

ONE

I could begin by saying that this is just a story of lost illusions, of wrong choices made, but that would be too simple. Human experience, I was once told, is only understandable as a state of transition. Whether or not that's true, I'm not clever enough to decide. All I know is that, years ago, in a foreign country, I lived through events and a love that, ever since, I have struggled to justify. How odd it is we can be so certain of the rightness of all our actions except those that stem from affairs of the heart. None of us are rich enough to buy back our pasts.

Nothing was clear-cut in Hamburg that merciless winter of 1946 in the stale aftermath of a long war. I slept fully clothed under my British Army greatcoat, in a ruined hotel bedroom with shards of glass from the broken window still lodged in the walls as though a circus knife-thrower had occupied it before me. Waking every morning semi-frozen, I shaved in icy water before facing our surly German waiters in the Mess; the only time I ever saw them smile was the morning they got the news that Goering had cheated the hangman at Nuremberg.

Until then I had had a lucky war, crossing to France as part of a Field Security unit on D+5 after the beaches had been secured, thus missing the carnage, true descriptions of which were deliberately concealed from the general public. Newsreel footage edited out the true horrors – men hosed down by MG-42 machine guns as, crapping themselves, they jumped from the landing craft and were taken out, pierced

through the eyes or testicles, their faces blown off, heads disintegrating into myriad red dots, the sea around them lapping a tide of frothy blood: the actuality had to be sanitized, preserving the fiction of men going bravely to their deaths, cleanly and surgically killed by bullets, not atomised by shell and mortar fire. I came through with nothing more serious than temporary deafness when a sapper ahead of me stepped on a Schu mine that blew his foot off, the severed extremity hitting me on the side of my head.

The other members of my unit were an easygoing lot. We had survived the war together more or less intact, only losing our CSM to a sniper's bullet in the battle for Abbeville, which resulted in my being promoted in the field. Our commanding officer was an Lt.Colonel Machell, an amiable, middle-aged old-Harroviaan, ex-Indian Army, fluent in fourteen languages. His favourite tippie was heroic slugs of neat Scotch which he termed 'mahoganies', for he took his poison neat and once, when pissed, confessed to me that he had left behind a love child in the Punjab ('The Monsoons always made me randy, dear boy.'). He referred to us as his 'Battersea Dogs Home' with some justification because we were certainly a mongrel bunch drawn from widely different backgrounds and thrown together in the haphazard way the Army did these things.

No stickler for discipline, he was content to sit back and leave most operational matters to his second in command, Lt. Grable, a much younger man who let everybody know he had a Cambridge degree in modern history, was generally regarded as a pedant and nicknamed, inevitably, 'Betty'. The chain of command then descended from me to Sergeant Armstrong, a regular who had survived Dunkirk, and two Corporals: Groves, a ponderous character who endlessly whistled Bach, and Sasdy, a Czech who had escaped to England after Munich.

Since he valued his own creature comforts, Machell had

always commandeered a series of reasonable billets as we progressed deeper into Germany. When we finally arrived in the gutted nightmare of Hamburg and set up a permanent base he pulled strings and obtained quarters in the Hotel zum Kronprinzen, which fronted onto the battered Haupt-Bahnhof Platz. The hotel had partially survived Operation Gomorrah, the great firestorm raid that blotted out the sun for four days and left thirty thousand of the inhabitants incinerated beyond recognition. It was definitely superior to most of our previous habitats. I had a room to myself on the third floor, which, despite the broken window, was an unaccustomed luxury. Outside, those that had survived the bombing existed like troglodytes, emerging every day to trundle their remaining possessions through rubble streets to barter for bare essentials. That winter many starved; many froze to death. It was an uneasy peace belonging neither to the victors nor the vanquished.

Now as part of the Army of Occupation our time was spent sifting through the lies of a Third Reich that hadn't lasted for a thousand years. For the most part we went our own way and made our own rules. Unlike Eisenhower who ensured he got his oats throughout the campaign, prior to us crossing the Rhine our celibate Monty issued one of his famous edicts, spelling out a code of behaviour we were to obey once in the enemy's home territory. "It is too soon for you to distinguish between good and bad Germans. In streets, houses, cafes, cinemas etc, you must keep clear of the Germans, man, woman and child. You must not walk out with them, or shake hands, or visit their homes, or make them gifts, or take gifts from them. In short, you must not fraternise with Germans."

The ban was more or less adhered to while the fighting lasted, but within a few weeks of VE Day a vast army deprived of female company saw no reason to settle for a monastic existence. Brothels soon flourished, but most men

took up with compliant German girls – hate was difficult to sustain when long-dormant gonads stirred again. In any case, German women proved just as amenable as the women of France, Holland and Belgium. If sex wasn't the panacea for post victory angst, some took solace by soaking their brains in wood alcohol that sent them blind. The Yanks had their own tipple called Swipe, just as lethal, while other foolhardy souls left this life asshole drunk on captured buzz-bomb fuel. Like everybody else I found the everyday misery of barbequed cities like Hamburg difficult to live in without compassion. Back home the new Labour Government promised a welfare state flowing with milk, honey and free dentures to return to, but it was hard to believe in a rosy future when nothing but reminders of recent horrors stared at us from every street corner.

When hostilities ended a barter system immediately sprang up. With the official exchange rate around 13 old Reich marks to the pound sterling, a single cigarette commanded 20 marks, a bag of coffee beans would get you a Leica or Rolleiflex, a bar of soap got your laundry done for a month. Non-smokers could hoard the weekly free cigarette issue until they had saved enough to acquire a Volkswagen. Those lucky enough to be invited to visit a Yank PX and buy some nylon stockings could count on getting laid. For entertainment we made do with the welcome, if basic, comforts of the Salvation Army and Nuffield canteens; occasionally ENSA concert parties arrived to demonstrate that variety was on the way out – there was usually a soubrette in every party ironically giving a rendition of Lily Marlene, a lament purloined from the Africa Corps. When ENSA was disbanded, the Ministry of Defence devised 'Combined Services Entertainment Units' made up of officers and other ranks from all three Services who had some connection, however tenuous, with show business. Officers were not allowed to perform, only other ranks, so

that the class status quo was kept inviolate.

It was at a production of *Charley's Aunt* given by an Army and ATS cast in the local Opera House (which had miraculously escaped total destruction), that I first came across a character named Chivers who was destined to become my nemesis. He was seated in the row in front of me with a very beddable Wren officer – the Senior Service always recruited the best lookers – wearing the uniform of the newly-established Control Commission with the equivalent rank of Major and had his arm around the Wren, from time to time possessively stroking her neck.

The play's creaky plot and stilted dialogue from a by-gone age bored rather than amused me – my humour that year was more graveyard. Staring at the Wren's delectable neck rather than following the play I felt an irrational resentment. Some of the Control Commission types took the superior attitude of 'Well, you brown jobs have done your stint and now you can move over and leave it to us to bring some order.' We who had come through the whole shooting match took it for granted that some of them had sat out the war in cushy civvy street jobs and, now that the danger had passed, wanted their share of the spoils, though the majority were probably motivated by a genuine desire to administer a conquered country fairly.

My first impressions of Chivers grated. His brand new uniform and insignia, his clean-shaven, almost babyish face and neatly styled hair, in contrast to my statutory Army-shorn-back-and-sides, put me in a lower social order. I judged him to be in his middle thirties, some ten years older than me. At the interval he got up to stretch his legs and gave me a smug look as he and the Wren edged along the row of seats. "Enjoying it, soldier?" he said.

I heard the Wren whisper to him as they left. Returning for the second act Chivers leaned back over his seat to say: "Sorry for the mistake in not addressing you by your correct

rank, CSM. Still learning, but Babs here put me right. Can I make amends by offering you a snifter after the show? Come and share a dram of Johnny Walker with us back at my hotel.”

I felt an urge to reply: ‘people kill for real Scotch in this town’ but instead I thought, Why Not? A free drink was a free drink and there was always the chance Babs might be persuaded to switch partners by the end of the evening. “Thanks,” I said, “I’ll take you up on that.”

“Splendid.” His plummy upper-class accent slipped occasionally, betraying the fact it was probably assumed. “Good fun, didn’t you think?” he said, as we filed out at the finale. “Very droll. I thought the chappie who played the Aunt was top hole, considering the programme says he’s only a Corporal in the Green Howard’s. Granted a bit downmarket from Olivier and Gielgud, but we can’t have everything, can we? Sorry. Haven’t introduced ourselves. This is First Officer Wilson, known as Babs to a privileged few, and I’m Major Kenneth Chivers. And your name?”

“Seaton. Alex Seaton.”

“Company Sergeant Major Seaton that is. Get it right this time, Kenneth.”

“Alex will do.”

“I thought all Sergeant Majors were meant to look fearsome,” Babs said with a sidelong smile I felt held promise.

“Only those in the infantry,” I said.

While we walked to his billet Chivers remarked, “I’m told there’s going to be a classical symphony concert here next week. I like a bit of Beethoven, much more my bag. He was a good German.”

“How would you know?”

“Sorry?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Just a joke.”

Chivers’ billet was in an officer-only hotel which had

been smartened up and the windows of his room were intact. He even had his own bathroom and a wardrobe, though there was only one chair. Producing three odd glasses he poured generous tots. I sat beside Babs on the lumpy bed. Close to she smelled delicious, her French perfume doubtless courtesy of some Yank. Girls like Babs always knew the ropes and where to find long denied luxuries.

“So, here’s to life to come on the ocean waves,” Chivers toasted with a knowing grin. “I think I’m going to enjoy living here.”

“Well, time will tell. When did you arrive?”

“Got into Flensburg a couple of weeks ago. Still finding my feet. From the first look of this place, I’ve got a big job to do. A big job.” He made it sound as though he alone had the responsibility for putting Germany back on its feet. “Of course, you know who we’ve got to be on our guard against, don’t you?”

“Tell me.”

“The Soviets.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Don’t be blinkered. Nazi Germany may be finished, but the enemy is still the Russian bear.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Hiroshima. That was a big loss of face for them. Basically, of course they have an Oriental mentality as you may or may not know. To have America steal the march didn’t go down well. Suddenly they’re behind in the race for world domination. Not a good omen.” He imparted this wisdom as though he alone had the inside track.

“I hope you’re wrong. I don’t fancy starting again.”

“I hope I’m wrong, sport. But I always take the cynical view.”

Going to the wardrobe, he produced a full tin of Players cigarettes, authentic coffin nails, and offered them around, lighting them for Babs and me with an American Zippo. “Bit

of Lend Lease in reverse,” he said. “About time we got something back from the Yanks.” Abruptly he switched to ask: “What’s the going rate for cigarettes? They’re the official currency, I understand.”

“A tin like that will get you a Rolleiflex,” I said. “Or a quick trip home if you aren’t careful, but I’ll let you off with a caution.”

He blinked and then recovered. “Oh, I’m careful. Careful is my middle name. I’m told that what really makes the Krauts salivate is a pound of coffee beans, so I packed a few.”

“Wouldn’t you salivate, if you’d been drinking roasted acorns for years?”

“I suppose so, but mind you the brew at the Savoy Grill, my favourite watering hole by the way, wasn’t anything to write home about during the jolly old krieg.”

“Really? How was your krieg?”

“Can’t complain, sport, though to my lasting regret I never saw action. Desperate to be a fighter pilot, but failed the medical. Dickey eyesight. They only took you with 20-20 vision.”

Or maybe you shaved your armpits, I thought.

“So because of my background,” he continued, his free hand resting on Babs’ thigh, “They put me into Bletchley.”

“Bletchley? What’s that?”

“Hush-hush outfit, still on the secret list, so I can’t say much. It’ll all come out one day. Until then, mum’s the word. Careless talk can still cost lives.”

“What was your background?”

“Academic. Senior Wrangler.”

“Really?” I had no idea what a Senior Wrangler was, though it suggested something to do with horses.

“When the show was over, felt I ought to do my bit over here. They were looking for chaps of my calibre and I guess we’re thin on the ground. What are you going back to?”

“Going back to?”

“Yes, what career?”

“No idea. Never had the chance to start one.”

“Going to be rich pickings if you keep your eyes open for the main chance.”

His self-satisfaction began to depress me and I regretted having accepted his hospitality, although the thin possibility of being able to shag the delectable Babs kept me there. I wished I had the nerve to make a pass at her, but she was savvy enough to know Chivers had more to offer. I turned to her. “How long before you’re demobbed, Babs?”

“Oh, I’ve volunteered to stay on and take a short commission. Anything rather than face going back to dreary old England. Everybody I saw on my last leave was so dowdy and depressing,” she said. “All those pinched, grey faces and hideous fashions. Plus the ghastly government. Daddy’s still in shock. You didn’t vote Labour, I hope?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, are we sharing a drink with the proletariat?” Chivers said. “We’ve got you to thank for them, have we? You’ll live to regret it, because they’ll fuck up, given time. Pardon my French, Babs. That awful little creep Attlee looks like Hitler in a Trilby hat. And I couldn’t agree more about the women. Can’t wait for them look sexy again. Present company excepted of course.”

“Watch it, Major,” Babs replied. “You nearly blotted your copy book then.”

She gave me a knowing smile and for a brief moment I fancied my chances, but given her general air of superiority she probably didn’t rate me. Chivers topped up her glass. He’s welcome to her, I thought, and then changed my mind again as she removed her uniform jacket, revealing good breasts straining against the crisp, regulation white shirt. I didn’t want to imagine the ubiquitous Chivers pasturing on that body when I left. There are few things more depressing

than being in the company of potential lovers. I downed the remainder of my drink and stood up. "Thanks for the drink. It's nice to see how the other half live. Excuse me if I call it day, I have to be on the road early tomorrow."

"What does your work entail?" Chivers enquired.

"Seeking out past corruption."

"Only 'past'?"

"For the moment, though you never know."

"I hope we don't make the same mistake as last time. Be too harsh on them, I mean. No more Versailles. They lost in a straight fight and now we must get them back on their feet."

"You thought it was 'straight', did you?"

Chivers flushed and I knew I had finally scored a point.

"I meant we traded blow for blow."

"Did we? Maybe eventually. Most of the war we were boxing above our weight. If you'd been here you'd have known it was often touch and go."

"Yes, well unfortunately I missed it doing another vital job else where."

As I put my glass down I brushed against Babs. "Always a pleasure to meet the Senior Service. Be careful going back to your billet, there are some ugly characters around, out for only one thing," I said pointedly. "But I'm sure you can take care of yourself. Nice to have met you, Babs."

She merely smiled. "We must meet up again," Chivers said.

"I expect we will. This is a small place."

As I left, Babs was kicking off her shoes. I walked back to my own hotel with the safety catch off on my Walter. An elderly couple pushing a wooden cart stepped off the pavement into the roadway as I approached. The man bowed, removed his hat and whispered 'Guten Abend', then waited, his expression fearful, expecting to be questioned. The homeless and tarts often took their chances and ignored

the curfew. I walked on. Outside my hotel two Military Police with blanched belts almost florescent white were frisking a youth.

Inside the Sergeant's Mess a three-piece German band was attempting to play one of the current American hits to a sparse audience of drunks. I ordered a beer but after Chivers' whisky it tasted like weak piss and I left it unfinished and went upstairs to my room feeling deflated. I thought of all the things I could have said to counter Chivers' insufferable air of superiority, but most of all I thought what Babs would look like naked.