

## Bradford, England

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It was still very dark when I woke up. I was dressed and ready long before 7:00 a.m., which was the time we had to leave. I went across to the canteen for some breakfast and met the driver there. One of the kitchen staff offered to make me a sandwich to take with me on the journey and I accepted gratefully. I thought how lucky I was to be treated so nicely.

Promptly at 7:00 the driver pulled up outside my Nissen hut. For the first time in three years I was going to travel on my own, with no guards to accompany me, and I didn't have to worry about being seen. It would take a little while to get used to this freedom.

The driver told me to phone the guardhouse after I got back and someone would pick me up at the railway station. He dropped me off and there I was, all by myself.

I had about half an hour until my train left. I entered a large hall and found the notice board, which directed me to the platform from which the train left for Leeds. In Leeds I had to change trains.

The carriage in which I traveled was not very full so I could pick my seat. I sat near a window so that I could enjoy the scenery.

Not long after we left, the conductor came to check my ticket. He looked at me several times, as if he wasn't quite sure what to make of me. Before he could ask any questions, I showed him the letter from my camp commander. He seemed to be satisfied with that and wished me a nice trip.

From Leeds it was a short trip to my final destination. Before long the first houses of Bradford came in sight. Not long after that, I noticed the train was slowing down and heard the brakes being applied. As we

rolled slowly into the station, the conductor called out, “Bradford, Bradford.”

Everyone got up from their seats and made their way towards the nearest door. Though I had been waiting for so long to be with my sweetheart, I remained in my seat. I was in no great hurry and waited until everyone had left. Looking out of the window I didn’t see Sue or her father and wondered what I would do if they were not there. I had brought their phone number with me but I had never used a telephone kiosk.

Finally I picked up my bag of presents and got off. People were still going back and forth along the platform. Sue spotted me first and came running towards me. With open arms she fell into mine. She said, “Oh Karl, we arrived a little late and I was afraid we might miss you, but now you are here, everything is all right.”

I held her face in my hands and said, “You are as beautiful as ever and I love you.”

She embraced me. “I love you too my darling.”

We didn’t have far to walk. When we got to the car, Sue motioned me to sit with her in the back. She had a lot to tell me about Heinz, Seppie and Theo, and about her new job.

When we pulled up in front of Highfield House, Clayton, Sue pointed towards some newly built homes. “See, this is where you used to work. It’s the place where we first met.” Most of the homes had been completed at the building site and the place looked so different that I didn’t recognize it any more.

Sue must have noticed my nervousness. She kissed me tenderly. “There is no one in the house but my mother, Pat and Daisy, the rest of the family are not going to be here until this evening.” She took my hand. “Come and meet them, they are anxious to see you again.”

Daisy stretched out both of her hands towards me and said, “Welcome to my house.” She seemed to have grown some since I saw her in the summer. Nevertheless, I picked her up high into the air and when I had put her back down she said, “I like you, are you going to stay with us for a while?” I told her yes, for three days. Sue’s mother gave me a hug and offered me a cup of tea and some scones.

She asked me to make myself comfortable in the living room and Sue followed her mother into the kitchen to help her. Pat came to greet



House of Sue's parents at No. 14, Nab End, Clayton, Bradford, Yorkshire

me next. We shook hands, and she curtsied and said, "Nice to have you with us." She sat down next to me and pointed to a picture of herself in a ballet dress and ballet shoes, hanging on the wall. She told me that she was taking ballet lessons. Little Daisy quickly sat next to me also, announcing that she took ballet lessons too and went to fetch a picture of herself in a ballet dress.

Sue's father joined us and tea was served. They made me feel like one of the family.

I had a hand-drawn birthday card and a present for Sue, and a bar of chocolate each for Pat and Daisy. Sue's present was a bracelet I had made from small silver coins (threepenny bits). They were no longer in circulation and were hard to come by. Most of them had been sent to me by Sue's father. To make them into a bracelet, I had drilled two tiny holes on each side of the coin and connected them with a very thin silver wire. Jack had bought the clasp for me to complete it.

Sue was thrilled with her gift and the birthday card, which I had made out of a thin piece of cardboard. I had drawn flowers around the birthday greetings. Everyone thought it was beautifully done. Sue gave

me a kiss, for the first time in front of the whole family. I couldn't miss the smile, which Pat and Daisy shared, when they saw their sister kissing me.

Sue's mother asked me to help them putting up the Christmas tree. Her father had bought it the day before, a beautiful big tree, and it was standing behind the house. It required two people to bring it in and put it in the stand.

We placed it next to the piano in the living room. I climbed the stepladder to reach the upper branches, and Pat and Daisy handed me the ornaments, with precise instructions where to hang them. Then they added strands of silver tinsel.

Mother was busy cooking a meal for us and Father gave me a glass of sherry with the words, "To a wonderful future to you, Karl." We sat down and talked. I told him about my Christmases as a young boy, and soon Sue's sisters came and sat on the floor in front of me, listening intently.

I explained how the five of us children had to stay in the kitchen while our parents put up the tree and decorated it. We were not allowed to see it being decorated. It always snowed on Christmas Eve, so we looked impatiently out of the window, watching the flakes come down and settling everywhere.

Often we saw people dressed as angels, going from house to house, carrying lanterns and singing Christmas carols. Every now and then we would open the kitchen door and call out, "Can't we come in yet?" However they made us wait till everything was ready. Finally we were invited into the living room, where we beheld a very festive sight. The candles on the tree were lit (they were regular candles, not electric lights) and we all sat around the tree, singing Christmas carols.

If we didn't see any gifts lying under the tree, we knew that Santa Claus was going to come in person. Our patience was tried again while we waited for him to knock at our door.

He arrived dressed in a long overcoat with a pointed cap and large boots. His long beard reached all the way down to his belt. On his back he carried a big sack with presents in it. In his other hand he carried a long broom or stick, which he threatened to use on anyone who had been naughty. Then he asked each of us if we had been good. If we said yes, and our parents confirmed it, he put down his sack and handed out the presents. As he was leaving we all thanked him and wished him a merry

Christmas. Now we could open the gifts and said thank you to our parents for giving them to Santa Claus.

Sue called us into the dining room for supper and Daisy told her, "Father Christmas doesn't come down the chimney in Germany, they actually see him when he comes to the house."

After supper mother told the girls to help clear the table before the visitors arrived. "They will be here very soon," she added.

Sue took me by the hand and said, "Come Karl, I will show you the rest of the house." All the rooms were very large with ten-foot high ceilings.

We went in the dining room first. The centerpiece was a beautiful table with eight high-backed chairs. In the corner stood a magnificent Chippendale sideboard. There was a chandelier and a very large picture window.

In the sitting room was a grand piano. There were four armchairs, each with a side table. On the walls hung beautiful pictures, a picture each of the two girls in their ballet dresses and a photo of Sue standing in the garden holding three little puppies. As we went through the long hallway I noticed a gorgeous looking antique grandfather clock. All the skirting boards and ceiling coves were of stained and polished hardwood.

The first room Sue showed me upstairs was her bedroom. As we got inside she quickly put her arms around me. I held her so close that we could feel each other's heartbeat. She whispered, "Oh Karl, I love you so much and I am so glad that you are here. I already dread the moment when you have to leave again, I miss you so very much when you are not near." We kissed passionately. She admitted that she fell in love with me the very first moment our eyes met at the little bridge I had built on the building site.

We were suddenly interrupted by Daisy, coming up the stairs and calling, "Mummy wants you to come down because the visitors will be here any moment." Sue wiped the lipstick from my face with her handkerchief, just before Daisy made it to the top of the stairs, and the three of us went down to join the rest of the family.

It wasn't long before the first visitors arrived. They were Sue's Uncle Cecil, Aunt Mabel, and her cousins Lorna and little Kathy. Then came Aunt Phyllis, mother's sister, and Uncle Harold her husband, with their sons Christopher and John. A little later Louis arrived, Uncle Cecil's eldest

son. He had picked up Grandma Cooper, who lived in Bradford. We had a lovely evening. Uncle Cecil told me that he was a prisoner of war for a short while in Germany. So we had something in common.

Most of the evening I stayed close to Sue. I didn't want to be questioned too much by her curious relatives but I joined in everything they did. We had a glass of port wine and did a kind of dance where everybody joined in singing. It went like this, "You put your left foot in, your left foot out, you do the hokey-cokey and you turn about, that's what it's all about!" I joined in as best I could. I even did some acrobatic stunts, which I had learned as a youngster. All the relatives were very friendly towards me, especially Grandma Cooper, who I found a delightful person to be with. She was very genuine and understanding and I enjoyed her company from the moment we met. Aunt Mabel and Aunt Phyllis were the life and soul of the party.

I felt very much at home with everyone present. What I really enjoyed was singing Christmas carols, and when I didn't know the words in English, which was most of the time, I sang along in German. I even sang one carol all by myself in German, accompanied by little Daisy on the piano. We got quite a lot of applause.

Grandma Cooper stayed the night. Pat shared the bedroom with Sue. Daisy got to sleep with Grandma. Sue's father and I were to sleep in the living room. They had four very large armchairs. We put two together, facing each other, to make a very comfortable bed for each of us.

Before we made up our beds, Father went upstairs to see that everyone was OK and Sue came in to wish me good night. She looked gorgeous, with her hair down, and wearing a beautiful silk shimmering dressing gown. It nearly took my breath away. Holding her close to me was more blissful than I had ever imagined. We could have kissed all night through. She then said, "Sleep well mein Schatz (my darling) in your makeshift bed and I will see you in the morning."

Sue's father came back and we settled in our armchairs and talked for a while, mostly about my future, which was quite uncertain, and about his job as chief engineer at the hospital.

I wondered what kind of Christmas Eve my family was having at home without their two sons. They had written to me that they were well, except for my father. He had circulation problems and also problems with water retention. With all the hardships they had to endure, having barely

enough food to go round, spending many hours in damp bomb shelters, no wonder their health was suffering. I wished I could talk to them. It was five years since my last Christmas at home with my family.

I finally fell asleep. The sleeping arrangements must have been very comfortable, because I didn't even hear Sue's father get up in the morning.

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I was awakened by a tender kiss. As I opened my eyes I felt like a prince in fairyland. At first I didn't know where I was, until I saw Sue standing over me saying, "Good morning, Darling. Merry Christmas. Everyone is up already, you had better get up too." I reached up and pulled her face close to mine, kissing her and wishing her also a merry Christmas.

The two chairs her father had slept in were already back in their places. It didn't take me long to get dressed and washed and then I went to join the others.

The dining room table was set very festively. As I walked in, everybody wished me a merry Christmas. Sue's mother and father were busy in the kitchen preparing breakfast. I could smell eggs and bacon. Daisy, who was sitting next to me, leaned over and whispered, "We can open our gifts after breakfast." Sue came out of the kitchen with a plate full of toast, which had been fried in butter. It smelled delicious. A pan full of sliced and fried tomatoes followed this. Then her mother served fried