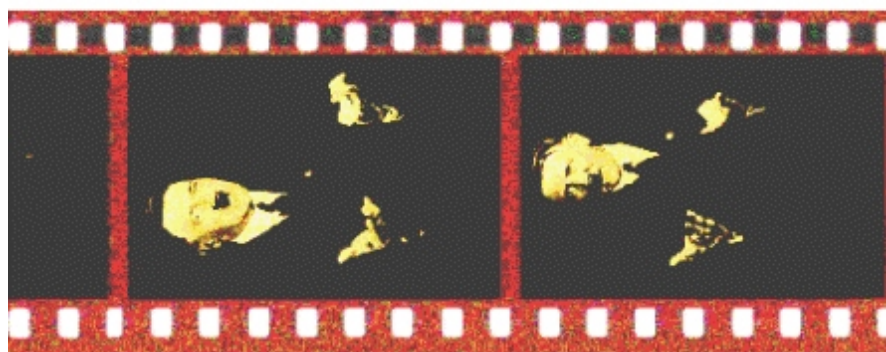




# A Desert Hotel



Henry T. Smith



# A DOGMA HOLY

[Pathos und Geste]

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Henry T. Smith

The Eastern Front had shrivelled a regiment to a young Leutnant and a handful of men. For them, the issues of World War II had been reduced to personal survival through the last few days; which could be achieved only by honourable surrender to the Americans, not their arch-enemies the Russians.

But during their journey to capitulation, they learned that nationality had ceased to define friend and foe. Renegade officers of their own army of occupation in Czechoslovakia were as dangerous to them as any declared enemy.

Having fought and schemed their way back to their homeland, the survivors found themselves unable to surrender meekly to the conquerors. Long years of war had bred daring, determination and an utter disregard for all laws but those of survival.

These qualities, and assistance from equally lawless allies, formed the core of their plan to conclude their part in the war on their own terms.

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## PUBLISHING HISTORY

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### *By The Same Author*

Sergeant Enterprise  
Major Achievements  
Merchant Submarine  
Death In Small Corners  
Death Is A Stranger  
Death On The Record  
Death From High Ground  
Doppelgänger  
Wacht Am Rhein  
Parachute For Sale  
Something In The Blood \*\*  
Allah's Thunder

*\*\* written with L. Gordon Range*

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The author asserts his moral right of identification.

Set in Gourmand, designed and made by Henry T Smith Productions, 10/12 SK6 4EG, GB.  
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Diese Versammlungen hatten für mich selbst noch das Gute, daß ich mich langsam zum Massenversammlungsredner umstellte, daß mir das Pathos geläufig wurde und die Geste, die der große, tausend Menschen fassende Raum erfordert.

*Adolf Hitler - Mein Kampf, Volume II:*  
**The National Socialist Movement**  
 6. The Struggle Of The Early Period –  
 The Significance Of The Spoken Word.





May has arrived, we are all sure of that, and the year is 1945. Only the date is a matter of opinion. Five of our company of nine say that today is May Day, and therefore Tuesday. The rest are equally convinced that it is Wednesday. Not that it matters. One day is much the same as any other to us. Today differs from yesterday and the day before only in that we have not been required to fight for our lives. But there is still plenty of time for that. We are still at war, and dawn lies no more than three hours behind us. Our most immediate concern is that it looks like rain. In our open truck, we are going to get wet again. Otto has a streaming cold and has been moaning ever since we moved off.

Where we are is another matter for debate. Louis would know, but he's asleep and wouldn't thank us if we woke him. The Leutnant says that we are in the hills above Krakow; 250 kilometres east of the front line and about 100 kilometres from the junction of the German, Czech and Polish frontiers. Like good soldiers, we accept the fruits of his map-reading course; mainly because we are too tired to argue. Leutnant Hals, the sole surviving officer of our regiment, is still very young; he looks a haggard eighteen. He was posted out East because he took a fancy to his CO's daughter and the Herr Oberst didn't favour the idea of the son of a postman and then the stepson of a Frenchman joining his exalted family.

Leutnant Hals is a prime example of what can be made of a boy who did well at school and showed a few signs of leadership. He had eleven weeks of instruction under old men, who still lived the glories of the 1870s, middle-aged men bursting with patriotism and the conviction that there is something splendid about dying for one's country, which they failed to manage themselves in the last war, and young men, who were older than any of the others because they had lost all hope; for both their own future and for the future of their country. Officer cadets were

given equal instruction in tactics and etiquette. They were taught how to assault a fortified position in the morning, and how to kiss a lady's hand in the afternoon.

Leutnant Hals is quite a decent lad now he's been knocked into fighting shape by battlefield practicality, and we get on quite well with him. Of course, being an officer, he likes to make all the decisions. But whenever he gets things wrong, we just do what has to be done and say no more about it. We're all secretly determined to get him home safely. That's about the only ambition we have left now that the world is falling about our ears. But it would take more than the worst the Ivans can do in the way of torture to make any of us admit it.

There were forty-three of us a week ago. We nine are the last survivors of the siege of *Cess-Pool Corner*, as we named our tiny pocket of shattered buildings. We hung there in limbo for days. The Ivans seemed content to contain us and to starve us out. And to break our spirit by shelling us unpredictably for exactly one hour three or four times a day. The knowledge that when the explosions started they would continue for precisely sixty minutes was at first infuriating and then unnerving. It pushed at least two men over the edge into madness. Their restless scrambling through the ruins, looking for something that they could never find, and the emptiness in our eyes when the bombardment ceased, made Louis persuade the Leutnant to break out of our trap.

Sergeant Lohr is driving our captured truck. They don't call him Crafty Franz for nothing. Those in the cab don't get wet when it rains. You'd think we'd be used to it by now, but rain is the final indignity. We can endure being cold, hungry, terrified, dirty, and all the other burdens of war. But to be wet at the same time seems a needless excess.

The Leutnant is in the cab too, with his Russian map. He places great faith in it, leaning out of the window like a tour guide to tell us whenever we approach a town or some geographical feature such as a forest, a lake, a river, or a similar potential hazard to our westward progress. We pretend interest. All we in the back really want to know is where the Ivans are likely to be concentrated and how to avoid them.

Being semi-lost behind the Russian lines is what keeps us fighting our way westwards, even though the war must be nearly over. We have no intention of letting either the Russians or the Poles get their hands on us. The Leutnant was sick for a week the first time he saw what they do to their prisoners with barbed wire and a bayonet. We thought he was going to die. Then Crafty Franz told him that starving himself to death amounted to desertion in the face of the enemy. That pulled him round.

That and his faith in his girl. He's sure she's waiting for him, despite her father's opinion of him. And he's always writing to her. But it helps him to survive. Even the most cynical of us has allowed him to keep his illusion. It's about all he has left apart from a tattered uniform, a pair of water-tight boots, and his share of the ammunition. And for all we know, she might not have forgotten him and her old bastard of a father might be dead.

The road is broken and treacherous, drifting through an ever-changing but always similar pocket of dismal, muddy ground and leaden, weeping sky. We've had to detour six times already. Our retreating army has blown up bridges and stretches of road, and blown down anything that could fall onto the road, in an effort to delay the Russian advance.

The Poles have also been blowing things up and down; attempting both to delay our retreat and to hinder the Ivans. We can see from the peasant faces that turn away from a Russian truck that the Ivans are not welcome. The dark, hostile eyes, which refuse to meet ours as we crawl round a shattered village, tell us that the Poles see the Russians not so much a liberators, but as old conquerors returned.

They have not forgotten the partition of their country between Germany and Russia in 1939, when the Ivans were still our allies of convenience. The saboteurs seem to want to bring the war to a halt so that the conflict, which began almost six years ago in their country, can end here with the annihilation of both our armies; thus ridding the Poles of the twin threats from east and west.

We pass a group of Russian telephone engineers making tea in a helmet over a fire of wet sticks at the side of the road, wreathed in smoke. Dieter and I exchange insults with them. Ours are sincere, theirs just routine. They take very little notice of one of their own trucks. American-made rain capes hide our different uniforms, and our helmets are camouflaged with mops of grass and twigs. We are in more danger of being picked off by Polish partisans after Ivans than of being recognized for what we are.

We curse the rain heartily when it descends on us, even though we know that it is as good as a smoke-screen. In these areas, a long way behind the front line, nobody goes out in the rain unless he has to. A grey, heavy sky seems to descend to a point just above our heads. We know that we are going to get bogged down very soon. The undamaged roads are often no more than barely discernable dirt tracks.

We pass the time by dreaming of being posted to the desert. Instead

of war-torn Poland on a wet day, we imagine gentle dunes of golden sand spreading in all directions from our oasis, and the luxury hotel for war veterans. Whenever we see someone with closed eyes and an idiot grin, we know that he has escaped from our perilous reality to seek a few minutes' comfort in our desert hotel.

By the last hour of daylight, we have covered over 400 unobtrusive, winding kilometres, each wetter and more miserable than the last. We are cold, damp, very hungry, and very thirsty, and cramped from lack of movement. There is no food, but at least the rain has stopped. We are in Silesia now; back in our own country. The coal-mining districts look grey and ravaged. Nobody can say for sure then we crossed the border from Poland. Everything looks much the same in the rain.

Louis is driving. We come to yet another river; and the prospect of a lengthy detour. The Leutnant says that there's a bridge two kilometres away. We don't laugh; we're too tired. The river is high and muddy, swollen by the recent rain. Its banks are about thirty metres apart at this point. A few minutes later, we see a rather shaky steel structure sprawled across the river. Dark craters on either bank tell us that someone has tried to bomb the bridge in the recent past.

Each has his own opinion on how to tackle the bridge. Cautious Peter thinks that we should all dismount, then let one volunteer crawl the truck slowly and carefully across the frail structure. But Louis doesn't give us time to think. He just puts his foot down and charges straight across like a rogue elephant. We can hear the Leutnant screaming at him as he dodges the splintered chasms in the wooden decking, or flies across the smaller holes. Loose fragments splash into the torrent behind us, but we manage to reach the far side.

A group of Ivans camped in a collection of wrecked and abandoned trucks gives us a cheer as we roar past them. One of them shouts something about seeing us in Berlin. Dieter reaches for a grenade; he lives there. Albert grabs him and refuses to let go until we are out of range.

There is a town ahead. Louis turns south-west to avoid it. The Sudeten Mountains rise in front of us and begin to close in on either side. They represent the front line in this sector. The actual front is an ill-defined stretch of unwanted no-man's land. The Russians have halted their advance to build up their forces for a dash westwards when our troops receive the general surrender order. We know that the British have linked up with them in the north and the Americans in the south,



cutting our country in half. We are not sure how far the Russians have advanced in the south, but we must find out.

Surrender is out of the question until we are well behind American lines. Not that we expect very much from the Yanks. They are sure to celebrate their victory by pushing we Germans about like slaves, but we expect to survive their bullying. At best, we expect a bullet from the Russians; at worst, a long, lingering death of the sort that only they can devise. Years of practice on their own people have allowed the NKVD, Stalin's Gestapo, to refine their methods of torture to a delicate precision; not the classical rack and hot irons in a damp, lightless dungeon, but ways of producing the killing despair that follows loss of all hope. We know from Russian prisoners that captured Other Ranks of our side have been sent to Siberian mines to work or starve. We are determined not to join this lost slave army.

It seems strangely ironic that the Sudetenland is still in our hands when we have lost most of our own country. We seem to be climbing into low clouds. Albert says that it is about eight o'clock on a cold, damp evening. None of us has a watch, but we believe him. Louis finds a fairly decent stretch of quiet road. A lighter patch in the sky ahead of us shows us where the sun is setting.

We meet a Gefreiter and half a dozen kids, none of them more than fifteen, at the bare crest of this path through the mountains. Fortunately, we have taken the precaution of removing our rain capes to show our uniforms. Their rather thankless assignment is to man a field telephone to give a warning when the Ivans begin their advance. We cadge a few cigarettes from them, but we are somehow too embarrassed to ask them for food. They look no better fed than ourselves.

About three kilometres beyond the frontier, we come to a battered town. Two blackened tanks straddle the approach road. When we get close to them, we can see that they are just abandoned hulks; out of petrol and ammunition, their tracks shattered, and their engines smashed beyond repair.

The sound of our truck sends the townspeople scurrying indoors. They come flooding out again when they see a Russian vehicle. We hurry through a forest of waving arms and an uproar of cheers and good wishes in what we assume is Czech. They cheer us even though it was the Russians that bombed their village. One or two people throw us small gifts: pieces of hard bread, apples, cheese wrapped in fine muslin, and a piece of meat wrapped in sacking. Albert, our country connoisseur, decides that it is boiled goat.

Having brought a little premature happiness to a bunch of war-weary civilians, we press on into the darkening evening. Louis manages about thirty-five kilometres before he is forced to admit that it would be foolish to continue. The truck has two holes where the headlights should be mounted. Leutnant Hals decides to make camp for the night. He marks our position on his map, placing a pencil cross to the north of Königgrätz.

We stretch our cramped limbs and jump about to get the blood flowing again, then begin our chores. Albert and Dieter tramp over to a small grove of trees in search of firewood. There is hilly farmland all around us. Louis chooses a spot off the road for the truck. I start a small fire nearby with dry wood taken from our small supply. Lutz fetches water from a stream on the other side of the road. The rest make a sort of tent at the side of the truck using spare rain capes.

There is enough food for about three decent meals, Dieter suggests that we cut the cards; the three highest eat, and the rest starve. The Leutnant has already divided everything into nine helpings. No one takes Dieter up on an offer to cut for a double helping or nothing. We eat slowly and daintily, making each morsel last as long as possible. Then we finish the meal with a strong brew of Russian tea and a smoke. The previous owners of the truck left us plenty of the tea along with excellent quality rain capes donated by their American allies and a supply of coarse, Russian tobacco.

Nobody is feeling particularly sleepy now, and competition for the first guard duty is fierce. Although we are in territory held by our own forces, somebody has to keep watch at all times. There are bound to be partisans around, or deserters looking for food, a smoke, and a drink. There is also the risk of our own troops stumbling across a Russian truck and showering it with grenades as a precaution.

The cards choose Peter, our powerful blacksmith's son from Rottweil, to stand the first watch. The rest of us settle down in the improvised tent and try to ignore Otto's coughing and the curses that follow each liquid sneeze.

The sound of artillery, rippling from the east like distant thunder, wakes us at first light. We hear only our own guns firing without reply, and conclude that they are dropping a few shells into no-man's land to warn the Ivans not to advance until the gunners have completed their retreat.

I have always considered artillery an unfair weapon. It kills indiscriminately and at random. If a man is going to kill you with a rifle, he has

to be able to see you, he has to set his sights properly, and he has to be able to aim steadily. There is a lot of skill involved, and that gives the target some sort of chance.

But if the enemy spots you while you're repairing a road or building a bridge, his artillery can just lob shells onto your position and a near miss will do much the same job as a direct hit. This impersonal ruthlessness has given us a profound hatred of all artillerymen; so much so that our officers used to try to segregate gunners and pioneers in rest areas to keep the number of fights down.

Breakfast consists of hot tea and half a cigarette. There is nothing else. But we are hoping that Albert, Louis, or Peter will be able to scrounge something during the day. Food seems to draw them like a magnet.

After dismantling the makeshift tent and erasing all traces of our overnight stay, we continue our journey to the west. Lutz takes the wheel for the first spell. He is the best rifle shot in the regiment, which should be of very little use to him in civilian life. He hopes to become a lawyer if he ever gets back to Mondorf.

It is very quiet out here in the country. The sound of engines drifts down to us occasionally from a lightly clouded sky, but we never see the aircraft. Leutnant Hals reminds us that we are in friendly Bohemia, and that any aircraft that we see or hear must be assumed to belong to the enemy. Someone is to keep a watch for fighters at all times and we are to keep clear of ditches if we have to bale out of the truck. Fighter pilots always look there for victims. This is all second nature to us now, but it's his job to tell us, so we let him get on with it.

We travel westwards for about an hour and a half through a sunny but fairly chilly morning. Then Peter insists on a change of direction. He is the youngest of us, apart from the Leutnant, a rather bulky fellow from somewhere near Rottweil in Baden-Württemberg. His hunches are to be trusted.

Peter's feelings of unease have saved us from ambushes and less deliberate trouble many times. A few more of our comrades would be alive today had they listened to him. He cannot explain why, but he knows that we would be better off heading to the north-west.

Less than an hour later, we reach a vast, double-fenced compound to the south of Jung Bunzlam. Lutz pulls over to the side of the road about fifty metres short of the wide, double gate of the compound. Ahead of us, we can see two continuous, dusty snakes of vehicles. Those on our left are arriving empty. Those on the right are heading westwards with a full load.

We watch the spectacle for a few minutes, marvelling at the sight of so many trucks on a main road in broad daylight. Then a motorcycle and sidecar combination charges out of a secondary gate and speeds up the road towards us.

A grey-haired Major in a beautifully clean and pressed uniform touches his cap with a grey-gloved hand in response to a precision salute from our tattered Leutnant. In a rather thick, Saxon accent, which matches his lumpy, peasant face, the Major announces that our truck has been commandeered, and orders us to follow him into the compound.

Lutz tries to argue, but our Leutnant tells him to shut up and get moving. A direct order from a superior is to be obeyed, not debated; unless one is looking for trouble. Even the most stubborn fellow learns to take this line of least resistance. He still grumbles, audibly or within himself as circumstances dictate, but the Army teaches you to do as you're told no matter how pointless or stupid the order. The implied 'or else' can bring the full weight of military authority crashing down on an isolated individual.

Muttering, we follow the Major and his motorcycle into the compound along a road behind a series of camouflaged wooden huts. The Major's driver swings between two of them and comes to a halt. A clattering of typewriters replaces engine noises. Under the hooded, green eyes of the Major, we form up beside our truck, clutching our weapons and a spare rain cape apiece. These are our only possessions, apart from the tea and a supply of rather evil Russian tobacco in Sergeant Lohr's pack.

Leutnant Hals makes a report of sorts, telling the Herr Major that the remnants of B Company of our Pioneer Regiment are at his disposal. He even manages to put a little conviction into his voice. The Major gives us the impression that all he really wants is our truck, and that we are something of an embarrassment to him. After staring blankly at us for about half a minute, he hails a passing Feldwebel and turns us over to him with instructions to smarten us up. And then, presumably, to aim us for the closest sector of the front.

We look like desperate scarecrows. Our uniforms are torn and stained with blood, mud, and grease from this and previous trucks; a complete catalogue of our journey back from Russia. Our faces are grey and hollowed. Now that we have examples of normal human beings for comparison purposes, we can appreciate just how far into our starved, soapless apathy we have sunk.

The Feldwebel is a tall, powerful man with a huge, shiny pink area on his left cheek and a dark green patch over the eye. Keeping his distance, he invites the Leutnant to follow him. Although we are numbed to it, we can tell that our smell is none too fragrant.

We become military machines again. Sergeant Lohr barks an order and starts us moving after the parade-smart warrant officer and our ragged Leutnant. A march of about half a kilometre brings us to a long, low building at the far side of the compound. The air is filled with petrol and exhaust fumes, and a continuous background juddering of engines sweeps across the central square. We see German trucks of all shapes and sizes interspersed with captured American, British, and Russian vehicles; all with their markings obliterated completely with smears of dark green paint.

There are two doors in the end wall of the building; one labelled 'Officers' and the other untitled. The Leutnant goes to the left. The rest of us file through the right-hand door. We are to be deloused. Two men in face masks and long, white coats squirt vast quantities of white powder into our clothes. Monstrous sneezes double us up; except Otto. His streaming cold seems to protect his nose from the irritant effects of the powder.

We hang around honking for a while, then the Feldwebel returns. Every stitch of our clothing is to be burned, apart from our rain capes and boots, which cannot be replaced. The articles to be retained receive a further treatment with the white powder when we dump them beside our weapons and our supply of ammunition. Then we strip off and throw everything into a limp, shapeless heap. The men in white coats pick up our discarded clothing with long-handled metal tongs and hurl it into the fiery mouth of a furnace.

We enjoy the supreme luxury of a hot shower next, using water heated, in part, by our sacrificed garments. We scrub and scrub with light blue, scented, soap, transforming ourselves from an entirely natural grey to a strange, pale pink colour. Our clean selves look even skinnier. In his ill-fitting uniform, little Dieter resembled a badly made scarecrow. Now, he looks like a human skeleton. Every single bone is visible beneath his waxy, tightly stretched skin. The rest of us look little better. Only Albert and Peter can boast a moderately respectable covering of flesh. We others have become decidedly knobbly. And they said the Army would make men of us!

After drying ourselves with fluffy white towels, we scrape off our three-day beards. Then we file through an equipment store, dressing as

we go. A complete uniform from underwear to webbing is hurled at us. The two men behind the counter seem quite decent judges of the recipient's size.

After reclaiming our boots and other bits and pieces, we are directed to the door at the other end of the building. We meet the Kid outside. Leutnant Hals is wearing a brand new uniform and a dazed expression. We hardly recognize him, and he is obviously looking at a bunch of strangers.

The Leutnant has been given some orders. After acknowledging the Feldwebel's rapid salute, he leads us confidently to another camouflaged building. Cooking smells draw us faster and faster until our pace becomes a mad stampede over the last fifty metres. After three weeks on starvation rations, we can hardly believe our good fortune.

We attract a few casual glances, which develop into stares when we barge into the canteen. The men dispersed among about twenty small, square tables are all wearing greasy overalls in either dark blue or green, and an American soft cap with a huge green peak. A pack of infantry uniforms wearing steel helmets and with arms full of American rain capes and an assortment of rifles and automatic weapons is obviously not a common sight here.

Now that there is food to be had, we become very calm and almost indifferent on the surface, seeking to prolong the joys of expectation. We hang our rain capes, helmets, and weapons on a series of hooks between two windows. Then we push three tables together to make one long enough for our entire company. Leaving the Leutnant to guard our tables, we stroll over to the counter to order two of everything.

"Eat like pigs, the bloody infantry," sneers a voice as we are carrying our spoils back to our tables.

Otto, his temper shortened by his troublesome cold, stops dead in his tracks, then turns round. He sets both of his plates down on a handy table, slowly and deliberately. As Dieter moves past him, Otto plucks the pistol from his belt.

Ramming the muzzle against the offending driver's forehead, he growls, "You said something?"

"Slit his throat, it's quieter," suggests Dieter, looking down at the white-faced driver with a feral smile draped across his sharp, hollowed features.

"Well?" demands Otto.

"He didn't say nothing," mutters one of the other drivers when it becomes clear that his colleague has lost his tongue.

"You'd better not be here when I've finished my breakfast," grates Otto hoarsely.

He slides the pistol back into Dieter's belt and recovers his plates. I don't think any of the drivers noticed that he neglected to release the safety catch. As soon as Otto's back is turned, the terrified driver pushes away from his table and races for the door. Grinning, we carry on to our long table. The Kid fixes Otto with a disapproving glare as he sits down.

Otto just shrugs. "We don't have to take that."

We rumble agreement, and get stuck in to the food. We may be pioneers, not infantry, but the insult was intended for any strangers. The canteen remains very quiet for a while. Albert, Louis, and Peter have room for more. The rest of us finish the meal with mugs of something alleged to be coffee. A generous flavouring of rum makes it more palatable. Lutz starts to clean his sniper rifle, humming cheerfully. We others cannot summon the same enthusiasm for the necessary task of cleaning the white delousing powder out of the barrel and the moving parts of our weapons.

Louis and Dieter decide to go for a look around the site. The Leutnant tells them that we have been ordered to wait in the canteen. Louis just flashes his teeth in the familiar reckless smile and says they could just be going to splash a few daisies, if anyone asks.

Louis is a tall, blond Rheinlander with a persuasive charm. At twenty-four, he is the oldest, apart from Sergeant Lohr, and has survived everything from our initial victories in Poland to our stealthy retreat through that country.

Dieter, in contrast, is short and dark. He looks like a crook, which we suspect he was before being called up. He has been in our company for just over two years; usually in some fairly cushy number such as an officer's driver and general dogsbody.

Leutnant Hals shrugs in surrender, defeated by Louis's smile and the pleasant weight of a large breakfast. "Don't be long," he tells the pair of them. "And for God's sake, behave yourselves."

"We shall conduct ourselves like true gentlemen at all times," beams Louis.

They collect their helmets and weapons, slip into rain capes, without which we all feel undressed, and stroll to the door. Five new uniforms push past them, hardly noticing that the obstacles are human, attention fixed firmly on the source of the food smells.

When their plates have been filled to their satisfaction, the new arrivals make for our corner of the canteen, towards similar uniforms.

Bulging contentedly, we watch them stuff themselves, reliving the pleasurable transition from near starvation to a full belly.

Their accents tell us that the newcomers are Austrians. Over rum-flavoured coffee-substitute, they reveal that they are all from the Salzburg region, which is still in our hands. The Austrians are hoping to get home before the Americans get there. Each of them has a wife and a family. They do not wish to return home to find a fat Yank with his feet under the family table.

I take a proper look at them for the first time. They are all old men of around thirty; almost half as old again as most of us. Now that the war is almost over, I can hardly dare to believe that I, too, may yet live to achieve such a great age.

Much to the Leutnant's relief, Louis and Dieter return after about half an hour, bulging suspiciously. Things have a habit of falling into their ready pockets when they are out on the prowl. We distribute their loot under the long table until they return to a normal shape. Each of us acquires a packet of English cigarettes. As Louis can bring back pleasant memories of childhood holidays in Austria, the newcomers receive a ration too.

Our comrades' haul includes some of the blue, scented soap from the delousing shed; a collection of toothbrushes and three tins of tooth powder; a spare pair of woollen socks for each of us; a writing pad and some pencils; corkscrews and scissors; a pair of pocket-sized wire cutters; half a dozen tins of sardines; and a bottle of reddish liquid, which is undoubtedly alcoholic. Dieter produces a brand new pack of cards and starts to practise fan and Monte-Carlo shuffles. The one-eyed Feldwebel arrives to drag us away before he can suggest a game.

We plod round the square to another stores building like a bunch of tourists. Half-way there, I realize that we are not marching. The Feldwebel doesn't seem to care, and the contentment of a full belly has pushed military thoughts from the minds of Leutnant Hals and Sergeant Lohr. We do very little marching anyway, these days. There's no point in presenting the enemy with an easy and concentrated target. The modern German Army travels spread out and at a run, at a crawl on its belly, or on four wheels if it can steal a truck.

Amid smells of grease and strong cigar smoke, a bearded Gefreiter issues us with packs containing a lot of rifle and 9 mm pistol ammunition, and a little food. The beard is coal-black and thrusts forward at his chin to a neat point. It makes me nervous. There is no reason for his CO to permit such a breach of regulations. We dart covert



glances at him when Lutz spots the Major in the shadows by a dark, wooden wall, shielded from the central rank of electric lights by a barricade of tins on dark grey shelves. He looks like an underworld grocer.

When we have been outfitted, the Major takes a fat cigar from his wide mouth and dismisses the bearded Gefreiter with a nod. Our fate emerges through a cloud of cigar smoke.

A bottleneck is developing about 220 kilometres to the south. The Americans have pushed forward to Linz, and the Russians have reached the area of St. Pölten. Our benefactor wants us to prevent them from linking up and cutting our lines of communication with the south; all fourteen of us, including the Austrians.

The Kid and the Major exchange salutes in a properly dignified fashion. Then the one-eyed Feldwebel shows us off the premises. We plod southwards unenthusiastically, following for about a quarter of an hour, a well-worn and lightly bombed road between broad, flat fields. Our five Austrian satellites seem moderately happy. If not exactly singing, they are humming contentedly because every step takes them a little nearer to home.

"What time is it?" Louis calls over his shoulder to Albert when we have covered a kilometre and a half.

"About ten. Why?" replies our human clock.

"Time we had a talk." Louis spreads his rain cape on the damp grass and stretches out on it. The rest of us straggle to a halt. He beams up at us. We stare down at him.

"All right, what is it?" demands the Leutnant.

"I think we ought to do some talking before we go any farther," says Louis. "Are you happy about that little lot back there, Jürgen?" he adds to me. "What did you think of the beard on that bloke in the stores?"

"It started me thinking," I admit, following Dieter's lead and spreading my rain cape on the grass verge.

Louis lights a captured cigarette and waits until we have settled ourselves comfortably. "First of all," he begins, "what do we do if someone stops us and asks us what we're up to? And why we don't have a set of proper written orders?"

"Well . . ." says the Kid.

"And what was that Major's name?"

"Well, he . . ."

"Right!" pounces Louis. "He didn't introduce himself. So we're following verbal orders from a senior officer with no name. A pretty thin

story if the Headhunters catch up with us. Our kind and understanding military police could string us up as deserters without a second thought."

The Kid starts to look worried.

"And odd things are going on back there. Dieter and I happened to look in a few windows while we were wandering around. We saw the mysterious Herr Major talking to a couple of Yank officers in a very chummy fashion. Anyone care to explain that?" Louis carries on without giving us a chance to speculate. "I think our friends back there have admitted the war's lost and nearly over. And they're going to make themselves a nice, fat pension out of whatever they've got stored behind all that fencing."

"And what proof do you have?" asks Lutz, becoming a lawyer for the moment. He's forever arguing about the obvious; for practice, he says.

"We had a word with some of the blokes in the repair shop. They reckon the supply dump will be cleared in a couple of days. And the stuff's going to Pilsen. We saw a map in one of the trucks with the route marked on it. So why should the Herr Major care what's happening to the south? And how long's it going to take us to cover over two hundred kilometres if we can't 'borrow' another truck? Four days' foot-slogging? Five? There won't be any bottleneck by the time we get there. And the Herr Major will be safely behind the American lines with his black market chums."

"So why didn't he just take our truck and tell us to bugger off?" asks Otto.

"I think he wanted us out of the way tidily and quietly," explains Louis. "After all, what's it cost him? Some food; he's got plenty of that. Uniforms and ammo; who's going to need either when the war's over? Instead of just leaving us half starved and in rags on his doorstep, looking for ways to break in and help ourselves, he's given us some bloody good grub, new clothes, and our very junior officer, no offence, has a mission. Just the job for good little fighting machines. And even if we decide not to accept his kind invitation to the party at the bottleneck, we'll be well out of his part of the world when the grub runs out."

"The sod didn't give us any boots, but he's got stacks of them," complains Dieter, unlacing his sorry pair. They are civilian hiking boots, which he acquired when his army-issue pair started to drop to pieces.

"That's right," agrees Louis. He unrolls his spare rain cape to reveal a splendid new pair of boots in wonderfully soft black leather. They look

like they'd cost any of us a year's pay. "People need these whether there's a war on or not. Anyone want any more proof he's a crook?"

"I think that's become pretty clear by now," says Sergeant Lohr. "So what do we do now?" He addresses the question to the Leutnant, but clearly expects Louis to reply.

"If I were in charge," says Louis, "I'd go back to our original plan and head west. If we follow the Herr Major's orders, we could end up wearing barbed wire underpants with a bunch of hairy Ivans jumping up and down on us and laughing their bloody socks off."

"You might as well tell us the rest while you're at it," invites the Kid. He has a great respect for Louis's opinions.

Louis is in one of his deferential moods, which means that we have to drag his thoughts out of him. He takes his captured wire cutters from his pocket and snips at thin air. "As I see things, the Herr Major still owes us one truck. I suggest Dieter and I hang around here till nightfall, then sneak in and take one. Those fences of his don't look too much of an obstacle."

"We'd still like to head for home, Herr Leutnant," says one of the Austrians in an apologetic tone. "And home is that way for us." He points down the road, towards the south.

"Suit yourselves." The Kid shrugs, displaying his total indifference. Clearly, he sees no reason to obey orders from a superior who indulges in banditry and collusion with the enemy on a grand scale.

"You haven't seen us; we haven't seen you," adds Dieter.

The Austrians lift themselves from corners of our rain capes. We wish them a safe journey. They head down the road at a smart pace, as if wishing to get out of earshot in case the Kid changes his mind and calls them back.

"Can I see your map?" asks Louis.

"Yes, of course." The Leutnant selects a sheet of tattered paper from his pouch and spreads it on his rain cape. We treat one another pretty informally when we are away from senior officers. Junior officers who create barriers between themselves and their men make easier targets for snipers. The survivors learn not to be too keen on salutes and not to stray too far from the common herd.

"I suggest we meet you about here. About a couple of kilometres past this village." A stolen pencil marks a neat cross above the Russian characters. Louis is asking us to cover twenty kilometres, but it's only ten o'clock, according to Albert, and we have been fed properly for once. "I don't know quite when we'll catch you up," Louis adds, "so

make sure you keep a lookout. And don't get lost."

There is no danger of Louis failing to make the rendezvous. He has an extraordinary sense of direction, and can absorb necessary details from a map in a matter of minutes.

"All right, but be careful," warns the Kid, converting Louis's suggestions into policy. "We'll wait until first light tomorrow." He does not need to add that if Louis and Dieter have not arrived by when, they will not be rejoining us. The plundering Major looks the type to hand out instant justice against a wall.

"We'll be there," grins Louis. Lifting aside a fold of his spare rain cape, he shows us a dark blue overall and an American peaked cap. "I hope you recognize us."

Dieter has a similar outfit concealed in his spare cape, and a new pair of boots. Leaving his old pair tidily at the side of the road, he strolls away from us to test the fit.

About fifty metres, he turns and begins to march back, swinging his arms up to shoulder level. Then he breaks into a strange pantomime of the parade march, mincing rather than marching, swinging his boots up to waist level, but bringing them down to make gentle, almost cautious contact with the ground. Laughter destroys his co-ordination. He strolls back to his rain cape, tugging at the crotch of his new trousers. Our new clothes feel rather like strait-jackets after our comfortable rags.

"Right, you lot. On your feet," orders Sergeant Lohr in response to a nod from the Leutnant. "Let's see if you can do any better."

With token groans, we climb to our feet and fold up our rain capes. We all get something extra to carry so that Louis and Dieter can travel light. Leaving them heading into a small wood in search of a comfortable place to spend the day, we set off. The Leutnant intends to take us to the north and pass in a wide easterly arc around the supply compound.

Two hundred metres up the road, we meet three more heroes on their way to hold open the bottleneck. They too have lost their truck. Their leader, a grizzled Unteroffizier with his left arm in a sling, is quite bitter about not being allowed to drive their own truck at least as far as Pilsen. All three worked out what the black-marketeering Major is up to, and were prepared to keep their mouths shut. But the old crook was not impressed by their hints in that direction.

We common soldiers seem to be pretty unpopular with everyone. According to the Unteroffizier, who seems to have travelled around

quite a lot, the Czechs are split into three camps. One lot wants the Yanks to liberate them, then leave them alone. Another lot wants the Ivans to do the same. The third lot want to be left alone by all foreigners. Everyone wants to be rid of the Germans, even the ones who were born and raised here. Time will tell how happy they'll be when we've gone.

Our general opinion is that they'll be lucky to find themselves better off. One of the Austrians told us that history is repeating itself. The Czechs were overjoyed when the old Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed with the end of the war in 1918, and they lost the guiding hand of Austria. Now, the guiding hand of Germany is being lifted from them. The Czechs are about to acquire new overlords.

Ten Germans on a Czech road have no objections to leaving the country. Our only complaint is that we are not being allowed to get out of it fast enough. Having to treat the natives as hostile and keep out of their way does help.

The Unteroffizier and his two companions agree with our views on the duration of the bottleneck. They intend striking west for Pilsen eventually. They are planning to steal back their own or another truck. We wish them luck and ask them to give our regards to General Patton. Then we continue up the road to the north.

A light drizzle starts as we enter the outskirts of the town of Jung Bunzlau. We slide into our rain capes and form up into a double file. The river Jizera has to be crossed, and the Leutnant has decided that the simplest way of doing so will be to use the bridge in the town. Tall, ancient buildings, gapped by bombs, rear up on either side of us.

Although lacking recent practice, we keep step and maintain our dressing, and try to exude a sense of purpose. Nobody takes the slightest notice of a group of men marching into the tail end of a deteriorating morning. We are just seven among hundreds of other soldiers.

Once through the town, our faces cold and wet, hands blue, and water pouring from our capes in rivers, we take to side roads. In this part of the country, they tend to be no more than cart tracks between the multitude of small fields, and connect clusters of houses scattered no more than a few kilometres apart.

The people on our route do not seem to know what to make of us in our American rain capes and heavily camouflaged helmets. They choose to err on the side of caution.

When the rain stops, those who emerge from their cottages to work

in the fields pretend not to notice us, or make a point of turning their backs. Women herd their children away as if we are evil spirits come down from the mountains to kidnap them.

We seem to have been walking for a wet age.

"In case anyone's interested," remarks Albert, "it's two o'clock and my breakfast's worn off."

"I wouldn't say no to something to eat either," adds Peter, our other big man. He is the son of a blacksmith and has the muscles for the trade. Albert's family owns vineyards near Marburg; clearly, grape-picking must be more demanding than we imagined.

"We'll stop at that place up ahead," decides the Leutnant as the rain starts to come down again in sufficient quantity to make life uncomfortable, but not to drown us.

There is a smithy in this village. The workshop consists of a low, wide building which is open to the elements at the front. We begin to feel warmer the moment we see the fire. Our reception is cool, but not overtly hostile. There is very little the smith and his boy assistant can do against seven heavily armed men.

Even though this is a German community, the Army is not welcome. We are a reminder of the uncertainty of their future and a target for the American Air Force. Not that it takes a uniform to attract the attention of American fighter pilots these days. The Austrians have seen them shoot at women on bicycles when no other target presented itself.

We trade a tin of sardines for some coarse bread, and finish our late midday meal with Russian tea. Lutz whistles at a pair of girls in shapeless smocks, but they dare not respond. He accepts the rebuff philosophically. Dieter tells him they'd probably turn his hair white if he got a good look at them.

Walther, our reluctant host, thaws slightly when he learns that Peter is also a blacksmith. As we are less than five kilometres from our rendezvous point, the Leutnant gives him permission to test his long unused skills.

We watch with interest as he hammers away at a strip of iron, spreading the red-hot metal, shaping, curling, piercing holes, and finally producing what we all recognize as the head of a hoe. It's strange to realize that someone like Peter can make something which an ordinary person has to buy in a shop.

I have always admired people who can work with their hands in an artistic sense; painters, sculptors, potters, carpenters, and so on. At the

same time, it's rather disheartening to discover that Peter's huge, coarse fists hold infinitely more talent than my much more delicate hands.

We set off again, much to the relief of everyone in the village. The sky is a mass of bulky drifts of light and dark grey cloud, but the rain holds off. After about an hour and a half, the Kid decides that we have reached the rendezvous point. Most of the last lap has been uphill. We have covered perhaps seven or eight kilometres of twisting country tracks.

Locating the main road is an easy task; we just head for the sounds of a convoy. We stop at a thick hedge and keep our heads down. Tanks, a handful of captured jeeps, and several truckloads of American prisoners are heading east. We settle down to wait for Louis and Dieter. Apart from birds, the occasional vehicle, and a couple of trains on the railway about two kilometres to the south, the peace of the countryside remains undisturbed. Perhaps the war is over.

We are experts at waiting. A soldier waits for everything; food, clothing, pay, a turn to fight; but not to die. Death has no waiting list. If you can't find something to do, waiting can stretch your nerves to breaking point. One of our company commanders used to get his men bored and jumpy so that they'd fight harder out of the sheer joy of having something to do. We get into strange ways in these strange days. But on this May afternoon, a long way from both fronts, we are free to pass the time playing cards, or in fairly untroubled sleep, dreaming of our desert hotel.



Someone wakes me up. Sleep is as good a way as any of filling idle hours. Sergeant Lohr is shaking my arm, outlined against a faint glow in the clinging darkness.

“Come on, you lot. The truck’s here,” repeats Lohr.

“Right, right,” I groan, blurring to full awareness.

We pile aboard, landing on something soft in the back of our new truck, which has headlights. Louis charges on to the next village, then turns off the main road. He stops after about ten minutes of bumping down the side road. We are all wide awake now, and eager to hear how our privateers captured their prize.

Albert starts a small fire in a hollow beside a sheltering hedge to brew some tea. Louis and Dieter arrange themselves comfortably on their rain capes. Lutz and Otto are supposed to be on guard duty; keeping an eye and an ear open for partisans. There are one or two roving bands of them in the area, according to Walther, the blacksmith. Another hazard is packs of deserters from our own army, who are marking time until the end of the war and taking whatever they fancy as long as they don’t meet with much resistance. A person is not safe anywhere, these days.

Louis does most of the talking. Dieter rarely has much to say for himself. Our sentries keep their faces turned towards the night, but take care not to move out of earshot.

“Getting in was the easiest thing in the world,” begins Louis, accepting a cigarette made from Russian tobacco and a page from Peter’s Bible. “I suppose that should have tipped us off. We waited near the fence for half an hour, watching, when it got really dark. We could see all sorts of things going on behind the buildings, about twenty metres away. Trucks coming and going; just like they’ve been doing all day. But no one patrolling the fences on sentry go. So we started cutting.

They must have stretched the wire bloody tight. Every time we cut a



strand, the ends whipped apart and the whole bloody section of fence rattled. It was a good job the trucks were making so much noise. Anyway, we got through both fences fairly quickly. I was just checking my bearings, when there was Dieter, kicking my feet away. I went down, and something flew over me. Scared hell out of me."

"Bloody guard dog," remarks Dieter.

"Not the sort that barks, either," adds Louis. "The ones that creep up and rip your throat out. It was a Dobermann. Black as night. I could hardly see it. Then it had a go at Dieter. He was just like a bull fighter. Out of the way at the last moment, and *ssschp!* practically chopped its head off with his bayonet."

"Good job he can see in the dark," says Peter.

"I didn't believe he could till tonight," grins Louis. "It was dead easy after that. When they bring an empty truck in, the drivers just leave it in a special area and wander off to the canteen for a meal. The rest of the mob there take the trucks to the various stores and load them up. We just tagged on to a gang of drivers and had some grub."

"Cheeky sods!" rumbles Otto in admiration.

"Then we hung about with the rest of them until someone said, 'You and your mate, take that one.' We ended up with a load of blankets," concludes Louis.

"So what happened to them?" asks Sergeant Lohr.

"We dropped them off at a field hospital on the way."

"Apart from one each, of course," adds Dieter.

"That was well done," approves the Leutnant. "I'm afraid I can't mention your courage and initiative in my daily report, but I can excuse you all guard duties for the next three days."

The Kid keeps a sort of diary of our movements and achievements, which he hopes will form part of the Regimental History one day. The trouble is, he can't record the most interesting parts.

"That's worth a couple of medals," remarks Louis, who hates the necessary boredom of guard duty. "I don't care what the rest of these scoundrels say, Herr Leutnant, but I think you're a gentleman."

"Thank you very much," laughs the Kid. Louis is well known for his left-handed compliments. "What time is it, Albert?"

"About one o'clock," says our human timepiece.

"Hurry up and drink your tea, and you can get about five hours sleep in," says the Kid

"Who wants some of this?" Dieter has another bottle of the nameless red liqueur. The dark bottle contains just enough for nine night-caps.

In the gloomy light of a wet new day, we see that Louis and Dieter have provided us with a Russian truck in better condition than the one which we lost to the Major at the supply dump. As well as headlights, it has a quieter engine, and there are no bullet holes in the dark brown cab and wooden sides.

The morning becomes a series of frustrations. Heavy rain since before dawn has turned our country highway into a river of mud. We keep getting bogged down. After the third time, we start to get annoyed. There is no cheerful banter as we splash down into the mud to cut branches from bushes and small trees to stack in front of the wheels to give them something to grip. When we push the truck on to them, we get covered in the mud shot in all directions by the spinning rear wheels. The rain washes it off at the next stop.

Our new uniforms become sodden, filthy rags. But for the fact that our present truck has a canvas shelter at the back and splashes of dark green paint covering the Russian markings, we look just like the scarecrows who drove into Bohemia two days ago.

After four hours of heaving and crawling and heaving again, we admit defeat and take to the main road, which is in better repair where it hasn't been bombed. The rain seems to be keeping enemy aircraft out of our area. But there is always the danger of someone on our own side, like the Major of the supply dump, poking his nose into our lives and sabotaging our plans.

The driver has to keep his speed down. There is thick, greasy mud all over the firmer surfaces, and every turn becomes a slow skid. There is very little traffic going our way, but frequent convoys heading south and east force us to pull in to the side of the road to give them room to slide past. At noon, the Leutnant estimates that we have covered a disappointing forty kilometres. And then, descending towards a town near the banks of the Elbe, disaster strikes.

Our truck lurches violently. Peter jams the brakes on. We slide slowly and gracefully to a halt with our nearside front wheel in a reed-choked ditch.

The other front tyre is a mess, slashed right open by a jagged strip of metal. We have a spare, but it refuses to stay inflated with the weight of the truck on it. Louis says he feels like weeping after all the hard work of stealing the truck and heaving it through the mud. Dieter breaks his usual silence to tell us what he'd like to do to whoever left the booby trap on our side of the road.

A motorcycle and sidecar combination overtakes us, then comes to an

abrupt halt. Two soaked military policemen tramp back to investigate a Russian truck and a group of suspicious characters in American rain capes, sub-machine guns at the ready.

"Watch that you say," Sergeant Lohr advises them before they can get a word in. "We're not in the mood for being buggered about."

"Papers," snarls the big one, who filled the sidecar to capacity. "Herr Leutnant," he adds as an afterthought then the Kid gives him the old Prussian fish-eye.

His partner looks rather nervous; the sort to shoot us all down, then ask questions. Only the fact that we can get him before he can kill all of us keeps an itchy finger clear of his trigger.

"I think the movement order's in the cab, sir," says Louis in a very respectful manner.

The Kid gives him a blank look.

"Shall I get it, sir?" Louis suggests.

"Yes, yes." Not knowing what he is talking about, our Leutnant has the sense to play along with Louis.

We watch him climb up to the cab, then drop down again holding a nice, new piece of paper which is decorated with dirty fingerprints on the outside. The larger Headhunter unfolds it, glances at it, then refolds the sheet of paper as fat drops of rain start some of the writing running.

"All in order, Herr Leutnant." He gives the Kid a smart salute and hands him the precious piece of paper.

Rising to the occasion, our Leutnant assumes a Prussian sneer and ignores the salute. "I will see your papers now," he announces.

The Headhunters look at each other, then back at the Kid with an air of outrage. "Our papers, Herr Leutnant?" asks the smaller of them.

"Sergeant!" says the Kid.

Lohr brings his right hand into view. It is holding a Russian pistol.

"We have been warned of American infiltrators in the area," continues the Leutnant. "Some of them disguised as military police. I will see your papers."

Nervously, the Headhunters reach into their dripping capes. The Leutnant takes his time examining their identity papers, allowing the rain to have its way. Then, tiring of the game, he admits that everything seems in order and returns them.

"A new tyre, sir," prompts the ever-practical Louis.

"Your road has done for one of our tyres." The Kid puts the blame on the MPs. "Where can we get a new one?"

"There's a depot in town, sir," says the smaller MP. "You can't miss it."

It's all on its own near the river. The buildings on either side have gone."

"Thank you," says the Leutnant, being polite in a very arrogant way. He doesn't like power-mad MPs. "And remember to keep your eyes open for strangers in military police uniforms."

The Headhunters escape to the motorcycle and drive on at a reckless pace. The one in the sidecar turns briefly to look back at us. It seems to me that he has a smile on his fat face, but I can't be sure. My eyes aren't too good these days. And we're too busy chuckling over our small victory. Nobody likes MPs, and if we can get them arresting one another as suspected infiltrators, so much the better.

"What's this?" the Leutnant asks Louis, tapping the movement order.

"The Herr Major at the supply dump has a whole stack of them," explains Louis. "All signed and stamped by someone with a very grand name. We borrowed a few."

"Go on, what does it say?" asks Lutz.

The Leutnant passes it to him without comment.

"Very official!" approves Lutz, scanning the document. "Leutnant S.P. Hals, eight men, and their vehicle are to report to the garrison commander at Außig to assist him in his task of defending the town against the Reich's enemies. Not a bad effort Louis."

"We do our best," says Louis modestly.

"Two volunteers to go into town with me to get the tyre," says Sergeant Lohr, bringing us back to our immediate problem. "Don't all rush at once."

We cut Dieter's cards. Albert and Lutz are the unlucky ones. The rest of us climb into the back of the truck and watch the rain splashing down into lake-like puddles.

Tyreless and frustrated, our foraging party returns just over half an hour later. All the tyres in the area are stored in an old warehouse, which is controlled by an elderly Hauptmann, who works strictly according to the rules. All requests for tyres must be accompanied by a properly authorized requisition.

Showing him a movement order and a damaged tyre left him completely unmoved. He needs the right piece of paper before he'll think about releasing a tyre. As all the forms and those able to sign them are thought to be in Prague, there appears to be very little chance of our obtaining one through official channels. Now I know why the MP in the sidecar was laughing his head off.

"Very well, Sergeant," sighs the Leutnant when Lohr has completed his report. "You did your best."

"We're not going to stand for this, are we?" demands Louis.

"You don't happen to have a signed tyre requisition, do you?" says the Kid hopefully.

"No," says Louis, "but those tyres are there to replace chopped up ones. We're entitled to as many as we need. And if some old fool of a Hauptmann won't give us any, I think we should bloody well go and take what we need. And maybe get him arrested for sabotage."

"Right!" mutters Dieter.

"But how?" says Albert. "The old sod wouldn't even let us through the front door when we didn't have his bit of paper. All the windows are barred, so you can't sneak in. And the back door's all barricaded. We looked."

"The place is like a bloody fortress," adds Lutz. "You'd need a tank to bash your way in. And the noise would bring every Headhunter in town down on you."

"There must be some way of getting hold of a properly signed and stamped requisition," murmurs the Leutnant, trying to convince himself.

"That might not be such a good idea," counters Louis. "What if someone checks up on our movement order? And the Herr Major from the supply depot finds out we've pinched one of his trucks? He'd make trouble for us on principle."

"We could make more for him," says Otto. "He's up to no good himself."

"But we lack proof," Lutz points out. "And him being in the wrong doesn't put us in the clear. If there's any trouble, they'll shove the lot of us up against the same wall."

"Not a chance," scoffs Dieter. "The Herr Major will be long gone. Off to say hello to General Patton in Pilsen."

"Look, let's not mess about," Louis cuts the discussion short. "Anyone got a good head for heights?"

"Jürgen has," says Peter, slapping me on the back and nearly knocking me off the narrow bench seat in the rear of the truck. "He once bored me stiff telling me about his rock climbing in the Ober Harz."

"That was a long time ago," I protest; but no one takes the slightest bit of notice.

"Just the thing," beams Louis. "Just how big is this warehouse?"

"One, two, four storeys," Sergeant Lohr counts from memory.

"And how many people in there?"

"We only saw the old bloke," says Lutz. "If he's not dishing anything out, he doesn't need any help."

"No, with all the convoys going through here, he must be doing some business," says Sergeant Lohr. "I'd say he'd have three assistants. One to polish his boots, one to pour his drinks, and one to do all the work."

"What's on your mind, Louis?" invites the Leutnant.

"Well," drawls Louis through a sinister smile, "while this place may look as tight as a tick's arse from the ground, I doubt the Herr Hauptmann expects anyone to come in through the roof." Louis has a way of drawling the word 'Herr' that fills it with belittling contempt. Through our chuckles, he adds, "So if Jürgen and I can sneak up the back of the building, and you can arrange a diversion to attract the old idiot's attention, we might be able to drop in, get a tyre, and drop right out again before anyone knows we've been."

"What do you think, Jürgen?" asks the Leutnant, his young face screwed up into an uneasy frown.

I shrug negligently, even though the very thought of wandering up and down the outside of a four-storey building without proper climbing equipment scares me rigid. "I'll have a go."

"We really must have a tyre," decides the Leutnant. "And short of fighting our way into this place, I really can't see another practical way of getting one."

"We could always wait till dark," says Dieter, offering his obvious alternative solution. "Then pinch a wheel off someone else's truck."

"Hang about here all day?" protests Otto.

Dieter shrugs. "It's just an idea."

"That's settled, then," says Louis, making up our minds.

Leaving Sergeant Lohr, Albert, and Lutz to guard the crippled truck, the rest of us trudge down the hill towards the town. Yet another of Louis's plans is going to save us from foot-slogging; those who don't fall off the side of a four-storey warehouse and break every bone in their body.

We check the lie of the land as we reach the first buildings of the town. On the left is a fast-flowing, wide river; the Elbe, according to the Leutnant's limp, grimy, Russian maps. A long row of warehouses, broken by bombed or burnt-out shells, follows the northern bank. Then comes another irregular and parallel row, all one storey taller than the warehouses at the riverside. A narrow alley, no more than four metres wide, runs between them.

Shops and offices in buildings with sloping instead of flat roofs separate the warehouses from the main road through the town. The buildings along the road are just two storeys high, with small, square windows set in the tiled roofs. A gap of at least twenty metres between the shops and the warehouses allows plenty of room for unloading and loading.

Locating the tyre store proves to be a simple task. It stands out like a sound tooth in a rotten mouth. We take a stroll along the alley behind it. There is a smell of burning in the air; not just wood, but a sharper, chemical stink. Two very inviting drainpipes run all the way up to the flat roof of our objective. The thin drizzle is a mixed blessing. It keeps possible spectators out of the streets, but the drainpipes have become quite greasy and slippery.

Louis and I hand our rain capes and helmets to Otto and Peter. Dieter takes charge of my MP40 and Louis's rifle. We retain our hand guns. As we begin the climb, a clock on the over-ornate town hall chimes the quarter hour, reminding us that the Leutnant will begin his diversion at half-past one.

I experience a sort of exhilarating terror during the first few metres of the climb. Then it becomes just an effort. Once above six or seven metres, height becomes irrelevant. A fall from sixteen or seventeen metres produces much the same injuries.

Pausing for a breather at the third set of windows, I grin across at Louis and wave. Much to my surprise, his answering smile is rather forced and he keeps both hands on the pipe. It doesn't seem possible that Louis could ever be afraid. But perhaps that's the measure of his courage; he can still make himself function coolly and with purpose when he's scared to death.

The drainpipe comes to an end at roof level, at the base of a parapet seventy centimetres high. Louis is stuck. My rock-climbing experience gives me the confidence to plant my feet on a support and straighten my legs to move up, to rise beyond the end of the drainpipe. The brickwork is in poor condition, which gives me a plentiful supply of hand-holds.

When I test the tiles at the top of the parapet, they move. I push them back. They hit the roof with a terrific breaking clatter, which seems not to reach our comrades on the ground. I wriggle over the parapet, then hurry along the roof to Louis. The tiles at the other drainpipe are still cemented solidly in position. I lean over and let my belt down to Louis. After a bit of a struggle, he reaches the safety of the roof.

"I wouldn't like to do that again in a hurry," he gasps, white-faced. "Come on, let's get out of this bloody rain."

We approach a skylight. I let out a hollow groan when I spot wire mesh inside the dirty, bird-stained glass. Someone is bound to hear us if we have to risk breaking the glass then cutting through enough three-millimetre strands to make a hole large enough to admit us. Louis is not so easily discouraged. He works at the frame with his bayonet, then levers upwards. Something splinters soggly, and wet wood gives with a muffled snap. Much to my surprise, the wire mesh is fastened to the window, not its frame. Someone has done a very sloppy job; probably some stores clerk who resented having to do it.

Louis uses a couple of loose parapet tiles to wedge the skylight open, then lowers himself to the full extent of his arms and drops silently. My landing after falling about two meters is not quite as noiseless. We listen for about half a minute, crouching beside a door, but nobody comes.

"There's time for a bit of a smoke," decides Louis. He wipes his hands dry on a piece of sacking and digs out half a cigarette.

The lines of strain smooth from Louis's face. I become the nervous one. When he takes a last drag from our shared cigarette, he can drop it into a pool of water which has dripped from our boots. We have explored the room with our eyes. Only motorcycle and bicycle tyres are stored up here. Undivided, the long, grimy hall stretches from one end of the warehouse to the other. In the distant opposite corner, at the front of the building, we can see a mechanical hoist. It comes as no surprise when we open our door and find a staircase.

On the floor below, we find black tubular stacks of car tyres. This makes sense to us. The heavier tyres for trucks will be kept on the lower floors. We are just about to take to the stairs again, when a gentle buzzing sound attracts my attention.

"What's up?" whispers Louis when I grab his arm and raise a finger to my lips.

"Listen," I breathe into his ear. "From over there."

In an alcove, behind a barricade of black rubber, we find two men stretched out on canvas beds, wrapped up in grey blankets edged with a double stripe in light blue.

"Cover them," says Louis.

I take the pistol from the holster on my belt and click the safety catch off. One of the men turns onto his side and opens his eyes a fraction, as though certain that his sleep has been disturbed needlessly but wanting to be doubly sure.



His eyes and mouth fly open, leaving his face locked in a ludicrous expression of surprise. Louis kicks one of the wooden legs of the other bed. The other man jerks out of sleep with a curse rising to his lips. It fades to a whisper when he sees me and the gun.

"Do as you're told, and you won't get hurt," says Louis pleasantly but with just the right touch of menace. "How many staff are there here?"

The two men exchange glances. They are both well into their forties. Neither wants any trouble. One of them has a round, florid face. He finds his tongue.

"There's just the two of us. And our officer."

"What do you want?" asks the other one, a rather ratty character with short, thinning, blond hair.

"All we want is a tyre for our truck," Louis tells him. "There's only going to be trouble if we don't get it."

"One tyre?" repeats the ratty one incredulously.

"Having to go to all this trouble for one tyre has made us a bit irritable," says Louis. "And we're liable to thump anyone who doesn't do what we say. Now; we're going to tie you up and gag you. You should be able to free yourselves in about twenty minutes. Or we could just slit your throats."

"You can take all the bloody tyres in the place for us," the chubby one assures him. "We won't give you no trouble."

We truss them up reasonably securely, then creep down one more flight of stairs. The staircase gives onto a gallery, which runs round three sides of the building, half-way up a huge room eight or nine metres high. Along the section of gallery on the wall to our right runs a series of offices. They have glass walls from about chest height to the ceiling. Great mountains of black rubber reach up from the concrete ground floor, some higher than our heads. How anyone could hope to remove any of the tyres without bringing the entire stack and its neighbours crashing down about his head is a complete mystery. We decide that the place is a classic example of the workings of the military mind; the arrangement looks very neat, but it is not intended to have any practical application. Even so, there must be a tyre to fit our truck down there.

"Where is the old sod?" Louis mutters, half to himself.

Fascinated by the pillars of tyres, it takes me a moment to work out that he means the Hauptmann in charge of the store.

"Don't know," I reply, scanning the lower floor. "I can't see him down there."

"I suppose we'd better wait here till he shows himself."

"All right, you thieving scum," grates a voice from a doorway on our right.

And there he is, silvery hair all tangled and hanging in his eyes, stained and crumpled uniform jacket hanging open to reveal a dirt-streaked shirt, trousers folded into random horizontal as well as vertical creases, boots dusty and unpolished, and aiming a Mauser pistol at us in a steady enough grip, his grimy finger within a millimetre of squirting the magazine at us. We see a camp bed then he pushes the office door open fully and steps out onto the gallery, Thanks to sheer bad luck, he was hidden from view by the opaque, lower part of the partition while he was having his midday snooze.

"Well, you thieving swine," he laughs, "you look like a pair of drowned rats. What's to stop me giving you what you deserve right now?"

"If, as you suggest, we are thieving swine, Herr Hauptmann," says Louis politely, "then we must receive a proper court martial. Anyone who shoots us out of hand is a murderer; which, I submit, is quite a few degrees lower than any thieving swine."

"A barrack-room lawyer!" sneers the Hauptmann, resting his elbow comfortably on the palm of his left hand. "I never did like scum twisting the rules to suit their own purposes. Perhaps I'll hand you over to the military police after all. Stretching your necks would save a bullet."

"I think I'd prefer a bullet," says Louis reflectively.

"Well, it's the rope for you," laughs the Hauptmann. "Into the office. Where I can keep an eye on you while I phone for the MPs."

We start to edge past him under the threat of the Mauser. *BAM! BAM! BAM!* A thunderous knocking shakes the front door. The Hauptmann turns his head automatically. I let fly with my right boot, catching the gun and sending it spinning into space. Louis has other ideas. Reaching down, he seizes the officer's ankles and lifts. With a small scream, our captor plunges over the rail and strikes a pile of tyres a glancing blow on his way to the hard, concrete floor.

The stack totters, then tumbles dramatically, shedding tyres from the top. A chain reaction sweeps outwards, ripple-like. Neat columns barge and struggle into an untidy, bouncing tangle. And still the pounding continues at the front door.

Louis and I take a short cut through the offices to a staircase at the front of the building. The Kid's eyes widen comically then we open a door and wave him and the others inside.

"Go on, where is the old bastard?" asks Dieter.

"Somewhere under that lot." Louis turns a negligent thumb over his shoulder. "The other two are tied up, upstairs."

Peter kicks the door shut behind him, then stops to stare.

"All right, that happened here?" sighs the Leutnant.

"He wanted to shoot us at first," says Louis. "Then he decided to let the Headhunters stretch our necks. But when you lot started knocking the door down, the shock was too much for him. He fell off the gallery up there. And managed to knock all this lot down with him."

"Careless of him," laughs Dieter.

The Leutnant orders Peter and Otto to look for the Hauptmann. Our assault on a superior officer, even an officer who was sabotaging the war effort by refusing to issue his stores, troubles the Kid. The search party ploughs into the debris, heaving tyres aside. The rest of us look for something that would fit our truck.

"Hey, look at this," calls Otto after a few minutes. "Sleeping like a baby. Not a mark on him. What do we do with the old sod?"

"If he's all right, leave him and help us look for the right tyres," orders the Kid, relief in his voice.

"Where's Louis?" calls Dieter. "I think I've found them."

"Where the hell are you?" asks Louis.

"I don't bloody know. You'll have to find me."

"Keep talking, then."

Dieter has struck gold. We take a tyre each for luck and march confidently out into the rain after the Leutnant. The four spares will be something to sit on as an alternative to the blanket-padded but still hard benches in the truck.

Albert and Peter, our two big men, make short work of the task of fitting the new tyre. Dieter remembered to bring some inner tubes. He produces them from under his cape when the rest of us are cursing and wondering who will have to plod back to the store.

Wet, but quite cheerful after our triumph, we press on. Not wishing to drive through the town in case the MPs are waiting for us, we turn round and tag on to the end of an east-bound convoy for a few kilometres. A turn onto a minor road, which leads roughly north-west, takes us back towards the Elbe.

The continuous rain has made the roads even worse. After getting bogged down three times within about ten kilometres, we have had enough for one day. Soaked to the skin, chilled to the bone, hungry, tired, and fed up, we are all grateful then the Leutnant directs Peter to an abandoned and isolated house and suggests that we take a rest and

have some lunch. Only Otto is against stopping, but he's just being awkward.

There is no back to the house. The blast from a bomb which fell to one side behind it has stripped off part of the roof and toppled most of the rear wall. Fortunately, the kitchen is still relatively dry. Albert gets a roaring fire going in the range within minutes. There is plenty of wood in a small shed beside the house. As if to spite us, the rain slackens to almost nothing as soon as we are under cover.

The room acquires a warm area. We hang our sodden uniforms around the fire and start eating. We demolish two days' rations, then finish the meal with Russian tea and cigarettes made from Russian tobacco and Peter's Bible.

"We're going to be rather hungry tomorrow," remarks the Kid, who is sitting on the only decent chair. The rest of us are using either the furniture or the floor.

"We're used to it," shrugs Louis. "And who knows? Something might turn up."

His optimism can become unbearable at times.

"Might be some wild duck or the odd goose around," Albert remarks amid the groans.

The drizzle stops completely around four o'clock, by Albert's mental clock. Nobody makes any mention of the fact that sooty drops are no longer falling down the chimney to land in the fire with an angry hiss, or that the sun is starting to look out. Common sense tells us that the roads will be just the same. The Leutnant is fortunate enough to possess plenty of that quality.

After all, a bunch of sensible people like ourselves would never let a fool lead us, or have kept a tin soldier of an officer alive through a Russian winter if we had not thought that he was doing a good job. Although nobody bothers to put it into words, we all know that we are here for the night.

## ESNCC

Saturday, by a majority opinion, begins bright and sunny. We decide to give the sun a chance to dry up some of the mud before we resume our journey. Breakfast is as much tea as we want and three rock-hard biscuits apiece.

Black clouds are gathering when we set off, two hours after dawn. As we are in hilly country, natural drainage has made most of the tracks passable. We are lucky that there has been no other traffic to break up the fragile surface and deepen the mud. We get bogged down only once before we reach the Elbe again; in a hollow at the bottom of a steep hill.

We work more cheerfully with the sun on our backs as we follow the familiar routines of branches and heaving. The Leutnant decides that we are about twelve kilometres downstream of Außig. We head north, away from the town, looking for a bridge.

Otto's cold seems to have dried up, but he is still just as miserable. He tries to cheer us up by insisting that all the bridges have been destroyed by either American bombers or our own army attempting to make life difficult for the invaders.

War is a full-time occupation now that engineers and other scientists have put everyone within range of a bomb or a V2 rocket. There are no days off for illness if the rest of your group has to keep moving. As Otto did, you have to keep up if you want to carry on living.

Stopping to surrender, even to a civilized enemy, can be a risky business. Sometimes, the enemy is too busy to bother with you, especially if you are too ill to move. A bullet solves all problems and cures all illness. Looking after a prisoner can be a lot of trouble, but another corpse by the side of a road makes trouble only for the burial detail.

It is quite pleasant cruising along the wooded river bank. Just being

warm and dry after the horrors of the previous day is enough to keep me happy. Most of us are asleep when the war catches us out.

A burst of automatic fire slashes the front of the cab; too high to be effective, but sending the Leutnant and Sergeant Lohr diving for the floor to avoid flying glass and lead. The rest of us leap out at the back of the truck, like paratroopers diving out of an aircraft. Otto, Albert, and Dieter go haring up the ridge on our right as though they have charmed lives. Two rifles splinter bark from trees all around them, but they get away with it. We others take cover and return the fire.

There are five of them. Two have British Sten guns, two have rifles, and the other one has a pistol. A figure rears into view, thrown backwards as if hit by a runaway train. He is not in uniform, so the ambushers must be partisans, not Americans. Lutz probably got him. He's our best shot.

Short bursts from three Schmeissers rip into the partisans' position from behind. We hear shouts of terror, then three pairs of hands appear. Otto shepherds the survivors towards us. Albert and Dieter stay behind to check the other two and to throw their weapons into the river.

We rise to our feet; all except Louis. Peter starts to dust himself down, but his uniform is impregnated with so much mud that he looks no different afterwards. I glance at Louis, then my heart sinks. He has a small hole just below his right collar bone; and a huge, oozing, red patch just above his belt at the back when we turn him over. We know he's finished, and so does he. And there's not a damn thing any of us can do but make him comfortable and wait for him to die.

Fortunately, he loses consciousness almost immediately. Our morphine supply ran out a long time ago. Most of it disappeared into a medical orderly, whom we shot when we found out that he was using our meagre and precious supply of drugs on himself instead of our wounded.

The three prisoners are jabbering away, but none of us can understand them. Two of them are quite old, forty at least, and have strong, solid faces and masses of muscle. The other is a young kid, no more than fourteen or fifteen. None of them looks particularly frightened, which we find baffling. Then one of them points to a filthy armband on his left sleeve and says: "Prisoner of war, huh, Joe?" in broken German; which confuses us further.

"That's a uniform?" remarks Lutz. He sounds more surprised than sceptical.

The prisoners seem to think that we are Americans. We suspect that

it matters very little to them whether they were shooting at Americans, Russians, Germans, or their own kind. We suspect that they wanted to stop the truck, kill everyone on board, and steal whatever they could find; that they are bandits rather than partisans.

Albert trots back down the road to report to the Leutnant. "Both dead. Dieter's keeping watch thirty metres further on."

The Kid suddenly remembers that he is supposed to be in charge of our group, and looks around. There is no need for him to issue orders. Lutz is thirty metres behind us, guarding the rear. Peter has climbed to the top of the wooded ridge on our right. The Leutnant's eyes fall on Louis, whose face is grey now from a combination of shock and loss of blood.

Louis shows no signs of coming round; which means that I will not have to deny him one of our few remaining field dressings. It may be needed by someone with a chance of survival later on. Louis would have done the same had it been me or any of the others lying there. We are beyond sentiment now, beyond the secret, guilty joy that someone else stopped the bullet. The war has taught us to think only of the living.

Our comrade Louis is dead, even though he can still draw slow, shallow breaths. But he will live on for the rest of our lives as part of a long sequence of memories; some good, some bad, and some which tear us out of sleep when they intrude into our dreams.

Louis's wound looks almost trivial from the front. Not that we still find shocking, the sight of a badly wounded man. Most of our casualties in the early days were caused by shell-fire and air attacks. I don't know how we ever became hardened to the sight of so much blood and the sounds of so much agony, but we did.

Some of our men could even laugh and joke as they collected up torn-off limbs and fragments of bodies which had been alive and terrified minutes earlier. It wasn't until we were transferred to the Eastern Front that we became acquainted with death dealt out at first hand.

When we stopped building roads and bridges and became reluctant infantrymen, we learned about knife and bayonet stab wounds, the slicing effect of a razor-sharp shovel used as a battleaxe, and the carnage wreaked by dum-dum bullets and phosphorus grenades. We learned that the human animal is at times ridiculously easy to kill, and that at others times, humans have an almost supernatural capacity for survival. We saw lives snuffed out with very little cause, and hideous

wrecks, which clung to a thread of life beyond all reason. Louis will die in the grey middle ground.

"Prisoners are out of the question," remarks Sergeant Lohr, grim-faced, returning our attention to the bandits.

"I know," sighs the Kid, his eyes fixed on Louis.

We all find his death impossible to accept. How little point there was to surviving almost six years of fighting, only to be struck down like this by the casual cruelty of war.

The bandits are dead before they realize what is in store for them. They die the easy way. There is no fear and uncertainty; just, perhaps, a moment of pain. Then blank nothingness. Logic and a calm, persistent form of hatred dictated their fate. If we let the murderers of our comrade go, they will only kill again, skulking in another ambush, false civilians assuming the soldier's right for their own profit.

We hate almost everyone at times. These bandits join an endless list. We hate the politicians who made us fight, our generals and our comrades for continuing this senseless war which won't change anything for the better, the enemy for doing the same, and ourselves for wasting our lives for nothing.

The bodies flop like stringless puppets when we drag them up the bank and dump them in a hollow. Sergeant Lohr covers them with branches. Otto kicks one of the front tyres of our truck in disgust. They are both completely flat. Even though we have spare tyres, there is nothing that we can do about the rusty water dripping from neat, black holes in the radiator, and the pool of black oil and acid from the shattered battery under the engine.

Albert starts to dig a grave for Louis in the wet, sandy river bank, using the long, Siberian knife that he took from a Mongol, who tried to slice his head off. We unload our meagre possessions and give the truck a push.

It ploughs through straggling bushes like a tank and plunges into the river with a huge splash. Much to our surprise, it manages to float out from the bank a few metres before disappearing completely.

Louis is dead. We wrap him in a blanket and lower him into his grave. Albert has claimed his boots to replace a pair worn out from the inside. Louis had seven cigarettes in a small, flat tin. Sergeant Lohr has taken charge of them. They are now communal property. Those of us with rifles divide his share of the ammunition. We throw his rifle and the bolt into the river at widely separated points. Any partisans who want them will have to dive for them.



We disperse the superfluous soil and replace the sections of turf. The Leutnant pieces a small, white stone at the head of the grave to mark a fallen comrade's last resting place. Our blood cooling from action to sorrow, we stare down at it.

My first reaction to the sight of death was one of surprise. I was so sure that I would be killed when the shells started to fall onto our position without warning for the first time, that it came as a complete shock to find that others had beaten me in the race to oblivion. Four long years later, that sense of wonder at my own survival remains.

One of my friends used to make a point of reminding himself each morning that he could be killed that day. He said the ritual kept him careful and alive. Then he woke one morning still drunk from the night before and forgot to remind himself of his own mortality. To no one's surprise, he survived the day. In fact, he lasted a whole two weeks before standing in the way of a sniper's bullet. I couldn't even begin to guess how many others we've buried between him and Louis.

"I hope they give him a good room in the desert hotel," says Sergeant Lohr. "Let's get moving."

This is the only epitaph that we need or expect; a reminder of our common mental retreat to the desert when the snows of a Russian winter settled around us. Louis will never be able to find out how the real thing compares with our fantasy.

We are on foot again. Walking is nothing new to us, but three days in our Russian trucks have spoiled us. Otto starts sneezing again, which starts him moaning about our luck. We have to threaten to chuck him in the river to shut him up. We don't like hoofing it any more than he does. In low spirits, we trudge about five kilometres, following the river, then we stop for a break.

Albert says the time is about half past nine. The Elbe is a muddy grey beneath the clouding sky. We stare moodily at the fast-flowing waters as Peter builds a small fire. We need some tea to help wash down the last of our rations; dry bread and cheese as hard as the armour on a Russian T34 tank. Albert's wild ducks seem to be keeping out of our way.

Otto wants to know how we're going to get across the river. The Leutnant tells him that we'll come across a bridge soon. He is a professional optimist. Officers have to be. Maintaining morale is their job. Sergeant Lohr faces Otto down when he opens his mouth again. When he's suffering from a cold, he doesn't care what he says. But Lohr, like Dieter, comes from the back streets of Berlin, and Otto knows that

he will find it just as hard to breathe through a broken nose when his cold has cleared up completely.

We gather round the fire like tramps to drink our tea. The road has taken a sweep to the east, away from the river, to follow the easiest route. We are squatting in an oak grove, and the high ground on our right has flattened out.

Our meal lasts a quarter of an hour. Not because there is a lot to eat, but because we're feeling too fed up to hurry. We allow ourselves a smoke afterwards, sharing one cigarette between two men. The Russian tobacco tastes foul, even after all this time. Peter's mother told him that he would be glad of it one day when she gave him a small New Testament. I wonder what she would say if she knew he's using the thin paper to make cigarettes. It's certainly a lot better for the job than the newspaper the Ivans use.

The rain holds off, but we wear our American rain capes as a precaution when we resume our march. It saves carrying them. We seem to be alone in the world. We cannot guess at the distance to the western front, but it must be getting closer every day. It is even possible that we could run into some Americans. In our rain capes, and with half a forest stuck in the netting to hide the shape of our helmets, we have a pleasing neutrality.

Albert and Sergeant Lohr wave a warning. The rest of us dive off the road and make ourselves invisible in the undergrowth. About a dozen men gallop past. They are all wearing brown greatcoats, except for their leader. He looks like something out of a comic opera. His uniform is dark green with enough tassels and gold braid to dress a Christmas tree. Two round, silver medals jingle on his chest below a swatch of bright medal ribbons. A flowing black cloak edged in gold billows out behind him. Dieter nearly chokes trying not to laugh. The officer's subordinates look very drab beside this peacock, but they manage to convey a ceremonial air, as if they are heading for a parade, not a fight. They are definitely not German, even though their abundant weapons are.

When they have charged past, we carry on. Lutz and I are sent out as scouts the usual fifty metres ahead of the main body. A few scattered drops of rain begin to fall, but not enough to matter. The ground is fairly hard on the right-hand side of the road, and churned to a muddy swamp by horses' hooves on the left. Through the trees on our right, we catch glimpses of open country; fields, hedges, and small woods. The river looks much the same; broad, muddy, carrying branches in its

irresistible grip, and completely uncrossable without the aid of a bridge or a decent boat.

"What do you make of that, Jürgen?" asks Lutz, his voice full of naked curiosity.

I interrupt a moody contemplation of the racing waters and follow the direction of his pointing finger with my eyes. All I see is trees, and I tell him so.

"I think there's a village," he insists. "Over there."

I look again, but see nothing but trees; some completely bare skeletons, some sprouting new leaves, and others clothed in just brown remnants from the previous year, all merging into a blur in the distance.

"All right," I say with a shrug, "if you can see a village, I'll take your word for it."

Lutz reckons that he can see the whiskers on a cat at a range of a kilometre, which is probably why he's the best shot in the regiment; which now consists of eight people. My distance vision has been getting a little fuzzy of late. I probably need glasses.

"Might be some food there," says Lutz thoughtfully.

"The place might be full of people we'd rather not meet."

"You miserable bastard! You're as bad as bloody Otto."

Lutz trots back to argue with the Leutnant. I plod slowly on. When I look back, a minute or so later, I spot Albert sneaking away in the direction of the village. He is about twenty-one and a man of the country; a solid, dependable, red-faced fellow with huge hands. Although rather slow in some ways, he has all the low cunning of a fox, an instinctive eye for good cover, and he can wriggle over dead, dried leaves with scarcely a sound.

The village is deserted. We find that odd mixture of total destruction and buildings which look as though their owners have strolled out for only a moment. A couple of tanks have been through this miserable collection of squat houses in the recent past. One of them went right through a house, wrecking it completely. We can see no obvious reason for such rotten driving, but that comes as no surprise. All tank crews, irrespective of nationality, seem to take a great delight in wanton destruction.

Albert and Peter go on the scrounge. If there is anything edible in the village, they will find it. The rain starts to pour down as if it means business. We take refuge in a house at the end of the village furthest from the river. We keep a lookout from habit. The countryside is very quiet. Only the birds have something to say.

The foragers return with four eggs, some hard bread, more of the inevitable hard cheese, and a tin of English bully beef. Albert makes a sort of stew out of the corned beef, with chunks of bread in it like dumplings. He boils the eggs. When we take the shells off, we find that one of them is bad, which makes sharing them among eight people a problem, Dieter suggests cutting his cards to find out which two will be unlucky. The Leutnant has a better solution. He tells Albert to divide the three eggs into quarters, then give everyone one and a half pieces.

We eat slowly, savouring each mouthful. After an appetizer of hard-boiled egg and brick-like bread, we gloat over hot stew, which tastes the better for having been provided by the Tommies. The cheese is ripe enough to blow your helmet off, but it is food and we eat it. Then, as Lutz makes the tea, Dieter explains why he's been looking so cheerful.

It seems that he nearly broke his neck when he tripped over a loose board in one of the houses. When he tore it up in rage, he found an oilskin pouch hidden away in a tin box. The pouch contains about 250 grams of rather coarse pipe tobacco. Albert chops it finer with his Siberian knife, and mixes it with the Russian stuff to see if it can be improved. We celebrate the discovery by having a whole cigarette each. About a third of Peter's New Testament has gone up in smoke. We have reached Luke, Chapter 22.

Towards noon, we continue our march to the north. We would rather have the protection of night, but there is plenty of cover beside the river. We have no wish to be recruited into some lunatic attempt to stop the irresistible advances of our enemies. Today could be the last day of the war, for all we know. None of us has the slightest desire to share Louis's pointless fate.

The Leutnant has worked out a plan of action. We will march until early evening, hoping to find a way across the river during the afternoon, and rest until dark. Then we will continue on until dawn. Which of our exhausted band will then keep guard while the others sleep has yet to be decided.

Very soon after we start out, Dieter and Otto wave a warning, then beckon us to advance with caution. The tension is almost unbearable as we slide forward to a bend in the road. We leave our safety catches on as our scouts did not give us a danger signal. But each of us has a round in the breech. Ever since Sepp shot himself in the foot and warned a bunch of Ivans that we were creeping round their camp, we have been aware of how easy it is to fire an inadvertent shot.

The safety catches come off when we are settled. Through a tangle of trees and low bushes, we see two officers standing about fifty metres away. Both are bare-headed and have very short hair; one grey and the other lightish brown. They are wearing long, black leather coats and highly-polished riding boots, and have American Thompson sub-machine guns slung over their left shoulders.

Their backs are turned to us at first. Then one of them half turns away from the river to look into the trees across the road. We catch a quick glimpse of a Ritterkreutz at his throat before he turns back. They are Germans for sure; but what are they up to?

The Leutnant just stares at the two men on the river bank as if hypnotized. Glad of a respite from our trudge, even though we have covered no great distance, we crouch in our positions of alert rest and wait for him to decide our next move. That's what he's paid for. Not that any of us has seen a pfennig since before Christmas. We are all going to be enormously rich if we ever collect our back pay, assuming the currency of our defeated country doesn't become as worthless as it did in the Twenties, when shoppers had to haul it around in suitcases.

"Look at those bastards!" groans Dieter in an envious undertone.

Both officers are smoking fat cigars with evident relish. They are just standing beside a river in Bohemia, apparently without a care in the world. They could be a couple of Prussians out for a stroll in the estate of the elder after a belt-bursting lunch and a skinful of priceless wines and brandies.

Sergeant Lohr has a look of anguish and hate on his stretched face with its prominent cheek bones and sharp nose. We are all filled with the same poisonous envy.

Feet crush through the undergrowth. Strange scraping noises, grunts, and the occasional curse focus our attention. Three men cross the road carrying a rowing boat. Their uniforms are black and look almost new. Their insignia are the death's head of a Panzer regiment and SS runes. They are the hard boys; they have to be to withstand the battering their own officers and NCOs add to what the enemy dishes out.

"There's how we cross the river," whispers the Leutnant.

Nobody else wants to have anything to do with a pack of SS, and we tell him so. They're too unpredictable. After a fierce argument in whispers, during which we are accused of disloyalty, desertion, and downright mutiny, the Kid gets his own way. He and Sergeant Lohr march smartly down the road to ask the gentlemen of the SS if they can have their boat when they have finished with it.

Our young Leutnant gets off to a bad start. He halts smartly in front of the leather coats and snaps off a fine regulation salute. They reply with the old fish eye and Party salutes delivered as an upward flap of the right forearm in a rather negligent, arrogant fashion. The younger officer laughs then the Kid has finished his request, then gives him a tremendous back-hander across the face. Our Leutnant manages to keep his feet; just. A deep, animal growl rumbles in Albert's throat.

Six worms begin to glide through the trees and bushes. The three soldiers have put the rowing boat down a couple of metres from the water and are watching the fun. They have their backs to us, but we know that they have grins sprawled across their ugly faces. Our poor Leutnant is going: "Yes, Herr Oberst," and: "No, Herr Hauptmann," and then the other way around in utterly helpless alternation. Sergeant Lohr is staring fixedly at a distant point mid-way between the officers' heads. He could have been a figure carved from granite; waiting for the rest of us to act.

Most of the colour has drained from the Kid's face, leaving an ugly, dark blotch on his right cheek. He tries to tell the Oberst that he is not a deserter, and that he is on his way to the front in the west. The Hauptmann buries a fist in his guts and knocks him onto his back. Then he reaches for the holster on his belt.

"That's going a bit far," whispers Lutz. He fires one shot.

At twenty metres, even I couldn't miss. The Hauptmann goes down as if poleaxed. Sergeant Lohr doubles the other leather coat over with a boot to the groin, then drops a stiffened hand on the back of his neck like a headsman's axe. A warning burst from Dieter sets the other three running for their lives. It's every man for himself these days, even against our own kind if they're not prepared to be reasonable.

Our Leutnant is out for the count. We leave him where he is for the moment while we tidy up. We dump the bodies out of sight of the road after relieving them of anything useful. Looting the dead is a routine and acceptable part of survival.

Otto gets a new pair of boots. I need one too, but the other pair is too small. We acquire some cigarettes and chocolate, which none of us has seen since the Leutnant's birthday. The boat can offer two rifle cases and someone's kitbag.

Otto and Peter win the draw for the pistols. They each get about fifty rounds of ammunition in a fancy leather pouch to go with them. The Oberst had a wooden box of fat, Dutch cigars in one of the pockets of his leather coat. Sergeant Lohr gives us one each, then stows the rest

away in his pack. He slips the Hauptmann's English gold lighter into the Kid's pocket as a sort of compensation for injuries received. The Oberst used matches.

Even if we discard both wooden rifle cases and the kitbag, the boat will not take all of us. A form of sixth sense prompts Peter to investigate the boxes instead of just tossing them out of the boat. Both contain food. Dieter tells us that he'd rather swim the bloody river than abandon food. He is not given the chance to prove the strength of his convictions. The Leutnant starts to come round. Sergeant Lohr gives him some brandy from a flask taken from the late Oberst. It makes him cough dreadfully, and probably does more harm than good.

In the meantime, Peter has found two civilian suits in the kitbag, along with a selection of shirts, collars, silk ties, underwear, socks, and two pairs of civilian shoes. The garments and the shoes are of quite decent quality, but nothing special, and have Swiss labels. It looks as though the two officers and gentlemen were planning to hand in their resignations in the near future.

Five is a safe number for the boat, according to Otto; who is a student of engineering and claims to have had more education than the rest of us put together. An argument breaks out over who is to stay behind. Sergeant Lohr wants to stay with the rearguard, but we insist that he remains with the Kid.

Sergeant Lohr is thirty-one now but he looks ten years older. Only he can give fatherly advice to the Leutnant now that Louis is dead. The Kid seems to believe that the experience to give worthwhile advice is possessed only by people older than his brother Karl, who is twenty-three and a prisoner of war in Canada.

As winners of the draw for the pistols, it is obvious that Otto and Peter must bring up the rear. Dieter gets his cards out again. I cut a deuce. We are a very democratic group. Any such important decisions are left to blind chance. Eating chocolate in leisurely, delicate nibbles and smoking our fat cigars like aristocrats, we stroll along the bank, watching the progress of the rowing boat. Even with four of them straining at the oars, the current takes our comrades three metres downstream for every one metre forward.

Otto and I are shouting encouragement to Albert and Lutz, who are making the return journey. Suddenly, Peter shuts us up, reminding us that he has been strangely silent for some time. Sergeant Lohr is waving frantically from the opposite bank and pointing to our left, in the upstream direction. Lutz pauses and looks over his shoulder. He shouts

something to us about cavalry, then starts to row harder and faster.

"Come on!" shouts Peter, stirred into action now that a vague feeling of unease has been confirmed as a warning of immediate danger.

We chase after him, tugging grenades from our belts. It is the troop of brown greatcoats and their comic opera officer whom we saw earlier. They are jogging along, chatting cheerfully. Most of them are smoking, and a couple of them are swaying gently in their saddles. They look as though they have just spent a hard morning in a bar somewhere. A blood-stained dressing covering the right cheek of one of the unsteady riders tells us that they have been fighting, and their general demeanour suggests that they won.

One of the riders spots the boat and lets out a bellow. Their leader's sword sweeps from its scabbard in a glittering arc. Howling outlandish war cries, they dig their spurs into their mounts and charge up the road.

They are thirty metres away when we let fly. One of Otto's grenades knocks the officer's fancy hat flying. We throw four grenades each, then dive for the shelter of the biggest trees. A wave of explosions erupts among the horsemen before they know what is happening. Steel splinters carve viciously into our trees. Then we start for the boat, leaving a heaving mass of flesh on the road.

Dreadful screams from horses and men follow us as we dodge from tree to tree, braced for the bullet in the back, but forcing ourselves to try to outrun it to steal a few more moments of tormented life. Breath rasps in and out, desiccating our already parched throats. The need to survive spurs us mercilessly.

The boat is still over a metre from the bank when we dive aboard. Peter takes an oar from a grey-faced Lutz, who is panting like a stranded fish. Albert looks capable of rowing us to the sea and back on his own. Our voyage across the racing torrent seems to take an hour. The effort of breathing, shaking hands, and the pitching of the boat rob us of the means of self-defence. Fortunately, the horsemen remain tangled until we are out of range.

When we reach the other side of the river, we are too far downstream to see the horseman. We scramble ashore and start to run directly away from the muddy river, leaving the boat at its mercy. After about a kilometre, we can go no further.

The Leutnant allows us five minute's rest, which serves only to emphasize our exhaustion, before urging us onward. Otto and I have to take one of the wooden cases. Lutz and Albert take the other one. Food is much too important to abandon.



We come to a shattered railway line after about ten minutes. Having checked carefully for trains, aircraft, repair crews, and just casual loafers, we cross the open space at our top speed and head directly away from the lines. The ground starts to rise to our front. We turn to the west and more level going.

Poor and insufficient food has reduced our reserves of strength to virtually nil. The Leutnant tells us to finish the chocolate to give us energy when we take our next break. We chew it joylessly, sprawled on the flank of either a huge hill or a young mountain, and feel no different afterwards. Our rest stretches to a quarter of an hour before we feel capable of struggling to our feet and carrying on.

Our plod towards the Americans and surrender loses all urgency. We are too far away to be connected with the explosions across the river. We rush across a main road. There is another railway some distance ahead. We hope that it has been bombed thoroughly. If it has, there will not be any American fighters hanging around to shoot at trains or any other tempting targets.

An age later, we collapse into a shallow depression in a stretch of hilly woodland. Albert says the time is about seven o'clock in the evening. We dropped together, as if to an order, like discarded puppets. Dieter starts to moan about deserting. No true Berliner will ever walk when he can take a tram.

Lutz, who comes from one of the small spa towns to the south of Köln, tells him that we couldn't scrape together one tram fare to the next town, never mind to the huge, gloomy tenements of the Ackerstraße in Berlin. Dieter doesn't care. He's still going to desert when he gets his breath back. We have been hearing the same tune for two years now, whenever depression loosens his tongue. His catalogue of things he's going to do when he gets home again has the soothing, familiar qualities of a lullaby. His list is his alternative to the desert hotel.

The endless folds of land around us are brown and black, and strewn with low trees and tangled bushes. The branches of the deciduous trees are bare, but I can see buds on the ones near me. Then I realize that they should have opened. They are dead. Something has killed all of the trees and bushes around us.

We are in the sort of country that can swallow an entire defending army. There could be thousands of armed men concealed around us, watching our movements with fingers on triggers, ready to wipe us out almost before we register the first shot. I find it a very creepy place.

We skirted numerous small villages during the afternoon. The secret

nature of the area seems to have rubbed off on the locals. Many of the houses which we saw were built into the side of a sheltering hill. They look quite normal from the front, but are almost invisible from the rear. A day dreamer could stray quite easily onto the combination of board and thatched roof. Weathered timbers on the gable ends and small, grimy windows told of age and neglect, and unprosperous times. But they were homes for families; homes for women, children, and old men who may be waiting for someone just like ourselves to return from this endless war. But will they recognise the returning soldier?

The Kid allows us a long rest, mainly because he recognizes the impossibility of getting us moving again in a hurry. Not that he is in any better shape than the rest of us, but an officer is expected to set a good example when his men sink into listless lack of enthusiasm for the job in hand.

Thickening clouds swallow a yellow glow, which is nearing a range of hills on the western horizon. Big, fat drops of rain start to fall as we prepare to march on. It becomes very dark and cold within minutes. Our American rain capes keep the downpour out, but my boots are leaking where the stronger stitching has burst through rotten leather.

Albert and I are carrying one of the food boxes. Our hands are purple from cold. Otto is sneezing continuously and can hardly see where he is going. None of us wants to get too close to him in case we catch his cold.

Our spirits are at rock bottom. Cold and miserable, lost in a rainstorm, we tramp across an unwanted part of Bohemia. We have reached the stage where nothing can happen to make our existence a fraction more wretched.

Albert starts to drift to the left. I allow him to pull me in that direction. Even the Kid changes course, perhaps because he senses that there is more purpose in Albert's chosen direction than his own.

Shelter! Albert leads us to a hut built against a low hill. The rest of us see it only when we are almost on top of the place. The roof is covered with grass, and seems to be no more than a change of angle of slope of the hill. A perfect camouflage of green overgrowth smothers the wooden walls.

We crowd inside, discovering to our joy that the wooden section opens out into a decent-sized cave in solid rock. Visions of eight of us trying to sleep in a space two metres by three, packed like sardines, fade mercifully. There are no windows in our refuge, just four holes about the size of a hand chopped roughly through the wooden walls at

shoulder height. We leave the door open for the moment so that we can see to explore.

Groping about in the last dregs of daylight, we find a generous supply of logs at the back of the cave, and a stone and brick chimney. A black puddle in the hearth and a meandering river, which reaches the door, show just how much rain has fallen in the last half hour.

The fire provides both heat and light, and a pleasant mask of woodsmoke to cover a damp, earthy smell in the cave. Peter, Lutz, and Dieter are already sleeping, and my eyes won't stay open. The last thing I remember is Albert telling the Leutnant that he will take the first guard duty. How he will keep his eyes open is a mystery to me. I suspect he's just saying it to keep the Kid happy.

Our steaming clothes have filled the hut with mist. Or maybe my eyes are closed.

## 8000

I wake into a dream world. I am warm and dry, and the air is full of delicious smells. My mind is a blank, but I will be able to name each aroma given time. Then I move. The dream shatters. I am stiff and sore. Every slight twitch is agony. Albert laughs at my piteous groans. He is crouching beside a glowing fire, stirring something in a steel helmet.

“God! I feel terrible,” I moan. “What’s that?”

“Breakfast,” he replies shortly. “Make yourself useful. Go and get some water.”

I creak to my feet. The stiffness eases with movement. I pick up a helmet and follow the direction of his finger to the door. It is still raining; heavily. Albert has spread his cape out on a framework of sticks to catch rain water. I jet my own contribution into the deluge from the shelter of the overhanging roof, then dash out into the rain to fill the helmet at the improvised well.

Breakfast is a delight. We stuff ourselves with porridge flavoured with honey and kirsch. Then we sit around the hearth drinking real coffee spiked with British naval rum and smoking American cigarettes, which taste fractionally better than Russian tobacco. We have to keep the door closed to exclude an icy draught, but Albert found a box tucked away in a niche at the back of the cave. It is packed with short, squat candles. Half a dozen of them add a flickering, peaceful, almost festive light to the glow of a cooking fire.

We knew that the SS are a very special bunch, but we had no idea that their officers lived so well. We haven’t explored our captured rifle cases fully yet. Just looking at the profusion of exotic tins, bottles, and packages makes our heads spin. We are all very ordinary fellows; tough, dirty, and half starved. The prospect of caviar and then peaches in syrup for lunch makes us dizzy in anticipation, even though none of us knows whether we will like caviar.

Otto and Dieter start to dig into our treasure chests after their coffee. They find a pair of weighted belts; one in each box. The belts are of dark brown leather, just over eight centimetres wide, and fitted with a plain, double-pronged brass buckle. Otto thinks that they might be diving belts, full of lead weights, but they look much too smart to be immersed in sea water. Peter, our blacksmith, tells us that the belts weigh about five kilos apiece.

Amid increasingly wild speculation as to the use of the belts, Sergeant Lohr picks at a securing rivet with his Siberian knife. Once we know what the weights look like, he thinks, we will be better able to guess the purpose of the mysterious belts.

Otto starts sneezing again. The Leutnant allows him a half mug of neat rum. We all know that alcohol poisons germs. Doktor Plotz always used to sterilize his instruments with vodka when he couldn't boil them. Hans from Remsburg used to drink the vodka afterwards. We're sure that's what killed him; by giving him the confidence to take a stroll along *Sniper Allee* on a sunny afternoon.

Not that the cannon fodder are safe anywhere in a war. Anywhere, anytime, happy or bloody miserable, awake or sleeping, you can never be sure that your next moment won't be your last. Living with this, it's no wonder that we no longer behave as normal human beings. In ordinary life, a man reacts in one of three ways to a threat: he runs, he fights, either with his fists or by legal means, or he bows down. We have two responses; we run, or we kill and keep on killing until our enemies are all dead or we can flee for our lives. We did both yesterday. The manly virtues of a good clean fight and fair play have no place in a modern war. Desperation, fear, and a touch of healthy cowardice are what keep us alive.

Sergeant Lohr drops his knife to the hard earth floor of the hut. The top rivet surrenders. Lohr gives a short laugh of triumph. Stitching along the middle divides the belt into two compartments. When Lohr shakes the belt towards his palm, two small discs tumble from the upper compartment. They have a dull, yellow sheen in the candle light.

"Brass, not lead," remarks Dieter.

"Odd," remarks the Leutnant when they reach him.

"This isn't brass," says Peter, who ought to know. "It's too heavy. And look at the edge. It's all wrinkled like a coin."

The same thought seems to strike all of us simultaneously. If not brass, then the yellow metal must be . . . We dare not complete the chain. The Leutnant heaves himself to his feet and strolls over to the

door. We crowd around him. In daylight, we can see that the discs have a bright, polished sheen and milled edges. They can only be gold coins.

Each measures less than two centimetres across and is over a millimetre thick. On one side is a German eagle, similar to the ones on our tunics. The eagle's claws are clutching a laurel wreath, which encloses a fat swastika. In a downward loop from tip to tip of the eagle's wings stretches the word 'REICHSNOTBANK'. On the other side, we find the figure '75' in squat numerals, and around it, 'SONDERGELD R.N.B.(M) 1944'.

Curiously, the lettering and designs are stamped into the coins, rather than standing up from them. When we examine a few more, we find that the inscriptions are not always central. The Leutnant says that this shows the work was done by hand and in something of a hurry. According to Otto, they are travelling money for officers on the run. The rest of us had worked this out for ourselves and we tell him so. He just laughs. The rum seems to have lifted his spirits.

Mistrustful of our good fortune, we open the other three securing rivets and shake the two belts. A shower of coins hits the floor. As soon as we are sure that we have become disgustingly rich, we make some more coffee and light the last of the cigars taken from our benefactor, the late Oberst of the SS. Each belt contains seventy coins in two rows of thirty-five. Peter decides that the figure '75' refers to a gold content of that many grammes.

Further exploration of the boxes yields half a dozen bars of scented soap, shaving sticks, and a box containing seven razors; one for each day of the week; and a quarter litre bottle of *Kölnisches Wasser*. Much to the Leutnant's delight, we all decide to behave like real gentlemen and take a helmet bath; an all-over wash assisted by the sheer luxury of a helmetful of hot water.

The Kid has had a good upbringing, and he used to believe that soldiers ought to look like smart, parade ground toys rather than filthy tramps; until a Russian sniper put a painful crease across his chest and he was converted to the belief that bright buttons attract bullets like magnets. But he still maintains that self-respect involves cleanliness.

He calls us excellent fellows, which is high praise, when we decide to wash our socks and underwear after shaving. Then we do our best to make our uniforms look a little more presentable. It is pouring down outside, and we have nothing better to do.

Surprisingly, this dull, domestic routine helps us to forget for a while that we are stuck far from home in the middle of a war. We could as

easily have been in our barracks at Remsbach, preparing for a Friday inspection; except that the *Kölnisches Wasser* on our clean and smooth cheeks makes us smell like a bunch of tarts.

Around midday, peach halves in syrup follow biscuits smothered with tinned butter and caviar as our luncheon. Our common opinion is that the black fish eggs are fairly tasty, a bit on the salty side, and nothing to get wildly excited about.

The rain stops in the early afternoon. We spend most of the time dozing and playing cards. We will not continue our journey until the world has had a chance to drain a little.

An hour from sunset, by Albert's mental clock, we divide most of the remaining food more or less evenly and fill our water bottles; one with rainwater and the other with a spirit or liqueur. We each take two candles from our unknown host's supply, and leave a bottle of vodka and five packets of American cigarettes as payment.

Just for a change, we have a final brew of Russian tea, sweetening it with honey, and make some cigarettes with Russian tobacco. Four more pages of Peter's New Testament go up in smoke. We have reached Chapter 24 of St. Luke's Gospel. We are becoming thrifty again.

My helmet smells of coffee. Our cooking pots have been transformed into military headgear again. Helmets are among the most useful items issued to us. Cooking pot, drinking vessel, basket for eggs when we can steal them; they take us just across the border from mere existence to modest comfort. Feldwebel Krause, the terror of Remsbach, would probably die from a long-overdue heart attack if he could see the fire-blackened shells beneath our freshly-filled camouflage nets. Assuming he's still alive.

The Kid takes a last look at his tattered map, then folds it carefully and slides it back into a scuffed leather pouch. The hut is about four kilometres from the border between Saxony and Bohemia, about thirty from what is left of Dresden, about sixty from Chemnitz, and nine kilometres north-west of the nearest Czechoslovakian town.

Knowing our approximate position, assuming the Kid's navigation is not hopelessly wrong, doesn't tell us where the front is. Fearing the worst, we are reluctant to head north, the shortest route back to the Reich. We have no desire to struggle across the Erzgebirge to find the Ivans waiting for us. Reason tells us that the front with the Americans cannot be too far away to the west.

Our plan is to keep to the foothills for the next couple of nights, then to descend into the valley of the river Eger and cross the Fichtelgebirge into Bavaria. When we are safely back in our own country, there will be very little left to do other than to surrender to the Americans in a regulation fashion. We are not looking forward to that.

The idea of giving up without being beaten offends us. But our country has lost the war. There is absolutely no point in getting ourselves killed fighting for a cause which no longer exists. Fatal pride must take second place to the realities of survival.

We reach another shattered railway line. There is a glorious sunset over the mountains ahead of us. Later, a waning half-Moon allows us to see where we are treading, but makes us very visible. We watch it sneaking in and out of the scattered clouds with mixed feelings. An unsettling stillness surrounds us. We are too keyed up to enjoy a nice night.

At around midnight, we pause for a meal of tinned meat and biscuits. We decide not to risk a fire until morning. Sitting cross-legged on his rain cape like a barely visible Buddha, Peter remarks that Sunday ought to be a day of rest. Otto tells him that Sundays have been suspended for the duration. After four and a half years in the Army, that sounds almost reasonable to me. It seems more like four and a half lifetimes, and much more ridiculous things have happened.

We have come a long way since I was called up on October 24th, 1940; most of it downhill recently. How anyone could have survived so long is beyond me. Otto was called up two months after me, in December. We have nine years service between us, and neither of us has even reached the exalted rank of Gefreiter. We seem to be invisible when they're looking for someone to promote.

Sergeant Lohr has been a soldier for eleven years. No wonder he looks so old and weary. He's the only one of us with a decent medal, but he never wears it. He thinks that an Iron Cross First Class makes a good target for a sniper. They gave the Kid a Second Class for Christmas. He's secretly very proud of the scrap of ribbon stuck to his buttonhole. And we gave him a very decent party to celebrate. I suppose the poor sod deserves a few scraps of tin for putting up with us. I know, I wouldn't like the job.

After a cushy number with some unit in Toulon, where his French step-father has some sort of business, Russia nearly finished him off right away. The other platoons were giving two-to-one he wouldn't last a week, and five-to-one he wouldn't be around at the end of the month.



I suppose that was when we developed the habit of looking after him. And picked up a small fortune in trade goods; food, tobacco, drink, and so on.

The trouble was, he came to the Eastern Front convinced that he was going to die, and wanting to end his days a hero so that his mother would be proud of him. And he was a bit snooty at first. It took us quite a long time to convince him that his old mum and dad would rather see his happy, smiling face at the end of the war than receive a black-edged sheet of paper telling them that Leutnant S. Paul Hals has fallen for Führer and Fatherland. 'I deeply regret' and talk of 'undying memory' from someone who never met the Kid are a poor substitute for a son; as families all over the world have discovered in the last few years.

"Are you joining us, Jürgen? Or are you happy here?" asks Lutz.

My thoughts scatter. The others are ready to move on, grinning down at me in the cloud-filtered moonlight. I struggle into my rain cape, feeling cold all of a sudden.

We continue on into the Bohemian night, taking a five-minute break every hour by Albert's mental clock.

By two o'clock on a chilly morning, we have left the hut a good twenty kilometres behind. The basis of the Leutnant's navigation remains obscure; he might just be trying to keep up morale. Dieter and Lutz are out ahead of us, scouting. We have found a quiet road going our way, which makes our progress faster and more certain than across country.

At a turning in the road, our scouts wave a stop signal back to the main body. After a moment, they wave an all-clear and disappear round the corner. We reach the turning about twenty seconds later.

There is a truck on the road; just a vague shape. We see two men standing in front of a dimmed headlight holding a large sheet of paper. One of them looks up and spots our comrades approaching at a leisurely stroll.

"Hey, buddy! Where the hell are we?" coincides with a cheerful greeting from Dieter.

"Yanks!" shouts Dieter as the Americans scream, "Krauts!"

Three shots split the night apart. The Americans spin away from their truck. One of them writhes and twitches horribly for a few moments, then lies still. Sergeant Lohr and Otto burst through the scanty hedge on our left and race down a field towards the truck. The rest of us stand by to give them covering fire. Dieter and Lutz have become invisible humps at the side of the road.

Both Americans are dead. The idiots left their rifles in the cab of their truck. We dump the bodies in the ditch at the side of the road, out of the way. Peter retrieves their map. It is just a sketch, and makes no sense to us. We discard it and pile cheerfully into the truck to continue our journey with a little style.

After about an hour of cautious driving along bad roads, the engine begins to splutter. We are out of petrol, and there is no reserve. Both tins in the back of the truck are empty. We are not sure whether to curse the Yanks for getting lost and using up most of their fuel, or to feel happy that we are about thirty-five kilometres closer to home.

There is nothing of any use in the truck, so we just leave it and continue into the night on foot. There is just about enough light to allow us to find our way along the roads.

Dawn finds us in lightly wooded country about four kilometres from the point at which the railway line crosses to our side of the river Eger. Odd parts of the bridge break the surface of the river in the middle. We saw them when we filled our water bottles. The railway line has been well bombed, and we do not expect any traffic along it. We know from experience just how much work is involved in making tracks serviceable again.

The Leutnant decides that we deserve a rest. Working with the smooth precision of a well-drilled squad, we construct a framework of branches and cover it with rain capes, making a broad, low tent something like a sagging Red Indian teepee.

We are not completely alone here. Single trucks and small convoys can be heard on the road to our left, and there are aircraft; flying high enough to leave a white trail among the clouds and ignoring everything happening on the ground. Some distance to the south, and perhaps even to the east of our position, we can hear gunfire. This is the time of day when the artillery remind everyone else of their presence. For once, we are a long way from the bastards.

The Leutnant places us about fifteen kilometres north-east of Karlsbad. Otto looks over his shoulder at the map, then suggests that we steal a truck and head south for Pilsen and all that beer. We sneer at the direction, but not at the idea of stealing a truck. General Patton and his mob will have scoffed all the beer by now. But foot-slogging is for the infantry. We are pioneers.

We have another reason for wanting to move more rapidly. Odd things are happening in this sector. We were able to see lights in several

of the large towns which we by-passed in the night. Why strict blackout regulations are not in force is a mystery. Perhaps the Americans can no longer be bothered bombing us. Just the same, the irregularity is unsettling.

When the shelter is ready, Dieter gets his cards out. Fate selects Sergeant Lohr and myself to take the first watch. The others are asleep long before the water in my helmet begins to boil. At least we can have some proper coffee to keep us awake until our stag is over.

Albert tells us that it is three o'clock in the afternoon. We are unable to sleep any more, and keep darting glances at the Kid, hinting that we are ready to be led. It is Otto's turn to make some tea, which means that it will be flavoured with peach liqueur from his reserve water bottle.

"How bad is it?" asks the Leutnant when he notices me examining the burst stitching of my right boot.

"I don't think it'll stand another night's march," I tell him. "It's only held together by will-power at the moment."

"Looks like we need some more transport," he says with a grave nod. "Unless there's a shoe shop around here."

We devise a very simple plan. There is a small road about half a kilometre in front of us. Combining reports from those who stood watches during the late morning and early afternoon, we determine that no more than four or five vehicles per hour use the road. We will wait in ambush, stop some suitable vehicle, and drive away with or without the original occupants, according to how co-operative they are.

After tea, we strip our camp and return the small clearing to its original condition. Something speeds along the road as we are making our way towards it. The vehicle sounds like a staff car; much too small for eight of us.

Otto and Dieter take up positions behind some bushes at a slight bend in the road. The rest of us roll a large rock onto the road to prevent the next driver ignoring us, and go into hiding about twenty metres from the bend. We are reduced to waiting again.

The Leutnant sits down on the boulder and lights a cigarette, trying to look very Prussian and commanding. Close to, he looks rather small and frail; but distance may lend him a little authority. Sergeant Lohr chooses a patch of grass beside the road. The rest of us move under cover as a reserve.

We wait for about three-quarters of an hour. Then we hear an engine grinding up a steep stretch of hill in low gear. Otto's signals tell us that

there are two men in a truck big enough to carry all of us. We prepare for an argument.

The truck picks up speed, rounding the bend at a fair pace. It screeches to a halt five metres short of the boulder. There is a frozen pause, then a huge man in an American uniform climbs out and starts shouting at the Leutnant. He has masses of white stripes travelling up and down his brawny arms, and a cigar stub in a wide mouth. The Kid's jaw drops straight down, leaving him stuck with a comical expression of surprise.

Tired of yelling at an uncomprehending German, the American reaches for the holster on his right hip. Lutz drops him with a single shot through the head. Albert sprints up to the truck. He grabs the driver's head, which is sticking conveniently out of his window, and twists. The American's neck snaps with a dry crunch.

For the Americans, the climax of the soldier's constant nightmare was mercifully brief. Going into a battle or a minor skirmish gets harder, not easier, as you gain experience and a more complete knowledge of what can happen to you. We who live under an uncertain sentence of death come to realize that the real fear isn't of death itself, but the manner of dying; a dread that it will be prolonged.

We know that death is inevitable for some, and that we might be among those who fail to survive. But surprisingly, few of us become fatalists. We all develop a death wish from time to time, but, in general, we do everything in our power to save our own skins and to cheat impossible odds. Rest periods take on a more frantic air as we try to cram forty years of life into a few days or even a few hours of ceaseless excesses; just in case. It is often true that a soldier goes back to the front to recover from his leave.

Our officers soon learned not to expect too much from us on our first day back from a break. We may have been willing enough, because disobeying an order always means trouble, but lack of sleep, hangovers, and the lingering distortions of vast quantities of drink made the fact of co-operation an uncertain business. Anything attempted on that first day back at the front usually ended in disaster; sometimes with fatal consequences for many of those involved, officers included. But today, we are alert and ready for anything. And the Yanks have gone to find their desert hotel.

We carry the bodies away from the road and hide them among some bushes. Lutz claims the fat one's pistol. We each have one now. I acquire his boots. My feet are rather broad, and getting a pair to fit

comfortably is always a problem. These are mid-brown, and lace all the way up the front. When we take a closer look at the Mercedes truck, we notice that the German crosses on the doors have been painted over and replaced by white five-pointed stars.

There is a map in the cab; a proper one. To our utter astonishment, we discover that we are at least fifty kilometres behind the American lines. We had no idea that they had penetrated as far as Most in the north. No wonder the two Americans with our previous truck were not carrying their rifles about with them. No wonder the towns along the river were showing lights. I cannot remember when I last saw any of our Luftwaffe.

The new map shows that we are about sixty kilometres from the Bavarian border. We are almost home. We may be hundreds of kilometres from our family homes, if they still exist, but we will soon be back in our own country, where we belong.

Feeling quite cheerful, we drive along the road until we come to a path which leads into an overgrown forest. Peter turns left onto the path and bumps along it until we are out of sight of the road. We intend to complete our journey under the cover of night.

There are camouflage nets in the back, which we spread over the truck. Under the nets, we find half a dozen twenty-litre tins of petrol, four boxes of five thousand cigarettes, four dozen bottles of American whiskey, tins of proper coffee, a box of chocolate bars, another full of tins of Canadian salmon, and a large tin of fancy biscuits. We feel almost prosperous. The rewards of the last few days seem to be fate's way of compensating us in part for the miseries of the last few lost years. If only Louis could have shared them.

"Someone should have told those Yanks the black market's a risky business," remarks Dieter.

The rest of us are too busy opening tins of salmon with our bayonets to reply.

Later, Otto finds a small cash box between the seats in the cab. It is crammed with American money. As we have no idea of the value of the dollar, we are unable to decide whether there is a small fortune in the cash box, or merely a lot of low-value paper which adds up to a modest sum, but we have something to win or lose when we play cards.



It is very dark. Thick clouds cover the whole sky, shutting out a waning moon and the stars. Our cooking fire is just a deep glow in a circle of blackened stones. Albert puts the time at midnight. We climb into the truck and begin the last lap of our journey home. Otto has checked the engine and found it to be in reasonable condition. The petrol tank is nearly full, and so are we; of salmon and chocolate bars.

Lutz takes the wheel. He can speak English better than either Peter or Dieter, even though his accent tends to be more English than American. Dieter just picked up a few phrases from films to impress girls. The wine trade makes up most of Peter's vocabulary. Lutz has a cousin in Nottingham in England. He used to write to her twice a month, and visited her two or three times before the war ruined everything.

We are wearing our American rain capes. Fresh, bushy growth sprouts from our helmets to conceal their nationality. Our small road joins the main road to the south-west after about one and a half kilometres. When we reach the junction, we find a convoy heading the way we want to go, edging along a hard strip at the side of the road, passing an ocean of deep mud.

There is a huge, wet military policeman standing in the middle of our road. Lutz stops about five metres from his backside and sits chewing gum like a contented cow. The Kid, sitting on his right, tries to appear nonchalant. The rest of us sprawl on the camouflage nets, weapons ready but out of sight, pretending to be asleep.

Eight more trucks crawl past. Then the MP drips to a hut at the side of our road and waves us on. Lutz crawls round the perimeter of the lake of mud, then speeds up to tag on to the end of the convoy, which is racing along the middle of the road as though it is a one-way street. Some of the other vehicles are captured German trucks. We hope that no one will notice an extra one. And if the worst comes to the worst and

we are captured, that the Americans will notice that we are in uniform before they shoot us as spies.

The convoy swoops into Karlsbad at a terrific pace. The abrupt snaking of the road forces the leader to slow down, allowing us to stare in wonder at a town full of lights, American soldiers, and loud music. I think of Classical Greece when I look at the spa town. It must be the combination of ornate columns and destruction; but by bombs, not time. A sharper turn brings our speed down to a crawl, giving us the opportunity to take in more details of the ancient splendour of the town. The bomb damage is not too evident at night.

Two or three minutes later, we are out in countryside lit only by the trucks' headlights. The apparition of Karlsbad becomes uncertain memories.

We continue on through pine forests, flirting with the river Eger, racing through towns and villages like an express train. Just after one o'clock, we reach Eger. We pass along cobbled streets between tall buildings with four or five rows of small windows and crowned by a high roof inset with a double row of attic windows. The paint on the fronts of the buildings is in need of urgent attention. Perhaps the owners will be able to cheat enough out of the Americans to pay for much needed maintenance.

The Leutnant tells us that we have reached the gateway to Bohemia. Eger has seen more than its fair share of fighting over the centuries. The Bavarian border lies about five kilometres away. Our convoy continues in that direction instead of north to Plauen or south to Marienbad. We would feel quite exposed without our American guides.

Military police stop us twice; once on the outskirts of Eger, and again in the mountains. We assume that they are checking the papers of the officer in the lead vehicle. When we get going again, the MPs shine their torches on each vehicle as it passes. The fact that the convoy contains fifteen not fourteen vehicles does not seem to penetrate their thick skulls. They say the test for one of our Headhunters is to hit him over the head with a brick. If the brick breaks, he's in. Perhaps the Americans choose their MPs the same way.

It gets colder as we climb out of the Eger valley and into the Fichtelgebirge. Dieter starts to hum a filthy song about the life of a desert warrior. This mountain chill nips at our faces, but the huge, rocky walls, which blot out the clouds all around us, seem more of a protection than a threat. In our experience, it takes a wind which has

blown unchecked across hundred of kilometres of open plains to bring the temperature down from painful and hazardous to lethal. We can see reassuring black granite and spruce forests in the meadows lower down.

When the ground is a featureless white and merges without a break with a bleached sky, faces turn the same dead white as the smothering snow and careless fingers freeze to exposed metal. Even metals are unreliable in the numbing shock of the eastern winter. They can become as brittle as ice, and can shatter into millions of tiny fragments. The frozen ground, in contrast, becomes more impenetrable than the strongest armour plate.

It seems incredible that we were expected to fight a war under such extreme conditions that the simple act of drawing breath became a major effort. But we did; and here we are to tell the tale, sitting in a stolen truck, humming a filthy song. The contagion has touched the rest of us. We are all dreaming of a holiday in the middle of our nice, warm desert; in a shady oasis with a pool for swimming and a five-star hotel in which to spend the cold nights.

The hotel has an enormous bar and a magnificent restaurant downstairs, and a well-stocked brothel upstairs. We have explored the dream so often that it has become a shadow of reality which contains a little of all of us. It is as clear in our minds as our most vivid memories. The hotel is a refuge which we have visited countless times to preserve our sanity in a mad world. Our desert hotel is also our Valhalla. All our dead comrades are there, waiting for the war to catch us out.

The second military police checkpoint shakes us out of the dream. When we are safely past it, the Kid bangs on the roof of the cab. Sergeant Lohr leans over to the window at the back to find out what he wants. We are back in Germany.

The news cheers us enormously. I work a bottle of American whiskey out of its box and throw the stopper over the side of the truck. After a healthy swig, I pass the bottle on to Albert. I have tasted much better, but it has two essential qualities; it is alcoholic and it cost us nothing. Dieter opens the tin of biscuits and hands them round. We pass the bottle to the cab along with some biscuits and start another one.

The Kid warns us that anyone who gets drunk will be in trouble. There may still be some fighting ahead if the Yanks are not in a mood to take prisoners. We expect them to be a lot more civilized than the Ivans, but war does strange things to people. Given the chance to kill, maim, or torture without risk of reprisal or censure, the mildest fellow can reveal a surprisingly dark side to his character.



Two cigarettes past the border, Lutz starts to drop back from the convoy. When we are about 300 metres from the last truck, he pulls into the side of the road and switches the lights off. We watch the shrinking snake of red lights, wondering what the Kid is up to. Then the head of the convoy alters course, almost doubling back on the body as it turns from a south-westerly course to almost north.

The Leutnant tells us that the Americans seem to be heading for Bayreuth. He wants to take us somewhere bigger, where there will be a properly organized garrison and facilities for dealing decently with prisoners of war.

We have over three hours of darkness left. Time enough to reach Regensburg, or even München if our driver puts his foot down. Sergeant Lohr takes the wheel. Peter joins him in the cab in case he needs someone who can speak English. The rest of us get our heads down in the back of the truck.

The sun crawls up through a thick, red haze of brick-dust, as if delivering a warning. München looks like something out of a nightmare; a chess board of broken shells and great yawning gaps. In the sluggish dawn light, we see stone buildings made of soot and snowballs: dusted with blackness and cratered with lighter pock-marks. They look as though they are in the grip of a terrible disease.

The whole city reeks of defeat. We have seen the same elsewhere: Sergeant Lohr in Spain and Poland, some of us in France, some in the Balkans, and all of us in Russia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. But this is one of our own cities. That makes a difference.

Some of the buildings look completely undisturbed with dusty glass at all their windows. Other present blank screens of wood and cardboard to the rising sun. Masses of broken brick and huge barks of splintered timber are piled up on many of the pavements, but most of the roads are passable.

A familiar sickly-sweet smell of death blows from some of the ruins. All colour has gone from the city, leaving sullen, grey drabness, relieved only by signs in rather plain English script to guide Americans through the ruins.

As we drive through the deserted, tangled aftermath of the bombing, we do not feel beaten, cowed, subdued by a mightier cause. There is only an irrational mounting anger, a complete hatred for the Americans, the British, and all their allies; for all those who have contributed to the destruction of an ancient and once beautiful city.

Albert begins to sharpen his Siberian knife. The Kid has a dazed look in his eyes as we cruise along empty streets. At least half of the city is in ruins. Then the Leutnant puts into words what is in all our minds.

Shaking his head, he says: "Not here. We can't. Not here," in a hoarse whisper.

None of us has ever visited the south-eastern corner of our country before. Sergeant Lohr picks his way through the city from north to south, steering by the sun. We see a few Yanks, mostly military police, but none of them takes any notice of us. Feeling cheated out of a fight, we glare out at them from beneath the brims of our helmets, American cigarettes stuck at a defiant angle in our mouths.

All our weapons are cocked and ready for instant use. We have two grenades apiece. Given the slightest provocation, we are ready to give the occupying destroyers a taste of their own medicine as we end our part in the war with a final act of senseless self-destruction.

We leave München and head west in a rather aimless fashion. Our rage dies slowly. The Leutnant clicks the safety catch into the 'safe' position and thrusts his pistol into its holster. Dieter passes him a bottle. he takes a controlled swallow, then passes it on. We each take a modest drink, then hand it to Peter in the cab.

Something or nothing can trigger the form of temporary insanity known as fighting madness. We owe our lives to the tiredness and indifference of the American MPs. Had a pair of them tried to challenge us, we would be lying at the centre of a circle of dead by now, or fugitives under hot pursuit.

"Well, what do we do now?" asks Otto, half to himself.

The Kid just shrugs helplessly, out of ideas.

"I think we should stop somewhere for breakfast, then decide," says the ever practical Albert.

"Very well." The Leutnant takes his maps out.

Sergeant Lohr has turned off the main road. We are following a minor road through farmland and forest. We are lost. This road is probably too small to appear on a small-scale map, but we appear to have run off the western edge of all of them. Perhaps the Russians didn't expect to get this far.

"There's a farm over there," says Lutz helpfully. "Looks nice and quiet. Apart from the blackout, I bet they hardly noticed there's been a war."

The Leutnant bangs on the cab to attract Sergeant Lohr's attention, then tells him that we will stop in the farmyard for breakfast. We turn right, through an open gate, and into a muddy yard. Weathered

buildings surround us on three sides. Sergeant Lohr drives up to a barn. It is empty apart from a scattering of bales of hay at the back. He continues into it. Habit prompts us to put our transport out of sight, just to be on the safe side.

At a nod from the Leutnant, we leap from the truck and scout the rest of the farm buildings, leaving the house until last. Farms equal food, and food draws scrounging soldiers of all nationalities like a magnet. When we are satisfied that we have the place to ourselves, the Leutnant and Otto start across the yard to the door of the farmhouse. Dieter and I take up positions by the windows. Albert and Lutz have trotted round to the back. Sergeant Lohr and Peter are covering us from the barn.

We are in our own country and we expect to find our own people in the house. But even through the arrival of our truck failed to flush out any foraging Yanks, long, hard years of war have conditioned us to prepare for the unexpected.

A man of at least sixty answers the door. Otto and I step past him to search the house. Otto races up the stairs. I take the ground floor. A quick glance into each room confirms that there are no Americans there. An old woman looks up in surprise when I look into the kitchen. I bid her good morning and apologize for the intrusion. The Kid made it quite clear that we are to be polite and not to frighten the occupants. She has four children in the room with her. I say hello to them as well, but they just stare at me with big, round eyes.

We report back to the Leutnant, then step outside the house to show the old man that we have no intention of staying if not invited to do so. He is still asking the Leutnant if we are MPs. Even though the Leutnant has taken his rain cape off to prove that we are ordinary soldiers, the old man finds it hard to believe his eyes. About the only sensible thing he has said is that his name is Franz Liebelt.

Very politely, the Leutnant asks Herr Liebelt if there are any Americans in the immediate area. He ignores the question, asking instead what a group of German soldiers are doing riding around in an American truck, armed to the teeth.

"Has no one told you the war's over?" he adds with a smile suitable for a silly remark.

The Kid almost drops his Schmeisser on his foot. "Is that official?" he asks, not daring to believe that it could be.

Grinning, the old man disappears into his house. We stand there, just looking at the blue door, watching it swing slowly closed. The war has been all of our lives for so long that it seems impossible that it could

ever end. Can the Führer's Thousand Year Reich really have crumbled away? The physical trappings of the State, perhaps; but the memory will last at least that long. We are part of history now.

The farmer returns with a leaflet. The war is on its last legs in Europe. Our forces in the north surrendered to the British General Montgomery on Friday. All members of the German armed forces are ordered to lay down their arms and turn themselves over to the nearest unit of the Allies.

Herr Liebelt explains that an American aircraft dropped several bundles of these leaflets on his farm. He has been using them to light fires. We listen with a curious lack of emotion to the news that the Führer is dead. Grand Admiral Dönitz is our new leader. The heads of everything; government, the Party, industry, the armed services; all are being rounded up and slung in gaol; most of them to await a trial of sorts and a short drop on the end of a rope. But this is only to be expected.

The fact that we fell into the mess of the last six years is proof of their total failure. perhaps they should stretch the necks of the politicians on the other sides as well. And add the intermediate layer of administrators who organised the whole calamity, who made it possible for the leaders to say: 'Let there be war', and who made it impossible for the rest of us to do other than take up arms and be slaughtered by the million.

According to Herr Liebelt, we can expect neither justice nor mercy from the victors. We Germans are merely pawns now, subject to the vindictive and changeable whims of the conquerors. This was the reality of defeat in 1918. In his opinion, we shall end up signing another Treaty of Versailles so that we can have another European war in twenty years time.

It is a very depressing thought. Millions were slaughtered on the battlefields in the Great War. This war has brought destruction to every part of the Continent. Towns and cities remote from any front line have seen as much devastation as any formal battlefield. What will the allies have made of our V2 rockets in twenty years' time? According to reports, half of London was levelled by them. When death comes without warning from the skies in the next war, perhaps the whole of the British capital will go in a single day; or Berlin, or Paris, or even Moscow and New York. It could all be over before they've had a chance to call anyone up!

Our country is full of Reds now, according to Herr Liebelt. As the Allies are doing their best to identify and presumably exterminate all

Party members, vast numbers of people have decided to claim that they were secret Communists all though the war. Self-preservation makes it expedient to have been a traitor. They say that truth is the first casualty of war. It seems that the same applies to defeat. Denunciation is now a common method of settling old scores. Herr Liebelt finds it vastly amusing that many genuine Communists have come to grief labelled as Party members.

We make a note to warn Sergeant Lohr. He is a Party member; unless he's been thrown out for not paying his subscription. It was a good way of getting into the Army when he joined up in 1934. As an accredited National Socialist, he signed on as a sort of honorary Gefreiter, and was placed nearer the top of the list when promotions were in the wind.

Perhaps it's just as well he wasn't a more enthusiastic Party member. Had he reached the rank of General instead of Sergeant, he would be in prison, awaiting a fitting for a hemp collar, instead of at liberty with the rest of us. None of we others joined the Party, but we were all in the Hitler Jugend; apart from Leutnant Hals, who went to live in France at the age of about ten; and Dieter of course, who never joins anything of his own free will. The social pressures of his childhood pointed him in a quite different direction.

Herr Liebelt seems quite surprised to find out how many we are, but seems completely at ease in our presence. We were half expecting him to try to shoo us away when he learned that we had not come on official business, in case the Yanks dropped in and found his yard full of armed German soldiers.

We receive permission to set up camp on a stretch of hard ground between the barn and a tumble-down cowshed. Herr Liebelt brings a chair from the house and sits watching our morning routine. The sight of helmets of water boiling for shaving and coffee is nothing new to an old soldier. We wash in cold water using a cattle trough near the cowshed. But as it is a special occasion; the end of the war which has controlled our lives for so long; we have decided to allow ourselves the luxury of hot water for shaving.

Albert takes some tins of salmon and four chocolate bars over to the farmhouse and trades them for three round loaves and a slab of butter. Herr Liebelt has already had his breakfast, but he keeps eyeing the helmet of coffee. He has not tasted the real thing for over two years. When invited to join us, he fetches a cup from the house, along with sugar and a jug of fresh milk. Milk in coffee is as much a novelty to us as coffee in milk is to him. We pass a bottle of American whiskey round

when we have finished eating. Herr Liebelt takes his share, and seems to be enjoying our company.

The children creep out of the farmhouse to watch us, chocolate smeared around their mouths. Herr Liebelt tells us that they are his grandchildren; twin girls aged four, a boy of seven, and another of nine. The Leutnant warns us not to swear in front of the children; automatically, like a tired schoolmaster addressing a rowdy class. Rather hurt, Peter reminds him that we are not complete savages. Probably for the first time in many months, the Kid looks at us and sees people instead of a collection of uniforms. He meets Peter's eyes squarely and offers a general apology. Peter gives him a cigarette and tells him that we have very thick skins.

Here is a sign of the times. The Kid starting to lose his officer starch and becoming human again. What else, we ask ourselves, will the peace bring?

Frau Liebelt summons her husband. He leaves us reluctantly to attend to some household chore, taking the children with him. We get down to the serious business of deciding our future. We learned from the old man that the Russians are in Berlin, and all over eastern Germany from Lübeck to Dresden.

Sergeant Lohr and Dieter have no wish to return to their birthplace under the circumstances. Otto, who comes from a small town on the banks of the river Mulde, also has no intention of placing himself at the mercy of the Ivans. According to Herr Liebelt, all prisoners will be sent home after discharge from the Army as this will be a tidy way of keeping track of them. Our three easterners begin to wonder how far it is to Switzerland.

Peter goes over to the farmhouse to see whether they have map of Germany. It feels strange not knowing where we are in relation to known landmarks. He returns with a child's atlas. Opening it at a map of Europe, he hands it to the Leutnant, who begins to measure distances with his pencil.

Lucky Peter is the closest to his home. The distance to Rottweil is a mere 200 kilometres. We could drive that far in a morning. Albert is 400 kilometres from the family vineyards in Hesse, assuming that they are still intact. Lutz and myself are 500 kilometres from Mondorf on the Rhein and Hannover respectively, assuming they haven't been bombed to nothing. Toulon, where the Leutnant's mother and stepfather live, is 700 kilometres away in a straight line across Austria, part of Switzerland, and Italy.

Now that we know where we are, the question of what to do comes round again. The Leutnant picks up the leaflet given him by Herr Liebelt and reads through it reflectively.

"If it's all the same to you, Herr Leutnant," says Otto in a firm and very formal tone, "I refuse to surrender to the Yanks or anyone else now."

"And the same goes for me, I'm afraid," Dieter adds apologetically. "Not if we're going to end up with the Ivans in charge." Sergeant Lohr says nothing, but we can read from his troubled expression what he thinks.

"It occurs to me there's no need to surrender to anyone," says Lutz thoughtfully. His father is a lawyer, and Lutz tends to talk like one when he's working something out in his mind. "We took an oath of Loyalty to the Führer and the Reich. The Führer is dead now. And we only have to look about us to see what's happened to the Greater German Reich. Our country is no more than pieces of territory occupied by our various enemies. I put it to you, gentlemen, that for this reason, the German Army no longer exists. A non-country can't have an army. And as we can't possibly be members of a non-organization, we must be civilians by default and therefore victims of the war rather than participants."

We all sit and digest this opinion for a couple of minutes, like a jury. Lutz has obviously had more than his share of whiskey, but we are extremely reluctant to pick holes in his argument.

"I can't see anything wrong with that," says Sergeant Lohr at last, glancing at the Leutnant.

"It certainly solves our problem," I add. "All we have to do is shake hands, say goodbye, pick a direction, and start walking. No need to hang about talking about it."

"It's been nice knowing you, Jürgen" Lutz extends a hand towards me with a grin.

"Give me a chance to get my breath," I protest.

"And what do we do with all these?" asks the Kid. He plunges his hand into his pack and pulls out a handful of identity tokens. They slide from his hand to land on the ground with a hard clatter. Then he brings out another handful, and another.

We watch, spellbound, with growing feelings of horror and revulsion. Each of those tokens represents a comrade who is now dead. One of them belonged to Louis until three short days ago.

The Kid has been marching around with this growing weight of death on his back for months; ever since an Ivan tank machine-gunned and squashed our wounded to a bloody pulp. Hauptmann Adler died

blowing it up with a mine.

"My God!" breathes Peter. "There's hundreds of them!"

"Exactly sixty-eight," says the Kid wearily. "You don't expect me to just throw them away and forget all these men, do you? We owe it to their families to report what happened to them."

"I agreed," rumbles Albert.

"Before we start arguing," says Lutz, "let's think about the problem. I think we're all agreed that turning ourselves over to the Americans is out of the question for some of us. And it would result in a lot of messing about for the others. Our own military authorities might no longer exist, but what other official body is still functioning, war or no war?"

We exchange blank looks, then return our eyes to Lutz.

"The police, of course," he sighs, shaking his head at our stupidity. "We just have to take all the identity tokens to the nearest police station. Once they're entered in the day book, we can be sure they'll be passed on to the proper authority."

"The police!" repeats the Leutnant in a tone of wonder.

"Isn't he a clever little sod?" adds Otto, looking with respect at Lutz. "That certainly sorts that out."

"I'm merely able to think clearly in a crisis," says Lutz modestly. "They should have made me an officer."

Herr Liebelt rejoins us as we are wondering where we, as individuals rather than a group, go from here. Albert, Lutz, and Peter will be heading for home. The Leutnant is trying to decide on a route to Toulon and his family. The rest of us are not so sure that we have anywhere to go, apart from on with the Kid. We suspect that Dieter has a police record in Berlin, which is an added reason for him to head south.

I have lost all of my close relatives; either in the bombing or killed in various branches of the armed services. The war has more or less wiped us out. Otto and Sergeant Lohr are thinking of travelling. Germany holds very little for them any more.

Cutting across our musings, Herr Liebelt tells us that we will need papers. The Americans are doing their best to turn the region into a sort of prison without bars. They are trying to control everything with pieces of paper, to tie everyone down with a web of identity cards, rations books, travel permits, and similar documents.

It's the same system that the Party used in the days when membership of the Party was the main qualification for getting hold of a permit. The Americans have just reversed the membership requirements. Only non-



Party members and traitors get permits under their rules.

The object of the Americans' exercise is supposed to be to sift out Party members, remnants of the armed services who have gone underground, black marketeers, and other undesirables so that they can be separated from the civilian population. Anyone who does not have a proper set of papers is liable to be arrested and slung in gaol.

Given the present chaos, a prisoner could rot in his cell for months, or even years, before his true identity could be established. Herr Liebelt paints a very grim picture of our conquered land.

We gain the impression that he knows how to obtain the necessary documents if we do not wish to go through official channels. Old Liebelt strikes us as the sort of person who can change his political colours like a chameleon, according to the company. He can dine with Party officials, then go far a drink with the local Reds, and feel completely at ease all evening.

The only problem is payment. Official-looking pieces of paper are very expensive things. The Kid starts to tell Herr Liebelt that we have some American money. Dieter cuts him off with a coughing fit. He throws his American cigarette onto one of the fires as an explanation and swears that they are poisoned. Then he slips the magazine out of his MP40, clears the chamber, and tosses the sub-machine gun to the old man.

"Why not have a closer look at it?" he suggests.

"There's a thriving market for such things," admits Herr Liebelt. "Yanks go mad for decent souvenirs. Especially weapons they can claim they took from dead Nazis after wiping them out heroically. That rifle looks something special."

Lutz unloads his Russian sniper rifle and passes it to him. The weapon is in beautiful working condition, despite its slightly battered appearance.

"I think there's enough here for a full set of papers each, and a little more besides," says Dieter, showing the farmer a Tommy gun. "We can't pretend to be proper Nazis, but I don't suppose that will matter much to souvenir hunters."

"Well..," says Herr Liebelt cautiously, scanning our arsenal, "we'll see. I'll go and speak to someone. He should be able to fix you up. Pistols too. We should be able to sort something out for you."

"Just one thing before you go," says Dieter with a grin that would have suited a shark for warmth, "you were a soldier once, right? And you know how tricky these paper merchants are? It might be an idea to

hint to your friend he won't last long if he tries to cheat eight soldiers. And rob an ex-soldier of his rightful commission on the deal."

"Yes," nods Herr Liebelt, not perceiving a threat to himself. "One thing the Army teaches you is how to kill; the methods and how to make yourself go through with it. I'll mention it to him."

"Paint," says Otto, "We need some of that. And brushes."

"What for?" frowns Peter.

"For the truck," explains Otto. "I'm not ready to start walking yet, and I think it would be an idea to paint it some non-military colour. And lose the Yankee markings."

"I know a man who can get paint," nods Herr Liebelt. "But he'll want payment right away."

"Can you get it now?" asks Otto.

"Yes, it's on my way to see the paper merchant." The old man winks at Dieter conspiratorially.

Otto reaches into a pocket and produces a ten dollar bill. He hands it to Herr Liebelt, whose eyes widen satisfactorily. "We don't want pink, or lemon yellow, or anything stupid."

"I'll see what I can do," promises the farmer.

Assisted by Albert, Herr Liebelt harnesses a skinny horse to a two-wheeled cart, which looks in desperate need of a coat of paint. With a jaunty wave, he bounces onto the road and jingles off in a westerly direction.

Sergeant Lohr comes to a decision. He takes the identity token from around his neck and looks at it for a moment. Then he drops it onto the pile in front of the Lieutenant. Dieter glances at him. Then, with a small nod to himself, he too becomes one of the fallen.

"New papers. A new start with a new name," says the small Berliner.

This idea appeals to Otto and myself. There could be advantages to being able to rewrite the past in our own favour. As they are going home, the others decide to remain unembellished to avoid confusion.

Suddenly, we feel very tired, having been active or alert for most of the night. Otto gets stuck with guard duty, but doesn't seem too concerned. I think he's working out amendments to his past. The rest of us clear up our campsite and retire to the barn for some sleep.

The last thing that I remember is Dieter telling someone that he has found a rusting truck in one of the buildings. He is planning to buy the registration number from the old farmer when he returns from his expedition.



Towards midnight on that Tuesday night, an American Jeep speeds into the yard and pulls up in front of the farmhouse. Herr Liebelt hurries out to welcome the paper merchant. Dieter puts his cards away. We have been playing skat, using the American dollars as money. The paper merchant enters the barn carrying an open wooden box with a handle, such as a carpenter uses for his tools. He casts a speculative eye over our truck, but Dieter warns him not to come too close as the paint is still wet.

Those on watch during the day washed the mud from it, then applied the paint brought back by the old farmer. Our vehicle is now two shades of light blue, and so is the two-wheeled cart. We have also carried out some necessary repairs to the canvas shelter at the back. Except for Lutz, Albert, and Peter, we are going on to Toulon with the Kid to see that he gets home safely. We have nothing better to do, and it will round things off nicely.

Dieter takes charge of the negotiations. To our surprise, the paper merchant, Turmfalk, wants the Tommy guns as well as our German automatic weapons and Lutz's rifle. Herr Liebelt explains that black marketeers will pay well for them. Some of them like to mimic American gangsters from the prohibition era, and a Tommy gun is a necessary part of their equipment.

Turfalk seems rather disappointed when we tell him that we have no grenades left; even more so when we refuse to part with our pistols. We would not feel comfortable going unarmed, peace or no peace.

Turfalk checks that our automatic weapons and the rifle are all in working order, then asks: "What are you, Nazis or partisans?"

"What?" says Dieter blankly.

"It's all the same to me," continues Turmfalk. "But why anyone would want to keep the war going is a mystery to me."

"What's he talking about?" the Kid asks Herr Liebelt.

"The war's not over for everyone," he explains. "One or two fanatics are carrying on to the last gasp. Mainly because they're for the chop, one way or another. But a lot of the partisans are people like yourselves. They've come home and found nothing there. They're settling the score for dead wives, sweethearts, parents, and so on. They censor it out of the news, but stories of sabotage and ambushes of Allied officers get around. I think they want us to believe that we Germans have accepted the occupation of our country without a fight. Not that most of us have had any choice."

"Does anyone believe propaganda any more?" scoffs Otto.

"We've had quite enough of fighting for the moment," says the Leutnant with a sad smile. "All we want to do is get home as fast as possible. And without having to hang around being investigated by the Americans."

"It's all the same to me," repeats Turmfalk, indifferent to the truth. "What else have you got?"

"What you see," shrugs Dieter. "Bayonets, helmets . . ."

"You can't give bayonets away," scoffs the paper merchant. "I don't suppose you've got any SS daggers? No, you wouldn't. And you call those helmets?" He aims a mocking finger in the yellow glow of two hurricane lamps.

Peter warned us that using our helmets as cooking pots would destroy the temper of the steel. In their fire-blackened condition, they are clearly useless as souvenirs for Americans who want to go home heroes. But they keep our heads dry when it rains.

"Well, I suppose this will have to do," says Turmfalk, trying to keep a gleam of avarice out of his eyes when he looks at our rifles and automatic weapons. "You're not interested in selling the truck? Pity."

He produces a bewildering array of documents, bottles of ink, and rubber stamps from his workbox. Each of us acquires a certificate discharging him from the Wehrmacht. As our commanding officer, the Leutnant signs the ones for Albert, Lutz, and Peter. Dieter adds Oberst Ebener's signature to the rest. He was the Old Man's driver for a time, and performed this task whenever the Oberst was too drunk to be bothered with official papers. There will be no problems arising from these last forgeries. Oberst Ebener was killed two months ago, but no one ever found enough of his body to bury him.

Next, the paper merchant makes out four new pay books for those who opted for a change of identity or circumstances. There is much

scornful laughter when my rank of Hauptmann is confirmed as a result of field promotions. Otto wanted to go one better, but we convinced him that it would be rather too ambitious to become a Major.

Franz Lohr promotes himself to Feldwebel on his new identity documents. With surprising modesty, Dieter rises to the rank of Unteroffizier. As bad news always travels, they can give their last civilian addresses as flats in buildings which have been destroyed by bombing. And most of our regimental records have gone up in smoke, which makes later details of their military careers impossible to challenge. Despite our staff officers' passion for preserving them, when it came to a choice of transport for people or papers, our headquarters clerks became pyromaniacs to a man.

Finally, the paper merchant makes out marching orders: to Rottweil for Peter, to their homes further north for Albert and Lutz, and to Toulon for the rest of us. The ghost of Oberst Ebener signs them. Herr Liebelt takes Turmfalk over to the farmhouse when he has packed his workbox. We assume that he wishes to extract his commission in private.

Otto opens a bottle of American whiskey to celebrate our new civilian status. The Leutnant is rather embarrassed about his first name, which he believes that he has succeeded in keeping from us since he was posted to the regiment in August of last year. But we call him Herr Hals or Paul, and leave Siegfried in the obscurity it deserves.

Dieter and Franz Lohr try their new names for size, like a pair of boots. Switching to a new identity, they decide, is like changing billets; you don't know where you are for a while. Otto tries to make everyone call him 'Herr Hauptmann'. As fellow officers, the Kid and I are allowed to use his first name. The others settle for abuse.

When the second bottle of whiskey is empty, we settle down to sleep out our last night in uniform.

The war is over officially. One of Herr Liebelt's neighbours told him that it ended at one minute past midnight last night. It was on the wireless at around the time we were discharging ourselves from the Army. Wednesday, May 9th marks the end of the wasted years.

I, for one, didn't want to join the Army. An eighteen-year-old has much better things to do with his time than prepare to invade England. All through our basic training, most of us were hoping that Churchill would make terms with the Führer. But we ended up in a pioneer battalion attached to Field Marshal List's 12th Army. We went east

instead of west; through Romania into Bulgaria, and then through Yugoslavia to Greece.

After that, we kept drifting to the east; until the Ivans' October offensive in '43. And now, a year and a half later, we're back there we started from; a very few of us. We began the war full of terror; mainly of our first set of NCOs. Once we had learned to live with their random fits of military rigidity and occasional friendliness, the terror of anticipating our first battle took over. We have been scared stiff ever since. The end of the war leaves us in a state of numbed uncertainty.

Breakfast claims our attention. There are eggs for all; boiled for breakfast and scrambled for lunch. We enjoy the change as much as our host and his family enjoy the last of our salmon.

We have decided to travel west to the French border and then south, rather than taking the direct route to Toulon. We will have to cross only one frontier, and we will be able to drop Peter off at his home near Rottweil. Albert and Lutz will head north from there, following the river Neckar to Mannheim and the Rhein. Water transport along major rivers should be almost unaffected by the war, and present fewer complications than a faster means of transport. They both feel in need of a little time to adjust from soldiers to civilians. At Koblenz, Albert will head east along the Lahn to Marburg and the family vineyards. Lutz will continue along the Rhein to his home town of Mondorf.

Herr Liebelt is in the process of gathering some clothes for us. Apparently, many men are still wearing uniforms or parts of uniforms because they have nothing else. If we are now civilians, we wish to look the part. Our host has promised us jackets and shirts at least.

Finally, a chilly day slips into evening. We prepare to leave the farm at around eight o'clock. Otto remarks that one of us will have to buy a watch if we're losing Albert, and reminds us that our group will be down to five members in the morning. The ones who are going home are quite excited.

That dream filled my thoughts in the early days. And then I realized that the war would drag on until I stopped a bullet or a bomb found our house. I'm still alive, but the whole street where I grew up no longer exists. And neither do most of the people, my family included. I tried to drown that hurt in alcohol and Russian lives. Neither gave lasting relief.

Herr Liebelt ventures out into the wintry wind to see us off. He has done rather well out of our brief stay. The rest of the family watch from the windows of the farmhouse. It could be Christmas for the children; fancy biscuits and chocolate bars will be on their menu for a few days.

The older boy has Franz Lohr's Iron Cross pinned to his pullover.

I don't really have much of a store of childhood memories, but when I was the boy's age, the Reds and the Nazis were scrapping in the streets. These children may have seen the real thing; full-blooded combat with plenty of weapons and no rules. And no police to break it up. There are signs of fighting all round the farm. Trees and fences still show scars from bullets and shell splinters. They're not the sort of thing that kids should see.

We wave to them as Franz Lohr takes us through the ever-open gate of the farmyard and westwards. There is a curfew from sunset to sunrise, but we are prepared to plead ignorance or thump any MPs who try to stop us. This first leg of our journey requires the cover of night.

Dieter's cards have allowed Albert, Lutz, Peter, and Franz to change into their civilian clothing. The rest of us are still in uniform. We drive for about three hours at a modest speed, which is dictated by the poor quality of the side roads. Tanks have ripped them into a shocking state and nobody has bothered to do anything about the damage. Franz turns the wheel over to Peter and joins the group in the back of our truck. Peter turns north towards a slightly better road.

A scattering of lights ahead shows us that we are approaching a small town. There is a convenient side road leading into a forest just before it. Sheltered by trees, Peter brakes to a halt and switches the engine off. The Kid jumps out and swings his pack onto his back. We follow him into a light drizzle, wearing our American rain capes and our fire-blackened helmets. We can hardly see in the gloom of the forest, but we have developed a form of instinct which allows us to avoid the trees. Solid objects seem to exert a form of pressure on us to keep us clear of them.

I feel the old, familiar tension of anticipation building within me, mingled with a certain excitement. We are playing by different rules now. There is no danger of being killed in this quiet part of our own country. But I sense an echo of the weakening, gut-churning terror that precedes every night patrol.

Yet, for once, I'm not insisting that this moment be stretched out to last forever so that the next instant cannot bring death. For once, our mission is of our own devising. Thus we are not hoping that it will be called off at the last moment so that we can return to sheltering holes in the ground.

All that, impossibly, is behind us now. Never again will we hear Franz Lohr telling us to cheer up because we'll soon be dead. And the other

pointless remarks and jokes which cause such irritation in the quiet moments before a battle. At sometime or other, every one of us has entered the fighting hating his comrades more than the enemy, provoked beyond reason by a senseless remark; a stick poked into the shell of our isolation at a time when we wanted to be anywhere else but were too afraid to admit it.

But tonight, there is something almost dream-like about our armed advance on a peaceful mission. We approach the town cautiously in single file. It is very quiet, but there are still lights burning, all of them along the main road. We pass a café full of American soldiers. They are grouped around a wireless set. Bursts of laughter explode into the night at regular intervals.

About fifty metres on, we come to the police station. The Kid pauses to check that we have all pulled up an improvised mask to cover the lower part of the face. There are two American military police inside the police station, leaning on the desk and listening to the wireless. A rather ancient German Gendarm is sitting with his chin on his fists. The frown on his wrinkled face suggests that he is having some difficulty in following the quick-fire American programme.

The Leutnant unfastens his rain cape. One of the Americans glances at him. His eyes drift back to the wireless set, then jerk round to confirm an impression of a German uniform, a mask, and the pistol in the Kid's hand. Both MPs unfold to their full height, towering over any of us. Dieter says something to them in English. Meekly, they unbuckle their belts and dump holstered pistols on the desk. For all their size, a man with a gun is much bigger.

Dieter waves them to the back of the room. I collect the keys to the cells from the Gendarm. We take the Americans to the back of the police station and handcuff, tie, and gag them. Dieter and I take great care not to step into Otto's line of fire. The MPs look capable of tearing us to pieces with their bare hands, and certainly angry enough to make the attempt, given a sporting chance.

Dieter is cackling softly as he locks the door of their cell. I suppose it must be quite a twist of fate for him to be locking up policemen.

"Tell them we'll chuck a grenade in with them if we hear a squeak out of them," says Otto.

Dieter pulls a grenade out of his boot and holds it up to the barred window while he relays the message. We still have a few left, but Paul didn't think it would be wise to trust Turmfalk, the paper merchant, with hand grenades.



The Gendarm and Paul are hard at work when we return to the front of the building. Our former Leutnant is sorting through a heap of identity tokens and passing them to the ancient policeman, who is writing in the day book, listing names, ranks, service numbers, and a brief word on where and when our comrades died.

There is an expression of mingled concentration and relief on the Gendarm's folded face as he wields the scratchy old pen. This must be the first time that his police station has ever been held up.

Towards the end of the pile, the street door swings inwards. Another ancient Gendarm enters, moaning about the rain. Dieter kicks the door shut as soon as he is in the room and invites the Gendarm to take a chair and shut up. He just stands there, dripping gently onto the stone floor, and staring at four masked figures and his colleague.

"Come on, Dad," says Dieter, taking him by the arm.

The Gendarm moves to a chair without resistance, his face a pale mask of confusion. Paul pushes his pack towards me. I take out the bottle of American whiskey and slosh some into a thick china cup. The new arrival drinks the spirit straight down like water. His courage restored, he holds the cup out for a second helping and demands to know what is going on. His colleague tells him that he will explain later, and casts a longing glance at the bottle.

I pour him a drink as well. Dieter develops a cough. We all end up with a cup of whiskey. The police station has a cupboard full of crockery near the door to the cells, suggesting that the Gendarms do a lot of entertaining. Not wishing to strain our drinks through a mask, we take it in turns to present our backs to the Gendarms before swallowing.

Paul gets to identity token number sixty-one.

The Gendarm dips his pen into the inkwell, then stops. "Where did he come from?" he asks cautiously.

"Georg came from Ulm, didn't he?" says Paul.

"That's right," confirms Otto.

"Dark hair, always a bit too long, thin face, and a long, pointed nose?" asks the Gendarm.

"And didn't know his left foot from his right," Otto recalls. "But he could drive a truck as if it had wings."

"I know his father," says the Gendarm. "Arrested him twice before the war for stealing cars. Nasty piece of work. Oh, well." With a sigh, he continues to write.

They reach the last identity token. Dieter cannot repress a chuckle when he finds out that it is his.

"And now, gentlemen," says Paul apologetically, "I regret to tell you we'll have to tie you up. We'll try to make you as comfortable as possible. You should be able to work yourselves free in an hour or so." He puts the cork back in the whiskey bottle and hides it in one of the drawers of the desk. "I hope this will go some way towards making up for the inconvenience."

"Tell me, lad," says the Gendarm at the desk, "why are you making all this trouble for yourself? Why can't you just surrender to the Americans in an orderly fashion and hand these in at the same time?" He stirs the heap of identity tokens with the handle of his pen.

"And what would happen to us if we did?" says Dieter.

"They'd put you in a prisoner of war camp for a while," frowns the Gendarm. "Until they can check up on you. Then they'll send you home. Unless they don't like what they find out about you," he adds darkly.

"We've spent the last three years fighting the Ivans," Dieter tells him. "You don't think I'd be stupid enough to let them get their hands on me now, do you?"

"Why should they?"

"When the Americans send me home."

"You won't have to go back to Berlin if you don't want to," says the Gendarm, recognizing at last, the sing-song, vaguely slurred accent. "They won't send you anywhere you don't want to go."

"I'm not taking the risk," says Dieter shortly.

"The point is," says Paul, "the war's over. And now that we've discharged this last obligation to our fallen comrades, we just want to try and pick up our lives again. We don't want to be herded around like cattle by the Americans or shot by the Russians. They all had their chance to capture us while the war was on. And now it's over, all we want to do is forget it. If that's possible."

"Why should the Russians want to shoot you?" asks the other Gendarm.

"Because it's their way." Paul shrugs. "They find it much easier to pull a trigger than to argue."

"You're only making trouble for yourselves," persists the Gendarm at the desk.

"I'd like another drink before you tie me up," interrupts his more ancient colleague. Having decided that we mean him no harm, he has removed his wet greatcoat and moved his chair over to the fat stove. He has also discarded his belt with its holstered pistol. We didn't bother to

disarm him because it would take him about a week to draw his weapon.

Paul thinks for a moment, then reaches a decision. "Can they hear us?" He points to the door to the cells.

"Not with all the doors closed," replies the Gendarm at the desk.

"If you give us your word you'll do nothing for half an hour, it won't be necessary to tie you up."

"You're not going to trust cops, are you?" says Dieter sharply.

"Well?" asks Paul, ignoring him.

"The English killed my brother with their bombs, and the Americans killed one of my sons and two of my grandchildren." The older Gendarm pauses to spit through the open door of the stove. "I'm an old man. My eyes aren't very good, and neither is my memory. My doctor says my circulation isn't very good either. He warned me to avoid being tied to chairs."

"Good for you, Dad," approves Dieter, impressed in spite of himself by such good sense.

The Gendarm at the desk fixes the Leutnant with an inquisitorial glare. "Can you give me your word as an officer you've done nothing criminal?"

Paul shrugs. "We're soldiers. Or we were. To survive, we've had to kill, steal, lie, cheat, everything. We must have broken every law in the book at one time or another. If we'd been angels, we would be dead now."

"There have been reports of massacres committed by the SS, and of thousands of Jews murdered in concentration camps," persists the Gendarm. "Many of those responsible escaped. They're said to be posing as ordinary soldiers. Like yourselves," he adds significantly.

"The only massacres we saw were committed on the battlefield," returns Paul. "Or by the Ivans. They seem to take as much pleasure from slaughtering their own people as from murdering wounded and prisoners of war."

"The things that happened in the camps in the name of the German people are enough to turn your stomach," says the Gendarm. "We've heard all about it from the American MPs."

"In great detail," adds his colleague sourly. "Makes the swine feel superior."

"We've just come back from a concentration camp," Otto tells him. "They called it the Front. There, they shelled you for hours on end to soften you up for an attack, or just to drive you out of your mind. They

crushed the life out of you with tanks, they shot you, they blew you up with mines, bombs, and grenades.

"And if they didn't kill you right away, they left you with phosphorus burning your insides out, or with simple wounds that got infected and killed you by millimetres because there were no doctors or medical supplies. And if you didn't starve or freeze to death, there was cholera, dysentery, plague, and a hundred other diseases to finish you off. Not to mention the lice and other bugs eating you alive."

He delivers the dreadful catalogue in a calm, level voice, revealing a hidden side of himself. I have always considered him to be a rather coarse fellow; educated, yes, but insensitive and self-centred. But perhaps I'm doing him an injustice to think he'd remained untouched by the horrors of the last four years.

Fixing the Gendarm with angry eyes, Otto finishes: "How do your concentration camps stand up to that?"

"But that was on the battlefield," protests the Gendarm. "I was in the first war. I know what it's all about."

"War has moved off the battlefield these days," says Paul reflectively. "As Lutz says, they blow the whistle at the start, and everyone gets stuck in. The price of human life drops to nothing. And the homicidal maniacs dive into a mad scramble to do their share of the killing before they blow the final whistle."

"You think that excuses gassing thousands of Jews and butchering political opponents?" protests the Gendarm.

"It's not a question of excuses," replies Otto. "That's just a fact of war. No one's safe anywhere. But it's funny how nobody says a damn thing if a bloke gets killed with a rifle in his hand. Or if the ceiling of a bomb shelter comes down in a raid and crushes a few hundred old men, women and kids. But they're just as dead as anyone they bumped off in the camps."

"Maybe they should have dug them out of the camps and shoved them in the front line," suggests Dieter. "Let them take their chances with us."

"But these crimes have been committed by our own people against our own people. And it was all done in the name of the country you've been fighting for," insists the Gendarm.

I find myself laughing, which brings a look of strong disapproving surprise to the wrinkled face.

"Don't be ridiculous, old man," I tell him. "We haven't been fighting for the glory of the Greater German Reich. We started fighting only

because we were put in uniform, issued with guns, and sent to a place there they were shooting at us. But only for ourselves. To stay alive. We had no choice about joining up. And once you're in, refusing to fight means a court martial and a firing squad or a rope. Or deserting and going over to the Ivans to let them finish you off in one of their concentration camps. The only thing we wanted out of the war was to come through it alive and in one piece."

"But these criminals must be brought to justice," the Gendarm says indignantly. "The camp guards and their superiors."

"It's the will of the Americans," his older colleague adds sourly. "From the way they talk, most of them are Jews, or have Jews for their best friend. Not that most of them cared a scrap for their racial brethren before the war."

"It's *your* job, shoving people in clink," Dieter says to the Gendarm at the desk. "Don't expect us to be interested."

"Look," says Paul, cutting the discussion short. "We're saturated with the deaths of people we knew. We've no room for strangers. You can either believe we're from a pioneer battalion, not concentration camp guards, or you can be tied up. It's all the same to us."

The Gendarm looks down at his day book, scanning the list of names, dates, and places. It tells, in random order, the story of a journey which lasted eight months and ended on the banks of the river Elbe a few days ago. "Very well," he decides. "We'll sit here for half an hour. But you'd better leave us the ropes so that it looks like we untied ourselves."

"Agreed," Paul looks at Dieter and me. We shrug and drop a tangle of ropes behind each of the chairs. We are not too happy about his decision, but following his orders has become a habit which is not easy to break.

"I don't suppose you have any spare cigarettes, do you?" remarks the Gendarm at the stove hopefully.

The kid drops a full packet of American cigarettes onto the desk, beside the heap of identity tokens. Then he struggles into his rain cape and collects his pack. Otto opens the door a crack and peers out into the street. With a nod, he slips out onto the gloomy main street. Paul salutes the two policemen gravely, then follows Otto. He seems quite confident that the Gendarms will keep their word. Dieter and I are not so sure. I rather think that Otto would like them to raise the alarm so that we can get into a scrap with the American MPs.

Dieter still has a collection of keys. He locks the front door of the police station, then places the bunch on a window ledge and waves

cheekily to the Gendarms. If they try a double-cross, we will be able to see the window opening. Perhaps we should have done something about the telephone.

Just before the café full of Americans, Dieter throws something into the air as hard as he can. It arcs over the houses on the other side of the street, but we do not hear it fall because the Americans are singing too loudly.

"What was that?" asks Otto.

"The keys for the cells," chuckles Dieter. "Those Yanks are going to be stuck for a long, long time. Let's see how MPs like being in clink."

"Best place for them," cackles Otto.

Just past the café, Dieter starts to root through his pockets and slows down.

"What's up with you?" asks Franz Lohr.

Dieter produces a ten dollar note. "Thought I might jog in there and get us a couple of bottles of Sekt to celebrate." He nods back towards the café.

"Are you mad?" gasps Paul.

"Me?" protests Dieter. He unbuckles his belt and lets Otto take charge of his pistol and bayonet. I get his helmet.

"Back in a minute," he adds with a cheeky grin.

We carry on to the end of the street. If Dieter gets himself into trouble, he'll be grateful for a distant diversion. But he rejoins us a few minutes later, cackling softly over his success and carrying three bottles. If you have enough cheek, you can get away with almost anything; strolling into a café full of Americans wearing a German uniform and one of their rain capes included.

We stroll out of the town, surprised that no one has challenged us, even though there is supposed to be a curfew in operation. We are really civilians again, even though habit makes us walk in pairs with a blank file, and in step.

"Hauptmann von Hann!" says Otto, apparently drawing the name at random out of thin air.

"What about him?" Franz Lohr throws over his shoulder.

"I've been trying to remember his name," explains Otto. "He was C Company's commander for a while. We shared a shell hole for half a day during a bombardment."

"So what?" remarks Dieter.

"We got talking while we were stuck in our hole," says Otto. "Like you do. Anything to take your mind off the possibility of the next shell

landing in your lap. They posted him to one of the camps. He stuck it for about a week. Then he told his C.O. that Hauptmann Joachim von Hann had had a noseful of concentration camps, thank you very much. So they sent him out East. He was pretty choked about that.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” laughs Dieter. “He didn’t know when he was well off. Lucky he was an officer.”

“That’s right,” agrees Franz. “When someone like us says no, it’s mutiny. A court martial job.”

“They probably thought the Ivans would do the job of a firing squad for nothing,” says Otto. “Which they did. But the thing that really stuck in his throat was two other officers asked for transfers at the same time. One of them got a staff job in Berlin. And the other one ended up in Italy.”

“They didn’t end up much better off,” remarks Dieter.

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” agrees Paul. “That’s the war all over.”

It takes us about ten minutes to find our way back to the truck. Dieter shows off his bottles of Sekt and gives our comrades an embroidered account of our mission as we continue our journey on four wheels. Its success seems to have shaken him out of his usual shell of reticence. At the end of his tale, Franz Lohr remarks that he’s glad he wasn’t along on such a dangerous job. He’s getting too old for such things, he adds. The glow of his cigarette lights a broad grin.

After about an hour of travelling south and west, Paul decides that we had better take cover until morning. Lutz bounces off the neglected road and into a small wood. Silence and blackness rush in when he switches the engine and lights off. Out of sheer habit, we mount a guard. Peter volunteers to take the first watch. The rest of us make ourselves as comfortable as we can in the truck and fall asleep in minutes. Sleep is a very precious commodity to a soldier. We have learned how to snatch a few moments or a few hours at any time of the day or night. Albert and Lutz can even sleep through an artillery barrage, as long as the shells are not falling too close to our position. I wonder how they will be able to use this ability in civilian life.

Albert allows us sleep until it is full light on this second day of the peace. It seems strange that a Thursday should be the second day of anything. While not exactly bright and sunny, the day is warm and the sky cloaked with thin mist, which makes a welcome change from heavy

rain clouds. We wake to the sound of early-rising Albert banging on the wooden side of the truck. There is a delicious smell of coffee in the air, and something else. It is not until we look into the helmets on the fire that we remember that Herr Liebelt sold us two chickens.

As we sit down to a magnificent breakfast, we realize that Albert has cooked for us for the last time. Our group has been together for so long that the thought of someone leaving of his own free will seems vaguely treasonous. Partings caused by bullets, bombs, shells, or a Russian soldier with a sharpened trench shovel are something which we can understand and accept. Complete independence is to be learned. Chicken washed down with Dieter's sparkling white wine makes a very tasty meal.

After breakfast, Dieter and I dig a hole in the drying earth some distance from our camp. We change into our civilian clothing almost guiltily. Our group looks strange dressed in a variety of styles, colours, and types of material. Then we sever our last connection with the Army by burying our uniforms. Paul furtively pockets the ribbon of his Iron Cross before dumping his uniform into the hole. He darts glances at the rest of us, but we pretend to be looking elsewhere. If he wants something to remind him of the war, that's his business. Otto and Franz Lohr keep their trousers. Herr Liebelt the farmer was unable to find civilian pairs which fitted them to their satisfaction.

We are also burying our past with the uniforms; burying our memories of the war deep inside us to prepare for peacetime. We will have to learn new standards of thought and behaviour. The past can no longer guide us; neither our fighting experience nor our dim memories of life before the war. The world will have changed so much that we must start afresh. I find this a disturbing thought. For so long, my life has been beyond my own control. There has always been an officer, an NCO, or some unseen staff officer to do my thinking for me. There is a great temptation just to drift along with the others and let life take care of itself for a while, to postpone making any sort of decision on my future until it becomes absolutely necessary. When we have filled in the hole, Paul calls everyone over to the truck. He looks at each of us for a moment, then pulls the cork from a water bottle.

"Gentlemen," he begins, looking rather embarrassed, "we've just broken our last link with the Army. We are all plain civilians now. I know some of you rather resented me when I joined you. I'm younger than any of you, yet I was your eleven-week-wonder of an officer. Well, I must admit I was horrified when I saw you for the first time. I know



we didn't meet under the best of conditions, but I saw a dirty, undisciplined rabble . . ."

Dieter interrupts him with a mocking cheer of the sort that comes anonymously from the back of an unruly mob.

"Thank you," smiles Paul. "But I assure you, when I went back to my billet after meeting you, I was convinced the Ivans would wipe us all out in the first few minutes of the next attack."

"Actually," drawls Lutz, "quite a few people bet us our shiny new Leutnant wouldn't last a week. We made a small fortune out of your first week with us, Herr Leutnant."

"It's Paul now, Lutz," says the Kid. "Well, for whatever reason, whether we deserved to or not, we eight came out of it alive," he adds, continuing his speech. "And we showed the Ivans that one German soldier is worth twenty of them."

"Unfortunately," interrupts Otto, "the odds were thirty to one."

"To the Devil with it," says Paul through the laughter. "I'm not a speech-maker. What I wanted to do is have a last drink together out here where we're still free and our own masters. We'll be saying goodbye to Albert, Lutz, and Peter then we get to Rottweil. And the last of us will be splitting up when we get to Toulon." He passes the water bottle to Sergeant Lohr, who is now plain Franz to his comrades, but someone completely different according to the papers in his pocket. "All I want to say really is that I'm glad I met you, and I'll never forget any of you."

"Here's to you, Paul." Franz Lohr raises the water bottle to his lips and takes a cautious swallow, expecting to find American whiskey trickling down his throat. A broad grin splits his battered face and he takes a second, more enthusiastic gulp. "So that's where the last bottle of brandy went," he remarks as he passes the bottle on to Otto.

When the water bottle returns to Paul, we insist that he drains it. Then, smoking American cigarettes, we prepare to resume our journey. I find that the peculiar American tobacco is starting to lose its strangeness. I suppose that proves you can get used to anything, given time.

After an hour and a half on the road, we come to a huge stretch of water. Dieter looks at it for a moment, then remarks, half to himself, that we can't have reached the sea already. Peter laughs and tells him that he is half right. We have reached the Bodensee. We know where we are now. We roll the canvas sides of the shelter at the back of the truck up

to the roof to give ourselves a view of the lake. All we have to do now is follow the northern bank, then head north-west. Peter's home is two hours away.

The road snakes lazily. There are lush forests to our right, and deep, blue waters to the left. We marvel at the tranquillity of it all. Then Lutz's sharp eyes spot another vehicle coming towards us. Those in the back are thrown into a heap on the floor when he brakes abruptly and turns down a track leading into the trees. A storm of curses breaks over the cab; until he halts and tells us to shut up.

A Jeep full of Americans cruises past the mouth of the track, then stops. Loud, laughing voices filter back to us.

"What is it?" hisses Paul. "Why have they stopped?"

Dieter shrugs helplessly, unable to pick a thread of meaning from the distant babble. He scratches his nose with the muzzle of his pistol, his face contorted into a fearsome scowl of concentration. I look down; to see that I, too, have drawn my pistol. So have we all.

"Are they looking for us?" whispers Paul.

"I think they're talking about basketball," decides Lutz. "I don't think they even saw us. And if they did, they're not looking for the gang that held up that police station."

"There's nothing to connect us with those criminals anyway," adds Dieter.

"We'd better make sure," Paul becomes a Leutnant again. "Sergeant, you stay with the vehicle with Otto and Peter. Albert and Dieter; scouts. Lutz and Jürgen, with me."

We melt into the trees, stepping cautiously through wet grass, using cover by instinct. Twenty metres apart, we work our way forward until the scouts reach the edge of the road. After a short pause, Albert waves the rest of us forward. Our approach is careful, but we know from Albert's signal that there is no danger.

"They're going fishing," whispers Dieter through a grin of relief. "Not hunting the gang that locked up those Yank MPs."

I know exactly how he feels. My stomach is drawn into a tight ball of tension. There is an uncomfortable trickle of sweat running down my back. We are still warriors. A few hours of peace have changed nothing for us. We seem to have a rather exaggerated sense of the importance of our visit to the police station, however.

Four Americans are taking baskets and fishing rods from the Jeep. They are a scant twenty metres away, and a split second from death should we allow our instincts to take over. In legal and diplomatic

terms, a war may be in full flood one second and history the next. Emotions take much longer to adjust to the change. For us, crouching in the trees with pistols in our hands, yellowish brown uniforms are still those of our enemies. We could wipe out all four of them and feel only pleasure at acquiring their boots, a vehicle, and possibly some food and cigarettes. Defeat has turned us into highwaymen.

"This is ridiculous." The Leutnant puts his pistol away and becomes Paul Hals again. "What do we care if they see us?"

"Yes, it is rather," agrees Lutz. "I suppose this is all my fault, barging off the road like that."

"We've got guilty consciences," mutters Dieter. "Jumping at shadows."

"Well, no harm done," remarks Albert.

One of the Americans is struggling with a map, fighting wind-filled folds of paper. The rest start for the lakeside, shouting over their shoulders at him. The one with the map is a fat, short, soft fellow with thick glasses; the sort of slug that front-line soldiers despise, mainly from pure envy.

Eventually, the fat American officer succeeds in folding the map to his satisfaction. Then he tosses it casually onto the driver's seat of the Jeep and hurries after his companions. The wind tugs at the map, plucking at a corner, raising it like a small sail, diving deeper. Like a parachute, the map billows from the Jeep and floats about ten metres in our direction before flopping to the ground.

"That might be useful," remarks Dieter.

Albert grunts agreement and starts through the trees, heading off to our left. Unbearable tension grips us as he leaves the shelter of the trees and sneaks towards the map. Suppose one of the Americans turns round? They are only at the lakeside and about thirty-five meters away. Just what would we do?

We scream silent curses at him when Albert pauses to fold the map neatly. With it tucked out of sight in his jacket, he rises from a furtive crouch to his full height and walks confidently back to the forest. Back at our truck, Albert hands the map to Paul. One side is a 140 by 100 centimetre map of Germany. Central Europe from Paris to Kiev fills the other side.

"Just what we need," beams Paul.

Eight tints shading from green through yellow and browns into purple describe the terrain. Many of the names of the cities and districts are in English rather than the language of their country. The paper has a rigid, almost starched feel; a marked contrast to the grimy, limp rags

which our young Leutnant used to guide us, with Louis's help, through hundreds of kilometres of enemy-held territory in the east. This American map is something to admire, like a valuable and ancient painting. It is certainly not intended for the likes of us.

Once we have fixed our exact position on this marvellous map, we are able to plot the most direct route to our destination. It takes Peter under an hour to drive us to a small town to the east of Rottweil. Two American MPs wave us to the side of the road as we are entering the town. Our papers survive their bored inspection. Old Turmfalk, the paper merchant, must know his stuff.

This sector has been in American hands for over a month. Some effort has been made to clear debris and to cover up damage, but the scars of war are still painfully obvious to all of us. Every bullet hole leaps out at us. Tanks have smashed road surfaces to rubble when not driving through gardens and homes. The place is a mess, but we see plenty of people in the streets, trying to pick up their lives again.

Around ten o'clock, Peter grinds off the narrow main street and turns into a wasteland of a garden. All but one of the windows at the front of the house are boarded up. Small, ragged craters pock the brickwork. The front door is split from top to bottom, and held together clumsily by rough strips of unpainted wood nailed across it.

"Home," says Peter apologetically as he drives into a shed on the left of the house.

We recognize a blacksmith's workshop at once, having seen one quite recently in Bohemia. We are impressed. After months of living rough, sleeping in broken buildings or out in the open for the most part, a home is a wonderful thing. Imagine sleeping in the same place every night without some idiot trying to shell you out of it! And leaving it in the morning knowing that you will return there in the evening; instead of plodding from one fight to the next, not knowing where you will spend the night, or even whether you have another night left. We all stand beside the truck and gaze for a moment at this humble, war-ravaged dwelling like tourists in front of the Taj Mahal.

The front door opens unsteadily. Drawn by the sound of our truck, a heavily built man of about fifty appears on the doorstep. He eyes the mob of intruders with a certain wary hostility. Peter lets out a yell and flies over to him. They perform a dance on the doorstep, hugging each other like wrestlers, laughing, shouting, and crying joyously. A small army of relatives pours out of the house to find out what all the noise is about.

After a while, someone notices the rest of us. We introduce ourselves; just in case Peter, in his excitement, forgets that some of us have new names and improved ranks. The party moves indoors. We take our remaining supplies with us. Otto immobilizes the truck as a routine precaution. Any one of us would steal such a valuable vehicle, and there must be plenty more like us around.

Peter's mother, a tall, well-rounded woman with a ready smile, develops a worried frown when she realizes just how many guests there will be for her son's homecoming party. Herr Hafenrichter will not hear of us leaving until the occasion has been celebrated in a proper fashion. Fortunately, we still have the cash box of captured American dollars. We learn that the exchange rate starts at four marks to the dollar, which means that the late GI black marketeers were doing very well for themselves.

Cigarettes and dollars are the currency of the moment. We are lucky enough to have plenty of both. Peter's mother, her sister, and two girl cousins disappear to negotiate for food with the local black marketeers. The girls are about eighteen or nineteen and quite pretty. Or perhaps they are just girls. Dieter watches them leave, his features drooping into an expression of disappointment. Then he notices Paul looking at him. He sidles over to our former Leutnant and winks evilly.

"An officer would be all right there," he remarks slyly. "Especially one with a bit of tin."

"I don't think an Iron Cross Second Class is much good for impressing anyone," says Paul modestly.

"Tell them they gave you the throat-ache," suggests Lutz, making polishing motions at his collar to suggest a Ritterkreutz. "I wonder if they've got any friends for the rest of us, eh, Herr Hauptmann?"

It takes Otto a moment to realize that Lutz is talking to him. He and I are a confused blend of soldier and civilian. Our self-appointed officer status is an added complication. But, no doubt, we will come to terms with everything in due course.

"If I had a daughter, I wouldn't let her have anything to do with the likes of you!" scoffs Franz Lohr.

"And me a hero, home from the war?" protests Lutz. "Hello, she's nice."

All we see is the girl's back view as she slips out of the crowded room with Lutz in hot pursuit. We may not be heroes, but we are certainly home, and judging from the reactions of Peter's relatives, that's enough to satisfy them.

## COGN

The household is still asleep when we assemble in the blacksmith's shop at the side of Peter's home the following afternoon. We are about to go our separate ways. The time is around two o'clock, but only Peter's Uncle Bruno, who lives next door, is up and about. The previous afternoon and night are just a jumble of delightful memories. Half the town must have dropped in on the party at one time or another. A splendid array of empty bottles covers every horizontal surface in the house; the ones not occupied by snoring bodies.

Peter's Uncle Bruno tells us that a couple of American patrols called during the night to find out what was going on. After a drink, they went on their way, satisfied that the local population wasn't planning a revolt. Fortunately, none of our group saw them.

We are not yet accustomed to treating Americans as people rather than enemies to be wiped out before they can do the same to us. Perhaps people is the wrong word. Masters, overlords, petty dictators; I have heard them called the same and worse. They seem unwilling to leave us in any doubt as to who is in charge, even when we're trying to enjoy ourselves.

It is clear that Uncle Bruno resents our defeat and the victor's assumption that they can push us around anytime they choose; not just the fighting men, but all of them. The most miserable coward can now creep out of his hole and become a dictator. We will not be allowed to forget this war for a long time to come. The trouble is, we will be blamed for everything; starting it, spreading it, and losing it. And the important facts of its true dreadfulness will be blunted and distorted. False notions of honour and glory will be woven into stories of battles with the wicked Germans. And another generation will follow ours onto the battlefield eventually to be wiped out in a few days by the latest wonder weapons.

Franz Lohr, our former sergeant, breaks our gloomy mood by telling us that he is in love. Crafty Franz disappeared last night. No one thought he had fixed himself up with a girl. He has been telling us for ages that he's going to find himself a rich widow when the war's over and settle down.

The rest of us paraded less realistic ambitions when we took leave from our desert hotel. Lohr, it seems, wasn't just talking. Lotte Fiesel is quite tall for a woman, with dark hair and deep brown eyes. Her clothes are rather shabby and well-patched, but she has quite a nice figure in a skinny sort of way, and when she smiles, nobody looks at her clothes.

Franz's widow may not be rolling in money, but she owns a bakery. Even so, she looks as if she hasn't had a decent meal for ages. Germany is starving, dependent on the charity of the invaders. Only the barons of the black market are getting fat. Frau Fiesel's husband and his brother used to run the business; until they were called up. They were posted to the hot, sandy wastelands of North Africa.

Neither of them found our desert hotel until they joined the casualty lists in early November of 1942; during one of the many skirmishes between the British General Montgomery and the late Feldmarschal Rommel.

Lotte has been running the business herself since then, assisted by two old men, who keep grumbling about retirement and a chance to put their feet up. Getting up very early on cold mornings is becoming too much for them. That should pose no problems for our former sergeant. We are used to functioning at any time of the day or night.

Franz Lohr was transferred to the regiment about a month before Dieter and Peter joined us, which means that we have known him since February 1943. In over two years, we never had the slightest suspicion that he knew anything about baking. But he has brought us some bread for the journey, made by his own fair hands, according to Lotte, using real flour from an unnamed source, so he must know something of the trade.

Our last act as a group is to open the leather belts captured on the banks of the distant Elbe from the bullying SS officers. Peter's uncle and Lotte Fiesel stare in disbelief as we share out the gold coins. The ones left over go to the four who will not be travelling to Toulon as payment for their share of the truck. Dieter suggests that we think again and club together to buy ourselves a desert hotel with the gold. It's a tempting thought, but no one takes him too seriously. No real hotel could hope to compare with our dreams.

Six of us and a passenger drive away, heading north-east, towards Stuttgart and the river Neckar. Our passenger, Karl Gabler, is a friend of Peter's father. He is going to introduce Albert and Lutz to the skipper of a barge when we reach Cannstadt. They are actually going to work their passage as far as Mannheim. With their share of the remaining black market goods, not to mention seventeen gold coins apiece, they could afford a first-class passage on a luxury liner. Perhaps they need some time to think.

Peter was lucky; he found his family and their home more or less undisturbed by the war. I think Albert and Lutz are a little afraid that they will not be so fortunate. They have had no news from home for ages.

There is enough room for Otto and me to stretch out full length on a bed of blankets and camouflage nets when the truck turns back towards the border with France. Dieter is driving, and Paul is planning our route again on his nice, new, American map. Of the black market goods captured with the truck, only a few cigarettes are left. But we have enough food for a couple of days, some real French brandy, and the means to buy anything else that we need.

There is more than enough petrol to take us to Toulon. We have heard that buying it on the black market can be a chancy business. Some gentlemen are not above selling you a tin of water with about half a litre of petrol floating on top for the smell. I drift off to sleep reflecting that camouflage nets make a very comfortable mattress.

I wake again at the end of the afternoon. We have about 120 kilometres to cover before we reach our chosen crossing point into France. We feel no sense of urgency, even though our timetable was thrown out by a long delay at the river. American MPs were searching our friends' transport.

Despite frequent protests to a pair of tame Gendarms, whom the MPs had brought along as interpreters, the captain of the barge was unable to discover the reason for the search. The thoroughness of the examination seemed to indicate that they were looking for something small. Their eventual abrupt departure with grim expressions told us that they were out of luck.

As we do not intend crossing into France until we have made a reconnaissance of the border controls, if any, we had no objections to spending about four hours in a small bar with Albert and Lutz and the rest of the barge's crew; a one-legged ex-sailor and a boy of about



fourteen. The beer wasn't very strong, which is why Dieter can still drive perfectly well after about four litres. But it was quite a novelty to drink real German beer in a real German bar again.

In fact, it is our driver who had the most recent memory of that treat. His triumphant return to Berlin on leave, and his plans for a repeat performance, were generally the topic on the rare occasions then he found his tongue. Dieter joined us in the spring of 1943, at about the time our counter-offensive in the Ukraine was sliding to a standstill in the annual thaw. I bet he never thought it would be over two years before he saw the inside of a German bar again.

And now there are just the two of us in the back of the truck; Otto and myself. It feels strange to know that we have so much room not because our comrades are all dead, but because some of them have completed the long journey home, and the others have no more than a few hundred kilometres to travel. Even stranger is the fact that either of us is sitting in this truck.

We have known each other since Otto was posted to the regiment after basic training in early 1941. But we were never friends. We knew each other by sight, but we never had friends in common in the early days, and we always belonged to different platoons. We were swept together in the end by absence, like the final grains of sand in an egg-timer. Thousands of men have been killed to bring us together. And yet, after all we've been through together, I tend to seek out the company of anybody but Otto.

He's a tall fellow with straw-blond hair and a round face with ruddy cheeks. He has an excellent opinion of himself. I find him bad tempered and rather loutish. He thinks there's something wrong with anyone who wants to study literature with a view to becoming a teacher. Although this ambition has long since been crushed out of me, a certain reserve remains between us. It dates back to my early pretensions towards the role of soldier-philosopher. I used to read Goethe and Schiller in the barracks while my comrades were glancing through newspapers and magazines, or whiling away the hours with endless games of cards. But that is all behind me now. The grinding realities of war are a great levelling force.

Self-preservation and finding enough food consumed most of our time. Our philosophy is the oasis hotel in a distant desert. Time has flaked away our major differences and crushed us roughly into a common survival mould. But they say that first impressions are the most enduring. And so, when Otto and I are together, most of the time passes

in long silences. About the only time we ever communicate fully is when we're keyed up, scared to death, and fighting for our lives. Then, we seem to have an instinctive understanding which doesn't require words.

We feel like tourists, parading around in our own vehicle, taking in the sights. The sun is setting across the Rhein. To our left, the Schwarzwald is a mass of fiery spikes and deepening shadows. Dieter is cruising slowly through a small town. Its main attraction is an air of timeless tranquillity. The war seems to have passed it by completely. Nobody has bombed or shelled it, and the place appears to be too small to merit the attention of the Americans.

We are grateful for their absence. GIs make us nervous. We keep feeling that we should be shooting at them, not trying to avoid attracting their attention. We see plenty of signposts in English, but Dieter tells us that they give directions and distances to camps a good few kilometres away. I notice that Otto's hand is hovering near his pistol now that we are surrounded by buildings. When I look down, I notice that my own hand is within centimetres of the holster strapped above my left hip.

Dieter turns right, towards the river, down the side of a modest garage. The single petrol pump at the front of the grubby building is wrapped up in a rusty chain with a padlock. Its owner is evidently not a trusting fellow. There is a small yard behind the garage. Dieter turns into it and stops the truck.

"No petrol. No petrol." A grey-complexioned man hobbles out into the yard, leaning heavily on a walking stick and waving his free arm at us as if to shoo us away.

"We don't want any petrol, thank you," says Paul. "We're just looking for somewhere to lock our truck up for the night. You must have room here."

"No, there's no room," protests the man.

Otto and I drop to the cracked, pot-holed, grass-punctured tarmac and stroll to the open door at the rear of a rather neglected building. Cracks in the remaining woodwork echo deep splits where joints in the wood have eased apart. We peer into the dingy interior. After a moment, our eyes become accustomed to the gloom of the workshop.

Paul is starting to become quite annoyed behind us. The garage owner is protesting that he has no room. I estimate the workshop to be ten metres long by about six wide. Apart from a workbench and a collection of boxes against the left-hand wall, the floor space is

occupied only by small pieces of junk and oil stains.

A young lad of about sixteen wanders over to the door and tries to kick it shut. It hits Otto's boot and swings back at him. The sight of some money changes the garage owner's mind. With a five-dollar note tucked safely in his pocket, he calls to the youngster to tell him to open the main door. It's amazing what some American money and a cigarette can accomplish.

When the truck is safely parked in the darkest corner of the workshop, we head for a small hotel at the riverside. The garage owner has told us that payment in dollars and mentioning his name will secure accommodation for the night. His son now treats us like a guard dog who has been told that the intruders are friends, or at least trustworthy. There is the same interest and eagerness to pursue a new acquaintance in his eyes as he watches us strolling down the town's central street to the guesthouse.

Just like the limping Herr Wille, the hotelier suspects that we are black marketeers. Unlike the garage proprietor, he does not take the trouble to find out that we are just four soldiers returning home from the war. Old Krafft seems prepared to take our money and keep his suspicions to himself.

Evidently a businessman, he suggests that payment in advance for our rooms would be acceptable. Meals, of course, are extra. Perhaps he expects us to be arrested in the middle of the night and sees no reason why he should be the loser.

The Americans have decreed that all newcomers to the district and those staying overnight at the hotel must register with the police. This causes no problems for us as the local Gendarm is sitting at the bar, not two metres away from us. We merely dump our papers beside him, buy him another beer, and enjoy another drink ourselves while he sorts through them and takes notes. The Gendarm is a youngster of about Paul's age; eighteen or nineteen. When he finds out that three of us are officers, he addresses Paul, Otto, and myself in a very respectful tone and ignores former Unteroffizier Dieter. The small Berliner just grins into his beer and says nothing.

Dinner consists of potato dumplings in a thickish gravy called stew, followed by a pie filled with various sorts of tinned fruit. Both courses are served by the hotelier himself. There is a sort of apologetic wariness in his manner, as if he expects rich black market barons to throw his offerings back in his face. But having a stranger cook for us is quite a novelty, and we have been living on much worse for many months. We

deal rapidly and efficiently with everything placed before us. Then we push our chairs back and take stock of our surroundings.

The long public room at the front of the guesthouse is divided into two parts. Three steps lead up to the dining area, which is located to the right of the front door. There are five tables, but chairs at only two of them. We are sitting beside the wooden rail which separates diners from the bar. Another set of stairs behind us leads down to the kitchen, which is located at the rear of the ground floor. The window behind Dieter and Otto gives Paul and me a view of the river if we choose to look to our left.

Herr Krafft, the hotelier, can offer us real coffee. He sounds very proud when he emphasizes that it is not the dreadful ersatz stuff. We suspect that it is black market American coffee, but look impressed; as though we believe that he brought the beans across the Atlantic from Brazil in a rowing boat. Paul orders a bottle of French brandy with the coffee, and suggests that Herr Krafft bring an extra glass.

When coffee and brandy have been poured, Paul raises his glass and says, "Gentlemen, a toast to . . ." His brows contract into a frown.

"I've got one," remarks Dieter, coming to his rescue. "Here's to anything worth drinking to."

Frau Krafft is about the same size as her husband, which means that he is fairly small. Both are approaching sixty. Herr Krafft's hair has receded to a silver half moon. His wife's fluffy curls are a darker grey which contains quite a scattering of black. She is the boss of the guesthouse.

Catching sight of her husband sitting with the customers, swilling down brandy, she marches up the steps to our elevated position and snaps at him in French. Paul says something to her in the same language. My knowledge of French is just sufficient to get me into trouble, but I manage to make out an apology for inflicting our company on her husband.

It comes as quite a shock to Frau Krafft to find a German who can speak her native tongue without a trace of foreign accent. While she is telling Paul that she comes from somewhere nearby on the Swiss border, and he is telling her that he spent half his life in Toulon before being called up, Herr Krafft drinks another of Dieter's general toasts and slips away to the safety of the kitchen.

I find myself yawning uncontrollably.

"Who didn't get much sleep last night?" grins Dieter.

"I suppose you got plenty?" I reply between yawns.

"I think I was as busy as the rest of you," grins Dieter.

"Doing what?" asks Otto with exaggerated interest. He spoils the effect by screwing his face into a massive yawn.

"You know what they say." Dieter shrugs. "The more you have to talk about it, the less happened. But that was one hell of a party last night."

"It certainly was," yawns Otto. "I wonder if I can find my room before I drop off."

In a fit of extravagance, we have booked a room each. The guesthouse is not exactly crowded. The rooms are quite small, most of the space being taken up by a double bed, but the sheer novelty of spending a night in solitary comfort like a gentleman is enough to drive back the tiredness for a while. We wander from room to room, inspecting them minutely, even though their spartan furnishings make them virtually identical, trying to decide who has the most comfortable.

Eventually, we decide that Paul has the best room, by virtue of the view from his window, and crowd in there to finish the bottle of brandy. Then we retire to our individual quarters. After a thorough wash, I find sliding between crisp, clean sheets a positive delight. I seem to sink about a metre into the goose-feather mattress.

The shape of my window decays from a twilight outline to merge with the wall. I feel tired, but sleep eludes me. I keep thinking of all the others; the ones who found a resting place, alone or in hundreds, in earth and snow; the ones who disappeared without trace; the ones who so nearly made it home; of Louis slipping away from us on the bank of a Bohemian river.

In the end, I wrap myself up in a couple of blankets and curl up on the rug beside the bed like a dog. The spell broken, I fall asleep in minutes.

## CSGSZ

Paul hammers on my door to tell me that it is seven-thirty. I snap awake, and find myself reaching for the cold reassurance of a Schmeisser machine pistol. Then my surroundings divide past and present.

Breakfast eludes us for the moment. We have no sooner assembled for whatever the guesthouse has to offer, than the garage proprietor's son comes racing in to tell us that some men are stealing our truck. Frau Krafft nearly has a heart attack when the four of us dash past the bar and into the street, drawing our pistols.

Otto and I head for the front of the garage. Paul and Dieter take the rear. We cannot hear engine noises. Either the thieves have not yet discovered what Otto did to immobilize the truck, or they have gone already.

The front of the garage is set back from the road through the town. Otto and I slow to a casual stroll as we approach the garage. There are two men lounging beside the chained petrol pump, with cigarettes drooping from their mouths like American gangsters. The few people out early in the streets ignore them completely, almost as if they are invisible.

Otto and I approach them like generals; keeping step, right hands holding pistols braced firmly behind our backs, left arms swinging through a moderate arc in perfect synchronization. For want of a better topic of conversation, we exchange a few words on our ideal breakfast menu.

"Look at this pair of idiots!" chuckles one of the sentries, nudging his companion with an elbow. They are virtually interchangeable; about our height but carrying more weight because they have been better fed, impossibly well dressed by our standards, blond, and very sure of themselves. Their pale eyes have a rat-like glitter, which hints at a vicious streak. We know the type; and how to deal with them.

"Morning, Herr General," laughs the one in the dark blue suit. He spits into the dust beside Otto's right boot and grins in a provocative fashion.

Otto and I bring our right hands to the front. Two pistols wipe away the grins.

"One squeak out of either of you, and we'll have to cancel your reservations for lunch," Otto tells them with a pleasant smile. "Turn round."

The thieves obey hurriedly, their faces taking on a greyish tinge. When we search them, we find that the one in the blue suit has a pistol. His companion, who is wearing dark grey trousers and a bright skiing jumper, has a flick knife in his right-hand trouser pocket. We take charge of both weapons.

Thick black paint on the front window of the workshop prevents us from seeing what is happening inside. Otto tests the handle on the windowless door. It turns easily. He opens the door and steps inside quickly, flattening himself against the wall immediately so that the brilliant contrast between the doorway and his dark clothes makes him an awkward target.

"Right, Jürgen. Send them in," he calls in a relaxed tone.

I nod towards the door. The two sentry-thieves enter the building reluctantly. In the half-light edging through the rear door of the garage, we see two men standing beside our truck with their hands on their heads. Dieter is keeping them covered. Herr Wille is sitting beside his work bench, receiving first aid from Paul. His son hovers in helpless attendance, looking as though he wouldn't mind a couple of minutes alone with the thieves and a machine gun. We march our pair over to join the others.

"All right, what happens now?" asks one of the prisoners. He is tall and has a long, thin neck. His Adam's apple looks like an indecisive egg, caught between up and down in his throat. A pair of very fragile, gold-rimmed glasses decorate his squashed nose. He is dressed in a dark blue overall, but looks too clean to be a real worker.

"Are they still putting people in clink for stealing?" wonders Dieter.

"Come off it," scoffs the prisoner. "You lot would wet your pants if a Gendarm came within ten metres of your precious truck."

Otto hauls up his left trouser leg and pulls a Siberian knife from the sheath in his boot. "I think we'd better just slit their throats and chuck them in the river," he decides. "No sense in making trouble for ourselves. You're first."

"Hey, wait! Let's talk!" protests the man, backing away from Otto until he fetches up hard against the truck. He can tell from Otto's tone that he could finish the lot of them off without a second thought.

"Talk about what?" asks Dieter.

"Look! I need some transport in a hurry. We can work something out." There is an urgent, pleading note in the prisoner's voice.

"I don't know whether I want to listen to you," growls Otto. "I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"Look, I'll make it worth your while," continues the man in the overall, gaining confidence from the delay. "I'll give you five dollars for the hire of your truck."

"Did he say something?" remarks Dieter, sticking a finger in his ear and wagging it lazily.

"And a couple of packets of cigarettes each," sighs the head thief.

"Is that five dollars each, too?" asks Otto with a great show of disinterest.

"Ten. That's my last offer. Ten dollars in your hand. Right now. No messing about."

"Where are you going?" I ask him casually. "You might be taking us more than ten dollars' worth out of our way."

"Out of your way?" repeats the head thief. "We're not taking you with us."

Otto lets out an unpleasant laugh and tests the edge on his Siberian knife with his thumb. "Do we look that simple? Suppose you sort of forget to come back?"

"I suppose one of you can come with us," concedes the man.

"To get knocked on the head and chucked in a ditch somewhere?" sneers Dieter like an American gangster.

"All right. Let's talk some more," says the overalled man, his Adam's apple leaping frantically. Otto's knife is having more effect on his composure than three pistols. I find the sight of the bulge in his throat bobbing up and down perfectly fascinating. "Can't you put that thing away?" he adds.

"I might," says Otto. "If I knew who I was talking to."

"Schmidt. Johann Schmidt. Fahnenjunker. Do you want my service number as well?"

"Before we go any farther, I think you owe Herr Wille some compensation," interrupts Paul. "I think your men did a good ten dollars' worth of damage to him."

Schmidt pays up reluctantly, sensing that Paul is more interested in



justice than profit, but that the rest of us can be bought if the price is right.

"Now get rid of the private army," Paul adds, following the prime tactic of getting the enemy outnumbered.

"Get lost. The lot of you," says Schmidt impatiently, dismissing his men with a wave of his skinny hand. "Now what?" His tone becomes brisk and business-like.

"Now we go back to the hotel and you buy us some breakfast," returns Otto. "We were just about to sit down when you poked your beak into our affairs."

"Bloody right!" agrees Dieter. "I'm starving."

"All right," surrenders Schmidt as two motorcycle engines roar into life in the yard behind the garage.

"I wouldn't like to be in your shoes if they're going for reinforcements," says Dieter with a sinister smile.

"I'm not bloody stupid," complains Schmidt. "Nor suicidal. And I think we can do each other a bit of good."

"That remains to be seen." Otto slides his long knife back into its sheath. "Let's eat."

The Kraffts are surprised to see us back. I think they were expecting to be invaded by the police moments after our sudden departure. The presence of Schmidt; or Joe as he prefers to be called, like an American; confirms their suspicion that we are part of the black market.

We have ham and eggs for breakfast. Joe wants to take the truck to a piece near Mengen, a journey of 150 kilometres in the wrong direction, as far as we are concerned. He offers us more money. We are not interested. This baffles and annoys him. Joe is evidently used to buying his own way very cheaply.

"We really want to go to France," Dieter tells him in the end, turning down an offer of twenty-five dollars as if it is worth so many pfennigs. "Mengen means sod all to us."

"Ah!" says Joe, glad to have dragged an indication of our desires from us. It was a tough job. "And you need some proper papers for the truck and so on. All right, if I get them for you, will you go to bloody Mengen for me?"

"For thirty dollars, yes," grins Otto. "And the cigarettes."

Joe groans for mercy, but accepts the deal. We were quite happy with the number plates bought from Herr Liebelt, the farmer. His truck was another Mercedes, and will never run again. But if Joe can come up with suitable pieces of paper to prove our ownership of the vehicle, we

are prepared to do business with him.

"It's going to take a while to get your papers fixed," Joe warns, almost as an afterthought.

"That's all right, Joe," says Dieter with a friendly smile. "We like you. That's why we're not bloody going to let you out of our sight till we get them."

Chained by desperation, Joe pays for the breakfasts and leaves a respectable tip. Paul puts a bigger smile on Herr Krafft's face when he tells him that we will be spending another night at his hotel. Not too surprisingly, money is tight and any sort of business is welcome.

We reclaim the track and drive down the road in the direction of Switzerland for about five kilometres. On the left, we see a collection of houses mixed with a few shops, and a school. Joe directs the truck round the silent school and into a yard at the back. All the windows are painted black, and a couple of human gorillas from Joe's army are guarding the back door.

When we dismount from the truck, they gaze impassively down at us and wriggle their shoulders in ill-fitting jackets, which look as though they were made from army blankets. Paul's hand strays nervously towards his pistol.

"Get the stuff for Korben loaded," Joe calls to his watchdogs, filling their minds with a task and leaving no room for aggression.

We follow him up three stone steps and into the building. His office, once occupied by the head teacher, is spartan and efficiently organized. His records and working capital live in a couple of suitcases near the window, ready for a quick getaway if there is trouble. Joe drops into an armchair behind an old and misused desk and picks up a telephone. Getting connected with someone in France seems to be a long and complicated procedure.

Dieter flicks through an American calendar, looking at the girls and making approving noises. He also takes the opportunity to investigate the open cupboards. When he drags a wooden chair over to the desk to join us, he is holding a packet of Lucky Strike cigarettes. I am convinced that they came from the cupboard, even though I didn't see either hand move into it.

Dieter, of course, displays neither guilt nor excessive innocence. Stolen property belongs in a limbo of ownership. According to Dieter's philosophy, stealing from a thief is not a crime. The cigarettes were Joe's. Now, they are his, and can be shared with his comrades in a completely natural manner.

Joe conducts a guarded conversation in French. Displaying pleasing guile, Paul does not let on that he can speak the language in case a double-cross is being planned. He seems satisfied with Joe's half of the dialogue when our business partner replaces the receiver.

"I've got to ring him again this afternoon," says Joe. "He should have everything fixed up by then. They should have loaded the truck by now."

"Just a minute," says Otto when Joe starts to rise to his feet. "Don't you owe us some money?"

"Payment after the job," Joe tells him.

"Half now, half then," insists Dieter.

We are more interested in the papers which Joe has promised us, but we feel that it would be a good idea to maintain a business-like façade.

"Okay," sighs Joe. He takes a wad of notes from a pocket and counts off fifteen of them. Paul takes charge of our fee as unelected leader of the group.

The gorillas have loaded ten wooden crates into the truck. As there is still plenty of room for passengers in the back, we conclude that they must contain something small and valuable. Any markings on the crates have disappeared under irregular splashes of white paint. Joe and Otto take the cab. One of the guards climbs into the back with the rest of us.

Our new companion is a tall, well-muscled fellow with thick black hair on the backs of his hands. His name is Max. He glowers at us warily at first, but when Dieter hands his stolen cigarettes around again and includes the big fellow, Max's heavy features settle into an expression of confusion.

I assume that he is used to being ignored and did not expect to be part of Dieter's generosity. There is a tendency to treat someone as big and battle-scarred as Max as an unintelligent beast of burden. And many men of his size like to think with their fists. But when we get him talking, we find that he is quite shrewd, but rather shy.

Although he doesn't know what we are carrying, he is able to tell us quite a lot about the workings of Joe Schmidt's black market operation in a general way. The Americans are their main source of supply, of course. They have so much that they cannot keep track of everything. Some of the materials which find their way onto the black market are stolen in commando-style raids on supply dumps. The rest has been sold by unscrupulous Americans, generally NCOs out to make a quick fortune before they are shipped home again.

Whatever the source, most of the black market goods in this sector

receive the same treatment. They are not resold within at least fifty kilometres of their source. This provides a measure of protection for the black marketeers. Should a suspicious American stores officer find that the black market is offering plenty of, say, blankets in his area and checks his stock lists, he will find no discrepancies. Satisfied, there is a good chance that he will not continue his checks and find that the tinned steak being sold fifty kilometres away came from his stores. Now that the urgency of war has been removed, the Americans have relaxed rather too much.

After a little over an hour on the road, we pass a signpost erected by the Americans to enable them to find Rottweil. We start to wonder that progress Lutz and Albert have made on their barge.

Max tells Dieter that he once worked on the barges; until the Luftwaffe decided that he would be more use to the war effort as a loader in a flakbatterie. Heaving 88 mm anti-aircraft shells around while the Allies are dropping bombs on you is not much fun, in Max's opinion. Having been on the receiving end of similar treatment while trying to build a bridge, or repair a road or a railway line, we know just how he feels.

We arrive at our destination at around eleven o'clock. We know what time it is because Max has a pocket watch. Dieter offers him twenty-five dollars for it. Max considers for a moment, then admits that it cost him eight dollars, and that he bought it from the man to whom Joe is delivering.

Otto turns right, bumping down a rutted road at the side of a graveyard. Another right turn, through a gap in a chest-high stone wall, brings us onto a well-worn path in the grass. The path is two straight sections, which are angled for no particular reason, and leads to a bombed church. A huge section of roof at the eastern end of the building has gone. But the walls appear intact, apart from the lack of glass in the windows.

We scrape through a doorway just large enough to admit a truck. The interior of the church is a mass of rubble at the eastern end; most of it stone and slate. All the pews and the fallen roof timbers have disappeared; presumably for firewood. Otto stops the truck in the section which can still boast a roof, about the place where the altar should have been.

Max suddenly develops a worried frown. "Listen," he says urgently to

Dieter, but included Paul and myself, "I didn't tell you nothing, okay? About what goes on?"

Dieter shrugs. "The only time you opened your gob was to stick a ciggy in it. Right?"

"Thanks, mate," replies Max gratefully.

We climb from the truck and stretch cramped muscles. A door opens on our right. The man who emerges from an inner room reminds me of a Feldwebel who terrorised A Company an impossible age ago. He, too, looked as though he spent the first hour of his day pounding his face with a brick.

Joe doesn't introduce his colleague, who seems quite surprised to see him. Perhaps we could have forced the price of the hire of our truck up even more. The pair of them move out of earshot to discuss something while two more big men help Max to unload the truck. They carry the wooden boxes into the inner room as though they contain loosely-packed eggs. Max follows them, and reappears with a jug of coffee and a collection of tin mugs. We perch on a set of stone steps to drink our coffee, keeping a watchful eye on the truck, Joe and his battered colleague, and the unloaders. Although Max has achieved the status of an honorary ally, we keep an eye on him too.

A religious person would probably consider storing black market goods in a bombed church an act of sacrilege, but it doesn't bother us. None of us believes that there is a god which cares a scrap for the human race. The events of the past six years have taught us that survival depends on our own efforts and sheer luck; good and bad.

Miraculously, Peter seems to have retained his faith, even though he allowed us to use his New Testament to make cigarettes and he grew out of looking pained whenever blasphemy slipped into the cursing of the non-believers.

Having stored the ten crates, the loaders shuffle from the store room carrying a long, flat case between them. It looks about the right size for transporting rifles. Paul pushes to his feet and hurries over to our truck.

"Hey, what's going on?" he demands, placing his slight form in their path.

"It's another job for us," Joe tells him casually.

"I don't remember discussing any more jobs," returns Paul coldly, giving Joe the old Prussian fish eye.

"An officer, eh?" remarks Joe's colleague.

There is challenging contempt in the other man's voice. He is probably a former Gefreiter, who spent a lot of the war behind bars.

That sort would go fifty kilometres out of their way, and miss a dinner with a film star, to kick an ex-officer in the teeth. We had a few like him in our ranks. Thoughts of what they would do to our officers when the war ended and they were free of military discipline were as necessary to sustain them as food. Revenge was their form of desert hotel.

Paul ignores the interruption and waves the long box away. "Take that back," he tells the loaders.

"Load it," orders their boas.

"Look, we can talk," groans Joe, his Adam's apple bouncing violently. "What's the trouble? Schenk will see you right for the job, won't you?" He turns to his colleague for support.

"You still owe us for the last job," remarks Dieter, "and we're a bit choosy who we work for. Like the Herr Leutnant says, we're not a bloody haulage service."

Schenk Korben hauls back the cuff of a grimy, blue silk shirt to consult his watch. "Look, this bloody lot has to be in Offenburg by half past one," he says impatiently.

"How far's that?" asks Dieter.

"About a hundred and fifty kilometres," says Joe. "How about it? Come on, Paul. Just one more job as a favour to me."

"Why should we do you any favours?" laughs Otto. He strolls over to Schenk and nods towards his left wrist. "That's a nice watch. How about another look at it?"

Schenk peels back his limp cuff again and shows the watch to Otto. "Well?"

"Come and look at this, Jürgen." Otto waves me over.

"What do you make of this?"

I study the watch, frowning; then it comes to me. "Strudel had one of these, didn't he? They're Luftwaffe issue."

"That's right," agrees Otto. "He's supposed to have pinched it off a pilot in a dressing station."

"So he did. He didn't think the pilot would last until they got him to hospital, so he thought he might as well have it as anyone else."

"I don't remember anyone called Strudel, Herr Hauptmann," remarks Dieter, flicking his eyes between Otto and me; and enlisting us in the ranks of Schenk Korben's enemies.

"You were still at school, you lucky little bastard," I tell him. "Strudel froze to death in our first Russian winter."

"Oh, yes, I keep forgetting your advanced years, Herr Hauptmann," grins Dieter.

"You were out there?" asks Schenk, a modicum of respect creeping into his manner. "In winter?"

"The first one was bloody nearly our last," returns Otto. He rubs his nose reflectively. I catch Schenk's eye, and find that we are both doing the same. "We thought we'd come out of it without any fingers and toes, or noses and ears, if we got out of it at all," adds Otto gloomily.

"They were bastards," agrees Schenk. I note that the last two fingers of his left hand lack the final joint. He is about seven or eight years older than Otto and me, which makes him a hard man of about thirty. We have been to the same hard school.

"Well, how about it?" Schenk comes back to business. That we survived the murderous assaults of both the Russian people and their weather balances the fact that we are former officers, if only self-made. Schenk seems more inclined to strike a reasonable bargain with us now.

"We'll do it for a watch apiece, like yours, and the petrol," decides Otto. "If that's all right with everyone?" He looks at Paul.

"I want to know what we're carrying," says Paul obstinately. "We're not having anything to do with gun-running."

"Show him," sighs Schenk, unused to scruples.

One of the loaders tears the wooden lid from the long box with his bare hands.

Paul's face freezes into an expression of hard anger. "What the hell's this?" he demands.

"Souvenirs," Schenk tells him casually.

Dieter squats beside the box and rummages around inside. It is full of SS equipment; daggers, belt buckles, cap badges, insignia, the lot.

"For the Yanks," explains Joe hurriedly. "They go mad for this sort of thing. Schenk's got six blokes down the road turning it out. The rest is helmets, bayonets, bits of tin from your average Iron Cross to a Ritterkreutz with crossed swords, oak-leaves, and diamonds. Stuff like that. Souvenirs for war-heroes to take home."

Otto and I start to laugh. Such bare-faced fraud is the sort of thing you'd expect from an old soldier like Schenk. Even Paul breaks into a grin. He has no objections to ruthless exploitation of our unwanted visitors.

"All right," he tells Schenk. "A watch apiece and the petrol for the round trip back to our hotel."

"We could do with a few cigarettes," adds Dieter.

"And a bottle of something," I mention.

"Anything else?" demands Schenk.

"That should keep us happy for the moment," Paul decides with an expression of mock seriousness.

Our truck is rather crowded when the loaders have finished. Paul and Dieter, being the smallest, join Joe in the relative comfort of the cab. Max stretches out on the boxes like a great bear. There is just enough room between the load and the tailboard for Otto and myself to sit on the ends of the bench seats.

We spend the early part of the journey playing with our watches. The first task is to adjust the black leather strap for comfort. Then we start timing things. Two buttons placed on either side of the winder operate a stop watch. There are two small dials on the watch face; the left-hand dial counts minutes, the other counts seconds.

We reach our destination at precisely twenty-three minutes and forty-four seconds past one. Dieter pulls up in front of a dye works and sounds the horn twice. A scarred door rumbles to the left on small, iron wheels. It is quite gloomy inside the building. Coming out of bright sunlight, it takes our eyes some time to adjust. All the windows on the ground floor are boarded up.

What light there is descends from less secure barricades on the second-floor windows, and through gaps between the tarpaulins which cover a huge hole in the roof. The building looks rather like a dark hanger, but one filled with huge vats, pipes, ladders, walkways made of perforated steel worn smooth by many feet, and storage hoppers for chemicals. There is a damp smell in the air, and an acrid, sulphurous reek behind it.

We have a stroll around while Max and another heavyweight unload the truck. Most of the vats are empty apart from a cracked skin of colour. A couple of them, on the right of the door, are full of broken slates. So this is where the missing roof is hiding.

When we return to the truck, Joe gives us bottles of beer and introduces us to Karl-Heinz. The big fellow who helped Max to unload the truck is called Karl and fancies himself as a boxer. The brains of the outfit, Karl-Heinz, is a very average fellow of about my age. He has plenty to say for himself, and insists on showing us his left leg.

"There, how about that," he asks proudly, tapping a length of shiny aluminium with his pipe. "Made it myself. Pretty good job, eh?"

"Why did you have to make one?" asks Dieter, staring in complete fascination at the artificial leg with its lockable compartment for valuables. "Wouldn't the Army give you one?"



“Luftwaffe,” corrects Karl-Heinz. “I was an air-gunner. No, I’ve got an official leg for every day of the week. None of them any good. I had this one designed by a clockmaker. An absolute genius on moving parts. Hello, here they are. My customers.”

Two American sergeants stroll into the dye works as if they own the place. Joe takes them over to the boxes of souvenirs. They have a good paw through them, then start moaning their heads off. That much is obvious even to a non-English-speaker.

Dieter says that they were expecting us half an hour ago, and that Karl-Heinz is asking too much for his trinkets.

“I thought all Yanks were stinking rich,” remarks Otto, lighting a Lucky Strike; part of our fee from Schenk.

One of the American sergeants looks at him, then makes a remark to his comrade.

“I think ‘Krauthead’ is supposed to be an insult,” Dieter tells us.

Not knowing what the word means, I don’t think any of us feels particularly offended. But Otto, of course, rises to the challenge.

“It’s been a while since I killed a sergeant.” He takes the Siberian knife from its sheath in his boot and starts to scrape delicately beneath his broken nails with the point. “Remember the first one? Remember Bieler, Jürgen?”

“That bastard!” I spit into the thick dust beside one of the dye vats. Sergeant Bieler has been dead for over three years, but his memory lives on among the former members of his Section. It is rather sobering to realize that we might be the only ones left who know what happened to him.

“Go on, what about this Bieler?” encourages Dieter when he realizes that the Americans understand German.

“He wanted to be a hero, and he didn’t care how many of us he killed doing it,” says Otto venomously. “A tin-chaser. By the time we’d lost over a dozen men in stupid attention-getters, the reinforcements were doing everything not to get into his section. They reckoned it was a death sentence.”

“So that did you do?” asks Max, glaring menacingly at the American sergeants.

“None of his lot could get close to him,” Otto recalls. “Because he knew they all hated him and would have stuck a knife in his ribs if they’d got half a chance. And he had his pal Corporal Singer to watch his back.”

“So we put a contract out on him,” I contribute. “And Otto crept out

of camp one night with a sniper's rifle."

"It rained all day," Otto grins. "But I got the bastard. Right between the eyes."

"It took him half an hour to die," I continue. "And no one but our section and Otto's saw what happened to him. And we told Bieler what we were going to do with him afterwards before he died."

"What was that?" asks Dieter with a blood-thirsty grin.

"We were putting a road back together after the Ivans had shelled it," says Otto. "When he died, we shoved him in a shell hole at the side of the road and covered him over. And when we packed up for the day, we swore blind no one had seen him for hours. They posted him as a deserter in the end." The memory brings a smile to his round face. "He was up for a piece of tin, too. A First Class. That was quietly forgotten."

"Serves the bastard right," rumbles Max.

"Since then," adds Otto, returning to the point of the tale, "we've never been bothered about getting rid of a sergeant who gets up our noses. It's so easy."

"Some of them can be a real pain in the arse," remarks Dieter reflectively.

The two Americans exchange nervous glances. They are on the small side, around Dieter or Paul's height, but with more flesh on them. They look rather soft, and we can tell that they have never been front-line soldiers. They don't seem quite sure whether Otto and I are telling the truth. We are. Just the same, they bring their business with Karl-Heinz to a rapid conclusion. One of them hands over a wad of dollars. After a rapid count, Karl-Heinz stows it in his leg. The Americans reverse an olive green truck into the dye works. Max and Karl complete the loading in record time.

"Right, let's be going," says Paul when Joe has tucked his commission into a pocket.

We hear a thud behind us. When we turn to look at our truck, we see Max and Karl heaving square crates into it.

"Well, there's no sense in going back empty, is there?" says Joe before we can get a word in. "It's boots," he adds to Paul. "You know, the American ones that lace all the way up the front. Like his." He points to my brown boots; the ones supplied by the black marketeering American sergeant who owned the truck before us.

"I wonder what we ought to charge him for this trip?" says Dieter, a mercenary gleam in his dark eyes.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm bloody starving," says

Otto. "I'm not going anywhere till I've had some food."

"Yes, I'm feeling a bit hollow," agrees Paul.

So are Dieter and I.

Joe surrenders. "Okay, we'll get something at a place near the station. It's not far."

We drive on into the centre of the town, which is quite big and very old in parts. Paul has been here before, but a long time ago. His parents took him along on a trip to Strasbourg, which is only about eighteen kilometres away on the other side of the Rhein. While Paul's step-father did a spot of business, his mother took Paul over to his native land for a look at Staufenberg Castle.

He is able to tell us that the river through the town is the Kinzig, which provides water for the various industries. The town used to be a fairly important road and rail junction until the bombers came. Its styles of architecture vary enormously from Gothic and Baroque through to square and very functional modern. Most of the examples have one thing in common; they are the worse for shot and shell, or the odd bomb.

Although the streets and pavements are unobstructed, and some attempts have been made to topple the remains of very badly damaged structures, there seems to be a depressing lack of willingness to do very much to repair the damage. It is almost as if the people have become accustomed to living with their town in this sorry state, or are afraid to waste time doing anything in case the bombers come back. Perhaps they are saying to the occupation forces: 'You did this. Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?' To which the answer is most probably: 'No!'

But we have been at war for the best part of six years, I remind myself, and at peace for less than four days. It's asking too much for anything significant to be achieved in the first week; either in the way of rebuilding or of lifting the despair and cynicism that ride with inevitable defeat.

Joe directs us to a small factory, which is full of dusty drilling and boring machines, and lathes piled with boxes of metal shavings. We leave the truck beside two American motor cycles. Otto removes the rotor arm as a routine precaution. We are still cautious, even though we have Joe as a hostage and there is an ancient, sleepy warrior with a Tommy gun guarding the place.

There is a great open space on our left when we step into the street. A few lonely fence posts on the other side separate us from the railway. Tram lines cut through the cobbles, but they are full of dirt. It has been

a long time since a tram ran along this route. The railway lines are unbroken, but there are huge white patches of new chippings in the black, oily ballast of the track bed to show that they have been repaired. Long gouges in the sandstone of the buildings beside us, and boarded windows, also speak volumes about the recent history of the area.

About fifty metres down the road from the factory, we come to a small bar. It occupies a corner at the junction of two main roads, opposite an iron bridge across the railway. The front window is boarded loosely in such a way as to keep out intruders but to allow in the maximum of light.

Customers are also offered a view of the railway. Joe pushes through a door at the blunt corner of the building. American soldiers fill the draughty, railway side of the bar; which is only fair as it was one of their machine gunners who shot out the glass and ruined the ceiling. We thread a nervous path through them, following Joe to a door marked 'PRIVAT' in gold letters.

In the back room, Joe stops at a hole in the wall to the right of the door to negotiate for food and drink. The rest of us crowd round a table in an otherwise unoccupied corner of the private room. There are half a dozen customers spread out over an area the size of a country station's waiting room, obeying non-fraternization rules which the Yanks in the other room seem prepared to ignore. They are either talking in low voices, or just minding their own business.

One of them decides to mind some of ours. A beefy Gendarm lowers his American newspaper and stares at us. He is about Max's size, around 190 centimetres tall, but most of his bulk is flab.

"Papers," he growls in what he must think is a menacing tone when he has shuffled over to our table. His type is one of the disagreeable facts of life; the petty official who delights in pushing others around to prove their own importance. During the war, these dregs tend to drift into small positions of power left by better people who have been sent away to be killed.

We have almost an embarrassment of documents, thanks to the efforts of Herr Liebelt, the farmer, and Turmfalk, his paper merchant friend. Paul decides to offer an identity card and his discharge papers.

The Gendarm squints down at them, then remarks: "They made a little shit like you an officer?" to prove that he can read.

"What was that!?" Paul is on his feet so fast that his chair flies across the room. Anger blazes in his eyes.

Even though he is nearly twenty centimetres taller than the Kid and

weighs about twice as much, the Gendarm takes an involuntary step backwards.

"You dare to call a former officer of the Wehrmacht a 'little shit', you disgraceful, rear-echelon tub of lard?" storms Paul. "I demand an immediate apology."

"Watch yourself," warns the Gendarm, starting to regain some of his poise. A soft, swooping whistle from across the room diverts his attention. The Gendarm pales visibly when he catches sight of Joe. He thrusts the papers back at Paul and gives him a comical nodding bow. "Sorry, Herr Leutnant," he mumbles.

To our amazement, he then darts another glance at Joe and makes a bee-line for the door to the alley behind the bar. Dieter retrieves Paul's chair. He sits down again, looking more and more embarrassed as his anger fades.

"I'm sorry, I forgot myself," he tells us.

"I think you showed great restraint," says Otto, scratching at his sprouting mop of straw-blond hair. "If he'd said that to me, I'd have dropped him."

"Well done, lad," calls one of the old-timers near the stove. He looks ancient enough to have served in the Franco-Prussian War in the 1870s. "That bugger needed shaking up. Flat feet, he reckons," adds the old soldier, turning a nicotine-stained thumb towards the door. "Sat here on his fat arse all through the bloody war."

"Can't let anyone swear at an officer," cackles Dieter. "Even if he is a bloody cop."

"I wonder what Joe's got on him?" I remark.

"He's probably a Party member," decides Otto. "Shit-scared in case the Yanks find out and re-educate him with a rope."

Large quantities of food and beer arrive at our table. Our thoughts turn from fat, cowardly policemen to more pleasant matters. They say that starvation shrinks the stomach. We seem to be doing a good job of re-stretching ours. The food has very little taste, but it is hot and there is plenty of it.

A man in some sort of railway uniform joins us when the plates have been cleared away and we are enjoying a smoke. He sits down next to Joe to discuss 'the boxes' in an undertone which is not intended to carry beyond Joe's ears. Joe nods a couple of times, then says that everything is okay. The newcomer looks relieved. He allows Max to fetch him a mug of beer and runs his eyes over the rest of the group.

"I don't suppose any of you know anything about railways, do you?"

he remarks. "Or want an honest job?" There is a laugh in his voice.

"What do you want to know?" asks Otto lazily. "About driving engines? Rolling stock and track maintenance? Signalling? Making up timetables? What?"

"If only you knew anything about these things," laughs the railway man, polishing his spidery spectacles with his tie. "You'd be set for life."

"What are you asking for, anyway?" frowns Dieter.

"We have a tremendous manpower shortage in the Reichsbahn. Not pairs of hands, you understand. The Americans have got plenty of them shut up in their prison camps. No, what we need is people to train them and supervisors. The Reichsbahn's in shreds at the moment. Anyone getting in right at the beginning of the rebuilding is going to be made for life."

"I don't suppose running one of our railways is much different from running one in Russia," remarks Dieter. "I used to drive an engine," he adds with a certain pride.

"Did you?" says Max, looking impressed.

"Right," nods Dieter. "I don't mind telling you, I was shit-scared when I got sent out East. I couldn't believe it when I found our company was running a railway. I had to do a couple of months as a stoker before they'd let me drive, though. That was too much like hard work."

"Great jokers, these lads, Felix," laughs Joe.

"No, it's true," counters Paul. "Before I joined them, of course. But I've seen photos of them with their trains."

"Where was this railway of yours?" asks Felix.

"In their bloody imagination," laughs Joe.

"In the eastern Ukraine," I tell him. "We ran it for most of nineteen forty-three."

We ran it through the burning heat of a Ukrainian summer. No one had much time for desert hotels. Our leisure thoughts tended to drift to somewhere cooler.

"It was all ours till the Ivans took it back," adds Otto. "That would be sometime in October. Remember the China Doll, Paul?"

"I don't think so," he says with a frown.

"He was our Company Commander at the time. Bloody lazy, but quite a decent bloke. Fond of making speeches." Otto strikes a heroic pose, cigarette held between finger and thumb, poised a couple of centimetres from his mouth. "Men, our whole world has been turned arse about tit. And here's the final proof. For about eight months, the Ivans have been dropping bombs on our railway, and we've been

putting the bits back together again. Now they want it back. Our job now is to smash it up into such small pieces that they'll have to start again from scratch." Otto pauses to refresh himself with a swallow of beer.

"I used to think blowing things up would be fun before I joined up," I remark in a sombre tone. "But it was bloody hard work and I hated every second of it."

"It was like blowing up your own property," adds Dieter.

"If you really know so much about railways, and you want an honest job," Felix casts a sidelong glance at Joe, "I can fix you up."

"Can I be a driver?" Dieter asks eagerly.

"Every section of track we rebuild makes our shortage of experienced footplate staff even more desperate," replies Felix.

"We've got some business to take care of first." Dieter looks across the table at Paul. "But I can be back in about a week or so."

"There's no need for you to tag along with us if you'd rather stay," Paul tells him. "Your life's your own now."

"I know," says Dieter, "but you did promise us one hell of a party when you get home."

"What he's trying to say," I add, sensing the same feelings within myself, "is it gives us a little more time to adjust to being civilians again," I know that I won't be able to think of a peacetime future until we have finished this last job of the war; seeing the Kid safely home. Loyalty, or maybe habit, continues to bind us together.

"Yes, adjusting is rather a job," agrees Paul.

"If you come back," Felix takes a scrap of paper from a pocket and tears it in half, "come and see me. And if you've not been running off at the mouth, you'll be set for life. Here's my name, Felix Niebuhr, and where to find me."

Dieter reads through the piece of paper, then stows it carefully in his pocket with his identity card and other papers. "I'll be back," he promises.

"How about the rest of you?" asks Felix.

"We'll think about it," says Otto.

"Seriously," I add.

Otto doesn't seem too interested in a job for life, but a comfortable administrative job which doesn't involve skulking round the countryside, starving and being shot at by soldiers and civilians of every other nationality is very appealing. I used to be quite good at making up timetables.

"See you do think about it." Felix consults a sparkling pocket watch. "Time I was going. If you're decent, hard working blokes, come and see me when you get back. But I warn you, I don't want any malingerers."

"I wish they'd let me drive an engine," remarks Max as Felix hurries away.

"Don't be ridiculous!" laughs Joe. "I pay you as much as half a dozen engine drivers. And for far less effort. Okay, can we get going now?"

We deliver the boots to Manfred, a red-haired ex-sailor with four gold teeth on prominent view. Joe tells us that it would be a pity to return home empty. We retire to a small café while he organizes another load. Some things are inevitable.

Max wants to hear more about our experiences as railway engineers. Dieter does more talking in an afternoon than he normally does in a month. As if wishing to prove that he, too, has enjoyed an interesting life, Manfred treats us to highlights of his recent history. It helps to pass the time.

He was the helmsman of an E-boat until the captain decided to surrender to the British. During his three weeks in a prisoner of war camp in Holland, Manfred became more and more bored and hungry. The British had turned over the administration of the camp to a group of rather wooden German officers, who had proved that they were better at the job than their captors.

Three weeks of parades, inspections, and poor rations made Manfred decide to escape. He went over the wire on a dark night and headed south, hoping to be captured by the Yanks. By chance, he met a distant cousin who combines dentistry with black marketeering.

"And there you have it," concludes Manfred, peeling back his lips to show off his gold teeth. "Decent teeth, decent grub, plenty of money. I tell you, we owe the Yanks a hell of a lot."

"Some more than others," remarks Otto. "Is he any good, this cousin of yours?"

"Best dentist I've ever been to," says Manfred. "Why, have you got a toothache?"

"A bit of a twinge," Otto admits.

"He doesn't usually work on a Saturday."

"Oh, is this Saturday?"

"Still, if you're a friend of Joe's," concedes Manfred. "Let's go and see if he's in."

Joe returns just as Otto and Manfred are on their way out through a



side door of the café. "Hey, where are those two off to?" he demands.

"Otto's going to the dentist," says Paul.

"What about the load?" protests Joe. "And my clients?"

"What difference will another half hour make?" I ask him.

"There's people waiting for that stuff."

"It's Saturday afternoon," says Dieter. "Let them wait."

"Doesn't look like I've got much choice, does it?" admits Joe. "Look, I'm going for a walk. There's this bloke I don't want to meet. I'll be back in half an hour. And you don't know me, okay? Come on, Max. We'll drop in on Tante Lotte."

The café is half full of people with very little money and nothing better to do than make their beer last as long as possible. Dieter produces his cards and we play Twenty-One for matches. Otto and Manfred return after twenty minutes and join the game. The dentist has filled two of Otto's back teeth and he seems quite cheerful. After a few minutes, Manfred asks what we've done with Joe. Paul tells him that Joe and Max have gone to Tante Lotte's, whatever that is.

"I'd better go and get them," groans Manfred. "They'll be there all bloody day."

"What's it matter to you?" asks Dieter.

"You're giving me a lift to Müllheim," replies Manfred casually as he deals cards.

"Oh! Are we?" says Paul, looking surprised.

"Not very good at telling people things, is Joe," says Manfred. He turns his cards over to show that he has twenty-one and hurries away, grinning.

"I don't see any camels," remarks Dieter.

"What?" laughs Otto.

"The Afrika Korps are in." Dieter nods towards the far side of the room, where we see two men in desert uniforms talking to the proprietor of the café. Almost immediately, one of them leaves. The other strolls over to join us.

"Just home?" he asks with a friendly smile.

"How can you tell?" frowns Paul.

"Have you seen what you're wearing?"

We glance at our outfits automatically. They are not the height of fashion and have seen better days. Paul looks quite smart, but we others are dressed in garments which fit where they touch. Even so, comparing ourselves with others in the café, we don't look too out of place.

"Just been on safari?" asks Otto. "You don't look any better, chum."

"This lot fits. And it's comfortable," grins the newcomer. He takes a packet of American cigarettes out of a breast pocket and offers them round. There are darker patches on his jacket where his badges used to be. "I don't suppose any of you lot were in the desert? Hell of a place, I can tell you. Hot enough to melt steel during the day, and cold enough to freeze the air at night."

"Struggling from one desert hotel to the next," scoffs Otto. "You don't know what cold is."

"No?" demands the desert warrior defensively. "You should try it, pal. There's no water in the air, you see, so the temperature goes right down with the sun. You can wake up with ice in your mouth."

"Wake up?" mocks Otto, refusing to be impressed. "We had our mouths full of ice for months on end on the Eastern Front. All day, all week, and Sunday too. What we'd have given for a nice sunny corner of a desert!"

"Even when the sun gets up, it heats the ground, not the air. If there's any sort of wind blowing, you can still be freezing. I've seen plenty of greatcoats in the desert. And the bloody sand! It gets everywhere. In the water, in the food, up your nose, down your throat. Every time we had a shit, we sand-blasted our arseholes."

"If you don't want to find out what it feels like to shit lead," Dieter tells him, "keep both your hands on the table where I can see them." He taps on the underside of the table with his pistol to prove that the threat is not a bluff. "Someone's trying to steal our truck," he adds to us.

We look out of the window; just in time to see Max flatten the other desert warrior.

"They'd never have got it started, anyway," remarks Otto.

"Outside, you," snaps Paul.

"Look, we can talk this over." Our prisoner rises slowly and carefully, and leads us to the door.

"That's the second time we've heard that today," I tell him.

"It's you, you bastard!" yells our Afrika Korps black marketeer when we reach the truck and he spots Joe Schmidt.

"Is he the bloke you wanted to avoid, Joe?" laughs Otto.

"He owes me two thousand dollars. And what have you sods done to Berti?" complains the desert warrior.

"I hardly touched him," protests Max.

"Ooooh!" groans Berti, who is sitting on the ground, leaning against the truck, his arms folded across his middle.

"Are we going to bash this one as well to teach him not to steal

trucks?" asks Dieter.

"No, let him go," decides Joe. "Everyone's entitled to one mistake. I'll pay you next week, Kugel."

"You said that last week, you bastard," snarls Kugel of the Afrika Korps. "I want paying now, private army or no private army."

"He's quite chatty for a bloke with a gun in his back," remarks Dieter. "He's going the right way to book himself a room in the Afrika Korps desert hotel."

"You can put that away now," Paul tells Dieter. "It's their private war. I think you two had better get lost," he adds to Kugel and Berti. "In case we change our minds about Max doing a bit more thumping. We're very fond of our truck."

Kugel hauls Berti to his feet. They retire to the café, muttering threats and curses.

"Are we all here now?" asks Joe. "Because if we are, I think we'd better get moving."

We reach the yard behind Joe's school at five o'clock. Leaving Max and the other big fellow to unload a collection of unmarked wooden crates, Joe takes us into his office. He makes another telephone call to his paper merchant, this time in German. There has been a slight hitch in obtaining all the necessary papers for our truck. But, as it is Saturday and Joe does not ask us to make another delivery, we accept his assurance that the delay is unavoidable.

We agree to meet Joe at the school at about nine o'clock the following morning. Then we drive back up the road to our guesthouse, covering the five kilometres at a leisurely amble. After parking the truck in Herr Wille's garage and coughing up a further ten dollars for the privilege, we leave him changing a leaking radiator hose and head for the guesthouse.

Herr Krafft seems rather surprised to see us back. We suspect that he thought we would be spending the night in the cell next to Joe's. A good wash swills away the grime of a black market tour of most of south-west Baden-Württemberg. Then we retire to the veranda beyond the dining room to watch the river and drink some beer.

It's almost like being at war again; swinging between the extreme excitement of dashing around with a truck full of black market goods, nerves jumping at every American uniform, and our present inactivity. The black market seems a strangely apt line of business for our forces. Having stolen whole countries, we are now doing our thieving on a

more modest scale.

According to Joe, about half of the goods on the black market were acquired in commando-style raids, and the rest was sold by crooked stores personnel. So many years of war have bred the necessary daring, lawlessness, and the ability to plan such activities. A signature on a piece of paper may have converted the fairly honourable military practice of foraging into plain theft, but these ripples from the war will splash around for a long time yet.

Our references for the job are impeccable. As good soldiers, we can follow orders and drive our truck to Joe's destinations, after appropriate bargaining, and we can keep our mouths shut afterwards. We are also aware that you can get away with practically anything when the fabric of the law is hanging in tatters.

Criminal activities become quite acceptable when foreigners have taken over your country. In our experience, they become acts of defiance in the eyes of the conquered people. Joe and his kind, until they eventually come unstuck, are the new German heroes, defying the Yanks. We, of course, expect to be far away when the axe falls on Joe Schmidt.

Like good soldiers, we have all brought our cleaning kit out onto the veranda. Otto and Paul strip their pistols with the rapid, sure touch of long experience. It seems strange to recall that we moaned so much when we had to clean our weapons during training. Perhaps working up a mirror shine on all the wooden parts of a rifle with a toothbrush was a complete waste of time. But we soon learned to keep the firing mechanism and the barrel in perfect trim when our lives depended on the weapon working reliably.

Dieter and I have just spread the components of our pistols neatly on the table. Paul is checking a spare magazine for grit. Then Herr Krafft appears with another jug of beer. He stares at us for a moment from the doorway, then dashes over to the table in a wild panic.

"What are you doing? What are you doing!" bursts from him in an urgent whisper.

We exchange puzzled frowns.

"Is there something wrong?" asks Paul.

"The . . . the . . . guns!" stutters Herr Krafft, pointing a trembling finger at the table. "What if someone sees them?"

It takes us a moment to understand the reason for his concern. Guns are the tools of the soldier's trade, but we are no longer soldiers, and have pieces of paper to prove it. Civilians do not end their Saturday

afternoons drinking beer and cleaning pistols as though they expect to be attacked at any minute. We have many bad habits to shed if we are ever to become proper civilians again.

Paul apologizes and explains, then promises to be more discreet in the future. Herr Krafft staggers away looking mildly terrified. Perhaps the local Gendarm is having a drink in his bar. Dieter and I complete our task as rapidly as possible. Then we all up our feet on the wooden rail and look out across the Rhein at France.

"That's the trouble with not getting captured and disarmed in a regulation fashion," remarks Paul.

"Where would you rather be?" asks Dieter. "Stuck in a POW camp, waiting for the Yanks to check up on you? Or here, drinking beer and dropping bricks?"

"Pass the bricks, someone," says Otto lazily, answering for Paul. "And who's got some cigarettes?"



Sunday has been just another day to us for as long as we can remember. Church bells calling the congregation to services are a baffling noise at first. It is quite plain that Frau Krafft does not approve of guests taking a generous measure of brandy with their Sunday breakfast coffee, but the unspoken censure of a large, female hotelier has no effect on four battle-hardened semi-civilians. A drink is something to grab whenever you can lay your hands on it; irrespective of the hour, the day, the month, or anything else. It might be your last. Our habits are now out of date, but it will take some time to learn new ones.

Dieter is a bit blocked-up this morning and keeps on honking into a large red handkerchief. When he accuses Otto of passing on his cold, Otto just grins and tells him that he has finished with it. I managed to sleep in my bed instead of on the floor of my room last night. I wasn't drunk, but I was quite cheerful at the end of a small party to celebrate our black market earnings.

Sleep came rapidly and naturally. Some of the locals made pigs of themselves when we started buying them drinks. But we didn't, strangely enough. We just kept going at a reasonable pace instead of swilling the beer down as fast as our glasses could be filled.

Perhaps we are starting to become civilized again. We ordered glasses of brandy this morning instead of a whole bottle. Dieter didn't spend the night in the guesthouse. He showed up as we were shaving, sneezing but grinning like an alley cat. I hope for his sake that a cold is all that he brought back with him. But it's his life.

Our final departure from the guesthouse is a relief to its owners. When we reach the garage, we learn that Herr Wille has gone to church. His son seems quite pleased that he was left to guard the place. He has as little use for church services as we do. Young Sepp has washed our truck and swept the cigarette stubs out of the cab. The windscreen

sparkles inside and out.

Paul gives the lad five dollars for his trouble. There is very little left now of the American money which came with the truck. Bohemia and our encounter with the two American black marketeers seem a lifetime in the past, instead of just eventful six days. Fortunately, we are earning more than enough from Joe Schmidt to keep us going.

A bend in the road cuts off the town. We are on our way to Joe's school. Dieter and I are in the back of the truck with the canvas sides rolled up so that we can enjoy a warm morning. Suddenly two American MPs in a Jeep speed up alongside us, sounding their horn. Otto has to brake sharply when they cut in front of the truck. One of the MPs marches up to the cab. The other strolls down the road for a look into the back of our vehicle. Both have unbuttoned the flap of their belt holster, and are keeping their right hand close to the butt of a .45 automatic pistol. They are typical military policemen; big, ugly, and full of their own importance.

"Okay, who's the truck belong to?" asks the MP at the cab in passable German.

Otto tells him to go screw himself, but the MP is clearly unfamiliar with the expression. His comrade seems quite disappointed when he discovers just four blankets, some camouflage netting, and Dieter and me in the back of the truck. We stare back at him. We have never been face to face with a Negro before.

"Let's see your papers," demands the MP at the cab.

Otto pretends not to understand him. Just as Paul is trying to find out why the MPs stopped us, the other one stabs a finger at the driver's door and calls in English: "Hey, Frank! Look at this!"

"I think they can see the shape of the American star on the door under the paint," mutters Dieter, slipping his pistol out of his belt.

Otto has guessed the same thing. His door bursts open, knocking the MP flying. Dieter extends his right arm and cocks his pistol. The other MP stops dead, still pointing at the door of the truck.

"Dieter, get rid of the Jeep," calls Otto. "You two, over there." He waves the MPs into the trees to the left of the road. "Bring some rope, Jürgen."

"We can't kill them, you know," murmurs Paul. "Not now. It would be murder."

"Nothing to stop us tying them up till we're out of the way," returns Otto. "We can't just let them go now."

"Yes, it's rather late for explanations," I chip in, offering agreement.

"I don't think they'd have believed our story before. And they certainly won't now."

"If we had a story to tell them," mutters Paul. "All right, tie them up."

The Jeep charges into the trees with Dieter at the wheel. We have just reached a sheltered hollow with our prisoners when we hear a crash and the sound of glass breaking. The Jeep's engine stops abruptly. Dieter appears a few moments later, running back to the road, grinning and unharmed. We show our prisoners no mercy when we tie and gag them, allowing the ropes improvised from camouflage netting to cut viciously into their arms and legs. Their own handkerchiefs complete the gags. We expect to be well on our way to France before they free themselves and raise the alarm.

Paul waves an urgent summons as we start back to the truck. We trot to the edge of the road, then stop to allow an American staff car to speed past, innocently checking our buttons as though we have been splashing a few daisies in the trees. Paul has the engine running when we reach the truck and scramble into the back.

"Fix them up nicely?" grins Dieter.

"They'll be as mad as hell when they get free," chuckles Otto. "We tied their feet to a tree to stop them worming to the road. And what happened to the bloody jeep?"

"It sort of fell down a hole," cackles Dieter.

"Well, they won't be needing these for a while." I fling two pistols from the side of the truck. They arc through the sunlight to be swallowed by the grey waters of the Rhein. The American MPs were lucky, even though they won't be feeling very fortunate at the moment, I reflect. Had we met them five days ago, they would be dead instead of uncomfortably tied to a tree. But bodies in peacetime mean trouble for the local population. And we Germans are in quite enough trouble without making more for ourselves.

Five minutes later, we reach Joe's base. His heavyweights dash from the school to our truck with wine packed into American whiskey cartons. It seems that we are doing another job for him. Paul, who knows something about fine wines but lacks drinking experience, examines one of the bottles and tells us that it has an impeccable pedigree.

"But a pretty shady history," I remark.

"Hasn't everything worth anything?" says Joe. "Careful with that." He stares at Paul with a worried frown until the dark bottle is safely back in its compartment in the whiskey carton. "Yes, I got all this lot off a



couple of telephone engineers. Mad pair of buggers. They got their hands on it while they were with the Fourth Air Corps at Rennes, in France. Their headquarters staff commandeered it."

"So how did these two get hold of any of it?" asks Otto.

"They didn't have much to do but plan how to steal it," explains Joe. "Their main job was to crawl out of the shelters in the cellars to ring each other up after an air raid. Egon would say, 'Did the bastards get you?' and Berti would tell him, 'No, they missed us again.' So Egon would say he was going back to bed again and Berti would call him an idle bastard. Then they'd ring round to check the rest of the lines."

"Not a very full day," comments Paul.

"Not unless the phones were dead. Then they'd have to go out and find the breaks," says Joe. "And that could be anything up to a dozen times on a bad day."

"The poor sods!" scoffs Otto.

"But how did they get away with the stuff?" asks Dieter, displaying a professional interest.

"That was easy," grins Joe. "Every time the bombing cut the phone lines, Egon sneaked down to the cellars again and pinched a couple of bottles. When they met, he'd pass them on to Berti, and he'd pass them on to their wine merchant."

"Their wine merchant?" laughs Paul.

"Oh, yes," nods Joe. "That was to protect their investment. Good wines have to be looked after properly, you know. They had a proper French wine merchant storing the stuff for them. He got every twentieth bottle as payment. Real crafty sods, they are. They even managed to get left behind when their mob moved to Poland for the Russian campaign."

"What about when the Allies landed in France?" asks Paul. "How did they get on then?"

"That was no problem," grins Joe. "When they saw it was all over for us, they deserted. They just went into hiding from about the middle of June to the middle of July, then they went to live with their wine merchant. They've both got very black hair. and they'd got quite reasonable beards by then, so they looked just like civvies. It's as well they did. A Yank general tried to steal their loot."

"Generals are good at that," remarks Dieter.

"But not good enough," continues Joe. "All the Yanks got was some very average stuff. But Berti and Egon followed them back to their headquarters and stole some better stuff off them. They sold quite a lot of that to some British generals. They actually gave them a fair price."

"The perils of hoarding," remarks Paul.

He is right, of course. Had the wine passed through our hands, we would have polished off the whole lot in record time. And then nobody would have been able to take it away from us. We have lost the habit of saving for a future which might end in a few hours' time. I find myself overcome by a wave of jealousy. It seems scarcely credible that these two could have spent their days mending telephone wires and stealing wine, skulking in a nice, deep cellar when the odd bomb fell nearby, and very probably living in relatively disgusting luxury. In our terms, this means that they received regular rations and didn't have to place themselves at the mercy of our enemies and the weather. Perhaps they have never been shot at!

"What about this paper merchant of yours?" asks Otto when one of the loaders tells Joe that everything is aboard our truck.

"I don't know. He should have been here by now." Joe frowns at his watch. "He's got some stuff for me too." He seems rather annoyed by the delay, and not a little nervous. We too are anxious to be on our way, but we can hardly tell Joe why. Evidently, he told us the story of Egon and Berti to take all our minds off the passage of time.

"Let's get some coffee while we're waiting," suggests Joe.

We follow him into the school and down a corridor to his canteen. The desks in this classroom have all been pushed to the back of the room because they are too small to seat an adult comfortably. An assortment of household furniture and three car seats give the place a rather eccentric look, but create almost a club atmosphere. Max is the cook, filling the air with a tempting smell of frying. We each have a fried egg on toast, just to be sociable, and wash the snack down with coffee and brandy.

The paper merchant arrives as we are cleaning our plates, chasing the last of the egg yolk with a piece of fresh, white bread. The new arrival has the sort of cheerful, unconcerned approach to life which has terrified me ever since I met a surgeon with a similar disposition. The joyful butcher had just spent about ten minutes digging into my right thigh for shrapnel, without an anaesthetic, assuring me all the time that my wound was nothing serious. Then someone mentioned that he had actually sawn the wrong leg off his last customer. I never found out if the tale was true, but I spent the next three days convinced that my number had been called.

The paper merchant makes some excuse about American road blocks, then sets up shop on the teacher's desk. We approach him one by one

and hand over all our pieces of paper. Ed, short for Edouard, sorts through our paper lives and places irrelevant documents to one side. The Americans keep changing them every so often to make life difficult for those who refuse to stay in one place, under their thumb. Ed copies various details onto more documents, and stamps them with seals and signatures. We then pass our new papers from hand to hand, folding and unfolding them, adding dirt and greasy fingerprints to give them artificial age.

The paper merchant is very thorough, despite his careless appearance. During his final check of our paper selves, he makes sure that the correct number of coupons has been clipped from our ration cards, and that we have at least one out of date document with a new one which takes effect from the appropriate date. Then he produces some papers for Joe.

Joe is impatient to be on his way. Leaving Ed discussing the breakfast menu with Max, he takes us back to our vehicle. The truck has acquired a new set of civilian number plates which match the information given in the paper merchant's documents. Otto and I end up in the back with the load. We drive south for about fifteen kilometres. Then, just as we are wondering where we are going to cross into France, Dieter makes a left turn and starts travelling east. Otto and I exchange frowns, but assume that Joe knows what he's doing.

We spend about twenty minutes on rather grim roads. Then truck crawls onto a stretch of soft grass beside the metalled surface and stops.

"All right, where the hell are we going?" demands Otto, swinging down to the grass.

"Over there, eventually," replies Joe.

We are parked on the side of a hill, on a narrow road in a strip gashed through a forest. We can just make out some cloud-capped mountains through the tree tops on our right, where Joe is aiming his finger.

"That's Switzerland," Paul adds. "We're going the short way."

"With Joe navigating?" I comment sceptically. "Don't you believe it."

"Go on, you miserable sod," laughs Dieter, throwing a blackened steel helmet at me. "It's your turn to brew up. I remember distinctly."

Despite all the initial rush to get moving, we remain at our campsite until ten-thirty. Then we follow the road down into the valley, reaching the border after travelling about two kilometres. There are two old men in threadbare and shiny uniforms at our side of the frontier, sitting in the

sun in front of their hut, playing chess. They glance at us briefly as we drive past, but behave as though we are none of their business. The invasion and occupation of our country seems to have lifted their sense of responsibility. One of them raises his hand in a half-wave when Joe throws them a couple of packets of cigarettes, but neither takes his eyes from the chessboard for long.

The Swiss border guards look prepared to repel any invasion. Joe breathes a sigh of relief when he spots the guard commander. The sentries seem grateful for something to do other than staring at sagging barbed wire fences, watching them rust. Our second-hand clothing draws amused contempt from the toy soldiers when they look us over. At Joe's insistence, our pistols are taped beneath the seats in the back of the truck and hidden by the load. Thus we appear relatively harmless to the armed border guards.

Our documents receive a thorough examination by the guard commander. We gain the impression that he is satisfying himself that they are in order to protect himself in the event of our doing something stupid, such as getting ourselves arrested. Joe slips him a couple of bottles of claret with a conspiratorial wink. Making sure that none of his men is peering in through the small window of the guardhouse, the commander permits himself a toothy grin.

A flurry of stamping between ink pad and our papers gives us permission to enter Switzerland on the strict understanding that we do not attempt to take up residence there, but continue on to France as planned within three days.

Joe takes the wheel for the next stretch, and seems very relieved to be in Switzerland. We hear later from Paul that there was some trouble in a village not too far away from ours earlier in the day. Some poor sod, who had seen his younger brother shot by the Americans because he was unable to keep up with a column of prisoners, had returned home to find his wife living with an American officer. He had killed both of them, and also three MPs who came to investigate the shooting, before escaping into the Schwarzwald.

It was one of the road blocks set up by the Americans during their search for him which delayed the paper merchant. Joe was rather worried in case we were stopped and searched before we crossed the border. He nearly fainted when Dieter told him about our encounter with the American MPs on the way to his school.

It seems strange that the authorities will get some quack to chop open the bodies. He'll dig out the bullets, and they'll be filed along with a

collection of paper until they can be matched with the gun that fired them. In peacetime, more fuss will be made about the death of one German woman and four Americans than would be made about the annihilation of a whole regiment during the war. The official sense of proportion has been turned upside down.

We drive south as far as Olten, then head south-west. Bowling along well-made roads through a country untouched by war is a strange experience. We see clean and well-fed civilians everywhere, going about their business, enjoying a warm Sunday before returning to a civilian job on Monday. It seems bizarre to me that life could be so normal here when every single country which borders on Switzerland is occupied by an invading army.

But what we see around us is not normal. Normality is death and destruction, starvation and disease, advancing and retreating over the same piece of shattered and worthless foreign ground with the seasons, replacing the same section of railway line over and over, filling the same crater at a road junction day after day, bombs, shells, and bullets, new faces to replace fallen comrades for a time, and strange lulls in the fighting which never last long enough.

The normality of war is a complete reversal of all civilian values, virtue made out of wrong, a world in which survival is the result of sheer luck more often than one's own efforts. And yet the people we see around us have been spared all this. I find myself developing a growing hatred for Switzerland and the Swiss.

Paul follows our progress on the map which Albert took from the American fishermen at the Bodensee. We pass to the north of Berne, and keep going. Boredom starts to set in. Otto and I do what we always do when time hangs heavily; we go to sleep.

I snap awake as the truck slows to a stop. Something is about to happen; my instincts tell me so. My new watch tells me that is two minutes past one in the afternoon.

"Everybody out," calls Paul. "We're here. And very fancy it looks too."

Rubbing my eyes, I ask him where we are. He thrusts the map under my nose and taps it with a pencil. The point makes a tiny mark at the easternmost reach of the Genfer See. We find ourselves at the side of a large hotel. It is a cliff of white stone and dark green drainpipes. Joe disappears through a dark green door. The windows on either side of it are frosted, but the five pairs above them are of clear glass.

Tall hedges screen the arrival of tradesmen at this side entrance.

Voices speaking German with peculiar accents are carried to us by a light wind. I wonder briefly what these innocent and prosperous Swiss would do if we were to burst into their midst, wearing our fire-blackened helmets and American rain capes, and brandishing our pistols.

Joe returns before I can suggest the experiment to my comrades. With him is a smartly-dressed man in his late forties. Black hair plastered to his scalp with scented grease shades into pale grey at his temples. His strong smell of *Kölnisches Wasser* creates in me an equally powerful desire to giggle. His reaction to us is well-concealed horror. Joe is quite presentable in his leather jacket, spotless white shirt and dark blue tie, dark grey trousers, and American black and white shoes. Paul's light grey suit is a reasonable fit.

We others are wearing rather ancient sports jackets and shabby trousers. Our shirts are pale blue and fairly clean, but none of us possesses either a collar or a tie, and we are all wearing boots. We must look like a bunch of roughs.

Joe presents the hotelier as Herr Odemar, but makes no attempt to introduce us to him. Odemar stops behaving as though there is a bad smell under his nose when he inspects the wine. He starts to babble like a chubby lunatic from sheer joy as he explores the cartons and discovers the magnificence of their contents. He opens a bottle at random to make sure that the wine is in good condition. Then a chain of underlings transfers our precious cargo from the truck to the hotel's cellar.

We lean against the truck, smoking Joe's Lucky Strikes and discussing very audibly what we would like for lunch. When the unloading has been completed, Joe tells us, in very apologetic tones, that Odemar has insisted that we eat in the kitchen with the staff. The hotelier has such a strong French accent that it's a wonder Joe understood that much.

We behave as though we are highly offended at first, and suggest reloading the wine and taking it to a more appreciative buyer. Joe's Adam's apple bobs up and down, and he polishes his gold-rimmed spectacles frantically with his tie as he tries to work out whether we are serious.

"All right. Let's stop bugging about. I'm hungry." Otto brings the play acting to an abrupt conclusion.

Looking rather annoyed, Joe leads us through the green door. Trade is his paramount consideration. He does not like being messed about by a bunch of mistrustful ex-soldiers who have him by the throat until he can lay his hands on alternative transport. Max told us yesterday that the

Americans stole two of Joe's four trucks on Friday evening.

Perhaps the Yanks would tell us a different story about recovering property originally stolen from them. But Joe has to take great care not to upset us. Our lack of appreciation of the value of money makes us a ridiculously cheap haulage service.

The kitchen staff look down their Swiss noses at us. We are decidedly inferior beings who cannot speak German with a proper French accent. They seem quite surprised that we bother to wash before sitting down to eat. Taking our cue from Paul, who, as a genuine officer, knows more than we do about formal dining, we select appropriate weapons from a regiment of cutlery and consume a thin but tasty soup at an unhurried pace.

Next comes duck in orange sauce with roast potatoes and green peas. We suspect that the meat is awkward bits considered unfit to grace the plates of paying customers, but it tastes all right to us. Two bottles of fairly decent rosé wine help to wash the duck down. Chocolate ice cream follows! I almost freeze myself to death with the first mouthful before I realise what it is. We all have a second helping of this Russian Front mousse.

Confirming our peasant origins, we take our coffee in the largest cups available. Smoking is not permitted in the kitchen, so we take our cups out to the truck. Dieter asks me to carry his cup. He wants to splash a few daisies before joining us. I catch a shadow of a sly grin and a quick wink as he turns to the washroom.

We park ourselves on soft, recently-trimmed grass and enjoy the sun, Paul produces his cigarettes, but Otto tells him to wait until Dieter gets back. Other than a hollow groan, Paul makes no comment. Otto starts to cackle softly to himself. I think he hates the Swiss as much as I do.

Dieter stops at the truck to collect his pack before joining us. His thin, sharp features are arranged into an expression of total innocence, but criminality glitters in his dark eyes.

"What did you get?" asks Otto eagerly.

"Very careless, these bloody Swiss layabouts," grins Dieter. "They leave doors open all over the place. It's really shocking, the temptations they put in your path. They use this for cooking." He opens his jacket to reveal two bottles of French brandy trapped in the belt of his trousers. Otto takes charge of one of them. Dieter hides the other in his pack. Then he reaches round to the back of his jacket. He has a box of cigars tucked into his belt round there. One advantage of shapeless clothing is its capacity for hiding things.

"If you treat a man like a dog, don't be too surprised if he takes a bite out of you," remarks Paul as Otto slops brandy into his coffee.

"Not bad, these cigars," remarks Otto when we are all smoking. He blows on the glowing tip of the short, fat cigar, then tries to blow some smoke rings.

"Tell you what," Dieter remarks to me, "stealing from the Swiss is a bit like taking stuff from the Yanks. Only a lot more satisfying."

"You don't like them either?" I ask.

"Stuck up bastards," growls Dieter. "You know, the four of us could do a pretty good job of holding this place up. We'd need a few more trucks to shift everything, though. You should see the amount of booze they've got here."

"Pity the war's over," comments Otto. "We could have started a third front here."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" says Dieter, becoming serious for a moment. "We'll all have to be good lads in future." His cheeky grin returns. "Or make bloody sure no one sees us."

"Wait till you're a respectable engine driver with a wife and seven kids," I tell him. "That'll slow you down a bit."

"That's something I could never see happening to me," Dieter tells his coffee cup. "Getting married and having kids. There was always a shell or a bullet waiting for me tomorrow or the next day. And now all that's gone." He taps his middle. "With these, we can do anything, go anywhere, and with no one shooting at us. We could even try a few desert hotels for size."

It takes me a moment to remember that he is carrying our share of the gold coins in one of the original belts. In the continuous world of the soldier, where day and night are merely different problems of survival rather than divisions, forever begins the day before yesterday.

We have been taking turns to carry the coins forever; as a sort of expression of mutual confidence. I can't remember the last time I thought about my share of our hidden wealth.

As if exhausted by what was a lengthy speech by his wartime standards, Dieter rolls onto his back and blows smoke at the blue Swiss sky.

"So you're not going to be an engine driver with all that gold to spend?" remarks Otto. "You're going to see the world first?"

"Not till they've had a chance to put it back together again," says Dieter with surprising perception. "And I don't think I'll like the bits that haven't been knocked about."



"That's a very wise decision," approves Paul. "Get yourself a good job with a pension. We're still very young. And even a quarter of a beltful of gold won't last forever if you start throwing it around. The world's full of people who would jump at the chance to help you spend it. In fact, here's one of them now."

"Okay, you guys!" Joe Schmidt calls to us in American. He thumps heavily on the door of the truck to break up the discussion. "Let's go."

"Since when did you start giving us orders, Fahnenjunker Schmidt?" drawls Otto, being awkward.

Joe emits a hollow groan. "Would you gentlemen care to join me for a gentle drive to France? Herr Hauptmann?"

"Well, if you put it like that," grins Otto.

We scramble to our feet, leaving the cups on the grass for some underling to clear up. There is plenty of room to sprawl in comfort on our blankets and the camouflage nets in the back of the truck, so there is no argument when Otto decides to drive.

The Swiss border guards give us no trouble. Our papers are in order, and they are content to apply their stamps. They do not even bother to search the truck. Their French colleagues are not so co-operative at first, perhaps because they are bored and we provide a welcome diversion. Every document receives a close scrutiny, even though their knowledge of German proves to be rather sketchy.

Paul has to translate the ownership papers for the truck, which allege that we bought it from a scrap merchant. His perfect French accent and the fact that he can produce a crumpled French identity card, which is decorated with a dark brown bloodstain, convince them that Paul, at least, is a decent human being. But he has to explain that Teine is the surname of his French stepfather, and that our army insisted on calling him Hals, his father's name.

A small present from Joe, in the form of several packets of American cigarettes, gives the border guards something to do other than make nuisances of themselves. We leaving them tapping the base to shoot cigarettes out of the paper packets. It doesn't take much to keep a cop amused, as Dieter tells us.

There is the inevitable load waiting for us at a small town about twenty kilometres south of Genf. This time, we can't be bothered asking what it is; until Joe complains that the suspense is killing him. Otto points out that anyone with half a nose could smell that it's coffee beans.

Paul's map tells us that our next destination is Vienne, a town on the river Rhône big enough to be marked on the map of Europe. We are about thirty kilometres south of Lyon. We arrive at about half-past five after an endless drive fragmented by frequent naps. The place is pretty deserted, which is not unexpected for this time on a Sunday evening. Joe drives us to the market. As the wind is blowing towards us, we run into a fair pong of rotting vegetables before we get there. The truck stops half-way down a narrow alley, level with a loading bay.

Joe hammers on a wooden door with peeling paint, his fist producing a dull, booming sound. A face peers down at him from an upper window. Then the doors are flung wide open. Three brawny Frenchmen wearing black berets and dirty, blue-hooped pullovers unload the sacks of coffee in record time. We watch them at work, smoking our Swiss cigars like bosses.

A French version of Joe, also wearing gold-rimmed glasses but without the squashed nose, chats briefly with him in heavily accented German and takes charge of a wad of money. I find myself impressed by the international spirit of the black market. We have just fought a war with the French; and just about everyone else except the bloody Swiss. But here are Frenchmen and Germans drawn together by a common bond of crime and a desire to make a dishonest fortune.

Off we go again. We will be parting company with Joe very soon, but we have still to collect payment for today's jobs. And he has promised us another meal. The town has a ruined castle, but the destruction cannot be blamed on either our forces or the 'liberators'. Here is the lesson of history: as soon as you build something, along comes some vicious bastard and knocks it down. The people of Vienne must have been aware of this fact for seven hundred years. It's a pity they didn't mention it to the rest of us.

After a brief tour of the town, we reach a clothing warehouse, which looks rather like a bombed cinema from the outside. We find two men in a clearing at the back of a forest hung with everything from socks to English overcoats. One of them puts his limp, much-thumbed book down and seems glad of someone to talk to. The other one puts down a wine glass and picks up a tape measure, emitting a hollow groan.

The reader is called Andreas. He is a German of about our age. His companion with the tape measure is a Frenchman of around fifty called Jean-Louis. Standing around, chatting and drinking Beaujolais while Jean-Louis runs his tape measure over us, is a very relaxing and pleasant experience. Then Dieter looks at the title of the well-read book.

"Hey, look at this!" he gasps, showing us the title page.

Andreas is reading *Mein Kampf*.

"It's all right. He's a Red, not a Nazi," explains Joe.

"It doesn't matter to us if he's an Eskimo," comments Otto. "What are you reading that rubbish for?"

"It can't hurt to study the other side's methods," grins Andreas. "And I'm a Jew, by the way. By birth, at any rate. I've had a good Christian upbringing and developed naturally into an evil atheist."

We stare at him frankly, as if he is an animal in a zoo. His height is between mine and Paul's, his dark hair lighter than Dieter's or mine, and his nose is no larger than Otto's film-star beak. But we can't think why he should be lying.

"I look almost human, don't I?" Andreas continues cheerfully, picking up his book. "No, any student of political methods can learn a lot from the ravings of our late Führer. His use of red for his posters in an attempt to attract Communists so that they could re-educate them was quite brilliant. So was the decision to address the audience as 'national comrades' instead of 'ladies and gentlemen'. And Party members calling themselves 'Party comrades'. Gather your audience, then slip them your message before they realize you're not what they think you are. That's what the book tells us. You won't get through to most of them, but you'll make a few converts you couldn't have made in the normal course of events."

"You're not going to try and make Reds out of us, are you?" Otto asks suspiciously.

"I doubt you'll be staying long enough to attend one of my meetings," grins Andreas.

"Aren't you going to give us some leaflets?" asks Paul.

"I don't go in for them much," replies Andreas. "As my favourite author says, a brilliant speaker is a thousand times more effective than a brilliant writer because the speaker is in direct communication with his audience. He can judge his effect on them very precisely, and adjust the pace, the style, the repetition rate, and the number of examples in his address to make sure that it reaches all of his audience. Something a writer can never hope to do."

"This is beginning to sound like a political meeting," I remark as Jean-Louis helps me into a jacket. It fits beautifully.

"No, we need a few hundred more people," Andreas tells us. "You need a good crowd to stop new members feeling isolated and self-conscious. They can only give the speaker their full attention if they feel

at ease, not a fool.”

“Is that from experience or what you’ve read?” asks Otto sceptically.

“Oh, a bit of both,” returns Andreas airily. “Our National Socialist Education Officers could guarantee you a good crowd.”

“They’d get a crowd for a Red?” scoffs Otto.

“Ah, but that was using Hitler’s tactics,” Andreas points out. “My copy of *Mein Kampf* was like the red lettering on his posters. Just bait. Mind you,” he adds modestly, “it takes a fair amount of cunning to get your message over with the Party’s representative sitting next to you.”

“And what do you stand for?” asks Paul. “People are always running the other side down, but you never seem to find out what they believe in.”

“I want to destroy privilege,” says Andreas piously. “To break up the big estates and nationalize every big industry. To squeeze the rich to give to the workers.”

“What do you care about the workers?” scoffs Otto. “You look like one of the people you’d be squeezing.”

“Ah, but the black market won’t always be necessary,” says Andreas. “And offering people something for nothing is a good way of persuading them to vote you into a nice, comfortable political job. And that’s a stepping-stone to almost anything. Nobody expects you to deliver when you’re in.”

“What happens if you run out of rich people to exploit and you do have to deliver?” asks Paul

“There’s no danger of that!” laughs Andreas. “There’ll always be capitalists. All we have to do is turn a blind eye while they’re growing. It’s rather like agriculture, only the seeds are self-planting. We just sit back and reap the harvest.”

“This fellow could go far,” remarks Paul. “But someone’s bound to find him out sooner or later.”

“That doesn’t matter,” grins Andreas. “It’s just like when I was in the Army. Anyone who denounced me then was a filthy Red trying to discredit a good National Socialist. If you can convince the right people you’re all right, it doesn’t matter what the rabble say.”

“No wonder no one ever has a good word to say for a politician,” remarks Otto. “If they’re all like you.”

Andreas shrugs. “It’s a job like any other. A rather filthy one at times, but the rewards are there if you’re prepared to work for them.”

“What’s the betting he’s the swine that starts the next war?” scoffs Dieter.

"On the contrary," counters Andreas, "it's our duty to make sure nothing like this happens ever again. And now's the right time to do a bit of stockpiling for the future."

"You've got a pretty fair stockpile already." Otto waves a hand to take in the contents of the warehouse.

"No," explains Andreas, "I mean arms and ammunition for a resistance movement. One that'll bump off any of our future leaders who look like getting us into this sort of mess again. And convince them we have both the means and the strength of will to go through with it after we've given them fair warning. The hand that rattles the sabre can't do much if it's been cut off at the neck." He draws a finger across his throat.

"You're in favour of assassination as a routine part of your politics?" Paul asks.

"Which would you rather do?" challenges Andreas. "Let them put you in uniform again and go off and get your head blown off in a regulation fashion? Or root the war-mongers out of their bunkers and do away with them in short order? Or isolate them and keep them under guard until they either starve or swear to change their ways? We must be ruthless and treat war as a disease, and attack the germs that cause it. After all, it's them or us. The Allies may be getting our former leaders ready for the chop, but they've outlasted millions of ordinary people like ourselves. It's getting to the stage where there could be no survivors of another war."

"No room at the desert hotel," remarks Dieter.

"An interesting point of view," comments Paul.

"We're fairly safe at the moment," adds Andreas. "As long as the Allies don't let us have any national pride or war heroes. Not that there are many live ones to be found. War's too thorough these days. Only the villains survive on account of their greater cunning."

"I can believe that," chuckles Otto, glancing at Joe, who is trying on various gangster hats in front of a mirror.

"Okay, sermon over." Andreas inspects us closely. "Well, you lot certainly look quite different now. There's a full-length mirror over there so you can admire yourselves."

We have been changing into our new clothes during the lecture. Four civilians stare back at us from the mirror on the wall to our right. We look very odd in dark blue suits, white shirts with snowy collars, and striped ties.

"Very pretty," grins Joe. "You've done a marvellous job, Jean-Louis."

"One does one's best, M'sieu," murmurs the outfitter with quiet pride.

We leave the warehouse carrying suitcases which contain a change of clothing and a pair of shoes. We keep our boots on. They make us look rather odd, but they are comfortable. Our next port of call is a farmhouse to the east of the town. The land is very flat for about five to ten kilometres around Vienne. Then the hills start. Most of the land is under cultivation, but we see sheep and one or two horses; but no cattle. We learn from Joe that we are at the heart of France's silk producing area. No doubt American silk stockings are giving the French silkworms plenty of competition.

Both the farmer and his wife are half-German, which makes their children half-German as well. The war has treated them badly. Their eldest boy lies at the bottom of the Atlantic with his U-boat, a victim of a British destroyer. Their only daughter was killed in an American air raid. But they still have two sons, both of whom are struck in a prisoner of war camp near Munster. It is rather depressing to look at the black ribbon-draped portrait photographs on the old upright piano. And rather strange to remember that Dieter is listed among the fallen in the day book of a police station somewhere to the south of Ulm.

Despite a gloomy start to the evening, things perk up when we begin a meal of Lyon sausages and pancakes with strange French names. Joe contributes three bottles of Rhein wine and some coffee to the meal. We provide a bottle of American whiskey which Paul squirrelled away and forgot about, and Dieter brings out his box of Swiss souvenir cigars when a couple of neighbours drop in after the meal for a word with Joe Schmidt.

Both neighbours are French, but they seem quite at ease in a house full of Germans. In fact, one of them is strongly anti-British, and both are anti-American and firm opponents of de Gaulle, the country's self-appointed messiah. France is a divided country in which a minor civil war is raging. Those who were in the gangs of partisans during the war are seeking out 'collaborators' and giving them justice with a bullet in the back of the neck.

The people who accepted the Vichy government and then our occupation of the great camel's hump in the south are being forced to learn how to arm and defend themselves. The world war may be over officially, but there are so many weapons around that old scores will continued to be settled in a very permanent fashion for some time to come.

On leaving the farm, we back-track to a small town mid-way between Vienne and Lyon. Joe directs us to a closed and grimy shop which

boasts a private drinking club behind its shuttered windows. Over a drink, he pays in US dollars for our recent services. The beer tastes rather strange, but it is quite drinkable. Joe seems quite sorry to see us go; mainly because we are taking a perfectly good truck with us. He gives us an address in Lyon, where we can leave a message for him should we change our minds and decide to make our fortunes. Then he grins and tells us that we'll have to learn the value of our services first.

Paul becomes quite serious for a moment, and tells him that he will meet plenty of people who are in a state of shock at coming out of the war alive. They will be quite content to ferry him and his loads of stolen property across half of Europe for the odd meal, a watch, and a suit of decent clothes. But they will regain their sense of proportion eventually. And some of them might be uncivilized enough to do something drastic to settle a grudge against an exploiter.

Joe polishes his glasses with his tie and squints nervously at Paul. Our former leader grins to show that his remarks are not to be taken seriously and pushes to his feet. After all the beer, he wants to splash his boots. Joe puts his glasses back in position and follows him. Moments later, Joe is back at our table for reinforcements.

"A couple of big blokes must have seen the money," he gasps, tugging at Otto's arm. "They followed us, and Paul was telling one of them to get lost."

We slip out of the back door and hurry to the primitive latrine in the yard. Two muscular Frenchmen are sprawled gracelessly on the stone flags. The Kid is standing over them, looking mildly annoyed and rubbing the knuckles of his right hand.

"All right, what's going on here?" a deep voice demands behind us in French.

"He's a cop, watch it," mutters Joe, confirming the note of authority in the voice.

The man has a sad face with a drooping ginger moustache and spiky hair. But his eyes are alert and full of suspicion.

"These two tried to rob me," explains Paul.

The policeman sneers at him, refusing to believe that someone of his slight build could have felled a pair of beefy Frenchmen. "Do you take me for an idiot?" he demands.

"Sounds like a fair exchange to me," Dieter mutters in Russian when Joe has translated.

"You lot beat them up," adds the policeman. "You're all under arrest. Hoi, you two!"

We turn to see the 'victims' scrambling over the wall at the end of the yard. Ignoring the policeman, they drop into the alley and scamper away.

"They can't have been too badly damaged," remarks Joe. "Why don't we have a quiet drink and forget all about this?"

The policeman shrugs philosophically. Nobody is going to give him any medals if he tries to make anything of the incident. We troop back into the club. Curious eyes follow us to the bar, but their owners pretend disinterest. It is understood that those who frequent the club mind their own business. Joe buys the policeman a large brandy, then hints that it is time we were moving.

"What did you do to those two?" asks Joe when we are back at our truck. "They were twice your size."

Paul shrugs vaguely. "They were determined to rob me. So I kicked one of them. And the other one was just standing, staring at his friend, when I hit him. It was the advantage of the aggressor."

"I hope you're not carrying any grudges against me," says Joe, looking shaken.

"We're becoming very civilized people," says Otto. "Some might think you've been getting the better of us. But the way we see it, we've been doing you a few favours."

"Well, you've got the address," says Joe. "If you ever need a favour back, it'll cost you what you charged me. Is that fair enough for you?"

"As long as the price of watches and suits doesn't go too high," I add.

"Just as a matter of interest," says Joe, "where did you get the truck? You didn't come by it honestly, I know."

"What makes you say that?" asks Dieter innocently.

"If you look at the doors from the right angle," explains Joe, "you can just make out the outline of American stars under the blue paint."

"Yes, the American MPs saw that," nods Otto. "We must do something about it."

"I don't think you can say we came by it dishonestly," Paul tells Joe. "We stopped what we thought was one of our own trucks to get a lift. What we didn't know was that we were behind American lines at the time. We ended up recapturing it from a couple of black marketeers."

"There's a lot of them about," laughs Joe. "Well, don't do anything silly, and keep out of the way of cops." He offers his hand to each of us, then hurries down the street to one of the houses. His business seems to be a full-time job. We board our truck and head south, down the valley of the Rhône.



Sunset is about an hour and a half away. We are an estimated 300 kilometres from Toulon. Given a clear run, we will be there at around midnight. Otto takes the wheel. Paul feels obliged to relay an intermittent commentary to Dieter and myself in the back of the truck. The whole region is full of Roman and more modern ruins, and cellars packed with maturing wines. It sounds an ideal place for a hard-drinking archaeologist to live.

It is getting quite dark and chilly by the time we reach Avignon. Carried away by a desire to educate us, Paul directs Otto to follow the river instead of the road to the east of the city. We pass a collection of massive and rather gloomy buildings where successive popes lived for most of the 14th century. Then we come to the famous bridge. We are quite disappointed when we see that it reaches only two-thirds of the way across the river. As we pass under the first of four remaining arches, Paul tells us that it has been like this for over 250 years.

Dieter, who has just blamed the destruction on American bombs, is unabashed. He feels sure that the Yanks would have bombed it if time and the river hadn't done the demolition job for them. Then we learn that the song about the bridge is incorrect.

People didn't dance *on* the Pont St.-Bénézet, but *under* it. Here is a disgraceful state of affairs; a song taught to children all over Europe spreads false information! What other lies have we accepted as fact during our upbringing?

We pass through Saint-Rémy, where the Dutchman van Gogh finally went mad, about twenty minutes later. The road turns eastwards, following the northern flank of the Alpilles, a range of small mountains about twenty kilometres long. Paul estimates that we will be in Toulon in less than two hours.

A rough patch of road bounces us up and down vigorously. Dieter and I are just about to protest, when the nose of the truck drops abruptly and we come to a jarring, ploughing halt.

Our front axle has snapped. Dieter blames the disaster on the Americans. The pair of black marketeers from whom we took the truck must have mistreated it. Thanks to them, we are well and truly stranded.

"You know what?" remarks Paul sorrowfully. "It's the thirteenth today."

"But it's Sunday," Dieter points out. "That should cancel out the bad luck."

"I wonder what Joe would have said if this had happened while we

were doing him a favour?" Thoughts like this often strike me at the wrong time.

"Trust Jürgen to say something stupid," groans Otto.

"Go on, then; say something clever and fix the axle," I challenge, embarrassed by my remark, but not prepared to let Otto call me a fool.

"Talking isn't going to get anything done," interrupts Paul, keeping the peace. "And neither's stumbling around in the dark. I suggest we have a brew of coffee, then get some sleep. We can decide what to do in the morning."

We push the truck over to the side of the road. Otto works off some of his frustration by chopping dead wood from a stunted, roadside hedge with his Siberian knife. A splash of petrol from our reserve helps to persuade the wood to catch fire. Paul consults the map by the headlights of the truck. We are about 110 kilometres from Toulon; a two-day march. A broken axle has transformed a journey of two hours into so many days on foot.

We drink our coffee in a grim silence before settling down to sleep away the rest of a black night.

## END

Despite a firm intention to make an early start, the sun has been fighting in and out of thick clouds for two full hours before Dieter comes to life and wakes the rest of us. It is my turn to make a fire for our breakfast brew. We are just settling down to a simple meal, when a horse-drawn cart stops beside us, and a dried-up old Frenchman shouts something in a distinctly hostile tone.

"Some bastard has been chopping his hedge to pieces," translates Paul.

"Tell him we only used dead wood," says Otto. "We've really done him a favour. He'd only have had to chop it out himself."

It turns out that the old man can speak our language pretty well. He has very little use for Germans; all we're good for, in his colourfully-expressed opinion, is stealing his chickens and chopping his hedges to pieces. But he is prepared to admit that Germans who know the difference between live and dead wood are not as bad as the rest.

"Is that coffee?" he adds, staring pointedly at the dark liquid steaming gently in one of our helmets.

"Would you like to join us?" Paul asks hospitably,

"Perhaps a small drop," admits the old man. "With perhaps a taste of that cognac?" He refers to Dieter's second Swiss souvenir.

Paul hands him a tin mug and a cigarette. "I take it this is your farm?"

The old man looks past the head of his horse, which is nibbling daintily at the hedge with big, yellow teeth. "It's been in my family for over a hundred years," he says proudly. "Are you on your way home?"

"Yes," nods Paul. "But to Toulon. My family lives there. Or we were till the axle broke." He nods towards our crippled truck.

"A German truck. A Mercedes, yes?" says the old man. "They make good trucks."

"Some Yanks had it before us," remarks Dieter, as if to explain the

reason for the breakdown.

"There isn't a repair shop around here, is there?" asks Otto, being sarcastic.

"We might be able to do something," says the old man thoughtfully. He pushes to his feet and circles the truck. "It looks in good condition otherwise. The tyres are quite new." He returns to the fire and reclaims his corner of a rain cape. His eyes travel to the helmet of coffee. Dieter fills his mug again and adds a splash of brandy.

"You can get us another axle?" asks Paul with well-concealed surprise. "M'sieu . . .?"

"Morny. Auguste Morny."

Paul runs through a quick round of introductions.

"It's possible we could get you another axle," continues M. Morny. "Your people left a certain amount of surplus equipment behind when they went home. If you can make it worth our while."

"We do have a few dollars," admits Paul cautiously.

"Good. You have spare petrol?"

"A few tins, yes," nods Paul.

We have six twenty-litre tins in the back of the truck.

"Then I can tow you to the farm," says M. Morny.

Paul and I climb into the cart with a tin of petrol. Dieter and Otto remain with the truck to make sure that no one steals the battery, the wheels, or any other detachable parts. The farmhouse is a leisurely half kilometre away, screened from the road by an apple orchard. M. Morny leads us along echoing, scrubbed boards to a room at the back of the farmhouse.

"I must telephone a friend," he explains.

"Well, look at that!" laughs Paul.

"Your people had a lot of field telephones they didn't need," says M. Morny as he twirls the handle of a standard Wehrmacht model. "They gave them to us because they had no room for them, and they didn't want to waste time blowing them up. After that, it was just a question of collecting enough of the wire they left all over the place."

The farmer makes a telephone call which involves several long pauses. One of his neighbours can supply us with an axle and is prepared to do the replacement job for a small fee. After some haggling, we agree to give him twenty dollars at once, and a further twenty when the job is done. In addition, we allow M. Morny to look after our spare petrol as long as he returns three tins.

His truck is a positive dinosaur which has not been used since the first

snow of winter. But we get it going after cleaning the plugs and the carburettor and pumping up three of the tyres. Half an hour later, we have our own truck safely stowed away in the barn that M. Morny uses as a garage.

"Your truck will be as good as new when you return," the farmer assures us, accepting another of Paul's cigarettes with a small nod, which expresses either his thanks or an acknowledgement of his due.

"As long as it's still here when we come back," remarks Otto. He is not happy about pressing on to Toulon while M. Morny arranges the repairs. But he is prepared to follow the wishes of the majority.

"I'm not a fool," replies the farmer frostily. "The young one would do well to hide his pistol a little better." He nods to Dieter, who has a rather conspicuous bulge in his jacket pocket. "I realize you could be dangerous enemies."

"It's just natural caution," says Paul hurriedly. "We're not used to trusting people."

"Well, I suppose we didn't trust the Germans at first," M. Morny says grudgingly. "Especially the secret police and the ones who stole our chickens."

"So what happens now?" asks Dieter. "Do we start hoofing it to Toulon?"

"We're getting a lift to Salon," Paul tells him.

"Where the hell's that?" asks Otto.

"Here we are." Paul shows him on his map.

Salon is the width of two thumbs from our destination; a good eighty to ninety kilometres away.

"Couldn't we get a bit closer than that?" protests Otto.

"I have better things to do than waste a morning driving you lot around," comments M. Morny.

"Oh, the look on your faces!" laughs Paul, finding the mingled anger and indignation on Dieter and Otto's faces vastly amusing. "Look at the map! See the black line through Salon? It's a railway. We can get a train."

Dieter and Otto are too surprised to say anything. Paul and I reacted in just the same way when we discussed transport with the farmer. Paul had to explain to him that we are so used to travelling by stealth that something as simple or as public as catching a train never entered our thoughts.

After a crowded and bumpy ride to the station in M. Morny's cart, we spend half an hour waiting for a train to Marseilles. We are a rather odd mixture of soldier and civilian with our army packs and suitcases. We

also have our American rain capes handy because it looks like rain.

There is a woman with a baby in the compartment when we board the train. Paul wishes her a cheerful good morning. She mumbles something in return, and eyes us nervously. In order not to alarm her too much, we exchange comments in mangled Russian, throwing in the odd word of German when our vocabulary lets us down. We feel rather like escaping prisoners of war passing through hostile territory.

The nervous woman exchanges a few words with Paul just before the next station, then changes compartments hurriedly, leaving us on our own.

"Go on, what was that about?" asks Dieter.

"She wanted to know where you lot are from," grins Paul. "I told her you're a bunch of Russian prisoners being repatriated after doing heroic war-work as farm labourers."

"I bet she'd have screamed the place down if you'd told her the truth," cackles Otto.

He evidently noticed how the woman's eyes flicked towards anyone who slipped a German word into our own version of the Russian language. We all make a mental note to be more careful. Some of the natives not be as well-disposed towards Germans as Joe Schmidt's black market contacts and Auguste Morny.

The novelty of a train ride; in a carriage rather than on the footplate of the engine or a guard's van; is beginning to fade after two hours on a hard seat. It is a relief to take a short stroll through Marseilles, pretending to be Russians, while Paul shops for supplies to cheer up the final part of our journey.

Our troops did a fair amount of damage to the city during the occupation. The locals probably didn't appreciate them blowing up the rabbit warren of slums in the Vieux Port district to deprive the partisans of hiding-places. And the destruction of all port installations the following year would not have made the citizens any more pro-German. We are quite glad to leave Marseilles safely behind us.

Toulon is quite a mess. The bomb damage is much worse than Paul remembers. By a strange turn of fate, he joined us in Russia in the middle of August of last year, at about the time the French were landing here to take back what the bombers had left of his home town. Paul's expression of increasing anxiety lightens as he leads us into a maze of narrow streets. The old town has been destroyed, more or less, but this part of the city seems to be intact.

The suspicious eyes of a pair of street-corner loungers follow us

through an archway and into a small courtyard. Paul takes us to a staircase, and up to the second floor. There are three doors on the landing. He stops in front of the middle one and raises a hand to knock. Then he pauses.

"Do I look all right?" he asks us anxiously.

"Perhaps you should have stood closer to the razor when you shaved," jokes Otto.

It takes a keen eye to spot Paul's beard, even after two razorless days. He runs a hand nervously over his hair to smooth it, then knocks timidly. No one comes. He knocks again, louder and with more confidence.

A surprisingly young woman opens the door and looks out at us. She makes what I assume is a suspicious inquiry as to our business in French.

"Have I changed so much, Mother?" Paul asks in German.

This is his mother? I think. The woman looks much too young to have a son the age of our former Leutnant. But there is a strong family resemblance when I search for it.

"Paul? Paul!" His mother grabs his arm and drags him into the apartment, shouting: "Hugo! Hugo! Paul has come home."

Experience gained at Peter's home-coming tells us that no one will notice Paul's three companions for some time. We follow the sounds of celebration to an inner room and make ourselves useful. Dieter locates glasses with all the sureness of direction of a lodger. Otto and I open bottles of champagne and pour liberally. We have six full glasses ready by the time Paul's parents notice us.

We drink a toast to Paul and his safe homecoming after hurried introductions. Paul's stepfather looks very French. He has a pencil moustache, and is exactly the same height as his wife and stepson. His mother's short curls are the same shade as the blond stubble on Paul's head. Both parents have a slightly dazed look, but the lines of worry on their faces have been recreated as joy.

We empty the first bottle of champagne on our feet, then Paul's mother insists that we sit down before we all fall down. She is bursting for news. The family has not heard from Paul since Christmas, and that was just a stroke of luck. We were in Lithuania at the time. The mail service tended to be whatever we could make it. Paul was fortunate enough to meet the pilot of a transport plane.

He gives his parents a sketchy account of our winter; his promotion to full Leutnant and an Iron Cross Second Class, being cut off during the

final spring offensive, and our long journey through White Russia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia to the Reich. Our travels with Joe Schmidt give him something more cheerful to talk about.

His stepfather disapproves strongly of the black market, but finds it impossible to condemn Paul. As he puts it, in quite good German, we were caught in a moral vacuum between the gigantic wrong of a war and the restrictions of peace.

Dieter gapes at M. Teine, and freezes with his hand offering a packet of cigarettes. We are relieved to find that such an apostle of virtue does not turn his nose up at a free smoke, even if it is a stolen American cigarette.

Paul's mother keeps saying how much older he looks. You grow up very fast when people are trying to kill you; or not at all. Then his mother wants to see his medals. He is rather embarrassed about showing them off in our presence. In the end, I have to remind him that he earned them, and therefore has nothing to be ashamed of. The long scar on his chest is proof enough that he is entitled to his wound medal.

As Paul is searching in his pack, his mother notices a bulge in his jacket. "What's that?" she asks.

"What's what?" replies Paul, looking down in puzzlement, not seeing anything out of the ordinary.

"You've got a gun!"

"Oh, that!" says Paul dismissively. "You've seen it often enough before."

"Why didn't they take it from you?"

Paul has to remind his mother that we were never taken prisoner; which his proud stepfather seems to assume is due to his upbringing. His discharge certificate convinces his mother that he is not a common deserter. While she is examining this forgery, not knowing that Dieter signed it, Paul takes the pistol from his belt and removes the clip. After clearing the chamber, he dumps the weapon on the dining table and remarks:

"There, it's completely harmless now."

His stepfather takes charge of the pistol and starts to play with it, clicking the safety catch on and off and working the slide. Guns seem to have a terrible fascination for all those who are not required to use them as everyday tools.

Paul's mother tells him to gut it away somewhere when her husband starts pretending to take pot shots at the pictures on the wall opposite. Then she notices the time. We have been talking for over two hours,



although no more than that many minutes seem to have passed.

Paul's stepfather decides that there is no point in going back to work. Madame Teine dashes off to lay in supplies for the evening meal, armed with a generous wad of our black market earnings. When we hear the front door of the apartment close behind her, Paul unbuttons his shirt and takes off our money belt. His stepfather, who insists that we call him Hugo, watches the performance with raised eyebrows.

When Otto goes to work on the rivets, Hugo is more interested in his Siberian knife than the leather belt. But when the rivets surrender and our golden stream flows onto his dining table, his eyes bulge in a comic expression of disbelief. Paul makes him promise not to tell his mother about the coins, then explains how they fell into our possession.

Hugo grimaces automatically when he sees the swastikas on the coins, but Paul tells him that his seventeen can be melted down into something less provocative. Recalling Schenk Korben's SS souvenirs, Otto suggests that they'll probably fetch much more than the value of the metal if the coins are sold to Americans. Hugo approves of the idea.

He has no scruples about taking money from gullible Yanks. The family business should be prospering by the time they get round to releasing Paul's elder brother from his Canadian prisoner of war camp.

Friends and French step-relatives begin to drop in to say hello to Paul. We are rather doubtful about how we will be treated at first, but the visitors have nothing much against Germans. We didn't sink their navy or drop bombs on them. Some of the guests have not yet forgiven de Gaulle's forces and the British for destroying their harbour. We are as white as the Russian snows in comparison.

The party must have been a good one. I wake up the following morning with a raging thirst and a vice clamped around my head. We were eating, drinking, laughing, talking, singing, and dancing until well into this Tuesday morning. And when the neighbours came to complain about the noise, they were invited to join in.

The time is five past eleven by my Luftwaffe watch. I find Otto lying on the floor wrapped in his rain cape. I acquired a blanket from somewhere. Dieter is hunched like a gnome beneath the dining table, cradling an empty Pernod bottle in his thin arms. There is a pleasant smell of coffee behind the stale cigarette smoke.

Paul is making some breakfast. His parents are still dead to the world. One of Paul's former schoolmates appears out of nowhere to join us. He looks as though a tank has rolled over him until he tugs his clothes back

into shape. Paul is the same age as Serge to within a few days, but his eyes and his bearing make him seem ten years older. Now I see just how much he must have changed, and why his mother still finds it difficult not to stare at her son.

This Tuesday will be a day of rest for us. Then Dieter, Otto, and I will be going back to Germany; if our truck is ready. We will probably end up selling it to Joe Schmidt. Dieter is definitely going to join the Reichsbahn as an engine driver. I, too, will be talking to Herr Niebuhr about an administrative job.

Otto is thinking of going to university, if there are any left. He wants to add some theory and a degree certificate to his practical engineering knowledge. The Army may stand for a humble Gemeiner directing the construction of a bridge across a fast-flowing river while his officer sleeps off a hangover, but in civilian life, you have to be at least a Herr Doktor before they'll let you pick up a spanner, never mind tell someone what to do.

Alternatively, he might just embroider his past a little more with details which cannot be checked. An incredible number of records has been destroyed accidentally and deliberately by those with something to hide. But equally, vast quantities of paper have been preserved at the cost of many human lives. Picking your lies is likely to prove a dangerous art.

Paul might even be going with us part of the way. His girl is living in Champéry, just over the Swiss border. Her father was killed in an air raid, and she went to live with an old aunt in Switzerland. Paul has sent her a telegram. If she still wants to see him, he will be off like a shot. She has been sending letters to his parents to be forwarded to Paul, but there has been nothing for two months. Perhaps the lack of replies has discouraged her.

As for the rest of us, we are just starting to realize what the end of the war means. A man in uniform is entitled to receive food, clothing, shelter, and payment. And when these are not provided, he has a certain licence to take them by foraging. We will be very much on our own as civilians, and tied hand and foot by restrictions.

Foraging comes under the heading of theft, as far as civil law is concerned. But at least our sentence of death has been lifted. We are no longer fair game for the rest of the world. People may be slaughtered by the million during a war, but the deliberate killing of a civilian during peacetime is a serious business.

Along with the rules of peacetime, we will have to learn humility. We

will have to apologize for our existence for a long time to come. I didn't start the war. Neither did Paul, Otto, Dieter, and all the others who served and died with us. But we are wrapped up in the greatest sin of war; we were on the losing side. I can see our nation developing a form of collective amnesia about the Führer and the Party; the people who were in charge. Those connected in any way with either are for the chop, one way or another. And no one in his right mind sticks his head into a noose.

Life is said to be a process of discovery. But there must have been millions who knew how this war would turn out. Why, I keep asking myself, didn't they make more of an effort to share their knowledge with the rest of us? Probably because they were probably afraid of being slung in gaol as traitors to the great cause or wiped out, is the simple answer.

But if Andreas, the black marketeer of Vienne, is more than just talk, perhaps the next generation will be told that all common soldiers lose in a war. Instead of marching away with armies of fellow victims to slaughter and be slaughtered by the other side's victims, perhaps Andreas will direct their strength against the puppet masters. Discovering war at first hand should be a matter for well-prepared volunteers, not conscripts.

And yet the war has shaped our future, as far as Dieter and I are concerned. We are still in one piece; the sick and the wounded stand very little chance in a retreat; and we can look forward to a flying start to our new lives. Our railway careers, like our paper pasts, can be whatever we wish to make of them.

Our war ended yesterday when we brought Paul home to Toulon. Today is the first day of our peace, and the desert hotel has closed down for the duration. As I stand in the kitchen of a second-floor apartment in Toulon, drinking black market coffee and trying to follow the conversation between Paul and Serge, none of us, two Germans and a Frenchman, is wearing a gun.

THE END

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## A DESERT HOTEL

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