

A Coin for the Hangman
Ralph Spurrier

It was the photograph that did it for them. All three of them. A simple square portrait photograph probably no bigger than three inches by two which would fit neatly into an army tunic breast pocket or, as I was to discover much later, secreted in the back of a German mantle clock. It was the photograph of a young woman named Steffi – her surname now lost forever – aged probably about eighteen or nineteen, her blonde hair braided neatly around her head and uncertainly smiling as if her mother, standing behind the photographer, had urged her to show her teeth for the camera. There was nothing particularly unusual about the photograph; it was just like thousands of others that girlfriends gave to their soldiers as they left for the fighting at the start of the Second World War. Germans, Italians, British, they would all tuck the photographs away in their wallets or tunic pockets, touch them for good luck, bring them out at camps and billets just to peer at fondly or to show off to their mates. Many of these men were to die in the mud or the desert with the photographs fading along with their rotting flesh and disintegrating uniform, the smiling faces of their girlfriends and wives fading into oblivion while those same women back home wept tears and suffered heartache as they wondered if their men were ever to return. This particular photograph escaped that fate, however, being rescued from the dead body of a German tank commander in the North African desert, and was passed from hand to hand until it fell, quite unexpectedly and, as we shall see, with unforeseen tragic consequences, from the back of a mantle clock ransacked from a house in Bavaria. My research was to uncover that this little, innocent photograph passed through the hands of at least five people, all of whom were to die violently. The irony was that for all my research and effort over the years I never once saw that photograph and have no real idea where it now might be or even if it still exists. The story begins back in 1987 and, like most opportunities in my line of business, it came completely out of the blue with a simple phone call.

“Hello Ralph. You still mucking about with books?” The voice at the end of the line was vaguely familiar but not one I had heard for some years. The inference that my book-dealing business was less than a proper means of earning a living immediately put me on guard, and although it was a

commonplace attitude it still managed to rile me whenever I found myself explaining the economics of buying and selling books.

I was desperately trying to place a name to the voice on the end of the phone as I replied, “Yes, still surrounded by books.” I laughed deprecatingly. “And even selling one or two occasionally.”

“Good. Good.” The recognition remained stubbornly locked away in the back of my memory. “Look. I have a little business I can put your way if you’re interested. I’m acting as executor for one of my clients. Well, it’s a late client, actually.” He laughed, and in that moment I suddenly recognized the voice of a solicitor I had dealt with some ten years ago when moving house. I was amazed he had remembered me. “The fellow has no offspring or living relatives as far as we’ve ascertained, and the trouble is that he was living in rented accommodation and the landlord is keen to relet the property. The place is stuffed with furniture and books. A lot of books apparently.”

Mentally, I assessed the bank balance and the space left in the store-room. Both were pretty tight and I wasn’t looking to spend much on new stock. But the lure of a collection of books always won out and I felt I could always say “no” if they turned out to be worthless.

The solicitor’s voice carried on: “The furniture we’ve managed to sort out – never much to be made on that kind of stuff anyway – but I felt there might be some mileage in the books. Interested?”

“Yes, sure.” I wanted to sound professional but I knew that nine times out of ten these kinds of calls were a complete waste of time. “Happy to take a look for you and let you know if I can use them. I’m assuming they’re reasonably local and not in the Shetland Isles?”

I had unhappy memories of the promise of a big book collection in Belfast that I had flown out to view at the height of the Troubles – that’s how bibliomania gets you – only to discover that the library was housed in an old coal store and had been gradually rotting away for several years. It took me no more than twenty seconds to make an assessment of 5,000 books. The fellow who had invited me over to view the library was more than a little surprised when I suggested he hire ten skips and lob the whole lot into landfill. The ride back to the airport had been in a difficult silence. I vowed never to go on a long-distance wild-goose chase again.

“East Dean, just this side of Eastbourne. About half an hour’s drive. That OK?”

“Yes, that’s fine.” I thought that I could at least combine it with a trip to the Eastbourne second-hand bookshops which still unearthed some rarities from the ageing and retired population in the area. We finalized the arrangements – I was to meet the agent at the house – and then get back to the solicitor if there was anything worth salvaging.

Despite many years of book dealing, the sense of expectation on walking in on a fabulous collection never diminishes, even though 99 times out of 100 the reality is somewhat different. I had been in any number of houses, viewed the paltry offerings of a shelf of dog-eared paperbacks or faux leather book club editions that the owner had never read but had kept buying on a monthly basis, cupboards that had disgorged out-of-date encyclopaedias, cookery and gardening books and suitcases that opened to reveal browned and crumbling souvenir newspapers of the Queen’s Coronation. I had learnt to live with the look of supreme disappointment on the face of the proud owners when I turned such offerings down. Still, to have first pickings on a large collection never failed to set the pulse racing and I set off for the East Dean address the next day. I met the fresh-faced boy from the estate agency by the front door of a bungalow that had seen better days and together we went in to the front room.

“I was all for chucking this lot out with the furniture but your solicitor friend said there was some stipulation in the will that the books had to be kept together and sold as one lot.” He pointed towards the large piles of books that now sat on virtually every square foot of floor space, waving his hands over the stacks as if he were a magician hoping they would disappear. “Bit of a nuisance, I have to say. Could do with someone taking them away pretty smartish.”

He raised a questioning eyebrow at me. I’d been in the business long enough to recognize someone who would be prepared to take anything just to get the stuff off his hands. Since this fellow was only the agent and the solicitor knew bugger-all about books, I sensed an opportunity to increase my stock of books for a very minimal outlay. I prayed that there would be just one gem amongst the collection, just one that would provide a comfortable buffer of cash for the next few months.

However my first visual skirmish didn’t give me much enthusiasm. Horse-racing annuals, woodworking books, a run

of Penguin crime titles in their distinctive green and white covers, a guide book to Durham, an ABC railway timetable – seemingly there was little here to get excited about. Getting down on my hands and knees, I craned my neck to read the titles lying on their sides. It was an eclectic mix of novels, poetry and philosophy, mixed in with the more mundane, including, for my own interest, a number of books on criminal trials. Whoever had owned these books had a wide, varied and unusual taste. There were enough crime fiction books in the collection, including a nice little run of war-time Agatha Christies, to make it just about worth my while. I made a quick decision.

“OK. I’ll take the lot away for you.”

The look of delight on the agent’s face was immediate. “Today? Now?”

I looked around the room and reckoned I could just about squeeze the lot into the back of the Volvo Estate if I folded the back seats down. I nodded. “Yes, shouldn’t be a problem. I presume I negotiate the price with the solicitor?”

“Nothing to do with me. Just pleased to see the back of them.”

Together we loaded them all into the back of the car. In any collection of books there are always what I call the bits and pieces, the flotsam and jetsam. Theatre programmes, cuttings, pamphlets, magazines, fold-out maps – things that don’t fit easily onto shelves and which normally accumulate in sideboards or get tucked away in boxes. There was one such box with this collection and I dumped it on top of the stacks of books and drove away back to my store-room.

The next day I began to take a closer look at what I had bought. I have always been fascinated by people’s books collections and, as any bibliophile will attest, there is a lot one can deduce about a person by the books they own. This time, however, I was puzzled by the enormously diverse nature of the subjects and, put all together, they just didn’t add up. I sorted them out into rough categories. The paperbacks I put on five shelves with the green and white Penguins forming the bulk of the titles. Next came the practical stuff – the previous owner had obviously been a keen woodworker at one time. Two shelves of horse-racing guides, bloodstock manuals and books on betting told me he had been more than an occasional visitor to the race courses around the country. I reckoned I could offload those fairly quickly to a specialist equine book dealer I knew.

Next was what I classed as the “literary” stuff: James Joyce, H.G. Wells and George Orwell, with collections of poetry by Yeats, Owen and Manley Hopkins. And there on its own, just one children’s book – a fairly well-worn copy of *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans. Then finally, a row of biographies, autobiographies and other material all related to crime, trials and executions. I’d always had a gruesome fascination with the whole panoply of capital punishment and had already earmarked a few of these to go into my own collection.

By chance, I picked out the autobiography of Albert Pierrepoint, the most renowned British hangman of the twentieth century. Opening up the book I was startled to find a hand-written inscription on the front endpaper – apparently from the author. It had been crossed over in red pen but was still clearly visible underneath.

To Reg, my partner “in crime” – who almost let one “bird” fly away!

Underneath the inscription was a crudely drawn gallows with a body swinging from the rope. Appalled and fascinated, I stared at the handwriting and the big red cross that slashed right over the page. Just who had owned these books? I remembered the agent telling me that his client’s will had insisted that the books be sold in one lot and not to be broken up. Why? That was just the question I asked the solicitor the next day when I phoned to tell him I had collected the books. He was unable to expand on the will’s stipulation.

“We see this kind of thing from time to time and it remains a mystery both to us and the legatees. Some bee in the late client’s bonnet I suppose, but most times that bee expires along with the client.” His laugh betrayed a sense of wonder at the occasional stupid request in his clients’ wills.

I laughed sympathetically and proceeded to mention a low figure I’d be happy to pay for the books. As they were already in my stock room I knew the solicitor had little choice but to accept my offer, although it didn’t stop him trying to squeeze an extra fifty quid out of me. I said I’d be happy to bring all the books round to his office and leave them with him if he thought the price was too low. The deal was quickly completed, but I had one last question:

“Your client. What was his name? Just between you and me.”

I could sense more than a little hesitancy at the end of the line.

“Just between you and me?”

I agreed.

“Reginald Manley.” The name rang faint bells but I couldn’t make a connection.

“Why would I have heard of him?”

Again, that hesitation. “Not many people would remember him, but someone like you, with your specialization in crime, should recall the name.” He gave a nervous laugh. “Reginald Manley was one of the last public hangmen.”

I put the phone down and turned to look at the books on the shelves. I was staring at the personal library of a man who had executed people for a living.

It took me some time to tease out the information on Reginald Manley. Bearing in mind that these were the days before instant access at the touch of a computer button or internet search, I had to resort to the library and newspaper archives to get most of the background. It seemed he had been first employed by the Home Office shortly after the Second World War to be an assistant hangman and he had certainly worked with Pierrepoint on a number of occasions. So the inscription in the Pierrepoint book looked genuine. Mentally, I added a hundred quid to the asking price of the book. Around 1951 he was promoted to be principal hangman and had acquired his own assistant – one Jim Lees. Then, for no apparent reason, the name of Reginald Manley dropped out of the archives sometime after May 1953. The solicitor had told me that Manley had been about eighty-seven when he died so he was as old as the century and had therefore, presumably, retired at fifty-three. I didn’t know to what age hangmen were employed – perhaps fifty-three was old enough to hang up the rope as it were – but I kept recalling Pierrepoint’s inscription in his autobiography. Was it some kind of in-joke or was Pierrepoint referring to a particular event?

Returning to my book room one day shortly afterwards, I noticed the box of ephemera I had taken from Reg Manley’s house. Lifting off the lid, I peered at the mound of paper inside. It certainly didn’t look very promising. London Transport bus maps, betting slips, receipts – the fellow obviously hadn’t thrown anything away. There were a couple of strange leather straps with buckles – much too short to be trouser belts – and what was once a white bag but now faded to a grubby grey, with drawstrings at the opening. Half-way down the box I came upon something much more substantial, a limp, black-covered book, devoid of any title or author name. Opening the book, I could see it contained about forty or fifty pages of neat

handwriting in pencil which began on the very first page. I sat back on the floor and read the opening sentences and felt a dense, cold fear creep over me.

I don't know who you are and, probably, you don't know who I am. Yet. But in three weeks you will come to this room to kill me. To this little grey cell with your ropes and buckles and apparatus, your wicked skills, and you will kill me. You will bind my hands and feet and you will cover my eyes. And then you will drop me from this daylight into oblivion. A brightness falling from the air; this fat Icarus, crashing to earth. I have a story to tell. Will you ever believe it and what will you do when you have read the truth?

It took me about two hours to read the whole text. The handwriting, neat to start with, became erratic the further I read and the last pages were very difficult to decipher. Some words or phrases were indistinct and I had to make educated guesses at their meaning, but by the time I had reached the last page I knew what I had in my hand. It was the diary of the last three weeks in the life of a condemned man, one Henry Eastman – and it was personally addressed to Reg Manley, the man I presumed had carried out his execution. I went to the notes I had made at the library and saw that the very last execution that Reg Manley had been employed on was in May 1953 and the name of that man was indeed Henry Eastman. I went back to the box and saw the leather buckles and the bag with the drawstrings and suddenly, with a sick lurch in the stomach, I knew exactly what they were.

For the next three weeks I read and reread the diary. The phone rang unanswered, letters and orders lay fallow on the hall table, food was taken only when hunger overtook my intense curiosity. There was something extraordinary and exceptional about the language. Henry Eastman was only twenty-four when he was hanged for murder, but the style and competence of the text was that of a man twice his age. Phrases and words he used looked familiar from other contexts but I couldn't immediately place them. Although, as a bookseller, I specialized in true crime and detective fiction, I had read widely in many other areas of literature over the years and I was sure I had come across some of the phrases Henry had used. I began to make notes as I read and reread the diary, struggling over some of the final pages, but eventually deciphering every last word. There were quotes and references strewn throughout the whole text and whenever I suspected a direct or indirect quote I added it to the growing list. By the time I had finished I had filled two whole foolscap pages and I

was sure that I had probably missed as many more. I looked at my notes and the quotes and wondered where the key to all this lay. It took me over a week to spot the first clue which, in turn, began to unlock some of the other secrets the diary held.

It came from a section of the diary in which he was writing about a young girl called Madeleine that he knew at the age of ten in the year just before the Second World War. They had formed a close attachment which he had described as “too deep for taint.” Where had I read or heard that phrase before? I racked my brains for days trying to locate the quote but nothing would come to mind. It was late one evening with the rain rattling against the window and the wind shredding the last leaves from the autumn trees that the answer came to me. I was sure I remembered it from a Wilfred Owen poem. I didn’t have a copy of his poetry on my own shelves but I knew where there was one – in the Reg Manley collection that was sitting on the sorting shelves in the book room downstairs.

I switched on the lights in the book room and the neon strips flickered to life. I ran my eye over the shelves and saw the Owen title amongst the literary stuff I had extracted from the collection and put on a separate shelf. I pulled it out and began to leaf through the poems. Eventually I found the quote in the poem ‘Strange Meeting’. *Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.*

Further down the poem I read: *I am the enemy you killed, my friend. I knew you in this dark.*

It wasn’t just the fact that Henry had used the Owen quote that I found fascinating, but that he had used it in the context of his love for Madeleine and in the diary he was writing to the hangman. “*I am the enemy you killed, my friend*” took on a frightening, Gothic, meaning. What stranger meeting could there be than between hangman and the condemned man? And of course, by the time the diary was read, Henry, like the soldier in the poem, was dead and buried.

I placed the Owen poems back on the shelf and then I hesitated, looking at the other titles I had placed together there. W.B. Yeats, H.G. Wells, John Donne, A.E. Housman, James Joyce, Thomas Traherne. It suddenly struck me that these were never the books of a retired hangman who did a bit of woodwork and, it would appear, spent most of his retirement at the race-track. I ran my fingers over the spines, tracing the titles and authors’ names. Almost as if I had received an electric shock, I realized whose books these were. These weren’t Reg Manley’s at all. They were Henry Eastman’s, the man he had executed. These were the books that Henry had

quoted from in his diary and which, I was to later discover, he had in his prison cell in the weeks before his execution. I had read in the diary that he had requested that Madeleine, his childhood friend with whom he had kept in touch, should bring them to the condemned cell for him.

Madeleine!

Madeline, the one and only children's book in the collection!

The diverse pieces of this jigsaw were tumbling into place. With a racing heart I reached for the copy of the children's book, *Madeline*, which was lying on its side on the top shelf and held it in front of me. The illustrated boards were heavily scuffed and the corners were beginning to fray, the hinges cracking. This was a book that had been read almost to death. Opening the book, I caught my breath when I saw the inscription on the front endpaper:

Happy Birthday Madeleine! This book was made just for you! Henry. August 1939.

Underneath Henry's name was a single little "x".

Here was the very book he had given Madeleine in 1939 and which, I had read in the diary, Henry had brought to his nose in the condemned cell in 1953 so that he could smell that lost summer and the scent of his beautiful Madeleine. I brought it up to my face and guiltily fanned through the pages. It felt as if I was eavesdropping on a lovers' private conversation. I leafed through the well-thumbed pages to see if there were any other messages hidden in its pages, but there were none that I could see. I turned over the last page and read the final lines of printed verse that diminished in size as it fell towards the bottom of the page. I had never read Bemelmans' *Madeline* before but I had read *that* final page elsewhere – and very recently. I went back to the diary and found them. They were also the final words in Henry Eastman's diary, completed, I assumed, seconds before Reg Manley came through the cell door.

The most astonishing part of Henry's diary was the revelation that not only was he *not* the murderer, but he knew who had done it and how. Towards the beginning of the diary he mentioned a box and wrote that when the hangman saw the contents he would know the identity of the murderer. He seemed to be playing a kind of game with the hangman as if he was assuming the role of a writer of crime fiction, waiting until the last minute to reveal the real culprit. The trouble was that I didn't have that box. It certainly wasn't among the books I had

taken from the house and, though I eventually tracked down the house clearance company, I realized fairly quickly that it was likely to have been dumped.

All I had left were the written clues in the diary and the name, Madeleine Reubens. And there was that all-important photograph that Henry mentioned which seemed to be the catalyst for the whole tragedy. I began to build up a history of the case of Henry Eastman and the murder for which he was hanged. The diary had been my starting point but somehow every breakthrough I made was quickly followed by a dead end. Most of the people involved with the case were either dead or had disappeared. Gradually my interest faded as the years went by and the various lines of enquiry came to nothing. Until, that is, late in 2001 there occurred one of those strange and unnerving coincidences which were, I came to realize much later, symptomatic of the whole tragic story.

I had been to an auction and bid on some large lots of books that were eventually knocked down for very reasonable amounts. One of the books that surfaced out of the hundreds that now lay around my stock room was Harris and Oppenheimer's *Into the Arms of Strangers, Stories of the Kindertransport*. As I pencilled in a price on the front endpaper, I ran my eye over the blurb on the inside flap and suddenly realized that the Madeleine Reubens of Henry Eastman's story may well have been one of the 10,000 Jewish children who had been sent out of mainland Europe in the nine months before the start of the war by parents desperate to ensure that at least their children would escape whatever was to come at the hands of the Nazis. If Madeleine had been a *kindertransport* child, I had to assume that the Kindertransport Association whose London address was given in the postscript to the book would have some details of where and with whom she had lodged when she arrived in London. My subsequent enquiries not only confirmed that she had indeed been sent over from Austria in early 1939, but that she had been lodged with a Jewish family in Bradford on Avon for some years before they moved to Trowbridge in 1945. And that she was still alive.

The Kindertransport Association wouldn't give me her address but agreed to forward any letter. How many days I wavered over the decision to send a letter to Madeleine I cannot now recall, but I remembered fretting about the effect that it might have on her. If my letter contained only the barest bones of what I knew, I reckoned that at least it wouldn't frighten her off or cause too much upset. I didn't mention the

diary. A month went by, two, and no response. I had begun to give up hope once again when I received a phone call early one evening. I picked up the receiver and as usual announced my phone number. There was silence, although not the silence we have now come to associate with those phantom machines that dial numbers at random. I could hear faint breathing. I repeated the number once more. This time there was a definite drawing in of breath, a hesitancy that confirmed that there was definitely someone there.

“Hello, can I help?” I said.

A short silence and then, “Mr Spurrier, the bookseller?” The voice was that of an elderly woman.

I was normally wary of confirming my name before I knew who was calling but this was no over-confident cold-caller.

“Yes, can I help?”

I expected one of the regular requests to come and see some books, but her next words rattled me as if the receiver had been short-circuited to the electric mains.

“You’ve seen Henry’s diary, haven’t you?”

What follows has been constructed from the long conversations that I had face to face with Madeleine Reubens in her Pimlico flat in the two years before she died in 2004. While we would talk about many things other than the fateful year of 1953 – and the aftermath – the conversation would eventually come back to Henry and Bradford on Avon just before the war. I’d watch as her face lit up with the memory of those summer months of 1939 as if it was the only brightness in a life clouded with tragedy. For my own part I had to invent a reason other than the hangman’s legacy for my coming into possession of the diary and Henry’s books. I wondered if she was ever satisfied with my explanation that I had bought them in a country auction as part of a larger lot of books, but she never questioned it and I saw no reason ever to divulge the donor or that crude inscription on Pierrepoint’s book.

It was only on what proved to be my last visit that I brought along the copy of *Madeleine* that Henry had given her in 1939. I had been somewhat wary of bringing up this tangible ghost from the past and handed over the wrapped packet with some trepidation shortly after we had settled down with cups of tea in her flat. Outside, the traffic along the Thames Embankment swished relentlessly in the heavy rain.

“I wanted you to have this back,” I said. “It should be with you.”

She peeled back the brown paper and turned the book over to see the front cover. An involuntary “Oh” escaped from her mouth and her hand stroked the edges of the book as if greeting a long-lost friend. She looked up at me and then back to the book. Another “Oh” as she opened the first page and read the inscription. Tremors shook her frail frame and I noticed, with embarrassment, that tears had come to her eyes. And then, astonishingly, Madeleine Reubens did exactly what I had done years before when the book first came into my possession – she brought the book up to her face and let the pages fan through her fingers as she savoured the smells and memories of those precious, happy days of 1939.

When Madeleine Reubens died in 2004 I received a letter and packet from her executor. The letter had been written some months before and had, apparently, been kept with her will.

Dear Mr Spurrier [she had never addressed me other than formally]

Ad me'ah shanah.

Having rescued the Bemelmans book once, I am entrusting you to keep it safe for a little while longer, if you would be so good. You are the only other person who knows its story and I think it would be a shame to be dumped into the general sale of my estate. Perhaps, also, through our conversations, you may now be able to unravel what actually happened in those early months of 1953 and try and prove at long last that Henry was, indeed, the subject of a miscarriage of justice. You know my suspicions for what they are worth, but I was always too close to the events – and much too young – to be able to express them to anyone in authority.

Madeleine Reubens

What I thought was to be the final part of the jigsaw was to fall into place a year or so later when I discovered that the assistant to Reg Manley at the execution of Henry Eastman was still alive. Jim Lees was now ninety years of age and in frail health but, importantly, his memory recall was razor sharp. He was living in a care home in Reading and I made no delay in going to see him. He is dead now but what he told me – a story he had kept to himself for over fifty years – is as remarkable as any fiction I have ever read. And infinitely more shocking.

Before you begin this journey with me, I have to ask for your indulgence on the matter of the photograph. My description of

it comes second hand through Madeleine Reubens. However, there is no way of knowing of its inception or the details of its gift to the original recipient or indeed who his name was. To that end then I will admit that the first and last chapters are, of necessity, fictional, but on completing the manuscript I felt that the photograph needed to be in the text right from the start and, as you will see, it will be there right at the end. All I have to go on is the name on the back of the picture – Steffi – and the little message that ironically reverberates throughout the whole of this story: *Vergessmeinnicht*. Forget me not.

August 1939
Chiemsee, Southern Bavaria
Steffi & Bernard

From his small office window looking out onto the platform the Chiemsee station master, Herr Vogel watched the two figures standing close to each other. He felt some guilt in spying on his son and his girlfriend, Steffi, but they were seemingly oblivious to the fellow travellers who had already boarded the early morning train. Steffi suddenly threw her arms round the neck of the young man who held her close to him, making Herr Vogel wonder if Bernhard would be not a little embarrassed at this public show.

The training that Bernhard Vogel had undertaken at the hostel in Baden Endorf, just fifteen minutes' walk from Chimesee, had earned him a corporal's stripe already and he had come back with the news that he was considered to be one of the best new recruits in his particular section. The Vogels were delighted and had lost no time in telling their neighbours and friends. Newly attired in the smart uniform of the *SS-Panzergruppen*, Bernhard had shown off the black tunic to his father a few days before, marching backwards and forwards on the terrace of their chalet. Vogel and his wife had looked on admiringly as their son had strutted in his highly polished boots with his *feldmutze* jauntily perched to one side on his head.

"Oh, Bernhard," his mother couldn't resist stroking the serge uniform, "you are so handsome. It's no wonder Steffi is so in love with you!"

“Mother! Please!” Bernhard blushed quickly and turned to his father. “Will you make sure mother doesn’t embarrass me in front of Steffi?”

Herr Vogel had smiled and patted his son’s arm. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep your mother in check but be warned that’s what women are for – to embarrass their menfolk!”

Now it was the Monday morning and Bernhard was taking the small train to Prien from the ferry station on the lakeside for his connection to Munich. Where he would go from there was anybody’s guess, but there had been gossip for some weeks that German forces were ready to go into Poland to regain their territory lost after 1918. At least this time, thank God, Herr Vogel thought, there wasn’t going to be the stalemate of the trenches as in the other war. Herr Hitler had made sure that the country was fully prepared and they weren’t going to get bogged down in the mud and filth that he had endured in Belgium. For the station master it all still felt very far away from this quiet corner of Bavaria and he prayed that Herr Hitler had everything in place. At least he was making a start on clearing out the Jews.

Herr Vogel leant on the sill of the booking-office window and contemplated the future. With luck, that young lad would get to see some fighting before it all finished but he’d have to hurry up. His eye suddenly caught the flaking putty at the edge of the glass and he noticed, for the first time, that the station was beginning to look a bit shabby. Perhaps he should contemplate repainting the whole building – make it look sparkling for when Bernhard returned. He ran his finger along the putty seal and dislodged a piece that had become loose. It fell from the window, skittered along the sill and landed at Vogel’s feet. Bending over, he picked up the hardened piece and turned it over in his hand before pocketing it. As he did so his fingers touched his watch and bringing it out he noticed with a slight alarm that it was almost time for the train to leave.

He stepped out of his office through the glass door etched with the station name and hurried over to the two figures still standing by the train on the platform. It was a perfect summer’s morning with the birds calling in the trees that surrounded the station and the sun now rising high above the Chiemsee Lake, the water shimmering towards the far horizon. Just over the way from the train station a ferry boat lazily tugged at its moorings and the gentlest of breezes came off the lake and spun the steam from the engine’s chimney that sat hissing expectantly at the head of the four carriages. As he approached, the young girl lovingly stroked the lapels of his son’s uniform,

picking off a speck of dust. Steffi lived with her parents close by the lake's edge on the Seestrasse and she and his son had known each other since they were at kindergarten. In recent weeks the station master had noticed a closeness in their relationship. He had warned Bernhard not to get too involved as it wouldn't be fair on Steffi with him going away to the army. Ha! What notice did the young ones ever take of their elders?

Vogel hesitantly interrupted their farewells: "The train must leave now, Fräulein. Are you both going to the town?"

"No. No. Just Bernhard." Steffi turned to the stationmaster and he could see that she was fighting back the tears. "Oh, Herr Vogel, I'm so frightened that he'll never come back."

The station master, genuinely touched, laid his hand on the soft skin of her bare arm. "Don't you worry about Bernhard. He'll look after himself and, anyway, all of this will be over in a few weeks. You mark my words. He'll be back before you know it!" He pulled out his watch from his waistcoat and flipped open the gilt cover. "Well, it's time for you to get on board. We can't wait any longer or you'll miss your connection at Prien."

Herr Vogel stood back, pretending to be busy with his watch as Steffi gave her soldier one more kiss. From her dress pocket she pulled out a small photograph and handed it to Bernhard.

"Keep it with you forever. Promise me!" With a sob she turned and ran off, disappearing around the side of the station office.

Bernhard looked at it and then showed it to his father. "Is she not the most beautiful girl in Chiemsee?"

The station master took it from him and held it close to his spectacles. The face of Steffi smiled out from the picture, her hair tied up in two plaits that curled round her forehead, a small forget-me-not flower entwined in one of the plaits over her ear.

"Indeed, she is. You make sure you come home in one piece my boy – and with a glorious victory under your belt and a decoration on that tunic of yours!"

"Ah," Bernhard pointed to the picture in the stationmaster's hand, "she's written something on the back. Let me see what it is." Bernhard took the picture back and turned it over. He smiled and showed it to his father, holding it up between his fingers. In a rounded Gothic script were the words: *My mouth is silent, but my eyes speak and say only this –*

Forget me not. Steffi, and underneath she had put a single cross.

“That’s sweet – and clever too; she is indeed a flower in more ways than one! Make sure you keep it safe, and yourself! Come back to us, and soon.” The little photo and its message had unexpectedly caught Herr Vogel off guard and he found himself more emotional about his son’s leaving than he had expected. Drawing in a breath quickly to stifle the catch in his voice, he formally announced: “Now, come along, time to get this train on its way.”

Bernhard tucked the photo into the breast pocket, shook his father’s hand and picked up his suitcase. With an assured step and a quick glance back towards the station, he boarded the little train. His father took another look at his watch and then signalled to the driver who was looking back from the window of the engine cab. A short billow of smoke blew from the stack, followed by a sharp whistle, and the engine with its tail of four carriages slowly moved forward, warily crossing over the points at the end of the platform. Herr Vogel turned back towards the station office and caught sight of Steffi standing by the rear of building, shadowed by the surrounding trees. He was never to tell his wife of the chill that ran through him at that moment, the sudden inexplicable draining of confidence and the terrible thought that perhaps he may never see Bernhard again. Quickly, he turned his head and looked towards the train as if hoping that it might have stopped, but the last carriage was just disappearing around the wooded bend and then it was gone. Stepping on to the tracks, he placed his foot on the shining metal line. He could feel the trembling in the strip that led away into the wood and he stood there in the morning sun, with the sound of a blackbird pinking a warning of some unseen danger in the nearby trees, until the very last traces of the train’s existence had disappeared and the drifting smoke from the engine melted into the bright blue of the sky and was gone.

Monday, May 11th 1953

Reg Manley

Reginald Manley lay next to his still sleeping wife and casually calculated the distance from the nape of her neck as it lay on the pillow to the point between the second and third vertebrae, that sweet spot, the dislocation of which would kill her almost instantly. The early morning light that filtered through the net curtains was just strong enough for Reg to see as he suspended his hand warily over the back of her neck, spanning the distance between thumb and forefinger from the cortex of her brain and the point at which disconnection would turn out the light. A life extinguished so easily with just one simple wrench.

He turned to lie on his back, peering sideways as he did so to check the time on the travel clock that perched in its case by his side of the bed. 6.15 am. An hour and a quarter before he had to get out of bed. He sighed. He was waking earlier and earlier these days, partly because Doris refused to have the heavy curtains closed at night – “it’s as dark as laying in your coffin with them closed” – and the nets did little to keep out the morning light. But partly he was beginning to realize that at the age of fifty-two he was reaching a turning point in life which increasingly unsettled him although, as yet, he was unable or, in truth, unwilling to identify the exact cause. This wasn’t where he planned to be at this time of life, but then any hopes and ideas that he might have had were thrown out the window fourteen years before in 1939 with the arrival of his call-up papers. Reg had made a conscious effort to erase the memories of those war years and had only ever spoken about them in the most general of terms to Doris. But on mornings like this, when sleep evaded him, the memories rose up unbidden. He quickly brought his hand to his mouth and bit into the fleshy part between thumb and forefinger, inflicting pain in an attempt to banish the ghosts, but still they refused to disappear completely. The image of an emaciated woman, toothless and filthy in rags, reaching out towards his hand brought a sweat to his brow and made him suddenly sit up in bed. Beside him, his wife stirred. Reg watched as Doris twisted a little to adjust her pillow slightly, but she remained with her back turned towards him. He settled back slowly on his pillow in a half-sitting position and reached for the book which he kept on his bedside cabinet. Agatha Christie’s *They Do It With Mirrors* had been the Christmas present from his wife the year before but he had only just started it. He had a long run of Christie novels – all of

them gifts from his wife who, without fail, had presented him with one every year since they were married. She had even saved up the ones that were published during the war while he was away and, on his first night back after his eventual demob, had proudly pushed the packet of ten books across the kitchen table. They were easy reading, and there was no doubt the author was clever with plot twists, but Reg found lately that the stories were becoming laboured. This one, set in a country house converted to a borstal, had his head spinning with the number of characters who were related in all kinds of ways, but he would probably persevere to the bitter end if only just to find out whodunit.

At 7.30 am the alarm went off. Reg closed the book shut and swung his legs over the side of the bed. As usual, almost like an automaton, his wife did the same on her side. Without speaking, she gathered her dressing gown from the hook on the back of the door and went downstairs to get breakfast ready. Doris always argued that she wasn't a "morning" person, but Reg knew that the almost total silence between them from rising to the moment he went out the door to work was a token of something more troubling.

Partially dressing before shaving, Reg stood at the bathroom mirror in his vest with the braces of his suit trousers hanging loosely from his waistband. Lathering the shaving brush, he lifted it to his face. Today, however, he hesitated, the soapy froth running down the wooden handle of the brush and onto the nicotine-stained ends of his fingers. Perhaps now, for the very first time, he noticed his father looking back at him from the mirror. The same hair, thinning at the temple, brushed straight back, and there was more than a hint of grey around the ears. He ruffled the hair with the tips of his fingers and peered closely at the reflection, twisting his head from left to right, unsure if he could detect how far the flecks of white had spread. He pulled his hand down over his cheek and neck, feeling the dark stubble under his chin. A hint of a jowl softened the once sharply defined chin. The pinch of the spectacles that he now used permanently for his figure work had left noticeable impressions on the sides of his nose, and the skin under his eyes looked darker. Quickly lathering his cheeks and upper neck, leaving the moustache clear to the edges of his mouth, he stropped the Darwin razor a few times with a firm thwick-thwack, thwick-thwack, before applying the edge just below the ear and scraping downwards on one cheek towards the chin. Flicking the shaved soap and cut bristle from the razor into the sink, he repeated the movement on the other cheek,

bringing his hand down in a smooth curve while pushing his nose to one side with the thumb of his other hand.

The sound of rain on the bathroom window made him pause and he turned towards the net curtain. He drew it aside with the head of the razor, leaving a trace of lather on the edge of the net. Peering out through the rain-streaked glass, he scanned the sky with its heavy grey clouds hovering just above the ossified forest of factory chimneys that sprawled away into the murk. From the nearest chimney a sickly drizzle of brown smoke leaked and bled into the sky. It was adorned with the name of the abattoir – MARTIN – which, when new, had blazoned out in clear white paint and was visible for miles around. Now it had all but merged into its surroundings, the dust and grime rising from the surrounding yards and the smoke rolling out of the chimney fading the letters to a dirty grey. Half a mile away, hidden behind the sombre sheets of rain, the railway trucks and wagons of the marshalling yards set up a continuous metallic clank as they were pushed and shuffled from siding to siding. Visitors to the house would always mention the sound of the trains, but he had lived here for so long that Reg hardly noticed it. He let the net drop back and turned to the mirror to finish shaving around his neck. Perhaps it was high time he moved out of this terrace, he thought. But with Doris? A knot of guilt tightened in his stomach.

By 7.45 am he had completed the shaving and had removed a clean, folded shirt from the drawer. It would last him for two days – until Wednesday at least – but the separate collar pulled from a different drawer would be fresh every day. Fixing the stud into the back of the collar and then onto the shirt, he pulled his work tie from the rack on the back of the cupboard door. He was proud of his expertise in tying a Windsor knot – a skill he had learnt from a fellow soldier when he was billeted in Germany. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, he performed the tying ritual before admiring the symmetrically triangular knot that sat perfectly central to his collar. For Reg, knots were important.

By 7.55 am he had put on his waistcoat and fixed the half hunter watch and chain from one buttonhole to the pocket on the left of his belly. The watch had been given to him by his father on his first day of work when he was fifteen and it had kept time flawlessly for thirty-seven years. Giving the stem a gentle twist with his fingers, he wound the mechanism carefully to its fullest capacity before automatically flicking

open the glass cover and clicking it shut before slipping it into his waistcoat pocket.

He reached the foot of the stairs by 7.58 am and halted by the wall mirror to ensure all was as it should be. His suit jacket, as always, was on a hanger on the side of the hall stand. His hat and overcoat hung to one side and the work brief-case leant against the foot. Reg smoothed the waistcoat lapels and gave the lower edge a quick tug down. "I wish you were my Gary Cooper" his wife had said when they walked back from the pictures after a showing of *High Noon* the week before. It had been a simple phrase and one that he was sure Doris hadn't thought about before she said it – a kind of back-handed criticism – but the memory of it still rankled. Once more he checked his tie, brushed his hair back with his hand and turned his face left and right to ensure he hadn't missed anything when shaving. His moustache curved gracefully in a thin line from the nostrils to the corners of his mouth, elegantly equidistant, and the shallow dimple in his chin nicely set off his full lips. Satisfied, he turned towards the kitchen from where he could hear the pips of the 8 o'clock news on the radio.

There was something wrong. Reg prided himself on his sensibility and he recognized an indefinably strained atmosphere as soon as he entered the kitchen. Doris had her back to him, standing by the stove, skillfully spooning the hot fat over the eggs in the frying pan so that they didn't burn at the edges.

"Alright, love?"

"Post's there." Doris announced with a marked indifference and without turning away from the stove.

Reg looked towards the small kitchen table that they used for breakfast and which Doris laid out each morning, carefully placing the mats, knives and forks opposite each other with the sauce, pepper and salt sitting in the middle. A cup of tea was already steaming by his plate. Against the sauce bottle leant a single brown envelope with the words *On Her Majesty's Service* in black above his own address. Even from that distance Reg had a fair idea what it was and he guessed that Doris knew as well. That would certainly account for her frostiness. Reg sat down at his place and picked up the envelope. Postmarked: London SW. Picking up his knife, Reg slipped it under the glued flap at the rear and slit it open. Pulling out various sheets of paper, he unfolded them and read the covering letter.

Henry Charles Eastman

I have a condemned prisoner, named above, in my custody and you have been recommended to me by the Prison Commissioners for employment as Chief Executioner. Two copies are enclosed of the Memorandum of Conditions to which the person acting as Chief Executioner is required to conform, and if you are willing to act as Chief Executioner I should be glad if you would sign and return one copy of the Memorandum in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope. I would be obliged if you would treat the matter as urgent.

It was signed by the governor of Wandsworth Prison. A railway travel warrant was also enclosed together with a note giving the date of the execution: Tuesday May 26th 1953. Reg leaned towards a small shelf that held Doris's recipe books and cuttings and pulled out a slim diary. Leafing through the pages he checked May 26th and found the date empty. Just over two weeks' time.

Doris turned away from the stove, a plate in each hand. She brought breakfast over to the table and placed one plate down in front of her husband, deliberately covering the rail warrant and return envelope.

"Doris, love!" Reg extracted the pieces of paper from under the plate and folded them into the diary. Doris sat opposite and picked up her knife and fork. The curlers that she kept in her fringe overnight had been removed and the hair rolled over her forehead like angry waves breaking on a beach.

"I thought you promised me you were going to get out of this business." She waved her fork towards the diary that lay beside Reg's plate. "You know how much I dislike it." She put her elbow on the table and pointed directly at her husband with the knife. "And if the company ever gets a whiff of what you do on your 'little holidays', as you call them, you can wave goodbye to your position there."

"No-one knows, love. Never will." Reg knew he was on tricky ground whenever the subject came up. Although he had promised her that he would hand in his resignation after the last job, he had found it difficult to make the final break.

"It's not the kind of thing someone in your position should be involved with." She cut into her egg, the soft yolk spilling over the lightly browned toast, her elbows jerking as she cut and folded food onto the fork. "It's a job for the likes of publicans and bookies. You know who I mean."

Reg knew exactly who she meant. Albert Pierrepoint.

Reg had remained in Germany after the war had ended, becoming involved with the organization of the Nuremburg trials. Pierrepoint, Britain's Chief Executioner, had been flying

backwards and forwards from England, hanging the condemned as the verdicts were handed down, but in the later stages he had found the intensity of the work exhausting. He had asked for a competent assistant from the army staff stationed at the barracks, and Reg had volunteered. He surprised himself on how quickly he had picked up what was required. Pierrepoint's professionalism and emotional detachment from the task greatly impressed Reg and, in turn, Pierrepoint was grateful for someone who followed his instructions to the letter. Equally in awe of the speed with which Pierrepoint dispatched those condemned to death and touched by the respect he had shown the corpses after they were removed from the rope, Reg found himself fascinated by the procedure. Over a period of a few weeks an unspoken bond had grown between the two men and on one visit to Germany Pierrepoint asked Reg if he had ever thought about taking up the post of Assistant Executioner when he got back to England.

"It takes a special person to do this task, Reg, and I reckon you've got what it takes. A few times a year, that's all. Won't interfere with your day job and if you want a recommendation from me you only have to ask."

Reg had indeed thought about it for a while and when he was finally demobbed he contacted Pierrepoint to see if he would support his application to be an Assistant Public Executioner. It was only after the application was successfully completed that he told his wife. He hadn't meant to keep it a secret from her but the war years had driven an unspoken wedge between them and his experiences at the relief of Belsen in April 1945 had marked a sea change in Reg that he was reluctant to acknowledge to himself, let alone to his wife.

After assisting in about twenty executions between 1947 and 1951, Reg was finally given his own post as Chief Executioner and the job that he had just been requested to officiate at would be his eighth in charge; but now Doris was becoming increasingly vocal in her opposition. His job at the steel works had become more important as the post-war industry picked up and a recent takeover of a smaller steel outfit by the company had seen Reg rise up the hierarchy. He was close to acquiring the position of senior accountant and Doris fretted constantly about his "dirty little secret" – as she called it – being made public. Months of chipping away at him had finally made him promise to put in his resignation. A promise he hadn't kept.

"I'm warning you, Reg. This will get out and then we're finished around here." Doris held her cup of tea in both hands

and looked at her husband over the rim. "I mean it. No company wants a hangman as their chief accountant. They'll lose business, and what's worse, you'll lose your job." She put her cup back on the saucer with a clunk and a splash of tea fell onto the table's Formica surface. She wiped at it angrily with the cuff of her dressing gown. "The next thing you'll know is we'll have the papers round here, sticking their nose in, just like they did with Pierrepont. It's got to stop, Reg. I'm serious." She snatched a piece of toast from the rack which Reg noticed was burnt, bearing the tell-tale signs of a knife scraped across the surface.

He leant over and placed his hand on hers but she pulled away.

"Promise me, Reg! This has to be the last time." She looked directly at him, one eyebrow slightly raised. Reg recognized the signs.

"OK, love. I promise. I would have done it after the last but I was so busy at work I just forgot." He withdrew his hand and picked a piece of toast from the rack, smearing it with some dripping from the pot. "Look, tell you what we'll do. Why don't you write out the letter of resignation for me and I'll sign it and post it straight after May 26th." He tapped the diary. "That's the date for this one. Last one, I promise, love, the very last."