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DISTANT ECHOES

SISTERS OF THE
PERPETUAL
VENERATION
PLAS GAERLLWYDD
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I HAVE NEVER BEEN A GOOD INVALID, I am afraid: not when I was a small child, fighting to survive the routine diseases that used to carry off so many infants in the late 1880s; nor even now, when I have lived so unbearably long that death will come to me as a welcome visitor; and not in all those many times in between when sickness or wounds have put me on my back for a spell.

Bronchial pneumonia laid me low the week before Christmas, while the sisters were busy preparing the vigil-night supper for us forlorn inmates of this home for Polish refugees. They put me to bed and called dr Watkins over from llangwynydd village to attend to me, but this was largely a formality: I was not expected to survive the next day, despite an injection of antibiotics and the use of an oxygen mask. It was not even considered worthwhile to call an ambulance to move me to hospital in swansea. Quite sensibly, I thought: I might as well die here as there, especially in the middle days of December when the ambulance men have their hands full dealing with road casualties. In any case, I was little disposed to argue, lying there fighting for breath and wondering like a shipwreck survivor in a freezing sea how many more waves he can be expected to breast before he gives in to the inevitable and goes under for the last time. It is by no means an unpleasant sensation, this dying, at least as I experienced it: rather like waking early in the morning, then realising that it is sunday and stretching lazily in one's hammock in the knowledge that the bugles will

not blow Auspurren for another hour. I was conscious of faces about me, and of people coming and going, but of little else.

Then they brought Father Mccaffrey to administer extreme unction. Now, I have nothing against the reverend father, who is a pleasant young irishman with a permanent smile and a shiny pink face, rather like a slaughtered pig that has just been scalded and had its bristles shaved off. Also he was conscientious enough to drive thirty kilometres late on a wet, cold night to offer the last meagre comforts of holy Mother church to a withered old husk of an agnostic like myself, baptised and confirmed as a Catholic—like all other subjects of the noble house of Austria who didn't claim to be anything else—but otherwise (like most Czechs) a hussite at heart and a sceptic as regards the head. But it was the extreme unction itself which did it—though I think not quite in the way they intended. I served in both world wars and in several conflicts in between, and I am strongly of the opinion that the wanton administration of religion to helpless sick and wounded men lying in hospitals is a practice which ought to be outlawed under the Geneva convention. I remember, at any rate, having a strenuous and most enjoyable argument on this point about twenty years ago with the Matron at the stanmore orthopaedic hospital, when I was laid up with a broken hip and a gang of well-heeled samaritans turned up to dispense Christmas carols and condescension to the inmates. Anyway, on this occasion, far gone as I was, having Father Mccaffrey smearing me with embrocation and muttering incantations over me was more than I could take. I pushed him away—to the horror of the assembled sisters—then managed to sit up and gather enough breath to tell him to leave me alone and be about his business attending to people who have asked for his ministrations. It was disgraceful, I know, but the anger worked like some marvellous elixir upon me. The exertion brought about a profuse sweat, my heartbeat grew strong and regular again, my breathing eased later that night and I recovered over the next few days to a point where, just before new year, I was taken off the danger list and officially declared a convalescent.

I am still confined to bed, however, until further notice, and sister

Felicja is enforcing the order by impounding my clothes. Really, I think that with someone of my age—a hundred last April—they ought to let me get dressed and wander out into the snow to perish like an aged and toothless red Indian brave. But their minds appear not to work that way— like those of prison warders who take away a condemned man's shoelaces and belt and braces for fear that he should hang himself and save them the trouble. But now it looks as if they will merely turn out to have substituted death from boredom for death from cardio-respiratory failure, because the truth is that I am finding my time in bed extremely tiresome. I cannot read a great deal these days, because of cataract, and I find that the wireless soon palls once one has listened to the fifth or sixth afternoon play about the problems of blue whales and single-parent families.

However it must be admitted that, even if I were allowed to get up, there would not be a great deal to do at the moment, for last Monday the weather suddenly changed. On saturday afternoon it was the usual January half-gale and drizzle along this stretch of the Welsh Atlantic coast. But then on sunday the wind began to veer round and turn into a raw, iron-grey north-easter, moaning steadily about the house up here on the headland and ruffling the trees and bushes against their gale-bent grain like an invisible hand stroked the wrong way along a cat's back. By Monday evening the snow had begun to fall: not the usual large, wet, sea-scented flakes of these parts but a solid, steady cascade of fine, harsh powder almost like that which falls where I come from in the middle of Europe. By Tuesday morning the roads were impassable, the sunken lane to llangwynydd village buried two or three metres deep along its entire length. The local people who have managed to struggle up to the Plas these past few days say that they have not seen worse in twenty-five years.

Not that it has affected me a great deal, lying here in my upstairs room. I was aware of the pallid, grey light reflected on to the ceiling when I awoke that morning, then of the branching fingers of ice on the window panes. But it was not until I managed to hoist myself out of bed, when the sisters' backs were turned, that I looked out of the window and saw the rock-terraced gardens about the house smoothed

to a gently undulating expanse of white, and the great ridge of the cefn Gaerllwydd beyond turned into the back of an albino whale standing out sharp and livid against a sky of tarnished pewter. The sea—commanded by the wind off the land to an unaccustomed calm—lapped sullenly at the shores of Pengadog Bay below the house, leaving a fringe of broken ice-shards as the tide went out. All was stillness and silence.

Movement to and from the Plas has been impossible these past few days, balanced as we are out here on the very tip of the peninsula, far from even the secondary roads and with only a couple of farmsteads between us and Llangwynydd. Earlier today there was a great clattering overhead as an RAF helicopter came over to drop fodder to the sheep up on the ridge; but apart from that we have been quite isolated from the rest of the world, except for the telephone and the wireless. Not that it matters a great deal though, in a place inhabited by ten nuns and eighty or so aged and impoverished Polish émigrés, most of them hardly less feeble and decrepit than myself. No, we have supplies for a month or so I believe, and central-heating oil for longer, so cannibalism will not be necessary, by my reckoning, until about the end of February. Likewise the suspension of milk and postal deliveries is no great hardship to us. Coming from Central Europe, we take lemon in our tea. And being of our accursed generation, we receive little mail, having precious few relatives or friends left alive to send us any. In fact there has been a certain end-of-term levity about the place these past few days. Yesterday a couple of the younger and more frivolous sisters were even induced to take part in a snowball fight with Major Koziołkiewicz and a few of his fellow-gallants, then help him build a snowman. An old biretta was dug out from somewhere to turn it into the semblance of a priest, with an empty vodka bottle tucked under one of its arms and a breviary under the other. But when a carrot begged from the kitchen to represent a nose was turned into something else altogether, sister Felicja felt that the fun had gone far enough and came out to send the nuns about their duties.

As far as I am concerned the sudden onset of the blizzards and our subsequent isolation from the world has had one unlooked-for benefit.

My young friend Kevin scully, unemployed ex-naval rating and part-time handyman about the Plas, drove across from llanelli on the Monday afternoon to fix a leaking tap and was stranded here as the snow began to drift in the lanes. He has been here for six days now. Not that he seems to mind very much: he has no job, and his "on-off" relationship with his girlfriend appears to be going through an "off" phase. And anyway, as an ex-serviceman, he has come to appreciate that the one great merit of military life is its irreproachable idleness. He has dug a few paths clear about the house and thawed out a pipe or two, and he is conscientious in his twice-daily checking of the boiler and heating pumps in their outhouse. But otherwise he seems happy to sit up here in my room, well away from Sister Felicja, talking with me about this and that or just reading quietly. He is the ideal sickroom companion: instinctively tactful and unobtrusive, with none of these irritating ideas about having to entertain me or otherwise justify his presence. Strange really, when you think about it, that just as I am about to depart this life, after having outlived all my generation, I should take such comfort from the mere presence of this uneducated, mannerless foreign youth. When I was a submarine captain back in 1918 we were once called to assist a torpedoed Austrian troop-ship off the coast of Albania. We arrived too late to do anything but retrieve a few dead bodies, and I remember how, when we dragged them aboard, we found that several of them had some pathetic everyday object—a pencil or a cigarette lighter perhaps—clutched in their lifeless hands, as if they had clung desperately to this last token of the world of mankind just as they were slipping out of it. But whatever the reasons, Kevin has been a great comfort to me in these exhausted post-illness weeks; likewise my friend and confidante sister elisabeth, who comes up to sit with me whenever her duties in the kitchen permit.

It was Kevin Scully and Sister Elisabeth who twisted my arm last autumn to tape-record my reminiscences of my career as k.u.k. Linienschiffsleutnant Ottokar, Ritter von Prohaska, First World War U-Boat Ace and officially certified War-Hero of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. You may perhaps listen to these memoirs one day, if you are interested in that sort of thing and if anyone ever considers them

worthy of editing and setting in order. But if you do ever hear these yarns you may wonder, like Kevin scully to whom I first told them, why it is that they commence in the spring of 1915, by which time I had been a career officer in the Habsburg navy for the best part of fifteen years and had already fought nine months of the world war which eventually brought about the collapse of my country. I had told Kevin that when the war broke out at the end of July 1914 I was in the Far East, at Tsingtao on the coast of northern China with the cruiser *Kaiserin Elisabeth.* But I avoided going into details, for if I had told him about my experiences there, and about my subsequent six months of adventures on the way back to Europe, it would have been necessary to tell him how I came to be there in the first place. And that, I am afraid, is a long and complicated story; also one which, at the time, I had a particularly strong personal reason for not wishing to tell. However, I say "had," because the day before yesterday, late in the afternoon, just as it was beginning to get dark, a curious thing occurred which has, I think, set me at liberty to relate this tale—provided of course that whatever residual deity oversees the affairs of agnostic ex-Austrian, ex-Czech, ex-Polish stateless persons grants me the breath and the time necessary to tell it.

I was sitting up in bed as Sister Elisabeth came to draw the curtains then went downstairs again to the kitchen. Kevin had brought me a couple of the last newspapers to arrive at the Plas on the sunday before the snow came. I was browsing through these as he sat in the armchair leafing through a colour supplement. I had just put aside that infinitely tiresome london-Polish journal the *Dziennik Polski* and had picked up a Friday edition of *The Times*. It was the usual thin post-christmas stuff; and anyway, if you ever get to my age world events will not interest you a great deal since you will have seen it all so many times already. I scanned a couple of pages in a cursory fashion—then felt my eye being dragged back up the page, like a jersey sleeve caught on a nail. It was in the obituaries column—not something I normally bother with, since all my contemporaries have been dead thirty years or more. It lay among the collection of minor entries down at the foot of the column, beneath those lucky enough to be given star billing: the obituaries

written about those worthies who were too obscure to attract any notice while alive, but whose death is regarded as being of just sufficient importance to merit a few lines near the bottom. It read:

PROFESSOR ALOIS FIBICH

The death was announced on 23 December at Limburg, Nebraska, of Alois Fibich, Emeritus Professor of Econometrics at the University of Omaha from 1947 until 1963.

Professor Fibich was born in Klagenfurt, Austria, in 1897 and served as a lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian Navy during the First World War. Following the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 he studied economics in Budapest and emigrated to the United States in 1929, becoming a US citizen two years later and serving on President Roosevelt's economic staff during the New Deal years. His paper "Towards a Multiple Regression Analysis of the Demand Deficit Curve" (1948) is now widely regarded as placing him among the founders of the science of econometrics.

"Al" Fibich will be sadly missed by colleagues and by several generations of students, not only for his sterling contributions to modern economic science but also for his great personal charm and courtesy, which brought even to a windswept mid-western university campus a distant echo of that long-vanished world into which he was born. He is survived by a wife and three daughters.

Kevin looked up from his magazine. Sensing that something had happened, he got up and came to my bedside, and saw my fingertip resting on the page. He seemed to know instinctively.

"Someone you knew then, was it?"

"Yes, Kevin …yes, I think that I must have done. Surely there cannot be many people with that name. I remember, but somehow …" Recollections were beginning to swirl and surge inside my head, like the incoming tide in that little cove down among the rocks below the Plas.

"Funny coincidence that, like. Mate of yours, was he? Did you know him well then?"

"No, no, not well at all. If this is the man I think it must be, then I can only have met him for five minutes at the most. It's just that there was …"

Kevin had walked over and was pulling the armchair up beside the bed. He paused.

"Want to tell me about it, then? Bugger all else to do there is. They reckon on the weather forecast we're in for some snow tonight, an' if I go downstairs that ol' cow Asumpta'll only start chewin' me bollocks off for missin' the exposition of the blessed bloody sacrament." He grinned. " 'Ere, tell you what, I've got a little water-heater thing down in the car, and some real coffee in a tin, just nice like. I'll nip down an' get it, then we'll have a brew-up here on the quiet while ol' Felicja's orderin' 'em about downstairs gettin' supper. Real rotten I call it, stoppin' you drinkin' coffee an' all. How long do they reckon you're … Sorry. I din' mean …"

I laughed. "You mean it doesn't make much difference at my age? Quite right: the sisters are never happier than when they're denying somebody something. It suits their instinct for ruling. They are determined that I shall be the healthiest corpse in the graveyard. No, go ahead and bring up your things and start making coffee. Then sit down and perhaps I shall be able to tell you about it."

"You sure, like? You aren't any too well, they reckon."

"What does it matter? I am already dying from inactivity here. It helps pass the time. And anyway, perhaps telling you about it will clear a load from my chest before I pass on."

"Like goin' to confession?"

"Precisely, like going to confession. Except that I shall not expect Father Kevin to maintain secrecy. In fact, come to think of it, in case I drop dead half-way through, we had better have Sister Elisabeth's tape recorder here with us this time."