

FIRST ENCOUNTER¹

BY SIGRID UNDESET

I CAN'T remember what my age was that birthday when I got my doll Gerda. But it was before I began to go to school, and after my mother had tried to teach me my ABC and backstitch in spite of my streaming tears. So I suppose I was seven.

But I remember that morning. I must have been kept in a few days for some reason. For I have it in my mind that the birches seemed to have burst into leaf in a single night.

We were living in Lyder Sagens Street at that time, and there were houses only on one side, villas standing in gardens. On the other side was a field. It was a rather remarkable field. In the upper part of it the big children of the street used to play ball—and there were some little outcrops of rock and heaps of stones which we made into play-rooms, and a stream of dirty stinking water where we could get our feet wet, and a nettle-bed down at the bottom by the fence of the Commodore's garden; within the nettle-bed there were a few miserable little raspberry bushes, and from mid-summer on we got our arms and legs stung all over searching for unripe raspberries. And then we could stand there and look into the Commodore's garden. They had no children, the Commodore and his wife, and none of us had ever been in there. But there were apple trees and pear trees and cherry trees and beds of rhubarb and

carrots and quantities of radishes. What a big garden it was, and what a lot of fruit there was in it—we used to tell one another the most fantastic stories about it.

Then one day there might be a horse tethered in the field. Or we might even find two or three cows grazing there. And then we stood at a safe distance from these strange animals and sang:

*Moo-cow, moo-cow, moo,
They're coming to catch you!
Oh no, oh no, oh no,
Mamma won't let me go!*

The bigger children actually told us that one autumn a whole flock of sheep had been in the field for several days. But we didn't quite believe that; at any rate we didn't expect such a remarkable thing to happen again. For there were many of us who had never seen a live sheep—we were little town children, all of us; the smallest of us had never been in the country. But we hung on the fence and called to the cows and sniffed in the warm, milky smell of cattle, and thought of the wonderful world which began on the other side of Church Road, a long way off, where we were not allowed to walk by ourselves—where there were barns and byres and stables and quantities of horses and cows and sheep, and perhaps there were actually billy-goats!

Well then, it was a fine bright morning in May, and I had been given a doll's pram and the doll Gerda. I had on a white frock which I hadn't yet managed to get messed.

¹The translation from the Norwegian is by A. G. Chater.

And I pushed the doll's pram along the street, which was in the usual state of a Christiania street that is only half built. The pram jolted over stones big and small, making lovely tracks in the mud, and the puddles reflected a pale blue spring sky in which bright little clouds were drifting. Above my head the birches of the villa gardens hung with their fresh leaves, so young and delicate that they were still a waxy yellow. But the end of the street was closed by the Commodore's garden with a thick green wall, dense as a forest. And the sun struck sparks everywhere, from the puddles in the road and the dandelions along the fence, and a thousand white flashes from the young sappy leaves.

II

Then I met two little friends. And they told me there was a horse in the field, and it had had a foal the night before. I meant to have shown them the doll and the pram, but we forgot that, all three of us. We dashed off to the field. And it was positively true. All the children of the street were there hanging on the fence and chattering about the miracle. We were astonished at its long thin legs, which it could walk on already, and its little curly stump of a tail—and we couldn't make out why it was so light, when its mother was black. And when it stuck its head under her and sucked, we got quite hot and uncomfortable at being so close to great, strange Nature.

But when my nurse came and called us in to have chocolate—the doll's pram was empty. Gerda was gone. Search was made everywhere. All the children were examined and inquiries were made at all the houses. Milli and Maya, who were two big and enterprising girls, wanted to fetch the policeman. They were not allowed. But

they acted as police themselves, backed by our nurse. And Nina, whose reputation was none too good, was subjected to a painful examination, till she howled aloud and her mamma came out into the street and threatened to go and tell Milli's and Maya's parents and mine too. But it was all no use. Gerda had vanished without a trace.

Well, I cried a little, but I wasn't so terribly upset about it. I had only had her a few hours, so I hadn't had time to get really fond of her. Besides, she did not have proper hair, it was only painted on her china head, and her frock was only calico, made at home by my mother—it was flowered all the same, and had a lot of lace and ribbons. But I still had the pram, and in that I planted my most precious doll, who always had to be kept in bed because her scalp and arms and legs were missing and the others laughed at her. And probably I should have forgotten the doll Gerda many years ago, but for the incident I am now going to relate.

A few months afterwards my nurse took me one day over to Balkeby. I don't know whether she had anything special to do there, or whether she just went to see some friends. We came to a little wooden house of two stories, squeezed in between new brick houses, which were already shabby and dilapidated and had a very poverty-stricken look. The place must be pulled down by now—I have tried to find it without success, and I am certain I should have known it again. It was painted a dull brown and the paint was peeling off—I remember there were blisters in it and I amused myself by bursting them while my nurse was in a dairy buying something. There were two shops on the ground floor, this dairy and a little shoemaker's. Presently we went into the shoemaker's shop.

On a low stool sat the shoemaker, wearing a blue apron. His face was the color of

dough and he looked cross. He and the nurse exchanged a few words and we went into a side room. There I sat for some time with my nurse on a sofa which was covered with American cloth—that made it very interesting, because I could let myself slide off it and crawl up again, until nurse said I must please sit still and be good. So I sat still, and looked round the little room meanwhile.

The air was foul and stuffy, and the room was altogether strange and unfamiliar. There were two beds, the like of which I had never seen—they were painted red and stuffed full of bedclothes to such a height that I couldn't understand how the people could possibly climb up when they wanted to go to bed. And there were sheets spread over them instead of counterpanes. And there was pink tulle round the looking-glass—and on the chest of drawers were two vases which looked like silver, but must have been glass.

After a while a woman came in. She had an infant at the breast. I remember her quite clearly. She had hardly any teeth and her face was yellow, but her sleeves were turned up and her arms and breasts were very white—a gleaming, corpse-like white with blue veins, which looked like thick dark strings under the skin.

Helene, my nurse, talked to her and asked presently: "And how's Solveig getting on now?"

I don't remember what the woman said, but Helene told me that the shoemaker and his wife had a little daughter who was just the same age as myself. And she asked if I would like to go in and talk to her. I got up obediently and went in to see Solveig.

She was lying in the kitchen. The atmosphere in there was indescribable. It gave me a sickening, faint-hearted feeling. In one corner there was a big bed, and in it

lay a pale little girl with yellow hair. She was wearing a pink bed-jacket.

III

I asked her what her name was and how old she was—though of course I knew she was Solveig and just the same age as myself. She didn't ask me my name, and I thought that was odd.

"Are you very ill?" I asked.

"Oh yes. I've got tubertles in the hip-joint, I have," said Solveig, brightening up a little and quite proud. "I've had two operations for it at the orspital."

"O my!" I said. "Wasn't that awful?"

Solveig made no answer. And I couldn't think of anything to say. I twisted my feet round the legs of the chair and sucked at the elastic of my straw hat. And the foul air settled stiflingly about my heart—it smelt of leather and cobbler's wax, for the door to the workshop stood open, and of coffee, which the woman was making as she went to and fro, with the child hanging all the time on her loose, blue-veined breast. And you could tell that the room they slept in was never aired. But I thought the air was like this because Solveig had "tubertles" in her hip-joint and had had two operations at the hospital. And I felt the tears rising and a catch at my throat—from grief at something I did not know and could only feel as a vague foreboding.

At last I thought I must say something. And I asked: "Don't you get tired of lying in bed all the time?"

Solveig did not answer at once. Then she pulled something out from under the bedclothes: "I got this from papa," she said. It was a little green botanizing case with a strap. "And mama gave me this."

It was a doll. It had a china head with yellow hair painted on it, and although it was very dirty I recognized the white calico

frock with the light-blue flowers and ribbons. It was Gerda.

I turned red as fire and my throat was choking. I had a feeling that it was I who had done something terribly wrong; I dared not look up and couldn't say a word.

The woman came in at that moment. And she looked at my crimson face. She hurriedly picked up the doll.

"That's not a thing to show to such a fine little girl," she said with an attempt at a laugh. "You must have plenty of nice dolls at home, haven't you?"

I looked at her for a second. Her eyes were shifty and she tightened her lips so queerly over her toothless mouth. Then she said in quite a different voice—a sugary, cringing voice which made me shudder with vague disgust and terror: "Oh yes, I'm sure your dolls are much better than that. But Solveig, poor little thing, she thinks it's fine—well, I gave two crowns for it at Vollmann's, anyhow—"

The woman kept on telling me how she had bought the doll. And I could feel her shifty eyes on my drooping head.

I remember she took me back to the other room to have coffee. And it was no use my protesting and saying my mother didn't let me drink coffee. I had to empty a whole cup and eat two of the nasty cakes Helene had bought at the dairy. The woman kept pressing them on me.

On the way home I burst into floods of tears. I wouldn't say why. But Helene said I ought to be thankful I was so well off—fancy if I had to lie in bed like Solveig. Yes, it would do me good to see what some little girls had to put up with. I cried more and more. Then she got frightened and promised me sweets and forbade me to tell mamma she had taken me to Balkeby.

I consoled myself by making plans as

we walked home. I was going to visit Solveig, and there was no end to the things I would take her. By imagining myself a Lady Bountiful I grew calmer and calmer and at last I was fairly cheerful.

Nothing came of it, however. In the first place my whole fortune at the moment was only a penny. In the second place mamma got to know of it, for I had another violent fit of crying when I had gone to bed and she came in to hear me say my prayers. And Helene was well scolded, and after that I was never allowed to go and see Solveig of Balkeby, who had "tubertles."

But even if I had not been hindered in this way, it is extremely probable that I should never have realized my pretty plans.

IV

This was my first encounter with poverty. And a year or two after, when my mother told me one day that we ourselves were poor—I remember my paralysing sense of horror, and I remember the burning blush that came into my childish cheeks—did it mean that we were condemned to live in foul air and cringe to other people, and look at them with frightened, shifty eyes and speak in a humble, syrupy voice?

And in due course I was a big girl, and then I was grown up. And I got to know more and more about life. About poverty, too.

But the worst of it I had seen, with the visionary instinct of little children—the humiliation that dogs the poor in this world—on the day I felt like a little criminal, as the shoemaker's wife at Balkeby snatched up the doll Gerda and hid it away.

MUSSOLINI IS TOTTERING

BY ANTHONY M. TURANO

POLITICAL conversation in Fascist Italy divides itself into two main branches: the ostentatious public panegyric, and the whispered private jeremiad. The first, of course, is always concerned with the glory of Il Duce, his dynamic personality, his pontifical infallibility, his success in commanding the respect of other nations toward his country, and his extraordinary feat of making the trains run according to schedule.

During a recent personal visit to the land of the Corporative State, I did not escape the loud panegyric; but it was also very interesting to overhear the monotone of lamentation and rebellion that prevails in every part of the peninsula. That my former compatriots were unusually communicative with me, is explained by the facts that I was a relative of some of them; that others still remembered me as a child, or knew my family; and that I spoke my native language perfectly, and evinced a genuine human interest in the daily lives of my erstwhile co-nationals. Furthermore, my curiosity was mild, because the writing of this article did not occur to me until some time after my return to America.

My first Italian acquaintance was a young corporal of the regular army, who traveled with me from Naples to Paola. There were no other passengers in our second-class compartment, and we were at liberty to speak freely. When I told him that I was visiting my birth-

place for the first time in twenty-eight years, he became very loquacious about the changes that time and Fascism had wrought in his country. After telling me, approvingly, of Italy as a great world power, he began to suggest that some things were not quite so good. When our train was passing near a village in the hilltops of the Southern Apennines, I said something about the beauty of Italian towns, those picturesque clusters of white masonry in a dark green background.

"Yes," he answered, "but you must have noticed that the clear white of your early memories is, in fact, a stained gray. The people refuse to whitewash or restucco their walls, because there is some sort of luxury tax that makes the business expensive."

After a pause, he asked me to tell him what the Americans thought of Balbo and his air squadron. When I described the admiration aroused by that spectacular performance, he beamed with patriotic satisfaction.

"There is no doubt," he said, "that Il Duce has done a great deal to increase Italy's international prestige." He lowered his voice to a barely audible tone and continued:

"But in our internal affairs, we have sacrificed personal liberty for the sake of military grandeur. You Americans admire Balbo, but you also respect *Il maestro* Toscanini. *Ebben*, when he was slapped here, in his native country, for refusing to play