

Acts of Fate

Preface

It is summer 1937. Tom Burgoyne, a 17 year old student, travels to Germany as part of a school exchange arrangement.

He finds Hitler's Germany hugely impressive – the sheer beauty of the Rhineland area and the order, obvious discipline and the attractiveness of the people in what is clearly an armed camp. He takes part in a sports day of the Hitler Youth and watches with admiration young officers of the German armed forces as they strut with Ruritanian verve around the cobbled streets of Koblenz, dirks dancing at the waists of their colourful uniforms.

He makes a number of German friends of both sexes, a young German youth of his own age and a young female student whom he meets during a steamer excursion down the Rhine. Losing his heart to the young lady and determined to keep in touch with both of them, he finds to his sorrow that the approach of war makes further fraternisation almost impossible.

With the outbreak of war he finally loses contact with both of them but they continue to figure prominently in his thoughts and memory.

Joining the RAF on his 18th birthday, young Burgoyne becomes a fighter pilot and flies with distinction throughout the war, finally taking an active part in the Invasion of Europe in 1944. It is during that year that events finally come to a sad, almost inevitable conclusion.

The facts and details of the air combat described – both bomber and fighter – are based on real events and are very close to the truth. As is the description of the German SS attack on the French village of Oradour sur Glane on 10th June, 1944 and the massacre that resulted.

Finally, the fate of Burgoyne's German friends is described, and the melancholy effect his war experiences had on Burgoyne himself.

An Introduction by the Author

The story 'Acts of Fate' took me about six years to write in the 1970s.

The original story was autobiographical, being based on a series of written notes describing some of my own travelling, flying and other more personal experiences occurring before and during the 2nd World War. Never meant for publication, it was merely a 'mind-clearing' exercise, as I was rather unsettled at the time - my two beloved parents had recently died in the space of three years, I had inherited a small property and my wife and family had moved several times between various rented homes in Norfolk. Moreover, I had just returned from three painfully unproductive years in America, where we as a family had all intended to make a new life.

As was my habit in similar circumstances, I used writing as a form of physical and mental relief. However my fulsome thoughts and words on that occasion were consigned unread to a shelf in my study for some years - where they might have remained to this day had they not been picked up by an inquisitive neighbour, who persuaded me that they had some literary merit and ought to see the light of day.

My first story, written about 1977, was very much a factual, sometimes revealing description of events, some of which - it was later pointed out to me - might prove to be disturbing for living relatives of a few of my characters. For this reason, I felt it prudent to avoid such a possibility, by changing several names and altering some of the situations portrayed, even if, by so-doing, I produced a final work that, if not precisely 'factual' was more 'faction' than 'fiction'.

Because I had used it before in some former 'faction' stories, I chose the pseudonym Tom Burgoyne for myself and Karl-Heinz Mohr as the name for the young German youth who had befriended me in 1937. The attractive girl I met on the Rhine boat I continued to refer to as Anna, for no other reason that I considered there must have been scores of Annas who were students in Germany at the time. Moreover, although she did prove to be the daughter of a German General, (whom I have never thought fit to identify), she was not the offspring of General Johannes von Blascovitz, a person I felt driven to introduce because of the notoriety that later surrounded his name. I also wrote of von Blascovitz as having a daughter and 'dying in his own bed', neither of which statements I was later able to confirm. If I was in error, therefore, and his descendants were offended by my remarks, I am happy to apologize now.

The various flying events in my story were based absolutely on fact. The pilot involved in the tragic bombing sortie against Berlin was an earlier acquaintance of mine, (again, I have changed his name), who had trained with me at No. 8 FTS, Montrose, in 1939 and had moved on to fly Lancaster bombers based at RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire. Although I do recall meeting him there, I was in a Spitfire unit flying from nearby Kirton-in-Lindsey shortly before his unhappy final trip.

The attack on the German ammunition train by a 9th USAAF Mustang (P.51) was one of several spectacular successes against similar supply trains travelling in France during the months before and after the Allied invasion of Europe. As an RAF liaison officer attached to 100th Fighter Wing of 9th Air Force throughout 1944, and flying a Mustang, I was lucky enough to be peripherally involved in one such momentous incident.

The shameful attack by the 2nd SS Panzer Division - DAS REICH - on the village of Oradour in Southern France on 10th June, 1944, has been recorded in detail in France and, no doubt, in Germany too. Both at the time and later, it was also a known fact that General Johannes von Blascovitz was the Sector Commander in France in which the DAS REICH Division was originally based. Whether or not he was in any way personally involved in the massacre, was not known to me when I was writing my story and now, almost 70 years later, is even more obscure. However, because of the horror and the enormity of the event, I thought it appropriate that his name should at least be mentioned

And a final word. I flew hard for almost six years against the Luftwaffe, and can honestly say that, despite the unspeakable horrors inflicted on millions throughout Europe by Adolf Hitler's henchmen and murder squads, I never had occasion to criticise my flying opponents in the Luftwaffe, although, naturally, I was always concerned about the policies and plans they were directed to implement.

Now, however, I am constantly reminded that the determined and skilful German airmen who shot at me so often over Kent and Sussex in 1940 and nearly put an end to me more than once in Malta, were, like me, smiling, noisy young men in their teens and 20s, some of whom I was to meet after the war at Duxford in England when exchanging tales of aerial combat, signing prints and books, and with whom I shared many drinks both in Germany and in Britain.

I am happy, too, to admit that, in my more reflective moments, my German friends during those warm and sunny days of 1937, have, over the years, been in my thoughts on many occasions - the beautiful Anna with her fractured English, the serious and courteous Karl-Heinz, his shy and friendly mother, who embraced and kissed me when I sang to them so hesitantly, together with his two flaxen-haired six-year-old twin-sisters, with their wide blue eyes and their pigtails. Even now, after more than 70 years, I see them regularly in my mind.

And, in spite of their contrived and imagined fate in my sombre tale, did any of them survive the war? And if they did, are they in Germany still - perhaps, like me, increasingly decrepit and in their 90s? And will they, by chance, ever read this story? And, possibly - just possibly - think occasionally of their young English friend of 1937, who was later to use the pseudonym, Tom Burgoyne - and had the temerity kill them off in a story?

PART ONE

Summer 1937

They left for Germany on the morning of the last Friday in July, a week or so after Tom Burgoyne's 17th birthday. There were 12 of them in the party, 10 boys and two masters. Tom carried a large rucksack and was rather on edge, a mixture of excitement, sadness at leaving his home and parents, and just a hint of apprehension. How on earth did one cope in a foreign land without knowing a word of the language?

On the four-hour journey to London, he was quiet and pre-occupied with his thoughts. Most of the others were in high spirits and for a time made pests of themselves, a commotion borne with exemplary tolerance by the rest of the passengers.

Tom ignored them all and gazed out of the window, becoming only a little more sociable when eating his sandwiches. Crichton, the elderly and sardonic geography master, who was nominally in charge, quietly smoked his pipe in a corner and allowed matters to take their course. Meanwhile, Smith, who taught French, a pleasant but fiddling nonentity of a man, fussed about endlessly, opening and studying documents and folding and refolding letters.

Arriving at Euston, they went by underground to Trafalgar Square and walked down Whitehall in the direction of Westminster. There they spent several hours looking at the mounted soldiers in Horse Guards Parade, then Downing Street and the Houses of Parliament, before crossing the bridge to the south side of the river. Finally, they all clattered below ground again and took a tube to Victoria.

Tom always enjoyed railway terminal stations. There was always an air of excitement abroad and invariably plenty of locomotives to be seen, purring contentedly like fat cats, resting warmly from the burdens of their recent journeys. Their own train had a King Arthur class engine upfront, blasting twin rods of steam into the roof with deafening persistence. Finding their coach, they settled themselves into their reserved seats.

The journey seemed to take an age. When eventually they arrived at Dover it was past midnight and raining miserably.

On their way to the ship, a vital strap on Tom's rucksack broke and, having almost lost his possessions in the street, he was obliged to carry the thing awkwardly in his arms, bumping and shoving through a mass of people. Half the population of Britain seemed to be going between Dover and Ostend. Everyone was looking lost and tired, the rain contributing maliciously to the general atmosphere of gloom. Moreover, that stupid man Smith was fussing about like a girl – Tom could think of no more damning resemblance – and they hadn't left England yet!

The ship was crowded, the various saloons packed to over-flowing. Smith, hurrying about in an ankle-length raincoat and a ridiculous looking sou'wester, eventually found half-a-dozen deck-chairs which they opened out in the most sheltered area of the deck

they could find. Those without sat on their kit bags looking dejected. There were people everywhere, pushing around them and tripping over their feet. Damp and chilled too the marrow and examining his ailing rucksack, Tom thought longingly of the warmth and comfort of his own home and bed.

After a time, ropes were cast off and the boat backed away from the quay before gliding towards the harbour mouth and the waters of the Channel. Diverted by the spectacle, they all lined the rails and watched the town lights slide away into the distance.

Soon they were into the turbulence of the Channel proper, the nose of the ship lifting and rotating and trembling from time to time like some terrified stallion. The rain continued to fall in slanting surges and the wind snatched gustily at their hair and bodies. It was wet and cold and very dark. Tom had a bout of shivering. He wished he had brought his heavier coat. In fact, he didn't feel at all at peace with the world. Germany or no Germany, this was more than he had bargained for. English summers! He might have known!

The night passed miserably. Even Tom, who normally slept like a hibernating bear, managed only an hour or so before waking thoroughly chilled and shivering. In front of him indistinct shapes were huddled over the rail and there were sounds and the stench of sickness. He eyed them with distaste and not little contempt. Not being affected by motion sickness himself, he had no understanding of the misery involved and very little sympathy for those who succumbed. Sea-sickness was all in the mind! His mother was a dreadful sailor. She could jolly well be ill just reading her boarding pass!

They arrived at Ostend at 5 a.m. It was quite light and the clouds had largely dispersed, the early morning sky a watery mixture of green, pink and blue. Everything was bleak and clammy and he was surrounded by pinched faces and people stamping their feet. He found one remaining sandwich in his kitbag and ate it like a wolf, noticing at the same time the sidelong glances of several who were obviously not that way inclined. Swallowing down the last morsels, he returned their scowls with a pleasant and seemingly innocent smile.

Their train was already drawn up when they reached the station platform. There were masses of people everywhere and seething, bustling chaos. Smith kept reassuring them that their seats had been reserved; it only remained for them to find the right carriage.

Having eventually located their part of the train, they all scrambled aboard – to find their seats occupied! Tom looked pointedly at the man sitting in his space but the recipient of the hostile stare was remarkably unmoved. Nor indeed were the other passengers the least bit daunted by the chattering invasion. To a man, they turned their heads and gazed into the distance.

Smith appeared in his oilskins looking like an advertisement for Angers Emulsion and, with no great conviction, began to speak in French. Unhappily, his French did not sound very much like their French and had singularly little effect. The squatters ignored him completely and made no move.

Faced with stony intransigence, Smith looked first surprised then destroyed. However, after a resigned sigh and a brief pause for reflection, he set off in search of

the guard, to return within minutes, not only with one round-hatted official but with two other individuals besides, one a voluble uniformed gentleman with a comic waxed moustache and the other a gendarme.

The battle joined, all three began to gabble away excitedly, waving their arms and largely ignoring Smith who looked earnestly from face to face interjecting an unheeded phrase here and there. The passengers then joined in with their own brands of dramatic gesture after which the argument spread like wildfire and the entire carriage degenerated into uproar.

An impasse arrived at, with a parting salvo of abrasive rhetoric the gendarme and two officials climbed down from the train leaving Smith looking like a child deprived of a toy, surrounded by ten bemused schoolboys. The squatters sitting tight moved not a muscle. The seats had gone for good; that much was crystal clear.

Tom, straight-faced and genuinely interested, had listened and watched throughout the whole blistering fracas after which he decided sadly that the Belgians en masse were off their rockers. In fact, he was singularly unimpressed with pretty well everything he had seen thus far. There was an air of unkemptness and disorder all around. The streets, the station and even the train seemed to him untidy and disorganised. And everywhere, but everywhere, was noise, argument and confusion. They certainly had the strangest ways of running a railway! Heavens, what a mob!

Having gathered his belongings, Tom sat on them in the corridor awaiting the train's departure. His companions did the same and soon the disappointment over the loss of their seats was forgotten in the interest and excitement of the occasion.

After a time, the train moved off, gliding out of the station. Soon it was rattling through a countryside of open flat fields and buildings of unfamiliar design. Then, almost within minutes, they were bowling along at a rate that surprised even Tom. He had always believed – known, in fact – that British trains were the fastest in the world but there was certainly nothing wrong with this one! It raced along, the landscape flashing past, hurling itself around corners and across points until he seriously thought it might come off the rails. Hanging on grimly he considered the paradox wonderingly. How could any country so obviously incompetent and inefficient be capable of producing trains with this sort of performance? The Belgians clearly had hidden talents!

He buffeted about to such a degree that after a time he decided that enough was enough. It was time to carry out a reconnaissance. After all, if the Belgians could sit in the wrong seats, why couldn't he?

Clutching the handrail, he lurched ahead for a carriage or two before coming across a second-class compartment with two vacant seats. Without a word, he sat down, and making sure that his possessions were within sight and reach, he forestalled interrogation by closing his eyes and feigning sleep. Wherever it was they were going, if they needed him they could jolly well come and find him.

He was awakened by silence. He opened his eyes. The train had slowed almost to a stop. Familiar faces appeared above him and excited voices. They were at the border. It was Germany.

The train halted at Aachen. It was like a new world. The station was smart, well swept and organised. Soldiers and other officials paced about in grey-green uniforms with long coats and tall-fronted hats. He watched with wide-eyed interest. It was just like pictures of the chaps in the last war! A group of plump, flaxen-haired girls wandered about chattering in a strange but not unpleasant language. People were laughing. The sun was shining. He was beginning to thaw out mentally and physically.

Formalities concluded, they moved off again and soon more countryside was streaking past the window. No hedges here but ordered squares of crop and field together with pine-woods, rolling hills and tallish, square buildings, strange to the eye. Everything seemed precise, neat, disciplined and clean. What a transformation!

Taking courage from his example, some of Tom's companions joined him in his newly-found compartment and soon the whole train it seemed was laughing politely at their clumsy attempts at conversational German. A few words and phrases of English were exchanged. Someone said 'Welcome to Sharmony!' and another, obviously familiar with the Boys' Own Paper, called out 'Good egg, Tommee!' Tom tried out some of his French but apparently that was almost as funny as his German. After that he gave up and confined himself to a fixed smile. If they wanted to talk to him, they would jolly well have to speak English. Shame really. It looked as though he was in for a quiet time.

As though in sympathy with the language problems, the clouds gathered and the sun departed. Soon there was rain. The landscape darkened until the carriage windows were filled with an endless panorama of muted greens and greys. There was no doubt about it. Wherever the British went, the rain followed them around like poor relations.

It was still pouring when they arrived at Koblenz. A dozen or so boys their own age, dressed in long waterproofs over their shorts and formidably shod in clod-hopper boots, were on the platform as a welcoming party. There was much handshaking and bowing and lots of well-practised 'Hellos' and 'Good Days'. A pleasant-faced youth with bright blue eyes confronted Tom and with a very serious face said, 'Hello. Have you . . .?' before drying up completely and going pink. Tom grinned like a chimpanzee to make the fellow feel better but it was a futile gesture; the boy gave a hurried bow and melted into the background, totally humiliated. After that, more smiles, more handshakes and 'How are you's?' by the dozen. Tom began to feel embarrassed. They should be speaking some German at least. He felt thoroughly ashamed and did some more bowing to ease his conscience. Then Smith was bowing like a Japanese salesman, fluttering here and there, speaking French then English in carefully articulated phrases, organising everyone, identifying kit, explaining endlessly. Meanwhile, Crighton, his eyes glinting behind his thick spectacles, was smiling thinly and saying little, his pipe jutting out like a blunt lance.

They were shepherded on to a bus and set off in the direction of the town centre. There seemed a lot of jackbooted soldiers about and military vehicles by the dozen in the cobbled streets. Then they were crossing a bridge and finally driving along the side of a wide river. This was the Rhine someone explained. The water seemed to be flying past. How fast was the current? Eight kilometres; a German boy was mouthing the words and holding up eight fingers. Tom worked it out. Five miles an hour! Some current!

They pitched their tents in a low-lying pasture beside the river, a mile or so out of town. It was raining still but as the air was clammy warm it was no great hardship for them, having become accustomed to the discomfort of water running down their necks. There was a good deal of mud underfoot and they almost began to enjoy squelching about as they hammered home the tent pegs. They would have to lie on this stuff later on. It was going to be an uncomfortable old night, that was for sure!

Bordering the campsite on the other long side of the rectangular field were railway lines which ran in a gentle curve behind a low stone wall. In the distance, a goods train came labouring towards them shooting a pillar of black smoke into the heavens. Tom straightened up with relief, welcoming the opportunity to stand and watch.

As the long dark snake came nearer, he saw that it was headed by a huge, black, brutish monster, covered in lumps and pipes and hissing steam. Not at all the refined sort of locomotive he was used to back home. It thundered past, bellowing and clanking, with more whirling wheels, balances and connecting rods than Tom had ever seen in his life. Heavens, what a Dragon!

And the wagons! Much bigger than in England; scores of them in a seemingly endless trail. Before the guard's van finally appeared, the fire-breathing monster in front was almost lost to sight. If there were to be a succession of these things all night, he thought sombrely, no one was going to get a wink of sleep. He sniffed appreciatively. Pungently sulphurous! The smell was the same anyway.

The drama of the passing train having slowly evaporated, he became aware for the first time of the constant background noise of swirling water. It was a country sound accentuated by country sights and scents. Away in the distance, the hills were becoming more clearly outlined as the rain lessened and the atmosphere cleared. There was a faint but unmistakably different smell, too. Did Germany – and Germans for that matter – have a distinctive odour, or was he imagining things? He remembered reading that, in the last war, German trenches always smelled differently – of stale cigars principally. Come to that, some foreigners complained that the British smelt, too. The French and Italians most certainly did; something to do with their cooking and the frightful things they ate. Did he 'hum', he wondered? Perhaps he did; one had to be fair in these matters. He thought immediately of a childhood story about 'Phewey, the Skunk'. Tom the pong! What a hoot! He grinned to himself at the thought.

With his hands on his hips, he gazed into the distance. This really was a super place. He would enjoy being here, rain or no rain. And it wasn't just because of the scenery. There was a tingling excitement in the air; something quite intangible and inexplicable but there, nevertheless; something he had felt since first crossing the border. Was it the uniform, perhaps; the military atmosphere, the precision, the orderliness, the obvious discipline? Or was it just the downright healthiness of the people with their fair hair, their long, naked limbs and glowing skins. They were all lusty looking animals, male and female. Not much factory pallor around here! But, more than that, they were so obviously courteous and thoughtful. Or, was he being altogether too naïve? Well, he'd soon find out. Meanwhile, he would keep an open mind.

The following morning dawned bright, clear and warm. He was awake early and rose shortly before 7 a.m. Trains had rumbled by at intervals throughout the night producing not only their own brand of prolonged turmoil but a series of earth tremors to boot. However, it took more than trains to deprive Tom Burgoyne of his just repose. His subconscious may have been in a state of disorder but the rest of him slept the sleep of the innocent.

At 9 a.m., the German party, which had so gallantly turned out for them the afternoon before, arrived at the camp bowing and hallowing with renewed vigour. Then they all ‘fell in’ and each individual was introduced with an excess of continental formality.

Tom found himself paired with a youth who bore a quite remarkable resemblance to pictures he possessed of Manfred von Richthofen. He was small with carefully trimmed mouse-blond hair and pale blue eyes. His features were firmly chiselled and pleasant, his complexion fair but ivory rather than ruddy – as one would expect in an Englishman – and his manner solemn and courteous. His name, was Karl-Heinz Mohr and, the lord be praised, he spoke English.

Karl-Heinz shook hands gravely and bowed. He then asked without a flicker of a smile if Tom was enjoying good health, adding that he hoped the weather would be helpful for them. After that, there was a brief pause during which Karl-Heinz frowned and thought up a few other appropriate conversational phrases. Then, having drawn breath, he stated emphatically that football was a good game and that, in a time, it would be played. Tom responded by concealing a smile and saying that he hoped it would.

A little later a football was produced and came bouncing amongst them. Two mixed teams were picked and the sides faced each other, the Germans seriously attentive, the English smilingly self-conscious.

It was a game notable more for its vigour than for its expertise. Within seconds, a scything German boot had landed on one of Tom’s exposed shins causing him to gasp an untranslatable word and hop about painfully for some minutes. After that, he was a good deal more nimble and paid greater attention to what was going on. The Germans, applying themselves with all the zeal of Attila’s hordes, hurled themselves into the tackles, apologising profusely when blood had been drawn. For their part, the British were obliged to learn quickly. The smiles disappeared within minutes and the game developed into something altogether more serious. Tom sensed the change of atmosphere and shot a few warning glances to some of his friends whose faces had suddenly become set if not grim.

For 20 minutes or so, he ran about with determination, disposing of a lot of energy and frustration. He noted with interest that Karl-Heinz was fetching and carrying for him, winning the ball when he could before passing it always in his direction; and all with the straightest of faces. For a moment, he stood breathless, his hands on his hips. What odd chaps these Germans were. So young and yet so darned dedicated and serious. Did they never become silly and giggle.

The German party left at noon promising to return the following day when everyone ‘would take a walk’. The English detected an ominous ring to the declaration. A walk was a walk. Route marches were out as far as they were concerned.

Later, they all went into the town of Koblenz and stayed for the afternoon. It was hot and sunny and everyone was in summer rig. Tom admired the German way of dressing; the shorts they wore had shoulder and cross straps and looked much more comfortable and attractive than the English variety. The German boys seemed to be fair yet brown-skinned and to have an attractive coltish look about them, accentuated it seemed by abnormally long legs, an illusion created no doubt by the cut of their shorts and their heavy boots.

He was intrigued also by the girls. He sensed they played something of a subservient if not an inferior role in the general scheme of things, the men very obviously being the peacocks. Blonde plaits were clearly in vogue and most of the young women wore blouses with longish peasant skirts of flowered cotton material. Overall, they presented a most pleasing appearance, one which Tom viewed with interest and appreciation. Plump, on the whole, and smiling, they all seemed agreeable but curiously deferential. Not a bit like some of the girls back home. He hadn't come across many deferential girls in England! Not so far, anyway.

He observed that the military were everywhere, mostly off duty and walking about singly or in pairs but occasionally marching about in squads of anything up to a dozen, the heavy soles of their knee boots clashing metallically on the cobbles. Steel helmets, too, were much in evidence. His father had brought a German helmet back from France in 1918 but these seemed a little smaller although much the same. The Germans seemed to go in for eagles a good deal, too; they had them everywhere on their uniforms and on their hats and helmets. And swastikas. Masses of swastikas!

All the uniforms seemed to be grey/green although there were a few about in black. Tom looked out for the Air Force but couldn't distinguish them from all the others, assuming there were any. The officers were obvious enough, however. They all wore the stiff, tall-fronted hat and sported ceremonial dirks, which dangled from the hip and looked very dashing. Mostly young chaps, they swaggered about with Ruritanian verve, but not objectionably so as they appeared not to throw their weight about, stepping courteously off the curb for ladies and even on several occasions for Tom and his companions. He even spotted a couple of monocles. Ye Gods! It was not unlike an American film of the last war or that chap Conrad Veight, who always seemed to be in British pictures these days, caricaturing the beastly Hun.

From time to time, aircraft flew overhead. They were seldom below about 4,000 feet but he managed to identify several small formations of Heinkel 51s and a few small groups of Junkers 86 bombers. He liked the look of the Heinkels which appeared very trim and waspish; not unlike the Hawker Fury back home but unmistakably German. He wondered where the aerodromes were sited. He would like to have a look at them although he we would probably be shot if he did so. Should he ask? They could only say no, when all said and done.

The following day they all went for their walk. In all, the distance to be covered was about 10 miles and Tom found himself with Karl-Heinz for the second time. The boy seemed to have taken a liking to him, or perhaps it was just a case of allocation.

In the late morning heat, they clambered breathlessly up one of the nearby hills and eventually through some vineyards, the cluster of grapes on the serried ranks of plants small, green and as yet unripe. Tom found them fascinating. He had never seen grapes close to before, other than in Kew Gardens and places like that, of course. He stopped to feel them. They were like clusters of green marbles.

At the top of the hill, pleasantly fatigued and damp with sweat, they looked down on the town and beyond. Where the two rivers Moselle and Rhine joined, there was a distinct change of colour, a line almost.

‘The Rhine is Germany’s working river,’ Karl-Heinz informed him. ‘It is not clean. Dirty!’ he added for extra emphasis, wrinkling his nose.

Later it became very hot, in the 90s Tom estimated. The group having gradually spread out, the two of them sat down then lay back on a gentle rise of coarse grass and gazed upwards into a blue and white patchwork of sky. It was quiet, the silence broken only by a single aircraft, a speck which droned its way thinly into the distance. He watched it idly. There was a companionable silence. He noticed how blonde the hairs were on Karl-Heinz’s legs. He was a nice boy; nice to look at and, on the face of it, nice in disposition. He wished, however, he would laugh a bit more. Tell a joke, even. Still, translating a joke into English might not be that easy.

‘I like it here,’ said Tom at last. ‘I must come when the grapes are ripe.’

‘They make only for wine. It is good wine. They are not for eaten.’

Tom smiled. ‘Well, whatever happens to them, I’d like to sample them one way or another’.

The warmth seeping luxuriously into his bones, he closed his eyes and let his mind wander. Dare he talk to Karl-Heinz about what his country was doing these days? Did he have a view about the Rhineland and Germany’s rearmament, for example? And Herr Hitler Before their visit they had been warned about discussing political topics and anything else that might give offence. After all, they were guests of a sort. But, the boy seemed quite a reasonable sort of chap. Tom thought it over and took the plunge, taking care to frame his questions in the most unobjectionable manner.

‘Do you think Herr Hitler is a good man, Karl-Heinz?’

The boy answered readily enough.

‘Herr Hitler is good for Germany. He leads us. Germany must have a leader. We have been bad here since the war. Germany had no honour.’ The words came out without hesitation as though the question had been expected.

‘Have you ever seen him?’

‘No. But we listen often. One day I hope to see him.’

Tom absorbed this information thoughtfully before starting on a new tack.

‘Are you in the Hitler Youth, Karl-Heinz?’

‘Ja! Oh, yes. Since I have fifteen years’

‘And do the girls have a similar organisation?’

‘Please?’

‘Do they have a Hitler Youth?’

‘Of course. Bund Deutscher Madel. Er . . . the League of German . . . Virgins? Is that right?’

Tom smiled. ‘Yes, it’s about right; or, I hope it is!’ There was no point in explaining further.

He went on. ‘Was your father in the war?’

‘Yes, my father was . . .’ the boy was stuck for words.

‘In the army?’

‘No, he . . . , how so, he help with engines.’

‘You mean an engineer?’

Karl-Heinz looked doubtful.

‘He . . . with Pfalz and Albatros.’

‘Pfalz! You mean he worked on aeroplanes?’ Tom sat up sharply.

‘Ja. He help with engines’

‘He was in the Air Force but didn’t fly?’

The boy nodded. ‘He with Pfalz engines, and Albatros, for one . . . two years. We have pictures in my house.’

Tom sat back excited. What a small world! Karl-Heinz’s father could have been in one of von Richthofen’s squadrons. The great man flew various Albatros scouts for many months in 1916 and 17. He turned to the German boy, his eyes alight.

‘Are you going into the Air Force?’

Karl-Heinz shrugged. ‘Perhaps.’

‘Are you interested in aircraft?’

The boy gave another non-committal shrug. Clearly, not an enthusiast, decided Tom.

They lay there for some time without talking, snatches of conversation from the other groups drifting faintly in their direction.

‘You will come to Germany again, yes? I will be pleased to see you, always.’

‘I will come to Germany again, yes. I feel happy here. I hope that nothing occurs to prevent it.’

‘Our countries should not fight again. I do not think they will.’

‘Could you come to England, Karl-Heinz?’

The boy frowned.

‘I would like to come. But my family is not . . . , does not have money. But, some day, I will try. I would like to see your King and your Parliament. And your Shakespeare house.’

Tom smiled. ‘It can all be arranged. We must write to each other. You will be my guest. You will not need money.’

Much later they sat around tables outside one of the cafes in the centre of Koblenz. The German boys ordered beer and Tom cocked an eye in old Crighton’s direction. Was beer permitted? He had only sampled English beer twice before and on each occasion had not liked it. But it would be fun to try the German product.

After a nod from the master, the beer turned up and Tom, with a thirst he could not disguise, took a deep gulp. It was cold and crisp and, though bitter, not unpleasant. Having drunk it too quickly the gas bubbled back noisily through his throat and they all laughed. A good deal of the reticence between the two nationalities had already begun to disappear and each group was relaxing to the point when individual personalities were beginning to emerge. Karl-Heinz was clearly held in some sort of pecking order among the German boys, there being obvious discipline and respect between the junior hierarchy and the rest.

Presently Karl-Heinz turned to Tom and for the first time, lowered his voice.

‘You are to go on a long journey in the Rhine boat, tomorrow, yes? On the day after, I will come to you and you are to take a meal at my house. I would also wish for you to come with me to our sports, where we run and jump. But, I will tell you all later. You wish to come, no?’

‘I would like to come, yes!’ Tom showed his teeth in a grin. ‘And thankyou for asking me.’

Karl-Heinz bowed stiffly and nodded in confirmation.

Next day, the English party alone departed for their steamer trip up river. They all rose early and were on board by 8.30 a.m., expecting to be away for the rest of the day. Tom found himself yawning; the trains, for some reason or other, had kept him awake for most of the night.

There was a holiday atmosphere abroad. The boat was decorated with streamers and bunting and they found themselves in the middle of a surging mass of young people, school and university students, Tom guessed. He heard a few isolated English voices amid the babble of languages but almost all the rest were German and French. There was, however, one which was reminiscent of someone gargling. Norwegian, or Swedish, possibly? He just didn’t know. How inept the British were! He so wished he could converse with the people around him.

The weather being warm and fine, the decks were crowded. On a brief tour of inspection, Burgoyne noted an area set aside for a band, with a small space in front,

presumably for dancing. A dozen or so young men in military uniform, some of them carrying musical instruments, were clumping around the ship. The band? Probably so.

The soldiers, with others, were all in good voice and ‘Heil-Hitler’-ing away in fine style. This form of greeting, accompanied by a stretched arm, Roman salute, appeared to be the customary method of salutation. Karl-Heinz used it constantly, Burgoyne recalled, though not as a greeting to the English. He watched with interest and wry amusement. It really did look a bit ridiculous. However, there was clearly no embarrassment among the Germans to whom it appeared as conventional as a handshake. Having been at it for several years now, they would be used to it by now, he supposed. Even so, it did seem terribly theatrical; a bit nutty, in fact.

They set off amid a crescendo of cheering and waving arms and for more than an hour, they thumped southwards against the current with everyone hanging over the rails or trooping around the decks spying out the land. There was so much to see and do; a score of corners to be investigated, a hundred new faces to be examined and smiled at, and countless sounds and experiences to be savoured.

Koblenz being left behind, the scenery improved in majesty and beauty. On either side, forested and vine-clad hills rose steeply from the river banks and, here and there, the occasional sinister looking shape of a turreted castle was outlined starkly against the sky.

What a fascinating place Germany was! How easy it was to visualise the origin of those fairy stories of his childhood in which handsome princes climbed to the rescue of fair damsels, each charmed to sleep indefinitely behind battlements of stone and impenetrable barriers of thorn, until awakened by the kiss of a lover. The princes would certainly have had their work cut out around here, mused Tom. Anyone scaling those heights and walls deserved all the damsels he could find!

Somewhere behind him, an explanation of the places of interest was being given over a loud speaker and, occasionally, the voice would break into heavily accented English. He tried to attune his ear to the crackles and fractured offerings of his own language but found it hard going and finally lost interest. Eventually, moving apart from the rest of his group, he contented himself with absorbing the sunshine, the sights and the sounds and eating an early lunch of bread and sausage from a paper bag, following it up with fruit when the mood took him. The sausage he could live without but the fruit was excellent. Germany seemed full of fruit; masses of it!

At the far end of the boat, the band started up and music with a martial beat began to filter between the decks. He was fond of military bands, but as with the bagpipes at home, distance lent enchantment to their particular brand of music. Humming to himself, he found a vacant corner towards the stern of the vessel where, undisturbed, he could watch the forest-clad slopes drift past and the water leap alongside in sparkling surges. He sat down, lay back, spreading his legs, and sighed with contentment. All those wretched trains last night! And how nice it was to have the music without the tuba ‘umpahing’ down his ear! With the sun full in his face, he closed his eyes and let his mind wander. The warmth and the sounds were like drugs.

After a time – was it minutes or hours later? – he became aware of female voices speaking in German. He half opened one eye and saw that there were about six of them in their pale blouses and peasant skirts, talking and laughing animatedly and leaning over the rail. He regarded them silently and saw one of them looking in his direction.

She was a tall girl, about his own age, slim but well-built, with flaxen hair, drawn back and hanging almost to her waist in two plaits. She continued to smile and held his frowning gaze for some seconds before lowering her eyes and looking away. Then, as they all moved off in a chattering group, she turned and smiled again, this time showing even white teeth and, in the briefest and most artful of waves, rippled her fingers at him as she pivoted on one heel to follow her companions.

Tom came awake with a start. He had never had a German girl make eyes at him before and the novelty caused a flutter in his midriff. He scrambled to his feet, straightened his clothes and ran his fingers through his hair. Then he remembered he was clutching a half-full bag of left-overs from his lunch. He would have to get rid of that for a start! Having found a suitable receptacle, he set off in pursuit with assumed casualness.

The band was playing away in fine style as he edged towards it through the crowd. There was an appreciative mob of young and not so young in a semi-circle around a small dance area where a score of couples were moving about in some sort of jogging rhythm.

Dancing! Burgoyne was no dancer, never having been taught. He had always considered dancing as being . . . well, indecently cissie, almost. None of the chaps he mixed with thought very much of it either. They had an evening dress affair for the upper school once a year in Manchester at which girls from one or more neighbouring establishments provided the female interest. But, he had not attended the last one. In fact, dancing with girls hovered just on the borderline of what was regarded in his circle as manly ‘good form’ and, at the moment, it was just beyond rather than within the area of acceptance. Although naturally graceful and coordinated in sport and in his movements generally, he became an object of tongue-tied embarrassment on a dance floor and could barely distinguish one dance from another. Waltzes he could recognise and were just about tolerable but foxtrots, tangos and rhumbas were only one step removed from jungle caperings.

For a time he watched with interest. The bandsmen were all pretty young and, despite blowing lustily with the now familiar Teutonic seriousness, seemed to be enjoying themselves. And, to Tom’s untutored ear, they sounded quite proficient, too.

Burgoyne saw that some of the girls who had wakened him were either on the floor or in the watching crowd, and he caught sight of the young woman who had smiled at him.

After observing her out of the corner of his eye, he contrived that their glances should meet, at which point she grinned back at him without reserve and raised her eyebrows. An invitation? Gosh! How he wished he could speak German. And dance! He moistened his lips. Should he chance his arm? There were so many people on the floor, he couldn’t make that much of a fool of himself.

Whilst he was turning this over in his mind, the band stopped playing and, exchanging a few words between themselves, shuffled their music. Then they were off again with the swinging rhythm of a Johann Strauss waltz. He felt his heart thumping. Should he ask her? What on earth would he say? He thought the matter over for a few seconds then, on impulse, pushed his way through the crowd.

She was not quite as tall as he had thought. Her eyes were more grey than blue and there were fine blonde hairs above her upper lip. She was smiling again, her mouth curving and slightly to one side and there was a shining film of moisture on her teeth.

He grinned and cleared his throat.

‘Hello!’

‘Guten Nachmittag!’ She gave the merest bob of her head then tilted it slightly, looking at him, amused.

He stood there transfixed. Heavens! What on earth was she saying?

The girl smiled openly at his obvious discomfort.

‘Mochten Sie tansen? You wish to dance with me, yes?’

His eyes lit up.

‘You speak English! Thank the Lord for that! Yes, please; I would like to dance with you. May I?’

‘Sicher!’

He grinned back, more at ease.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means . . . er of course! Certainly! – or something like, so.’ She was still laughing. Then she held up her arms and he drew her on to the floor.

Now, for Heavens sake, what did he do? He counted to himself, one-two-three, one-two-three, before setting off, hauling her in his wake like a locomotive with a very uncertain tender. The girl stumbled then gave the briefest of exclamations before concentrating on following his over-masterful steps.

He negotiated the first corner – which he was dreading – and set off down the straight like a ship under full sail, the other dancers falling aside like a bow wave. This wasn’t so difficult after all! What on earth had he been worrying about?

At the far end of the dance floor there was something of a traffic jam which suited Burgoyne admirably. Now all he had to do was jog about more or less in time with the music and stand still. He examined the girl’s parting under his nose. The blonde hair was only slightly darker at the roots and her body under his hands, surprisingly firm and hard, except for the front bit which was excitingly squashy. He was giving this part of her anatomy a few experimental nudges under the pretext of being jogged from the rear, when she looked up at him and grinned.

‘What is your name?’

‘Tom’

‘Tom!’ She pronounced the word solemnly, her grey eyes round and her lips pursed. Then she giggled. ‘Englanders are always Tommee. Is that truly your name?’

‘It is truly my name,’ replied Tom, a little stiffly. ‘And what do I call you?’

‘Please?’

‘What is your name?’

‘Anna.’

‘Anna, what?’

‘Please?’

‘What is your second name?’ In the manner of most of his countrymen when faced with a foreigner who did not understand English too well, he had raised his voice.

‘Second name? Ah! Blaskowitz. Bla – sko – witz, yes?’ She mouthed the syllables, her eyes wide and earnest. ‘But Anna is better for you, no?’

‘Yes,’ responded Tom faintly, a little daunted by the name itself and a fraction dismayed by the ‘please-yes-no’ routine. Then in a flash of gallantry he added, ‘That is a very nice name.’ ‘You think so?’ Her ‘th’s all came out ‘s’s, but otherwise she was more than understandable.

Tom nodded. The conversation was not exactly taxing the intellect, he felt, but it was the best they could manage in the circumstances.

The girl nodded gravely in return.

‘I think so, also.’ Then she grinned suddenly before giving him a little squeeze so that her soft parts spread out against him deliciously.

At this point he glanced up to see the grinning faces of two of his friends egging him on, delight shining maliciously in their eyes. He frowned threateningly. He would never hear the end of this, he knew. Stupid asses! Why couldn’t they find girls of their own?

The crush having sorted itself out, they moved off again and he found himself concentrating once more on his steps and leading the very desirable, softly-warm creature he held in his arms.

Suddenly she was looking at him again.

‘You are here for holiday?’

‘In Koblenz, yes. For a week. We go on Saturday.’

‘Nachsten Samstag!’ That clearly did not please her as she gave an exaggerated continental shrug. ‘I am sorry that you should go.’ She thought it over. Then: ‘Do you go to England?’

Tom shook his head.

‘No. On to Weisbaden, for another week.’

‘Ah, Weisbaden. Is a good town. You will like it there. I have many friends in Weisbaden.’

That information being exchanged, they moved around for a time in silence, Burgoyne becoming more and more relaxed.

Then he bent so that his nose touched her hair and she looked up questioningly.

‘Did I do something wrong?’

He smiled. ‘No, nothing wrong. You smell nicely.’

The girl looked serious.

‘Smell? What is smell?’

Tom thought, Oh, God! and added hastily, ‘You have a lovely perfume.’

A blank look. Then: ‘Ah. I understand.’ She beamed, transforming her face. ‘And you smell, also.’

Burgoyne glanced about quickly. He hoped the others were not within earshot.

The dance completed, he took her back to where they had first met.

‘Thank you.’ He found himself bowing. It was catching, it appeared.

The girl seemed a little bewildered.

‘Vielen Dank. You must try to speak German just a little.’

‘I will have to learn.’

‘Then I will teach you, yes?’

He was getting desperate. How did one end this sort of conversation?

She was still smiling but a little wistfully.

‘We must dance again. You will ask me, no?’

‘Yes, I will ask you – later.’

‘Bis spater, Tommee. Auf Wiedersehen.’

‘Goodbye, for the moment.’ He bowed again and backed away. What a super girl! But he had to get away. He was hot. Goodness, he was hot. He searched for a handkerchief.

Before turning the corner, something prompted him to look round. She was following him with her eyes, smiling still, but just a little perplexed, he thought. Then, for the second time, her fingers rippled at him.

Burgoyne retreated to the far end of the ship to recover his composure but was immediately surrounded by members of his own group. They were all bubbling.

‘You old devil! Where did you find her?’

‘She wasn’t lost,’ replied Tom tersely. ‘She was just in the crowd and I asked her to dance.’

‘God! What a poodle-faker! Who’d have thought it? Have you got her all set up for the rest of the trip?’

‘Look! Why don’t you find some girls of your own and leave me alone?’

‘My, my, touchy, aren’t we? Come on, let’s have it. Are you going to have another basin-full, or do we all get a turn?’

‘Just push off and leave me alone.’

‘Come on, fair’s fair; share her round a bit.’

‘Push off!’ Tom’s voice rose threateningly and, laughing, they all withdrew.

His preferred corner being vacant, Burgoyne settled himself down again in the sun and admired the scenery. After a time, the distant music became punctuated with single chords and fanfares and there were bursts of cheering. Something going on, he thought; party games, probably. He lay back and closed his eyes. He wasn’t in the mood for party games. Let ‘em get on with it! He allowed his mind to drift away. Goodness, he could do with another rest.

He came to with someone talking to him. The news was that the boat would be halting for an hour or more to enable passengers to disembark for exercise and sightseeing.

It took him a little while to focus his thoughts. He had not expected to be able to stretch his legs on shore or be given the opportunity for a little private fraternisation. His mind turned immediately to the girl. He wondered where she would be.

Shortly after 2 p.m., the engine vibrations subsided and they drifted towards a riverside landing-stage in the centre of a substantial and picturesque village dominated by the high, steep side of a wooded hill. A church with the type of architecture he had always associated with Bavaria or Switzerland, nestled among high conifers. It presented a vivid and colourful picture, not unlike those he had seen on the boxes of jigsaw puzzles.

The boat having tied up, the heat was oppressive. Lord, it was warm! He could do with some of that cool beer they sampled the day before. Did he have to ask permission all over again? Or could that be taken for granted? The best thing was not to ask!

He began to consider the practicalities of walking off with his newly-found German friend. But, not for long! The fluttering Smith was bustling about like a hen with chicks and the members of his group were moving towards the ever-silent Crighton. With a resigned sigh he joined them.

‘We shall be here until 4 o’clock,’ Crighton announced. ‘Do what you like, as long as it’s legal. Do not drink the local wine and do not miss the boat. Be back on board at a quarter-to-four and report to me here so that I can check numbers. Alright? Off you go, then.’

Aldred, who shared Burgoyne’s tent said to him: ‘Are you going off with anyone?’

‘Not especially.’

‘Sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure.’

‘Should we go together, then?’

Tom said that he didn’t mind and they moved off in step.

‘I say, do you like the cheesecakes they make here? I think they’re super.’ Aldred gave a skip of excitement. ‘We could have a few drinks, too. What d’you say?’

‘Do beer and cheesecake mix?’ asked Burgoyne without enthusiasm.

‘We’ll soon see. How many marks have you got?’

The passengers left the boat in a gradually ebbing flood, the various parties and groups laughing and chattering. Burgoyne kept an eye open for Anna but didn’t catch sight of her, there being flaxen plaits by the score. A little pensive and disappointed, he resolved to see as much of the place as he could – and preferably on his own! If Aldred wanted to come, well, that was his affair, but he was going to climb that hill, with or without him. Aldred wasn’t a bad chap really, pleasant but simple-minded. However, there were times when, like Garbo, a fellow preferred to be alone, and this was one of them!

They crossed the landing-stage area and passed into one of the main streets. The pavements were hot and dusty, but clean. It was an unusually wide thoroughfare with a green area in the middle and a line of colourful and well-kept shops, catering mainly for the tourist, down one side.

They stopped at an open-fronted stall selling fruit and examined the produce. The Germans certainly did themselves proud with fruit; there was a mass of it, and all very cheap. Tom gave himself a little mental exercise calculating the prices shown in terms of shillings and pence. Goodness, it was inexpensive!

They each bought some peaches, after a little while embarrassed miming with the greengrocer, and went on their way eating and laughing when the juice ran down their faces.

It was like a Sunday afternoon in England, quiet and warm. There were several cafes around with tables and chairs spread about, but mostly vacant, and one or two cake shops, which acted on Aldred like lures to a trout. They gazed rapturously into the windows.

‘Heavens! Look at those cheesecakes!’ Aldred was almost drooling. ‘Every colour and flavour under the sun. Should we have some now?’

Tom shook his head. 'Not for me.' He looked up and sniffed the air. 'I want to walk up that hill and have a look at the church. It won't be quite so easy if I'm all bunged up with cheesecake and booze. D'you want to come?'

Aldred hesitated sufficiently for Tom to add quickly, 'Look, why don't I meet you here in, say, an hour. We'd both feel like something to eat then, I would think.'

'Alright, then.' Aldred sounded reluctant. 'An hour from now. That café over there at a quarter past three.'

Burgoyne set off up the hill walking slowly. The road was narrow and winding, without curbs and the occasional large and substantial house set well back on either side. Presently, the ascent grew steeper, the buildings dropped behind and the tarmac began to wind ever more precipitously into the tall pines.

After a long spell of climbing he stopped, his heart thumping with the exertion. Collapsing gratefully on to a tree stump on the grass verge, he looked back.

He was much higher than he had expected. The river below shone like a bright silver coin, the silence broken only by the movement of a breeze in the high branches of the trees above him and the air heavy with the scent of pine. He wasn't too knowledgeable about plant smells but, whatever it was, the fragrance was deeply satisfying and, in a strange way, nostalgically moving. Was he reminded of Wales? – or Scotland? – or where? He inhaled again and again, filling his lungs to capacity, savouring the clean, mountain freshness.

After some minutes, he rose to his feet and plodded ahead before turning to his left into a hard, rutted path which curved away to disappear between high hedges. This, presumably, would lead him to the church. He smiled to himself. The incumbent here must have parishioners of unusual zeal and agility if they were prepared to walk this far, and up this hill, to attend to their devotions.

After a hundred yards or so, the hedges fell away and he found himself in a churchyard.

The burial ground was obviously old and well-established; the graves huddled together like conspirators. There were elaborate memorial sculptures on every side and more angels and Madonna's than he had ever seen in his life. Catholic, obviously; a discovery which struck him as surprising. Bavaria and Austria, he knew, were predominantly Catholic but they were a good deal further south. Most of Germany, he imagined, would be Protestant – Martin Luther, and all that – but apparently this was not so.

He bent down to examine some of the graves. Most of them were surrounded by ornately decorated rails with a variety of stone vases for flowers, each grave with a small identification card and photograph, all the personal details preserved behind transparent rectangles of mica or glass.

Unable to read German, he was, nevertheless, able to deduce that, all around him were the remains of young men who had been casualties in the last war. The faces of a dozen or more in their late teens or early twenties, stared or smiled at him from small, faded prints, like ghosts from another generation.