

# A Gentleman of Weight

by J David Edwards

## Chapter 1

There is a small and inexpensive gravestone in the *Invalidenfriedhof* in Berlin. The cemetery is old and by decree became the final resting place for distinguished Prussian military personnel. And so it is fitting that Maximilian von Rittenauer, born in Bavaria in 1886, should be interred there. It was I who added the prefix, von, thus denoting title to the name. Among the twenty or so mourners, several were of the British consular staff, including the Ambassador. There were representatives of the *Deutsches Reich*, three members of the *Schutzpolizei*, and several foreign journalists. He was buried without ceremony, with all of his medals, and in a borrowed field-grey uniform.

The war to end all wars was over. I was standing in a long line of khaki-clad soldiers in greatcoats and blanched webbing, my mood troubled by mixed thoughts and emotions. There was little movement and certainly no jostling as we all waited in the cold, sleety rain for our turn to embark. I perceived an almost reluctance to board, but it was a reluctance that I shared and therefore understood. The ship, seemingly made distant by the rain, and tethered with ropes as thick as a man's arm to rusty bollards fore and aft, lay alongside the pier, looking as grey as each of us must have felt. We were heading home, home to England. The exultancy of victory and the euphoria of armistice had abated now to be replaced by the guilt that it was we who were returning home. And with the guilt, a certain melancholy and a hopeless sense of sorrow for the comrades and brothers that would remain here, never to return. They would guard those miles of trenches and duckboards that bore all of their life's blood. They would be stewards to those fields of blood-red poppies. And we would not forget them.

Stretcher-bearers carted men who were but yesterday only boys, and now no longer whole or sound of limb, to form another long line waiting the order to embark. Grey-caped nurses moved about the slowly shuffling throng, handing out cigarettes or pannikins of hot tea here and there along with brief words of encouragement. Even briefer flashes of red from cape lining or wimple hem gave some odd sense of gaiety to the scene. The sounds were lost in a muffle of general noise of boots on cobble and the low susurrations of the quiet voices, the clank and movement of pier machinery, and the drone and grind of slowly moving lorries that brought the wounded and the dying from the hospitals in France to be ferried to the hospitals in England. The smell of wet wool, sea, and death hung in the air as a pall.

It was not like this before. It was not like this in England when the pier bustled with marching men and the sound of bands martial. It was not like this when attractive young women waved gloved hands and scented-handkerchiefs under the bunting, when fathers stood proud and mothers smiled through their tears as the sound of huzzahs washed over those who were marching up the gangway. It was adventure then. It was a moment then. It was with swollen heart and eager rush these men all boarded the boats with patriotic fervour for King and Country. It was not like that now. Even though we had done what we set out to do. Even though we were returning victorious, glorious and bearing medals of distinctions earned, it was not at all like that now. Our eyes had seen too much. Our hearts were overburdened and our youth squandered, never to be reimbursed. We, each of us, tended to avoid looking at the other's eyes, too mindful of the darkness we would see reflected in them. This moment of joy-of-homecoming was but feigned. Whoever could we tell of the horrors we had been witness to and perpetrators of? Moreover, who would believe that such horror and evil could possibly exist? And all of us, deep within our soul, wondered if we could ever be without the fear and the terror in a home where such fear and terror had not touched. All of us in the years ahead would become strange, and a stranger to those who knew and loved us before. That was to be the price of our victory. What worse price was there for those in defeat?

I wish I had been there in the Compègne Forest at that railway siding on that grey November day when it all came to an end. I wish I had been there to witness the secretive signing of the armistice that commenced at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It may have convinced me that it was, indeed, all over. It may have allowed me to convince myself that it had, indeed, been worth the cost. Captain Cameron of the 130<sup>th</sup>, to my surprise, arranged for me to travel there with other journalists after Germany capitulated, but it was by then an anticlimax. I began my war as a correspondent and, as Captain Cameron declared while apprising me of the arrangements he had made for my travel to Compègne, it was fitting that I should end it as a correspondent. That particular occupation now seemed far removed from that to which I had recently grown accustomed, but I would be grateful to the thoughtful Captain in the years soon after the war. I was but eighteen as the world tumbled into an inevitable war following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, and still in school. My father would not let me put an education in abeyance to join up with all those others who were excited to be involved in an adventure to tug on the moustaches of the Kaiser. They would be home in months if not weeks they vowed and I was going to miss it all because of an insistent patriarch. My only hope was the lottery of conscription. I saw many of my friends off amid guarded jealousy for their good fortune to be part of this adventure of a lifetime. Each promised to kill a Hun for me as if it were merely a

cricket outing that I could not attend. We slapped each other's backs and shook hands and I thought they all looked grand in their uniforms. But they did not come home in weeks. They did not come home in months. They did not come home for years.

My formal schooling ended on a Wednesday in 1916 and a career began the Thursday following in the employ of a small daily newspaper of Tory bias in London. So many men were now overseas that career vacancies went begging and I was confirmed in my position weeks before semester's end. I was not, I must admit, quite so eager now to join the ranks of those whose constant companions were mud, death, and fear. The daily casualty lists grew and it was nigh impossible to know of a family wherein tragedy had not struck. I still exchanged billets with many of those whom I had seen off to war not long after its outbreak, and received their assurances that I did not want to join their ranks. Thus far, all were still intact, given only to minor wounds that were mended in field hospitals only slightly removed from the front itself. Yet here I was, able-bodied and with a need to prove myself. As the year grew to its close, I had begun to make my mark in my chosen career and found favour with my employers. I was youth incarnate however, and abused my patronage and importuned for a situation as war correspondent. The annoyances of my petitioning eventually came to the attention of Mr Chesterton, the son of the founder of the newspaper and I was summoned to his office. It was unnervingly reminiscent of similar summonses to the office of my old Headmaster. I remained standing in front of a large, ornate but uncluttered desk while my employer cited some of the disruption my carping had caused. He called into question my suitability as an employee of the newspaper. He chastened me in a most patronising of manner at the unlikelihood of such request as only, thus far, a handful of correspondents were selected, and these were deemed journalists and news writers of considerable renown. Moreover, he went on to explain, their endeavours were pooled, despite their private associations, and the pooled commentaries and other writings made available to all news sources. More correspondents were not, therefore, needed or even desirable. He proceeded to dress me down in such a manner that I assumed my career was thus terminated and I set about noting the details for my future recollection.

Chesterton was a man of large proportion who took to wearing wing collars and bow ties and sported a gold fob watch on his waistcoat. He wore a Homburg out of doors and carried a walking-stick that he did not need. He drank, it was said, to an almost excess of the finest whiskey and smoked the foulest of cigars. His peers, with extreme favour and privilege, gave him full regard. The office was curtained in heavy material of royal-red velvet and panelled with wood that had long since darkened with age. Several large portraits adorned the walls to brood over the events that took place therein. It was redolent

of whiskey, and a small sideboard held crystal decanters of the fabled distillation, and the air was heavy with the lingering aroma of cigar. There was also on the sideboard a silver-framed photograph, the details I could not discern but was to later learn was of Chesterton being interviewed by Queen Victoria. A bookcase boasted an array of leather-bound and gilt publications that appeared well used. The carpeting of the office was thick and of Persian device. A black-leather daybed looked inviting under the window whose drapes were now drawn closed. The sudden movement of the chair in which Chesterton reclined recalled my attention. He leaned further back, apparently finished with his summing-up of my character, and I awaited my discharge. He steeped his fingers while seeming to choose his next words, though I was not altogether certain he had not nodded off for his eyes were closed and his head slumped forward as if in prayer.

“I shall make some enquiries. Till then, stop making an ass and a nuisance of yourself. Enquire also of your father if he has objection to any such proposal. Request a meeting with me in a few days time”.

It was nearly that simple. Late November saw me aboard a troopship underway to France with a complement of Empire expeditionary forces from the far-flung Commonwealth. I was in uniform at last and on my way to war and adventure. I was, to all intent, but not precisely, an official war correspondent. I would not thus remain for long in either event. In the opening months of the war when appointments were made for war correspondents, they were kept safe well behind the lines and attached to General Headquarters. There they were given whatever information about the fighting the high command wished to convey, which wasn't much or always accurate. When the battle of the Somme began, those correspondents reported that first day's disaster as a victory, in line with that which the generals expected would be the case. Several of the correspondents voiced concerns over this treatment and to demand access to the front where they could see for themselves what was happening. Haig relented, and by 1916, correspondents and cine-photographers turned up in unlikely and often dangerous places. I was attached to GHQ but not as an independent. My position had been created to allow my presence as a dogsbody or assistant to the other officially recognised correspondents. I was but an apprentice though such debasing terminology was never employed.

My first taste of battle occurred not long after my arrival in France. It bore no resemblance whatsoever to the vainglorious mental image I assumed all battles to be. I freely admit that a tempering had occurred when I witnessed the biblical devastation to the countryside and had blundered through the mud of rutted roads for miles at a time. This was my first expedition out of England and I simply assumed that the peculiar, unpleasant odour that permeated the landscape was but the smell of France. We were briefed that an

offensive was planned for the morning and I managed to insinuate myself with a party that was going to be there to report on the battle. It was exciting, and combined with the bitter cold and a nervous stomach, I found it hard to stop from shaking as I crouched in the trench with the shelling whistling overhead to trouble the enemy before the charge was scheduled. It was still dark and the sleeping soldiers were brought awake with the command, "fall to, on the double". I managed to speak with several of the soldiers pressed against the sandbagged wall of the trench as they awaited the signal to go over the top. One lad, a replacement, and only in France for less than a day and a night, was eager to do well. He was a volunteer and signed his Attestation papers one day after the birthday that made him eligible. Commands were shouted and whistles blown and brave young men climbed the ladders with the breaking of dawn. I watched my new friend as he gave me a quick smile and took his place at the ladders. He made it to the top then fell back, his arms stretched wide, his rifle falling from his open hand. He was dead before his body hit the floor of the trench, a bullet to the head. There was something so outrageously unjust with that sudden horror that I almost cried out with indignation. The attack faltered at a cost of nearly one hundred men killed or wounded. The smell of the battle became my nightmare. The smell of faeces, of blood, and of cordite all mingled with the intimate aroma of the earth, torn asunder by shells, to imprint itself upon my brain. That was not to be the worst of it for I had not yet become fully acquainted with the smell of death and rotting, putrid flesh. I managed to climb one of the ladders after the disengagement, risking the anonymous sniper's bullet, to gaze across the few yards that separated ours from the enemy's trenches. Smoke drifted like patches of early-morning mist across the earth, becoming a wreath to honour the bodies of the fallen brown mounds that once were those young, brave men. I was astonished at the silence after the tumult of battle and comforted by the steadying bark of orders of command by the non-commissioned ranks and junior officers. Such madness. I knew then that I needed to be one of those whose hands were lent to the completion of the war. I could not stand by while others did the job, while others signed off on their lives to bring this war to an end. It was my shoulder that needed to be at the wheel and my life forfeit if need be. Spring's warmth of 1917 saw me as a private in a rifle regiment and taken on strength by a battalion in the frontline trenches. The fading warmth of summer then saw me promoted in the field to corporal. I continued to write of the war in lengthy billets to Mr Chesterton to whom I felt obligated and more personal letters to my father who I felt I had betrayed.

I survived the war without incident other than a wound to the chest from a high-explosive shell that knocked me off my perch with its concussive force. A splinter of shell tore through a rib and collapsed a lung. We were promised that the Hun was short of shells but someone failed to notify him, as he was quite profligate with their use.

Each day presented us with bizarre events such that bizarre became normal. German shells would blast asunder a group of men who were then interred as the next round showered them with fresh dirt to conceal their mutilated bodies. A further round would exhume the corpses to leave them lying grotesque and barely recognisable as human. I watched French civilians, farmers, wandering from trench to trench, and selling vegetables to small groups of soldiers in the midst of bombardment. Inevitably, one or another would be blown apart from the blasting but still they picked their way around shell craters as if it was nothing more than inclement weather. I can give no answer to such odd behaviour other than their farms were all but destroyed and one must presume there was no reasonable alternative. When the whole world has gone insane, some other yardstick must define sanity. The shelling on the day I was wounded was the prelude to a counter-attack by the Hun, and they had been falling for nearly two hours without cessation. Each shell had a history of its own as it ripped to pieces our comrades in great splatters of blood. I waited for the one that would claim me. It finally came to land less than a dozen feet from where I was cowering and left me painted with my own blood and considerable stinging of my breast. A comrade assisted me with dressing the wound and I crawled my way to safety, some three hundred yards distant. The way was very difficult and I was obliged to crawl over several bodies of the heroes that lay there, victims of a sniper. One of those lifeless bodies was a friend from my own section and I almost joined him as a sniper's bullet cut loose and I was obliged to lay my head close to the ground. I shut my eyes and crawled the rest of the way until I was behind the trench and into another that led to the road that led to a first-aid station. I remember repeatedly damning to hell all German snipers as I crawled my way out of danger. The aid station sent me in its turn to a field hospital in Boulogne. I was then evacuated on a hospital ship to England and taken on strength at Endell Street Military Hospital to enjoy the ministrations of the female staff there. When I had almost recovered my health, I was given the privilege of an opportunity of interview of Dr Flora Murray, Doctor in Charge and the founder of the Women's Hospital Corps. It was an interview I would remember always, not least because Mr Chesterton, who had glanced through it while on an official visit to the hospital, printed it in its entirety. However, I was glad to be deemed medically fit again as it seemed unnatural to be there away from harm, away from fear, while my comrades were still in the thick of things. I was not at all reluctant to rejoin the lads at the front. Though I acquitted myself well, not wishing to disappoint those who had placed their trust in me, I was not desirous of remaining in uniform even one day longer than required.

At war's end, and again in civilian costume, I paid my compliments to Mr Chesterton. He greeted me with respect and affection and without need of an appointment. I discovered that he always assumed I would take up my position and resisted any attempt for me to do otherwise.

I was once again his employee but due, I suppose, to my having maintained almost weekly contact by way of the post with my observations about the war, I was now elevated to a level of contact of an almost personal nature. I discovered that many of my comments had been published in his paper, though heavily edited and censored where my remarks may have been a little less than prudent.

England was enjoying summer in 1921 when I was summoned to Mr Chesterton's office. I was now a senior employee and attended many such meetings within this sanctum. I was first introduced to a Mr Rauch and invited to sit in one of the leather chairs that fronted the large desk. I found Mr Rauch to have an infirm handshake and he did not create a good first impression. I deduced by his manner of holding a cigarette that he was from the continent and I was rather curious of what was to come. I looked expectantly at Mr Chesterton but the first comment caught me by surprise as Rauch uttered it and he asked what I thought of the Versailles Treaty.

This was a dangerous subject, for I still retained strong feelings about the war, its causes, and its aftermath. I was one of those who feared the worst from this treaty; that it would lead only to another war. Rioting, bordering on revolution, was a continuing occurrence in Germany these days, and coupled with spiralling inflation and much unemployment was cause for concern. I sensed that this referral to the treaty was not simply a ploy of conversation by Rauch, and so I chose to make my reply straightforward. If he wanted to make more of it, then it would be him forced to do the prompting.

"It is far less a treaty than it is a decree of guilt, and more punitive than concord".

"Punitive? In what manner"?

There was somehow an atmosphere of heightened expectation in the room, though neither man betrayed any expression. This was especially so with Rauch, and I was careful again to consider my response.

"England reels under burden of debt. Though some suggest it is because of overzealous spending budgets, it is clear the war was a drain of unprecedented proportion. This being so, it must also impact upon Germany in like manner. How then is Germany expected to make those demanded war reparations and maintain reasonable economy"?

"That first impossible demand for reparation was seemingly made more honourable by reduction. But even reduced, it does not make it any the less impossible".

“Germany was given no part in the drafting of the treaty. She was simply obliged to sign it on threat of starvation by the continuance of our blockade and a return to hostilities. More than seven million Germans are lost to the annexation of former German territory. It must be anathema to the German populace to be held solely responsible for the war and then to have its armed forces curtailed in such a manner as to leave them vulnerable to attack by any other nation wishing them harm. That is not treaty; that is travesty. I fear it will bring repercussion of enormous consequence”.

Rauch and Chesterton merely looked at each other and I saw first an almost imperceptible nod from Rauch and acknowledged by Chesterton. Rauch stood suddenly and made a deferential bow of the head, a slight leaning forward of the upper torso towards Chesterton who remained seated.

“I have another appointment if you will kindly give me your leave”.

Mr Chesterton leaned forward across the desk and shoved out a hand that was taken briefly by Rauch as if some deal had just been fully negotiated and agreed to.

“Good day, Herr Rauch. I will be in touch before you leave”.

Rauch turned to give me a curt nod of departure and, taking one step backward before turning, made his way to the door of the office.

Chesterton waited until the door had closed fully behind the departing Rauch before explaining that Herr Rauch was in charge of a foreign news desk located in Germany. I was to be made a foreign correspondent at some considerable increase in salary if I so wished. Chesterton looked upon me with an amiable expression that implied my acceptance was mere formality that was requested out of politeness alone. I would spend the next celebration of Christmas in Berlin.

Our offices in the Alexanderplatz, not far from the police headquarters of the newly reformed *Schutzpolizei*, were comfortable but austere. The German government, stumbling along since the adoption of a new constitution in Weimar two years before, was unable to control the unrest that plagued Germany. And it was hard pressed to conform to the demands made upon it by terms of the Versailles Treaty, and crippled by the Inter-Allied Commission, *Inter-Alliierte Militaer-Kontroll-Kommission*, formed on German soil to enforce those demands. It did not help that the terms of the treaty also restricted the size of the civilian police forces to their 1914 level and that police power remained decentralized. The hand-tied *Deutsches Reich* had little choice but to evade many of the restrictions or face the total collapse of Germany. These evasions, as sensible as they may have been,

invoked the wrath of the IMKK leading to abject frustration of the government. Almost no one in Germany was satisfied with conditions and no one could see how they would ever improve. It was not a good time to be a German but it was a most interesting time to be a foreign correspondent.

## Chapter 2

One falls in love with a great city. I fell in love with Berlin. School was far behind me but the education in languages stood me in good stead and I learned to speak the language with some fluency, though some said that I spoke it like a Wiesbaden butcher. There was always an air of suspicion in Berlin that played upon the faces of people whom you were meeting for the first time. I found this disconcerting and for much of my early time in Berlin, I restricted myself to the company of other foreigners, expatriates and, of course, other journalists. There was little national pride left now in Germany and attempts to display any were quickly suppressed, so it was no wonder that patriotism took refuge in the beer-halls and rathskellers of Berlin-by-night. One of the journalists with whom I became a close friend was an American, named Alec. He was a doughboy in France in that final year of the conflict and we had, it seemed, been in several same places at several same times. This was enough to ensure ourselves that we must have met before and that was as good a reason as any to continue the bonhomie.

We never spoke much about the war or our part in it except in the most general of terms and we both hastened to find some device by which we could change the subject. I found Alec to be of strange manner. He was always straightforward in either condemnation or praise but sought to dissemble should the conversation drift into any aspect of the fighting. I attributed his strangeness to the effect upon his nerve during the war in France. For my own part, I thought that I was able to handle well the aftermath. I soon got over the sleepless nights and tortured dreams that came when, finally, Morpheus took me to his bosom. I believed body and soul that I, one of the fortunate few, had come through it all unscathed of mind and manner. But I recall a dinner with my father where I mentioned the disturbing number of suicides among those still young men, veterans of the Great War. I sympathised that they could no longer find their balance in a world they lost when they fought to preserve that very world. Though I did not condemn them, I called them strange then and odd. My father held my gaze for some long seconds before he said, in quiet voice, that I was one among them. I sought to deny this accusation almost as soon as it was spoken but he was as quick to show me ways in which my own personality had become seriously altered. I was, to some degree, aware of those changes but attributed it all to the fact that I was maturing. But it was not so. It was as my father said.

Neither Alec nor I were ensnared by romantic involvement in those early days and so most of our time was spent together in the company of other hedonistic young men and women. We caroused, drank, and made good contacts that furthered our careers. We became intimate associates with consular staff from several embassies, giving us an inside source for breaking or about to break news items. All aspects of our lives, barring our health, prospered from an almost licentious lifestyle. It was such a lifestyle of abandon that it was almost with relief that I surrendered to a more structured and steady existence with my marriage to Elsa, with whom you are most certainly aware, though her much-loved books are authored under a nom de plume. But here I get ahead of myself, for the story I wish to tell you occurred fully one year before I met the beautiful, sunny girl who would become my wife. That sober and happy event would occur in the same year the National Socialist German Worker's Party began its rise as a potent force in German politics, and just before the world was plunged into economic depression.

The coterie that included Alec and myself was well known at certain restaurants, *kaffeehäuser*, and the rathskellers we all frequented. Much valuable work-related information was quietly passed on to us there, sometimes for cash or sometimes for future favours. We got to know and recognise at sight many of the regular patrons of these establishments and, in some cases, joined them in conversation.

This was not always as simple as it may sound due to the suspicious nature of so many Germans after the war. It was not prudent, it was learned, to let one's views on certain matters become known. I must admit to my ignorance in those very early days of my introduction to German society. We often would find ourselves at a table with young German men at a rathskeller we particularly enjoyed, and when the topic of conversation drifted to those emotion-charged years of the war, almost none would admit to having been in the army. Though it was quite clear they must have been, they manufactured unlikely stories as to occupations held in Germany for all those years. My understanding of their motive came to fruition one night when our table became louder in direct proportion to the amount of beer with which we swilled our forever-parched throats. I do not remember the lead-up to the anecdote that Alec was prompted to relate of an incident in France. But it was quickly topped by another in the same vein by one of the German group of rowdies at our table, and then by another, not to be outdone. The boisterous happening did not go unnoticed by a sullen-looking group of aesthetes at an adjoining table. It is odd how something that should have been lost in the general din of noise from patron and cabaret music could become such a point of focus and attention. One of those aesthetes banged but once his near-empty stein of beer on the table and all eyes and ears turned to witness the event this proclaimed. There was a moment when the agitated brew remaining in the stein frothed and foamed in

consequence but soon lost all import with his muttered comment that surrounded the word, fascist, and led to sudden tension all across the hall. It was met with retort from our table and with challenge from theirs. It began with a sudden commotion that was quickly a brawl. I was far more fortunate than my friend, Alec. A huge forearm swept out of nowhere and knocked me back to sprawl on my behind some distance from where I had just been sitting. Other hands reached down to pluck me from the floor and settle me onto a bench to witness the result of the ruckus. The unfortunate Alec, with no love for the communists, struck a blow that was made ineffectual by the brewer's art. He was in turn struck with some indeterminate object that poleaxed him to the floor, blackening both his eyes and rending his cheek. He was removed, along with the rest of the combatants, to spend the remainder of the night in a gaol cell, courtesy of the quick response by the polizei. I was able to declare for him, and a few other of those for whom I could personally vouch, the following morning, and to see that Alec and they received proper medical attention. But I had gained some valuable insight into the post-war German psyche.

One of those denizens of the rathskeller was a man whom I had, on many occasions, acknowledged with a nod or a word of recognition, but with whom I had been unable to begin any intercourse or dialogue. I did make several attempts but was either ignored entirely, as if I was not there attempting to reach him, or rebuffed in harsh, guttural dismissal. I admit to being somewhat intrigued by his enigmatic manners. I enquired about him but gleaned scant knowledge for the effort. Some who had heard him speak said he was Bavarian. Though he dressed as a factory worker, no one knew for sure if he was thus employed, and more than one declared him to be on a pension. He smelled badly, as if he went for very long periods without bathing or scouring his clothes. This odour was not of honest labour turned musk but the unpleasant stink of reclusion. It was probably good fortune that he always sat alone and never in company, or it may have been the reason. I continued to nod at him when he entered the beer-hall or to acknowledge him when he had arrived before me, but I had long since given up trying to speak with him. He was tolerated, I was told, because he gave no trouble and usually departed before the, dare I say it, better class of customer arrived in the very late evening.

One night I noticed a stranger to the rathskeller. He was seated opposite the peculiar man at the other wall, and was staring at him as if trying to recall where he had seen him before. I observed this odd vignette for a time before noting that the stranger's drink had finished before his thirst, and he was patting his pockets in a vain attempt to find the funds to buy another. I signalled to a barmaid to bring me two steins of beer and joined the stranger at his table, cordially pushing across one of the steins to replace his empty lager glass.

“Excuse me for intruding. But I noticed you looking at that man over there as if you might know him. I am most curious about him and wonder if you are acquainted with him or can tell me anything about him that could further satisfy my curiosity. I, and others, have attempted to converse with him but we have met with no success at all”.

“He is from Bavaria. I think his name is Max Rittenauer”.

The answer was grudgingly given and even that much would not have been forthcoming except for his thirst. I saw his eyes travel my length as he sized me up before deigning to answer. He would have concluded that I was a foreigner by my habit as well as traces of my origin in the way I handled his language. I decided to take a punt.

“He has been coming here for some time and we have been unable to discover much about him, though we all are in agreement, from his bearing, he is a veteran. Perhaps you served with him”?

I watched him carefully but did my best to disguise it. I could immediately see that look of suspicion when it crossed his face and saw in his eyes the beginnings of a plausible lie. He would have finished his drink in one quaff had it not been still near the brim and taken his leave with some excuse or other. I was not about to let that happen. As soon as his drink was but quarter full, I would call for another and for as many thereafter until I had all this gentleman knew or until the bribe of fresh beer was no longer a currency. I was prepared to look very sceptical should he attempt to lie and tell me he remained in Germany in some occupation vital to the war effort. I think he discerned that a lie would not wash and spared me the trouble.

“I was a headquarters clerk in the army. I never was closer to the fighting than perhaps the occasional sound of artillery. I doubt he would have served with me. I am not even sure that he is Max Rittenauer, the more I look at him”.

He was becoming most uncomfortable and was trying to finish his drink in order to end the conversation. I took pity on him.

“Come, my friend. Join the rest of us at our table. I will stand you beer for the rest of the evening and you will enjoy their acquaintance, for almost all of them, they will tell you, were simple company clerks during those brutal years as well”.

He looked little relieved but followed me to the table where I introduced him to the others. It was not long before his doubts subsided though, and he told us all he knew of Sergeant Max Rittenauer. He was Bavarian as we already established but he was

also much decorated and he was a famed sniper. As soon as he spoke the word, I recalled a terrifying moment of my own when I damned all German snipers. It was clear by his knowledge of such things, that our informant was not some company clerk and that what he knew was from personal experience. His own comrades shunned Rittenauer, not openly, but with a reluctance to know him as if he were of another caste. There was a feeling that what he did was unholy. It was not the impersonal killing of battle rage, but the cold, deliberate death of murder. Moreover, it was felt to some degree that his actions might draw attention to them and mark them for targeting. The Allied forces employed snipers also and their activity seemed to increase, and so had their marksmanship. To some, it seemed retaliatory. As the war neared its inevitable conclusion, some others began to think of the possibility of retribution for what they feared might be regarded as a terrible crime. I suddenly felt sorry for Rittenauer. It must have been horrible enough to know the hatred of the enemy, but to sense it from his comrades and to be alienated by all must have taken its toll. Perhaps his madness now was part of that price.

I am left wondering to even this day if Rittenauer had known that we were discussing him that night. I wonder if he heard his name and could even hear our conversation or if he recognised the stranger from some distant battlefield of memory. It seems so unlikely; yet, no more than three evenings later when Alec and I turned up to haunt the rathskeller, we were startled by the sight of Rittenauer seated at his usual table but not in his usual dress. Above his civilian trousers, he was wearing a stained field-grey tunic of the German army, and pinned to his left breast was the Iron Cross 1st Class, and around his neck on wide ribbon could be seen the Iron Cross 2nd Class. There were two other medals suspended from his neck that neither Alec nor I could see properly. We were told by another of our group, with some degree of awe, that he was certain one was the Bavarian Military Merit Cross with crown and swords, awarded only for extreme bravery, and generally to those who had already earned the *Eiserne Kreuz 1-Klasse*. Beneath the medal pinned to his breast, and precisely placed was, we were informed, a wound medal. Apart from this ostentatious and bizarre display of decorations, presumably earned, there was nothing to set Herr Rittenauer out of place from his usual visitations. There was, however, an exception to that remark for which we did not at that time make a connection.

Much later that same evening, a man dressed in a rumpled brown suit and wearing a fedora approached Rittenauer's table. The man said something to him and promptly sat opposite. They exchanged but few words, and those mostly on behalf of the man in the brown suit. Herr Rittenauer seemed alarmed and somewhat puzzled and appeared to continually query the man's remarks. I contemplated finding some ploy to move within earshot but that idea was cut short when the man

spat out a few words of obvious contempt, though I could not hear them, and quickly stood. I did not see anything further as the cabaret had just begun and many stood to applaud the featured act. When they regained their seating, the man had vanished. It was evident that Herr Rittenauer left shortly after but I missed his departure in my enjoyment of the entertainment. We openly wondered who the man in the rumpled brown suit was and what his connection to Rittenauer might be. We concluded from our past experiences of Rittenauer that there was likely no connection and the man had simply approached him in response to his display of the medals. Whether he had taken offence or had attempted to congratulate Rittenauer we could not deduce, and when Herr Rittenauer turned up again two nights later, he was dressed as usual and the medals not in sight. And so, we forgot about the episode.

I do not wish to give the impression that I habituated the rathskeller with my custom. It was often just a quick visit to make contact with associates or to enjoy a hasty meal and almost as much time was spent in a rather more cultured atmosphere. There were several fine restaurants in Berlin and my employer happily paid my accounts at more than one of those. We also had dutiful rounds at the many embassies for tea and dinners and formal functions. The constant need for maintaining our connections and more importantly, our informants, kept us on the hop. Many of these observations of Herr Rittenauer were from other sources that knew of our idle curiosity with the man. It was thus that we were to learn of the tragic news.

The year following my taking up career and residence in Berlin was filled by the reporting of revolution and counter-revolution, of riot and strikes, assassinations and murders and of attempted putsch. The murder of Rathenau, the Foreign Minister, in late June, only re-opened the animosities; for some of those involved with this murder had been dealt with leniently in what became known as the Kapp Putsch in 1920. The beleaguered government lurched and stumbled, unable to come to grips with the unrest, and inflation, already at its highest level since the war, worsened. As my second year in the maelstrom that was Berlin neared its end, another widely reported putsch took place in a Munich *Burgerbrau-Keller*. A man of determined politics, and consumed with nationalistic pride, broke into a meeting, escorted by two, heavily-armed associates. They fired weapons into the air in order to call for attention. Then a man known as Herr Hitler strode to the speaker's platform. Gesticulating wildly, it was said, he fired his own weapon into the ceiling, calling for silence and shouting, "The National Republic is proclaimed".

I had occasion to hear Herr Hitler speak a few times earlier at political rallies or meetings, which he did with some fervour. I also read copies of several speeches transcribed by fellow journalists on behalf of their employers. I fully admit that I then agreed with much of his rhetoric.

He was passionate and described not only the ills that had befallen Germany, but also plans by which Germany could recover from them, especially from her economic woes. This was rhetoric that did not fall upon deaf ears within the German populace. The Bavarian siege was of short duration however, and the charismatic Herr Hitler was sent to prison. I thought, and fully expected, this would end his political ambitions. It had not been long before this event that I first crossed the path of Herr Rittenauer, and not long after this event that I was to learn of the tragedy that befell him.

### Chapter 3

It was late afternoon. Berlin skies were sullen grey and it had continued to drizzle with a cold rain that made walking from appointment to appointment on the slick city streets a discomfort and a slight annoyance. I was tired and under some pressure to file my copy before deadline as I made my way back to my office in the Alexanderplatz. The rain had, I supposed, kept others from leaving their own offices and so they made good use of the telephone exchange. I shook the rain from my cap on entering our offices, more as an expression of my feelings than for any practical purpose, and was handed several messages that were received in my absence. The young woman who was our receptionist and telephonist took her duties very seriously and always recited the names on the messages as she handed them over. This was a ritual procedure that politeness demanded we allow her to perform, for she took a perfunctory dismissal very badly. I rarely minded, though I seldom listened with any rapt regard, for I enjoyed the simple pleasure of gazing at her. She was very young, doubtless not yet twenty, but compellingly attractive. The list of names was familiar and I surmised the nature of the call with each one except for a message to contact Herr Ernst Schlage of the polizei. It would have to wait, for my deadline would not.

It was almost six o'clock and the grey, rainy sky had given over to the darker onset of evening before I finished all my work. I was stiff and uncomfortable from concentration for so many hours and my eyes were sore. The office lamps were lit though I had not noticed when they came on. There were still a few others working in their cubicles outside of my own office. I was one of the few who had an entire office of their own and I suspect this was due to Chesterton's influence and it gave me a certain status among the other correspondents. I stared at the message from Herr Schlage hoping it might contain some clue as to what was on the policeman's mind. I went through the other messages. Most of those were from people I would run into later in the evening anyway, and the others could wait until tomorrow. That left Herr Schlage. The office exchange was still manned and I proceeded to make the call. When I enquired after Herr Schlage, I was informed that he had left for the evening and would not return until

the morning. I asked that he be told that I returned his call (it is not wise to be seen to be avoiding the police) and gave my name. There was a slight pause, a slight hesitation as if the person had been reminded of something on hearing my name.

*“Ein moment, bitte”.*

When the voice at the other end of the line came back, it was to inform me that Herr Schlage had left another number at which I might reach him. Curiouser and curiouser, I thought, recalling the line from Alice in Wonderland. I quickly made the new connection and Herr Schlage, himself, answered it. When I established my credentials, he informed me that he might have some unpleasant news for me. There had been a death. My immediate thoughts flew to my father and a chill of dread coursed my body.

“Do you know a Herr Maximilian Rittenauer”?

Despite all of the drama and speculation surrounding that man at the time, I honestly admit that I could not recollect the name and was about to tell Herr Schlage that it had drawn a blank. Then the improbable image of a man in soiled field-jacket and bedecked with several medals for courage and bravery focused in my mind. I suppose it was concern for my father that the name was so delayed in coming to the surface, but there it was, and I cautiously admitted to it to the policeman.

“Herr Rittenauer died in his home, yesterday. Evidently, he committed suicide with the aid of an army issue pistol. Did you know Herr Rittenauer well enough to make a formal identification? We are unable to trace any relatives.”

For a man whose living is earned from words, I was at a loss for them then when they were sorely needed. I was also at a loss to understand why his words left such impact upon me. No, I did not know Herr Rittenauer. I had never been able to speak with Herr Rittenauer. I knew nothing about Herr Rittenauer other than what could be gathered by conjecture and gossip. I was nothing to Herr Rittenauer and Herr Rittenauer was nothing to me. Yet, why then should I now feel sorrow for Herr Rittenauer? All of these thoughts played across my mind until I realized, with a start, that the policeman was still awaiting an answer.

“I am not sure if my identification will be sufficient, but I do know that Herr Rittenauer was Bavarian. Perhaps relations can be found for him there? However, Herr Schlage, I will help in whatever manner that I can”.

“Your offer to assist is very much appreciated. We did know of his birthplace as well, but no one of his family is still alive that we can trace. Would it be possible for you to make identification for us at the police morgue tomorrow, say about nine o’clock”?

“Nine o’clock it is. But, tell me, Herr Schlage, how is it that you came to contact me, for I have no association with the man”?

“Ah! We were told that he frequented a nearby rathskeller. When we spoke with the proprietors and staff, they informed us of your interest in him. Simple police work. May I ask in turn, out of my own personal curiosity, a thing which plagues us policemen, what prompted your interest in Rittenauer”?

“That, Herr Schlage, is something I cannot tell you, for I do not know the why of it, myself. He just seemed so oddly out of place that it attracted my attention.

“Ha! You might consider giving up journalism and becoming a policeman, yourself. You seem to have a nose for things”.

“Herr Schlage, I do not like uniforms. *Auf Wiederhören*”!

I met with Alec for a late supper at Romanisches Café, as prearranged. The drizzle had turned to showers and I was wet and cold before I got to the warmth of the intimately lit restaurant. I had not eaten since a breakfast of sweet-rolls and coffee and I was ravenous. Strangely, I broke the news of Rittenauer’s death to Alec almost as if he were a member of the family and needed to be protected from the shock. I was gratified to see he took it as badly as did I. Neither of us was in the mood to go to the rathskeller that evening and sombrelly tarried over our coffee and sweets. Then we parted and each went home and to bed. Those people I had expected to run into this evening would have to wait until a more convenient time. Alec agreed to accompany me to the morgue in the morning.

The morgue was harshly and garishly lit, clinically cold and it reminded me more of a torture-chamber than a hospital. Herr Schlage, who had requested we call him, Ernst, was pleased to see us both and offered an honest handshake. We stood looking at the corpse. In the repose of death, his features softened and we both were shocked to see what a young man Rittenauer was. Had we been obliged to guess his age from our sightings of him at the rathskeller, we would, as Alec and I later agreed, have put his age as more nearly fifty. His hair, for reasons best known to the examiner, had been close-cropped and, though white, it was not the white of age, and the cropping gave it a youth not pronounced in the unkempt lank to which we were accustomed. The seamed lines of his face that we took to be wrinkles of age had smoothed by removal of the grime as the

body was prepared for examination. There was a small hole in his neck that in this light and against the exsanguine flesh looked obscene. Part of the skull to the back of the head was missing we were told, but not obliged to inspect for ourselves. Several scars from old wounds disfigured his body. I felt rising indignation to match that on the day I witnessed that young man, that boy, flung from the parapet at the scene of his first battle by an unholy bullet. I fought it back, for indignation now was as useless an emotion as it was then.

“It is my belief that this is the man I knew as Maximilian Rittenauer”.

My voice echoed slightly against the tiled walls, as did Alec’s when he intoned the same words in an almost sepulchral litany.

“It is my belief that this is the man I knew as Maximilian Rittenauer”.

The body was laid out naked and I wanted to place a sheet over him, for it was cold in the room, but I did nothing and said even less.

We accompanied Ernst back to his office to sign some formal statement of necessity, and it was pleasant to leave the morgue though the office to which Ernst took us was only slightly less austere. We signed our papers amid a low hum of activity and stood to make our departure and to close the chapter on the life of Sergeant Maximilian Rittenauer, late of the Prussian army.

“Would you like to see his rooms? Where he lived”?

I could think of no reason why I should want to do so and was therefore much surprised when Alec agreed that he did want to view the scene of the tragedy. I began to wonder if I had missed something in the conversation, but held my tongue and let Alec take the lead. Ernst left our company momentarily to return with a carbon copy of the police report. It must have been one of the last copies, for it was barely legible and needed to be turned on the oblique to a source of light in order to read it at all. Ernst had some other matters pressing but agreed to meet us later that afternoon at that unprepossessing residence on a street not far from the rathskeller.

I called into my office to clear up anything of any urgency that may have arisen in my morning absence. I felt obliged to notify my superior that I would be spending most of the day out of touch, and why. He was not too concerned for most of us lived to a schedule of catch-as-catch-can and there was nothing of any pressing nature that demanded my presence. I did some paperwork and attended to the messages that had built up in my tray, and before long it was time to make my way to the busy Potsdamer Platz to meet Alec for luncheon at Café Josty, whence we would take a taxi to our afternoon appointment. Alec was at the café by the time I arrived, and it looked

by his empty coffee cup that he had been there for a while. He replied to my query that he checked in with his office the same as I, but there was nothing needing his attention and he came straight to the café where he spent his time productively reading the police report that detailed Rittenauer's suicide. Fortunately, having already worked his way through the report it was easier for him to read it back to me, and where, due to its quality, the poor copy still presented difficulty, he was able to provide me with the gist of the paragraph.

An English male tourist raised an alarm at 1615 hours when he hailed two uniformed policemen walking a beat to say that a gunshot had been heard further down the *straße* and a woman was seeking assistance. He then guided the police to the house where they witnessed a woman, Frau Dunst, the housekeeper, banging on a door and shouting out, "Herr Rittenauer. Herr Rittenauer".

Frau Dunst reported that she heard a gunshot from Herr Rittenauer's suite of rooms while she was in the kitchen at the back of the house preparing the evening meal for Herr Rittenauer. She rushed to his door but it was locked and he would not answer. She could hear his gramophone playing.

At that moment, the front door to the street opened and a strange man appeared and enquired if all was well, for he had just heard a gunshot from the house. His command of the language was not good, and it took some effort for her to understand what he was saying but she then implored him to get some assistance.

The policemen, one of whom was our new acquaintance, Ernst Schlage, took over from Frau Dunst to pound on the door and demand that the door be opened by whoever was in the room. That failed, and an attempt to turn the door handle proved the door was locked. Ernst raised a foot and kicked the door with the intention of breaking his way into the rooms. The doorjamb gave with the rewarding sound of rending, splintering wood, and falling metal. The door shot open to leave a night-chain swinging gently back and forth like a pendulum, the slide having been torn off the door by the forced entry.

Herr Rittenauer was lying on the floor on his back, on top of a toppled bentwood chair that he, presumably, had been sitting in when he shot himself. His medals were on the table together with several photographs taken in the early days of the war, and of scenes later identified as being in Bavaria. A soft, oily rag, the size of a handkerchief, was spread on the table and three 7.65mm Parabellum cartridges were stood in a neat row on top of the rag and next to a near-empty bottle of peppermint schnapps and a glass. As if for artistic effect, a highly polished, leather *pickelhaube* bearing a Bavarian helmet-plate formed a backdrop to the sinister-looking bullets. Both a Parabellum Pistole P08, of service issue, and a metal-

framed photograph of an attractive young woman dressed in dirndl were lying on his body. One shot from the 8-round magazine had been fired, the casing found only a short distance from the body, and Schlage determined the pistol was recently fired. The gramophone had long since finished playing and the needle was noisily scratching its way on the end-groove. According to the report, Schlage opened the lid, retracted the arm, and switched off the machine before examining the rest of the room.

It appeared that Rittenauer shot himself under the chin and the bullet smashed through his brain and blew skull fragments out of the back of his head. Though awkward, given the ergonomic design of the Luger, it was probably the least awkward of any attempted self-inflicted shot other than pointing it at the temple. However, temple-shots did not always penetrate the skull and were apt to miss the brain entirely. There were blood-spatters on the wall behind the chair, and these were low, close to the baseboard, suggesting that they were on a downward trajectory after being sprayed from the wound, so it looked as if Herr Rittenauer had been sitting upright in the chair when he pulled the trigger.

Herr Schlage made consistent notes of everything he did and everything he looked at. This included opening and closing cupboards and drawers and looking through books for items hidden between the pages. Rittenauer's suite consisted of three small rooms. The room in which he was found was used as a sitting and dining room for he had gotten out of the habit of joining his housekeeper for meals at the dining table, and took a plate into his room. One room, containing only a trundle bed and a nightstand, was put to obvious use. The third room contained a large, overstuffed easy chair and a magazine-rack that contained only out-of-date newspapers.

The sitting room was the only room with windows to the outside. These were two sash windows and both were locked by a catch that prevented the lifting of the lower sash. Schlage tested the sash lock and found it firm and secure, and designed to defeat the insertion of a blade from outside the window to prise the lock open. There was only one door between the rooms and that was from the sitting room to a short hallway opening on to the others. The entrance door, now made useless by Herr Schlage's policeman's boot, was the only entry to the suite. That door had been locked and the key was in the lock on the inside and the night-chain was employed. Where the night-chain slide had been torn from the door was clearly visible though the chain had by now stopped its pendulum motion from its fixed point on the wall next to the splintered jamb.

The hinges to the door were on the inside and painted over so it was clear that the door had not been removed, possibly since it was first installed many years previous.

The rooms offered a cloying unpleasant stench of feral animal as if it were some she-bear's den. Frau Dunst complained that she was allowed into these rooms only occasionally. Whenever that happened to be, she gave them a thorough cleaning and opened the windows and doors to a good draught of fresh air. But Herr Rittenauer complained about the smell of the soaps, and those occasions became fewer. She was left pretty much on her own, paid well for her services and kept the rest of the house spotless. She also made certain that the farmhouse-style meals she prepared for Herr Rittenauer were plentiful and rich and nutritious. She had no idea what he did on those nights he did not spend at the rathskellers or what he did when he came home from them, and he never, to her knowledge, was employed. He often visited the post-office and she guessed he was receiving a pension of some sort but did not seek to pry. She enjoyed her position and they were hard to find these days. He was always a quiet man and the only sound that came from his rooms was gramophone music that she seldom recognised but guessed was Wagner. She found the medals in one of the drawers while she was cleaning on that rare occasion when she was allowed in but had no idea where he kept the gun. She discovered a bayonet in the back of a wardrobe when she attempted to take his clothes to be laundered. The only laundry service she was regularly allowed to provide was the bed linen but that was barely once a month, when she would find them bundled up and placed in the hallway.

Frau Dunst and the English tourist, Ronald James Wiggins, entered the room together following the policemen. He suddenly became pale on seeing the spectacle of the body and was obliged to take hold of the door for the moment in order to steady himself. He then asked if he might be allowed to leave. Schlage consented but requested he remain outside of the house to be interviewed. Wiggins nodded assent and was later found sitting on the stoop with his head between his knees, shaken and still looking pale. The other policeman, whose name could not be determined by the faint carbon imprint, interviewed Wiggins while Schlage continued prowling the rooms. Wiggins was an Englishman from Somerset. A relative was killed in the fighting in France and he wanted to see if it was possible to view the resting place. This brief tour of Germany was simply an extension to that. He was trying, he said, to get some feeling for what it must have been like for the combatants and spent considerable time studying records and events of the battlefields. These were his last few days in Berlin, and indeed, in Germany. His given reason for being in front of Rittenauer's house to hear the gunshot was coincidence. He managed to get himself turned around while walking and wound up on the short *straße* by error. He was making his way back to his incorrect turning and was passing the house when he heard the definite sound of a single gunshot. He rushed to offer assistance, thinking perhaps a crime was being committed. He

thought better of pounding on the door as it might alert the shooter to make his escape. He tested the door and found it unlocked. He pushed it open in time to see the distressed Frau Dunst at the door to the suite. His command of the language was barely adequate to get by in daily communication of his needs, but he was able, finally, to get Frau Dunst to understand his offer to assist. All of Wiggins' documents were in order and they verified his summary of his travels. He was asked to give the exact time of the gunshot but he had no idea, and it never occurred to him to verify the time but he estimated it was only within a few minutes of his first contact with the police officers. He was asked to complete a written statement, which he was more than happy to do, and it was consistent with the notes taken verbally at the scene. Wiggins asked for and received permission to return home to England, as it was not likely any inquest would be held into the affair.

The body was taken to a city hospital and transferred to the police morgue. Two medical examinations found the cause of death to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. The gun barrel had been pressed up under the chin as confirmed by powder burns, and the bullet traversed through the soft tissue and exited the skull, taking a large chunk of bone with it. The spent bullet was found amid the gore under the body where it lay on the floor.

Neither medical report nor the written statement by Wiggins was appended. Other than that, the document was thorough, detached and most of all, grim. Our meals arrived during the reading of the document and our points and comments were punctuated by stabbing forks in the air between the movements of morsels from plate to mouth. We both grew silent, lost in our own thoughts and I compared the demented image of the man thrusting a gun barrel under his chin with that of the calm young man, lying still in death in a cold, tiled room that seldom saw emotion.

I sensed, more than noticed, that Alec was about to say something rather profound, whereupon I imagined I would respond with something of equal or more brilliant profundity by way of retort, for that was the easy way of our friendship.

“What do you suppose Schlage is up to”?

I was in the process of stuffing a forkful of *apfel-strudel* into my maw and unable to reply, thus giving me precious moments to consider his question. Those moments were wasted for I could not determine the direction of his query much less provide an answer that could be deemed suitable. I hated having to admit that I had no idea what he was talking about. I much preferred being one step ahead of Alec, for though he was gracious in defeat; he was unbearable in victory, a poor winner by any standard.

“Why should Schlage be up to anything”?

“Some three months ago, an American was run down by an automobile. He stepped off the tram and into the path of the vehicle. There was nothing the driver of the auto could do to prevent the accident, and it was entirely the fault of the pedestrian. I thought it would be good copy for a slow day and requested to see the police report. I was given short shrift. I could not even get the death details, even though he died in hospital from some internal disorder as a result of the accident. And now, here is Rittenauer, a German national about whom we know little and have no claim upon. He kills himself in pretty obvious circumstance and Herr Schlage, call me Ernst, bitte, Ernst, offers us a copy of the actual report, asks us to view the body, and suggests we might like a grand tour of the scene of the event. Does that not strike even you, as odd? Whenever did you last have a policeman offer to be your friend, and whenever did you begin trusting policemen”?

Being phrased that way, yes it did strike me as odd. In fact, the more I reviewed the whole sequence of events that led to our next appointment, the more odd it all became. Schlage said he interviewed the proprietors of the rathskeller to get my name. Why not ask the proprietors to make the identification of the body? Surely, some of the wait-staff had seen, and even talked to Rittenauer far more frequently than either Alec or I.

“Just a minute. Why didn’t Frau Dunst go to the morgue? And why didn’t Schlage bother to mention a housekeeper? For that matter, he seemed to go to some length to tell us what happened but told us absolutely nothing other than Rittenauer apparently killed himself with his service pistol”.

Alec simply grinned that annoying grin of his when he has outmanoeuvred you or bested you, and nodded knowingly. It is one of his least desirable qualities.

“Finally, old chum, finally. Slow as turtles. I think we should go and beard our friend, Ernst, bitte, Ernst, in his den. I am sure I remember that it is your turn to pay for the meal. *Nicht wahr*”?

Ernst Schlage acquainted us with Frau Dunst by informing her that we were friends of Herr Rittenauer and were assisting him in finalizing some details. We apologized for our intrusion. Schlage, it seems, had given the housekeeper permission to remain domiciled at the residence until the investigation was finished. She was distraught over the event and Schlage soothed her distress by informing her that the investigation was likely to last for a considerable time and she need be in no hurry to make her arrangements. I suspect that Herr

Schlage either overstepped his authority by making such a promise or sensed something about the event that escaped the obvious.

The rooms were exactly as found when Ernst planted his boot against the entry door, excepting for the removal of the body. The bentwood chair lay on its back on the floor as found, though doubtless having been shunted somewhat out of position when the body was lifted.

Alec and I wandered the floor examining, in order, the items detailed on the copy of the report. We noted the table, the bullets, the helmet, the schnapps, the glass, and all those items that filled the report in the manner of someone completing a stock-take of some bankrupt warehouse. The gun, we were told, was taken to police headquarters for safekeeping. We, too, tested the sash lock and took note of the key in the door and the broken night-chain. We wandered from room to room as if planning to upgrade the police report. Schlage patiently waited in the sitting room while we touched, probed and, perhaps not a good idea, fingered the evidence. Schlage spoke only to inform us what we should be expecting to find as we slid-open drawers or looked under furniture or probed closets. I could see no value in this exploration, especially so as Ernst had done it all before us, and I still had no clue as to what he was up to, and why he had chosen us to become so intimately involved with this investigation.

I spent more time than necessary admiring the splintered doorjamb and the extent of the damage caused by one well-placed kick. It would be a nice endorsement adding to my stature if, in retrospect, I was able to say that I was sensing something was wrong even at that moment. The truth is I was bored. I was stymied. You cannot look for something that does not exist. You cannot find something that is not there. I really wanted to finish up and forget about it, and I wondered if Alec, still poring over objects, was merely feigning an interest. He edged back to the door where I was standing and studied the splintered wood as I had been doing, as if I were on the right track all along. This was the third time he performed these same observations, and he did so all the while under the very watchful eye of Herr Schlage. Alec squatted to examine some screws, presumably scattered from the door hardware when all was kicked asunder. It was at that same moment that I detected a stiffening of attention in the posture of Herr Schlage.

Alec picked up two of the screws and Schlage took one pace forward. Alec partially closed the entry door in order to examine the wood there. Still holding the screws, Alec began to closely examine what was left of the mortise the deadbolt had rent. Herr Schlage was, meanwhile, moving slowly closer as if subjected to some great magnetic force of attraction that involuntarily drew him in. It was now, thank God, my turn. I watched Alec's examinations of those things I had looked at and studied before, and suddenly realized what

was not there but should have been, and what was there but should not have been.

“It is enough”?

The softly spoken words by Ernst Schlage answered my question of why he was allowing us such uninterrupted access to the scene. Alec, holding the screws close to his eyes for minute examination, nodded.

“*Jawohl*, Herr Schlage, it is enough”.

We drove in the police Opel to an outdoor café on the *Kurfürstendamm*. It was a place frequented by what was called the café crowd: artists and writers in imitation of the left-bank aesthetes of Paris. A uniformed policeman sitting at a table in plain view was not good for custom, and I had the feeling that Schlage had brought us here because it appealed to his sense of humour.

“Who do you suspect”?

Alec’s question directed to the policeman caught me off guard. I had only just reconciled my mind to believing that something was wrong with the obvious and I was far from the next step of what that something wrong implied. I cautioned myself that I really needed to catch up.

“It is not in my nature to be a gambler. I believe only in things that are certain or absolute. Any hunch I have I follow only to where it leads, not to where it might lead. But if I were a betting man, my wager would be on the Englishman, Wiggins”.

I was caught mentally lagging behind the flow of conversation yet again. The leap from something being wrong, to determination of a culprit just seemed too desperate a jump of conclusion and I felt the need to voice an objection, if just for the sake of appearance.

“Wiggins? Do you really suspect Wiggins? How would it be possible for him to have a hand in Rittenauer’s death, given the facts”?

“Given the facts as they appear, no, Wiggins cannot be implicated. But the facts, as they appear, may not be facts. That is why I allowed you both to make that discovery for yourselves. And the only person likely, at this stage, seems to be Mr Wiggins”.

“I still don’t understand why Wiggins. Does he look to be a criminal type? Is it possible he and the housekeeper are staging something in concert”?

Alec had said nothing since posing his first question and he reached into the pocket of his shirt to withdraw the screws he picked up from the floor earlier. He made as if to examine them again and Schlage, looking slightly alarmed, reached over to snatch them from his fingers and to pocket them in his own coat. I fancied I saw a reproving look pass over his face as he glared at Alec.

“There is no such thing as a criminal type. If that were so then we could simply arrest all of those who fitted the type because sooner or later they would commit a crime. Frau Dunst is not even to be considered. She is entirely without motive. For as long as Rittenauer lived, she had a place to live, all of her meals included and a wage besides. Her job was not difficult because Rittenauer made very few demands and I suspect that if Frau Dunst merely left his meals at his door, she would not hear from him from one month to the next. No, she stands to lose far too much. We have not found any relatives of Rittenauer nor is there any evidence he created papers that might have provoked his housekeeper into killing him for the profit thereof.”

“I have been a policeman for a long time. There are some things I have learned. People almost always lie to policemen. It may not be black is red type of lie, but everyone is wary of somehow incriminating themselves, so they do not always tell the truth. We, of course, almost always find the truth and so we wonder what reason that person had for lying. Some lies that people tell are designed to fill in a gap. They feel that if there is a gap then there may have been time for them to commit a crime and so they stretch things to fill in the gaps. But no one can account for every minute, the minutes go by without notice and police investigators can tell when someone is stretching the fabric of their story to fill a gap. Mr Wiggins had no gaps. Everything he reported was consistent and plausible. Everything he said he had done and where he had been was all plainly visible. The answers he gave to my colleague matched precisely the details he committed to paper. That shouldn't have been so. Mr Wiggins appeared shaken and disturbed by the event he witnessed and was an unwitting participant in. He should have been a little confused, a little mixed up. Parts of his story should not have agreed so that we would have to go back and ask him again to clarify some things. But everything fitted exactly, and that should not have happened, and I want to know why. That is why Mr Wiggins is of interest to me”.

It was pleasant sitting there on the *Ku'damm* in the afternoon, watching the traffic of automobiles, horse-carriages, and young men in straw hats and pretty girls in close-fitting dresses. I was in love with Berlin. And sitting here in spring's warmth, drinking strong coffee and eating tempting Viennese-pastries while the world passed by outside my table, was an idyllic enchantment. I was loath to pursue this enigma of the even more enigmatic Herr Rittenauer.

“I fail to see why, if you believe Wiggins has some connection to this crime, you allowed him to escape home to England and out of your reach”.

“He has not escaped. He only believes that he is safe, and that being so, he will not hinder the investigation by destroying evidence that might implicate him. It is not my job to bring criminals to justice, it is my job to prove that they are criminals and need to be brought to justice”.

Alec had been struggling to consume an expensive cream-filled confection with some degree of dignity or at least to avoid spilling it over his attire and had remained silent through all of this. He mopped his face with a napkin and drained his coffee cup.

“Was the anomaly of the door sufficient to create your suspicion that someone else may have been there with Rittenauer? There is no proof that something is actually amiss with the door, although I agree it would certainly seem so. The fittings on the door may have been tampered with days before he was killed and have nothing at all to do with his death. I would have thought other evidence suggesting that Rittenauer was alone in the room is pretty conclusive. And what does the door suggest other than there being something possibly amiss”?

“I would have been suspicious if even one thing did not make sense, amiss, as you put it. I may not have pursued the investigation if it had been only the one thing. But once my suspicion was aroused, I began to look for other things that might also make no sense. There were several. And when there are several things in the investigation that do not make sense then the presented facts of the investigation must be wrong”.

“You discovered the screws on the floor all lying close together when, by rights, they should have been flung apart. None of the screws has any wood adhering to it. Had they been yanked out of the wood, they should have some fibres of the wood attached somewhere on their length. The wood fibres are missing. The only thing that would account for that would be if they were carefully unscrewed from the timber first”.

“The striker-plate was on the floor, where it landed after supposedly being ripped from the jamb by the deadbolt. It should have dragged its screws along with it, but neither of the screws was still attached, and there was no good reason for them to have been flung from the plate. And why were none of those screws found on the floor, bent? At least one screw, presumably, would have bent before releasing. There was not much left of the mortise in the doorjamb, but each screw-hole for the striker-plate was intact. That, itself, is odd. As you saw, there was clear evidence of the threading in the holes. The

threads should have ripped out, scouring the hole like a rasp. That can only mean the screws of the striker-plate were carefully removed before I kicked the door in”.

“The slide of the night-chain still had one screw attached and it was bent as the slide was torn from the door. If you examine the screw-holes in the door, they are differently sized. The one next to the jamb is larger. An examination of the hole shows that it has been reamed, a consequence of the slide having been yanked off the door. The other hole is intact. Clearly, that screw was carefully unscrewed before the event as well. The door and the locking mechanism had obviously been tampered with before we arrived. For some reason I have not yet determined, the night-chain slide was secured by only one screw and that screw was in the wrong position.”

I did not see the weight of evidence quite as clearly as Schlage, but his summing up was much as I deduced when Alec’s examination of the doorjamb prompted me to see the anomaly.

“But even so, Ernst, that may have nothing at all to do with the event of that afternoon. As Alec pointed out, those screws may have been removed and the night-chain position altered at any time in the past”.

“*Ach so!* But as I replied, when you find one thing suspicious, you are prompted to look for others. Tell me, did either of you happen to souvenir anything from the battlefields of France, like a handgun, perhaps”?

I immediately sympathised with my German friends who are reluctant to admit involvement with the war. My own first reaction to the question was to ask in turn, what made him think I was in the war. I recalled what he said about people not wanting to tell the truth to policemen. I wondered, on reflection, if Herr Schlage had done some homework long before he left a message for me to call him. I tried not to look guilty while it was Alec who responded.

“Well, I happened to. I managed to smuggle it home in fact. It is in a trophy case at my father’s house, along with some other memorabilia.”

“*Ach so!* Will you describe it for me”?

“It is what you would expect, a 9mm Luger P08 with 8-round magazine”.

“Would I be correct to say it was service issue and, not to be indelicate, previously held by a German soldier in the field”?

This was one of those moments when I would expect my friend, Alec, to start to dissemble and seek to change subjects. I sat forward as I

was most interested in what his reaction might be from this, so far friendly but probing interrogation.

“Yes”.

The simple declaration did not somehow surprise me but I could tell, and doubtless Ernst could too, that Alec wanted to say a whole lot more about the incident yet prudently chose to bide his tongue. Ernst was agreeably nodding his head and a small smile of triumph played on his lips as if he held the trump card.

“Then why do you suppose our friend, Sergeant Rittenauer, was issued with a 7.65mm Luger Pistolet that has not been in use since about 1908? The magazine was full except for the round that was put into Rittenauer’s head, yet there were three additional rounds on the table. Did you find a box of ammunition anywhere in his rooms? I did not. The brass cartridges were clean and shiny. If they had been stored in a drawer or a sock under the bed or something, they would have dulled. So, who cleaned them or who had recently purchased them? I saw you both finger the oily cloth on the table. I did not notice you sniff at it so it was clear to you, simply from touch, that it was light gun-oil. That of course, by the way, means you are both very familiar with such things. But did you find a gun cleaning kit anywhere? Did you find the source of the oil on the rag? I did not. Nor did I find anywhere the gun would have been normally kept. There was no place in any of the drawers that showed where the gun might have rested. I found no hiding places, and I did check very carefully. I found only a bayonet, a couple of knives and a steel helmet, a *stahlhelm*, at the back of his closet. I do not believe Rittenauer owned a gun and that means someone either gave it to him, or used it on him. The question is, who”?

The closet to which Ernst referred was little more than an alcove fronted by simple wardrobe doors. Alec and I had inspected it also and noted the bayonet on a leather belt and the *stahlhelm* that rested on a peg attached to the wall. However, my own reaction was curious on seeing these relics of the war, for the sight of the familiar coalscuttle helmet was far more ominous and threatening to me and recreated more sinister images than did the potential of the dangerous bayonet. Both items seemed to be hung there to wait the moment of a call to arms when they would be donned again, not like something that has been put away forever, whose use or need is long past.

“So why, Herr Schlage, are we here? Do you think that one of us might somehow be involved”?

“*Nein. Nein, durchaus nicht!* When I first learned of your interest in Rittenauer, you both became suspects, of course. But when I quickly discounted you and was able to remove you from any possible

involvement, I realised that you both could be of some invaluable assistance to me”.

Both? I wondered if Alec had also received a message from Herr Schlage, and if so, why had he then chosen to keep it hidden from me. From his next comment, it seemed our friend, Ernst, was also capable of mind reading.

“It was necessary only to contact one of you. All who profess knowledge of you agree. You are inseparable. To find one, you need only find the other. I would have been disappointed had Alec not been dragged along to the morgue with you and I was delighted to discover what I had been told about you was corroborated. But let us get back to the problem at hand. The scene in that room was designed to tell a story. What story did it tell both of you”?

Alec, to my amusement, was staring wistfully at the crumb remains of the pastry on his plate. He wiped them with his finger and transferred them to his mouth before speaking.

“Presumably, we have a veteran sitting alone in his rooms staring at old photographs of comrades. He has several mementoes of those years, like the *pickelhaube* and his medals for valour and bravery. He is drinking schnapps and maybe trying on the helmet. He is fondling and wiping his pistol. He is also looking at a young girl’s photograph, someone very dear to him considering the expensive framing for her picture. He becomes despondent and shoots himself, holding her picture close to him. But would he not have left a note or something”?

“People who intentionally kill themselves generally do so to relieve themselves of pain, it is a release. Those who leave notes generally do so to cause pain to others. It is a condemnation, blaming them for not being able to solve their problems or of relieving the pain. Many of those do not intend to die, they expect to be discovered in time, but the note, like a dagger dipped in poison, remains to be thrust into the heart of the other person or family. It is a selfish and petulant act performed by a very self-absorbed person. In the case of our Sergeant Rittenauer, your telling of the story could have been most likely quite correct. Except there is nothing to suggest he ever owned such a weapon. I also believe the *pickelhaube* shared the closet with *stahlhelm* and bayonet belt. So, why did they not adorn the table as well in this intimate reverie you describe”?

The three of us remained silent for some lengthy period, each involved in thoughts of our own. I often do not come off to advantage in this narrative because dear Alec would seem to be of quicker mind and is thus more quickly off the mark. It was the case in this instance as well.

“Two questions then, Ernst. What of the possibility that Rittenauer decided to ease his pain, and purchased a weapon recently? And how is it that we can be of help to you, for you seem to have gotten this mystery by the throat already”?

A benevolent smile came over Ernst’s face as if some matter of urgent concern had been resolved to his immense satisfaction, and for the first time since our initial meeting, he no longer appeared to look like a policeman, but a confederate.

“Rittenauer lived from week to week. Frau Dunst told me that on the same day of every week, the day upon which he was killed, he would go into town in the afternoon. He would be gone for several hours, perhaps dropping into a rathskeller for a meal and a drink. Because he would not need her for those hours, she would leave shortly behind him to attend to her own duties in town. She believed he was on a pension and went to collect his stipend on those days. She saw him on occasion going to the post-office. We have not been able to find the source of his income as yet, though we shall in due course. But he was a predictable man. We learned roughly how much he drank every week, and knowing his other expenses, we were able to calculate quite precisely, what the amount was that he received every week. This amount of money, give or take, was recovered from his body. Clearly, he had not made a purchase of a gun that day. I am sure he never made any such purchase; he never owned a gun”.

“I am convinced that the Englishman, Wiggins, murdered Rittenauer. Now that he is back in England, it poses some slight problem in investigating him. You have resources that I do not have without the need to explain my reasons for wanting them. Your governments do not take too kindly to such requests from a defeated enemy despite the appearance of cooperation. And if the motives of my investigation were made clear to them, in this case the British government, they would most likely go over my head to quash any investigation and claim it was a regrettable but clear-cut case of suicide. I would get a brief but pointed letter from my superiors and that would be the end of it, another injustice played upon Herr Rittenauer”.

My knowledge of such things led me to agree with Ernst on probable outcomes. He was in need of our assistance. I reached across the table to give my hand upon the deal. Alec, with a smirk in my direction that intimated I had stolen a march, did likewise.

We stood to adjourn and it was time to settle the account. There was a slight hesitation on the part of Ernst.

“Ah, this is a matter of some delicacy, but you might realise that we policemen are not paid what is considered a princely sum, and though we are here at my choosing—”.

He left the sentence dangling but the inference was clear and I promptly paid for our repast. Alec and I made our way to the parked Opel while Ernst excused himself briefly and entered the café. He came out mere minutes later and drove us to our respective offices.

I am somewhat remiss in not having described our friend, Ernst Schlage. The reason, I suppose, is that up to this point, he was merely a Berlin policeman and it is enough simply to say so and let it go. Alec and I are both over six feet, and Alec is a wiry individual that causes some hesitation in a person wishing to be belligerent. I am slightly heavier than Alec and am also considered a challenge despite what I am told are my boyish good looks. We are both daunted by Ernst. He is huge in a country-oaf manner and stands inches taller than either of us. He is Nordic-blond with blue eyes but the eyes tend to look deeper than what you would expect, and certainly deeper than you would prefer. His manner matches his appearance of country-oaf and it is tempting to dismiss him as bumbling and witless. That would be to your peril. His mind is more nimble than most and leaps to conclusions far out of the reach of the rest of us. In a word, Ernst is formidable. I thought him to be humourless but I soon discovered that his humour is on a different plane, far subtler than what you would expect from his appearance. I did not like shaking his hand for it was like trusting your hand to a bear's paw. I envisioned him living alone in some dingy one-roomed apartment somewhere, eating simple meals out of the same saucepan in which it was cooked and finding his entertainment at the cinema. He was, as I discovered to my absolute amazement, married to a diminutive woman of immense charm and beauty, father to three children, all of whom were accomplished musicians and played classical music in a Berlin youth orchestra. He lived in a fine, large house on an estate that the Greater Berlin Act, four years previous, had drawn into its precincts. To my astonishment, he also was an accomplished violinist. Neither Alec nor I, by way of footnote, play any musical instrument or display any talent other than that of our chosen career, though I do like to consider myself a handy batsman and Alec fancies himself at gridiron. There were photographs and portraits of similar-looking men to Ernst, in military uniform of some splendour, hung on walls of his home. I assumed these to be his forebears and the photograph of a Prussian officer with several decorations was a remarkable likeness, and I was certain I was looking at the man, Ernst, of less than a decade earlier.

Ernst impressed upon us the need to keep our meetings informal to avoid speculation by those who might take an interest in such things and such meetings. We met only at public venues, never at police headquarters or at our offices. It was made to appear as if we were currying favour with this representative of the *Schutzpolizei* as an aid to our occupation. To this end, most of our meetings were held in restaurants and rathskellers where Alec or I were clearly seen to be

hosting the policeman. I tend to dislike subterfuge but there was an inherent clandestine element that appealed to me. Ernst always had a brief moment with the proprietors before our departure. I was curious but assumed it was either in his official capacity or perhaps to remind them that our meeting was to be forgotten. The romance of cloak and dagger tends to lead to such assumptions.

“People murder people only with reason unless they are a sociopath. If we are to believe that Wiggins murdered the sergeant, or provided him with the gun to take his own life, then we need to establish a connection between Wiggins and Rittenauer. The most obvious connection is one of location. Where were they likely to have met before? My guess is that they met on the battlefields of France. According to records, Rittenauer never left Bavaria until the war. And Wiggins speaks the language so clumsily, it is clear he never spent much time in Bavaria in the past”.

This was the usual less than loquacious response by Ernst made at the first of those meetings. It was at a café on the *Ku'damm* not far from my own apartment whose bed I was sorely in need of at the moment. We met in the very early morning to discuss a strategy to assist our ursine friend with his investigation. His ability to distil nebulous problems to a few brief sentences showed clarity of mind that I sadly lacked at any early-morning meeting. I tentatively resolved to start getting to bed earlier.

Alec arrived not long after and to my extreme disappointment and slight annoyance looked as healthy and hale as Ernst. I only hoped I did not look as dishevelled in my dress as I felt dishevelled in my brain. Franco-American relations were at an all time high compared to the entente cordiale that described Anglo-French relations in that year. France, in a rather surprising and high-handed move, occupied the Ruhr. It was supported by Britain but not with any good grace. Alec agreed to use his connections in France to attempt to trace and verify Wiggins' activities in that country before making his way into Germany. I promised Ernst I would begin my enquiries of Wiggins that same day. Such pronouncements, I discovered, caused him to beam at you like some proud and approving parent at a child who has completed some challenging task. I had a headache.

I stayed very late at the office completing my copy and making notes to myself to follow up on other stories that I hoped might lead to something likely to cause my employer to beam at me in that same manner. I owed Chesterton a personal letter and I needed to ask him for permission to use the paper's resources, as I had agreed with Ernst to do. It probably wasn't necessary but I always felt less encumbered if I mentioned these assumptions to him and didn't take such liberties for granted. I enjoyed my correspondence with Chesterton. It was like writing to my father without the guilt

associated with an absence of contact. His letters back were always brief but warm and you could tell they were personal and heartfelt. Otherwise, in the normal pattern of business communication, he would simply direct an editor to respond or dictate a letter to a secretary among the normal mailings he was obliged to handle in the course of a business day. I was finishing that portion of the letter directed to items of a personal nature rather than those that were work related, and hovered for a moment to find a beginning for the tale of Sergeant Rittenauer. I began it thus: We all have odd dreams; dreams that are purely personal; dreams whose significance is known only to ourselves and whose context is meaningful only to ourselves. I have such a recurring dream. I am seated at the edge of a shell-crater in France. I am alone but strewn about me are bodies of my comrades. Each has a single hole in his forehead. I am waiting though I do not know for what. When I awake and can remember the dream, I realize what it means, what urged it into my idling brain. I often wonder how many times I have stood within the crosshairs of a sniper's gun-sight and it was not my turn to die.

## Chapter 4

It was nearly ten o'clock before I sent instructions over the wire to the paper to check through gazetted items for references to Ronald James Wiggins and to search for Attestations for a man of that name from Somerset. It was a long day. I was tired and hungry but mostly tired. I tidied up my desk and took a taxi home and went to bed.

It was not long before I received the information that Lance Corporal R Wiggins received the Military Medal for conspicuous gallantry. Details from an Attestation form for Ronald Wiggins of Somerset followed, and that was followed by some disturbing news. I didn't know quite what to make of it and requested verification. I arranged a meeting with Alec and Ernst when the information was, disagreeably, confirmed. I had a bombshell to drop upon them and I was keenly interested in seeing their expressions when it fell. It was Alec's turn to buy our lunch. Ernst always looked apologetic but I was looking forward to a large repast at Alec's expense, or rather, his employer's expense. We had only begun our meal when I laid out all of the information I was able to retrieve on our man. There were several additional references sent me to a Wiggins other than those I have already mentioned, but it was likely many of these were not the same person. I withheld the bombshell until the appropriate theatrical moment. When that moment was ripe, I broke the news that Ronald James Wiggins of Somerset was dead. Alec froze with the news and shot me a look to see if I were joking. Ernst was pouring the opened bottle of red wine that had been left to breathe and appeared as if he had not heard me.

"Yes. I thought that might be so".

Alec and I exchanged stares and then looked at Ernst in our consternation. He replaced the bottle carefully and sipped his wine without the ostentation of swirling the glass or sniffing the bouquet. He evidently was waiting to hear my reply. I had none to give and when he realised that fact, he shook his head in a tut-tutting manner.

“You must stop thinking like someone who only reports the news. You must start thinking like investigators. You must be expecting the news, not waiting for it to jump up and surprise you. Wiggins freely gave us all of his details and papers. No murderer or criminal is going to do that unless the papers are false or the identity is forged. So the man he is pretending to be is likely dead. My guess is that the real Wiggins was on the opposite side of a trench to Rittenauer’s army group. If that is proved, then the next guess must be that a certain sniper sergeant known to us killed him. If that is what happened, then revenge may be the motive behind Rittenauer’s death. So, who is pretending to be a dead man, and why that particular dead man? If we can figure out why he chose that particular dead man to impersonate, then we can figure out who the real Wiggins is. That is good news. You have done well”.

Alec put down his glass of wine. Clearly, Herr Schlage had trumped me once more and Alec was enjoying the spectacle. He turned to look at me with that smile on his face that was not one of his better qualities. He then thought of something and cleared his throat.

“If you are going to make a case against the man posing as Wiggins, how are you going to explain away the door being locked, and the key in the lock on the inside and everything”?

“I don’t have to explain it. I only have to confront him with it and he will have to explain it”.

I dropped my bomb with great anticipation. It was, to my disgust, a dud and did not explode and for that matter, it hardly made a decent thud. I needed to re-evaluate many things, not the least of which was my regard for the bear of a man sitting opposite me.

“Tell me, Ernst. Do you play chess, and if you do, are you good at it”?

“*Ja*. I play chess and I believe that I play it well. Do you wish to play me a game some time”?

“No, Ernst. I fear we both would be just wasting our time”.

There are bright summer days when the air remains cool and the sky is vaulted with blue like a watercolour sketch. These are days that gladden my heart and quicken my step. That was Berlin for weeks at

a time that year. Handsome young women in white dresses and summer hats paraded the streets and smiled at handsome young men who hoped to make them smile. Horse-drawn cabs took people to appointments at leisurely pace. But there was an undercurrent, a sharp edge that made it all seem fleeting and tense. The inflated economy was pushing even essential everyday-items beyond the reach of most citizens. This created shortages in most things we take for granted at other times, and resulted in frustration and resentment. There was always the feeling that at any moment it could all erupt as political factions waged their own fights, to push and jostle for control of the moment. It made Berlin a volatile city and kept me busy reporting on it all. I received instructions from my editor to continue my investigations into the Rittenauer affair. I smiled as I read the penultimate paragraph that suggested that it should not be considered an excuse to exceed my accounting-budget with regard to expenses. This, I knew, was added at the behest of Chesterton; a way of telling me he had received my lengthy letter and would reply soon. I ignored also a comment which I hoped to be jocular, that my writings were far below that of my contemporary, Joseph Roth, for I had written several small stories, vignettes of life here in my beloved Berlin, and simply included them without comment in my mailings to the attention of my editor. I met Roth on occasion and though it was said that he bore a love-hate relation with Berlin, I was always under the impression that he saw her as a whore and treated her thus.

I now had Chesterton's blessings, the full resources of the paper to work with if need be, and I began to make some ground. I wondered if the man posing as Wiggins could hear the bloodhounds baying in the distance.

We read the war diaries of Wiggins' company commander. We saw the maps of the trenches and the opposing forces. We read the casualty figures and we interviewed men who were there. There was a carefully pencilled note in one diary report: A German sniper is playing hell with us. Another of our men was picked off this morning as he returned from a night-patrol. That makes 29 so far that he has accounted for. Sergeant Pentecost led a patrol to take enemy prisoners. They ambushed the Hun digging a camouflet near CIVET trench and went at them with rifle-bayonets, killing six, and taking five prisoners. As the Huns were being led back to our lines, the sniper opened fire, killing our man and causing enough confusion for three of the prisoners to escape to the safety of their own perimeter. The diary entry was dated October 12, 1918.

I kept Chesterton informed of our progress and regaled him with my comments on the redoubtable Ernst Schlage, and of my interest in the enigmatic Herr Rittenauer and my desire to seek justice for him, if justice need be done. I received from Mr Chesterton a brief, warm note on his personal stationery and some comments regarding this

quest. He enclosed also a page copied from an Attestation for Albert Thomas Wiggins from Dorset. He made no reference to it whatsoever and I wondered what was his intent, for it did not look like an afterthought. It took on significance simply because it was isolated from comment and had me wondering of its purpose. Alec, meanwhile, had been able to trace our man's movements through France. They followed almost precisely the movements of Wiggins' battalion right up to the date when the trenches grew silent and German troops began to move back from the line. It would appear, once again, that Ernst had been able to predict the outcome like some gypsy fortune-teller.

Our meeting that day was at Herr Schlage's home. Frau Schlage served us lemonade in the garden and Ernst, as ever, was the perfect host. It is odd how a man can live such disparate lives. I even detected a difference in his speech in these surroundings. Ernst was always polite and I never heard him resort to profanity but one or the other of his personae altered to reflect its image, and I was never able to detect which. It was odd, indeed.

Ernst had by reason alone convinced us that Rittenauer died by someone else's hand and that the likely hand was that of the man pretending to be Wiggins. Moreover, having led us to this certainty, it was axiomatic that the reason behind the murder was revenge. I was able to establish that Wiggins died by sniper fire and that clearly suggested that Wiggins was the man being avenged. But who was the man posing as Wiggins, who was the avenger?

We needed some string to lead us to the man. We sat in full sun enjoying its warmth and trying to construct some bridge to span the gap of what we knew and what we couldn't. Ernst was hatless in the style of so many Berliners, especially those who were bald either by heredity or by razor, and I thought that his close-cropped hair afforded him no protection from being broiled, but he showed no discomfort. Alec was eased into his chair with his long legs spread out in front, ankles crossed and studying his notes. He suddenly straightened, drawing his legs under him and leaned forward to peer at one comment of his notes.

"Listen to this. Wiggins stayed at a small *pension* in France and was described by the owner as an Englishman in an ill-fitting brown suit and fedora hat".

He barely finished the comment as the image of Rittenauer with his medals and his strange table companion struck us both. Ernst saw our revelation and queried us. We explained what happened on that night and why it had no import to us then. Ernst tried to get us to reconstruct exactly what we saw that evening and asked defining

questions for each aspect of our story. He queried what we meant when we mentioned the ill-fitting, rumpled suit.

“What do you mean? Did it look as if the suit was too big for him”?

What appeared to be a rumpled brown suit now took on a different interpretation, and we agreed that it was indeed a similar effect to a too-large suit of clothes. It was Alec who drew the comparison to a younger brother dressing up in his big brother's clothes. I mentally examined that image for maybe a half-minute and then remembered Albert Thomas Wiggins of Dorset.

There was our bridge across the Rubicon and so we crossed it, string in hand, knowing it would lead us to our quarry. It took us another two weeks to gather the needed evidence together. Both Ernst and Alec waited patiently for me to compile it all. It was a far simpler task now that we knew precisely what information we sought and where we were likely to find it. At fortnight's end, we had our story pieced together and we were able to read the tapestry of tragedy. Ronald and Albert Wiggins were brothers, some eight-years-apart in age. Their parents died together in the tragic circumstances of the same accident and his elder, much-loved brother, Ronald, cared for Albert. Their only other relative was a maternal aunt of poor health, living in Dorset. Ronald and several of his mates enlisted following the outbreak of war, and his Attestation form declared the aunt as next of kin. This was because Albert, still too young to enlist, went to live with the aunt. Albert came of age in 1917, and against the wishes of both his brother and his aunt, volunteered. The aunt died in her sleep the following year. Albert was placed on report on several occasions for fits of temper or rage. He nearly beat a barracks-mate to death because of a suspicion he had stolen Albert's razor. A lieutenant in his battalion recommended, through channels, that he be sent to a hospital for evaluation after the lieutenant found him repeatedly punching, kicking and bayoneting the corpse of an enemy soldier following a brief battle when the Germans counter-attacked a recently won position. Albert requested permission in late summer of 1918 to visit his brother who was with another battalion in the front lines. He was to discover that a sniper had killed his brother less than two weeks before. He requested information on the whereabouts of certain other soldiers serving with his brother, and described as his brother's mates. They too had all been added to the sniper's tally. A cryptic comment in the company records, written by the officer who had been the bearer of the news said: he did not take this information well. Albert requested a transfer to his brother's battalion but this was refused in a personal letter between battalion commanding officers. Albert was demobbed in due course following the end of the war and simply fell off the face of the earth. Notes in his record seemed to indicate that he attempted to remain as a career-soldier but things also hinted at involuntary discharge. There were one or two

episodes requiring hospitalisation and these required reference to his war records, which made him visible again momentarily. All of these references located him in Dorset. The most significant breakthrough was the result of some personal digging by a reporter of my acquaintance who was junior to me in 1921 and with whom I held good rapport. Why he was assigned to this task is unknown to me but I suspect that it was some of Chesterton's involvement. The inspired reporter, and now someone to whom I was indebted, began to source suppliers of weapons to whom Albert had easy access and found on his first interview the dealer who sold Albert the Luger 7.65mm Parabellum. He recognised the photograph of Albert the reporter had with him and recalled the peculiar incident clearly. Albert sought the Luger automatic but wanted one that showed signs of much use and wear. He explained it was to be used in a war museum display and a new gun would look out of place. The dealer said that he could quickly manufacture a replica, a far better idea for use in a museum to which the public had access. Albert insisted that it be a working model with the excuse that he wanted to fire it once or twice to get an idea for how it should be held. The dealer was sceptical and tempted to refuse but happened to know where he could lay his hands on the 7.65mm model. Albert suggested that viewers to the museum would not detect the calibre and a deal was struck. However, the dealer was only able to acquire an even dozen of the Parabellum rounds.

The case against Albert Thomas Wiggins was now, to our minds, proved. Ernst identified the photograph that accompanied the receipt of our information positively and Alec and I were certain it to be the man we saw in the rathskeller. Two problems remained however: the first was that, though we were satisfied, it would have to be proved in the courts, and I for one, doubted such a strong case could be made given the circumstances of the locked room, and at best would be found circumstantial. The second problem would be getting Albert Thomas into a court of law despite the belief of the long arm of that law. Alec said as much. Ernst performed his tut-tutting head nod.

"The fact that an illusionist has performed some trick to which you do not know the answer doesn't mean you must believe in magic to accept the evidence of your own eyes. You either attempt to recreate the trick for yourself or simply accept it as an illusion and enjoy the performance. Wiggins did not shoot Rittenauer by magic. He was there. We need to reconstruct what must have happened and leave out how it was performed".

"We know that both Rittenauer and Frau Dunst left the house in the early afternoon, the one shortly after the other. Wiggins must have been waiting nearby and seen them both leave. He then entered the house in some manner not yet determined. We know that the door to Rittenauer's rooms was probably locked because Frau Dunst tells us that it was his practice to keep the door locked even when he was

inside. It is unlikely Wiggins had a key to the rooms; so to gain entry he needed to break in. There was no sign of tampering on the outside of the door from jimmy or a knife used as a jimmy. I suspect that Wiggins leant his weight against the door until the lock gave. He now had access to the room but the broken door would alert Rittenauer or Frau Dunst on their return”.

“I am only just guessing here. Wiggins is now in the room but must close the door. That is not as easy as gaining access. I suspect he either had some tool, like a nail file on his person or searched the rooms to find some tool to remove the screws from the striker-plate. The deadbolt could be pushed against the wood of the frame, but the striker-plate would have not allowed it entry to the keeper. He placed the screws on the floor, slipped the striker-plate over the deadbolt, and forced the door closed. Depending on the extent of damage to the doorjamb when he first applied pressure to open the door, that was sufficient to give the feeling of a fully locked door. Otherwise, he could have shimmed the door with some of the wood from the damaged jamb. I suspect he may have employed the night-chain in case the door moved as Rittenauer tried to unlock it, giving him some warning of the tampering if Wiggins did not hear him arrive home while Wiggins was prowling the quarters. Wiggins would not have wanted him to slam open the door and gain some advantage. Why he modified the chain lock as he surely did, I do not know for certain. Perhaps he had already decided to confuse the authorities into thinking it was suicide and the extra few centimetres gave him enough of an opening to engage the slide before he ran from Rittenauer’s room”.

“When Rittenauer returned home, before or after Frau Dunst, he would have unlocked his door and entered the room as usual. Wiggins probably heard someone arriving at the front door, quietly released the chain and waited. When the door opened past the jamb, the striker-plate would have fallen to the floor making a noise and Rittenauer may have had his attention diverted long enough for Wiggins to either grab him or point the gun at him. Beyond that and until he was shot by Wiggins is only speculation. But Wiggins shot Rittenauer; there can be no doubt. Having shot him, he needed to make good his escape and quickly. Whether he had only made it to the door before Frau Dunst appeared, I don’t know. Maybe he only closed the front door behind him and waited on the other side until his sudden reappearance claiming he heard a gunshot. I don’t know”.

“But that doesn’t explain—”.

“No, no, Alec. Nothing needs explanation. If we attempt to prove what we do not already know, then we only prove that we could be wrong. It is far easier to suggest something does not exist than to prove it does. We have all the proofs we need to show Wiggins must have

murdered Herr Rittenauer. It is for him to provide the reasons he could not have done so”.

“If we can make a strong enough case against Wiggins, then we must be able to get him into court. My only concern is that politics will get in the way and the investigation will be dropped. That is why we need to have strong and clear evidence that will be difficult to ignore before the politics can intervene”.

It was a Sunday that day we wrapped up our case against Albert Thomas Wiggins, again in the pleasant gardens of Herr Schlage’s elegant home while drinking cold lemonade in tall glasses served by the equally elegant Frau Schlage. I was reluctant to leave but it was soon approaching a mealtime and it would have been impolite to stay longer. Alec and I parted company on the *Ku’damm*; he had a meeting with a pretty girl he had been seeing of late and I had much work, long neglected, at the office. I needed to sort out my thoughts. I would do this with a lengthy handwritten letter to Mr Chesterton and a shorter more dutiful one to my father. I summed up for Chesterton all that Ernst had said and wondered now what could be done to bring Wiggins to account for his actions. I felt somehow let down for there was little more I could do but watch as whatever course of action was taken inched its way past to an end. I paused in my letter, though I feared it might interrupt the flow, to wonder if I should write down a narrative of the events in case justice for Rittenauer took backseat to political considerations. I could at least be the voice behind Rittenauer; I could be his champion and let others decide if justice had been derailed for a man whose only crime was to be a soldier.

The hours passed quickly enough and it was fully ten o’clock by the time I finished my writing in the pool of light from the lamp upon my desk. I tidied up and mentally tossed a coin as to whether I was more tired than hungry. Hunger won out and I took a cab to a small restaurant that I knew would not be too busy and unlikely to host anyone I knew, for I did not feel much like conversation this evening.

## Chapter 5

Ernst had taken his wife and children to visit his wife’s parents for a week and Alec was sent by his editor to France to canvass opinion on events in the Ruhr. It was almost now a month since we three last met and neither Alec nor I had come across Ernst, though we resumed our own dissolute ways in Berlin-after-dark. I received a telephone call from my contact and friend, Douglas Linden, of the British embassy. He was guarded and asked me to meet with him the following afternoon at a predetermined time at the embassy. He requested that both Alec and Herr Schlage (with an emphasis placed on Herr) accompany me and that I was to insist also that Herr Schlage not arrive in uniform. He would venture nothing else and seemed

desirous of making this telephone call as brief as possible. I was left with the feeling that a plot was underway. I wondered if I was about to make the right choice. I was to meet Alec that night for a late dinner as prearranged and so I needed only to contact Ernst. I gave it some thought, especially as regards the hesitancy with which Douglas made the approach, and decided to call Ernst at his home and spoke with Frau Schlage. I explained to her what was required. She asked no questions, particularly about my specific instructions as to his manner of dress. She assured me Ernst would meet us there at the appointed hour.

I informed Alec (over a dinner that would not be entered in the history of gastronomy except for what not to do to a chicken) about the meeting and the strange request. We speculated on many scenarios and finally concluded that Ernst's fears (or perhaps expectations) of being told to close the file on Rittenauer as an unfortunate suicide, and to cease all further investigation of the matter was going to be the order of the day. I don't know how Alec felt about it, but there was a rising tide of indignation in my crew that was not helped when the bill for the evening's meal arrived and I saw the amount charged for the chicken.

We three arrived within minutes of the other at that grand building on the *Wilhelmstraße*. The former Palais Strousberg was damaged by fire in the revolution of 1919 but was now fully restored and an impressive monument. Alec and I were dressed as usual, though perhaps a little more attention had been paid to our attire for this particular visit to the embassy, but Ernst, despite his bulk or perhaps as a result of it, looked as if he were a visiting dignitary both in dress and manner. I suspected he too guessed the nature of the meeting and that we were to be officially informed our interference in the matter of Rittenauer was to cease forthwith. We entered the imposing Great Hall and were promptly met by an almost scurrying Douglas Linden. He smiled a wan smile in my direction before taking my hand in the briefest of acknowledgements and proffered little more to Alec. This despite the fact that not too many weeks earlier Alec and I had been obliged to carry a soused Douglas home from a night of revelry to put him to bed, and to discover him the next morning sleeping naked in the foyer to his apartment. He did a bit better with the third member of our trio and I gave him some latitude because I expected it was his onerous task to formally advise us of the political reasons for closing our file on Rittenauer.

"Herr Schlage, I am extremely happy to make your acquaintance. The Ambassador will meet with you now".

Now, that was unexpected. I am certain that none of us had for a moment thought this meeting would be anything other than the reading of a previously dictated note to a secretary and passed down

the line to some civil servant, like Douglas. Everything suddenly became more ominous, explaining in part the strange and unusual attitude adopted by my friend in his phone call, earlier. Moreover, it appeared that this invitation had not been bestowed upon me but upon Ernst, and Alec and I were simply to be part of his retinue. Curiouser and curiouser. We were whisked to a chamber office to meet with the ambassador, Lord D'Abernon.

I had the pleasure of introduction to Lord and Lady D'Abernon on two occasions of embassy functions before. Lady Helen Vincent was a stunningly beautiful woman of poise and charm, and the bearded Lord a clever, thoughtful man for whom I had considerable respect. I shared the sentiments of many that believed his actions to be eccentric, but he clearly wished to protect Germany from the bullying of France and that alone made me an ally. There is a study of Lady Helen Vincent, painted in Venice by John Singer Sargent, which I admire. Though it was painted in 1904, the intervening years did nothing except enhance her beauty. I had not ever been granted an audience with His Excellency before and not likely to do so again. Lord D'Abernon greeted us cordially. Herr Schlage clicked his heels smartly and bowed. Alec and I, minus the heel clicking, did likewise but with neither the ceremony nor dignity displayed by our friend, Ernst, who I feel had the better of us.

We were invited to seat ourselves and the Lord took up a casual position in front of his desk, using it as a perch. His manner conveyed that the meeting was to be considered informal, though I doubt that any such meeting in these circumstances could ever be considered anything less than formal if not august.

"In the matter of Herr Maximilian Rittenauer, the investigation into his demise will end immediately, as it is in no one's interest, least of all that of the British and German governments for it to continue. His death will be ascertained as accidental or as death by misadventure".

I felt indignation rising and contemplated an objection.

"You may continue to make yourself comfortable, young man, there is no particular need to hurry this meeting".

He looked to a carriage-clock on his desk and smiled amiably to continue.

"In fact, there is quite some time left until my next appointment and perhaps I may regale you with a story that I have recently heard from the Home Office. It should amuse you. I hope that you find it so at any rate".

“The Home Office was approached by a person of some considerable weight of influence and requested to look into an article recently forwarded to a newspaper office by two foreign-correspondents that, it would appear, collaborated on the article. It suggested that a former soldier of His Majesty was guilty of fraud at several levels and of impersonating another former soldier of His Majesty. The gentleman of weight suggested that, if presented to the public, the details could prove an embarrassment to members of His Majesty’s government”.

“The inherent military implications suggested that an investigation by Military Intelligence, specifically that of the group generally referred to as Section 6, would be in order. MI6 then requested the assistance of a special branch of the London Constabulary, presently housed in the New Scotland Yard to assist with the civilian aspects of the alleged fraudulent activity. Scotland Yard Special Branch and MI6 reviewed the articles about a man whom, for the purposes of this story, we’ll call Albert, and found them to be substantive.

“Albert was tracked down in due course and requested to assist with the enquiries being made into these allegations. He told a rather fanciful, improbable story. His brother died of a gunshot wound he received in the recent conflict. Albert was bereft and sought revenge upon the enemy soldier. He assumed his brother’s identity, even to wearing some of his clothing, and purchased a handgun that would not, in the usual course of events, be easily identified and traced back to him. He spent much time in study of the war and narrowed his search to three possible soldiers”.

“The most likely of these resided in Berlin, and Albert travelled there, managing to smuggle the weapon out of England. He stalked the man for more than a week but was unable to approach him in any manner that offered a chance for revenge without being caught and charged with the murder. He lurked outside of his quarry’s home and peeped through windows that looked out onto a side-alley. There he observed his quarry reviewing photographs and dressing up in what he assumed was his old army uniform. The man played music on the gramophone while he dressed himself in military attire and ceremoniously awarded himself several medals, which he would don. Finally he put the medals and photographs in a drawer, undressed and retired for the evening.”

“Albert was spotted peeping through the window one night, and the quarry picked up a knife from the table and rushed over to the window. Albert fled to hide behind some trees in time to witness the man rush out of his house in a bid to search for the intruder. He appeared to be inebriated and the search was random at best. Eventually he gave up and placed the knife in his pocket and headed off in the direction of a frequented beer-hall”.

“Albert found him in the beer-hall still wearing the tunic and medals. He accosted him in an attempt to ascertain if he was the man he sought. Unfortunately, he did not speak the language well and alarmed the man. He became afraid he might attract too much attention, and left”.

“He noted one afternoon that his quarry left the house to be followed shortly by a woman he assumed was the man’s wife. She appeared to lock the front door with a key suspended from some twine inside the letter slot”.

“He continued to lurk near the house. Once again he saw his quarry leave, followed by the woman. When they were sufficiently distant, he approached the house, pulled the key through the letter slot, and entered the house after assuring that no one else was in residence. He found the door to his quarry’s rooms was closed and locked. A brief search of the house did not turn up a key. He broke into the room. There was actually little damage but he was still unable to close the door again. He was able to find a small tool in a kitchen drawer that would serve as a screwdriver. He had the intention of dismantling the lock. He couldn’t do so and settled for removing the screws from the striker-plate. He chipped some wood from the edge of the jamb sufficient to allow the bolt to slip back into the mortise. Placing the striker-plate over the bolt to act as a shim to keep the door tight he forced the bolt across the jamb and home”.

“Albert’s original plan, he said, was to await his quarry, hold him at bay with the gun until he was able to lock the door and apply the security-chain so he could not easily receive assistance. He would apprise him of why he was going to shoot him and then make good his escape via one of the windows, leaving the gun behind so it would not incriminate him were he caught”.

“He surveyed the windows and decided that it might take more time to wriggle his way out than thought and could lead to his being accosted by someone attracted by the sound of the gunshot. He decided to alter his plan. A search of the rooms revealed the drawer with its medals and photographs and a closet that contained the tunic, helmets and a belt with a bayonet. An examination of the photographs showed his quarry posing with several other soldiers at a field camp somewhere, and he was holding a rifle of the type favoured by snipers. He was now convinced this was the man he sought and went ahead with his preparations. He placed the medals and photographs on the table along with a bottle of spirits he discovered next to the bed. He admired the *pickelhaube* helmet and decided to add it to the scene he was creating. He carried with him an oily rag wrapped around the gun. His intention was to wipe down the gun with the rag so that it had legitimate reason to be in his quarry’s possession. He planned to recover the key from him, and after

shooting him, lock the door and make good his escape from the house and the scene of the crime”.

“Convinced of the legitimacy of his vengeance, Albert proceeded with his plan. He rehearsed the events and the only points that might unravel the scheme were the absence of the key to the rooms and evidence that the door had previously been forcibly opened. That would only become evident should another key that he did not find in his brief search be used to open the door”.

“He needed a plan that would involve the door being broken into again in order to hide the original damage. He decided that he could amend his plan to allow for his reappearance, supposedly in response to hearing the gunshot, to break through the door. Then he would plant the key on the floor to be found at a later time. But there was a small flaw. If the wife or someone else arrived home before his quarry and were in possession of a key, then he needed some surety that the door would be forcibly opened, thus hiding the injury of its earlier violation”.

“With this thought in mind, he removed the security-chain and relocated it to give sufficient allowance so he could secure it from outside the door before locking the door and disappearing. He hoped he would have at least ten seconds before anyone else within earshot responded to the gunfire. If he were surprised at the door, he planned on stating it was in response to the noise of the gun. He finished creating the scene, including placing a gramophone record on the platter. All he needed to do now was wait”.

“Albert discovered as he moved about the room that he was able, if he stood in the correct position, to view a small portion of the walk through the window and he should be able to get advance warning of someone returning home. His thoughts were verified when he sighted the woman he believed to be his quarry’s wife pass by shortly after. He turned on the gramophone and stood by the door to listen for her”.

“He heard a commotion at the front door, then the woman called out something as she passed down the hallway to the rear of the house. He heard nothing else and the woman did not reappear. Taking up his vantage at the window, he then saw his quarry pass by. He turned off the gramophone and stood in ambush at the door”.

“When the door opened, the striker-plate dropped to the floor and the man’s attention was directed at the floor to ascertain the source of the noise. This allowed Albert enough time to reach out, drag the man into the room, snatch the key from his hand, and push the door closed behind him. He stuck the barrel of the gun under the man’s chin as he wrestled him over to the chair next to the table. The man was caught off guard and off balance and was unable to resist

momentarily. Suddenly he began to struggle despite the threat of the weapon. Albert pushed the man into the chair and it began to fall backward. Sensing the fight might be about to get away from him, he pulled the trigger. It had not gone according to plan but Albert quickly put the rest of it into action. He threw the gun and a picture of a girl he guessed might have been an earlier sweetheart on top of the body. He placed the needle onto the gramophone record and made to exit the room. The striker-plate was originally recessed into the doorjamb and he pushed it into position, hoping it would hold long enough for the door to be closed before it fell. It held. He deftly slid the security-chain into place and locked the door. He made it through the front door without being detected”.

“Albert stood for a while at the front door in order to get himself under control before he attempted the second phase of his plan. He soon heard the woman calling out the man’s name and heard her pounding on the door. He cautiously opened the front door and was gratified to see she did not have a key to the door in her hand, but this made it imperative he get the key he took from the man, back into the room. He tried to offer to break into the room but she didn’t understand him and asked for him to get the police. He had been lurking in the region long enough to know where the police would be walking their beat at this time of the afternoon, and set out after them. He led the police hurriedly back to the house and was pleased when one of them kicked the door in, doing considerable damage to the doorframe. He now needed only to plant the key somewhere likely in the room. The woman rushed in behind the police and he followed her. He was suddenly inspired and made it appear the grisly scene overcame him. He pretended to hold the door for support while neatly slipping the key into the lock. He now needed only to be officially dismissed”.

“Still feigning distress, Albert asked for permission to leave. As he headed for the outside, he noticed the key to the front door hanging over the letter slot. He realised the sharp-eyed police might notice it and realise how easy it would be for someone to enter the house. He removed the key and put it in his pocket to join the tool he had stolen from the kitchen to manipulate the lock. Eventually, one of the policemen came to interview him on the steps to the house where he still feigned distress. When the sympathetic officer finished the interview, Albert suggested he might offer a few words of comfort to the woman before he took his leave. She was standing in the hall in tears and some considerable anguish. He held out the key to the front door, indicating that it had fallen to the floor. She took it with a brief attempt at a smile and slipped it into her apron pocket”.

“Albert offered to make a written report to the police and then requested an authority to return home to England. He was granted permission to leave and, as a result, became certain that he was

under no suspicion. He felt jubilation and a sense of vindication in the commission of his crime”.

The ambassador paused to let this sink in before he settled to a more comfortable position and returned to his story. In view of his earlier pronouncement, I was at a loss as to where he was headed.

“The Home Office was placed in a dilemma. Here was a man confessing to a crime that was never reported as a crime. It took place in a country that man, according to available records, never visited. There was nothing to suggest Albert ever requested a passport from the British government. What were they to do? They could choose not to believe him, for his service record indicated he was prone to prevarication. Still, as that man of considerable weight pointed out, the populace in general might believe the details and they may demand some action if the story were published. This was especially so as Albert showed the authorities the tool he said he stole from the kitchen drawer to manipulate the screws of the door. Were it to be identified by the housekeeper as having been previously in her possession, then many awkward questions might arise”.

“It was considered, after some debate, that only a man of unsound mind would freely detail and admit to murdering another man if he were not guilty of such a crime. This caused the interviewers to look more closely at Albert’s service records. They referred them to experts in the field of psychology and psychoanalysis, who concluded he was as mad as a hatter, and dangerously so. Their recommendation was that he be committed to an asylum for the criminally insane. This recommendation was taken before a magistrate who, in deliberation, decreed that this man, Albert, should be committed to an asylum for the criminally insane, never to be released. He was committed Thursday last”.

“It is an interesting story, do you not agree? I trust you were as much amused by it, as was I. Well, I shan’t bore you with such anecdotes any longer though I do hope at some future moment in time to meet with that gentleman of considerable weight. It is not often that the feathers of the Home Office are so ruffled. I wish that I had a similar influence with the Foreign Office for we seem mostly to be at odds these days”.

I doubt if any of us so much as blinked during the course of this monologue. It was over. It was resolved and resolved in such a way that none of us had even conjectured. I would need, I realised, to explain to both Ernst and Alec that this man of considerable influence was Chesterton, himself. He appreciated our dilemma in seeking justice, and so he created a dilemma for others who could find a solution. I am certain he and Ernst would get along splendidly. I had

just one more item needing resolution. The ambassador caught my eye.

“There is a cemetery at the head of *Scharnhorststraße*—”.

“Ah, yes. I see. I am certain that can be arranged. I will see that it is arranged. You will be advised. Now, if you would excuse me, I must attend another appointment”.

I hurriedly explained to Alec and Ernst of Chesterton’s involvement in this affair, detailing some of the lengthy letters I had sent to him, before Douglas Linden appeared out of nowhere to escort us through the Great Hall to the doors that opened onto the grand façade of 70 *Wilhelmstraße* and the late-afternoon sun of a Berlin summer.

We stood on the *straße* blinking our eyes against the glare after the comfortable gloom of the building’s interior. Ernst admitted of another appointment but before he departed, he reached out and took my hand to give it a brief shake. He then stood back, clicked his heels as he had done in the ambassador’s office and bowed. I did not know how to respond but the moment passed as Ernst clapped Alec on the arm and turned to find a cab. I was hungry. Alec joined me.

The *Invalidenfriedhof* is large and we were in a quiet corner of it: a small but distinguished group of mourners huddled close in intimate respect. Someone not knowledgeable of the affair that was taking place may have well wondered whom such eminent dignitaries were thus honouring. There was no funeral service, no memorial, and no eulogy, just a simple interment of a simple soldier. He was buried with his medals of valour and bravery, dressed in a uniform that he never owned. The coffin had been removed from its bier and was lowered into the grave. It was a farewell to a man whose life became forfeit at the sounding of the war tocsin. It was a small degree of respect for a man who had earned it but to whom it had never been granted. He did his duty, and what more can be asked of a man. It was our turn now to do our duty and give to him that which he had earned. The three members of the *Schutzpolizei*, seemingly on command, stepped back and saluted. The ceremony had run its course.

Ernst was quick to suggest that it was his turn to treat us at our favourite café and Alec and I raised our eyebrows at this rare largesse. We sat in the shade of an awning. It was interesting to note how quickly the adjoining tables became empty once this uniformed man sat down. I was still quite certain this particular café was chosen, less for its culinary-delights than for its delight to Ernst’s sense of humour. We spent less than an hour sipping coffee and speaking of the event that brought us together before each of us had need to return to our work. Alec departed first, having spied someone whom

he had been trying to interview for several days. Ernst stood to leave when a familiar Opel pulled up to the curb. He went inside briefly, as he seemed to do whenever we left some restaurant. I had a moment of curiosity and when the Opel pulled away into traffic, I slipped inside to speak to the proprietor.

“Oskar, tell me what it is Herr Schlage says to you every time he comes in here when we are ready to leave”.

“He says nothing. He just requests a receipt for the meal so his department can reimburse him. I like you and Alec but my taxes pay for all those meals you make Herr Schlage buy for you. Maybe your newspapers should offer to pay once in a while”.

Cooler weather returned to Berlin but that was offset by hotter tempers, and as the days grew shorter, further political unrest occurred. Despite new measures adopted by the former *Reichskanzler*, inflation was slow to ease its ever-upward spiral, and this continued to create shortages of basic commodities and the German people suffered. I had my hands full filling pages of type to document these daily events and felt just as helpless to suggest a course of action that could even begin to offer relief. Germany was just waiting for a messiah.

Soon after the funeral, I requested from Ernst the photograph of that girl in dirndl that was tossed so casually onto Rittenauer's lap after he had been shot. She had not been identified and I thought perhaps, were she still alive, she might like to know how Rittenauer had finished his life. I arranged for one of our photographers at the foreign-desk to make copies of the photo, and I distributed them to various contacts that had been helpful in the past. The third week of October brought me an answer of awful irony. The girl in the photo was Rittenauer's sister, all that was left of his family after their parents died in a tragic accident. Rittenauer went off to war and his sister became a nurse. She was tending to German wounded at an aid station not far behind the lines when a regrettable targeting error occurred and British artillery unwittingly shelled the aid station, killing several of the wounded, one doctor and two nurses. One of those nurses was Traudl Rittenauer. I remember that I cried.

The End