

The Doll Maker

A novel by Erndell Scott

This is an unedited and unformatted excerpt starting from page one, chapter one.

Chapter 1

The steam whistle blew echoing into the misty cold air alerting the dismal world below. Annie shuffled through the barbed wire gates crowded by the other workers at a near run, desperate for warmth. They scurried into the factory with their heads down following the cracks and fissures of the floor, a map they learned well leading them to their workstations. Lights from high above, lost among the steel labyrinths of support structures and years of entangled cobwebs, slowly came to life.

Annie sat down upon her steel work stool. It creaked and tilted, its fasteners aged and rusted. She removed her worn coat, nothing more than a scrap of cloth not recognizable to any one fashion. She reached up to her left and switched on her task lamp, a dull bronze shade that emitted a beam of light exposing tiny delicate ivory fabrics in many shapes set in neat stacks on her sturdy, tarnished oak desk. To her right side on the floor lay dolls of all types in crumpled cardboard boxes, soft shapes of girls, boys, bears, lions and giraffes. She glanced down upon her table at a small, half finished doll in the form of a little girl with black pulled yarn for hair, glass beads for eyes and sewn lips finishing its woolen face. A sparkle from Annie's eyes brightened the dolls smile.

“Good morning Mrs. Penelope. I hope you slept well. I sure didn't. Frau Schnabel's quarters are most unbearable this winter, the frigid drafts from the windows menacing my warmth. I tried to nestle in bed with her as usual but she would have none of it, ‘Not this night Annie’, she said in a drowsy breath as she rolled over and piled her blankets over her head. Frau Schnabel comes home late at night often, Mrs. Penelope, and is never in a splendid mood. I dare not ask her, and it worries me so. I hope that whatever is troubling her passes. Now, as for you Mrs. Penelope, today I'm knitting you a much needed piece of fine lace to accent your coat. It will be most beautiful, a touch of joy to bring you added warmth.”

“Make little talk and more work, Annie, or find yourself to meet a most terrible punishment. The SS auditors prowling about witnessing such banter would have a definite end for you. Don't take Frau Schnabel's kindness for granted. You risk us all and your abilities here do not far outweigh the lives of many. Hurry now and quiet your voice.” The floor superintendent

walked off, her arms rigid, her stride hard without grace, her head swaying left to right, eyeing the hundreds of workers across the floor troubled with despair.

“Frau Wittman is a mean one, Mrs. Penelope ... wha, what did you say? Yes, I suppose I should get back to work ... I mean start to work for my part.” Annie giggled to herself and picked up her knitting needle and lace and began to work.

“One day Mrs. Penelope, we shall leave this haunted place, a sea of ghosts stricken by the torture of time decaying their spirits. We shall find our sanctuary and build beautiful things. But I can tell you we won’t be building paper boats.”

Annie stopped knitting and relaxed her arms to rest upon the desk. “I cry for Otto inside and hope he is well, Mrs. Penelope. I wish to see him again one day. I know it is killing him inside to learn of how I make my paper boats. I trust that alone should keep him alive.” Annie wiped the tear from her eye and continued knitting.

Hours passed and the sun rose steady through the tall, grimy factory windows. Light not subdued by the spoiled glass peeked through the broken panes, offering greater warmth. The whistle blew signaling a break period. Annie gently placed her doll on the table and slid from her stool. She stretched her hands and arms high over her head, her tattered dress following, exposing her belly. She yawned and took a deep breath.

“I don’t know why you stretch Annie, you just sit and craft fun dolls all day while I sew stupid things on German uniforms.”

Annie turned and laughed, “Ha, Eva, there you are with a good bender again. Stop your fretting. It’s no easy chore knitting.”

“It’s easy for you. Despite the appearance of your calloused hands, they’re small enough to fashion the most precious of intricate patterns. That’s why they chose you. Look at my big ugly hands.”

“Yes, well, they are rather large to say the least.”

They both stared at each other and began laughing. “See Annie, there you go ... making jokes again. It’s easy because you smile so much. Your confidence makes me suspect.”

“Otto and I would trade jokes until we could not breathe from the laughter. I should think smiling is far more fun than the alternative. As far as confidence, that is how I survive this hell we are in.”

“Hell? No, this is not hell Annie, I have heard of worse places on earth. Places of great horror and suffering. We are most lucky to be in this place, this ghetto they call it. We have food, little I understand, but food nonetheless. As long as we work and keep shut, the soldiers leave us alone.”

“Have I not told you of the little boy and what happened to him when I first arrived? About how he was thrown to the wall by the officer and smashed? No, my dear Eva, We are in hell. Disguised by the reaper for his own amusing play.”

“Stop it Annie. You are frightening me.”

“I don’t mean to Eva ... you are my friend. You should go, the whistle will blow, get back to your tasks.”

Eva turned away from Annie, a solemn glare raising her fears. She hesitantly glanced back at Annie but then quickly turned away again, her steps carrying her across the floor into the depths of the factory floor.

The whistle blew on time and the masses poured back into the factory and hastened to their stations.

Annie hopped up onto her stool and picked up her knitting needle. She went to pick up a glass bead from a small pile but it slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. She reached down and found the bead resting at the front of a shiny, black leather boot. Her eyes followed the boot up until it ended becoming crisp, black woolen pants. Suddenly, she heard a click and her task lamp switched off. She rose upon her stool and into the glare of a SS officer. To his side steady as a marble statue, were two SS stormtroopers, armed and poised for ill will. Her heart faded.

“Yes, this is the one. Take her. Bring her to me. The men grabbed Annie before she could flinch and pulled her by her arms, dragging her down the troubled concrete floor from the factory. No one dare look and all kept to their business. Annie did not speak, a tear did not fall, and she did not cry or resist her captors.

The superintendent happened to peek from her office window down upon the floor and saw the men take Annie from her station. She raised her eyes, sprang from her chair and rushed down the steps from her perch. She passed Annie’s workstation and continued running to the gates of the factory, but they had vanished. She became frantic and ran back to her office, “Where is Frau Schnabel? Where is she? She quickly rang the phone and cried into the line, “Frau Schnabel? Where is she? They have her! ... I don’t know why, Can you alert Frau Schnabel? ... What do you mean she is not here? ... Where is she?”

The twisted hand cut swiftly through the air and met Annie’s face. Her cheek crushed against her teeth cutting it inside as her head whipped sideways and surrendered to the blow. Blood spewed from her mouth and speckled the pale yellow wall behind her. The right side of her face continued swelling, her eye pulsing and closing, hiding from the terror. “Speak child and rid yourself of this wrath. Let this end and I promise this pain will vacate your mind.”

Annie's head spun and jerked. She struggled to keep it upright as it bobbed left to right and sprang back to face her tormenter. She said nothing. Wisps of her long black hair bunched up in her mouth, seeking shelter from further agony. The rest lay limp and stranded on her bare shoulder. The binds around her wrists holding her to the seat tightened, as her body slumped forward, digging further into her skin.

"Nothing have you?" The hand rose again but was suddenly startled. A frantic, lone angered cry grew louder and louder from outside the room. "Leave her. Leave her alone ... you promised no harm would come to her."

"Frau Schnabel? Who let you enter? You are not welcome. Leave here ... this is of military significance. I warn you not to enter or you'll meet the same ..."

She firmly grasped the door handle with both hands and flung the wooden barrier to the side. With forced steps her presence filled the room, a tear welled in her eye. She remained stoic despite her desperation. "And what, you will hit me? That is hardly a concern of mine, SS Sturmbannführer Rolphe. Your madness is ill justified. This girl knows of no matters of military significance."

The SS Major retracted his hand. Darkness veiled his eyes, the light from the opened doorway played host to his cast shadow that menaced the walls behind him.

"Oh no?" He snaked slowly towards Frau Schnabel, his foul breath liquored and demonic. He sidestepped from her portrait and slithered around her, his venom capturing the air. "Maybe you should like to witness the grisly sight of the latest victim, SS Obersturmführer Wendorff? Vile murders, all of them, the patterns are similar to what has been witnessed in Paris, Amsterdam and Antwerpt. These young girls ... their skin is soft, luscious and unspoiled. They swirl and prance around the loins of wanting men, cackling while they fondle their own wares. The sirens of the dark, they carry out the labors of the devil. They lure the weakness of men to their quarters, invited I admit, and when the throws of lust have vanished, they slash their lovers necks from ear to ear leaving them to choke on their very own blood well before they are to die of their wounds. That Frau Schnabel, to me, is of military significance."

He continued walking around Frau Schnabel, her eyes in a gaze following his trance. "Five officers I have lost to this savagery. Your little doll maker knows of what I speak. She has heard of the tales from amongst the girls of the ghettos ... these cowardly tarts."

"A girl of age nine is then your coward, Major? It would seem she has taken your beating quite well. That's hardly a coward."

"Yes, children usually do well to giving up their secrets quickly. But this one, she is strong. Perhaps a harder, more convincing strike is called for."

Frau Schnabel stepped in front of Annie, “You shall do no such thing. This girl is mine, as promised by you. Need I remind you of our arrangement?” She approached the Major, her voluptuous hips swaying in smooth mesmerizing rhythms. She lifted her hand to her head and released her richly blonde hair from its hold, left to cascade to her nearly exposed chest that lent shape to her deep blue eyes and soft roundish face. She reached out with yearning and pulled the Major towards her, running her left hand to his crotch, and standing on her tip-toes, she opened her mouth and bit the Major’s ear, expelling a heavy breath into his hair. Slowly she lasciviously pulled away and caught his grin.

“Hmm, that is more like it Fraulein. Yes, well, we do have an agreement I suppose.” He turned away and paused, tilting his head to admire his statuesque shadow upon the wall. “Go on then, take her. Be off. She would have spoken if she knew. No child could survive such blows. Yes, take her.” The Major pulled his dagger from its sheath, turned and approached Annie. Frau Schnabel grabbed his arm stopping him short, her mind in terror. The Major grinned and reached behind Annie and cut her binds. Frau Schnabel caught her as she threatened towards the floor, picking her up with both arms as a mother would her baby from her crib. “It is over Annie. Let us find solace.”

Frau Schnabel held her tight to her bosom as she walked from the room not caring to look back at the Major, yet fearful of the coming of his last words she knew were sure to follow.

“Frau Schnabel ... I expect to see you tonight at the usually time.”