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Waiting for the Lifeboat.

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Waiting for the Lifeboat.
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Erika Mann.

It isn't easy to find a room in Lisbon. Lisbon is overcrowded, like a city where a World's Fair is being held,- a city to which famous festival plays entice thousands of visitors from all parts of the world. The most colorful and the gayest traffic seems to be going on in all the streets and the prices the hotels and restaurant-keepers ask for the most insignificant service are enormous. The people on the streets and in the restaurants converse in all the various languages of Europe,- just as it should be in an international meeting place.

It is strange, how sad almost all the people look and how poorly they are dressed. Too, an odor of fear, evil and extreme nervousness permeates the air, which is ordinarily foreign to "international meeting places".

Lisbon, the only free and neutral port of Europe has become the meeting-and waiting place of all those, who are fleeing from Hitler. Oh, neither a world's fair nor festival plays have brought the people here, who are moving about in the streets. They are the exiled ones, the homeless ones, that are gathered here; their number varies,- but always there are thousands of them: without luggage, without money,- often without any identification papers those engaged in flight arrive here,- and what is there to do? Only to stay, as long as they are permitted to. Only to wait,- for what?- For the rescue ship that is to take them away, anywhere, - away,- away,- further away from the enemy who was on their heels, wherever they went. He has driven them through all of Europe,-

and now they are waiting for the rescue ship.

I had flown from England to Lisbon; that was the end of October and my heart and head were filled with the great and stirring impressions of the " Battle of London."

They had not been easy, those months of September and October,- not for anyone who spent them in London. And yet they had been beautiful,- in an unforgettable way. A fight was being waged there,- for a great cause. Battle is good when the enemy is bad and if one has confidence in one's own strength and invincibility.

Here, in this refugee camp in Lisbon, there was no battle. Here there was only helpless fear, only dismal waiting, here there was oppressive sultriness; the clouds hung low over the City and the fugitives ran through the streets senselessly; they couldn't do anything and hardly expect anything. Although my papers were in order and the " clipper" was to take me " home" to America, within a few days, I was obliged to go to the police quarters for strangers on account of my " Exit-permit". "It is only a formality" the porter at my hotel said,- " you just go there,- have your papers stamped,- that is all."

I went. The taxi took me to the door of the building, but I had to walk back about eight minutes,- down the streets which we had just passed, in order to find my place in the waiting crowd. There was a queue that seemed endless. It covered more than four or five blocks and finally followed a winding street around two curves. Those in front must have been waiting many, many hours and those in the rear could hardly hope that it would be their turn on this day. In spite of it I took my place in the rear among those waiting.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked the person just ahead of me. I spoke in French and since he didn't understand, I repeated the question in English, Spanish and German. He understood German, but he was, as it developed later on, a Norwegian. "Are you waiting for your exit-permit too?" I asked. The man shook his head. "No" he said,- " I am waiting for my permit to stay; most of those here are waiting for their permits to stay. The fewest of them have any use for an exit-ermit ,- unfortunately."

I had only stood there for a few minutes and already there was a long line of people in back of me. There were several new arrivals. I turned around toward them and saw a familiar face. When I saw that face last it was bronzed and topped a Spanish uniform collar and the military cap was perched loosely on dark wavy hair. That was in Valencia, in the summer of 1938. "Juan!" I exclaimed,- "what on earth...?"

Juan had been the leader of a brigade in the Loyalist army. After the collapse he had been jailed, but finally he had managed to flee,- I learned all that now. He asked the person in front of him to keep his place open for him and stood at my side, in order to tell me things and to hear some. " I have only one hope" he said,- " and I am lost, if it misses. I am trying to get a visa for one of the South-American states. My brother is living there,- he could, at first, take care of me and give a guarantee. The Consul's name here is X. It all depends upon his good will. I am lost if the Consul doesn't save me; and I haven't yet succeeded in getting to him."

It just so happened that I knew the Consul. I promised to

intercede with him in Juan's behalf.

Juan said: " It is strange here. Just look at the people standing here. Most of them hardly know how they got here and why they had to flee. It is different with me,- I am a Spanish democrat and fought against the Fascists,- I am an avowed enemy of the Fascists. But all these people here,- all the Belgian and Danish and Norwegian men and women and children, were surprised by the enemy in their own countries, as if by an earthquake or a flood. Suddenly everything was destroyed and lost,- suddenly they were homeless and persecuted and outlawed; and suddenly here they stand and wait. It is very strange."

He spoke calmly and without excitement,- really without making an accusation,- only tremendously astonished.

The time passed. Only very slowly did the queue move forward.

I decided to abandon my waiting for today and rather to arrange an appointment with the important Consul of the south-American country, who alone could save Juan.

At the telephone the Consul was brief and friendly. He would be in the small coffee-shop in the main square at five, he promised. I should meet him there.

On my way back to the hotel I passed the visa-office of the American Consulate. And if the line of waiters in front of the police quarters for strangers had seemed long to me, I was undeceived by the sight that now met my eyes. For this line, the one in front of the American Consulate didn't seem to have any end at all. The entire street, yes, even the entire part of the city, seemed literally black with human beings.

I rushed past. I was seized with fear at the sight of

this infinite and helpless misery. And again my thoughts went back to London, where the enemy had brought misery,- much misery. But in spite of all that misery there was a wide gulf between the hopeful, active, courageously- confident life of the people in England and the passive wretched existence of those waiting here.

Shortly before five I entered the small coffee-shop on the main square.

I had to wait for the important and allmighty Consul. The coffee-shop was overcrowded. In fact everything hereabouts was overcrowded. Those seated here who drank the bitter coffee, overly roasted, such as it is served only in the South of France, in Spain and Portugal, frequently put down their last Escudo on the soiled marble tables. They could by no means afford to visit this place. In spite of that they came again and again,- they would rather forego a warm supper or stopping at a hotel for the night, than to miss being with their fellow-sufferers, whom they were sure to meet here. Groups who spoke the same language were seated together,- the Frenchmen sat with the Belgians,- the Germans with the Austrians and Czechs; - the Norwegians and Dutchmen, most of whom had a command of French and German beside their own tongue, talked with each other in some other language, not their own. The air was dense with the smoke from cigarettes and with the breath of many humans. Most of the refugees wore the same clothes in which they had left their own country or the country that had given them refuge; the clothes were worn and dirty,- often torn. The air was heavy with the odor from the soiled torn clothing. I sat alone and listened to the various conversations, carried on at all the tables in every conceivable language; fragments of these conversations floated through the room and made the air still heavier; - it could barely be breathed that air in the small frightfully "international" coffee-shop in Lisbon.

"My permit to remain is ended" someone said in French at a neighboring table,- "it expires tomorrow,- I may not stay longer than day after tomorrow. But where shall I go? Will they deport

me to Spain? They'll lock me up there, and if Hitler so decrees, deliver me to him. Where shall I go?" he repeated and knew well enough that there was no answer to his question; -" I have no visa for any country and day after tomorrow I have to leave..."

Someone entered and addressing all those present so to speak, he said, while still in the process of entering: " they say the Spanish border is closed,- both borders,- the French-Spanish and the Spanish-Portuguese; - my God and my wife is still in the South of France; I sent her money- travelling expenses,- she hoped to be able to flee,- today or tomorrow,- and now the borders are closed!"

Tremendous excitement ensued,- they all talked pell-mell,- but they all said the same thing. " My God"- they said,- "the borders closed,- the last road to escape cut off for my wife,- for my husband, brother, and son,- the borders closed, my God,- and our dear ones in the deadly trap!"

The bearer of the alarming news had spoken in French,- but it developed that he was a Czech. Now he was seated with a group of Germans and Austrians and spoke to them in German about his wife. "My wife is a German by birth, from the South of Germany" he said; " she is a good democrat and a good catholic,- a very pious catholic. When Hitler began to persecute the catholics and the Nazis stoned Cardinal Faulhaber at Munich, she fled to Austria. That is where I met her. She was kindergarten teacher,- she took care of the smallest children in a catholic orphanage. I was correspondent for a Czech newspaper. When Hitler came to Austria, we were both obliged to flee. We fled to my home, Prague.

That is where we were married too. We were happy for many months,- oh, our happiness lasted almost half a year, from March 1938 to October; then Hitler seized the Sudetenland and we knew: Czechoslovakia is lost. From October 3rd. 1938, that day of Munich, until March 15th. 1939,- the day of the Nazi march into Prague,- we did little else but wait for the disaster. Of course we worked besides. But work and even home life and in peace had actually become unreal. The only thing that was real was waiting for the disaster,- waiting for the well-known catastrophe. When Hitler was at the Hradschin,-"

For a moment the Czech interrupted his narration. He gulped,- then he scanned the circle about him,- angrily and questioningly he looked into the faces of those seated about the table."When that man Hitler was at the Hradschin..." he repeated finally. I knew that this picture: Hitler at the Hradschin, as ruler of all the Czechs, governing the City of Prague,- Hitler, the foreign slave-driver at this Czech citadel,- I knew only too well that this visualization alone was horrible enough to make every Czech patriot ill. My neighbor obviously felt sick whenever he thought of it. He looked about for the waiter and ordered a cognac. Then he looked into his purse and countermanded his order for cognac. "Thanks" he said,- excuse me,- I was mistaken,- I don't want a cognac."

I was greatly tempted to order the cognac for this man, but I didn't dare. Would he have accepted it? But had he already become sufficiently accustomed to poverty? He was no beggar,- he was a prominent Czech journalist; wholly destitute of course.

He continued. He said: " When Hitler came to the Hradschin,-

we had to leave. Naturally,- we had known all along, that we would have to leave then. We fled to Poland. At first we had nothing to eat, for I had no work, since I could no longer write for the Czech papers. Somehow or other my wife managed to pull us through; - she gave private German lessons to Polish children. It wasn't easy,- but for many months we were almost happy,- oh, it lasted almost half a year. When Hitler marched into Poland, we had to flee. This time it was very hard;- flight is difficult and dangerous in times of war. At first we fled to Warsaw. There I was wounded during a bombardement. Nothing serious,- a piece of shrapnel lodged in my leg. I couldn't walk and yet we had to flee. At times my wife almost had to carry me. But we succeeded and got to Roumania and on a boat to the South of France. There my wife was interned,- because of her German descent. They were very nervous and very bewildered in France. I remained at liberty and was permitted to visit her once a week. I received a small amount from a Czech charity committee. Life was not very beautiful,- but for many months,- oh, it was almost half a year,- we were not too unhappy. The fact that we were in a country that was at war with Hitler,- that we were in a country that was helping to rid humanity of its arch enemy, made it possible for us not to become really unhappy. When Hitler marched into Paris, we had to flee. That is to say, we should have flown. But my wife couldn't. She was interned and couldn't get away. Of course I wanted to remain also. But she wouldn't permit it. "Only from outside can you help me", she assured me again and again " and I shall find peace only when you are out of it all." That convinced me. I fled,- without an exit-permit,- from France and

almost without any money through Spain. You know the mountains I had to climb,- I needn't tell you anything about those mountains nor about the time of misery in Spain. As a matter of fact I needn't tell you anything at all,- you know all that horror, as I know it,- you went through the same experience yourself. Why do I talk so much anyway?"

And once more his angry questioning glance roamed the circle of those about him.

"It is only,-" he said, as if making excuses to his fellow-sufferers,- "it is only, because now the borders are closed and my wife will fall into the hands of the enemy and she has been such a pillar of strength to me, she almost carried me, there in Poland and earned money for us both, and a few days ago they released her from the internment camp and I sent her the money for travelling, managed to get it here in Lisbon, and now the borders are closed..."

Those at the table only nodded. They had been listening to the Czech, as one listens to a sad, but well known melody. They had recognized every note,- it was their song that the Czech had been rendering,- the song of expelled, of persecuted human beings,- the chant of the victims.

The Czech was ashamed of his loquaciousness. "I shouldn't have bothered you with my every day story", he said once more.

He was a nice and intelligent looking man; narrow eyes, a broad, not very high forehead and high cheek-bones, under which the cheeks had become hollow, denoted his Slav descent. He was not tall, but broad-shouldered and well built. That he had to sit here and couldn't do anything,- that he couldn't fight,- not

for his wife,- not against the arch enemy,- that he had to sit here and wasn't permitted to work, yes, that he could neither stay nor leave, and that he was too poor to buy a cognac, when he felt the need of one, made him entirely helpless. He gulped again. I believe he would have liked to put his head down on the dirty marble table and cry. But he was brave. And in order to contribute something gay, something encouraging to the conversation, he turned to the person seated opposite him,- a girl, who evidently was Dutch, but with whom he spoke French.

"You are well off" he said and even forced a smile,- "You with your American visa in your pocket. You should be too proud to sit at the table with us visaless birds of misfortune. You should be too proud and too haughty. When are you sailing?"

Several of the people at the table hadn't known about the American visa of the Dutch girl,- "what?" they exclaimed,- "a visa? What is it,- an immigration visa,- or an emergency-visa,- how did you get it,- where did you get it? Not here surely? When do you leave?"

They were all happy over the enormous, the incomprehensible luck of the young Dutch woman and all of them were envious.

"Yes,- when do I sail?" the lucky girl said sadly "and do I sail at all? The American Export-Line is sold out months in advance; the clipper also, which incidentally I couldn't afford, is sold out for a long time to come. My only hope is a Greek boat. But if war should break out between Italy and Greece, then the Greek ships wouldn't sail any more,- and my visa,- oh, no, it is by no means an immigration-visa,- will expire, before I can leave."

Again they all nodded, as if they heard a very sad and well-known melody. Then the Czech began the refrain that was bound to follow. "The visa will expire" he said " and your permit of stay here will expire and where can you go then?"

Yes,- where could she go this young Dutch woman,- where could the Czech opposite her go,- where anyone in this room,- anyone here in this metropolis of the persecuted?

It had become dusk in the square outside and in the room where we were seated the lights went on. I still felt queer, when evening came and no " Blackout" came simultaneously. It seemed unnatural to me that there could be lights in the windows as darkness set in and that the street-lamps would be lit. It was astonishing that one needn't be afraid of the Nazi bombers. But was I glad because it was so? Did I feel better, here, in the brightness of this city of Lisbon at evening time,- better than I had felt in the darkness of London? And those, who were seated here with me,- the fugitives all about me,- yes even the Portuguese fugitives, of whom, incidentally there were very few in this particular coffee-shop,- were they happy, did they feel better, than the people in the bombarded cities of England? They were not happy and they didn't feel better. For the fear of the threatening catastrophe, to which one was abandoned helplessly, is worse than the catastrophe itself. And to know the enemy, to fear, abhor him and to know that he is close by, without being permitted to fight, is very much worse than the fight itself. He who defends himself successfully is not unhappy; he who goes into battle for a good cause,- for the good cause, is not unhappy; he who knows that he will be victorious is not unhappy and he does not fear the danger.

I was happy in London. But here I was unhappy.

Where on earth was the Consul? Powerful people should be affable and not keep those impotent waiting needlessly. I had been waiting for almost an hour, that was certain. Of course: how many seekers of visas there must have been in his office, this afternoon and possibly he had extended his office hours out of pure friendliness into the evening, so that the sad helpless giant queue would not have to wait in vain.

Or possibly he was seated in this mob for some time and I had overlooked him?

I looked about me in the room- but there was no sign of a Consul.

Somewhere along the wall,- about seven tables removed from me, a girl crouched and wrote,- she was there already as I entered. The girl was alone, She wore a cap, pulled far down over her forehead and since she didn't look up from her writing pad, I hadn't yet seen her face. She was entirely absorbed in her work,- and seem oblivious of the noise around her. Now someone passed close to her table and with his elbow brushed one of the closely written pages, spread out before her, ~~to~~ the floor. The girl looked up and I wasn't at all sure, whether what I saw was reality or merely the spectre of cigarette smoke and phantasy.

"Toni!" I cried out and approached the girl,- "Toni,- it's not you,- is it?"

My excited conduct made very little of a stir in these environments. It was nothing unusual that people who believed themselves lost to one another, suddenly found one another again; scenes of joy resulted,- or tears,- because the newly found person looked so ill, so changed,- and because he brought bad news of

other lost ones.

Toni stared at me for several seconds with a wild and bewildered expression. At last she realized that it was I who appeared here out of smoke and noise. She, too, jumped up,- we grasped each other by the shoulders,- roughly Toni shook me back and forth by the shoulders, as if she needed one last proof of the solidity of my person.

For many years a great friendship had existed between Toni and myself.

Like myself, Toni came from Munich,- she was a literary genius of great purity and originality. Her lyrics which she devoted to praise the Bavarian landscape, her little love songs and the pious and charming verses, dedicated to the Heavenly Mother and to all Saints, were famous in Germany. She was entirely and extremely "unpolitical",- Toni,- she did not even have the slightest "political" contact with the catholics. When the Nazis came to power, it would have been easy for her to remain, to do "blood and soil poetry" for the new rulers and to become the star poetess of the "party".

It would have been easy of accomplishment. "It was impossible" Toni told me, when, after many years, I saw her in Paris again,- it was really absolutely impossible. One cannot live there; - and work,- write, compose poetry, that one needn't be ashamed of,- it just cannot be done. If I had stayed, I would have chocked at all that injustice, that was being committed daily and hourly all about me. Or I would have had to cry out and accuse the murderers,- in my verses. They would have killed me soon enough in that case."

I had seen Toni last in Paris,- in September 1938. At that time the outbreak of war was generally feared and Toni was desperate, because they would force her brother in Germany to fight against us, - against civilized mankind, - for Hitler and to die for him. " He hates the Nazis!" she had cried out again and again, - " and they will force him!"

At the end of the night which we had spent together, talking, deliberating, worrying, Toni had come to a decision. "If war comes now" she had said, - I'll return to Munich and fetch Franz. Oh, - I'll get him out somehow or other. Naturally, - he is of military age and would be a 'deserter', if he goes now. But I cannot let them make a traitor of him, a traitor of everything we believe in, - of all decency and dignity and of all humaneness. I promise you, - I am promising myself, - I shall go and get him, - if the war comes now."

I knew she would keep her promise and I feared for her. The Nazis hate no one more, than those they would have liked to keep, the "Aryans", the " politically uncompromised", - whose gifts and talents they desired to exploit to the end that they may gain a little lustre and regard in the world. The Nazis hated Toni. And now she wanted to go there to get her brother, who was destined to die for the Nazis.

I had not seen her again since that memorable night, at the end of September 1938. I was almost convinced that she had been taken prisoner in Nazi Germany and been killed.

And here she stood, in this coffee-shop in Lisbon and shook me by the shoulders.

She had changed very much. Her otherwise gentle face, that

seemed to have been carved as if from a picture of the Virgin Mother, was hard and thin. There were dark rings around her bright eyes and her child-like full mouth seemed to have become thin. She wore a faded rain-coat; when she sat down, it opened at the knees and I could see that she wore no dress under it.

Toni said: "Franz is in Spain. They locked him up, in Madrid. He is a deserter, - you know that, - Hitler can ask for his extradition, - then he will be shot."

She said all that with a strange calm. Apparently she had been thinking so much and so intensely of all this horror, that she could speak of it quite matter-of-factly. All I could say was "Toni!"

The flight from Germany, - I finally learned, had been accomplished after a thousand difficulties and dangers. Franz and Toni had escaped to France and for one long winter had starved their way through life. After the outbreak of war, they had both been interned. "In separate camps, of course" Toni said. "I haven't seen him since then. That you should have recognized me!" she cried out suddenly, - "I look dreadful, - that's because of the typhoid fever. I was ~~will~~ with typhoid fever for such a long time, - that has changed me completely. The worst of it all was, however, that I didn't know what camp Franz was at. Now I know it. It was a camp close to the Spanish border. And I was there, - I passed the place on my flight, - and I didn't know it and didn't see him, - that is the worst of it, the very worst."

Now it was I who nodded as if listening to a sad, a well-known

melody. "The borders are closed" I said,- "how can we get him out?"

Toni was more confident than I. "I got him out of Germany" she said, "and he escaped from France,- he'll flee from Spain, too,- if they will only give us a little time,- if only they wont extradite him,- if they wont extradite him immediately!"

I couldn't find an answer; in my throat there was an irritating harshness and my thoughts were jumbled. "Toni", I thought,- "your beautiful, graceful verses and songs, lost and burnt; - your childish Madonna-like face ravaged by typhoid,- no dress under your faded rain-coat,- Toni,- and your France imprisoned in Madrid, to be shot, your Franz,- because they wont give us time... "Why?" I thought,- why must it be, all this? What have you done, that your life had to be spoiled so frightfully, so horribly. You are innocent, Toni,- and you were happy,- in former times!"

Toni startled me out of my thoughts by suddenly laughing lightly. "It is terrible here" she said, still laughing softly,- "it is really so awful that it makes one laugh. And the most terrifying of it all,- the unthinkable horrible part of it is, that this particular spot,- this insane Lisbon,- is no exception. The misery here is possible more concentrated, more definitely visible than anywhere else in Europe,- but fundamentally there is the same misery everywhere." And if Hitler should be victorious" she added,- almost adreamily,- "if Hitler should win this war,- then it wont be much different in the entire world than it is here right now. We mustn't let him win" she said and now it did not sound hopeless,- "we simply cannot permit it that victory is his. Wherever we are, we must do our utmost to see that he is

defeated. Wherever we are,- and little as it may be, we must do what we can."

"Yes,-" I said and as through a dense fog I saw the bombarded streets of the city of London and the Champs Elysees of the city of Paris, where Hitler paraded,- " yes,- that we must."

There was a slight movement at the surrounding tables. The Consul,- the important all-powerful Consul of that South-American country, the man for whom I had waited so long, had entered.

Many of the refugees knew him, uneasily they turned their heads and stretched their necks,- like animals in a cage, when the keeper rattles his keys.

The Consul made a vague little bow toward the assembly. Then he went to the bar to drink his whiskey.

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