

The Beast of Berlin

A Tale of the French Resistance

JOHANN W. OLDCASTLE

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Chapter 1

Among the Ruins

7th June 1940

Paris was in ruins. The mighty city, a few weeks ago prosperous and beautiful, the flower of France, what had sometimes been called the most beautiful city in the world, that had been impregnable, protected by the might of the French Empire and its ally the British Empire, surrounded by defences, and putting her trust in the Maginot Line, was now largely a heap of smouldering rubble, interspersed here and there by scarred, jagged and charred spire-like buildings that pointed their blackened fingers at the sky. France was crumbling. In the midst of all the rubble, houses stood, and in one of these I lived with my aunt, Madame Assous. She was a spinster – at twenty-seven – and I, Paul Barthélémy, was an orphan, eleven years of age, the son of a soldier who had fought in the Great War, but had died when I was nine. It was still

dark when I awoke on the morning of the 7th June 1940 in the small room that I occupied at the front of the house. It was rather early, but it was the change in sounds that had awoken me. For once there was no longer the sound of the boom and crash of bombs falling as the Nazis attempted to batter France into submission, only a strange silence. It was deadly calm, as though it were waiting for some final shout of terror. I got up and went to the window and, drawing the curtain aside, looked out. A lone streetlight stood, without a light in it, beside the window, but the moon gave plenty of light, to see the gaunt and blackened landscape that spread out from the lone couple of houses that stood, untouched by the relentless bombing. It was a dismal sight. But the horizon, which had in previous days been glowing red and orange from fires, was dark, and a couple of stars were shining in the east, where in a little while the pinks of dawn would be appearing. It was a strange, deathly stillness. I closed

the curtain again, and tiptoed out onto the dark landing beyond my bedroom. A light was on in my aunt's bedroom and the door hung wide open, so I peered in – the sound of a radio was crackling from inside. It was an unfamiliarly heavy German accent speaking in broken French, and saying something about a glorious Third Reich – anyhow nothing that made much sense to me. My aunt flicked off the radio with a sarcastic laugh. She looked cynically at me for a moment.

'France has surrendered', she explained, seeing my baffled expression, 'The combined forces of Germany and Austria will be marching into Paris today, as soon as they can. Ha!', she added after a moment, 'That is to say, *if* they can.'

'What will happen now?', I asked. 'To us? Especially as you were involved with the old government.'

'Let them do their worst', said my aunt with another sarcastic laugh, 'They will never turn French people into Germans.'

The truth was that my aunt had been associated with the Renaud government which had been in place at the outbreak of war. When the Renaud government, refusing to surrender to the Nazis, resigned, Petain had taken over to negotiate a surrender, whilst Renaud and his cabinet had fled France. My aunt, however, had not fled, partly due to pride, but mostly because she was too unimportant to expect the Nazis to arrest her. My aunt stood up and clumped past me down the stairs. 'You mark', she said, 'If they try doing anything to me, they will have a hard time about it.'

We were pretty quiet over breakfast. All eyes kept glancing up at the portrait of Hitler, with a large red 'X' across it, which we had hung up at the beginning of the war, in my aunt's typical spirit.

'It is not coming down', my aunt assured me, 'Not while I am in charge of this house.' That morning, we heard the sounds of military tread, and the growl of engines as

Paris was overrun with Nazi tanks and engines of war.

‘Well, they needn’t make such a hubbub’, said my aunt, who was the only one with any incentive to talk, ‘It’s not as if they even want to wake the dead, which they will at this rate – all the worse for them as there’s quite an army of them’, she added grimly.

After a while there came a thunderous knock at the door. My aunt laughed. ‘So it’s like that is it?’, she said, going into the hall and opening the front door. There was a rough voice saying something in a foreign language. My aunt replied in French. Then the voice of a burly soldier began to answer in the same language with a thick German accent.

‘Are you Madame Francine Assous?’, the voice demanded.

‘Yes’, replied my aunt haughtily, ‘If you make it your business to interfere.’

‘Bah!’, said the soldier, ‘I am Colonel Köple, and I have been ordered to arrest you, as you have been involved in treacherous

dealings with the old French government. You will be taken to jail until we can decide what to do with you next.'

There was a loud scuffle, the door slammed shut and the house grew silent. I went to the window and looked out. The street, if it could be called that any more, was deserted. That is, except for a Nazi soldier who stood guarding the door. What he wanted there I did not know, but I was not about to stay to find out, so I pulled on my coat, strapped my shoes on tightly, and darted out of the back door into the daylight. There was no one about – most were afraid to step outside because of the military, so the sentry uncannily standing outside the front door was the only person in sight. Most houses had their curtains tightly shut. I wondered what to do – go back inside and wait to see if my aunt would be released – or stay out for fear of the Nazis? But just then my decision was made for me. A Nazi soldier came sauntering up to the front door, and together he and the sentry went inside.

Chapter 2

The Desolate City

June 1940

There were not many places left in the city where one could go for shelter. I did not have many friends or relatives to go to for shelter either. I remembered one – the house of my aunt’s good friends who knew me well and lived nearby. But after the bombing there were very few landmarks left to guide one by. And their address would have been useless, even if I could have remembered it, but I could only remember their names. So, forlorn, homeless and friendless I wandered aimlessly among the ruins of Paris. Coming up behind a ruined building I saw a squad of Gestapo invading a house that stood gaunt and ruined, at what looked like the remains of a fountain. They were shouting rudely in German as they dragged their victim out of the house. It was well known that the Nazis had a ‘black book’ in which they had written a list of all those

who they could arrest first. These were some of the firstfruits of many. But on the whole the soldiers I saw were well-behaved as they wanted to create a good ‘first impression’. As I scrambled up a heap of rubble to get a better view of my surroundings, I was surprised to hear someone whisper my name quietly. ‘Paul!’.

I jerked around to see the small figure of Rémi Bernard, who had been a good friend of mine. He pulled me down through a hole into what looked at first like a rabbit warren, but was actually the entrance to the cellar of an old house. It was black, and lit only by a murky candle in the corner.

‘What are you doing here?’ Rémi asked.

‘What are *you* doing?’, I asked, before carrying on, ‘My aunt has been carted off by the Nazis and they have taken over the house.’

‘Don’t worry’, Rémi said, with the familiar impish grin on his face, ‘You are just in time for the first meeting of *résistance* – we are going to discuss what we can do to get rid of

the Nazis.’ He put his finger to his lips and led me through the rickety clapboard partition in the cellar. Seated round a candle-lit table were several unfamiliar faces. Most were men, but there was one other boy. One looked up, ‘Who have you brought, Rémi?’, he asked.

‘Paul Barthélémy’, he replied, ‘whose aunt-cross-mother was arrested – for her association with the Renaud government, I expect.’

I nodded to confirm him.

‘Well, Paul’, said the man, ‘I am Julien Noisette. Welcome to *La Résistance!*’

I sat down next to Rémi in the mellow, winking candlelight. The faces around the table were angry, sombre, sad or just about anything but happy.

‘As you all know’, began Monsieur Noisette, ‘France has surrendered to Nazi Germany.’

I thought of my aunt and the picture of Hitler on the wall, with the large red ‘X’.

‘But,’ continued Monsieur Noisette, ‘That is not the end. The end? There is nothing

saying that *we* have to surrender. Doubtless many other people have had the same idea as this small group, and hopefully later on the whole country will be organised with resistance groups all over France. But our job, as individuals, is to resist and make it as difficult as we can for the enemy. We can each help to do something, even boys. Rémi knows all about such things as how to poison a car engine – he assures me it is easy – and there is something for even the weakest to do. There are messages to be carried, messages to be stolen and decoded. The stronger of us can begin jobs like helping escaping Jews, airmen who have been shot down over our country and so on. But first of all, I want you all to solemnly promise to keep the secret. We can have no informing for money that the Nazis will doubtless offer to traitors. But I trust that none of you will become traitors to your country.’

One by one, repeating the words he gave us, we promised solemnly.

‘Meetings will be held here in Rémi’s dwelling each day after dark,’ Monsieur Noisette said, ‘And we can discuss and plot the next manoeuvres. And each of you must never, never, never even hint at the place of the meetings. Are you all clear?’

There was a general nodding.

‘Then we can disperse for now,’ Monsieur Noisette said, ‘One by one to avoid suspicion.’

One by one, the resistance fighters slipped through the warren entrance and into the air outside. Last of all, Rémi and I were left alone.

‘Paul’, Rémi said at last, ‘You are welcome to stay here. It will be good to have someone to help with – jobs, you know.’

I nodded, ‘Where are your parents?’ I asked.

‘They were killed when the house was bombed down a couple of days ago’, Rémi said briskly, ‘But about these jobs. We have quite a few to start us off with. The first one is to find the nearest Nazi base. Once that is

established, we can nab their letters and so on, and poison their vehicles.'

'What's this about poisoning vehicles?' I asked.

'Well, you just dump sugar into the fuel tank', Rémi explained, 'Then, presto, the thing won't run any more – it clogs the engines up.'

'I will be delighted to help', I said with a laugh.

But darkness had fallen over France, and the long night had begun.

Chapter 3

La Résistance

June 1940

As soon as darkness fell, we were ready to go. The Nazis had set up a curfew – that meant that everybody had to be inside by eight o’ clock or else – for what reason I did not know. Possibly to show who was in charge now. Anyhow, we had to be careful of patrols that went round looking for people disobeying, and nobody knew what would happen if you were caught. Whatever, Rémi knew all the hiding places and I was content to follow him.

‘First, we will go to your old house’, Rémi said, blowing out the candle on the table, ‘It is one of the most intact in the area, so I’d expect them to make it into some kind of den.’

‘I saw them going in’, I replied.

‘Ah, but that might have been because they wanted to look for you,’ Rémi said with a mischievous grin, ‘Come on then.’

We popped out of the warren into the cold night air and hurried along, keeping an ear out. After a while, there came the sound of measured military footsteps tramping along. Rémi caught me at once by the arm and dragged me behind the broken-down wall of an old house, where we crouched low and waited silently in the darkness. The tramp of the footsteps came closer, passed and faded into the thick darkness, until lost in the black ruins of the city. We waited a while longer before Rémi stirred. 'Should be alright now', he said, and we slipped out again. It was difficult to show him the way to the house in the dark; besides which I was not too sure of it anyway. That said, we came across it in a little while, its shell standing out above the rubble all around. There were lights on inside and we could hear a radio through the open window, crackling rather loudly in a strange language. Two men in military uniforms stood at the front door, but the back door was unguarded, and on the front door there

was painted a large and dominating swastika. We slipped behind the house toward the back door. Rémi nodded to me 'This is it', he whispered. It certainly looked like 'it'. We could see in through the windows, and about the kitchen table were seated several Nazi officers of the Gestapo, lolling with cups of beer and a radio. A picture of Hitler hung on the wall, this time without the red 'X' on it. It made my blood boil to see them in my house behaving like that, as if it was theirs.

'I wish we could chase them out', I said.

'Oh, that will come with time', Rémi said casually. I could not see his face in the gruesome darkness, but I knew and felt that he was grinning.

'We have some useful information for the Resistance', he said, and led me around the other side of the house. Here, shadowy in the darkness, there were parked a couple of Nazi military lorries. Groping around the back of the house, where one could hardly see the ground, I lost my footing and slipped

on a stone in the darkness. There was a clatter as I fell. Rémi melted into the darkness of the shadow of the wall.

‘Who goes there? Halt!’ barked a heavily accented German voice. I lay mousy still in the darkness where I had fallen. There were heavy footsteps as the sentry went in and out among the vehicles. A light flashed along the wall, and the sentry muttered something in German, but his light never came near the corner where we were. Eventually he gave up his half-hearted search and clumped off to take up his post once more, whilst we slipped quickly and silently away in the direction of Rémi’s cellar.

Monsieur Noisette was pleased with our findings when we met the next evening under the cover of darkness.

‘Well done’, he said, ‘That will be very useful to the Resistance. We have a new member to our group, as well.’

I scanned the faces. There was one new one among us, cool and untamed with a clean-

shaven young face that looked a patch too military for my liking.

‘This is Monsieur Jean Chiffre’, explained Monsieur Noisette, ‘As his entry pass to get into the resistance he drove a tank into the Seine river. Doubtless he will tell you about that later.’

Monsieur Chiffre had seen himself being introduced and came over to greet me.

‘And who are you?’, he asked, giving the traditional French greeting of a kiss on both cheeks.

‘Paul Barthélémy’, I replied.

‘I am pleased to meet you’, he said, ‘It was a good thing that you managed to have a spy on that Nazi post.’ He spoke in a loud voice with frequent guffaws. ‘The Germans are evil. They should be driven into the Seine river, like that tank.’

‘Be quiet’, I urged, glancing at the door to the hole, ‘It’s not like this room is in any way sound proof.’

But Monsieur Chiffre was far too exultant to be much quieter. I was glad when he went

off to brag and boast to someone else. He was also far too open with his thoughts on the Nazis for safety, and he had a horrible guffaw.

‘I don’t like the look of this Monsieur Chiffre’, I whispered to Rémi, ‘He’s suspicious somehow.’

‘I know’, Rémi agreed, ‘But Monsieur Noisette should know, otherwise he wouldn’t have let him in.’

‘We could follow him when he goes out’, I suggested, ‘just to make sure.’

‘Well, I’m not against *that*’, Rémi said, with a grin.

Chapter 4

Monsieur Chiffre

June–December 1940

Darkness had long engulfed Paris as we left the cellar, following close on the heels of Monsieur Chiffre who had been the last to leave. He was not uneasy – at least to begin with – and gave no backward glance as he rolled along the street like a drunken soldier. If he showed any signs of fright or uneasiness in our direction, we would merely jump into the shadows of some structure, or a doorway if there was one to hand. Our first surprise came a couple of streets from the cellar. I felt Rémi’s hand on my arm.

‘Patrol coming’, he hissed. We sprang behind a wall and lay down low in the shadows. I could see through a crack in the rickety structure the Nazi patrol marching down the street straight towards Monsieur Chiffre who made no effort to hide. ‘Halt!’, barked the Nazi sergeant. Monsieur Chiffre

replied with some strange mumbo-jumbo in German, and the sergeant exchanged a joke with him as if they were old friends, before both continued on their ways. The moment the Nazis were out of sight, we were off again after Monsieur Chiffre, but he had disappeared and we were unsuccessful in finding the slightest trace of where he had gone, so we returned to our cold little cellar. Rémi went as soon as the sun came up to report to Monsieur Noisette, who was not too concerned. He told us that it was probably a ruse, but neither Rémi nor me were at all put at ease by his careless words. The weeks and months passed by however, and Chiffre gave us no trouble at all. The Nazis tightened their grip on Paris all the time. The curfew time was made earlier and earlier. Jews were taken in troops away to Germany, their shops ransacked, their homes torched and signs were put up everywhere, saying 'No Jews Allowed'. But the Resistance movement grew underground. The Nazis caught wind of it,

arresting anyone caught involved with such acts of sabotage. Rémi and I dashed about Paris, robbing Nazi canteens, taking top secret messages from one Resistance group to another, poisoning vehicles and spying on Nazi military posts. Everything we did was reported to Monsieur Noisette, but to no-one else, and we never, never, never, wrote anything down. I am certain that but for the brains and sharp eyes of Rémi I would not have survived one week in occupied Paris, let alone several months in the Resistance. Summer slipped by into winter. News came by the Resistance Radio 'Free France', broadcast from London, (illegal of course, as the Nazis had banned all wireless sets), that Hitler had gained control of nearly all of Northern Europe and that he had begun his battle to wipe out British air defences in preparation for his invasion of Britain's southern coast. Every day huge Nazi bombers hummed overhead on their way to bomb the cities of Britain into submission. Things looked bleak. Some people, including

the local Roman Catholic priest, said that the Day of Judgement was at hand. And watching the huge, mighty steel bombers roaring overhead in their hundreds, it seemed quite probable to me. December came and the weather grew cold, especially for one living in a burnt-out cellar. We were having a Resistance meeting, and were listening to the Radio 'Free France' one dark night, when Monsieur de Montforte, a member of the Resistance group arrived, looking out of breath. Neither he nor Monsieur Chiffre had been present up to that point.

'Please listen a minute', he said, looking worried. Rémi leaned over and turned the banned radio off.

'What's the matter?' asked Monsieur Noisette.

'A family of six Jews are hiding in Madame Chastenet's house', explained Monsieur de Montforte, 'But Resistance spies have heard that they are due to be raided tomorrow.'

They need to be escorted to a place of safety immediately.’

‘Paul!’, said Monsieur Noisette, ‘Will you then escort these Jews from Madame Chastenet’s house to mine at once? You know all the directions.’

I nodded. I knew Madame Chastenet’s house from our various expeditions over the last couple of months. In moments I was out of the rabbit hole into the cold night air. It was far from pleasant outside, as it was cold and a dank, dark drizzle had set in, engulfing the eerie spires of the ruined city in a hollow, uncanny mist that made them stand out in a fuzzy haze of ghostly glow, thin pinnacles of smashed bricks. The town was like a ghost-haunted mythological dwelling of man’s own imagination, not the Flower of France, Paris itself. I escorted the Jews safely to Monsieur Noisette’s house where his wife, Madame Noisette, received them and hid them in the attic. She gave me a bite to eat as well, so it was almost midnight when I arrived back at the cellar.

Gratefully, I slipped in, out of the cold to the comparative shelter and warmth of the cellar. To my surprise, the candles were still burning and the cellar was completely empty. It showed signs of a scuffle. Chairs were smashed and lay at forlorn angles across the room. Shocked, I stood and stared. It was empty, lifeless and devoid of life. The chipboard wall was broken down. And I knew it inside as soon as I saw it, that they had been arrested.

Chapter 5

A Vagabond
December 1940

It would not have been safe to stay in the cellar. Whoever it was that had betrayed the Resistance, (and I was certain it had been Monsieur Chiffre) would know that I was not there with the captured and would doubtless be on the lookout for me. The question, naturally, that was on my mind was where, then, to go. My first impulse was to go back to Madame Noisette; but no, the Gestapo would almost certainly raid the house, as Monsieur Noisette was leader of the Resistance group, endangering the Jews in the process. Madame Chastenet? No, she too, would be arrested the next day. And so, probably, would all those involved in the Resistance group, if the Gestapo knew where their houses were, or could torture them into giving them away. I thought quickly. Rémi and I had got together a point of meeting if either he or I were separated; I

would make for it, the house of the Roman Catholic priest of the neighbouring parish, who had been very friendly towards us and sheltered escaping Jews in a hideout in the cellar. So once more I set out through the gruesome dank and eerie night. At least when I was going to Madame Chastenet's house I had the consolation of the fact that my being there could mean the salvation of some Jews from the cruelty of the Nazis; when I was coming from Monsieur Noisette's house, I also had the consolation and exhilaration not only of having successfully helped the Jews to evade the Nazis, but also that I would get under the comparative shelter of our cellar and have a long sleep at last, or spin a long yarn with Rémi. I suppose I never realised quite how much I had relied on Rémi. It was not a comfortable prospect to be cast out alone in the world a second time that year. It was bad enough to have Rémi carted off by the Gestapo, but also to have all my other friends from the Resistance arrested as well

was not at all easy to take in all at once. Now, out in the fiercely cold and damp blackness of the night, I made for Madame Noisette's house first to warn her of her husband's arrest, so she could arrange to get the Jews to a hide-out in the ruins. As I hid behind a heap of rubble from a Nazi patrol, I envied them, who had a warm, comfortable bed to return to after the cold and wet patrol, and worst of all, they would be returning to my own house! At Madame Noisette's house, I was highly surprised to see a light coming through one of the smashed and patched window panes. Peering through a crack in the old curtains I saw a sight that made me melt away at once into the dark shadows without another look. I saw a seething mass of Gestapo men, pressing Madame Noisette at gunpoint towards the wall. Gnashing my teeth, I made east for the next parish where the priest's house (or half a house) was situated. The night was very, very dark. I got lost in the dreadful night mist several times, so it was

nearly morning when I finally arrived. The lights were on, but it was getting on for morning, so there was nothing untoward about that. I was too cold, wet and tired to take notice of whether the safety sign was up in the window or not, but it was anyway, so that would not have made any difference whatsoever. Anyhow, I knocked the special code on the door. It opened promptly. Inside was a man dressed in military green with the Nazi Swastika adorning his collar. He laid his hand on me and wrenched me violently inside. The front door slammed behind me and he locked it quickly.

‘Who are you?’, he demanded roughly.

‘Please, sir’, I said, ‘Is this Monsieur Legendre’s house?’

The Nazi guffawed loudly, ‘Don’t pretend you’ve got the wrong house. I know all the tricks!’ Violently he half-shoved half-threw me headlong through the door into the living room. In a corner, his face to the wall, bound, and flanked by Nazi men sat the priest.

‘Tell me!’, bellowed the Nazi who had ‘brought’ me in, ‘Do you know this fellow?’

The priest did not answer or even look at me. The Nazis took hold of his head and wrenched it round to point at me.

‘Go on, bald-head!’, they roared, ‘Who is this? Do you know him?’

In the midst of the cruel lawlessness I noticed one Nazi soldier sitting in the corner who did not partake in the cruel deeds of his comrades. The rest of the Nazis were howling with heathen laughter.

‘Come on Kurt!’, they shrieked at the Nazi in the corner, ‘Join in the fun! Go up, thou feeble hoar-head!’ they howled at the priest and began to cuff him. Seeing that I was neglected, they gave me a punch on the head from time to time.

‘Right, enough entertainment’, one of them said at last, ‘Let’s see what we can get out of this one here,’ he motioned to me, ‘Kurt! Bind him up straight, now.’

Kurt got up quietly from the corner and bound me up, without so much violence.

‘Put a bit more jerk in it than that, Kurt’, the leader of the Gestapo said, ‘It’s not a glass ornament. Right then, you!’, he said to me, ‘We’re going to ask you a couple of questions. And you’d better answer!’, he waved his fist at me, ‘Number one! Where are the Jews?’

‘What Jews?’, I asked.

‘The Jews!’, replied the Gestapo officer, ‘The Jews you are hiding. The Jews this bible-lubber is hiding. *You* know. That’s why I’m asking you. Where are the Jews – unless you are a Jew yourself?’, he added with a heathen guffaw.

‘This is France, not Palestine’, I told him.

The Nazi guffawed again. ‘Come on, where are the Jews! This priest’s Jews! The people with long noses!’

This went on for an hour or so, but they got no information out of me. For one thing, I did not actually know where the Jews were at all.

At length they bundled us into a military lorry and drove us to the nearest Nazi base

where we were locked up inside an upstairs room.

Chapter 6

The Prison
December 1940

The room was silent for a while after the door had shut and the Gestapo man's footsteps had died clumping away into the silence of the house. But the priest broke it in the end. 'Paul Barthélémy', he whispered, 'Is that you?'

'That's me', I agreed.

'It was so bad that you came along right then', he said, 'I was taken by surprise, so the safety sign was still in the window.'

'I didn't look, so it wouldn't have made much difference', I said ruefully, 'Rémi and all the others from our group have been arrested. That was why I came to your house.'

'I hope you weren't too hurt', the priest said, 'they really did throw you around.'

'Thanks', I said, 'But are *you* alright? They were much more violent with you.'

‘I’m not too sure’, the priest said, ‘They gave me a right whack on the head and it still hurts badly.’

‘Mine is throbbing too’, I said, ‘They kept on whacking it.’

A couple of hours later, we heard footsteps on the stairs, and a key in the lock. The door swung open revealing a young, military, face on top of a rigid and foreboding Nazi uniform. I recognised it at once as being ‘Kurt’. He carried a platter with a couple of crusts of blackened bread and some water with breadcrumbs in it. I remembered the sight of a Nazi tank filling up with Camembert cheeses – the Nazis certainly suffered no lack in France, but they obviously did not share it with prisoners. He laid the platter down on the floor, and rummaged for a moment in his pocket, drawing out a large cheese.

‘I smuggled this in’, he whispered through his teeth and closed the door. ‘Monsieur priest’, he said in a desperate whisper in

French. 'Please, I apologise sincerely for the conduct of my comrades.'

'Fear not', said the priest, 'I have prayed, "Father, forgive". It matters little to me. It matters to *them*.'

'Please, most reverend priest', Kurt said desperately, 'I am a very wicked person. And I saw whilst I was helping to tear up that bible, the words written, "For behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, when the wicked and the proud, and all that do wickedly shall be as stubble". That frightened me, and I did no more persecution that evening. Monsieur priest, please, I am wicked and very proud. What can I do?'

'You have confessed your sins to me', the priest said, 'And I will pray for you, being a priest. But you must whip yourself, and fast often. This is what he wishes you to give to earn salvation.'

'But please, reverend priest', Kurt said even more desperately, 'I can try, but please, I am sure that even then, if I whipped myself I

would only whip the hard places. I am certain that I am too wicked and too proud to earn salvation. God will never accept me. Please, priest, whatever can I do?’

The priest reached inside his coat and took out a slim copy of the New Testament. ‘Take this’, he said, ‘It is in French, but you speak it quite well. This will tell you anything that I have not. God wrote it himself, after all.’

‘Thank you’, replied Kurt, ‘I will read it. But, come, tonight I will let you both out.’ and with that he was gone. The priest mopped his brow. ‘I just don’t *know*’, he muttered.

‘What?’, I asked.

‘What he was asking me about’, the priest replied, ‘I told him what the church has always told me, but I admit that I’m not too sure about it myself. He didn’t want it, whatever.’

I shrugged. ‘He was very desperate about something.’

‘That, I expect’, replied the priest, rather distractedly.

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Darkness fell over the ruins of Paris. It was cold in our room as we waited in silence to hear the stealthy turn of the key in the lock. It took us by surprise, however, when it came, as we hardly heard the key in the lock before the door swung silently open and Kurt stepped in.

‘We are ready’, he said, ‘Follow me, and don’t make a sound. If you do, that’s the end of us. But’, he added with a crooked half-smile, ‘I doubt that will be any problem for these resistants.’

He dealt with our bonds quickly, and we were free. In seconds we were out of the ‘cell’. The passageway was dark and it was very difficult as we had to follow exactly in Kurt’s footsteps to avoid stepping on any creaky boards. As we passed one room we could hear the racking snores of a Nazi inside, and the mumble of sleep-talking that sounded haunting and spooky in the darkness, the strange sounds of incomprehensible German. Almost invisible in the darkness, the stairs plunged into a

hollow space of blackness. Painfully slowly, we made towards it, spreading our weight as much as possible on the boards to prevent them creaking. For a few heartstopping moments we traversed the landing and began descending the stairs in full view, should anyone happen out onto the landing. With great relief we reached the hall below. It was easy then to run along to the door at the back of the house. Kurt let us out.

‘Get as far away from here as you can!’, he warned, ‘Don’t look back. They will make a thorough search of all the area once they discover you are missing.’

We thanked him.

‘No, thank you, reverend priest’, Kurt said, ‘I will read your book. And I wish you well, young Paul.’

I wondered briefly how he had found out my name. But all such thoughts were quickly swept away as we each fled as fast as we could from the Nazi base.

Chapter 7

Journey South
December 1940

The old priest and I parted some miles from the place where we had been caught. I shook his hand and wished him well – he was going to an old monastery on the outskirts of Paris where he knew he would be warmly received by the monks.

‘You can always come, too’, he said, ‘I am sure the holy brothers would have compassion on you and take you in.’

‘No’, I said, ‘Rémi and I had our scheme worked out well. If you were in trouble, too, we had a place worked out as a second option. If I fail to follow our plan, I may never see him again, even if he does escape.’

Seeing that I could not be persuaded, the old priest took his leave of me. To reach the place I had in mind was easier said than done. Rémi’s Uncle Franco lived on a farm by Urrugne near Ciboure in the Basque Pyrenees right in the south of France. It had

been, of course, a last resort, but now faced with the task of getting myself there, it seemed an insurmountable task to travel all that distance to Ciboure. But, even so, it had to be done. I wondered as I wandered towards the Seine River, where Rémi was, and whether he would be able to escape or if he would be transported to one of the rumoured Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany. It hardly seemed likely. Rémi, optimistic, mischievous and naturally sharp and lithe, would hardly allow himself the honour of being treated in that way. He, in my mind, could always escape whatever the danger or odds. Maybe it was true – he certainly had a knack of getting out of a tight spot. Anyhow, that did not solve my problem. The thing that needed to be done, as far as I could see, was to smuggle myself south on board a goods train, because, although the roads were badly damaged, the Nazis kept the railway open, because it could mean to them the difference between victory and defeat. A couple of miles from

the Seine River, I came across the vast yards of track, illuminated dimly in the darkness of the ruins. I wandered along the railway line a little way until I came across a siding with a line of goods wagons lying still. A risky business, would it be going in the right direction? I had no way of knowing, but it was pointed in the right direction and outside was cold and now pouring with rain. I scrambled, slipping and sliding up into the wagon whose door was open. It was a welcome shelter from the rain, as it had an iron or tin roof. I crawled, completely exhausted, inside and curled up behind some sacks in a corner to rest. Above me in the gloom, the thunder of the rain sounded on the metal wagon roof, but it did not hinder me from falling into a deep and sound sleep. I awoke sometime the next day. The light was coming in through the cracks in the wagon, and the rolling motion coupled with the thunder of metal against metal told me that the wagon was moving, and moving fast. The thunder of rain was

also absent, which told me that it had stopped raining, too. I uncurled myself and looked around in the gloom. The wagon was empty on the whole, except for a couple of old sacks. As my eyes grew used to the gloom, I saw a shadowy figure in the corner by the wall of the wagon. In fact, it looked strangely like a human being. Blinking eyes, shining in the half-light, appeared, and were staring at me.

‘Bonjour’, said a voice, of someone who had evidently just woken up.

‘Who is it?’, I asked lamely.

‘Who is *it*?’, asked the shape, and stood up. It rolled across the wagon and sat down next to me. I looked up into the face. Trim, neat and now smiling kindly, it seemed vaguely familiar. I almost choked with surprise, and my blood congealed as I realised that it was none other than Monsieur Chiffre!

‘Is it Paul? Or Rémi?’, asked Monsieur Chiffre coolly.

‘Paul? Rémi?’, I asked lamely, ‘Do excuse me. I have just been asleep.’

‘I know’, he said, looking at me closely.

‘Yes, it must be Paul. I would know you anywhere, my friend. Those wicked Nazis! I would do anything I could to help you, as I see that they have been up to their dirty tricks again’, he spoke loudly, as usual, ‘They betrayed the Resistance and raided it, so I see. It must have been Monsieur de Montforte, as he was late. I came later on and found no one there at all.’

‘What time did you arrive at the cellar?’, I asked suddenly.

‘I think it was about one o’ clock’, he said, with a guilty laugh.

‘Honesty, Monsieur Chiffre, is the best policy’, I told him.

Monsieur Chiffre guffawed loudly again, ‘I... I wasn’t sure about the time in the first place’, he hedged, ‘Maybe it was about two.’

‘Monsieur Chiffre’, I said gravely, ‘It may get you money at the moment to be a traitor to your country, but one day all that will be of no use to you or anyone else. Remember,