

THE OLD HOUSE

A Novel

By
CÉCILE TORMAY

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FOOTNOTES:

CHAPTER I

1

It was evening. Winter hung white over the earth. Great snowflakes crept over the snow towards the coach. They moved ghostlike over the silent, treeless plain. Mountains rose behind them in the snow. Small church towers and roofs crowded over each other. Here and there little squares flared up in the darkness.

Night fell as the coach reached the excise barrier. Beyond, two sentry boxes buried in the snow faced each other. The coachman shouted between his hands. A drowsy voice answered and white cockades began to move in the dark recesses of the boxes. The light of a lamp emerged from the guard's cottage. Behind the gleam a man with a rifle over his arm strolled towards the vehicle.

The high-wheeled travelling coach was painted in two colours: the upper part dark green, the lower, including the wheels, bright yellow. From near the driver's seat small oil lamps shed their light over the horses' backs. The animals steamed in the cold.

The guard lifted his lantern. At the touch of the crude light, the coach window rattled and descended. In its empty frame appeared a powerful grey head. Two steady cold eyes looked into the guard's face. The man stepped back. He bowed respectfully.

"The Ulwing coach!" He drew the barrier aside. The civil guards in the sentry boxes presented arms.

"You may pass!"

The light of the coach's lamps wandered over crooked palings, over waste ground—a large deserted market—the wall of a church. Along the winding lanes lightless houses, squatting above the ditches, sulked with closed eyes in the dark. Further on the houses became higher. Not a living thing was to be seen until near the palace of Prince Grassalkovich a night-watchman waded through the snow. From the end of a stick he held in his hand dangled a lantern. The shadow of his halberd moved on the wall like some black beast rearing over his head.

From the tower of the town hall a hoarse voice shouted into the quiet night: “Praised be the Lord Jesus!” and higher up the watchman announced that he was awake.

Then the township relapsed into silence. Snow fell leisurely between old gabled roofs. Under jutting eaves streets crept forth from all sides, crooked, suspicious, like conspirators. Where they met they formed a ramshackle square. In the middle of the square the Servites' Fountain played in front of the church; water murmured frigidly from its spout like a voice from the dark that prayed slowly, haltingly.

A solitary lamp at a corner house thrust out from an iron bracket into the street. Whenever it rocked at the wind's pleasure, the chain creaked gently and the beam of its light shrunk on the wall till it was no bigger than a child's fist. Another lone lamp in the middle of New Market Place. Its smoky light was absorbed by the falling snow and never reached the ground.

Christopher Ulwing drew his head into his fur-collared coat. The almanac proclaimed full moon for to-night. Whenever this happened, the civic authorities saved lamp-oil; could they accept

responsibility if the heavens failed to comply with the calendar and left the town in darkness? In any case, at this time of night the only place for peaceful citizens was by their own fireside.

Two lamps alight.... And even these were superfluous.

Pest, the old-fashioned little town had gone to rest and the fancy came to Christopher Ulwing that it was asleep even in day time, and that he was the only person in it who was ever quite awake.

He raised his head; the Leopold suburb had been reached. The carriage had come to the end of the rough, jerky cobbles. Under the wheels the ruts became soft and deep. The breeze blowing from the direction of the Danube ruffled the horses' manes gently.

All of a sudden, a clear, pleasant murmur broke the silence. The great life-giving river pursued its mysterious course through the darkness, invisible even as life itself.

Beyond it were massed the white hills of Buda. On the Pest side an uninterrupted plain stretched between the town and the river. In the white waste the house of Christopher Ulwing stood alone. For well nigh thirty years it had been called in town "the new house." The building of it had been a great event. The citizens of the Inner Town used to make excursions on Sundays to see it. They looked at it, discussed it, and shook their heads. They could not grasp why Ulwing the builder should put his house there in the sand when plenty of building ground could be got cheaply, in the lovely narrow streets of the Inner Town. But he would have his own way and loved his house all the more. The child of his mind, the product of his work, his bricks, it was entirely his own. Though once upon a time....

While Christopher Ulwing listened unconsciously to the murmur of the Danube, silent shades rose from afar and spoke to his soul. He thought of the ancient Ulwings who had lived in the great dark German forest. They were woodcutters on the shores of the Danube and they followed their calling downstream. Some acquired citizenship in a small German town. They became master carpenters and smiths. They worked oak and iron, simple, rude materials, and were moulded in the image of the stuff they worked in. Honest, strong men. Then one happened to wander into Hungary; he settled down in Pozsony and became apprenticed to a goldsmith. He wrought in gold and ivory. His hand became lighter, his eye more sensitive than his ancestors'. He was an artist.... Christopher Ulwing thought of him—his father. There were two boys, he and his brother Sebastian, and when the parental house became empty, they too like those before them, heard the call. They left Pozsony on the banks of the Danube. They followed the river, orphans, poor.

Many a year had passed since. Many a thing had changed.

Christopher Ulwing drew out his snuff box. It was his father's work and his only inheritance. He tapped it lightly with two fingers. As it sank back into his pocket, he bent towards the window.

His house now became distinctly visible; the steep double roof, the compact storied front, the mullioned windows in the yellow wall, the door of solid oak with its semi-circular top like a pair of frowning eyebrows. Two urns stood above the ends of the cornice and two caryatid pillars flanked the door. Every recess, every protruding wall of the house appeared soft and white.

Indoors the coach had been noticed. The windows of the upper story became first light and then dark again in quick succession. Someone was running along the rooms with a candle. The big oak gate opened. The wheels clattered, the travelling box was jerked against the back of the coach and all of a sudden the caryatids—human pillars—looked into the coach window. The noise of the hoofs and the wheels echoed like thunder under the archway of the porch.

The manservant lowered the steps of the coach.

A young man stood on the landing of the staircase. He held a candle high above his head. The light streamed over his thick fair hair. His face was in the shade.

“Good evening, John Hubert!” shouted Ulwing to his son. His voice sounded deep and sharp, like a hammer dropping on steel. “How are the children?” He turned quickly round. This sudden movement flung the many capes of his coat over his shoulders.

The servant’s good-natured face emerged from the darkness.

“The book-keeper has been waiting for a long time....”

“Is everybody asleep in this town?”

“Of course I am not asleep, of course I am not——” and there was Augustus Füger rushing down the stairs. He was always in a hurry, his breath came short, he held his small bald head on one side as if he were listening.

Christopher Ulwing slapped him on the back.

“Sorry, Füger. My day lasts as long as my work.”

John Hubert came to meet his father. His coat was bottle green. His waistcoat and nankin trousers were buff. On his exaggeratedly high collar the necktie, twisted twice round, displayed itself in elegant folds. He bowed respectfully and kissed his father's hand. He resembled him, but he was shorter, his eyes were paler and his face softer.

A petticoat rustled on the square slabs of the dark corridor behind them.

Christopher Ulwing did not even turn round. "Good evening, Mamsell. I am not hungry." Throwing his overcoat on a chair, he went into his room.

Mamsell Tini's long, stiff face, flanked by two hair cushions covering her ears, looked disappointedly after the builder; she had kept his supper in vain. She threw her key-basket from one arm to the other and sailed angrily back into the darkness of the corridor.

The room of Christopher Ulwing was low and vaulted. White muslin curtains hung at its two bay windows. On the round table, a candle was burning; it was made of tallow but stood in a silver candle-stick. Its light flickered slowly over the checked linen covers of the spacious armchairs.

"Sit down, Füger. You, too," said Ulwing to his son, but remained standing himself.

"The Palatine has entrusted me with the repair of the castle. I concluded the bargain about the forest." He took a letter up from the table. Whatever he wanted his hand seized, his fist grabbed, without hesitation. Meanwhile he dictated short, precise instructions to the book-keeper.

Füger wrote hurriedly in his yellow-covered note book. He always carried it about him; even when he went to Mass it peeped out of his pocket.

John Hubert sat uncomfortably in the bulging armchair. Above the sofa hung the portraits of the architects Fischer von Erlach and Mansard, fine old small engravings. He knew those two faces, but took no interest in them. He began to look at the green wall paper. Small squares, green wreaths. He looked at each of them separately. Meanwhile he became drowsy. Several times he withdrew the big-headed pin which fastened the tidy to the armchair and each time restuck it in the same place. Then he coughed, though he really wanted to yawn.

Füger was still taking notes. He only spoke when the builder had stopped.

“Mr. Münster called here. His creditors are driving him into bankruptcy.”

Christopher Ulwing’s look became stern.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

Füger shrugged his shoulders.

“I haven’t had a chance to put a word in....”

The builder stood motionless in the middle of the room. He contracted his brows as if he were peering into the far distance.

Martin George Münster, the powerful contractor, the qualified architect, was ruined. The last rival, the great enemy who had so many times balked him, counted no more. He thought of humiliations, of breathless hard fights, and of the many men who

had had to go down that he might rise. He had vanquished them all. Now, at last, he was really at the top.

With his big fingers he gave a contented twist to the smart white curl which he wore on the side of his head.

Füger watched him attentively. Just then, the candle lit up the builder's bony, clean-shaven face, tanned by the cold wind. His hair and eyebrows seemed whiter, his eyes bluer than usual. His chin, turned slightly to one side and drawn tightly into an open white collar, gave him a peculiar, obstinate expression.

"There is no sign of old age about him!" thought the little book-keeper, and waited to be addressed.

"Mr. Münster lost three hundred thousand Rhenish guildens. He could not stand that."

Christopher Ulwing nodded. Meanwhile he calculated, cool and unmoved.

"I must see the books and balance sheet of Münster's firm." While he spoke, he reflected that he was now rich enough to have a heart. A heart is a great burden and hampers a man in his movements. As long as he was rising, he had had to set it aside. That was over. He had reached the summit.

"I will help Martin George Münster," he said quietly, "I will put him on his legs again, but so that in future he shall stand by me, not against me."

Füger, moved, blinked several times in quick succession under his spectacles, as if applauding his master with his eyelids.

This settled business for Christopher Ulwing. He snuffed the candle. Turning to his son:

“Have you been to the Town Hall?”

John Hubert felt his father’s voice as if it had gripped him by the shoulder and shaken him.

“Are you not tired, sir?” As a last defence this question rose to his lips. It might free him and leave the matter till to-morrow. But his father did not even deem it deserving of an answer.

“Did you make a speech?”

“Yes....” John Hubert’s voice was soft and hesitating. He always spoke his words in such a way as to make it easy to withdraw them. “I said what you told me to, but I fear it did little good....”

“You think so?” For a moment a cunning light flashed up in Christopher Ulwing’s eye, then he smiled contemptuously. “True. Such as we must act. We may think too, but only if we get a great gentleman to tell our thoughts. Nevertheless, I want you to speak. I shall make of you a gentleman great enough to get a hearing.”

Füger bowed. John Hubert began to complain. “When I proposed to plant trees along the streets of the town, a citizen asked me if I had become a gardener. As to the lighting of the streets they said that drunkards can cling to the walls of the houses. A lamp-post would serve no other purpose.”

“That will change!” The builder’s voice warmed with great strong confidence.

Young Ulwing continued without warmth.

“I told them of our new brickfields and informed them that henceforth we shall sell bricks by retail to the suburban people. This did not please them. The councillors whispered together.”

“What did they say?” asked Christopher Ulwing coldly.

John Hubert cast his eyes down.

“Well, they said that the great carpenter had always made gold out of other people’s misery. The great carpenter! That is what they call you, sir, among themselves, though they presented you last year with the freedom of the city....”

Ulwing waved his hand disparagingly.

“Whatever honours I received from the Town Hall count for little. They have laden me with them for their weight to hamper my movements, so that I may let them sleep in peace.”

“And steal in peace,” said Fügen, making an ironical circular movement with his hand towards his pocket.

“Let them be,” growled the builder, “there is many an honest man among them.”

The book-keeper stretched his neck as if he were listening intently, then bowed solemnly and left the room.

Christopher Ulwing, left alone with his son, turned sharply to him.

“What else did you say in the Town Hall?”

“But you gave me no other instructions...?”

“Surely you must have said something more? Something of your own?”

There was silence.

Young Ulwing had a feeling that he was treated with great injustice. Was not his father responsible for everything? He had made him a man. And now he was discontented with his achievement. In an instant, like lightning, it all flashed across his mind. His childhood, his years in the technical school, much timid fluttering, nameless bitterness, cowardly compromise. And those times, when he still had a will to will, when he wanted to love and choose: it was crushed by his father. His father chose someone else. A poor sempstress was not what Ulwing the builder wanted. He wanted the daughter of Ulrich Jörg. She was all right. She was rich. It lasted a short time. Christina Jörg died. But even then he was not allowed to think of another woman, a new life. "The children!" his father said, and he resigned himself because Christopher Ulwing was the stronger and could hold his own more vehemently. Unwonted defiance mounted into his head. For a moment he rose as if to accuse, his jaw turned slightly sideways.

The old man saw his own image in him. He looked intently as if he wanted to fix forever that beam of energy now flashing up in his son's eye. He had often longed for it vainly, and now it had come unexpectedly, produced by causes he could not understand.

But slowly it all died away in John Hubert's eyes. Christopher Ulwing bowed his head.

"Go," he said harshly, "now I am really tired." In that moment he looked like a weary old woodcutter. His eyelids fell, his big bony hands hung heavily out of his sleeves.

A door closed quietly in the corridor with a spasmodic creaking. Ulwing the builder would have liked it better if it had been

slammed. But his son shut every door so carefully. He could not say why. "What is going to happen when I don't stand by his side?" he shuddered. His vitality was so inexhaustible that the idea of death always struck him as something strange, antagonistic. "What is going to happen?" The question died away, he gave it no further thought. He stepped towards the next room ... his grandchildren! They would continue what the great carpenter began. They would be strong. He opened the door. He crossed the dining room. He smelt apples and bread in the dark. One more room, and beyond that the children.

The air was warm. A night-light burned on the top of a chest of drawers. Miss Tini had fallen asleep sitting beside it with her shabby prayer book on her knees. The shadow of her nightcap rose like a black trowel on the wall. In the deep recess of the earthenware stove water was warming in a blue jug. From the little beds the soft breathing of children was audible.

Ulwing leaned carefully over one of the beds. The boy slept there. His small body was curled up under the blankets as if seeking shelter in his sleep from something that came with night and prowled around his bed.

The old man bent over him and kissed his forehead. The boy moaned, stared for a second, frightened, into the air, then hid trembling in his pillows.

Mamsell Tini woke, but dared not move. The master builder stood so humbly before the child, that it did not become a salaried person to see such a thing. She turned her head away and listened thus to her master's voice.

"I didn't mean to. Now, don't be afraid, little Christopher. It is I."

The child was already asleep.

Ulwing the builder stepped to the other bed. He kissed Anne too. The little girl was not startled. Her fair hair, like a silver spray, moved around her head on the pillow. She thrust her tiny arms round her grandfather's neck and returned his kiss.

When, on the tips of his toes, Christopher Ulwing left the room, Miss Tini looked after him. She thought that, after all, the Ulwings were kindly people.

2

A glaring white light streamed through the windows into the room. Winter had come over the world during the night and the children put their heads together to discuss it. They had forgotten since last year what winter was like.

Below, the great green water crawled cold between its white banks. The castle hill opposite was white too. The top of the bastions, the ridges of the roofs, the spires of the steeples, everything that was usually sharp and pointed was now rounded and blunted by the snow.

The church tower of Our Lady belonged to Anne. The Garrison Church was little Christopher's. A long time had passed since the children had divided these from their windows, and, because Christopher grew peevish, Anne had also given him the shingled roof of the Town Hall of Buda and the observatory on Mount St. Gellert. She only kept the Jesuits' Stairs to herself.

“And I'll tell on you, how you spat into the clerk's tumbler. No, no, I won't give it!” Anne shook her head so emphatically that her fair

hair got all tangled in front of her eyes. She would not have given the Jesuits' Stairs for anything in the world. That was the way up to the castle, to Uncle Sebastian. And she often looked over to him from the nursery window. In the morning, when she woke, she waved both hands towards the other shore. In the evening she put a tallow candle on the window-sill to let Uncle Sebastian see that she was thinking of him.

Then Sebastian Ulwing would answer from the other shore. He lit a small heap of straw on the castle wall and through the intense darkness the tiny flames wished each other good night above the Danube.

"The Jesuits' Stairs are mine," said Anne resolutely and went into the other room.

The little boy sulked for some time and then followed her on tiptoe. In the doorway he looked round anxiously. He was afraid of this room though it was brighter than any other and Anne called it the sunshine room. The yellow-checked wall paper looked sparkling and even on a cloudy day the cherry-wood furniture looked as if the sun shone on it. The chairs' legs stood stiffly on the floor of scrubbed boards and their backs were like lyres. That room was mother's. She did not live in it because she had gone to heaven and had not yet returned home, but everything was left as it had been when she went away. Her portrait hung above the flowered couch, her sewing-machine stood in the recess near the window. The piano had been hers too and the children were forbidden to touch it. Yet, Christopher was quite sure that it was full of piano-mice, who at night, when everybody is asleep, run about in silver shoes and then the air rings with their patter.

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