

A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE

A Novel



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REMARQUE

Author of the World War I masterpiece
All Quiet on the Western Front

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Translated from the German by Denver Lindley



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Chapter One

DEATH SMELLED DIFFERENT in Russia than in Africa. In Africa, under heavy English fire, the corpses between the lines had often lain unburied for a long time, too; but the sun had worked fast. At night the smell had come over with the wind, sweet, stifling and heavy—gas had filled the air. The dead and they had risen like ghosts in the light of the alien stars as though they were fighting one last battle, silent, hopeless, and each for himself alone—but by the next day they had already begun to shrink, to nestle against the earth with infinite weariness as if trying to crawl into it—and if later they could be brought back some were light and dried out and the ones that were found weeks after were hardly more than skeletons that rattled loosely in their uniforms suddenly far too big for them. It was a dry death, in sand, sun and wind. In Russia it was a greasy, stinking death.

It had been raining for days. The snow was melting. A month earlier it had been three yards deeper. The ruined village, which at first had seemed to be nothing but charred roofs, had risen silently, night by night, risen higher out of the sinking snow. Window frames had crept into sight; a few nights later the archways of doors; then stairways that led down into the dirt and whiteness. The snow melted and melted, and with the melting came the dead.

They were old dead. The village had been fought over several times—in November, in December, in January, and now in April. It had been taken and lost and taken again. The snowstorms had come and covered the corpses, sometimes within hours, so deep that the medical corpsmen often could not find them—until finally almost every day had thrown down a new layer of white over the devastation, like a nurse stretching a sheet over a bloody, filthy bed.

First came the January dead. They lay highest and came out at the beginning of April, shortly after the snow began to slip. Their bodies were frozen stiff and their faces were gray and wax.

They were buried like boards. On a little hill behind the village where the snow was not so deep it had been shoveled away and graves were hacked out of the frozen earth. It was heavy work. Only the Germans were buried. The Russians were thrown into an open paddock. They began to stink when the weather turned mild. When it got too bad snow was shoveled over them. It was not necessary to bury them; no one expected that the village would be held for any length of time. The regiment was in retreat. The advancing Russians could bury the dead themselves.

Beside the December dead were found the weapons that had belonged to the January dead. Rifles and hand grenades had sunk deeper than the bodies; sometimes steel helmets too. It was easier with these corpses to cut away the identification marks inside the uniforms; the melting snow had already softened the cloth. Water stood in their open mouths as though

they had drowned. In some cases a limb or two had thawed out. When they were carried out, the bodies were still stiff, but an arm and a hand would dangle and sway as though the corpses were waving, hideously indifferent and almost obscene. With all of them, when they lay in the sun, the eyes thawed first. They lost their glassy brilliance and the pupils turned to jelly. The ice in them melted and ran slowly out of the eyes—as if they were weeping.

Suddenly it froze again for several days. A crust formed on the snow and turned to ice. The snow stopped sinking. But then the sluggish, sultry wind began to blow anew.

At first only a gray fleck appeared in the withering white. An hour later it was a clenched hand stretching upward.

“There’s another,” Sauer said.

“Where?” Immermann asked.

“Over there in front of the church. Shall we dig him out?”

“What’s the use? The wind will dig him out by itself. The snow back there is still a yard or two deep, at least. This damn village is lower than anything else around here. Or do you just want to get your boots full of ice water?”

“Hell no. Any idea what’s to eat today?”

“Cabbage. Cabbage with pork and potatoes. Pork nonexistent.”

“Cabbage of course! For the third time this week!”

Sauer unbuttoned his trousers and began to urinate. “A year ago I still pissed in great arcs,” he explained morosely. “In good military fashion, the way it’s supposed to be done. I feel fine. Advance each day so-and-so many kilometers. Thought I’d soon be home again. Now I piss like a civilian, half-heartedly and without pleasure.”

Immerman stuck his hand under his uniform and scratched himself comfortably. “I wouldn’t care how I pissed—if I were a civilian again.”

“Me either. But it looks like we’d go on being soldiers forever.”

“Sure. Heroes to the grave. Only the S.S. still piss in great arcs.”

Sauer buttoned up his trousers. “They can do it too. We do the dirty work and those beauties get all the honors. We fight for two or three weeks for some damn town and on the last day up come the S.S. and march into it triumphantly ahead of us. Just look at the way they’re looked after! Always the thickest coats, the best boots, and the biggest chunks of meat!”

Immermann grinned. “Now even the S.S. aren’t taking towns any more. They’re going back. Just like us.”

“Not like us. We don’t burn and shoot what we can’t carry off with us.”

Immerman stopped scratching himself. “What’s got into you today?” he asked in surprise. “You’re talking like a human being. Take care Steinbrenner doesn’t hear you or you’ll soon find yourself in one of those disciplinary companies. Look—the snow over there has settled. Now you can see a piece of the fellow’s arm.”

Sauer looked over. “If it goes on melting like this by tomorrow he’ll be hanging on a cross. He’s in the right place. Right over the cemetery.”

“Is that a cemetery there?”

“Of course. Didn’t you know? We were here once before. During our last counterattack. Around the end of October. Weren’t you with us then?”

“No.”

“Where were you? Hospital?”

“Disciplinary company.”

Sauer whistled through his teeth. “Disciplinary company! I’ll be damned! For what?”

Immermann looked at him. “Former Communist,” he said.

“What? And they let you out? How did it happen?”

“A fellow has to have luck. I’m a good mechanic. Apparently they are more useful no here than there.”

“Maybe. But as a Communist! And here in Russia! They’re always sent somewhere else.” Sauer suddenly looked at Immermann with suspicion.

Immermann grinned derisively. “Take it easy,” he said. “I haven’t turned spy. And I won’t report what you said about the S.S. That’s what you meant, wasn’t it?”

“I? Not a bit of it. Never thought of such a thing!” Sauer reached for his mess kit. “There’s the field kitchen! Quick—otherwise we’ll only get dishwater.”

The hand grew and grew. It was not as if the snow were melting but as if the hand were slowly stretching up out of the earth—like a pale threat or a paralyzed gesture for help.

The company commander halted abruptly. “What’s that over there?”

“Some Panje or other, sir.”

Rahe looked more intently. He could recognize a piece of the faded cloth on the sleeve. “That’s no Russian,” he said.

Sergeant Muecke wriggled his toes in his boots. He could not bear the comparison with the company commander. To be sure, he stood before him with irreproachable rigidity—discipline transcended personal feelings—but privately, to express his contempt, he kept wriggling his toes in his boots. Stupid ass, he thought. Numbskull!

“Get him out,” Rahe said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Get a couple of men to work at once. That sort of thing’s not a pleasant sight!”

Babe in arms, Muecke thought. Twaddler! Not a pleasant sight! As though that was the first dead man we’ve seen!

“That’s a German soldier,” Rahe said.

“Yes, sir. For the last four days we’ve found nothing but Russians.”

“Have them get him out. Then we’ll see what he is.” Rahe walked across to his quarters. Conceited ass, Muecke thought. Has an oven, a warm house, and the Ritterkreuz. I haven’t even the Iron Cross first class and I’ve done just as much to earn it as he has with his whoopee hardware store. “Sauer!” he shouted. “Immermann! Come here! Bring shovels along! Where else is there? Graeber! Hirschland! Berning! Steinbrenner, take charge of the detail! The hand over there! Dig it out and bury it if it’s a German! I bet it isn’t.”

Steinbrenner sauntered over. “You’re betting?” he asked. He had a high, boyish voice which he vainly tried to keep low. “How much?”

Muecke was disconcerted for a moment. “Three rubels,” he said then. “Three occupation rubels.”

“Five. I don’t bet less than five.”

“All right, five then. But pay up.”

Steinbrenner laughed. His teeth glistened in the pale sunlight. He was nineteen years old, blond, with the face of a Gothic angel. "Pay up of course. What else, Muecke?"

Muecke did not like Steinbrenner either; but he was afraid of him and therefore cautious. Steinbrenner came from the S.S. He possessed the golden insigne of the Hitler Youth. Now he belonged to the company, but everyone knew he was an informer and a Gestapo spy.

"All right, all right." Muecke pulled out of his pocket a cherrywood cigarette case that had a flower design burnt into its lid. "Cigarette?"

"Sure."

"The Fuehrer doesn't smoke, Steinbrenner," Immermann said casually.

"Shut your trap."

"Shut yours, you bastard."

Steinbrenner lifted his long eyelashes in a sidewise glance. "You seem to be feeling pretty good. Forgotten all sorts of things, haven't you?"

Immermann laughed. "I don't easily forget anything. And I know just what you mean, Max. But don't you forget what it was I said: The Fuehrer doesn't smoke. That was all. Here are four witnesses. And the Fuehrer doesn't smoke. Everyone knows that."

"Stop jawing!" Muecke said. "Get on with the digging. Orders from the company commander."

"All right, move!" Steinbrenner lighted the cigarette Muecke had given him.

"Since when is smoking permitted on duty?" Immermann asked.

"We're not on duty," Muecke explained irritably. "Now cut the talk and get going, Hirschland, you too!"

Hirschland came up. Steinbrenner grinned. "First-rate work for you, Isaac! Digging out corpses. Good for your Jewish blood. Strengthens the bones and the spirit. Take that shovel over there."

"I'm three-quarters Aryan," Hirschland said.

Steinbrenner blew smoke from the cigarette into his face. "That's what you say! As far as I'm concerned you're one-quarter Jew—and through the generosity of the Fuehrer you're allowed to fight side by side with true German men. So, dig out this Russian swine. He stinks too much for the Lieutenant's delicate nose."

"This is no Russian," Graeber said. He had dragged a few boards up to the dead man and had himself begun to cut away the snow from around the arm and breast. The wet uniform was now clearly visible.

"Not a Russian?" Steinbrenner came over, quick and surefooted as a dancer on the teetering boards, and squatted down beside Graeber. "It's a fact. That's a German uniform." He turned around. "Muecke! It's not a Russian! I've won!"

Muecke walked over heavily. He stared at the hole into which water was slowly trickling from the sides. "I can't understand it," he declared disgustedly. "For almost a week now we've found nothing but Russians. He must be one of the December lot that sank deeper."

"He might just as well be from October," Graeber said. "Our regiment came through here then."

"Nonsense. There can't be any more of them left."

"There could be. We fought a night engagement here. The Russians retreated and we had to go on at once."

“That’s true,” Sauer announced.

“Nonsense. Our replacements must have found all the dead and buried them.”

“That’s not so certain. By the end of October it had started to snow very hard. And at the time we were still advancing fast.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said that.” Steinbrenner looked at Graeber.

“I’ll be glad to let you hear it again if you like. At that time we were counterattacking and we advanced more than a hundred kilometers.”

“And now we’re retreating, eh?”

“Now we’re here again.”

“That means that we’re in retreat, doesn’t it?”

Immermann nudged Graeber warningly. “Are we perhaps going forward?” Graeber asked.

“We’re shortening our lines,” Immermann said, staring derisively into Steinbrenner’s face. “For a year now. Strategic necessity. Everyone knows that.”

“There’s a ring on his hand,” Hirschland said suddenly. He had gone on digging and had exposed the dead man’s other hand. Muecke bent down. “A ring,” he said. “And a gold one too. A wedding ring.”

All of them looked at it. “Watch yourself,” Immermann whispered to Graeber. “That swine will do you out of your furlough. He’ll report you as an alarmist. He’s just waiting for the chance.”

“He’s simply showing off. You’re the one who’d better watch out. He’s got it in for you more than for me.”

“I don’t care. I won’t get any furlough.”

“Those are the insignia of our regiment,” Hirschland said. He had gone on digging with his hands.

“So then it’s dead certain that it’s not a Russian, eh?” Steinbrenner turned and grinned at Muecke.

“No, it’s not a Russian,” Muecke replied angrily.

“Five rubels! Too bad we didn’t bet ten. Cough it up!”

“I haven’t got it on me.”

“Where then? In the Reichsbank? Come on, cough it up!”

Muecke glared fiercely at Steinbrenner. Then he produced his wallet and handed over the money. “Everything’s gone wrong today, damn it!”

Steinbrenner pocketed the money. Graeber bent over again to help Hirschland dig. “I don’t believe it’s Reicke,” he said.

“What?”

“This is Lieutenant Reicke. There are his bars. And here, on his right hand, the last joint of the index finger is missing.”

“Nonsense. Reicke was wounded and sent home. We heard that later.”

“It is Reicke.”

“Clean off his face.”

Graeber and Hirschland went on digging. “Careful,” Muecke shouted. “Don’t poke him in the head.”

“He won’t feel it now,” Immermann said.

“Shut your trap. Here lies a fallen German officer, you Communist!”

The face emerged from the snow. It was wet and made a strange impression with the hollows of the eyes still filled with snow: as though a sculptor had left a mask unfinished and blind. A gold tooth gleamed between the blue lips.

"I can't identify him," Muecke said.

"It must be him. We didn't lose any other officer here that time."

"Wipe out his eyes."

Graeber hesitated an instant. Then he cautiously wiped the snow away with his glove. "It's him," he said.

Muecke became excited. He took command himself. Since an officer was in question a higher rank seemed necessary. "Lift him! Hirschland and Sauer take the legs, Steinbrenner and Berning the arms. Graeber, take care of his head! Come on, all together—one, two, pull!"

The body moved. "Once more. One, two, lift!"

The body moved again. From under it out of the snow came a hollow sigh as the air rushed in.

"Sergeant! The foot's come off!" Hirschland shouted.

It was the boot. It had come half off. The flesh of the foot had rotted in the melting snow and was giving way. "Let go! Let him down!" Muecke shouted. It was too late. The boot jerked loose and Hirschland held the boot in his hand.

"Is the foot inside?" Immermann asked.

"Put the boot down and go on shoveling," Muecke shouted to Hirschland. "How would anyone know he was already so soft? And you, Immermann, shut up! Show some respect for the dead!"

Immermann looked at Muecke in amazement, but he kept quiet.

A few minutes later they had finished shoveling the snow away from around the body. In the wet uniform they found a wallet with papers. The handwriting had run but was still legible. Graeber had been right: it was Lieutenant Reicke, who had been a platoon leader of the company during the fall.

"We must report this at once," Muecke said. "Stay here, I'll be right back."

He went over to the house where the company commander lived. It was the only one that was still in some degree habitable; before the Revolution it had probably belonged to the village priest. Rahe was sitting in the big living room. Muecke stared spitefully at the broad Russian oven in which a fire was burning. On the oven bench Rahe's sheepdog was lying asleep. Muecke made his report and Rahe went out with him.

He looked down for a while at Reicke. "Shut his eyes," he said then.

"That can't be done, sir," Graeber answered. "The lids are too tender. They would tear."

Rahe looked over at the shell-torn church. "Take him over and put him in there for the time being. Have we a coffin?"

"The coffins were left behind," Muecke reported. "We had a few for special occasions. The Russians have them now. I hope they'll have use for them!"

Steinbrenner laughed. Rahe did not laugh. "Can we make one?"

"It would take too long, sir," Graeber said. "The body's very soft already. Besides, it's not likely there are any suitable boards in the town."

Rahe nodded. "Lay him on a strip of canvas. We'll bury him in that. Hack out a grave and make a cross."

Graeber, Sauer, Immermann, and Berning carried the sagging body over to the church. Hirschland followed uncertainly with the boot with a piece of foot still in it.

“Sergeant Muecke!” Rahe said.

“Yes, sir!”

“Four captured guerrillas are being sent here today. They are to be shot early tomorrow morning. Our company has received orders to do it. Ask your section for volunteers. If you don’t get them the master sergeant will select names.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Heaven knows why it has to be us. Oh well, in all this confusion—”

“I volunteer,” Steinbrenner said.

“Good.” Rahe’s face was expressionless. He stumped back over the pathway shoveled in the snow. Back to his oven, Muecke thought. The dishclout! What does shooting a few guerrillas amount to? As though they hadn’t picked off hundreds of our comrades!

“If the Russians come in time they can dig the grave for Reicke too,” Steinbrenner said. “Then there won’t be any work for us. Get it all done at once. What do you say, Muecke?”

“It’s all right with me!” Muecke’s stomach was bitter. That schoolmaster, he thought. Thin, overgrown, a long lathe with horn-rimmed glasses. Lieutenant from the time of the first war. Never promoted in this one. Brave all right, who wasn’t? But not a leader by nature. “What do you think of Rahe?” he asked Steinbrenner.

Steinbrenner looked at him uncomprehendingly. “He’s our company commander, isn’t he?”

“Certainly, but what else?”

“Else? What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Muecke replied crossly.

“Deep enough?” asked the oldest Russian.

He was a man of about seventy with a dirty white beard and very blue eyes, and he spoke broken German.

“Shut up, Bolshevik. Speak only when you’re spoken to,” Steinbrenner replied. He was in fine spirits. His eyes followed the woman who was one of the guerrillas. She was young and strong.

“Deeper,” Graeber said. He, together with Steinbrenner and Sauer, was supervising the prisoners.

“For us?” the Russian asked.

Steinbrenner sprang down quickly, lightly, and hit him hard in the face with the flat of his hand. “I told you, grandfather, to hold your tongue. What do you think this is? A country fair?”

He smiled. There was no malice in his face. It was simply filled with the satisfaction of a child pulling the wings off a fly.

“No, this grave is not for you,” Graeber said.

The Russian did not move. He stood still and looked at Steinbrenner. Steinbrenner glanced back. His face suddenly changed. It became tense and watchful. He thought the Russian was going to attack him and he was waiting for the first move. It would have made no difference

to anyone if he had shot him then and there; the man had been condemned to death anyway and no one would question very closely whether or not it had been a case of self-defense. But for Steinbrenner it was not the same. Graeber could not tell whether it was a kind of sport for him to provoke the Russian so far that he would forget himself for a moment, or whether he still possessed a remnant of that strange pedantry which seeks through some subterfuge always to appear legal when committing murder. Both existed. And both at the same time Graeber had seen it often enough.

The Russian did not move. Blood ran out of his nose into his beard. Graeber considered for a moment what he would do in the same situation—whether he would throw himself on the other and risk instant death for the satisfaction of returning the blow, or accept anything in order to gain the few more hours, the one night of life. He did not know.

The Russian bent slowly and lifted the pick. Steinbrenner took a step backward. He was ready to shoot. But the Russian did not straighten up again. He resumed his hacking at the bottom of the hole. Steinbrenner grinned. “Lie down there,” he said.

The Russian put the pick aside and laid himself in the trench. He lay there quietly. A few pieces of snow fell on him as Steinbrenner stepped over the grave. “Is it long enough?” he asked Graeber.

“Yes. Reicke wasn’t tall.”

The Russian was looking upward. His eyes were wide open. The blue of the sky seemed to be reflected in them. The white hairs of the beard around his mouth stirred with his breath. Steinbrenner let him lie there for a while. Then he said, “Out!”

The Russian climbed out. Wet earth clung to his coat. “So,” Steinbrenner said, and glanced at the woman. “Now we’ll go and dig your own graves. They don’t need to be so deep. It makes no difference if the foxes eat you next summer.”

It was early morning. A pale red band lay along the horizon. The snow crackled; it had frozen again during the night. The open graves were very black. “Damn it,” Sauer said. “The things they load on us. Why do we have to do this? Why not the S.D.? After all, they’re specialists at shooting people. Why us? This is the third time. We’re supposed to be respectable soldiers.”

Graeber held his rifle loosely in his hand. The steel was very cold. He put on his gloves. “The S.D. keep busy farther back.”

“Right. They don’t come this near the front. Wasn’t Steinbrenner with the S.D. earlier?”

“I think he was in a concentration camp. Block warden or something like that.”

The others came up. Steinbrenner was the only one fully awake and rested. His skin had the rosy glow of a child’s. “Listen,” he said. “There’s that cow in the bunch. Leave her for me.”

“How do you mean for you?” asked Sauer. “There’s not enough time for you to get her pregnant. You ought to have tried sooner.”

“That’s just what he did,” Immermann said.

“Who told you that?” Steinbrenner asked. “The International?”

“And she wouldn’t let him near her.” Steinbrenner turned around angrily. “You’re mighty sly, aren’t you? If I had wanted to have the red cow I’d have had her.”

“Maybe not.”

“Oh, cut the jawing.” Sauer bit off a chew of tobacco. “If he means he wants to shoot her

all by himself he's welcome as far as I'm concerned. I won't fight him for that."

"Nor I," Graeber declared.

The others said nothing. It grew lighter. Hirschland looked at his watch. "Aren't things going fast enough for you, Isaac?" Steinbrenner asked. "Be thankful you've been picked off for this. It's just the thing to cure your Jewish tearfulness. Shooting—" he spat, "much too good for this gang! Ammunition wasted for that! They should be hanged. Like everywhere else."

"Where?" Sauer looked around. "You see any trees? Or shall we build a gallows? And with what?"

"There they are," Graeber said.

Muecke appeared with the four Russians. Two soldiers marched in front of them and two behind. The old Russian came first, after him the woman and then the two younger men. The four arranged themselves, without being told to, in a row in front of the graves. The woman glanced down before she turned around. She was wearing a red woolen skirt.

Lieutenant Mueller of the first platoon came out of the company commander's house. He was Rahe's representative at the execution. It was laughable, but formalities were still for the most part strictly carried out. Everyone knew that the four Russians might be guerrillas and then again might not; they had been formally tried and condemned without ever having a real chance. What had there been to find out? They had been charged with possessing weapons. Now they were being shot with due formality and in the presence of an officer. *A* if it mattered to them one way or the other.

Lieutenant Mueller was twenty-one years old and had been assigned to the company's weeks before. He examined the condemned and then read the sentence.

"The cow's for me," Steinbrenner whispered.

Graeber looked at the woman. She stood calmly in her red skirt in front of the grave. She was strong and young and healthy and made to bear children. She did not understand what Mueller was reading, but she knew it was her death sentence. She knew that in a few minutes the life that pulsed strong and healthy through her veins would cease forever—but she stood there calmly as if it were nothing and she were only a little chilly in the cold morning air.

Graeber saw that Muecke was officiously whispering to Mueller. Mueller glanced up. "Can't that be done afterward?"

"It's better this way, sir. Simpler."

"All right, arrange it as you like."

Muecke stepped forward. "Tell that one over there to take off his shoes," he said to the old Russian who understood German, and pointed at one of the younger prisoners.

The old man told the other. He spoke in a low, almost singsong tone. The other man, a gangling fellow, at first did not understand. "Come on," Muecke growled. "Shoes! Take off your shoes!"

The old man repeated what he had said before. The younger one understood and, like someone who had neglected his duty, hastened to take off his shoes as quickly as possible. He wobbled, standing on one foot while he drew the shoe off the other. Why is he rushing so, Graeber thought. So that he can die a minute sooner? The man took his shoes in one hand and offered them obsequiously to Muecke. They were good shoes. Muecke snorted an order and

pointed to one side. The man placed the shoes there and then stepped back into line. He stood in dirty foot bandages on the snow. His yellow toes protruded from the wrappings and he kept curling them in embarrassment.

Muecke inspected the others. He found that the woman had a pair of thick fur gloves and ordered her to lay them beside the shoes. The red skirt held his attention for a moment. It was un-torn and of good material. Steinbrenner grinned surreptitiously, but Muecke did not tell the woman to take it off. Either he was afraid that Rahe might be watching the execution from his window or he did not know what could be done with the skirt. He stepped back.

The woman said something very rapidly in Russian. "Ask her what more she wants," Lieutenant Mueller said. He was pale. This was his first execution.

Muecke questioned the old Russian.

"She doesn't want anything. She is just cursing you."

"What?" shouted Mueller who had not understood any of it.

"She is cursing you," the Russian said louder. "She is cursing you and all Germans who stand on Russian soil! She is cursing your children! She hopes that her children will some day shoot down your children just as you are now shooting her down."

"What impertinence!" Muecke was staring at the woman.

"She has two children," said the old man. "And I have three sons."

"That's enough, Muecke!" Mueller shouted nervously. "We're not chaplains. Attention!"

The group of soldiers came to attention. Graeber took hold of his rifle. He had taken off his glove again. The cold steel seemed to suck at his thumb and index finger. Beside him stood Hirschland. He was yellow but he stood firm. Graeber decided to aim at the Russian farthest to the left. In the beginning, when he had been commanded to take part in executions, he had shot into the air, but that was past. Doing it was no favor to those who were to be shot. Others had had the same idea and there had been times when almost everyone had intentionally missed the mark. The shooting had to be repeated and so the prisoners were executed twice. Once, to be sure, a woman had thrown herself on her knees after not being hit and had thanked them with tears for the minute or two of life she had gained. He did not like to think about that woman. Anyhow, that sort of thing did not happen any more.

"Take aim!"

Over his sight Graeber saw the old Russian with the beard and blue eyes. The gun sight cut his face in two. Graeber lowered it. The last time he had shot away someone's lower jaw. The breast was safer. He saw that the barrel of Hirschland's rifle was raised and that he intended to shoot over their heads. "Muecke's watching you. Aim lower. Sidewise!" he murmured. Hirschland lowered the barrel. "Fire!" came the command.

The Russian seemed to rise and come toward Graeber. He swelled out like a man seen in a convex mirror in some fun house at a country fair. He swelled out and then fell backward.

The old man had been hurled half in and half out of the grave. His feet protruded from it. The two other men had sunk down where they stood. The other one without shoes had thrown up his hands at the last minute to protect his face. One hand hung like a rag from the tendons. None of the Russians had had their hands tied or their eyes bandaged. It had been forgotten.

The woman had fallen forward. She was not dead. She had propped herself on her hands and was staring with lifted face at the group of soldiers. Steinbrenner wore a satisfied

expression. No one else had aimed at her. She had been shot in the stomach. Steinbrenner was a good marksman.

The old Russian struck at something from the grave; then he was still. Only the woman still lay propped up there. She stared out of her broad face at the soldiers and hissed. The old Russian was dead and now no one could translate what she was saying. She lay there with her arms braced like a great bright frog that could go no farther and she hissed without turning her eyes aside for an instant.

She seemed hardly to notice as Muecke approached disgustedly from the side. She hissed and hissed and only at the last moment did she see the revolver. She thrust her head to one side and bit Muecke in the hand. Muecke cursed and with a downward blow of his left hand knocked her lower jaw loose. As the teeth let go he shot her in the nape of the neck.

“Damned bad marksmanship!” Mueller growled. “Don’t you know how to aim?”

“It was Hirschland, sir,” Steinbrenner reported.

“It was not Hirschland,” Graeber said.

“Quiet!” Muecke shouted. “Wait till you’re asked!”

He glanced over at Mueller. Mueller was very pale and stood without moving. Muecke bent over the other Russians. He put his revolver behind the ear of one of the younger men and fired. The head jerked and lay still. Muecke put his revolver back and looked at his hand. He took out a handkerchief and wrapped it.

“Have some iodine put on it,” Mueller said. “Where’s the infirmary?”

“In the third house on the right, sir.”

“Go there at once.”

Muecke went. Mueller looked across at the dead. The woman lay sunk over forward on the wet ground. “Put them in and cover them up,” he said. He was suddenly very angry without knowing why.

Chapter Two

THAT NIGHT the rumbling on the horizon got heavier. The sky was red and the flickering of the artillery fire was more distinct. Ten days earlier the regiment had been withdrawn from the front and was now in reserve. But the Russians were coming closer. The front shifted from day to day. There was no longer any exact line. The Russians were attacking. They had been attacking for months. And for months the regiment had been going back.

Graeber awoke. He listened to the rumbling and tried to go to sleep again. He could not. After a while he put on his boots and went outside.

The night was clear and not cold. From behind the woods on the right came the sound of explosions. Parachute flares hung like transparent jellyfish in the air and showered down with their light. Further toward the rear searchlights were probing for airplanes.

Graeber stopped and looked up. The sky was moonless but full of stars. He did not see them; he only saw that it was a good night for fliers.

"Nice weather for men on leave," someone beside him said.

It was Immermann. He was on sentry duty. Although the regiment was in reserve, guerrillas had filtered in everywhere and sentries were posted at night.

"You're early," Immermann said. "You still have half an hour before the change. Turn in and get some sleep. I'll wake you."

"I'm not tired."

"Furlough fever, eh?" Immermann looked questioningly at Graeber. "What luck! Furlough!"

"I haven't got it yet. They could still cancel all leaves at the last moment. That's happened to me three times before."

"It could be. How long have you been due?"

"Nine months. Something always interfered. Last time it was a flesh wound that wasn't good enough for a trip home."

"Tough—but at least you're eligible. I'm not. Unreliable. A hero's lot, and nothing else. Cannon fodder and fertilizer for the thousand-year Reich."

Graeber glanced around.

Immermann laughed. "The German glance. Don't worry, everyone's snoring. Steinbrenner is snoring too."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Graeber replied angrily. He had been thinking of it.

"So much the worse." Immermann laughed again. "It's got so far into our bones we don't even notice it any more. It's comic that in our heroic age the informers spring up like mushrooms in the rain! It makes one stop and think, doesn't it?"

Graeber hesitated a moment. "If you know that so well you ought to look out for Steinbrenner," he said finally.

“I don’t give a damn for Steinbrenner. He can do me less harm than he can do you. Simple because I don’t care. For somebody like me that’s a sign of honesty. Too much tail-wagging would make the big boys suspicious. An old rule for former party members, to keep from being suspected. Don’t you agree?”

Graeber blew on his hands. “Cold,” he said.

He did not want to get into a political discussion. It was better not to get involved in anything. He wanted to have his furlough, that was all, and he didn’t want to endanger it. Immermann was right; distrust was the commonest quality in the Third Reich. One wasn’t really safe anywhere. And when you aren’t safe you’d better keep your mouth shut.

“When were you home last?” Immermann asked.

“Two years ago.”

“That’s a damn long time. You’ll be amazed when you get back.”

Graeber made no reply.

“Amazed,” Immermann repeated, “at all the changes.”

“What changes can there be?”

“You’ll see.”

Graeber felt for a moment a sharp fear like a stab in the stomach. He was familiar with that; it came now and then suddenly and without reason, and was not surprising in a world in which for so long nothing had been sure.

“How do you know that?” he asked. “You haven’t been on furlough.”

“No. But I know. In the disciplinary company you hear more than you do here.”

Graeber stood up. Why had he come out? He did not want to talk. He had wanted to be alone. If he were only away! It was almost an obsession. He wanted to be alone, alone for a couple of weeks, alone in order to think, that was all. There was so much he wanted to think about. Not here—but back there, at home, alone, away from the war.

“Time for sentry change,” he said. “I’ll get my stuff and wake Sauer.”

The rumbling went on through the night. The rumbling and the flickering on the horizon. Graeber stared across. The Russians—in the fall of 1941 the Fuehrer had announced they were done for, and it had looked that way. In the fall of 1942 he had announced it again, and it had still looked that way. But then had come the inexplicable time in front of Moscow and Stalingrad. Suddenly there were no further advances. It was like witchcraft. And all at once the Russians had had artillery again. The rumbling on the horizon had begun, it had drowned out the Fuehrer’s speeches, it had never ceased, and then it had driven the German divisions before it, the road back. They had not understood, but suddenly rumors were abroad that the whole army corps had been cut off and had surrendered and soon everyone knew that their victories had transformed themselves into flight. Flight as it had been in Africa, when Cairo had already seemed so close.

Graeber stamped his way around the village. The moonless light distorted all perspectives. The snow caught it and threw it back diffusely. Houses seemed farther away and woods nearer than they actually were. There was a smell of strangeness and of danger.

The summer of 1940 in France. The stroll to Paris. The howling of the Stukas over the disconcerted land. Roads jammed with refugees and with a disintegrating army. High Junco fields, woods, a march through an unravaged landscape. And then the city, with its silver

light, its streets, its cafés, opening itself without a shot fired. Had he thought then? Had he been disturbed? No. Everything had seemed right. Germany, set upon by war-hungry enemies, had defended itself, that was all.

And later, in Africa, during the enormous daily advances, in the desert nights full of stars and the clatter of tanks, had he thought then? No—not even during the retreat. It had been Africa, a foreign land, the Mediterranean lay between, then France and only after that came Germany. What was there to think about in that, even if it were lost? One couldn't worry everywhere.

But then Russia had come. Russia and the defeats and the flight. And this time no sea lay between; the retreat went straight toward Germany. And it was not just a few corps that had been defeated, as in Africa—the whole German army had gone back. All at once he had begun to think. He and many others. That was easy and cheap. As long as they had been victorious everything had seemed to be in order, and whatever was not in order had been overlooked or excused because of the great goal. What goal? Had there not always been two sides to it? And had not one of them been from the start dark and inhuman? Why hadn't he thought about that sooner? But hadn't he really done so? Hadn't he often enough felt doubt and disgust and driven them away again and again?

He heard Sauer cough and walked around a couple of ruined cottages to meet him. Sauer pointed toward the north. A mighty, billowing fire thrust upward from the horizon. There was a sound of explosions, and sheaves of flame arose.

"Is that the Russians? There already?" Graeber asked.

Sauer shook his head. "No. Those are our engineers. They're blowing up that place over there."

"That means we're retreating farther."

"What else?"

They remained silent and listened. "I haven't seen an undamaged house in a long time," Sauer said after a while.

Graeber pointed over to the house where Rahe lived. "That one is still in pretty good shape."

"You call that good shape? With the machine-gun holes and the burned roof and the wrecked barn?" Sauer exhaled noisily. "An undamaged street is something I haven't seen in an eternity."

"Nor I."

"You'll soon see them. At home."

"Yes, thank God."

Sauer looked over at the conflagration. "Sometimes when you see how we are destroying Russia you could get scared. What do you think they would do to us if they got across our border? Have you ever thought about that?"

"No."

"I have. I have a farm in East Prussia. I still remember how we had to flee in 1914 when the Russians came. I was ten years old then."

"It's still a long way to the border."

"That depends. It can go damn fast. Do you remember how fast we advanced in the beginning?"

“No. I was in Africa then.”

Sauer glanced again toward the north. A fiery wall was rising there and then came a series of heavy explosions. “You see what we’re doing there?” he said. “Now just imagine the Russians doing the same thing in our country—what would be left?”

“No more than here.”

“That’s what I mean! If we keep on going back it will happen.”

“They’re not at the border yet. You heard the lecture we had to go to day before yesterday. According to that we’re shortening our lines in order to bring our new secret weapons into a favorable position for attack.”

“Oh, nonsense! Who believes that sort of stuff? Then why did we advance in the first place? I’ll tell you something: when we get to the border we must make peace, there’s nothing else to do.”

“Why?”

“But man, what sort of question is that? So they won’t do the same thing to us that we’ve been doing to them. Don’t you understand that?”

“Yes. But what happens if they refuse to make peace?”

“Who?”

“The Russians.”

Sauer stared at Graeber. “They can’t refuse! We offer to, and they have to accept. Peace or no peace! The war will stop and we’ll be saved.”

“They’ll have to make peace only if we surrender unconditionally. Then they will occupy all of Germany and you’ll have lost your farm just the same. That’s what you mean, or isn’t it?”

Sauer was disconcerted for a moment. “Of course that’s what I mean,” he declared. “But it is not at all the same thing. They wouldn’t be allowed to destroy anything more if we surrender.” He squinted his eyes and suddenly became a sly farmer. “Then our country will be undamaged and theirs will be smashed. Sometime or other they’ll have to get out of Germany again and so in spite of everything we’ll still practically win the war.”

Graeber made no reply. Why am I talking again? he thought. I didn’t want to get involved. Talking does no good. In these years what hadn’t been talked over and picked to pieces? Every belief. Talking was dangerous and pointless. And the other thing, which had crept up noiselessly and slowly, was much too big and too vague and too sinister for talk. One talked about the service, about the food and about the cold. Not about the other thing. Not about that and not about the dead.

He returned along the road through the village. Planks and boards had been thrown across the streets to make it possible to cross the melted snow. The planks shifted as he walked over them and it was easy to slip off; there was no longer anything firm underneath.

He went past the church. It was little and bullet-scarred and Lieutenant Reicke was lying inside it. The door stood open. The evening before two more dead soldiers had been found and Rahe had ordered that all three be given a military burial next morning. One of the soldiers, a lance corporal, could not be identified. His face had been eaten away and he had no identification marks. His stomach, too, had been torn open and the liver was missing. Foxes, very likely, or rats. How they had got at him was a puzzle.

Graeber went into the church. It smelled of saltpeter, decay, and the dead. He threw the beam of his flashlight into the corners. In one of them stood two broken images. A couple of torn potato sacks beside them showed that under the Soviets the room had been used to store vegetables. Nearby a rusty bicycle without chain or tires stood in the snow that had drifted in. In the middle of the room lay the dead on strips of canvas. They lay there severe and aloof and alone, and nothing mattered to them any more.

Graeber closed the door and went on around the village; shadows hovered about the ruins and even the feeble light seemed traitorous. He climbed the rise on which the graves had been dug. The one for Reicke had been widened so that the two dead soldiers could be buried with him. He heard the low sound of water trickling into the hole. The earth that had been shoveled out shimmered dully. A cross with the names on it leaned there. Anyone who wanted to could, for a couple of days, find out from it who lay there. Not for longer—the village would soon be a battlefield again.

From the rise Graeber looked out across the land. It was barren and dreary and treacherous; the light magnified and obscured, and nothing was familiar. Everything was foreign and penetrated by the chill loneliness of the unknown. There was nothing that one could rely on; nothing that offered warmth. Everything was as endless as the land. Without boundaries and alien. Alien outside and in. Graeber shivered. That was it. That was what had become of him.

A clump of earth freed itself from the pile and he heard it fall with a thud into the hole. Did this hard-frozen earth have the worms survived? Perhaps—if they had burrowed deep enough. But could they live yards deep? And what did they find there to live on? From tomorrow on they would have plenty if they were still there.

They had found enough in recent years, he thought. Everywhere we have gone they have been able to feed on superabundance. For the worms of Europe, Asia and Africa we have been the Golden Age. We have turned over to them armies of corpses. Not only soldiers' flesh—women's flesh, too, and children's flesh and the soft bomb-torn flesh of the aged. Plenty of all. In the sagas of the worms we will be for generations the kindly gods of superfluity.

He turned away. The dead—there had been too many. At first the others; principally the others—but then death had encroached more and more upon their own ranks. The regiment had constantly to be re-formed; of the comrades who had been there at the beginning more and more had disappeared, and now they were just a handful. Of the friends he had had there was only one left—Fresenburg, commander of the fourth company. The others were dead or transferred or in the hospital or in Germany unfit for service, if they had been lucky. All that had once looked different. And it had been called by a different name, too.

He heard Sauer's step and saw him climbing toward him. "Has anything happened?" he asked.

"Nothing. I thought for a moment I heard something. But it was only the rats in the paddock where the dead Russians are."

Sauer glanced at the mound under which the guerrillas had been buried. "They at least got a grave."

"Yes. They had to dig it themselves, though."

Sauer spat. "You can really understand the poor beasts. After all, it's their land we're ruining."

Graeber looked at him. By night one had different thoughts than by day, but Sauer was an old soldier and not excessively emotional. "How did you hit on that?" he asked. "Because we're retreating?"

"Of course. Just imagine their doing the same thing to us some day!"

Graeber was silent for a while. I'm no better than he is, he thought. I too kept pushing the idea away as long as I could. "It's funny how you begin to understand others when you get your own ass in a sling," he said then. "As long as everything's fine you just don't think about it."

"Of course not. Everyone knows that."

"Yes. But it's not much of a testimonial, is it?"

"Testimonial? Who cares about a testimonial when his own neck's at stake?" Sauer looked at Graeber with a mixture of amazement and irritation. "The things you educated fellows keep thinking up! We two didn't start the war and we're not responsible for it. We're only doing our duty. And orders are orders. Aren't they?"

"Yes," Graeber replied wearily.

Chapter Three

THE SALVO WAS quickly smothered in the gray wool of the huge sky. The crows perched on the walls and did not fly up. They simply replied with scattered cries that seemed louder than the shots. They were accustomed to more than that.

The three canvases lay half sunk in the melting snow. The one around the faceless man had been tied shut. Reicke lay in the middle. The torn boot with the remnant of foot in it had been laid in its proper place. But while he was being carried across from the church it had been pushed to one side and now hung down. No one wanted to put it back in place again. They only looked all at once as if Reicke were trying to dig his way deeper into the earth.

They shoveled in the wet clods. When the grave was filled there was still a pile of earth left over. Muecke looked at Mueller. "Shall we stamp it down?"

"What?"

"Stamp it down, sir. The grave. Then we can get the rest of the dirt in and put a few stones on top. Because of the foxes and wolves."

"They won't come here. The grave is deep enough. And besides—" Mueller thought of the foxes and the wolves had enough to eat in the open without digging up graves. "Nonsense," he said. "What made you think of that?"

"It has happened."

Muecke stared at Mueller blankly. Another of these bone-headed fools, he thought. Always the wrong people get to be officers and the right ones get killed. Like Reicke.

Mueller shook his head. "Make a mound of the rest," he directed. "That is suitable. And put the cross at the head."

Mueller ordered the company to form up and march off. He shouted his commands louder than was necessary. He always had the feeling the older men did not take him seriously. They didn't, either.

Sauer, Immermann, and Graeber shoveled the rest of the earth into a mound. "The crows won't stand up for long," Sauer said. "The ground is too soft."

"Of course not."

"Not for three days."

"Are you related to Reicke?" Immermann asked.

"Shut up! He was all right. What do you know about it? You didn't meet him in your disciplinary company."

Immermann laughed. "That's all you have kept in your mind, isn't it? Disciplinary company—you ignorant bumpkin!" He was suddenly furious. "There were better people than you there."

"Shall we set up the cross?" Graeber asked. Immermann turned around. "Ah, our furlough boy. He's in a hurry."

"I suppose you wouldn't be in a hurry, eh?" Sauer asked.

“I’ll get no furlough. You know that very well, you dung beetle.”

“Sure. Because you wouldn’t come back.”

“Perhaps I would come back.”

Sauer spat.

Immermann laughed contemptuously. “Perhaps I’d even volunteer to come back.”

“Yes, perhaps. With you nobody can tell what’s up. You have lots of stories to tell. Who knows what secrets you have?”

Sauer picked up the cross. The post had been sharpened to a point. He set it in place and hit it a few times with the broad side of his shovel. It sank in deep.

“There, you see?” he said to Graeber. “It won’t stand up even three days.”

“Three days are long enough,” Immermann replied. “I’ll give you a piece of advice, Sauer. In three days the snow in the cemetery will have sunk so far that you can get at the gravestones. Fetch a stone cross from there and set it up here. Then your servile soul will be at rest.”

“A Russian cross?”

“Why not? God is international. Or isn’t even He any more?” Sauer turned away. “You’re a wit, aren’t you? A genuine international wit!”

“I’ve become one. Become, Sauer. Earlier I was different. And the suggestion about the cross came from you. You made it yourself yesterday.”

“Yesterday! We thought Reicke was a Russian then, you distorter of words!”

Graeber picked up the shovel. “I’m leaving,” he declared. “We’re all through here, aren’t we?”

“Yes, furlough boy,” Immermann replied. “Yes, you model of prudence! We’re all through here.”

Graeber made no reply. Outbreaks like this were nothing new. He walked down the hill.

The section was quartered in a cellar, lighted by a hole in the roof. Under the hole four men were squatting and playing skat on a board. A couple of others were asleep in the corner. Sauer was writing a letter. The cellar was large and must have belonged to one of the party bigwigs; it was partially waterproof.

Steinbrenner came in. “Have you heard the latest news bulletins?”

“The radio’s on the blink.”

“Why? It’s supposed to be kept in order.”

“You fix it, baby,” Immermann said. “The man who used to keep it in order has been lacking a head for the last two weeks.”

“What’s the matter with it?”

“We have no batteries for the set,” Berning said.

“No batteries?”

“No.” Immermann grinned at Steinbrenner. “But perhaps it will work if you stick the wires up your nose—you’ve always had a head full of electricity. Just try it.”

Steinbrenner smoothed back his hair. “There are some people who won’t hold their tongues until they get properly burned.”

“Don’t talk so mysteriously, Max,” Immermann replied calmly. “You’ve already reported me several times. Everyone knows that. You’re a sharp fellow. And it suits you nicely. Unhappily I’m an excellent mechanic and a good machine-gunner. Right now that sort of skill is more needed here than yours is. That’s why you’ve had so little luck. How old are you really?”

“Shut your trap.”

“About twenty, eh? Or just nineteen? In that time you’ve managed to put a fine life behind you. Five, six years of chasing Jews and betrayers of the people. My compliments! When I was twenty I chased nothing but girls.”

“One can see that!”

“Yes,” Immermann replied. “One can see that.”

Muecke appeared in the doorway. “What’s going on here?”

No one answered. Muecke annoyed them all.

“I asked what was going on here!”

“Nothing, sir,” said Berning, who was nearest him. “We were just having a conversation.”

Muecke looked at Steinbrenner. “Has something happened?”

“The latest news reports have come through.” Steinbrenner straightened up and looked around. No one was interested. Only Graeber was listening. The card players went on playing stolidly. Sauer did not lift his head from his writing paper. The sleepers snored on.

“Attention!” Muecke shouted. “Are you all deaf? The latest news reports! Look alive! This is official!”

“Yes, sir,” Immermann replied.

Muecke cast a glance at him. Immermann’s face was alert and betrayed nothing. The card players spread their cards face down on the board. They did not push the hands together. That way they saved a second by being ready to go on playing at once. Sauer had straightened up from his letter.

Steinbrenner threw back his shoulders. “Important news! Announced in the ‘Hour of the Nation.’ Serious strikes in America. The steel industry is completely tied up. Most of the munitions works are at a standstill. Sabotage in the airplane industry. Demonstrations everywhere for immediate peace. The administration is shaky. Its overthrow is expected.”

He paused. No one said anything. The sleepers had waked up and were scratching themselves. Through the hole in the roof melting snow dripped into a pail below. Muecke breathed noisily.

“Our U-boats have blockaded the entire American coast. Two huge troop transports and three freighters carrying war materials were sunk yesterday; that makes 34,000 tons this week alone. England is starving amidst her ruins. Shipping lanes have been broken up everywhere by our wolf packs. New secret weapons have been perfected. We now have bombers that can fly to America and back without landing. Our Atlantic coast is a giant fortress. If the enemy attempts an invasion we will chase them into the ocean just as we did before, in 1940. *Heil Hitler!*”

“*Heil Hitler,*” about half the section responded indifferently.

The skat players took up their cards again. A lump of snow fell with a splash into the pail. “I wish we were quartered in a decent dugout,” growled Schneider, a vigorous man with a short red beard.

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