

PART I

The Quangels

Some Bad News

The postwoman Eva Kluge slowly climbs the steps of 55 Jablonski Strasse. She's tired from her round, but she also has one of those letters in her bag that she hates to deliver, and is about to have to deliver, to the Quangels, on the second floor.

Before that, she has a Party circular for the Persickes on the floor below. Persicke is some political functionary or other – Eva Kluge always gets the titles mixed up. At any rate, she has to remember to call out 'Heil Hitler!' at the Persickes' and watch her lip. Which she needs to do anyway, there's not many people to whom Eva Kluge can say what she thinks. Not that she's a political animal, she's just an ordinary woman, but as a woman she's of the view that you don't bring children into the world to have them shot. Also, that a home without a man is no good, and for the time being she's got nothing: not her two boys, not a man, not a proper home. So, she has to keep her lip buttoned and deliver horrible letters from the front that aren't written but typed, and are signed Regimental Adjutant.

She rings the Persickes' bell, says 'Heil Hitler!' and hands the old drunk his circular. He has his Party badge on his lapel, and he asks, 'Well, what's new?'

She replies, 'Haven't you heard the bulletin? France has capitulated.'

Persicke's not content with that. 'Come on, Fräulein, of course I knew that, but to hear you say it, it's like you were selling stale rolls. Say it like it means something! It's your job to tell everyone who doesn't have a radio, and convince the last of the moaners. The second Blitzkrieg is in the bag; it's England now! In another three months, the Tommies will be finished, and then we'll see what the Führer has in store for us. Then it'll be the turn of the others to bleed, and we'll be the masters. Come on in, and have

a schnapps with us. Amalie, Erna, August, Adolf, Baldur – come in here. Today we’re celebrating; we’re not working today. Today we’ll toast the news, and in the afternoon we’ll go and pay a call on the Jewish lady on the fourth floor, and see if she won’t treat us to coffee and cake! I tell you, there’ll be no mercy for that bitch any more!’

Leaving Herr Persicke ringed by his family, hitting the schnapps and launching into increasingly wild vituperation, the postie climbs the next flight of stairs and rings the Quangels’ bell. She’s already holding the letter out, ready to run off the second she’s handed it over. And she’s in luck: it’s not the woman who answers the door – she usually likes to exchange a few pleasantries – but the man with the etched, birdlike face, the thin lips, and the cold eyes. He takes the letter from her without a word and pushes the door shut in her face, as if she were a thief, someone you had to be on your guard against.

Eva Kluge shrugs her shoulders and turns to go back downstairs. Some people are like that; in all the time she’s delivered mail in Jablonski Strasse, that man has yet to say a single word to her. Well, let him be, she can’t change him, she couldn’t even change the man she’s married to, who wastes his money sitting in bars and betting on horses, and only ever shows his face at home when he’s broke.

At the Persickes’ they’ve left the apartment door open; she can hear the clinking glass and rowdy celebration. The post-woman gently pulls the door shut and carries on downstairs. She thinks the speedy victory over France might actually be good news, because it will have brought the end of the war nearer. And then she’ll have her two boys back.

The only fly in the ointment is the uncomfortable realization that people like the Persickes will come out on top. To have the likes of them as masters and always have to mind your p’s and q’s, that doesn’t strike her as right either.

Briefly, she thinks of the man with the bird face who she gave the letter from the front to, and she thinks of old Frau Rosenthal up on the fourth floor, whose husband the Gestapo took away two weeks ago. You had to feel sorry for someone like that. The

Rosenthals used to have a little haberdashery shop on Prenzlauer Allee that was Aryanized, and now the man has disappeared, and he can't be far short of seventy. Those two old people can't have done any harm to anyone, they always allowed credit – they did it for Eva Kluge when she couldn't afford new clothes for the kids – and the goods were certainly no dearer or worse in quality than elsewhere. No, Eva Kluge can't get it into her head that a man like Rosenthal is any worse than the Persickes, just by virtue of him being a Jew. And now the old woman is sitting in her flat all alone and doesn't dare go outside. It's only after dark that she goes and does her shopping, wearing her yellow star; probably she's hungry. No, thinks Eva Kluge, even if we defeat France ten times over, it doesn't mean there's any justice here at home . . .

And by now she's reached the next house, and she makes her deliveries there.

In the meantime shop foreman Otto Quangel has taken the letter from the front into the parlour and propped it against the sewing machine. 'There!' he says, nothing more. He always leaves the letters for his wife to open, knowing how devoted she is to their only son Otto. Now he stands facing her, biting his thin underlip, waiting for her smile to light up. In his quiet, undemonstrative way, he loves this woman very much.

She has torn open the envelope, and for a brief moment there really was a smile lighting up her face, but it vanished when she saw the typed letter. Her face grew apprehensive, she read more and more slowly, as though afraid of what each next word might be. The man has leaned forward and taken his hands out of his pockets. He is biting his underlip quite hard now, sensing that something terrible has happened. It's perfectly silent in their parlour. Then the woman's breathing comes with a gasp.

Suddenly she emits a soft scream, a sound her husband has never heard from her. Her head rolls forward, bangs against the spools of thread on her sewing machine, and comes to rest among the folds of sewing, covering the fateful letter.

In a couple of bounds Quangel is at her side. With uncharacteristic haste he places his big, work-toughened hand on her

back. He can feel his wife trembling all over. 'Anna!' he says, 'Anna, please!' He waits for a moment, and then he says it: 'Has something happened to Otto? Is he wounded, is it bad?'

His wife's body continues to tremble, but she doesn't make a sound. She makes no effort to raise her head to look at him.

He looks down at her hair, it's got thin in the many years of their marriage. They are getting old; if something serious has happened to Otto, she will have no one to love, only him, and there's not much to love about him. He has never had the words to tell her how much he feels for her. Even now, he's not able to stroke her, be tender to her, comfort her a little. It's all he can do to rest his heavy hand on her hair, pull her head up as gently as he can, and softly say, 'Anna, will you tell me what's in the letter?'

But even though her eyes are now very close to his, she keeps them shut tight, she won't look at him. Her face is a sickly yellow, her usual healthy colour is gone. The flesh over the bones seems to have melted away – it's like looking at a skull. Only her cheeks and mouth continue to tremble, as her whole body trembles, caught up in some mysterious inner quake.

As Quangel gazes into her face, so familiar, and now so strange, he feels his heart pounding harder and harder, he feels his complete inability to afford her the least comfort; he is gripped by a deep fear. A ridiculous fear really, compared to the deep pain of his wife, but he is afraid that she might start to scream, more loudly and wildly than she did a moment ago. He was always one for peace and quiet; he didn't want anyone to know anything about the Quangels at home. And as for giving vent to feelings, no, thank you! But even in the grip of his fear, the man isn't able to say any more than he did a moment ago: 'What is it in the letter? Tell me, Anna!'

The letter is lying there plain to see, but he doesn't dare to reach for it. He would have to let go of his wife's head, and he knows that her head – there are two bloody welts on it from the sewing machine – would only slump once more. He masters himself, and asks again, 'What's happened with Ottochen?'

It's as though the pet name, one that the man hardly ever

used, recalled the woman from the world of her pain back into life. She gulps a couple of times; she even opens her eyes, which are very blue, and now look bleached white. 'With Ottochen?' she says in a near whisper. 'What do you think's happened? Nothing has happened, there is no Ottochen any more, that's all!'

'Oh!' the man says, just a deep 'Oh!' from the core of his heart. Without knowing what he's doing, he lets go of his wife's head and reaches for the letter. His eyes stare at the lines without being able to decipher them.

Then the woman grabs it from him. Her mood has swung round, furiously she rips the letter into scraps and shreds and fragments and she shouts into his face: 'What do you even want to read that filth for, those common lies they always write? That he died a hero's death for Führer and Fatherland? That he was an exemplary soldier and comrade? Do you want to hear that from them, when you know yourself that Ottochen liked nothing better than fiddling about with his radio kits, and that he cried when he was called away to be a soldier? How often he used to say to me when he was recruited that he would give his right hand to be able to get away from them? And now he's supposed to be an exemplary soldier, and died a hero's death? Lies, all a pack of lies! But that's what you get from your wretched war, you and that Führer of yours!'

Now she's standing in front of him, the woman, so much shorter than he is, her eyes sparkling with fury.

'Me and my Führer?' he mumbles, stunned by this attack. 'Since when is he *my* Führer? I'm not even in the Party, just in the Arbeitsfront, and everyone has to join that. As for voting for him, I only did that once, and so did you.'*

He says it in his slow and cumbersome manner, not so much to defend himself as to clarify the facts. He can't understand what has induced her to mount this sudden attack on him. They were always of one mind . . .

* The Arbeitsfront was a vast, Nazi-run umbrella organization of all German labour unions, instituted after Hitler outlawed the free and diverse labour unions of the Weimar Republic. Membership was voluntary but it was nearly impossible to get a job without joining, and the Reich made a considerable income from its compulsory fees.

But she says heatedly, 'What gives you the right to be the man in the house and determine everything? If I want so much as a space for my potatoes in the cellar, it has to be the way you want it. And in something as important as this, it's you who made the wrong decision. But then you creep around everywhere in carpet slippers, you want your peace and quiet and that's all; you want never to come to anyone's attention. So you did the same as they all did, and when they yelled: 'Führer, give us your orders, we will obey!' you went with them like a sheep. And the rest of us had to follow you! But now Ottochen's dead, and no Führer in the world can bring him back, and nor can you!'

He listened to her without answering a word. He had never been a man for quarrelling and bickering, and he could also tell that it was her pain speaking in her. He was almost glad to have her scolding him, because it meant she wasn't giving in to her grief. The only thing he said by way of reply was: 'One of us will have to tell Trudel.'

Trudel was Ottochen's girlfriend, almost his fiancée; she called them Mother and Father. She often dropped in on them for a chat in the evening, even now, with Ottochen away. By day she worked in a uniform factory.

The mention of Trudel straightaway set Anna Quangel off on a different tack. She glanced at the gleaming clock on the mantel and asked, 'Will you have time before your shift?'

'I'm on from one till eleven today,' he said. 'I've got time.'

'Good,' she said. 'Then go, but just ask her to come. Don't say anything about Ottochen. I'll tell her myself. Your dinner'll be ready by midday.'

'I'll ask her to come round tonight,' he said, but he didn't leave yet, but looked into his wife's jaundiced, suffering face. She returns his look, and for a moment they look at each other, two people who have been married for almost thirty years, always harmoniously, he quiet and silent, she bringing a bit of life to the place.

But however much they now look at each other, they can find no words for this thing that has happened, and so he nods and goes out.

She hears the apartment door close. No sooner is she certain he is gone than she turns back towards the sewing machine and sweeps up the scraps of the fateful letter. She tries to put them back together, but quickly sees that it will take too long now. She has to get dinner ready. She scoops the pieces into the envelope and slides it into her hymnbook. In the afternoon, when Otto is at work, she will have time to fit them together, glue them down. It might all be lies – mean, stupid lies – but it remained the last news she will ever have of Ottochen. She'll keep it safe, and show it to Trudel. Maybe she will be able to cry then; just now it still feels like a flame in her heart. It would do her good to be able to cry.

She shakes her head crossly and goes to the stove.

What Baldur Persicke Had to Say

As Otto Quangel was going past the Persicke apartment, rapturous shouting mixed with chants of 'Sieg Heil!' greeted his ears. Quangel hurried on, anxious not to encounter any of that company. They had been living in the same building for ten years, but Quangel had always been at pains to avoid the Persickes, even at the time old Persicke was just a little loud-mouthed publican. But now the Persickes had turned into important people, the man held all sorts of Party posts, and the two older boys were with the SS; money didn't seem to be an issue for them.

The more reason to be wary of them now, because people like that had to keep on good terms with the Party, and the only way they could do it was if they did things to help the Party. 'Doing things' meant reporting on others, for instance: So-and-so was listening to a foreign radio station. Ideally, Quangel would have packed up all the radios in Otto's room and stashed them in the basement. You couldn't be careful enough in times like these, when everyone was spying on everybody else, the Gestapo had their eyes on all of them, and the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen was expanding all the time. He, Quangel, didn't need a radio, but Anna had been opposed to getting rid of them. She still believed in the old proverb, 'A good conscience is a soft pillow.' Even though it was all bunk now, if it hadn't always been.

With these thoughts going through his mind, Quangel hurried down the stairs, across the courtyard, and into the street.

The reason for the cheering at the Persickes was that the darling of the family, young Bruno – who now goes by Baldur because of Schirach* and, if his father's string-pulling can get

* Baldur von Schirach was head of the Hitler-Jugend – the Hitler Youth.