

One of the Girls in Our Party by Thomas Wolfe  
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The mid-day meal was ended and "the tour"—a group of thirty women, all of them teachers from the public schools of the American middle west—had got up from their tables and left the dining-room of the sedate little Swiss hotel where they were quartered. Now they were gathered in the hall beyond: their voices, shrill, rasping and metallic, could be heard lifted in a united clamor of strident eagerness. In a moment one of the older women, who wore an air of authority, returned to the dining-room, and looking through the door at two young women who were still seated at one of the tables hastily bolting a belated luncheon, she called imperatively:

"Miss Turner! Miss Blake! Aren't you coming? The bus is here."

"All right!" Miss Turner, the smaller of the two women, was the one who answered. "In a moment."

"Well, you hurry then," the woman said in an admonishing tone as she turned to go. "Everyone else is ready: we're waiting on you."

"Come on," Miss Turner said quickly, in a lowered tone, as she turned to Miss Blake, "I guess we'd better go. You know how cranky they get if you keep them waiting."

"Well, you go on then," said Miss Blake calmly. "I'm not coming." Miss Turner looked at her with some surprise. "I've decided to pass this one up. I've got some letters to answer, and if I don't do it now, they just won't get answered."

"I know," said Miss Turner. "I haven't written a word to any one in two weeks. The way they keep you on the go there's no time to write." The two women got up from the table, moved toward the door, and there faced each other in a gesture of instinctive farewell. Then for a moment each stood in a constrained and awkward silence, as if waiting for the other one to speak. It was Miss Turner who first broke the pause:

"Well," she said, "I guess that means I won't see you again, will I?"

"Why?" Miss Blake said. "You'll come back here before you get your train, won't you?"

"No," said Miss Turner, "I don't think so. They've taken our baggage to the station and I think we're going to get out there on the way back—I mean, all the girls in *my* party."

"Well," Miss Blake said, in her curiously flat and toneless way, "I guess I won't see you, then—not until we get to Vienna, anyway. I'll see you there."

"Yes," Miss Turner agreed, "and I want to hear all about it, too. I almost wish I were going along with you—I've always wanted to see Italy—I'd almost rather go there than where we're going, but then you can't take in everything at one time, can you?"

"No," Miss Blake agreed, "you certainly can't."

"But I think it's just wonderful how much you do see!" Miss Turner went on with considerable enthusiasm. "I mean, when you consider that the whole tour only lasts six weeks from the time you leave home, it's wonderful how much you do take in, isn't it?"

"Yes," Miss Blake said, "it certainly is."

"Well, good-bye. I guess I'd better go."

“Yes, you’d better,” Miss Blake answered. “I wouldn’t want you to miss the bus. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” Miss Turner answered, “I’ll see you in Vienna. Have a good time, and take care of yourself, now.”

“All right,” Miss Blake said flatly. “You do the same.”

Miss Blake watched the bus go, then turned and went quickly upstairs to her room and set to work on her unfinished letters. She wrote:

England was the first place we went to when we left the ship. We were in England a whole week, but it rained all the time we were in London. The coffee that they drink is awful. All the traffic goes to the left in London, and none of the girls could get used to this. Miss Cramer, who is one of the girls in our party, came within an inch of being run over one day because she was looking in the wrong direction; I know they have a lot of accidents. London was also the place where Miss Jordan slipped and fell and sprained her ankle when getting out of the bus. She is one of the girls in our party. She didn’t get to see anything of London because she was in bed all the time we were there and has been walking on a cane with her ankle taped ever since. But we took two bus-tours while we were in London that covered the whole city. In the morning we saw the Bank of England and the Tower of London and the Crown Jewels and came back for lunch to an old inn where Doctor Johnson, who was a good friend of Shakespeare’s, used to eat. Miss Barrett was especially interested in this as she teaches English literature in the Senior High at Moline. She is one of the girls in our party. After lunch we saw Trafalgar Square with Nelson’s Monument and the National Gallery. We didn’t stay long at the National Gallery, we just stopped long enough to say we’d seen it. Then we visited the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey with the Poets’ Corner, and Buckingham Palace with the sentinels on duty walking up and down. We got there just as the King and Queen were driving out; we got a good look at her but you could hardly see the King because of that big hat she was wearing. You couldn’t help feeling sorry for the poor man. As Miss Webster said, he did look so small and henpecked peeking out from behind the edges of that big hat. Miss Webster is one of the girls in our party.

We also spent a day at Oxford. We had good weather there, it didn’t rain at all the day we were there. Then we spent a day at Stratford-on-Avon where Shakespeare was born. But as Miss Webster said, they’ve fixed that house up a lot since he lived in it. It didn’t rain the morning of the day we went to Stratford-on-Avon but it started in again as we were coming back. It rained most of the time we were in England. No wonder everything is so green.

The next country that we visited was Holland. Of all the countries we have been to I like Holland best. Everything was so clean in Holland. We spent three days in Holland, and it didn’t rain the whole time we were there. We were in Amsterdam for a day, and we went out to the Island of Marken where all the people were dressed up in their quaint costumes and even the children wore wooden shoes just the same as they have done for hundreds of years. Miss Turner took some pictures of some children. She is making a collection to show to her classes when she gets back home. It is a very interesting collection, and most of the pictures came out very well. Miss Turner is one of the girls in our party.

We spent another whole day at Haarlem and The Hague. We saw the Palace of Peace and some pictures by Rembrandt, including “The Anatomy Lesson,” which of course was

interesting to me and some more “grist for the mill” as I will be able to make use of all this material in my drawing class when school takes up again.

In Holland we had the nicest guide we met on the whole trip. Everyone was crazy about him, we have thought so often of him, and laughed so much about him, since. He was an old man named Mr. Vogelsang, and when Miss Watson, who is one of the girls in our party, asked him what that name meant, he said the name meant Song-Bird, so after that we called him our Song-Bird. You couldn't get the best of Mr. Vogelsang, no matter what you said. He always had an answer ready for you. We have laughed so much about it since whenever we thought of Mr. Vogelsang.

Vogelsang iss my name unt dat means Sonk-birt. Sonk-birt by name, sonk-birt by nature; if you are nice to me perhaps I sink for you. Now ve are comink to de olt shot-tower. It vas conshtucted in de year uff sixteen hundert unt t'venty-nine mit contribushions mait by all de burghers uff de town. De roof is all uff golt unt silfer conshtucted vich vas gifen by de laities from deir chewells, ornaments unt odder breicious bossessions. De two fickures dat you see on top uff de olt glock iss subbosed to represent de burgermeister uff dat beriod, Pieter Van Hondercoetter, unt his vife Matilda. Upon de shtroke uff t'ree o'glock you vill see dem come out on de platform, turn unt shtrike mit goltten mallets on de bell— so! it comes now, vatch it!—so! *vun!* de burgermeister shtrikes upon his seit vun time—you see?—So! Now! *two!*—de laity shtrikes upon her seit vun time—so! now! *t'ree*—de burgermeister shtrikes upon his seit— now it iss t'ree o'glock—all iss ofer for anodder hour— unt laities, dat's de only time dat a man has efer been known to haf de last vort mit a voman.

Oh, you couldn't get the best of Mr. Vogelsang, we used to tease him but he always had an answer ready for you.

Now, laities, dis tower vas erected at a cost of t'welluf million guilders witch iss fife million dollars in real money. It took ofer sixteen years to built it, de golt, chewells unt odder breicious metals in de roof alone is vort ofer vun million two hundert unt fifty t'ousand dollars. De tower is two hundert unt sixty-t'ree feet tall from top to bottom unt dere iss tree hundert sixty-fife shtone steps in de shtair case, vun for efery day in de year engrafed mit de name uff a citizen who gafe money for de tower. If you vould like to gount de shteps yourself you gan now glimb to- de top but ass for me I t'ink I shtay here. For ald'ough my name iss Sonk-birt, I am now too olt to fly.

Mr. Vogelsang always had a joke for everything. Well, we all climbed up to the top of the tower then and when we got back down Miss Powers said that Mr. Vogelsang was wrong because she had counted three hundred and sixty-seven steps both ways, and Miss Turner swore that he was right, that she had made it three hundred and sixty-five both up and down. And then Mr. Vogelsang said: “Veil, laities, I tell you how it iss. You are both wronk because I liet to you. I forgot to tell you dis iss leap year, unt ven leap year comes dere is always vun shtep more. Dis year you find dat dere is t'ree hundert sixty-six if you gount again.”

Well, we had to laugh then because you couldn't get the best of Mr. Vogelsang. But Miss Powers was awfully mad and swore that she was right, that she had counted three hundred

and sixty-seven both ways. She and Miss Turner had an argument about it and that's why they've hardly spoken to each other since. But we all liked Holland, it didn't rain there, and everyone was crazy about Mr. Vogelsang.

We were in Paris for four days, and it only rained once. We were really only there three days, we got there late at night, and we were all so tired that we went to bed as soon as we got to the hotel. But we didn't get much sleep, it was the noisiest place you ever saw, and those little taxi horns they have kept tooting all night long right under your window until it almost drove you crazy. Some of the girls thought they'd lost their baggage, it failed to arrive when we did, they almost had a fit. It didn't get there until the day we left for Switzerland and Miss Bradley said her whole stay in Paris was ruined by worrying about it. Miss Bradley is one of the girls in our party.

We took a bus tour the first day and saw Notre Dame and the Latin Quarter, the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triumph, and came back and had lunch at the hotel. After lunch some of the girls went shopping, but the rest of us went to the Louvre. We didn't stay long, just long enough to see what it was like, and to see the Mona Lisa. One night we all had tickets for the Opera, where we saw Faust. The next night we went to the Folies Bergeres and the last night we went up to Montmartre in buses to see the night life there.

Today we are in Montreux: this is the place where the tour splits up, some of the party leaving us to take the trip along the Rhine, and then to Munich, Salzburg, and the Bavarian Alps, while the rest of us are seeing Switzerland and Italy. After visiting Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome, and the Austrian Tyrol, we will join up with the other group in Vienna two weeks from now.

All of us were sorry to say good-bye to most of the girls, but we know it will only be for two weeks' time, and we are all looking forward eagerly to our meeting in Vienna and relating our experiences to one another. But, frankly, there are one or two of the girls we wouldn't miss if we never saw them again. There are always one or two on a party like this who can't adjust themselves to the group and do their best to spoil the trip for everyone. That Miss Powers was one of them. She was always losing her baggage, or forgetting something, and leaving it behind; we got so tired of having her yapping all the time that there were three hundred and sixty-seven steps in that old shot tower, that she was right and Miss Turner wrong, until Miss Turner finally said: "All right, have it your own way—there were three hundred and sixty-seven—who cares about it? Only, for heaven's sake, forget about it, and give the rest of us some peace."

Of course, that only made Miss Powers madder than ever, she was furious about it. She was certainly a pest, if I ever saw one. She was forever coming up to one of the girls and asking her to write something in her memory book. She carried that memory book with her wherever she went, I believe she slept with it under her pillow.

Now when one of the girls wants to be funny, she says, "Won't you please write something in my memory book?"—it's become a regular joke with us. But Miss Powers was certainly a nuisance, and none of the girls are sorry to say good-bye to her.

We have been spending the day in Switzerland. We all visited the League of Nations in Geneva and the famous castle of Chillon this morning. This afternoon, while I am writing this letter, everyone has gone for a bus tour through the Alps. We are leaving for Rome tonight. Well, it has been a wonderful trip and a wonderful experience, as well as being very educational. I can hardly wait now until I get home and have time to think over the many beautiful things I have seen.

The tour has been well run and well conducted from start to finish. And on the whole the girls are enthusiastic about the way the trips have been managed. Of course when you have to cover so many countries—we will have covered nine countries—England, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Germany—by the time we set sail for home again, just thirty-one days after we disembarked—it is wonderful to think of all you do take in in such a short space of time.

I get a little confused sometimes when I try to remember all the places we have been to and all the wonderful things we've seen, and if I come back again I think I will take it a little more slowly and travel in a smaller party, with just a friend or two. But I'm certainly glad I took this tour, it gives you a chance to look around and pick out the high spots, so you will know what you want to see when you come back a second time. And it has certainly been very educational. Still, I won't be sorry to see home again. I am looking forward to it already.

I'm dying to see you and have a good long talk with you as soon as I get back. I'm starved for news. What has happened? Is Ted still going with the Trumbull girl, or has he found himself a new "enamored"? ("Ain't love grand?" Especially when you are seventeen —hah! hah!) Have you been out to the lodge this summer, and were Bill and Lola there? Couldn't we get them to take us out the first week-end after I get back? It will be good to get a cup of real coffee for a change. Summer has come and gone before I knew it, and soon autumn will be here again.

. . . and the smell of the woodsmoke in Ohio and the flaming maples, the nights of the frosty stars, the blazing moons that hang the same way in a thousand streets, slanting to silence on the steeple's slope, nights of the wheel, the rail, the bell, the wailing cry along the river's edge, and of the summer's ending, nights of the frost and silence and the barking of a dog, of people listening, and of words unspoken and the quiet heart, and nights of the old October that must come again, must come again, while we are waiting, waiting, waiting in the darkness for all of our friends and brothers who will not return.

I'll see you in September.