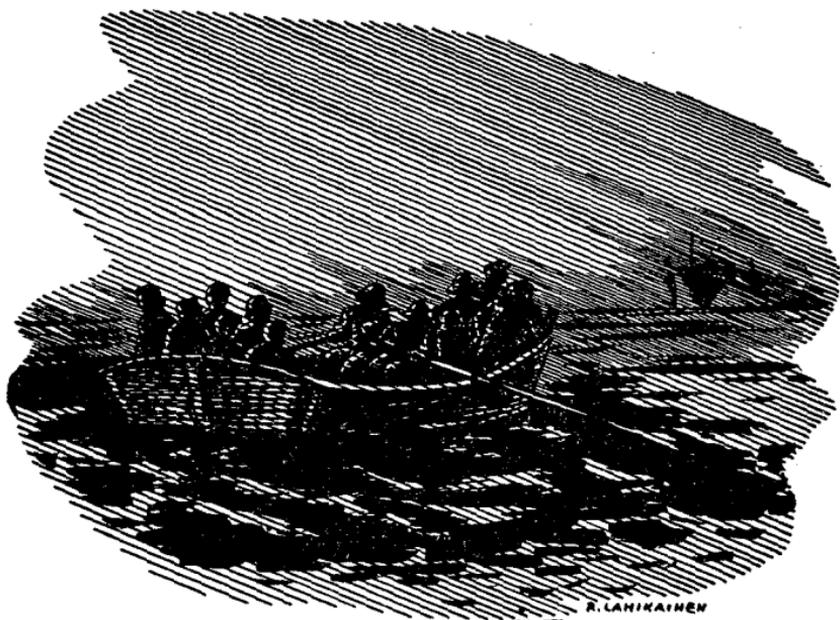


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1

SILHOUETTE AGAINST THE SETTING SUN

I KNEW THAT I was being foolish but I could not stop staring at the receding shore. Just as Lot's wife fled, I was fleeing from the country which had held for me a horrid fascination. Or, perhaps it was those swirling, malignant mists reaching outward that drew and held my attention. Certainly there were no pleasurable memories to fill the eyes with tears of regret, or to warm the heart with yearning for the land of my birth. The only gifts that land had given were sickness, fever, hunger, nightmares, and endless driven-labor in the munitions factories. I never wanted to return, yet now something kept my gaze fixed, whether feverish desire to stamp its hatefulness forever in my mind or the fascination of those lurid mists, unlike any other mists that hover about shallow waters when the sun is setting.

Gnawing hunger within started my body to shivering, and my imagination to seeing more than mists. As I watched, dull flames appeared to light the edges of those vapory tentacles, sometimes with a sulphurous glow, sometimes with greedy flicks as of serpent tongues aflame with unsatisfied appetites like that which tore at my vitals and weakened my reason. My faltering senses tried to tell me that it was the setting sun painting the wind-churned mists, yet that assurance was too weak to still the dread within.

Incredulous as it seemed, I was escaping! I could not understand or grasp this reality yet, and sometimes the fever and the sickness within me clouded my understanding. It fused horrors of the past and nightmare memories with today's promise, until they were one hideous delirium. Choking and gasping, I strove to reach out and make the promise true. Perhaps it would have been less difficult to believe if I could only understand by what miracle I had been given this escape. Although weak and discouraged, hungry and desperately cold, I somehow had never been quite able to sell myself for food or bits of clothing which might have made me strong enough to even hope that I might be one of the few who would effect escape.

Yet, without either warning or effort the passport and the tickets spelling freedom had come. Me! Me! I knew that there must have been a strange mistake, yet I did not make the foolish error of trying to set right the men who had brought me the precious bits of paper. That the officials were uneasy and a little confused by my appearance was apparent. Not to weak and inefficient, starved and hopeless ones were their offers made of these magical papers. There was room in the Promised Land for so few, therefore with care even the few were chosen. Often I had heard the girls, crowded with me in the mean basement room, discussing the necessary qualifications. I had listened, adding up my deficiencies against their abilities, my weakness against their strength. Even my inability to exploit myself, against the clever use my companions had made of their most meager charms to get extra food and clothing or a few paltry luxuries, came to light. Yet, *they* had not hoped to be fortunate enough to win passports out of the country that had made prostitutes of them.

When suddenly the coveted escape keys had miraculously been put into my hands there had been less of kind wishes and more of ugly hatred for me. I had been glad that the date set for my departure was so close. It gave me little time to try and explain what really could not be explained. No clothing or belongings had to be packed, no house had to be set in order, no farewells had to be said. Morosely the girls watched my going. If they were glad it was not for me, but for the few extra crusts soon to be theirs. I tried to walk steadily away; to show confidence, yet inwardly I possessed a new terror which would not let me alone.

It was all very well to have been given the passports and tickets by mistake, but surely when I tried to use them I would be turned back! Rejected, I knew that I would not return to that basement room, even if I could make my way there. I could not face their jeers and their laughter!

Strangely enough, the tickets had been honored, the passport accepted. The bus and the train had carried me swiftly across the border, through this new country and even to the seaport from which the refugee ship was to sail. I stumbled off the train, but the men who examined my treasured slips of paper did not seem to notice. I had had little enough to eat. On the journey there had been less food because I had no money with which to buy. The few crusts I had brought with me were soon gone. No one had offered to share, and so I came to the boat, stumbled, and fell into it in my eager haste and with fear of being left behind.

The damp fingers of the mist were already taking hold of the small boat as it slipped away from the dock and headed out to sea and the ship supposed to be there. Perversely, I looked back, not forward, to see the ship. My eyes watched with an intensity that sapped my strength.

With a mighty effort I pulled my gaze from the past—to look into the future, dazzling with promise. Ahead of us lay the ship that had come to take us away from the unhappy lands that had never shown us kindness; which had indeed been inhumanly cruel.

I gasped at the beauty and grace of the huge mercy-ship as she waited with body that looked like carved ebony against the full circle of the low-hanging sun. I could see tiny black figures ready

to help us as we drew near. The blinding gold behind the ship made the sharply etched silhouette seem as unreal as the rescue boats of my dreams during the past few years.

Suddenly, a deep silence became evident all about me. All eyes were on the ship. I had been the only one to look back, and whimsically I wondered that I had not been turned to "a pillar of salt." It was not surprising that all faces were lifted now prayerfully toward the escape-ship. But also it was strange that lips should be so silent. My people are not a silent people. Highly emotional, full of imagination, and zest for living, we chatter happily and incessantly for the slightest reason or no reason at all. Now, when there was so much cause for happiness, lips were silent, though I could see them moving, as if in wordless praise to God who had sent deliverance at last.

I felt a deep and conscience-stricken humility as I looked on their faith. In my breast there had been for months a cynicism that was making me, even on the eve of deliverance, question a God who had so long delayed sending help. If they had been ignorant children or unschooled adults their faith would have aroused only a passing pity, but my people are not unschooled or simple. From them have come spectacular world achievements—in science, in medicine, in the arts, in music,—wherever learning needs genius there will be found the deep marks of my people. Thus their faith (sometimes I wished I could call it my faith, too) could not be viewed either with pity or condescension. As I watched their uplifted faces, on which the sun tenderly and gently painted an unearthly golden glow, I felt only humility tinged with awe. After the years, the centuries, of being completely forsaken by their God they could still have faith in Him!

I shook free of my moodiness. Surely, it was not good to be taking any of the past into the promised splendid future! So I lifted my face, too, and I prayed a prayer that was not so much of thanksgiving as fervent demanding that this not be delusion too.

Somewhere I had read or heard that to man comes only what he expects. I do not know if that be true, but certainly my expectations have been of trouble and more trouble. That is all that I have known for most of my short life. And, as if in answer to

my inward turmoil and forboding, the sun suddenly slid out of sight in the far-darkening sea, as our little boat came into the black shadow beneath the ship. The shadow cast was darker for having had such a gorgeous backdrop of flame and gold, moments before. To my taut and cynical mind the scene was sinister in the extreme.

In spite of myself I shivered and screamed. Startled, my fellow-passengers turned to look at me. I looked away, but could not hide the tell-tale, humiliating flush that spread upward across my face. The small boat touched the side of the ship and immediately my outburst was forgotten in the hustle and bustle of embarking. I was glad that I had found a seat well in the back of the smaller boat, for it gave me time to regain my composure before I, too, clambered across the seats to the unsteady ladder that hung against the sleek sides of the rescue ship. Friendly hands reached out to lift and steady me; suddenly I, too, cast my premonitions to the wind and let the thrill and excitement that surged around me have its way.

And it was thrilling to climb unsteadily, pantingly, that swaying ladder, up and up out of the dark shadows below into the last frayed edges of sunset glory—to feel the air, new, clean and free! I laughed, cried and chattered as excitedly as any of the others who were weeping, hugging, and dancing ecstatically. It was a wonderful moment, a moment fraught with a joy not to be experienced often in a lifetime. And I indulged myself until I had drowned out my last morbid doubt in the joyous actuality of deliverance.

The great ship shivered, and I shivered ecstatically with it, as it slowly began to move out toward the rim of gold that was still visible from the high deck where we now crowded against the rail. No one looked back at the slowly widening stretch of water between ship and shore. There was nothing there to claim us. There was everything ahead!

No one looked behind, did I say?—except me. Involuntarily I crept back out of the tight cordon of new friends and their relatives and returned to erase from my mind and heart forever the horrid hold that land had over me. Surely if I looked at it from the safety of this great, magnificent ship I could throw back to it

forever every doubt and misgiving that I had felt there. I crept along alone and looked back to the shore. But there was no wide stretch of water between me and that shore! Only writhing, twisting mists like to disembodied spirits or broken bits of the land itself reaching, reaching, ever reaching to draw me back again. Surely the ship was nearer shore now than she had been! That heavy black bank could not be mere fog or my imagination!

A vagrant wind caught my hair, then it sped past me to flutter a curtain in a window. Out of the coiling, twisting maelstrom of mist, some of those long tentacles stretched toward me, reached me, then smothered me in clammy embrace. I had been right—we were not to escape after all! God—if there was a God—had been only mocking us. Before the damp breath of rain I collapsed, shrieking before the inescapable monster that was forcing us back, back to that awful land again.

Down, down, down into darkness, into fevered imaginings and awful memories I was being sucked and did not know past from present or where memory ended and reality began!

Even as a tiny toddler I had worshiped my sister, Rachel. I did not need the overheard compliments to tell me that she was beautiful. I sat by the hour feasting on the picture she was as she sat busily embroidering or weaving. My hair always had been stringy and unruly, but hers hung in soft black ringlets about a face with skin as fair as that of the Bible's Rachel. Black eyes flashed, twinkled, and sparkled or became deep pools of dreaminess that fascinated me. I felt like the ugly duckling; and, without meaning to let me see it, others compared us unfavorably. Not that I minded, for my childish heart was so filled with admiration and love for my sister that I had no place in it then for jealousy. She never seemed conscious of how her beauty stirred people. Her nature was sweet and lovely and she showered us with love and little kindnesses. I doubt if she knew how to be cross or really unhappy. Her sweet voice was forever trilling in melodious recitation of the age-old poems of praise and prayer to our God. Perhaps that is what imparted to me my feeling of futility and cynicism.

Of what avail had her worshipping and praising and praying been when *they* came! As inexorably as the tightening clammy arms of the mist *they* had come into our small village—into every village in fact and into every home. There was no escaping. There would be no escaping *them* now. I struggled against the darkness that enfolded me; I wanted to blot out the memories; fear of the past, fear of the the present, dread of the future.

Had there ever really been any happiness at all or had my small mind only dreamed that there was somewhere happiness? Almost with my first words I began to hear rumors and hinted uneasiness. Rachel, alone, seemed serenely unaware of the growing doubts and fears. Her full soft lips curved always in a half-blossoming smile. I looked away from the darkening shadows settling on the faces of my older brothers and my father; yes, even on the face of my serene mother. It was easier and pleasanter to look at Rachel's smile and listen to her gentle untroubled voice than to look at their troubled faces and listen to their hushed worries.

But the rumors and tales, those thunderclouds would not dissolve or go away. There came a time when even my small ears and eyes could not shut them out—when even into Rachel's eyes and face there crept a shadow when she was not aware of watching eyes. I looked in vain for the tiny dimples to show about her smiling mouth. I fought against the memories crowding my sick brain. How could I keep remembering the smile when I had seen it erased so horribly! I struggled to come out of the darkness filled with screaming ghosts that would not stay in the past.

The mists rolled away a little. I seemed to swim up out of the murkiness toward a blinding white light; then suddenly just as I gathered my wits to fight them, a figure loomed between my sight and the light. Then I knew that I had not been battling against mere mists and hallucinations for I saw the gold braid and the shiny buttons that proclaimed the hated uniforms. *They* had taken Rachel away months, years ago and she had not had the spirit or the strength to fight them off. Unlike her I had never had time to learn femininity or sweetness. I had been schooled in a rougher school in the years since she had disappeared. I met the

oncoming figure with clawing fingers and rejoiced when a ripping nail drew blood—blood—blood—

They had come for me shortly after the taking of Rachel but not for the same reason. Rosalie, and Sarah—all the lovely girls her age had been taken first. I was too young, too thin and too homely. The beauty that had been my sister's had become a curse and not a gift to be coveted. I was, however, not too young or too thin or too homely to be put to work in *their* underground factory. Nor to be released from feeling the horror and nightmare that swelled day into night and night into endless night that knew no day.

Children came and went. Not all could stand the arduous labor and inadequate rations, the filth and insanitation. We were given a small dish of water from which to drink and bathe each day—if it were not forgotten; a handful of beans, hard and tasteless, or blackened, dirty bread. I learned to save out a few uncooked beans and to sprout them in my dark, damp corner. Perhaps it was that small bit of knowledge somehow gleaned from my mother's frugality that saved my life though often I wondered if my life were worth saving. Not that I ever lost my desire for living, but if living meant prolonging the agony of those weeks and months, why did I feel the urge to cling to life?

There were even mad moments when whispering together between shifts we could not quiet the questioning; perhaps those girls who had been dragged away for other uses had not fared better after all. At least they had been fed and clothed and housed until—but the pretty girls diminished. We felt the rake of cold appraisal as others with some remnant of charm were sought among us. The screams of the few who were taken cursed us for even allowing such thoughts to come into our blurring minds.

Rumors sifting through reached us at long intervals. Rumors, only, but we clung to them as mothers had clung to their babes centuries ago in Egypt. Perhaps the rumors were but wishes transplanted from our dreams, for exhaustion insists on sleep and sleep often brings dreams. Most of the dreams were but nightmare-continuance of the daily slavery and horror; some few were of

rescue. There were those dreams of shiny tanks and glittering armor, of blasting guns, of clean men and true. Surely out there in other countries there must be deliverance for us! Not from God for He had not proved His omnipotence, or His indifference if indeed there be a God! Our help or hope of help lay in the people of other lands. Surely they would heed and would come to us soon.

Like thunder rumbling, roaring and crashing; like lightning flashing, burning and blasting, deliverance had come at last! For a brief time even my heart had joined in praising God for sending it. How stubbornly my people held to their faith in God!

Briefly there had been sunshine, cleanness and food. The soldiers gave of their rations yet there were so many of us. Soon even a crust of bread became a thing over which to fight and to claw. Tantalizingly into my nightmare came the sweet smell of food. Its fragrance tore at those mists and I saw a bowl passing before me. I knew it to be a part of my dream, yet I clawed it out of the air only to drop it from fingers too weak to hold it.

Food! I had had it in my hands, yet now it spread across a strange, bright carpet, leaving bits of gold and white and green and brown. At least I could have them! Hands reached out and held me. They would not let me retrieve even one fragrant bit of precious food. It was then I knew that I could not fight *them* any longer and I collapsed weeping, not caring enough to fight any more.

The bright white light was dissolving the mists. Reluctantly they loosened their clammy hold, uncoiling, thinning, disappearing before the relentless glare. I clung to the mists for my swollen eyelids and tear-drenched eyes flinched before that brightness. I did not really want to come awake. The nightmares and horrid memories were somehow being crowded out, dimmed before a wonderful new delusion.

Over and over I seemed now to hear my mother's tender, crooning voice. I could even feel her gentle arms about me and oh, I did not want to waken to reality again. My pillow was drenched with tears I had thought I would never be able to shed again. Perhaps I had drowned myself in tears.

A calmness and peace was within me such as I had not remembered existed on earth. I had known little of it in my sixteen years. I clung to the illusion that seemed to be my mother, hiding my face in her soft bosom, listening to her dream-voice singing sweet promises to me. Let her sing them—I had learned that promises meant nothing. I was learning, too, that one can sometimes hide himself in a dream world so that reality becomes as nothing, too. Or, was I wrong? Was I hiding myself from reality, from a new and wonderful reality?

I struggled; I was afraid to come completely out of the dream-world that was half death, yet, I was afraid lest by delaying too long I might lose the chance to return if this were not delusion. The sweet voice faltered. There seemed to be tears choking, stopping it. Could it be that I was causing those tears? Then a new voice cut across the singing,

“Let her weep, little mother. The tears will heal and bring their own relief. She will be all right now. There is more color on her cheeks. She is taking the food we bring. I think she even hears you, now.”

I had not thought ever to hear a man’s voice again without cringing. Yet there was something in that voice that stirred a wish within me. I lay still and listened.

How long had I been crying? Crying? I had forgotten how to cry long ago!

Food! He had said that I had been eating! Eating without knowing or enjoying the eating! But that could not be! I remember that they had held me back from the overturned bowl of food—yet, I did not feel hunger.

Little mother! Little mother! Oh, yes, I had been hearing her! Suddenly I could not stay in the dream world any longer. Let her singing stop! Let her arms fall away! I would not fool myself or wait until the nightmares tore her away from me again. I twisted free and sat upright, blinking, staring against that sudden blaze of light.

Unspoken words—or were they wishes—choked in my throat, “The light is not white but golden, coming softly through the wide-

open window. It lies like a halo about a never-forgotten head. My mother! Oh, my mother! I have not been dreaming after all! It was your arms that held me! Your voice that called me!

"I reach out and touch your hair. Silver now, where once it had been so darkly shiny. But beneath its framing softness I see a little of your old serenity and peace shining in your tear-wet eyes. Pain you have felt and deepest sorrow, yet you are not afraid to face the future. Your singing voice told me that and it has drawn me back. What were you singing?"

"Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of the law; . . . For the Lord will not cast off His people, neither will He forsake His inheritance . . . O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever . . . He hath inclined His ear unto me . . . the sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow, then called I upon the name of the Lord . . . Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful . . . I was brought low, and He helped me . . . He has delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord, who hast chastened me sore: but He hath not given me over unto death . . . My feet shall yet stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem!"

"How softly your lips uttered the words, yet how deeply you meant them. Perhaps you can lead me back into your faith, my mother, even as your God is leading our people into the land of their inheritance. Let me listen and hearken that I may come before Him with praise and singing, even as you have done. Let me walk in the land of the living—I have lived in the land of death for so long. Surely if you can have hope I can have it, too. Perhaps there is a Promised Land for us after all."

The sun was setting. How many times had that golden, flaming sun slid into the sea? I did not know. I knew only that as I looked out through the ship's window I saw a path of gold stretching, stretching far into the distance behind my mother and a hand, gentle and kind and strong reaching out from the shadows to rest softly on her head.