern edge of the sea. The lance became a bow-string, the curved rim of the risen sun.

“Trees!” cried Willi suddenly. Everyone looked round. There was only mist suffused with dawn. “There they are again!” Yes, there they were again. Trees. The mist unfolded, and revealed them, and closed in on them again. Three or four seagulls dipped and reappeared on the ground-swell.

“Better stop the engine,” said Chaim. He switched off, the boat glided forward silent as a thought, under its own impetus. “You never know who’s around.” He took one of the oars and fixed it in the rowlocks amidships, Leon

did the same. “Gently now, gently,” Chaim said. “Keep her head on, Willi.” They rowed forward a hundred yards, two hundred yards. The waves could be heard softly lapping on the beach. They could see the sands quite clearly beneath the keel. Ahead, of them the sands, the grey sands, scored with the prickly grey-green fauna of the foreshore, rose imperceptibly to a belt of pine-woods. There was still mist about.

Then suddenly Leon cried out:

“Mines! We mustn’t forget! The beach may be mined!”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Chaim. “But further up, if anywhere, in the scrub. Here we are now.” They were running forward, they were grounded. The tide was coming in, and the waves gently lifted their stern. The boat heeled slightly to starboard.

“*Mazel tov!*” cried Hinda. “Me first!”

“Wait!” ordered Leon. He was determined to be cautious. He got overboard and lowered his legs gently—the water came half-way up his thighs. “It seems all right!” he said. The other men got out and pulled the boat further inshore. “Now, girls!” said Leon. “Now, Channah! Now, Mila!”

Hinda was already down. She preferred to do things for herself. In a moment or two they were all ashore. They were in Italy.

Leon looked north, he looked south, he looked straight ahead. There was no one in sight.

“I’ll go forward,” he said. He was not one for forgetting his responsibilities even in such a moment of joy as this. Chaim winked. Possibly he thought you either trod on a mine or you didn’t, and if you did it didn’t really matter very much. The others followed in Leon’s wake. The seagulls mewed overhead. In the trees the crows uttered their first cawings. From somewhere a long way off a cock crowed. Straight ahead somewhere a dog barked. There were no more frightening noises than these.

Leon turned. They had reached the scrub now.

“It seems to be all right, Chaim, doesn’t it?” he observed.

“I think it’s all right,” agreed Chaim. “There’s probably a road beyond the pine-trees there.” They thrust through the sand and scrub and reached the wood. Chaim was right. A blue-grey road ran down from north to south, straight and level as a canal. Beyond, parallel with the road, the railway came down through broad fields of maize.

“And now?” Leon turned to his friends. “Which way?” He looked them over affectionately, the eight companions of whom most had been unknown to him only a few days ago. His eyes moved from the grey bearded man of sixty to the girl of seventeen, the girl so recently half-way to a corpse. The flush of young blood was in her cheeks now and her lips were tremulous with excitement over the adventures that lay ahead. He looked them over one by one, the food-chemist with the excellent teeth, the learned Agronome who got on your nerves now and again, the engineer with the cloth cap retrieved from Lenin’s tomb, the two young partisans from the Slovak woods standing there with their fingers intertwined, the benign Channah with somewhat heavy-lidded eyes, a beautiful woman still, a mysterious woman, concerning whom everything was in a sort of luminous shadow, excepting her adoration for young Mila, which was stark and fervent as noonday.

“Well?” they smiled back at him, well aware he was engaged in a sort of stock-taking. “Well?”

“Have I been a bit of a nuisance sometimes?” asked Karl Berger. “Sometimes my nerves run away with me a bit.”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” Leon answered indulgently, “not in Mestre. What does anything matter?”

“Ask Captain Aghnides,” said Willi. “He knows.”

“And now?” asked Mischa Fasan, “which way? Where are we?”

“We are in No Man’s Land. Who knows where we are? Then which way, everybody?” asked Leon, invincibly the democrat except in moments of acute crisis.

Everybody’s head quite unconsciously veered towards the left. Away from the north, where the enemy still was. Towards the south, towards friends.

“Come,” said Leon. “Let’s go out on the road. It’ll be easier. It’s so early, nobody will be stirring yet. And if they are, they’ll be country people. We don’t ever need to be afraid of *them*.”

“And the road’s so straight,” said Chaim, “we could see traffic coming from miles off. If we see anything, we can get back into the wood again, and lie flat till it’s gone by.”

They went out on to the roadway from between the trunks of the pine-trees reddening in the early sun, and turned left, southbound. A bedraggled group they looked, if they could have seen themselves with other eyes than their own. But their eyes sparkled. Whatever lay ahead, they had endured much hardship

together, and some danger, in the few days since they had been together. They had been brave and intelligent. They had come through.

“It’s a pity for that poor lawyer,” said Mischa Fasan to Leon who was walking beside him.

“Oh yes, the lawyer,” agreed Leon. “The one we left at the Hungarian frontier. I am ashamed. I have already forgotten his name. Perhaps the next time he is at the frontier they will let him go on.”

“*Allevei!*” murmured Mischa. “*Allevei!* Would that it were so! Hallo, what’s he doing?” He was asking about Julius Vastagh, the food-chemist, who had crossed the road into the field on the other side. “Oh, I see!” Julius Vastagh had broken off an unripe ear of maize and was coming back with it to Karl Berger, grinding it between his firm teeth.

“Yes, Karl. A good species,” said Julius Vastagh. “As good as they grow it.”

“Not any better than they grow in Eretz already, I should think,” said Karl Berger. “There’s a lot of water around here. Look at the irrigation ditches. This will be good rice country, too. Yes, look!”

Mila turned and smiled up into Elsie’s face. But she was growing fast. Mila would soon be looking straight into Elsie’s face, eye to eye.

“*Italy, Channah!*” she said. “I never dreamt of it! Never! Even when I was a little girl, and we had all those picture-books of famous towns . . . you know, in Italy and Spain and England and France. We always went to Prague for holidays. But *Italy!*”

“Who knows, Mila? Perhaps it will still be Italy and Spain and England and France, after all. Here we are in Italy already.”

“But I want to go to Eretz, first,” said Mila. “You said so, didn’t you, Channah?”

“Yes, darling, of course. Eretz first. Look, look! A rabbit! Did you see it dive into the field there?”

“Yes, yes. There’s a bird! Do you hear it? Up in that tree somewhere!”

“Let’s sing!” said Willi. “What shall we sing?”

“Please,” begged Leon. “Are you in Haifa already? Listen! Listen, everybody! Stop! Do you hear something?”

They stopped and stood rigid there, listening. Sure enough, there was a confused noise down there, southward, some distance away. You could see

nobody yet, but you could hear voices. It was people singing. The sound was swelling in volume. The people singing were coming towards them.

“Back!” said Leon. They thrust themselves off the roadway back into the shelter of the pine-wood. It might be a posse of Fascist militia. It might even be a regiment of German soldiers. If they were German—or Fascists, for that matter—they were not likely to be feeling very gay, but singing helps you out, anyway, however down in the dumps you feel. Whether German or Fascists, they were not people the travellers wanted to meet, that fair morning by the Italian sea.

The singing became louder. No, that was not the singing of marching men. You could hear shriller voices, now, the voices of women and children, as well as the voices of men. You could hear the banging of improvised instruments. Kettles, buckets, saucepan lids.

Who could these people be? What was the occasion of this singing? Was it the celebration of some saint’s day? Had it something to do with the war, maybe? A defeat? A victory? Whose defeat? Whose victory?

“There they are!” said Leon. “They’re coming in from a side-road. There must be some village down there! Wait! Don’t come out yet! There’s a whole crowd! There may be informers among them!”

The people were out on the main road now, coming towards them closer and closer. There seemed to be a few soldiers among them, perhaps a priest, if it was not some tall woman swathed in black. But chiefly they were peasants. They held two banners above their heads. Yes, it must be some saint’s day, after all! But that could be no hymn they were singing! Never was singing less liturgical! It was hoarse, strident, a yell, a jeer. Yet every now and again someone ran forward in front of the crowd, and made a gesture of profound obeisance towards the banners.

Then, in the very moment that Leon, Leon with the sharp eyes, identified the images on the banners, the song changed—if you could call it a song. What was this new song? What? Was it not the song of the British . . . ‘Tipperary’, they call it?

“Mussolini!” shouted Hinda, at the top of her voice. “Hitler!”

It was the images of those two men, hanging upside down, with ropes about their throats, that had been daubed upon the white banners. Had one of those men, had both, within the last hour or two, met their doom? Had the enemy armies surrendered? Was the sullen interminable war over at last?

And suddenly the church-bells crashed out from all the steeples for leagues

around—ding-dong-ding, ding-dong-ding, across the clear sweet air. The steeples seemed everywhere, far off, near at hand, though there was not a single church to be seen.

“Leon!” cried Mila. She stood there, her arms thrust forward, her eyes wide and wild with joy.

“Mila!” cried Leon, and took her to his heart, and laid his mouth on hers, and kissed her and held her close.

Then suddenly Mila broke away and turned, seeking for Elsie. Her face was red with shame and grief. The others did not see, or they pretended they did not see, pretended that the peasants and the saucepan lids and the effigies held all their attention.

“Oh, Channah, Channah!” said Mila brokenly. “How *could* I? Oh, how *could* I?”

“My dear girl,” said Elsie jovially. “Don’t you think I’ve got eyes in my head? Go on, Leon dear! Give her another kiss! Then give *me* one, boy! I’m your mother-in-law, aren’t I, in a way of speaking? Go to it!”

She put a brave face on it, but she was not so gay as she seemed. She felt alone, and lost, all of a sudden.

The singing of the peasants was more strident in her ears than it had been a moment ago. A bird chattered harshly in the boughs overhead.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected or standardised.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been corrected or standardised.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

[The end of *The Dangerous Places* by Louis Golding]