**On Playwrights and Heroes**

Marion sat in the garden of the villa at Menton listening to the surf on the sandy beach below. It was nearly midnight but still warm enough to sit with just a shawl around her. The smell of citrus fruit and sea salt was delightful at any time of day but seemed especially potent now.

She was sipping a glass of champagne, only her third in the course of a successful evening party. The last of the guests had gone and the quiet now that the music and chatter were stopped was welcome, even though she had enjoyed the evening as hostess to some of ₀the Riviera’s literary and artistic residents.

Kristoph came to join her at the garden table. His choice of after dinner drink was a glass of single malt whiskey. The clink of the ice in the glass was a sharp counterpoint to the natural sounds of the night.

“What are you thinking about?” Kristoph asked.

“How lucky I am to be able to talk to the authors I wrote essays about when I was doing my literature degree. Evelyn Waugh was really nice to talk to. The trouble is, he hasn’t written the book I studied. Brideshead Revisited is a post-war novel. That’s the whole point of it. The revisiting is to show how the war broke down all the strictures of class that existed before.”

Kristoph smiled broadly.

“Another four thousand words and it would be a first class essay,” he said.

Marion laughed, thankful that her essay writing days were well behind her. When she read a book like that, now, it was purely for enjoyment of the twentieth century novel as a literary genre.

“Actually... I was wondering... Something I should have asked before. I didn’t because I ... I didn’t want to know. I wanted to be like the people of this time... Blissfully unaware of what is coming.”

“They weren’t completely unaware,” Kristoph noted. “Only the most foolish didn’t realise something was in the air. This is the year Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Even if Winston Churchill was the only politician to see the danger at this stage there were undercurrents. I even noticed some of them tonight. Between the champagne and literary talk there was a sense of something in the air.”

“They didn’t want to think about it,” Marion said. “They didn’t want to admit that this warm, fragrant, carefree life wouldn’t last forever. I know how they feel. I want to hang onto it, too. But since I know for certain what’s coming, I can’t keep pretending to myself.”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about,” Kristoph assured her. “We won’t be here when the storm breaks. It isn’t our war.”

“I know. And I’m glad of that. But Kristoph... What happens to everyone here in another seven years. When the war comes... When the Germans invade France.…”

“Most of our friends we entertained tonight went back to their own countries, “ Kristoph said after a moment’s thought. “Messrs Maugham and Haxton went to America. They are both too old for service, anyway. Mr Scott Fitzgerald….”

“He died in 1940, in America,” Marion noted. “I remember that from studying his work in an ‘American Novel’ module.”

“Alcoholism,” Kristoph noted. “He went through most of a whiskey bottle tonight. That’s a fate already set in motion.”

“Yes, I noticed,” Marion nodded philosophically.

“So much we know from the biography pages of their works yet to be written,” Kristoph added. “Then there is Mr Samuel Becket whom you tried to avoid all night...”

“I had to. His plays are the most boring stuff I ever had to endure. I'm sure he’s a nice enough man, but I couldn’t pretend to be interested in him.”

“I understand,” Kristoph assured her. “I’m not so sure about Waiting for Godot, either. But Samuel didn’t retreat to his neutral Ireland when the Nazis entered Paris. He stayed there, taking advantage of that neutrality... And worked with the Resistance. Exactly what he did in that capacity he didn’t divulge afterwards. He wasn’t the sort of man who had to brag about his activities, but he was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance by the French government for his efforts in fighting the German occupation.”

“Goodness? Really?” Marion was surprised. Beckett was a slightly built, bookish looking man. He hardly seemed the type. Though perhaps that was the point of Resistance fighters. The less likely they appeared, the more they could do in secret.

“My estimation of him as a man has risen hugely,” Marion admitted. “But I don’t think I could like his literary work, still. “

Kristoph nodded and smiled. That was an honest view. He expected nothing less of Marion.

“All of them... Everyone we dined with tonight... except for Fitzgerald, at least, they all came out of the war all right,” he assured her.

That was important. Meeting people in history had one fundamental downside, and that was knowing too much about the future.

“But what about the ordinary people who live around here?” se asked. “Menton isn’t just a winter paradise for the English intelligentsia. People live here. There are shopkeepers and fishermen, schoolteachers. There’s the staff who look after these villas whether the English are here or not. What happens to all of them when the Germans come? “

“Italians,” Kristoph corrected her.

“Italians?”

Of course, she knew that Italy under Mussolini had been a participant in the Second World War and an ally of Germany at the beginning, at least. But the rest was vague, as she imagined it was to most people of her peacetime generation who mostly knew about the war through the films made about it.

“Most of the south of France was under the jurisdiction of the Vichy puppet government,” Kristoph explained. “Ostensibly run by the French but controlled by the Nazis in reality. But this region was invaded by Italy before the French surrendered in 1940. Mussolini considered the Alpes-Maritimes to be historic Italian lands – or at least he represented it as being so. It was held under Italian military administration until 1943 when Italy surrendered to the Allies. Unfortunately, that left the area to be taken over by the Germans and the population suffered some cruelties in the last year and a bit of the war. Many people who had fled to these parts to escape German pogroms were rounded up and deported as well as those who comforted them.”

“That’s the part I didn’t want to hear.”

“I know, but that is the truth and there is no point in pretending otherwise. There is a famous story about Menton and the Italian invasion, though. It impressed me, anyway.”

Marion noted Kristoph’s tone. It was as a war veteran himself that he spoke and he sounded pleased.

“The rail line Le Train Bleu travels along and the road into Italy both take a very narrow route through the Alps. The invaders had to come by the same bottleneck. When they reached Menton, something like five thousand of them were held up by a machine gun post manned by a handful of French soldiers.”

“A handful?”

“Nine,” Kristoph clarified.

“Really?” Marion was impressed. That was what she called bravery.

“Really. It must have been quite a stand. Of course, a narrow defile and a slight height advantage – it’s a well-known military tactic. It has worked in many a battle. I’ve even heard of a variation in space. But this particular example isn’t well known enough in my opinion. There should have been a film on the epic scale of The Alamo. The Defence of Pont Saint Louis ought to be a byword for heroism and patriotism. Yet there isn’t even a plaque marking the spot in the future. I think French people after the war were a little ashamed of how easy their military had surrendered. Stories of small acts of heroism were forgotten.”

“So, I suppose their names aren’t even known, then?” Marion asked. “And yet, they’re probably local mem, living here, now. They could be working in any of the shops I’ve visited, or still at school, even.”

“That’s what really makes time travel so very strange,” Kristoph noted. “And why those of us who do it on a regular basis have to be so careful. Don’t go wandering around looking for the nine heroes of Pont Saint Louis before any of them even put on a uniform, or before the French government even built the machine gun post they defended.”

“I won’t,” Marion promised. “But I do feel a little proud that somebody in this town put up a fight, even for a short time. Good for them. Good for Menton.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Kristoph said, taking a sip from his glass and sitting back to enjoy the peace of this night long before anyone was called upon to be heroic, whether it was nine citizens of the Alps-Maritime region of France or an Irish playwright called Samuel Beckett or even a Time Lord who had seen his own fair share of wars that were still in the future from the temporal perspective of this warm night in the south of France.