

# Christmas In Vienna, John Mark Clubb and Jacqueline Audrean Robotham

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## Christmas in Vienna

It is 8 pm and we are already late for the opera. Tonight is Christmas Eve 1943 in Vienna. It's one of the most beautiful cities in the world as far as I'm concerned. But war has come to my city. It intrudes on the beauty. The Nazi's have been here since 1938 and they have their signs of hate and discrimination hung from the beautiful buildings that line the old cobblestone streets of my home.

This is the place where I grew up. It's where my family has been for hundreds of years. We are distant relatives of the Hapsburgs, one of Austria's original ruling dynasties. The Hapsburgs are wealthy and powerful. My mother was a distant cousin to Maximillian Hapsburg. I suppose this makes me royalty by relations. My parents, Victoria and Edward however, made sure that I always understood what money and position can buy, what it can't and the difference in what is important in life. I'm an only child and while my parents were alive was completely doted on by them both. My father and I did everything together. We hunted, rode horses and debated subjects of the day. I respected him so very much. I miss them both terribly.

Sometimes it hits me how surreal going to the opera is in light of the fact that a World War is raging around us and I am calmly getting ready for an evening out. The whispers about what is going on in the camps that the Nazi's have built around their empire are starting to intrude into our daily lives. The horror of the reality is too hard to accept but

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after watching and listening I know that what they whisper about is true.

My name is Christoff and I am an Austrian Army Officer. My father, Edward was an Austrian Army Officer as was my grandfather Ferdinand. The Germans who occupy my city have forced me back into my uniform. So far I have not been asked to do anything beyond supervising my countryman acting as policemen in my city. The Germans keep the citizens under control and I make sure that traffic moves smoothly. I am embarrassed by this fact but my upbringing does not allow me to discuss it. A gentleman and good soldier does his job.

People around me have begun to disappear at an alarming rate. The new Gestapo Commandant, Major Hans Schmidt, has arrived and I have seen his cruelty and sadistic streak firsthand. One afternoon as I made my rounds, I watched as his soldiers hung three boys in public for stealing bread to feed their families. The boys were Jewish and their father was standing to the side begging for their lives. The Commandant forced one of the spectators, another Jew, to kick the stools they were standing on out from under their feet. Their deaths were horrible to watch and changed me forever.

The building that he uses as his headquarters is the Wiener Staatsoper, one of the majestic old theaters that Vienna is famous for. There has been a steady stream of trucks and cars with people in them that go into the courtyard of the theater. The gates close behind them. They come out empty.

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I am obligated to fulfill my duties as an officer of the Austrian Army. It is an obligation that I meet with great hesitation. I am continually repulsed by the behavior of the Germans towards my countrymen and fellow citizens. My inability and fear about speaking out shames me to my core. Some of my fellow officers with naval experience have been sent to command the U Boats. None of them are returning. It adds to my humiliation that I am spending this war in relative comfort while others are dying every day. I am about to change that.

Natalia is my wife. She is 23 years younger than me. She grew up in Salzburg which is quite a distance from my home. She originally came to our family as a ward of my parent's. She came to us because our fathers served in the Calvary together. They were best friends. They trusted each other implicitly and were like brothers. Natalia's parents both died when she was very young. Her aunt cared for her until she was too old to do so any longer.

Natalia's parents had her late in life. They were totally devoted to her also. The loss of her mother and father must have been devastating. However, because of her own upbringing she rarely shows any emotion about it. I still see the sadness behind her eyes when she doesn't think I am looking. When she came to live with my family, she was no more than a child. As she emerged into the woman she is today, I realized that my feelings for her went far beyond what they were supposed to.

Originally I didn't know what to do with this woman child. I was quite hesitant and

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awkward having never been around many females other than my mother. We developed a friendship slowly and spent many afternoons riding our horses and sitting and having tea. As I watched her grow up, my feelings of friendship deepened and I realized that I was falling in love. I began to be unable to see a life or a future without her in it. I was always proper with her until one night I couldn't hold back. In a stammering, stuttering voice, I told her of my love. She laughed and told me that she beginning to get tired of waiting for me to come to that realization. She knew of my feelings for her before I did. I asked her to marry me that night. Our marriage has been filled with joy. When we got married, it caused quite a scandal. There were whispers and stares when we made our relationship formal but our love for each other overshadows everything else. So far we are childless but I hope to remedy that very soon. This war has injected so much uncertainty into the world and into our lives. I don't want to add any more complications to what we already face.

I enter the room and see Natalia sitting at her dressing table combing her long dark hair for what seems like the hundredth time with her back to me. There is a fire burning in the huge fireplace that we use to heat our bedroom. Because of the warmth of the room, she's wearing nothing but a camisole. I don't realize at this point that she's naked from the waist down. She does not know I am watching her. I am immediately aroused. I walk across the room and she suddenly sees me in her mirror. She gives me the smile that I know precedes her desire for me also. I take the brush from her hand and begin to brush her hair. She leans back into me and closes her eyes. I suddenly am consumed with desire for her and I drop the brush to the floor and begin to kiss her passionately. I move

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my mouth using my tongue to trace a path from her neck to her breasts. I cup each one of them in my hands and rub the nipples with my fingertips. As my mouth moves lower onto her chest I kiss her breasts all over. My tongue moves to her nipples. I can hear her breath quicken and she begins to softly moan. At this point I realize that she is naked from the waist down. I use the tip of my tongue to trace a line down her stomach and I gently play with her navel. As I move lower she puts her hands on my head and her fingers in my hair pushing me down to where she knows I want to go. I enter her womanhood with my tongue finding that spot on her body that makes her go wild with desire for me. Her moans become louder, her back starts to arch and I know what she will ask for next. She likes it when I stay clothed and she's bare. She tells me that it makes her feel more naked and vulnerable to me. I stand up and with great urgency she is undressing me too. After I am naked she bends forward so that her mouth is almost touching me. I can feel her breath on my maleness and I know that she is teasing me for what comes next. Her hands reach out and wrap themselves around me. She slowly inserts me into her mouth and I become weak at the knees. As her mouth becomes more wanting for me, I know I'm desperate to be inside her. I gently remove her mouth from my body and pick her up and carry her to our bed. I leave her camisole on and cover her body with mine. She looks me in the eye and says, "I love you Christoff". The tenderness in which she says those words to me almost breaks my heart. I slow down the pace of our lovemaking in order to enjoy being with her even more. I gently touch her body with my fingers and cover her breasts with my hands as our kissing becomes more frenzied once again. At that point she pulls me on top of her and inserts me. I completely forget about our social obligations and my world shrinks to the immediate space around

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our bed. I slowly begin to move in and out of her. We are one. All of my senses are fully aware of how she feels smells and looks. Her touches are small jolts of electricity that make their way to my very soul. She begins to meet my thrusts and as we look into each other's eyes, our passions explode together. As we slowly come back into the world she wraps her legs and arms tightly around me. I feel more protective of her than I ever have in my life. Our eyes meet once again and I say, "Natalia, I love you so much". She begins to cry. Her tears bring mine and we weep together in the intensity of our love for one another.

There's suddenly a knock on the door. My personal butler has brought me my uniform for the evening. I'm jarred back to reality. I kiss her gently and tell her we must finish getting ready for the opera. She takes my face in her hands and says, "Never forget this evening my love". I wonder what she means by that and then shrug it off.

As she sits once again at her dressing table, her hair frames her face and the dark expressive eyes that tell me so much without her ever saying a word. It's hard for me to be impatient with her. My wife is stunningly beautiful both inside and out. She has high cheekbones, full lips and long slender legs that she wraps around me when we are making love. But her physical beauty is not all she possesses. She is unfailingly polite to everyone around her and I watch in amazement as she makes the people she comes into contact with feel like royalty and a member of our immediate family. Everyone wants to be around her for her radiant light and positive glow. Natalia finally finishes at her dressing table and begins to put on her evening gown. It is a robin's egg powder blue. It

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is cut just low enough to show off her full breasts. They are round, firm, and have small pink areolas that drive me wild when I see them in the candle light next to our bed. She wears pearls that were my mother's. Her hair is placed on top of her head in a sweeping hairstyle that frames her face perfectly. It's placed up with combs that I have gotten her on one of my many trips to the east to do family business. I have never seen her more beautiful. I can't believe the good fortune that has brought us together. She has brought a feeling of home to a very large empty house for the first time in my life. I can see growing old with her and watching our children and grandchildren run and play. Her love for me helps to shove the war raging outside these walls and all around us away. She looks at me coyly over her shoulder and smiles. The promise in it melts any desire to leave the protected sanctuary of our bedroom in the mansion that I have inherited from my father. I look forward to filling it with the children who will eventually inherit it from me. As I look at her, I am suddenly struck with the fear. I see the Gestapo Commandants face. Natalia is a Jew.

Both my parents show me growing up how people are supposed to love and be loved. First they show me in their actions towards one another and then in their behavior towards me. They are unfailingly polite almost to the point of being too formal in all of their interactions with each other and with me. I am hardly ever disciplined as a child because one look of disappointment from either of them is enough to control my behavior. They dote on me from my very earliest recollections. My father was a handsome man with rugged looks. He was tall with piercing green eyes. He was demanding yet loving to a fault. My father served proudly in the horse cavalry of Austria

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and passed on his love of horses and the military to me. He came home a decorated hero from one of the many conflicts of his era. I remember thinking that an entire lifetime would go by before I saw him again when he left. My mother spent many days and nights staring out the window with her hands in prayer, waiting for his safe return. My mother was also a beauty. She had her own dark hair and dark eyes like Natalia's. She was gentle, loving and very feminine. Whenever I smell her perfume on another woman I am immediately taken back to all the memories I have of her. I remember the way she looked at me as she gently scolded me for some infraction. She always had a problem doing it with a straight face. Her words would be stern but her mouth would twitch as she fought to hide her laughter. I loved the way her small delicate fingers looked as she played our piano. I often stood behind her and covered her eyes but she knew the songs by heart and she laughed easily and played them without having to look at the keys. There was a core of steel inside her that I saw when she needed to be strong. She was strong enough for both of them when he was away.

When my father eventually came through our gate again, I think that all of us including the servants were bursting with joy at his return. The welcome home party compared to none. Although my father came home a hero, he was changed man. Before leaving, he was always smiling, telling funny stories and cheerful to a fault. After his return, he seemed to me to be one of the saddest men on earth. Quieter, his sense of humor evaporated like the smoke on a battlefield. His face looked older and more lined. He never seemed to smile anymore and never told another funny story for the rest of his life. He continued to be polite in all of his dealings with our family and servants but after that



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became more formal, more distant than I had ever seen him.

As a result of his service I felt obligated to serve during WWI. The day I told my father that I was leaving, he burst into tears. This is the first time I had ever seen my father cry. It was the most emotion I'd seen from him since his return from his own conflict. He begged me not to go but with the stubborn pride of youth and arrogance I told him I had to. It was a stupid show of misguided manhood on my part. I was afraid that I may not measure up to the man my father was if I didn't. It proved to be one of the most horrifying experiences of my life. The trench warfare, the gas, the smell of decaying bodies, horses and the rats came back to haunt my dreams on almost a nightly basis when I finally came home. The dreams finally stopped when I started sleeping with Natalia.

When I returned from war, I came home to a house filled with love and affection. The sight of my family and my home was much more poignant than I could imagine. I saw the wall that my father hid behind come down once again. He was almost beside himself with joy when he saw me for the first time. He hugged me tightly and kept repeating over and over, "my son, my son". The demons that came home with me chased me in my dreams and almost drove me insane. I could still hear the screams of the wounded and dying and see the parade of the dead. Sometimes it was as if they were calling to me. They were calling to me to come join them. It makes me even more determined to do my part to ease the suffering I see going on around me.

My mother died during the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918. With her death, my

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father's reason for continuing to live disappeared and he died shortly after. I buried both my parents within a year. Natalia and I were left to interact with each other without the buffer that my parents provided for us. Our relationship became more formal and stiff for a time. I didn't know how to express my overriding grief that the loss of my parents injected into my life. What I didn't realize was that she was working through her own loss and grief and we could have been allies in healing together. She eventually became distant and it felt as if my heart was being ripped out of my chest when I saw her and I couldn't express my true feelings for her because of the wall that I built to hide my pain. I wanted so badly to tell her how much I loved her and needed her. I'm sure my distance confused her. It continued until I finally found the courage to tell her how I really felt.

I am tenser than usual tonight. I am keeping secrets from my wife for the first time in our marriage. Several weeks ago, I was approached by one of the men of the underground movement in Austria fighting the Germans. They tell me they are hesitant to talk to me knowing the penalty for getting captured is a long slow death by torture at the hands of the Gestapo. They tell me they have been watching me for some time and sense in me war weariness and anger towards what I am seeing every day. My contact is a man named Ulf. Ulf is well known to me and I am surprised by him being involved. I never thought of him as having what it takes to fight a secret war.

I am also glad to finally be acting instead of sitting by helpless while I watch the Nazi's who have invaded my country slowly tear it apart. It is a new and daring operation to smuggle human cargo, specifically Jews, out of Austria into Switzerland. They need me

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to provide cover and legitimacy for their operation. They need papers to get passed checkpoints. What is even more fantastic about the process is that the Americans will be helping us using B-17 bombers. The bombers are used to carrying heavy loads. They are suited for carrying many people. They are at a secret base in Switzerland and will fly low level to Austria to pick up their cargo before returning home. Tonight is the first mission and everyone is concerned about the chances of success or failure. I have been working for the last three weeks with Ulf to obtain checkpoint papers and identity cards for the people involved.

As Natalia finishes getting ready, I walk down the sweeping staircase of our house to my smoking room. I am already in my military uniform and wait with a brandy and cigar. I'm deeply lost in thought when she enters the room and don't even hear her say my name the first time. "Christoff". When she says it a little more loudly, I jump and it seems I'm looking at her for the very first time in my life. I realize I love her more deeply than I could have ever imagined loving anyone. My heart aches for the risk that I am taking and I suddenly feel very guilty for not sharing this with her. After I regain my composure, I give her my biggest smile and ask her if she is ready to leave. After a long moment of looking through me, she nods her head and asks me if everything is all right. I tell her that it is a work matter and even though I get the feeling she doesn't believe me, she accepts my explanation and we leave.

As our driver takes us to Saint Stephen's Cathedral and Opera House the city seems to be alive with lights and festivities. It seems that despite the evil that lurks behind the scenes,

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everyone is trying to hide it in their preparations for Christmas. The snow is falling gently now and Natalia sits closer to me to share in the warmth of my military great coat. I can barely move when I have it on but it gives me a more secure feeling about what I have to face tonight. I am too quiet for Natalia. I know this. Most of the time our conversations are lively and spirited discussions about what we are feeling and experiencing.

Sometimes they have to be in whispers about what is going on around us. I trust almost no one anymore including our driver. I'm not sure who is reporting to the Gestapo and who is not. Tonight I detect wariness in her that I haven't felt before. There is a wall between us that has never been there. I attribute it to my own apprehension and dismiss it. The Opera House is lit and an endless stream of cars and German Army vehicles pull up and discharge their passengers. I recognize some of the Germans that I work with on a daily basis and try to get Natalia inside before they can stop us for small talk.

My biggest fear now is that they will discover Natalia's family secret. I'm afraid that the repercussions will be beyond my control. As we walk in I am confronted with the sight of the new Gestapo Commandant Major Hans Schmidt of the SS. His face is made cruel by a scar that reaches from below his ear to the edge of his mouth. He has dead eyes and when he looks at me and then Natalia it's as if a cold arctic wind has been blown across my soul. His thin lips form an even crueler smile. He says to Natalia, "We must get together for tea sometime". It infuriates me but I am unable to respond in the way that I want to. I simply nod and take her by the elbow to our box seats where my family has been viewing operas for generations. Tonight happens to be one of my favorites, *Tsar Kaloyan*. It's a love story that turns into tragedy. At times when I have seen it, I am

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overcome by emotion. Tonight I barely pay attention. I feel as if I'm in the enemy's living room. At intermission I excuse myself and go to the WC. Inside I run into more German Officers who try and make small talk with me. I gently brush them off while smiling and pretending to have a sore throat. As I walk back to my box, I once again run into Major Schmidt. He comments with a leer about how beautiful my wife is and once again tells me how much he would enjoy getting to know her better. I imagine running my saber through his throat. As I walk back to my seat, I know that the time for my mission is drawing near. All of my senses come alive.

It's the time to take the risk I have been waiting for these weeks. As I escort Natalia to the car, my heart is racing and my heartbeat is pounding in my ears. As we drive home I try to make small talk about the opera we have just seen but my voice sounds hollow and empty to me. As we pull into our drive, I ask the driver to wait for a few moments while I escort Natalia into our house. She asks what is wrong and I explain that while at the opera, I have been tasked by the Germans with overseeing some logistical duties that have be done tonight. I tell her that I won't be long and not to stay up. As I kiss her soft lips, I am overcome with guilt but justify it by telling myself it will put her in danger if she knows. She looks at me as if she knows I am not telling the truth but smiles and tells me to be careful and to hurry home. She hugs me one last time and with intensity I have not seen before says, "I love you with all my heart". I walk out the door with a heavy step because of my untruths.

I walk back into the snowy night, get into the car and have my driver drop me off at a

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predestined meeting spot that I have coordinated with Ulf. As I stand in the cold and watch the snowfall, I see German soldiers walking patrols in the city. The underground has been quiet for the past few weeks in order to give this newest operation the greatest chance for success. I spot Ulf and another man I have never seen before. The stranger has his hat pulled low over his eyes and doesn't say anything to me but simply nods. I am fearful that this might be a trap to take attention away from the active participants in the resistance by turning me over to the Germans. I put my hand on my revolver in case I have to use it. I have never been very religious but offer up a prayer to God for my safe deliverance from this night. It strikes me that I am praying for myself and not the people I am about to try and rescue from the Germans. We have to wait for some time in order for our human cargo to be put into place and for the city to become quieter before proceeding to the pickup point for the truck. We go by car to where the first truckload of people is waiting. As we pull up, I panic. This is where it becomes most dangerous and most likely for a trap if one has been set. But it goes as planned. As we lead the truck to the rendezvous point, all of my senses feel taut. My whole body feels as if it has been electrified. We begin the journey to the pickup point without incident. I'm still tense about what is going to take place and try not to look all around me as we drive. As we pull up to each checkpoint I tell the guards that the truck behind us has secret cargo and it is not to be inspected. Because of my rank and who I am, my orders go unchallenged. We make it through the checkpoints and pull into the edge of the field where the plane is to land.

We sit in the car and wait. Eventually I see the dark shape of the B-17 as it circles the

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field inspecting the landing area. Flaming pots have been placed along the landing strip. There is barely enough light for me to see the edge of the runway. I am amazed at the skill and daring of the pilots who are flying the airplane into this dangerous place. As soon as the airplane touches down and comes to a stop, the truck races to meet it. We drive to the airplane and I get out of the car. As the flap on the back of the truck is lifted and I look into the darkness there is an audible gasp from the occupants. They think they are about to be arrested by me or by the people working for me. I am standing there in my full uniform and I tell them quietly “quickly get out of the truck and into the airplane”. Because of the darkness and natural confusion and fear they are feeling they obey without comment.

The crewmembers help get their cargo into the airplane. They also don't know what to make of the Austrian officer in full uniform standing there in that dark snowy field. I simply nod and then turn my attention to Ulf who is helping the women and children climb through the bomb bay door into their ticket to freedom from the horrors of what they might have faced. I pay scarce attention to who might be present. It's partly because I don't want them to see me and partly because I don't want to see them. It is easier for me if I don't put faces into my memories of this night.

As the last of the people we are saving get into the airplane, I walk to the front and take a long look at the pilots still sitting in their cockpit. My eyes lock onto theirs and I give them a salute, which is returned. My relief at completing my task is overwhelming. . We wait as the airplane taxis out for takeoff and as it lumbers with deep throated engine

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noises, into the dark sky we sit until we can no longer see it and then I return to my home.

As I walk in the door, I have conflicting emotions. I feel that I have given these people the gift of life and know that at the same time I am risking all that I know and love if the information about this night ever gets out. After entering the forward hall, one of the servants comes to me visibly upset and hands me a letter. When I ask her what it is about, she simply sobs and runs away. With a sinking heart, I open the envelope to find a note written in Natalia's handwriting. It says:

*My darling Christoff, if you are reading this letter, it means that I am gone from you. I know what you have been planning. What I couldn't tell you was that I have been doing similar things that I had to keep from you. I know that you wanted to tell me but were afraid. I understand my darling and I couldn't tell you either because I know you would have never allowed me to do what I did tonight. It is with great joy but also great sadness that I have to tell you this news. I have your child growing inside me. I know also the danger that both of us face in the world we live in if the news of my family ever gets out so I have decided to leave Austria for a safer place. What you didn't realize as you were planning to help these people leave tonight was that I was talking to the same people you were. I will be on the airplane that you arranged. You will watch me get on that airplane and fly to a safe place for all of us not realizing that it's me. I know the danger that being your wife brings to you. So I am leaving tonight to save us all. I am leaving to save you, our unborn baby and me. I do this out of love for you and for our child. I hope you can forgive me for my deceit. I have already forgiven you for*



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*withholding what you have done. Understand that I do this for all of us. Be strong and if fate allows it, I will be waiting for you. I love you eternally.*

*Your Natalia*

I sink to my knees and try to catch my breath in the entry of our house. My world is suddenly gone. I don't know what to do. I can't breathe. The tears begin and I lose sight of where I am. I rise to my feet and I move as if in a trance to my smoking room and sink heavily into my favorite chair. I don't see the room or realize where I am. My rage, my loss, my sadness overwhelms me. But as the hours go by and the Christmas morning light arrives in the windows of my room, I slowly begin to understand the gift that Natalia has given me. She has given me hope. She has given me not only my life but also hers and our child's. If she had told me of her plans I would have forbidden her to go. In the end it might have cost me everything I finally loved. In her love, she has given us a chance to be together, to have something after this war is finished. It is one of the most unselfish gifts I have ever received. I smile and wish my wife a very Merry Christmas.