

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

The Children of Guernica. By Hermann Kesten.

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"The Children of Guernica."

By Hermann Kesten. Alliance Book Corpor.
Longmans, Green and Co. 2.50.

As grown up people behave like madmen and act like wild beasts, children, in comparison, acquire the dignity and wisdom of philosophers. They are the innocent, pathetic victims of fanaticism and brutality, and, staring at their adults with horror, ask: "Why are you so crazy? Why must you be so wicked?"

In the book, writing in the first person, Hermann Kesten is an exiled German author in Paris and meets a lad who, like himself, is a refugee. As writers by profession are bound to be curious, Kesten is eager to hear the life-story of the young stranger. And the boy begins his narrative in a quiet and epic manner: "My name is Carlos, and I come from Guernica. My father had the chemist's shop on the market-square. He was the best man that ever lived..."

The tragedy of Carlos and his family is the tragedy of the Spanish people. Life in Guernica, the Holy City of the Basque Country, used to be calm and pleasant. The chemist was happy with his wife, Señora Pia, and with their children who had such beautiful names: Carlos, José, Ghil, Innocentia and Modesta. They loved their mother and adored their father. But the idyll was somewhat disturbed by the sudden arrival of Uncle Pablo, an adventurer. Many years before, there had been a serious quarrel between Father and Uncle Pablo, and the two brothers had not seen each other for a long while. Now Uncle Pablo comes back, and makes trouble. He is impudent and cynical and rather witty. He amuses and frightens the children, and starts once more flirting with Señora Pia who had once been his fiancée.

The Civil War, the tragic fight between brothers, has its prologue in this private sphere. The family in Guernica is not concerned with politics whatsoever. ~~They are faithful Catholics, and beyond pursuit of~~
and ~~their faith~~ demand only a certain amount of personal freedom and com=

fort. When it comes, the Civil War strikes them as an unintelligible catastrophe, like a thunderstorm or an awful disease.

The Spanish children with the fine romantic names have to watch and to commit revolting things. Some of them even get involved in a murder case, and little Innozentia loses the right to her lovely name. Life has become a nightmare. The sinister, naive and moving report of young Carlos reaches its unforgettable climax with the description of the notorious bombardment. For the children of Guernica it means something like the end of the world. The mysterious, ruthless enemy destroys their home and their city, brings death to two of the children and to the good father, "the best man that ever lived". However, Señora Pia and Uncle Pablo succeed in escaping to France, with what remains of the family, as ~~also~~ also does Carlos who gets separated from them.

But the flight to France was not the last adventure of the family. The story goes on like a baroque fairy-tale, almost overcharged with odd events and absurd complications. Matters become still more confused when the lost son - Carlos, in Paris called "Monsieur Charles" - finds his mother who is living at the time with his cynical Uncle Pablo. The latter finally abandons the poor woman, going away with the attractive wife of Carlos' generous French host. Carlos, for his part, quarrels seriously with his brother José, since both of them have fallen in love with the same girl. There is a half-tragical, half-comic mess altogether. Carlos tries to commit suicide, and when he fails comes to important conclusions as to how to continue with his life. He decides to become a writer, confident that he may thereby communicate essential truths by telling of his past experiences.

Hermann Kesten, already the author of several brilliant novels and literary essays, often seems to laugh about serious matters. Sometime, the reader almost gets the impression that the author approves of Uncle Pablo's

cynical ideas. But in reality, Kesten is a moralist disguised as a grim
joker. His book is neither bitter nor frivolous, for is it frivolous to
notice the grotesque elements in a tragedy? There are plenty of reasons,
these days, to cry about human beings, and to laugh at them. The moralist
in exile, whose face is wet with tears and distorted with painful
laughter, exclaims with a touching sort ^{of} desolate enthusiasm the words
of Beaumarchais' Figaro: "Hail to joy! Who knows if this world can endure
another three weeks?"

Klaus Mann.