THE Executioner's HOUSE

EDWARD GLOVER

THE EXECUTIONER'S HOUSE

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EDWARD GLOVER

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Do not tell secrets to those whose faith and silence you have not already tested.

Elizabeth 1

Great advantage is drawn from knowledge of your adversary, and when you know the measure of his intelligence and character, you can use it to play on his weaknesses.

Frederick the Great

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CHAPTER ONE

The Courtroom

The entrance to the plain-fronted building, set back from the main road, was architecturally unremarkable and still largely intact despite the intensity of Allied bombing in the latter part of the war. Passing the military guard, Major Richard Fortescue climbed a wide flight of stairs to the first floor. Turning left, he walked a few paces to enter a spacious high-ceilinged wood-panelled room with two large curtained windows high up on the right-hand side.

It was Thursday 24 October 1946. He had returned to the courtroom at Nuremburg where, between 20 November the previous year and 1 October, he had witnessed the trial, conviction and sentencing, for war crimes, of Hermann Göring, Rudolf Hess, Julius Streicher, Hans Frank, Wilhelm Frick, Alfred Jodl, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Wilhelm Keitel, Joachim von Ribbentrop and fifteen other Nazis. He had seen the bodies of those who had been executed the week before. His job as an interpreter and legal assistant on secondment from the army to the British prosecuting team led by Sir Hartley Shawcross and his deputy Sir David Maxwell Fyfe was now done. It was time for him to say farewell to remaining colleagues and friends in the US, French and Soviet teams and leave for Berlin for some final duties and thereafter departure to London. Aged thirty-two, he was

uncertain of his future.

There were few present in the courtroom that morning. It was being prepared for more prosecutions. Shafts of late-autumn sunlight penetrated between the curtains. On the left, facing the windows, was the dock where the accused had sat; beneath the windows was the bench where the judges, two each from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and France, had presided. In front of the accused had sat their German defence lawyers. The prosecutors had been to their right, the accused and witnesses testifying in front of them. In the far left-hand corner of the courtroom had sat the translators, providing simultaneous translation for the very first time.

Those in the courtroom that morning spoke in whispers. He absorbed the atmosphere one more time – a late-autumn warmth outside but the chill of death inside. As a cleaner silently swept the floor, he could almost hear the echo of the words of the accused at the start of the trial as each was asked to respond to the charge against them. "*Nicht schuldig*," not guilty, was the frequent reply.

Fortescue recalled his urgent summons to Nuremburg in the late spring of the previous year; the rush to acquaint himself with the intended trial proceedings; his participation in the interrogation of the some of the accused; hearing, with the commissioners appointed by the court, the harrowing evidence of the thirty-three witnesses who testified for the prosecution against the indicted; and spending countless hours sifting through the never-ending river of accumulated documentary evidence, some pages compelling in their distressing narrative while others were sickening in their grisly detail. A victim of long days and sometimes mixing with the hard-drinking international press corps in the evenings, including, occasionally, Rebecca West, writing for *The New Yorker* magazine, he had become a smoker and partial to late-night whisky, much to the admonishment of his girlfriend, Susannah, in her letters impatiently awaiting his

return to London. He would never forget the written testimony, the grainy, gut-churning film of the concentration camps and the neat handwriting of each entry on page after page of the SS records, listing, like accomplished bookkeepers, those deported and executed. Nor would he forget the frequent nonchalance of some of the defendants during interrogation or in the dock – the way they smirked, seemingly oblivious to the enormity of the crimes they had committed.

After final goodbyes, he left the building without a backward glance and headed to what remained of the old city. He stopped, again for one last time, at the badly bombed thirteenth-century St Sebaldus Church, surrounded by rubble, its once beautiful nave still used for worship despite being open to the sky. He sat for a few minutes to ponder the destruction, the cost of war and the future. Within three weeks, he would be back in London. Leaving the church, he joined some American colleagues in a bar, eventually returning to his billet to pack his belongings and snatch a few hours' sleep.

Early the next morning he left by road for Munich, where he had decided to stay a day or so before flying in a military aircraft to Berlin. Though the Bavarian capital had suffered extensive Allied bombing, he hoped it would still be possible to revisit some of the places he had seen as a young man in the autumn of 1938, when he had stayed with a family in Wilhelm-Weitling-Straße, improving his German and surveying the literary landscape. The opera house, where he had seen Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, was now shattered but sight of its ruins would still bring back the memory of meeting, in the interval, a tall attractive blond girl in a low-cut dirndl. He and Annalise, whose family were devoted admirers of the Führer, had met several times afterwards and on his departure in December 1938 they promised to keep in touch, but she never replied to his letters – no doubt intercepted by her parents or by the police. He would try to find the seedy hotel

where they had once spent a night together – he having sex for the first time.

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl in the Café

After a day walking around the ruins of Munich's old city and spending an evening with his American colleague and friend from Nuremburg, Max Steiner, who was on his way to join the US army war crimes unit in Berlin, Fortescue got up early the next morning. Returning once more to the city centre, he went to a café a stone's throw from the historic National Theatre which, until it was gutted in an air raid three years before, had been Bavaria's prestigious opera house. It was Saturday 26 October.

He sat by the window, drinking a large mug of unpleasant bitter-tasting coffee, watching people scurry past. Though the streets had been extensively cleared of debris, Munich remained a war-shattered city, beautiful landmark buildings still empty shells, stripped bare of the Nazi cultural veneer he had seen in 1938. Electricity supply was still erratic and heating at a premium. Its citizens had not regained their pre-war *joie de vivre*. Poorly dressed, they went silently about their business – whether legitimate or not. In the half-full café, no one spoke, each hunched over their meagre fare. In an atmosphere of little trust and boundless cynicism, people were careful what they said and to whom they said it. Max had described Munich as the city of the damned. He had countered that such a soubriquet was surely better reserved for Berlin. Max shrugged his shoulders.

Light snow began to fall, adding to the city's dismal profile. He glanced through some old newspapers on the windowsill, including an edition of *Der Tagesspiegel* of 6 October reporting the sentences passed at Nuremburg across which someone had scrawled an indecipherable expletive. Pushing them away, he opened his well-thumbed pre-war travel book about a journey to East Prussia in the 1920s – a journey he had wanted to make in 1938 but his money had run out, leaving only enough to get back to England for Christmas. The book contained some fine sepia photos of distinctive buildings – all of which, he imagined, the Russian army had demolished in their advance towards Berlin. He had found it in a street flea market the day before. Beneath it on the stall was a battered copy of *Mein Kampf*, now banned, with various passages underlined in black pen. He had bought the two at the asking price, taking pity on the shrivelled elderly stallholder shivering in the cold, telling her to keep the change. In return she had shown him a chipped ashtray bearing the Nazi emblem, which she hastily rewrapped in its newspaper before thrusting it into his hand – a bonus, she said, for his kindness. Leafing through *Mein Kampf* later, it appeared to be inscribed by a soldier in the *Wehrmacht*. Towards the back was a folded blood-stained swastika armband, perhaps used as a bookmark. At the end, someone had written "*Quatsch!*" What a load of rubbish!

He looked up. A young woman had entered the café. She was tall, slim with shoulder-length brown hair. She wore a shabby dark-green coat, its hem above the knee, and a fawn beret. Her shoes were black and scuffed – perhaps hand-me-downs or purchased in the market. She sat down and took a pack of cigarettes from her handbag. He noticed that her hands were slightly trembling – from cold or fear he could not say.

"Hey you!" cried the bartender, a rough-looking man with a scar across his left cheek. "I can't afford women like you to come in and wait for customers without buying a drink. Either you buy

or I'll throw you out. Times are too hard for non-paying customers."

The woman looked up, her face flushed.

"Of course, I'll go," she mumbled. Visibly flustered, she got up, wiping away a tear.

Fortescue went across and touched her arm. She bridled at his touch.

"Let me buy you a coffee."

"Thank you but that will not be necessary. He's right. I should go."

"I insist. It's snowing and you look cold. And I'm fed up reading about someone's travels in East Prussia long ago."

Before she could reply, he called for two coffees and beckoned her to his table. "You can't refuse me now."

He saw her hesitate as she resisted the temptation to walk out, then she unbuttoned her coat, revealing her slender figure, and sat beside him, glancing at him with tear-filled eyes.

The bartender placed the two mugs of coffee on the table.

"This is not a pick-up place, you know. I run a clean house – no prostitutes allowed."

"I'm clean, so is she," replied Fortescue. "Now bugger off."

The barman was taken aback. He was about to respond but thought better of it. Fortescue turned to the woman beside him.

"The coffee is undrinkable but, despite that regrettable fact, I suggest you drink it before it gets cold."

She said nothing as she took a sip.

"Are you from Munich?" he asked.

She looked at him briefly and then down at the mug cradled in her hands.

"Yes," she replied.

"Bad times?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she whispered. "And you? Where are you from? Your German is good but you're not from Germany."

"No, I'm not – just passing through."

"Oh," she murmured, "you're lucky. Are you American?"

"No. I'm English. I came here before the war and stayed with a German family, which improved my fluency. I had a good time – visiting art galleries and museums, and I met my first real girlfriend here. I even went to the opera across the road but didn't like the Wagner."

A faint smile crossed her face. "Me too."

"But recently I was in Nuremburg for the trial. I'm on my way back to Berlin and then London. After that, I don't know what I'll do."

"Who did you stay with – when you were here before?"

"A family called Klaus. I went to find their house but it's gone. And what about you?" he asked.

"Nothing much to say," she replied, avoiding his eyes.

"You need to tell me a little more than that in exchange for the revelations about me."

She closed her eyes for a moment, her hands still tightly cradling the mug.

"I once had a family near here but like the family you looked for they're gone." She saw that he intended to press her further. "Please do not ask me any more questions. It was kind of you to buy me coffee but I don't know you and I have no wish to discuss the past. It's gone, beyond reach, and good riddance to it." She turned to look at him once again. "Please, no more questions," she repeated with a slight smile.

Fortescue looked at her. She was attractive, in her twenties he would guess. Her eyes were green and her lips delicate. There was only a trace of make-up. He had seen many women in uniform in Nuremburg but the young woman sitting beside him had a physical allure. He was struck by her long slim fingers curled around the mug. Looking at them gave him a sexual frisson. She suddenly pushed her chair back.

"Won't you have another coffee before you leave?" he asked.

"No. Thank you. I really must go."

"Go where?"

"I have a friend to see."

"Male or female?" he shot back.

"I said please stop asking me questions. I'm not in the witness box." She slid the mug across the table and stood up.

"I'm sorry for being so impertinent. Forgive me. I must stop the habit."

"You're forgiven, Mr Prosecutor," she said, half smiling.

"I was not a prosecutor. I got my bad habit from interrogating people, trying to find out why certain defendants did what they did. And I did not pull their fingernails out."

She sat down.

"And the result of your interrogations?" she asked.

"Here," he replied, pushing the stained copy of *Der Tagesspiegel* in front of her. She shuddered.

Again, she stood up.

"Thank you for the coffee. I must go now. I'm late."

"I have two opera tickets in my pocket – for tonight at the *Prinzregententheater* – a Mozart selection. Would you join me?"

"I can't. I'm doing something tonight."

"Are you? Or is that just an excuse?"

"Look, please stop asking questions!"

"Of course, I'm sorry. Look, here's one of the tickets. Take it. If you happen to be free later, join me. Let's end this drab day on a musical note. After all, while we listen to the music I can't ask you questions. The writer Aldous Huxley – you may have heard of him – once said, 'After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.' We'll enjoy each other's silent company."

"It won't be possible," she insisted.

"Look, I won't take no for an answer." He thrust a ticket into

her hand. “The performance starts at seven o’clock. I’ll be there for sure. If you come, there will be a seat for you. If not, I will miss you.”

She paused, looking at the ticket intently, then slowly put it in her handbag.

“Goodbye,” she said.

He held out his hand. “By the way, my name is Richard Fortescue. In case you do me the pleasure of joining me this evening, may I ask your name?”

She looked at him. “Karin,” she replied. She gave him a faint smile, her eyes still red from her earlier tears. She left the café without turning back.

He ordered another coffee and some bread and cheese. Would she come that evening or not? He doubted she would, but on the other hand she just might. If she did, he would be pleased to have an agreeable young woman next to him – an evening with the enemy, some of his colleagues might have said.

Half an hour later, Fortescue left the bar. He noticed on his way out a burly sullen-looking man trying to hide his face behind a crumpled newspaper but failing miserably to do so. He recognised the man from the day before – following him around the flea market. His superiors had warned him before leaving Nuremburg of ex-Nazis either seeking to escape from defeated Germany before they were arrested or anxious to settle old scores. And then there were the black-market entrepreneurs, eager to screw money out of the unsuspecting. Nor should he overlook the blackmailers making money out of those anxious to hide past crimes or misdemeanours under Allied occupation laws. Fortescue was under no illusion: he himself was probably under observation as an occupier, and buying *Mein Kampf* had been a breach of British army regulations. He would take all necessary care and remedial action if required to conceal what he had done.

Shortly before 7.00 p.m. he took his seat in the theatre – the second seat from the aisle in row F. After a short delay, the curtain rose at 7.10 p.m. A few minutes later, as the soprano sang *Ruhe sanft* from Mozart's *Zaide*, Karin slipped into the aisle seat beside him. He turned and briefly squeezed her arm. Her face showed no emotion.

After the performance, they walked out into the bitter cold. She still wore her green coat and beret. He noticed her shoes were different – high-heeled.

"Would you like something to eat?" he asked. "I'm sure we could find somewhere."

"No thank you. I had better go."

"Why is it better to go? You look cold. Perhaps we can find some warm soup somewhere."

"No, thank you. I really must leave."

"Why must you leave?" he asked.

"Because that's the way it is," she replied, her voice showing a trace of irritation.

"At least let me escort you home. The streets are unsafe this time of night."

"I would welcome that," she replied to his surprise.

He found a taxi. They went several blocks, stopping at a partially damaged tenement building not far from the *Hauptbahnhof*.

"On which floor do you live?"

"The third," she replied. "But I can find my way."

"I'll see you to the door."

Signalling the taxi driver to stay, Fortescue accompanied Karin to the bottom of the stairwell.

"I still don't know your surname."

"Eilers, Karin Eilers," she replied.

"Thank you."

He was sorely tempted to kiss her cheek but instead proffered

his hand. She shook it gently and disappeared into the blackness. He stood in the stairwell listening to the click of her heels on the stone steps. Then he heard her voice.

"Leave me alone. I don't want to see you again. Please go away."

A muffled cry followed.

He ran up the dark stairs. In the flame of his lighter, he saw a dark hatted figure, collar turned up, pressing Karin against the wall, one gloved hand over her mouth and the other pulling up her coat and dress. She was struggling to escape her assailant's grip. The man spun round to receive Fortescue's fist in his face. He staggered back, clutching his nose. Fortescue pushed him to the floor, kicking him in the ribs. He grabbed hold of Karin.

"Come with me," he shouted, pulling her down the stairs behind him.

They scrambled into the taxi.

"Follow my directions," he instructed the driver. Periodically, he looked back to see whether they were being followed. There was no sign. He put his arm around Karin, who was struggling to hold back tears.

On arrival at the British safe house, he signed her in as a friend from his pre-war Munich visit. The concierge on the front door gave Fortescue a knowing look but made no comment. Once inside the small two-room apartment, she refused food but drank a large brandy. Her face was tear-stained and bruised, and two of her fingernails were broken from the struggle with her attacker. She gave an occasional sob. Resisting the urge to ask her questions, he gave her some aspirin and insisted that she take his bed. He would sleep on the sofa. He closed the bedroom door behind him.

He sat for a while thinking about what had happened and what he would do in the morning. Was she a prostitute who had failed to keep an appointment with a client, or did this striking

well-spoken young woman have some other secret? Whatever the answer, it was evident she was at risk and he decided he would help her if she would let him. Despite the fact that he would be breaking the rules by fraternising with a German while on active duty, he would not abandon her. But how could he do that? In two days' time he was due to fly to Berlin. Could he possibly take her with him? Or could he defer his departure to find out more about her and find her a safe place to stay?

He threw some spare blankets on the sofa. Before going to sleep, he slowly opened the bedroom door. In the dim hall light, he saw she was awake, looking at him.

"I'm cold. And frightened."

He sat on the bed and took her hand. It was frozen.

"I'll get you another blanket. Like everywhere else, there's no heating."

"No, please just lie beside me. Put your arm around me. Make me feel safe and warm," she said, her eyes brimming with tears. "They will not leave me alone."

He decided not to ask who "they" were.

Without undressing, he did as she asked. She clasped his hand tightly, holding it against her chest. They fell asleep.

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