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Voyage with Robin.

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VOYAGE WITH ROBIN .

By Erika Mann.

At first I didn't even see her, hidden as she was between boats four times her size. And when I'd finally found her, I refused to believe in her identity. But then she was pointed out to me, and I could doubt no longer. There she was, - my ship, my destiny for weeks to come, - the S.S. Dwarf.

Her name, of course, ~~whshhh~~ isn't really "Dwarf". It's a military secret. She was - and is - a neutral freighter of about 2 700 tons.

"Gracious!" I said, upon recognizing her, - "what an exceedingly small boat!"

The man to whom I said it, didn't understand English. He was one of the crew and spoke nothing but his own neutral language. But he guessed from my expression that I'd criticized his ship; and he wouldn't stand for it. The Dwarf - he informed me in neutral - was as good and safe a vessel as any. "Look, please!" he added in English, brandishing a newspaper clipping under my nose. "Corpses!" he said. "They arrived plenty safely!"

And, sure enough, the news-photo showed a considerable number of coffins aboard our freighter, - one of them just being unloaded. "Grim Cargo Arrives Safely" stated the caption. An explanatory paragraph gave the names of those who'd perished in a recent plane crash, and whose bodies our ship had brought home.

"Nice?" said the sailor, putting the clipping back into his ^{pocketbook} ~~hand~~. You could see that he was very proud of it.

I shuddered. "Sheee!" I said senseless

ly. Then I started counting the passengers. No sooner started, than done. There were six of us, including myself and two tiny children. While we grown ups kept near our luggage in a silent huddle, the kids played hide and seek between the boxes and chests on the dock, untroubled by the anxious calls of a bare legged girl who turned out to be their nurse.

"What am I to do?" she asked nobody in particular. "They're such an unbridled lot; and Robin is such a delicate child, really; and I understand there won't even be a doctor around!?" - She spoke with a distinct Swiss accent, whereas the little screams and exultant shrieks emanating from Robin and his smaller sister left no doubt as to their Australian origin.

The elderly and ~~scary~~-faced man next to me twisted a Norwegian passport in his hands. When called upon to open his luggage, he merely shook his head. He didn't have any luggage. Nor did he want to talk. And it was only much later that he told us all about the torpedo doing and how he'd finally been picked up by a Canadian destroyer. "When it happened," he would say, - "I was in the kitchen. Naturally, I was. I am a cook, don't you see?"

The sixth passenger didn't appear unduly talkative either. Standing very erect, his ~~boyish~~ boyish face framed by an impressive beard, he turned over the leaves of an illustrated book on aviation. He couldn't, however, have grasped much of its contents. For his eyes kept wandering astray, - back and forth, between the ~~silhouettes~~ silhouettes of the ^Ksky-scrapers ^{at} our backs and the quiet water-surface before us. His passport showed that he was a native and citizen of the land whose neutral flag was painted all across the deck and walls of the S.S.

Dwarf. He'd been brought up in the U.S., though, and now returned home to join the air force of his own country.

"How old are you?" I asked him. For although the six of us had only just met, our common fate, the Dwarf, had already established a certain ^{im}palpable intimacy between us. Irrevocably separated as we were from the rest of the world, and uncannily excluded from the gay and busy life of the ^{near}city, we felt dependent ⁿ on each other, - thrown on each other.

"I'm 22" said the native, but ^epresently added: "no, I'm 19. It's the beard that makes me look so old. That's what I'm ~~w~~earing it for, after all!"

Actually, the beard made him rather look ~~like~~ like a disguised child.

When we were finally admitted aboard the S.S. Dwarf, it was almost dark. Not quite dark enough, though, for us to overlook the incredibly dirty condition of the place. Everything seemed to be covered with soot, cigarette stumps, and suspicious bits of rubbish.

"Well, -" sighed the bearded child, stumbling over something or other, "she's not really meant for passengers, I guess!"

Robin cried. He had been crying for an hour or so, - nobody knew why. But now his unfathomable sadness reached a new ^{depth} ~~peak~~.

"He's tired, that's all!" said the Swiss girl, whose name was Heidi. But Robin shook his head. "I'm not tired!" he sobbed. "But I don't like this ship, - oohhoooh, I don't like this ship!"

"Bébé likes it fine!" said Heidi. "Look at her; she's only

two; yet, she behaves like a little lady; aren't you ashamed of yourself, Robin, - you, a big boy of four and a half?"

Bébée said in a clear and firm little voice:

"Nasty ship, - nastiest ship I know!"

(And, surely, she sounded the ^egeneral opinion. Still, it was at this very moment that something caused me to change my attitude towards the S.S. Dwarf. "Right, or wrong, - my vessel!" I felt, and "tough, fearless little thing, burdening herself with all those coffins!"

Our cabins, tiny and primitive though they were, turned out to be quite neat and proper, and everybody tried his best to make himself at home. Even Heidi hhhhhhhhhh seemed comforted. Robin joined the bearded child in his vain attempts to get his portable going, while the Norwegian was having a look at "our cargo".

"Some of it seems explosive!" he reported apprehensively.

Robin, his sorrow all gone, looked animated. "Will it explode?" he asked; "When will it explode? Why won't it explode?"

"Because it won't" I said firmly. "It just won't!"

We were to become great friends, Robin and I. Bébée was sweeter in a way, easier to get along with, more charming, if you like. However, it was Robin's infinite curiosity, his boundless imagination; his fleeting moods; his coaxing looks at one moment, and his proud inaccessibility at the next, which fascinated me more than anything else. He was not actually handsome, - Robin. His face seemed rather too delicate for a boy's, - too fair-skinned and wide-eyed; Sudden fits of anger or of sadness would

leave their shadows beneath his eyes, and he would blush or pale for seemingly trifling reasons. While Bébée's hair was golden and curly, Robin's was straight and without much lustre. But the prominent back of his head was attractive; and so was his fine mouth, its upper lip boldly curved.

Robin was a native of Yugoslavia where his father - a British diplomat - had been stationed for a while. When war came to the Balkans, Bébée had just been born. Father was called back to England; mother accompanied him, and nobody knew where they'd be sent next. So, the kids were entrusted to Heidi who'd take them to Cairo, where ~~they'd wait~~ they'd wait for further developments. They didn't have to wait long, for Rommel's panzers to threaten Alexandria and all Egypt. And since Grandma happened to live in Australia it was thought best to proceed there. It had been a ~~very~~ ^{tedious and} hazardous journey, from Belgrade to Melbourne, - by car, railway, plane, and boat. Robin remembered it all quite well, while Bébée ^{merely} thought she ~~remembered~~ remembered it. She and Robin would exchange their "memories" like two seasoned warriors.

Heidi for her part kept talking of Switzerland, in that nostalgic, ~~slightly~~ slightly reproachful way in which all nurses and governesses talk of "home". And as neither Robin nor Bébée had ever seen their own country, they both believed Switzerland to be "home", - the home of everybody, it appeared. Robin, moreover, laboured under the impression that, while one is always on one's way home, countries are places one goes to, in order to be through with them one none too distant day. "As soon as I'm through with Australia," - he'd announced

upon arrival in Melbourne, - "I think I'd better go home to Switzerland!"

"Home", - he knew, - was an idea, a beautiful dream. Home was peace; light green meadows; silent mountains; brooks, fringed with willows, and flocks of sheep, guarded by small boys who'd never seen an airplane.

Robin had seen hundreds of airplanes; and, when, three days after we'd left port, a couple of huge bombers were heard roaring in the distance, he was not a bit upset.

"Ours?" he asked lightly. We didn't know yet. But Robin was all confidence. "Sure, they're ours!" he declared. "And they'll put Hitler and Hirohito to sleep!"

"Hitler and Hito to sleep!" said Bébée hhh who'd always repeat Robin's more important ^{statements} ~~statements~~, thus giving them a certain incontestable finality.

Both, the sight of the bombers, and the thought of Hitler who wasn't quite asleep yet, reminded me of a little chat I'd meant to have with the Captain.

The Nazis, I knew, indulged in strange habits, and this tiny neutral island of ours was probably anything but tabu, as far as they were hhhhhhhh concerned. As to myself, I'd been a most intimate enemy of theirs for more than ten years. And they'd been after me for just that long. So, why shouldn't they try to get me now? And although I had never read about any such kidnapping, a chat with the Captain seemed indicated.

I found him in his state-room, listening to the HHHH B.B.C. ~~transmission~~

"Lovely day!" he said.

I nodded. "^{do}~~was~~ you ever meet ~~have~~ any German submarines?" I asked somewhat abruptly.

The Captain looked startled.

"Why, yes!" he assured me after a brief pause.

I remained gay and casual. "Really?" I said. "And ^{do}~~was~~ they ever stop ~~have~~ you?"

"Why, indeed!" said the Captain; "they've been stopping us quite frequently!"

"What for?"

"Nothing in particular. Just to inspect the cargo, and search for contraband. Also, maybe, to take off a few passengers."

"Is that so?" I said. "But they haven't actually taken any passengers off this ship yet, - have they?"

"Of course, they have!" the Captain reassured me. "They've taken three passengers off this very ship; and quite recently, too!"

I just stood there for one more moment without turning a hair.

"Thanks a lot!" I then said cheerfully, and went straight down to my cabin.

There, at least, I'd be alone. What a relief it would be to stop acting! Things, after all, looked pretty bad. They looked downright frightening. And the amused curiosity I'd faked ^{up} at the Captain's ^could now give way to my real feelings. No doubt, I'd feel horrified. In fact,

a nervous breakdown was probably the one thing to have in a situation like this.

The wavering cave I inhabited was quite cosy in a way. All ~~the~~ my books and manuscripts were spread over one of the two narrow cots; and my suitcases, covered with tags, were a gay reminder of travels victoriously endured.

I sat down on my bunk, and waited for something to grip me. But nothing did. I felt definitely fine. "Worry!" I admonished myself. "It's silly, not to!" Alas, I was silly. Silly sure that the unspeakable wasn't going to happen; silly certain that, even if it did, I'd get out of it, - somehow. And silly, as this, too, may sound: I've always been convinced that dangers will be attracted or averted by one's own ~~unconcerned~~ attitude towards them; and that they consider nothing more flattering and inviting than fear. Reasonable precautions, on the other hand, taken in a composed fighting spirit, are rather offensive to dangers, and apt to keep them away.

This in mind, I had another talk with the Captain, which resulted in my christian name being removed from the passenger-list, leaving "only" my last and middle names. "Now they'll never detect me!" I said, and must have sounded like a person who, after having shaven off one of her eye-brows, considers herself irrecoznizable.

"Never!" confirmed the Captain. "Besides, I'm not going to surrender you anyway. I'm going to hide you. Now, since I realize, what they'd do to you, I won't let them do it. That's all."

"But, - " I ventured, - "they might know that I am aboard; ^{of so,} their agents might have told them. ~~then~~ they'd probably just give you

30 minutes or so; and, unless you produce me, ^{tell,} ~~annnn~~ you to take to the lifeboats; where-upon they'd blow up the ship."

The Captain looked at me in silence. "That" he said finally, - "would be a real shame. I've been with this ship for eighteen years, and should hate to see her blown up."

He smiled, while I had to clear my throat, before saying "thank you". I was very happy. For, although nothing on earth could ~~never~~ have induce ^d ~~me~~ ^{ever} to consider the Captain's "offer", I ^{knew} ~~nnnn~~ that he meant what he'd said, and it made me happy.

This was the eighth day of our voyage. But to the six of us it seemed as if we'd spent a solid life time together. The odd little family we were, lived in confiding harmony, and each of us felt comfortably at home in the biographies of the others.

Bébé was and remained nearly everybody's darling. But mine was Robin whom I'd watch and listen to, for hours.

"Yesterday, -" he would assert, raising his forefinger and looking like a small Angel of Annunciation, - "yesterday, I was on a huge ship! And there was a war on. And we took a taxi, and went straight to the huge ship. And I thought we were going home to Switzerland, but we didn't. We didn't, yesterday. But tomorrow, we shall!"

"Where did you go, then?" I asked him.

"Oh, -" said Robin, drawing a little semicircle in the air with his forefinger, - "just around the corner, - you know, - to my house in Melbourne!"

To him, all that had happened, was "yesterday", and all that would come, was "tomorrow". Whatever wasn't ~~phhhhh~~ present,

was "just around the corner", and wherever he'd slept, was "his house". He was profoundly right, I felt. Time and space - he knew - were inseparably related. No place, where he'd been but yesterday, could possibly be far off. All things past, co-existed, super-imposed on each other, and irrevicably interwoven, as they were in his mind. As to the concept of "truth", Robin suffered from its ambiguity. For while there seemed to exist one objective, impersonal kind of truth, he, for his part, hadn't found it reliable. The truth he believed in, was personal and subjective. It was the real truth; and its knight, Robin, despaired of the world in general, and Heidi in particular, when he found himself branded as a liar.

"Today, -" he declared one fine morning, - "today, right now, is my birthday!"

I conveyed my congratulations, and made him a present of an old illustrated magazine.

"Do you know, who that is?" I wondered, pointing at a full page picture of Admiral Niemitz. Photographed in techni-colour and his gala-uniform, the Admiral looked commanding.

"' course, I know!" said Robin.

"Well, then, who is it?"

"Soldier boy!" he said, turning the leaf.

And wasn't he right, again?

He may have been wrong, though, as far as his birthday was concerned. According to Heidi, at least, that jubilee wasn't due for another five months. Robin, however, insisted, and cried bitterly, when he was scolded for having lied to me again. But when some sort of cake was being

served for luncheon, the shadows disappeared from under his eyes, and in a moment his face seemed bathed in bliss.

"My birthday cake!" he triumphed, -raising his forefinger, angelically; "my real birthday cake, on my real birthday!"

Now, even Heidi didn't have the nerve to contradict.

In the evenings, when we'd put our children to bed, we'd sit in the small chamber which was the Dwarf's parlor, dining-, living-, writing-, and reading-room. There the family would talk things over with the Captain and varying members of his staff. We'd converse in French, English, and "neutral", - the bearded child acting as an interpreter between his countrymen and the rest of us. None of us spoke Norwegian. So, the survivor used his own version of French, which Heidi transfigured into her own version of English, thus enabling the bearded one to pass it all on to the neutrals. At first the "belligerent" among us had felt somewhat hesitant to discuss the war. But gradually it became evident, that the Axis had nothing but foes aboard the S.S. Dwarf.

How furious, they were, our neutral hosts, when the survivor conjured up the invasion of his country, and the sinking of his ship. Nobody knew what had become of his wife and his small son. But it was the older boy, whose memory the father recalled most glowingly.

"He was only seventeen!" he said; "but he wouldn't have stayed behind for anything. So, I took him along. And so, I lost him. He was on deck, when it happened. But I don't think he was injured. I watched him dive, and he seemed alright. His voice, too, ^{sounded} ~~was~~ alright, as he shouted for me not to worry. Then, those...."

those..."

He swallowed.

"They fired." he said in a low, indescribably disgusted voice. "They machine-gunned us. I never saw him again. His name was Erik."

They understood, even while he spoke. His eyes told the story none less movingly than his mouth.

"When did it happen?" one of us asked.

"Four months ago, -" said the Norwegian; "Four months, and five days ago. But it seems like yesterday."

"Yesterday", - Robin's yesterday!

Only once a suspicious something was sighted in the distance, and the life boats were set in readiness. Water, biscuits, and tins were stored beneath the benches; and the family were instructed how to behave, if, and when..

Robin was all joyful anticipation. Jumping from one foot to the other, he asked a dozen questions, without ever waiting for an answer. "Is it a submarine, why isn't it a submarine, why don't we chase it, isn't it an enemy, may I go onto the life boat now, - may I, please?"

There were no life jackets for the children, and Heidi looked rather pale, as she tried to fit Bébée into a jacket three times her size. Bébée laughed.

"She doesn't understand!" said Heidi.

I'm afraid, I didn't either. Somehow I felt inclined to share, if not Robin's ~~inquisitive exaltation~~ ^{inquisitive exaltation}, at least his unreasonable desire to "chase" the thing, as long as it was an enemy. Was it? We'll never know. After having lingered

for a while, the spectre grew hazier, and finally faded away.

When Tunis fell, we had but one more night to go. So, what had been planned as a quiet farewell evening, turned into an all out victory-celebration. Little by little the grand news came over the wireless; and as the Axis debacle deepened, our spirits rose to undreamed of heights. We cheered, we toasted, we danced. Sedate Heidi went as far as to waltz with the Captain, while I found myself hopping up and ~~up~~^{down} the deck with the bearded child. Even the Norwegian participated in the general hilarity by wistling a duet with the chief engineer.

How long had the children been watching the scene? How had they managed to get here in the first place, when tonight, as every night, we'd sacrificed our handkerchiefs to fasten their little legs to their cots? And what must they think of the grown ups' peculiar behaviour?

They looked both, enchanted, and enchanting. Their tiny figures wrapped in light blue pyjamas, their radiant faces turned up, and their fair heads bent towards each other, they stood motionless in the door-frame, - a picture of arresting sweetness.

Of course, they had to be scolded. They took it lightly, acquitting themselves with dignity of the unavoidable. Then, matters had to be explained to them.

"Oh, - " breathed Robin, when told about the victory, - "oh, - we've won, - and there's no war any more, - no war at all! And peace has come, - and..."

His eyes and voice melting with joy, he was about to say, what, - for some foolish reason, - I couldn't quite bear to hear...

not yet, -" I said ^{swiftly} ~~without delay~~, - "Robin, darling, - we can't go home, yet. There'll have to be a few more victories, you see..."

"Why?" he said softly, lowering his darkened brow.

The eclipse, however, past as quickly, as it had come. All shining serenity, Robin repeated: "A few more, you see, - just a few more victories! And then, right away, - tomorrow, - there'll be peace!"

"Tomorrow, - peace!" sounded the faithful little echo which was Bébé.

For a few moments all was quiet, save for the familiar rumbling of the engines, and the gentle noises of the sea. Then, Robin, dashing towards the railing with alarming speed, heaved a triumphant scream.

"Land!" he shouted, - "and hills, and houses, and cars, and people, and dad and mama, can't you see them, - they're waving at us, right there, on the beach!"

And while what he proclaimed was as usual Robin's own personal truth, this time, its essence proved to be valid.

Vaguely yet, but unmistakably in the moonlit mist of the spring night, the tender silhouettes of a distant shore stood out against the horizon.

We'd made it. We were there!

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