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ACHTUNG!

a half-hearted homily

by Jason Owen

ACHTUNG! I was desperately to shriek in the hotel bedroom in the strange city in the strange land, fighting off the murderous hands which closed around my throat.

Drunkish, I could remember in my panic no other German word suggestive of alarm, of plea for help, but Achtung! Achtung! — which now rasped from my throat so perilously under attack, as I and my assailant fought panting and grim on bed, on floor, against wall: to gain essential advantage of the door, he to block, I to escape to whatever lay beyond.

And then I won a split-second point: I reached it!—but only to find myself in a dark and many-doored well, with none seeming to lead to an outside world and safety. All save one (to a lighted but deserted room), those doors remained callously and uncannily closed; not one soul responded in voice or action to my desperate Achtung!s.

I called to silence, hollow and alien; and, unstopped by escape, the fight could only continue, follow the light into the one, open, deserted room, resume its struggle upon another bed.

The hands closed around my throat once more; my Achtung! became more helpless, more strangled, weaker.

So this is how and where, struggling, it is to be, I thought: here in a Hamburg back-street, where I have no right to be, where I have invited and reaped my own disaster. Death in the national press, with all the innuendo, all the question-marks, all the shock, all the sorrow.

But, even as his hands furiously closed, my assailant was yet also afraid (himself a stranger in a strange city in a strange land, without even an Achtung! at his command); was frightened by my own Achtung!s of alarm, desperately trying to silence them in angry bewilderment.

«Parlez français!» he spat out (as if comprehension could help him), exasperation, confusion and growing fright in his eyes . . .

... The prelude to this dim, shabby room of desire and deceit had been doubtless a cliché of undercover, coterie experience—just as the subsequent risk and struggle were to become. But, if they were, I had yet to discover it: a late starter, or a late Emerger, still so eager to 'like', hopeful enough to find sympathy as well as eroticism in any city on any night; and indeed I was a sucker for large, liquid black eyes such as had bewitched me in the certain bar (which I had just sufficiently been on a wavelength to discover at all after the chance recommendation in Berlin, the previous stop in the hectic, let-loose mere fortnight of holiday); such as had led me to this sleazy hotel and this next stop to death.

And the other protagonist in the squalid and frantic duet, played to silent wings? Maybe he was not specifically sinister or evil; perhaps just a boy from a different and more cut-throat ethos; a Mediterranean lad stranded and pfennigless in a tough northern city, driven by one aim—to get by any means at all the cash to allow him to escape, get south and

back across his native sea to alluringly hot sun and limitlessly long beaches; a man almost himself frightened by his own threats (accompanied by expressively violent gestures) to slit another's throat—the tipsy, naif British 'queer' the easy prey in the night's jungle.

That is the retrospect, the attempt at understanding and charity.

Then it was different, with the first chill realisation that physical excitement was not being reciprocated, that responses were uneagerly negative. The moment had heavily, hollowly, come when it penetrated that the sympathy sought in the foreign city was not after all being found; that, sentimentally gauche, I was being the perfect foil for the traders in false affinity and larcenous villainy, who prowl the streets of cities seeking (and finding) dupes; and that I was in a potentially highly dangerous situation, demanding all the resources of unnatural cunning which I could muster. But, as much as the physical danger, I immediately (and more permanently) suffered a further nail in the coffin of disillusionment in which mankind is laid out.

And so the awareness of danger suddenly flickered into my eyes, which then darted, fox-like, to the door, gauging distance and the relative disadvantage of my position in relation to it. Immediately it was war: the attitudes of feigned passion were with a leap replaced by a cat-like and threatening crouch.

And so, now ballet, now wrestle, the contest in cunning was played until the firm panicking hands gripped tighter and my final *Achtung!* ended in a choke of blue bubbles before it even began . . .

And then it was that at last they had their effect, my *Achtung*'s. Somewhere behind one of those closed and callous doors a bell began prolongedly to ring; the finger upon it the only human response to my calls for help in a death-struggle: pressing, summoning the world beyond that annexe of casual lust (but not, it was evidently preferred, of death in the room next-door, leading to enquiry, discovery . . .). And that, blessedly, was the beginning of an end, leading to life rather than, after all, to death.

That bell had really frightened my opponent and his own thoughts were now also and urgently only of escape. His fingers slackened and he abandoned my weakened body in his alarm. While I, dishevelled, shaken, but released, yet managed with a last flash of furious, self-preserving cunning to find and snatch my clothes (containing also my wallet) before making for the escape door which did exist; screaming angrily my charges at the bent old man with his bunch of keys who now appeared, summoned by the bell; screaming now more than a mere *Achtung!* but little of it that was coherent.

My own safe, shared room was by very lucky chance not far away; and, trembling, but still after all alive, I found my way to it and fell upon my bed.

But, after minutes only, I rose—my wish for comfort and congratulation evidently stronger than that for a sleep of temporary oblivion—and with a shaking hand I wrote a note to leave on the bed of my friend and holiday companion: 'Whatever time you come in, chaps, please wake me!'

'Whatever time' was likely to be several hours later, when dawn was already breaking over the Alster: the hour when the morning before—having split earlier as young men will to go their separate ways to their separate pleasures after the shared drinking preliminaries—we had fortuitously and suddenly come together like ghosts at the top of the unashamedly, extrovertly, vigorously, garishly infamous Reeperbahn to catch through the misty dawn the streetcar named the German for Desire, which hourly through the hazardous night winds over its route, up and down, in and out, with early workmen and flotsam like us aboard, bearing them to the centre of the northern water-city, carrying us back to the Pension room to which our emptying pockets had reduced us. Where I now awaited Angus off the 0100 ? 0200 ? 0300 ? 0400 ? 0500 ? Strassenbahn . . .

And then, quite soon, the pad of his suede boots, the sound of a key turning: he also had returned earlier that night.

Silently I awaited his reading of my note.

'Chaps . . .' he said (it was always our burlesque form of greeting); and almost immediately he had disappeared with some of the last of our deutsch-marks to buy brandy at the nearby Hauptbahnhof (indeed the centre of our hamburger lives: where we had arrived, whence we were to depart—our neglected God willing—, and which seemed to dominate like a conniving magnet our in-between).

We sipped it from cups and Angus examined the marks which had begun to show around my throat. I was quite proud to tell him how nevertheless I had managed, with cunning and tenacity and responsibility, to save most of our remaining money (I the banker), which had so nearly cost me my life.

Next morning, on the day of our impoverished departure, I quickly passed the door of Heinrich's Hotel and stealthily threw with a jingle and a thud down into the well of its porch the key to one of its annexe rooms which I had found in the pocket of my crumpled linen suit.

It was not a souvenir which I wanted to keep (even salutarily to warn me); and my scrupulous return of it was, I tried to comfort myself, at least the start of a climb back towards other standards of behaviour . . .

ACHTUNG! indeed: all you young men loose in Europe, or in any of the beguiling, predatory cities of the world, five miles (and more) away from your homes.

Book Reviews

Jonathan to Gide

(The Homosexual in History) by Noel I. Garde. Vantage Press, New York 1964. \$ 10.00. 751 p. with Introduction, Bibliography, and 4 Indices: Subjects listed 1) Chronologically, and alphabetically by 2) Name, 3) Nationality, 4) Profession and Occupation.

«A more appropriate if unrealistic, title would be», to quote from Mr. Garde's Introduction, «Short Biographies of 300 Men, of Sufficient Importance in Politics and Culture in the Last 3000 Years to Merit Articles in the Best Encyclopedias, Who Have Been Referred to in Respons-