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INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT

OUR train drove on through the chirping crickets of a hot midsummer night, through the quiet plains of eastern France. The occupants of my compartment ate sandwiches desultorily and peered at one another. At times the train would stop, for no apparent cause, and as we sat a voice would be heard saying, "It's the trains, you know. They haven't been the same since the war." And the warm, scented air would drift in the window, questioning the reality of that destruction, leaving away the latest memory of a stricken Calais. Then we would move on again and, dozing, I could hear the wheels catching up the echoes of my mind: Switzerland, Switzerland for a holiday. Join our party now, still a few vacancies, still a few, still a few...

WE changed trains at Paris about midnight, and to our somnolent eyes the platform scene seemed more than ordinarily confused. There was a great shouting and waving of lights; porters, guards and passengers, surging in unspecified directions, fell eagerly over one another; questions framed in halting French floated wanly unanswered until swallowed by the ocean of Parisian vernacular. Or a voice, rising thinly out of the confusion, would remark, "I say, this is a bit thick." Eventually I found myself on the platform securely moored to one end of a vast wardrobe trunk which, I had rightly concluded, belonged to one of the members of my party. Its owner was at the other end, looking confused but English.

Written for "The Listener"
by J. R. MINOGUE

"Is it always like this?" I asked.
"Yes," she said. "Well, just now, anyway. It's the height of the tourist season and this train goes right through to Italy."
"Do you know the number of our carriage?"
"I haven't any idea. Miss Thingummy has all the tickets." Miss Thingummy was our organiser, and, seeking her vainly in the confusion, we could only hope that she still retained her active capacity. Then we saw her head poking out of a carriage window, and though her words were inaudible her gestures were meaningful enough. Someone took possession of my end of the trunk and I was left to haul my haversack aboard. The passage, however, was completely blocked with suitcases and unseated travellers, so I sat on the haversack and dozed off to the tune of an insistently agonised voice repeating, "I just can't believe that I shall have to sit here all the way to Domodossola. I just can't believe..."

A VOICE said sharply, "What are you doing here?" and there was the organiser, looking ruffled but triumphant.

"Phew! these French trains," she said. "All our booked seats had been taken and I've had the dickens of a job getting everyone out of them. But you can come along now, if you can get through." Somehow or another I did, to find my compartment occupied by four women and one enraged Frenchman, who was prancing furiously before them.

"What's the matter?" I whispered to the girl next me.

"I don't know. I thought it was about his seat, but it must be something much worse than that. He's been going for about five minutes." With scarcely more than a few words of French between us the greater part of his voiced disapproval was without significance, but as the moments, stiff with embarrassment, passed his meaning became more clear. He pointed at his first war medal ribbons, at his hair, at us and at the heavens. Then suddenly he stopped shouting and his body sagged with what seemed to be the utter humiliation and futility of it all. With bowed head he left the compartment and then, in an inspired moment, slammed the door and leant invincibly against it. No one could get in or out. He grimaced at us through the glass and began to tell the woman beside him of his coup d'etat. They doubled up with laughter.

BY this time our British sangfroid had almost deserted us.

"Let's force the door," said one woman, no longer in her first youth. "We can't stand for that."
"No, don't take any notice," said another. The door opened a few inches and the Frenchman hurled an imprecation in; a fatal mistake for the organiser arrived simultaneously. There was a scuffle which we won by weight of numbers, and when the door finally crashed shut she was inside and nursing no more than a squashed finger.

"Are you all here?" she asked when she could speak.

"We don't know who's meant to be here," said someone, and then a young, fair girl squeaked, "Oh, where's my cousin?"

"Which one is she?"
"The one with the wardrobe trunk."
"I saw her last on the platform," I said.

"Oh, her," said the organiser. "By the way, for the benefit of those who don't know, my name's Belton. Lorna Belton. She's on board, but she got stuck in the passage with her trunk."

"It's always the same," said the fair girl. "I'm sure I don't know what she puts in it."

THE door opened again with sounds of protest and a man came in.

"Hullo, Gordon," said Miss Belton. "How did you manage it?"

"What is all this?" said Gordon. He was fat, and a slightly injured expression sat uneasily on his pleasant face. "Some old buffer tried to tell me I couldn't get in here."

"Another member of our party. Mr. Searle," said Miss Belton. "He's in next door with the others. That man says



He insisted on waking each one of us and shaking hands

that we'd no right to take his seat, although we'd booked it. Says it's a French train and he was here first. He fought with us in 1914 and now look what happens. I don't know how I ever got him out," Gordon looked at him sourly.

"Putting on a bit of a show, isn't he?" he said.

"I'll try offering him a cigarette," said Miss Belton. "We don't want to offend him unnecessarily." She held out her case to the Frenchman, who held his nose.

"Oh, dear," said the fair girl, "I think that's my cousin. She's having a bit of trouble." The Frenchwoman had blocked her passage, but after a shortlived struggle she catapulted groaning into our midst.

"The old thing," she said, feeling her back. "She waited till I'd got past and then jabbed me in the back with her elbow as hard as she could." She sat down gingerly beside me.

"Where's your luggage?" said Miss Belton.

"I've been sitting on it in the corridor. I couldn't get past people and no one would help me with it. I'll have to go back soon because I'm afraid someone might get off with it."

"I shouldn't worry," said her cousin. "They'd need an elephant. Anyway, you can't get out now."

"I'll help you," said Gordon, "but it will have to be later, when these people have calmed down a bit. I'd put the light out in the meantime and then they can't see you." We followed his advice and, gently, peace descended.

Hours later it seemed the door snapped open, the light went on, and there was the Frenchman. He was getting off the train, he said, and after a short but eloquent speech he insisted on waking each one of us and shaking hands. The door slammed shut and he was gone. I sat considering the incident.

"Have we forgiven him, then?" I asked Miss Belton.

"No," she answered, a little bitterly, "he's forgiven us." And the train lumbered on through the sweet-scented darkness that was still France.