

GERTRUDE LAWRENCE

A Star Danced

Table of contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	23
Chapter 3	41
Chapter 4	57
Chapter 5	75
Chapter 6	81
Chapter 7	93
Chapter 8	101
Chapter 9	115
Chapter 10	123
Chapter 11	129
Chapter 12	143
Chapter 13	155
Chapter 14	163
Chapter 15	181
Chapter 16	189
Chapter 17	207
Chapter 18	221
Chapter 19	235

CHAPTER 1

“Lunch in London, the day after tomorrow...”

The skipper dropped the words out of one corner of his mouth without disturbing the cigarette in the other corner. He disposed of some three thousand miles of atmosphere as nonchalantly as you would toss a peanut shell over your shoulder.

I blinked. But only once. After all, the past two days had been so fantastic that this ultimate scene and conversation on the brilliantly lighted airfield outside a city in one of the Southern states, beside the big airliner which was to take me to England in a scheduled thirty-six hours, seemed part and parcel of the events that had been happening thick and fast ever since the telephone woke me at seven o'clock one morning.

The telephone had summoned me from a dream in which Richard and I were running, hand in hand, down our own narrow strip of Cape Cod beach into the ocean. Sleepily, unwilling to let go of that dream, I reached for the receiver and held it to my ear. New York calling. At Dennis,

Cape Cod, at seven o'clock of a May morning, New York seems as far away as London or Timbuktu.

"Are you up?" the voice of my lawyer demanded crisply.

Knowing me as she does, this was purely a rhetorical question which, I felt, did not rate an answer. She went on: "Get up! Right away! Get yourself onto the first plane, or the first train, into New York. I've just had word from the Air Ministry in Washington that there is space for you on the British Airways plane leaving at midnight tomorrow. You're on your way."

After weeks of more or less patient waiting, repeated timid, pleading, urgent, and finally importunate requests to the authorities who rule such matters in Washington and London, and a rapid-fire barrage of telegrams, cables, and telephone calls, it had happened. At last I had permission to do what I had been wanting desperately to do for four years—go to England and do my bit on a tour for E.N.S.A. Though no one knew just when, everyone was aware that the invasion of Europe was imminent. More than anything in the world I wanted the opportunity to entertain the British and American troops who would soon be fighting in France.

Basil Dean, founder and director of E.N.S.A.—the British equivalent of the U.S.O.—had cabled, asking me to come; but getting a priority to make the crossing and getting a place aboard a plane had taken a lot of wire-pulling at the American end. Now, I was really on my way home to London which I had not seen in six years. I would see my old friends, or at least those who remained of that gay com-

pany after the Battle of Britain—those who weren't fighting in Italy or the Near and Far East, or on any one of the seven seas.

And I might see Richard.

That thought brought me out of bed and under the shower in one swift leap. From then on the next two days were one mad rush, winding up with the final leap to the airport.

And now here I was, ready to board the big airliner for the hop to Newfoundland. I caught my breath, and did my best to imitate the casual-almost-to-the-point-of-boredom air shown by all members of all the air forces I have ever met when they are about to take off.

I was assured of passage to Newfoundland, where we were due to land at 9:00 A.M. the next day. Whether there would be a place for me in the plane going on from there to Ireland remained disturbingly uncertain. We all joked about it, standing there beside the plane. The others were sure of their passage all the way to England. They were officials or had diplomatic passports and were bursting with priorities. But I had only a number-three priority, which guaranteed me nothing much more than leave to hitch-hike.

Ernest Hemingway was among the favored ones. I met him then for the first time. There is something about Mr. Hemingway that makes one think of a small boy—a rather mischievous small boy whose pockets are full of bits of string, old rusty nails, chewing gum, and maybe a pet toad

or two. A small boy hiding behind a big, bushy beard. He asked me, grinning:

“Suppose there is no place for you on the plane? What will you do?”

“Stow away,” I retorted, “in your beard!”

This, I found, was Hemingway’s first visit to England. How strange and sad, too, to have one’s first glimpse of London in her grim battle dress.

My first view of Newfoundland, from about five thousand feet, was of an enormous black-and-brown land splashed with snow, like a huge chocolate cake with white icing. All around was a calm, oily, gray sea and, overhead, a beautiful clear, cloudless sky. We had breakfast in the cabin of the plane before we docked. Then we went out to breathe the fresh, salty, fishy-smelling air, stretch our legs, and see the sights. The airport was full of Canadian, British, and American airmen from the planes which ferry steadily back and forth across the North Atlantic. You felt you were getting close to the fighting front, even though several thousand miles of ocean still stretched between Newfoundland and Europe. Here, everyone was engaged, in one way or another, in getting on with the war. The little town was crowded. People spoke matter-of-factly about hopping from continent to continent.

Recalling letters from England and tales of food shortages over there, I did some prudent shopping and emerged triumphantly with a watch, which I had forgotten to get in New York, two pounds of butter, and a dozen eggs. I tried to buy some lemons, which I knew were regarded in Eng-

land as extinct, but they were extinct that day in Newfoundland also.

The local paper announced that the Germans were retreating in Italy. Good! The invasion of Europe was believed to be very near now. And it was reported that Roosevelt would run again. I wished my chances of holding my seat (in the plane) were as good as his.

After lunch and the arrival of the Pan-American Clipper, bringing more passengers bound for England, I was assured there was a place for me on the plane leaving at one-fifteen. I told Ernest Hemingway:

“Your beard is now safe from British invasion.”

For the next eighteen hours, during eight of which I slept soundly, we flew so high, sometimes at an altitude of eight thousand feet, that there was nothing to see but clouds. How strange was the knowledge that far below was the stretch of tossing gray ocean I had crossed so many times since my first trip to America in 1924, when I came over with the cast of *Charlot's Revue*. Strange to think that, far below us, the American and British navies were patrolling those same waters to protect the convoys of transports and freighters which were plying back and forth with men and war matériel.

Just after daylight we had our first glimpse of Ireland—lush green fields and the heather-colored mountains of Connemara with the morning mists curling from their crests like ostrich feathers. Disturbingly peaceful it seemed after the warlike atmosphere one felt in Newfoundland. Fat white sheep grazed placidly in the fields that bordered the

road by which we motored from Limerick. Several times our car slowed down to clear the road for the herds of young beef cattle, bound (as I hoped) eventually for England. Every letter I had had from friends at home had spoken wistfully of the past days of plenty. Though none of the writers complained, you read between the lines the same longing you see in children's faces pressed against a sweet-shop window.

We took off again late that afternoon and put down at Croydon about seven o'clock. The skipper, who had promised me lunch in London that day, was only five hours out on his calculation.

Flying across southern England, I wondered where Richard was and how soon I might see him. After all, I couldn't expect the American Navy to adjust its plans to allow one of its lieutenant commanders to be at Croydon to meet his wife. But, being a woman, I couldn't help wishing.

In the excitement of actually recognizing the big, familiar field just below us, I bounced in my seat—and promptly broke two of the precious eggs in my lap.

"My God, woman," said Hemingway, helping me clean up the mess, "what are you going to do *now*?"

"Fortunately, I'm the same shape front and back," I told him. I jerked my tweed skirt around so that the egg stain was behind me, buttoned my fur coat, and assured myself, as I tripped down the gangplank, that I was making as neat an entrance as any in my career.

It was eight o'clock, the dinner hour, when I drove up to the dear familiar Savoy. It was not yet dark, just the beloved

twilight, yet London's streets were strangely quiet and free of traffic. There were great gaps in the familiar skyline and piles of rubble along the streets we drove through. All the way over I had been steeling myself for this, my first view of bombed London. I knew it was going to be hard to take. There was bound to be that wrenching struggle between the impulse to cry out and the feeling that one simply dared not give way to one's feelings. London is my home town. I was born there in Kennington Oval. I grew up within the sound of Bow Bells. I spoke with a cockney accent until I was eleven or thereabouts, when Miss Italia Conti scolded and drilled me out of it. In London I have been by turns poor and rich, hopeful and despondent, successful and down and out, utterly miserable and ecstatically, dizzily happy. I belong to London as each of us can belong to only one place on this earth. And, in the same way, London belongs to me.

The windows of my room at the Savoy looked out over the Thames Embankment. After a solitary dinner, as I stood there looking down, I had my first sharp realization of what war had done to my town. An impenetrable black curtain seemed to have fallen between me and the city. The enveloping blackness in which the stars seemed unreally bright and near and the unusual, wary, listening stillness were more impressive at that moment than the destruction wrought by the bombs. They filled me with a swift, blinding fury against the enemy who could muffle the voice and force of the greatest and most tolerant city in the world. Suddenly the silence overhead was cut by the whir of fly-