

MEETING AT THE RESTAURANT DANUBA

A Short Story

by

Norman King Lloyd

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Ten *bloody* days, Ernest! That's how long I've been working on this damn speech. So if you can drag yourself away from watching the festivities outside and get it typed... And you might pour us both a well-earned, drink.'

I stretched my legs and went over to the window. My foot snagged on the threadbare carpet. The Minister had promised that I would be first in line for some new furniture. Ernest spoke softly: 'Go out onto the balcony, Sir and get some fresh air. It should be safe enough now.'

The Winter sun warmed my face. The Victory Party opposite was beginning to lose momentum. In this no-man's-land, between war and peace, I wondered which of the go-getting, bastards I would serve. Some were already making their bids for power. One thing was certain. I had written a *very long* speech. What had pompous, old Novák said? 'Give us one of your inimitable, detailed and sinuous displays of logic and emotion, if you please, Jonas.' And out of earshot of the others, had whispered, 'I mean, *baffle* the bastards!' Poor old darling, probably wouldn't last the week out, but a Minister is a Minister.

I breathed in deeply. At last, fitting and proper weather for peace. On the streets below, people were taking their evening stroll. After all these terrible years, when just to be seen going to the shops was dangerous, was it any wonder that everyone practically lived outdoors now; thronging and jostling along the wide pavements, parks and squares... I called back to Ernest: 'They're seeing their city as new - like tourists. The balmy and beautiful scent of peace!' It was tempting to go inside for another cigar as I was still fretting over my speech. The thorny problem of the infamous, teenage police-units. In some ways, I felt sorry for them. Plucked out of orphanages, they had been trained to kill for the State. Though, in a way, I felt more contempt for the civil-servants and the sleazy bureaucrats even though I was one myself. The sun went behind some clouds. I mumbled something about going for a walk along the embankment before dinner. 'Is that wise, Sir?' Ernest although old, had acute hearing which was one of the reasons I had kept him on during the war. He warned: 'They are still some snipers about. They kill out of boredom.'

The crowd below had suddenly become hushed. People were pointing to a nearby building. A woman, arms raised high above her head like one of the Snake Goddesses of Ancient Crete, stumbled down the steps of the mansion opposite. Rumour had it that this

was one of the most terrifying Rehabilitation Centres of the régime. I leant forward over the balcony. The woman, bare breasted, ran into the wide Avenue, zigzagging from side to side. Even from my top floor apartment, it was not difficult to see what it was she held aloft in her outstretched arms. Certainly not the small, wriggling vipers of Ancient Greece, but something much worse. At that moment the sun came out, illuminating her heavy, ankle-length, multi-layered skirt. It shone like glazed earthenware. Then with a horrible, wailing sound, she released, like a hammer-thrower, each of her appalling burdens. Ernest joined me with the drinks. ‘Grab her, you fools! he shouted, down. ‘Grab her and bring her in!’ Several men tried to seize the woman, others clapped and shouted, but she escaped and ran down the hill towards the old port. I looked at my clerk with surprise. ‘Ernest! A desiccated old scholar like yourself has no business getting so transcendently excited. What is the world coming to?’

The sun which had been low in the sky went behind another dark cloud before reappearing with incredible intensity. For a brief few seconds it seemed to burn with the power of a mid-day, sun. The sandstone mansions and apartment blocks which lined the Avenue glowed with a wonderful warmth. The way people looked up, shielding their eyes and shouting wildly to one another - it reminded me on one of those pictures of Catholic miracles.

Then the sun disappeared for good. The Avenue became what it had always been; cool and shady, austere and elegant; a high point of nineteenth-century, architecture. That the oppressors had looked after our historic buildings could not be denied. I wondered if being interrogated in spacious drawing-rooms with glittering chandeliers had softened up our dissidents. Was it pleasanter to be tortured in well-appointed libraries? Of course, I knew the answer to these questions. Why pretend otherwise?

We went back inside and I debated whether to phone the Minister. No doubt, my speech would be cut to ribbons. Ernest turned off the desk-lamp, gathered up my papers and deposited them in the wall-safe. My revolver fell to the floor. Perhaps, it would be prudent to take it with me. After all, I had been given it for my protection. I hesitated. It was the moment that I had feared for so long. The war, no longer an excuse to put off my revenge. I would go out into the suburbs and commit murder. ‘He was a friend my wife had pretended to love.’ Ernest looked puzzled. ‘That’s what you always say, Sir. I don’t understand. If she only pretended...’ I placed the gun in my overcoat pocket and checked if I had enough money. First, I needed a good meal. Using money again instead of privi-