

THE DEATH OF CHILDREN.

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h.p.

~~There was a black floor~~

There was a black floor and almost bare white walls, with yellow and pink flowers amid green spray standing in earthenware jars. The room was at the top floor of the building, and one of its windows, which ran the whole length of the wall, looked over ~~the~~ ripped and broken roofs. The night was not still yet, and the last of the traffic from the theatres was going swiftly, with a deep humming, along the wide street far below, towards the expensive districts in the west. This street below had bright lights coloured blood-red and green.

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Most people were sitting on the floor or half-lying across the two divans. On the long table were dozens and dozens of shining wine-glasses, and bottles of brandy, gin, vermouth, white and red wine. Above the table there were coloured designs for stage-sets done in crayon, most of them on black paper, so that the colours were brilliant and striking. There were pierrots in white, ballerinas, men in tail-coats with pink flowers in their buttonholes, creatures in great knarled masks under spotlights, acrobats in tights with leather bands round their wrists, women with wide bustles and dresses which flowed back from their waists in magnificent half-trains, and then slanting white columns, crooked arches, and dim, flashing interiors. On the table near the glasses there was a white plaster hand, with the nails painted green, and between the middle and the index finger there was an unlighted cigarette. Leaning against the wall, mounted on cardboard, there were flashlight photographs taken at the film-studios, during a break in the work, at tables of tubular steel, by cheaply painted backelbths, on planks, by imprévised dressing-rooms, and all these photographs were signed, by actors or producers.

Charlotte, who sat by the window overlooking the broken roofs, wasn't an actress but was connected with the theatre through her husband, the manager of one of the most prosperous houses in the city, where the overheads were small because of its situation. Hundreds and hundreds of people were prepared every evening to drive out across the dark, silent places where ghosts walked, to see his shows.

She had grey hair, which was tinted the slightest blue, making her seem cool and withdrawn. She was plump, with heavy, white arms, and her face had once been very beautiful. Her eyes were often lost, gazing right out beyond people, arrogantly, as if she were coming to amusing and ruthless conclusions. Her usual colour was black, for any little gaiety of colour in her dress would have spoiled her. There was never any hesitation in her voice, which was rich, deep in the throat, hugged down into her, not disembodied or tense as it sometimes is in city-people. Always when she spoke there was a half-smile on her lips, and always she looked away from the person she was addressing, gazing up or sideways, never down; then suddenly she would give the other person a quick, brilliant glance, so shining that there could be tears in her eyes.

When she said hullo to a friend she always called her 'meine¹ Süsse' in a kind of longing, voluptuous, adoring way. She often used these expressions---'my sweet', 'my little one', 'my own darling', 'y pretty'. Shy women who went to few parties recoiled from these suave, too-expert compliments, and many women, especially young ones, blushed under her gaze. People said she was lesbian, but no one was sure.

Outside, in the deep black of the city, now almost still from the nervous day, there were chasms, unwholesome pits, and sudden grey hills mounting up and up, mixed and angrily pushed

together, sharp monsters which cut and tore across the sweet, accomodating sky. Then there were flatter places, more clement wounds that flowed out as far as the eye could see, with the wind coming quietly across them; unvisited and silent places, warning the hot, fleshy passer-by, the fool who came clothed in his living flesh, crying to him in the stillness, 'Go back, go back.' Under these terrible mounds and hills lay a community of people, deep now after the passing of years, and children who had never so much as sighed against the world, their grabbing hands now wrapped in a mantle of cascading wall, rock crammed in rock. In this city no living man believed in heroism.

Koelner came into the room later than most of the others. He stood at the door and stared at everybody with hard eyes. Yet he wasn't a hard man.

He was tall, slim, with a balding head and a very white face; his eyes were dark, never looking at a thing deeply or for long. His gaze was like that of a man working over a desk, dealing with papers and urgent telephone calls. He spoke crisply, in careful sentences, dedicating himself only to what was said, without foible or mannerism or anything personal at all. He seldom glanced at other people, and when he did so it was a quick glance, expending nothing in charm or pity, much less interest, but closed in, refusing any communication.

The hostess took him across to the window and showed him a seat near Charlotte, who had watched him come into the room and stand for a moment near the entrance, erect and unmoved. He nodded to her and sat down, then carefully took out a cigarette from a shining silver case. She looked at him while he did this, then, as if she had arrived at an exciting conclusion about something, she leaned forward and began talking to him. He glanced

up, a little surprised, with a slight smile. She began asking him question after question, and slowly he began to talk, until he also was leaning forward in his chair. A moment ago she'd been half-lying on the divan, gazing up at the ceiling, her eyes full of a cruel secret, it seemed, talking softly to the young woman at her side; and now she was quick, filling every pause in this man's speech, her eyes absolutely concentrated.

The maid brought them a second drink, and they touched glasses. The room was noisy now, and a slowly moving layer of blue smoke drifted across from one wall to the other. Someone by the door slipped, half-fell against the table, shaking the thin glasses, then managed to right himself and leave the room.

Koelner explained to her the difficulties of his last production, how someone had fallen from a piece of scaffolding and would put in a heavy claim for compensation, how the designer had created a set which was in the poorest taste and how they'd had to take it down and re-build it again in the space of a few hours, between nine in the evening and give the following morning. She listened to him closely, her glass in her hand, sipping every now and then, and she would nod, saying, 'My God!', 'No!', 'But really!' And with each encouraging exclamation he thought of more and more things to tell her. He still sat rather erect in his chair, but he gesticulated a little more, his white, delicate, rather feminine hands held up in front of him, the tips of the fingers touching and parting, touching and parting as he talked.

He paused, and she watched him for a moment.

'The war can't have helped,' she said.

At first he didn't understand her, so she quickly added, 'These wars are always for freedom.' She spoke with a bitterness which acquitted only him. 'After every war we're supposed to be

thankful, aren't we?'

It wasn't at all connected with what he'd been saying, with the plays his wife had starred in, with his own fall, many months before, from a height of fifty feet while directing a film, with the contract he'd almost torn up; but at the same time it seemed to summarise all he had said. For improvised studios, too few cameras, scaffolding which collapsed, stages far too small, these were the results of the war; and the actors were inferior, for the best people preferred working in quieter towns, not in this city of pits and ghosts.

He nodded quickly and said, 'Ah, the war!' He leaned forward: 'I could work better without these headaches every day. Look---' He lowered his head, to show her. 'Right across here, it seems to clamp right down on my brain, and I just have to sit and wait until it goes away.' He drew his finger along the top of his skull, where it was bare, showing her the wide line which ran from the back of his head, a livid colour. 'As you say,' he went on, 'for freedom! It was all for freedom! And I have to be thankful!' His lips were thin as he spoke. The bitterness was rising in him. His eyes were harder and tighter. He went on to speak about the pains in his stomach which were the result of a burst of machine-gunfire, the rheumatism caused by lying out all night in the wet with these growing wounds in his body, and as he spoke his face grew redder, flushing above the collar, and sweat began to appear on his brow, while Charlotte, her eyes a little narrowed, drew from him more and more of his terrible confession.

They filled their glasses again, this time without the maid. There was a great jug of punch at the table, and Koelner leaned back and took it. He picked out the nicest fruit for her, and

she made soft grateful noises as he dropped the cherries into her glass with a wooden spoon. He was so aware of outrage, his wounds and pain, that he couldn't bear to look at anyone else in the room apart from Charlotte. It almost seemed that the other people in the room were responsible, and that while he talked rapidly and passionately, the red rising up from his collar, he was blaming them all, and Charlotte was calmly helping him to do this, her face quite unflushed, her hair still in place, the lightest shade of blue, and her cool hands resting just as they had done before on her knees.

Someone opened the window and at once there came the shuddering and swooning sound of the huge church-bells hear by, in a tower not so many yards away in the darkness. They were banging furiously together, in chord and discord, hushed and then belhowing on the slight wind, asserting eternity above ruins, above the dead and lying children, above the pains of living people, above anything that could happen on the earth.

The blue smoke went rolling and turning out of the window, and no one looked up when the sound of the bells came into the room. The talk was very loud, a woman was shouting at the top of her voice, 'But you mustn't, you mustn't!', while her friends laughed, sprawling on the floor. Most people were drinking the strong punch now, in long wine glasses, with cherries, pieces of apple and apricot near the rims.

'Are you uncomfortable there?' Charlotte asked him, frowning slightly as she did so, looking at him from under her eyebrows, to show her concern. He glanced down at the wooden sides of his chair, and then he smiled. His lips were wet and fuller now, and when he opened his mouth he showed good teeth: it was a most gentle smile, altogether unlike the stiffness of his

entrance not long before. He nodded, murmured, 'A little', and she at once got up from the divan. She stood for a moment looking at the other people in the room, her eyes with their special amused insight, and then she touched him on the arm; she spoke to him intimately, 'Let's move across to the other side, then. It looks more interesting.'

They went beyond the table, their glasses in their hands, and sat down on the floor by the hearth, against cushions, still a little away from the other people. They sat close together, their hips touching. She offered him her right hand and said, 'Read me my life.' He took it lightly in his own and traced the life-line with the very tips of his fingers. She drew her hand over his, and for a moment, so that no one else in the room could have noticed, they gripped each other, in the briefest understanding. Now all the room was noise, no longer were there bells, and the street below with the red lights was silent. He leaned towards her and asked her when she would leave, adding immediately, before she could reply, 'We mustn't separate.'

'I'll be going soon,' she said. He looked at her suddenly, the light fallen from his eyes, and she watched him for some time before she added in a lower voice, 'I'll leave you my 'phone-number. Call me just before you leave here.' Then they looked away from each other, resting, the decision having been made.

A cat came into the room, paused near the entrance, smelling and staring about, then ran quickly to one of the chairs and hid underneath it, alarmed by the noise. Koelner watched this. He was absolutely absorbed for a moment in the creature's soft, long, silent movements, and he chuckled when he saw it disappear under the chair. Charlotte was now talking to someone else behind her, leaning languorously back; she had a fine straight

nose, a warm mouth, and her body was in that richness which just precedes decline, the flesh's epoch of choice. Sometimes, when people looked at her, they felt that nothing in the world was strong enough to resist her will.

Koelner jumped up, in sudden glad abandon. He went carefully and slowly towards the chair. In all his movements now he was casual and easy. He watched the chair for a little time, then bent down and made a scratching noise with his nails against the back. He waited patiently. There was a slight movement behind the chair-cover, at the foot, then the cat's head appeared, black, her great astonished eyes staring upwards. The scratching nail was discovered. Koelner smiled, bending further down. Under the chair the creature's ~~tail~~ tail swished and swished, her back low and arched, then suddenly she leapt out, turning as she did so, and made a clawing wild jump at his hand. He hopped back, roaring with laughter, and one or two people came closer, to watch him. He put his hand higher, again there was a tense leap, with the ears flat back, and again he drew his hand away. The game quickened. The cat jumped up on to the chair, Koelner moved his arm quickly, up and sideways and down, then at last she was full on her prey and they wrestled together, until Koelner took her up into his arms and began stroking her head softly. The spectators also put out their hands and touched her, as she lay proudly against his waist-coat.

Later, when Charlotte left the room, her fur wrap over her arm, he turned suddenly, at the moment she happened to be looking in his direction, and smiled at her as if he found extraordinarily and dazzlingly beautiful.

After she'd gone he began talking to other people, standing
saxily

easily at their sides. He listened to them with his head slightly bowed, and laughed frequently. He even called out to an acquaintance on the other side of the room in an odd, mildly mocking way, and this cry of his made several people laugh. But for all that he was still alone, and never glanced fully at anyone. An hour later he went into the hall and telephoned the number she'd given him. She answered him almost at once, in a soft voice, her lips very close to the mouthpiece.

'Where are you?' he asked.

'At home.'

'Let's go to a club.'

'I'm leaving home now. Go down to your car,' she said, 'and I'll be there in a few minutes. I'm leaving this very moment.'

He left the party without saying goodbye to anyone, and went down the chipped stairs. There was only the dimmest light on each floor, and up from beneath came a chill flow of air, like that from a tomb. His eyes were no longer cheerful but wondering, bereft of any guile. He reached the doorway downstairs and walked between two long piles of rubble to where the cars were parked. He saw the spire of the cathedral, pushed right up into the sky, and at its side a long street of huge buildings, all of them silently grieving the dead, without windows, roofs or floors. Sometimes the moon could be seen gleaming through these shells, but tonight there was none. He waited and in a few moments a car turned the corner and came towards him. Charlotte leaned from the driver's seat, her head wrapped round with black lace in the Spanish style. He took her hand, which she offered, and kissed it.

'Look,' she said, 'follow behind me. I know where to go.'

He started his own car and followed close behind her, going slowly over the dusty, uneven road. When they were out into the main street, past the lighted corner where whores were standing, they speeded forward. Then Charlotte guided him off the main road, to a street where most of the houses were intact. At the end there was a great lighted sign, HOTEL, and here she pulled up. She didn't wait for him to get out but walked straight into the foyer. He came in just as a page-boy and the hall-porter were bowing to her. The page-boy took her fur-wrap and walked before her up the main stairs. Koelner stood where he was, with the hall-porter's eye on him. Just before a turn in the staircase Charlotte stopped and looked back, and when she saw him standing there, his eyes round and wondering, she burst out laughing.

'Well,' she cried, 'aren't you coming?', and just before she turned back to the stairs again she gave the hall-porter below a brief, collected glance.

Koelner followed behind her, astonished, his mouth half-open. They reached the second floor and walked along a corridor. At the end the page-boy unlocked one of the doors, pushed it softly open, switched the light on inside, then stood back to let them pass. They walked into the soft, pink and silver room, their shoes making no sound whatsoever on the carpet, and the page-boy murmured, 'Gute Nacht, gnädige Frau,' as he closed the door again.

The light in the room was very dim, shining from one side of the bed. Charlotte threw her wrap on to a chair and walked across to the window, where white lace and chintz curtains were stirring slightly. There were no other houses in sight.

Koelner hadn't moved since he came into the room. He was simply staring at her, and slowly she became aware of this, and

aware of the room's terrible silence. So she turned and asked softly, 'Well, what's the matter?' He looked into her eyes, searching her, and then he almost shook his head; in that moment he could discover none of the signs by which she'd become known to him at the party. She turned back to the window, looking out.

He put his hand up to his eyes and then, just as if a kind of fever had suddenly got hold of him, so that there was no question of his using control, a kind of shuddering fever, he bent his head forward and began to weep, his face screwed up, his mouth open, uttering long, dim, throttled cries from under his hand. He stood in the middle of the room quite broken, his legs bent a little at the knees, his shoulders trembling: his clothes seemed old now, those of a beggar, because of the way he was standing there in the dim light. The moment she heard his first cry she turned her head with a sudden, astonished movement, her eyes widening slightly; she stood looking at him, fascinated, unable to believe it. His lips were shivering so that she could hardly hear him when he spoke, so lightly and childishly, 'No... No! We must talk!' But there was no softness in her eyes to receive him, only a troubled stare. Nothing encouraging came from her. She wasn't the woman who had gripped his hand that evening.

At first she shrugged and began to smile. But the cries behind her were so dreadful, and so unexpected, reminding her for some reason of the death of children, that she paused. ~~Then~~ And at last, in a terrible ~~weariness~~ weariness, she leaned her head against the white ledge of the window, her eyes turned away, and began to feel the approach, though she tried to keep her amused secret, of shame.

She looked up for a moment beyond the piles outside where the dead lay, but all the dusky stillness of the sky gave her

no message back, only receded further and further into its own eddying, dusty vagueness, offering no complaint, and neither she nor the sobbing man behind her could understand.

~~Berlin, 1953~~