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# 1933

## Evelyn Toynton

By May it was already harder to send money out of Germany, especially for Jews. Her father managed, however, to smuggle her grandmother's jewelry to her, in a round tin of *Lebkuchen* with a picture of the Frauenkirche on the lid. There were two square-cut diamond brooches, a small emerald pendant shaped like a lily, and a pair of sapphire earrings that dangled pearls. She took them to a pawnbroker in the East End, an *Ostjude*, her mother would have said with a sniff, who, coming out from behind the counter at her entrance, fingered the stuff of her dress, complimenting her on the quality of the fabric. But when she brought the jewelry from her handbag, he assumed his professional manner, turning each item over and clucking his tongue. Then he told her, shaking his head and sighing, that they were all too-old fashioned to fetch much; it was a pity, but that sort of piece just wasn't attractive to people anymore. He offered what she knew must be a very low price, but still it was enough for her to get by for three months.

She was still going to the pub on most evenings, but it had become harder to strike the right note. For the first time in her life she was reading newspapers. And then there were the stories whispered by the refugees who'd started trickling across the Channel—accounts of a little Jewish boy being dragged into an alleyway and set on fire by his schoolmates, an old woman being knifed in the street.

Two sisters she'd gone to school with, who were in London to learn to type, came to see her, bringing a letter from her father with her grandmother's wedding ring. She invited them to meet her at the King's Head one evening, where she introduced them around, but they were not a great success. Julian was telling a story about climbing into his own window at Christchurch after curfew: how the beadle had called out to him, and then he'd bumped his head as he tried to extricate himself, which made him stagger, so the man had thought he was much drunker than he was. The girls from Nuremberg hadn't laughed; they only gave him identical puzzled smiles, their dark eyes somber, their hands folded primly

in the laps of their unfashionably wide skirts.

"They're a bit heavy going, aren't they?" Julian whispered in her ear. "Thank God you're not like that."

She had found them hard work herself, she wished they had made an effort to be charming, but she wished, too, that he had been kinder to them, just as she wished he'd hold her in his arms when they made love and say he'd protect her forever. But if she reported what she'd read in *The Times*, or the stories she'd heard from the refugees, he only said scornfully that everyone knew the Hun was a beast, she was better off in London. Then he'd change the subject.

Since she'd been in England she'd come to understand that his drawling voice, the way he lounged in a chair, the whole graceful derisive manner she had found so dazzling when they met were not as extraordinary as she had thought. Most of his friends, in fact, were very like him. But even to think such things frightened her. If there was nothing remarkable about Julian, if he wasn't the one great love of her life, why was she in England? Without her romance, she would only be another refugee, like the two mournful sisters, someone whose country didn't want her any more. She told herself of course she loved him. She told herself there was something fragile and lost about him, like a child; that was why he could not comfort her.

At the Aliens Registration Office in Lambs Conduit Street, a stocky man in a bright blue suit looked her over suspiciously and told her that the only work permit available to foreigners like herself was for domestic employment.

"And what does that mean?" she asked timidly.

"It means a maid."

She remembered Ilse, her mother's housemaid from the mountains, whom she'd courted with bread and jam and almond pretzels when she was a child. Ilse used to let her feel her muscles sometimes. Ilse could carry a bucket filled with coal up three flights of stairs without pausing for breath, or push the heavy sideboard away from the wall single-handedly when she wanted to clean behind it. Louisa got dizzy just scrubbing the bathtub after her bath; often she could not get the front door of the lodging house open, even when she hurled her shoulder at it while turning the key. She had to ring the doorbell instead. The other lodgers, who presumably had not lived through a famine, teased her about it; the landlady grumbled. Nevertheless, she asked the man humbly for an application and sat at a

long high counter, filling it out in her best handwriting. She was the only person there in a hat with a feather on it, or a coat that was not sagging at the seams.

She had stopped attending the lectures at the Courtauld. The fares were too much, and such interest as she'd had in Renaissance art seemed to be waning. On the other hand, she could not spend all day in her room, either; the landlady didn't like it, and the gas fire ate up sixpences at a terrifying rate. She wandered around shops, she went and sat in libraries, but finally, stammering with embarrassment, she had to explain to Mrs. Croxden that she had only one week's rent to give her; she would need to look for a cheaper place.

"I know something like that was happening, dear," the woman said. "I can always tell with my young ladies."

Louisa hung her head, ashamed to have been so transparent—one in a long line of impecunious lodgers.

"You're best off going back to your own country, if you don't mind me saying so."

"But I can't," she said wildly, and then stopped. "I can't," she said again.

Mrs. Croxden gave her a shrewd look, "It's that way, is it, dearie?"

"I'd get a job," Louisa said in a rush, "but they'll only let me go into service. And I'm not strong enough."

The woman looked her up and down, pursing her lips. "I tell you what," she said. "I got a sister, see, who does sewing for some very fine ladies, and just today she was telling me about one of them, Mrs. Dingwall I think her name is, what's just had to fire her lady's maid on account she was stealing from her. Robbing her blind, she was. Anyone can be a lady's maid, I'm sure. There's nothing to it, is there? Just hanging up her clothes and keeping the dressing table tidy, as far as I can make out. Cleaning up the spilled powder. You can do that much, can't you?"

Louisa nodded uncertainly. It did not seem possible that that was all there was to it, but at that point she was ready to try anything.

"I'll get my sister to put in a word, shall I? This Mrs. Dingwall might take quite a fancy to you, you being so ladylike and all. And then you can stay here. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

And so, on a rainy morning in May, Louisa found herself entering a blue painted gate in Blomfield Road, just opposite the canal, where a row of shabby-looking houseboats rocked gently on the water. When she rang the bell, a roly-poly little maid appeared and showed her into a blue and gold morning room. Louisa



looked at the beautiful dark masses of Mrs. Dingwall's hair, piled and twisted and coiled around her face, and wondered if she could possibly create such a coiffure. But when she explained haltingly that she was most anxious to obtain a position and, inexperienced though she was, would do her best, the other woman looked at her in distress. Louisa realized that Mrs. Dingwall was only a few years older than she was, twenty-two maybe, or twenty-three, and not completely mistress of her facial expressions.

"Oh, but I couldn't," she cried in an agitated voice, and then more firmly, "I'm sorry, but it's out of the question." She leaned towards Louisa as though as she were about to clasp her hands in sympathy. "It would be too awkward, don't you see? You're so obviously not a maid."

"But what am I going to do?" Louisa blurted. "I have to get a job, and they won't give me a permit for anything but domestic work. I can't be a proper maid—I'm not strong enough—and I don't know how to cook. What would you do?" Then she blushed, because of course it was presumptuous to suggest that Mrs. Dingwall would ever find herself in that situation.

Mrs. Dingwall frowned, shifting her hands in her lap. The rain lashed harder against the window. Louisa was sure she would say, What business is it of mine? But no. "Let me think," she said and Louisa waited tensely while she thought. Then her face cleared. "Hang on a moment. Isn't a governess domestic help?"

Louisa had no idea, but it seemed a moot point: she could not possibly be a governess, with everything she didn't know.

When she said that, though, Mrs. Dingwall laughed in delight, dislodging one of the coils of hair. She tucked it behind her ear. "My dear, you can't imagine the ignorance of the average English governess. Mine had barely mastered the times table. The only thing I learnt from her were the Latin names of flowers. Can you play the piano?"

"A little. Not very well."

"As long as you can thump out a tune or two. How's your French?"

"Not too bad. I went to school in Lausanne."

She clapped her hands like a child. "Splendid. And fluent German, of course. You'd be perfect. I know it's a rotten sort of job, but better than a lady's maid, don't you think? And if you have a decent employer...Let me see."

Louisa sat there expectantly, as though she might come up with a job on the

spot. Instead, she picked up the gold and white telephone and rang her mother to find out the name of the governess's agency she had used. Then she wrote, on beautiful cream colored letterhead, a character reference stating that Louisa was known to her personally; she could vouch for her good character, as well as her exquisite German and French. She blotted it and put it into an embossed envelope. For a moment it almost seemed as though she might invite Louisa to stay for coffee, as though they would even become friends, but of course that didn't happen. Louisa never saw her again, though Mrs. Dingwall stood as she was leaving and kissed her impulsively on the cheek, wishing her luck.

Two weeks later, just as her money was running out —she had one pair of stockings left, and had to choose between bus fare and breakfast—the woman at the agency sent her to a house in South Kensington, where she was hired to teach a precocious, lame little boy not strong enough to go to boarding school. She never became as fond of him as she had romantically imagined she would—he mocked her accent and was skeptical about her grasp of mathematics—but she had no trouble falling in love with his parents: his mother was so grave and kind, like a Quaker saint (it was Julian who explained to her what a Quaker was); his father, who worked in the Foreign Office, was stooped and gentlemanly. He seemed to understand better than most why she could not return to Germany. Occasionally he even sought her out to discuss the situation there. She told him what the latest refugees had reported and translated the parts in her father's letters about the massive rearmament going on. It was plain, he wrote, that sooner or later Germany would be going to war. When Louisa repeated that to her employer, he nodded grimly. She hoped, though she did not place much faith in it, that maybe he was taking this news back to the Foreign Office, that soon England would start doing something about Hitler.

But really most of her worrying was about Julian. She no longer asked herself if she loved him or not; it was only necessary that he should not have stopped loving her. The more she felt him drifting away, the harder she tried to be entertaining, though he no longer responded as he used to, not wanting to be charmed. Even his friends at the pub seemed to address fewer remarks to her, so that sometimes whole evenings passed when all she could do was to laugh appreciatively at their jokes.

With the warmer weather, they had moved from their table by the fire into

the back garden, where rickety tables were set up under the trees, and the air was filled with the scent of the creamy miniature roses splaying over the trellis. People brought their dogs, who wandered from one group to another, begging for scraps. The sky was a fresher blue, surely, than it ever was in Nuremberg.

Sometimes people at the other tables would call to Julian by name; jokes would be exchanged about the test match or the scandalous behavior of a politician's wife, but he never introduced her to them. After smiling at him in vain, then at her hands, then at whatever dog was closest, she would stand and announce that she was going. He stood too, as the others did, to wish her goodnight. But he never made a move to follow her. It had been weeks since he'd asked her to come back to his aunt's.

In August, she was to accompany her employers to their house on the Norfolk coast. Julian, it seemed, was going to his parents' place in Suffolk, something she only learned from hearing him discuss it with a couple at the next table. She felt she ought to make a scene. She was always nerving herself to speak to him, rehearsing impassioned speeches as she went over French verbs or the geography of Africa with her charge. But he almost seemed to know, every time, when she had summoned the courage to touch his hand and say she needed to talk to him alone, as though he had some special sensitivity to her then. At that very instant he would call out a remark about the rugby to someone sitting at another table, or push back his chair and ask who was ready for another drink.

So she went to Norfolk and walked in the garden in between lessons, still making up withering things to say. She wrote him long pleading letters—if you knew how you were hurting me, you could not do this—that she crumpled up and threw away, and then she could not sleep. When she returned to London she did not go back to the pub. She lay awake in her room at the top of the house, down the corridor from the servants, formulating wild plans of escape—into a life of espionage, onto the musical stage—until the sky turned light, when her defiance guttered out. In the dark, faces appeared to her of people she hadn't thought of in years: the French mistress at the Madchengymnasium, the boys from her dancing class. Sometimes she wrote to her father and asked him what they were doing now, but he rarely told her. More and more, his letters were filled with silly jokes, as though she were twelve years old.

But after a sleepless night she might stand in front of the mirror and become



wholly absorbed in re-parting her hair, or winding it into a chignon at the nape of her neck. Then she would glance at herself over her shoulder and practice different smiles.

She began going to a shabby café in Primrose Hill where other refugees, most of them older than she was, gathered to drink coffee and carry on running arguments. They never exchanged sad stories; instead they mocked and teased each other, joking about everything from Hitler to English cooking. The men, all of them so much darker and shorter than Julian, wore shabby suits and highly polished shoes. The women were always in black, and chain-smoked, and interrupted each other. Louisa became their mascot. Often she sat in silence, watching their faces and their hands but not really hearing what they said; instead she played the scenes with Julian over and over in her mind. It was safer to do that when there were other people around.

She wanted to look different from how she'd been with him. She bought a silver-gray dress with flowing sleeves and black satin cuffs, a dark gray hat with a wide brim; she wore long jet earrings and dark red lipstick, to make her look hard and inviolate. She told herself she had given up on love.

There were other Londoners who frequented the café also, painters who rolled their own cigarettes and consumed vast quantities of cheap wine, left-wing journalists who got into tremendous arguments about politics, though they were all ostensibly on the same side. As in the pub, conversation might spread to two or more tables. Sometimes the more erudite among the refugees would be called on to settle an argument on collectivization or Rosa Luxembourg or the exact number of prostitutes in Hapsburg Vienna.

It was in the café, two years later, that Louisa met a newspaperman named Philip, an Irishman who nursed sick pigeons on the roof of his flat and kissed her on the eyelids and knew all about what was happening in Germany. "Why do you wear that terrible lipstick?" he asked, tracing the lines of her mouth. "It makes you look like a tart." So she took it off, along with everything else. Lying in his bed, in an attic in Camden Town, with his arms wrapped around her and the rain drumming on the skylight, she knew that she was finally safe; even if the faces of her classmates went wandering in and out of her dreams, he would somehow be able to make it all right