

The Girl from Wurzburg

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A GI and a German girl — what happiness could the future hold for them? A haunting love story which mirrors the fears — and hopes — of Europe

A Short Story

AT THE last minute the SS leader rejected the demand of the American general to surrender the town without fighting. Against the wishes of the impotent population, he gave the order to resist, though nothing could possibly be gained by it.

So Wurzburg on the Main, the city of wine and fish, of churches Gothic and Baroque, where almost every other building had been an irreplaceable work of art, was—after thirteen hundred years—destroyed in twenty-five minutes.

Next morning the Main, in which the country's loveliest town had been mirrored for so long, flowed slowly and serenely on, through rubble and ashes, into time.

Johanna walked along the river. The charred ruins of the town had grown cold, the countless dead were buried. Behind her there was nothing but hopelessness and despair; before her the young green willows, lustrous and full of sap, stood in the sunlight as if nothing had happened.

She had been cleaning a dilapidated goat shed — ten feet square, which had stood unused for many years among the willows on the river bank — and had furnished it scantily with the remains of her possessions.

JOHANNA was twenty-one, and alone. Her mother had been dead for a long time. Her father, a drawing master at the municipal high school — and a Nazi — had hanged himself just before the steadily advancing American Army arrived. He had left a letter in which he called down curses for the last time on the head of his unpatriotic daughter.

Johanna had brown hair, brown eyes set with little shining stars, and a delicate face, white as wax even in the scorching sunshine of July. She looked as though Nature had destined her to pass on to future generations a physical loveliness finally attained through thousands of years.

Since the occupation of the country, she had been busy all day long, every day, trying

to get enough food to keep alive. She had no money, and there was no work for a secretary — no typewriters in a town that was no more. Also, the American military authorities had refused to employ anyone whose father had been a Nazi. Things might have been easier if she had shown them the letter in which her father cursed her. But she could not bring herself to do that.

On this late afternoon in July, she had been bathing in the river, and now she sat down on the bank to rest. She was wearing an improvised bathing suit consisting of white woolen panties and a blue silk scarf, her most treasured possession.

Already the voices of the animals could be heard in the quiet of the evening. A slate-gray heron hovered over the river, motionless, ready to swoop at any fish which might rise to the surface.

JOHANNA, who had no present and no future, was lost in her past. Scenes from her childhood intimately entwined with the streets of her home town, came back as vividly as if they had just happened. She heard the familiar six o'clock chime of Wurzburg's thirty church bells, and for several seconds did not realize that she was hearing the bells of churches that no longer existed.

She took a deep breath, rose — and stepped reluctantly out of her childhood into reality. Looking behind her to where Wurzburg had been, she saw only a gray field of ruins. How can one free oneself from the town in which one grew up? she thought. It is in us. We are part of it. Now we alone are Wurzburg. We alone!

Once more she sat down in the grass motionless, her head cupped in her hands, her elbows on her knees, seeing nothing, thinking of nothing. So sit the homeless, who have nothing to lean on and nowhere to go.

Suddenly there was a stirring in the willows. Johanna got up and listened intently.

A few seconds later an American soldier came out of the bushes. He said, astonished: "Oh, I beg your pardon."

Johanna, seeing that though he was embarrassed, he could not help staring at her instinctively, bent forward in an impulse to cover up her half nakedness.

She was not afraid of him. She had lived through destruction and thousandfold death, when the earth itself had seemed to explode and swallow the crumbling houses, and children, trying to escape, had been irretrievably stuck in the hot asphalt. She was not afraid of a pair of blue eyes from America.

HE SAID: "Nice evening, isn't it?" As Johanna did not answer, he asked, smiling shyly: "Would you rather I went away?"

His embarrassment moved her — she did not know why. "Wait a minute," she said, and hurried into the shed, which stood among the taller willows. Hastily she put on her only dress, over her panties. While she wound the blue scarf around her neck, she asked herself, "Why didn't I say, 'Yes, please go away?'" She had no answer to her thought.

The soldier sat down and looked across the river. He was seeing himself home from the wars, back again on the farm in Pennsylvania. Michael, the Welsh terrier, was tearing along, as though trying to jump out of himself, barking, wiggling his tail, licking his master's hand. The soldier's father was saying: "Well, so here you are, Steve." His mother was standing in the doorway, unable to move for joy.

At this point in Steve's reverie, a little wagtail hopped in front of him coquettishly from stone to stone, so near the river's edge that its tail-tip touched the water. Now Steve was again in Europe, sitting on the bank of the Main, wondering if Johanna would really come back.

The American, long and thin, was one of those fellows whose coat sleeves, no matter how carefully he chose his suits, were always too short. His blond head, so far, only suggested the strong, masculine outlines it would later assume. The thin nose, to which a little hump above the bridge lent character, was in keeping with his thin-lipped mouth. His ancestors, Swedes and Germans who had gone to America two hundred years ago,

seemed to look out from his bright blue eyes, deep set in finely molded sockets.

From childhood Steve had known a few dozen German words, and during the war he had enlarged his vocabulary enough, through his association with German prisoners, to speak German without much difficulty.

He heard Johanna's step and turned around. Her bare legs moved lightly over the gnarled roots of the willows as she came toward him. The thin black dress showed off the contours of her body. Steve stood up.

He was only two years older than Johanna, and still as inexperienced as she. He said: "I'm sorry. You would probably have liked to lie in the sun some more."

"No," she said, "it was getting too cool anyway."

He felt a sudden warmth all through him. Many of his comrades had met German girls and boasted about their conquests. For a long time Steve had wanted to do so, too. But now he did not think about it. Johanna

had stirred in him a deeper feeling, such as he had never known before. Not knowing what to say, he offered her a cigarette.

"No thank you. I don't smoke."

A helpful half minute was gained while Steve tried to light one for himself, which a mild wind prevented him from doing. Johanna stood looking at the evening land-

scape as though she were a stranger, and had never before seen these quiet shores and the peacefully running river.

Finally Steve managed to light his cigarette, and something had to be said, for these two were not yet intimate enough to sit side by side in the grass without a word.

STARTLED innocence has its own peculiar sweetness; so did Johanna's smile, parting her lips a little. But she said, as if she had already gone too far: "Those are good shoes you have on, I can see that. Cowhide."

"Sure, you can't wear them out. At first they pinched; I've worn them for almost three years, changing off with another pair."

"And you own two pairs of shoes!" cried Johanna with a sudden, inexplicable exuber-

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She thought: "I'm watching America in uniform building a stove for Europe"

