

Staring Into Darkness

Out in the cold night, a muffled bell tolled one, two, three times, from one of Nürnberg's many towers. Then there was deep silence again, save for a murmuring wind. Minutes passed without reference to time. Then, across the endless ceiling of heaven, the high, lonely sound of a solitary aircraft crossing from south to north, tugging at his heart, urging him to be gone, return home, seek the lonely places; slowly, so slowly it passed, that the sound only ceased when the bell tolled once more. Half past three.

McKelvie stared into the darkness; then turned again, determined to get some sleep before the day began. Four hours he had lain there; turn in early, get some sleep before another big day, he had thought. He had been wrong, for sleep had stalked about angrily in the night. His feet burned alternately hot, then cold, his neck unable to find a position of rest upon the bolster they had supplied, stinking still of the stale sweat of previous lodgers, soldiers, refugees - who knows? Perhaps every single previous lodger was now dead, or lost in the Russian plains.

Nürnberg, November 1945. What was he doing here? The war in Germany was over, all of his fellows had either retreated to the safety of civilian life, or were finding themselves some niche up north with the Control Commission. Not him. Something important for you to do, they said. A contribution to the Peace, they said. Work that you will look back on with pride. It had seemed persuasive then. Not so now, in the middle of an abandoned German winter's night. Now, it seemed, the work was riven with doubt: was this justice or legalised vengeance? Was it retribution, or an excuse to pardon the less-prominent war-criminals? Such doubts pushed in upon him also by day, surrounded as he was by vistas of destruction, poverty, resentment.

Two days ago, he had been introduced to his "client", a bulky man with every appearance of commanding a team of hair-dressers and manicurists, despite his confinement in a small room with bars on its windows. He wore a beige, high-buttoned, military tunic in haute-couture style, his black hair was slicked back, his chin was shaved smooth as silk. Sir, said the officer, this is Flight-Lieutenant McKelvie; he will be your interpreter. The German had nodded perfunctorily, then turned back to gaze out of the window at the falling snow, his fingers playing nervously. McKelvie had mumbled a few polite words in German, glad not to have to shake hands with the man; then he had been escorted from the room and dispatched to examine some of the legal papers which would be discussed by the court over the next few weeks.

He had tried to rationalise; but he had been annoyed that this man had not thought him, McKelvie, worthy of more than a glance. Was not this man the prisoner, and McKelvie his line of communication, and therefore his main hope of a fair outcome from the proceedings? Angry, too, that the prisoner had treated him as something of right, with a confidence that he would be his personal servant; there was no doubt about it. McKelvie fitted in neatly to the prisoner's view of society. He had not looked like the kind of man who was interested in the lower ranks, expected them to obey without question. He looked, on the contrary, like the kind of man who was used to facing down his enemies with a tailored uniform and a commanding gaze. And, sure enough, this was exactly how he had presented himself on the previous day, his first day before the Tribunal, called with a score of his erstwhile colleagues to stand before the judges. The charges against him were read in English - summarised as "crimes against peace" - McKelvie had dutifully, slightly nervously, translated them into acceptable German, the accused had said nothing, simply sat back relaxed an amused smile on his face. McKelvie was invisible to him, just a voice in the head-phones.

McKelvie turned again in his bed, the rough blankets irritating his face. He lit and smoked a cigarette. The glowing tip burned comfortingly in the blackness of the

night. This was not work as a man, this was work as a device, a tool, a pen, or a wireless set. Interpreting meant communication between two minds, each tuned to a different station, it was a creative act, requiring skill, nuance, understanding. That's why they had picked him, they said: your mastery of the German language is well-known. You have a major role to play in the coming months. The eyes of the world will be upon the Tribunal in Nürnberg. This is your chance to be part of history. This is not simply a job, it is a duty. Of course he had snapped it up: yes, sir, it would be an honour.

Yesterday, at the Tribunal, most of the faces had been unknown even to him, who had kept his finger on the pulse of German politics throughout the past fifteen years of turmoil. The faces were bland, like shop-keepers, scared, like trapped rats, smiling, like politicians, downcast, like penitents, blank, like criminals. Only those of Hess, Goering, Ribbentrop and Speer were familiar to him - but even then, he might not have recognised them in such unfamiliar settings; as for the rest, twenty of them, they could have been any well-heeled Germans waiting to be measured by their tailors, or attended to by a dentist. Such unsurprising faces concealing such an abyss of cold, sinister human cruelty.

The accused sat in two rows in front of a line of military guards, an ill-fitting block. The eight interpreters sat at two desks, jammed tightly in a corner to the right of the dock. The rest of the great wood-panelled room was occupied by secretaries, recorders, defence counsel, guards, newspaper-men, observers, military brass, judges, messengers. A clock solemnly ticked away the minutes. The air was hazy with cigarette-smoke - American, mostly - which billowed around the lights. In a lull in the proceedings, McKelvie had cast a glance over the defendants, considered just how many of them would walk free, how many would serve short prison sentences, how many would die on the scaffold. There would be pressure to keep some of them alive, notwithstanding their complicity in the dark matters which were now said to be resolved. There would be endless submissions of regret, sorrow, ignorance, repentance; it would be pointed out that none of the accused were of an age to continue to pursue past policies in this life. Some, almost certainly, would be spared to live out their lives, sporting blazers and dark glasses in leafy suburbs. Why could it not be as it was with Mussolini in Italy - just let the people take charge of justice, and be done with it, quickly, finally? What need of all this bureaucracy, negotiation, ceremonial? McKelvie kept his thoughts to himself. This was, after all, his job: to slot in to the machine like the well-oiled cog. Don't ask questions, just interpret back and forth, don't even consider the significance of the words.

Doubtless, the Juggernaut wheels of justice would reveal details to the world which were not already common currency. The tragedy and farce of recent history would probably be enacted again in startling manner in this court-room. But the broad picture was unlikely to change. At best, McKelvie could hope for six, nine months of comfortable living, ensconced in the home-town of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Sachs, it would be a steady job, an impressive tour of duty to which to refer when applying for a position back in Britain.

The clock-tower rang out four o'clock. Still not the slightest promise of sleep. How was he going to concentrate tomorrow, when questions of great import were posed and all ears would attend upon his own words? He lit another cigarette. Yes, he would get used to it: tomorrow was only the second day; there were days and days and weeks to come, McKelvie would adapt, this work would become just a framework in which he could live. He had done such things before, he fitted in: fitting in was what he was good at.

These were the bleakest hours of the night, hopeless, lonely, dark, empty, cold. Christ Almighty, it was cold, a surprise even to McKelvie, who had experienced some of

the breath-robbing, penetrating winters of central Europe. He clutched his blankets about his feet and head.

At worst, he thought, I can waste a year of my life providing a service for this thug. Speaking to him, but not conversing; listening to him, but not sympathising; rendering into English some words, thoughts, excuses which he had no time for. Then doing exactly the same for the prosecuting officers, or the presiding judge: would the prisoner explain why he did this? whom did he order to do that? please provide the names of those who...it would go on and on. To what end? The German people knew who had ultimately led them into destruction, they would surely exact revenge, where revenge was needed. They did it after the last war - Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, revolution, civil war: when there had been a need, there had been response enough. Now the Germans needed to be left alone to sort themselves out, not to be patronised by the Allied judiciary.

But if I don't do this job, he thought, then someone else will. Would it not be better just to stay at my post, see this through, do the work, then go home, find the quietest corner of Scotland, and lose all my memories? Or would I regret it for the rest of my life, if I just walked away from this? Is it my duty to stay here, or is it simply a job of work to be done? Is this a golden opportunity, or a poisoned chalice? He knew there was no answer to these questions: work was work, it had to be done, or he had to walk away from it and not look back.

Far and away in the sky, the heavy sound of a second transport-plane, or a bomber with no bombs left to drop, as it droned without faltering across the stars, as near as if he were in the cockpit, for minutes on end, threading through the heavy cloth of the night. Heading home, perhaps. The second in one night: McKelvie felt the utter futility of life wrap its arms around him.

The last hours of the night hissed past, slithering bell by bell into the coldest passage, the ghostly catacomb of dawn. His teeth began chattering. He got up and struggled into his RAF great-coat, pulled on an extra pair of socks, went over to the window and looked out. He thought that the sky in the east was beginning to lighten. Outside, a street away or more, a dog began to bark monotonously. It might have been the only living creature left in all the world. No one shouted at it to stop. McKelvie went back to bed and lay breathing heavily into his hands.

At half-past-six, he slipped into a desperate slumber.

Only to be roused at seven o'clock precisely by the driver assigned to him. He clattered up the stairs and burst in. "Time to shake a leg, sir," he announced cheerily, "Can't lie there all day! You're a regular Kip van Winkle, eh?" After which erroneous bonhomie, he clattered back down the stairs and sat outside revving the engine. Drained of all energy, McKelvie reluctantly got out of his bed, shaved, dressed, lit a cigarette, set off for work. Coffee and hot rolls and butter, treasures enough for the rest of Germany, were always in abundance at the International Military Tribunal; and nicotine, as much as your tongue could take.

It should be a comfortably decent number - "I was the interpreter for Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering" - now that, surely, was a hook for a short conversation with a woman, a man, anybody. It should be a decent number, if you kept your eyes down, where the light of procedure shone; but what if you raised them and stared into the darkness?