ENEMY BROTHERS



CONSTANCE SAVERY

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Also by Constance Savery

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1. Out of the Gray North Sea

A YOUNG MAN in Air Force blue stood by the window of a hotel lounge, staring out at a gray world: the gray streets of a gray town under a gray sky with a gray sea beyond it. Streets and sky and sea had to be taken on trust; for all that could be seen was dense gray mist.

"And the sea sighed and the fog rose up sheer,
A wall of nothing at the world's last edge,"

murmured the young man. He turned back into the empty room and sat down by the fire. Taking a folded sheet of paper and a tinted photograph from the end-flap of a shabby leather pocket-book, he studied them closely.

On the paper was a child's colored-pencil drawing of a house with a high peaked roof. Red and blue flowers sparkled in window boxes; a balcony with curly balusters decorated every story; fluted pillars flanked the front door; and pargeted plaster urns, laurel wreaths and fat dangling tassels filled the space between one window and the next. A dachshund sat under a linden tree on a grass plot in which heart-shaped beds had been cut for roses. Tree, flower beds and dog appeared to be sliding down a steep hill toward small garden railings near the foot of the sheet. The airman's half smile died away as he looked at the photograph.

It showed the head and shoulders of a boy of ten, with the name Tony written beneath in a woman's upright foreign hand. The little face that laughed up at the airman might well have belonged to a younger brother: the likeness between them was not confined to their dark-brown hair and blue-gray eyes. Had a dozen years been taken from the elder's age, it might not have been easy to tell them apart.

The airman's keen gaze rested for some moments on the boy. Then, sighing, he returned photograph and sketch to the pocket-book. "Poor old Tony!" he muttered. "I wonder what you've become."

He sat for a long time, deep in thought. Then he glanced at his wrist watch, flung himself back in the chair and within two min-

utes was asleep, his head pillowed on his arm. Flames crackled on the hearth; beyond the glass doors figures flitted to and fro in the entrance hall; from the unseen harbor came muffled sea sounds. Half an hour later two midshipmen hurled themselves into the room. Wide awake in an instant, the sleeper started to his feet.

The newcomers stood looking at him reproachfully.

"And is that all the welcome you have for two young heroes, Flying Officer George Dymory Ingleford? Your beloved brother Ginger and his dearest friend Lancelot rush into your arms, fresh from their valiant exploits—and what sort of welcome do they get? None whatever; 'cause you're asleep, at this hour of the day! You lazy beggar, Dym!"

The young man grinned. "Sorry," he said. "I'm tired."

"Been busy lately?"

"Much as usual. What have you been up to?"

They looked at him with mock severity.

"We're the great strong silent Navy; we don't rush about, shouting the names of the places we've visited lately. We leave the R.A.F. to do all the talking. We've been dodging round here, there and everywhere in the icy North Sea—Icy North! Ugh!"

Two more easy chairs were drawn up to the fire. Dym rang the bell for coffee. The brothers looked into each other's eyes and smiled. It was their first meeting since the outbreak of war.

"All well at home?"

"All well."

"Decent of you to come all this way on a bare chance of meeting me, Dym. Must have cost you a fortune."

"Well, what could I do when I had a leave and a whisper that you might be here at a given time? It didn't cost me anything. Cousin Olive insisted on franking me—"

"She's an old trump."

"She is," Dym agreed, speaking as though words and thoughts had drifted apart.

"What's up, Dym? Still sleepy?"

"No. I was only thinking that I should have come, whatever the cost." He laughed.

"I'm honored."

The airman fidgeted with the lapel of his tunic. "No, you're not. You'll call me superstitious when you hear that I had a queer feeling

I had to come. As if"— he paused, and his eyes went to the seaward windows "as if someone called me here."

"Called you here? What on earth do you mean?"

"I don't know."

It was Ginger's turn to grin.

"Sounds like softening of the brain, old man. Who do you suppose was doing the forsaken merman act? Not me, I assure you, and certainly not old Lance. We're jolly glad to see you, but we didn't call."

"No," said Dym, with a laugh and a shrug, "neither of you. I can't explain but I knew I had to come. Ring the bell again, Ginger."

The waitress brought coffee and cakes and banked up the fire with driftwood. Little salty flames of blue, purple and green danced round the rusty nails in it. Outside the windows the fog pressed closer.

"Can't think how you managed to get ashore in the morning," said Dym as he poured out the coffee. "Didn't expect to see you till this afternoon."

"So you probably would have," said Ginger, "if the Skipper hadn't told us to take the German prisoner ashore and buy him some clothes."

"Prisoner? What have you done with him?"

"Left him in the hall to wait for us, under a joint guard composed of porter, receptionist and giggling maids."

"Quaint way of dealing with prisoners, isn't it?"

"Well, he isn't an ordinary prisoner. He's only twelve."

"Twelve!" said Dym, startled.

"Picked up in mid-ocean on board a motorboat packed with young Norwegians escaping to England. They were workers in a chemical factory that had been commandeered by the Germans. The plucky chaps set fire to their own factory by night and made a dash for England in a motorboat belonging to their German masters. They bumped across a deadly mine field straight into us; their petrol and stores were just about exhausted—"

"But the German boy?"

"Oh, it's a long tale. Surely you don't want to hear it now?"

Once more Dym's eyes sought the fogged glass. "Yes," he said.

"Here goes, then. One of the Norwegians was Olaf Eriksen, the son of the ex-manager of the factory. Only fifteen; he'd had a bad

time. His father had been clapped into prison for refusing to serve under the Germans, who put in men of their own instead—Quislings. Well, that proved a failure, so the head of a chemical works in Germany was sent out to take their place. He brought his wife and son with him and billeted himself and family on the Eriksens. The wife wasn't bad, but the son was a thoroughgoing little Nazi, as fanatical as they're made. He bullied Olaf's little brother and sister, and spied on Olaf. Made a good thing of his spying, too. He found out that Olaf belonged to a secret patriotic association for schoolboys and informed the authorities. Olaf just had time to get his mother and the kids into hiding lest they should be made to suffer for his so-called sins. Then he joined the others in their flight. If he hadn't gone he'd have found himself in a concentration camp."

"Plucky lad! And your small prisoner?"

"Mixture of revenge and prudence on the part of Olaf's friends, I'm afraid. Olaf himself didn't know about it till they were standing out to sea. Fact is, the other Norwegians didn't intend to leave Little Hitler behind; every child in the place went in terror of the young monkey. So they carried him off when everybody was busy trying to save the factory from going up in flames—and, after some hair-raising days inside a German cockleshell, the boy found himself a prisoner on a British man-of-war."

Dym kicked the nearest lump of driftwood and stared into the sharp blue spires of flame. "Poor little chap!" he said.

"You wouldn't be so sympathetic if you knew our Little Hitler," said Ginger. "From what we've seen of him it isn't hard to believe that a week ago he was a swaggering, blustering, detestable little bully. He's arrogant still, in spots, though he's been partly tamed by fright and by the tossing he's had since he put to sea. There's not much of him left now, barring a sort of white determination to go down with the swastika flying. I don't know what he thinks is going to happen to him in England. You can see that he's been stuffed with awful stories about the British. I fancy that death by slow torture is about the best he expects."

"Poor little chap!" said Dym again. "What's his name?"

"Eckermann—Max Eckermann."

"Ah!"

"You don't mean to say you've met him on your travels before the war?"

"No, I didn't mean that. Go on."

"But you spoke as if you'd found a missing bit in a jigsaw puzzle," protested Ginger, eying his brother curiously. "Something slipped into place then; I'm sure it did. What did you mean?"

"Tell you later. Go on."

"The Skipper turned Olaf and Little Hitler over to the gun room and made the lot of us responsible for their health and happiness. Olaf's had the time of his life. He's wild to join the Navy—ours or his, it doesn't seem to matter which! He and the rest of the Norwegians will be off as soon as we've got into touch with their authorities—there'll be dozens of people ready and willing to look after them till the war's over. As for Little Hitler—well, there's no love lost between him and his fifteen nursemaids, that's all I can say."

"He's game, though," said the silent Lancelot suddenly, between two mouthfuls of bun.

"Yes, that's his best point," Ginger agreed. "The Norwegians say he fought like a young tiger before they got him on board the motorboat—and he's fighting-mad still, whenever he has the strength for it. Luckily for all concerned, he's the world's worst sailor, and has spent most of the time on board more dead than alive. But he was game even then—he took his punishment without whimpering. He stood up to the Skipper yesterday, too. I had the luck to be present at the interview as a kind of unofficial prisoner's friend.

"The Skipper told me to bring Little Hitler down to the after-cabin—he wanted to find out whether the boy had any friends in England. He's much too small to be shipped off to a camp for young male enemy aliens. The Skipper thought his people might have friends among the German women who have been interned here. But they haven't—as far as we can make out. Little Hitler was as cautious as you please, wouldn't say an unnecessary word. Instead of answering questions, he began demanding to be sent back to Germany at once! He said that his detention was a breach of international law. Must have invented that for himself, for I don't suppose there has ever been a case like his before. Shows he's got brains, doesn't it? Don't believe the Skipper knew himself whether Little Hitler was right or wrong. Do you?"

"No," said Dym, "but that point needn't detain us. Get on with your story."

"So he told Little Hitler, as comfortingly as he knew how, that the British Government couldn't undertake to send him home because the German Government wouldn't grant safe-conducts for ships carrying children. 'We're responsible for your safety, Max,' he said, 'we can't let you run the risk of being torpedoed on the way home.' It took him a long time to say all that; for he speaks German badly, if you know what I mean. The Skipper told him that he would have to make the best of a bad job. He couldn't go home at present; but the British Government would find him a temporary home, probably with other Germans. Little Hitler didn't seem pleased. He grumbled till the Skipper lost patience and told him straight out that it was no good storming about a trouble he had brought on himself by bad behavior.

"Little Hitler drew himself up, looked the Skipper squarely in the face, and said in English, without any trace of an accent, 'You have no right to speak to me like that. I am German.' None of us had the slightest idea the kid could understand English, let alone speak it almost as easily as you or I! Hullo, Dym! What's wrong? You jumped as if a mine had blown up a yard away."

"Did I?" said Dym. "Sorry."

"It's my belief," said Lancelot solemnly, "that the Skipper rather likes Little Hitler. He hates people to be afraid of him—the boy certainly isn't or, if he is, doesn't show it."

"Yes, he likes Little Hitler, but wants to get rid of him as soon as he conveniently can," said Ginger. "He can't keep him on board and doesn't know where to park him while he's getting in touch with the authorities. He's been sounding the married officers to find out whether they have wives brave enough to house Little Hitler for a week or two. But they're turning a blind eye to his blandishments; they say etiquette demands that the Captain's wife should be asked first, and hoping she'll rise to the occasion."

"She won't," said Lancelot. "I've seen her. She's young and as timid as a kitten. The mere sight of Max would scare her stiff."

"Euphemia wouldn't mind—" Dym began.

"Not on your life!" said Ginger. "That's carrying kindness too far. After all, England's bristling with orphanages and child-adoption societies—the Skipper will find a way out somehow. It's his business."