

Stephen and Anne

HE lay there quietly. The beam he was gazing at had a dark, nut-brown color. On it someone had scribbled the word *quarantine*. It struck him as funny that the walls here inside should be the same red color as the outside walls. He already had his bed—a narrow strip of the paving-stone floor. In the semidarkness he could make out the rounded shapes of the women, who were getting ready to lie down in the uncertain, flickering light of the candles. He had been lying here in this way for many seconds, in the grip of a fever he was not even aware of, and full of tantalizing thoughts.

Then he fell asleep. He would wake up, wild with desperation, thinking that it was almost dawn, would close his eyes again, desiring to protract the delicious darkness in which he dropped, rose and dropped anew.

He awoke early in the morning. Astonished, he looked around to find out where he was. Next to him slept a girl, covered by knapsacks and a dark blanket, on his other side an old man who snored with the exertion of sleep.

He narrowed his eyes and saw her clearly like the white summit of some snow-capped mountain. Her brow was smooth and her skin well-nigh transparent, she had loosely flowing golden hair and an equally fair nape. The violence with which her image kept returning to him frightened him.

He waited for her to wake. Her hair was like autumn leaves, her lips were pale and half-open. He felt a cur-

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rent pass through him, a current in which there was the light of dawn and the quiet of night.

She sat up, slightly startled. She covered her face with her long fingers.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

"Please don't be angry that I am lying here," he said. "I didn't see properly last night."

"It doesn't matter," she replied.

She looked across him to where the old man was lying.

"Are you getting up?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," she said.

"Have you been here long?"

"A week," she replied.

And then: "I was already asleep when you arrived."

"We came in the night," he said.

"Some transports do come at night," she replied.

"We don't even know each other," he said.

She smiled, and he could see both bitterness and embarrassment on her lips.

"My name is Stephen," he said.

"Mine is Anne," she replied. And she repeated it: "Anne."

An official appeared on the threshold of the wooden staircase.

"It's one of ours," she said. "He has a star."

A wave of silence swamped the attic.

"What's he want?"

"He is going to read out the names," she said.

"Our names?"

"Yes, perhaps our names, too," she replied.

The official stopped a few paces away from them. He spread out his papers like huge bank notes. Then he said that those whom he was going to read out had been selected by the Council of Elders—entrusted with this task by the German HQ—and would go and live in the ghetto.

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"And the others?"

"Elsewhere," she said.

"Where?"

"Nobody knows," she replied.

And then: "In the east," she said.

The old man next to them was awake now. He was holding a wrinkled, sallow hand to his ear, so as to hear better. "My name is Adam," he said. "Adam," he mumbled.

"Haven't you been read yet?" Stephen asked her.

"No," she said.

Suddenly she felt ashamed that they had not read her yet.

"My name is Adam," murmured the old man.

Then Stephen's name was read out.

"That's you," she said. "Stephen."

"Perhaps he'll read you, too," he said.

He did not.

"Be glad," she said.

He was silent, frightened suddenly by the infinitude of leave-taking that clung to him.

"Don't cry," he said.

"I'm not crying," she replied.

The official announced that those whose names had been called were to go downstairs into the courtyard within ten minutes.

"Just those I've read out—neither more nor fewer," he said curtly.

Then he added: "I'm not making this up—it's orders from HQ."

"Adam," the old man repeated.

The official left.

"Are you thinking about it?"

"No," she answered.

"They'll read you tomorrow," he said. "Or some other time."

He could not make himself stand up, yet he knew he would have to.

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He took her hand.

"Come and see me, won't you?" she said.

"I'll come," he replied.

"We have known each other so short a time," she said.

"I'll come for sure," he said again. "I'm alone here. We can be friends."

"If they leave us here," she said.

"Why?"

"I've heard things."

"What things?"

"That we are to be sent on," she said. "Maybe within a week."

He helped her with the knapsacks.

"You're lucky," she said.

He was looking at her, unable to reply.

The current rose up in him from somewhere deep inside, right to the top and back again to his finger tips with which he was touching the palm of her hand.

"Perhaps," she said quietly, "I will still be here."

"You will," he muttered.

And then he added: "Certainly you will."

"Go on, then," she said.

He looked at her, and he again felt the current, being drowned in it. Then he got up, letting her hand slip out of his, and something stopped inside him; he felt it in the contraction of his chest and the smarting of his eyes that increased with each step he drew farther away from her.

"Adam," mumbled the old man.

Then he ran along L Avenue; everything that had enveloped him like a spider's web and that alternately burned and went out inside him, driving him forward and drawing him back to the attic of the *quarantine*, turned over inside him and reverberated like the echo of those words.

He put down his knapsack on the bed assigned to him.

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Then he ran back the way he had come, not caring what would become of him and his things.

He dashed inside. He saw her, so slim, on the grey pallet.

"Stephen," she said.

Then: "It's you."

And finally: "So you've come." She lowered her eyes.

"Annie," he said.

"I didn't really expect . . ." she said.

He ignored the old man, whose snoring disturbed everyone near him. He sat down at her side on the mattress, out of which the straw projected like so many arrows. He did not feel any need to say more than that one word he had said already.

"Annie," he repeated.

He embraced her shoulders and felt the current surging up from inside. The feeling that he was protecting her with the hand that touched her stifled him.

He sat silently next to her, in front of the barrier of stone that was the old man, whose glassy eyes did not take them in and whose sallow neck, resembling a human tree trunk, shielded them from view.

Suddenly his eyes met those of the old man.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied.

He could feel that she was afraid. She pressed herself closer to him.

Then she saw the old man's gaze and she was frightened by what she read in it—a wild, imploring insolence and an inquisitive envy.

"My name is Adam," the old man muttered.

He kept holding his hand up to his face to catch the sound of words that did not reach him.

"Let's get away from here," said Stephen.

"Yes, let's," she said.

Then she added: "What if the official comes?"

"Why should he?"

Her eyes fell and she looked at the floor.

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"Let's go, then," she said.

She did not dare to look again into the dark pools of the old man's eyes. She rose. She had on a coat of some warm, blue material.

Looking at her, the coat and everything else seemed to him to be as clear and clean as the sky.

He had to step across the old man's mattress.

He knew he would speak to him.

"Look after Anne's things," he said.

And to Anne it seemed as if only these words really woke the old man. He dropped the hand that had acted as a hearing aid. His almost-brown eyes grew wide and soft.

"Adam," he said.

Then he added: "Right! You run along, children!"

She had to lower her eyes once more.

"Is that your brother?" the old man asked.

They looked at each other. He felt the current again running through him.

"Yes," he replied for her.

They went out, and it seemed to them that everything they looked at was without shadow.

And Stephen wished that the current should pass through the tips of his fingers to Anne, that she might feel in that touch the sun, and hope, and the rosy rays of day and its light.

"Brother and sister," he said.

And then: "More than that."

They walked round the blacksmith's shop. On the other side of the slope that towered above the town they saw the rambling building of the Council of Elders.

"If only I had an uncle here," she said.

"Has he gone?" he asked.

She turned her face to his and, with her finger quite close to him, tapped her forehead.

"Silly," she said, "I was thinking of an uncle who does not exist."

"Are you alone?"

"Completely," she replied.

"Are you hungry?"

"What could you do about it?"

"Do you know where I live?"

"No," she said.

"Here," he said. "Wait a second."

He ran upstairs and pulled a piece of cake out of his knapsack; this he broke in two, leaving one of the halves to the boys who were watching him.

"For your hunger," he said when he was downstairs again.

"Thanks," she said.

Suddenly they both laughed.

"Let's go back there," she said then.

"There?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Yes," he repeated.

When they were sitting down again, he said: "They'll read you tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm not thinking about it," she said.

"There are other things apart from that," he said.

"What things?"

"Other things," he repeated.

Then they went out, but they only had time to walk once round the town. The darkened trees began to merge with their own shadows, the twilight toying with the leaves.

"Come," she said. "I'll accompany you."

He gazed into her eyes, so close to his. He put his arm around her shoulders, which were frail and gentle, making him think it was up to him to protect her. The strong feeling that seemed to have a life of its own inside him and rose in waves up to his throat and farther, both the light and the dark curve of her silhouette, that which at once constricted him and released him from the shadows, holding out the promise of a sensation of freedom—all this flowed into the single word which he now uttered:

"Anne!"

"Stephen!"

He kissed her on the mouth.

"I've never . . . been like this before," she said.

It was his first kiss as well as hers. And he again felt those waves returning, clean and fragrant, and he kissed her lips and eyes, which were now filled with tears, and felt a desperate longing to never, even at the price of death, live otherwise than at this moment.

They walked a little way from the door, to the spot where a yellow, wooden fence divided off the ghetto from the HQ. They shivered with the chill of evening.

"It's not so late yet," she said.

"Annie," he said.

"Where shall we go?" she asked.

"Annie," he repeated.

"We'll have to be going," she said, and stood still. He felt the irrevocability of the hour that closes the day like a thin blade having the power to cut even the invisible current somewhere deep inside where no one can see.

He led her wordlessly round the block of houses next to Q 710. He was aware that some outside influence was disturbing that current inside him, and yet he was glad he was walking by her side and feeling her warmth, and at the same time unhappy because he knew what was coming; his throat was constricted by the same huge hoop that was encircling his chest and pressing against his eyes.

"Annie," he said.

"Yes?" she replied.

And then, after a long silence: "If you want, Stephen," she said, "come and see me in the night."

"I will," he whispered. He felt as though she had cut through ropes which had until now bound him.

"Yes, I will," he said again. "I'll come for sure."

"You can go across the courtyards," she said.

Then she added: "That's how they do it here."

"Yes," he said.

"We'll be moved soon," she said. "I feel it."

"I'll come," he repeated.

"I feel it somehow," she said.

And then, "I'm terribly afraid. It's even worse now."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll come for sure."

"It's not far across the courtyards," she said.

"Yes," he said.

He took off his coat and threw it over her. She returned it to him.

Then, all at once, she ran off, suddenly and unexpectedly. She tore herself away from his hands, regretting that she had said what she did. She had known the laws of the ghetto a week longer than he. He heard only her steps, receding into the darkness.

A fraction of that moment was before his eyes every second that passed by, deepening the darkness, these fractional parts of the picture composing a huge mosaic which contained the current and her half-open lips and her tears.

Then the boys became quiet and went to sleep.

He knew he would stay awake. He pieced together the fragments of the night, and only when it seemed to him that the stillness was going to overwhelm him with its immense, unbearable weight did he steal from his bed.

He jumped over the knapsacks and shoes lying in the middle of the room and stood by the door. He reached out for the handle. In the instant when the cool contact poured a whole ocean into his brain, the shining brass growing dull under the imperceptible shadow of his palm, he was again conscious of the warm waves and heard the creaking of the wooden stairs that led up to the attic. At that moment he heard his heart beating, a bronze bell tolling inside him. He pressed down the handle, cautiously but firmly.

The ocean poured itself out into emptiness. The room was locked. He felt the soft blow. The earth fell

away beneath him. He swallowed his tears. Now he could see the emptiness, and in it a small face and the transparent skin of her forehead, that indescribably fragile something that filled him with a feeling that there was a reason for his existence, those frightened eyes and that breath bitter like almonds.

He crept back to his bed, and then again to the door. The white square, full of an overpowering silence, gave back a mute echo of the brotherhood he felt for her, a brotherhood that from that moment elevated him above this world and at the same time flung him down to its very bottom.

He rattled the handle.

"Be quiet!" someone shouted. And added something else.

He tried to make himself believe that she could see him all the way from where she was, through the silken web of the night, that it was all one great window, and that behind it was she.

Then he lay on his back, his eyes fixed on the grey ceiling, upon which was her image, indistinct and hazy, but clear in all details—her eyes and lips. Her hair fell loosely down in the shadows and her voice sounded in the stillness.

His eyes smarted. He was aware of this only every now and again, in the intervals of his imaginings in which he heard every word a thousand times and once, as a single word, and then as one great silence.

She penetrated everything: the white door and the stillness of the night. She returned to him in his feverish visions, and he walked with her, his hand on her shoulder, and the waves rose and fell in him and filled both of them.

In the morning he ran, breathless, through the town. He flew upstairs. All he found was an empty attic. The transport to the east had left in the night.