



Prolog

It was a pleasant spring day. The sun shone brightly on village and farms; the sheep grazed contentedly on the outlying slopes. Soon the sheep would be herded to the high summer pastures; already some of them had been dabbled with bright colors on their backs, the dye showing specific ownership. At the moment a number of ewes and lambs stood close to the gray stone walls of the houses, feeling most comfortable there.

The nearby town was swollen with country people, because it was market day, but many others remained at work in their fields and houses. Someone had to watch the animals, regardless of the day.

There was the sound of motors. Men and women paused from their labors, listening nervously. There had been fighting in the region, and it had been coming closer as the Basque line was turned by the better equipped enemy. But defeat was unthinkable. The four insurgent generals--they'd all be hanging, as the song had it.

Soon airplanes loomed on the horizon, as they did more frequently these days. The country was at war; young men from the village had enlisted and disappeared into the labyrinth of training and dispositioning, and every family tried to suppress the hideous fear that not all those young men would survive. Normally the younger sons, unable to inherit, went elsewhere to seek their fortune, but now there might be need of them here. This was really a foreign war, but it was forging nearer to this town, like a poisonous snake that writhed and cast about randomly in search of a target.

A woman looked up from the letter she had been writing. Her house was near the main bridge across the river. Her attention had been attracted more by the cessation of song in the neighborhood than by the distant motors. These people were always singing. Young shepherds would bawl out melodies without words. Children sang together as they walked home. Young men regaled each other in groups, hurling songs back and forth. In bad times older people sang dirges, and the troubadour was highly regarded. But suddenly all song had ended.

She went to the window, looking out at the cluster of houses in the near distance. Some had whitewashed walls, and all had orange tiled roofs. She could just see the spires of the church. Beyond it were the airplanes.

No wonder the singing had stopped. Those machines were coming *here!* Not passing obliquely, but heading directly for the village. Yet of course that was probably coincidence; they would pass over harmlessly. There was after all nothing to interest a war machine.

She tried to see what kind of airplanes they were. The Russian ones were all right; they certainly wouldn't stop. But the others--

These were German planes; the Nazi emblems were plain. There were the heavy black and white truncated crosses on the under-surfaces of the wings, and the grim tilted swastika on the tail. They were traveling north toward the industrial region. There had been increasing activity there as the Nationalists closed on that prize.

Apprehension had caused her to look up the aircraft that had passed before, and now she recognized them at sight, as she recognized a particular species of bird she had labored hard to identify. There were three Italian medium bombers, and a greater number of German bombers, JU 52s, considered obsolescent. But these were nevertheless death-dealing machines, the horror of the civilized



world. It was incongruous to see them here over the peaceful countryside.

She had thought she had escaped such violence by retreating here to the pastoral hinterlands. She was a pacifist, opposed to any war, but especially to this one that was ravaging her beloved country to no purpose she could approve. When the opportunity came, she had prevailed on her husband to remove his practice from the big city and set up here, albeit it at a financial sacrifice. He had been one of those younger sons who had done considerably better in the outside world than his elder brother who had been in line to inherit this farmstead. But that brother had died relatively young, creating the need for a changed inheritance, and she had begged her husband to accept it.

But the senseless destruction of war seemed to be following them. No region was safe any more.

What was that? There was a plane she didn't recognize. Smaller than the others, with heavysset, molded wheel casings, making it look almost like a sea-plane. But it wasn't; it was some sort of bomber, for she could see the bomb-assembly between those wheels. It must be an experimental model. The Germans were dismayingly inventive in such dread matters.

The woman returned to her letter, since she had identified the aircraft as well as she was able, and there was nothing she could do about them anyway. In moments they would pass overhead and continue on to wreak destruction of the factories to the north. She approved of none of this, but was selfishly relieved that the bombs would fall on other heads than hers.

Her missive was addressed to a correspondent in distant America with the unusual name Quality, who was working to master the language she had studied in school by corresponding with a native. Actually, in this region the natives had their own separate language that dated back millennia; most of the villagers spoke it rather than the national tongue. Which was one reason the woman was glad to correspond; it kept refreshing her own language. She liked the isolation, physically, but not intellectually or linguistically, so the letters were valuable.

Quality was another pacifist, and seemed like the sort of person whom it would be worthwhile to meet despite her youth. It was easy to write to her about the futility of revolution and war, the senseless savagery. Yet at this moment the war mocked them both; the devastating machines that were its minions were passing almost overhead. Adolf Hitler, the self-styled *Führer*, was testing his new toys, in violation of international treaties. Yet the community of the world clucked its tongue and did nothing. Who was most culpable, then: the bully, or those who let the bully have his way? Yet here was a moral trap: how could the bully be stopped, except by more violence? It was a difficult point. Pacifism had no easy answer to the problems of international aggression.

There was a series of explosions. Oh, no! The bombs were falling *here*!

The woman dashed to the door. Her husband emerged simultaneously from the goatshed, staring at the carnage, his black beret clinging to his head. The Nazis were bombing the town, *this* town! Debris was flying up, smoke roiling, and fire bursting in the dry bracken that was used for animal bedding. The stone houses were tough, but some direct hits were tumbling the walls, and the slate tiles were flying from the roofs. What hideous devastation even a single bomb could do!

"Why are they doing this?" she cried. "There are no soldiers here!"

Her father ran in from the field--technically her father-in-law, but she had adopted the fine old man--clasping his gnarled walking stick. This was still his farm, until he died; every aspect of it was his



personal responsibility. He yielded chores only grudgingly, beginning with those his late wife had done. He was not fleeing the bombs, he was coming to protect his house.

A fighter-plane swooped low on a strafing run. The bullets kicked up little goutts of dust. The man cried out and fell, face down, his beret flying from his head. Even from this distance she could see the blood.

Her husband, ordinarily of sedentary bent, caught up a pitchfork and hurled it at the passing plane. The gesture was pathetically futile. The craft took no notice; it was strafing the sheep in the pasture. The animals milled about and fell, bleating in bewilderment.

She screamed, somehow feeling the horror of the pointless slaughter of the sheep more than that of the man. She was numb to her father's fate; her emotion could not yet compass it; it wasn't real. But the sheep--their deaths were real, if incomprehensible.

Dully she watched the bombs falling on the town. Every house was being hit, systematically. She heard the screams of the people caught in collapsing homes. Her neighbors, her friends. . .

Yet more terror came plunging out of the sky. It was the strange, small plane, diving down in a collision course with the ground. It must have gone out of control--but it was falling directly toward her own house!

She ran outside. The noise of the descending plane became deafening. A bomb sundered the house, behind her. Stones, plaster, slate and burning wood showered about her. That strike had been intentional! She was a pacifist, yet she felt primitive rage.

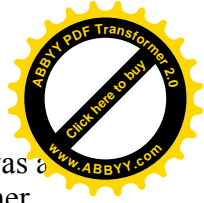
The plane's motor sputtered even as the bomb scored. The machine tilted, dangerously near the ground. The pilot tried to pull it up, to level it, but could not quite succeed. The plane stalled; then with seeming slowness it dropped to the ground beyond the sheep, bounced, plowed a furrow in the turf, and came to rest almost intact.

The woman ran toward it. It would be a miracle if the pilot survived, and a part of her mind marveled that God should allow such miracles to such undeserving people. She knew that airplanes were apt to burst into flames because of surplus fuel. Panting, she caught up to the smoldering craft. The pilot was moving slowly, dazed. She scrambled up on the broken wing and to the open cockpit, amazed that the man hadn't been cut to pieces when that bubble cracked apart. She caught hold of one of his arms and half-hauled, half-urged him out. Like a child he came, a uniformed German, the swastika on his left arm. No--that was bright red blood; her imagination had transformed it into the dread symbol of Nazism.

"Why are you helping me?" the pilot asked. He spoke in German, a language she hardly understood, but she grasped his meaning. What else would he be asking? "I was aiming for the bridge, but lost control."

And she found herself baffled. This man, this foreign criminal, had bombed her house, destroying it. One of his companions had killed her father and decimated their herd of sheep. She had every reason to hate the Germans! Why did she try to help this monster? It was not that she valued life, even of enemies, though she did; she should have run first to her father-in-law, far more deserving of aid. Why aid the enemy?

Then she realized what it was. She had a correspondence with a foreign person, one she respected.



ne pilot was a foreign person. There was really no similarity between the two; her correspondent was a pacifist woman while this pilot was a killer in the notorious Kondor Legion. In the stress of horror, her emotion had made a wrong connection, identifying the foreign enemy with the foreign friend.

Now the surviving villagers were charging toward the downed plane, carrying staves, pitchforks and kitchen knives. Innocent victims had been transformed by the brute alchemy of violence into savage remnants; here was the only possible object of their vengeance.

The German pilot, his head evidently clearing, looked at the horde. He glanced down at his arm as if considering whether to run. How fast could he proceed while his strength was being drained by that wound? Where could he go without leaving a telltale red trail? "*Donnerwetter!*" he muttered.

He brought out his wallet and gave it to the woman; perhaps she could notify his next-of-kin. He thumbed it open and showed her where his name was: Hans Bremen. She nodded to show she understood.

Then Hans Bremen drew his pistol, put it to his head, and fired. His body crumpled silently. Vengeance had been denied the villagers. The woman stood, somehow unsurprised. War was madness; why would she expect otherwise? Sanity had departed when the first bomb fell on this village.

As the villagers arrived, one more airplane came. It dived out of the sky and planted a bomb in their midst. Bodies flew wide, and one of them was that of the woman. The German airman's wallet tumbled through the smoke and was lost in the debris. There would be no notification of the next-of-kin by this route.

At last the remaining planes lifted away and departed to the south, leaving the smoldering ruin of the village. This was merely another incident in the year 1937, in the course of the civil war in Spain, in which Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union tested some of their equipment. The headlines of the world never reported this test run against a Basque town, and the dead were lost among the three quarters of a million that were the final toll of this vicious civil war.

But this incident foreshadowed, in significant respects, the greater conflagration soon to come. The hundreds who perished needlessly here would be eclipsed by the millions who would die in World War Two. This was in fact an omen, a warning--that was ignored.

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