

## ***Crossing the Bridge***

It was almost midnight. Captain Veitel swung his umbrella against the flurries of snow blowing in his face and turned to cross the bridge to the South Side. He glanced ahead. The bridge was empty, except for the snowflakes streaming like a silent cloud of locusts past the yellow globes of the lamps on the stone balustrades and out into the blackness of the river. As he walked he fingered the money in his overcoat pocket doubtfully. It was very late...She might still be expecting him though. Anyway, she had never yet turned him away.

His shoes fell softly upon the white - carpeted pavement. He could hear the river below. The water ran darkly under the arches with a muffled sound tonight, as if it were trying to conceal the haste of its onrush. He hunched himself down into his coat. It would feel warmer on the South Side. That was just an illusion of course; there was no difference really. The houses stood closer together and the lights were brighter, that was all. But it was good to feel warm. Warmth was like youth, and it was good to feel young.

He smiled wryly to himself and brushed some crystals of snow from his grey moustache. How the years did pass by! Still, there was plenty of time left yet - and it would be a good time too! The little room that waited to embrace him with its warmth glowed affectionately in his mind's eye. Ah, it was good, that little fire burning cheerfully.

He was almost to the middle of the bridge when his reverie was disturbed by a shadow moving across his path. He stopped and looked up, vaguely alarmed. There, a few yards in front of him a girl was climbing awkwardly on to the balustrade. She grasped the lamp standard, steadying herself for a moment, and looked down at the water. She was going to jump! The light shone around her head, glistening in the snow on her hair. In another moment she would be gone. She could not have seen or heard him coming. How stupid!

'Please don't!' he called.

The girl turned wildly and almost fell. She looked horribly frightened. Tears and snowflakes smeared her cheeks. She was quite young, not more than twenty, but ugly with fear. He stared at her in some confusion. Surely they had nothing to do with one another.

'Leave me alone,' she cried, making him start. Had she guessed his thought?

He must seem a forbidding figure to her, standing there dark against the light, the umbrella making a black cowl round his head and the snow blowing past him. On an impulse he closed the umbrella and crooked it over his arm.

He raised his hands towards her. 'Let me help you down,' he said as gently as possible. She could see him fully now, the neat overcoat and hat, and the grey moustache. He was perfectly respectable.

'Go away!' She gripped the iron lamp standard and shook her head. Her hair was long and hung lankly down her face; she was not a pretty girl.

'Please let me help you,' he insisted. 'Do be careful.' But she made no move. How provoking! It was getting so late too.

'Come along now,' he said more firmly. She began to sob, but he sensed she was yielding. When he took a step towards her and raised his hands higher she did not draw back. He held her waist and she came clumsily down.

They moved apart. He was embarrassed by the contact, as if he had touched her improperly in a crowd.

'I'm sorry,' he murmured inadequately.

She smoothed the wetness from her cheeks with the tips of her fingers and shook the hair back from her face with a reproachful gesture; a pathetic attempt at dignity which made her look even more forlorn. But it moved him to put up his umbrella and shield her from the snow.

What on earth was he to do with her! Cheap raincoat, down-at-heel shoes, she was obviously from the South Side.

'Are you all right now?'

She nodded. 'Yes, I'll be all right.'

'Is there something I can do?'

'No, there is nothing you can do.'

That was very probably true. After all, how could he get involved in her affairs, whatever her trouble was. 'Where were you going,' he asked.

'To the North Side.'

'Why were you going there?'

'I had an appointment...with a man.' She turned her face towards him defiantly. 'And where were you going?'

The question took him by surprise. 'I was going to the South Side.'

Her upper lip curled slightly. 'To see a woman?'

He nodded defensively. 'Look,' he began earnestly, 'keep your appointment. I'll see you safely over to the North Side. Go to him.'

Her face became sullen. She looked along the bridge where the snow slanted through the lamplight. 'No, it's too late. I don't want to go now.'

He felt a hopelessness. 'Wouldn't it be better than going back alone, or perhaps...?'

From somewhere on the North Side a bell began chiming the hour. It was too late! He would have to turn back. Damn her! Why hadn't he been on the other side!

'Or what...?' she challenged him suddenly.

He gestured irritably at the balustrade.

'Oh that...I thought you meant something else.'

The hair prickled on his scalp and he stiffened.

'Look here, if its money you need, take this.'

He drew the note from his overcoat pocket and thrust it towards her.

'I don't want your money.'

'Wouldn't it tide you over...well the next few days?'

'It can't buy me anything I want.'

Oh how tedious! Why the devil had he stopped her! He could have been across the bridge and...he glanced over the balustrade.

The river slipped beneath the arches of the bridge sleekly, like the black rim of a spinning wet rubber wheel. The lamps shone on it, a row of broken yellow orbs...She would be carried a long way down by the current. They would take her body out, perhaps a couple of miles away, where the river turned through the woods and the tree roots clutched out from the bank. Or she might drift into the dappled echoes of the backwater under the jetty. The workmen who fished there in the lunch break would find her. They would get excited and anxious and talk about it for days. It would make a small column in the local paper.

He had seen bodies before of course. In Normandy, pushed to the side of the road, as if they were sleeping uncomfortably. But then everyone had slept uncomfortably. And later in the Rhine too, groups of bobbing grey and brown humps in the freezing water, like abandoned equipment waiting for someone to tidy up. He had been young then and worried about the idea of death.

It was the noise that was so hideous. No one seemed to care about the noise. You couldn't escape it. Even if you went away somewhere, there was still the ringing in your ears.

He had slipped away. To a village over on the left where there was nothing much happening. It was just a cluster of mouldering stone houses with shutters at the windows and walled gardens. There was nothing there, but a strange and beautiful stillness...

He had thought the village was deserted. Then round the corner came a young, round-faced German in a grey uniform. It looked so different from the khaki he had seen for days and days. The German had a parcel under his arm. They looked at each other with embarrassed surprise. Neither of them had any right to be there. Then he remembered - this was the enemy. He pointed his rifle and pulled the trigger. The silence cracked.

The German grimaced at him, as if he had indigestion or had been shocked by the noise. Then he lowered himself slowly to the worn flagstones and went to sleep.

'You can't sleep there. You are in the way. The villagers might stumble over you!'

Though they couldn't miss seeing him really, a grey heap with a parcel in the middle of the pavement.

'Il s'est couché,' they would mumber, stepping politely round him. And the German would not move.

But for the ringing in his ears. It was all quiet again. There was no one else there. No one had seen. He turned and went back to his own side. Doch ist er entschlafen.

He turned towards the girl. The German would have been about her age. She was looking at him passively.

'I should get a good night's sleep. Things won't seem so bad in the morning. Shall I see you home?'

'No, I've already caused you too much trouble.'

He glanced past her towards the South Side. How beautiful the snow looked on the rooftops! 'Won't you let me walk a little way with you?'

'No, I don't need you now.'

Then there was nothing more to do but go back. He felt the lamps shining brightly down on him. She would not help him. It was such a small thing after he had done so much for her. Not that he expected thanks; but surely she owed him something. As if from a height he saw himself standing in the middle of the bridge, sheltering her with his umbrella.

'That was a dreadful thing you were going to do.'

'No, it was crossing the bridge I dreaded.'

'Surely! Such a paltry thing?' What an extraordinary girl!

She shrugged. 'I suppose you are right.'

That was reassuring. She was going to be sensible. 'I know I am right,' he said detemindly.

'Of course you are right!' she flung at him. 'You are too stupid to be wrong!'

He could see she half regretted the words immediately they were spoken, but it was too late. That was an unforgivable rudeness.

'I have just saved your life.'

Her eyes widened with wonder and derision. 'You saved what!'

It was like a blow in his face. He stepped back, and the movement withdrew the shelter of his umbrella from her. She stood alone, like a wraith in the light, the snow sweeping past her.

He turned away and walked back along the bridge. When he reached the end he felt compelled to stop and look back. The bridge was empty!

He looked down at his footprints filling rapidly with snow and then doubtfully again along the bridge. If he hurried...he could be sure. But what good would that do...? Perhaps he should say some sort of prayer... No...That might seem rather pretentious.

He turned and walked slowly towards the dark, still buildings of the North Side.

GORDON INSKIP.