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John R. McKay

THE ABSOLUTION OF OTTO FINKEL



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VANGUARD PAPERBACK

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For the children of Drancy

Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 19:14)

PROLOGUE

BRITTANY 1964

The man in the black suit and grey overcoat sat in the dark near to the window. Fixing his heels into the carpet he pushed back with his legs, sliding the chair backwards along the floor until it touched the wall. Using the thin strip of light at the side of the curtain, where it hung away from the window and allowed the dim glow of a nearby streetlamp to penetrate the darkness, he re-checked the automatic handgun he held firmly in his right hand. He did not want to adjust the curtains or switch on a lamp for fear of someone outside seeing him. No one could know he was there. There was only one man he wanted contact with tonight and as yet that man had not returned to the second floor hotel room.

Although he already knew it to be in good working order, a round firmly wedged in the chamber and the silencer screwed on tightly, he checked it again nevertheless. The man in the black suit and grey overcoat had waited a long time for this, almost a quarter of a century, and there could be no problems. Not now. There could be no room for any mistakes.

He had been sitting in the chair for over an hour and he was desperate for a cigarette although he knew smoking one would do nothing to calm his nerves. Instead he fiddled with the edges of his moustache, continually twirling the whiskers together and then releasing them, before starting the process over again. He had meant to shave it off having been told recently that men with facial hair looked at least ten years older than their less hirsute contemporaries. This ratified something that someone long ago had told him, but he had found neither the time nor the inclination to do so. That same person, all those years back, had said that it gave him an air of authority and for that reason alone he had kept it adorned for so long.

He looked towards the door. He could hear the laughter of a young couple passing in the corridor and saw their shadows break the light at the foot of the door as they walked by. They were speaking French but he could not make out what they were saying although he was virtually fluent in the language having visited France many times throughout his life. He blinked and rubbed his eyes with the back of his left hand, keeping his gun hand free and the weapon continually trained on the door.

He was tired. Tired beyond belief. Tired of the whole thing. But this night, this cold and wet September night, it would all come to an end, and maybe then he could finally get some real sleep.

Another fifteen minutes passed and he was beginning to think that his prey would never return, that he had somehow found out what was awaiting him in his hotel room and had simply disappeared, like he had done all those years before. But then he heard footsteps approaching the room and instinctively knew it was him, that the time had finally arrived.

He adjusted himself in the chair once more, took a couple of deep breaths and then concentrated on holding the gun steady, supporting the wrist with his left hand to prevent it from shaking.

He heard the key turn in the lock and then the door opened slowly. The man he had not seen for so many, many years entered the room and pressed the light switch. Nothing happened. The man with the gun, sitting in the darkness had taken the bulb out on entering the room to prevent the dazzling effect it would have had after being sat in the dark for so long.

With irritation the man shut the door and walked to the side of the bed to turn on a lamp not noticing him or sensing another's presence in the room.

'Leave it,' said the man in the black suit and grey overcoat sharply. 'Sit on the bed and don't move.'

Startled, the man who had entered the room fell back onto the bed, looking in the direction of where the voice had come from.

‘What… Who…’ said the man in German, squinting his eyes.

‘Don’t speak,’ interrupted the man in the black suit and grey overcoat in English. He was surprised at how calm he was feeling.

‘I have a gun and it’s pointed at your stomach,’ he continued. ‘Do not make any attempt to leave, or to shout, or come any closer otherwise I will pull the trigger. I will not hesitate, believe me.’

‘Who are you?’ replied the German. ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘You don’t remember me?’ asked the man in the dark suit and grey overcoat. ‘Well, it has been some time I suppose, so I will forgive you for that. Nevertheless, I know who you are and, more importantly, what you are.’

‘I do not understand,’ said the German nervously. ‘I am just a simple businessman on a business trip. I do not know what you want with me.’

‘I know who you are,’ replied the man with the gun and then said his name to confirm it. He could see the man twisting nervously in the half-light, sweat appearing at his forehead.

‘Who?’ he replied. ‘I do not know him. I do not know of whom you speak. I am Heinrich Vogel, a businessman from Austria.’

‘You really don’t recognise me do you?’ said the man calmly from the chair. He leaned to his left and switched on a bedside lamp to reveal his features to the German sitting on the bed, who was unable to move with the shock of what was happening.

The German again squinted his eyes as he scrutinised the man sitting calmly in the chair, no hint of recognition in his eyes.

‘I’ve been looking for you for some time, my old friend, for a very long time, and let’s face it, you know that don’t you?’

‘What are your intentions?’ asked the German suddenly. ‘Are you going to shoot me here? In this room?’

The man in the dark suit and grey overcoat did not reply.

‘Who do you work for?’ continued the German. His voice was now getting thick with despair, realising that this could be the final conversation he would ever have and was trying to get some sense from it. ‘British Secret Service? Mossad? The Americans?’ he added nervously.

The man laughed humourlessly. ‘None of the above,’ he replied. ‘I suppose you could say that I work for myself, if anyone. But who I work for is of no importance right now. I suppose you could also say this is about the choices we make in life. You see, people make choices in their lives that affect others, either directly or indirectly, and more often than not they have no idea what the consequences of those decisions will be. You have made choices in your life that all of us have regretted, maybe even yourself. Your choices, and mine for that matter, have led us to this moment. Right here. Right now.’

The German leaned closer and looked into his eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said after a while, his confidence gaining strength. ‘Maybe I do recognise you.’

PART ONE

BRITTANY 1928

CHAPTER ONE

Jack Graham loved his summer holidays. This was the third time in as many years that the family had stayed at the Hotel Britannique belonging to Madame and Monsieur Descartes, the old French couple who never smiled and looked in Jack's opinion, to be around a thousand years old. He had received, along with his younger brother, Francis, a sharp slap across the top of the head from their mother due to them both laughing loudly on seeing old Monsieur Descartes drop a pot of coffee in the dining room, spilling the contents on the floor and exclaiming, 'Merde! Merde!' in a high pitched voice that had reminded him of the toucan he had seen in London Zoo during the Easter holidays. Jack laughed again as Francis whispered, 'Clumsy old fart,' not realising his mother could hear him. She had apologised for their behaviour but was not quite sure whether the old man understood what she was apologising for. Their father, Stephen Graham, who had sat quietly saying nothing, whilst attempting not to laugh, was unable to prevent a smirk from appearing upon his face. His wife glared at him and raised her eyebrows, to which he shrugged at her with feigned innocence.

Two days earlier, Jack's mother and father, along with Francis, three suitcases, a picnic basket and two fishing rods, had collected him from the boarding school he attended in Hampshire and driven to Portsmouth to catch the overnight ferry across the English Channel to St Malo for what was becoming their routine annual trip to France and the Brittany coast. Jack's father had remained silent as the vessel slowly made its way to the walled French port, often wandering alone on the deck lost in his own thoughts, not wishing to be disturbed. Their mother had told them not to bother him during the journey. Jack was now old enough to understand that a great and terrible war had occurred in France not too long ago, in which his father had taken part, and maybe it was this that he reminisced as he stood, leaning against the gunwale, smoking the old pipe with the foul smelling tobacco that Jack hated, as they approached the land of his nightmares. Jack was old enough to understand that it was probably for this reason that Stephen Graham looked significantly older than his thirty-eight years, his hair completely grey and face haggard and worn. Jack had wondered why he would ever want to set foot in France again if this was the case, let alone visit it willingly on a family holiday.

They had arrived at the small, quiet hotel, mid-morning and dropped off the suitcases in the two rooms they had been allocated on the first floor, before heading out into the sunshine to explore the surrounding area. The hotel was half a mile outside the main town, a short walk from the beach, where fishing boats could be seen from the windows, bringing their catches back to the harbour, to sell at the markets and local restaurants. It was in good repair, had four floors with nearly thirty rooms, and a large dining room, which served continental breakfasts and coffee. It had a limited menu for evening dinner, most guests choosing to eat at one of the many restaurants and cafés in the immediate vicinity. It was not exactly the Ritz but it served their purposes well, and it was clean, which was the most important thing in Margaret Graham's opinion.

The previous year Jack's father had taken the boys to the harbour where they had been allowed to use their new fishing rods from the sea wall and marina. Although they had not caught a thing all day, Jack had become obsessed with angling and had pestered his father to take him fishing during the weekends he spent away from the boarding school. And now, in his own modest opinion, he had developed into an expert angler.

They paid for bicycles for the day from a hire shop that they knew from their previous visits and enjoyed the rest of the afternoon cycling around the town stopping only to eat lunch al-fresco in a local park. It was only here that Jack's father's normal jolly countenance had returned and he was his usual jovial and chatty

self, laughing and joking with his two boys and having fun often at them and their mother's expense. He would make fun of the way Francis's dark fringe tended to stick up, defying gravity no matter how much he attempted to comb it down and then he would turn his attention to Jack and remark how much he looked like a friend he used to know in the army, who was nicknamed Scruffy Joe on account of how his unkempt appearance would always get him in trouble with the regimental sergeant major.

He would also have fun with his wife, Margaret, telling her she looked like a Hollywood movie star and she would laugh good-naturedly, indulging him, allowing him to enjoy this time with his family, even though she knew that some of what he was doing was a front to hide the true melancholy he had been feeling since his return from this very country a decade earlier. She had asked him, a year or so ago, if he would like to ever return to the battlefields of the north, to pay his respects once more to those who had fallen and to maybe purge the demons from the past that she knew still haunted him in his dreams at night. But he had refused. It was still too soon, he had said, still too raw. Maybe one day in the future, but not now, not just yet.

That evening, after eating out at a small restaurant near the waterfront, they had returned to their rooms and all fallen into a deep sleep until waking that morning and going down for breakfast. Jack had noticed a couple of other young boys, roughly his own age, eating at other tables and wondered if they too were there on holiday.

On the table next to the Grahams sat another couple with a young boy. The father was dressed formally in a suit and tie, had dark hair slicked back with oil and wore small round spectacles with thick lenses. His wife did not seem to speak a lot, only to answer her husband when he addressed her and the young boy did not speak at all, sitting up straight and eating his meal in what Jack thought could only be described as the "correct and proper manner", something according to his mother he had not yet mastered, despite his twelve years. The boy looked quite small and was probably older than he appeared, he thought, blond hair side parted and deep blue eyes that were both intense and pensive. When he noticed Jack observing him he turned his head away quickly, avoiding the eye contact Jack had tried to make.

Further along, at a table near to the door sat another family. Jack knew these to be Italian as he had seen them the previous day checking in at the reception desk in the lobby and wondered why Italians would travel all this way when they had so much coastline of their own to enjoy. He had never been to Italy but had seen books and photographs of the sights there and hoped one day to visit. The city of Rome, with its marvellous Coliseum and stories of Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, and of ancient great battles and conquests, both fascinated and intrigued him. He knew where it was on the map and thought it the oddest shape for a country, reminding him of a large heeled boot.

There were four of them. The father looked a lot older than his wife. Or was he the grandfather? Jack was not quite sure. He was bald with grey hair at the sides and gave the impression that he was an important man from wherever he came from. His wife sat facing him and would smile affectionately whenever he spoke, responding with a chirp in her voice that Jack thought quite comical. The two children, a boy of around twelve years old and girl perhaps a year younger, who looked a miniature version of her mother, sat quietly and well-mannered as their parents conversed happily.

At a table in the corner sat another boy, alone, quietly sipping at a glass of orange juice, the croissant on the plate in front of him untouched, an expression of total boredom upon his young features. His curly brown hair was unkempt and uncombed and the clothes he wore had obviously seen better days; the holes in the elbows of his pullover proof of this. As Monsieur Descartes passed him, he leaned over and pushed the plate closer toward him, saying something sternly in French. Jack could not see the man's mouth as it was covered by a huge bushy moustache, but the deep tone resonated across the room causing a few of the guests to turn and look over to see what was happening. The boy picked up the croissant and reluctantly put it in his mouth, biting off the end and chewing at it laboriously. Jack theorised the boy was probably related to Descartes in some way and wondered why he was sitting at the table without parents or any other company.

Noticing her son looking around the room at all the various hotel guests Margaret said, 'Jack, stop staring at people. It's rude.'

'I wasn't staring,' he replied. 'I was just looking.'

'Please don't contradict your mother,' said his father.

Jack did not respond and quietly turned his head to face his brother across the table. Then Stephen Graham too had a quick look around the room curiously to see as to what and whom Jack was observing.

He caught the eye of the man on the next table, the one with the blond son and silent wife. The man smiled at him and Stephen smiled back out of politeness.

'Forgive me intruding,' said the man in a heavy German accent. 'I was wondering how old your boys were.'

Stunned at hearing the accent, Stephen replied robotically, 'Jack here is twelve and Francis is not quite eleven.'

'Ah,' said the German smiling politely, 'I thought so, I thought so.' He paused for a moment to take a sip from his coffee. 'My boy here, Otto, he is twelve years also. We are visiting my wife's family for a few days. For a holiday you see. We are from Dortmund. Well, I am… my wife is actually French. I was wondering… '

Jack's father turned his head away and looked down at his plate, ignoring the German's attempt at friendly conversation. The German stopped talking but continued to look in the direction of the Grahams.

Jack's mother smiled awkwardly at the German, who responded by looking from her to her husband then back to her, all the time maintaining a smile. It was obvious to Jack that his father was making every effort to ignore the man and it intrigued him as to why his father would behave in such a rude and out of character manner toward the stranger. Jack and Francis stared at their father who smiled at them when he caught their eye.

'If I have offended you in any way…' said the German slowly.

Stephen Graham put down his knife and fork and turned around to face him.

'If you have offended me! I am British and you are, as you have just told me, German. Your very presence in the same room as me offends me…'

'Stephen!' said Jack's mother sternly. 'Stop it. This is hardly the place… The children.'

'I am sorry you feel that way,' said the German, the smile remaining fixed to his face as though a permanent feature. 'But I can understand. I take it you were involved also. I saw my friends killed at Passchendaele and Verdun. A truly terrible business for both sides, don't you agree?'

Stephen Graham looked at his wife and turned back to the table, ignoring the man once more. 'I have no interest in talking about such matters,' he said. 'Please refrain from addressing me in such a manner.'

'Of course,' said the German apologetically. 'I am sorry to have caused you such discomfort.' With that he turned back to his family and spoke to them quietly in German. They did not respond to his words.

'Stephen,' said Jack's mother after a while. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine, Margaret,' he replied, picking up his coffee cup and taking a sip. After a short while he sighed and turned to face the German family again. 'Excuse me. Can I apologise for my little outburst just now? It is quite unlike me to be so discourteous.'

'That is fine,' said the German, still smiling.

Stephen Graham again turned away.

'So what business are you in?' asked Margaret Graham politely, seeking to alleviate the heavy atmosphere that existed between the two men.

'I am a university lecturer,' he replied. 'I teach foreign languages. English and French mainly but also a little Italian now and again.'

'How long are you here for?' she asked. She was aware of her husband's unease with holding a conversation with him but did not wish to look rude herself.

'We are here for a week,' replied the German good naturedly. 'We are here to visit my wife's parents. Their house is very small, so that is why we are staying in this hotel. They are very old now. It is a good opportunity for Otto here to see his French family. However, I fear he is getting bored as he has little to do.'

Without thinking she replied, 'Maybe he could tag along with my two boys, Jack and Francis here. They are going fishing today while we visit the cathedral.'

Jack shot his mother a harsh look. This was all he needed, he thought. He already had to put up with Francis's ramblings when he was fishing and now his mother was suggesting he look after a German stranger's boy who probably spoke little or no English. Francis turned his head to look at the young boy who

seemed oblivious to what was being suggested, the straight serious expression not having changed once since the conversation began.

The two English brothers looked at each other and frowned. Rather than make any comment, they continued with their breakfasts in silence. Whatever was decided they would have to live with, there was not much they could do about it now.

The German turned to his son and spoke to him in his native tongue. The boy replied in what Jack thought was a slightly too high a pitched voice for a boy of his age. He sounded like a girl. Although Jack did not know him and had no reason to, he made a decision there and then that he would not like him. Maybe this was because of the way his father had taken an instant dislike to the adult, no doubt because of the past that they both shared. He did not want to betray him in any way even if that meant an unwarranted low opinion of someone he did not even know.

'That is very kind,' replied the German to Jack's mother. 'Otto would like to join them in their endeavours if it is not too much trouble. I fear we older ones bore him slightly and mixing with children his own age will be nice for him. Maybe he can improve on his English too.'

'There,' she said to everyone. 'That's settled then.'

'Thanks, Mum,' said Jack sarcastically when the German family resumed their own conversation.

Jack's father ate the remainder of his breakfast in silence.