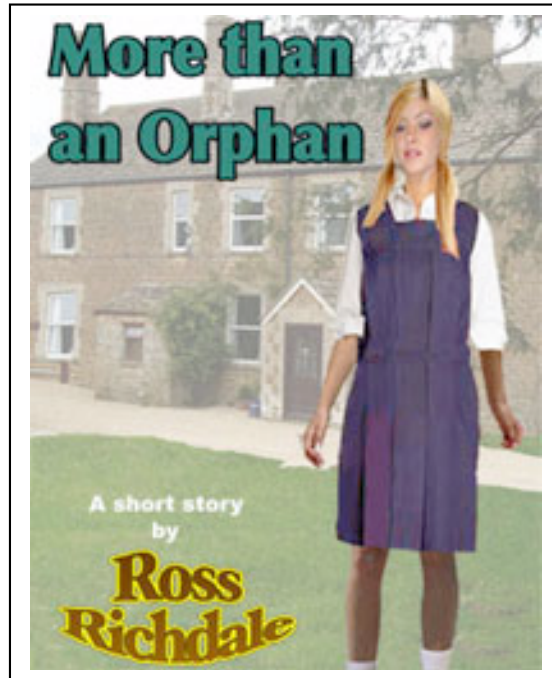




More Than An Orphan By Ross Richdale

An anguished sob was heard half way along the dormitory that held forty beds squeezed together in a room built for thirty.

"Sally's wet her bed again," came a voice through the darkness.

Anna jerked awake and took a flashlight from beneath her pillow. It was no use using a light switch as they were always turned off at the main box in the corridor. She stepped from under her two thin blankets and shivered in the sub zero temperature.

It was January 1941 and a quarter hour before the doors of the girls' dormitory were unlocked and the lights switched on. Saint Margaret's Orphanage was meant to be one of the more enlightened establishments in war torn England but wasn't.

"I'm coming, Sally," the teenager called. She slipped on an overcoat and old socks and squeezed past the sleeping girls to where Sally was sobbing eight beds away. At fourteen, Anna was the oldest girl at the orphanage and took it on herself to provide the girls with a wee bit of love. There was very little from the women who ran the place.

"I tried, Anna," sobbed ten-year-old Sally. "I had nothing to drink yesterday after tea and I went to the bathroom before lights out but I still wet it." "Baby!" called a voice.

Anna swung around, shining the flashlight into the eyes of the offending child, another ten year old. "You hush up, Diane. I said you were not to tease Sally. We

have to stick together." She spoke perfect English with only a trace of an accent. Diane pouted but said nothing.

"What do I do, Anna?" cried Sally as she stood shivering beside her bed. "I'll get the stick this time, I know. Mrs. Ranson told me so."

"No...you won't," Anna said grimly. "Take off your wet night gown and put on your clothes. Otherwise you'll freeze."

She reached over and gave Sally a hug. The younger girl buried her head into the crook of Anna's arm and continued to sob. They both knew the sadistic Mrs. Ranson wouldn't think twice about hitting the slight little girl. Half the girls in the orphanage bore welts from Ranson's battering across their arms or buttocks.

Anna knew the supervisor would be in shortly. Without hesitation, Anna returned to her own bed, pulled off the sheets, took them up to Sally's bed and replaced the wet ones with hers. The mattress was damp, too, but with luck, that wouldn't be noticed. Next, she took the wet sheets and placed them on her own bed.

"If anyone says anything, they won't be my friend," Anna announced. The other girls held Anna in high esteem. Losing Anna's friendship would be almost as bad as the physical punishments administered by Mrs. Ranson and the other the women running the orphanage. Nobody would say a word.

*

At the dot of six, the double doors at the end of the dormitory squeaked open. The blackout curtains were checked, the lights went on, and Mrs. Ranson stood there with a menacing glower. A short woman with a massive bosom, she never smiled, and controlled the children by using sarcasm--and her cane, a bamboo rod about three feet long.

"Everyone up!" she bellowed. "Bed inspection."

At this command, the girls were expected to stand beside their beds. The fact that they were only in their thin cotton nightclothes, and it was below freezing, didn't matter. Most girls had made the habit of dressing in the dark before six, so at least they would be a bit warmer at inspection time.

"Hurry up," the woman grumbled as she stalked down the narrow middle aisle and inspected every bed.

At Anna's bed, she stopped and glared at the wet sheets. Her watery eyes hit Anna. "You swapped the sheets again, didn't you Anna Green?" she hissed. "Me, Mrs. Ranson?" Anna said with only the merest hint of a smirk. "I'm afraid I wet my bed. Sorry."

Mrs. Ranson raised her cane and swished as hard as she could over Anna's arm. Although the pain was excruciating and the welt drew blood, Anna didn't even flinch. She just stared defiantly at the woman.

"Don't you lie to me, girl."

"My name is Anna," she said as the others around shrank back and watched

their hero with frightened stares. They were far too terrified to do anything to help. "You have ten minutes, *Arrna*," Mrs. Ranson said, sarcastically imitating Anna's slight accent. "If you don't tell me who the filthy little grub is, you can do the punishment."

"I told you. It was me, Mrs. Ranson. I drank too much water before I went to bed," the mature blonde girl replied.

The woman glared at the defiant girl. Not once had she been able to get Anna Green to cry, and in her mind, this was a major failure.

"All beds are to be made and potties emptied," Ranson ordered, "and the floor will be polished before breakfast."

"Tomorrow is the day we polish the floor," Anna protested, but the woman merely shrugged.

"It's filthy. It will be done now." Vera Ranson swung around, and with a mocking smirk, she stalked out.

"Thanks a lot, Anna," one of the older girls, Mary sarcastically grumbled. "Why do you have to always stick up for the little kids?"

"Because I want to," Anna said softly. "Somebody has to, Mary." Mary opened her mouth to speak, but clamped it shut and averted her eyes from Anna's penetrating gaze.

After Mary turned away, she mumbled, "So we all get punished." "We're proud of you," Janice, another teenager, said. "Here, let me put something on your cut arm."

She took Anna's arm and pulled up the jersey sleeve. There was an ugly cut across the upper arm. Blood oozed and already an ugly blue bruise had begun to rise.

*

When Janice had finished, Anna noticed Sally standing beside her. "I'm sorry Anna," the youngster cried.

Anna smiled warmly and drew Sally into a hug. "You can help by looking after the seven year olds the same as I look after you. Is that a deal?" "Okay, Anna. I'll help them polish their part of the dorm."

The beds in the dormitory were allocated by age so the youngest were closest to the door while the three eldest at the far end. Each age group was responsible for their own area. This, however, was somewhat unfair on the juniors as they had the most foot traffic past their beds. Anna and Janice usually helped the little ones, so they ended up doing twice as much work as anyone else.

*

Breakfast in the dining room always started with a grumbling lecture by Mrs. Ranson or Miss Harrison, Old Square Eyes, who took turns doing the morning shift.

The boys filed in from their dormitory and sat behind the long benches on the

left of the room. Anna and the girls sat on the right.

"Stand up, Green," Mrs. Ranson snapped, glaring at the girl when she did. "Do you have anything to say?"

"No ma'am." Anna held her head high.

"Very well." Ranson barked as she glared at the eighty orphans. "Anna Green was very naughty last night, everyone. She urinated in her bed rather than using the porcelain bowls."

A laugh ripped through the boy's side of the room and one obnoxious youth called out. "Put a cork in it, Anna! That'll stop the pee."

"Who said that?" Ranson said, but nobody admitted to the crime of using such a foul word as *pee*. The ridicule wasn't important but one did not use language deemed as vulgar at Saint Margaret's.

Anna knew it was George Watson. She glared at him until he turned away. "You know the punishment, Miss Green," Ranson said. She stepped back and reached for the wet sheet that had been brought into the dining room. "Come here!"

Anna stepped forward in hushed silence and stood staring eye to eye at Mrs. Ranson as the woman tossed the stinky wet sheet over her. Usually, when this was done to a younger victim, everyone laughed or giggled but today there was silence throughout the room. Even the usually glib George refrained from making any cutting remarks.

Little Sally sat along one side with tears rolling down her gaunt cheeks. She sniffed and gave a little smile when Janice caught her eye and gave her a little wave of encouragement as if to say, *we girls have to stick together*.

Mrs. Ranson glared at the sullen faces and unexpected silence. Meanwhile Anna, covered in the sheet, walked up the dining room and out the back door. She knew there would be no breakfast for her, not that she enjoyed the lumpy porridge. Once out of sight, she snatched the sheet off and headed to the laundry where she was expected to wash it using cold water and a bar of yellow soap. Only when she was alone, did she give in to tears.

By eight-fifteen, she had finished and hung the offending sheet out on a line stretched across the laundry. The weather was too wet to hang it outside. Anna shivered and walked back along the corridor towards the stairs leading to the girls' dormitory. At eight thirty the bell would ring for them all to assemble for the mile walk down to the local school.

Anna took in a deep breath and shook her head. It was difficult enough to understand a new language but everything else was so different, too. She still converted the measurement back to kilometers but gave up on the funny English money with pounds, shillings and pence. Not that it mattered. She rarely had much money to worry about, just a few pence a week that the older children were paid for doing domestic chores. Boys brought in buckets of coal for the fires and cleaned away ashes while girls swept, cooked, mended and washed clothes.

Somehow, Anna thought the boys had the easier jobs though she did admit they worked hard in the summer digging up the gardens and planting vegetables. When

the bell rang she still hadn't reached the stairs. She sighed, knowing there would be one more punishment for being late. Her empty stomach rumbled and she hoped Janice had managed to sneak a piece of toast and dripping to pass on to her.

Suddenly Anna stopped. She heard crying: pitiful little sobs, but the corridor and landing were empty. "Who's there?" she called and the crying immediately stopped.

She frowned. Tears were not uncommon in the orphanage but she would never become used to them. Where could the orphan be? She stood very still and listened but the only noise was the distant rumble of feet as eighty children lined up in the front entrance way. It must be cold otherwise they'd be assembling outside. A tiny sniff came to her ears and Anna knew where the person was hiding. She walked over to the broom cupboard under the stairs, gently pulled the door open and peeped inside. Scared, tear filled eyes stared up at her. It was Johnny, one of the boys, a thin lad a couple of years younger than her.

"It's okay," she whispered. "It's only Anna."

"Go away." Johnny sniffed and wiped his eyes with a thin jersey sleeve. He was crouched up on the small downside of the triangular shaped cupboard. "No, I won't," Anna said. Without thought of the extra trouble she would get into herself if she did not arrive at school by nine o'clock, she stepped in the higher part of the cupboard, amongst the brooms, buckets and mops and pulled the door shut. She found a cord that hung down and pulled it. A weak light bulb glowed above them. Finally, she pulled her knees up and sat down facing the boy.

"Go away," Johnny cried again. "You'll get the strap."

"So." Anna shrugged. The strap stung but it wasn't as bad as being whacked with a cane. She smiled sympathetically. "What's wrong, Johnny?"

"My money's gone and I can't pay off George," Johnny stammered. "He's already belted me and that's only the beginning. If he sees me talking to you it will be worse. I'll be called a sissy. Only a sissy cries in front of girls."

"What rubbish," Anna snapped, but her voice softened when she studied the distressed face looking back at her. "What do you mean about George, Johnny?" she continued. She knew the boys fought a lot and bullying went on but this sounded different.

Johnny blew his nose on an old piece of rag, which served as a handkerchief, and smiled. "I'm sorry. Boys aren't supposed to cry," he said quietly. "Girls are, but I have never seen you cry, Anna. Never!"

"Oh I cry," Anna whispered almost to herself. "I just hide like you. I refuse to cry in front of Mrs. Ranson or Old Square Eyes, that's all." She stopped and smiled. "But you still haven't explained about George."

"He takes our pocket money," Johnny began. "It's to buy his friendship. There are four of the older boys who belt the others. George says the money he takes is our wage for him to stop the other boys hitting us. If we pay him nobody hurts us. See?"

Anna pursed her lips in anger. So this was what was happening! The girls

could be mean and spiteful but at least they weren't physically violent. "And what happened this morning?" she asked softly as she took Johnny's cold hands. He jerked away as if he was scared of her touch then smiled and left his hands in hers.

"The buckets of coal," Johnny explained. "They're heavy and the little boys carry one together but now I'm eleven and have to carry one myself. I was lugging it over the field from the coal shed yesterday morning and slipped on the ice. The coal spilled all over the ground. I picked it all up but Mrs. Ranson saw me, so I wasn't paid my sixpence this week." He swallowed. "So I can't pay George threepence." He pronounced it *thruppence* in the English way.

"You mean George takes half your money every week."

"Yes. It used to be a penny but I had my eleventh birthday last week so it went up. Great bloody birthday it was." He flushed and waited to be scolded for swearing but Anna merely smiled. "Anyhow, I have no money. So George, Brian and Jack are going to get me tonight. They already gave me Chinese burns. He held out his arms and pulled back his sleeves. On both lower arms were red marks where the skin had been viciously twisted to make the *burn*.

"I see," Anna said, smiling grimly. She stood up, brushed down her black gym frock. "Come on Johnny. Lets sneak out the back. If we run we might get to school before bell. Meet me by the door next to room eight at lunch time and I'll tell you what we'll do."

Anna and Johnny both attended the local technical school but seldom saw each other there as the boys and girls had separate playgrounds. The room Anna mentioned was at the end of the building between the two grounds and often girls and boys met there, even though it was banned.

She switched off the light, pushed the door slightly ajar and peered out. The corridor was empty.

"Come on," she whispered. They both knew all hell would break loose if they were caught coming out of the cupboard together.

Within seconds, the two youngsters were out the back door and dashing along behind the coal shed. From there, it wasn't hard to climb the fence into the neighbor's place and walk out to the road.

"Hey you orphan brats," Old Smithy, the neighbor, yelled from his porch when he saw them. But Anna and Johnny ignored him. Old Smithy always screamed at them.

"The old bugger," Anna said.

Johnny broke into a grin. Most girls would be too scared to use that kind of language, but Anna had learned more than the King's English since arriving in the country. On the road, they started to run but kept slipping on the ice and slush. About half way to school, they heard the bell. It was nine o'clock. They'd be late and that meant at least the strap on the hands. Johnny turned pale.

However, luck was on their side that day. Another hundred yards up the road there was a dull wail that built up to a screaming howl. An air siren was being sounded. Jerry bombers were coming.

When this happened, the five hundred pupils evacuated the school buildings and ran down two narrow concrete slits in the playground to a bomb shelter where they remained until the all clear siren sounded. There was usually a bomb alert a couple of times a week when the weather caused the bombers to fly overhead on their way to London about fifty miles away.

"Quick!" Anna shouted, grabbing Johnny's hand. The shelters were on their side of the school buildings so they actually arrived before the other pupils. They ran inside to a dark empty concrete room and sat under their class signs. Class 4B1, Anna's class, was half a room away from Johnny's class.

"Remember lunch time," Anna said as they parted. "I will," replied the appreciative boy.

They were just in time. In a burst of noise, the pupils from the school rushed in and sat in their designated areas. Nobody noticed the two early pupils sitting on the damp floor.

*

At lunchtime, Anna met Johnny at their prearranged meeting spot. Old Marge, one of the old dragons on the staff was on duty and talking to a boy who had earned a detention.

Anna pressed a piece of notepaper and three pennies into Johnny's hand and whispered, "Pay off George and get another boy to give him this note. It's from Mary. He's always making eyes at her so we've set up a surprise for him tomorrow."

"Thanks, Anna," Johnny said with a smile of relief. "I'll pay you back. I promise."

"I don't need the money but perhaps you could give one penny back for Sally. She gave it to me for you. I only had tuppence."

"Thanks," Johnny said again and then he disappeared as Old Marge appeared around the corner.

*

The next afternoon at four, the three senior girls waited quietly in the coal shed. Wearing bright red lipstick, a jersey and tartan skirt rather than the sexless school gym clothes, Mary leaned against the door. Anna and Janice hid out of sight inside the door.

Sure enough, they had only just hidden when Mary whispered that George was coming.

"I got your note," the boy mumbled. "You look jolly nice in your Sunday clothes, Mary but why are you wearing them?"

Mary did her best to look provocative. "I was getting bored," she said and stepped sideways so George was between her and the door. Immediately behind the

opened doorway, Janice dropped down onto her knees while Anna stood further back with a determined expression on her face. The main action would be up to her.

George was all eyes and didn't hear the slight scuffle behind him. He could smell the liberal quantities of cheap scent Mary had applied and was eagerly looking forward to a kiss with the girl he was attracted to. Mary was a perfect actress.

"We'd better get out of sight," George whispered gruffly as he stepped inside. This was it!

Mary placed both her hands on George's chest and gave him a hearty shove. He toppled backwards right over Janice crouching on her hands and knees across the space. It worked perfectly. The momentum shot George's legs up as his body rolled over Janice and he crashed on his back with a thump. Before he had time to recover, Anna grabbed his arms and sat on him. She knew he'd be too strong for her but reasoned, quite correctly, that her whole body would be difficult to throw aside.

"What the hell!" screamed George as he thrashed out with his right arm, which Anna hadn't managed to pin down.

The surprise element worked. Before the boy could bring his strength to play, Janice had risen, jumped around Anna and literally sat on George's other arm. Meanwhile, Mary had also slipped inside and shut the door.

They knew nobody would come. Three of the younger girls were discretely placed in the grounds to stop intruders or to warn them if any adults came. In this freezing weather, though, none were expected.

George bucked, thrashed and swore, but three girls; each not a great deal lighter than him, used their combined weight to subdue him. He finally lay on the coal dusty floor and glared up at them.

"I believe you've been picking on the younger boys and taking their pocket money," Anna stated with her voice as cold as the weather.

"That's none of your bloody business," George hissed, again attempting to fling the girls off.

"Oh but it is," Anna said. "The senior girls have decided you're a lout and a bully and need to be punished."

George grinned. "Oh yeah," he replied smugly with his confidence returning. "And what can you do?"

"Strip him!" Anna directed, and Mary immediately started to undo George's belt while at the same time Janice undid the buttons of his shirt. "Stop it!" George screamed. He flung one arm so violently that Anna almost lost control. "I'll tell."

However, the girls were determined. Mary yanked the trousers down to his ankles while Janice got the shirt undone. Anna managed to reach back for a bucket of icy water and coal dust they had waiting. She slid it forward and tipped it over George's face and chest. Half of it splashed on herself but she didn't mind.

"You bitch!" George spluttered as he spat out water that ran into his mouth. But still the girls held on the squirming, screaming, soaked boy. His shirt was undone and trousers down to his ankles so there was only a grimy undershirt and

shorts showing.

"You bastards! Stop it," George howled. Looking scared, he whimpered, stopped thrashing around and lay back. Without warning, he burst into anguished sobs with all thoughts of fighting gone. Tears streamed down the boy's cheek as he started to cry uncontrollably.

Anna's eyes dropped and she flushed in embarrassment. The boy's underpants stuck out as if there was a massive finger beneath. This was something about the male anatomy she didn't understand. She turned her eyes up and noticed her friend's faces were also bright red.

"Stop picking on people smaller than you," she muttered, averting her eyes from his tented shorts. "Otherwise we'll tell everyone you were bawling. Do you understand?"

"Okay, Anna." The victim sniffed and the girls leaped back.

George looked pathetically at the three girls for a moment, grabbed his clothes, used them to cover his swollen shorts and leaped out the door. The girls said nothing until Anna finally whispered, "I don't think George will tell anyone. I say we'd better keep quiet, too."

Mary shuddered and Janice nodded. The three teenager girls walked back to the main building deep in thought.

Vera Ranson glared at the orphans sitting in the dining room. The evening meal was over and it was now time for chores, homework and a little free time before bed and lights out at eight.

"These girls will report to my office straight after dining room chores," she said dourly. "Mary McMullen, Janice Rowe and Anna Green." Anna frowned until she saw a smirk on George's face across the room. She dug Janice in the ribs and pointed the boy out to her friend. "The bastard's squealed," she whispered.

Janice nodded but it was too late to do anything. Eight minutes later, the girls stood in a row in front of the old varnished desk in the orphanage office. It was not the first time they'd been summoned there, but they all had a feeling this was going to be the worst.

Mrs. Ranson stared at Anna and spoke in a subdued voice. "One might expect boys to be physically violent," she twisted a long cane between her hands, "but with girls, especially the oldest ones at Saint Margaret's, it will not be tolerated." She smirked. "What explanation can you give Miss Green?" "For what?" Anna said. She knew whatever she said wouldn't make any difference in the end but promised herself not to involve Johnny.

Ranson whacked the cane on the desk with such force, the girls jumped in fright. Her beady eyes glared at Anna. "Don't you dare play ignorant with me, Anna," she spat. "I know you're the ring leader."

"We all did it," Janice blurted.

"Hush, girl," retorted Ranson. "I'm talking to Green." She swung back to Anna. "Well?"

"George was bullying the younger boys and taking their money," Anna said.

"We wanted to stop him."

"You did?" raved Vera Ranson. "So you attack the boy with sticks and practically kill him."

"That's a lie. We didn't use sticks," Mary protested.

"Have a look at him. There are no marks on him," Anna said. "That's true, Mrs. Ranson," Janice said. "We never had any sticks." Anna couldn't help grinning a bit. It appeared George neglected to mention being stripped.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Green," Ranson snapped. "This is no laughing matter. You're stepping on very thin ice, my girl."

Anna glared at the woman but said nothing.

"I have a different story," Ranson continued. She took a piece of notepaper from a drawer and read from it. "The three girls crept up behind me while I was getting coal. Before I knew what was happening, I was belted over the shoulders with a thick stick. Anna started it then Janice hit me, too. Mary tried to stop them but she was the one who poured water over me..." The statement continued in a similar vein with only enough truth in it to make it appear plausible.

"It's all lies," Anna protested. "I'll tell you what really happened." Janice's eyes caught hers but Anna gave a slight nod. No way would she tell about removing George's clothes but the rest of her statement was the truth.

"Lies, Anna!" Ranson thundered. "Why should I believe you? Ever since you've come here you've been a trouble maker and now you're even stirring up the other girls to help you in your foul deeds."

"George exaggerated, Mrs. Ranson," Janice added. "Listen to us."

Ranson folded her arms across her mighty bosom. "Okay Janice," Ranson said. "Why don't you tell me exactly what happened."

Janice explained briefly about the stand over tactics, without mentioning Johnny's name, and said they didn't think the older boys like George should be allowed to bully others. "We only wanted to teach him a lesson so we poured cold water over him," she concluded. "That's all."

"I see," Vera Ranson's gaze switched to Mary. "And where did you get the lipstick and make up, Mary McMullen?"

Mary gasped and burst into tears. "It was me mum's, Mrs. Ranson. I'm sorry! I won't do anything wrong again. I promise," she whined.

Anna glared at Mary. It was so typical of her to give in like that. At least Janice had some gumption.

"I've heard enough," Ranson said. "Janice and Mary, you'll both receive two strokes on the hand. Anna Green," she said, glaring sadistically at the tall blonde girl. "You're the ring leader and will receive four strokes on the buttocks."

She walked around the desk, purposely shut the opened door and glared at Mary. "Hand out! "

Still in tears, the frightened teenager held out her hand and screamed when the cane lashed across it. She bent forward howling while the woman stood back and reveled in a near grin.

"Other hand!"

"Please. No, Mrs. Ranson," Mary wailed between shuddering sobs. "I'll be good!" But her pleading was to no avail.

The terrified girl held out her other shaking hand. There was another vicious down cut, the girl screamed and Ranson turned to the next girl. The strokes Janice received were every bit as painful as Mary's but she didn't make a sound. Tears brimmed in her eyes but she gritted her teeth to keep from crying out loud.

"You two can go," Ranson said.

When they left she turned to Anna. "Remove your bloomers and bend over the desk," she said with a gleam in her eyes.

Anna stared at Ranson and realized this sadistic woman was enjoying herself. Her face drained white and tears formed in her eyes. This made Vera Ranson beam in triumph. Tears at last!

"Drop your pants, hold up your dress and bend over," she repeated in a vehement voice.

Anna stood up and realized she was actually taller than Vera Ranson. "No," she said in a whisper.

The woman stared at her intended victim. Then, without warning, she slashed out with the cane and hit Anna diagonally across the back. The pain was excruciating and blood soaked through the girl's thin cardigan and dress. Her body jerked before Anna could stop but she gritted her teeth and stood still waiting for a second cowardly strike.

"Bend over, Green."

"No!"

Another crack filled the air as another whiplash slashed across Anna's tender back. This was followed by a third and fourth. The woman's eyes were savage as the tall girl stepped back and swung her hands up to defend herself. Two more strokes hit Anna across the arms before she retaliated.

"You're filthy swine," Anna said in a hard voice. "You're no better than the Nazis who killed my mama."

Ranson glared at her but couldn't understand a word because Anna had spoken in another language.

"Bloody foreigner!" Ranson screamed and lashed at Anna again.

Two more lashes hit the girl's back before she staggered and dropped but Ranson wasn't finished. As Anna crumpled to the floor, she kicked the girl in the stomach and stood back, dissolving into hysterical laughter.

"There! That will teach you," she puffed and was about to slash Anna across the shoulders when the teenager retaliated.

With hair hanging forward over her gaunt face, Anna grabbed for the cane and yanked it from the woman. With a groan, she stood up and lashed out once. The cane caught Vera Ranson across the back. The woman screamed in agony and cowered back with her hands frantically held high for protection.

Anna lifted the cane again but stopped. She was not going to lower herself to

this brutality. She turned away from the whimpering woman, broke the cane in half over her knee and threw it into the corner.

"I shall be reporting this to a higher authority," she said.

With blood streaming from her arms and pain she'd never known in her life before, the brave youngster walked out, shutting the door quietly behind her. She was about to head for the bathroom when the corridor began to spin in front of her eyes. She gave a faint cry as her legs buckled beneath her and she collapsed, unconscious, in a bloody heap on the floor.

*

Throbbing pain cut across her back and arms, so much so that it was almost unbearable, but Anna forced her eyes open. She could see nothing but whiteness which, when she focused, became a pillow. She realized she was lying on her stomach with the pillow propped under her chin. Next, she felt a tender touch on the cheek. A very tender touch. Someone had kissed her!

Anna turned her head and cried out in pain as her back and arms touched the rough sheets. Her eyes noted the surroundings. This was the infirmary at the orphanage, a small room down the hall from the boy's dormitory on the ground floor. It was quite sparse but served as a mini-hospital for the orphans. Very rarely were doctors called in to visit but a nurse came occasionally if children were really ill.

Anna wondered about the kiss and attempted to sit up to see further. "It's all right, Anna," said a voice. "It's only me."

Anna looked around and saw the tear filled eyes of Johnny staring at her. He was dressed in striped pajamas with a jersey pulled over the top. Johnny's face flushed bright red. "I'm sorry I kissed you, Anna," he muttered. "I know I shouldn't have."

Anna smiled up at him. "Bend close to me," she said.

Johnny did and Anna reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Funny, it felt different. Her lips sort of tingled. She looked right into Johnny's face for really the first time. It was a slim face but not unattractive. He had blue eyes and a scruffy tuft of fair hair a similar color to her own and a concerned look in his face.

"You can kiss me any time you want," she added. "I like it." Her eyes found his. "And you were crying for me weren't you?"

Johnny nodded mournfully. "I know boys--"

"Stop it," Anna snapped. "Don't you dare say boys shouldn't cry. Perhaps if males learned to cry a little we wouldn't have this horrible war."

"Oh Anna," Johnny burst out. "I thought she'd killed you."

Anna gazed at Johnny and reached for his hand.

"But she didn't. Not this time." She grimaced as the stinging in her back intruded on her thoughts. "What time is it?"

Johnny shrugged. "Don't know. It was too dark in the corridor to see the

clock when I sneaked in. I've been here for hours but you didn't wake up..." He continued talking about everything that had happened. Apparently, Old Square Eyes came along and stopped Ranson from attacking Anna again. Janice and Mary carried her to the infirmary and bathed her wounds the best they could before everyone was ordered off to bed.

"As soon as it was quiet, I sneaked out and came to sit by you. Only the girls are locked in. We're allowed to go out to the bathroom during the night if we wish." Johnny continued as he studied the girl now lying sideways on the bed. She was still wearing the same dress as the night before but the buttons at the back had been undone so her back could be cleaned up. At the moment, the dress sort of hung down off her shoulders. "You look terrible, Anna. There are horrible cuts across your back and arms."

Anna looked back at Johnny. "You really care, don't you, Johnny?" She smiled when tears once again welled in the boy's eyes.

"Yes," he said. "You're my only friend here in the orphanage. Since my mum and sister died in the bombing, I have no family."

Anna reached out and squeezed his arm before wriggling into a sitting position. "You will have to tell me about it one day."

Johnny grinned for the first time and nodded. "There is some ointment on the bench. Would you like me to rub some on?"

"Please," Anna said, "but softly. It stings so much."

Johnny walked around to the other side of the bed and very tenderly dabbed the white ointment on Anna's back. The five or six red and blue welts across it made him grit his teeth in anger.

"Your dress is covered in blood," he said as he continued to dab the ointment on. "You need a clean one."

"I'll get one later," Anna said. "I need to do something." She swung around off the bed so her feet touched the floor. "I need to write a letter. Have you a pen and paper?"

Johnny screwed up his nose. "I've got a school notebook and a pencil. You can have a page out of that but I haven't got an envelope."

Anna smiled. "Can you get your notebook for me, please?"

Johnny nodded and slipped away. Anna glanced around at the white walls and the thick blackout curtains then smiled. A small electric heater was sitting on the floor with its one bar glowing. Old Square Eyes would have done that. Miss Harrison was kinder than Mrs. Ranson.

Johnny returned with his only notebook. Every pupil at the technical college had one, which had to suffice for all their subjects, as paper was scarce. She noticed drawings of Spitfires shooting down German bombers drawn all over the cover and grinned. It was funny how boys always did that.

Johnny found a clean page, carefully ripped it out and handed it to Anna. She took the stub of the pencil he had and began writing a letter while her friend watched. When she had almost finished, he stared at her neat curly writing in

amazement.

"I can't understand it, Anna," he said, "and I'm a good reader."

"That's because it's in Polish," Anna said. "I come from Poland."

"I see," answered the boy. "I always wondered."

"About my accent? I try to hide it but sometimes--"

"Don't," said Johnny. "I love the way you speak. I love--" He stopped and flushed.

Their eyes met again and they both smiled before Anna started to write again.

Finally she finished and turned to Johnny with a serious look. "Can you do a real big favor for me? You may get into heaps of trouble, though. And it will be hard."

"I'll do whatever I can for you. What is it, Anna?"

"I have a friend at Mendleford Air Base. He's the pilot who flew me out of Poland. Can you get this letter to him?"

"I haven't any stamps."

"That's the trouble," said Anna softly. "It's eight miles away but you'll need to deliver it. I wouldn't ask but..." She stopped and her face clouded over. "I whacked Mrs. Ranson back and I'm sure she'll come and thrash me again. I just can't deal with that again, Johnny."

Johnny stared at her and took her hands. "I understand," he said. "I know the way there. I'll leave straight away."

"No," Anna said. "Go tomorrow after breakfast then nobody will notice your absence until everyone comes home from school."

*

It was mid-afternoon and Johnny was mesmerized by everything going on in the corridor of the prefabricated air force headquarters, so much so he never saw the tall officer dressed in a flying jacket walk in.

"Johnny Slade?" Johnny turned to see the man who was speaking. "I'm Jozef, Johnny. I believe you're Anna's friend." The man extended his hand.

Johnny took the iron grip and smiled shyly. My God, the man wore the pips of a squadron leader. "Anna needs your help," he said, gulping. He took the wrinkled letter out of his pocket and handed it to Jozef.

"I was told a bit by Martha, that's the W.A.F. officer you were talking to when you arrived. Now let me see." As Jozef read the letter, his expression grew fierce. "How is she?" He glanced up at Johnny.

Johnny bit on his lip and felt tears rising again. "Terrible," he said, trying not to sob. "I sat with her all night. She has these ... these huge...." He stopped, as he couldn't go on.

"She's a good friend isn't she Johnny?"

Johnny nodded, feeling ashamed of his emotions. But the thought of poor Anna...

"It's okay, Johnny. We'll help, but tell me, what is the orphanage like?"

"Awful," the boy said. "It's so lonely. There's only Anna." He couldn't stop the tears so he turned and walked away as his whole body erupted into sobs. Suddenly he felt an arm around his shoulders.

"Never be afraid to cry, Johnny," the squadron leader said. "Only fools are afraid to cry." He handed the boy a handkerchief.

*

After lights-out time two jeeps and a massive Humber car drove into the orphanage grounds. The car was a camouflaged military vehicle flying two small flags from its front fenders. One was a union jack while the other consisted of two horizontal stripes of red and white; the national flag of Poland.

Twelve fully armed soldiers in combat uniforms jumped out and rushed to the front door, straight inside and up to the kitchen. Without even knocking, they burst in and confronted the three adults having a cup of tea there.

"Sergeant Pelosky of the Free Polish Army. You are to assemble in the corridors," the first soldier shouted in a no-nonsense voice. He stared at Vera Ranson and the other women, each in turn.

Ranson stood up. "How dare you!" she snapped but halted when the soldier behind the sergeant quietly lowered his gun and clicked back the bolt. She trembled and raised her hands. Within one minute, the adults were in the corridor lined against the wall.

Meanwhile two other soldiers visited each dormitory. In the girls' dormitory, a volley of screams went up when the lights were turned on.

"Relax girls," soothed one soldier. "We're looking for Anna."

"She's locked in the infirmary," Janice said. "It's downstairs at the end of the corridor."

"Show me," the soldier said.

"Follow me," Janice said. Ignoring the fact that it was freezing and she was only wearing thin cotton nightclothes, she jumped out of bed and walked out the door.

*

Downstairs, an officer in a Royal Air Force uniform entered and stood grimly in front of the three petrified women. "I am Squadron Leader Jozef Wishnowsky from the 3rd Polish Squadron of the Royal Air Force. Which of you ladies is Mrs. Vera Ranson?"

"I am," sniffed Ranson.

Jozef eyed her coldly. "Your office, please, Madam."

Ranson opened her mouth in defiance but saw the steely look in the man's eyes and decided to obey.

"I wish to see Anna Vladisciuszko," Wishnowsky said.

Vera smiled coyly and confidence returned to the pudgy face. "I'm afraid you

are mistaken. We have nobody here by that name."

Jozef Wishnowsky nodded to the armed soldier who accompanied him and a rifle bolt was snapped back. "I am not here to fool around, Mrs. Ranson. If Anna isn't here within five minutes--"

"This is England," Ranson fumed. "You can't burst in here and threaten me like that. We are--" She screamed as the soldier fired a round. The shot echoed through the building and a piece of the ceiling disappeared. "Oh My God!" she cried, rapidly dissolving into hysterics.

"You have two minutes left," the squadron leader said.

Anna appeared shortly thereafter and ran into Jozef Wishnowsky's arms. "I knew you'd come," she cried and stood back to glare at her assailant, Mrs. Ranson.

Jozef smiled warmly at the girl and then recaptured his steely expression. "Take off your cardigan, Anna," he instructed.

She did and the huge welts, now swollen and bruised, showed on both her upper arms. The color drained from Vera Ranson's face.

"Turn around, Anna," Jozef said.

Anna, who was still dressed in a frock with buttons down the back, quietly turned around.

Jozef turned to Vera Ranson. "If you will undo the buttons on Anna's dress, please."

The woman stared miserably at him. "Do it!" the officer snapped.

With shaking hands, the woman undid the buttons on the dress. Anna helped by pulling the dress off her shoulders. It fell forward so her complete back was exposed. It was now a pulpy bloody mass of red and blue flesh with the bruising of each cane stroke crossing other ones. Blood and watery liquid oozed from her wounds.

The squadron leader sucked in a sharp breath. As he turned to Ranson, his features morphed into a raging fury. He clamped his jaw tight, as if attempting to control his anger. An unbearable silence filled the room.

"You did this to a fourteen year old girl!" he finally said through clenched teeth.

"She attacked me," Ranson howled. "I was defending myself."

Wishnowsky turned to the door and signaled to a guard in the corridor. "Take Anna to the car," he ordered. "A doctor will need to treat her wounds." He smiled at the girl and waited while she buttoned her dress and walked out. When she was out of sight, his face clouded. "Face the wall," he spat at Ranson.

Eyes wide, Ranson froze.

"Turn around, Madam, or I'll have you stripped naked and paraded down the corridor."

The terrified woman turned. The squadron leader reached towards her and yanked the material of her dress. There was a screech of tearing material and the woman's back was exposed. Across it was one red and blue welt.

"My apologies," Wishnowsky said without attempting to hide his sarcasm. "I

see Anna did manage to retaliate...once. Face the front again."

Vera Ranson turned, clutching the torn dress to her throat. Tears streamed down her face but Wishnowsky ignored them.

"Sit down," he directed. In a grim whisper, he asked, "Have you any idea who Anna is?"

Ranson shook her head. "I knew she wasn't English but with the name Green..." her voice trailed off.

"The young lady is Countess Anna Vladisciuszko from Poland," Wishnowsky hissed. "She is a distant cousin of your King George VI. I had the privilege of flying her out of our country in 1939 after her family was assassinated and she barely escaped with her own life. She came to England for freedom and it has been necessary to disguise her identity." His eyebrows creased into a dark line and the last words were spoken through clenched teeth, "She escaped...to *this*! You madam, are nothing but a thug as bad as the Nazis who control our homeland. I will give you one week to resign from your position here."

"But I have a family," Ranson howled

"Resign within one week or I'll personally see you are never employed again. Believe me, not even an ammunition factory will take you after I'm through. I'll also have you arrested for the violent assault of a minor. I'm sure, even during war time, the English courts don't condone this." He turned to the door. "I shall return in seven days, Mrs. Ranson. Good evening."

The officer walked out to the drive where Anna sat in back seat of the Humber with Johnny, awaiting transport to hospital

"Thank you Jozef," she whispered.

The squadron leader stepped forward, grinned and rubbed her hair. "We look after our own, Countess," was all he said.

The End

This story was part of the novel. Countess in Exile.

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