

IF THERE IS ANYTHING LEFT

ORDINARILY, Eduard Reiner and his mother left the small brownstone house on West Ninetieth Street, near Riverside Drive, late in the afternoon. He would hold the vestibule door open with his left elbow and take his mother's arm so that she wouldn't trip over the door mat, and then he would help her down the eight steps to the sidewalk. He was a medium-sized man with gray, thinning hair and thoughtful features. In front of the house, old Mrs. Reiner would turn around and look up to make sure that the windows of her two-room apartment on the second floor were open and the Venetian blinds lowered. She liked the house because it had Venetian blinds, no elevator, and only three floors. Back home in Prague, she had lived for more than forty years in an old three-story house near the Waldstein Palace. It had a baroque façade, a sixteenth-century iron gate, and Venetian blinds. She had entered the house as a bride, and, following the death of her husband three years later, had lived there with her son. Shortly after the Reiners had arrived in New York as refugees, in 1940, the old lady had had a slight heart attack and her son had suggested moving to a ground-floor apartment, but the old lady had refused to move. "I have walked stairs for forty years in our house," she had said. "Just let me go back home to Prague and I'll be as young and healthy as ever."

She was a small, frail, white-haired woman, and the doctor had cautioned against any physical or emotional strain. The doctor was also a refugee from Prague and had known her for many years there. "There's nothing wrong with you, *milostivá pani*," he had said, "but you are over seventy and mustn't overdo things." He had glanced at Reiner and said, "I'm sure that the *Herr Direktor* will take good care of you."

Down on the street, Reiner would take his mother's arm and cautiously guide her, watching out for the traffic at intersections. New York's heavy traffic was one reason he would never let his mother go anywhere alone. Fortunately, she had no desire to see the city. Most of the time, she was content to sit in an armchair by the front window, gazing out at the street and commenting on what she saw. In summer she watched, disapprovingly, the children playing ball on the pavement and between the parked cars. "In Prague, people wouldn't let their children play in the middle of the street," she said time and again. "I never let you run around

in front of the house, Edi. Look how they fight and shout. All unwashed. The parents in this town have no time for their children." She always called New York "this town," as though she didn't like to say its name.

If the weather was fine, the Reiners would walk over to Broadway and ride a streetcar down to Seventy-second Street. They liked the streetcars because they reminded them of the trolleys in Prague, though in New York the motormen stopped and started so fast that they were always thrown back and forth. On Seventy-second Street, Reiner and his mother would get out and walk to one of the small cafés where they were always sure to meet some of their people. The waiter would greet them profusely—"Kompliment, Herr

Direktor"—bowing deep from the waist and smiling the smile that he reserved for important clients. He would hold the chair for Madame and help the *Herr Direktor* out of his coat and, without waiting for their order, would hurry over to the counter and bring two cups of coffee, one with an extra portion of *Schlag* for Madame, and a black one for the *Herr Direktor*. Everybody called Reiner *Herr Direktor*, or *pane řediteli*, as they had done back home in Prague. There was the smell of freshly baked pastry and of good, strong coffee—not made in one of those strange, balloon-like bottles but in an old-fashioned drip pot—and the muted, pleasantly familiar sound of Czech and German voices. Occasionally, a few Americans would come in for a piece of pastry—they called it "cake," unable to distinguish between *Sachertorte*, *Guglhupf*, and *Nussroulade*



"Er—it's very hot here, too."



"Get ready, everybody! Dinner's almost thawed out."

—but they were as incongruous a sight as though they had suddenly appeared at the Café Continental in Prague, where everybody would turn to look at people who spoke English. Old Mrs. Reiner didn't understand English.

Reiner had been a director of the Prague Eskompte Bank. He had been also one of the town's more eligible bachelors, but instead of getting married, he had devoted himself to his widowed mother. Elderly women had sighed wistfully at the sight of *Direktor* Reiner appearing with his mother at concerts or at the theatre, and thought of their own children, who came to visit them reluctantly only once in a fortnight.

Reiner's opinions on economics had been widely listened to in financial circles. In 1938, the *Prager Tageblatt* and the *Lidové Noviny* had published his statement, made at a stockholders' meeting, that the Germans would not bother actually to invade Czechoslovakia, since "they could make fullest use of our economic resources by way of peaceful mutual trade agreements." Reiner had always been of the opinion that the world would be a better place if it were managed by internationally-minded businessmen, bankers, and industrialists,

who knew "how to get along." When one of his secretaries, a Sudeten German named Hoehnel, had suggested early in March, 1939, that there might be trouble and that the *Herr Direktor* had better leave the country, Reiner had politely thanked him for the suggestion and added that he preferred to make his own decisions. A few days later, Hoehnel had sat at the large desk in Reiner's oak-panelled private office and told him to get the hell out of the bank. After a few unpleasant months, Reiner had managed to obtain an exit permit for his mother and himself, but he had had to leave almost everything behind. He hadn't minded so much leaving his farm and the old house, but he regretted having to give up his paintings—a fine collection of French Impressionists—and his first editions, which included the complete works of Franz Kafka. Fortunately, he had some American securities, which he had bought as early as 1933, and he figured that the income from them would be just about enough for him and his mother to live on very modestly in America. He had asked Dr. Hudec, the bank's counsel, to take care of his things. Dr. Hudec was obligated to Reiner—indeed, owed his

position to the *Herr Direktor*—and had promised to do all he could. "We'll be back as soon as this is over," Reiner had said to him. "My place is here."

ONE evening in June, 1945, the Reiners were having dinner at a Viennese place near Seventy-second Street when they were joined by Dr. Hermann, a friend and fellow-refugee who had been a noted corporation lawyer in Prague. After greetings had been exchanged, Reiner pointed to the food on his plate and made a face. "They call this boiled beef, but it's a far cry from the boiled beef at Piskaček's."

Dr. Hermann sighed deeply. "Piskaček," he said, pronouncing the name of the famous Prague restaurant in a melodious, wistful way. "Sounds like another world."

"Tomorrow we'll eat at home," Reiner said. "I'll go over to the market and get a young chicken, cleaned and washed, ready to cook. You put it into boiling water and that's all. Mother likes the soup, and one chicken is enough for two dinners."

Dr. Hermann agreed that one couldn't eat well in restaurants these days and, besides, it was too expensive. "Why don't you buy that ready-made chicken in glass jars?" he said. "You have only to heat it and serve it."

"Mother doesn't like food that comes in cans and jars," Reiner said. "She thinks it loses its nutrition value in those containers."

Old Mrs. Reiner nodded and said, "Why, look at the bread they have here. Packed in cellophane and cut in slices. Does it smell like bread? Does it taste like bread?"

"There is a baker on Second Avenue who has very good rye bread," Dr. Hermann said. "Almost as good as back home. When I get there the next time, I'll buy you a loaf, too."

"You are always so attentive, Dr. Hermann," the old lady said. She took another swallow of coffee. "When do you think we'll go back home, now that the war is over?"

"President Beneš's last speech was hopeful," the lawyer said. He added, "Of course, the question remains whether it will ever be over for *us* who are here in America."

Old Mrs. Reiner gave him a startled glance and Reiner spoke sharply. "What's the matter, Dr. Hermann? You were always an optimist."

"If I were not an optimist, I'd tell you what they are thinking of us back home," Dr. Hermann said. "While they have suffered hunger and persecution,

we have been sitting here pretty safely. Besides, the people who now have our houses and businesses won't be very happy to have to turn them back to us. If there is anything left—" He stopped abruptly.

"But why shouldn't there be anything left, Dr. Hermann?" old Mrs. Reiner asked. She looked perturbed.

"The wind has changed," Dr. Hermann said. "Now it blows from the East. The more I see of it, the less I like it." He sighed and got up. "Well, I must be running along. I'm going to see Lilian Harvey in one of her old movies. They play it on Eighty-sixth Street. Next week, they'll play 'Zwei Herzen im Dreivierteltakt.' *Rukulíbám, milostivá paní.*" He kissed Mrs. Reiner's hand and bowed to Reiner and left.

They stared after him in silence; then old Mrs. Reiner took her son's hand and asked, "Edi, why did he say, 'If there is anything left?'" She stared into her son's face, intently.

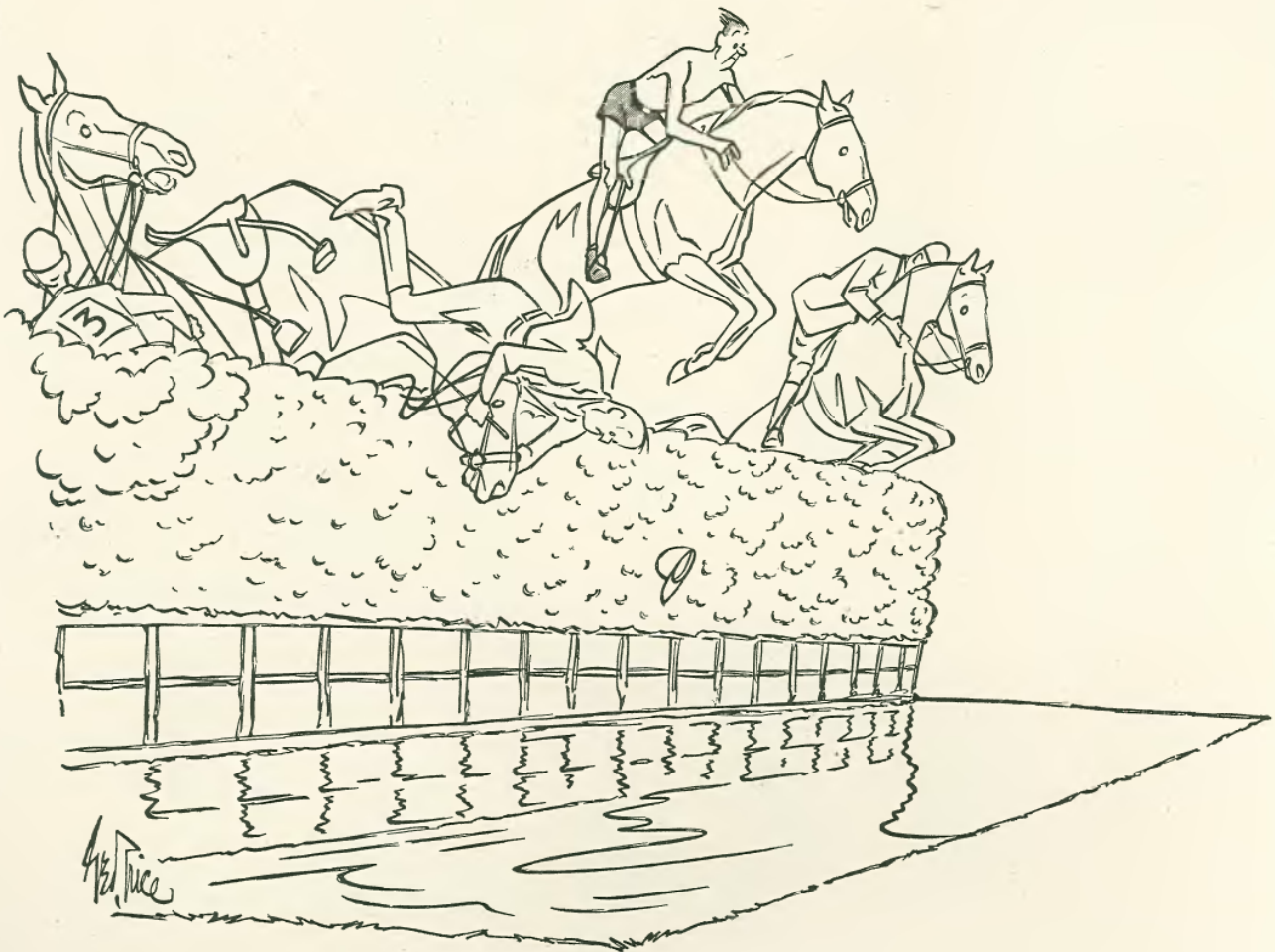
Reiner shrugged. "Hermann likes to be theatrical. He is a good lawyer, but he's never had any vision," he said, with the superior calm that had been widely admired at his bank during market crises. "He simply doesn't know what

he is talking about. As soon as things settle down a little, I'll go to Washington and get our visas. Let's go, Mother. Time for you to get home."

During the summer and early fall, Reiner often took his mother over to Riverside Park, where they sat on a bench in a quiet side lane while he read the papers to her. He was a subscriber to the *New-Yorské Listy*, the Czech-language daily, and the *Aufbau*, a German-language weekly. During the war, when one couldn't write or receive any letters from overseas, the papers had been the most vital link between themselves and the world they had known. When he had read to his mother about the V-bomb terror in London, she had said, "Poor Leo and Lucie. First they had so much trouble getting into England, and now all those horrible things." The strained situation in Palestine gave Mrs. Reiner occasion to worry about Agnes Keller, her dearest friend, in Tel Aviv. When the papers reported the gallant stand of the Czechoslovak Brigade in Ruthenia, she had said, "God bless our little nephew Robert. He is with them, isn't he? It's hard to realize that Robert must be nineteen now. I still see him come to our house every

Saturday. He always got strawberry jam smeared all over his mouth. Marie gave it to him. Marie gave him everything he wanted. She spoiled him too much." Marie had been their cook for eighteen years. She was a gruff old misanthrope and an excellent cook. Reiner had said, "I wonder, Mother, whether Marie is still in the house!" And his mother had replied, "Of course she is. I told her to wait there and she promised me."

THE news from Prague had been bad enough during the war, but it scarcely improved, the Reiners felt, in the autumn that followed the war's end. Several of their relatives had vanished. They had been deported to Poland and most probably had died in concentration camps. Czechoslovakia was free again and Beneš was back in Prague, but, reading the newspaper stories, Reiner couldn't help having a feeling of hopelessness—something he had never known before, not even in the darkest days, when one still knew that things *couldn't* always remain like that. Even more disturbing than the newspaper stories—of Beneš signing decrees about the partition of all



large estates and the nationalization of all mines, utilities, and foundries employing more than five hundred people—had been the letters from people in Europe and from people who went back to find that they weren't welcome any longer, from people who were *afraid* to go back.

Reiner had been so shocked and bewildered and frightened by these reports and rumors that when news came of the requisitioning of the large farm he owned outside of Prague, he had been almost indifferent. He ceased to care about the bank, too. He hadn't even been upset when he heard that the bank, *his* bank, now housed the headquarters of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. All he wanted back was the old house. His mother would never be happy anywhere else. As soon as postal communications were restored, he had written to Dr. Hudec, asking him about the house and his paintings. "We intend to return in the near future," he had said.

"He will answer at once by air mail," Reiner had told his mother. He had sounded as though Dr. Hudec were still his bank's counsel, always at the *Herr Direktor's* disposal. But after weeks of waiting for an answer to the letter and to two subsequent cables, Reiner had begun to wonder whether something hadn't happened to Hudec—though even in such a case his office should have answered *immediately*. Then, one afternoon, Dr. Hermann had called at the Reiners' apartment with news of Hudec. "He managed to make the half-left turn," Dr. Hermann said. "I've just had a letter with news about him. It seems that he's doing much better than before '38. And I can remember the days when he, in person, accompanied the sheriff, trying to attach someone's personal belongings for a measly two-hundred-koruny judgment, because he couldn't afford any office help. There is another postwar career for you."

Old Mrs. Reiner had grasped her son's hand. "Do you think something may be wrong, Edi?" she asked. "Perhaps some people live in our house and they don't want to move out—"

"Don't worry, Mother," Reiner had said. "I'll send Hudec a cable today." He didn't say anything about the two cables he had already sent.

Dr. Hudec's answer finally came by mail a few weeks later. It spoke of the "generally unsettled conditions" that made it difficult—at the moment, at least—to have any definite news. Of course, he was undertaking "so far as

PALM BEACH SUMMER: THE DEAD SEASON

A trance of summer holds and holds, and folds
The sunlight, lap and overlap. There are
In this winter city interminable silence
And too much sun and too much loneliness.
As in a frieze, the vacant coast lies still,

Over the sand the heat unwinds like wire.
But at night, when the wind is off the sea,
The palms shake softly in the phosphor moon,
The bloated jasmine drift in the silent streets.
Then it's the frieze in motion. It is this that frightens.

The shops are shuttered; the spangled mannequins wrapped
In burlap, only in winter to rise like Venus,
Dripping gold coins. The great houses are shuttered;
Where once their bright-eyed heiresses were dancing,
The aimless hummingbirds spill tuneless music.

The exodus is over, the luggage packed.
Children and nursemaids play at Bailey's Beach,
The last compartment for Bar Harbor bought,
The last plane chartered. And the sunlight moves like a flood
Through the formal gardens, up the vacant stairs.

Stroll down Australian Avenue to the sea.
Where are the girls in white shorts and white halters,
Where are the sun-goggled beauties? Where is a winter
With its glittering pianos, its promise of happiness?
The rasping cicadas make ambiguous answer.

A lazy gardener clips at a boxwood hedge.
I shout "Hello," to hear my voice, to hear
His voice, to know—uncertain—we still live.
I stop at a corner shop and buy three mangoes.
We are figures in a frieze, the dead in motion.

But soon in September the hurricane season will come.
I wait for the wind to rise up over Cuba,
And tear up the paper waters to Key West,
And past Key Largo roar, and past Miami—
I wait for the thunder and the sundered palms.

—WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

is feasible" to safeguard Reiner's claims. What puzzled Reiner more than the coolly impersonal tone of the letter was a postscript it bore. Dr. Hudec had always had the irritating habit of putting the most important item of a letter in a postscript. It read, "Under the circumstances, I cannot conscientiously recommend that you consider returning now or in the near future."

The old woman gazed at her son. "What does he write, Edi?" she asked.



From the North River came the sound of a tugboat's whistle. She leaned out of the window and looked toward Riverside Park. "It must be lovely in our *Stromovka* gardens now," she said. "Funny, when I look out from here, I think I always see the banks of the Vltava and the *Stromovka* and, somewhere in the rear, the Hradčany Castle." She sighed.

Reiner looked at her, the frail body silhouetted against the window frame, and beyond her the walls of a tall, ugly apartment house, and then he looked at the letter again. "Dr. Hudec writes that everything is fine," he said. "Just a couple of months, Mother, until we get our passports and papers, and we will be back in our old house."

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG