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Reunion - Far from Vienna. A Story.

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REUNION - FAR FROM VIENNA

A STORY

BY
K l a u s M a n n

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Cpl. Max Berman, of the U.S. Armed Forces in North Africa, beamed when the First Sergeant told him that he could pick up his Liberty Pass in the orderly room after chow, about one o'clock, and was free to stay in town until 9 P.M.

The unit to which Max was assigned had just arrived in Morocco. The trip across the Atlantic had been a long nightmare of boredom and sea-sickness; nor was there anything pleasant or exciting about the primitive replacement center, a few miles from the ~~sea~~ seaport, where the men were temporarily stationed, -- waiting for further developments and busying themselves with dreary routine details. An afternoon in town would indeed be a most welcome change.

Max had been in this part of the world before -- as a young boy, with his parents. A prosperous business man in Vienna, Austria, Bermann Sr. could afford to take his wife and son on a pleasure trip to Sicily and Morocco. The corporal remembered this journey as one of the great adventures of his pre-American life. What a glorious time they had -- Dad, Ma, and he -- in those strange, fabulous cities -- Palermo, Casablanca, Fez, Marakesh.... It seemed ages ago. So many things had happened since -- apocalyptic events, disasters which upset changed the face of the world and upset millions of innocuous individual lives.

Max's father committed suicide, a few weeks after the Nazi invasion of Austria -- as did many Jews when their homeland was violated, devoured by the barbaric neighbour. But his young son did not want to die. He was nineteen years old, at the time of the tragedy -- avid for life, revenge, work,

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~~Success~~
~~adventure~~. His mother went with him when he embarked for the United States -- almost penniless.

They were hard off at first. Max would not have minded the hardships, ~~the tedious struggle~~, if it had not been for his mother. Proudly aware of his responsibility, he tried hard to make a decent living. Finally he succeeded. About December, 1941, he had established himself in the same branch of business in which his father had been prominent -- over there, in the faraway, half-forgotten old country.

When the United States entered the War, Max was anxious to join the Army as soon as possible. Of course, he could have got himself exempted from the draft, on account of his mother's dependency. But she agreed with him that he had to be in this War -- the great crusade against the Evil One whom both mother and son hated with a personal, passionate kind of hatred. Besides there was enough money for the old lady to last for a certain time, and she could always count on the allotment from Max's Army pay.

"A private's pay ain't bad, but a corporal's is much better," he contemplated -- rather pleased and proud -- as he slipped into his blouse and caressed the two handsome stripes with which the sleeves were adorned. -- "Our little corporal thinks he's Napoleon," one of his tent-mates grinned. "Looks kind of sharp, though, this afternoon -- don't he? All dressed up for them Arabian babes..."

They made for the gate -- Max and five other fellows who had been lucky enough to obtain passes. Outside, they found a long line of soldiers -- all neatly shaven and combed -- waiting for a G.I. truck to give them a ride to town. ~~They were in a holiday mood -- keyed up with expectation and curiosity.~~ Max and his companions joined the group.

They were received with rough jokes and with the inevitable questions which soldiers ask each other on all Army posts: "How long have you been in this hell hole, brother? To what outfit do you belong? What State are you from? How is chow in your mess hall? Know any girls in town?"..... Max was familiar with all their clichés and accents. He felt at home in their midst. He was glad to be one of them.

They kept laughing and kidding each other, during the short ~~a~~ ride to town. It was a magnificent day -- the ideal weather for a festive excursion. After a chilly night -- spent, most uncomfortably, on the damp floor of a tent -- the winter sky of Morocco appeared radiantly blue and the air had a crisp, tonic flavour. Even the prosaic suburbs through which they were travelling seemed transfigured by the touch of this golden light.

The truck driver -- a native -- turned around to explain to his passengers some curiosity on the roadside. He spoke French -- which caused a minor panic among the G.I.'s sitting next to him. "Any of yous guys understand what he's talking about?" they inquired. There was an embarrassed silence; finally one man sounded off. It was Max who said, apologetically: "My French must be rusty as hell. I suppose it will do, though..."

His French turned out to be all right, and he did a nice job translating ~~fluently~~ what the Arabian driver had to say about town and people. All the G.I.'s on the truck were considerably impressed and the fellows from his company ~~seemed~~ were proud of their clever pal.

"Let's stick together," they said, after they had arrived. "We'd be in a hell of a jam without our interpreter. Max must do the parlez-vous for us..."

He grinned -- flattered and embarrassed.

He sounded a trifle patronizing -- much like a guide, if not like a host who is going to show his guests around -- as he said: "Well, boys, let's go!" I hope you'll like the place..."

It was a peach of a town, in the opinion of these visitors -- a swell place and first-class deal, positively O.K. They had the time of their lives watching the colorful crowd on the boulevards and café terraces -- Arabs, French uniforms, U.S. soldiers and sailors, African troops and quaint-looking civilians -- most of them bearded, dressed in black, with funny little berrets or bare-headed. As for the women, some were ^{decidedly} ~~undoubtedly~~ "hot stuff;" but their charm seemed ^{somehow} ~~curiously~~ unreal -- not quite from this world. None of the boys would have had the nerve to make a pass on one of the fragile angels who displayed the precious grace of past ages -- sipping apéritifs at little marble tables, or riding slowly through parks in old-fashioned carriages. Maybe they would have preferred a powerful motor car, as any reasonably modern person, and it was only on account of the gasoline shortage that they had to content themselves with such obsolete vehicles. But the carriages ^{seemed} ~~were~~ in perfect harmony with their personal style and appearance. One of the soldiers remembered having read a story about a French dame who had an affair with a guy while taking a ride in a carriage. The name of the gal was Madame Bovary. The fellow who knew the book told his pals all about it. They had a good laugh -- with all those carriages moving along the boulevard. It was a lot of fun -- wasn't it? -- to be in a foreign country and see outlandish things.

Unfortunately, the Arabian district was "off limits" -- with its gates grimly guarded by the formidable M.P.'s. But the so-called "European" town seemed actually half-Arabian --

* decidedly

** somehow

A Poor thing

-5- *half-naked children*

teeming with ~~dirty kids~~, veiled women, and long-robed men. The boys made a tour through the Sultan's palace -- a sumptuous affair, much in the taste of the Arabian Nights -- and purchased exotic trash in various bazaars -- just a few souvenirs, for the folks back home. After having stopped at a number of bars, they considered to buy an old, hysterical monkey as a company pet. Max -- the only one who stayed sober -- talked them out of the deal. Finally they got tired.

Kids
Sure, the Arabian ~~children~~ were cute enough; but ~~in~~ the long run their obstinate begging became ~~tiresome~~. "American friend! Please, give smoke! Give candy! Cigarette! Money!"... Was there ~~nothing else~~ they had to say? Besides they looked as if they had never -- really ~~n e v e r~~! -- been free of vermin and filth. The U.S. lads -- fanatics of soap and showers -- were slightly alarmed and shocked. It was good to breathe, after so many dubious smells, the ~~sterilized~~ air of the American Red Cross.

irritating
An affable nurse -- the very embodiment of cleanliness and neatness, in her immaculate white and blue outfit -- showed them the way to a restaurant recommended by the military authorities. Max would have preferred to discover an eating place of his own; but the others were against experiments. "If the joint is good enough for that pretty nurse, it will do for Cpl. Maxie, too," they said. They didn't mean to hurt his feelings, though, and were greatly surprised when he snapped back, ~~irritably~~: "All right, all right! Let's be strictly G.I. -- and have a lousy dinner!"

*had a bath in their
lives.*

A nurse



A

*sterilized-
looking*

He had been in a peculiar mood for the past two or three hours. For one reason or another, the sightseeing got on his nerves; ~~it made him feel~~ ~~pensive, nostalgic~~. Maybe it was just that the city reminded him of his father who had once pointed out to him its monuments and curiosities -- inconceivably long ago... Or was there something else that intrigued him? The atmosphere of the French colonial seaport was laden with memories, full of familiar rhythms. While his American friends were fascinated by the gaudy façade, he sensed behind it a drama of which they were not aware. He sensed ~~Europe~~ Europe -- its misery, its charm, its tradition and tragedy. Wherever he looked, he recognized the marks of suffering and struggle. Not that he wanted to notice all those ~~tiny~~, melancholy, disquieting things which were ignored by his naive companions. In fact he hated himself for discerning what they overlooked -- ~~ignorantly and innocently~~ -- the proudly concealed symptoms of ~~his~~ poverty and decay; the shabbiness under the surface of elegance; the weariness behind a smile, the nervous tension behind a polite phrase or ~~conventional~~ gesture. How could he help being sensible to these inconspicuous, yet unmistakable nuances? He was a child of the tragic continent whose proximity now disconcerted him.

Max No, he had nothing to do with ~~Europe~~; ~~its~~ ^{the} troubles and splendors were none of his business. He was an American citizen and an American soldier, having chow with a bunch of boys from New Jersey, California, Texas, Missouri, and Brooklyn, in a restaurant full of U.S. uniforms. The boys laughed their heads off as they tried to teach a few juicy pieces of G.I. slang to the ~~elderly~~ French waiter. Max -- laughing with them -- suspected that the waiter was not really amused.

but mildly

- a distinguished-looking gentleman in his sixties -

When they left the restaurant, they found the boulevard dark, blacked out. Blind at first, one of the boys ran clumsily into a group of French soldiers. Max apologized on his comrade's behalf. As soon as he began to speak, one of the Frenchmen started, turned his head, looked at him, and cried, "Max!"

-- not very loud, in an intimately lowered voice, as though his exclamation were not supposed to be heard by anybody, except the one to whom it was addressed.

Max stared at him -- motionless, mouth ajar, dazed by surprise, as it were. Finally he managed to make a curious little motion -- pointing at the stranger, as children point at some frightening and yet attractive object.

I
What was this? A hallucination? An absurd mistake?.... Surely, this was not Otto! This French soldier was tall and lean, and he wore a strange kind of beard -- no mustache, just a stripe of thin, dark hair framing the lower part of his face -- like a high fur collar, or something...

Law
If it were Otto -- Otto Stossinger -- Max would recognize him at once, without hesitation. Otto was his best friend -- almost a brother, that was Otto to him. Otto and Max had played together as kids. They went to school together. Otto's sister was Max's first love. Was this stranger the brother of Max's first love, Irene? Was he his old companion in so many pranks and adventures? Was he Otto? Impossible...

"Mais c'est bien moi, mon vieux," the French soldier said, with a sonorous little chuckle. "C'est moi -- Otto!"

It was he, all right. This was the familiar

Otto

voice -- the voice of the good old days, the tone of brotherly affection.

"Why, Otto!".... Max's voice sounded shaky and his eyes were suddenly full of tears. "Bist du's wirklich....," he said -- laughing now, and already in the arms of his friend. They embraced each other; it was a dramatic scene -- watched by the French "poilus" with discreet amusement; by the G.I.'s, with godd-natured curiosity.

"Why, Otto..." This was Max again -- slightly embarrassed after his emotional outburst. "Y o u here, of all people! I can hardly believe it... And in uniform! Since when are you a French soldier?"

"What is so astonishing about it?" Otto seemed a little irritated. He sounded mildly reproachful as he added: "What ~~else should~~ did you expect me to be -- if not a French soldier?"

This seemed to remind him of certain civilized formalities which, among Frenchmen, must not be neglected -- no matter how dramatic the circumstances. Hurriedly he presented Max to his French comrades --: "Mon vieux copain Bermann," he said, and added, as if to apologize for the embrace and tears: "We haven't seen each other for a pretty long time, you know..."

There were four of them -- all in their early twenties. They wore American uniforms, with the silver Cross of Lorraine replacing the U.S. insignias. Otto -- as Max noticed now -- was the only one whose outfit was originally French, not made in U.S.A. Max

explain

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was curiously moved by this detail. "Of course, he tries to be more French than the Frenchmen," he thought -- not maliciously, but with a sudden pang of knowing sympathy. The young American patriot of Austrian origin was only too familiar with this fervent and pathetic aspiration of all foreign-born -- to overcome whatever deviates, in their character, from the norm of their new homeland; to assimilate themselves; to become regular, inconspicuous; to be "one of the boys."

"What do you say, Maxie? Aren't you going to present us to your friend?" -- This was Texas-Joe, speaking for the G.I.'s who grew slightly impatient.

The two groups -- U.S.A. and Free France -- shook hands with each other.

It was Otto's idea that one should have a drink together. "They serve fairly good wine at the Café de la France, just around the corner," he said, and his cheerful laughter contrasted strangely with the solemn pallor of his haggard face. "We may as well make it an evening! Tomorrow we'll be far away, anyhow..." Then, in a lowered voice, to Max: "Our regiment is alerted..." -- Max -- looking almost comically despondent -- said, "Not really? That's too bad..."

"You two guys will have a lot of things to talk about," one of the Americans suggested, when the party was settling down in the Café de la France. "Why don't you park your ~~behind~~ ^{plenty} behinds at this cute little table, ~~here~~, and mind your own business."

Max protested: "How could I do such a thing! After all, I am your interpreter..."

But the G.I.'s insisted: "Don't be ridiculous! We'll get along without your kind assistance! -- What do you say, Frenchies?" -- The French soldiers, thus challenged, grinned bravely, if somewhat uncomfortably.

They got along, all right -- with the help of gestures, laughs and grimaces. Men can have a good time together without exchanging ideas in an articulate manner -- just drinking and looking around and listening to music. There was a fairly good band in the Café de la France. When it played a French song, the "poilus" would chime in; and when the musicians intoned "The Yanks are coming," or "Pistol-packing Mama," it was the turn of the Americans to sound off.

While the boys understood each other, although one half of their party didn't know what the other half was talking about, Max and Otto found it difficult to choose the idiom in which to open their conversation. Should they speak German? It seemed the natural thing to do, no doubt, -- and yet it would have been utterly out of place, indeed, almost scandalous. Otto's English was fair -- considerably better than Max's French. Courteous and ambitious, Otto tried to express himself in the unfamiliar tongue. But somehow it did not work; he was handicapped, irritated by the limitations of his vocabulary and the awkwardness of his accent. Should Max make an effort to be more fluent, in French? But if Otto -- definitely the more brilliant one of the two -- had failed in this kind of experiment, how could Max hope to succeed? It would be a waste of time. And they had only half-an-hour before the café would close. Only half-an-hour! -- and so many things to discuss, to explain, to ask, to remember....



They had not seen one another since 1939 -- the year of Austria's catastrophe -- when Max left for the States and Otto escaped to Paris. At first the correspondence between the two young refugees was regular and extensive. But as the months passed, the intervals between their letters became increasingly long -- and when the War broke out, in 1939, no word came through from Otto anymore. Max, in Chicago, worried. His anxiety grew when France collapsed and surrendered. What would happen to Otto? If he were caught by the Nazis! ~~The~~ Max hardly dared to imagine what the monsters would be do to his admired, beloved friend. If it was bad enough, in the eyes of the Hitler fanatics, to belong to the Jewish race, it was worse to be an "Aryan", such as Otto Stossinger, and still an enemy of the "Aryan Cause" -- a deserter, a traitor. Otto's name, and his father's, had its prominent place on every Black List of the Gestapo; for both father and son were uncompromising, active anti-Fascists. What would Father Stossinger do in a Nazi concentration camp? Max liked to think of ~~them~~ him as the only real idealist he had ever met in his life -- a venerable, almost saintly figure, with his gentle, near-sighted eyes, his beautiful silver whiskers and gigantic slouch hat. He was a gentleman and a scholar -- Otto's father, a veteran leader and orator of the Austrian labor movement. How those unspeakable Prussians would enjoy liquidating the grand old fellow!

"How is Father Stossinger?" There was apprehension in Max's voice, as he asked this question. he was afraid of what Otto might have to tell him... But Father Stossinger turned out to be alive, in Portugal, and in the best of spirits. Every new setback of the German armies seemed to have a rejuvenating effect on his organism --

(102)

- "it's really misadventures,"
GMO said chuckling.

"After ~~the~~ Station got,
the old boy joined about
fifteen friends, and
after train's ~~has~~ ~~been~~
~~begin~~ to ~~turn~~ ~~from~~
the hair on his head
began to grow again.

They laugh. Still
laughing. That ~~asked~~
"A-A how is ~~you~~?"

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