

RANDOM HARVEST



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"According to a British Official Report, bombs
fell at Random."

— GERMAN OFFICIAL REPORT

PART ONE

N THE morning of the eleventh of November, 1937, precisely at eleven o'clock, some well-meaning busy-body consulted his watch and loudly announced the hour, with the result that all of us in the dining car felt constrained to put aside drinks and newspapers and spend the two minutes' silence in rather embarrassed stares at one another or out of the window. Not that anyone had intended disrespect — merely that in a fast-moving train we knew no rules for correct behavior and would therefore rather not have behaved at all. Anyhow, it was during those tense uneasy seconds that I first took notice of the man opposite. Dark-haired, slim, and austere good-looking, he was perhaps in his early or middle forties; he wore an air of prosperous distinction that fitted well with his neat but quiet standardized clothes. I could not guess whether he had originally moved in from a third- or a first-class compartment. Half a million Englishmen are like that. Their inconspicuous correctness makes almost a display of concealment.

As he looked out of the window I saw something happen to his eyes — a change from a glance to a gaze and then from a gaze to a glare, a sudden sharpening of focus, as when a person thinks he recognizes someone fleetingly in a crowd. Meanwhile a lurch of the train spilt coffee on the table between us, providing an excuse for apologies as soon as the two minutes were over; I got in with mine first, but by the time he turned to reply the focus was lost, his look of recognition unsure. Only the embarrassment

remained, and to ease it I made some comment on the moorland scenery, which was indeed somberly beautiful that morning, for overnight snow lay on the summits, and there was one of them, twin-domed, that seemed to keep pace with the train, moving over the intervening valley like a ghostly dromedary. "That's Mickle," I said, pointing to it.

Surprisingly he answered: "Do you know if there's a lake—quite a small lake—between the peaks?"

Two men at the table across the aisle then intervened with the instant garrulousness of those who overhear a question put to someone else. They were also, I think, moved by a common desire to talk down an emotional crisis, for the entire dining car seemed suddenly full of chatter. One said there *was* such a lake, if you called it a lake, but it was really more of a swamp; and the other said there wasn't any kind of lake at all, though after heavy rain it might be "a bit soggy" up there, and then the first man agreed that maybe that was so, and presently it turned out that though they were both Derbyshire men, neither had actually climbed Mickle since boyhood.

We listened politely to all this and thanked them, glad to let the matter drop. Nothing more was said till they left the train at Leicester; then I leaned across the table and said: "It doesn't pay to argue with local inhabitants, otherwise I'd have answered your question myself—because I was on top of Mickle yesterday."

A gleam reappeared in his eyes. "*You were?*"

"Yes, I'm one of those *eccentric* people who climb mountains for fun all the year round."

"So you saw the lake?"

"There wasn't a lake or a swamp or a sign of either."

"Ah. . . ." And the gleam faded.

"You sound disappointed?"

"Well no—hardly that. Maybe I was thinking of somewhere else. I'm afraid I've a bad memory."

"For mountains?"

"For names too. *Mickle*, did you say it was?" He spoke the word as if he were trying the sound of it.

"That's the local name. It isn't important enough to be on maps."

He nodded and then, rather deliberately, held up a newspaper throughout a couple of English counties. The sight of soldiers marching along a Bedfordshire lane gave us our next exchange of remarks — something about Hitler, the European situation, chances of war, and so on. It led to my asking if he had served in the last war.

"Yes."

"Then there must be things you wish you *had* forgotten?"

"But I have — even *them* — to some extent." He added as if to deflect the subject from himself: "I imagine you were too young?"

"Too young for the last, but not for the next, the way things are going."

"Nobody will be either too young or too old for the next."

Meanwhile men's voices were uprising further along the car in talk of Ypres and Gallipoli; I called his attention and commented that thousands of other Englishmen were doubtless at that moment reminiscing about their war experiences. "If you've already forgotten yours, you're probably lucky."

"I didn't say I'd forgotten *everything*."

He then told me a story which I shall summarize as follows: During the desperate months of trench warfare in France an English staff officer reasoned that if some spy whom the Germans had learned to trust were to give them false details about a big attack, it might have a better chance of success. The first step was to establish the good faith of such a spy, and this seemed only possible by allowing him, over a considerable period, to supply true information. Accordingly, during several weeks before the planned offensive, small raiding parties crawled across

no man's land at night while German machine gunners, having been duly tipped off as to time and place, slaughtered them with much precision. One of these doomed detachments was in charge of a youth who, after enlisting at the beginning of the war, had just begun his first spell in the front line. Quixotically eager to lead his men to storybook victory, he soon found that his less-inspiring task was to accompany a few wounded and dying survivors into a shell hole so close to the enemy trenches that he could pick up snatches of German conversation. Knowing the language fairly well, he connected something he heard with something he had previously overheard in his commanding officer's dugout; so that presently he was able to deduce the whole intrigue of plot and counterplot. It came to him as an additional shock as he lay there, half drowned in mud, delirious with the pain of a smashed leg, and sick with watching the far greater miseries of his companions. Before dawn a shell screamed over and burst a few yards away, killing the others and wounding him in the head so that he saw, heard, and could think no more.

"What happened to him afterwards?"

"Oh, he recovered pretty well — except for partial loss of memory. . . . He's still alive. Of course, when you come to think about it logically, the whole thing was as justifiable as any other piece of wartime strategy. The primary aim is to frustrate the enemy's knavish tricks. Anything that does so is the thing to do, even if it seems a bit knavish itself."

"You say that defensively, as if you had to keep on convincing yourself about it."

"I wonder if you're right."

"I wonder if you're the survivor who's still alive?"

He hesitated a moment, then answered with an oblique smile: "I don't suppose you'd believe me even if I said no." I let it go at that, and after a pause he went on: "It's curious to reflect that one's death was planned by *both* sides — it gives an extra flavor

to the life one managed to sneak away with, as well as a certain irony to the mood in which one wears a decoration."

"So I should imagine."

I waited for him to make some further comment but he broke a long silence only to summon the waiter and order a whiskey and soda. "You'll have one with me?"

"No thanks."

"You don't drink?"

"Not very often in the morning."

"Neither do I, as a rule. Matter of fact, I don't drink much at all."

I felt that these trivial exchanges were to cover an inner stress of mind he was trying to master. "Coming back to what you were saying," I coaxed, eventually, but he interrupted: "No, let's *not* come back to it — no use raking over these things. Besides, everybody's so bored with the last war and so scared of the next that it's almost become a social *gaffe* to bring up the matter at all."

"Except on one day of the year — which happens to be today. Then the taboos are lifted."

"Thanks to the rather theatrical device of the two minutes' silence?"

"Yes, and 'thanks' is right. Surely we English need some release from the tyranny of the stiff upper lip."

He smiled into his drink as the waiter set it before him. "So you think it does no harm — once a year?"

"On the contrary, I think it makes a very healthy purge of our normal — which is to say, our *abnormal* — national inhibitions." Another smile. "Maybe — if you like psychoanalyst's jargon."

"Evidently you don't."

"Sorry. If you're one of them, I apologize."

"No, I'm just interested in the subject, that's all."

"Ever studied it — seriously?"

I said I had, which was true, for I had written several papers on it for the Philosophical Society. He nodded, then read again for a few score miles. The train was traveling fast, and when next he looked up it was as if he realized that anything he still had to say must be hurried; we were already streaking past the long rows of suburban back gardens. He suddenly resumed, with a touch of his earlier eagerness: "All right then — listen to this — and don't laugh . . . it may be up your street. . . . Sometimes I have a feeling of being — if it isn't too absurd to say such a thing — of being *half somebody else*. Some casual little thing — a tune or a scent or a name in a newspaper or a look of something or somebody will remind me, just for a second — and yet I haven't time to get any grip of what it *does* remind me of — it's a sort of wisp of memory that can't be trapped before it fades away. . . . For instance, when I saw that mountain this morning I felt I'd been there — I almost *knew* I'd been there. . . . I could see that lake between the summits — why, I'd *bathed* in it — there was a slab of rock jutting out like a diving board — and the day I was there I fell asleep in the shade and woke up in the sun . . . but I suppose I've got to believe the whole thing never happened, just because you say there isn't a lake there at all. . . . Does all this strike you as the most utter nonsense?"

"By no means. It's not an uncommon experience."

"Oh, it *isn't*?" He looked slightly dismayed, perhaps robbed of some comfort in finding himself not unique.

"Dunne says it's due to a half-remembered dream. You should read his book *An Experiment with Time*. He says — this, of course, is condensing his theory very crudely — that dreams *do* foretell the future, only by the time they come true, we've forgotten them — all except your elusive wisp of memory."

"So I once dreamed about that mountain?"

"Perhaps. It's an interesting theory even if it can't be proved. Anyhow, the feeling you have is quite a normal one."

"I don't feel that it *is* altogether normal, the way I have it."

"You mean it's beginning to worry you?"

"Perhaps sometimes—in a way—yes." He added with a nervous smile: "But that's no reason why I should worry *you*. I can only plead this one-day-a-year excuse—the purging of the inhibitions, didn't you call it? Let's talk about something else—cricket—the Test Match. . . . Wonder what will happen to England . . . ?"

"Somehow today that doesn't sound like cricket talk."

"I know. After the silence there *are* overtones . . . but all I really wanted to prove was that I'm not a complete lunatic."

"Most people have a spot of lunacy in them somewhere. It's excusable."

"Provided they don't inflict it on strangers."

"Why not, if you feel you want to?"

"I don't want to—not consciously."

"Unconsciously then. Which makes it worst of all. Not that in your case it sounds very serious."

"You don't think so? You don't think these—er—peculiarities of memory—are—er—anything to worry about?"

"Since you ask me, may I be perfectly frank?"

"Of course."

"I don't know what your work is, but isn't it possible you've been overdoing things lately—not enough rest—relaxation?"

"I don't need a psychoanalyst to tell me that. My doctor does—every time I see him."

"Then why not take his advice?"

"*This* is why." He pulled a small notebook from his vest pocket. "I happen to be in what is vaguely called public life—which means I'm on a sort of treadmill I can't get off until it stops—and it won't stop." He turned over the pages. "Just to show you—a sample day of my existence. . . . Here, you can read it—

it's typed." He added, as I took the book: "My secretary — very neat. *She* wouldn't let me forget anything."

"But she can't spell 'archaeological.'"

"Why does she have to?" He snatched the book back for scrutiny and I had the feeling he was glad of the excuse to do so and keep it. "Calderbury Archaeological and Historical Society? . . . Oh, they're my constituents — I have to show them round the House — guidebook stuff — an awful bore . . . that's this afternoon. This evening I have an Embassy reception; then tomorrow there's a board meeting, a lunch party, and in the evening I'm guest speaker at a dinner in Cambridge."

"Doesn't look as if there's anything you could cut except possibly tomorrow's lunch."

"I expect I'll do that, anyway — even though it's at my own house. There'll be a crowd of novelists and actors and titled people who'd think me surly because I wouldn't talk to them half as freely as I'm talking to you now."

I could believe it. So far he had made no move towards an exchange of names between us, and I guessed that, on his side, the anonymity had been not only an encouragement to talk, but a temptation to reveal himself almost to the point of self-exhibition. And there had been a certain impish exhilaration in the way he had allowed me to glance at his engagement book for just those few seconds, as if teasing me with clues to an identity he had neither wish nor intention to disclose. Men in whom reticence is a part of good form have fantastic ways of occasional escape, and I should have been the last to embarrass an interesting fellow traveler had he not added, as the train began braking into St. Pancras: "Well, it's been a pleasant chat. Some day — who knows? — we might run into each other again."

Spoken as if he sincerely half meant it, the remark merely emphasized the other half sense in which he did not mean it at all; and this, because I already liked him, irked me to the

reply: "If it's the Swithin's Dinner tomorrow night we may as well introduce ourselves now as then, because I'll be there too. My name's Harrison. I'm on the Reception Committee."

"Oh, really?"

"And I don't know what your plans are, but after the show I'd be delighted if you'd come up to my rooms and have some coffee."

"Thanks," he muttered with sudden glumness, gathering up his newspapers and brief case. Then I suppose he realized it would be pointless, as well as discourteous, to refuse the name which I should inevitably discover so soon. He saved it for a last unsmiling afterthought as he jumped to the platform. "My name's Rainier . . . Charles Rainier."

* * *

Rainier nodded rather coldly when I met him again the following day. In his evening clothes and with an impressive array of decorations he looked what he was—a guest of honor about to perform his duties with the touch of apathy that so effectively disguises the British technique of authority. Not necessarily an aristocratic technique. I had already looked him up in reference books and found that he was the son of a longish line of manufacturers—no blue blood, no title (I wondered how he had evaded that), a public school of the second rank, Parliamentary membership for a safe Conservative county. I had also mentioned his name to a few people I knew; the general impression was that he was rich and influential, and that I was lucky to have made such a chance encounter. He did not, however, belong to the small group of well-known personalities recognizable by the man-in-the-street either in the flesh or in Low cartoons. On the contrary he seemed neither to seek nor to attract the popular sort of publicity, nor yet to repel it so markedly as to get in reverse; it was as if he deliberately aimed

at being nondescript. A journalist told me he would be difficult to build up as a newspaper hero because his personality was "centripetal" instead of "centrifugal"; I was not quite certain what this meant, but *Who's Who* was less subtle in confiding that his recreations were mountaineering and music.

On the whole I secured a fair amount of information without much real enlightenment; I hoped for more from a second meeting and traveled to Cambridge in a mood of considerable anticipation. It was the custom of the secretary and committee of the Swithin's Society to receive guests informally before dining in the College Hall; so we gathered first in the Combination Room, where we made introductions, drank sherry, and exchanged small talk. It is really hard to know what to say to distinguished people when you first meet them—that is, it is hard to think of talk small enough to be free from presumption. Rainier, for instance, had lately been in the financial news in connection with a proposed merger of cement companies, a difficult achievement for which negotiations were still proceeding; but it was impossible to say "How is your merger getting on?" as one might say "How are your chrysanthemums?" to a man whom you knew to be an enthusiastic gardener. Presently, to my relief, some other guests arrived whom I had to attend to, and it was perhaps a quarter of an hour before I saw him edging to me through the crowd. "Sorry," he began, "but I've got to let you down—awful toothache—where's the nearest dentist?" I hustled him out as inconspicuously as possible and at the door of the taxi received his promise to return to the dinner if he felt equal to it. Then I went back and explained to the company what had happened. Somehow it did not sound very convincing, and none of us really expected to see him again. But we did. An hour later he took the vacant place we had left at the High Table and was just in time to reply to the toast with one of the best after-dinner speeches I had ever heard. Maybe the escape from physi-

cal pain plus the Cambridge atmosphere, with its mingling of time-honored formality and youthful high spirits, suited a mood in which he began with badinage about toothache and ended with a few graceful compliments to the College and University. Among other things I remember him recalling that during his undergraduate days he had had an ambition to live at Cambridge all his life, as a don of some sort (laughter), but exactly what sort he hadn't stayed long enough to decide (laughter), because fate had called him instead to be some sort of businessman politician, but even what sort of *that* he hadn't yet entirely made up his mind (more laughter). . . . "So because of this fundamental indecision, I still hope that some day I shall throw off the cares of too many enterprises and seek the tranquillity of a room overlooking a quadrangle and an oak that can be sported against the world." (Prolonged laughter in which the speaker joined.) After he had finished, we all cheered uproariously and then, relaxing, drank and argued and made a night of it in the best Swithin's tradition; when eventually the affair broke up, it was Rainier himself who asked if my invitation to coffee still held good.

"Why, of course—only I thought maybe after the dentist you'd feel—"

"My dear boy, don't ever try to imagine what my feelings are."

But he smiled in saying it, and I gathered he had forgiven not so much me as himself for having taken part in our train conversation. A few friends adjourned to my rooms near by, where we sat around and continued discussions informally. Again he charmed us by his talk, but even more by his easy manners and willingness to laugh and listen; long after most of the good-nights he still lingered chatting, listening, and smoking cigarette after cigarette. I didn't know then that he slept badly and liked to stay up late, that he enjoyed young company and jokes and midnight argument, that he had no snobisms, and that public