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My Very Life Began...



Rico

«Would this night of travel never come to an end?» Alexander asked himself. Conversation in the carriage had become markedly subdued after the train had passed the zonal frontier. This special train bound for the Leipzig Fair offered many travellers their first chance to see relatives in Eastern Germany since the end of the war. The Fair was but a pretext legally to cross the frontier between the divided parts of the country.

Having crossed the frontier twice before — once illegally shortly after the end of hostilities and, again, with an interzonal passport — this was Alexander's third chance to see his old mother at Dresden. Twenty-four hours after his arrival at Leipzig friends

would take him by car to Dresden thus evading the train-controls within the Eastern Zone. No visitor to the Fair was supposed to leave Leipzig during his stay.

Everything had been carefully planned, yet Alexander felt uneasy. This time there would be another meeting before he saw his mother again. Where would he stand at the end of the day whose dawn he was travelling to meet? He settled back in his seat and his thoughts returned once more to events which had taken place three years ago.

Three years ago. Hadn't those events been valid only for the short time they had lasted? Could they be called events anyway? For a short while he had had a young companion at his side. The features of this young face, lined by hardship and starvation, had lived to this day in his memory as though engraved in steel.

The resinous smell of forests and the scent of meadows awaiting their second cut rose yet from the memory of those days. Would he ever forget those meadows hidden in a large forest, where he had lived for a short span of his life? Perhaps he might have forgotten it all long ago had not two lines of poetry again and again recurred to him —.

«A landscape first resolves its face,
When with a friend its bounds we pace.»

The truth of these words had come home to him for the first time three years ago. Young Gottfried had been at his side and the landscape had resolved its face by his presence.

Flight had preceded his arrival at that never-forgotten corner of the world. The last year of the war had been spent in continuous flight. Eventually their road had come to a dead end. Their only concern had been which of the Allied Forces would capture them. Would it be the Russians, close on their heels from the East, or would it be General Patton's army thundering down from the North? In the end the Americans had overtaken them.

With the small remnants of his unit he had been sent to a POW camp in the forests. The woods were interspersed with meadows, cut in half by a stream. From their tents at the edge of the wood the prisoners looked down to the meadows with their hedges and silver birches. Nothing had been able to disturb the tranquillity of this small world, not even the terrible scarcity of food. Not knowing how long the Americans would keep them prisoners it had been useless to think about the future. It was better by far to accept simply such an unexpectedly tranquil interlude.

Soon after his arrival at the camp Alexander got into the habit of going down to the meadows at noon. On that day which was to turn out so differently from all others, he found the wide expanse of the meadows strewn as usual with the dark-tanned bodies of the prisoners. It was like a camp of the ancient Greeks, waiting upon some distant shore for a favourable wind to send them home, he was thinking while he walked to his own corner. Where the stream entered the meadows, its banks were covered by dense willow-thickets but he had found a way through them. Arrived at the secluded spot of which he had grown so fond, he took off his uniform. From a pocket he drew the small volume of Goethe's «Iphigenia in Tauris» which had been his companion all through the war. He began to read first, at the beginning of the second act, the dialogue between Orestes and Pylades, both prisoners like himself. Here was Pylades speaking —

«I purpose still through the entangl'd paths,
Which seem as they would lead to blackest night,
Again to guide our upward way to life —».

Yes, he reflected, the dangers of blackest night had passed him. He went on reading. And now Orestes was speaking to Pylades —

«Until my cares forgetting, I with thee
Was lur'd to snatch the eager joys of youth.»

And Pylades telling his friend —.

«My very life began, when thee I lov'd.»

The small volume dropped from his hand. «My very life began, when thee I lov'd —». The words seemed still to linger when he saw the willows part on the other bank. Out of the thicket stepped a tall young soldier. Without noticing him he took off his old worn uniform and stretched both his arms.

Alexander was completely taken by surprise. Had he suddenly been transported to ancient Greece? Had Pylades come to the bank tired



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from the hunt, seeking the embrace of the river? A Pylades knowing that Orestes was near?

The water splashed as the young soldier sprang into it with a shout of delight. Images of Greece disappeared and a no less tempting presence took their place. The bather dived, came up again, shook the water from his hair, dived once more and finally reached the other bank. When he hoisted himself up he saw Alexander. He threw himself down.

«Isn't the water wonderful?» had been his first words.

He had looked at the young face. It bore the mark of starvation like all others. The young prisoner turned and his gaze fell upon the small volume.

«May I ask what you're reading?» he had said.

«Goethe's Iphigenia,» he had answered.

«I haven't read that for ages.»

«For ages?»

«Well, at least not since I left school.»

«And that seems ages already?»

«The war gives you a different idea of time.»

«How long have you been in the Forces?»

«Two and a half years.»

That made him about twenty. A good many years lay between them. And at that moment Alexander desired nothing more than to have the young prisoner removed from this peaceful scene around him. He did not want it shattered by another presence, even though the lad seemed to fit.

However, it was not to be. Maybe he surrendered the stronghold of his self-chosen isolation on that very first afternoon. At its end they had walked back together across the meadows, still crowded by the dark-brown bodies of the soldiers.

«Doesn't it all look like an old Greek camp?» he had repeated his former thought and had pointed to the small volume in his hand.

«I wish you'd read the play to me,» Gottfried had diffidently answered.

«Why not? With pleasure,» he had said.

So it had come about that on the afternoon after their swim, he had read the first act to the lad. They had enjoyed the second and third act on the following afternoons.

But they were not to finish the play. On their fifth afternoon together they had both fallen asleep after a longish swim. They woke up only when the Sun was already setting. The meadows were quiet, and the boy said, «Let's begin with part of the fourth act now.» Alexander began slowly to read the lines of the famous monologue with which the fourth act opened —.

«When the powers on high degree
For a feeble child of earth
Dire perplexity and woe,
And his spirit doom to pass
With tumult from joy to grief,
And back again from grief to joy,
In fearful alternation,
They in mercy then provide,
In the precincts of his home,
Or upon the distant shore,
That to him may never fail
Ready help in hours of need,
A tranquil, faithful friend — —».

He paused. Unexpectedly he heard his young companion repeat, «A tranquil, faithful friend —». He turned and found Gottfried looking at him. After a short break the boy went on talking, gazing steadily at the other's face, «Strange, isn't? Sometimes one thinks for days about something and has neither the courage nor the right words to speak up. Then all of a sudden from a book come the very words one has longed to say.»

It had now been Alexander's turn to be silent for a minute before he put the question those eyes were pleading.

«Do you want me to become your friend?»

«Yes.»

A sudden jerk of the train made Alexander conscious of his surroundings again. Through the window he could see the lights of a station. The train was passing through Dessau. Journey's end was near. Once more he leaned back and closed his eyes.

They had shaken hands. It was only much later when the boy had spoken again, choosing his words carefully, «It would at least be some gain from the wreckage of this horrible war, if we could become friends. As you know, I have none.» And hesitatingly he had added, «To grow up is a far more difficult business than it is usually credited with. To have someone like you as a friend — well, I could wish for nothing better.»

This was a wholly unexpected offer life was making him, he had

thought, even though the lad must never realize what the offer of his friendship meant to him. To be sure of the steadiness of his own voice he had waited for some time before he had led the boy gently back to less emotional ground. They had started making plans for their eventual return. Saxony and Thuringia, their respective home-counties bordered on each other. Personal contact would be easy.

But things had turned out differently. Only a day later he had been told one morning to have his men ready for discharge the same day. There had been just time to dash over to Gottfried's tent and to say a hurried goodbye to him. They had both been sure of meeting again soon, as Gottfried's unit would be the next one to be discharged.

When he had gone with his men through the business of discharge he had been informed, however, that a repatriation to Eastern Germany was no longer possible. The Americans had, after three months of occupation, withdrawn from that part of Germany, and the Russians had taken over. This had been very bad news indeed. So he had himself discharged to a small town in Western Germany where distant relatives of his were living.

This unexpected turn of events had broken the connection between him and Gottfried for years to come. For a long time there had not even been mail between the two halves of the country. It was only much later that he had learned by letter of Gottfried's illegal return to the Eastern Zone. —

As a result of the political situation they had remained apart. When he had had his first two chances of visiting his old mother after a long interval he had not told Gottfried of his plans. Another twelve months had passed when the lad had informed him in a letter of his recent engagement. He had felt a strange relief when he had read the news. Maybe this engagement would release him from the promise of a friendship given years ago.

Alexander returned once more to his surroundings as the train reached Leipzig at break of dawn. How would this meeting end, he wondered, their first after they had parted from each other years ago at the POW camp? When Gottfried had heard that Alexander was coming to Eastern Germany he had insisted on seeing him before he travelled to Dresden and Alexander could not very well refuse his urgent request. Nor did he wish to.

The train drew in. Alexander, as he alighted, saw the boy at the end of the platform eagerly scanning the faces of the passengers. In a flash he realized how haggard were the lines in the young face, and how thin the lad looked. Compassion, that most tricky of all feelings, rose to the surface. There was, for Alexander, no longer the promise of a friendship given years ago but love, born in a split second out of compassion.

They spent their first hour together in the waiting room. That Gottfried was deeply moved by this meeting was all too evident, but Alexander did not permit himself to ask after the source of the lad's apparent delight in seeing him again. As it was he had enough to do in dealing with the complete reversal of his own feelings.

When later they arrived at the home of Alexander's friends they were shown the room they were to share that night. When the boy took off his jacket and shirt in order to wash, Alexander received a second shock. The lean face had already told its tale but now a deep feeling of guilt crept over the older man as he realized how starved Gottfried's body looked. The malnutrition of the past few years told its story. The youngster had never mentioned the scarcity of food in his letters, and Alexander himself, who knew only too well the living conditions in the Eastern part of the country, had never once troubled to inquire. He felt guilty and ashamed as he realized his own thoughtlessness.

It was with different feelings from those he had experienced at the station that some time later he drew Gottfried into his arms. How would he react, he wondered, to this — their first embrace? Alexander felt no resistance, and when he put his arms lightly on Gottfried's shoulders the boy's arms gently completed the circle. They stood thus for a long time without speaking. The older man was suddenly reminded of an organ whose keys had been touched by human hands after a long interval of silence. What melody would emerge? Neither of them at that moment could tell.

Their first day together passed quickly. Though Gottfried seemed completely happy in his engagement and told Alexander the whole story in great detail, he also insisted on retaining the other's friendship, once promised to him. Alexander wondered about the girl, and why it had not been arranged for him to meet her but he asked no questions.

They went to bed late that night and, when Gottfried was about to lie down on the camp bed which seemed far too short for his length, Alexander said, «Hop into bed with me for half an hour, Friedel. Let's talk a bit longer.»

The boy joined him instantly, and stretched out contentedly next to him. «I had not realized there was so much to say, after so long,» he said.

Alexander prayed that the lad might not hear the pounding of his heart, and later, when Gottfried prepared to leave him, he drew him again for a moment into his arms. Then he released him, saying, a touch of mockery in his voice, «You will have to get used to that. I must be able to touch what I like.»

Gottfried flushed. «Well, if it were not you —» he said, and seemed about to say more, but he left the sentence unfinished. He gently stroked Alexander's hair and then went to his own bed.

Alexander went to Dresden next day and ultimately returned to Western Germany without seeing his friend again.

Letters started to pass between them once again. One day, about a year after their meeting, Alexander received a letter telling him that Gottfried had broken off his engagement. That Alexander was not the cause of this, the letter plainly made clear. The two young people had realized in time that their engagement had been one of those hurried post-war affairs and, though the parting had been mutual, the boy's letter told of the first great frustration in his young life. There had been

frustrations before. The war and its aftermath was a complete frustration but it seemed to Alexander that the engagement had been an attempt on the part of the youngster to return to a normal, domestic, happy way of life, and this dream, too, had been shattered.

There were at that time still ways and means to cross the frontier illegally. Alexander wrote to the boy and invited him. Mailing the letter he smiled wryly to himself when he realized how confused were his own feelings. The need to give Gottfried a helping hand in the first disappointment of his young life was oddly paired off with hopes of his own.

Gottfried crossed the border safely and alighted one evening from his train at the small town where Alexander was living. Their first evening together was one long talk about the broken engagement. Though Alexander felt the boy's scars still hurt, there was also a feeling that they were beginning to heal slowly. When late at night they stood at the window watching the full moon rising over the linden trees in the garden, Gottfried said with a happy sigh, «Being with you really means being home at last.» And once more Alexander's own desires receded before the trust those lips implied.

It was Summer. Long country walks and daily swims filled their vacation. Their nights held the hour when they lay side by side on Alexander's bed for a last rambling talk before going to sleep.

Three days before Gottfried was due to leave, the friends returned late from a long walk in the country. Being healthily tired they decided on an early bedtime. As usual, Alexander washed and went to bed first. This was the one weakness he indulged in — it was sheer delight watching the boy on these occasions. There was all the unconscious harmony in the movements of his tall body. When the boy had rubbed himself dry, he switched off the light and stood for a few minutes at the open window in his splendid nakedness. Then he approached the bed. «Do you mind my lying down as I am?» he asked. «Not at all,» Alexander replied and the boy quickly climbed across him to his accustomed place near the wall. This couldn't have been done intentionally, Alexander thought when he felt the young body so near him. But the young voice went on as usual, there was no different inflection to be detected. It was becoming unbearably difficult, Alexander found himself thinking, to have this young and beloved boy near to his touch and yet never completely his. Would he, who had become Pylades to him, never say, «My very life began, when thee I lov'd —»?

When an hour later Gottfried prepared to leave him all the feelings which he had suppressed by sheer force of will suddenly broke loose in Alexander. Or was it Gottfried's fault? When the lad moved his naked body across that of his friend, he leaned for a moment on his elbows and looked down at Alexander. The very next moment the older man had drawn his young friend tightly into his arms. Both realized that this was a different embrace. A minute later Alexander loosened his grip, but Gottfried remained where he was and once more the other's arms closed round the lad's shoulders. It was done gently this time, as though he were putting into this gesture all those things of which he had never spoken. But to his surprise the boy was now seeking closer contact. He

could feel the mounting tension in the young body. The waves gripping the boy could no longer be held back — a sigh, a deep intake of breath, and all was quiet.

No words were spoken when some minutes later Gottfried went to his own bed, but Alexander knew that for a long time neither of them went to sleep.

In the morning Gottfried got up first. Slowly he came over to the other's bed and sat down at its edge. He looked straight at his friend. «What happened last night must never happen again,» he said slowly.

Alexander did not answer.

«You know it is criminal, don't you?»

«Under certain circumstances — yes.»

«What do you mean?»

«If it is intentionally done, at least in our own country.»

«And wasn't it?»

«No.»

«What was it then?»

«Something arising from the mistake I made when I took you into my arms. Own up that it wasn't anything else.»

Now it was the boy's turn to be silent until finally he said with a half-choked voice «But it's unnatural.»

«Did you think so?» Alexander asked quietly.

Slowly but honestly the boy said, «As a matter of fact I didn't.»

«Am I right then?»

«No — you aren't. It's only not unnatural because it happened with you.»

«What do you mean?»

«You know exactly what I mean. You know that I'd never let a man touch me. But strangely enough I'm used to it from you because I know you. Yes, and because I trust you, and think such a lot of you.»

«Why make such a fuss about something which was quite harmless and natural?»

«You call that harmless and natural?»

«Yes. What happened after all? For a moment we were as near to each other as we had never been before. And what followed was quite natural. A movement of my hand, such as you had experienced many times before, created this time a tension which dissolved itself without our doing anything. That was all. Why make a tragedy out of it?»

«I don't want to really. On the contrary. With anyone else this would have been the end. But with you things are different. Will you promise me one thing, Lex?»

«Gladly — if I can.»

«I've told you already — no repetition of last night.»

«I needn't promise you that, as after all nothing much happened. But not to touch you any more is the only thing I can't promise. For even you must be aware by now of what I am going to say for the first time. *I love you*. Wince as much as you want to under these words but they are true all the same. I had been hoping that one day it would be you saying these words for the first time to me — —».

«You know how much I like you.»

«Yes, I know. But you know also the difference between these two statements.»

«Yes. I am grateful for your love.»

«Don't talk nonsense, Friedel. I don't need your gratitude.»

«But what else am I supposed to say?»

«At the best — nothing. And above that — forget last night. What is between us is strong enough to enable us to forget last night.»

«If I could love a man, I mean, really love him — —».

«Then I'd be that man, I know. But as you can't we needn't talk about it any more.»

«But what about you?»

«Goodness, you should know me well enough to realize that I'll get over it all.»

«Then all remains as it was?»

«Of course, silly boy. What else did you expect from me?»

«I only thought — —».

«That I'd throw you out for not having found my pleasure with you as the saying goes? Credit me with a bit more intelligence and a more acute perception of friendship.»

«Then all is settled?»

«Yes.»

Whilst his face was reddening, the boy leaned over and kissed him.

«Are you by any chance trying to seduce me?» Alexander asked, forcing a laugh.

This had gone better than he had hoped. All to be done now was not to give himself away at the very last moment. The slip he had made last night might easily have had worse consequences. But danger seemed at bay as a first shy smile suffused the boy's features. Then Gottfried stood up to commence his extensive morning toilet. The movements with which he took off his pyjamas and began to rub down his body with cold water were as free and easy as ever — they made Alexander feel sure that the boy he had come to love so deeply had come to no harm. He shut his eyes once more. What lay ahead of him was as clear as the light of early morning. It might not even be difficult after all — as it might be easier to give up something one would never be able to possess than to have to give it up after possession. There was so much else that remained. He realized how important it was to show himself as the boy was seeing him. A victory on that scale might bring forth love — another kind of love but a no less valuable one.

He opened his eyes again. Gottfried was just putting on his swimming trunks. The expression on Alexander's face and his smile forced him back to the bed. For a while he stood in all his clean-cut young manliness over Alexander. They did not speak, until finally the boy said, slowly and carefully choosing his words, «I haven't told you all of the truth, Lex. But will you take it in the right way — I mean — what I am going to tell you now?»

«I'll do my best,» Alexander said.

«It's this — I love you, Lex.»

«I know.»

Both their smiles merged into one.

Rudolf Burkhardt.