

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

Profit by my experience. I. II.

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ERIKA MANN:

PROFIT BY MY EXPERIENCE

I

It was a long walk - about three quarters of an hour - from our home in Munich to the school I attended when I was seven years old. During the winter I did not mind so much, but in the summer it was awfully hot and the satchel on my back was heavy.

I still remember the blue linen dress I wore the day when the great adventure began. I see myself as I was then: tall for my age, very thin, all of my dresses too short one month after I had got them, straight black hair, sunburned legs always scratched from the fights I had with my brother's friends.

At about the last third of the way I used to meet Helga C. who was only one year older than I but, in my opinion, already the perfect specimen of a young lady. She, of course, carried her satchel under her arm as did all those who meant to give a grown-up impression. She wore delightful little print dresses that always seemed to swish crisply and coolly as if moved by a slight breeze. Her light, honey-colored curls framed a gay and delicate face, dominated by a pair of cat-like eyes. Helga was utterly charming.

" Want an icecream cone?" she asked me that morning. She was chatting with the icecream man, holding a wonderfully pinkish icecream cone in her hands, and licking it like a kitten. Sure I wanted some icecream. In fact, there was nothing I wanted more. However, I did not have money for such things. Whenever I had to buy some exercise books or pencils, I was given a few nickels; that was all.

Looking at Helga's icecream with envious eyes, I said I did not really feel like purchasing any icecream at the moment. Helga smiled: " That's a lie, isn't it?" she said. " Let's make a bargain. You must have some money in your pocket; it's not meant for icecream, I suppose, but the icecream man doesn't mind. Raspberry is delicious; chocolate and strawberry too."

I felt my mouth water.

She continued: " Now all you have to do is to buy whatever you please. I bet your people won't even ask you what you spent your few pennies for. If they do, you just tell them there was so much to write at school, so you've used up all your pencils and had to buy a couple of new ones. In case that does ^{not} work, I promise you, on my great word of honor, to refund ^{you} those nickels ~~the~~ ^{after} out of my own pocket. How about it?" and again she smiled the smile of the born seducer. I hesitated.

" Why," I said, " if you can spare the money, don't you give it to me right away? I could repay you later out of my birthday presents. "

"That's not at all the idea", Helga replied. Of course, I could give you the money. But I want you to take the chance because I know that nothing will happen, anyway." She smacked her lips to show me how ^{delicious} the icecream was.

Slowly I got hold of that last nickel in my linen skirt and, with a voice that sounded somewhat strange to me, I ordered chocolate, raspberry, strawberry, all mixed. I don't believe that anything ever tasted so exquisitely good; the apple, I felt, Adam and Eve's apple, must have tasted like that. Helga, the serpent, watched me with delight. Then we continued our walk, Helga chatting and laughing all the time, I trotting at her side in silence.

I had some icecream the next day and some more the day after. Although my consumption of pencils and copy books might have aroused suspicion at home, and although I suddenly seemed to give a great deal of money to the Red Cross and other welfare organizations that made collections in our school, nobody at home asked me questions.

I shall never forget that summer. The sin I had committed, and continued to commit, seemed to separate me in a sinister way from my brothers and sisters with whom I generally shared all my secrets. I lived in lonely darkness which even the icecream failed to brighten. I also began to hate Helga. All the more so, as it was not any longer the icecream itself she loved to discuss with me on that last part of our way to school: now she indulged in picturing the face my poor mother would make if she knew what a clever little thief I was. She wondered whether my father ever bothered

about my financial affairs, which latter point was particularly agonizing. For my sweet father, absent-minded and unsuspecting, never concerned himself with what I spent. Apart, however, from my personal worries and the feeling that I had got onto a slippery road on which there was no halt, Helga herself disquieted and puzzled me. What on earth, I kept wondering, is she after? What could she possibly get out of me? She is rich and independent and very grown-up. If she only wants me to have that stuff, why doesn't she buy it for me? What concern of hers is it anyway whether I have icecream or not? Gradually ~~my parents~~ ^{my parents} ~~started to notice~~ began to worry about my silence and the two strange wrinkles that frequently appeared between my brows without any reason; even my brothers and sisters talked to me as if from a distance.

I was early one morning and arrived at Helga's and my corner five minutes before the usual time. As the heat was particularly oppressive that day, I stepped into a doorway and waited for my wicked companion. I don't know what caused me not to leave my hiding place when she finally arrived and stopped at the icecream man's to purchase her icecream.

"Has Erika already been here?" I heard her ask.
"Who? The little boyish one?" the icecream man said.
"I don't think so."

" I'll wait for her," Helga announce, glancing at her chic little wrist watch. " Though it's getting late. You see," she said, leaning her ^{dainty} ~~head~~ head closer to the icecream man's wrinkled face, " Erika has got to go on buying icecream with that stolen money. And if I leave her alone she might get out of the habit. That would be a great pity. It's fun," she exclaimed, her light voice jubilant, " to teach the little one things. Such fun!"

It was fortunate that my doorway had a back exit; so I could run away and take the next street to school. I had fifteen minutes to digest Helga's utterance before school began.

That's it, I felt, that's the solution I have been seeking for such a long time. How frightening and how simple! What does she get out of it? I always wanted to know. Just this: the pleasure of teaching me how to be evil without being discovered, how to steal without being punished, how to get lost without being missed. That's all there is to it. She has seduced me, I felt (I am sure it was the first time in my life that the word entered my mind), and I have fallen for it. That any such thing should exist: seduction for the sake of seduction and for no other reason, and that it should be clad coolly and charmingly like Helga and look out of her smiling greyish eyes!

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I found my mother in the kitchen." What's up?" she asked noticing how upset I was. " You have ~~not~~ bought any birthday gifts yet, have you?" I asked breathlessly. This was a silly question, since my birthday was still three months ahead. " Of course not," I answered myself. " And I don't want you to, either. May I make one wish instead, a big one? I should like to get five Marks. Would that be too much?"

It was not too much, but money was not for children, my mother informed me. " But I have got to have it," I insisted, " and I won't keep it either. In fact, I owe it to you; it's four Marks sixty I owe you, and I have got to give it back."

It was easy, much easier than I had thought. Once I had started to explain, the words came all by themselves and so did the tears. It was all right. I had left the slippery road and come home into the familiar garden where one could play with one's sisters and brothers without feeling like a stranger. I was only seven years old, yet I felt that my experience had taught me a great, crucial lesson. Without it, evil might have had a far greater chance to get hold of me while I was growing up. As it was, I had been vaccinated with it and against it by Helga - once my little demon, the serpent in the paradise of my childhood; now,

almost a guardian angel warning me against illegal
incecreams and other fruits of the forbidden tree.

ERIKA MANN:

PROFIT BY MY EXPERIENCE

II

It was anything but easy. I was sitting in New York, without money, without a job, without a family, without friends and without a language. In a sense, I expected to catch English as one catches a cold and eventually I succeeded.

Yet more had to be done. I discussed my situation with one of the three Americans I knew. He was a sweet elderly gentleman, most helpful and enterprising. He was ^{also} rather influential.

"Why," he said looking at me cheerfully, "why don't you take a job as a professor for European history? I happen to know of some vacancy in a fine school. I am sure they would be glad to have you."

"But," said I, after having swallowed a few times, "I have never studied history and I don't think I could teach it."

"You are quite wrong," was the answer. "In the first place you have been in the thick of European history for quite some time, haven't you? Besides, you better take the boy for a model whom they asked whether ^{he} could play on the violin; so he said that he was sure he could

though he'd never tried."

I did not become a professor of European history but I remembered that boy.

Some weeks later the telephone rang - that unpaid for telephone which I kept operating under such trying circumstances. There was a meeting to be held, a voice informed me, a protest meeting against the persecution of Socialdemocrats, Catholics, Jews, Protestants in Nazi-Germany, which in that winter of 1936 to 1937 had already stirred the conscience of the world; would I put in an appearance, read a cable message from my father in Switzerland, and give a short talk of my own, fifteen minutes or so?

Never in my life had I made a speech, not even in German; but the boy with the violin appeared before my eyes and I said: yes, indeed, I would be delighted.

I wrote the speech in German, had it translated and learned it by heart, word by word during those few days allotted to me. My subject: - the fate of German women under Hitler's dictatorship, -was indeed close to my heart. It was an exciting job to compose the speech and fortunately I didn't have much time to get scared.

Just one day before the great event I found out that the meeting was to be held in Madison Square Garden. Mayor La Guardia, General Johnson, Rabbi Wise, John L.

Lewis were among the speakers. Madison Square Garden sounded like a large place. Maybe there would be a thousand listeners to that first speech of my life. As I considered the occasion to be a serious and not a social one, I got into my simplest short black frock: with its small white collar, I thought, it may look tidy and modest enough.

In the afternoon I began to get fidgety. The situation was helped little by another telephone call informing me that it would be extremely difficult to enter the platform to-night without a proper escort. The meeting was scheduled for 8 p.m. Someone was going to pick me up at 7.30 sharp and see me through the cordons of cops, watchmen, and ushers.

I waited until 7.30, I waited till 7.45, I waited till 7.50. Finally it became clear to me that I had been forgotten. Of course, the committee had to think about Mayor La Guardia and John L. Lewis, how could they think about me! Should I take it as a sign from heaven and skip the entire crazy enterprise? Yet there was my young violinist smiling encouragingly and helping me into the old shabby furcoat in which I had escaped from Germany and which I therefore used to call my "escape-goat".

I don't know how I ever managed to break through the barriers surrounding Madison Square Garden that evening. I begged, I shouted, I fought. Finally I

found myself on the stage. If I ever had a frightening view it was there and then. The stage alone was crowded with what I had first thought to be the audience. At second sight, however, a human ocean spread ~~low~~ before my eyes, jamming to capacity a hall that holds more than 22 000 persons. The whole scene became blurred and unreal, I felt rather shaky, as if I would faint the next moment. "Don't!", I kept on repeating to myself. "You have come here of your own free will and because you think you have something to say. Now pull yourself together."

As I was by far the least important one among the speakers, I had been scheduled as the first. In fact, the Chairman ^{had} started to introduce me while I made my belated entrance. This may have been my salvation: I had no time to faint. Like a desperate soldier I marched toward the microphone which, all by itself, should have sufficed to scare me stiff.

I had never faced such a thing before. I felt that I was very pale and vaguely hoped to make at least a pathetic impression in my little black school-dress.

Just when I was about to start, there was a short interruption. Through another microphone someone made an announcement. I did not quite get it, but vaguely gathered that Mrs. Soandso was expected at the Eighth Avenue Exit. Well, now it was my turn. For the second time I opened my mouth, when the chair-

man, approaching me from behind, distinctly whispered in my ear: "The mother is dying, you know!" I staggered; my mother or whose? For Heaven's sake, and why on earth had I to know this very second? Of course I did not link this terrifying remark with the announcement I had heard a few seconds before.

"Jump!" I implored myself, "jump into the icy water! Or everything will be lost!" The noise produced by 22 000 people even when they are silent surrounded me like the tuning of a gigantic orchestra.

I was in a kind of trance. Then I talked. My voice, strangely clear and gratifyingly amplified by the ~~loud~~ speaker, did not seem my own. I said a few sentences, the last of which I was mildly proud of. However, to my horrified surprise, some people in the gallery seemed to disapprove violently: they whistled. Whistling, to any European, means the strongest expression of disapproval. Heavens, I thought, they don't like you! They want you to stop. But here my fighting spirit got the better of me. While up to this moment I had been talking in a calm, equable tone, I now raised my voice, underlining anything I thought important, determined to convince those whistling rowdies up there. I smiled at them, friendly but militantly, accompanying my words with resolute

little gestures. This is a battle, I felt, and I have to win. I did. They gave me a big hand which made me feel all the happier as I understood that it was meant for the cause I represented. Many people were whistling and clapping their hands simultaneously. So I realized that the whistling wasn't meant in a nasty way and all was glory.

I heard the important addresses delivered by all those important men around me as if through a dense but soothing fog. I was completely exhausted and completely happy. Was there not an enchanting melody somewhere in the air, played by a distant violin?

Some days later a nationally known magazine published my picture, adding that I had made a nice contribution to that meeting. ^[Paragraph 1] Thus I became a lecturer, and I do not think that any audience, in any country, under any circumstances, could possibly ever frighten me. That first jump into the icy water taught me how to swim.