

# THE BOX

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THE other day, in a quiet Italian olive grove, I came upon the grave of Willy Kraus. I will not say it was a shock to me, for I had known him only slightly. But it was a surprise, as I had often wondered what had become of him.

The unpainted wooden cross told me little or nothing:

Gess. Willy Kraus

- 8.4.1912

+ 12.2.1944

That was all. What lay between the minus and the plus, and what was the sum total, remained unwritten.

I tried to recall his large angular figure, the emaciated features with prominent cheek bones, and the wide troubled eyes of a child. That is how I remember him when he gave me German lessons for a short time before the war. He, his wife and I used to go for picnics on Sundays in the Prater woods near Vienna. She was a slight doll-like creature, with aristocratic traditions which she never let you forget. While Willy and I would get into long philosophic discussions, she would sit silent, patching his threadbare coat with a sort of reproachful concentration.

Afterwards we corresponded in a desultory way, and of course when the war came I lost track of him altogether.

No, I hardly knew him at all. Yet he was a simple soul, and in our brief encounter he managed to lay before me the whole of his life.

How did he die, I found myself asking. What were his thoughts as the end approached? No one will ever know, or ever care.

But in one of those moments of intuition, in which we half perceive and half create, I seemed to see it all.

Undoubtedly some of my story is based on what I knew of his past prior to 1939, and of the circumstances surrounding the events of the 12th February, 1944. Some of it is pure conjecture.

But I like to think that, with his characteristic candour and naivete, Willy spoke to me from the grave.

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First of all, I must tell you that he is buried on a hill known on our military maps as *Feature 207*. It is a pleasant prominence, topped by an olive grove (known as *Marigold* on the maps),

overlooking, on the west, a vineyard of rich red soil (*Bluebell*), on the south, green sloping pastures bounded by the tiled walls of a ruined sheep fold (*Tulip*), and, on the east, the ever opal waters of the Adriatic (*Daffodil*).

Now on the 12th of February, 1944, it was decided by our High Command to attack *Feature 207*. It was a set piece affair, involving several regiments of medium and heavy artillery (censorship will not permit me to give the exact numbers) which were to bring down a box barrage on the area *Marigold/Bluebell/Tulip/Daffodil*, followed by an infantry advance on to the objective, *Feature 207*. Zero hour was set at 1830 hrs.

At 1815 hrs., somewhere between *Marigold* and *Daffodil*, Willy Kraus set down to make himself some tea. It was a procedure involving some labour, and not a little ingenuity. First he had to steal a petrol tin from under the eye of the Uberleutenant himself. He retired with this to a secluded corner of the camp where he could be alone. Tea was a precious commodity, arriving from home at rare intervals, and invariably seized upon by all the others who, like that odious Heinrich, had no one to send them things.

Funny how you came to hate people you could not escape from, he thought, as he proceeded to cut the petrol tin with his pocket knife. Now, he didn't hate the English like that. Or the Americans. Or the Canadians. Or even the Italians, whom nobody liked. But they were at least a mile away on the crest of the next ridge. True, they opened up on his company every so often with fire on a scale more lavish than his commanders could possibly afford to return. But there was always something impersonal about it. Just like the Yanks, he would say, grinning to see the wasteful amount of lead they poured over on a dummy tank or an abandoned weapon pit.

But Heinrich was a different matter. He had to listen to Heinrich all day, and sometimes far into the night. And Heinrich was always right. One of the new class who despised culture and yet bored everyone with their own pretensions to it. The complete party man! To disagree with him was to question the correctness of the whole order of things, of the Fuehrer himself. So Willy did not disagree. He only listened in silence.

Having successfully completed his operation on the petrol tin, he filled one-half of it with earth and petrol, and washed out the other half. He put in a cupful of water, added a light to the fire, and sat down to wait. Just time to boil a cup of tea before dark, he said to himself.

It was early spring, and the evenings still fell fast in the mountains, whose long purple shadows stalked across the valley like the march of giants. In their wake came icy Appenine winds, driving the shepherds and their flocks to the warmth of a common bed in the pens. And on opposite ridges, under the cover of shattered walls, and scrubby olive trees, the men of two armies built their fires and sought to stave off the cold and the unknown with a pot of boiling tea.

But Willy's pot did not boil. At precisely 1830 hrs. he found himself thrown on his face by an explosion of such force that it seemed to him the earth had collided with another planet.

"I am innocent!" he shouted toward the Judgment Seat, as he had shouted that day ten years ago, before the Summary Court in Vienna. He saw it all again . . . the trams at a standstill due to the City Power Station Strike . . . the angry faces . . . the ragged elbows jostling him toward the Karl Marx Hof where someone was making a speech . . . "Down with the Heimwehr" . . . "Down with the Dolfuss dictatorship" . . . "Fight for the workers' flats" . . . "Arm yourselves at the Republikanische Schutzbund" . . . cheers . . . shouts . . . panic . . . police . . . a blow on the back of the head . . . darkness . . .

"But I am innocent! Innocent!" he sobbed in the stifling, smoky courtroom. No one paid any attention.

A man named Weisl got up and made an impassioned speech, which he did not understand, ending with the words: "Long live the International Workers' Movement!" The judges chatted among themselves, and suddenly, finding the speaker was finished, sentenced him to death.

The condemned man turned to Willy with a strange smile and said gently: "It is not enough to be innocent, my boy, you must also have understanding."

What did he mean? He didn't know. He didn't care. He was just a trapped, dumb animal. But fate, that capricious hunter, had decided to play with her prey.

"With all due consideration to the youth of the accused . . .", etc., etc. His case had been dismissed.

Now, ten years later to the day, it all came back to him. He was trapped again.

The shells fell around him with a mathematical regularity that eliminated the possibility of escape. Fascinated, he watched the net draw in, the pattern of death unfold, until there was

not a place anywhere you could stretch out at full length without touching a crater. Then he noticed a curious thing.

Somewhere between him and the camp, following the line of the neatly planted olives, the pattern thinned out. In the distance he could see people running about . . . there was Heinrich waving his arms, diving for shelter. Evidently they were outside the beaten zone.

A favourite trick of the English, this: to pick upon an area arbitrarily, and, by training the pivot guns of every regiment on that zone to wipe it out. They called it the "box barrage".

But why was he in the box? What sort of justice was it that allowed him to be caught, while a swine like that Heinrich escaped? It had always been the same. Why had his school-fellows plagued him until he ran away and hid in the woods, while they turned up for school? It was no use to say: "They made me do it." He was the one who got whipped.

Ah, but the woods were splendid! Wandering down those majestic aisles he forgot his injustices, he seemed to enter upon a domain of his own. He liked to imagine himself as a great poet or philosopher, who would create an abstract world nearer to the heart's desire. "O Goethe! O Kant!" he would declare to the trees, "You alone are my brothers!"

Why, then, had he not followed the dream? He would willingly have starved in an attic on dry bread and wine, as all the great writers had done. But he could not let his mother and younger brothers starve. After skimping the last penny of his inheritance to put him through college they expected some reward. Yet he had stubbornly taken up philosophy and languages. What use were these?

He took the obvious course open to him; he became a school-master. Once again he had been caught—this time in the trap which the school books called economic necessity.

In order to eke out his meagre salary, he began giving private lessons . . . it was in this manner that I first met him. But generally he was patronized by noble families whose children were either lazy or backward. He liked this, for it gave him access to good books, cultivated society, and a square meal into the bargain. They in their turn liked him, they were impressed by his elegant language and his somewhat tragic demeanor. So he was able to give up schoolmastering after a while and confine himself to tutoring.

Thus it was he met his future wife. He spent some time on the estate of a titled family near Linz, whose sole income

was now derived from the local cloth factories. He tutored the younger children, and during the summer months he stayed on at the invitation of the eldest daughter, Anna, who had returned from school at Basle. How quick they were to discern the sympathy between them! Oh, those long afternoons they spent in the boat on the artificial lake, reading Hoffmanstahl aloud, she with the sun in her ashen hair, and he with his head in her lap! And the evenings, the long evenings together on the terrace, silent, under the stars . . . He remembered every moment of it. It was the highest point in his life. He wondered now if it was indeed more than the seduction of romance for her and the flattery of beauty and social position for him?

The family were deeply shocked by the match, but reconciled themselves without much difficulty when labour troubles reduced their dwindling income to the vanishing point. The estate had to be sold, and Willy went to work in the factories.

These were the years of the long terror. Terror of losing his job like so many others (one-tenth of the population of Austria was in the breadlines) . . . terror of the landlord, the butcher, the grocer . . . terror of his wife, in whom terror had early blighted the flower of romance . . . terror of revolution . . . terror of war.

Why had he not been as lucky as his cousin, Franz, who escaped to America before all the troubles at home set in? Just think! He might now be a distinguished professor at Harvard, or a prosperous cattle rancher in Idaho! But Franz was in another box. And he, in this one, bit the dust, and waited.

Names came back to him now that he had ignored before . . . Dolfuss, Stahremberg, Fey . . . how little he knew about them or what they stood for! He had never paid much attention to politics. He preferred to regard himself as an onlooker at life—from a certain elevation, of course, as befitted a disciple of Goethe and Kant. Even the murder of the Socialists in Vienna might have passed unnoticed by him, had he not had the misfortune to turn down the Nussdorfer Strasse when he did.

Yet after the Anschluss he could not help noting with a certain satisfaction the improvement in his fortunes. Especially when the manager of his department, a Jew, was dismissed, and he was chosen to take his place.

"You must not believe all you hear," he wrote to his cousin Franz. "The so-called persecution of the Jews is much exaggerated. And, in any case, a mischievous minority must never

be allowed to obstruct the march of a people to its destiny."

He had fallen into one more trap—through the delusion of self-interest. Yes, he saw it all now. All his life he had been pigeon-holed by circumstance, convention, chance. Never had he made an effort to escape. Or only once, when the instinct of self-preservation or of fear (call it what you will) drove him to it.

The war had come as a terrible blow to him, as though he had been personally affronted by the savagery of a world not yet up to his cultural standards. "To think it would come to this!" he said over and over. "Never mind," said his wife, "it will soon be over, and then things will be much better than before."

Then his calling up papers came. He turned deathly pale. "Who do they think I am?" he cried, trembling. "I'm not a soldier. I am a man of intellect. I am not a Nazi. I never approved of their damned regime. I do not believe in war. I . . . I would rather join the Underground!"

His wife slapped his face. She had not done that before. He could still feel it now, stinging to the very core of his self-esteem. Then she locked herself in her room. "You will disgrace me!" she howled. "You will disgrace us all!"

He walked the streets all night. Along the quays he stopped several times and looked down into the dark glimmering waters. Like all his great compatriots, he told himself, he had always been a death-lover . . . "'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished . . ." Yes, surely this was the way.

He checked to see that he had all his proper identification on him, and he selected a spot where he was reasonably certain to be found. Anna must know what he had done. Then he filled his pockets with stones.

But something about the water—a faint putrid odour of sewage, perhaps, made him desist. He was a fastidious man.

Punctually at eight o'clock in the morning he turned up at the recruiting office. It was too late now. For him there was no escape.

If only he had known in time . . . if only he had understood. Yes—that was it! That was what that queer fellow Weisl meant. He'd puzzled over it off and on for ten years, and now at last he saw it. "It is not enough to be innocent—you must also have understanding."

Everyone lived in a box of some kind. The difference between success and failure might depend on whether you were

born in latitude 35 or 45, or whether your grandfather was a sheep-stealer, or whether you stopped a man in the street to ask him the time. It didn't matter which compartment you were born in. What really mattered was whether you understood what you were doing. For if you did not, you were nothing but a dumb trapped animal!

The whole world was in a gigantic box—and the key to it was understanding.

Would the others over there, who were about to kill him, wondered Willy Kraus, would they, unlike him, find the key before it was too late?

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