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Opening Extract from...

Night Train to Berlin

Written by Margaret de Rohan

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NIGHT TRAIN TO BERLIN

MARGARET DE ROHAN



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Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi
dona nobis pacem

Amen

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I had a completely different topic in mind for my first adult book, and a different location. I'd even done some research in Wymondham, Norfolk in preparation for writing it.

But every time I discussed this with 'Nathaniel from Norfolk' his response was 'why not Berlin?' So eventually I thought *Yes, why not Berlin indeed.* And this book is the result.

I also had the first line of *Scarborough Fair* playing in my head. But how to reconcile an English folk song with Berlin? That is the question I've tried to answer in *Night Train to Berlin.* I hope my readers will find the book enjoyable, and sometimes also confronting.

Nat came with me on the Night Train in October 2014 – it was the least he could do! It was then that I saw for myself the egregious folly which is the European Union's Schengen Agreement. Having open borders between European countries was a lovely idea, but did the EU never consider *The Law of Unintended Consequences* in the quest for ever greater integration?

As one of my characters says in *Night Train* 'you could take a surface to air missile on that damn train and no one would be any the wiser.' Nor would they – until,

of course, a terrorist attack happened! *But hand-wringing after the event does not restore the dead to life.*

The EU has form for ignoring *The Law of Unintended Consequences.* For example the common European currency: how could countries as different in national character and work ethic as Germany and Greece ever cope with the 'one size fits all' Euro?

And what did the German Chancellor think would happen when she issued her 'come one, come all' invitation which plunged Europe into crisis in the summer of 2015?

And, more importantly, why hasn't she already resigned?

Finally, grateful thanks to the always helpful and patient Matador/Troubador people. You know who you are and how much you have done for me. God bless.

London, December 2015.

ONE

Tuesday 7th March, Paris

The seven men sat huddled around a wooden table near the centre of the shabby room. The curtains were drawn against what remained of the day and the windows were fastened. The atmosphere in the room was heavy, airless; bordering on fetid, but none of them seemed to notice. An old-fashioned ceiling light hung low over the table: a channel of grace in a crude space.

A casual observer, chancing upon the scene, might have thought someone had died, or alternatively, that a séance was about to be held. That observer's appraisal would not have been too far off the mark; only the tense would have been wrong. The death, or rather deaths, were yet to come.

'Do you see what I see?' the thick-set man near the centre of the group said. 'Four days he was in Paris – four long days – and what did he do? He played the innocent tourist, that's what. He went here, there, and everywhere, but never once did he go near the police, or the security services. Not once.'

He picked up the pile of photographs on the table

and began to deal them out to each man as though they were playing cards.

'Now look at the photos again and this time examine each one of them carefully. Use one of the magnifying glasses if you need to – but tell me what you've finally noticed! And what you should have noticed before. Call yourselves agents do you? Hah! A boy scout would have done better than you!'

He spoke in English, but that was not his mother tongue, so he spoke with a middle-eastern overlay. He was the boss. A tough, battle-hardened man of around sixty years of age. His face was heavily tanned and lined by the sun, a long scar visible on his right cheek. None of the other men would have dared to cross him, or even contradict him. He had killed before and would not hesitate to kill again, and all of them were well aware of that fact. And, as if that were not enough, his temper was quick and sometimes ruthless.

A much younger man, perhaps in his mid-twenties and with a lighter complexion, cleared his throat nervously, and then spoke. 'He only made *real* contact with two people twice. The woman and the lad – that's right, Ammi – isn't it? Just those two: once at the Eiffel Tower and again at Napoleon's Tomb.' The boss was the brother of the younger man's mother, which permitted his use of 'Ammi', the Arabic word for uncle.

'Well done, Jamal,' his uncle said. 'Yes, just those two people – the woman and the lad, out of all the other Parisians with whom he came in touch. Now why was that do you think? Why them and why twice?'

The question hung in the air for what seemed like forever. No one wanted to be the first to speak; the first to get it wrong. Finally, Jamal, educated, precise, English faultless, cleared his throat again and said, 'They were his contacts in Paris, Ammi – isn't that right?'

'Yes, my bright boy,' the older man said, breaking into what looked suspiciously like a smile as he regarded his sister's son, 'they were his contacts. And so the next question is…'

'Where are they now?'

His uncle nodded, 'Yes indeed; where are they now? Now – all of you – get out there on the streets and find them. That's our number one priority. If we can't find *him*, surely, Allah willing, we can find *them*, and they will lead us to *him*.'

'Did he speak to the woman and the lad?' Jamal asked. 'Or did he give them anything?'

'Yes, and also no,' his uncle replied. 'At Les Invalides he spoke but we can't decipher what he said, and she replied but we can't fathom what she said either. At the Eiffel Tower he spoke only to say what, from the footage I've seen, looks like *thank you* after the woman picked up something he'd dropped.'

'Let me see, Ammi,' Jamal said.

'Okay,' his uncle scrolled back on his tablet. 'Here. See if you can work out who said what to whom and why.'

Jamal studied the film for five minutes or more, running it back and forth and sometimes freezing it. Finally, he shook his head.

'No luck?' Ibrahim asked.

'Some luck, Ammi, but I fear nothing that can really help us. I can't understand what he said at Les Invalides because he was looking straight at her, but I can – at least I *think* I can – see what she replied. But it doesn't make sense.'

'Tell me, anyway,' Ibrahim said quietly.

'She said *parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme*.'

'Some kind of shopping list for him?' his uncle asked. 'Was someone making soup?'

'Who knows? What did he drop at the Eiffel Tower?'

'A newspaper. A *Berlin* newspaper, *Die Welt,* which he arranged to land almost at the woman's feet. She looked at it for a few moments then smiled and gave it back to him. Then he thanked her and walked away without even a backwards glance. Two days later he meets her again at Les Invalides.'

'Why didn't whoever was doing the filming stop him right there and then, sir?' Yusuf, another man, asked.

'Because he was following orders as a true worker for the cause should. And those orders were to shadow him and film – that's all,' his boss, replied. 'But somewhere, in or around Les Invalides, he lost him. Then there was a commotion in the street and the police came, and now we can't find him. He's gone to ground somewhere.'

'We must find him, and stop him,' Jamal said passionately. 'If we don't we'll get the blame for whatever he's planning to do.'

His uncle frowned. 'Yes, we'll get the blame: our people *always* get the blame, one way or another.' As

he spoke he suddenly looked old. Old and war-weary. *I want done with all of this,* he thought. *Let someone else take up the cause now. I feel Allah's calling me home soon. And it can't come too soon for me.*

★

'I don't want you to go, Megan,' Philippe Maigret said. 'Not you and Nat on your own. If you wait a week or so I'll go with you. I've already said I will.'

'And I've told *you* that this is Nat's half-term and Monday 13th is the only date that will work for us. And that *particular* train, on that *particular* day, is a one-off celebration of some *Deutsche Bahn* milestone and it's the only time there will be a dining car.'

'It's nothing like the Orient Express, if that's how you're imagining it,' her husband said with one of his legendary sighs.

'I know that, but it might be a scaled down version if we're lucky. And at least it will be an *adventure* for us. What could possibly go wrong? The train is non-stop. Paris to Berlin and that's it. We leave Gare de l'Est at just after eight at night and arrive at Berlin Hauptbahnhof at eight-thirty the next morning. I'll spend all that day in Berlin then fly back to Paris the next afternoon, and Nat will return to Norfolk a few days after – simple.'

Oh my love – if only you knew even a fraction of the possibilities there are for what could go wrong! The sights I've seen and the anguish I've witnessed. Yes, witnessed – and experienced too. But you can't imagine those things and I can't

tell you. Not without damaging your faith and destroying your peace of mind. And I can't do that to you because I love you, Philippe Maigret thought. *Love you – and need you.*

'But still…'

'Besides, I need you to take care of the cat and…'

'And that's another thing. Why do we even have a cat? Was there any discussion about it? No – you arrived home one day with a cat and it seems it was a *fait accompli.'*

'She followed me home. She's a rescue cat, love.'

'I don't even like cats…'

'Miss Tibbs, our cat, is a rescue cat, too,' Nat said, looking up from his tablet on which he was devising a crossword puzzle. 'But she came from an animal shelter, not a park.'

'She loves you, Philippe – I can tell she does.'

'She loves whoever feeds her.'

'Stop sulking. You only have to feed her for two days, and be sure to walk her twice a day in the park. She likes the feel of the grass under her paws. And she's quite used to her little harness now; you'll have no trouble putting it on her.'

'I'm not walking her and that's final.'

'Then she'll shred our expensive sofas and curtains and I'll have to replace them when I get back.'

'Do you know how many times I've been wounded in the performance of my duty?' Philippe said to no one in particular.

Nat, his step-grandson, was very interested. 'How many times?'

'Once that I know about,' Megan said before Philippe

could answer. 'That was at Gare du Nord when you were shot in the shoulder and carelessly bled all over me.'

'*Four times*,' the chief inspector said. 'Four times, and the time I was shot at Gare du Nord was probably the least serious wound I've had. And now,' he paused for effect, 'and now I'm to be relegated to the role of cat-walker. Not even a dog… but a damn cat!'

'Careful,' Megan warned, glancing at Nat as she suspected an outburst of bad language might be imminent. 'And don't say what you're thinking.'

'What am I supposed to be thinking?'

'You're about to spout Shakespeare again, aren't you?'

'Maybe…'

'I hate to disillusion you, Chief Inspector Maigret, but although you are an exemplary police officer you are definitely not *the triple pillar of the world*, nor am I a *strumpet*…'

'What's a strumpet?' Nat asked, looking up again.

'It's a medieval form of musical instrument similar to a trumpet,' Megan said, thinking quickly.

'Oh,' Nat said, returning to his tablet, satisfied.

'It is not!'

'Well… it might be. It certainly *could* be. And what would you know about the matter anyway?'

'Only that it now appears I've arrested a good number of… *medieval instruments* during the course of my career,' he said, winking at her. 'And I must admit that I enjoyed every single moment of those er… impromptu musical performances!'

Later that night, as they were preparing for bed, Megan said, 'People can be very strange sometimes – don't you think? I mean the way they'll do odd things for no reason. Total strangers; people who might otherwise seem normal and… well, *sane.* And then out of the blue they'll do the most surprising thing.'

'Oh dear,' Philippe said, with another of his sighs as the police officer took over from the husband. 'Who said what to you today – and where? Sometimes, Madame Maigret, I could swear you have a flashing sign above your head that reads loonies and misfits apply here!'

'Loonies is not a politically correct word for a police officer to use. I'm not saying another word without my lawyer present.'

'If only that were true….'

Megan picked up the nearest pillow and threw it at him: she scored a direct hit.

'Ouch!'

'Sorry!'

'So what happened today? Tell me.'

'Okay. It was nothing *sinister,* just a little weird, that's all,' she said. 'And the man who….'

'Just the facts please, ma'am. The who, the where, and the what.'

'Okay. An attractive, fair-haired man, maybe thirty or thirty-five, at Les Invalides when I was there with Nat this afternoon.'

'And the what?'

'He said, *Are you going to Scarborough Fair?'*

'*Comment*?'

'That's what he said, Philippe. *Are you going to Scarborough Fair?'*

'And that's *all* he said?'

'Yes.'

Her husband frowned. 'That doesn't make sense. I hope you ignored him – that's what I would have done.'

'And yet you wonder why some people think the French are arrogant!'

'You're not telling me you actually replied to his nonsense?'

'Of course I replied! I said *parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.*'

'Dear God, why would you say something like that?'

'Because it's the next line of the folk song.'

'A folk song? An *English* folk song?'

'Yes. It's a very *old* English folk song –

Are you going to Scarborough Fair
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Remember me to one who lives there
She once was a true love of mine.

And then he just walked off and we didn't see him again. Although we had actually seen him before. A day or so earlier. Nat will probably remember exactly when.'

'Where?'

'At the Eiffel Tower.'

TWO

Wednesday 8th March

Chief Inspector Maigret tossed and turned that night. The words of the folk song kept spinning around in his head together with images of the Eiffel Tower and busts of Napoleon Bonaparte. *Are you going to Scarborough Fair – that sounds like a classic way of establishing contact with someone working undercover*, he thought. *Make the approach, say the line then wait for the response. If the wrong response is given walk away: the person is not your contact after all, but no harm's been done: your cover has not been compromised.*

But Megan had made the correct response, yet the man had still walked away. He knew that because at 3am he reluctantly left his warm bed and his sleeping wife to make an Internet search on his laptop. And there he read the entire folk song in a number of different versions. *So why had the man walked away?*

The next morning, as soon as he arrived at police HQ – 36, quai des Orfévres, not far from Notre Dame, he tapped on the glass of his office to summon Inspector Georges Martin.

'Close the door, Georges,' he said. 'And pull up a pew. Want a coffee?'

'Yes, sir – thanks.'

'Now then,' his chief said, 'I'm about to say something to you and I want you to say the first thing that comes into your head as I speak. Got that?'

'Yes, Chief.'

'The very *first* thing – no questions, no preamble. Yes?'

'Yes.'

'*Are you going to Scarborough Fair?'*

'Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme,' Georges Martin replied without hesitation.

His chief was astonished. 'You *know* the folk song? The *English* folk song?'

'Yes, Chief,' Georges Martin replied looking a little sheepish, 'I am, or rather *was,* a big Simon and Garfunkel fan. *Scarborough Fair* is on their *Greatest Hits* CD, although they didn't actually write the song, even if many people think they did. It's been known for hundreds of years in England, and other singers had recorded *Scarborough Fair* long before Simon and Garfunkel discovered it.'

'Mon Dieu,' his boss said, easing the tension in his forehead with the tips of his fingers.

'You look tired,' Georges said without thinking.

'Of course I'm tired, man! I've been awake half the night.'

'Oh.'

'Sorry, Georges; it's not your fault I didn't sleep well

last night. The blame for that can be laid at the feet of Madame Maigret, as usual.'

'Another one of her… er…adventures?'

'Looks like it.'

'What's happened now, sir? You know I'm a good and… er, *discreet* listener.'

'Yes you are, *mon ami.* So let me tell you what happened to Madame when she went on what should have been an innocent outing to Les Invalides yesterday afternoon with young Nat. This man…'

'I'd have thought she'd be safe there, sir – the place is usually *infested* by the *Gendarmerie*,' Georges interrupted.

His boss chuckled. 'Indeed, the dreaded *Gendarmerie!* However, as your senior officer, I feel obliged to remind you that they are *usually* on *our* side! Now not another word until I've finished my story.'

A few minutes later, as the chief inspector ended his tale, he leant back in his chair, massaged his aching forehead again, and asked, 'So – what do you make of all that, Georges?'

For a few moments Georges sat quite still and said nothing. Then he abruptly left the room without so much as a word to his boss, returning seconds later with a piece of paper which he passed to Chief Inspector Maigret.

'What's this?' he asked suspiciously.

'It's a report of a hit-and-run outside Les Invalides at 3.45pm yesterday. Look at the description of the victim, sir – it could be… *might* be… the same man.'

'Medium build, fair-haired male, aged between

thirty and forty,' his chief inspector said, reading from the accident report. 'Is he dead?'

'Not yet, but he's in a pretty bad way.'

'Where?'

'Intensive care at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital.'

The chief inspector stood up, walked around his desk, opened the door and called, 'Jacques! Get the car, we're going to the P-S Hospital, and at top speed with heavy-duty siren please!'

Twenty minutes later the three of them – the chief inspector, Inspector Georges Martin, and Sergeant Jacques Laurent – arrived at the hospital where an immediate turf war ensued, with a great deal of shouting and waving of hands, between the over-wrought senior registrar and the under-slept Chief Inspector Maigret. Georges and Jacques stood well back and awaited the inevitable verbal explosion from their boss.

'Twenty euros says the boss will have to pull his revolver stunt again,' Georges whispered to Jacques, 'before the doctor gives in.'

'The boss wouldn't do that – not in a hospital! Is he even wearing it?'

'Don't know. Might be, could be.'

'Nah, not taking the bet, Georges; not enough info to go on. Anyway I hope to God he's not wearing it.'

'Why?'

'Because I *loaded* it a couple of days ago and he might not remember that!'

'Why'd he want it loaded? That revolver's hardly ever loaded and I'm almost certain it's never been fired.'

'He said we live in dangerous times now and that he felt it… er, *prudent* to take all precautions.'

'If that's the case I think we'd better get involved now,' Georges Martin said quickly. 'Not a good look for the boss to gun down a doctor in his own hospital!'

So they did.

'If I might suggest a small compromise, sirs,' Inspector Martin said gingerly, glancing sideways at his boss.

'What!' the registrar and the chief inspector shouted in unison.

'I thought that, perhaps, we might be permitted to examine the *clothes* that the injured man was wearing yesterday, and perhaps even take a couple of photographs of him. Without disturbing him, of course.'

'Well, yes, I see no reason why that can't be done,' the registrar said, calming down a little although his face remained the colour of a squashed plum.

'And perhaps just a question or two? Certainly no more than three,' Georges Martin said, chancing his luck.

'No, no, no – no questions! The man is in no fit state for questions! And that's the end of this discussion.'

'I give you my word, Doctor,' Philippe Maigret said. 'One question and one question only. Agreed?'

'Very well, Chief Inspector,' the doctor said after some hesitation. 'One question only and entirely against my better judgement.'

When the chief inspector saw the patient he understood the doctor's reluctance: his face was a mish-mash of cuts and there was considerable swelling. *No*

point taking any photos, Philippe Maigret thought, *I doubt his own mother would recognise him in this state.*

'Wait outside please, Georges and Jacques. See if you can find this poor man's clothes. I'm not sure he's even conscious.'

Maigret sat down by the side of the man's bed and took hold of his hand. Without fully knowing why he began stroking it. *The human touch,* he thought. *Maybe it will do some good.*

After a while the man's eyelids fluttered but he did not open his eyes.

'You are safe now, *mon ami*,' the chief inspector said softly in French. 'You are in a hospital and we will take good care of you. Would you like some water?'

There was a miniscule movement of the man's head. Maigret poured a small amount of water into the glass and held it to the man's lips. He clutched at it, took a couple of slurps through the straw, then slumped back again on his pillows, exhausted. Maigret removed the handkerchief from his top pocket, wrapped it around the glass, emptied the remaining water back into the jug and carefully dropped the glass into his pocket. Then he began stroking the patient's hand again. Suddenly, in a move that made him jump, the man, still with eyes closed, grabbed at his hand and whispered, 'Beware the Ides of March.'

'*Comment?*'

'Beware the Ides of March… The Ides…'

'That's enough now, Chief Inspector,' the doctor said, standing in the doorway.

'But I haven't asked him my one question yet!'

'No, but he spoke to you and that's more than enough intervention for now.'

Ignoring what the doctor had said, Philippe Maigret touched the man's hand, and once more his eyes fluttered. 'Are… you… going… to… Scarborough… Fair,' Maigret said distinctly.

An almost imperceptible movement of the man's head.

'Where is Scarborough Fair, *mon ami*?'

'Berlin.'