CHILDREN ARE CIVILIANS TOO

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ACROSS THE BRIDGE

The story I want to tell you has no particular point to it, maybe it isn't really a story at all, but I must tell you about it. Ten years ago there was a kind of prelude, and a few days ago the circle was completed...

A few days ago I was in a train crossing the bridge that once, before the war, had been strong and wide, as strong as the iron of Bismarck's chest on all those monuments, as inflexible as the rules of bureaucracy; a wide, four-track railway bridge over the Rhine, supported by a row of massive piers, and ten years ago I used to take the same train across that bridge three times a week: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. In those prewar days I was an employee of the Reich Gun Dog and Retriever Association; a modest position, I was a kind of errand-boy, really. I knew nothing about dogs, of course, I haven't had much education. Three times a week I would take the train from Königstadt, where our head office was, to Gründerheim, where we had a branch office. There I would pick up urgent correspondence, money, and "Pending Cases." The latter were in a large manila folder. Being only a messenger, of course, I never was told what was in the folder....
In the morning I would go straight from the house to the station and catch the eight o'clock train to Gründerheim. The journey took three-quarters of an hour. Even in those days, crossing the bridge scared me. All the technical assurances of well-informed people concerning the ample load-capacity of the bridge were to no avail: I was just plain scared. The mere connection of train and bridge scared me; I am honest enough to admit it. The Rhine is very broad where we live. With a quaking heart I was invariably conscious of the slight swaying of the bridge, of the ominous rocking that continued for six hundred yards. At last came the reassuring, more muffled rattle as we regained the railway embankment, and then came the vegetable plots, rows and rows of vegetable plots—and finally, just before Kahlenkatten, a house: it was to this house that I clung, so to speak, with my eyes. This house stood on solid ground; my eyes would clench at this house.

The exterior of the house was of reddish-brown stucco, it was very clean, the window frames and ledges all picked out in dark brown. Two floors, three windows upstairs and two down, in the middle the front door with three steps leading up to it. And invariably, if it was not raining too hard, a child would be sitting on these steps, a spindly little girl of about nine or ten holding a large, clean doll and frowning up at the train. Invariably my eyes would stumble over this child, to be brought up short by the window on the left, for each time I saw a woman in there, a bucket beside her, bent double, a scrubbing cloth in her hands, laboriously washing the floor. Invariably, even when it was raining cats and dogs, even when the child was not sitting there on the steps. The woman was always there: the thin nape of her neck, betraying her as the mother of the little girl, and that movement to and fro, that typical scrubbing movement. Many a time I meant to notice the furniture, or the curtains, but my eyes were glued to this thin, eternally scrubbing woman, and before I could think about anything else the train had passed. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, it must always have been about ten minutes past eight, for in those days the trains were nothing if not punctual. By the time the train had passed, I was left with a view of the clean rear of the house, silent and uncommunicative.

Needless to say, I began wondering about this woman and this house. All the other places we passed held little interest for me. Kahlenkatten—Brüderkotten—Suhlenheim—Gründerheim—there was nothing very interesting about these stations. My thoughts were always preoccupied with that house. Why does the woman wash and scrub three times a week, I wondered. The house didn't look at all as if there were dirty people living in it, or as if a great many visitors came and went. In fact it looked almost inhospitable, although it was clean. It was a clean and yet unwelcoming house.

But when I caught the eleven o'clock train from Gründerheim for the return trip and saw the rear of the house shortly before noon just beyond Kahlenkatten, the woman would then be washing the panes of the end window on the right. Oddly enough, on Mondays and Saturdays she would be washing the end window on the right, and on Wednesdays the middle window. Chamois in hand, she rubbed and rubbed. Round her head she wore a scarf of a dull, reddish color. But on the way back I never saw the little girl, and now, approaching midday—it must have been a few minutes to twelve, for in those days the trains were nothing if not punctual—it was the front of the house that was silent and uncommunicative.

Although in telling my story I shall make every effort to describe only what I actually saw, presumably no one will object to the modest observation that, after three months, I permitted myself the mathematical combination that on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays the woman probably washed the other windows. This combination, modest though it was, gradually became an obsession. Sometimes, all the way from just before Kahlenkatten to Gründerheim, I would puzzle over which afternoons and mornings the other windows of the two floors
were likely to get washed. In fact, I finally sat down with pencil and paper and devised a kind of cleaning timetable for myself. From what I had observed on the three mornings, I tried to figure out what was most likely to get cleaned the other three afternoons and the remaining whole days. For I had the curiously fixed notion that the woman never did anything but wash and scrub. After all, I never saw her any other way, always bent double, so that I thought I could hear her laboring breathing—at ten minutes past eight; and busily rubbing with the chamois, so that I thought I could see the tip of her tongue between her tightly drawn lips—shortly before twelve.

The story of this house preyed on my mind. I started daydreaming. This made me careless in my work. Yes, I became careless. I let my thoughts wander too often. One day I even forgot the “Pending Cases” folder. I drew down upon my head the wrath of the District Manager of the Reich Gun Dog and Retriever Association. He sent for me; he was quivering with indignation. “Grabowski,” he said to me, “I hear you forgot the ‘Pending Cases.’ Orders are orders, Grabowski.” When I maintained a stubborn silence, the boss became more severe. “Messener Grabowski, I'm warning you. The Reich Gun Dog and Retriever Association has no use for forgetful employees, you know. We can look elsewhere for qualified staff.” He looked at me menacingly, but then he suddenly became human. “Have you something on your mind?” I admitted in a low voice: “Yes,” “What is it?” he asked kindly. I merely shook my head. “Can I help? Tell me what I can do.”

“Give me a day off, sir,” I asked diffidently, “that's all I ask.” He nodded magnanimously. “Done! And don’t take what I said too seriously. Anybody can make one mistake, we've always been quite satisfied with you....”

My heart leaped with joy. This interview took place on a Wednesday. And the following day, Thursday, was to be my day off. I had it all figured out. I caught the eight o’clock train, trembling more with impatience than with fear as we crossed the bridge: there she was, washing the front steps. I caught the next train back from Kahlenkatten and passed her house just about nine: top floor, middle window, front. I rode back and forth four times that day and had the whole Thursday timetable complete: front steps, middle window top floor front, middle window top floor back, attic, front room top. As I passed the house for the last time at six o’clock, I saw a little man’s stooped figure digging humbly away in the garden. The child, holding the clean doll, was watching him like a jaileress. The woman was not in sight....

But all this happened ten years ago, before the war. A few days ago I crossed that bridge again by train. My God, how far away my thoughts had been when I got onto the train at Königsstäd! I had forgotten the whole business. Our train was made up of boxcars, and as we approached the Rhine a strange thing happened: one after another the boxcars ahead of us fell silent. It was quite extraordinary, as if the whole train of fifteen or twenty cars were a series of lights going out one after another. And we could hear a horrible, hollow rattle, a kind of windy rattle; and suddenly it sounded as if little hammers were being tapped against the floor of our boxcar, and we fell silent too, and there it was: nothing, nothing... nothing left and right there was nothing, a ghastly void... in the distance the grassy banks of the Rhine... boats... water, but one didn't dare look too far out: just looking made one giddy. Nothing, nothing whatever! I could tell from the white face of a silent farmer's wife that she was praying, other people were lighting cigarettes with trembling hands; even the men playing cards in the corner had fallen silent....

Then we could hear the cars up front riding over solid ground again, and we all had the same thought: they've made it. If something happens to the train, maybe those people can jump out, but we were in the last car but one, and it was almost a foregone conclusion that we would plunge into the river. The conviction was there in our eyes and in our pale faces. The
temporary bridge was no wider than the tracks, in fact the tracks themselves were the bridge, and the side of the boxcar hung out over the bridge into space, and the bridge rocked as if it were about to tip us off into space.

But then all of a sudden there was a firmer rattle, we could hear it coming closer, quite distinctly, and then under our car too it became somehow deeper, more substantial, this rattle, we breathed again and dared to look out: there were vegetable plots! Oh, may God bless vegetable plots! And suddenly I realized where we were, and my heart throbbed queerly the closer we came to Kahlenkatten. For me there was but one question: would that house still be standing? And then I saw it, first from a distance through the delicate sparse green of a few trees in the vegetable plots, the red facade of the house, still very clean, coming closer and closer. I was gripped by an indescribable emotion. Everything, the past of ten years ago and everything that had happened since then, raged within me in a frenzied, uncontrollable turmoil. And then the house came right up close, with giant strides, and then I saw her, the woman: she was washing the front steps. No, it wasn’t her, those legs were younger, a little heavier, but she had the same movements, those jerky, thrusting movements as she pushed the scrubbing cloth to and fro. My heart stood still, my heart marked time. Then the woman turned her face for just a moment, and instantly I recognized the little girl of ten years ago; that pinched, spidery, frowning face, and in the expression on her face something rather sour, something disagreeably sour like stale salad.

As my heart slowly started beating again, it struck me that today was in fact Thursday.

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MY PAL WITH THE LONG HAIR

It was a funny thing: exactly five minutes before the raid started I had a feeling something was wrong. . . . I looked warily round, then strolled along the Rhine toward the station, and it didn’t surprise me at all to see the jeeps come dashing up full of red-capped military police who proceeded to surround the block, cordon it off, and begin their search. It all happened incredibly fast. I stood just outside the cordon and calmly lighted a cigarette. Everything was done so quietly. Quantities of cigarettes landed on the ground. Too bad, I thought . . . instinctively making a rough calculation as to the cash that must be lying around there. The truck rapidly filled up with the ones they had nabbed. Franz was among them . . . he gestured to me from a distance in a resigned kind of way, as much as to say: “Just my luck. One of the policemen turned round to look at me, so I left. But slowly, very slowly. Hell, let them pick me up too, I couldn’t care less.

I was in no mood to go back to my room so I continued my stroll toward the station. I flicked a pebble aside with my stick.