



The Sane King
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The Sane King

*Based on characters
first encountered in
Edgar Rice Burroughs'
The Mad King (1914)
and
The Cave Girl (1913)*

CHAPTER 1

"We spent an entire year escaping from Europe at the end of the war and you want to return? Really, Emma, you must be out of your mind!" Barney Custer, American, once king of Lutha, a now non-existent monarchy of Europe, looked toward the slim figure of his wife, the one-time queen of Lutha.

Emma Custer nee-von der Tann stood at the back door of the Custer's rented house in New York City and listened to the bright voices of children at recess in the yard of the neighborhood school a block away. The air was warm under blue skies with puffs of white cloud drifting in from the Atlantic toward the Jersey shore. Slowly, and with an erect stance that Barney knew boded ill for him, his wife turned to look at the red-haired man, just showing hints of gray, sitting at the rough kitchen table. Before him lay a newspaper turned to the help wanted section. She almost smiled as his coffee cup paused halfway from the table to his mouth when she said:

"We *are* going and that's that."

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"Yes, Your Highness," Barney grinned, the argument over before it started. "If the king may ask—which funds will the royal couple use for travel? The personal accounts are empty and the royal treasury is bankrupt."

"I did not say it would be *easy*!" Emma came to his side and perched on his knee. A white hand went to the back of his neck and caressed her husband's long hair. The other hand went to her bodice and drew out a small postal envelope which was much stained during transit. "This is why we have to go."

Barney Custer took the letter and read the short note.

Dear Emma,

Munich is no longer safe for me and my husband. They took his chair at the university. I have no family since the war. I do not know what to do. We are watched because he is American and I am French. This letter is to let you know that (a crease in the letter was so soiled the words could not be read) to Herr Ernst Schroder, 21 Le (a water stain diluted the ink) are amazed he has risen so quickly! If you can send funds to Ernst, he will help us leave Germany. It may already be too late. I know I ask much as we have met only once and your troubles have been so much greater than mine.

With hope,

Genie

Custer frowned as he re-folded the letter and placed it inside the envelope. He leaned back in the wooden chair and pulled his wife to his breast. "Who

is Genie?"

"Eugenie Marie Celeste de la Valois, Countess of Crecy, Mrs. Waldo Emerson Smith-Jones, professor of Aboriginal History. She is my cousin."

"This Waldo character, he's a Yank, right? Why didn't she write his family?"

"They disowned him when he decided to become a university professor rather than follow in the family business. We have to help her, Barney!"

Emma looked at the envelope atop the newspaper and frowned. "There was so much she didn't say and I am afraid for her, just as I was afraid for all of Lutha when the Kaiser..."

Barney's hard hug stopped those memories. Emma cupped his cheek with a trembling hand. "If anyone knows the underside of Europe it is you, my darling, for that was how you brought most of us to this wonderful land. You and I could go bring them..."

The second hard hug shut Emma up. "No doing. I mean, you don't go no matter what is decided. There are two pigs over there that frankly frighten me to death and I will not place you in that kind of danger ever again. No!" he admonished when her mouth opened to disagree.

Barney reached out and pulled close the other wooden chair, which did not match the one in which he was sitting. Putting both hands about Emma's slim waist he transferred her bottom from his lap to the chair. "That's better, dear. I do not think as clearly when you are sitting in my lap. Now, pour yourself a cup and tell me all about Genie and Waldo."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Barney looked at his wife's glistening eyes, her

bright smile. "I didn't say I'd go."

"No, you didn't." She poured coffee for herself and topped off his half-empty mug.

* * * * *

Barney Custer sat on the bench outside the Newark bus station. At four in the afternoon the majority of pedestrians on the sidewalk were children and women. Across the street was a grocer with a large display of fruits and vegetables under a dark blue awning. The king of Lutha pondered the sweetness of a stack of oranges and was on the verge of crossing the street to find out when a recklessly driven automobile came to a screeching stop at the curb. A heavy hand blared the horn. An instant later a handsome man in a gray suit jumped from the driver's seat and rapidly approached Custer.

"Your High-er, Barney! It is good to see you!"

"Otto," Barney returned the man's hearty grip, "you drive cars as hard as you ride horses."

General Otto Butzow grinned and grabbed Custer's grip from the pavement before Barney could. He placed the bag in the back seat and had the passenger door open nearly as quickly. "It is always the speed and power, my friend. I have told you that many times, no? How is Emma? And the boy? Get in! Get in! Sarah is baking apple pie and there's a roast."

The touring car's engine roared to life, gears meshed, and the machine leapt forward like a racing hound. Within minutes the automobile was approaching the city limits, during which time Otto did not cease to chatter. Then, after turning off the main

road to take a lesser, Otto Butzow glanced at Custer.

"That you are here now instead of our next reunion indicates something of importance. Something you could not discuss in a telephone call."

"That's right. Is there a bar or some place we can talk before we get to your house? I do not wish to needlessly upset your wife."

"Sure," Butzow arched an expressive brow. "Sure thing."

The Luthan general's accent had eroded over the years since the Great War—at least as much as most European accents erode when mixed in the hodge-podge of American English. He had embraced the new country with open arms, but only after all hope of holding the monarchy of Lutha sovereign had failed. Otto Butzow looked as he was, an ambitious man eager to make his fortune and, for Butzow that path was selling automobiles. He owned one outlet and was preparing to open a second twenty miles away.

The bar Barney's companion from the Great War selected was uncrowded this early in the day, but if the size of the dirt parking lot surrounding the building just off the road was any indication, it was a very popular place at night. Butzow waved to the bartender, who greeted the Luthan by name. Otto held up two fingers and the barkeep nodded. Guiding Custer to a dark leather booth they waited for their order.

Butzow leaned across the table. "What's that, sire? Gray hair?"

Barney laughed. "I see you are sporting some of that yourself, old friend."

"What's the news from Wall Street?"

Custer scowled. "I do not give a—" The red-haired man's expletive was held back as the barman delivered tumblers of white wine. Custer listened with amusement as the bartender told Butzow that he might "...keep more of this stuff around because the ladies seem to like it. No offense!"

"None taken, Harvey," Butzow chuckled. "Now scoot, *mein Freund*. We have business to discuss."

"Ah!" Harvey winked. "Another customer for Otto's Autos? Sir, Mr. Butzow has the best prices in Jersey."

Custer refrained from smiling until after the man returned to the bar. "Otto's Autos? What happened to 'Butzow's Touring Cars'?"

"You Yanks, that's what. Now, my good friend, why are you here?"

"I'm taking a vacation, Otto. Thought you might like to go along."

"Where?"

Custer sipped his wine, then said—quiet and deliberate:

"Germany."

Butzow leaned back and narrowed his eyes. He thought of his pregnant wife. He thought of his ex-wives. He thought of his business. Then immediately replied:

"When do we go, Your Highness?"

* * * * *

The Smith-Jones estate was large, walled, and gated, a monolithic exhibit that Old Money had been

untouched by the collapse of the stock market. The buzzer went unanswered, no matter how heavily Butzow pressed his thumb. Custer ceased pacing and said, "Never mind that, Otto. Give me a boost."

When Barney was astride the brick wall he leaned down to hoist his companion to the top. They dropped to the manicured lawn and walked toward the house at the top of the hill, brilliantly lit by party lanterns and electric lights. The sound of a string quartet came on the night breeze and abruptly stopped when the two uninvited guests came through the French doors open to the garden. A man in livery hurried forward, balancing a tray of martinis to imperiously order Custer and Butzow to leave or he would call the police. Custer squared his shoulders and walked past the butler. The small gathering of a dozen socialites opened before him. Barney came to a stop before a withered old woman seated in a velvet wingback chair.

"My apologies for the rude entrance, Mrs. Smith-Jones, but I have been unable to contact you for the last two days. I have come on a matter of some urgency that concerns your son and his wife."

Before the startled woman could respond a man in his mid-twenties, burly and dark-haired, stepped between Custer and the seated woman. "Get out, or I'll throw you out." The way the tuxedo strained across his chest served as warning he was capable of backing up his threat.

"Alexander Smith-Jones!" the elderly woman admonished. "That is no tone to take, even with riffraff."

Butzow stepped between Barney and Alexan-

der. He spoke to the woman, but his eyes were locked with the young man's. "You are in the presence of His Royal Highness, King Barney of Lutha."

"Yeah?" Alexander Smith-Jones challenged.

Butzow jabbed his finger into the young man's chest and said, "Yeah!"

"By God, you are him!" An older man, perhaps fifty, came across the room with an outstretched hand that he drew back, attempted to bow, and nearly tripped. Custer gripped the gentleman's arm and put him right. The older man spoke rapidly. "It's alright, Alexander, he is who this man says he is. I was there during the Blentz revolt and you were magnificent! Auntie, may I present Barney Custer, king of Lutha?"

Mrs. Smith-Jones waved all that aside. "What's this about Waldo and Genie?"

"They are in grave danger," Barney replied.

A sudden rhubarb of conversation broke out. Mrs. Smith-Jones became irritated. "Gilroy, please show our guests to the garden. And take the orchestra with you." She waited until the butler coaxed the crowd to leave by rolling the portable bar outside before she spoke again. "Alexander, please sit down. You are not intimidating that man one bit. No, on second thought, the two of you go to the kitchen and bring some coffee. What is your name?"

Otto drew himself to military erect and bowed. "General Otto Butzow, late of the Luthan Army."

"That's nice. You and Alexander fetch the coffee. You," she indicated Barney, "sit there. My eyes are not as good as they used to be. Now, tell me about Waldo."

Barney explained the changing political situations in Europe and how recent events in German politics had placed her son and daughter-in-law in danger. "My wife fears they may be held as hostages or killed."

Butzow and Smith-Jones returned. Mrs. Smith-Jones would hear nothing more until the coffee was served and the chairs rearranged so that she could see all three seated men. "Please continue."

"There is little more to say, madam. We have some information on how we might find them. Once found Otto and I will bring them out to a neutral country and then back to the States."

Mrs. Smith-Jones frowned in thought for a moment. "Would it not be more direct to have the President call the Chancellor and arrange for their safe transportation? I can call him."

Otto balanced a delicate cup and saucer in one hand and leaned forward. "That would be the most unwise, Mrs. Smith-Jones. You do not know those in power in Germany the way that Mr. Custer and I do. We fought their type what only seems a few years ago and in the end they destroyed my country and killed nearly all our population."

Mrs. Smith-Jones blinked, then continued quickly. "But Waldo is American and his wife, regardless of her origin, is protected by American law!"

"Mother," Alexander interrupted, "you don't read the papers, I do. Butzow is right. Now I have a question, Mr. Custer—I'm not going to call you king—why are you here?"

"Your brother's wife is my wife's cousin. It is a matter of family."

Alexander shook his head. "That's not why you're *here*. What do you need from us?"

Custer chewed his lip, lowered then raised his eyes, and looked directly at Mrs. Smith-Jones. "Money."

Alexander Smith-Jones gave a hoot and slapped his knee. "That's what I thought! Damn, you boys are good! Almost had me believing you. Thanks for the entertainment. Finish your coffee, then get out."

Barney reached inside his jacket and retrieved the letter. "Madam, this is my bonafide."

Mrs. Smith-Jones read the letter. After a moment she handed it to Alexander, who scanned the contents then slowly folded the stained paper and held it. Alexander sighed. "When do we leave?"

"We? You do not need to come."

"Like hell. That's my brother for all that I haven't seen him since I was six. I'm going along to make sure mother's money is used for its intended purpose."

Butzow stiffened and started to rise. Barney's light grip on the Luthan's forearm caused Otto to relax.

"You may accompany us, Mr. Smith-Jones. I only said that it was unnecessary."

Mrs. Smith-Jones asked: "How much?"

"Ten thousand."

Alexander laughed again. "I do not know which is more lame, your story or the paltry amount you've asked for."

"We will not be traveling first class. In fact, the way we go may be something of an education for you."

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Alexander Smith-Jones found nothing amusing in that reply. To his mother he said, "Best make it \$50,000 because I bet we're dealing with five kinds of fools here."

"Otto!" Barney barked, restraining by voice the hot-blooded Luthan. Custer rose and bowed to Mrs. Smith-Jones. Butzow did the same. Turning to Alexander Smith-Jones, Custer said, "We leave in the morning. Wear work clothes. If you don't own any we'll buy some on the way."

* * * * *

Autumn in Spain was hotter than New York. Alexander scowled as he held the reins to the horse drawn wagon. A bead of sweat seeped from under the brim of his battered hat, and from unshaved chin to dusty boots there was no hint of the high society son of an American industrialist. At the rear of the wagon Butzow and Custer lifted down huge oak barrels which had been cargo on the tramp steamer they had crewed on across the Atlantic. To the south was the Mediterranean Sea, the breakers of which rolled into Valencia harbor. Alexander could clearly see their ship at dock.

The Spanish merchant counted the barrels Barney and Otto had unloaded. He kicked one and nodded with satisfaction. Removing a cloth purse from his vest, the merchant paid for the goods and delivery and offered a wine skin as a bonus. Alexander's scowl deepened when his companions took long pulls from the wine skin and he was offered none.

Custer rattled off something in Spanish as Otto

climbed into the driver's cockpit. The Luthan, looking rough and equally unshaved, jerked a thumb to Alexander to climb in back of the wagon. Barney shook hands with the merchant, mounted the axle, and settled next to Otto. Smith-Jones waited until they were well away from the merchant before saying, "Thanks for thinking of me."

Otto turned his head and smiled. "You are too young, my friend. It would not be seemly to lead you into a life of dissolution and dissipation. What would your mother think?"

Barney tossed two coins to Alex. "Your share of the tip."

Alexander laughed. Beneath his loose shirt he wore a leather money belt containing \$49,925—the two pesos meant nothing to him. "This is important to you, Custer? Settling accounts? How droll. We could have been here two days sooner taking the liner from New York to London."

Butzow thinned his lips. The young American had done nothing but complain since the moment they left the Smith-Jones compound. But Barney had begged that he ignore Alexander—a difficult thing to do. Custer leaned on the low seat rail and replied.

"And we would have then taken two weeks to get here from London. Get this through your head, Alex. We have to stay low profile. In two days we'll be in Barcelona and from there we go by road. The Germans have spies everywhere. Americans traveling in Europe these days are subject to undesired attention."

Alex Smith-Jones scowled. "Hitler and the Nazi Party are not the problem in Europe. What happened

after the war is the problem."

Otto Butzow turned his head away from driving the wagon, glared at the man, then shook his head. "You have led a sheltered life, *mein junger Freund*."

"Educate me!" challenged Smith-Jones.

Barney stretched, easing a muscle kink in his back. "Keep your eyes open and you will learn. Hurry it up, Otto. We'll return the wagon, get our pay, and leave the ship. We go overland from here."

* * * * *

Alexander Smith-Jones glanced at the dingy shops along the *schmale Straße*, beginning now to think in the German his companions had been teaching him over the last two weeks. There were few or no customers in the streets. The pedestrians walked with collars upturned and hats pulled low because the day was overcast and a light mist had been falling for hours. The Munich Alexander Smith-Jones saw was not the one pictured in the travel books his European-traveling relatives had spoken about. This Munich was dreary, dirty, and depressing.

"Where are we going?"

"Schroder's," Custer replied.

"Why there? Wouldn't it be easier to just go to Waldo's house? So far I don't see anything keeping Waldo and his wife here, or why we can't simply go get them."

Otto, his eyes never ceasing an eternal search of all shadows, doorways, and rooftops, snorted in disgust. "Do you recall what happened to that couple in Stuttgart?"

During their travel by foot, rail, and bus they had been stopped at checkpoints manned by grim-faced men in gray uniforms. Swaggering men. Men who looked at the trio of itinerant laborers as less than the dust on their calf-high boots. Alexander's education had not been happy and he flushed with heated memory recalling Stuttgart as they were getting off the train. Men that Butzow had scathingly identified as Gestapo had detained a man and woman several cars down from theirs. Voices had been raised. The officer had struck the man down as the woman wailed. He flushed a second time with memory because Otto had jammed the hard muzzle of a revolver into his side saying, "Shut up, Alex! Do nothing! Move!"

Alexander Smith-Jones inserted very ounce of animus possible into his reply. "General Butzow, are we there yet?"

Otto grinned, but it was not humor intended. "Shut your face, my young and stupid friend."

Getting into Munich had been a little difficult. Getting around town proved more so. The three men walked with hunched shoulders against the rain, their hat brims dark and drooping. Herr Ernst Schroder lived at 21 Lestrandrassen and when they arrived they continued walking because the front and rear of the house was attended by a half-dozen men wearing uniforms emblazoned with the insignia of the SS.

Custer, Butzow and Smith-Jones entered a bakery across the street and a few houses down from Schroder's. "Buy some bread," Barney ordered Butzow, while gripping Alexander's arm as they stood near the shop window.

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"This does not look good. We'll go to your brother's house."

Butzow returned with a newspaper wrapped package under one arm.

"Objective Two," Custer said. "You've been to Munich. Lead us—the back way."

CHAPTER 2

Gertrud Schwartzenberg pulled the collar of her worn coat tight to keep the rain dripping from her soggy hat from running down her slim back. The dark blue linen skirt clung to her legs as she hurried down the narrow street. She wished for an umbrella, but the one her family once owned had been destroyed some months ago, a group of Brown Shirts had used it to beat her father outside their little shoe repair shop, the shop they no longer owned.

The paper bag holding a loaf of bread, two potatoes, and a bunch of leeks was beginning to split apart. Gertrud let go of her collar and used both arms to cradle the food.

She constantly glanced left and right, examining every shadowed doorway she approached. Nearly as frequently did she look behind her. Jewish girls were not safe these days. Gertrud disliked living with fear, yet more than that, she disliked her father's stupid belief that things would get better.

Poor papa! she thought. *As long as the little corporal is in office no Jew will be safe in our homeland!*

Last April the government forced all Jews to declare fortunes greater than 5.000 Reichmarks. The Schwartzenberg family had no such fortune but that order had made their neighbors look upon Gertrud's family in a different way. People she had known since

she was a little girl began to shun her. The women for whom she had watched their children no longer employed her. For months now fewer and fewer had come to her father's business. No, the family had no fortune greater than 5.000 Reichmarks—the Schwartenberg family did not have even 5 Reichmarks!

The afternoon light was fading rapidly. Away from the commerce area the old oaks and elms spread over the narrow street between residences girded with iron fences and tall hedges. The street lights were widely spaced and rarely illuminated the street because of the huge trees.

It was so quiet! No one seemed to be about. Usually in November people would take advantage of any day not bitterly cold if for no other reason than knowing in days or weeks there would be snow on the ground. *The rain*, she thought, *it must be the rain*.

At the next corner Gertrud briefly struggled with the wet paper sack, which finally parted. She picked up the potato that fell to the street. She put it in her coat pocket, followed by the second potato. The leeks and bread she put under her coat. Angry, she wanted to throw the useless bag to the street. She did not. Gertrud was a neat girl in both appearance and habit. She wadded the paper into a ball and thrust it in her other pocket.

To the left lay the richer neighborhood that was near the center of Munich. She turned to the right, the residences becoming more modest with each block. Some distance later she crossed the street to avoid the Gestapo car and two men outside the residence of Herr Smith-Jones, the professor. They

were big men, these Gestapo, sterling examples of Hitler's Aryan Ideal; broad shouldered, blonde-haired, swaggering. They smirked as the young woman hurried past, red-faced because of the names they called her.

Gertrud did not look at them. She did not dare look as had little Estella a month ago. She did not give them any reason to question her...if a beating and rape could be called "questioning!"

At the corner of the second block past the American professor's house, Gertrud did look back. The Gestapo had been joined by a large truck. From the truck two dozen soldiers descended, fanning out, two at a time, to houses along the street. The Gestapo men joined them, heading to a house opposite Herr Smith-Jones' abode.

Sudden shouts with fists and rifles banging on doors caused lights to come on, or go out, all long the street. Gertrud stepped away from the street, leaning into a privet hedge nearly as tall as the slender girl.

What is happening?

Gertrud heard similar sounds on the next street. Somewhere a woman screamed. She turned as another Gestapo truck rumbled down a side lane, shrinking further into the hedge that scratched her face, tugged at her hat and hair. The lights illuminated the houses opposite, leaving her side of the road in darkness.

Several houses down the truck stopped. Men jumped from the rear as an officer exited the cab. "Gather the Jews!" he shouted. "Bring the filthy creatures here!"

Papa!

Gertrud faded back, keeping to the shadows. Her heart pounded rapidly as she hurried to the little home she shared with her father. The Gestapo were coming!

It seemed impossible to avoid the Gestapo. They seemed to be everywhere, yet, Gertrud knew that if they were after Jews they would not be on other streets, streets where Jews did not live. She turned her steps accordingly, making her way as close to her home as possible. Several times she shuddered when the distant crack of a rifle sounded. She fought tears because Jews had been shot down before and no one seemed to care!

One block remained. One block and she would tell Papa what she had seen and heard. She would *make* him believe and that they *must* leave while they still could!

Gertrud hurried around the corner and ran into the back of a gray uniform. *Dear God!*

"Ho," the Gestapo officer grinned. "What have we here? A little Jewess girl." His gloved hand gripped Gertrud's chin and forced her face upward. "Pretty. You, I will entertain before turning you in. Come!"

The man's grip on Gertrud's arm was painful. She could not stop the moan which escaped her lips. Nor could she fight his brutal strength as he dragged her toward the bushes around Herr Tonder's house. Gertrud took a deep breath to scream for help, and was roughly slapped down. Fingers gripped her dark hair, twisting her head sharply to look upon a cold figure sprawled awkwardly on the lawn.

"He can't hear you," the Gestapo said, "and they won't care." He laughed as he glanced toward the gray uniforms lining Jews up to be loaded into the truck down the street.

"Dear God!" Getrud breathed as the man bent over her.

"Hey, *Fritz!*"

The Gestapo was startled. He quickly turned and as he did a hammer hard fist crashed into his chin. Getrud heard bone break. The officer slumped to the ground, motionless.

Standing near her was a young giant with a rough beard. He was rubbing his hand. He then lifted a finger to his lips, jerking a thumb toward the truck. He did not wait to see if she understood. He knelt, stripping away the fallen man's sidearm, which he hid under his rain-soaked jacket.

"Komm biter!" he whispered, holding out his hand.

"I must go to my father," Gertrud breathlessly said, rising. "I—"

At that moment, from the interior of the house where Gertrud and her father lived, came a shot. Then a second. She started to run toward the house, but the young man swiftly captured her, emphatically shaking his head.

"Shh!" he hissed, one hand poised to cover her mouth if necessary.

For a dozen heartbeats they faced each other. From the house came three men, two carrying a frail body. Gertrud saw the blood on her father's breast, then the back of his head blown apart. Her knees gave way.

The man swept the girl's limp form into his arms and quickly moved across the lawn. Pushing through several hedges, he crossed a drive then paused beside a monster oak to look about. There was a garage nearby and several indistinguishable shapes were near the door.

"Barney!" the young man whispered. "Otto!"

Gertrud squirmed and was instantly set upon her feet. "Okay?" the giant asked. She nodded.

"You are not German," she said in English.

The young man grinned. "You won't tell *them*, will you?"

"They killed my father."

His hand, still on her shoulder, squeezed briefly. "Sorry." To the other who had joined them he said: "Forget the car. Something's up. I'll bet a dollar to a donut every car will be stopped tonight, and everybody that's out and about."

"Yeah, I know. That's how we got Waldo and Genie out of the house. Who's this?"

"My friend," the young man said.

Gertrud looked at the older man, his hair appeared red with streaks of gray under the knit cap. "He saved me. I am Gertrud. Did you say Herr Professor Smith-Jones and his wife are with you?"

The older man did not answer. He spoke to the man at her side. "You played Hobb, Alex!"

"What was I supposed to do, Barney? He was going to rape her!"

Three others gathered in the darkness under the great tree. Gertrud knew two of them. She held her hands toward the older woman. "I am glad you are out of that house!"

"So are we, Gertrud!" Mrs. Smith-Jones replied. "Now, if we can only get out of Germany!"

The tallest man, Herr Professor Smith-Jones patted Gertrud's arm. "Where's your father?"

For a moment Gertrud could not speak. That pain was too fresh to be fully felt. The man named Alex put his arm going about her shoulder and said:

"Shot down in his house. These Gestapo bastards are picking up all the Jews. Maybe—"

"Maybe we can use their attention on that pogrom to our advantage," said the remaining man.

"Perhaps, Otto. Know a way we can get outside the city?"

"After the Gestapo have what they came for, they should leave..."

"Damn *callous* of you, old man!" Alex hissed.

Gertrud did not know why, but she gripped his arm. "He is right, Alex. This misfortune should benefit somebody besides Adolf Hitler!"

Barney said, "We'll have to do something pretty quick. the Gestapo will soon learn that Waldo and Genie aren't at home."

"Yes, there's that," Waldo said. To the girl he added, "Sorry about your father, Gertrud."

Gertrud sniffed back a tear then bravely said, "He, at least, is spared any more hurt in this life."

Otto reached down to pick up a valise. "I suppose we should go."

A moment of panic ran through the dark haired girl, as well as a sudden realization of inevitabilities. Gertrud turned to leave. "Goodbye and good luck!"

"Wait a minute!" Alex stopped her. "Do you have a place to go? Somebody to take care of you?"

"Take care of me?"

"I mean," the young man stammered, "you can take care of yourself, I'm sure. Family. Do you have any family to go to?"

"No one. Just papa..."

"Then come with us," Alex said. "We're going... er... we're leaving Germany. Once we're out, you can go anywhere you want. I don't think Germany will be safe for Jews."

"Because I am a Jew it might not be safe for you to have me around."

"You let me worry about that," Alex said and took her arm.

Barney leaned close, "Anything wrong?"

"Nothing. Gertrud's coming with us."

* * * * *

The journey out of Munich was part nightmare, part misery. The nightmare was dodging Gestapo trucks rumbling through the city and hearing frightened people being roused from their homes. None knew why these events took place. How could they know that Nazi authorities issued the collection order for Jews in Germany and Austria after the murder of German diplomat Ernst von Rath, by Herschel Grynszpan a French Jew in the German Embassy in Paris? Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were looted and burned. 91 Jews were killed, and 20,000 were taken to concentration camps. This was the *Kristallnacht* (Night of broken glass).

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The misery was the weather. Wet, cold, and endless walking off-set by breathless hiding. Near dawn the group was well-away from the city into the farmlands and forests. They had found no shelter as they continued to move south and east. Switzerland was 200 km as the crow flies. To reach France would be the same distance, perhaps more.

They made an unusual group: Six human beings tramping through the countryside, three big men, a compact man, a graceful lady and a diminutive girl. More unusual was their order of travel.

Waldo Emerson Smith-Jones led the way. He had spent a number of years stranded on a jungle island and had learned to live as a primitive. He could read sign and his senses, despite his middle-age, were in many ways superior to the others, except for his wife. She, too, had been on that jungle island and was raised by aboriginal peoples from the Stone Age, though she was the true daughter of a French Countess orphaned upon that unnamed shore. Next came Otto Butzow, the proven modern warrior. In addition to a small revolver, he carried the Lugar Alex had taken from the Gestapo officer. Barney Custer and the two women followed. Alexander Smith-Jones brought up the rear. He carried what luggage the party had with them.

As the day brightened under gray skies, Gertrud looked back as often as reasonable. The man who saved her from the Gestapo brute was nearly as tall as Herr Professor Smith-Jones, and so much bigger and stronger! He was not unpleasant to look upon, especially when he was not frowning or grumbling.

Mid-morning Otto held up a hand to stop the

party. In a quiet voice he said: "Waldo spotted a barn. He's checking it out. We need to rest..."

Tense minutes passed as they blended into the brush at the edge of a clearing. The pasture beyond was high meadow surrounded by a dense forest. Then, striding toward them, came the American professor. At his wave, they approached.

"Barn's empty. Looks unused for quite some time. There's a house over the hill. Vacant. Dust everywhere. Hasn't been lived in for a while. I suggest the barn, but also suggest we raid the house for anything useful, like clothes!"

Barney nodded. "Otto, go with him. Try not to disturb anything. Leave no tracks."

"In this mud?" Otto asked with a wry smile.

"If it keeps raining, it will wash the tracks away. We'll be at the barn."

There was some hay in the loft, not much, but it was better than sitting on the dirt. Alex forked down enough to make some beds. Barney cleared a spot to make a very small fire and produced a coffee pot from one of the bags.

"Oh!" Gertrud said with a trace of embarrassment. She produced the two potatoes, the wilted leeks, and what was left of the bread after her rough handling.

Genie took the larger pot Barney dug out and collected water dripping off the barn's eave. By the time the water was near boiling, Otto and Waldo returned. They had two blankets, three dresses, some trousers and shirts of various sizes, three knives, a half dozen spoons, and a small bag which turned out to be salt.

Mrs. Smith-Jones prepared the meal which was more broth than soup. She scowled for a moment, then turned to her husband. "Remember what we ate on the island?"

"I do, dearest," the man grinned. "I'm not sure our companions would find it delightful."

"True, but you and I can eat that and they can have this. We need food."

"Your wish is my command. Thandar will hunt."

Gertrud leaned toward Alex with a confused expression. "What are they talking about?"

"Thandar, mighty warrior, killer of Flatfoot and other degenerate beast men, killer of Nagoola the black panther."

Alexander went on to explain how his brother had been washed overboard in the South Seas in 1913 and spent several years reinventing himself as a cave man. Waldo had fallen in love with a little cave girl, "...the one who is now cooking your potatoes."

Gertrud glanced toward the regal Genie Smith-Jones, who had always been kind to her from the first day the professor and his wife had moved into their neighborhood. "She is the daughter of a Countess?"

Alex grinned. "That's what I've been told."

"Thandar" entered the barn. He carried a rabbit by its ears in one hand, and two rats by their tails in the other. Professor Smith-Jones knelt by the fire and took up a knife to begin expertly skinning and dismembering the animals. Seemingly in an instant Waldo said:

"Your larder is filled, madam!"

Alex eyed the rats with some distaste. "Waldo, you're kidding, right?"

The Sane King

"Not in the least, little brother," the professor replied.

Genie had already dropped the rabbit meat into the pot. She and Waldo sat broiling the rat meat, or rather passing it through the fire a couple of times, then wolfing it down with hungry impatience.

Otto, a practical man, was curious of only one thing. "How did you kill them?"

"Rock. Good as a bullet if you can hit what you're throwing at."

Barney tried some rat meat while the stew was finishing. "Damn gamey. Well, after we eat we'll take turns sleeping. As they say, boys and girls, we aren't out of the woods yet!"

* * * * *

"We need a car," Butzow declared days later. "Or horses."

Waldo said, "Horses unlikely. Those that haven't been eaten are in the Nazi's little army."

"I could eat a horse," Barney said. "Getting a little tired of what we can steal from local truck gardens."

"Be quiet, Barney, this is serious." Butzow frowned at the older Smith-Jones brother. "It is a sure thing we cannot take a train, Monsieur Waldo. You are too easy to recognize."

Genie linked her arm through her husband's. "Waldo cannot help it that he is so handsome and distinguished. It seems all the Smith-Jones men suffer equally in that regard."

Alexander's face turned red. Gertrud smiled just a little for the first time since her father was murdered. The big American was not as gruff as he pretended to be.

The younger Smith-Jones, instead of finding amusement in the byplay, seemed determined to be obtuse. "Well, Your Highness, what do we do now? I thought you had this thing planned out."

Rather than snap back, Barney Custer sighed. "In adventures like this, my young Alex, those plans, best laid, often end up with us eating the mice."

They walked another quarter mile in silence. So far they had been able to avoid roadways and houses, though that tortuous path had added many miles to their travel. Ahead was a stone fence, an indication of people, and the strain was felt by everyone.

At night Thandar would take his little brother hunting. Sometimes it was meat. Sometimes it was potatoes or carrots. Any thefts from houses along the way were items not likely to be noticed...a can here, a little milk and flour there. Never very much at any time, and as a consequence, the men lost weight, the women less so. "We had a snack while hunting," they would say. "I don't believe you," Genie would scold then kiss them.

One morning Gertrud was gone. Her blanket had been rolled up. Barney whispered to the anxious Alex: "Probably on a potty break. Gee whiz, son, you're making me nervous!"

Thirty minutes after daylight even Barney was nervous.

An acorn hit Alex on the side of his head, which can't happen under normal circumstances. He turned

to see his brother gesturing beyond the brush. Alex and the others looked. A little girl with dark braids and a blue wool coat came carrying a basket nearly bigger than herself.

"Alex!" the girl softly called. "Alex!"

As Gertrud passed his bush, Alexander grabbed her, covering the girl's mouth at the same time. "Where the hell have you been?"

Barney growled sotto voce: "Move now! Talk later!"

Gertrud was suddenly frightened by the harsh looks. Alex gripped her arm firmly. The pace set was difficult.

"I can't..." she gasped.

"Sure you can," Alex was unrelenting. "Just a little walk, just like the one you took. Where—"

"Alex!" Butzow's bark was quiet.

Another dozen fast steps passed then Gertrud fell and the basket dropped. Something made of glass broke. The girl sat down and began weeping. She wanted to scream but held that in, beating on Alex's shoulder when he knelt down.

"Nobody followed me!" Gertrud gasped. "I went a different way and got lost that's why I was late and nobody but Mrs. Fairchild saw me and she would never tell because she hates the Nazis too and we are so hungry I went to get food because we have to have it—" Gertrud opened her eyes and stopped talking when Alex's finger touched her lips.

Alex turned to Genie, who had righted the basket, removing a broken jar of peaches. "Tell Barney we're resting here for a minute. Tell him everything is okay."

Genie nodded and ran forward.

The young man took Gertrud's hand and apologized. "You scared us, honey. Why didn't you say anything? You can't go off by yourself. Understood?"

"Even if the Gestapo caught me I would never tell! Never!"

Alexander believed her. "Just don't do stupid things. Let us know. Hey, if nothing else, let me know. I've never been to Germany before. I'm a dumb f—cluck."

Somebody hit Alex in the back of the head. "This is true, my young friend. All better now?"

Alex looked up. Butzow was smiling. "All better." He stood up and lifted Gertrud to her feet. To Butzow the young man said: "Do that again and I'll flatten you."

"Maybe, maybe not. Come we must find shelter. It will snow tonight."

It did snow. A dead fall provided some shelter though a fire could not be risked. The women were given the blankets, even so, they were miserable. The men fared even worse in their coats, backs turned to the wind.

At dawn options were discussed. "We need shelter and we need to stay put."

"Can't have it both ways, Barney" Waldo observed.

"We find the shelter," Barney said, "and then we stay put. Too easy to track us in the snow."

Genie looked at the hillside above. "Do you remember our little home?"

Waldo glanced at the eroded block of rock and hill. "I'll take a quick look..."

The Sane King

The professor was gone before Barney could frame his question. Genie said, "Waldo is looking for a cave or a cleft. Someplace we can shelter and build a fire. On the island we did not worry about freezing!"

A cave was found. Alex was not that impressed. The hollow was about twenty feet deep and six to eight feet wide. The entrance was behind a clump of bushes and the dark green leaves would dissipate any smoke; even so, the fire was kept small to avoid detection and to make the flammable materials last.

Three days later a rise in temperature melted the snow. The weary group began moving west once again.

* * * * *

The mid-day stop was near a clearing—they stayed in the brush. There was no food. The weather had moderated, which was the only bright spot. Custer had been thoughtful since his exchange with Alexander and results of that cogitation was revealed shortly after they settled down.

"We'll have to split up. Waldo, is American money any good here?"

"Why, yes, it is," the professor replied, "but we're not splitting up."

"Yes, we are. Our party is too large."

Gertrud lowered her head. "Leave me. I'll—"

"Like hell!" Alexander said.

"Shut up, Alex, and listen! You and Gertrud go together. She speaks German and you speak nothing, get it? Keep your mouth shut. Otto, you and Waldo.

I'll take Genie."

"I won't be separated from my husband!" Genie Smith-Jones declared.

"You want him alive or dead?" Barney asked.

The woman subsided.

Otto Butzow had stretched out. He did not bother to sit up. "What's your idea, Barney?"

"At the next town you go in with a fist full of youngster's cash and buy a car or truck and take Reichmarks for change. Gertrud and Alex get in the car and get to Switzerland or France. We go on foot to the next town. Do the same thing."

At that moment a droning filled the air. The group ducked under the trees. Aircraft had passed overhead several times during the last week, flying low, obviously searching.

Alex followed the path of the single engine aircraft until it disappeared. "Or, he said, "we can follow that aircraft and steal it."

"Why would we do that?" Waldo asked.

"Because I'm a pilot."

Barney turned his head toward Alexander Smith-Jones. "You surprise me. I like that idea better."

CHAPTER 3

Liking an idea and putting it into action were two different things. Otto was adamantly against following the aircraft. "It is the wrong direction!"

Barney chuckled. "Agreed! However, we have two possibilities, well, three if you count what we are going to do anyway which is keep walking. If we get the chance to split up, we should do it. We should look for a car or truck. We should try a train. Whatever we do, we do quietly."

This would have been a grand idea except for the fact that not a minute after uttering those words did they hear:

"Halt!"

Three German soldiers showed themselves. Two on one side of their little column, the third on the other, with his rifle pointed at the younger Smith-Jones' mid-section.

Alex shook his head, muttering angrily:

"If that don't beat all, Barney Custer! Damn it! You and your cockeyed plans—"

The German standing near Alexander Smith-Jones didn't see the fist that smashed into his face, but his finger did tighten on the trigger. Alex felt a stab of ice that quickly turned to fire as the bullet cut his left side. He stamped his boot into the fallen man's face to make sure he stayed down. He lunged

for the rifle as another shot rang out. Turning, bringing the muzzle up, the young man saw his brother holding one fellow whose head wobbled most unnaturally on his shoulders. Otto Butzow, with smoking pistol in hand, stood over the prostrate third man—whose face was a red ruin.

Barney picked up a rifle. Waldo did the same. "Stay here!" Custer ordered the younger Smith-Jones. Barney, Otto and Waldo vanished into the brush.

"You are hurt!" Gertrud exclaimed. She ran to Alex, frantically trying to open his jacket.

"I'm all right!" Alexander pushed her small hands away, then realized he'd been rough. "I might have to fight. Be a dear and take a quick look, will you? It doesn't feel like it's bad—"

Gertrud swiftly pulled aside the jacket and tugged the shirt from his waistband. A long shallow gash over one rib bled somewhat profusely. She stepped back to lift her skirt. Gertrud tore the bottom off her slip then tore the fabric into strips to use as a bandage.

Alex had noticed her legs. Very nice looking legs! Then kept his eyes on the forest, wishing he had eyes in the back of his head, too. He let the girl plug the cut with a wad of cloth and quietly laughed when she almost could not reach around his chest with both arms to lay on the bandage. When she was done Gertrud moved away to hold hands with Genie. The women knelt low to the ground, eyes wide, breathing rapidly.

"Alex!" a soft voice warned. "Coming in!"

"Come slow!"

Otto and Waldo appeared. Butzow began stripping the uniform from the nearest body. "There's a car. Road's about three hundred yards south. No one else around. Help me—"

"New plan?" Genie asked as she tugged trousers her husband had unbuckled.

"Yes. You, me, and Gertrud are prisoners of these three villainous fellows. Or two if Alex can't get into the man's uniform."

"I'll make it," Alex replied, taking off coat and shirt.

The Germans were given a quick burial—the bodies were shoved under a bush. Alexander Smith-Jones paused, looking down at the cooling pile of Ayran Ideal.

"Should say a few words, Waldo. Let me: *May you rot in Hell!*"

* * * * *

The car seated six comfortably. Alex was assigned his familiar role as big, dumb, and do not speak even if spoken to. Butzow was behind the wheel. His uniform declared him a sergeant. Custer, now a lieutenant of the SS, sat beside Otto and was swiftly going through the papers taken from the dead soldiers. There was a map, which was put to immediate use. Larger towns were avoided and petrol was obtained at every opportunity.

"These men were not looking for us," Barney said. "I mean they weren't looking for Waldo and Genie. Their orders were to pick up Jews on the run."

"That's something," Butzow kept his eyes on the road. "With orders as open-ended as that, we might drive all the way to the border."

"Let's hope so," Custer replied.

Twice they encountered checkpoints. Each time the soldiers yawned as they looked at the occupants of the back seat. Two women huddled together, terrified, and a large man, his head covered by a sack, lay on the floor with the guard's boot planted firmly on his neck.

Butzow and Custer, who spoke German as native born, inquired as to the success of the pogrom against the vile Jews. Where to find a meal and schnapps?

After the second checkpoint Waldo sat up on the floorboards and rubbed his neck. "I say, Junior, I believe you're enjoying your part!"

"Go fly a kite!" Alex replied through a mouthful of bread and cheese. Peevishly he added:

"Sergeant Butzow, are we there yet?"

* * * * *

In the end it was almost comedic. They ditched the car on a side road near Lake Constance. The uniforms were discarded for civilian clothes of good quality bought by Genie and Gertrud. They had used a little of Alexander's greenbacks in a small town a few miles back. The group walked down to the lake side, bought tickets on a steamer, and had a delicious picnic luncheon on the voyage to Switzerland. Within hours of arrival the group boarded a train to Paris, where they stayed overnight. After an early break-

fast they took another train to Cherbourg. Alex was all for catching one of the liners leaving France for the United States, but there were no accommodations at any price. There were, however, several small packets running to England where westbound Cunard liners were available.

The next morning in Dover, England, Alex did not join his friends at breakfast in the hotel dining room. Gertrud, seated next to Genie, glanced at the empty chair to her left.

"I wonder where is Alex? He was not feeling well yesterday."

Barney frowned. "The boy did seem a little out of sorts. I'll go check on him."

"No, Barney, I'll do it," Otto pushed back his chair, rising to his feet. "We share the same suite. I, of course, have the key."

"Impeccable logic, General. Tell sleepy head to hurry up before they stop serving."

Butzow returned ten minutes later. "I'm afraid we won't be leaving today."

Gertrud's eyes grew round. "Is he...is Alex all right?"

The Luthan, as well as everyone at the table, knew how Gertrud felt, even if she did not yet know. Thus, the Luthan spoke with a great deal of kindness. "The hotel physician has seen him. Appears the boy has an infection. Raging fever. I asked if a hospital is required. The doctor said that would not be necessary unless he should take a turn for the worse."

"I must go to him!" Gertrud left the table and hurried to the lobby and the elevators.

Waldo was concerned since Butzow was still standing. "He will be all right?"

"*Ja!* Yes! Of course!" Otto replied. "I have seen this many times before. A few days he will be raining rightly!"

Barney chuckled. "Otto, you butcher American slang so artfully! Sit down and have some breakfast."

* * * * *

The antibiotics, draining the infection, and rest had worked wonders within forty-eight hours. He lay in the hotel bed scowling and grumbling. The fever was gone and Alexander Smith-Jones almost felt human.

"Except for the bloody fact I can't go take a pee all by myself!"

Gertrud smiled. He *was* feeling better!

"And damn it, you don't need to be trotting that urinal down the hall, Gertrud!"

"I don't mind."

"Well," the young man growled, "I do! That's what wait staff is for."

"Yes, Alex," she said, carrying the urinal down the hallway.

She returned to fluff his pillows. Coffee was near to hand. The best of the magazines from the downstairs lounge lay ready on his bedside table. She looked around. What else could she do? She looked down as his hand touched hers.

"You don't need to wait on me hand and foot, kid. Go have some fun. I'm okay."

Gertrud took the chair close to his bed, the chair she had occupied every day during his convalescence. She took his hand between hers and leaned close. "There is nothing I would rather do than look after you, Alex."

He looked into her eyes, then down at the small white hands that held his so firmly. Then it dawned on him.

Seven kinds of stupid, old man! She's in love with you! Nice enough kid, he thought, but I don't feel the same way.

After all she'd been through, losing her father, knowing her people were being murdered back in Germany, four weeks getting to this point—it was obvious she'd fall for the guy who helped her escape all that.

I didn't encourage this!

"Thanks, Gertrud," he said. *What else could he say?*

* * * * *

Alexander woke from a troubled sleep. Something was not right. He heard a gasp. Then something like a chair shoved across the floor. A shadow came between him and the afternoon sun through the window.

A man in an overcoat with his hands around Gertrud's throat!

Smith-Jones came out of the bed. That action was noted by the intruder who flung Gertrud aside. He leapt toward the American. Alex was not at full strength, but his strength was sufficient to dodge the

blow aimed at his head. Alexander's hard right slammed into his attacker's mid-section. An explosive grunt followed. Unfortunately the young man's automatic follow-up left missed.

Alex took two smashing blows to the ribs—his hurt ribs—and red pain clouded his eyesight. Even so, his wild right caught the snarling man on the side of the head. The attacker staggered back, dropped into a crouch, then came at Alex again. Smith-Jones fought blindly, landing blow after blow, and taking the same in return. He did not know how much longer he could take it. But the vision of the man strangling Gertrud put iron into his frame.

Gertrud found her voice. She began to scream: "Murder! Murder! *Help!*"

"*verdammen!*" the man growled. With a malevolent glare at both, the intruder turned and ran.

Alex swayed unsteadily for a few seconds, then went to his knees. Clutching his bandaged side Alex crawled over to Gertrud and took her in his arms. Frantic, he touched the bruises starting to show on the girl's slender throat.

"Hey! Look at me, kid! Are you all right? *I'll kill the bastard!*"

Butzow and a hotel porter burst into the room. "What the hell happened?" the Luthan cried.

"Some prick tried to snuff Gertrud! Call the doctor, will you? *Gertie?* Damn—she's fainted!"

The porter ran for the doctor while Alex and Otto lay the girl upon the bed. Alex sat at her side, chaffing her little hands.

"Where were you?" the young man scowled at Butzow. "Didn't you hear anything?"

"My room is the other side of the suite, you idiot! I was giving instructions to the porter for pressing that new suit you bought me for the trip!"

"How did he get in?"

Butzow inspected the window and saw scuff marks on the sill. The fire escape just beyond made the entry point clear.

"Did you get a good look at him?" Alex asked. His eyes never left Gertrud's pale face. "I didn't."

"Saw someone's heel going through the front door, that's all."

"Why?" Alex asked. "She never hurt anybody!"

"You know the answer to that, my friend. Those goose steppers do not like to be foiled. And we did kill three of theirs."

"Do they *know* that?"

"If they found the car they would know they are missing."

"How did they find us?"

"How could they not? We left a trail a fool could follow. Six people in a car taken from the Third Reich. Six people boarding at Lake Constance. Six people taking one train and another. Six..."

"I get it, Otto. Okay? Sorry I asked."

The girl's eyes fluttered open.

"Gertie!" Alexander Smith-Jones cried. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

She pushed him away, but not with any enthusiasm. "I don't like 'Gertie', Alex."

"Well, I don't like, 'Alex', Gertrud." He kissed her again and she happily responded.

There was a thunder of running feet in the hallway.

The Sane King

The girl pushed away and the young man allowed. There were tears in her eyes. "Call me 'Gertie' if you like."

"I'll call you 'married' before we get to the US of A," he promised. "Doc, take a look at her. Anything you need, you got it!"

* * * * *

Waldo Emerson Smith-Jones stood as best man to his younger brother's shipboard wedding to Miss Gertrud Schwartenberg, who looked absolutely radiant. There was a cake and reception in the forward lounge. Champagne flowed freely as the young couple danced to an American jazz trio.

Later, at dinner, Barney Custer offered a toast to the newlyweds.

"May your lives be happy and long."

CHAPTER 4

Otto Butzow continued his sales pitch to the obviously well-heeled gentleman pondering the shiny vehicle on the showroom floor. Otto's Autos in Tenton was one of the first car dealerships to have an interior display.

"Comfort and speed, sir," the ex-general declared. "This particular model comes in any color you want, as long as it is black."

"Yes, yes," the man replied. "Very nice."

Sensing the hesitation, Butzow charged forward with the last item in his arsenal. "We do have a very nice payment plan. Twenty-five dollars down and ten dollars a week..."

"I'll bring my wife by to take a look. Thank you."

"Good day, sir!" *Well-heeled? Just a heel!*

"Hey boss," a red-haired man called from the parts department counter. "Got a minute?"

Otto Butzow scowled at the departing customer one last time before walking over to the counter. "What's up, Barney?"

"That '35 Ford needs a new distributor cap. Should I send Billy over to McGuire's to get one?"

Butzow noticed the oil and grease on the man's hands, a man who had once been his king. "You're supposed to be the service manager, not one of the grease monkeys."

"I get bored pushing paper around."

"Yeah, sure, send the kid. Make sure he gets a receipt."

"No sales today?"

"Who's buying cars? Everyone's running scared since the Brits got kicked out of Dunkirk."

"Won't be long," Barney observed, and they both knew what that meant.

"And we're too old for anything but desk jobs." Butzow scowled.

"I think that'll suit Emma and Sarah just fine. I'll get Billy on the road. Oh, Linda said Alex called. Left a number."

"Alex called?"

Barney Custer shrugged. "Maybe he needs a new car."

"Mr. Moneybags? Yeah, right!" Otto laughed.

Butzow walked across the showroom to the front office. "Got that number for Alex handy?"

"Yes, sir," the recently hired little blonde cheerfully replied. Her lipstick was too bright and her nails too long, but she looked good and had a head for figures—mathematical figures.

Butzow entered his office. He paused long enough to light a cigarette, then dialed the number.

"Alex? Otto. How are you doing?"

"I need to see you, General."

"Something come up?"

"You could say that. We're not at home. I won't say where we are, but you'll know. You remember what happened three months ago. You'll remember where we stayed. Don't say it, just come."

"Need Barney?" Butzow asked quietly.

The Sane King

"I don't want to trouble him..."

"Trouble him? Do you know what he'll do to me if I don't? It'll take a couple of hours. Okay?"

"Good enough, but hurry."

Butzow took a drag off the cigarette then mashed it out with a savage twist. He picked up the phone and called his wife. "Sarah—Barney and I have to go out of town. Will you call Emma and let her know?"

"Otto..."

"It's important. Alex is in trouble."

"Oh. Be careful, dear!"

Butzow draped his overcoat over his arm. He opened the side drawer of his desk and removed a .45 automatic which he tucked into the waistband beneath his jacket. Reaching further into the drawer he produced an identical weapon which he kept under the overcoat. Jamming a felt hat over his balding head, Otto stopped at Linda's desk long enough to say:

"You got it all to yourself for a couple of days, kid. Barney and I will be out, so keep an eye on the grease monkeys, will you? Don't let them steal me blind, and don't listen to any of their sweet talk."

"Sure, boss. Where can you be reached if I need you?"

"Here and there. I'll check in. Later!"

At the parts counter Otto beckoned to Barney Custer. "Go wash up. Get your things. Alex and Gertie are in trouble."

"Again?"

Otto let the .45 peek from his overcoat. The once king of Lutha grimly nodded. "Right with you."

Twenty minutes later they were headed up state. Barney calmly checked the weapon Butzow passed over, then put it inside his jacket. Neither spoke again until they reached Newark.

"They aren't going to leave the kid alone, are they?"

"Otto, you know elephants don't have memories as long as those Prussian polecats. Remember?"

"Yes, I do."

For another twenty miles neither spoke. Their minds were remembering another war, the war that was supposed to end all war, the war that engulfed a tiny, beautiful kingdom and left nothing but ashes and refugees in its wake.

"I asked Sarah to call Emma," Otto said.

"Good. I was looking for a pay phone."

"You know New York," Otto laughed, "they lack the conveniences."

"Or we're just in the sticks. Driving straight through?"

Butzow pulled into a road side with a gas station and a diner. "Alex sounded a little worried."

They left the car to be gassed, hit the men's room, and bravely tackled a gallon of coffee to wash down hash browns, sausage, and eggs. Barney grabbed the check. "I'll have the girl whip up some sandwiches."

Butzow stepped out to square with the pump jockey. Barney got behind the wheel to drive the next leg into the Catskills. Otto leaned back, pulling his hat over his eyes.

Near midnight they pulled up to a lodge in the middle of nowhere. Six cabins and an office. The light

was on in the office. Alexander Smith-Jones and his wife were inside. A sawed-off shotgun lay across the young man's lap. He sat that to one side when he recognized his friends.

Alex sported a black-eye. Gertie nursed it with an ice bag. "Hey, fellows! Glad you could make it!"

Gertie jumped up. Her face was worried. Her eyes red from crying. "Barney! Otto!" She hugged each then returned to her husband.

"Started the party without us? Did you win or lose, kid?" Otto asked.

"I won. Must be getting slow in my old age. Bastard laid one on me."

"And you called a pair of old gents?" Barney smiled at the couple who were at least twenty years younger than either of them. Custer glanced toward the little ex-general. "Bring any spinach, Otto?"

"Brought Betsy. Need a doc?"

Alex shook his head. "Nah. *He* might..." He jerked a thumb toward the manager's office.

Barney stepped inside. Two men lay on the floor. One was the manager with a bump on his head. He was snoring. The other was fairly beat to hell. Mashed lips, cut eyes, bruises all over. Having seen Alex fight, Barney had no doubt the rest of the guy looked pretty much like his face. The man's hands and feet were tied. Custer checked the man's pulse. It was beating. He stepped back into the tiny lobby.

"Where's the other one? Usually come as a matched set."

"Got away. Just left as a matter of fact, Barney. About ten-fifteen minutes before you guys showed up."

For a long time they did not speak. Six months ago Barney and Emma had been attacked in their New York City home by "gangsters" who wanted to know where Smith-Jones lived, hence the Custer's move to Trenton and the low-profile job. A month after that the Butzow house was invaded. Butzow killed both "burglars" one of whom had a society page picture of Alexander Smith-Jones and his wife Gertrud in his pocket. Three months ago Alex and Gertie were run off the road by a sedan, which was not too remarkable given the wild kids these days, but the long hail of gunshots fired at them was *very* memorable.

Otto turned to Barney with an arched brow. "*Now* do we call Elliot Ness?"

"The FBI have better things to do," Barney said.

Alex got up. He flung the ice bag down on the desk. "Enemy assassins in our country trying to kill us and that's not enough?"

"We aren't at war with the Germans," Barney softly corrected.

"Yet!" Alex roared.

The young man shrugged into his suit coat with the torn front pocket and spruced his tie. Gertie lay a calming hand on her husband's arm. She looked worried. He gave her a hug and a smile. "You know me, honey," he said, "all bark and no bite."

"Yes," Gertie said, eyes brimming with pride. "I know so well this is true."

Alex kissed Gertie's forehead and turned to the two men. "These guys took out the phone and fixed our car so it won't run. I'll get a blanket to keep the blood off your seat cushions. The old man needs a

look over. As for that other fellow, I'd like to leave him under a bush somewhere."

While the husband part of him heartily agreed, Barney Custer shook his head. "Can't do that, Alex, but we can turn him over to the sheriff."

As Alex started toward one of the cabins, Custer shoved the automatic into his waistband. "Just in case. Gertie, you stay with us while we haul the manager and Happy out to the car."

The sheriff was not amused at being awakened at 2 a.m. and was even more unhappy to have a sneak thief and attempted murderer put in his jail—and in need of a doctor. Mr. and Mrs. Smith-Jones swore out the complaint.

At the hospital the manager thanked Alex for saving his life. "You don't mind if I beg you to never come back?"

"Not at all!" Smith-Jones laughed. Five sawbucks put a smile on the manager's face.

An hour later the four were headed back to New Jersey. It was very early Thursday morning.

* * * * *

Sunday morning, near dawn, no one was asleep at Barney Custer's Trenton house. Three men sat in the darkness, one drinking coffee, one chain-smoking, the third sitting silently.

"I should call Gertie," Alex broke his silence.

"Nix," Otto stubbed out the Lucky Strike. "The boys are there, Billy, Mike, Sam and Joey. Nothing's going to happen there. It's fixed, remember?"

Alex remembered asking questions all the way back to Trenton, such as how did the Nazis find the lodge when nothing had been said? Otto had an idea and tested his theory as soon as they got back by giving his office manager a little news about where he and two others could be found over the weekend. A little while later she made a phone call to another number repeating everything she'd been told.

The girl was currently under "house arrest" by two of the grease monkeys. Butzow glanced toward the hulking shadow that was Alexander Smith-Jones.

"Linda was the rat, I told you that. What we don't know is why these bastards want you more than they want me or Barney. The two of us kicked their Hun asses for a while in the great war. You, my young friend, they don't have a beef with."

"I agree with Otto," Barney Custer finished his coffee and poured more from the pot on the stove. He turned the burner off and what little glow the blue flame emitted was gone. Only star light and the setting moon illuminated the kitchen of the small two bedroom cottage. "They're after *you*."

"Gertie?" Alex asked. "Think they are after one of the Jews who escaped?"

Otto shrugged. No one saw the motion. "I don't think so. This feels personal."

"A vendetta?" Alex snorted with disbelief. "I thought only Italians went in for that!"

Custer, who had been leaning against the kitchen counter put down the coffee cup. "We'll know soon enough," he said, moving toward the window over the sink. "Car just pulled up. With the headlights off."

"Remember, they have to be in the house before we shoot them," Otto warned.

"I want them alive," Alex snarled, "so I can beat them to death!"

"Shut up, both of you!" Barney whispered. "We want them alive. We need to find out why they have followed us to America."

Barney had the best view. "Four. Otto, front bedroom. Alex, parlor... One of them just cut the phone line."

Barney took a position behind the back door, which creaked softly from a delicately applied pry bar. Though no emotion registered on his face, Barney's heart rate increased. His muscles were bunched for action.

The front door burst open, not loudly, but loud enough to make the hair on Alex's arms stand up. How many would come through? One shadow... two...

"Otto, *now!*"

At Barney's shout Butzow threw the main breaker. Every overhead and lamp had been left turned on. The sudden light confused the invaders.

"Drop it!" Alex jammed his gun into the nearest man's back. A heavy revolver hit the floor. "You, too, wise ass!"

The man in the center of the room did nothing. He did not drop the gun, or the knife. He did not turn around as Barney and Otto herded the other two men into the room.

Otto shoved one man toward the couch. "Sit down! Get over there!" Butzow kicked the other man in the backside.

Alex pushed his captive in the direction of the couch and waited to see what the fourth man would do. "You have three guns on you," he warned.

The voice which replied was very guttural. "You have been most difficult to locate, Herr Smith-Jones. I will release my weapons now."

Otto policed the guns on the floor, and the knife. Barney frowned.

"Who are you?"

"Major Erik Schneider, SS." The big man turned slowly to face Alex. "Do you remember me?"

The fellow had an ugly mug. Long scars on both sides of his face along the jaw. Under his hat was crew cut blonde hair and blue eyes.

"Face don't ring a bell, though it looks like you used it to ring one. I don't know you."

"Munich, a little over a year ago. This you did to me over a little Jew girl!"

The blood ran cold, then roared hot in the veins of Alexander Smith-Jones. Very quietly he tossed his gun to Barney Custer and began rolling up his sleeves. Very quietly the little Jew girl's husband said, "Yeah, I remember you, *Fritz!*"

With a roar Schneider rushed Alex. With one punch Alex shattered the German's jaw a second time. Collapsing to his knees, Schneider moaned hideously. Alex reached down and bunched the man's coat in his left hand. His right fist rose.

"Alex! Don't do it!" Barney shouted. "We're not like him!"

Smith-Jones trembled with rage. Deep breaths filled his massive chest. "Damn it!" He released the German. Major Schneider fell to the floor, weeping.

Butzow, meanwhile, stood looking at the three men. "You, I know," he said to the one-eyed goon in a rumpled suit. "I know you're a crook, Snake Eye, but until now I thought you better than Nazi scum!"

"*What? What Nazi, Mr. Butzow?*"

Alex answered. "Pretty Boy is a graduate of Adolph's little boy's club."

Otto Butzow leaned down and shook a finger before Snake Eye's face. "When did you start working for Adolph?"

"*Yer outta yer mind!*" one of the others seated on the couch exclaimed. "That guy said fancy pants swiped his broad. He was heartbroken. That's why Linda gave up the number."

"Well," Alex said, grabbing Schneider by the collar and dragging the German to his feet, "now he's just broken."

Custer stepped forward and glared at the trio of hired henchmen. "Get out of here!"

The short one was a little stupid. "What about our guns?"

"What about *jail?*" Otto roared.

They went. Stumbling over each other.

* * * * *

The Sane King

July 22nd, 1945
Washington, DC

Dear Alex,

Gertie's getting fat. I mean really fat. By the time she has that baby you'll be looking up at him instead of the other way around! Emma, Sarah and your mother have spoiled her rotten. You finish kicking Jap ass and get home.

Our boy graduated college and joined up the next day. I'm proud of him, but like any father, scared for him, too. This war has been terrible for all of us. Thank God the Germans are licked and Hirohito is on the ropes.

Heard from Otto, well as much as I'll ever hear from one of the hush hush boys. I think our friend is having too much fun bringing confusion and dismay to the enemy.

I'm back and forth between New Mexico and Washington, as usual. I miss the old days when I gave the orders instead of the other way around.

Been toying with an idea. After the war Emma and I are thinking about buying one of those Caribbean islands and setting up the new Kingdom of Lutha. Otto will be Prime Minister. How would you like to be Air Admiral? You can be a duke or a count, take your pick. Our princesses can lie in the sun and drink Whiskey Sours and Manhattans all day while we fish and drink beer. Sound like a plan?

Here's a little something to brighten your day: Remember our old chum Erik Schneider? Got his in Berlin outside the Führer bunker. Don't have the

The Sane King

details, but suffice it to say, the Russians were pretty peeved by the time they got there.

Gotta run, Harry calling. Wonder what the old boy is up to now?

Barney