

CLARIMONDE

A novel of faith in a dark time.

By Nancy M. Cross

Chapter One

Old lace sifted the rosy evening light; forlorn circlets of flowers loosely held by tired leaves – a decaying beauty shot through with a beam from above. How could it be – this lie of lace and light?

Black boots intruded their blunt noses from under the scalloped edge. They told the truth. Clarimonde, wrenching her head away to the other cheek, tasted dust. Responding to her breath, wisps rolled away into the gloom. Her floor-ear caught noises from below: a closing door, voices, then determined footsteps across a wooden floor, the creaking stairs, one by one. Lieber Gott! She wriggled further into the dark depths. At the door, a scritch of a key, snap of the lock, and creaking hinges. Silence.

“Clarimonde?”

“Clarimonde! Wo bist du? What in hell?”

One stomp took him to the wardrobe; the aged doors clacked against the frame. She watched the lived-in boots turn, stand still, and imagined his scowl as he scanned the room.

“What kind of game is this?”

The flimsy barrier to her hideaway was raised. His red face with an abbreviated slap of yellow hair across the brow, grimaced while his eyes adjusted. Was machst du? Get out from under there! Gut Gott! What’s the matter? Are you sick?”

Grabbing her arm he roughly pulled her out from under the bed.

“Herr Grunner, please call a doctor. I am sick.”

“Nicht Herr Grunner, it’s Holtz. And,” he grinned, “Oberleutnant, not mister. How sick?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Well, say. What’s wrong?”

“I’ll only tell the doctor.”

“How about Frau Krebs?”

“No, not her.”

He had been holding her at arms lengthy, viewing her quizzically.

“Calling a doctor is out. You don’t look sick to me.”

“But I am; I’m hurt.”

“Ahhh.” A knowing smile cracked the stiff boyish face. “You silly virgins! I suppose a little blood? Well, we’ll soon make it worse, eh? Come here, hübschen.” He grabbed her tightly.

“Bitte! Please!”

“How old are you? Doktor Überhunt said eighteen, but you’re not eighteen. Look at this slim little body, such small tits. I bet you’re sixteen. Are you sixteen?”

Clarimonde looked down.

“Come on, look at me. I’m not so bad, do you think? See. . .his voice softened. “Honest, Clara . . . I’ll call you Clara. You are pretty, I don’t want to be mean. I know you’re scared. But really isn’t this better than the Raven? You’re better off with me, even if I am mean. I might even like to be mean, but still, you’re better off here.”

“I’d rather be anywhere.”

“Really! You thought Gerta Überhunt was just great, did you?”

Clarimonde’s face clouded; her eyes closed. She shuddered. Tears formed under her lids, welled out and slid slowly down her cheeks.

“But, I promised . . . I promised.”

“What in hell did you promise? Something to that kind old-lady doctor?”

“Nein, Nein. Zu meiner Gott.”

“Zu meiner Gott? What did you promise to God. God! You are delectable! He began to nibble through her blouse front.”

When she drew back, he held her wrists.

“I promised God that I would be all his, and now I can’t ever be.”

“What? You what?” He dropped her wrists. “Der Teufel! You’re not one of those! Some religious freak. Did I end up with some religious freak? With all those girls to choose from - a religious freak?”

She stepped back out of reach. Brown hair brushed her shoulders framing her clear face and those wet, dark eyes accented by long black lashes and straight full brows.

He leaned out and pulled her back.

“Hell, I don’t give a damn. You’re just something, du bist. Now don’t draw away from me. Would you rather have had Gruppenfuehrer Schillenberg, or one of those old guys to have been the one? Kommst du, you are really lucky. I’m not so bad at all. Lots of girls, real Deutsche Mädchen, would give anything to have my attentions.” He thrust back his shoulders. “They all love the SS uniform. As for those poor suckers down there in . . .well, you know. . . And couldn’t you look at it as an act of God? If I hadn’t been assigned to the Raven, or if I hadn’t had the good fortune to catch that witch of a doctor making loose with a pink triangle - you know, they’re Lesbians – well, you’d probably be up in her fine little clinic right now with a leg she broke to mend crooked. The dear Arzt proposed this little pay-off and I earned it. Damn good luck!

Kommst du! Clarimonde. God can’t have you. You’re mine and I intend to keep you for. . .well, for as long as I can. Then, well, we’ll see. Of course, with you here waiting for me each night at Frau Krebs,” he nuzzled her, “it may take me longer than I thought to interrogate all those clever broads.”

A buzzer sounded, then sounded angrily again from somewhere in the lower house.

“That impatient Frau! Wonder what’s for dinner tonight; I’m hungry. I’ll bring you up a plate. We can’t have anybody running away from this place,

können wir? Till you're good, you'll just have to be locked up. But it suits me, Hönig. Ummmm. " He fastened his mouth on her neck.

Clarimonde stood quietly.

"Don't tell me you're praying. Ach! Can I really stand this?" Holtz got up and left the room; the lock clicked.

She turned to the window and drew back the frayed lace. Praying, she was; "Dear Father, help me. Help me."

Light leaping off the ripples of the Moselle, light blinding her eyes, and this behind her closed lids. Glorious light; she walked again high-up beyond the grapevines along the crest and looked down the familiar corkscrew of her river, while the sun glinted and blinked at her off each of its bends back thirty kilometers. Why this vision? She often saw things when she closed her eyes. Figures would madly cycle past; a patient cow in the corner of a fence, its tail working like a rotor, would watch; a clown walked out of a storefront on his hands. She never knew why the images were there or what they meant; she'd learned to ignore them. But now, the Moselle, the lovely, the sweet river. . .she could almost smell the fragrance of the late fall air, leaves and sweet, sweet smoky grapes, the warm sand perfuming under the heat of the sun.

As the last of the setting sun disappeared, she opened her eyes and looked down into the dreary backyards of a dozen brick houses that lined the street in this town, their unpainted wooden fences an unsolvable maze. How many other girls like herself were locked into bedrooms in Neustrelitz, frightened and . . .without God. It was forbidden that Jews be taken as concubines by SS officers, but there were ways around it. Dr. Überhant had rewritten her records and claimed her to be a Prostituierte, not a Jude. There were plenty of prostitutes at Ravensbrueck. The Nazis despised all deviants, but prostitutes were permissible sex partners when Jews were not. Of course, when the SS officer moved on, and he would move on, the girls went right back to the clumsy tortures of der Arzt Gerta. She would be determined to make up for their month of "rest and refreshment" and was devising more intense experiments than ever – she thought she'd invent ways to transplant limbs and be honored forever for great medical advances.

"Dear Jesu, you know I have given you my pledge of my whole self." Her Bible heroine Esther came to her mind, but she had never memorized her words so she made up her own, "Body and soul; I despise my captor. I will not give him anything; he takes what he wants, but I will give him nothing, because I love only you. Nur Sie . . .only you. Make me brave and let me not see him, just you, Jesu, . . .nur Sie."

The room grew dark, and after first considering whether to crawl under it again – why was it so hard to decide to move? - Clarimonde lay down on the coarse worsted of the bed just because it was easier and took no decision. Anyway, what good had it been to hide? Perhaps he would not come back.

Perhaps the quiet night would come to her alone and she could slip back, back into Mother's kitchen – but the cat. She was so very tired.

She barely made her escape into sleep when the light snapped on, an overhead bulb that brought the room's dark wood menacingly alive. Over her head the tall bedstead leaned forward with threatening Bavarian grotesques, grinning squirrels, elves with cocked hats. Holtz stood over her, too, with a plate.

“Kommst du, Mädchen. It isn't half bad tonight, mashed potatoes and sausage. Real sausage. Here try a bite.

She wasn't hungry, but opened her mouth a little to accept the piece of meat. It was dry and tasteless. Trying to swallow, he stood ready with a spoonful of potatoes. Clarimonde turned her head way. “I can't,” she forced out the words.

“Now listen here, you have to eat. You never know when it will be your last good meal. I mean they may transfer me just any day, and you'll go back to that luscious fare at the Raven. In fact, if I don't get back here some evening, Frau Krebs has orders to keep you till they come for you. Now eat this!”

After the meal, Holtz quickly undressed first himself and then her. Shamed to the core, she faced another night of misery and torment, for this young man was insatiable. She never knew much about sex. It was not a topic of conversation in her home, nor among the girls at school. Never. She knew where babies came from, but she thought it was a prearranged meeting perhaps once a year, like taking their stallion over to the neighbor's mare. What was this constant demand all about? Was he demented? Shuddering, she hated it, and wanted to hate him. When he finally fell asleep, groaning with the pleasure and exertion, she lay awash with an inner ache and a pain that reached into her heart. “Would, lieber Herr, would that I die. If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.”

The jounce of the bed awakened her; by the dim bulb she watched Holtz's muscled back as he tucked his trouser legs into the black boots. Then unlocking the door he headed for the bathroom to shave. When his lank form disappeared, the door stood open. It was an invitation, but where would she go even if she got out of the house? She imagined tiptoeing past the bathroom, down the stairs, through the hallway, past the kitchen door, and out to the back lean-to. When Holtz brought her here she'd been through that way. The shoes she'd been issued to leave the Raven didn't fit right, but they were all she had; she would need to carry them until she was safely out of earshot. The sweater – would it be enough warmth for these chilled, late autumn days? No matter, to freeze would be better than this. Maybe in the wardrobe there were garments she could take. She shifted her legs out from the blanket. Standing, her head swam for a moment. She used the chamber pot that had been brought in for her, and then made her way to the wardrobe. Pushing aside Holtz's uniform jacket and clean shirts, nothing was

there. Footsteps in the hall! Swinging the wardrobe door back as it was, she just made it into the chair when Holtz strode into the room. His hair was slicked back; it and the sideburns were closely shaved up high. He scarcely noticed her, quickly finishing off his shirt with the black tie, polishing up the silver skull and crossbones insignia with his breath and the bottom of his shirt, thrusting his arms into the black jacket and dexterously buttoning the front. His movements were assured and graceful; under other circumstances she might have admired him. But loathing welled up in her. "Aufwiedersehen, Liebchen, I'm nearly late. You'll be here tonight, eh? Don't go away! And laughing, he was gone taking the key from inside and carefully locking the door behind him.

Clarimonde clamped her eyes against the tears that began to stream down her cheeks. Soon her breath was riding the sobs in waves. Did God hear her at all? She had been taught all her life that God loved. Her mother reared in a good Jewish family had accepted the Christ and shared Him with her daughter. She had felt His love, but what kind of love was this? Abandoned. Abandoned. Sixteen years old and abandoned. "Oh God." She flung back her head and both arms in despair. There was a clatter as a picture propped on the dresser fell to the floor. The heavy frame hit the boards shattering the glass. Within minutes a low gravelly voice hollered at the door. "Was ist? Are you breaking up the house? What's going on in there?" The key scratched and the diminutive Frau Krebs stood in the open door. "Ich sagt, what are you doing?" "I'm sor. . . ry, . . . rea. . . lly. I just. . . kno. . . cked this . . . pic . . . ture off. . . the dresser. I'll . . . clean it . . . up." Her breathing was so constricted with tears she could scarcely form the words. The old woman stood with her hands on her hips looking hard at her, then turned and left. If Clarimonde had had a moment of clarity, she would have begged the woman for help. However, the wrinkled face with its cold eyes was not a hopeful bearer of mercy. Burying her head in her hands, she forced herself into deep breaths. The key rattled again, and the gray one came into the room carrying a basin of water, which she set on the commode with a very small remnant of brown soap. Handing Clara a towel, she rasped without expression, "Die Dienerin gerecht," and went out. She thought she was a servant? As the lock clicked, Clarimonde thought, "No, not you Madam, I am the slave."

Picking up the shards of glass, she could see it was a wedding picture of a Prussian officer and a smallish woman that she supposed could have been Frau Krebs' father and mother many years ago. Obviously, this was a military family. Holtz had told her with pride that being bivouacked with Frau Krebs was a lucky break. Gerhardine Krebs, he rolled her Christian name off his tongue with satisfaction, was sister-in-law to General Hans Krebs who was close to Der Fuehrer himself. "There'll be a way to use this. I can say, 'Oh yes, the General, I have been houseguest in the home of Frau Gerhardine – you know, the General's sister-in-law'. A man has to take advantage of every break these days to get ahead."

After her bath, even in cold water, Clarimonde's distress lessened. Frau Krebs wasn't entirely uncaring. In the remaining water she washed out her one piece undergarment the best she could and hung it over the back of the chair to dry. She had been sent out with only these clothes, exchanged when some other poor soul was handed the striped, sleeved sack to be worn for the duration or, far more likely, till taken off her corpse. The little blue dress fit her, but the black sweater with frayed sleeves was enormous. Still she was glad for it. Shivering she wrapped it around her damp body. Rolling up the sleeves, she was mopping spilled water with the towel when she noticed a big old Bible at the end of the commode. It had been a prop for the broken picture.

The very look of it opened a causeway home. Hardly believing, she smoothed the embossed leather lovingly with her hands. It was just like the family Bible that sat on the bureau in her family's formal parlor. Opening it, she could have been sitting on the rose patterned rug in that room in the glow of the radiating stove, looking again at the pictures she knew in detail. She was warmed by instant comfort. Nothing could be so very evil if this most loved, intimately known world was sharing confinement with her. She turned to the middle of the big book where enough pages were planned for recording the births and deaths of the family for generations. In her family's Bible many of the pages were full. This Bible recorded nothing but one marriage. Either it was a barren family without children, or not blessed with religious faith. In the Jagaerschmid Bible, with varying pen points and darkness of ink, but always with deliberate penmanship, the whole lineage was recorded back into the early 1800's. Marriages, births and deaths were dutifully recorded by a succession of formal hands. Her own birth, June 10, 1928, and her rare baptism, June 15, with her confirmation in 1940, were the last entries, just above in the record were her brother Eric's important dates, ten years her senior. He had followed his father's Catholic faith; his mother had not objected, nor when she had made that decision at ten years. It was an anomaly to have a mixed faith family.

Of course, her mother's side was not recorded there. She came from a Jewish family of merchants in the big city of Köln – FEINBERGGER WEINHÄNDLER was the weatherworn sign above the cavernous concrete building that housed the rows of die Weinfass in a level below ground. Mother was very beautiful with thick brown hair that curled around her face. It was no wonder that Father fell in love with her. They met when he was making wine deliveries to Grandfather Feinbergger's export warehouse. He wooed and won her even though the Catholic family at home was adamant against it. He had persevered. Why then? Why had he not tried to save this woman he loved? To save them both? Twining the sweater closer she felt the bitter chill of how cold he had become toward both her mother and herself after they were forced to wear the yellow Star of David. When the soldiers came for them, she could still see his stocky figure walking off, his shoulders set, as if to say, "I have nothing to do with

these women.” There must have been something she could not know; he had always called her “Mönchen” lovingly.

She slowly turned through the familiar woodcut plates till she came to the one where Jesus was teaching the multitudes on the Mount of Olives. Even printed in black and gray, his face shone down on the eager faces turned up to his. She knew where to find the words he spoke that day and turned to them in Matthew. Reading slowly, the words brought back Fraulein Stein’s firm, but modulated voice in the classroom at Speyer. Oh, if Father had only let her stay in boarding school there, perhaps none of this would have happened. Perhaps the Gestapo would not have found her and Mother. No, though the nuns would have hidden her, they would have found Mother. Her dear Jewish mother made her Catholicism void in Nazi eyes. The mother made her a Jew, and she wouldn’t have wished that Mother be taken alone. She could not wish it, even though they had so soon been separated. She felt again how it was walking beside her strong, tall mother who took the pushing and shoving, the rude words, and the neighbors’ abashed looks without any show of emotion. Though never a Catholic, she had “set her face like flint to go to Jerusalem to die,” just like Jesus. “Why hadn’t they taken me to die, too?” she sobbed.

Clara had not always known that the end for the Jews was death. That was not what the SS had told the knots of neighbors when she and her mother were driven away; nor was it what they were told at the Registration. “To a work camp,” a kind-faced SS officer told them, “to aid the German Reich win the war.” This same man with a stern word stopped the soldiers from buffeting them. She believed him. It was only at Ravensbrueck that she learned what the true reason was for removing all Jews from their homes. Some of the women had been at Auschwitz and for “medical” reasons had been brought to Ravensbrueck. They knew; they knew too well. But Mother had known, too, Clarimonde was sure of that. She had set her face like flint toward death. She had walked steadily, unflinchingly toward it. Now it was her turn to be unflinching - but in life. The comfort of death would not come soon, she feared.

She turned the pages to the scene of the crucifixion. How often on a Sunday afternoon, she had studied that picture. The family would come home from early Mass to a big breakfast; Father would go off to inspect the vines, Mother would read one of her favorites, perhaps Lessing. And Clara would take the Bible down on the rug, putting herself in the scenes; it was so easy for her to slide into the crowds, or to be the little girl roused from death, “Tabitha, arise.” How often she had anguished with the mourners at the cross. There stood her other Mother, the one . . . the one who suffered as much as her son, but did not die – not then. She suffered and . . . lived to suffer on. Her clear eyes, stricken but tearless, penetrated Clarimonde as her son cried out, “It is finished.” Those eyes as deep as wells drew her into an infinite sorrow. She knew it all now. Down, down she went where the silence where the cloud covered the heart of

God, the bleeding heart of God. Yet, Frau Stein always said that with God the Father was deep peace - that God did not suffer. But the God-Man suffered and close to Him Mutter Maria stood, wrapped in density and silence. With the tips of her fingers Clarimonde pressed into her mother's breast, deeper, deeper, till into that thorn-crowned heart she welded herself. For minutes she scarcely breathed. A slight sensation, a pulse, her fingers began to tingle. Then slowly the trickle became a flow. Strength surged up traversing her fingers into her arm and through to her heart. "I will. . . to be. . . like you, Mother Maria," she whispered. "I will be like you."

A pregnant seed was planted, but how would it, how should it grow? She closed her eyes, knowing that her prayers were being answered in this very moment. She heard no voice, but it was as clear as though a voice had spoken. Jesus would give her a word if she would just look for it. The word would fit completely with the promise she had made to Him to belong to Him and no one else. To be like her teacher, Fraulein Stein; to someday follow her into the hoped-for Carmelite order had been her dream, but now she sought a word to redirect that promise. The big book lay spread on her lap. That word would be in the gospels. It would be evident when she found it; she would know it immediately. Her finger trailed down the columns of St. Matthew quickly one by one. How grateful she was for all the scripture study through which Fraulein Stein had guided her students in her two years at Magdalena. And there it was!

She had almost scanned through it because it was about marriage. Jesus was talking about marriage, and she did not expect her word would have anything to do with marriage. She had pledged herself to be God's alone, a Carmelite nun as soon as she was old enough – never to belong to a man. But her word was there! Embedded in Jesus' instruction about the meaning of man and woman from the beginning, it was there.

"Have you not read that the Creator made them from the beginning male and female?" And he added, "for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be made one with his wife and the two shall become one flesh. It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. What God has joined together, man must not separate."

One flesh! One flesh! He had repeated it twice. Could this really be her word? One flesh?

She shuddered. Wasn't it just that this fleshy, horrid sexual intrusion on her life made her sensitive, painfully sensitive, to words that never had meaning before? Perhaps that was it; just a psychological response, an emotional response, the kind that Fraulein Stein always warned her students about. They as

awakening, pubescent girls, were to be wary of such sensations. “Don’t follow those emotional urges without the strict discipline of thought, and root your thought in solid gospel truth,” she often taught. She turned back to the old German script on the page and followed the words carefully. It was then the fire was struck; “one flesh” was not the word meant for her, it was just a preamble to the real word.

Jesus spoke to Clarimonde, “*What God has joined.*” These were His words, the words meant just for her.

A flame now leapt up from around her heart burning her smooth cheeks red. “I pledged myself to you alone, dear God. I pledged myself to you alone. I put myself into your hands. And you have taken my whole self and joined me to a man. When I gave myself to you it was to do with me whatever you willed. And You have willed to join me to . . .” it was hard to say . . . “to this man, to . . . Holtz. Let it be . . . ‘what God has joined.’” The heavy Bible began to slip down, she grabbed it before it hit the floor, and then followed the pull of its gravity. There she stretched out on the thin mat with her head on the great book.

Didn’t Mother Maria know all this too? She had pledged herself to God alone, to be His alone, and He had made her pregnant. She had thought her life would be celibate and fruitful only in a spiritual way; He, omnipotent as He was, had made her life, not at all what she had imagined, but what He wanted, a physical fruitfulness, a baby, a Child. And of course, it was perfect. Perfectly perfect.

Clarimonde slept; this time peacefully. It was when she awoke, again late in the sullen afternoon, that the questions flooded her mind. She wanted to doubt that she had really been directed in such a strange way – it was a sinful way, wasn’t it?. What had seemed reasonable a few hours earlier, now was covered with cloud. If she accepted this as God’s word to her what did it mean?

Did it mean that she was Holtz’s wife without benefit of clergy, without the blessing of the Church? How could that be?

Was there any precedent for such a thing? In the Scriptures? Among the saints?

One day she had known degradation and humiliation at its ultimate worst, and today she was to turn this around and for God and in God give herself to the very person who had so injured and sullied her deepest being? If she warmed to him - the very thought was repellent, he would think that she was nothing but a . . . a Prostituierte along, merely feigning virginity. She couldn’t abide him thinking that. Anyway, there was no sexual desire in a cell of her body. Except in a delirious love of beauty she had never been a sensual girl; determining a life of celibacy from twelve years old on had channeled all love feelings toward God in a pure sublimation. This rape of her soul as well as her body had sealed off any feminine response that might have been awakened in time by a loving man. If that had been God’s will. No, the idea of giving herself to Holtz was abhorrent.

He didn't care for her except in the grossest way possible. She could have been one of a thousand other women and he would have felt the same, done the same. She knew she would carry the shame of it to her grave.

She tried to recapture the strength and the will that had been pressed into her heart just hours before. She had promised to follow this word. "What God has joined," and allow herself to be joined to Holtz as wife to husband. Looking around the darkening room, she tried to make sense of this. If God's will was present in this room at this moment, and she had to believe that His will was there for her to see, then . . .the facts were: she was locked in one room; in the whole universe there were only two other human beings to touch, with whom to exist; she was dependent on them for everything. God had provided His heart and mind in this book under her head; therefore, there was but one thing to do – to do what He had told her.

This, as Fraulein Stein had so often taught, could be done only moment by moment in trust. Oh, Fraulein Stein! She was a Jewess, too. Clarimonde felt a deep kinship with her teacher and friend – she closed her eyes and saw her beautiful, serene countenance; only then did she notice that her tall frame, clothed in black, was surrounded by pitch darkness that could only be described as ultimate ruin. (Had she really fulfilled her desire to become a Carmelite? Clarimonde knew her desire . . . not its fulfillment.) Was she now living out what she had taught so powerfully, that there could be no foreseeing or planning, just simple obedience to the Word? "Remember always," she had said, "how you feel in a situation is not only unimportant, it is irrelevant. Put your trust in God and go forward. I can see now" she'd said once, "that when Our Lord spoke of a time when women would cry out, 'Hills cover us, mountains fall on us,' it will come to pass in our lifetimes. And you, dear, dear girls . . ." Fraulein Stein had never cried in their presence. It wasn't like her. But she had turned her head away.

The light blinked on; Holtz strode in carrying a tray with two bowls, spoons, and a covered tureen.

"Late tonight! The old woman left this out for us – rather cold cabbage soup. She's getting beefed up rations because of me, but you'd never know it. I suppose lots of hungry folks would think this was great; we need to win this war and soon! Oh, look! It does have some sausage in it and a few potatoes. The bread doesn't look too bad. Come on, let's eat!" Then he looked at her. "You look different!" He took another long look. "What's happened?"

"Frau Krebs brought me a basin and I took a bath." "Is that it? You look, well, you always look good enough to eat," and he passed his hand beneath the sweater down her front to her crotch. She winced but didn't move away. He paused, looking at her with a hint of a frown. "Sit there, I'll sit here," and setting the tray on one corner, he pulled himself backwards up on the commode.

There was no serving spoon, so he simply poured the contents of the tureen into the bowls. She felt hungry for the first time, and though the soup was

barely warm, it tasted good. She was only getting one meal a day, but that was a big improvement from the moldy crusts and infrequent watery soups of Ravensbrueck.

“I know what’s different, you’re not crying. Even without tears, you always look like you’re crying.” He studied her while she studied the soup. “What do you do all day?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “You know what I do? You wouldn’t like it. It is not much of a job; but I intend to make it a conveyor, you know, up and up. I’m going to be somebody in this outfit; he rubbed the insignia on his collar. I’m getting information, even if I have to make some of it up. Doesn’t matter any in the long run – those poor devils will die one way or the other, might as well be shot. So if I elaborate a few details about their involvements, say in espionage or communism – boy! Communism really does it! Just makes my commander happy, and brings a few deaths a little sooner . . . more humanely than other ways, wouldn’t you say? Bang, bang. Probably doing a very good thing.” Taking the uncut loaf in his hands, he pulled off a piece for them both, then chewed appreciatively.

Clarimonde was horrified to her depths. He was more of an animal that she had even thought. How? How was she to think of him joined to her in a holy matrimony? A repulsive, inhuman killer. God would not, could not! She could never give herself to him. She pushed away the food.

“Now what’s the matter? You’re so touchy, touchy. Well, I’ll eat it.”

Later she tried vainly to push him away. Again she struggled to endure the night. “Touchy, touchy” his every touch was searing torture. Never, never could she give even a shred of herself to this monster. When he finally slept, she lay like a stricken deer by a roadside, life seeping away with great eyes staring for hope that never came, until the light left them.

The gray days grew colder. The room itself became freezing cold. The basin of water every week was like ice water, and the sliver of soap became miniscule. She gritted her teeth to strip and wash, then took the blanket off the bed to wrap in, stomping her feet to gain circulation, but quietly enough, not to rouse the Frau. The hours dragged on from the smoky dawn to the dismal evening with the intrusion again of this bragging boy with his demanding lust and scandalously unused and evil mind. All he thought about was sex and how to climb up and break into die Regierung – the “in” group.

Graduating from Unterstertia, Clarimonde and her class had been provided copies of Mein Kampf by a local businessman. Her father scornfully called it “782 boring pages of the barbaric New Order, or 782 barbaric pages of the boring New Order. Take your pick,” and burned the impressive volume with the trash. To Holtz’s mind, lacking both intellectual and moral formation, the ideas were neither barbaric nor boring, but presented a visionary future for Germany. Faced with such a thoroughly indoctrinated man, who displayed not a shred of character capable of response to truth, her resolve faded; it was with effort that she prayed, the prayers bouncing back at her from the dark walls, echoing emptily in her head as she would repeat them again and again longing for the words to come to life.

“Our Father . . .” “forgive us as we forgive” . . . “lead us not into temptation” . . . “deliver us from evil.” Such mockery she heard in her own voice with each repetition. She avoided the big Bible with its heavy leather, which looked now like bonds, leather bonds. How long had she been here? Probably only three weeks, but it seemed like her whole lifetime. Some time after she had been forced from home her monthly periods had stopped. It was a small thing to be grateful for; but she couldn’t really think the word “grateful.” It was more like being blank. Her body was blank, her heart was blank, her thoughts were blank, she began to sleep most of the days and as soon as the torment was over, all the nights, not waking each morning until Holtz was gone.

One morning, her eyes slowly accustoming to sunlight after days of gloom, she knew she could not endure another day sunk in this grave of despair. She would kill herself. Yet, deliberately, she forced herself to take the Bible from the commode, wound herself in the blanket, then moved what she now thought of as her chair, into the sunlight seeking its small warmth, and opened the big book. Why had she waited so long? The great book oozed out a greater heat by far than the weak sunshine playing across her knees. She pulled the blanket up over her head like Grandfather Feinbergger’s prayer shawl. Breathing in its woolly odor there was added a tinge of something like sweet pipe tobacco. What a strange and wonderful smell! She closed her eyes and drew in a breath again. She could have been pressing her nose into her father’s broad chest. She felt his arms around her, “Forgive me, little Mönchen, someday you will understand.” She sat perfectly still, accepting the strength of his presence; forgiving was easy. It was as he said, someday she would understand; she almost did now. He must be heartbroken and alone.

Of course, it was the grief over Eric had nearly undone him, strong as he was. His beloved son, Eric, the prodigal, had lied his way into the Third Reich Navy, the submarine branch out of Bremerhaven. He’d been found out, betrayed by a fellow student from Cochem. “Eine Jude” He was imprisoned somewhere in a camp. They never knew which one, and heard not a word except the official notice that Eric Jagaerschmid was dishonorably discharged, charged with crimes against the Reich, and interned until a forthcoming military Kriegsgericht. Then silence.

It hadn’t been long after that the soldiers came for her and Mother. She sobbed. “Yes, Papachen, I do understand. Your losses were too great to bear. It was not arrogance, or cowardice that made you shut us out, it was helpless anger and fear, fear for Mother and me . . . after Eric. Are you living still? What have the bombs done? Do you sit out front at table with a favorite Weinbrande smoking your pipe? Is our house the same, snuggled in along the edge of the vineyards, set back from the others? Is the ancient graveyard carved from the vineyard waiting still? Does the old realm-castle topped by its bishop’s mitre keep holy vigilance, casting its shadow slowly down the vine striped hill through the village, watching and guarding, first to one side and then to the other, as the sun rises and sets?

“ Oh, Papa, keep living still, you must! Don’t despair, as I almost have. We must not do that, Papa. There’s just we two, and we must live on to find each other again. But. . . then will you understand about this horrid Holtz? He’s a Nazi, oh, dear Father, I’m not a virgin! And I hate him!” She wiped her tears, breathing again the welcome blankety smell; her eyes growing heavy, finally closed. Sleep had become the only solace.

She awoke with the Bible shutting off circulation in the hands that lay under it. Smarting and tingling, she forced them to turn to her favorite Psalms, number 143. Amazed, she read words that could not have expressed her inmost self more succinctly.

An enemy has hunted me down, has ground my living body under foot and plunged me into darkness like a man long dead, so that my spirit fails me and my heart is dazed with despair.

“Oh God! These words. You do know!” Her head dropped to her chest, as she pondered the words. If God could express so exactly her condition - her mental, her spiritual state, what way out might He also have in store? She had failed him; she had not been able to carry through with all those high resolves given in moments of inspiration. Weak as a kitten, and, she knew, just as immoral as her enemy for all that she hated him, she could do nothing about it. She threw back the blanket and found the place, each phrase was as though printed with her blood. “But I’ve done that before and look where I am now,” she thought. “There has to be a direction.” The psalm rolled on.

“Teach me to do thy will, for thou art my God; in thy gracious kindness, show me the level road.”

A road - she saw it in her mind’s eye, level and smooth being pressed out ahead by a giant steamroller. “I was too quick to think I could do it, I needed much more understanding. . . no, no, much more . . . grace. Well, understanding and grace –“ I beg you, Lord, lay out the level road and I will try to follow it. I just don’t have strength to do more than put one foot ahead of another.” The end of the psalm demanded much. Clarimonde thought of Holtz as her enemy.

“Keep me safe, O Lord, for the honour of thy name and, as thou art just, release me from my distress. In thy love for me, reduce my enemies to silence and bring destruction on all who oppress me for I am thy servant.”

Though on such a rare day she wanted simply to watch tree branches shake in the sun, she stuck her head back under the blanket to think. The dark silence held a promise that must be unfolded. Holtz her enemy? He whom God had joined to her despite her rebellion? No, it was what he had been fed that was her

enemy, the awful machinations of so-called thought that he had swallowed whole. He spouted to her all the devilment of his SS studies, Mein Kampf - ridiculous and hateful stuff that no good mind should ever accept. It was this that was the Enemy. He was as much a victim as she. He had told her that all the Grunner family were token Lutherans, otherwise unchurched. So without the protection of faith – no wonder, no wonder they were entranced by Hitler’s Weltanschauung. He had joined the SS because of his father’s love of the Nazis and near worship of Herr Hitler. Off he had gone as soon as he was old enough to the cadet school at Lichterfelde outside of Berlin. How proud Herr Grunner was of his son, how encouraging of his ambition to succeed to higher rank, and to be seen by all as a highly decorated SS officer for Der Fuehrer! Clarimonde saw through it as it was - demonic rubbish. Holtz had been reared on it. So, he was just as much a victim of these Satanic lies as she. That was the secret she needed to understand that would level out the road ahead.

Suddenly it was stifling under the blanket; she needed air. She sat for a long time allowing these new ideas space to incubate, her feelings lifted with the lovely strong branches, even to the branchlets in the sun - rounded fine plumes, trimmed even as with haircutting scissors, all waving in lively rhythm on the wind. What a difference a short span of time could make. Her spirits, now brightened, waved with hope with them. God had let her experience exactly what she was without Him, nothing. Now, she would depend wholly on Him and no longer on her own strength, which was – Nichts, Null.

So, she was to start over. And what was the beginning? God had joined her to Holtz. She remembered that, too well, but she had rejected it. Where could she go with it now? Fraulein Stein, or perhaps with that vision of her, Sister - something. What would her professed name be? She had loved St. Benedict. It might be Benedicta? Sister Benedicta sounded just right. What would her teacher say?

First, there was forgiveness. If she hoped for forgiveness by God for foolish pride and hate, she must forgive. She must see that Holtz was the victim of demonic nonsense, and somehow love the man who could be, not the one who was. She would pray the prayer secretly over Holtz. It was the prayer that her classmates had all learned,

“Michael the Archangel, protect us in the danger” to bind the devil and his evil spirits.

Then Holtz would need to forgive her for hating him. That seemed to be the only place if she was to begin again. Fraulein had often taught her students that as women they would each be engaged by God in the fight against evil. It was woman’s role, she said, to stand up against evil. But Clarimonde had never dreamed it could amount to this. Yet, she found a small comfort in the thought of being part of an uncounted multitude of women, suffering women, who would somehow overcome the Evil One even as Mary had by sheer obedience; in her case by obedience to God’s Word in bringing forth Jesus.

The evening began the same as all the others. A tired Holtz, tired, but full of himself, brought up a plate of dinner. While she ate, he stretched out on the bed. "Gut Gott, what a day! You do know what goes on in that whorehouse, don't you? If this is the final solution, it sure beats me! The mess it makes seems endless, getting rid of Jews is one thing, but who comes along to clean up the mess? It's endless. Disgusting sickness, ugly people nearly animals, crouching in corners, slinking around, smell, piles of refuse, ditch latrines full and running – even bodies. Gott, what a vile mess! Everything stinks!" He threw an arm across his face. "To think that you go back there! Probably soon! It's awful!"

She was quiet. It was the first time he had ever reported things as they really were, the first time he hadn't bragged about rubbing elbows with some higher-up, or how he had been praised for his ruthless interrogations.

"Why do you think that is, Holtz?" Her quiet voice surprised him. The arm came down, he lifted his head, puzzled, looked at her and scowled. She went on, "Maybe there is something very wrong at the very bottom of all of this, or, at the very top." The frown darkened.

"Whatsh" he slurred, "you mean? Something wrong. The whole damn thing is wrong. It should be easier, cleaner, neater. Dealing with these people it's terrible. They shit, they crap, they vomit, they bleed. Worse, they cry, they moan, they fall over in their own shit. There should be a better way. Take them all out to sea, weight them and throw them overboard. Wash the decks; the boats would come back clean. None of this heavy, filthy rot. He threw the arm back over his face, "But then. . . the damned bodies would float into shore. God awful!"

Clarimonde saw that this was not a smooth road to be traversed, not now. She changed the subject.

"I have something important to ask you."

"Nein, I can do nothing about it. Don't ask!"

"Please, it is not what you think."

He sat up. "Well, then?"

She got down on her knees. "I ask you to forgive me."

"What? What the?" He began to laugh. "Forgive?"

He laughed so hard she thought the bed would fail. Added to all the other shames, it always creaked, an embarrassment for ears below. Calming, he pouted, "You're fooling with me now, you little sly one,"

He came over to her grinning, "Come, get up, let's fool around a better way."

She stood and her hands went to his chest, "No, really, before that, I must have you to forgive me." She was serious. He looked into her artless face, and pure eyes. What was in there? What was behind those eyes? She was serious.

Sober now, he frowned, "For what?" He added sarcastically, "For what do I forgive you."

"For, for hating you, despising you, for refusing you in my heart."

“Oh that. Well, why shouldn't you hate me? I sure hate the people, even the Uberoffizieren who use me! It's natural.”

“It may be natural, but God has told me that He will not forgive me unless I forgive you, and in order to forgive you, I ask you to forgive me.”

“What a rigmarole that is! Romantic nonsense! And what makes you think you can ever forgive me. Haven't I been beastly? Oh, I love being beastly. Come on, let's be beastly,” and he lifted her from the floor. “You're as light as a feather. You mustn't lose more weight, or I'll drill right through you.”

“But will you forgive me.” He dropped her on the bed. “What the hell does that mean? I don't know what you're talking about and it makes me angry. So stop it!”

“Please Holtz, I will love you once I stop hating you. I need to have you say, 'Clarimonde, I forgive you for hating me.' Like that.”

He walked over to the chair and sat down. His face became mask-like, his eyes, blue as the skies, were hard as marbles. He simply stared over her head at the wall. She didn't move; he didn't move for what seemed many slow, slow minutes. Then he rose, took off his clothes, pulled back the bedding and lay down in his underwear with his back to her. Nothing more was said; he did not move all night.

When an hour or so went by, Clarimonde slipped off the bed, and turned off the light, then crawled in beside his hard, but warm back. She didn't know what to think, but some new dynamic had been unleashed. What road would it drive them down, this new dynamic?

“Dear Lord, you make the road - send the steam roller. Make it a big one. Roll out the level road.” She closed her eyes, opening the inner eye of sleep on a wide highway like the autobahn. There she sat beside a happy Holtz in some kind of futuristic vehicle, her hair blowing in the wind.

He was gone in the morning when she awoke. She amazed herself at the warm feelings that she sent after him. This was the day when the next piece of her new life would become clear. She placed the chair again in front of the window, gathered up the blanket, her prayer shawl, pulled the Bible on her lap and began to think about what her teacher had told them about marriage and the relationship of man and woman in Catholic matrimony.

There may have been something in St. Paul that Fraulein Stein took issue with. She so firmly believed in the equality of man and woman, and taught them so carefully to be women of confidence. Did she think that St. Paul was still a man of Jewish persuasion when women did not have the same status as men? Maybe that was it. But there was something in St. Peter that was important. Looking through the back pages of the heavy volume, she came upon I Peter, and there it was.

“In like manner, you married women, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, even if they do not obey the word of God, will be won without a word.”

Astounding! That was truly astounding!

“Do you mean, Lord, that if I really give myself to Holtz that he will catch something supernatural from me and be won to the word of God?” In that case, everything was changed. Sex instead of being repulsive and to be fought for fear of lustful feelings, was to be enjoyed as a medium for the Spirit. Could that be it?

She reread the passage. The “In like manner.” In like manner to what? It referred back to the way Jesus had submitted himself to the Cross. She was to submit herself to Holtz” in like manner.”

And what manner was that? Always the words Fraulein Stein used to speak of Jesus and the cross began with “embraced.” She taught them to “embrace” their crosses in life just as Jesus had embraced the cross. Look what had happened because of Jesus’ willing submission – the whole world had been granted salvation through his sacrifice and given hope of eternal life through his resurrection. All because of submission. What a word! Unterverfun.

If such power was there, and it couldn’t be doubted, then of course, it could convert a heart as . . . as bedeviled as Holtz’s? The rest of the day, she prayed the Saint Michael prayer and waited anxiously for his return. How would she embrace him? It was an imaginative exercise that whiled away the hours. With that active inner sight, she walked with him through the verdant vineyards among the hills at home, hand in hand. She showed him her favorite paths up through the ranks of vines to the edge of the forest high up on the hill where the mists rising from the Moselle dripped from the leaves before the morning sun arose. The grapes thrived in that moisture. Then, a bottle of wine between them, they sat in the warm sun at the old table on the street while her Mother went and came from the garden, a basket of Brussels Sprouts over her arm. It would be the season for harvesting them. Mother smiled at Holtz as she went by.

What would Mother really think of this? She dared not imagine that. A Nazi like Holtz who had killed Jews, or at least had made sure someone else had killed the innocent? Mother would never grasp the idea that submission to such a man was anything but evil. She believed in an eye for an eye. In some ways her philosophy and Holtz’s were similar, softness and forgiveness were weak and servile. One must master that kind of thing; be on top of it, never let it gain a foothold. The world would disintegrate into a morass of devilry if such a weakness was allowed to take over. One stood and fought for one’s rights – fought to the death, never begging for mercy. Mercy was despicable. Ask for forgiveness, and Mother would say,

“I don’t believe in that stuff! It’s a cover for feigning false sweetness that isn’t there. Don’t talk to me about forgiveness! Those nuns! I would never have sent you to Magdalena; it is your father’s idea, and look at the notions they are putting into your head. Virginity, bah! Romantic nonsense.”

Hadn’t Holtz just said that to her? Yet, Mother might have said it, too. The sound of her voice, and the presence of Mother was so strong, Clarimonde could

smell the good soapy smell of her clothes; she held on to that image, breathing in the smell, reaching out to those big capable hands.

“Mama, Mama, please understand, I love you, I need you, please understand, Mama.”

Surprisingly, the big hands opened, the arms extended, and she was embraced warmly, kissed and hugged, her hair smoothed.

“I do understand, may Gott bless you, my daughter, my dear Clara.” She heard these words in her mother’s own firm voice. Was this a voice from heaven? Feelings swept over her, so happy. . . so sad . . .so happy, so sad. The mix was rich in her throat down into her chest, around her heart. So very sharp and rich; she might die of it.

From downstairs came sounds; like appropriate movie music for an intense and heartbreaking scene it swelled. Frau Krebs’ phonograph was cranked up occasionally for a Beethoven sonata, the same one each time - number 8 in C, but more often it was this recording from the Ring, the duet between Sieglinde and Siegmund.

Clarimonde knew this music. Her father had been very fond of Wagner; he had taken her once to the festival at Bayreuth for the three-day performance of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The wonder of it had spilled over at home. Father bought recordings that frequently filled the house with the most moving (at that time she wouldn’t have used the word “passionate”) music Clarimonde thought had ever been written. The scene with the twins who fell in love with each other, unknowingly falling into incest, was cast in a mysterious, romantic cave-like dwelling in a forbidden woods; it came into view again whenever she heard these thrilling vocals of throbbing anguish. In her childish view it was hard to understand such fervidity of a brother toward a sister. Now with the sexual window open wide she understood the pathos and drama that had been merely mystifying before. The picture replayed as she listened to these waves of music unsuitably engulfing the ruined room. The diva and her brother on stage had been gigantic figures; to imagine them now as lovers took every ounce of imagination. Love was certainly not predictable or orderly; it was as wayward and capricious as her father’s wild donkey. Now, she thought with a start, it was to be Holtz and Clarimonde, certainly as unconventional a coupling as God alone could devise.

She waited restlessly through the darkening hours. Would he never come? How strange it was to be anticipating his arrival after weeks of dreading it. Despite the coolness of the room, she had taken off the ugly sweater that had been a faithful and needed friend, to make a more appealing figure in the little blue dress. It was modest enough, but fit well across her bosom, and the little white collar would set off her face. For the last hours, she had slapped her cheeks and wet her lips more than a few times. When finally the key scratched in the lock, she was posed to welcome him, almost breathless.

Holtz entered the room. She stopped in her move towards him. He was pale to grayness. He might have been an old man. He didn't look up, his shoulders sagged. What had happened? What was the matter?

"Was ist los?" she asked. He didn't reply. She asked again.

With a quavering voice, he said, "I don't know, things aren't going so well. I think I may be sick."

"Did you ask the Kommandant? They would see you to medical help."

"No, not them. I just need to sleep. I asked Frau Krebs to bring you some food, but I'm going to bed."

He stripped off his uniform. While he fell into bed, she hung it up for him. Pulling the blanket up around his shoulders and tucking it in, she stood for a moment looking down at him. She smoothed back the hair across his forehead. She thought of her mother's hand that eased her headaches. He looked up at her.

"Holtz, it may be the wrong time, but I need to talk to you."

"Nein, Nein, nicht. I can't hear it."

"But you don't know what it is."

"Yes, I do. I can't hear it. It will make me sicker."

"How can you know?"

"I just do. I don't know what's happened. It's all bad. It's changed everything. Now, please, please, just leave me alone. Here, take the key and go down and tell Krebs to ring up the number she has and explain I'm sick. I can't meet my lift tomorrow morning."

She looked at the key in her hand. What would he know if she just gathered a few pieces of bread, and went out the back door while Frau Krebs' ears were filled with Wagner? But now that she had it, she could not take the freedom it offered.

"You may as well eat down there, my dinner and yours, too. You won't get me in trouble will you?"

She leaned down to his ear. "You are my husband now, Holtz. There can be no trouble." She kissed him lightly on his damp, stubbly cheek. He shrank away, and she turned to her errand.

The next morning he was not better, possibly even feverish as he had not been the evening before. He slept through the morning. Frau Krebs came up about mid-morning, looked at his motionless form and at Clarimonde sitting by the window, Bible in lap. Scowling at the unlocked door, she asked for the key, saying nothing else, she locked the door after her. The old woman feared the consequences if her tenant escaped, and the man was certainly not to be depended upon. The situation was getting out of hand, and she would pay if it did. By afternoon she brought up tea and toast with a bit of cheese. Holtz roused enough to have Clarimonde help him sip some tea. He seemed as weak as the beverage, but he looked up at her as she bent over him, and half smiled.

"What have you done to me, Mädchen? What ever will happen to me?"

She waited. It was not rhetorical, he wanted an answer.

“It is not what I have done; it is what God has done.”

He had no response, just turned his eyes away to the window. “This will ruin me, you know. I think it has ruined me. Everything at the Raven yesterday went totally kränklich; I was overwhelmed with scruples. Could hardly write a word. The eyes of those women looked like your eyes. Every one of them - your eyes. God! I’ll hang!” His bright marbles, were they capable of tears? Gazing at him, they no longer looked like stones to her, but were now blue pools that were leaking from the corners.

“Ohh, he groaned; you have torn my life in shreds.”

“Well, if that’s so, you should know the whole story.”

“I suppose there is nothing else for me. It’s in that Bible that this has happened . . . my life ends . . . a total tragedy. How unlucky I was to get an innocent, pure, holy girl, and a Jude at that.” His voice was weak and raspy. “Whatever attracted me to an innocent, pure, holy girl – a Jude? Her helplessness? I’ve been undone by a helpless wisp of a girl.” He moaned and turned over to the wall.

She sat down next to his back on the edge of the bed.

“You are acting like a baby, Holtz. But then, you are being reborn, I can tell. This sickness is really just a birthing time; and you will now come alive as you never have known life!” He listened. “Holtz, I believe that God has wedded us together. I accept you now as my husband. Will you accept me as your wife?” Silence. After a few moments, she looked over his shoulder. He was asleep, sound asleep. Satisfied, Clarimonde, snuggled in next to his long body.

The bed jouncing awakened her. Holtz was finishing the last touches to his uniform. Still pale, his face, already shaved, was stern.

“Are you really going today?”

“I must.”

“Will you be all right?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you come back?”

“Yes, yes, I think so.”

“If you don’t what will happen to me?”

“I will tell Krebs to let you go. I’ll find you. Come here.” He took both of her hands in his.

“Clarimonde,” his voice was constricted, “I do; I do take you for my lawfully wedded wife. To have and to hold from this time forward, till death do us part . . . so help me God!” Tears welled in his eyes, he brushed them impatiently away, stooped to kiss her chastely on the lips, walked out the door and was gone.

She looked a long time at the open door. She wished she had had a response, but the whole sequence had taken her by surprise – where had he ever learned the wedding vow? Where, when? Did God give him those words? She rolled them around in her mind again and again, and doubted that she would have known them herself. They were beautiful, and she was a bride.

What day was this? She went over to the big leather book and opened to the center pages. What date? She had no idea. It was sometime in late autumn, there had been snow a few days ago, maybe late October. There was no pen to make the record. What could she write with? She'd been through the commode looking for a fresh garment, or even a pillowcase to make into a shift. Emptied before her arrival, nothing was there. There were hangers in the wardrobe, old metal ones. Bending one straight, she took the metal tip trying to scratch the open page. It didn't work. Then she saw the key. The door stood open and it hung in the keyhole. Pressing with the sharpest edge it made a discernable mark. How odd that this instrument of forced imprisonment was now to declare the freely given gift of herself to him who had been her captor and torturer. She wrote: Holtz Grunner and Clarimonde Jagaerschmid, wed by the hand of God today in late autumn 1944, Neustrelitz. It took effort and as careful as she was the effect was clumsy, but if they died now, at least in a Holy Bible on an appropriate page this miracle was recorded.

Chapter Two

Sometime in the night, Clarimonde awoke to two things. First, the persistent jingle of a telephone, and . . . she was alone in the bed. Instantly, she realized the conjunction of the two was not coincidental. What was she to do? The phone went unanswered, for after a pause, it rang again. Where was Frau Krebs? The old lady's ears were sharp; such a clamor would not go unheard. Either she was a very sound sleeper, or she was out of the house. Both seemed unlikely, as unlikely as that she'd disobey the command given on the other end. The miserable old woman had been eager to get rid of her.

She must leave, immediately, but to where and how? The weather had worsened; though it didn't last long on the ground, snow had come over the past days. She had the run-down shoes, which she'd not worn since the day she arrived, no stockings, and only the sweater over the skimpy dress. No matter, there was no time to lose. Despite the woman's complaining to Holtz, the door had remained unlocked. She had brought nothing, there was nothing to take. But . . . the second pair of Holtz's boots - she looked hard at them, they would be too large, but perhaps better than the shoes. She took them in hand and went quickly down the hall to the stairs in her bare feet. A small light burned somewhere below. Rounding the landing she bumped into a chair, and reaching to balance touched something else. As she did, a sharp bolt of recognition struck her down to her knees. The military boots clattered on down. She couldn't breathe, she sank back against a stair, unable to move or think. Above her head a pair of gnarled feet swung softly back and forth, back and forth from the impact.

Clarimonde vomited and fainted. When she came to herself, it took moments to take in the awful reality. Frau Krebs, clothed in a heavy nightgown, her face distorted and blackened was hanging from the wrought-iron fixture just above the stairs. Its feeble bulb lit the scene. A short rope looped over the flange; the woman had stepped off into space above the steep decline.

Not able to stand, Clarimonde slipped down tread by tread under the softly swaying body, till she reached the floor. Wobbly she rose and wanted to run, but her legs melted under her. In dreams she had had this happen - a desperate need to move quickly but with no nerve able to respond. Sitting again, how long a time went by while the horror of what hung above her grew heavier? She could not bear it. Then suddenly, setting every nerve alive, the trilling of the phone!

Jumping to her feet she ran toward the back door. She stumbled over. . . dear God, what?. . . other boots. The door! But, the doorknob - a dark shadow. She froze, what was it? She reached out in the dark and felt fur. A dead animal collapsed against the door! Gasping, it took precious moments to understand and reach out again. A coat, an old fur coat! Frau Krebs! Dear Merciful God!

She halted and turned back. She wanted to find the living Frau Krebs, fall on her knees, embrace her, beg her to forgive! "Oh, dear, dear woman! What has happened to you is all because of me. May God . . ." she couldn't finish the thought because the telephone jangled again. Those on the other end wouldn't be

patient much longer. They'd come. She slipped into the coat, pulled on the old boots, and reaching in the capacious pockets pulled out a woolen head scarf from one and a wrapped package from the other. A long gasp passed her lips, her dead benefactor had even provided food. She was as dizzy and blinded as though she had been slapped violently across the face. Opening the door, she staggered back once more, shakily made the sign of the cross toward the faint but now still shadow, then slipped out into the pale dawn of a Neustrelitz day.

Judging by the rising sun, Clarimonde, set out toward the north. South simply could not be; she imagined even at that moment the motorcycles or cars racing up the highway from Fürstenberg. About twenty kilometers south, on the outskirts of Fürstenberg was Ravensbrueck. It seemed close enough to smell. In the south, too, sprawled fearful Berlin with its devils. It would be north; she would go north. North was the lake region and Mecklenburg's country lay open for miles to the Ostsee. At least that was how she imagined it from Geschichte and Geographie studies.

She had made her way through the jungle of spindle fences behind the houses out to a main street that headed in the right direction. The wonderful fur coat and the old black headscarf were a perfect costume of disguise. Pulling some hair down to her eyes, and tying the scarf low, she assumed a stooped posture and a slight shuffle in the worn boots. No one would give her a second look, this small thin woman, lost in an old coat, out to look for firewood, or beg a scrap from the market.

After passing rows of half-timbered houses, many still shuttered against the morning cold, she came into the bomb-damaged Baroque center of town. The early morning market activity, subdued because of the war and the shortages, was nevertheless beginning. Farmers were hiding away their vegetables in cellars to provide for the winter. There'd be plenty of carrot and cabbage soup for their families, at least. Left was little to sell, just enough to earn a coin or two to buy essentials like flour and sugar if they could be found. A few farmers' wives were unloading their rickety carts of small baskets of carrots and beets, and a few cabbages. One old fellow pulled a brace of rabbits from his sack. Someone would be lucky to get one of those, she thought. Clarimonde was hungry, and felt appreciatively in the pocket. The packet was reassuring, but she would wait hours before daring to open it. The women were turned to their work, only one with hands on her broad hips looked at her curiously; after all, didn't she know all the early morning folk very well? This odd one, well, who knew where she came from?

From the square, heading north again in the shadow of the buildings, Clarimonde kept her landmark in view. A fat, ill-shaped church tower now set her direction. Determined to stay clear of any main roads, she found it difficult because the streets from the town center radiated out like spokes, and the important one was the one that ran north to Neubrandenburg, so following one of the less important streets she was forced to move out more east from the church tower than she liked, but as she had no real destination it would be as it

would be. The houses grew smaller, the garden spaces between larger, and she was soon out beyond the last straggling cottage and shed. She found it was not possible to stay in the pastures; the uneven, frozen ground and the poor fitting boots prohibited any decent forward movement, and she was anxious to get out beyond where she could see woodland. It was risky, but she headed toward a paved road to her right. She judged it would take just about fifteen minutes to make the woods if she hurried. Yet, even an innocent woman walking alone along a highway might be stopped for questioning.

Meantime, had she known, in the town square, the farmwomen were being questioned. Two men, identified immediately as SS by the suspicious women, had careened in on a motorcycle/sidecar. Had the Frauen seen a young girl this morning? What age? Flegeljahr. Nein, the women had seen no teen-aged girl. Well, had they seen anyone suspicious? A stocky woman moved forward and looked the men over. The little woman in the fur coat had come immediately to mind, but she didn't like these hounds' looks. Whatever the cause, the little one didn't need the likes of them. "Nein, nein," she led the chorus, "nothing unusual at all." So which way would they go from here? The men conferred. One would take the road to Newbrandenburg, the other the road to the east.

"If you are looking for someone, wouldn't she be here in town?" asked the wise one. "Who in her right mind would be out on the highway? No young girl. Sure, she'd be in somebody's garden shed, or lean-to, out of the cold wind."

One responded, "Ja, that sounds right. Anyway, she wasn't here. Drive back, Hans, we'll see what the boss wants. No sense a wild-goose chase."

They roared off, while the wise one went back to peeling bad leaves off her cabbages. "Dummkopfen, Einfaltspinsel" she chuckled.

Out in the open, walking quickly along the road, Clarimonde felt the cold east wind in her face. Her eyes watered, not just from wind, but in gratitude for the warmth of the coat, and for the love, it was love, of the woman she had so despised and feared. She was now wrapped in the life of another. How could she repay such sacrifice? It was hard to see through full eyes and she was surprised at the suddenness of the woods looming up before her. Stumbling in over uneven turf, she found a large oak and circling around to its leeward side, she smoothed away broken branches. Taking one to sweep up its abundant leaves, she nestled down in them. She felt perfectly safe, the big tree wanted to succor her. Its intentions towards her were clear – it would watch and protect.

"So many to take care of me," she thought, "somewhere Holtz, Frau Krebs, she would be in heaven for her sacrifice, this tree."

She didn't know how many others – the farmer's wife, with more willing hearts ahead. Pulling the leaves around like a small fort, meaning merely to rest because it was still early in the day, she decided to wait before checking the packet. The thought of Holtz had roused anxiety. Putting her head back against the rough bark, she closed her eyes and saw him clearly. What was happening to him?

He sat on the other side of an interrogation desk, not the side he was used to. A swarthy, mustached man with heavy dark eyebrows, his interrogator, was thumbing through papers, not looking at him. "Where was the concubine? Had he helped her escape? Did he know Frau Krebs had committed suicide? Where would the girl go? Did she have relatives in the area?" To all of these questions, Holtz had no input.

"You know you're already in trouble the depth of the Rhine! Turning in this rubbish!" The man impatiently thumped the sheaf of papers. "Not a single fact or lead for days! Then refusing an order. Do you know what that will cost you?"

At this point, just as a rough arm grabbed Holtz, her vision went blank. She breathed in the brisk air, and breathed it out again, slowly.

"I must trust you dear God, I must trust you for everything. I put my husband in your hands. I put myself in your hands. You have cared for me. Please, care for Holtz. And bring Gerhardine Krebs safely through Purgatory into Heaven."

She was emotionally and physically exhausted, and when she awoke, the sky had cleared and the panoply of stars blinked and winked through the waving tree branches above. Her feet were very cold. Boots without stockings could not keep out the earth's icy breath. She tucked them up under the ample folds of the coat and rubbed her toes against the sparse lining fabric of the boots. It didn't help; they seemed to grow colder. "I must get moving, but first a bite of food."

The packet in her hand evoked an image of the old woman, determined on her fateful course, but taking time, energy and thought for the needs of her escape. Not just wrapping food, but wrapping it carefully. Within she found three smaller packs: in one a sizeable piece of brown bread, in the other a generous hunk of cheese, and between the two a small wallet of walnut meats. "How, walnut meats? She must have cracked walnuts for her own use, and then when she knew . . . when she knew, wrapped them for me." She fingered them lovingly, "I must make this last until I . . . what lay ahead?"

Would she find . . . she didn't even know what to hope for. Did she think someone would take her in? If they did, wouldn't they report to the police this wanderer who must have something ungesetzlich to hide? Could she live in a barn? Not for long without food or heat. Now November, she couldn't expect to live through the winter without help. Until God opened a door for her, or closed one forever, she must keep this food supply going as long as possible. She nibbled on a walnut meat. Had anything ever tasted better? Grandmother Jagaerschmidt's walnut cake - that's what it evoked. Perhaps a second one? Counting them out, they would last just ten days at only two a day. With nothing to cut with, she took a bite of cheese and then a bite of bread. So delicious, so wonderful. The best food ever; she savored every nibble, chewing slowly, especially the cheese. Wrapped up just as carefully as Frau Krebs had done, the remainder went back into the pocket. She patted it; it must last.

Rising on her unfeeling, wooden feet, she clomped her way back to the dark road. Before the light of dawn she hoped to find some kind of building to hide in through the day, perhaps a building with an animal that would provide heat, if it were willing. Sheep. She imagined mild, woolly sheep. The hidden sun was just turning the clear sky rose as she walked into it. A low roaring at a distance she recognized at once. Looking almost into the sun she saw something like a flight of bees far off. It must be a Russian strike; scores of planes, heading for German cities. Sending down deafening waves of sound, a small formation flew overhead. She walked for some way without a vehicle passing her; the planes accounted for the lack of traffic. Strafing was not uncommon. After an hour or so, off to one side a farm road left the highway. Edging down gradually, it made its gravelly way into a valley where a few small gray buildings huddled up to it. No farmhouse was visible, but there must be one to account for outbuildings. No matter what she did now, if she went down, or kept on the highway, it would be taking a chance. On still numb feet, wishing for warm pockets for them like the coat provided for her hands, she turned into the small road and began the descent just as a farm lorry passed toward Neustrelitz.

Rounding a curve lined with small trees, she braced herself to encounter the farmhouse and its people. The folk would be about chores by now. Please, may they . . .but – both relief and disappointment, all that confronted her was a chimney standing starkly above the ruins of a house. Some poor family had been burned out. It took a few minutes to look through the ruins. Something there might be useful to her needs. She was beginning to be very thirsty. There were old kettles and broken bottles, but none held remnants of rain or snow. Some half-burned Hitler Youth magazines (perhaps it was good no one lived here anymore), and pieces of ruined furnishings – a burned stool amidst the rubble of bricks and mortar, window frames, and broken glass, but anything worthwhile had, of course, been salvaged. She turned back to the outbuildings. She must find a way to warm her feet, and then water. Even the walk had not restored circulation, and she prayed that they were not frostbitten. Not knowing the signs of that, she knew that no animal would be here to share warmth.

The first small building held an ancient tractor, a lot of empty oilcans, and other pieces of farm implements, bent, rusting, broken. Would that there'd be a match or a carton of matches left on the dusty ledges! She even thought of checking to see if the tractor had a key, and imagined starting it up and warming her feet on the engine. A desperate thought!

On she went to the next building. The barn-doors were locked together with a padlock through the latch. Looking in the small, cobwebbed window, the place looked empty except for straw. "Why lock it?" she thought, "This place could be home for today." Was there another way in? Walking all around it, there was no other door or window. "I've got to get in there – it looks clean and will be a hiding place. Circling it again – why she didn't know; clearly the place was tight - she noticed three boards at the bottom at the back that had been cut out together, then replaced. Perhaps it was made for a dog entrance, or at one time wired over for a rabbit hutch. She tried to pull the section out with her fingers,

but it was fastened. Walking quickly back to the first shed, she selected a broken saw blade, a piece of pipe, and a shovel handle. Would they work? Even with determination and effort, using the sawblade as a wedge in the crack and hammering at it with the pipe, little was accomplished. The short shovel handle had no obvious use, but by some inspiration she stuck it under the bottom board which hung over the foundation and pried up. Nails began to rasp. She put her weight on it, and slowly the whole panel, screeching, gave way. Dropping the tool, she crawled through the opening.

The smell was one of dust and straw, not unpleasant. If it had housed animals, it was free of manure. She must find water, but with food and some warmth it would be a decent home for now. What was best was with all the effort her feet had begun to tingle, in fact, to hurt. The instinct of fear caused her to climb back out and attempt to put the boards back in place. How could she do this from the inside so that it would not be apparent to anyone else? The panel was still of one piece, the boards firmly bonded together across the back by wooden straps. She took the pipe and banged away at the rusty nails till they broke off, and propped her hideout door against the building. Then noticing how churned up the ground was where she'd worked, she pulled out some straw, walked over it till it looked soiled with time, added some leaves, and fluffed it up with the end of the saw blade. She threw her tools into the cavity and crawling in after them, she reached out, and with some effort lifted the panel pulling it in place by the straps across the back. It fit snugly. She was safely incased, and just in time.

Newstrelitz was crawling with the Secret Service looking for Clarimonde. This second day they'd set soldiers in the square to question anyone coming in from the highways. One Gemusefarm driver reported the only person he had seen along the road was a smallish woman in a fur coat. He described the dirt road where she entered and how it angled down into a depression. He knew the kilometers from town, not far.

Hearing the motorcar turn in at the highway, Clarimonde quickly pulled straw into the corner next to the window and burrowed into it. But in a second she thought better. I have to hold that panel tight just in case. She scooted to the spot and lying prone to be less visible from the window, grabbed the wood straps that held the three boards together. The voices of men seeped in through the loose barn doors.

"Don't see any tracks anywhere. Course, the ground's frozen."

One went to the building next door. "Just junk in there." The other rattled the barn doors. Her heart beat so loudly, she feared they'd hear.

"Nobody in there, door's locked."

He peered through the dirty window; she huddled down low, close to the wall – she was within sight.

"Nope, nothing there. Should look around in back, but whoever was around here, isn't here any longer. Probably just a bitch looking for a garden to rob. You can see the house's burned down. "

The men tramped around both buildings, stopping just where she'd worked. Clarimonde held her breath. She heard a scratch against the building just at her head, then another one. What was happening, had they seen something? With clammy hands, she gripped the braces.

"Damn match!" They were having a smoke.

Oh, if only they would drop one of those unresponsive matches!

They moved on, going through the rubble of the burned building, and returning to the car, revved the engine. There was a whirr of tires on gravel and the sound of the motor slowly faded into the distance. Only then did Clarimonde noisily take in a lungful of air.

The first thing was to thank God. For this, she fell on her knees and bowed her head to the straw covered floor. The daylight was diminishing; she got out the packets and greedily ate more of the ration than she should. She was so relieved. But eating increased her thirst.

She hadn't drunk anything for nearly two days. She must find water. A farmhouse in a low place like this might have been placed near a stream or creek for the convenience of watering animals. The place would soon be dark, and she had to risk that no one would be around. Did she dare take down the trapdoor and go out? She didn't want to. But she couldn't wait till morning.

She pushed out the little door, and forced her painful feet to carry her down the gravel, past the stark foundation, and toward the dip in the pasture that might be a small stream. She'd need a pan. Remembering the one in the rubble, she went back to look for it. It was now nearly dark. Picking her way through the remains, she found the pan, and headed out to the depression. Praise God! There was a trickle of water coursing up over a rock with a small pool catching it below. The banks were frozen and ice was forming along the edges of the pond, but she could reach it easily. She dipped in her pan, and saw the water spurt out from its bent bottom. Opening her mouth, she let the cold water run into her mouth and down her throat. Was anything more wonderful than water? The pan was useless as a container, but for the moment it acted as providential water fountain. Tomorrow she would find something that would hold water to carry with her.

Back in her hideaway, she gathered a large pile of straw. Taking off her boots and coat, the poor feet were suffering. White in color they were growing more painful. Rubbing them up to the ankles with her hands, she slipped out of the sweater and stuck one foot in each sleeve, then wrapped the body of the sweater around them both. Burrowing down into the straw, she pulled the coat over her inside out. The fur was not soft, but it captured her body heat and she soon felt quite snug, feet excepted. The sweater, at first warm with her body's heat, soon took on the temperature of her feet.

She dreamt of Holtz. He was walking upright and carefree, but the surroundings were full of bodies. Then something happened that he fell among them.

She woke in the pitch-black building frightened. There was a strange noise in the straw, and she thought she felt something. Too dark to see, she huddled under the coat like a tent and held her breath. It wasn't outside her nest; something or some things were under the coat with her, even moving along her leg. She wanted to scream, but since Ravensbrueck she was careful never to make a noise at any horror. She stifled the sound in her throat but kicked her leg out to shake off what felt like tentative little teeth.

It sent the mice out from under, and the rustle in the straw became quiet. Then a pounce! The straw was full of rustling commotion. If she had been able to, she would have run from the building, but the exterior blackness was more a challenge to courage than whatever was now sharing her bed. Something was actually crunching bones; she imagined a mouse being devoured. The intruder must be a cat; she'd seen cats do that.

She waited, then tried with wavering voice, "Here, kitty. Here, kitty."

The rustle increased, the doors jiggled, and the creature scuttled off into the dark. She was sorry it went because the mice again tried to share warmth with her. She kept kicking and flaying with her arms. Time went by slowly, she couldn't sleep. Finally a gray light slowly heightened outside the little window. It was below freezing inside and out. Unwrapping the sweater around the now burning extremities, they looked red and swollen, but feeling had returned with a vengeance.

Lying waiting for dawn she had devised a plan. Crawling over to the piece of saw, she stretched the sleeve of the sweater from the end of her toe, and sawed at it with the implement. The fabric snagged, but wouldn't cut through. Finding a bit of the broken nail she picked at the shoulder seam with it, then with her teeth and finger nails until the seam opened and ripped away easily. The result was two long wool stockings open at the ends. Pulling them on, she folded over the fabric at the toes and thrust them into the boots. Wriggling her toes, the wool and boot made peace; then she tried walking. Though the long stockings wanted to fall over her boot tops, it would be much better going today. The boots fit snugly, her feet had feeling and the pain was easing.

The rest of the sweater, now more like a bolero, she wrapped twice around what was left of her. Then she pulled on the coat. Reaching in the pocket for the remains of her food, she found only pieces of shredded paper. The midnight visitors had had a feast. From months of poor nourishment, her body had acclimated to few calories, but she was hungry, very hungry, and this morning weakness assailed her. She had counted on those pieces of bread and cheese and the walnuts. She could have wept for the walnuts.

Then the words of the men came back to her about "the bitch" scavenging gardens. She pushed out the small door, crawled out, and shoved it back in place. A few small snowflakes sifted down through the quiet air. Searching around the house in ever widening radii, she looked for remnants of the farm wife's garden.

It wasn't hard to find, but it had been picked clean. Not even a carrot frond was left. But looking carefully over the still evident rows she saw what she hoped for - the dirty greenish suggestion of a big root. At home when she'd tried

to pull carrots the lacey greens often would snap off leaving just such a bare top, especially when the ground was hard or frozen. Hurrying back to the ruins, she found a board with a nail protruding from the end. She used this to slice into the cement-like earth, and finally had herself a carrot! A big, frozen carrot. It had come out with a few nail gashes, but nearly clean.

For carrying a drink, the rubble provided only an unbroken bottle, quite small with a tiny opening. Along with her prize orange root, she took it to the pond, which had developed a skim of ice. Knocking a hole through it with the old pan left the night before, she drank gratefully from its spurting bottom. The little bottle wouldn't fill, the top was too small, but turning the spurt toward the opening, water slipped in and the bottle filled. How fortunate that the opening was small, there was no cap so it must stay upright in her pocket and would not be easily spilled. She washed her carrot and impatiently began to gnaw on its frozen flesh.

Going back toward the highway, along the edge of which was the only way to make progress in a known direction, she said goodbye to her overnight home, and spying a cat in the frosty grass called out, "Aufwiedersehen, kitty." The animal bounded away.

The snow became more determined when Clarimonde headed east. With her headscarf low over her face, and keeping along the edge of the woods, which were now thick on each side of the road, she watched ahead for cars or trucks, and peeled her ears for the same behind. Every now and then she looked back, and if something came over the far hill she ducked into the woods. After a short time, she felt that was too dangerous, so she kept in the woods walking somewhat parallel to the road. The ground was covered with pine needles, which provided smooth going. That helped because her legs were weakening.

With growing effort, she walked through the morning, finishing the carrot and taking a small sip from the bottle. Hunger had made her faint sometimes at Ravensbrueck, and for the past few days she'd lived on adrenalin. However, now the carrot seemed only to make her hungrier.

The woods were extensive; by noon she had begun to climb with them ever higher but with ever more difficulty. The highway had gone off on its own to her left as she had struggled up the hill. Stopping often for breath, she finally stepped out at the crest, and there at her feet lay a small lake. Her knees wobbled from the climb. She tried to lock her them to keep from falling. The trees had protected her from the blowing snow, but now it swirled up from the grey turbulent water into her mouth and nose. Which way should she go? She wanted only to sit down, or better lie down, but it mustn't be done. She would not be able to get up. Right or left? She chose right and picking up a stick for support, began consciously putting one foot before the other along the height, following the contour of the lake. She would need shelter soon, for the snow here was accumulating to some centimeters, and her strength was gone. Only the stout stick kept her upright. At least snow would provide water, so the little bottle needn't be refilled. As she rounded the north side of the lake, the slope of the hill

descended, but the snow grew deeper, too. Forcing herself with effort out into more open ground, a two-rut track for single vehicles crossed in front of her. Even such a meager road must go somewhere. She followed it weakly through another stand of trees, and then into a clearing. Standing or rather squatting there by the edge of massed trees, a half-kilometer away, was a small cottage with a thatched roof in the Fischland style of the north country. She noted immediately someone lived there - smoke was blowing in swirls from a chimney. The track swung out and around to avoid a large garden patch and a shed. The brown roof of the place swept low over the side facing Clarimonde, with no windows, only a dark recessed door. The shed was in a line that could provide cover for her while she looked through the garden. She had already noted the ramrod Brussels sprout stems with their topknot of leaves still crowning a few lines of fat sprouts. One crop that thrived in the cold, the sprouts grew sweeter with frost. Some had been already stripped but a few were left. Even raw they'd be like sweet cabbage. The snow was up to her boot tops but the good sweater socks kept out any wet.

She began to have moments when things went dark. Strange visions emerged. The frightening occasion of receiving the sweater came vividly alive. For a moment she hallucinated the room at Ravensbrueck with the distorted laughing faces of those who dressed her for getting _____ (they used a word she wouldn't even think). She nearly fainted.

"I must stop this. I mustn't fall now. I couldn't get up." On failing legs she stumbled into the garden, keeping the shed between her and the door of the cottage. If the people were inhospitable, she'd still need to fill her pockets with what she could.

Fraulein Edith Stein appeared quite naturally, not at all like a vision, saying, "It's all right, Clara dear, it is not stealing to take food when one is facing starvation. Remember your moral theology for the exam."

She grabbed for the first sturdy stalk, and steadying herself, tried to pry off the resistant buds. Her fingers were too cold to do the job, so she knelt down and fastened her teeth around a sprout. Barely able to bite it off, she fell forward in the snow. Where was Fraulein Stein now?

So good it was to lie there! She had no strength to move. Even the thoughts in her head were slurred. "This, dear Lord, is when I hand over myself to you. Here I am, take me."

How long she laid in the snow, she didn't know. It kept sifting over her like flour over a lump of dough. She felt cold but didn't mind because she was no longer there at all. She was in a group kneeling in a great cathedral, dripping with icicles, like the Köln one, and they were singing the rosary. She had never heard the rosary sung, but the tune was familiar. She knew the words, confusingly they weren't really the rosary, "Jesu, think on me. Make my soul like unto thee." It was a familiar tune. She hummed the tune while the choir sang on. How could she hum with this big thing in her mouth. What? What was it? She spat out the big sprout, and heard the voice.

A choir member was saying, "My God, my God, a woman in the snow!" Was it the book she'd read in school, "Drei Männer im Schnee"? Three Men in the Snow, but not a woman in the snow.

But the voice kept crying, "My God, My God, a woman in the snow." She must correct this voice, she opened her mouth and whispered, "Three men. It's three men."

The voice responded. Are they after you, three men?"

"Yes," murmured Clarimonde, "after me." There was a pause while this was considered.

Then a woman's voice hollered, "Carl, come and help me. I can't get her up."

Two strong arms were under hers and leaning back on them she struggled to her feet trying to focus. Wavering in front of her was a round face framed with a bright woolen cap from which poked out two blonde braids. The lips moved,

"Who are you? And where are these men?"

Clarimonde didn't understand. "Are there men? Then I must hide."

"Never mind, you poor thing. We'll worry about that later. Carl, help me get her to the house." Between the two of them, the stout lad and the stocky woman, they half dragged her through the knee-deep snow to the house.

Through that first night Marta tended the still hallucinating Clarimonde, shushing the children until they too slept. It was nearly morning before the spoon-fed warm soup to which she had added milk began to clear Clarimonde's brain. She found herself on a divan covered over with a pile of quilts on one side of a large room with a bright fire burning on the hearth across. Could this be heaven? It felt like heaven. And there, eyes closed, in a chair nearby was an angel. Marta looked angelic; blonde hair curling on her brow framed a rosy round face; a plump arm resting on the chair's arm propped her chin, above which full lips semi-parted in sleep. A belly, round and full rose beneath her apron.

Clarimonde could not remember how she had got to this place. She could remember nothing at all except she had not been safe, and now she was – thoroughly safe. She slept on and on, waking only when this angel fed her more warm milk soup. Even a small child climbing over her and quickly pulled off could not really waken her.

When she did awake she needed a bathroom. "Please, please, angel," she said softly.

Marta turned surprised from the hearth where she had been adding wood. "Are you really awake, now?" After helping Clarimonde to a commode in a rear room of the house, she supported her to a small sofa pulled up to the table where on a matching sofa behind, two children were being kept occupied with small building blocks and crayons. A boy about five and a girl a bit older looked at her with wide eyes. Marta pulled a chair around.

"I don't want you to do anything you don't feel like yet. Do you want to talk?"

It was in conversations at this table over the next days that Clarimonde learned her name, and the names of the children, Rosa and Frederick, who was named for his father, a sergeant in the Reich army, now fighting on the Russian front which was fast shrinking into Poland, which itself was not so far away. Marta would soon deliver their third child conceived on his last leave. Going back on duty he had sensed that defeat was around the corner, and had promised that if he lived, in any retreat from a possible chaotic front, he would find her before the Russians did.

The family was out here, living away from Berlin in the cottage her artist father had built about twenty years before. His dream was to begin an artists' colony village in this rural solitude where aspiring artists would come for lessons and where exhibitions could be organized to tour cities in Germany. His was the only "art cottage" built before the First World War had delayed his plans. When his wife, her beloved mother, had died, the plan was permanently ended. The place had just become a vacation get-away for the family.

But with the bombing of Berlin, Frederick insisted his family move to the country. Carl was the retarded man, more like a boy, who lived in a hut in the woods. His presence had given Frederick ease of mind that Marta had help with the heavy chores, and the fellow could maintain the necessary contact with Feldberg just a few kilometers away. Carl walked, and when sent with a note he was strong enough to carry home the provisions they needed each week. It was the best possible arrangement to keep the family safe until Frederick could find his way to them again.

While Carl and the children played a game of homemade checkers on the floor, Clarimonde told her story apologizing for bringing her troubles to their doorstep. Marta said, "Nonsense! War was trouble for everyone, everywhere." But she did shudder to think of a fugitive under her roof. Yet, what could she do? Clarimonde was not only beautiful to look at, but as clear as glass in soul. Marta saw a reflection of purity just looking at her. She could never turn her in. She had no idea that there were such things as "camps" like Clarimonde described; and the thought of a place like Ravensbrueck chilled her to the bone. In fact, except for this young woman's obvious truthfulness, she could hardly believe it. For her part Clarimonde did not share about her marriage to Holtz. She sensed that though Marta was a good Lutheran, she would not understand this kind of mystical marriage, nor would she approve. So she told everything but that, and for a time she merely said she escaped from the house at Neustrelitz.

They carried on their conversations the first few evenings after the day's work was done. Carl was wonderful keeping the children entertained because he was entertaining himself with them. It was Marta's curiosity about the coat that finally brought out the whole sad story of Frau Krebs. Marta's sense of the danger of housing her new friend was heightened with this frightening piece of information. She lay awake at night thinking - people had actually died in helping this innocent girl. A much more sinister government was in charge of Germany

than she had ever thought possible. Hadn't her country gone to war to right desperate wrongs done to the Fatherland after World War I? Wasn't their cause just? Frederick thought so, her parents had always thought something had to happen to right the wrongs, and they had supported Hitler's rise. That Jews and other "misfits" were interred in camps wasn't information that fit what she believed about the goodness of those in authority. Anyone sent to a camp during the war had to be a subversive. But then she looked at Clarimonde, who simply could not fit that description, and who said her crime was being one half Jewish. She did recall that Frederick had been peculiarly quiet about the war on that last leave. Had he seen things he didn't want her to know about? He had been so proud about the army earlier, and had described in detail how strong and disciplined the winning Germans were. The course of the war had changed; winning was not talked about. In fact, hadn't he told her bluntly that he would get to her before the Russians when the turning tide overcame what was left of his division? When she asked, he had said, "Let's just say that nothing really was as it was presented to us."

The days grew shorter; after dark, which came about 4:00, Clarimonde helped Marta prepare the evening meal. The provisions were very simple but there was enough to share with Carl who came in stomping his feet and clapping his hands, complaining "too cold, too cold." Though he seemed clumsy, long ago he'd learned to snare rabbits and squirrels. Marta had dried some of the vegetables at the end of the summer, and had stored others in a cold cellar dug behind the house. Rabbit stew was savory, and eventually was made into soup by boiling the bones into broth and adding the leftovers. Pepper made it acceptable. Any extra from the soldier pay that had been regular until the past few months, she had been careful to save behind a brick in the chimney. She made sure that neither the children nor Carl knew where this was. From this dwindling money, she sent Carl to town for necessities.

Among the few books in the house, was a Bible, which, as the days grew shorter, Clarimonde would read by lamp light. This led to conversations with Marta about faith. Some of Clara's beliefs were borderline superstition, she thought privately. A practical soul, Marta didn't ponder deep things like Clarimonde, and saw nothing to be gained by saying a rosary, the same verse over and over. Didn't scripture say not to repeat empty words.

When she chided Clara, she only got a sweet smile with "Oh, Marta, they aren't a bit empty. They are very full. I'll teach you." And Marta would shake her head a bit severely. But love was growing between them, day by day.

When the household tasks were complete, Marta taught Clarimonde how to use the spinning wheel and loom which were part of the old cottage décor that the artist father had taken pride in. Marta spent her evenings at the wheel spinning yarn from wool that had been gathered during the halcyon days of "art colony" excitement. Together they planned out a design and began weaving a wool covering on the loom, even making dyes from dry winter weeds, flower-seed tops, and grasses gathered in the field.

Though the first big snow had melted away in a week of warm weather taking snow-play for the children with it, as Christmas came nearer, Clara taught them how to make little ornaments from pine cones and candle wax. This evolved into pinecone dolls, which needed clothes. Rosa learned to stitch using pieces of fabric cut from Clara's blue dress. After her arrival at Vogelhaus, (the house did resemble an ornate bird house) Marta had dressed her in a long woolen skirt that she could no longer fasten around her middle, and a white linen bodice. As Clara filled out over the weeks of good food, it fit better. Away from the fire, a heavy beige wool sweater in the Norwegian style kept out the chill that always lurked in the corners of the room.

Clara missed the Mass and expressed how she would like to go to church at least when Christmas came, but Marta was worried about her ever appearing in town. Besides, Jesus was as near here as He was in church.

"Oh, no, Marta, He comes as intimately as a bridegroom into the very soul at the Mass. You know, it's just like having intercourse!"

Marta was shocked and didn't hide it. "You ridiculous girl! That's blasphemous. We Lutheran's believe in the presence of Jesus in communion, but I've never heard anything as . . . as awful as that!"

"But, He said he was a bridegroom."

"Well, he didn't mean anything so gross as what you just said." "Why is intercourse gross?" "This conversation is going nowhere. It's you Catholics who are hung up on sex. 'Fruit of your womb,' and all of that stuff. And asking celibate men to regulate your sex life. Yuk! It's ugly!"

"I thought the Church's blessing and oversight made sexual union quite beautiful with a husband."

"But you've never known a husband, and certainly sex with that Holtz must have been horrible."

"Yes, it was very horrible, but . . ."

"But what?"

"It won't be when we are together again. You see, Marta, we are married."

Clarimonde had been correct. No explanation she could give would satisfy Marta. Even the scripture verses that had made so much sense sounded a bit bizarre even to Clara's ears, so how could she expect Marta to understand? She knew in her inner being that truth was in them, but trying to explain was impossible. Marta had a faculty of turning away from things that were too demanding as though she had never heard a thing.

She smiled at Clara saying, "We'll get dried peas from storage tonight and make thick pea soup. It's one of the children's favorites, but I'll have to send Carl for milk. He's chopping wood at the shed, would you take these marks and the milk jug and ask him to go right now?"

Carl set off for his grandparents' small farm that sat on the outskirts of Feldberg. It was a brisk day with bright sunshine and he was happy. He loved to

see his grandparents, and their Doberman Adolph was his closest friend in all this world.

The dog was kept to protect the goats from milk-theft. Hungry people had begun to take what was not theirs. His grandfather explained to those who were surprised at naming the dog Adolph that he was like the Fuehrer, generous and helpful to his friends, and protective and vicious to his enemies. Just the way a good leader and a good dog should be!

His grandparents provided milk to those who could pay for it, and were happy to have Frau Marta Hoffmann as a regular customer. They hardly tolerated Carl who sensed he was never encouraged to stay around long, so he would try to think of surprising or interesting things to catch their attention.

“Grossvater, guess what?” His grandfather walked away. “A big tree fell in the woods right near my house!”

He badly wanted their approval but most days had to settle for Adolph putting his big paws on his chest and licking his face. Today, setting the money and his mittens on the kitchen table, and handing his grandmother the milk jug, she said roughly, “While I get the milk from the cellar, you get back outside and take those old mittens with you.”

“Grossmutter, guess what?”

“Never you mind what, just go outside and wait.”

“We have a Jude living with us now.”

“Oh, ya, sure, a Jude.” The little woman bustled to the ladder that went down under the house, and disappeared quickly into the dark hole. The spring in the basement kept the milk cold and fresh for days. Carl carried the jug back to the cottage not feeling as happy as he had been setting out.

That evening the two old people sat before the fire as they always did. The grandfather was nodding off as usual, when his wife began to snicker, “Imagine that Carl with his preposterous story. ‘We have a Jude at our house.’ What next? That overgrown child is nothing but stupid and I can’t stand having him around. I don’t know how Frau Hoffmann can put up with that idiot. If der Fuehrer had come a little sooner he would have been drowned at birth.”

She was surprised, thinking she was talking to herself, to have her husband say quite loudly, “He said what!”

“He was trying to get me to talk to him, so he said they had a Jew living at their house.”

The old man was quiet for a while. “Probably is just a story, but I think I’ll walk out there tomorrow. I need Carl to chop us some firewood, so I’ll take the barrow.”

Even on these freezing days Marta and Clara hung things outdoors to dry. The women worked together between two tubs. Clara was washing on a scrub board because it was hard for Marta to bend over, and Marta was rinsing. Then wringing, one on one end, the other at the other, they twisted the heavy fabrics between them. Clara was dodging frozen towels as they clanked back and forth

on the lines, pinning up a sheet, when a hand touched her shoulder and a man's gravel voice said, "Hallo! Do I know you?"

She started, and turned to see a heavily furrowed face frowning under bushy white brows.

"Oh, my goodness, you frightened me! Let me get Marta!"

"No," the hand gripped her shoulder, "Who are you?"

"Please, I'm a friend of Frau Hoffmann's. Does she know you? I think I should get her."

His grip didn't loosen, "A friend. A friend from where?"

"Why a friend . . . from school days."

"I see. No need to get Frau Hoffmann. I'm Carl's grandfather and I've come for some wood. What is your name?"

Clarimonde always regretted that she wasn't a quick thinker. Her forthrightness tripped her up when it came to lies. "Clarimonde Jagaerschmidt."

"Strange name. Clarimonde, did you say?"

"Yes, they call me Clara."

"All right, Fraulein Clara, greet Frau Hoffmann for Herr Block and I'll be on my way." The old man picked up the handles of his barrow, and wheeled it off toward the shed.

Clara left her basket of wet clothes and hurried into the house.

"Do you know Herr Block? He is here!"

"Dear God, really? No. Not him."

"Why, what's the matter? He said he was Carl's grandfather."

"Yes, he's his grandfather. But he never comes here. Never. What brought him today?"

"He said he'd come for wood."

"But, he has his own wood. It can't be that."

"He had a barrow."

"Maybe, but he has his own wood – a whole forest of it right behind their farm. He's never come for wood before. Something is not right. Did you talk to him?"

"He asked me who I was. I told him a friend of yours, and my name."

Marta's rosy face faded to ash gray.

"This is a bad sign."

"Why? Do you think he would turn me in?"

"He would."

"But on what grounds?"

"He must be suspicious to have come out here. Oh, dear. I sent Carl for milk just yesterday. But Carl knows nothing. Nothing at all. I suppose he hears us talking, but I don't think he really understands anything much at all. I can't think he would have a thing to say to his grandfather."

"We'd better ask him."

The women waited anxiously, taking turns watching from behind the frozen sheet, until they saw the stooped shoulders and stocky legs push the empty barrow off down the trail. Then Marta hurried out to the shed.

“Carl, why was your grandfather here?”

Carl turned red from the roots of his curly red hair to the collar of his jacket. He pushed back his cap and wiped his brow.

“Uh, uh, he came to . . . he came to . . . to see me.”

“Why, why did he come to see you?”

“He wanted to see the Jude.”

“What did you tell him?”

The boy, he always seemed like a boy to the women, stammered, but told the truth. “He don’t like Jude, but he wanted to see one.”

“Did you think Clara was a Jew?”

“She said she was a Jude, or half a Jude.”

Carl began to cry. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

“My Grossvater, he don’t like Jude but he wanted to see one. I told him she was just half a Jude, but he still wanted to see one.”

“It’s all right, Carl, come in for supper, then you can go to your hut.”

That evening, the women did what they could to prepare for the inevitable. They made two bundles of absolute necessities; some food, some warm clothing for themselves and for the children and wraps for the baby, just as much as each could carry. But then they considered - it would be impossible for Marta, now within a week or possibly two of delivery to set off into the unknown. They would have to wait for the baby to be delivered here, if possible. If the Secret Service came before that, they would try to take the bundles. Just maybe, no one would come. Just maybe Herr Block would not . . . after all, a pregnant woman and her children? Just for taking in a friend? No one could be that heartless.

They lay awake all that night, Marta thinking and worrying, Clara praying, “Dear Father, How have I brought these dear ones into such danger? Did you really, really Father bring me into their lives to poison them – yes, to poison them unto death? They saved my life, dear Father, save their lives. I can go to the Cross, but not them, dear Lord, not them. Save Rosa, save Frederick, save my dear, dear Marta, and the little one, the little one. Dear Lord, save them. Save them, I beg you, do not let them perish because of me.”

The morning dawned gray with a heavy threat of snow. Marta took the few marks left – Frederick’s pay had not come this month - from the chimney-hiding place and tucked them into her bosom. She dressed the children and herself in their warmest woolen clothing and set out a second set of woolens to be slipped into at the door. She did not look at or speak to Clara at all, which seemed to speak louder than words that she regretted ever extending hospitality to this fugitive. She had brought her dear children into the worst of all bad eventualities because of a soft heart. How could doing one’s Christian duty bring

coals of fire upon all those whom she loved the most? Her heart as big as a black moon, ached all the way into her feet – encompassing this child's heart about to be born in mourning. Why had it not shrunk to a hard black pea when she first encountered that Clairmonde.

Then she saw again those eyes, those eyes that had eyes behind eyes. That was how she saw Clarimonde. This dearest girl had eyes behind her eyes, eyes that saw things most people never saw, eyes that reflected things that no earthly scene held. Marta had looked into those eyes and seen vistas of serenity and clarity and peace and love. Yet, it was this girl with those eyes that was bringing horror into her life, bringing blackness the depth of pitch upon her dear children. She shrank at the thoughts that assailed her. Her spirit receded into the corners of the room even while she mechanically prepared a breakfast meal for them.

Rosa and Frederick catching the tension of their mother, sat like two small shrunken statues on the divan behind the table, breathing shallowly. They picked at the bread softened with milk and sugar in the bowls in front of them. Neither could eat.

“Eat now, this may be all we have for a while. You must eat it now!” Her voice didn't sound like their mother, so constricted it was in her throat. She swallowed and looked around for Clara.

Clara sat on the edge of the bed, the very bed where she had been nursed back to life by Marta just six weeks before. Her head was bowed. Then she looked up with that direct gaze, but her eyes were filled with tears.

“Dear Marta, what have I done to you?” There was no answer because there was no answer. Marta turned away.

There was nothing to be done, and they could do nothing. They sat, even the children, through the morning hours, waiting. The children dozed. When the black car finally came, it came bringing a kind of relief, at least now they could go forward and not sit in miserable agony and fear. Two black booted men burst into the room, “Which of you is Clarimonde Jagaerschmidt?”

“I am. Please, take me but leave these others, they have had nothing to do with this.”

The first man struck her. “Don't be telling me what to do! This woman harbored a dangerous enemy of the Reich.”

The men picked up the two children who began to wail and strode off to the car assured that the women would go nowhere but follow. Marta handed one of the prepared parcels to Clarimonde, and took one herself and stumbled after her children. When they reached the car, the first man grabbed the parcel from Clarimonde and threw it as far as he could, then pushed the girl into the car. The other knocked Marta against the car door, causing her to drop her package. The man stomped on it and kicked it aside, then thrust the heavy woman into the back seat onto her children.

The cries had subsided because Frederick had been slapped severely in the face, “Stop that bellowing!”

Clarimonde tried to comfort sobbing Rosa; Frederick huddled against his mother with his face in her breast. The car drove off down the deceptively peaceful lane with four trembling human beings now reduced to impersonal objects considered a danger to the state like canisters of poison – something to be got rid of as soon as possible. A tearful redhead wringing his mittens stood in the shed door watching it all.

“Get dolphie doggie dark - go to der Fuehrer,” he mumbled.

Chapter Three

Feldberg was only twenty kilometers from Ravensbrücke. Clarimonde didn't know it, but in her escape she had actually come closer to the wretched place. It took the speeding car, jolting and jerking over back roads, less than twenty minutes before coming in view of the rows of electrified barbed wire that like steel claws gripped the bleak rows of single storied barracks. As they traversed the surrounding SS camps, Marta had begun to moan softly. Then she reached out and clutched Clara's hand. The pressure was so great it hurt, and Clara knew immediately. Marta was in labor. She looked at her face to see wide brown eyes full of terror. Reaching past Rosa she put her arm around her shoulder and with her other hand tenderly stroked down over those fearful eyes.

"We must trust," she whispered, "If Jesus takes us to His Cross, He will be there."

Marta shook her head and pushed her hand away. Her mouth moved without sound, "Don't tell me that, now!"

Then she put her hand over her mouth to stifle a cry. The car was allowed through the gate, and drew up to a door with "Registratur" over it.

"Kommen Sie, get out!" the SS officer commanded, and grabbed Marta's arm to pull her from the seat.

"Stop! She's in labor!"

The man laughed. "Labor huh! Goes in easy, comes out hard? Well, this is just the place to take care of that! I'll get somebody."

The other man stepped back. He wanted nothing to do with a woman with water streaming down her legs. The first man came back followed by a woman in military dress.

"We have Doctor here for just such as this. Come along, now, I'll help you to the clinic." Her voice was masculine, but not as rough as the men.

Over her shoulder she said to the officer, "What's her offense? A Jew?"

"Worse, harboring a Jew."

"You harbored a Jew," the woman said to Marta, "Why in the world would you do that? Now look at the fix you are in."

Seeing Rosa and Frederick trying to cling to their mother, she added, "And with other children, too. You poor Rauschgift. I suppose that thing over there is the Jew."

She looked again. "Hey, I remember her – the one we dressed up to be a concubine. The one who was a virgin. Ha ha."

The laugh was not a laugh at all but was only a crude sound. "So they caught her at last. There's been quite a fuss over her. That SS guy, he really got it in the neck. Ha ha."

One of the men spoke up, "Be careful how you talk about the SS, Kapitan. You may have some authority here, but you'd better watch your words! We don't take kindly to insults."

"Oh pardon, I wasn't being insulting, but didn't you know that that buddy of yours, Leutnant Grunner, was sent off to a camp? He'd consorted with that one

– a Jew, against der Fuehrer’s explicit orders to the corps? So they sent him to a Jew-lager!” She clapped her hands for emphasis.

This information about Holtz penetrated Clarimonde like water, albeit foul water, into a sponge. She wanted to ponder every drop, but saved them away, because of Marta who was barely standing.

“Well, come along, little lady, let’s get this over with. Ha ha.”

Clara remembered with a chill that very laugh the day they had dressed her in the one-piece chemise and the little blue dress, poking at her where they shouldn’t, and . . .that laugh.

She shuddered. This was the way it was with Jesus, mocked and tortured. “Let it be for You – but me, have it be me, not Marta, Lord!”

The Kapitan called over two women standing at the corner of the building, watching curiously from a safe distance. Clara knew them to be Kapos, internees who worked for the administration.

“See those kids? You know where they go – to Youth Camp, macht schnell!”

The two came and pulled Rosa and Frederick away from Marta.

“You better go with them, dears,” she said. “I will come as soon as I can. Clara, please, see they are safe.”

“But I must come with you. You don’t know these doctors as I do.”

The Kapos looked at each other knowingly. In shock, the children made no protest, but trustingly put their hands in the hands of their captors and were walked away. Frederick, as though waking from a dream, tried to pull away to run back, but the woman tightening her grip hauled him away, screaming, “Mama, Mama.”

It was the last time Marta ever saw her children. There were no children in the camp. The “Youth Camp” consisted of vans used to gas unwanted children. Clara knew in her heart what would happen; at once she saw them both like angels in heaven. They were baptized in Christ, they would die in Christ and live with Christ. Their hope could not be on this earth where black evil reigned, it would have to be in the resurrection. Then she saw clearly with inner eyes Mother Mary gathering Rosa and Frederick to herself.

“Mama, Mama,” Frederick ran to her burying his blonde curls in her breast, and was enfolded in her arms, Rosa, too, came after. Mother Mary put her hands around her face and kissed her. Then they faded away.

Clara was immediately sent off to the part of the dreaded clinic where Doctor Gerta held court. Artz Überhant had sworn an oath to make her sorry for the way she had treated them – running away- so nearly putting her own head in a noose. If she hadn’t changed the records back marking her as a Jew, she would have had hell to pay, and it wasn’t easy. But she’d made Holtz take the rap. She told everyone that he’d insisted on this Jew-girl for a concubine even though she’d warned him about the rules.

“Look,” she’d told the SS investigators, “Here’s the record, it says plainly ‘Jew,’ and here’s his signature when he signed her out.”

He’d defended himself, “That woman has changed the records. She signed me out with a prostitute.”

“Oh no! Why would I have changed a document?” She knew he wouldn’t confess to blackmailing her in order to get Clarimonde.

This doctor of death turned to the task at hand. In a dirty clinic room Marta was delivered of a healthy baby boy. The doctor held him up for her to see, a ruddy, bawling infant. It was the only time she saw him. She slept on a cot outside the room for a few hours, was given a rag to act as a pad for her bleeding, and then was taken to the dormitory where she was assigned a bunk – a board with a dirty blanket.

“You can rest today, but tomorrow you’ll get an assignment,” the Kapo had said.

“Where are my children? And when do I get my baby?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about them. They are taken care of.”

Marta had fallen back weeping and exhausted; she had no vision, but neither did she have hope. Her precious children, her precious children, lost, lost, lost. Did sleep knit up the raveled sleeve of care? Not in this place. Sleep was agony. Awake or asleep all was agony. In the night a different Kapo brought her a drink of water and a rag to bind her breasts.

“You’d better not get milk – just give you more trouble.”

It was a small kindness. This woman would try at times to ease some of the suffering. Her status in the camp, though very low, was higher than the poor inmates, and whenever possible she tried to aid them.

The next day Marta was forced to the camp office to be enrolled. Despairing of life, wanting to die, she could scarcely walk. The Kapo found her, and for a few moments tried to tell her that she must get up and walk or they would do something more horrible to her. She helped her get to her feet, and when the SS officer came, she was able to put one foot in front of the other.

At the enrollment office, she was stripped of her woolen clothes and undergarments, given another rag for sanitary purposes, some old knee length underwear, and the standard course blue striped shift of the camp. The enrollment officer asked her the standard questions, her name, age, and address – her Berlin address. Marta rallied, weakly trying to protest her arrest and her illegal assignment to this camp.

“My husband is a Sergeant, a hero with medals from the battle for Leningrad in 1941. He was with the Army of Field Marshall Wilhelm von Leeb on the Eastern Front. I am not a Jew nor a subversive, but a loyal wife and mother of the Third Reich. Where are my children and my baby? This was a crime . . .”

At this, the officer made a threatening gesture and told her to shut up. He got up and took out a great sheaf of papers from a cabinet behind her. What is your husband’s name?

“Frederick Wilhelm Hoffmann.”

It took a few minutes for the man to thumb through the pages.

“Sergeant Frederick Wilhelm Hoffmann of 97 Logan Strasse, Berlin?”

“Yes, that’s my husband.” She was feeling very weak and faint.

“Too bad, he’s listed here as missing in action. The Russian front? No doubt dead.”

Marta awoke back on her bunk. She felt bruised all over.

“How did I get here?” she barely whispered.

“Oh, you fell off the chair and we partly dragged you, but you walked some, too. You’d better recover quickly or you will be worse off. Come on now, gather yourself together.” It was the kinder Kapo. “You’ve been assigned to the shoe house.”

“The shoe house?” “Yes, they make shoes here out of straw. You’re lucky, you can sit down in there.”

“Lucky? How can you say that about anyone.”

“Well, lucky in comparison with some others.”

“Where is Clarimonde?”

“That’s what I mean. Artz Überhunt has her over in the laboratory.” The woman shook her head. “Some awful stuff goes on there, believe me.”

With the help of the Kapo whose name she said was Katze, “Katze the Kapo” - she didn’t smile when she said it, Marta found a place at the long table where women were weaving straw making the soles of shoes. None of them looked up or spoke, but their fingers moved mechanically braiding the coarse material.

When the Kapo left, one woman, still not looking up, but keeping her fingers moving, asked, “What did you do? You don’t look especially Jewish.”

Marta didn’t reply, she could not think about anything, nor speak.

“Oh, a snooty one!”

“Leave her alone,” said another, “Can’t you see – she can barely sit up.”

“I heard she came with kids,” said another. “And had a baby yesterday.”

One of the women began to wail.

“Stop it, Sophie, Stop it. Do you want us all put in the experiments?”

Turning to Marta she bluntly announced, “Don’t feel sorry for yourself, most of us came here with children.” Around the long table pairs of dark eyes viewed her with some hostility. The wailing died down.

“Sophie had a baby here, too.” The woman next to Marta whispered. “I’m sorry. Here let me show you. You do it this way.” Her fingers were raw and bloody, the nails broken down into the quick.

In only two days came the morning when Marta refused to get up from her bunk.

Katze was worried. “Please, please, you must keep going. There are worse things than the shoe room. Have you heard about der Walzcommando? Believe me, you don’t want to invite that!”

Marta didn't respond, but lay with her face to the wall. She didn't care anymore.

"I'm going to see if your friend can come. Maybe, if she's able, I can pretend she is supposed to go somewhere. I know where she is and I don't think she's had her legs broken or anything."

The Kapo moved slowly. No one moved quickly in this place, and no one acted as though they had a destination. Such straightforward activity brought suspicions and questions, and no one asked for that. So ambling around for a while, Katze wandered into the clinical building where the experimental victims lived, but mostly died. The screaming in the building went on day and night. It got so that screaming no longer had the power to raise the hair on the arms, or cause the heart to beat faster. It was like loud background music – awful to say or think that! Katze could still feel nauseated at the sights there – mutilated women ; but she swallowed hard and looked for Clarimonde.

She found her sitting in a chair – a good sign. But then she saw her leg; it had been slashed with some blunt instrument and was swollen red with the beginning of infection. Clarimonde had her head back with her eyes closed, but it was evident that she was not asleep. The Kapo had to act rough even though there weren't others around. She shook Clarimonde and ordered her up.

"Get up! You're wanted!"

An office assistant to Doktor Überhant came out of the next room.

"What's going on?" "She's wanted by the Oberleutnant for a short time. If she can walk."

"Oh, she can walk still. Things haven't gotten quite to that stage." The assistant laughed. "She's not quite right in the head – keeps seeing things, from the fever I suppose. Some garden, she talks about with olives and angels and of course her Herr. Drives us nuts! But sure she can walk."

"It won't take long and I'll see she gets back."

"Well, you'd better be sure of that, Artz Gerta is having a great time with that one."

Katze raised the slight girl to her feet and the bad leg buckled.

"Here, I'll get a bandage it will help with the gooey stuff, too."

They wrapped the leg tightly, especially around the knee, and stood Clara up again. She groaned slightly but bit her lip, and leaning on the Kapo's shoulder limped stiff-legged a few steps.

Out of earshot, the nurse assistant had gone back into her office, Katze whispered to Clara, "You've got to come and help your friend, or they will shoot her, gas her, or even bring her here. She's too depressed to get up this morning."

"Oh, oh, my Marta?"

"Your Marta, huh! Now if I have to rough you up a bit, or knock her around a bit, you know, it is just to keep important people from being suspicious. Like this."

And she hit Clara in the head. It was timely; a woman in uniform had just emerged from one of the huts.

“Stop dragging that foot!” the Kapo yelled and shoved Clara in the back making her stumble forward. “These fakers,” she growled to the uniformed woman.

They made their way through the rows of low buildings to the one housing Marta’s dormitory. The smells everywhere were intense, but different from the clinic, which had putrefying odors from putrefying bodies. Here it was unwashed bodies and excrement in the nearby latrine.

Marta lay as she was, face to the wall. Clara dragged her bad leg over and tried to kneel down, but couldn’t so just sat on the straw covered floor beside the low plank.

She patted Marta’s head, “Marta, dearest Marta, will you talk to me?” There was no movement in the horizontal body.

“Please, please, my sister, today is Christmas. Did you know that? I figured it out on the Doktor’s calendar. The best gift in the world would be if you would talk to me.”

She unevenly parted the wild, dirty blonde hair with her finger and began to braid it. Marta made no move.

“There now, I don’t have much time, but I must tell you something. This is Jesus’ birthday, and the best present we can give Him is this suffering. We have a chance now, my Marta dear, to do what few people can do, to follow him all the way. We have nothing to lose – if you want to lose your life right now and die, then let’s die for him by doing something no one else can do.”

There was no response. The woman lay inert. Clara put her hand upon the still head.

“Lord Jesus, take what is left of me, take it all, but give her, give her . . . won’t you please give her . . . your Spirit?”

Marta stirred; words formed that had trouble leaving her lips. “What can we do?”

Clara leaned over her and whispered, “We can love and change the world. We can overcome evil with good. Do you see this Kapo here” – Katze was leaning nonchalantly against the doorframe trying to light a cigarette butt, really acting as lookout – “she is doing her best for us and she’s a Jewess. We have the power to do great things in the name of Jesus before we die. We aren’t afraid of anything now. They can shoot us, or anything, nothing can really harm us. So, please, now, get up, and make this a Christmas Day to remember. Perhaps the Angel of Death will take us home today, on Christmas Day, and you will be with Frederick, Rosa and the baby.”

At that Marta began to cry, trying to stifle her sobs.

Clara asked softly, “The baby, did you name the baby?”

Marta’s voice was barely audible, “Ja, I named him Holtz, after your husband.”

Clara was so astounded she burst into tears. “You’ve forgiven me?”

After a long pause, the reply, “How could I not forgive you? This is not your doing,” her voice cracked. “Frederick and I . . . his parents . . . the Blocks,

and other good Christian Germans brought this on. I know it now; we had no idea what we were doing. O God, Deutschland” her whisper was barely discernable, “über alles.”

“Oh, Marta, you sound stronger!”

“No, very weak, but . . . with God’s help . . . I need to do this . . . Can you help me up?” Clara had trouble getting off the floor, and then Marta saw the leg.

“What are they doing to you?”

“Don’t you worry; it isn’t going the way she wants, and I want it all to be for . . .” the Kapo came back into the room. . . “ for Him . . .you know.”

“Come on now, we have to get back,” said the Kapo. You,” she pointed to Marta, “get over to the shoe room as fast as you can. Make up an excuse on the way - you can say I beat you - and then work like the devil when you get there. If they don’t ask, say nothing.”

“You are an angel,” whispered Clara.

“Don’t try that angel stuff on me,” Katze said, “Really I’m a devil,” and she cuffed her rather hard on the arm.

From that day on Marta became a mothering figure for all of the weakest and most afflicted. She sat with the sick often delirious at night, holding their hands, smoothing their foreheads, giving an extra bite of her own ration of bread. She would go for water in the middle of the night, and aid the weak to the latrine. One time when trying to help with her garments an old woman who could hardly stand, she lost her balance and nearly fell into the cesspool only saved by putting one foot in and the woman squatting next grabbing and holding on.

Over a week she gathered a small group of a few Christians; they were gypsies and prostitutes, also some prominent German women who were implicated in their husband’s plots against the government. It was a motley group. At first they displayed bitterness and antagonism toward each other, and anger with any Bible reference. But in the late evening and as quietly as possible Marta led some prayers. She asked for memorized Bible verses to be recited in the group. Gradually more and more were stirred to remember childhood lessons, and the women began to compile all of the Bible verses they could remember. The Kapo provided them with pieces of cardboard and paper from the kitchens and a stub of pencil – very precious, indeed. They said the Lord’s Prayer, and began to help each other through the day with agreed upon signals to “forgive as they hoped to be forgiven.”

At the work tables, Marta willingly took risks to aid whoever was most in need; the friendly Kapo often covered for her. Once when they were caught at an errand of mercy, they were forced into a charade. Katze knocked Marta to the ground and kicked her mercilessly. It was impossible to feign the beating or the charade would have been exposed.

“What are you trying here?” she screamed, and kicked her and kicked her. The SS guard was satisfied and walked off. Katze walked off too, leaving Marta to make her way back to her bunk the best she could. But the attitude in the barracks

had changed. People smiled more often, they offered encouraging words, trying with the meager means at hand to help each other.

In the shoe house, the group became split, some sneering and angry, a few trying to do good in whatever way possible. Marta was always the first in the building each morning, bringing what she could find for the stove, even straw from the floor to break the cold, greeting the workers with some word of kindness or, sensing that would antagonize, merely looking directly at the woman in recognition.

One stooped woman with a long braid of dirty gray hair wound around her head, never looked up, never spoke or smiled. She was pointed out as Rabbi Scholersohn's widow. Katze said that she'd heard gossip that on Kristalnacht he had been knocked to the ground and shot while protesting the Brownshirts who were ravaging his synagogue. She had been at another camp for several years and had just been brought here. One morning Marta arriving at the work room found Frau Scholersohn waiting for her. Marta was surprised.

"I am sorry to frighten you," the gravel voice was very soft. It was hard for Marta to understand. "But I need to know about you." There was a pause, then the raspy voice continued, "What is it that makes you like you are? Why do you go on when it does no good, no good at all? Don't you know that it makes it harder for many of us who just want to sink away from thinking or seeing or being at all?"

Marta didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry if I offend you."

The voice rose, "Of course, you offend me and most of these," she waved her hand over the tables. "Just stop!" her voice grew still stronger, "stop this . . . this caring. It's agonizing. Let us go. We want not to feel. Don't you know the space of oblivion? You can get there if you just would retreat and leave us alone."

"It is better to love than to feel nothing."

"Love?" the woman fairly spat it out, "You are sick! I don't want to hear that word. Do you know where you are? How can you even speak such a word?"

Marta felt tongue-tied. "I know where I am . . . and I know whom I serve." She struggled with what to say, "I just want to invite you. . . to our group. We meet after lights are out briefly, tonight. We'd like you to come."

Frau Scholersohn shook her head impatiently, saying, "I hear you talk about Torah. Horrible! You're unteachable," and moved to her place down the table.

A great stir moved like a giant wave through the camp with gossip that a large contingent of women were to be chosen for release to Sweden. A Swedish diplomat had arranged with Himmler, chief of the camps, to repatriate 10,000 mostly Poles, 2000 of whom were Jews. Himmler, realizing that the war would eventually be lost, with war crimes in mind, had begun to make himself appear to be somewhat humane. When news of this came to Marta, she amazed herself one night in prayer to find that even if she were offered such a way out, she would

stay where she was with those she had come to suffer with and to love. This misery had become transformed by uniting every moment of it to the sufferings of Christ. Until relief was there for everyone, she could not leave. And there was some evidence that the final days of the camp might not be too far in the offing.

Hopes were being boosted by a low boom, boom, boom many miles away that could only be heard on days with an east wind. The Russians were coming. Or so they thought. (Actually the Russians were too far away to hear, but the Germans were putting up new defensive positions, and using dynamite to do it.) One of these days they would be liberated. At least that was the hope of the poor ragged women not chosen for Sweden and slowly starving to death through the bitter winter of 1944. But they were the more fortunate among the Ravensbrück inmates left, all 70,000 of them. In the clinic of Artz Gerta, the more women died in their agony, the more inspired this evil woman became to do medical experiments.

Clarimonde simply was a trial to her. She had infected that leg with every imaginable bacteria, even putting spawn of gangrene into the wounds, and though they were truly infected and oozed slime, gangrene did not develop, not even blood poisoning. The wounds would actually try to heal until they were opened up again. She salivated with the gouging and tearing, but finally decided that the girl didn't have enough flesh on her skinny legs. What could she do with her?

The problem was solved when she was contacted by the W.V.H.A. of the SS that experiments in freezing were to be carried on at Dachau. Could she send some women? Perfect! Perfect for some of these tough prisoners. What could that Clarimonde do to thwart an experiment in a vat of ice water? She let the leg heal roughly on its own, and signed her in for the transport that would come for a contingent women in two weeks.

The other camp officers fingered Marta. The woman was well named Marta –Martyrer. Her with the obnoxious platitudes. So send her. One of them complained about the Kapo that called herself Katze. She was entirely too often sneaking around with what was suspiciously like prisoner aide. That Jude. Get rid of her, too. The transport list grew.

Doktor Gerta Überhant always slept like a child. She would lie awake for a short time, which was always creative, devising new twists on her scientific "studies," and then would fall into dreamless sleep, awakening invigorated for a new day. Her house outside the compound was far enough away so that the screaming, which she was used to anyway, did not disturb her nights. But this night was different; she lay awake a long time thinking. The booming to the east, even though she had been assured that it was not the Russians, still meant that Germany was in trouble. New fortifications nearly on the western Polish border? That seemed ominous. One hundred kilometers was not very far. A retreat and an advancing army, how long would that take? Not nearly long enough. Perhaps it was time for her to find a way to leave Ravensbrück. She certainly wouldn't

want to be on the premises if and when the place was broken into by the Russians. Gott behüte!

It would have to be done surreptitiously. She couldn't just pack up and leave; the Deathhead corps operating and guarding the place wouldn't tolerate that. Then she thought of a brilliant plan. She would take some of the garments from a few failed "experiments," which happened everyday, and keep them ready. With enough clothes underneath, she needn't be cold. Then she'd disguise herself and join the women on the transport. If possible she'd slip away someplace along the route, using her authority to take up residence in some German home till it was all over. She had lots of friends in the Berlin environs and they'd have to go that way.

If that was impossible, and she got to Dachau she'd identify herself, explaining some necessity of traveling with the prisoners. Oh yes, she would need to be sure to take identification papers. There was the problem of the women traveling with her knowing her. Well, she could threaten them. She would still have her old power once the folks on the other end recognized the famous Doctor Gerta Überhant. It seemed foolproof.

There would still be a Germany even in the event of a surrender. Anyway, surrender to the Americans would be a darn sight more safe than surrender to the Russians. And if that ever happened, and it wasn't inevitable, she would pass herself off as someone else. If she stayed at Ravensbrück, that would be impossible. The next morning she added a name to the transport-to-Dachau roster. Impeccable as the Germans were in their record keeping, she was pretty sure that no one would check out the names on the roster against the camp names and numbers. She called herself Anna Lutz who was at the point of death, and gave herself her number.

One late evening, as the group had just finished their few prayers, a small figure emerged from the night and stepped into the darkened barracks. It was Frau Scholersohn. When Marta recognized her, her first thought was that she had probably brought SS with her, and she mentally prepared for the worst.

The woman said, "I was invited, so don't be angry."

"We're not angry," said one of the group, "we welcome you." No one used the words, "happy" or "glad" so inappropriate such words now seemed.

"I have a message from my dear dead husband, Rabbi Scholersohn. It is a message that you very deluded, if not demented, women should hear. God is not hearing you. Did you hear me? God is not hearing you! You need to know that what you are doing is utter futility, God is not hearing you, and if he should be, he is angry at your affrontery to disturb him. God has turned away, *Hester Panim*. It is as it is written in Deuteronomy – the Torah describes the Hiding of the Face. God has hidden from us, he has turned away, and he is allowing the universe to run on its own. Can't you see that? Or are you all as unteachable as this one who runs around here so full of herself." Marta assumed in the dark that she meant her. "I don't know the whole passage to tell you, but it's something like

this, ‘ In that day my anger will flare up and I will abandon them and hide my face from them, so they shall be devoured and many evils and distresses shall befall them.’ That is *Hester Panim*. This is how the world is when God’s control is suspended. All your praying is for nothing, for nothing! Except you might be antagonizing the Lord and He will withhold His ordering from the universe even longer! I beg you to stop! The Rabbi would be thoroughly disgusted with you, but as he always said, ‘It takes goy stupidity to be a Christian.’ Now I know exactly what he meant – goy stupidity.”

Not a sound, except for breathing, came from the women. Then someone said softly, “That god is not the God I know and love. He would never turn His face, because He is right here with us enduring everything we endure.”

There was more silence, then another said, “God came to earth and went through all of this, the beatings, the mockery, the torture, the slow agonized death, just like us, to make us know that He was with us in the worst that this world can do.”

“I feel Him with me every day,” said another.

A fourth spoke up, “We are helping Him lavish forgiveness on the world of sin by doing penance for it; why do you think Uberleutnant Schiller knows we meet but has never turned us in? Because we pray for him and he has changed. Marta brought him the Gospel.”

Frau Scholersohn’s face could not be seen, but one could imagine the look of disgust that was there, for she abruptly pushed her way out of the group, muttering, “Goy stupidity, goy stupidity!”

The next day at the lineup for roll call, the little woman with the gray braid wrapped around her head, the little woman who had never looked up, shouted out a raspy obscenity at the officer. “You Nazi dog, you son of ----- . Faulen in Hölle!”

The two attending SS who usually lounged around at the side of the building during the roll call, immediately sprang towards her. They had the offender on the ground in an instant and the larger of the two simply stomped the life out of her. The first picked up the limp body like the bag of bones it now was, and flung it into the fence.

“Who’s next?” asked the officer. “For that you can stand here until I say so.”

It was five hours wrapped only in their rags in the bitter wind before a subordinate returned and released them to the workroom. By then their fingers were so cold they could not make them wrap straw.

The roster for the Dachau transport was complete, but because of complications those chosen waited for four days in an otherwise empty barracks with no heat and only a two day ration of bread which was to have been for the days on the road.

Marta and Clara could scarcely believe it when they saw each other among the assembled. They both were only a shadow of their former selves – walking,

talking skeletons. But Clara was much the more ravaged. Her leg had been amputated in a last attempt to keep authorities in Dachau from faulting the “work” that had been done on it. Artz Gerta would have had her killed, but hatred for Clara and her visions of ‘the Lord’ kept her name on the roster. More suffering than anyone could imagine is what she wanted for Clara, the damned saint! Clarimonde leaned on her crutch and hopped. So frail she was that when Marta first recognized her she saw the scrawny, one-legged hen that she had once kept out of sympathy.

Marta’s heart leapt towards Clara, and she embraced her without thought of consequences. Let them shoot her, she had in her arms the only one alive in the world she loved.

“My dear, dear Clara, what have they done? What have they done? Are you really here with me?” She buried her head against the bony shoulder careful not to upset her precarious balance.

“There, Marta. Is it Marta?” Two sunken eyes took her in. “Oh, how wonderful! Oh, Lord, thank you!” And Clara hugged the shrunken form that once had been so round and hearty.

With so much to share, both knew they would say nothing, perhaps forever. They just sat on the straw covered floor and held hands. Oddly enough they did not look at each other again, but communicated through their icy fingers, enough warmth to fill their aching hearts.

The women had been issued second-hand coats from the building bulging with “donated” clothes for the journey, but at night to keep from freezing they slept in a heap, changing places so the outside person could be warmed. Only one of the twelve was not locked in the communal embrace, Anna Lutz, who came at the last moment into the group.

By the fourth day, starving, dehydrated, freezing, staggering, they were ushered out to a transport truck. At the embarkation point stood Überleutnant Schiller. With one look at the huddle of fleshless, shivering, scarcely human refuse, and among them one without a leg, he was filled with indignation.

“Who is in charge here?” he bellowed.

The SS officers on hand all shook their heads. The senior man said only, “We were assigned here today. Somebody must have lost orders. You know. . .”

“I do not know! Get these women some food, macht schnell! Bring blankets and warm tea or coffee. If there is none, bring water!”

Then he eyed a comparatively portly prisoner standing a bit apart from the others, she had her back to him. He was curious.

“Who is that?” He asked Katze.

She shrugged. “If I knew I wouldn’t tell.”

“Really?!” Now the Überleutnant was really puzzled. He walked over and tapped the woman on the shoulder. The face that met his was wholly odd, smeared with dirt; she looked as though she had been eating dirt. Dirt was around her mouth. He felt repulsed. What kind of creature was she with her straggly black hair hanging over her defiant eyes? To be that stout she must either be a newcomer or had come to Ravensbrück obese.

“What’s your name?”

“Anna Lutz,” the voice was like a growl.

“Are you on the transport list?”

“Ja.”

A pile of disreputable blankets had been rounded up, and one Kapo came with a big covered pot that was steaming.

“Herr, you sent for this?”

“What is it?”

“Soup, Herr.”

“Well, get these women to sit down and feed them.”

“How can I do that?”

“Have you got a ladle?”

“Ja, Herr”

“Take a ladle full to each one and go around this circle until they have had their fill.”

Another officer had come on the scene. “What’s going on here, Heinrick?”

“We are sending these women to Dachau for a special mission, and they can’t arrive dead. That’s what’s going on here! Total neglect. Who has been in charge of this?”

“Don’t know, probably just one of those things that slipped through. I’ll find out.” He walked away.

The soup, though mostly made of darkish potatoes and beans, was devoured greedily. Too greedily. One of the women couldn’t keep it down, vomited and fainted. She was taken off the list and carried away. Then, each clutching a blanket, the rest were lifted into the back of the truck. When it came to the odd one, the soldier actually grunted. All the others had gone up like feathers, but this one was more than a few stones weight. So Anna Lutz was on her way to Dachau.

“Lock the doors,” was shouted to a soldier after the last woman was heaved up. He went over and slipped the bar from one door through the flange on the other.

“Wait, there!” Oberleutenant Schiller walked over and lifted the bar. “We don’t lock those women in. They may need to get out of there for any number of reasons.”

“But, sir, they will escape.”

“Escape? To where exactly? In the shape they’re in? I suppose that some soul along the road will take in these bags of bones? No, they won’t escape,” and he thought to himself, “would that that were possible.” “But they aren’t to be locked in. At the rate of efficiency around here, they just may be left unaided for days. They aren’t to be locked in!”

“Yes, sir.”

The officer shouted in, “ You in there! Slide the bar across from the inside. It will hold the doors together. “ One of the women did.

Clarimonde and Katze had thought they recognized the stranger. They didn't know whether to believe their eyes, or to think there was another in the camp who looked like an Artz Gerta who had rolled in the dirt. They tried to watch the woman, who again had separated herself some spaces away on the board bench. She kept the long scarf over her head dangling across her face. It was hard to tell, but Katze whispered,

"I really think it is that piece of ----- . What do you suppose she's up to?"

"Well, that's just it," Clara whispered back, "Why would the Doctor be with us in this journey to what she told me would be a worse hell?"

"Ja, Richtige."

The trip from Ravensbrüeck to Dachau was about six hundred kilometers. Because of the wartime conditions, some of the roads around Berlin were closed, so the route became circuitous with many delays. The truck rode like a lame monster, lurching and bouncing until the passengers found clinging to the narrow benches too arduous, and spread their blankets a few deep on the bed of the truck. Then sharing the nest, they huddled together again for warmth. Thankfully the weather had moderated. Not many of them, other than Anna Lutz, could have withstood another day and night in below freezing conditions. Part of her bulk, they decided, was that she had on many more layers of clothing than was standard issue even with the extra coat, and she refused with a shake of the head any communal warmth when offered.

The pail at the back of the truck for relieving themselves, she also refused, until finally she had to admit to the same physical necessity as the rest. Katze chuckled, "Look at that arse," she said, "all that meat and no sauerkraut."

"Hush that," said Clarimonde.

But aside from the face, the woman was much too clean, much too plump, to be an inmate. She was forced to believe it was the Doktor, Gerta Überhunt. What was she doing here?

Clarimonde closed her eyes, leaning against Marta, she whispered, "I think that woman is the same brutal doctor of the Raven who maimed and killed so many – my leg. Why do you suppose she is with us? And what do you think we might do about it?"

Marta winced. "Really, you do?"

Silence took over for some kilometers of twisting with the slamming of their poor bodies against each other.

Marta put her arms around the stick that was Clara and spoke quietly in her ear, "Perhaps the war is close to ending. There was that rumor we heard that the Russians were all the way through Poland. You know Ravensbrüeck's not far from the Polish border, not far at all. I'd guess that your doctor doesn't want to be captured by the Russians. That's the way I'd see it. She couldn't very well walk

out of the camp. The powers that be wouldn't take to that. So she's using this way to escape."

Clara turned, "If the war is ending, why would they be sending us to another camp? That doctor said we were taking part in an experiment that would make me wish I were dead. Why would they be doing that now?"

"I don't know, some people may not want to face reality. Dachau being so far south, they may think they have a lot of time. But if that really is Doctor Überhant what should we do?"

They rode on jouncing and bouncing for more hours without further conversation. Clara was suffering. With one leg it was hard to keep sitting upright in the swaying vehicle. Marta tried to brace her, and for that Clara was grateful, but finally she begged to lie down. The women were sleeping leaning into each other, but Marta wriggled back enough so that Clara could recline. They both slept, Marta with her head banging against the wooden bench, Clara with her head on Marta's leg, which soon fell asleep on its own.

The trip, which normally took about ten hours, took twenty. Officer Schiller had put several loaves of bread on board. One of the women, Todi, "a whore," she said of herself, was given custody of the loaves. She was a fair distributor, perhaps even short-changing herself. About what she guessed was every four hours she put out an allotment of bread and passed the bottle of water. "Just a sip," she admonished. They were all careful to take only their share except when the bottle came to Anna Lutz. To their amazement she took several big gulps, and when Todi grabbed it from her, she let loose with a string of expletives.

"That's her voice. It's her!" Katze was on her feet in a moment and with a lurch of the truck, nearly landed on top of the offender. Taking her big coat on both shoulders in her strong hands, she lifted the woman to her feet, pushed her to the tail of the truck bed, unlatched the doors that met in the middle, and shoved her out onto the highway. She did this so quickly and so smoothly that the startled women had no chance to exclaim. That the truck was at the time moving no more than ten kilometers per hour over a bad road probably saved Artze Gerta's life. She lived. (With her credentials she was able to make a way for herself until the allies caught up with her and tried her for war crimes at Nuremberg.)

Aghast, the prisoners said nothing, not then, not ever. To some Katze was a heroine, to others a criminal. It depended on whether or not they knew Gerta Überhant. Some did not know her, and no one ever bothered to tell them. Katze couldn't care less what they thought.

Chapter Four

Clarimonde's dreams of Holtz and the words she had heard the Kapitan say about him formed a picture in her mind that was almost complete. She saw him as she deeply felt him to be, an abused prisoner somewhere in a camp suffering just as she was suffering. Well, maybe not with the kind of torture she knew, but with other tortures of mind and soul. He did not know the strength of God that she leaned on. She could pray that he would find that strength and comfort. Perhaps because of his necessity he would open himself and turn further in the right direction. She had seen a miracle in him once; she prayed that it would open more windows to the flood of love that she experienced even in this extremity. So she prayed.

When Holtz had been expelled from the SS, his uniform stripped off, he was beaten severely, and sent via a crowded transport to Dachau prison near Munich. His superiors thought he would die on the way. The interference with death was by an old SS friend, an *Überleutnant* Gerhardt who had been in military training with him at Lichterfelde. When the transport arrived at the terminus, those able to walk were taken off and marched to interrogation and assignment. Holtz, lying in straw on the truck bed, could not move or be moved without screaming. Gerhardt was supervising the transfer, and though thoroughly accustomed to screams, he took a second look at this huddled mass. Though the face was smashed, it was that distinctive lank blonde hair evident through matted blood that made him stop. "Holtz? Holtz! Can it be you?" The eyes tried to open through the swelling and dried blood. Stooping down, Gerhardt heard his name whispered.

"Mein Gott, what is this?" He yelled an order to a couple of soldiers to bring a stretcher. Though it might have indicted him, he ordered his friend's broken body be carried as carefully as possible to that double floored place of horror dreaded by all the Dachau inmates known as Hospital.

In delirium for many days, Holtz was cared for by a prisoner who also acted as a camp medic. The medic's name was Johan. Very short in stature, the others called him Kurz. He was an odd looking man with an overgrown mustache making up for a very bald head. But to Holtz he was a gentle caregiver. When the fever subsided and Holtz's native strength began to pull him back from death, it was Kurz who fed him, washed him, and spoke the needed words of encouragement. The little medic was known for his big courage, and so far his insistence with the couple of German doctors who came through every few days had saved more than a few lives, including Holtz's who had received a small amount of penicillin that had made the difference. The broken pelvis kept him bedridden but with his steady improvement he and Kurz struck up a friendship. Why was Holtz there? His nurse wanted to know.

Where to begin? At first Holtz told him only that he had had a falling out with his superiors.

“Just a falling out?” wondered Kurz. “They beat you nearly to death over a falling out?”

Holtz hesitated. “I can trust you, can’t I? You’re not an informer? No, I know you’re not. I had to tell them that they were working for the devil – Herr Fuehrer. Satan-worshippers! That I had been working for the devil in doing what they wanted.”

Kurz said nothing, and Holtz was immediately apprehensive. But when he turned his head, there was a smile under the big weedy mustache. “Oh, the devil! That guy! He’s been plenty busy around here, too. But unless you want another beating, you’d better keep Herr Satan out of it.”

“Kurz, are you a Jew?” There was no reply, and the bow-legged fellow picked up the bedpan and made off with it.

The agonizing days in the Dachau hospital went by slowly. The buildings were scarcely heated through the bitter winter days. Tuberculosis was raging alongside typhus. Wards could hold 150 men. There was no way to maintain cleanliness, and body lice were a constant torment. More morgue than hospice, uncounted dead bodies were carted out each morning. Kurz had managed to round up some extra blankets for his patients and that took some doing because he was caring for about a hundred men. Over a week he had appeared daily at the gas-house where delousing went on. Acting as though on official business for the hospital, he stacked up as much of the ragged, but now vermin free, bedding as he could carry.

Some of his patients at one time had been aristocrats, prominent clergy, and former government leaders, but now were called “political prisoners.” Their prestige was the only reason they were kept alive; that and the ever more present reality that the war would end in defeat. The overseers of this hellish system were in a quandary of what to do with so many people who were a testimony to their hatred and brutality, people whose word would yet be trusted. With the war nearing a close, future testimony gave the camp overseers continuing anxiety. The yards were filling up with dead bodies; the crematorium, actually made simply of oversized incinerators, couldn’t keep up even though the burners were state-of-the-art. A plan was evolving to ship some of the more prominent prisoners out of Germany to Switzerland on the pretense of expatriating them to freedom, and then have some “unfortunate accident” take care of them.

After Holtz was able to walk with crutches, he began to become acquainted with some of the other men who had serious chronic illness or injury, but were not to be executed, not yet. One had been the chancellor of Austria before the Anschluss. He had been brought in broken in body from his captivity and mistreatment, but not broken in mind. Forced to clean toilets with his own personal towel, enforced sleeplessness, and other unspeakable indignities had taken his health. For the sake of his wife and child, also prisoners, he was

determined to regain it. From the stories his companions told, Holtz began to realize that though he'd not had an easy time of it with the horror of the Entsetzen, his casting out, and the beating, yet the SS friend who saw him into the hospital, and Kurz who cared for him were all inexplicable except for . . .for God and for someone, he knew who, who loved him and continually prayed for him.

He had often felt her heart pulsing near his through the days of pain and delirium. He thought at times her slight body was warming him, that heat from her blood she could scarce afford was slowly coursing through him. He woke in the night smelling that soapy smell when she had bathed in Frau Krebs' basin; a saintly odor among the smells of filth and excrement. When his thoughts became more coherent the most pleasant pastime for the long hours was to go back over every detail of the weeks with Clarimonde in that otherwise gloomy bedroom of Frau Krebs. Her face had an inner light even in despair, and he had forced her nearly to despair. He came into the room, and there she lay with her head on the big Bible.

He knew now that though she seemed sound asleep, a river of sustenance was flowing in. The book itself was a radiator of light. He wondered that he had not seen it then, because he could see it now – even to the color. An amazing multi-colored light as though from a prism radiated through her, pulsing out through the ends of her fingers and her sweet bare toes. Sometimes, burning with shame at the way he had used her, he would hear her say, “Holtz, forgive me, and then I will love you.” He was to forgive her? The enigma of it made him shake his head even with the pain of broken ribs. One time late in the night he didn't realize how much head rolling back and forth he was doing, until he felt Kurz's hands over each ear stopping the motion.

“What's wrong, Buddy, you got a headache?”

“Nein, nein.”

Tears were running down around his ears to the folded sack that was a pillow while Kurz continued to hold his head.

“Hey, now, getting my hands wet there, Buddy. What's wrong? You don't cry when you're hurting, so why the tears?”

“You wouldn't understand.”

“You don't know. I just might. I've heard just about everything there is to hear.”

Holtz said nothing, so Kurz took his hands away. But he stood by the cot quiet for so long that Holtz, thinking he had gone, finally opened his eyes.

“You're still here. Why?”

“Because I am going to trust you. I have something to tell you.” He paused. “I'm a priest. I can help you more than just to tend to your body, I am here to tend to your soul.”

Dumbfounded, Holtz closed his eyes again and painfully turned on his side with his back to Kurz. “Please, another time,” he whispered, “go away.”

“Are you Catholic?” “Nein, nicht katholisch.”

“Strange, there's something about you, I would have thought you were. Have you been baptized?”

“Nein, nicht taufen.”

“Well, we must take care of that at once,” and Kurz reached over to the rusty basin next to the bed and walked away with it. In a few moments he was back.

“I am going to ask you some questions just say, ‘Ja,’ and from this point you will grow into faith just like an infant does.”

At this point the man in the next bed woke. “Iz zat you, Kurz, bottle, bottle, bitte.” Kurz reached under the bed and pulled out the long-nosed urinal. The man sat up and swung his one leg over the side, the other leg was gone at the knee.

“Sit over the other side,” ordered Kurz. He shifted his weight to the other side. While he did so, Kurz putting his hand in the basin poured water down Holtz’s head and face three times, speaking softly,

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.” Looking up, he added softly, “Sorry, Jesus, no time for questions.” He rounded the other man’s bed, took the urine bottle and proceeded out of the ward.

For his part, Holtz lay stunned with water running down his neck into his prison garb. He shivered. But suddenly he saw Clarimonde clearly. He visualized the soft brown hair, the eyes. There were always the wide set, clear, straight eyes. They had the power to pierce him to the core. Like soft drills, they were. Dearest drills. He looked up to the darkened ceiling, and there was her face smiling at him, right over the bed. He looked and looked; she looked back. He wanted to reach up and pull her down next to him, but he knew that with that she would be gone. What a look of love and tenderness! Her heart was baptizing him with an ethereal embrace. She was the one who saw things unseen, until bedridden he had never before seen with other eyes things that he knew were not there. He had meant to wipe away the water from his brow, but now he would let it stay there slowly feeling it grow cold as ice, but letting the ache of it penetrate as far as it would till it met the ache in his heart as she faded away.

“Clarimonde, Clarimonde,” he murmured, “now we are wrapped together in your faith, I make it mine, I make it mine.” He lay still the rest of the night, voyaging in and out of sleep, but on peaceful waters that seemed full of stars. Awakening only long enough to hear words in his head, “Clarimonde, our faith,” he sailed off again.

Holtz was released from the hospital to a barracks where to his surprise he found himself in a contingent of Polish priests. How had that happened? Kurz had tampered with his records, taking over the identity of one of the dead. In the confusion of last months of the Third Reich, records were now becoming a shambles. It wasn’t difficult in the deep hours of the night for Kurz to work out a plan to make Holtz’s identity that of a Catholic seminarian from Szczecin who had died of tuberculosis. That he spoke only German was not a difficulty because many of the western Poles had lived all their lives in German speaking enclaves.

He was put to work with the rest at some of the coldest and most difficult jobs including removing snow from the barrack roofs with bare hands. But in the evenings when the few bites of black bread and margarine had been slowly caressed by the teeth and tongue and fondled in the mouth into a gruel before swallowing, and the dim lights turned out, the real work of the starving men began.

A small piece of bread, a real sacrifice, was saved- it was probably not unleavened, though so black and rough it hardly resembled bread. Without wine a few apple peels purloined from the kitchen garbage pile had been brewing in water under a loose plank. (Another sacrifice, for anything in the garbage that was at all edible was surreptitiously, hungrily stuffed into a passing mouth). It must not be found. Yes, the communion wine for consecration was supposed to be juice of the grape, but what could they do? Jesus, they recalled, made wine from water. "Lord," they prayed, "make this an acceptable offering." A few drops of the juice, faintly fermented, was lovingly put into an empty bottle taken from the hospital. With these "gifts" the priests offered together the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Holtz knew nothing about what was happening, but he knew keenly that something was happening. When the voices around him joined in the Consecration the hairs of his body rippled like waves blown by the wind. The men had all fallen on their knees; he could do nothing but fall with them. A crumb of the Body of Christ, a moistening of the lips with the Precious Blood, and each one remained in the dark silence without moving until with some stifling sobs, they finished the final prayers. Nothing did Holtz desire more than to be one with these men in the sacred meal. He felt his whole being drawn out of him toward the One Being. The goodness of these men appeared to him as radiant beauty shining out of their distorted skulls. This glory was more evident than their emaciated bodies. He perceived their souls, and was beginning to see things that he had never known could be. When so many questioned where God was in this living hell, he knew where He was and loved Him even as he grew to love the coterie of comrades he had fallen into. In these soliloquies he was aware of Clarimonde but in a strange way.

Clarimonde and her pathetic group had arrived at Dachau. Everything there was in confusion. If there was any good, it was that Überleutnant Schiller had kept them from being locked in. The old driver, showing his papers to get through the gates, simply walked off after driving a short way inside. He had only taken the job because his ailing wife lived in Munich close to the camp and the appeal for drivers had given him an unexpected but providential way to reach her. Otherwise, he despised every hour on the road with this dying cargo.

After some silent hours, the women opened the doors and looked out. They were in the midst of a compound surrounded with the type of buildings they knew too well. Activity around them seemed sporadic, no SS guards were in sight, only a few of the ragbags of skeletons that they were so like themselves. Discipline in this camp had certainly broken down. Frighteningly, they could see what appeared to be piles of angled cordwood stacked helter-skelter about five hundred meters away between buildings. They feared it was bodies. It had the

look of bodies glistening like frosted wood in the half-light of the shrouded sun. What were they to do?

Katze knew. “We need to get out of here now. Into those buildings over there. If they don’t know we are here we can fade into whatever living bodies there still are. They wear the same as this.”

She opened her coat. “I wish we could keep these, but they are a mark that will get us into trouble faster than we will be anyway. We can’t go together.” Pointing to Clara, “Marta, you’ll take care of that poor one. The rest of you do the best you can. I’m gone.” And she threw her coat into the interior of the truck, jumped down and headed for a doorway where two women were loitering.

The women from the transport were unable or unwilling to lose their coats, they sat benumbed inside the truck doors, waiting for what they did not know nor any longer cared. Several were near death. The loaves provided had not lasted out the journey. They had been starving to start with, and now energies were wholly depleted so that even a jump from the cargo hold of the truck, a plunge of merely six meters was in their eyes a jump off a precipice into death. A quick end, but it was easier not to go; they would die sitting here.

Marta roused Clara and guided her charge to the lip of the truck bed.

“I am going to lift you down, hold onto your crutch tightly because you will need it when you reach the ground. Then lean into the truck until you catch your balance.”

Clara didn’t protest. She meekly raised her arm for Marta’s arms to encircle her. Marta got down on one knee and slowly helped Clara to the edge. On her one good leg, she tried to help by giving a little jump. Though she was as light as a bone, Marta nearly lost her grip. But then Clara was down, wobbling on her crutch, and Marta jumped after. Together they hobbled, hopped and stumbled to the nearest barracks. Pushing the door open they saw the familiar rows of plank bunks and at first no person. But after a moment, a head lifted from one of the upper beds. Then the face disappeared again and the woman had said nothing. Marta helped Clara to sit down on the nearest plank. The space was too shallow for her to sit, so she leaned over on her one leg. Marta helped her position herself, and went down to where the face had appeared.

“Please, will we be all right in here?” The face reappeared. Even in its disheveled state, it was obviously the face of an aristocrat.

The voice though hoarse was that of a gentlewoman. “What do you mean, all right? Can you really ask about anything being all right?”

Marta quickly told her of their situation. They had been transported for medical experiments, but there had been no one to meet them, and they were trying to escape.

“Escape? There’s no escape. You can’t escape inside this place. Everyone is dying. The reason no one met you is because I believe the Commandant has left here and taken the higher-ups with him leaving some sub person in charge. They

must think that the war is over, or something. They have taken the women from here, except for just a couple of us, and I believe they simply shot them.”

Marta took this information in and after a few seconds asked, “Why were you left?”

“My husband has had a prominent position with the Third Reich and I am Princess Matilde of the Habsburgs. We have been told that we will be expatriated to Switzerland the next few days with some of the Lutheran pastors who are here with their wives. There is at least one army general, I hear, and a daughter of someone - some politician. I don’t know how many all together. But you look to be in terrible shape, and what is your friend down there to do without a leg.”

“I don’t know. We have had no food for days. Are they still feeding you here?”

“Yes, they are anxious that we not appear to have been too badly mistreated when we arrive in Switzerland. I don’t know who is arranging it, there must be somebody left in charge, because we get soup and bread each day.

“Where do you get fed?”

“They’ve been bringing it here for Louisa and me. There now, Louisa, wake up!”

A low moan greeted her words, and then down at the other end of the room, a thin, angular woman sat up swathed in one of the ragged blankets.

“Louisa, we must think of a way of saving these two who have escaped the experiments. That tenacious devil of a doctor will not give up until the end is inevitable, and even then I think he will find a way.” She turned back to Marta. “Louisa was secretary to General Huissenberg. When they accused him of conspiracy, they sent her here. But she knows a lot about what went on, so she doesn’t expect to be spared in the general extermination that’s going on.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than a shot rang out close by. They instinctively ducked, and lay still for seconds. A voice shouted out something like, “drag her away.” It was quiet again. When it had been still for a just a moment, Marta crawled over to the window. Two small panes were on the door side of the building. She raised her head until her eyes looked out the dirty glass just in time to see a male prisoner dragging off a bloody form.

“Dear Lord, it’s Katze. May the angels receive her.” She wept.

Clara had heard, and she turned her face into the boards. “Father, how much more suffering? How much more suffering? . . . Yes, mein Herr, I know . . . she is better off. Now, take this one to yourself who has given the last ounce of herself for us.”

The four women lay still and silent for some time.

Marta had begun to sleep; Clara had gone to sleep almost at once. Her sleep now was unlike any sleep she had known. She seemed to be never truly sleeping but awake behind closed lids; yet the strange things happening could only be dreams. How could she always be watching? Yet she felt like she was watching and waiting, never sleeping. Her eyes were so heavy, yet she must watch and not lose consciousness. So it went, on and on, this inner watching and waiting.

When at last he came, she thought he was Jesus. The face was radiant and he led her away through the darkness moving backwards, his face to her face, going ahead of her like a lantern guiding her across the vast gray plain. She felt great happiness to be in company with this luminous guide even though he was not Jesus.

Then it was Matilde's voice that brought them all to the surface. "We must risk it, Louisa, we must act as though these two were also left here meant for the Swiss convoy. I will call this blonde – you say you are Marta – I will say that you are my daughter. I have had a daughter, where she is I don't know. But only if we are asked anything. They may have a list, probably will, but I will act indignant that my daughter, Princess Alexandrina, has not been listed. That all along you have been with me. We will hope that it works. And that little person down there. How can we save her?"

Clarimonde had not moved. Marta rose stiffly from where she had been lying, and moved down to her.

"Clara?" The moment her hand touched her, she knew. The thin skeletal back was unyielding as stone. She tried to turn her head toward her; it moved, but like a rusty piece of machinery. Marta threw herself upon the slight unyielding form and sobbed. She rubbed the cold hands – the slim beautiful hands that had become skeletal and were now like plaster.

When the camp Kapos brought the potato soup that evening, they called for one of the Polish prisoner priests who sometimes helped dispose of bodies to take Clara away. Marta met the man.

"They said you are a priest. Are you a Catholic priest? I want special prayers said over this dear one," she said, tears coursing down her cheeks. "This is a woman whom you are specially blessed to be able to pray for because she is now a saint in heaven. You will see. She will work a miracle for you, any miracle at all."

At first the young priest frowned, but then he looked at the face of the girl that he was to pray for, who did not look to be a woman. He had never seen such a face. It was serenely composed and beautiful even in emaciation. Death had come in this horrid place, but there was no anxiety or fear there. The eyes were closed, he thought. But then he looked more closely, and he thought for a moment that they were gazing at him – softly watching. Yet, surely they were closed. They had to be closed. He knelt down beside the little body.

"Oh Lord, this is your faithful. . . "What is her name."

"Her name is Clarimonde."

He resumed, "This is your faithful Clarimonde. May angels come to meet her. May the saints welcome her into your eternal kingdom. Welcome, dear Jesus, this sweet saint, Clarimonde."

It was quiet except for the staccato sobs of the two other women. "Where will she be buried?" Marta was still holding her hand.

"I have no control over that. But I will take her wrapped in this blanket, and try to find a quiet place for her, not just . . . well, with the others. I will try."

The young priest took up Clarimonde's crutch and put it beside the body before wrapping both together tenderly in the old blanket. Then lifting his bundle, he carried it off as though carrying a baby. Marta put her head down on her knees beside the now empty bunk and wept.

Later, though she felt guilty about it, she devoured what was left of the cold soup, wrapped herself in a blanket and slept next to Matilde for warmth. The older woman found herself grateful for this "daughter" and lay praying that somehow together they might be bound for Switzerland. She had heard Marta describe the poor crippled girl to the priest, and she believed with all her heart that with all the dead she had seen, this one was very special. Hadn't she noticed a sweetness, almost a flowery sweetness, unknown about this place, that came into this charnel house with the entrance of that little person? She found herself praying for the intercession of Clarimonde that their plan would be successful in the morning, but she could not sleep.

When Karol returned to the barracks after finding a spot under the trees near the crematorium for Clara's body - there was no other spot that seemed suitable, he lay down. He was weak from hunger himself. He looked forward to the strength he gained from the Mass. The evening masses had become more frequent as the camp discipline had declined and the SS guards few and far between. Karol wondered how much longer they could hold on in their wait for liberation. Their hopes of being freed had risen with rumors of the end of the war. Fewer guards meant fewer beatings, but then the weeks dragged on. Every day in its relentless stubborn passage dragged more and more of his comrades to their deaths from sickness and starvation. He fell asleep, awakening when the new seminarian Holtz leaned down to hand him the evening slice of brown bread with margarine.

"Is it you?" he heard himself asking. "Oh, sorry, for a moment, I must have been dreaming. There was this girl, this most unusual girl. I'd say a saintly girl. I, well, I'd guess you'd say . . . I laid her to rest yesterday. I was seeing her in my dream, and she was quite alive."

Holtz felt his lungs constrict the flow of breath from his body. The knowledge of who it was and what had happened tightened around his throat like a rope. He sat down beside Karol.

"What do you mean?"

"I had to find a special place for her, not to just leave her with. . . with the others. Her friend asked me to, you know. And she said there would be a miracle if I asked for one."

Holtz found his voice. "Her name, her name is Clarimonde."

Karol looked surprised. "Such a different name. How did you know? "

A woman bicycling in and out of camp had become an emissary for the priests, even taking messages to Archbishop Feinbarger from the incarcerated Bishop Clermont-Ferrand. Surreptitiously plans were made to ordain as priest a young seminarian who was very ill with tuberculosis. The woman's aid had been

invaluable. That evening she brought the first wine the priests had had. Was it Clarimonde's first miracle? Holtz had been confirmed by the Bishop, after being instructed by him, and had received his First Communion. The small piece of His Body, and a sip of the Blessed Blood of Jesus at that evening's communion was a mystical union with the Holy One, and enmeshed with his own was the spirit of his beloved Clara. Though he was saddened to the core, at that moment it was right, right that she was in the state of perfection that she was, and right that he was united to her in the sacrifice of the Mass amidst these brothers. His tears flowed. In this he was not alone, all around him were the sounds of weeping as there were at every clandestine Mass. He knew then that she blessed the secret he had been harboring, that God willing, if he should walk away from this place alive, he would keep his promise.

The next day the work detail from his priest barracks was sent to dig trenches for disposal of bodies. The incinerators, spewing their human molecules out over the countryside, could not keep up, fuel was low, and the new young commandant of the camp, inexperienced, yet fearful of the consequences of being found floundering in bodies when the allied troops arrived, had ordered pits be dug. The weather moderated in what had been a cold March, but the first foot of soil was still frozen. It took great effort of the miserable men to break through it into softer ground. Holtz still had considerable pain in his body, but he worked alongside the rest, some more seriously impaired with illness and injury than himself. The guards overseeing the project were clearly nervous. It was imperative that these ditches be deep and long, and that they be done on the double! There was the cursing, and the continual whipping and blows with clubs, but it was not expedient to kill these miserable weaklings or the work wouldn't get done at all. None of their guards wanted to do it!

The men were allowed but a short interval every couple of hours for rest and water, or to relieve themselves, and could sit for twenty minutes for the soup midday, otherwise the work ground them down and down further until dusk. Holtz found his arms doing a mechanical thing: thrust down, dig, lift up, and throw, sometimes with little on the shovel, and he began to wonder if he could really stop the motion. It was as if some will other than his own had taken over. His hands, hardened by work, cracked and often bleeding, gripped the shovel handle as though it had grown out from their rough surface and was part of it. When finally back on his bunk, thoroughly exhausted, with his arms crossed over his chest, his fingers still curled tightly around that shovel handle and his aching arms seemed to continue that motion all the night through.

In the morning, there was yet another day of digging to face. Two of the men couldn't be roused. One was Karol. That day some young soldiers, barely sixteen years old, were forced to work alongside them. The overseeing officers let up on the whip and club, and the work, though still agonizing, went faster. After five days two deep trenches, eight hundred meters long and seventeen meters across were ready. Seven of their fellow priests had been added to the dead. Then the task changed to carting bodies. The cold weather had kept decay from

being the horror it might have been, but longer days were fast changing that. The stench threatened to become stifling until even far from the trenches or the human stacks every breath was full of it. Layer after layer of the dead were covered with soil until the trenches were full. Holtz found Clarimonde wrapped in the blanket under the trees near the crematorium just as Karol had described and laid her with profound respect before the last trench was covered over. He found himself amazed that there was no putrid odor about her body. He realized fully that her spirit was not with the small form but continued very much alive to him; this was no more Clarimonde than the crutch with her was Clarimonde. Though his heart ached to see the tortures she'd endured, because he had her fully, he did not wish her back. The night after he interred Clara with the countless others, he chided himself, only adding prayers at the Mass that he had not thought to do at the site. He imagined her quiet voice in a somewhat amused way saying,

“Holtz dear, what you were doing was a prayer, silly; I could hear it clearly. It was a beautiful prayer of faith and love. Thank you, beloved.”

He smiled weakly at the sound heard only in his head, and knew that he would never be without her.

Chapter Five

The young soldier, not quite seventeen, was frightened to the core by his first assignment. What was this place? How could he have been sent into this nightmare? A camp! And in chaos! Could this be really in the Germany he knew and loved? Could this really be close to Munich? Spring had been flowering in what was left of Munich. Munich had been die Schöne before the bombing, and blooms were attempting to hide the scars. But this place was hell, a deep level of hell. The woodcuts he'd been mesmerized by as a child in the family copy of The Inferno were pallid beside this. At least the heavy stifling smoke had ceased in the past few days because the crematoriums were shut down for lack of coal. Death! Bodies everywhere. The stench was gagging.

Danke Gott . . . his thoughts stopped. He shook his head. How to *thank* God? If this was really Germany, how . . . ? He couldn't even find words adequate to frame a question. He thought of his home, of his father, so proud of his sons, now sending the youngest to the honorable fight for the beleaguered, yet beloved Fuehrer. "You may, indeed, die, dear Siegfried," his father had said, his chin nearly trembling beneath the tight lips and trim mustache, "just as two of your brothers have gone to their honorable reward. But remember, your mother and I give you freely for the sake of the glorious defense of the fatherland. Go and make us proud!"

This . . . this was the glorious defense? The callow youth could not keep his lunch down, and running, threw it up around the corner of a building.

Before dawn on the morning of April 27, 1945, this same Private Siegfried was handed the papers to round up the women from the adjacent barracks for the bus that would take those selected on their last ride supposedly to freedom into Switzerland. If Clarimonde had interceded, it was her second miracle, and she had managed to find the right soldier.

The barracks had been filled to the walls in the past few days with newly transferred prisoners from the eastern camps. With a smelly, tooth-grinding, vicious crowd of women, their gaunt faces nearly in his, he simply wilted under Countess Matilde's indignation at the stupidity, the outrageous stupidity that her daughter Alexandrina's name was not on the roster. The poor fellow was shattered. He just wanted to get out.

"Sorry, sorry," he kept muttering, while the woman towered over him like an enraged eagle, ready to tear him to bits.

"This is not an oversight, this is a colossal blunder. I could have you court-marshaled."

"But, Madame, I had nothing to do with it", he swallowed hard against the nausea. His training had been wholly inadequate.

"Tell that to your commanding officer. Go and get him! At once!" The woman's screams set off a louder clamor among the pack pressing around him till it grew deafening. "No, rather than get your head lopped from your body, you stupid boy, take your pencil and write Alexandrina right on that line. Do you hear

me? Take your pencil,” his hand was trembling, “and write Alexandrina Salvator on that line!”

“How do you spell it Madame?”

He could scarcely write. He felt the talons already in his liver. Vomiting was only kept down by hard swallowing. All he knew was that this Countess was ready to kill him, or, if not her, the whole malignant mass would pin him to the wall. He hated this place, he feared this place, he would do anything not to draw attention of any superior, especially if he were doing something wrong. Anyway this younger woman probably was her daughter, poor thing. The sooner he shut die Hexe up and got them both to the bus with that other woman the better. At the door an officer appeared.

“What’s the trouble, soldier? A lot of screaming here. What’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing, sir. Just some frightened women.” He looked sideways at the anything but frightened Countess. Why was he covering this up? He didn’t know except that there was that added name to his roster, written by his own hand with his own pencil.

“Well, hurry it up. The buses are almost full and ready to pull out. It’s just a block-row over there, in the square, you know?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Macht schnell! And hand your roster to the officer in charge of the first bus. He’ll be assisting the driver. ”

The bus, first in a line of six, had only a few dark wooden seats empty. Several black cars were strung out behind the last bus in the convoy, and an escort car with about four SS sat impatiently about a stride ahead of the radiator, ready to roll. This official car, one of those whose maintenance was a casualty of the general disarray, belched out clouds of blue exhaust. The faces inside the car were animated, as though the occupants thought they were off on a lark. Compared to life in the SS camp these days, they were. They carried sealed orders, and would take turns as drivers of the buses through the next couple of days till arrival at an unannounced destination in the Alps.

Private Siegfried Sellmacher helped the three women up the high steps (this residual courtesy marked him as a greenhorn), shakily handed over the papers to the stern faced Oberleutnant Colonel - the highest grade officer he’d seen since his arrival – and took himself out of sight as fast as was presentable. The Colonel proceeded to read off the names, asking for a responding “Hier.”

Marta and her benefactress the Countess found a seat together about half way back; Louisa sat across the aisle beside a bespectacled man.

The first thing he said to her was, “My glasses! I’m so happy for my glasses!” and patted them lovingly with what sounded like a purr.

Louisa looked across at Matilde, raising an eyebrow. Maybe the man was mad. So many had lost their wits.

The Colonel had reached the last page just handed to him by the soldier. Reading the names mechanically, he called out, “Louisa Braun.” She answered,

and he paused for what seemed an unending moment, his brow furrowing. The women held their breath. He put the paper to the light of the front window –

“Now what? Is it Matilde and . . .and, what’s this. . . Alexandrina Salvator? Am I right? Salvator. You’re related to the Habsburgs through the Tuscany branch? I have some great, great uncle, or something who was of that line – came from down there. I suppose you’re related to some traitor of der Fuehrer and you’ve lost everything, eh? You Salvators, always looking to restoring a king! We’re probably related in some way, but you should have kept your nose clean. Well, it’s too late now.”

He laughed sarcastically, turned, chucked the driver on the back, and folding the roster, stepped down out of the bus. Marta, Matilde, and Louisa -the three faces flushed with relief, each uttered a prayer.

Louisa took a deep breath, turned to her male companion, “I’m happy for your glasses, too.” The man beamed, nodded, and with that contented noise, patted his eyeglasses again.

“You see,” he spoke softly, “when we were taken out of our barracks this morning, a fellow prisoner made a remark that angered the SS officer. He knocked my friend in the head so that his glasses went flying to the floor. Then the officer stomped on them, smashing them to fragments. I am so blind without my glasses. I can’t see without them.” Again he patted them. “They are the only thing I have left in this world. My health is gone, but my eyesight . . . Even these clothes belonged to someone else. Maybe not too long ago. We were just given these today. So many have died, so many bodies . . .” His voice trailed off.

The convoy made an attempt to start out. The escort car, filling the bus with fetid fumes by its effort, jerked ahead a few feet and stopped again. The men piled out of the car. Some kind of conclave of SS and Gestapo was held right at the front fender. Finally after a nervous hour at which all on the bus feared that they would be ordered out, the old bus shuddered and got under way. After many turns and some backtracking, the direction seemed more set. From the late April sun, just rising above mountains in the east, Marta gathered that they were heading south. That was what they understood –that Tyrol or Switzerland was the destination.

One hundred and thirty-seven prisoners were in the string of buses, Louisa’s companion informed her. Some were women and children of men hung for participation in a plot against Hitler, some were high-ranking officers sent to the camps after military failures, the Dutch foreign minister, government officials of Austria, Hungary and other countries, some with wives, Lutheran pastors, and a Catholic bishop. All of them were considered important persons. During the last few days when they were assembled in several of the barracks, a couple of Brit airmen had joined the group. These two had been part of that famous prisoner-of-war escape from Stalag Luft I. Despite all they had been through, beatings and endless interrogations, they held themselves with that kind of airman cockiness.

Herr Bessemer in his assignment in the camp office had himself seen orders from Himmler that all these special people were to be evacuated before the inevitable happened – the war could only be days from its bitter conclusion. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of ragged emaciated prisoners, some of them the Polish priests, had been sent out walking to the south the day before. Most would be lost in the mountain snow. He hesitated, then added rather wanly that he “guessed” they were privileged to be riding.

Brightening, he looked at the paper-wrapped parcel in his lap, “and with this wonderful packet – you’ll get one, I’m sure. It’s food.” and he smelled the paper. Louisa noted that. He couldn’t have been as foodless as she had been the last days. Arriving late, the women hadn’t received their packets, but once in her hands she wouldn’t just be smelling it.

What was Louisa’s status that she was numbered with them? she was asked.

“I’m not sure. I suppose they thought I knew things; lots of papers went through my hands, or I typed them. Why they didn’t just kill me . . . I don’t know. I expected it. I was the private secretary to General Huissenberg in the Berlin Central Command, and, of course, my father was Admiral Joseph Braun – in the First War. Maybe that’s why. He was a patriot. My old boss the General was supposed to be in Dachau.”

“Oh, the General Huissenberg. Yes, I know him. He and several other Generals of the Wehrmacht are on board these buses. Some of them accused of plotting the death of Herr Hitler.”

“He is here! It will be good to see him, I’m relieved to know he’s alive. I thought he would have been shot. And what is your name, sir?”

“I’m Bessemer, Richard Bessemer, with the British Secret Service. You see, I know some things, too.”

With the disintegration of the camp over the past weeks, the International Red Cross had finally been allowed in with one truck of supplies. The contents couldn’t go far to the thirty thousand still in the wretched death grip of those last weeks. But food parcels were handed out to each of the grateful passengers. As though they were too good to be true, or would disappear if touched, some were actually reluctant to open them, and perhaps hesitancy was wise. A man behind them announced that he was a medical officer. “Take it slow with the food,” he cautioned. “I know how ravenous we all are, but try to chew it well, and pace yourself. You don’t want to lose it, or make your digestive system refuse to get in gear. The best things at first are the carbohydrates – chew them well. I’d leave any meat for later. Drink a little water with the food, but not too much.”

“Meat?” Louisa tore open her pack. Three little cans, two biscuits, a small box holding a couple of cookies, a wrapper of dried beef, and a small can-opener, met her incredulous gaze. Salivation sent excruciating pains surging up into her ears along both jaws. The biscuits! She took them into her mouth and tried to chew slowly, but the pain increased till her jaws seemed locked. Rubbing them vigorously helped. As the shooting pains ebbed away, she chewed a biscuit while

impatiently trying to open the first can. Her seatmate took the opener and showed her how to press the point down into the top, making a close triangular design along the edge until the lid was free. Peaches with juice! She lifted the can to her parched lips and drank the thick liquid, which flowed over her tongue and slowly down her throat sending waves of blessing through her body, sweet and glorious. The waves of blessing were as intense as the pain had been. How could food be the source of a most spiritual delight? She looked across the aisle and saw the same look of beatitude on the faces of her friends. Their mouths full, they looked down at their open packets with the eyes of worshippers.

A large jug of water was part of the bus provision. Clean water had been in short supply in the camp, especially with the influx of so many new prisoners. Severe thirst had brought the barracks to near anarchy, and the self-appointed underground committees that were now running things had had their authority tested. Only demands turning to threats had convinced the SS that a water supply had to be found. Who would have thought of intimidating the SS in earlier days? True, the head of security at one point had ordered everyone shot; guards were placed around each of the barracks with submachine guns. But the camp surgeon had protested. There should be no more killings. Water was finally brought in by trucks.

“Is it possible we are free? Is it possible? Food. We have had no bread since the arrival of the women from Auschwitz. Do you know they walked all those miles barefooted? Nearly half of those assigned to our barracks died the first day. What a pathetic lot they were! But after those, they brought in still more Jewish women from Sachsenhausen. So crowded by then, we had to sleep three in a bunk, and there was nothing to eat. Earlier we’d had soup and bread each day, but that was before the onslaught of evacuees from the other camps. But now, freedom?”

“You know,” her companion confided, “I don’t want to dismay you, but we are not free yet, and it doesn’t look good. I have seen the list of this evacuation, and along with it were SS orders that everyone on the list was to be taken to a place in the Alps and shot. That’s why the SS and some Gestapo are with us. They will declare a tragedy happened in a strafing by US planes. . . . Now that it’s too late, they’re trying to cover their tracks.”

He seemed so calm, so matter-of-fact. The iron words smote Louisa where she breathed. She choked on a bite of dried beef, and looked at the remainder with indifference. The evil hand of their tormenter was stretched out over them still. To be lifted up to sublime heights - silly she’d let mere food do that - then only to be flung down at the last; her heart sank. She looked over at Matilde and Marta. The older woman had fallen asleep, crumbs still on her parted lips. Marta was watching the countryside as they rolled through the early mountains. Her eyes, as hungry for it as her stomach had been for the offering of food, were devouring the green beauty. She turned to glance at her sleeping companion whose stiff gray hair had been pulled back and tied with a lace. How much they all needed a bath and a shampoo! All bathing, minimal at best, had ceased with the water shortage. Then across the aisle she noticed Louisa’s stricken face.

Motioning, Marta whispered. “Kommst du.”

Awakening Matilde, the three shrunken shanks had ample room on the seat together. “Is something wrong, Louisa?”

“Oh, Jawohl. After all this, we are going to die. We are being taken to our execution. Herr Bessemer, my seatmate, has seen the papers. Orders for the Gestapo to take us toward Switzerland as though releasing us to a neutral nation, and somewhere along the route we’re to be shot.”

The words settled down on them like the final coffin lid. Hope that had begun to burn in a steady flame was snuffed out; they had no more fight left. Even Matilde’s grit was shaken out. They rode along in silence, their heads bobbing and rolling with the pitch of the bus on the uneven road, feeling the other’s sharp, angular bones, but knowing that the valiant heart of each would soon cease. What a false hope had been theirs.

“It is time then,” Marta spoke softly, “To prepare the best we can for our eternal Judge. I’ve tried to treat each day as though it were my last all along, but in these few days, I’ve actually thought I might live again – I mean here, on this earth. I know, of course, I will live again; that is what my Savior died to give. But I began to hope we would . . . well, you know. . . I long for my children. I look forward to that. And Frederick, of course. And to see whole again, our little saint, Clarimonde.”

With the two women she’d shared more about the girl they had known so briefly. Matilde and Louisa acknowledged that of all the many women with whom they’d suffered through these dark prison years, in the brief hour being near her something was unmistakably different.

“She showed me how to live for Christ at Ravensbrueck, a place more cruel than anything here at Dachau. (“You weren’t here long enough,” Louisa interjected softly.) Because of her I learned to live, truly live, in the midst of death, minute by minute. The life of Jesus transformed so many. She taught us that He was just waiting for us to come to Him, and when we did, He did what He promised. We took on His yoke, you know what it was – the Cross, and the rest was easy. I can even say it was easy, because we had this strange peace. He carried us on His shoulders. And we were able to give it to others.”

Matilde had been raised Catholic, strongly in the Monarchist tradition, but she had never thought of faith brought to such a level of utter practicality. Deprived of the Mass, she hadn’t really thought about Jesus since being in the camp. Louisa from north of Berlin not far from the district where Frau Krebs lived, was Lutheran, and she, too, found it hard to think prayer might actually be practiced in any confident way in such wretchedness. Oh, she had cried out to God many times, always feeling her utterances of despair falling right back upon her with the dirty plaster from the ceiling. During the last days in the barrack they’d begun to pray together and to love each other; they often mentioned Clara in their prayers and asked for her intercession. Marta accepted this, she even suggested it, and Louisa didn’t protest though it was foreign to her tradition.

Somehow, it seemed appropriate. After all, over and over, Louisa had insisted she had smelled roses in that dank and sour place where the girl had died, especially when the man came, wrapped her with her crutch in the blanket and carried her away. Matilde was amazed at this when she heard it. She had only heard of roses associated with St. Therese, and this broken girl, who had ever heard of her? What was so different about her from all the other sufferers who died in that devil-ridden orbit day after day. Marta's story of her own resurrection from death at Christmas almost convinced her.

Not one of the three cried. Tears over everyday torments they had learned long ago were ineffective and took energy.

"Saying her name again has me wondering," Marta paused for a moment. "We credited her with choosing that poor scared kid to collect us. . . someone Matilde could buffalo into getting me safely listed among the evacuees. Do you think she would do that only to have us on a bus destined for a violent end? No. No, for a long time I've had the thought that God wants us to do further work for him, that we are not meant to have all we have gained through these years wasted. We are to witness to his goodness and mercy. Yes, goodness and mercy even in the midst of horror. The world must know that God's own people, in the mire and muck of the deepest pit man can devise, are able still to praise the God who Himself endured so much for us. There will be many who will say with Job's wife, 'Curse God and die!' Many will say that. We are saved to say, 'Bless God who is with us till the end of the world. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Somebody still alive has to shout that to the heavens!'"

The other two added nothing, but their change in body language spoke, not of resignation to death, but of renewed hope. Matilde's frame straightened, Louisa's arm around Marta's bony shoulders went from flaccid to tender.

"We're three musketeers for the Lord, we are," said Matilde. "Even if you are wrong, Marta, we will be smiling, even rejoicing that it will be over, when we face those weaklings who must depend on guns. Ugh, that marvelous cookie gave me the stomach ache."

Late that night, the convoy pulled into a camp near Innsbruck. Illuminated by a swaying lamp was a sign, "Police Education," but the place had all the earmarks of the hated familiar – long dark barracks with wooden bunks. There the company was assembled in two buildings. Talk circulated around on what the next day might bring. The two British airmen, centering the plans, obviously were not content to allow the Germans the last word or a final act. The huddle of men in one end of the barracks, shrank as some went off to the next building, then expanded when they returned with still more men. Eventually a few nervous SS men, stomping in, demanded the discussions cease, and moved the less important men including the airmen out to sleep in a separate building. But by then some plans had been laid. The three watched this activity as it formed, and then when things had quieted, they curled up on the boards, surrounded by other women and the few children, with the remnants of their food packets safely in their grasp.

The children – the children concerned them. They were so passive and quiet; they never needed hushing. Years of misery in filth and hunger had killed the child-spirit in them; they were like wizened old men and women.

The next day dawned gray and cold. The mountain air threatened snow. The loaded buses set off for the Brenner Pass where a bombing run the day before had chopped the road into impassible craters. That caused another delay. During the long chilling wait in the unheated bus, Marta overheard a conversation between the two men who were seated ahead of her.

“Oh yes,” said the one, “I knew her when she was a brilliant assistant of Husserl under whom I also studied. In fact we were students together. With so much to offer the world of philosophy, it was hard to understand why she left it to become a nun. I have heard that there are manuscripts left behind. These should be safeguarded. I hope the Carmelites will recognize their value.”

“I thought she was safe once she got to the Netherlands. But not so? And now you say you’ve heard the worst, that in ’43 she was taken to Auschwitz? We know what that means.”

They were silent for some time. “Was she really a Jew? I thought there was some agreement with the Nazi’s that a person who had a baptismal certificate was exempt.”

“In Holland the Bishops came out so strongly against the Nazi pogrom that they rescinded that allowance before it ever became effective. So Edith and her sister Rosa were both arrested and taken off. By then she had taken the name, Sister Benedicta of the Cross. The reports are sketchy, only through the grapevine, but there is little doubt the outcome. Her Carmelite superiors had a notice finally that she was dead. Such a loss all around. A loss for the Church, a loss for us who awaited her philosophical writing, certainly a deep loss for her family, and, of course, for the Carmelites. This pitiless era will go down in history as pure demonry that destroyed the likes of Edith Stein and so many other geniuses.”

Marta’s ears had heard it right. “Edith Stein!” How often Clarimonde had invoked that name! She credited her teacher Fraulein Edith with instilling in her the love for Jesus and His Church. She wanted to be like her, and look at that! She had died the same kind of death under the same tyrannical Satan. She had received the same answer to her prayer that she live or even better, die for Christ. Clarimonde’s vision had been passed to Marta – that fervent love had been catching. If she were to die now, she prayed that she would die in a way that would give glory to God as both Sister Benedicta and little Clarimonde had done.

Once a narrow lane of road was opened, progress was slow, but they eventually were through the pass and turned off the main road to the east. The corkscrew of a mountain road took them down toward the valley of Meran. It was already evening when at a rail crossing the caravan stopped. An SS officer shouted in the door, ordering everyone out. Shivering in the cold, Marta looked warily at the group of men who were to kill them. But the black uniformed men just milled about looking confused, even frightened. One of the buses was out of

petrol, and there was a flat tire. The Brit they called der Flügel with a man Bessemer said was one of the generals had walked away to the crossing hut looking for a phone. The SS didn't know what to do. Their orders hadn't taken into account something like petrol and tires, but they had schnapps, and soon gathering their buddies together in the warmth of their cars, they got drunk. This wasn't reassuring; what, the prisoners wondered, would these drunken henchmen do next with the pistols in their belts?

One of the civilian drivers, who had sympathy for his bus-full had gone back to talk to the others. While the SS partied, this driver got all the passengers into the three buses that were still road-worthy. Packed together, mutely standing in the aisles, they were driven a short distance to a large hotel perched on the side of a mountain.

"I know this place; I really know this place!" Mathilde was surprised, "I spent vacations from boarding school at my uncle's villa. I recognize the landmarks. In fact, this hotel we often came to for meals. That town down there . . . it's Meran. That's where Unterpfanden is – my uncle's villa. He was a Baron. My goodness, who would expect we'd come here? Yet, I thought some of the mountains looked familiar. Why it's like coming home!"

When she recognized the Austrian chancellor and his wife from news reports, it took just a moment for the owner-hostess to understand what this bedraggled and shivering group was all about. A momentary worry – lice – oh dear God, lice in the hotel, but her compassion overrode this. Orders were given; comforts and food provided. Then small groups by sex were invited to the hotel basement to the showers for workers.

"Please, one thing," she asked, "if you can limit the hot water to just a minute, maybe two, there will be enough for all. You know, just soap-up and rinse. It isn't water we are short of, it's fuel." With towels she handed out small bars of white soap and a black tar soap to pass around for shampoo.

Can anyone imagine the joy of one minute of soap and hot water? The chill and fright of the day's torment along with the dirt and body smells just ran down the drain while face, body and hair luxuriated in sixty whole seconds of bliss! Count them! Sixty and maybe a few more. Then the same angelic woman brought a pile of the hotel maids' shifts – clean and presentable. The men emptied the hotel's supply of male worker's undershirts and shorts. The foul clothing that was washable went to the hotel laundry. It took three washings with strong soap, dried on lines before the open fires in the furnace room, before they were returned to the lobby in the morning for their owners, still gray – nothing could bleach out the residual, but smelling of naphtha! What could be better than this? Even death seemed, for the moment, an impossible thought – or had it happened and they were on the other side of that divide? The three friends found themselves bedding down for the night with pillow and blankets on a settee in the lobby. The proprietress felt guilty about this, but she drew the line at infesting the rooms with lice.

They had reached South Tyrol, which seemed an anteroom to paradise, even though the contingent of drunken SS was still within a short distance. They could hardly fool themselves for long that they were safe or free. The night still saw the old anxieties stalking the edges of their dreams. It would be years before this grotesque parade would fade, yet the hospitality of this hotel and its owner would be blessed in their memories forever.

Before dawn the women were awakened by stamping of feet and loud voices. Had the fatal hour come? A dozen or more German soldiers of the regular army burst through the doors led by a platoon officer. Der Flügel and the general hurried to greet them.

The general clasped the hand of their commander warmly, "So grateful you could do this, Eric, now if you can just kick out those SS and Gestapo swine and send them packing! We'll happily place ourselves under your command."

The "swine," who had arrived during the night and were parked hung-over in the drive, were forcibly relieved of their weapons, and then took off in different directions in their petrol-hungry cars. A report a few days later came back. When finally stalled out, Austrian and Tyrolean partisans had strung them up.

The two airmen, commandeering an old Volkswagen, went down into Meran to seek the headquarters that they heard was recently established under the command of United States army occupying Italy. On May 4, 1945 an American contingent of soldiers took over the hotel. The German soldiers were taken as prisoners of war, but with the testimony of the Brits, generals, and pastors in their favor, were promised to be released and on their way home to Germany as soon as the war was officially over, which would be in about four days. Along with the rejoicing others, Marta, Mathilde and Louisa were truly free!

It was Friday, one of those days when nature itself rejoices with a brisk wind from the west whipping up glory amongst the valley flowers, the snow capped mountains all around lifting glowing faces into the blue, and huge white clouds playing their tricks of hide and seek with the fiery face of the sun, but there was one immediate thing to do. The Bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, the same bishop who had surreptitiously ordained a man to priesthood in the prison camp, was supplied with clerical garments by the local priest of St. Nicholas Church, and would preside at a thanksgiving Mass in the old church. Everyone, the Lutheran pastors included, was eager to attend.

The first thing that struck Marta's eyes as her vision adjusted to the glorious interior was the contorted figure of the crucified Christ, his arms outstretched, mounted above the tabernacle and surrounded by a rich, blood-red, satin-like canopy that fanned out into an elegant formal cope. Jesus the Crucified! You are the conqueror of evil and of death! She sank to her knees weakly, her elbows pressing heavily on the chair railing ahead to hold her body from sinking to the floor. The other two women knelt as well. Their nostrils were filled with the odor of holiness – the ages of prayer and incense embedded into the very walls. How could one think of food and hot water in the same breath of beatitude as

this? That was idolatry! Here was the object of worship because here was the Subject of Everything – and Him crucified!

An altar boy came from the side with the long-handled taper which with difficulty he lifted to each of the dozen or so candles on each side of the tabernacle; the soft radiance spread out until it engulfed the high altar. Overhead lights suddenly illuminated the nave while the organ boomed out from behind them, and the procession of two priests and the bishop, attended by servers in lace surplices sedately approached the altar, genuflected and took their places. The two priests and the bishop mounted to the three high-backed red chairs placed on the side of the sanctuary. The Mass had begun.

The old priest needed the continual assistance of one of the altar boys to walk, but with that young strength to lean on, he reached the ambo for the readings. The large gilded book was opened, and before the first lesson was read, this pastor addressed words to those he named, “the most distinguished and honorable persons I have ever been graced to serve.”

His voice was much stronger than his legs. He expressed the gratitude on behalf of all the Tyrolese citizens for the resistance against evil these men and women had courageously exercised that had resulted in a suffering like unto the Lord Himself.

“And now you have come to the Savior of your souls for the blessedness of receiving Him whom you have served so well. He will come to you, Body and Blood, soul and divinity. You have come in the holiest of all attitudes of soul, thanksgiving, and this alongside your suffering, a penance like unto the Cross, will be accepted as forgiveness for all of the sins you may have committed since your last confession. I do strongly exhort you to seek the Sacrament of Confession soon, but I sincerely believe that Jesus welcomes you, one and all, to partake of His blessed communion today”. With that, he raised his arm in the sign of the cross, which the worshippers repeated for themselves, and then turned to the first reading in Latin.

On this beautiful earth there is nothing as beautiful, as good, as true, or as unifying of God and Man as the Mass. The two Lutheran women, Marta and Louisa, were struck with awe. It was just as though they were worshipping with the angels. They did not follow the Latin words, but even without translation deeply in their spirits they picked up the gist of what was read. Words in the Gospel and prayers sprang out at them – “Sacrum, benefictio,” and they savored each one.

In a brief but powerful homily, the bishop spoke surprising words. “Will we someday awake to see the necessity in the overall plan of God of the ordeal we have all been through? Will we someday believe that God allowed this evil to hold sway over these lands for a revelation that will bring the world to repentance? I do not have the answer, my friends. But I do believe that God brings good out of evil. We have only to meditate on the Cross. The Cross – both the greatest evil, and the greatest good. Perhaps we cannot have one without the other. We have seen what the human heart is capable of, unfathomable are the

depths of degradation it can foment, and at the same time we have seen what the human heart is capable of, unfathomable are the depths of sacrifice, love and forgiveness it can pour out. Now is the time for each of us to examine his heart and leave no room in it for bitterness. For some reason we have been spared. Let our thanksgiving never fade, let the praise of God never diminish, may God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, be glorified in the way we live the rest of our lives!”

The consecration itself, in its solemn, ageless Word and gesture from the first prayers to the elevating of the host, thrilled through as it was by the ringing of bells, pierced their starved senses, senses which in succession opened to the flood of eternal truth. This was truly Jesus. Jesus in His fullness coming to them! Melted to the core, transported to another realm, they were realizing that nothing in their previous religious experience had provided even a hint of the existence of anything so glorious. Mathilde rose to go forward to receive communion, “You come, too,” she whispered to her friends, “Father invited you, you come, too.” They knelt together at the altar rail, and the two imitating Mathilde, accepted Jesus on their tongues, into their mouths, and into their bodies. It was spiritual intercourse with the lover of their souls. From that moment they were committed, though they were unaware, to this eternal communion.

Did they feel deserted by God many times over the past three or four years? Did they doubt that God cared? Had they been sorely tempted to disbelieve in the reality of love and turn from the faith? For Him, for this wondrous consummation, would they suffer it all again? The answer to each of these questions was, “Yes. But now, I seek to do your will for you alone are worthy of my love. Nothing else matters.”

Chapter Six

Spring in Meran on the south side of the Alps has to be one of the most beautiful times and places in the world. The alpine air grows soft under the Italian sun. Arbored vineyards, rose-vines, fig trees, even palms and bamboo flourish, and in April clouds of apple, peach and almond blossoms perfume the air. All this with the great ice-capped summits only a few kilometers away. It had been that wondrous spring two and a half years ago - that Tuesday May 8, 1945, that marked the end of WWII. It was that Meran spring that won the three to remaining here. Through the two winters the women had experienced only a few snowfalls, not at all like Germany. Winter was a succession of bright, exhilarating days in the dry brisk air. Sitting together now on a cool October evening, they reflected on so much that had happened since their freedom, especially the amazing conclusion of the evening before.

The American process for repatriation of those most important persons of the Dachau survivors took nearly six months, the Wehrmacht Generals, the important Lutheran and Roman Catholic clergy, including the Bishop, and the Austrian hierarchy and other nations' officials were sent into Italy for the process to work out, but for the less important it had taken only a month of paperwork and a final judgment that those released did have provision made for them by family or friends, or could support themselves.

The Americans' money allowance given the women for repatriation back to their homes in Germany had been pooled by the three and used for rent on the second floor of a home in the Obermais district that overlooked Meran. The thought of returning to Germany was emotionally distasteful. The country was in chaos, and not one of the three had anyone to return to, Mathilde was a widow, Louisa was single, and they found Meran such a congenial place to live. Perhaps here they could eventually free themselves from the past and find a life pleasing to God.

The small apartment was neglected and dirty. Hans Elder the widower who owned the place took no care of it. Unlived in for many months, he would not have had folks rent again except that the American command had requested people of the area to make available rooms or flats for the influx of displaced people - both those who had walked from Germany - survivors of the forced evacuations, and those who had found ways to come north out of Italy as the war had turned civil life into misery everywhere.

The women found joy in chasing out dust and dirt, airing the linens, washing down walls, scrubbing the floors and making a home for themselves at last. With only two beds and a tired sofa, they decided on a weekly rotation - what luxury to have a clean, safe place - no sagging springs could dissuade them into believing that this was anything but wonderful. The American commissary allowed the expatriates a food ration card, which was to hold them over until they found work and were self-sufficient.

After they had been settled a few days, had napped in the morning, in the afternoon, and slept every night, Mathilde proposed a walk around the area. The childhood villa she had told her friends about she estimated was only two or so kilometers away. She felt sure she could find it among the multitude of such great houses; already she had noted the old landmarks. The three found they were not as leg-strong as they had thought. By the time they reached the familiar district, and Mathilde had glowingly pointed out the place, they were happy to just sit on the lower steps that rose up through the gates to the wide front door and take in the gracious house. It had seen no care for years. Boarded up, its grounds crowded with unwelcome vegetation, the vines gone wild, still there were flowers everywhere.

“Well, there is no reason for us to climb the stairs, we can see no one is living here and we can’t get in. Let’s just rest a while and tackle the walk back. It’s sad to see Unterpfinden without people. My aunt and uncle were great entertainers. There were always guests, lots of people – so hospitable, the place filled with music – violinists, pianists were their friends. Now to see it dark and quiet – so sad. It seems to be sighing, can you hear it? It’s sighing and longing to be brought back to life again – like us. I’m going to see if there are records in the town about who owns it now. Uncle and Aunt were in poor health five years ago. I wonder if they are alive, and where.”

Realizing what these women had endured, the people of Meran were generous in finding them work. Some who had been servants and grounds keepers remembered the young girl who had spent time at Unterpfinden. A bit of guilt might have been mixed into their generosity and concern, for they had watched good Jewish neighbors boarded into trucks and driven away, never to be heard from again. At least eighty had perished in the extermination camps. Setting up a Joint Distribution Committee with the remaining Jews, the Americans’ reopened a sanatorium which over the next several years would become a temporary haven for 15,000 Jewish survivors.

Besides the comfort they had felt in Meran from the first day, and the emotional ties they had to the church whose towering steeple dominated their view, they had found an immediate, and compelling reason for staying. Some Jewish children orphaned in the camps were another responsibility forced upon the American Occupation. What to do with them was a critical problem to be solved in hours, not weeks or months. Marta heard of this in the American headquarters where she had been hired as a housekeeper. With the prayerful agreement of her friends, she offered to make a home for ten of these children. The small Jewish community, now active in rehabilitation, was asked for consent. Overwhelmed with the needs of so many, they agreed these Christian women could take the children, with the provision that they honor the dead by presenting Judaism to the children as their inherited religion. The agreement included a phrase which the women had proposed, that they could be free to explain their own faith to the children, if and when they were asked.

“Well, yes,” the Jewish rabbi, recently repatriated himself from Reichenau, agreed, “but not otherwise.”

And so the agreement was written up and placed on file in the synagogue. The rabbi expected that all the children would come to the synagogue school for instruction as soon as their health permitted.

The Americans transported the waifs to their door just a few weeks after the war ended. Thus began the home for Jewish Orphans in Meran. For a year the apartment was crowded, improvised beds on the floor, but once the old villa, scrubbed down and aired out, was in operation, the Jewish Orphan Home expanded, eventually becoming home for fifty-five children.

This miracle happened because during the same period, Mathilde had been hard at work. The clerk at the town office found that the title of the villa was still under the name of the German official who had simply stolen the place – everyone felt that the title wasn't worth the paper it was written on, but some official word had to declare its legal state. Over the next months Mathilde Salvator was able with Louisa's knowledge of the Berlin labyrinth of offices, just creaking into motion again under allied control, to work through the tangle of legalities about ownership of the villa. It had indeed been confiscated by one of Hitler's Nazi friends early in 1938 and taken over for a summer home. Berlin finally acknowledged that the man was being tried for war crimes. More months went by before from prison he renounced ownership. During these months death certificates for Baron Ferdinand Salvator and his wife were located in the registry. What an amazing day it was when a letter came stating that a further search of the records had produced the wills of Ferdinand and Teresa. Mathilde was the closest living relative, and to Mathilde the villa had been left. That the place might become her own was a marvel of God's making.

While waiting for the process to play out, the three women worked at whatever was at hand to earn a living, and at the same time caring for their new family. It demanded ever ounce of their slowly returning health and vigor, but they greeted each day with awed gratitude. Eventually Marta's children would be returned to her times twenty. One little boy of the first ten, too young to talk, she teared up just watching. He could be her little Holtz. While he played on the floor, she'd walk by, her hand seeking out his soft hair to smooth.

Pats and hugs were freely given to every child. She often thought about Jesus saying that those who gave up homes and children for His sake would have them multiplied. But she doubted that she qualified. Had she really given up home and children for His sake?

Louisa overrode her objection with vehemence. “Of course, you did. Of course, you did! When you took Clara in why else would you have done it, except for the love of God? Where do you suppose that compassion comes from? Even if you had known the outcome, could you have turned her away?”

The three became surrogate mothers of the most intuitive, loving kind. Being survivors, they knew too well the broken wills, the terrorized emotions, the stunted minds. The immediate task was to nourish frail bodies that resembled stick

figures the children drew. Marta was given a full case of American peanut butter by the US Army commissary. The women soon experienced the value of this. The children loved it and its nourishment put flesh on the small bones faster than any other food. Besides, it had a long shelf life and needed neither refrigeration nor cooking. This was important as electricity was intermittent at best, and the one small refrigerator in the place was always stressed for space. Neighbors with Italian heritage laden them with pasta and breads, neighbors with German heritage brought thick pea soups and stews. Meat, in fact, food itself was scarce, so these gifts of food for the poor orphans meant less on many tables. But reparations were in order, especially when pictures and accounts of the camps that were forthcoming every day made it ever clearer what the good people of Germany, Austria and Tyrol had allowed by either participation with the Reich or by studied blindness. Hadn't some of their own men written home expressing disbelief and disgust after seeing a camp? Hadn't those involved in the resistance told of the horrors going on right at Innsbruck's Reichenau? It had been hard to believe, and easy to forget.

After the move to the villa Unterpfanden, built for generous hospitality of a different kind, but seeming to have just such an enormous family in mind – bedrooms, closets, baths, and all, and the multiplying of the numbers of their children by five, the place was renamed Salvator Jude Kinder. It saw benevolent activity day and night when some of the young and many of the older mothers of the town would come to feed, and then rock half the night, children whose nightmares otherwise made sleep impossible. Women of all the churches made clothes and knitted mittens, scarves and hats for winter. When the little ones began to speak, bits of memories came out with that child-like frankness and innocence that made the horrors leap into adult imaginations like the demons they were. These stories were told in the shops and market, at the cafes, in the barbershops and around dinner tables uniting the townspeople in aiding “those three survivors and their children.”

Marta and Louisa had become Catholic in their hearts from that Mass of thanksgiving on the Friday of their emancipation. With the twenty-four hour a day duties of child-care now pressing on their energies, taking the steps necessary for full communion became impossible. The old parish priest was ever more disabled, and their own responsibilities kept them wholly absorbed every waking moment from the minute the first ragged children had arrived. Until more volunteers took up work at the Villa they had time only for Mass and marketing. Tasks outside of the house were staggered so that only one was away at a time. Fortunately the two Masses each Sunday made it possible for all three to attend.

Marta and Louisa were eager to become communicants, but there were no hours to take instruction, so after yet another year, the pastor suggested he send an assistant to lead them through the beliefs and practices of the Church. The priest, Father Holtz, had recently taken an assignment at St. Valentine's Church at the end of the valley, fifteen kilometers away, but work there was mostly weddings of young people who were attracted by the romantic name of the place. Few village folks attended Mass there, rather they belonged to the Meran

churches and St. Nicholas. So Father was living in the St. Nicholas rectory aiding Father Vincent, having but one Mass a week at St. Valentine's and, of course, witnessing the marriages. He was a man hard to judge for age. He had white hair receding from his forehead, his body was stooped, he walked with a decided limp. His eyes, though, were different. His body might speak of age and decrepitude, but his eyes were bright with radiating wrinkles speaking of wisdom and kindness.

The first acquaintance with Father was on a warm afternoon. He parked his small aging car down in the circle and laboriously climbed the long stairs, arriving out of breath at the open door. He was greeted by a clamorous group of children who had just come in from a hike with some scout volunteers from the Jewish center. When Marta heard the visitor had come, she emerged taking off her apron. "Sorry, Father, we are just a little late with things here, for quiet let's go into the garden. I think everything is under control. "

Catholic instruction for her and Louisa began that afternoon in the high-walled garden at a little table canopied by rose-vines, which dropped down petals of rose and pink with every stir of breeze. For the weeks that followed, it proved such a propitious place that they continued to meet there on good days, which in Meran are almost assured. A few times pressing duties, including a bout of stomach flu affecting the whole household, canceled the meeting, but otherwise they progressed slowly through the catechumen instructions.

Beginning with Salvation History they threaded their way through the Old Testament, and arrived at the culmination all of its wondrous foreshadowings in Christ and His Church. Then followed the Church's founding on the rock of Peter, its history through the Fathers of the Church, its major creedal beliefs and how they were founded on Scripture. There was such a depth of truth and wisdom to be plunged into, except for their growing desire to be welcomed at Holy Communion, they would not have cared if the study went on forever. Besides, this good priest had become a good friend as well.

Occasionally Father would take a few of the older children on outings down to St. Valentine's, while he met with young couples to plan a wedding. Before returning, they'd eat the picnic lunch provided by the home's kitchen, and on the green that surrounded the church, have a ball game. On other evenings he would arrive to play checkers or organize dramatic skits that were given for the fun of the house. These became favorite occasions.

Father Holtz slowly worked his way into assuming a father-like presence in the otherwise purely mother-centered parenting. There was an advantage to being a celibate, and his fathering of the youngsters added an important part to his own life because he grew to love these children as his own.

One day, with the reluctant permission of Marta and her two cohorts, he brought three puppies to the villa. They had to have names, so the children crowding around the box, amidst the most hilarity yet heard by these walls, named them Flitzen, Ritzen (he scratched his ear) and Dixen. These puppies proved to be the best therapy of all. Exuding unconditional love, licking faces,

jumping into arms, and simply breaking down the walls of sad withdrawals, they brought such happiness to aching hearts that the women realized quickly that rather than being a worrisome additional work, the pups were God-given.

That very day, lumber poking out the windows of his car, fencing coiled in the trunk, Father rounded up the older boys, and the supplies were dragged and carried up the stairs to the outbuilding. After several days of noise of hammer and saw, shouts of pain – a misplaced hammer blow, and laughter, a very adequate kennel and three doghouses emerged. Printed carefully over the entrances were the three names in black paint. From that experience several of the boys took to building things. With the priest's head bent with theirs as they sketched and discussed construction, this was just the first of the projects planned on the dining table.

In the next week lessons in training the pups began. Father knew a lot about dogs. He kept the children working at these lessons to ensure the pups would become good house-pets and companions. His organizing of their care, giving rotating responsibility to the older children and insisting that they fulfill their duties, eased any burden associated with puppy feeding, puppy elimination, and puppy kenneling. The women looked on with tearful appreciation. Oh, yes, tears had become welcome again, especially because of gratitude for the goodness that was poured out on them; healing hearts simply had many occasions to produce wet eyes.

At the religious instruction sessions, the prison-camp past was never brought up. The women assumed this was because their background was well known in the town, and that out of respect for their feelings, Father simply kept that topic well buried. No need to fan into flames embers that were slowly dying in the outpouring love of serving these children. So how did Holtz and Marta come to the consciousness of their deep relationship?

The topic under discussion that late afternoon was “the saints.” The sun would soon sink behind the western mountains, so the women wearing their thick sweaters against the cool fall air, suggested they go to their favorite garden table until it became too dark. Matilde enjoyed the discussions and joined the instructions when enough volunteers stepped into the household duties.

The four prayed together holding hands, then Father Holtz introduced the theme, “The Church is a vast family that extends in time and space. Often Protestants protest. . . which actually explains why they are called that, our so-called “worship” of others than the Holy Trinity. Because our churches are full of family portraits in statuary and paintings, they assume we are worshipping all these folks. Of course, we worship only the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Yet, we have a close affinity to a great company of saints. Jesus intended to form a family – he the new Adam and His Mother the new Eve would spiritually generate the family that God wanted from the beginning, but which was delayed . . . delayed only, not destroyed by the Fall. We saw how he started that family with Abraham. And as with any family, we enjoy remembrances of those we love, those who have gone before us – pictures of parents and grandparents. I don't know what saints you may be familiar with. Our churches here in Meran, like

everywhere, are named after saints. Saint Valentine and Saint Nicholas both have a legendary following that is hardly the real story. The real story surpasses any legend. I have a little book here that you may want to read. It has the life stories of some of the favorite saints of the Church.

“How does a person ever become a saint?” the conversation had stirred Marta’s ever-present thoughts of Clarimonde. “Does the Church need some proof of a specially holy life? And who determines it?”

“There’s a long period of examination, as I understand it. Someone even acts as the Devil’s Advocate to try to find things contrary to sanctity in the life. Besides that two authenticated miracles must take place. It can be centuries before a saint is declared to be one. When elevated to the altar by the name ‘saint,’ it means that the person’s soul is actually in heaven, not in purgatory, nor merely on the way to heaven.”

“We’ve thought we may have known a saint. We even thought we knew of one arrangement that only she could have made possible. Without her intercession, I believe I wouldn’t be here now.”

Louisa broke in, “I smelled roses the hour she died. I smelled strong roses – just like the fragrance right now,” she paused. “But where are the roses? These are spring-flowering, and ceased blooming two months ago? Where are the roses?” They inhaled and, wondering, looked up at the vines where only green leaves moved in the cool autumn air.

“I do smell roses, don’t you?” asked Marta.

“Yes, I think I do. It is certainly strange, Where did you know this woman?”

“I knew her very well. Louisa, who knew her not at all, but only happened to be in the same place at the same time, was the one who smelled the roses. I can’t say I did. It is a long story, and one I can hardly tell, but it was both because of her that I was interred in Ravensbrueck, and because of her that I became born-again in Christ, or I would have died in despair – my soul under that fearful sin, and because of her that I was given this opportunity to live again. Everything I am at the moment is traceable to her alone.”

“For one person to be responsible for so much in another person’s life, there must be quite a story. Ravensbrueck, you say. That was your prison? I once knew a young woman who was an inmate there, and just like you it was because of her that I am the person I am. But she didn’t die there. She died at Dachau and I buried her.” He crossed himself slowly, “Her name is Clarimonde.”

The End