

THE GIRL FROM WURZBURG

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ance which rose from a source dammed up for years and now shining in her eyes.

He stood up in his sturdy shoes. "The others are almost new. I hardly ever wear them. You see, they pinch too."

She said eagerly: "They can be stretched — if you put them on lasts over night."

They went on talking about his shoes, and then at length about her beechwood sandals, whose crossed straps left her slender toes free. . . . But it did not matter what they talked about. Johanna felt as clearly as he the unspoken feeling behind every word they said.

Steve looked at her white legs outlined against the dark-green grass. He said thoughtfully: "Lots of the girls at home don't wear stockings either."

Then, stimulated by her questions, he described in a matter-of-fact tone the things that little people in America enjoy — things that little people in Europe do not even dare to think about. When he mentioned casually that many servant girls in his country owned cars, Johanna thought, utterly amazed, "Well then, I surely wouldn't mind being a maid in America."

BY NOW the sun had gone down. The willow bushes wore gossamer-like evening veils, and the fluffy mist floated close to the surface of the water. Steve asked: "Where did you put on your dress? I didn't see any house near by."

"The willows over there are rather high." Johanna started to get up, and he helped her. As they walked toward the willows, he silently took her hand, and she did not withdraw it. It felt good to have him hold her hand. . . .

The goat shed had no door. In the opening hung a sheet, which Johanna had found in the charred ruins of her parents' home. Holes had been burnt in it as big as a child's hand. Johanna could not patch it, because needles and thread, like a thousand other things, were no longer obtainable.

In the shed stood an iron cot, a chair, a table — nothing else. Steve could not stand upright under the low ceiling.

"But where do you cook?" he asked. Johanna shrugged her shoulders and pointed to the twisted alcohol burner: "That isn't much help either; there is no alcohol."

He looked around — a plan already forming in his mind — and discovered a round air vent near the unplastered roof. "There's plenty of room for a stove in this corner, and the pipe could be led out through this hole," he said.

"But there are no stoves," said Johanna. She was thinking: "I let him hold my hand; and now here he is in my bedroom — such as it is." She was confused, and did not know what to say next. Finally, after a moment of hesitation, she asked, "Why don't you sit down?"

STEVE, too, felt the strange tension which develops between two people who are yearning for each other and are alone in a room for the first time.

Johanna sat down on her bed. She tried unsuccessfully to pull the hem of her short skirt over her knees. The glance they exchanged about this helped them to feel more at ease.

Now these two, for whom nothing during the past half hour had been unimportant, once more talked of unimportant things. Outside, the many-voiced cricket choir sang. The evening song of the frogs had begun from far and near. Johanna could see Steve's face only when he drew on his cigarette.

Finally he got up. "Well, I'll be going now." They were standing in front of the

sheet which hung in the doorway. Steve bent down to her.

"Don't — please don't," she said. But there was longing in her voice, too.

Toward evening on the following day, Steve hauled a pushcart over the uneven ground through the willows, loaded with a bucket of clay, old bricks to which centuries-old mortar still clung, and old stove pipes and iron plates, for which he had searched all day long in the rubble heaps of the town's endless ruins.

After her daily bath in the river, Johanna had dried herself and her hair in the sun, and then fallen asleep on her iron cot, worn out with hunger.

Steve knocked several times on the door post and finally entered. She was lying on her back, knees drawn up a little, hands under

The table, the bed and the chair stood at the right of the open door. In the left-hand corner was the space for the stove. Together Steve and Johanna brought in the bricks and the pipes, and together they carried the heavy bucket of clay, discussing how the stove should be built. Their manner was exaggeratedly matter of fact, as though they had completely forgotten the kiss.

THEN Johanna ran down to the river for a pail of water — and suddenly stopped dead. The fearful oppression in her breast had vanished. "That he should be building a stove for me!" she thought. "That he should be doing this!"

Steve had brought everything with him — hammer, trowel, chisel, T-square, spirit-level.



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her head. She was again wearing the white woolen panties, and across her breast was the blue silk scarf.

She had expected him to come. But nobody on earth, not even Johanna herself, could have said with certainty whether in the seconds before falling asleep her unconscious wish to reveal to him so much of her loveliness had induced her to stay half dressed.

STEVE'S mouth tightened. It was not a smile — it was the feeling of taking something she was not giving him of her own free will. But he could not turn his eyes away.

Overcome with an awe which he had felt only as a child in church, he wanted to steal away, but she opened her eyes and her lips a little. Still half lost in sleep and dreams, she stretched out her arms to him.

His kiss fully wakened her. She drew back and looked wordlessly at the man about whom she had been dreaming.

Steve could find no words either. Like mountain climbers who have lost their way on a steep precipice, they could move neither forward nor back. Each read the unspoken thoughts in the other's face.

The stove pipe on the tilted pushcart started rolling off, and fell with a clatter. Relieved, Steve hurried outside.

Johanna slipped into her dress. But the kiss, the first in her life, was with her still. She had to sit down on her bed before she had the strength to fasten her belt buckle. Then the sensation flowed up and down her arms as they hung limp at her sides. Fear looked from her eyes. . . .

First he knocked off the ancient mortar from a number of bricks, and by and by four walls, squarely fitted to each other, began to take shape. In the front wall he made an opening for the firebox, and on the top laid an iron plate with removable lids, on which Johanna could roast a turkey — if she had a turkey.

Squatting on her heels beside him, she thought: "I'm watching America in uniform building a stove for Europe."

It was midnight before Steve had finished, and sat back to survey his work. It was a brick cube, with an ornamental projection at the top and the bottom, and reminded him of old brick houses which he had seen while on leave in New York City; only it had no windows, and instead of a front door, there were the little iron doors to the firebox. The pipe passed through a vent near the roof, and rose three feet above the shed. Over the pipe, as protection against the rain and for his own particular satisfaction, Steve had put a pointed tin chimney hat.

THE two of them sat on the floor in front of the stove. "Wonderful!" said Johanna, deeply moved.

Steve grinned at her, showing his white, even teeth. Johanna felt like saying, "You dear one!"

They went outside. A waxing moon hung over the ruins where Wurzburg had been, and in its light, the area looked like a vast expanse of pale white bones. Steve and Johanna looked at the scene, silenced.

"Do you hate us? Because we destroyed your town?" asked Steve, in the voice of

someone whose conscience is bothering him. Johanna answered, after a long pause: "Not when I think things through." She lowered her head, and several seconds passed before she murmured: "But one does not always think things through."

"Then you hate us."

His words unloosed her tongue and the flood gates of her memory. She began to talk, living again everything she had been through, suffering it anew:

"One Sunday morning the Freudenheims were taken by the Gestapo. They were fur dealers in Gerber Street — small stuff only, mostly rabbit skins. They were good-hearted people, and harmed no one. First they were led through the town, back and forth, and then they were killed in the marketplace. The daughter, Ruth, was my friend; even as little children we played together. But Ruth wasn't killed. She was taken to Poland and put in a house. You know what I mean. She was seventeen — the same age as I. . . . Hans told me later that he saw her in that house. . . . Hans had been engaged to Ruth."

JOHANNA understood next to nothing about world politics. She had judged events — the unleashing of war by Germany, the devastation of innocent people — only from the angle of her own experience. She knew nothing — and yet everything, because she knew everything intuitively.

On that Sunday morning her wounded heart had turned away from her triumphant father and everything he stood for, from everything that was happening in Germany. There could be nothing good in it, since it had begun with the slaying of the Freudenheims. She was in the marketplace when it happened and, paralyzed with horror, began to scream only when the blood-smeared corpses were dragged away by their feet.

As she raised her head now, Steve saw in her eyes a look of guilt that seemed to ask if he could like a girl linked by fate to those who had caused this nameless suffering in Europe. It was a dark and heavy look.

Shuddering, he felt the presence of a bloody ghost between him and Johanna, separating them. He turned away. After a silence, through which he looked into the distance at the pale white stretch of ruins, he said, quite obviously including himself: "Lots of us think that in many cases more was destroyed than was really necessary. . . . That's bad. Isn't it?"

JOHANNA did not answer, did not move. Conscience and a sense of guilt stood between these two, and nothing could bridge the gap but their own hearts.

Steve brought her to her door — the hanging sheet — said good night and left. Johanna stood still in the goat shed. She wished she could cry, but she couldn't. She leaned against the door frame for a long while, an innocent participant in the world's infamy, a prisoner of fate.

Four days later, Johanna was slowly making her way back through the ruins of the town to her shed. At the rubble heap where her parents' home had stood, she stopped from force of habit, for now and then she found something she could use at the little shed in the willows.

People she knew passed her on the narrow pathway which had been dug through the rubbish. They greeted her silently, each with the same ghostlike smile — from nothingness to nothingness.

Suddenly she saw something colored lying on top of a charred rafter, and recognized a lithograph of Bismarck which had hung in her father's study. But it did not stir her; she had no moving memories of her parents' home. . . . A little cloud of dust from the rubble pile rose

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