

P. Howard

**The 14-Carat
Roadster**

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Chapter One

I

Ivan Gorchev, sailor on the freight ship 'Rangoon', was not yet twenty-one when he won the Nobel Prize in physics. To win a scientific award at such a romantically young age is unprecedented, though some people might consider the means by which it was achieved a flaw. For Ivan Gorchev won the Nobel Prize in physics in a card game, called macao, from a Professor Bertinus, on whom the honour had been bestowed in Stockholm by the King of Sweden a few days earlier. But those who are always finding fault don't like to face facts, and the fact of the matter is that Ivan Gorchev did win the Nobel Prize at the age of twenty-one.

Professor Bertinus, with the Nobel Prize in his briefcase, had boarded ship in Göteborg, and before the ship sailed, the Swedish Franklin Society assembled on deck to present him with the big gold medal for his successful experiments in the splitting of the atom. The ship then departed, and the worthy professor was all impatience to arrive in Bordeaux, where he owned a few acres of vintage, as elderly French civil servants generally did, from the executioner's assistant, to the director of the museum.

Ivan Gorchev, on the other hand, boarded ship in Southampton, to cross the Channel for reasons unknown even to himself. It's true that he had been fired from a freight ship (the Rangoon) because he had used a four-pointed boat hook to beat up the navigator. But as to why anyone who had beaten up a navigator and been fired from a freight ship would want to cross the Channel, we do not understand any more than so many of our hero's actions.

Another perplexing fact is how this frivolous young man was able to become acquainted with the world-famous scientist; what is particularly obscure is how he was able to convince the aged and reticent professor to play, even for very small stakes, macao, a game of chance prohibited in many countries. We must resign ourselves to ignorance of these details. Allegedly the whole thing began when the professor became seasick on deck. Gorchev offered him a pleasant-tasting lemon-cognac-sodium bicarbonate drink of his own concoction. The professor recovered, and asked the young man who he was, and from where he had come.

„My name is Ivan Gorchev, twenty-one-year-old by profession, and son of the brother of Baron Gorchev of the Tsar's Chamber, from the family of Nasya Goryodin. My father was a captain in the guard and my uncle, as the military commander of the Yustvesti Verstkov, defended Odessa against the rebellious naval forces.”

Naturally, not one word of all this was true. But the gullibility of very young girls and aged scientists is apparently boundless. The professor put on his pince-nez. „So, you are an emigrant.”

„Definitely Professorovitch Uncleushka,” Gorchev answered, with a sigh. „Once in high spirits, my father gave ten thousand roubles to the Tsar's ballet... And he was flown to Tsarskoe Selo in a troika with a gold escutcheon on it... Oh, kontusovka! Oh, Volga, if only I could be there once again...”

„But listen, you can't remember Russia if you are only twenty-one!”

„That makes it all the more difficult, Uncleushka Professorovska! Just imagine! I have never once seen that magnificent snowy land which so unforgettably lives in my memory...”

„And where are you *en route* to now, Mr. Gorchev?”

„I’m travelling for political purposes, disguised as a sailor.”

If we have observed our hero scrupulously, then we will have noted something peculiar about him: he never told the truth, but then he never lied either. It was just that he said, without hesitation, anything and everything that came into his mind - a habit that plunged him into many astounding situations. His words rarely followed a logical line; nor, for that matter, did his actions.

„Unfortunately I’m travelling with very little money,” he went on. „A scoundrel cheated me of everything.”

„How on earth did it happen?”

„I was unsuspecting and stupid. One becomes acquainted with all sorts of shifty characters, without ever thinking of the consequences. It just happened that in London a crook taught me to play macao, and won all my money.”

„Forgive me for saying so, but that really wasn’t very clever of you. What sort of game is this macao?”

Gorchev sighed again, and pulled out a pack of cards from his pocket.

„Well, you see... we deduct the tens column from the total value of the cards, whereby in all cases, nine is the highest possible count...”

The professor tried his luck, on a five-centime basis, and won ten francs. Later, after he had lost two thousand, they raised the stakes. Then they raised them a number of times, and by the time they reached Bordeaux, Ivan Gorchev had won the entire Nobel Prize to the last centime, from the professor. And had the professor been going as far as Nice the ambitious young man would probably have won the large gold medal of the Swedish Franklin Society itself. (This precious medal was awarded to an elite for successful experiments in the field of atom splitting.)

At the age of twenty-one this, too, would have been an unprecedented achievement on the part of our hero. Unfortunately, the professor departed at Bordeaux with the large gold medal of the Swedish Franklin Society and with some sad ponderings on the wastefulness of French colleges, whose syllabuses did not include the teaching of the game of chance called macao. Gorchev stood by the rail of the ship, deeply moved, and waved after the professor for a long time, with a handkerchief.

II

What does a man do at twenty-one, without a trace of seriousness in him, when he unexpectedly comes into unbelievable wealth? This question Gorchev asked himself, and immediately answered himself.

Get off in Nice! Wander around the harbour. And look for some companion. This stuff isn’t worth a damn if one can’t squander it in company.

Who’d be the lucky one? He looked around the harbour.

His attention was attracted by an individual on the shore who had the appearance of a delivery-man; he stood at the place where the dock workers gathered; he wore a brown jacket,

and a black bathing suit. All the others had taken themselves off to some work, and only he stayed. What made him peculiar was his pince-nez, and the yellow towel on his shoulders he had substituted for a shirt, sticking the fringed ends into his bathing suit. The slightly negligent appearance of these trunks was balanced by a straw hat in fairly good condition, though perhaps a half size smaller than might have made it perfect, but its rim was in almost perfect state. The individual's thick black clipped moustache was the centrepiece of a scornful and sorrowful grimace of wrinkles. The man looked tearfully choleric. Meantime, he picked his teeth, perhaps because that was to have at least a realistic substitute for the illusion of eating. It began to look as if he wouldn't find work for that day, when a foreman called to him.

„Hullo there! Come to the fifth basin, crates have to be loaded.”

„Are they heavy?”

The foreman's eyes bulged stonily. No dock worker had ever asked such a question!

„Forgive me,” explained the gentleman in the brown jacket with a tinge of nervousness in his voice, „but I have to know, because I had a hernia a few years ago.”

„Idiot,” said the foreman and continued on his way.

„A fine man, is all I can say,” mumbled our man scornfully.

Gorchev, who had overheard the conversation, immediately felt that this was his man and stepped up to him.

„Tell me something. Do you want to work?!”

„I am not an idler!”

„That's too bad, but never mind. If you must, then work. What's your favourite occupation?”

The man questioned looked at himself, at his skinny legs, his comical trunks, at the round-edged brown jacket, and then shrugged:

„How can you ask a thing like that? I would like to be a secretary.”

„Well, then you're lucky I came this way. From now on, you're my secretary. Your salary will be two thousand francs a month. What's your name?”

„Vanek.”

„Good name, that. Here is one month's salary, three thousand francs.”

„You said two.”

„I gave you a rise because you have shown amazing progress in a very short time. Here...”

„Of course,” said Mr. Vanek, as he crumpled the money into his breast pocket a little nervously, as one who doesn't like to be troubled with such trifles, „I shall have to know what my duties are.”

„You will have many. What they are, I don't know yet. But that's unimportant, anyway. Don't worry, your luck's in, old boy...”

„As I have said, my name is Vanek,” the favoured replied with cool stress, refusing all familiarity.

„Excuse me, Mr. Vanek,” said Gorchev. „You are a remarkable find,” he added with satisfaction.

He liked people with self-respect, who not even when the going is good, will forget what they owe to themselves.

„If you are interested, I can tell you from what heights I’ve dropped, and so low...”

„I’m not interested, but you can tell me. However, if you’d refrain I would be much obliged.”

„As you wish... I don’t force myself on anyone. What shall I do for the present?”

„I don’t know yet, but we’ll think of something. Now I’m off to look around Nice, and if I am in need of you, I will inform you, my dear friend...”

„My name is Vanek.”

„Mr. Vanek... Excuse me. I’m pleased that you are so sensitive. I don’t like normal people anyway. Well, let’s meet here shortly.”

„Shall I stay here?”

„Leave if you want.”

„But then you won’t find me.”

„It doesn’t matter. Good day.” And Gorchev hurried away joyfully.

He was very happy that he could give Mr. Vanek money. Although surely Mr. Vanek will vanish with the three thousand francs, since he will fear that Gorchev’s attendants will appear and insist that he return the insane man’s thoughtless gift.

Gorchev went straight in the direction of Nice’s marvellous marine promenade, which is called ‘Plage’ and where the most illustrious hotels of the Cote d’Azur line up on the seaside, among the palm trees. Here he sat down in the restaurant of the unmistakably aristocratic ‘Hotel Méditerranée’. The guests who had been nonchalantly basking in the sun looked with horror at this young man with a child’s face, wearing off-white canvas pants, a blue sailor blouse, and curiously enough the white round cap of the British navy.

A girl in a red dress at a table nearly laughed out loud. The young man lifted his round sailor’s cap with a friendly smile, then he struck the table a few times with his fist.

„*Garçon!* Bring me a beer!”

A waiter rushed over, anxiously.

„Listen, this is not a sailor’s bar.”

„How interesting... And I would have sworn that this was the ‘Ye Merry Murderers’ restaurant, where the gentlemen meet for five o’clock knifing... but I don’t suppose it matters now. This will be good enough. Bring me a mug of beer.”

„We do not serve tapped beer.”

„Well then bring me a pound of caviar, a bottle of French champagne and one hundred stems of La France roses!”

At this point the waiter made the mistake of attempting to assist Ivan Gorchev’s departure, and by doing so, naturally touched his arm.

And this he should not have done...

In the next second, everything went black before the waiter, and it was a while before he regained consciousness and found he was being supported by a number of people, and that someone was washing his face with a damp cloth. And all he had received was one slap! The

stranger finally felt insulted, raised the cap that had been designed for the British navy, took out, the devil only knows from where, a black-rimmed monocle, pinched it in his eye in a stately manner, which made him look like a complete idiot, and while everyone hunted for the waiter who had rolled under a distant table, he departed. The girl in the red dress laughed again, and Gorchev, astonished for once, turned for a minute. ‘Hmmm! Pretty!’

Straight back he rushed to Mr. Vanek at the dock, not at all sure that he would find him there. But to his great surprise, his secretary was standing in the same place, in the same pose, and, as a matter of fact, in the same bathing suit. Only the toothpick in his mouth had changed. He was now five toothpicks further on.

„Mr. Vanek. I’m glad you’re here. Your hour has come.”

„You wish to hear from what heights I’ve dropped, and so low?” returned Vanek eagerly.

„The hour for that has not yet come. At any rate, your predicament seems interesting, and at the proper time you will tell me of it.”

„My dear sir, I was a correspondent at one of the foremost...”

„I was certain of that when I first saw you. You will now go into action. You will have to go somewhere, and bring a package...”

„That is not quite the work of a secretary.”

„Napoleon started from the bottom also...”

„But not as your employee. Well, never mind. But I must know how heavy the package is. I think I have already mentioned that I had a hernia...”

„I know, I know. The package is not heavy.”

„Besides, I am not allowed to walk in the sun. I have high blood pressure.”

„There is no need for you to walk in the sun. You will buy an umbrella somewhere and use it.”

„My dear sir, one can’t afford to buy umbrellas out of three thousand francs!”

„I’ll pay for the umbrella. Furthermore, you will buy a pair of pants; that’s on me, too, of course. This bathing suit, even with the bath towel, and the straw hat, does not become a self-respecting, serious secretary. So, forward, old boy.”

„The name is Vanek, if you don’t mind...”

„All right then, forward, Mr. Vanek!”

III

The guests at the ‘Méditerranée’ restaurant had long since forgotten the episode with the mad sailor, when an individual resembling a delivery-man appeared, wearing a brand-new, shaggy pair of pants of the dazzling green of a detergent; these ended in the knee, with gaiters. The designer of the gaiters must have been entranced by an incomprehensible idea, nevertheless it is doubtful that he had Mr. Vanek in mind as the ideal masculine type to wear it. Mr. Vanek immediately rushed to the head waiter, and with a stern and portentous expression he said:

„I was sent by His Excellency Prince Chervonets...”

„At your service, sir.”

„I am to place an order in connection with some items of food, which I shall take with me immediately.”

„And what does His Excellency desire?”

„A cold lunch, shelled lobster, trout, pineapple, two bottles of champagne, as well as truffle *pate* and roast chicken.”

„Yes, sir.”

„Hurry!”

Out of the hotel came Mr. Vanek with the package and stopped by a bench near the terrace. Suddenly Gorchev stepped up to him from nowhere.

„Thank you, old boy.”

„My name is Vanek.”

„Thank you, Mr. Vanek.”

He took a miraculous bundle of thousand-franc banknotes from his pocket and handed two to Mr. Vanek, the man who resembled a delivery-boy; then he gave him a few assignments and sat down on the bench exactly opposite the ‘Hotel Méditerranée’.

The man who looked like a delivery-boy left, and the sailor spread the caviar, roast chicken, champagne, and the different kinds of jellied fish all out before him, and began to demolish them cheerfully. The champagne bottles he simply banged against the edge of the bench, whereupon long creamy white spray shot forth from them.

The contents of a bottle went down in one gulp. He then turned towards the onlookers on the terrace, and smiled.

„To your health!”

The girl in the red dress laughed aloud. Gorchev gratefully noted this expression of approval, and for a second, his eyes rested on the girl.

„Hmmm! Pretty!...”

Later Mr. Vanek reappeared and brought with him seventy stems of La France roses, from who knows where. By this time several hundred spectators had gathered around to stare at the youthful Nobel Prize winner.

„There were no more,” said Mr. Vanek panting. Then, accepting a further thousand francs, he added, „You do pay well, but one has to work for it.”

He rushed away once more.

The manager of the hotel, shaking with excitement, reproached the ailing waiter whose left eye seemed to have disappeared entirely in a violet-coloured swelling.

„Wretched idiot! Can’t you recognize a tourist travelling incognito? A waiter should have eyes!”

„To have them knocked out?” the waiter moaned.

„How could I know the customer was off his head?”

„When will you understand that world-famous bathing resorts cannot be founded on guests who are sound in mind!”

The policeman, it seemed, knew this, because he stopped politely before Ivan Gorchev. He even raised his hand to his cap.

„Good day, sir.”

„Good day. Would you like some chicken?”

„No, thank you.”

„Fruit, cognac?”

„No, no...”

„Well, then, do accept at least a few roses!...”

„Oh, you are very kind, sir, but it’s forbidden to walk around with roses instead of a baton on duty.”

„Come now! Nor is it permitted to drink red wine, and yet you came out of the bar on the other side of the street...”

„Excuse my asking but why is it that you are consuming your tasty lunch in a kind of open-air performance?”

Gorchev looked up. He seemed for a moment to be uncertain of something.

„Will you be so kind as to inform me whether this city is in the Republic of France?”

„It certainly is.”

„Well, then everything’s all right,” Gorchev said, and took a bite of the chicken. „Because I once heard somewhere that certain human rights were proclaimed here at the time of a revolution.”

With this he swallowed half a chicken leg.

The policeman scratched his head. He remembered that two years earlier a Swedish cork manufacturer had dressed as a cowboy and sold candy on the Promenade des Anglais. The policeman, who at the police station had indulged in rather violent expressions to reprove the industrialist, had been subsequently transferred to the lighthouse at the fishermen’s wharf. Since then he had not served within the city.

„Wouldn’t you be more comfortable inside?”

„They threw me out.”

Cars honked from all sides, since in the meantime the crowd of observers had increased to almost a thousand. But our delivery-man fought his way through them. He returned with a mushroom-shaped, yellow garden umbrella, which he very cleverly fastened next to the bench.

„This was a most difficult errand,” he said panting.

„Thank you, Mr. Vanek,” answered Gorchev uneasily, and with a hasty movement, handed over another thousand-franc note.

„Believe me, I deserve this. To carry packages in this heat,” whined the porter-like individual, and since the sun shone fiercely, he opened his own umbrella, which made the scene change from the comic to the frightening.

„I am Marvieux... secretary of the hotel manager...” whispered a humble voice next to them.

„You haven't been announced to me,” answered Gorchev carelessly, and put on his monocle, which in reality was only a rim without a glass. „And I'm in the midst of lunch anyway...”

Marvieux turned to Mr. Vanek, who had just spat out a tooth-pick.

„Will you please announce me.”

„What is your name, and why do you wish to enter the premises of the bench?” asked Mr. Vanek in the curt manner of an overworked secretary.

Gorchev meanwhile went on eating, and looked in the other direction.

„Tell him that I am Marvieux, the secretary.”

„You are mistaken. *I* am the secretary. But I suppose it doesn't matter. You aren't properly dressed for admission. But I shall try my best, though my lord the director lays a great stress on etiquette.”

He went over to Gorchev, and touched his shoulder.

„Listen, there is someone here named Marvieux to see you.”

„Let him in.”

By then the number of onlookers had increased to over a thousand. The policeman lined them all up, so that the cars could continue on their way.

„What is it you wish, my dear Marvieux?”

„I would like to apologize in the name of the hotel, and may I suggest, with due respect, that you honour me by taking a place among our guests...”

„I don't mind if I do,” said Gorchev and stood up. „Mr. Vanek, will you join us.”

„All right,” Mr. Vanek said, waving his hand as though he were making a serious sacrifice and off he set in his multicoloured clothing, with his umbrella held high, like an African queen in low spirits. The manager's secretary was slightly taken aback.

„Mr. Vanek is my private secretary, and my first cousin...” said Gorchev. „Perhaps you have some objection to him?”

„No, of course not, of course not...”

They marched onto the terrace. Gorchev smiled, and greeted the girl in the red dress, who turned away. They sat down at the largest table, and the waiter appeared.

„What happened to your eye,” enquired Mr. Vanek, and Gorchev, too, turned with sympathy, but then ordered haughtily.

„You may bring me a beer! And what will *you* drink, Mr. Vanek?”

„I'd rather eat something this week, whilst I have five thousand francs.”

Gorchev nodded in agreement, and Mr. Vanek ordered, carefully and thoroughly.

The porter was swiftly produced and gulped down. Then began the parade of the courses, an intimidating procession if there ever was one. Mr. Vanek, Improvised Secretary, Privy First Cousin to His Lordship, tied the napkin about his neck in the manner of real family men so that the long corners rose to stick out on the back of his head like pointed ears. In this posture he reviewed the food parade, like a general.

„What’s your reason for being in Nice?” asked Gorchev.

„I don’t know.”

„Then it seems that we’re in the same boat. May I tell you quite honestly, I like you because, despite your poverty, you preserve your self-respect.”

„My dear sir,” spoke up Mr. Vanek, and sadly looked around at the lordly guests on the hotel terrace. „I don’t imagine that you understand from what heights I’ve dropped, and so low.”

„Unfortunately I cannot take you to a more distinguished hotel than this...”

Mr. Vanek didn’t continue his speech. He ate several roast ducks, one or two cakes, and then he lost consciousness.

„Waiter!” called Gorchev.

The waiters marched in, led by the manager’s secretary.

„You called, sir?”

„Have you a royal suite in this hotel?”

„Yes, of course, sir. A twelve-room apartment.”

„Then have Mr. Vanek placed immediately in those twelve rooms. When he recovers, tell him to come and see me.”

„And where will he find you, sir”?

„I don’t know.”

With this, Gorchev left.

„You see,” said the manager’s secretary instructing the waiter with the injured eye, “this is the type of guest on which a world-famous bathing resort can be founded, until an uncle comes along. Most of our guests are eventually put in asylums by their uncles.”

Gorchev rushed straight to the Boulevard Victoire, in high spirits, whistling. On the corner he wrestled with a few taxi-drivers, then he went to the barber’s, where he took a few winks while they combed his hair and shaved him; but first he sent over a few boxes of chocolate to the waitress in the cafe across the street.

This was a madman, mad as a hatter, even a blind man could see that.

Then he went to Lafayette’s, a large department store, where he took care of his most pressing needs. He bought a number of Mickey mice, a few tennis balls, several dozen fountain pens and four bars of chocolate. Then he dressed from head to foot. Dinner jacket, starched shirt, a shining vest button, a silk handkerchief, and a white chrysanthemum for his lapel in the way elderly journalists and the occupants of the boxes at the opera-house favour them. Afterwards he bought a bottle of perfume, and whilst a straw hat glided onto his head, he pulled on a pair of gloves the colour of which evoked a Chinese coolie perished of yellow fever. Now all he needed was a bamboo cane, and that awe-inspiring monocle. The black object in his eye, the saucy straw hat clapped at an angle on his head, he looked into the mirror complacently.

The entire staff of the shop as well as numerous shoppers stood about admiring him, and when the young man caught with his mouth a cigarette that he had flipped up in the air, they clapped delightedly. After this, Gorchev dispersed the fountain pens and tennis balls to his most appreciative audience and departed.

Five minutes later he returned. He addressed one of the shop assistants most politely:

„All my money is in my other suit, which I took off a few minutes ago.”

„Yes, sir. Just a second, sir.”

The shop assistant looked white as a sheet as he returned with the tremendous bundle of thousand-franc notes.

„I knew that it would turn up. Good money is never lost!” Gorchev exclaimed, and gave the shop assistant a thousand-franc note. He crumpled the others into his various pockets. The last roll of notes, held together by a rubber band, didn't fit anywhere else, so he popped it under his hat, and this time departed for good. In front of the department store, he jumped up onto the runningboard of a taxi that was passing.

„No need to put on the brakes. Let's go to some bank!”

He opened the door, and sat down next to the driver. The car continued on its way. Gorchev pulled out a few rumpled thousand-franc notes and gave them to the driver.

„Would you change these for me, old boy? I want hundred-franc notes. There's about eight thousand francs here, maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less...”

The chauffeur was sufficiently perturbed to drive a little awry; finally he stopped in front of a bank with his peculiar passenger.

If it had not occurred to Gorchev to change money, or if he had been taken to a different place, everything might have turned out entirely different. But Gorchev had come here with the taxi, to this particular bank and with that action of his he had boarded the special express train of fate, to start with lightning speed on his peculiar, terrifying, and altogether improbable adventure.

„I'll wait for you in the car. Hurry,” he said to the driver.

The driver went into the bank, leaving the stranger in the front seat. At the cashier's desk he counted the money.

„Twenty-eight thousand francs!”

Was his passenger drunk or mad? One could never tell. Possibly both. Presently he returned, and once again found himself in front of the bank. With surprise he deducted that the stranger and his car had disappeared.

He stood there, perplexed, with the vast sum on his hand.

All that had happened was that Gorchev had spotted, behind the wheel of a sports car, the girl in the red dress who had smiled at him from the terrace of the hotel.

She smiled now too, as she whizzed by him, in the direction of the dock, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Halloo!

With this wild cry, Gorchev trod hard on the accelerator, and raced after the sports car with the speed of a lunatic...

Chapter Two

I

On that day, only fate's special mercy protected, from a taxi turned insane, the cars on the highway leading to Monte Carlo. Ivan Gorchev drove that taxi, at a deathspeed of about fifty thousand miles.

But some people are born with a destiny that enables them to survive all danger intact. And such a thoughtless, happy-go-lucky one is the hero of our book.

Meanwhile, the girl turned round and noticed the taxi running amok, which wobbling, veering madly in all directions, skidding violently, pursued her at a fantastic speed. She immediately changed into top gear, and the black sports car took off along the road with a leap. The engine whined and roared like an elephant, the car took the corners at an angle that made one's hair stand on end, and like a giant ostrich-plume, a tremendous cloud of gas fumes rose tauntingly in the direction of the taxi, where, a moment before, the car of the girl in the red dress had been...

And this is how they arrived in Monaco. The cabman in the dinner jacket, with his black-rimmed monocle and snappy straw hat, created quite a disturbance on the streets of the city. But the traffic police of Monaco knew that the traffic of world-famous bathing resorts is very rarely founded on the visits of completely sane tourists, so on the taxi crashed.

Very few people in this world have ever driven a car with more audacity and with less aptitude than Ivan Gorchev. But he was still able to escape catastrophe. Please don't misunderstand, *he* didn't avoid catastrophe. No, indeed, he drove into it at all costs! Catastrophe avoided *him* - that was the situation. Now, for example, he raced right through a red light.

Brakes screeched on all sides.

Drivers cursed.

A maid, by the window, screamed and covered her eyes with the dust-cloth... And the taxi raced on! Halloo!

This man had all the luck in the world... Now they were driving along the serpentine road which led to the Casino of Monte Carlo, and the young man waved his straw hat and laughed.

The car of the girl in the red dress came to a stop in front of the 'Hotel de Paris'. The taxi made a smart turn through the beautiful English garden that decorated the square, and with a slight miscalculation, but comparatively accurate braking, it stopped.

Only a small section of the bonnet rushed in through the hotel door, but this sort of thing could really happen to anyone.

The madman calmly got out of the car, handed the terrified desk-clerk a thousand francs. It would seem that he wouldn't use a smaller denomination. The desk-clerk bowed and arranged at once that the taxi be towed down next to the pavement.

Gorchev immediately rushed to the alarmed girl with a triumphant smile. But this time he didn't escape an accident.

A broad-shouldered, hard-faced, immaculately dressed blond giant appeared from somewhere. He saw Gorchev and measured him up with a freezing glance.

„Are you acquainted with this gentleman, Annette?” he asked the girl.

„No! And it’s exactly this intolerable situation that I wish to change,” the Nobel Prize winning sailor said gleefully.

„This is how I define intrusion.”

„My dear sir, it would seem that you have no idea about the style of a gentleman. Nowadays no one who wears a beautiful double-breasted jacket like this matches it with bad manners.”

„Are you willing to give me satisfaction for that insult?”

„Of course,” answered Gorchev with a reassuring smile. „However, I haven’t the time to go through a long drawn-out process. If you seriously wish to stick to your aggressive ideas, we can fight, but right now, special delivery.”

„All right, I am Baron Lingeström.”

The other hesitated for an instant.

„And I am Prince Chervonets,” he said finally, „...first lieutenant of the guard, the Tsar’s obedient servant to the bitter end, and so on, and so forth... Where shall the clashing point be, uncleshka?”

The girl stood, frozen.

„In the Officers’ Casino of Monaco. I think that the gentlemen will be at our service, even though they are not acquainted with us. I shall await you there,” said Lingeström, and sprang into a waiting taxi.

To his great astonishment Prince Chervonets sat in the driver’s seat, and connected the meter.

„The taxi is my own, my dear Duelovitch Baronotchka,” he said, and started the motor. And the taxi rattled away with its mad driver, and the astounded Lingeström.

II.

Annette Laboux stood sadly in front of the hotel. The young man with the laughing face was undeniably impudent, but he had such a pleasant face, and was so merry and gay. Lingeström was a giant, who lived for sport only, and was no doubt a fencing champion, too; he would slice that light-headed, scatter-brained, but delightful fool to pieces. Come to think of it, by what right was this Lingeström fighting for her, she asked herself with waking fury. After all, he was not her fiancé!

She didn’t like the baron, after all. Just who did that baron think he was?! It was six months ago that he had unexpectedly appeared at their house, and had discussed long with her father, but strictly between the two of them. Since that time he had been trying to appeal to the girl. Up till now his attempts had been unsuccessful.

She sat down at one of the coffee tables before the hotel. Here she sipped, with a heavy heart, a raspberry juice...

A good hour and a half later a clattering car arrived. The vehicle was a taxi and at the steering wheel sat the mad stranger in his straw hat. And wearing a monocle, too.

This time the car stopped quite neatly beside the pavement. It was with the merest crunch that it touched the bumper of a nearby car.

But the stranger didn't bother with such trivialities as a bent bumper. All in all, his stopping manoeuvre had been quite successful. He rushed straight to the girl, and sat down.

„I hope you weren't bored?”

„You...” stuttered Annette, „...left here with Baron Lingeström. What happened to the baron?”

The young man lowered his eyes, and awkwardly twisted his straw hat.

„Answer me!”

„I sliced off one of his ears,” he answered shyly. „Anything wrong with that?”

III.

„Lingeström was wounded??!”

„Well... he has something to remember, but after all, what's an ear... especially if they sew it on again...”

„So... his ear was injured?”

„And... his head...”

„His head too...?”

Gorchev nodded apologetically.

„It isn't a big cut, five inches, to say the most, the only thing is that it's a little deep. I couldn't help it. When I cut his arm and chest the doctor suggested that we stop the duel. But that Lingeström is a diligent sort of person and he continued fencing at all costs, even though he was covered with bandages from head to foot, and looked like an angry advertising board.”

„You should be locked up in an asylum! As a prince, aren't you ashamed of what you've done?”

„Who said I was a prince?”

„You.”

„Well, I'm not. My name is Gorchev, and I'm no prince.”

„Then why did you say you were? Do you generally lie?”

„Very rarely, and even then only on questions of life and death...”

„Why did you say you were a prince?”

„Because I'm ashamed that I'm not. A Russian emigrant who isn't a prince should disappear from the surface of the earth these days.”

„You are saying ridiculous things again.”

„This is something you can't understand... a terrible tragedy: I am Gorchev, Russian, and neither a prince nor even an officer of the guard.” He sighed. „My parents moved to Paris before the war. I was born there. My father was irresponsible, and didn't try to establish contact with the guard in his youth. He was simply poverty-stricken, and he emigrated.”

He delivered the whole with such pitiable face that Annette could not but laugh again.

„You’re amused at this? Do you know what a bitter fate it is to be neither a prince nor have any contact with the guard?” This he burst out as if he were on the verge of tears. „A Russian houseowner, with neither title nor rank, is less in Paris than a fishmonger, because in the market they know a Count Nazostin, who plays the balalaika. Now what can I hope for, whose father was just a houseowner, but had no connection to the bodyguards, and didn’t even kill Rasputin? I must ask you not to spread the story, because I’m terribly ashamed of it...”

„You are a profane man. You make a joke of everything,” answered Annette, but smiling.

„Really? Well, then get this, I can’t even speak Russian! Don’t you understand what a tragedy this is? My parents always spoke French, to practise the language. My first love left me for good when, at a theatre, she asked me to translate the Cossack folk singer’s song about the Volga, and after I had translated it, it turned out that the singer in question was a Greek actor, who had been singing selections from the *Merry Widow*... Don’t laugh at this tragedy! It cries out for revenge against the corruption of American films and French film criticism. The only things I know in Russian are popushka, unclesushka, and brotherushka. Possibly sisterushka. That’s all.”

In a little while the girl, although she herself didn’t know how it happened, strolled off with the young man, along the narrow, sloping trail, which led from the Casino to the railway-station, and where a sweet little pavilion was hidden among the trees. Into this pavilion they went.

„My dear fellow,” said Annette, „if my father scents a breath of scandal around my person, you will have to face the consequences.”

„In which case I will immediately ask for your hand in marriage... Which is not such a bad idea. Would you like to be my wife?!”

Annette looked at the boy, frightened. Unfortunately she liked Gorchev very much. But it was useless, he was insane!

„Now you’re thinking that I am crazy. Well, you’re wrong! Maybe, when it comes to serious matters I leave a tiny bit to be desired, but I am not crazy. So you can say ‘yes’ quite calmly.”

„But I don’t even know you.”

„That’s what makes it such a good idea!”

„Tell me something... Don’t think that I am being nosy, if I ask a question. What have you been doing up till now?”

„Lots of things. I was born in Paris, where my irresponsible father, whom I have already mentioned, neglected to establish connection with the guard, or at least kill Rasputin, and because of this negligence, he was forced into business in Paris.”

„What sort of business?”

„Such small-scale business that he could carry the whole thing in his neck. He sold sweets in the street, I too became a bread-winner precociously. At the age of twelve I was employed as assistant instructor at a sports school.”

„Is that where your proficiency in fencing comes from?”

„Yes. But I am a master of everything. I was a pianist, have been a sailor, a tennis trainer, I am an excellent driver, and most skilful on the stock exchange...”

He felt that he could give a more realistic picture of himself, if in the meantime, he put on his monocle. The girl laughed at him for this. He pricked.

Evening fell. They discussed many things, and went walking on the big terrace behind the Casino. They may have even kissed each other, but this is not established. One thing is incontestable, which is that a great love began that evening.

This behaviour is natural between two young creatures. Even beside the sea.

IV

After Gorchev had said good-bye to the girl, he rushed straight to the Casino. He decided that he would finish off the enterprise, that he would explode the bank. For some incomprehensible reason, he did not choose the methods of explosion that had proved successful many times, like a picric acid or dynamite bomb; instead he picked roulette, that game of chance, a figurative method of exploding the bank.

Within an hour he had won two hundred thousand francs.

Within another hour he stood there in the Casino, exactly as he had left his position on the freight ship 'Rangoon' - without a penny to his name. He whistled softly.

What now? Unfortunately, he did love Annette. How could he marry the girl without a penny? Instead of furniture and a proper standard of living, he could not offer her romanticism as a substitute.

He walked out on to the terrace, where, who knows why, busts of famous composers and authors were dotted around, as if they had some connection with games of chance.

Suddenly he noticed a strangely familiar figure. The ghostly individual moved about in an old-fashioned loose tail-coat, wore a white bow-tie, and his pants flapped over his shoes in humble folds, as pants generally do when they are too long.

The tail-coat was quite loose, and the two flaps beat themselves against the ghost's heels from behind. Diplomats on the screen wore this type of clothing in the earliest days of the cinema.

Good Lord! That's Mr. Vanek!

„Hello, what's the matter with you!”

„Good evening,” said the secretary resentfully. „Nice situation. I was trying my luck.”

„And?”

„I lost everything. Would you mind giving me a thousand francs.”

„I haven't a penny, old boy.”

„The name is Vanek.”

„All right then, we're finished, Mr. Vanek.”

„But *you* are a millionaire.”

„Nonsense. And you expect a millionaire to guarantee your well-being? I hereby relieve you of your duties.”

„What do you mean? I've received my wages.”

„But a beggar cannot keep a secretary.”

„Even if he has already paid for it?”

They moved off to the square in front of the Casino, Mr. Vanek scolding Gorchev violently.

„You are a frivolous man!”

„But Mr. Vanek!”

„Quiet! You had no right to squander my next month’s salary. You can be irresponsible in so far as your own future is concerned, sir, but not with that of another person!”

„You are right. Now, tell me where you got those tails.”

„If you really wish to know, I rented them from a boatmaker. He was married in them eighteen years ago, and has taken excellent care of them ever since...”

„I wouldn’t think so to look at them...”

They arrived at the ‘Hotel de Paris’ where Gorchev had left the taxi. To his great surprise, sitting in the driver’s seat was the chauffeur, who had gone into the bank for a moment to get the change. Now peacefully and sweetly he snoozed by the steering wheel of his newly recovered vehicle.

The result of some miraculous telepathy, he awakened when Gorchev neared him, and called loudly:

„Sir!”

„What are you yelling for?”

„You owe me an entire day’s salary! And what’s more, you are in debt to me for one bumper.”

„What did you need a bumper for?” interposed Mr. Vanek reproachfully.

„I didn’t remove your bumper,” said Gorchev to the chauffeur. „It just got all dented.”

„That is a total of four hundred francs,” the driver went on. „Here is twenty-seven thousand six hundred, and in the future I refuse you use of my taxi without my permission.”

With that he indignantly handed over a stack of thousand- and hundred-franc banknotes to Gorchev. Which was the amount which he had changed in the bank that morning.

Whoever heard anything like this? They stood there as people who had been hit over the head. Mr. Vanek began to hiccup. Meanwhile, the grumpy driver had already started the motor.

„Here is a thousand francs,” said Gorchev finally. „Your reward.”

„Thank you,” answered the chauffeur and drove off.

Mr. Vanek turned to the young man in fury:

„You’re still throwing away thousands? Aren’t you ashamed?! You should learn from past history!”

And he castigated Gorchev terribly...

„But Mr. Vanek, an honest finder certainly deserves that much reward?”

„In future, please refrain from this type of donation, even in situations where it is justified, until you have proper reserve funds.”

„All right. Although I wished that you'd allow me to advance you two months' salary, since I would like to make certain of having your valuable service. But if you feel that I shouldn't throw my money about...”

„What?...” Mr. Vanek nervously twisted his head, then he nodded permissively. „Well, all right, I won't mind one exception to the rule.”

„Thank you,” answered Gorchev gratefully, and handed him eight thousand francs.

„It's all right,” Mr. Vanek said sullenly, and pocketed the money. „I hope that from now on, you will not have occasion to regret having hired me. Now I suggest we dine...”

„You've recovered from lunch?”

„Oh, there was nothing whatsoever the matter with me,” he said haughtily, and pulled his white vest down from the region of his throat. The dicky of his dress, it would seem, was waiting for this moment, because it immediately shot upwards and flapped in his face, as though Mr. Vanek's head were a box which had been awaiting a lid.

The tail-coat Mr. Vanek was wearing behaved like an unmanageable beast, when it attacks its tamer. However, after a short but exciting battle at close quarters, Mr. Vanek put his rebellious pieces of apparel in order, with the exception of one malicious, blood-thirsty vest button, which clawed him resolutely as if it had vowed that by midnight it would wriggle from his vest to his shoulder-blade, where it would neatly pop off the secretary's back.

Gorchev was increasingly pleased that he had recruited Mr. Vanek. With a great deal of enjoyment he watched him stand there in his unhappy tails, like the owner of a summer garden restaurant in a picturesque part of pre-war Budapest, where the Prince of Wales and his escorts had reserved a table for the evening. His cuff-links were larger than was necessary, and for this reason they fastened his sleeves in the rounded position of a stove-pipe, and his rosette necktie had started out on a journey and had got to the stage of his earlobes, where it rested at present. The nose of his dried-out patent leather shoes curled up in a semi-circle, and his thin, long, grizzled hair was disorderly from the great excitement. His rounded, wide nose, peculiar moustache, pince-nez and tormented face blended themselves with his clothes in complete harmony. But it would seem that he was pleased with this Sunday best, because he glanced at himself from head to foot, with satisfaction:

„Would anyone notice that this morning I was nothing but a docker?”

„Anyone who saw you now would swear that you were a philandering watchman in a wax museum, whiling away the evening in the tails of Bismarck's wax model.”

„The tails are quite all right,” motioned the secretary curtly and decisively. „You are no expert in a gentleman's fashions. Let's go to dinner.”

„Reserve a table, and I'll come at once.”

The wax museum tails got particular attention in the dining room as well, especially when Mr. Vanek pulled his pince-nez out of his pocket, so that he would be able to study the menu with the appropriate profundity. He discussed everything from *hors d'œuvres* to dessert, from wine to mineral water.

„And please bring me immediately a glass of water in which two entire lemons have been squeezed; I suffer from a lack of acid.”

„All right, sir.”

„It's not all right, as I haven't been able to receive proper treatment for some time.”

Before the dinner was served, Gorchev returned.

„I feel completely different if I have a hundred thousand francs,” he said. „This sort of thing puts me into a much better state of mind.”

„From where did you get so much money?”

„I thought that while you were ordering, I would go into the roulette game, and play my fortune on the rouge. I won by accident. I consider this a good omen, so I left the whole thing to play on.”

„You irresponsible man! Have I advised you for nothing?”

„I admit that I acted improperly, and I won't do it again. But at the same time I am happy about the money, because I can now assure myself of your services until almost October.”

„Not even that excuses your irresponsibility.”

Meanwhile, they began to serve the food, and Mr. Vanek became silent for a longer period of time.

Gorchev drank a few bottles of beer. His usual high spirits, despite his luck at the roulette table, had escaped him.

He liked Annette Laboux's sweet childlike face very much, with its long, beautifully arched eyebrows.

He was in love. And very much so at that.

On the other hand, Mr. Vanek ate. That is if one can call it eating, if a man, showing complete disregard for his teeth, swallows food whole. He proceeded to work on a whole turkey, with a determined sigh, as David must have done so long ago, when he threw himself into battle against the remaining Philistines, with but one ass jaw. Of course, the secretary was dependent upon his own jaw in this combat, but he stood his ground as firmly as David.

„What should be done, Mr. Vanek, if you were to faint here on the spot?” asked Gorchev prudently.

Before answering, the secretary swallowed the half turkey that was in his mouth, and then briefly informed him of the immediate precautions to take.

„Shirt and collar to be unbuttoned, left to lie in open air for a few minutes, perhaps artificial respiration, and sixteen drops of camphor spirits.”

Gorchev made note of these instructions, and continued drinking. When Mr. Vanek finally fell under the table, he handed the paper to the waiter.

„Proceed with the instructions, and then to Nice with him, to the 'Hotel Méditerranée'.”

He settled up the bill and left.

Chapter Three

I

Where?... he would find Annette! He rented a car, and started off in the direction of Nice. He himself didn't know what he wanted or why he was running around so much.

It was a good deal after midnight, when he saw her... from a distance.

A tall, grey, thin man with a sun-tanned face came out from the restaurant of one of the hotels with Annette beside him. The third party was a general. They stepped into a tremendous blue Alfa Romeo. The car was chauffeured by a Negro.

He had never seen a touring car as beautiful as that Alfa Romeo. It was not mass-produced. It must have been the special model of the factory, for wealthy and distinguished people. The tremendous touring car, despite its great size, was dainty and graceful. Its strange sheen, dignity of line, streamlined bonnet, tremendous engine, suggested the haughtiness of a queen.

Its masterful springs and the harmony of the engine made the proud machine move off soundlessly, gracefully. It reminded one of the decisive, yet soft step, which noble, aged and retired owners of ancient castles print on thick rugs on quiet nights.

Did Gorchev feel instinctively that this automobile was to play a decisive role in the lives of so many people, in the life of an entire, though small country, and in his own future as well, frighteningly, and inevitably as if cruelty himself sat at the steering wheel?

It's possible. Because he stared at the departing Alfa Romeo in amazement.

„Who were the two gentlemen with the lady?“ he asked the doorman, having drawn up in front of the hotel dazed by the Alfa Romeo, and had pushed a stack of money into the hand of the Cerberus with the beard of a Father Christmas.

„The grey, thin man is Gustave Laboux, the minister, the lady is his daughter, and the name of the general is Auguste de Bertin.“

Gorchev began hunting for another banknote.

„72, Boulevard Victor Hugo,“ said Father Christmas, and accepted the money. The young man stared at him in amazement.

„You know, you are not so stupid after all.“

„The three most important factors in my profession are brains, psychology, and a carefully groomed beard. In addition one needs...“

...But what was needed in addition, Gorchev never found out. (Although it's possible that it would have interested him.) He was more interested in Annette. For this reason he simply rolled away, so that, in the manner of a dangerous dilettante, he could rush to the Boulevard Victor Hugo.

Perhaps it would have been much wiser to continue his discussion with the grey-bearded doorman and it isn't impossible that in that case he had been able to see into the future, and especially the happenings of that night.

But has there ever lived a twenty-one-year-old young man, and in love, to boot, who could foresee his own future? If young people could foresee things, what would happen to society? The number of broken engagements and divorce cases would torrent into a horrible ocean.

Luckily, nature gives man limited powers, and Gorchev in his car cruised along the road of destiny, convinced that it would be better to rush after the young and pretty girl than to listen to the views of the elderly doorman.

How wrong he was!

II

A young man stood in the shadow of the trees, and watched the summer house. Why was he spying? What reason could he have for standing there? Not even he himself knew...

He had stood there for perhaps half an hour, nervously, with very dejected spirits, when two men neared. He could see them for an instant by the light of the corner streetlamp, as they crossed the path of the light. One had the appearance of a tramp, and was surly in expression, the other a dumpy man, slightly better dressed.

They stopped by Gorchev, never thinking that someone stood behind the tree.

„I will simply go in and speak with Laboux.”

„Out of the question. That would completely ruin the business.”

„The devil. Either he recognizes me, or gets a knife in his ribs. *Nom du nom!*”

„Psst!”

The garden gate swung open. Perhaps the general had only accompanied Annette and her father, and was now leaving for home.

The lamplight didn't penetrate the dense trees along the road. The man with the appearance of a tramp suddenly stepped out in front of the general.

„Don't rush, de Bertin! Do you recognize me? I am Portenif!”

„What do you want?”

„General,” spoke up a rough voice, obviously the dumpy man's. „Do indicate a place where you would be willing to meet us.”

„I have no reason to meet you, and...”

Portenif struck with something. The general jumped back, jerked his sword up. But the dumpy one grabbed his wrist and Portenif's second blow struck home.

At this point Gorchev threw himself into the game. The two attackers had not dreamt that a soul was near. The counter-attack was unexpected.

A fist from somewhere caught Portenif on the mouth and drenched it with blood; he dropped to the road, while the dumpy one flew into the fence from a sly kick...

„Help!” called a woman's voice from the villa; it was probably Annette.

„Police!” called the general, staggering to the fence of the villa...

„Blackguard...” growled the dumpy one, and struck at the attacker with something again, but was beaten to it by such a smack that everything darkened before him.

The steps of a running policeman were heard along the asphalt. The dumpy one and Portenif slipped away. They hadn't seen Gorchev in the dark even for a second.

„Are you all right?” a pleasant masculine voice asked the general.

„Yes... but my eye is covered with blood...”

A long shadow appeared at the gate of the villa, with a pistol in his hand. It was Laboux.

„What happened?”

„The general was attacked at the same moment as I arrived here.”

„I am de Bertin. Thank you for your successful interference,” said the general to Gorchev. Then he took charge of the policeman, who had arrived in the meantime.

„At any rate, I will accompany the general home...”

After de Bertin had departed, Laboux turned to Gorchev.

„You are an exceptionally brave man. You rushed to help the general against two opponents...”

„Two men? Those aren't odds. On the Vi-Shung Square in Shanghai I once insulted twelve chauffeurs.”

„And you left on your own two feet?”

„I was forced to, because there wasn't a driver left in the vicinity who was in condition to handle a car.”

Laboux laughed uproariously.

„You are really a first-class chap! I'd invite you into my house if it weren't so late... I hope that I'll have the pleasure some day...”

„Most likely tomorrow. You see, it is my plan to ask your daughter in marriage.”

Laboux stared at Gorchev.

„What?... What did you say?...”

„We went for a walk this afternoon...”

„Oh, so you are the one who sliced up Lingeström?” cried the father. „Look, young man, a few moments ago you behaved in such a way that I cannot do more than ask you to leave.”

„But...”

„You should be taught a serious lesson for having compromised my daughter. Unfortunately, however, I cannot do anything to you, since you protected my guest, and therefore I am obliged to you.”

After a few moments of thought, Gorchev said:

„Tell me, sir... I have a question to ask you: if, say, someone loved your daughter, and that individual would make a good husband, would you deny your fatherly blessing, just because the young man had beaten you up once? Of course, I am thinking of a real beating.”

Laboux stood out in front of him, and laughed uproariously.

„Do you mean to say that you would like to beat me up, but won't do it for that reason?... Well, listen to me! You will never be my son-in-law because you are a frivolous, untrustworthy character.”

„We'll return to that later...”

„Of course,” Laboux let it go, with sparkling eyes, and a delightful expression on his face. „But as a matter of fact, I hereby announce that, if by some chance, I were to accept you as my son-in-law, the afore-mentioned affair would only count in your favour!”

„In that case, let's fight. All right?” suggested the young man, and his eyes sparkled too.

„I warn you,” said Laboux, and licked his lips, as if he had found a delicacy that he had been denied for a long time. „It would be best if you cleared out of here!”

„Do you want to have a conversation or fight?”

„Fight!” said the sun-tanned grey-haired man with enthusiasm.

„Right. Should I start?”

„Wait, not here... would you honour me, in my villa. Please enter.”

The two men were all smiles and politeness. After they had entered the garden, something occurred to Laboux.

„I'm going into the house for a moment, to reassure my daughter. In the meantime, please take a seat here in the garden.”

It was indeed a breath-taking and sweet-smelling Riviera night. Gorchev sat down among the bright flowers, on a stone bench. While he smoked a cigarette, he dreamt, partly of Annette, with whom he was in love, and partly of Laboux, whom he would beat to a pulp on his return.

He didn't have to wait long. The owner of the house came shortly. He brought a bottle of brandy with two glasses, and poured.

„To your health!”

They emptied the glasses, and smiled at each other, like good friends.

„Can we start?”

„Wait,” said Gorchev. He took off his coat, hung it on a tree, then undid his tie and opened his collar.

„What are you doing?!” asked Laboux impatiently. „Did you come here to fight, or to have a swim?”

„It's hard to replace torn pieces of clothing at dawn,” he answered, and Laboux was forced to accept the argument.

„Don't be surprised at my impatience,” he apologized. „But I haven't fought in fifteen years,” he said with nostalgia, like an elderly lady remembering her unforgettable honeymoon in Venice.

„Wouldn't it be better if you practised a bit? Fifteen years is a long time, you know.”

„If you do not wish to remove your shoes, let's begin,” was the father's war-cry.

„All right, and...”

Gorchev couldn't continue, because Laboux cut into his words. Literally so, and with such force that the young man flew gracefully into the pool of the fountain. He came up dumbfounded and staggering like the enraged Neptune of classic painting.

That slap, too, was a classic. His brain buzzed, and he shook his head several times.

„Well?!” shouted Laboux impatiently. „Do you want to swim all the time?”

Gorchev climbed out of the water. He received a second slap, dropped back and went under water for a while like a diver who fills his lungs and lets himself down to the bottom of the ocean.

Before the third smack could reach him, he had jumped out of the pool. The moon shone out, and lit the two men. Gorchev was grinning.

„Congratulations. You hit very well. But it isn't the real thing yet.”

„And what do you say to this, for example?”

...One of Laboux's amazingly fast smacks started out, but didn't arrive at its destination. Gorchev caught his wrist, twisted it easily, so that his charming host waltzed over Gorchev's shoulder, and, as the result of a successful straight left, dived into the fountain. Gorchev retrieved him, but only to slap him twice, and having done this, pushed the gentleman back. This he repeated a number of times, as village women slap and rinse their washing. Finally instead of a defeated Laboux, by some strange means, a long foot appeared from the pool, sole first, and with a precise kick toppled the surprised Gorchev into a set of woven garden furniture. After a short battle of fists, they rolled along the ground, wrestling through the ruins of the garden furniture.

André, the butler, with side-whiskers and manners of a famous actor in a grand performance, awakened at the noise and thought it his duty to rush down to the garden. He dressed quickly, since nothing on earth would have forced him to appear improperly dressed outside his room.

Downstairs, in the darkness of the garden at night, the battle raged. Meanwhile the moon had hidden behind a cloud. Both parties had decided that he had met his match in the other. They rolled along the ground, clutching each other's throats, and the nearby La France roses, as though sensing their doom, fluttered petals on them.

With one hand Gorchev held Laboux's throat, with the other he directed a punch partly between the nose and mouth, in the direction of the jaw, and partly towards the left eye. The third punch would have landed at the base of the ear, but now Laboux jerked his knee upwards, and Gorchev flew among the dense lotus blossoms in a tiny artificial lake, and found himself up to his neck in the reeds...

But he sprung from the pool, kicked the shadow running along the lawn in the stomach, and when the shadow shouted, and doubled over, he cut upwards with his fist so that his opponent dropped silently among the group of speechless Harlem tulips...

„That wasn't the right thing to do,” said Laboux, while standing next to him. „To have flattened out my butler.”

„The devil take it!”

André, who had arrived at the scene of the fight at an un-favourable moment, now lay unconscious among the Harlem tulips. He moved slightly, all his limbs heavy.

„I think that it's been enough,” said Gorchev.

They looked at one another, panting. Dawn was breaking. Water dripped down them in slow, pudgy drops.

Gorchev put on his coat, his straw hat, and put the framed monocle in place. He looked as though he were wearing a pince-nez, since his other eye also had a wide black ring on it from Laboux's fist.

„It's really been a pleasure to fight with you.”

„If I were your son-in-law, we could fight as much as you liked,” he pleaded with the gentleman, whom he had beaten ragged.

„I have no intention of giving up my daughter to a stripling brat of a go-getter.”

„But when you were my age, you couldn't have been older than me.”

„But I had completed life's academy... I was a hero in the Legion, not on the Riviera.”

„Is that such a big thing?”

„I'll tell you what,” said Laboux sarcastically. „Join the French Foreign Legion, and when you have been discharged, there won't be anything to prevent you from marrying my daughter.”

Gorchev stood silently for a second.

„What did I tell you,” said Laboux bitingly. „That was a bit too much for you.”

„I was surprised,” said Gorchev, „that you don't want anything more of me. It's really nothing. I'll join today.”

„Just try it. You boaster!”

„You're a conceited fraud,” said Gorchev, and headed furiously toward the gate.

At the turn, in the inky darkness, he stumbled into a bucket of whitewash which quite infuriated him.

„Boastful poseur!” called Laboux after him angrily.

„What did you say?”

„Boastful, stupid, idiot!”

Gorchev grabbed a brush from the bucket, ran back along the winding road at the greatest speed the darkness allowed, and without a second's hesitation shoved the tremendous brush into the face of his enemy so that the entire head disappeared in whitewash. Then he struck with the wooden handle of the brush.

„So I'm a nut?... Huh?...”

The brush swung from left to right, then, with a final tremendous sweep, it knocked its opponent into the fountain and hit him a few more times, until finally he surfaced croaking.

„A dolt?... Answer me!... What am I... What?”

„Don't question him further,” said Laboux, standing next to him. „The butler doesn't know who or what you are.”

Poor André spread out on the ground, bent over the edge of the fountain, resembled a puppet theatre's wax player during an interval in performances.

„He always shows up at the wrong moment,” grumbled Gorchev.

„Now, go home, my friend, because in a short time the people of the house will be waking up.”

„I'm not going home! I'm going to the Legion.”

„Why do you insist on this bluff? Do you think that will have any effect on me? You can even go to the Legion if you like!”

And tossing André over his shoulder, he left the young man where he stood.

Gorchev rushed away with the speed and fury of a cyclone. He would go and join the Legion! But immediately.

III

He got into his car and rushed like a madman towards the nearest barracks. He stopped before the gate, knocked over a sentry-box, and then, while backing, caught one of the guardposts with his back bumper. They made ready to sound the alarm, thinking that a motorized civilian was attacking the barracks. But the car finally, and with great difficulty, came to a stop.

Gorchev soaking wet, and in a dinner jacket, immediately presented himself to the recruiting officer, a very sleepy man.

„Your name?” asked the drowsy officer.

„Ivan Gorchev.”

„You want to join the Legion?”

„Yes.”

„Do you have any money?”

„I must have about a hundred thousand francs in my pocket. They got a bit wet in some gymnastics I did last night.”

The lieutenant carefully examined the beaten up, somewhat worn, but still good-looking young man.

„What in the world is forcing you to join the Legion with a hundred thousand francs in your pocket?”

„Love.”

The officer nodded, knowingly. France's traditions protect the honour and emotion of that word from the sarcasm which it is subjected to in other countries.

When he had signed the contract, they took away all his papers.

„This is your railway ticket,” said the officer handing it to him, „and at the same time, your identity card, with which you have to report in Marseilles. You are now a soldier, and your orders are to take the first train to Marseilles, where you will report at Fort St. Jean. They'll have a warrant made out for your arrest, and you will be seriously punished when you are caught, if you don't arrive in Marseilles on the afternoon train. Your departure will be checked up on, and you must report with this ticket at the railway station before you leave. Got it?”

„I understand, Lieutenant.”

„With the signing of this contract, you have become a private in the French colonial army. You are under the jurisdiction of military court, which has the right to inflict a death penalty. You will be serving the proud and world-famous flag of the Legion. Do that as becomes a man. I wish you the best of luck, my friend.”

The officer extended his hand, and two minutes later, Gorchev was at the gate again, turning the car. He twisted the steering wheel to one side, and started the motor, but forgot to take the car out of reverse; so he flattened an advertising poster. Having got the car out of reverse, he made a quick turn onto the opposite sidewalk, and raced towards the seashore...

Chapter Four

I

My dear Sir,

Judging from your left hooks, you are a gentleman, though I didn't doubt it from the start. At the end of our heated argument last night, you promised that if I join the Legion and come back, after my discharge, you will not refuse me your daughter.

Therefore, I have the great honour to report that as of today I am a member of the Legion, which can be proven by the ticket containing the number 1172/27/36, which is in my possession. Moreover, by the time you receive this letter, I'll have already reported for my military assignment at Fort St. Jean.

Since not only your left hooks, but your right uppercuts have reinforced my impression that you are a gentleman, I feel that you will not let yourself into a position in which you should find it necessary to give your daughter's hand to anyone else in the meantime. Unless, in the event of my death (of which, I assure you, there is but slight possibility) you are freed from your promise.

I request that you report our agreement to your daughter Annette, and I close my letter in hopes that your butler André will soon be well.

Your true admirer, Ivan Gorchev

The black bandage was still on the general's forehead. He listened to Laboux very thoughtfully as the latter read the letter aloud. This took place in Laboux's summer cottage, on the morning after the eventful night.

Silence prevailed for several seconds.

„Did you really tell him that you would let him marry Annette if he joined the Legion?” asked the general.

„What if I did? You don't imagine that I consider Annette to be the fiancée of some easy-come-easy-go, lightheaded nitwit, just because he misunderstood a joke?!”

„What's your most serious objection to the boy? What you've mentioned up till now isn't a bit serious.”

„Are you defending him...?”

„Until now the only defence was his of me. Against two tramps.”

The general paced the floor undecidedly. This silence made Laboux nervous.

„Tell me, honestly, please, what is your opinion of the whole thing?”

„Gustave! We have been good friends for twenty years... I would really prefer it if you didn't ask for my opinion...”

„I insist that you speak frankly.”

„That’s different. So there. A young man, who enjoys living, is healthy, and isn’t even poor, joined the Foreign Legion last night. Because of you.”

„How could I know he was insane!”

„You could know what the Legion is!”

„Ah,” said Laboux, with feigned indifference, his face pale, „you’re taking the whole thing very emotionally.”

He rang a bell, and spoke nervously to the butler who stepped into the room.

„André! Cognac!”

A violet colour was washed across the butler’s eye; his mouth was swollen. All in all, he looked like an actor interpreting, with success, the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

He filled the glasses, then departed with a true butler expression on his face, which contains a bit of reproach, a degree of insulted self-respect, and also a touch of dramatic haughtiness toward his employer.

„Cheers!” said Laboux, but the general didn’t return the toast.

„I must know your standpoint, Gustave. I’m afraid that in this situation our opinions are very distant from each other.”

Laboux jumped to his feet.

„Hey, André! Tell Parker to bring the car immediately.”

„What do you want?”

„We must find that man. You come with me. Maybe it isn’t too late!”

„A gentleman is waiting in the hall,” announced André.

„I cannot see anyone... I’m not at home... Come on! We’ll go down the back stairs.”

And he dashed off with the general to find Gorchev at all costs. Even if they had to go to hell and back to do it!

André returned to the hall where the guest waited.

„Monsieur Laboux is not available for the time being,” he reported to the guest. „What may I tell him upon his return? Who wished to see him?”

„My name is Ivan Gorchev.”

II

„I am certain that Monsieur Laboux will regret that he was not available.”

„My dear Uncleushka André,” answered Gorchev, „a man is not available in his own house, but at home in it.”

„Monsieur Laboux has no objections to my speech.”

„Yes, he has. He just never told you. Now, will you announce me to Mademoiselle Laboux,” he said easily, biting off the end of a cigar and spitting it past André’s head with such force that the butler shuddered.

„Mademoiselle does not receive guests at this time,” he answered indignantly.

„Now you listen to me, André! I don't like waiting, and I don't like arguing, so go on, Popushka, and do what I say, because if I get mad at you I might just knock you out.”

„I'm sorry, sir, you can't force me to disobey my orders.”

Gorchev simply pushed the butler aside, and walked up the stairs.

When he reached the landing, he opened one door after the other. He was surprised on several occasions. For example, in the bathroom, where the piano teacher just happened to be in the tub. Later, in a tiny closet, when a dog who was suffering from an inoculation came racing out, howling. (The dog bit the scurrying, hysterical piano teacher, and she too had to be inoculated against hydrophobia.)

But finally, in one of the rooms - it must have been the twentieth or so - he heard Annette's voice.

„You may tell the gentleman that he should rest assured I'll be there.”

The girl was conversing with someone.

„It is in your own interests, Mademoiselle, that you come,” answered a croaking, well-wined voice. „I can assure you that no one wishes to harm you.”

Gorchev peeped in the keyhole with little regard for convention. He almost fell flat at what he saw.

Standing in the room, facing Annette, stood the tramp who had attacked the general. The one called Portenif.

„So, you won't forget, Mademoiselle. Toulon, Texas Restaurant. But I will wait for you at the first filling station within the limits of the city, so you won't need to inquire about the route.” The owner of that husky voice now went to the window and, as though this were the most natural way of departure, stepped out on the sill, and disappeared.

Definitely Annette's visitor was the same man who had attacked the general. The fight had taken place in complete darkness, but Gorchev had seen the two men from behind the tree, as they passed under the lamp. This was undoubtedly an advantage insofar as the two brigands would not be able to recognize him if they met again, but he had taken careful note of their features. He decided that he would not be an uninvited intruder in the girl's affairs, and that he would not mention the eavesdropping, unless Annette told him of it, by herself.

Someone touched his shoulder. André stood behind him, his eyes blazing.

„My dear sir, this method...”

The butler was quickly knocked down and shoved under the couch. Then Gorchev knocked on the door.

„Who is it?”

„Ivan Gorchev.”

The girl opened the door in amazement.

„How did you get in here?”

„On the stairs... Darling.”

„Where is André?”

„Your dear old butler had an unexpected visitor, a relative from the provinces, and he is now showing him round in the city...”

„What do you want?”

„I asked for your hand in marriage last night.”

„You’re joking...”

„This is the one question about which I would never joke. I asked for your hand, and your father agreed to our marriage.”

„Is this... true?” asked Annette, her eyes shining.

„So true that I shall kiss you.”

He hugged the girl, and kissed her a number of times. Annette protested.

„I also came to say good-bye to you, because your father only consented on condition that I join the Legion.”

„What?... That’s out of the question!”

„Why! I can’t be stopped by such a triviality! Of course, I immediately reported to the barracks.”

„You’re insane! You aren’t going to join the Legion...” she cried, frightened.

„I already have...”

„I’ll take you over to Ventimiglia, over the border in my car!”

„Don’t bother, Annette,” he stroked the girl’s face, laughing. „I am the most obstinate person in the world. I think your father was right. It won’t hurt if I become a bit more serious. This whole history is so insane, and so beautiful that we mustn’t spoil it. I will serve for you, Annette.”

„But, please... think it over... It’s sheer madness!”

„Life is only worthwhile if it is a bit mad...”

„If something happens to you, Ivan... I want you to understand that I won’t marry anyone else.”

„Please, I don’t even want you to say such a thing. Only very stupid men like it if women sour themselves in sadness. If, through death, I shouldn’t come back, then I really wish that you find someone else with whom you can laugh, and have a wonderful married life... Bless you, Annette...”

One last kiss, and he hurried off. He had to be on the afternoon train to Marseilles.

In the hall André stepped before him, with a haughty, stern, and slightly swollen face.

„Not one step! I have sent for a policeman and...”

Regretfully Gorchev knocked him down again and shoved him this time under the piano. He departed.

III

All this time Laboux and the general searched for Gorchev. First they enquired at the 'Hotel Méditerranée'. Gorchev was not known at the desk, but they seemed to have heard of a mad Russian somewhere. He had last been heard of in the royal suite, in the form of pistol shots, when he had turned off the lights by shooting out the bulbs on the chandelier. Following this information, they spoke to Mr. Vanek, in the closet of the royal suite. The secretary had a neurotic fear of spaces, and couldn't stand the many large and lavishly furnished rooms. The tremendous wardrobe, in which the belongings of the good man, a bowler hat, swimming trunks and an umbrella, were placed, was still twice as big as his last abode, from which he had departed several months previously.

The secretary had been awakened, and was consequently a bit brusque with the enquirers.

„We are looking for a gentleman!” said Laboux.

„So? Just look for him. Or am I disturbing you?”

„Don't you know where he might be?”

„Who?”

„Ivan Gorchev.”

„Oh, that half-wit Russian? I really couldn't tell you,” he said, helplessly.

Laboux sighed, and turned to the general.

„Monte Carlo perhaps?”

„I was there yesterday,” said Mr. Vanek.

„I'm asking about Gorchev, my dear sir!”

„Oh, surely he goes out to the Casino?” de Bertin urged.

„My dear sirs,” answered Mr. Vanek, ponderingly. „Now that you have honoured me with your visit, won't you tell me just who this Gorchev is.”

„But, you are his secretary!”

„That doesn't mean that I haven't the right to know anything about him. To be quite honest, he seems a suspicious character to me. I like him, but he is an unknown quantity. You'll see, something will turn up at some unexpected check-up somewhere abroad.

Laboux tapped his forehead, indicating an unfortunate psychiatric diagnosis, and then said to the general:

„Come, Auguste.”

Laboux began to admit that he had been a fool. They ransacked all Nice and its neighbourhood in vain: Gorchev could be found nowhere. At nine in the evening, they returned home exhausted and were greeted by André in the hall. The poor man looked quite worn. One of his lips, for example, had been chaffed by something in their absence.

„André, I'm looking for a man called Ivan Gorchev. Go to the police station...”

„I have already contacted the police about Mr. Gorchev, but he, unfortunately, has already departed.”

„What?!... When did he leave?”

„I didn't see him.”

„Where were you in the meantime?”

„Under the piano.”

„And before that?”

„Under the couch... You see, Mr. Gorchev forcibly occupied the apartment during the morning hours, broke into Mademoiselle's room, and prevented me from action on several occasions. At these times he buried me under various pieces of furniture.”

They dashed up with the general, four steps at a time. Annette was in her room, sobbing bitterly.

„I hear, Annette,” began her father, in a diffident tone, „that Gorchev was here...”

„...He's gone... an hour ago... on your orders...” sobbed the girl. „You sent him to the desert! And you might as well know that I am his fiancée, and if he dies, I'll die too.”

„Annette, ...don't speak like that ...I'm sorry already... But what can I do... Maybe he has some sense, and he'll escape after all...”

„He has no sense, and he won't escape!” sniffed Annette.

The two men stood silently. The girl's tears fell in large drops... they fell and fell... She seemed irredeemably embittered by the young man's choice of occupation.

André entered the room, and announced:

„I think there is someone here with news of Mr. Gorchev.”

Lingeström entered the room with a bandaged arm, head, and a face that was also swathed in bandages...

Chapter Five

I

After a short, weighty silence, Laboux spoke up again, in a diffident tone.

„I was quite sad when Annette told me that that mad young man...”

„Don't anyone dare to say that!” shouted the girl, her eyes flaming. „Ivan Gorchev answered a challenge in a manner befitting a gentleman!”

„The conflict did occur in defence of Mademoiselle Annette,” consented the baron.

„I didn't ask for your defence! And as far as I know, our relations are not such as to entitle you to defend me.”

„That is why I came here, Annette. You see... But... why are you laughing?!”

„Excuse me... oh! oh! oh!...”

And she ran out. The general and Laboux looked at each another. The girl was mad. If only they could have seen her sitting down on the carpet in the other room and rocking with laughter - for she had suddenly pictured Gorchev as he held his hat shyly, and said, looking at his shoes, „I sliced off one of his ears... anything wrong with that?...” She pealed away to herself.

Then, without any warning, she began to cry. He was in the Legion now... That sweet... sweet madman. He had already arrived. It was six o'clock...

My God! Six o'clock... She had to be in Toulon... They were waiting for her at the filling station.

She grabbed her cape and hat hurriedly and dashed out.

She left the gentlemen in a somewhat icy mood, in the salon. Baron Lingeström was the first to speak.

„I observed from Annette's conduct that I have little reason to hope.”

„I think you are quite right...” answered Laboux honestly. „What can we do? That insane young man completely fouled up our plans.”

„Do you know,” Lingeström asked de Bertin, „that Portenif is in Nice?”

„I've already met him,” answered the general, straightening the black bandage on his forehead as if substantiating his statement.

„So you've contacted that character?” asked the host.

The baron hesitated.

„Since I conclude that my feelings toward Annette are unrequited, there is only one attitude left for me, which is that I choose the solution which can benefit me the most.”

„I understand. Annette's hand would have been the reason for your being with us without hesitation.”

„What of it?”

Laboux poured a water tumbler full of cognac, drank it, then turned to Baron Lingeström, laughing.

„May I be quite honest?”

„As you wish...”

„I am really delighted that my daughter did not choose you as her husband, my dear Baron.”

„What am I to understand by that?”

„I was always a gentleman, but before I became a millionaire I did duty in the hells of the Sahara for several years... since then, *nom du nom*, in the serious moments of life, instead of the twisted salon language, I like the simplicity of the legionary...”

„I knew that you were in the Legion. And I have also been told that you are a great believer in simplified methods of action...”

„Confound it!... Is this meant to be some sort of literary spitefulness?! Look, don't try to ride the high horse, because I have learned more in my lifetime than you. For instance, besides Shelley's poems I also learned the classic left hook...”

„Gustave,” interrupted the general.

„Please, general, I am truly interested in the provincial exhibition of our host...”

„You have been wounded and my guest at the same time. If I apologize that is the only reason for it,” said Laboux, and he drank another glass of the strong cognac as though it were water.

„Admit that it was most peculiar to refer to your defeat as a lover in connection with another affair with which Annette is not in the least connected.”

„Mr. Gorchev's appearance shook my confidence in the stability of our ties...”

„Now, you listen to me!” Laboux growled at the baron. „There is no need for any more solid basis than my word! Take note of that... And as far as Mr. Gorchev goes, the man is completely crazy and should be shot instantly, because otherwise only God knows what he will do next. But he is a real man, and his punches are the kind I take my hat off to. Otherwise he'd knock it off. And... hmm... as I can see, he also knows how to fence,” he added.

The bandaged baron became red as a beet.

„I found out in the meantime that Gorchev is an *agent provocateur!*” he yelled in retaliation.

„Can you prove it?”

„At the age of sixteen he was a sports trainer, and therefore a professional fencer.”

„I was a boxing trainer in the army,” interrupted Laboux, „and I got extra pay for teaching. But I hope that that doesn't stop you from considering me a gentleman.”

„At the age of seventeen, he became a sailor,” Lingeström continued with the facts. „He spent a month in jail in Tokyo for illegal fishing. He was prohibited from entering Greek ports for a knifing, and later played the accordion at the infamous 'Sailboat Bob' in Port Suez...”

„But this is all wonderful,” cried Laboux excitedly. „And I was beginning to feel ashamed that he knocked out one of my teeth!”

„I am no longer surprised that you don't consider me a suitable member of the family,” answered Lingeström, his face burning. Then he rose.

The gentlemen took leave of one another with rigid bows.

„Do you think that Lingeström will turn against us?” asked Laboux, when only the two of them remained.

„What makes you think that he was with us until now?” answered de Bertin nervously. „Did you tell him the secret of the automobile?”

Laboux blinked as if in embarrassment.

„Answer me! Did you tell him anything about the gold?!”

„Well... specifically, no, but... I did mention as a joke that the Alfa Romeo was now worth at least ten million pounds.”

„You madman!”

„Why are you so frightened? The car is standing here, in front of the house, and at night that Negro Parker guards it in the garage... I admit that I was a bit rash to trust that Lingeström, but his father was such a decent man...”

„Your father was a decent man, too,” groaned de Bertin

„That’s true,” answered Laboux, and he rang the bell

André answered. One of his eyes was no larger than an acorn

„Send in the driver.”

„I’m afraid that Parker is not in condition to appear.”

„Where is he?”

„He is sitting on the staircase crying, because someone stole Monsieur’s automobile.”

II

When Annette left the carved-up Lingeström, and her father the car still stood before the gate. The girl looked for Parker in vain. What should she do? She got into the car and started the motor knowing full well that she should first ask her father’s permission. Laboux considered such rules very important.

The old man was very sensitive about his car, but eventually he would be certain to allow her to take the beautiful Alfa Romeo on a short tour...

The car slipped noiselessly along the snow-white smooth highway between the dreamy palms and flower beds of the Riviera. Dazed by the fumes of the lush vegetation of the Cote d’Azur, warm and slightly smelling of fish, she sat behind the steering wheel filled with love, and sadness, and with the indestructible faith of youth. Gorchev was sure to return!

On the surface of the miraculously smooth sea, the lights of two reflectors streaked along, from the tops of the lighthouses. The white and red stripes interchangeably cut the dark back of the water with their thin whip of light.

Gorchev...

Her eyes filled with tears, the houses, palms, the highway changed into blurred things, forcing her to slow down.

What was this? The girl's motorist instinct told her that the usually faultless oil brake was not holding... But never mind... Let's go! She had to clear up a situation which involved her father... That ragamuffin had shown her some kind of letter, in which Laboux was slandered...

Sixty miles... Seventy... The speedometer soared its way up the scale... On that wide highway even a greenhorn could run at racing speed...

But what was this? She was unable to push the car up beyond eighty! What in the world was the matter with this car? Then a few more shocks. The oil and the petrol were burning up at a much greater speed than was warranted by the car, and the distance covered.

But she hadn't the time to think about this peculiarity of the automobile. Toulon was on the horizon, and she had to hurry, for fear of being late. She put her entire weight into the accelerator, gave it more gas, but was unable to get the car going faster than eighty... It was the standard bad dream: a person tries to escape, and his feet, instead of running as directed, just take large steps. She felt this as she gave more gas, but no matter what she did, the car would go no faster than eighty. Any kind of tiny Fiat or other midget car could have easily passed by, and taken the crown from the big touring car.

Toulon!... There was the filling station. Stop!

Despite the command of the fine oil brakes, the car skidded some twenty metres, screeching like some ancient T-Ford in which the brake had been completely worn down... Incomprehensible!

The ragamuffin shot open the door, jumped in beside her, and spoke quietly.

„Get going, quickly! Right at the second crossing!”

The girl instinctively obeyed, started, and raced on.

„Are we going far?”

„One minute. There, turn right at the square. Does anyone know that you came?”

„I promised, so of course no one knows it. To whom does that letter that you showed me belong?”

„You'll find out. Stop before those red and blue lights on the corner.”

The sound of the zither and accordion could be heard. A woman sang in an alto voice, blurred with drink. Above the entrance a sign read:

TEXAS RESTAURANT

„We'll go in from the courtyard,” said Portenif.

Annette followed him silently. They passed through a dark unplanted plot. On the other side of the house, he opened a door to somewhere. He let Annette ahead, but did not follow her in. Instead, he closed the door behind her.

The girl stood in a tiny room, facing two men. One was the little dumpy one, the other a broad-shouldered tall, grey man.

„Please come in,” said the broad-shouldered one. He had an intelligent face, a high forehead, but was possessed with such a frightening calm and resolution that Annette shuddered.

„I came here because I was shown a letter, which is either a mistake, or a deliberate lie. I do not believe anything bad of my father.”

„If that is so, why come here?” asked the dumpy one, in a croaking voice, whose cheap elegance was made complete by a loud necktie, and a glass tie pin.

„I came because I want to quash even the shadow of a doubt.”

She heard a noise. As if someone were trying to start a car somewhere!

„I left my car unguarded.”

Before she could step to the door, the grey man stood before her.

„You are staying here!”

She didn't notice the dumpy one darting behind her. Suddenly he twisted a drugstore smelling rag around her head, which her scream was lost in... She felt them holding her down, and then she lost her senses.

She came to herself in a police station. It was evening. The commander, a big moustached sergeant, stood before a table, drinking tea. When Annette sat up, he turned.

„Are you feeling better?”

„Yes... only my head aches, and I feel dizzy. Phone to Nice, please.”

The sergeant looked at her.

„But you are in Nice!”

A thousand bells rang in the girl's brain. Now she felt the effects of the dope.

„Please... I should like to go home,” she said dizzily. „Call me a taxi...”

„I'm sorry, but all motorized traffic has been forbidden in Nice,” answered the policeman, and when he saw that the girl was looking at him dumbfounded, he added, „A fantastically important, blue, tremendous Romeo car, alias Alfa, has disappeared. Its licence number is 126-513 DK. Hey! What's the matter! Mademoiselle!... Water!...”

Annette had fallen to the floor in a faint.

III

At approximately the same time as Annette, Gorchev began his trip to Toulon. The mysterious automobile had begun to involve its unsuspecting victims. After he had placed André under the piano, Gorchev hurriedly climbed into his borrowed car, in front of Laboux's villa, to rush to reach the five o'clock train to Marseilles, because an order is an order.

And, a warrant is a warrant.

The car was in a rather battered condition. The lack of one door was particularly noticeable. This had probably been ripped off in Monaco, when he ran through the herd of oxen waiting before the abattoir. The running board had been dragged off by a tram car while going around a bend, that was all right, he remembered that. But where had the hood become dented like that, and where had he left his headlights? Oh well, there was nothing he could do about it now.

The first thing to do was to have an aperitif!

He carefully and nimbly stopped in front of a cafe. Finally he did that perfectly: he was braking beautifully, and didn't run into any parking vehicles.

This was partly because Gorchev was beginning to get used to driving, and partly because in front of the cafe there was no vehicle. It so happened that all parking there was prohibited, with the exception of buses. The customary sign stood there: No parking!

However, Gorchev had never paid attention to signs, and he stopped smartly, if not exactly in front of the cafe, a little further up, by a cinema...

„A Pernod, my dear director Uncleushka,” ordered Gorchev hastily, throwing a coin on the table.

But the drink almost got stuck in his throat.

In a hidden booth, at the very back of the cafe, he saw one of the attackers of the general, in the company of the thoroughly bandaged Lingeström.

The two men were deeply engrossed in a discussion. Gorchev backed up against a wall in order to be in line with the curtain of the booth. In that way Lingeström couldn't see him. He had nothing to fear from the one called Portenif, for he didn't know him.

„Be good to the girl, Portenif. The important thing is the automobile. When will you speak to the Chief?”

„It will take a good hour and a half for me to reach Toulon. I'll be meeting them at the 'Texas Restaurant'.”

„Look, there is no need to frighten the girl. The important thing is to steal the car. Outside Cannes, on the road leading to the park, I'll be waiting for you... Waiter!”

Oho!... So this is what he is up to! Two long steps and Gorchev was outside the cafe.

He was greeted by tremendous confusion. Traffic on the street had closed down, because the only way in which the buses could get by Gorchev's car was to go onto the opposite side of the street.

A number of policemen went into the cinema, to find the owner of the car, and the showing of the film had to be interrupted. The traffic, diverted into a back street, became blocked beyond hope. At least a hundred cars stood bumper to bumper, blowing their horns, and an alarm had brought out the police to keep order.

Gorchev had no idea what had happened, but he was in a hurry, and not the least interested. So he climbed into his car.

He was immediately stopped by at least twenty policemen.

„Is that your car?”

„Can't you see the sign?”

„How dare you stop here?”

Gorchev picked at the starter, and stepped on the accelerator.

„Will only two police squadrons speak at once,” he said, not even looking up. „What happened?”

„You didn't park correctly.”

„Now? What would you have said if you had seen me this morning, in front of the pastry shop?”

„That crossed out letter ‘P’ means that there is no parking here!”

„My dear gentlemen, I can drive a car, but I don’t understand hieroglyphs. Express your wish in an intelligible way.”

A policeman informed him that the game would cost him two hundred francs, if he didn’t want them to bring it before the magistrate. Since Gorchev didn’t want this, he handed over the desired amount, and departed. The only further mishap was that he knocked the cinema’s coming attractions sign down in front of the baker shop, which cost but eighty francs in all.

A real bargain!

He moved beautifully to the hotel entrance, and finally braked at the cost of a seventy-franc tricycle. His car was immediately surrounded by curious onlookers, because everyone thought that the Greek entrant for the Monte Carlo Rally who was *en route* from Athens over mountain, valley, in snow, mud, over roads, and cross country, without stopping, had arrived.

For his car certainly seemed to have endured all that too.

Gorchev immediately went to the royal suite, and rushed straight to the wardrobe. Mr. Vanek was just completing his toilet.

„Good day,” he greeted his employer. „Two gentlemen were looking for you.”

„Who were they?”

„I don’t know.”

„What did they want?”

„I don’t know.”

„Did you tell them who I am?”

„Do I know that?”

„Well, describe them, at least.”

„One of them must have been a high-ranking military official, the other a skinny, greying, tanned man in mufti, with blue eyes.”

„Laboux?”

„It’s possible, but it didn’t show on him.”

„What bad luck... Well, never mind.” Gorchev sat down in an armchair. „Listen to me, old man...”

„The name is Vanek.”

„Mr. Vanek, you will finally have the opportunity to prove your worth. I have such confidence in you that I shall let you replace me personally for the near future!”

„You may rest assured, sir...”

„If you accept this replacement for one day, you’ll receive a special award of a thousand francs!”

„I am at your orders, sir.”

„I have joined the Legion.”

„I understand. You may rest assured that while you are away, I will do your work without error.”

„Just the opposite. You will have to report tonight at Fort St. Jean, to replace me in the army!”

Mr. Vanek jumped up, and with a dazed grin, he replied:

„My dear sir, then they will have to dissolve the Legion.”

„I don't want you to be a soldier. But I have something very important to attend to tonight. This I didn't know, however, when I joined the Legion. But, if I don't report, there will be a warrant out for my arrest in twenty-four hours, throughout the country.”

„Then what would my duty be?” asked Mr. Vanek, and he pulled open the necktie rack and then the shoe box built into the side of the closet.

„What are you looking for?”

„I left my lunch here somewhere... Aha!”

He pushed a button, and out of a sunken dressing table appeared a comb, clothes brush, shaving mirror, and a cup of tea, accompanied by a few slices of toast, a half pound of salami, and two shoe-trees. „Go on, please.”

„So, tonight, you will take the ticket that is in my name, go to Marseilles, and report at the fort. You will replace me until tomorrow, so that I shan't be missed and hunted, and I will relieve you tomorrow afternoon.”

„And what happens, if due to circumstances beyond your control, you are unable to appear?”

„Since you are not under contract to the army, you cannot be kept there.”

„But they will refuse to be silent about the fact that I tricked them!”

„You are a civilian, and cannot be hurt by the military authorities, since you are responsible only to civil courts.”

„All right, I accept the assignment.”

„Here is the ticket in my name, and two thousand francs advance, since I know you to be a gentleman.”

„I do not know you at all, but despite this I shall accept the money, since I feel that I shall not suffer disappointment.”

„Thank you for your confidence. You needn't be afraid that I shall be absent-minded, and forget you.”

„I myself deplore absent-mindedness, since among all human weaknesses it is the most ugly and the most worthy of contempt,” said Mr. Vanek, and fastidiously stirred his tea, it so happened, with a button-hook. If he had an idea at all of what was about to crash down on him with this assignment, he would have run away hysterically... But he didn't have an inkling...

IV

If we wish to fully understand the states of mind of de Bertin and Laboux as they paced the floor after the disappearance of the automobile, we must first be let in on a secret.

Two thirds of M. Laboux's Alfa Romeo was of fourteen-carat gold. The nickel plated headlamps, the clutch, the bumper, the chassis, the ashtrays and the door handles were all of solid gold. The finest motor available had been built into it to carry the tremendous weight, but even then the brake proved weak, and the car was unable to attain great speed.

And this fantastic treasure had now been stolen.

When André reported the disappearance of the car, the general, as though the news served as a tranquillizer, immediately became calm.

„When did you last see the car?“

„It can't even be a half hour, sir.“

de Bertin reached for the telephone.

„Please connect me with the police department... My name is de Bertin. Gustave Laboux's Alfa Romeo touring car, licence number 126-513 DK, blue coloured, has been stolen by persons unknown. Anyone discovering the car, or giving some clue to its whereabouts will receive a 50,000 francs reward. I ask that the search begin, and that all police stations be immediately notified by radio. There are invaluable military papers in the automobile.“

Within a half hour, car, motorcycle and a pedestrian search had begun, all roads in the South of France were being scoured for the automobile licenced 126-513 DK, and a constant stream of police reports poured into Laboux's summer cottage.

7 p.m. A blue Alfa Romeo, licence number unknown, had been seen on the highway, going in the direction of Cannes.

8 p.m. It was confirmed that a car licenced 126-513 DK had been filled at a petrol station at seven o'clock sharp, on the outskirts of Toulon.

The roads leading out of Toulon were immediately closed off, while hundreds of policemen searched the streets and garages.

Laboux and the general barely spoke. Avoiding each other, they paced the floor endlessly, length and breadth.

9 p.m. The blue Alfa Romeo, with the licence number listed, had left Toulon at eight in the evening. It had filled up at Cannes.

All roads leading out of Cannes were closed.

Sensational news came at 9.30!

A guard reported that he had heard the news of the search late, because at the time of the radio message he had been in a restaurant watching a suspicious individual, while standing at the counter. He had pretended to be drinking wine, but in reality he was keeping a sharp eye on the suspicious person. Later he concluded that the individual was not the one suspected of the robbery, so stepped out into the street, spotted the searched for Alfa Romeo, on the Boulevard Victoire, going at about sixty miles an hour - on the pavement. Further on, on Avenue Magenta, it had knocked over a vendor of fried potatoes, but continued without stopping, and finally, cutting through the flower garden of the Promenade des Anglaises, it turned onto the

Plage. Particular characteristics: on the bonnet of the car a deck-chair could be seen, on which hung a silk lady's kimono (black background and golden oriental pattern).

De Bertin glanced out toward the garden, in the direction of the gate. And then for an instant he felt as though he had lost his mind:

An Alfa Romeo, licence number 126-513 DK, was standing at the gate! On its bonnet were a deck-chair, and a silk kimono (black background and golden oriental pattern).

Chapter Six

I

Gorchev took off for Toulon at top speed at exactly 4.45 p.m. At 4.46, due to a collision, he was forced to halt. By then he had completed exactly twenty yards of the distance from Nice to Toulon. He came to an agreement of forty francs with the driver of the steam laundry's van and raced on with the speed of the wind. At 4.49 he noticed that he was out of petrol. He turned in at a filling station, but in doing so he moved it some eight yards away from its place, so there could be no question of filling. He paid three hundred and sixty francs, instead of four hundred, because he subtracted forty for one of his headlamps and his horn.

He had finally managed to get petrol, departed, and this time successfully reached the highway. Here Gorchev became wild. He sped at a hundred, despite the fact that the stormy weather made steering more difficult, with the wind clinging to the front wheels, letting them go, just to push them in the opposite direction. The car swayed from one side of the road to the other.

A street-sweeper made the sign of the cross at the sight of the swerving car. There'd have been no trouble if his right front tire hadn't had a blow-out. A crack like a rifle shot... the brakes screeched, Gorchev twisted the steering wheel wildly, but all in vain. The car, pressing on the rim of the wheel, crashed into a tree, turned over, rolled twice onto its side, a terrifying crash, roar, and crunch, and finally the car and driver fell into a ditch. Finish! Neither would ever move again. Shouting men rushed forward to the scene!

„Phone for an ambulance!” ordered a wealthy holiday-maker.

„Be careful! Lift him slowly,” commanded Margot, the directress.

„This life-saving has to be planned,” said a man with whiskers, who was a teacher of embroidery in a girls' school, while beside him a world-famous author gave orders in pyjamas.

A foot appeared from behind the steering wheel of the car, followed by another. Finally, head downwards, the unfortunate driver gradually appeared to the waist, and in that condition, signalled with his feet, probably that they should pull him out.

„In my opinion, we shouldn't touch him before the doctor arrives,” said the embroidery teacher. The foot kicked in anger. Still, they didn't dare touch the driver, who was only visible to the waist, while his upper body hung in the window, on the inside of the wreck.

When he kicked again, his trousers began to fray, and one had to fear that any further tension on the material would lead to serious complications. A sailor and the world-famous author climbed down into the ditch, to prevent the impending catastrophe.

The wealthy holiday-maker suggested that it would be wise to cover the individual with an overcoat until the ambulance arrived, but he didn't offer his own, so the sailor and the world-famous author lifted the driver out of his tricky position.

Torn, bloody, oily and dirty, he staggered out of the ditch. A doctor examined him, and poked at him.

„My dear sir, this is a miracle!”

„Every-day practice with me,” answered the ragged driver. „Now where can I hire a car?”

„You don’t mean to say that you wish to continue your journey?! The ambulance will be here in an instant. It’s possible that you suffered internal injuries.”

„If that’s the only thing, then I don’t mind it at all. Is there an empty car in the garage?” he called over to a nearby filling station attendant.

„You can’t hire a car in this condition! You look like a corpse.”

„Watch your mouth, Popushka!” growled the Russian at him.

The elderly attendant approached him.

„Like hell I will. Think you can scare me?”

And he took hold of Gorchev’s arm. At this the victim of the catastrophe immediately hit him on the mouth, so that he flew into the ditch, among the ruins of the car.

„I guess he doesn’t have internal injuries after all,” said the doctor to a property-owner.

When the ambulance arrived, they dashed down into the ditch and, naturally, began to nurse the unconscious filling station attendant. The crowd divulged nothing, because the condition of the man justified immediate medical attention.

Meanwhile, Gorchev got into a car that had been left alone by the side of the road, and took off as fast as he could along the highway.

The ambulance attendants bandaged their charge, and were in the process of placing him on a stretcher, when a terrified woman, the wife of that very filling station attendant, appeared on the scene.

„My husband!” she screamed in fright. „What has happened to my husband?!”

„You must be strong, madame,” answered the ambulance attendant with dramatic simplicity. „He is in no danger of dying.”

Then they pushed the stretcher with the filling station attendant into the ambulance, and raced off amidst a scream of sirens...

II

In Cannes, Gorchev got out of the car, and purchased a sailor suit. Somehow he felt better wearing it. Then, because he preferred the honest way, he rented a dilapidated Chrysler, and raced off toward Toulon. Within ten minutes his clutch burned out. Of all things! At 5.55 he was racing along in a beautiful Mercedes, and at exactly six o’clock he dashed through the vegetable garden of the boys’ orphanage in the street cleansing department’s T. 106/91 watering car.

Within a short time he arrived at the dock; it wasn’t too difficult since he went on foot. In order to project his gentlemanly image affectively, he put on his black-rimmed monocle, noticing with sorrow that a section of the celluloid had cracked off, leaving the naked wire frame showing.

He reached an outer warehouse by the dockside, where shifty looking individuals could be readily seen. In the depths of an arcade, he noticed a moving shadow. He stepped over it.

„How do you do, old man! Won't you please tell me where I can find the 'Texas Restaurant'?"

„No.”

„What?"

„Listen to me, and go to the 'Plum Blue Paradise'. That's a dive too..."

„But..."

„My dear sir, listen to me, and don't say anything.”

„But I have to go to the 'Texas Restaurant'!"

„Don't talk so much, the 'Plum Blue Paradise' is right here, to the right of the coal wharf, you go there, and not another word!"

And with that he left him.

„Idiot," called Gorchev after him. The individual turned round. It was getting dark. In the dark harbour two figures stood facing each other, one tall, the other short.

„Did you say anything?" asked the tall one.

„I only mentioned the fact that you are an idiot.”

„Take it back.”

„I'm afraid I can't do that," answered the shorter shadow. „After our short conversation, this impression has become fixed within me." And in an almost apologetic way he added, „You're an idiot, Uncleushka, and what can I do about it? It isn't my fault..."

„Now I will have to beat you to a pulp.”

„You don't say! Are you that angry?"

„Yes... take that... ouch!"

The monocled young man caught the arm that was working into a swing, twisted it, and vivaciously kicked into the suspicious passer-by. He fell head first into a small pool of oil paint with which on that very day they had painted the 'Local Blue Ribbon.' on the chimney of the fastest motor boat in Toulon.

Gorchev rushed onward, and further still, at the customs office, he called to a tiny British sailor.

„Hello, boy!"

„What can I do for you?!" the freckled youngster asked brightly.

„Can you tell me, old man, how to find the 'Texas Restaurant'?"

„Go to hell!" answered the boy, furiously, and left him on the spot.

Goodness! It would seem that the 'Texas Restaurant' must be notorious around here. But he still had to get there, and quickly!

He stopped a peculiar individual, who was eating sunflower seeds from his cap, wore a sleeveless striped suit, and was leaning against a streetlamp. His wide, large bones spoke of a muscular man. His enormous beaky duck's nose moved peculiarly, as he chewed on the sunflower seeds, and he spit out the shells with such a nice routine that he was occasionally even able to hit distant passers-by.

„How do you do,” Gorchev greeted him, and ducked his head against a barrage of sunflower seeds.

The man in the vest didn't answer his greeting, instead he spoke in a scraping baritone voice.

„What do you want, silly? Out with it, or scram.”

„Look, my little pigeon... Upsa!” and he avoided another blast of sunflower seeds. „I just arrived by ship from Iceland, and I can't find my way around very well. I wouldn't like to go into the 'Texas Restaurant', because someone warned me against it...”

„A little scrag like you had better not even go to the Texas.”

„Upsa! That was a bull's-eye... What I would like...” he wiped his eyes. „My friends suggested the 'Plum Blue Paradise'. And what I would like to know is where the 'Texas Restaurant' is, so that I don't find myself there by accident. Upsa!”

„You're in luck. You can't even get over there by accident, because I happen to be on my way to the 'Plum Blue Paradise', and I'll take you with me, since you're so helpless.”

The devil take it! And here he was already being led along. Whoever heard anything like it!

„But where *is* the 'Texas Restaurant' so that I should be able to avoid it?” grunted Gorchev again.

„Just don't be afraid of anything, and come on. There is the 'Plum Blue Paradise' on the corner. It's a quiet respectable place.”

When they arrived at the pub in question, Gorchev felt feeling of respect mounting up within him for the 'Texas Restaurant', to which by comparison, this was a quiet and what's more, a 'respectable' place. Because a police car stood out in front of the 'Plum Blue Paradise' awaiting the alarm, while from the inside came the sound of breaking glass, and a general din, a number of shots; then a waiter half beaten to death running out, and shouting on the street:

„Ambulance! Bigeur is dead, and the other two...”

What happened to the other two never turned out, because a bench hurled through the door after the waiter bounced off his head and knocked him unconscious. In the meantime the police dragged off a handcuffed something, closely resembling a man.

„Do you like boiled mutton with onions?” asked the duck-bill-nosed, „because they make that good here.”

„It's all the same to me what I eat.”

„Noze, not to me. I like meat with onions.”

It was entirely unnecessary to admit this, because, from the outset of their conversation, Gorchev was fully aware of the loving ties between the stranger and onions. Meanwhile the waiter regained consciousness, picked up the bench and returned to the place, where, in his opinion, Bigeur had died and something had befallen the other two.

„Well, come on, at this time dinner is usually ready. And because you're such a greenhorn, I'll pay for you. If you want, you can sleep in my place too.”

„Where do you live?”

„Oh, nowhere.”

„Well then, why don't you spend the night with me? I don't have a place either.”

„You idiot,” shouted the duckbill-nosed at him. „I am Alec Lonesome. I know the most comfortable cattle-trucks in the dock, and I know some first-class secret crates too.”

Alec Lonesome, expert of cattle-trucks and secret crates, went ahead, with Gorchev behind.

A thin man wearing eyeglasses came over to them. He held a wet, blood-soaked kerchief to his head, and greeted his guests with measured enthusiasm.

„Sit down,” he growled. And he pointed toward Gorchev with hatred. „Who’s that character?”

„My name is Chervonets.”

„You don’t say!... I’m Bigeur. Did anything happen?”

„Are you the man who died?”

„Idiot!” he growled at the young man. „My tapster is neurotic, and every time they break my head in, he runs out onto the street screaming for an ambulance! He does it every single day.”

„Bring us mutton with onions,” spoke up Alec Lonesome, expert of cattle-trucks and secret crates. „Boiled beans in oil, vinegar, and a bottle of red wine.”

Bigeur took the order.

„Why do you have to repeat that stuff every day? We already know the kind of meat that you characters eat,” answered Bigeur, and he yelled into the kitchen, „Two orders of the Alec Lonesome mutton.”

„Tell me something, have you ever been in the ‘Texas Restaurant’?” Gorchev asked his benefactor when they were left alone again.

„How could I not have been? I have work to do there pretty often. But that’s different! It’s the name, you know! I can go anywhere, in peace.”

Meanwhile they were served, and Gorchev, despite his impatience, finally was able to enjoy eating bean salad *à la quay*, with loads of pepper and onion rings, and mutton, with red wine.

„What is your name?” Gorchev asked his neighbour, the expert of cattle-trucks and secret crates, during dinner. „I can’t believe that it is Alec Lonesome. I’m sure that you have another, human name too.”

„What business is it of yours? Did you come here for an introduction or for dinner?!”

„I only thought.. if we became friends...”

„Become friends with the likes of you!”

Gorchev began to like this man more and more. Though he burned with impatience because of Annette, he would have liked to learn more from this expert of cattle-trucks and secret crates.

„What do you do for a living?”

„I’m a bandit,” answered Alec Lonesome. „Why aren’t you drinking any wine?”

„What?”

„What’s the matter, are you deaf? Along with a few friends, I practise commissioned banditry. It’s really quite an occupation.”

Alec Lonesome, commissioned bandit (and on the side, expert of cattle-trucks and secret crates), smacked his lips, took out his pocket-knife, then resting his elbow on the table, began to pick his teeth after the dinner, with the blade of his knife.

„Commissioned banditry as an occupation isn't dangerous, but it doesn't pay that well either. There are real bandits, who give out smaller work on commission. Say, if they robbed a warehouse, then we'd get the stuff away in lorries, I'll knock out anyone, ship him to wherever ordered, then I wash my hands of the whole thing.”

„Hmmm... It must have been a long time since you got an assignment,” said Ivan Gorchev looking at Alec's hands.

„Just today! We are to catch a swine, and blow out his candle for him.”

„Some rich man with an inheritance?” asked Gorchev pouring himself some wine.

„Like hell! The man's a scoundrel, and his name is Ivan Gorchev... Hey you! What's up? To choke on one swallow of wine?! Cough it up!”

III

„Who is this, this... Gorchev, if I understood you correctly?” Gorchev asked Alec, when he had regained his power of speech.

„A swine! He's spying for some African king, here on the Riviera.”

„Really?” This did surprise him. „The African kings are planning an invasion of Monte Carlo?”

„There's something completely different in the background. But that isn't important. He has joined forces with a few fanatical characters; he's clever, and daring.”

„What does he look like?”

„Not like you!”

„That's for sure.”

„But enough of that. Why don't you tell me what you are doing around here?”

„I'm an apprentice on a ship.”

„How did you become that?”

„I was studying to become a ladies' dressmaker, but I ruined a lovely spring costume, and they threw me out,” he said, his face serious. As I mentioned before, Gorchev had a very trying habit of saying all sorts of ridiculous things immediately, without hesitation, if anyone asked him a question. „First I wanted to be a waiter,” he explained airily, „but I'm a coward, and have a hard time learning things, so I figured that it would be better for me to live in the docks.”

„Idiot!” yelled the duckbill-nosed, and hit the table so hard that a piece of meat that had been quartered, fell into his lap. „Do you think that the harbour is for cowardly idiots?”

„Well, at any rate, it's different from the restaurant, where it can happen that some drunkard beats up the waiter.”

„And are there no drunkards at the docks?”

„Are there?” he asked in fright. „Then I really am in a fix! I never thought of that.”

„You’re mad! You’re a lost man here, with that girlish face of yours, innocent as you are! What would you do if someone hit you?”

„Don’t worry, I could protect myself.”

„How?! What?”

„I would immediately report the individual in question!”

„Get the hell out of here immediately!” But when Gorchev jumped up, he shouted after him, „Wait, you lunatic...”

But the Russian ran as fast as he could, happy and anxious at the same time because he was pleased with his opportunity to escape, and he was afraid that Annette would be in trouble!

Alec was very sorry he had frightened the cowardly, helpless young fellow. He was a very pleasant, frank kid, and there was no one to protect him. He went after him, but the Russian ran like a madman.

„Stop, you idiot! I won’t hurt you! Stop or I’ll break every bone in your body...”

But his enticements were all in vain; Gorchev ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

IV

Now what should he do?... It was already evening. Where could the ‘Texas Restaurant’ be? Aha!

A first-class idea!

He quickly dashed into a telephone booth, and called the fire department. The sound of the siren would lead him there, because the restaurant was somewhere nearby, that much was certain.

„Fire department,” a voice answered.

„Come at once! The ‘Texas Restaurant’ is on fire!”

„Thank God.”

„What?! Are you mad? This is the owner speaking!”

„Is that you, Raoul? Why did you set the place on fire again. They won’t believe that the corpse was a victim of fire anyway.”

„This time it’s true. The gas stove exploded next to him.”

„But your stove is ceramic.”

„Yes... but we brought in gas too... are you coming?”

„All right, we’re on our way. How is Emanuel?”

„Uh... he’s well now...”

„Was he sick?!”

„No... not really... too much smoking, you know,” stammered Gorchev.

„What? Emanuel smokes?”

„Well... of course not... He only lit a Turkish pipe as a joke...”

„The mule?!”

Gorchev became furious.

„Yes! The mule! He smokes a pipe, reads novels, and even talks!”

„Hello! What did you say?!”

„That you should go and hang yourself!”

He slammed down the receiver. Whew, how unpleasant.

„There you are, you scoundrel!” A policeman was holding him by the throat. „So it’s you who call the fire department from this place!”

„But...”

„Quiet! I’ve had every telephone booth checked for over a week. You called out the midwife to Councillor Lusson’s engagement party, saying it was an emergency!”

„Please, I admit the fire department, but the midwife isn’t true, and...”

„Come on, now we’ve got a proof at last!”

„But the ‘Texas Restaurant’ is on fire!”

„I’ll fix you!” shouted the policeman. „Where is that restaurant burning, huh?!”

And he pointed to the neighbouring house.

There, above the door was a large electric sign:

Rude guests pay an exit charge
TEXAS RESTAURANT

And in front of the restaurant an Alfa Romeo drew up. Out stepped Annette and Portenif, and immediately disappeared through the gate by the courtyard, which opened onto the empty plot of land.

Chapter Seven

I

„Come on,” said the policeman, grabbing Gorchev’s arm, and starting out.

„I swear that I am innocent of the midwife story. I admit the fire department and...”

He heard the sound of a motor... and turned around quickly. The Alfa Romeo was coming in his direction!

The next day when the policeman reported the incident, he said he had slipped in a puddle when the prisoner escaped. The truth was that Gorchev cleverly tripped him, then jumped up on the trunk of the Alfa Romeo as it ran past him.

They left Toulon behind them. Portenif drove quite well... They arrived in Cannes. ‘That park will be somewhere nearby,’ thought Gorchev. The car braked near a thin group of trees... then it stopped. This was the park all right, but Baron Lingeström was not there. Portenif, in a driver’s uniform, got out, slammed the door and looked around. Then, in the dark, someone slugged him on the mouth, and he fainted...

Gorchev, of course.

He immediately sat down by the steering wheel and started up the Alfa Romeo. With absolutely no idea that the entire country had been chasing him for over half an hour, he started in the direction of Nice at his usual pace. Such childish things as warning shots, hand waving, and so on, didn’t disturb him very much, and when a policeman jumped in front of him, his arms open, he grumbled, sarcastically, „Well, old pal, if I could brake from this distance, then I’d win the world championship.”

On the strength of the principle ‘a smart man admits defeat’ the policeman jumped out of the path of the car, just barely saving his life. He was surprised to see that the thief, subject of a country-wide manhunt, leaned out of the window and shook his finger at him, threateningly, shouting out words of rebuke...

Could this be true? The hunted, threatening the police?

Just before Nice, while going around one of the bends, he very skilfully cut through the ladies’ sunbathing area by the beach of the ‘Hotel Europe’, crashing through a fence, and among the panicking lady guests, taking one of the deck-chairs with him, to which he later added a black silk kimono, with a golden oriental pattern on it, from the Perriere laundry. And on he raced, since that afternoon his secretary had joined the Legion in his place, just as a certain obliging gentleman in one of Schiller’s dramatic poems replaced his friend for several days in the condemned cell, while the sentenced man attended his sister’s wedding feast.

Ivan Gorchev rushed towards Nice. He wanted to be in Marseilles at dawn, which wasn’t a long journey on foot, but unfortunately Gorchev was fond of travelling by car.

It’s amazing, but this is the way it happened: The car, which was searched for high and low, arrived at its destination. While they searched for it in Toulon it was on the highway. In Nice they received news of it only after it had arrived at Laboux’s villa. After that no one looked for it. And this was understandable. Who would imagine that the thief of a car would park it in front of the victim’s villa?

Gorchev immediately rushed to the Lafayette Department Store to do some shopping.

„Send a few things to the royal suite of the ‘Hotel Méditerranée’ for me, „he said to the shop assistant. „First, two or three thin, sleeveless undershirts, all kinds, that a colonial soldier would need, and then the kind of sailor suit that this was, only when new.”

„Excuse me,” the shop assistant interrupted him, „but I don’t know what this suit was like when it was new. A few years is a long time.”

„I bought it new, yesterday! And besides, the colour is white.”

„Hm... Maybe that’s the part about it that’s most difficult to determine.”

„Attention please!” a loudspeaker squeaked.

„What’s that?” asked Gorchev, and the speaker began an announcement, to which every customer listened excitedly.

„The blue Alfa Romeo, licence number 126-513 DK, with its driver hunted all over the country, is making an unsuccessful attempt to escape through the centre of Nice. His capture is inevitable! The finder, or anyone giving useful accurate information to the whereabouts of the car, will still receive a reward of 50,000 francs...”

II

„What was that?” Gorchev asked the shop assistant. „I was asleep all afternoon, and I don’t know anything.”

„A car containing important military documents disappeared. The whole country’s in a fever, and the police are searching for the thief, who is supposedly the family murderer from Lyon, and a professional robber, too.”

„You don’t say!”

„One of our customers saw him, as he turned onto the Plage. He has big red whiskers, and is a giant.”

„This is really what he saw?” murmured Gorchev.

„That’s right. Most criminals can thank their captivators for this kind of observation.”

„They certainly can thank that kind!”

He paid his bill, and left. How deserted the street was. Traffic had been stopped. But were these people mad? The car had been taken back to its owner. But maybe the only place they weren’t looking for it was where he had left it.

He noticed tremendous confusion at one street-corner.

„What’s happening there?” he asked someone in the crowd.

„They’ve caught the criminal and are about to lynch him! He kidnapped the Lindbergh baby too. He’s a cowboy in disguise, who was a partner of Al Capone.”

Gorchev slowly discovered an axiom of general validity: most of humanity are born to be script writers!

The confusion centred on a Bugatti, licence number 709-846 ChU, in which a veterinary surgeon from Beromunster had arrived with his wife and little son.

„That’s the one!”

„He painted the car! The paint is still wet!”

„Where did you steal the child?”

His own child! The woman screamed, the child howled, and the veterinary croaked, and someone knocked his hat off. A company of policemen quietened down the threatening atmosphere, by shoving back the crowd, while informing the people that the car had been found. Meanwhile they hit the crowd with truncheons.

As a result of the excitement the veterinary from Beromunster had another attack of facial neuralgia, and because he had already been allowed home from Lourdes certified as completely cured, instead of continuing on to Monte Carlo, he headed for the town of miracles to ask his money back by law!

Gorchev went to the ‘Hotel Méditerranée’ on foot. He walked whistling through the shining hall in his dusty, crumpled clothes.

The hotel desk-clerk called after him:

„Where are you going, please?”

„To the first floor. When did Mr. Vanek leave?”

The desk-clerk shrugged.

„I didn’t even know he had arrived.”

„He was renting the royal suite.”

He looked it up in the book, and shrugged again.

„There is absolutely no Mr. Vanek there. Some insane Portuguese called Gorchev is renting it.”

„Please,” said Gorchev, „I was sent here by that Portuguese gentleman in order to pay his bill, and he gave me permission to change my clothes in his suite.”

„Tell me, young man,” asked the desk-clerk confidentially, „is that Gorchev some sort of industrialist?”

„Of course. He has a patent on mud-coloured ladies’ face cream, but his major field is in argentine knick-knacks. He’s going to Villa D’Aragon from here.”

„Are you the scuttle-man there?”

„No, I work in the vegetable garden. The building belongs to Gorchev’s wife, from whom he is separated. The industrialist made it up with his wife today, and they are returning to Portugal together, where they will devote the rest of their lives to argentine manufacturing...”

He rushed up to the suite where he quickly changed into the clean sailor suit which had been sent from the department store with his other belongings, in a yellow suitcase. He liked the clean sailor suit together with the round cap. It suited him very well, and indeed he made a pleasant picture, with his rhythmic gait.

He also wanted to shave. A man shouldn’t join the Legion in just any old way. He tied a towel in his neck, and opened the tremendous built-in closet in which there was everything.

And then, to his great surprise, Mr. Vanek fell out from the lower shelf onto the floor.

Chapter Eight

I

„My dear sir, why don't you knock on the door, when you enter!”

„I rent this suite!”

„But the closet is my private residence. My home is my castle!”

„Mr. Vanek, I fell down from the heavens.”

„But still it was I who hurt myself in the fall.”

„You were supposed to report at the Legion in Marseilles. You accepted a thousand francs, and despite this you are still here. You've cheated me.”

„That's a lie!”

Mr. Vanek was possessed by the haughtiness of the utterly self-righteous.

Gorchev, on the other hand, couldn't look at Mr. Vanek's face with the pince-nez, and his thick black moustache without wanting to laugh.

But the situation was bad, and Gorchev concentrated all his attention on remaining serious and even a bit threatening.

„You,” he said in answer to Mr. Vanek's outburst, „are aware of the fact that I shall now hit you.”

„I didn't doubt that for an instant. But here I stand, like Galileo. Hit me! Break me to bits! Completely to bits! And still it moves.”

„You do not have the right to compare yourself to a respectable astronomer, after you have cheated me.”

„That is a whopping lie!”

„If you don't explain the situation immediately, then I will squash you in among the shoe-trees, and will push that big oak table in front of the door, and you'll be stuck in there!”

„Galileo would have borne it with his head held high!”

„I demand an explanation!”

„You asked me to replace you in the Legion for one day, and you gave me a thousand francs for this. Is that correct?”

„Correct.”

„I arranged to have you replaced in a different way, to see that you did not remain without a secretary.” Here he beat himself on the chest. „Because I feel that I may say, without being boastful, that I have, if I may use the word, made myself indispensable to you. So I stood before the barracks, and spoke up to the first unhappy looking gentleman that I saw, who was obviously to enlist. I was easily able to convince him to take your place, and I gave him five hundred francs, to look around, in no danger at all, in the Legion, and he can think it over, and step out tomorrow, when you replace him, Mr. Golitser.”

Gorchev did not correct him.

„And so, what is the situation now, Mr. Vanek?”

„That you have a replacement in the Legion, but you have not lost your secretary, and I have five hundred francs to my credit. Or rather, you have lost your secretary, because you insulted me, and I am leaving instantly, but,” he ended, his head raised in pride, „the earth still moves! Make special note of that, sir!”

And he opened the drawer, to take his old coat, bathing suit, umbrella, and a slice of lamb with a small amount of cucumber salad along with him.

„I would like to make up for it, if I hurt you,” said Gorchev, apologetically.

„Perhaps it isn't too late,” opined Mr. Vanek, and he quickly replaced the cucumber salad, not without spilling it on his shoes.

„I shall make amends!”

„Well, all right. This time I'll stay. But take note of this: I have never lied.”

„And the earth isn't moving at all,” said Gorchev sadly, „because if it did, it would open up and swallow you!”

The following morning.

„Mr. Petrovich!”

Gorchev woke up. His secretary stood before his bed, wrapped in a sheet.

He wore this instead of pyjamas at night in the closet, and in such a way that it ran from his right waist to his left shoulder, making him look like Julius Caesar in an American burlesque.

„Get up,” he said patiently. „You have to report at the Legion today to replace a certain Mr. Cortot! Get up!”

„Tell me something, you leech...”

„My name is Vanek...”

„Tell me something, Mr. Vanek, you Mr. Leech, why are you so worried about me?!”

„I certainly wouldn't like it if our old and sincere friendship were to end in my being disappointed in you, Mr. Zwillinger!”

Gorchev jumped out of bed as though it had caught fire under him.

„Man! I understand everything, but will you immediately explain where you got that Zwillinger from, before I have a fit.”

„That's beside the point! I myself made a guarantee in your name to Mr. Cortot, who is replacing you.”

„That's all right. But where did Zwillinger come from?”

„It was a joke, I am well aware of the fact that you are basically Petrovich.”

„And who is this Mr. Cortot? Why did he join the Legion?”

„Patriotism. He was exiled from France because of criminal activities. Now he's returned in secret and joined the Legion.”

„Impressive.”

Gorchev dressed quickly. They succeeded in catching the train, and by the time the noonday bells rang, they were in Marseilles.

On the road leading to Fort St. Jean, Gorchev stretched his hand out to Mr. Vanek.

„Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

„Don’t mention it. I was only doing my duty, Mr. Petrovich. But regardless of this fact, you may give me my assignments.”

„I don’t believe that the rules of the Legion would permit even one secretary for a private.”

„But I am a civilian, and am exempt from military rules and regulations.”

„I am truly touched by your devotion. It just occurred to me that I would like to ask you for something, Mr. Vanek!”

„Yes, sir.”

„Will you please call Nice?”

„I can do that,” he answered, and started out.

„Mr. Vanek! Stop! I haven’t yet told you what to do.”

„I am to call Nice, long distance. Isn’t that what you asked me to do?”

„But *why* are you going to call Nice?”

„A good secretary never inquires about the private affairs of his employer.”

„You will call the Laboux house in Nice... Please, don’t start out yet... You will ask if Mademoiselle Annette is at home, and if so, you will report this to me somehow. Annette Laboux.”

„What is your connection with the young lady?”

„That is a private affair, Mr. Vanek.”

„Aha!” and he winked. „Most likely an actress! You must be careful with artists, because love...”

„Good-bye!”

Gorchev went straight to the fort. The guard let him in without a word. From now on getting out will be the only difficulty. He crossed the courtyard, in the direction of the company office. The place was swarming with soldiers. Where was his replacement, Cortot, who couldn’t live without France? After searching for an hour, he found him. He was an individual with a low forehead, and an ugly face, who looked rather tainted. He was already in uniform.

„Are you that character, that Gorchev?” he asked in the exaggerated drawl of stupid people.

„That’s me, Popushka. Thank you very much for the favour, and now let’s change back!”

„We’re not changing. I leave for Africa this afternoon.”

„What the...? I am Ivan Gorchev and give me back my identity!”

„Keep cool! I found a sergeant here, with whom, in better days, I worked in Paris at the Peugeot Works. His name is Hector Potiou. I got to him by accident. If now I were to give you back your place, and join again, there’s no telling what kind of sergeant I would get... This way the sergeant is my pal. It means a lot. Look!”

„But I want to serve.”

„Then you join again. Do you think they care how many Gorchevs serve at the same time?” said Cortot the white-slave-dealer, who could hardly stand, he was so drunk.

„Hm... And you are going to use the name of Gorchev?”

„Don't worry, I won't wear it out.”

„Well, all right, old man... Then I'll join again, and you just go on off with your sergeant.”

Another hour passed and Gorchev quietly sat down on a bench, and turned his face to the sky. He was doing some impromptu sunbathing, at least as much as was possible in a place such as the fort. But events were not going to give him much time for such quiet activity.

Later he saw Cortot again. He was staggering in the company of a sergeant, totally drunk, and the sergeant had a red moustache. That would be Hector Potiou. Then, at the roll call, all new recruits in Hector Potiou's company lined up with their bag and baggage. Cortot kept his belongings in a cigar box, of medium size, tied together with a string. On the box, in large childish letters, he wrote the name Ivan Gorchev. It never does any harm, he thought, if a person writes down his name, because he might forget it.

He put the box down in front of himself.

Then came the sound of the bugle, and the little group started out, through the gate of the fort, to board ship in the harbour. In place of them another NCO appeared in the midst of the courtyard, a certain Sergeant Verdier, who shouted at the top of his voice:

„Everyone who reported for duty this morning, line up by the right-hand gate of the building.”

This referred to Gorchev as well. Sergeant Verdier was called The Lion among the privates, because the peculiar wrinkles around his mouth and nose, and the strange blinking of his eyes reminded them of that particular beast. But at roaring he was far superior to that wild animal. His right eye was constantly half-closed, in an expression of everlasting suspicion. It was claimed that his teeth were an inch long. This might be an exaggeration, but it is certain that square teeth of that size have never before or since been seen in a human jaw.

At this particular moment he was trying to make the impression of a good-hearted and pleasant NCO. However, the understanding and good-natured expression combined the lines of an executioner comforting his victim, and a psychotic meditating over blissful vision, with diabolic glee.

„You have joined the Legion,” he said to the new recruits, - „this is a great fortune and an honour which you must constantly be aware of. I beg you to understand this. If you do, you will ensure yourselves the lives of gentlemen. You have come to a comfortable place, free from worry. You see, I am the most benevolent person in the world. At one time the men under me called me father. The only thing I dislike is being trifled with. Anyone who tries it will be sorry for it later. I'm sorry that I cannot prove my statement with witnesses, because none are alive today. You just make note of that, and the rest is my job. You won't forget it. Anyone who doesn't trifle with me will be able to live in the company like Alice in Wonderland, because I am the most benevolent person in the world. Get going, you swine, I don't even want to see you. Thieves! Crooks!”

He said this completely without expression, and at a quick pace, like a professional best man rattling off the set toast at a wedding feast; then he dashed away, complete with the threatening musical undertones of his sword, medals and heel-plates. A sleepy-voiced,

disdainful-looking corporal stepped into his place. He was called Gent, and suffered from civilophobia. The name of this sickness had been coined by a bohemian company doctor there in the Fort St. Jean. The symptoms of this incurable disease: extreme nausea, followed by torturing attacks of rage induced by the nearness of civilians.

His face showed moody disgust, and slight sleepiness, as he stepped before them, hooked his thumbs into his belt, spread his legs apart, and spat.

My God! How many civilians! How many shaking chests, and wavering heads! They're chewing their nails, staring at their boots, standing around bored stiff, and the rows are as crooked as a bent string.

And these would have to stand at an everyday early morning roll-call in the Sahara as though they were at a dress parade! „I am Corporal Gent,” he began in a melodious voice, almost softly. „You are the dirty 'bleus'.” This came from the days when, in Napoleon's time, the collar sewn on the new recruits was tight around the neck, which made their tongues hang out, and their faces turn blue. Since that time they've called every stupid horde 'les bleus'. „Follow me, but stand in some sort of rows, I don't care what kind, because I'll start crying in a minute, if I have to keep looking at you.” The sheep followed the corporal.

„Little sister, this is a place of a sort of informal style,” said Gorchev to a frightened faced, huge butcher, with eyes that popped, as though he had a goiter, and who was the victim of a poor memory. He had wanted to cheat the insurance company, and for this purpose, he set fire to his house, after he had carefully locked all doors. It was only after the fire was over that it occurred to him that he had forgotten about his wife, who had been sleeping inside, in the bedroom, and that he had neglected to warn her of his plan. For this reason he had escaped to the Legion. Forgetfulness can be a curse.

„My name is Boisson,” the butcher answered Gorchev. „What's yours?”

Gorchev didn't like questions of this kind. „My name is Tintoretto,” he answered, according to habit, immediately and foolishly.

„Hm... I seem to have heard that name somewhere before.”

„I'm a painter.”

„Yes, I remember. Where are you from?”

„From Cinquecento.”

„Is that somewhere in Savoy?”

„It's a little village. Between Avignon and Toulon.”

„I know, I know. I had a relative living there once. Or rather nearby. There is a similar place around there, isn't there?”

„Well, yes. Quattrocento.”

„Yes, something like that. It had a shunting yard. I had a relative living there, he was a skinny person, a writer.”

„Aha! I know him! Petrarch is the name.”

„His name begins with a B.”

„Botticelli.”

„I think so...”

„Of course! Sandro Botticelli! What’s the old boy doing now?”

„Meerschaum pipes...”

„He’s the one! A good friend of mine!”

This was interjected by the corporal, who went by, dizzy from his civilophobia. Meantime they had reached the troop hall. In the dimness of the place, a tremendous pushing, shouting and shoving began, for shelves, for beds... Corporal Gent picked up a cigar box from the table which had been found in the courtyard by a new recruit. It had been forgotten there by the drunken Cortot.

„Ivan Gorchev,” shouted Corporal Gent, amidst the din of the shouting, pushing group, reading out the name on the box.

Gorchev shouted from somewhere in the back:

„Here I am, little sister!”

„Little sister, your godmother,” answered the corporal, who would have liked to get a glimpse of the impudent one among the distant dark shadows in the corner. But all he heard was:

„You’re mistaken, Corporal Gent! According to religious rules, my little sister cannot be my godmother. But it’s physically improbable also, since in decent families a little sister is born later than her big brother.”

„We’ll discuss that on the proper occasion, my dear Gorchev!” shouted the corporal in disastrous encouragement. He would have very much liked to see the individual, but this rabble was showing about so much that he felt himself about to faint. „Once you’ve finished this beastly hubbub, go to the main gate of the headquarters building, to station number two. That’s where you get your uniforms. Change clothes.”

With this he departed.

Gorchev went over to the table and looked at the wooden box, tied together with a string. This belonged to Cortot, of course. He would have to find out the criminal patriot’s destination. He’d send it after him. He placed his second-self’s belongings on the shelf. His own well stocked yellow suitcase was already there. The butcher had picked the bed exactly next to his.

„This will be a good place, my dear Mr. Tintoretto... We are near to the window. And what is your honourable first name?”

„Casimir.”

„That’s a fine name, Casimir Tintoretto. And what is your profession again?”

„I’m a symbolist.”

„Really? You are a musician then. I, unfortunately, don’t play any musical instrument.”

„You can be sorry. Symbolism is really a lovely music.”

„Did you bring your thing... your symbol with you?”

„Here it is in that little box... It’s a long instrument. I put it together from three parts.”

„And why does it say Gorchev on the box?”

„That’s my alias... Your cousin wasn’t a born Botticelli either.”

„No, that’s true. I think his name was Brazhik. They were Alsatians, you know.”

„I know. He talked a lot about that. And he also mentioned that at one time you were both children.”

„Really? How interesting. It’s really true.”

A red moustached lance-sergeant pulled out his bayonet and stepped over.

„If you don’t stop that conversation at once, I’ll slice one of you to bits.”

„Gorchev!” they shouted from the door, while fresh men poured into the tremendous hall.

The young man rushed out.

Finally Wurfli could stand up from the other bed. He was a dancing and etiquette teacher who with many others had been ruined by the custom of five o’clock teas, and had taken to drinking in his despair. The last straw came when his wife, who was short, dumpy, cross-eyed and ugly, left him because of their poverty. This was a disgrace which the vanity of a dancing and etiquette teacher couldn’t bear, and that was how he had reached the bottom of the ladder, the Legion. Now he turned to the butcher.

„Tell me, my dear sir, I couldn’t take part in the previous conversation, because more than one person was sitting on me... Who was that... Tintoretto with whom you were speaking?”

„His alias is Gorchev, he’s a private, musician, and wall-painter. Some relative of mine, whom I don’t know, is a good friend of his... What are you taking notes on?”

„I’m writing a diary about the Legion. I want to get rich from it. What kind of instrument does he have hidden in that wooden box?”

„A symbol. It’s the same kind of instrument as the bombardon, only long and narrow. What’s your name?”

„Egon Wurfli. Owner of the one-time famous Wurfli Ballhaus, in Zurich.”

Mr. Wurfli took notes on everything, as is proper for a studious diary writer. The butcher was more interested in Gorchev’s suitcase... That too had a note on it - Gorchev. How good life was to that one. He hadn’t joined the Legion like him, with one shirt, a bar of soap and without a comb...

Sighing, he went out into the courtyard. But he stopped in his tracks in amazement.

What the hell! Tintoretto was talking to a general.

II

It was General de Bertin waiting for Gorchev when he was called forth. With Laboux next to him. They had come by car, and had had a violent argument on the way.

„Gorchev reported at the fort, you can bet your life on that. I inquired by telephone,” said de Bertin.

„And I say that he manipulated the car. No one else has such an ugly black-rimmed monocle...”

„He reported in Marseilles last night, so he couldn’t possibly have been in Toulon at the same time.”

The black-rimmed monocle was there in Laboux's hand. On one side there was a small crack, where the celluloid had chipped off.

The general stopped the blare of trumpets that heralded his arrival with one movement of his arm, and immediately called for Gorchev, who appeared at once.

„You're mad!" shouted Laboux immediately. „You're insane!"

„That's quite right," answered Gorchev, and he unbuttoned his jacket. „There is a little empty cellar next to the storehouse, we fight there."

Laboux's eyes glistened and he began unbuttoning his coat, but the general pulled him back.

„First of all, young man, my reason for looking you up was to thank you for your brave, manly interference the other day."

„You don't really have to thank me. I like to fight."

„Then why don't you learn how?" interrupted Laboux sarcastically.

„Gustave!" said the general.

„You're right. We'll leave the fighting for later. Let's talk first."

„Wouldn't it be better the other way? Why can't we fight first?"

De Bertin impatiently spoke to the one-time minister pleni-potentiary:

„Quiet, please... Listen, Gorchev: Were you out of the fort last night?"

„Me?... I didn't even know it was allowed. I'll go out tonight."

„Wait," interrupted Laboux. „Where did you lose this monocle?"

„This? A certain individual who resembled a car thief asked me to let him have it." And with this he took it back. „But I won't give it to you."

De Bertin shook hands with Gorchev.

„I'd like to thank you again, my friend, and now I command you, as a general a private, not to get mixed up in any affair with Monsieur Laboux."

De Bertin rushed off.

Gorchev winked at Laboux with joyful enthusiasm, when they remained alone.

„Thank God I haven't taken the oath yet. I don't have to obey the order. Come on to the storehouse!"

„Wait, Gorchev. I want to speak to you... Tonight, at exactly nine o'clock, by the Old Port, at the Cannabiere corner, a car will be waiting for you."

„I can't leave here."

„An NCO will take you to the town with him, under orders. The car will be in Genoa by morning."

„And will Annette drive that car, with parental consent in her pocket?"

„You're mad!"

„I'll only answer that in the storehouse."

„Please understand..."

A cry starting as a scream, and ending in a roar, pierced the air.

„Excuse me, but the sergeant just whispered the assembly call,” said Gorchev and rushed off.

The new recruits rushed from everywhere. The Lion stopped before the line.

„Men! Anyone who now feels that he isn't serving willingly, has one more opportunity to think things over. Those who feel this way, step out.”

About ten stepped out. Among them was the butcher, the victim of a poor memory.

„So, you would willingly go home? Step out, you fat one, and answer. Within twenty-four hours everyone in the Legion can think things over.”

„Yes, sir, I would willingly forget about the whole thing,” answered the butcher innocently.

The Lion turned to the lance-sergeant.

„Well... Mark all of them with a star on the list of names. These are the untrustworthy ones. They go to Agadir with tomorrow's transport... The others leave tonight for Oran!”

The butcher gasped.

„What's the matter, fatty?! What are you croaking about? Is something wrong?!”

„But, you said... that within twenty-four hours... everyone could think things over...”

„So what? Maybe they can't? You know something, everyone can even think things over tomorrow. Only you can't leave. That's for sure! *Rompez!* Dismiss, miserable, worthless scoundrels.”

Gorchev immediately began to write something on a piece of paper, handed it to one of the soldiers, and returned to Laboux, who waited for him patiently.

„I was only joking when I promised you my daughter,” insisted the father.

„If you dare to say that to me when I come back after a few years of duty, I'll shoot you down like a dog, and the court won't punish me severely when I tell them the circumstances. An honourable gentlemanly society will acquit me, but you won't be able to join any Casino in the other world!”

„You silly brat!”

„Quite correct! Let's go to the storehouse! You won't get anywhere with me anyway.”

„Let's go.”

There were many civilians in the storehouse, so no one noticed when they dashed into one of the neighbouring empty rooms.

...Ten minutes later Gorchev appeared again, with the unconscious Laboux under his arm. Half of Laboux's jacket seemed to have been lost somewhere.

„What happened?” asked the lance-sergeant.

„This individual fell on his head, suddenly.”

„Where did he hit you?”

„Behind my ear. But I got him square in the jaw.”

The general, it seemed, knew Laboux, for he didn't say anything when the ex-minister appeared with a black eye and half a jacket, and sat down next to him in the car.

„I couldn't make him change his mind,” said Laboux while on the road to Nice.

„Look here... This was thrown over the fence with a stone wrapped in it a few minutes ago,” said de Bertin, handing over a letter.

My dear General,

I should like to report that a dangerous individual called Laboux who among other things is my future father-in-law, attempted to entice me into absconding from the Legion. An NCO is also included in his plans, who is to come for me in the evening with an order. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that a high-ranking military official is also taking part in this conspiracy. I ask that you examine my report immediately, so that the guilty be meted out just punishment.

Yours very truly,

Pte Ivan Gorchev

„Unprecedented impudence!” raged the general. Laboux smiled with a swollen half mouth. „You know... if I had met him earlier... the devil only knows...”

„You'd consider him a better son-in-law than before?”

„Certainly, most certainly. We could fight all the time!”

Chapter Nine

I

Gorchev had just decided to go to the canteen to drink some beer, when someone called him by name.

A sergeant with a moustache like a catfish stood in the middle of the courtyard. The young man rushed over.

„Yes, sir!”

„A young man with the same name as yours serves in my company, and sailed with his company today, drunk.”

‘Could only be Cortot,’ thought Gorchev.

„Are you Sergeant Hector Potiou?”

„What?... hm... Yes. Maybe that guy spoke to you?! He must have been lying.”

„It’s quite possible.”

„What did he say?”

„That the Sergeant is a very clever man with a strong character.”

„No... at times like that he doesn’t talk through his hat... As far as I know, by mistake they gave you his baggage, which he dropped here.”

„Yes, sir. It’s above my bed. A little wooden box, tied up. Where should I send it to?”

„Nowhere. I only leave tomorrow morning, because I’m not the accompanying NCO. And I’ll take it with me... Just leave it above your bed.”

Hector Potiou departed. And Gorchev rushed to the canteen, which was reached by going through the dark arched corridors of a side building. In the dust the legionaries pushed and shoved at each other both coming and going.

„Get out of my way,” said someone to Gorchev, and pushed him a little.

„Hey, don’t shove!” he knocked the person in question in the side, and wanted to rush on, but the other grabbed him, growling.

„You insolent...”

He couldn’t say anything else, because Gorchev grabbed him by the neck.

„Now I’ll strangle you, you crackercrumblor!” Why should he have said crackercrumblor? This was one of the quirks of human instinct which unexpectedly come to the surface. The soldiers passing by laughed loudly, because they liked the word, and the crackercrumblor wasn’t able to answer, because one needs a certain amount of air in one’s windpipe to do this, and this had been temporarily squeezed out by Gorchev’s hard hand. Just before choking to death, the new recruit let him go. The dying man suddenly showed signs of life.

„Who are you?”

„I’m a new recruit, you crackercrumblor!”

„Private, give me your name!” thundered the one nicknamed crackercrumblor, and the echoes of his voice shook the arches, as though Samson were shaking one of the columns in the darkness. Everyone’s blood went cold!

It was Sergeant Verdier, the Lion whom the young man had insulted! He was crackercrumblor to the unfortunate young man. But it was pitch dark. How could he have known?

„Ivan Gorchev! At your service!”

„You’ll be taken to account for this!”

„Until I’ve taken the oath of duty I can’t commit a military crime. Besides, how could I know that I was going to meet with you in the dark, sergeant...”

„*Nom du nom...* So you are an expert in military law... All right!... You’ll soon learn the difference between the Lion and a crackercrumblor... once you’ve taken the oath.” And he rushed off.

‘Hm. This is getting off to a good start...’ thought Gorchev. Corporal Gent was sure to find out who had explained the ‘little sister’ and ‘godmother’ business, while the sergeant was certain to call his attention to the difference between a Lion and a crackercrumblor...

But it was all the same... what would be would be. Suddenly he was surprised by the sight of Mr. Vanek in the courtyard who, in the shadow of his umbrella, pondered deeply over an open newspaper, sound asleep.

Gorchev shook him.

„Hello, Mr. Vanek!”

„Where were you? I’ve been looking for you these ten minutes. I was able to arrange a visit, because unfortunately they refused to let me in on the basis that I am your secretary. On the contrary.”

„Tell me about the results of the telephone call.”

„Satisfactory.”

„In what sense?”

„I have come to the conclusion with full confidence that you do not know the name of the actress in question. In the entire list of the Nice telephone directory there is not a single Lolette Anjou!”

„What???”

„I found one Pauline Aragonnes who is a lay canoness, but she doesn’t know you, besides being seventy years old, and not a film star. Then I called a Mimi Albouxrier, who doesn’t know you either, but she said that she would be willing to meet you, and will be at Clichy in the evening. After that there was only one name which seemed likely: I called Lola Zwillingler, because I felt that the name Anjou was only a slip of the tongue. But this lady doesn’t know you either, or at least today she no longer admits to knowing you, and unfortunately she only worked in the circus, on the trapeze, but that was eight years ago. I think I did very thorough work.”

„Yes,” answered Gorchev, and he was very sad.

„The trouble is,” continued Mr. Vanek, „that your memory isn’t very good.”

„Are you certain that you didn’t forget what I told you?”

„My dear sir,” Vanek answered, motioning with his hand, „if I take note of something, then you can be dead certain of it. The name hovers before me as if imprinted on my brain, the way you see this name on the front page of the newspaper here: Annette Laboux.”

Gorchev grabbed the newspaper out of Mr. Vanek’s hand and his blood chilled as he read the front page:

*AT NOON TODAY ANNETTE LABOUX WAS
KIDNAPPED FROM A VILLA IN NICE*

II

When the general and Laboux arrived home from Marseilles, the house was the same as usual to all outward appearances. Parker, the Negro chauffeur, opened the garden gate, and Annette’s dog, a large white greyhound, jumped on the two men.

But he whined.

However, they didn’t notice this. They arrived in the salon, and were just beginning to speak, when they heard a soft moaning from the direction of the cupboard. Laboux wasn’t even surprised when he glanced into one of the wide drawers and saw André there, tied up.

„I have never been placed here before,” said the butler, groaning, when he had been freed.

„What’s this all about? What happened?”

„I was knocked unconscious,” he said, panting.

„Are you feeling ill?”

„Hardly. A person gets used to it...”

A few minutes later they knew everything. There was a letter in Annette’s room.

We have kidnapped your daughter. If tonight at eleven o’clock your car does not appear, in unchanged condition, on the Nice-Cannes highway, where the road branches off to the north next to the park, your daughter will be killed. In the name of all of those from whom you have stolen, I owe you this revenge. Whether or not you believe me is incidental.

B. L.

Laboux stared gravely at his own feet.

„What should we do now?...”

„We must inform the police.”

„Do you think that people like Portenif and his associates will not carry out their threat if we report them?”

„But... what do you think?...”

„The gold... we’ll give it to them...”

„Now they only *think* that we have stolen, but if you *give* them the gold the charge will be supported.”

„But, Annette,” whispered the calm, hard-as-flint man, for once his mouth trembling. „We must give them the gold, Auguste.”

„It isn't ours.”

„Even so. I will give whatever fortune I have to repay the King of Ifiris, and I will repay the rest by instalments... If need be, I shall pay for the rest of my life.”

When they reached the garden a group of policemen jumped out of a police van.

„Who called you?”

„Someone telephoned that the Mademoiselle had been kidnapped.”

„It isn't necessary to take note of it. Please,” said the general, „call your men off immediately...”

Laboux rushed back to the house.

„André! Who called from here?”

„I did. I heard that Mademoiselle...”

„I'll knock you flat!”

„That's perfectly all right. But if I may ask you, sir, don't place me in or under any piece of furniture. It is an inexcusable method in my opinion.”

„Blockhead.”

Laboux dashed off with the general. They sat in the blue Alfa Romeo, but this time it was not Parker who drove.

At nine in the evening Annette was home, and the automobile, almost all pure gold, had gone into the possession of Lingeström and his associates.

III

The girl had spent but a few hours as a prisoner of the brigands. She didn't complain about her treatment. They had dragged her to a villa in the neighbourhood of Cannes. There Lingeström and a few other men awaited her. The baron was cold, but polite.

„My dear Annette,” he said, in his usual diplomatic manner. „If you had returned my affections, then it would not have been necessary for me to use this method to force my rightful inheritance.”

„Oh, do shut up,” answered Annette, infuriated. „You are a blackmailer! A criminal!”

„I demand my rightful possessions from your father!”

„My father never was unjust to anyone!”

„Just as you wish,” said Lingeström, and placed a letter before her:

We the undersigned are taking ten million pounds worth of gold with us from Ifiris. We have agreed that in the event of the death of any of us, his portion will be inherited by the others. Aboudir oasis, Ifiris, June 26, 19... (signed) Baron Lingeström, Portenif, Laboux, Latourette, Van Diren, Hurine, Legionaries.

She recognized her father's signature. Its authenticity was beyond a doubt!

„This doesn't prove anything.”

„Here.”

He held a ragged, foxed letter before the girl. It was the primitive writing of a shaky hand:

My Son,

I shall die shortly... They treat prisoners dreadfully here, and I am withering away. I am sending you this paper. I fought together with Gustave Laboux as a legionary in Ifiris. The king was killed, and the legionaries escaped together with the child heir, and several native leaders. We took the royal fortune, the state treasury with us. Laboux was wounded. We carried him on a stretcher. Life down there is merciless and wild. Why should I try to mince matters? We decided to kill the native leaders, and steal the money - we were in the jungle, after all. Everything went according to plan. We snatched the gold. We took the wounded Laboux along with us, and our escape was successful. This Laboux, after we had hidden the gold and arrived at the oasis of Kufra, entered into collusion with a captain called de Bertin. de Bertin's soldiers caught us, and in front of our very eyes de Bertin and Laboux dug up the king's fortune... Laboux knew only too well what he was doing. If we were to tell anyone of the gold they would hang us because of the murdered natives. He got away that day. We were caught and sentenced as deserters... Since then Laboux and de Bertin made careers for themselves, while I'm here in Columb-Bechar, dying and I think Portenif is still alive somewhere. Revenge me, my son, and try to get back what you are entitled to.

(signed) Baron Kurt Lingeström

Columb-Bechar, Penal Ballalion

Annette stared at the letter, paralysed.

„And in your opinion, where is the money?” she asked the baron.

„The Alfa Romeo car is practically built of fourteen-carat gold...”

Now she understood why the brake didn't hold well enough, why it couldn't get up speed, why it needed more petrol; the car was heavy - heavy under the weight of the gold.

But as I have said, by evening Annette Laboux was home. And the fourteen-carat roadster was in the possession of Lingeström and his associates.

IV

Finally Annette's father spoke.

„I think, old man, that even your military honour demands we tell Annette everything.”

„Yes,” nodded de Bertin. „Annette will know that she must keep silent.”

„Look, these are the documents, my daughter...”

He went to the safe, and pulled out an old leather wallet. He took a few papers out of it, and handed them to Annette.

Gustave Laboux is under orders to proceed to Oran today, where he is to report to Section D, General Staff.

Another order.

Gustave Laboux is sent to Oran today under orders. He is to appear as a military deserter before Ifiris' ruler, Mala Padan, and he will offer his services against the rebels. He will maintain secret contact with the company command at Aboudir, with Captain de Bertin, who will send him his further instructions. Dated...

Annette began to cry with joy. Then she kissed her father.

„How happy I am! And I.. I was already inclined to believe that you... had done something after all...”

„It was for that ‘theft’ that I was awarded my ministerial rank,” said Laboux. „And I had to endure the shameful appearance of being a thief too, because France, as such, couldn't get involved in the situation.”

„What situation?”

„Mala Padan, ruler of Ifiris, was a friend of France. A rebellion against him was instigated by a Portuguese, called Dizard. It would have been against the colonial status-quo for any of the great powers to interfere into it openly. But Mala Padan, African king, was a friend to France. This is the key to the mysterious in the situation.”

„Now you should tell Annette the rest too,” interrupted de Bertin.

Laboux, who was a little worn by the events, gulped down a glass of cognac.

„Well, listen very attentively, Annette. While an official in the foreign ministry, I was appointed a diplomatic adviser to Mala Padan. When the problems in Ifiris arose, I received the confidential instruction to organize an army of volunteers for Ifiris, without the knowledge of French official circles. Then I joined the Legion, and served as a private.” His eyes began to shine. „They were hard months, but I'll never forget them!...”

Annette's face clouded. For one second they were all weighed down by the same thought.

Gorchev was on the open seas heading for Africa!

„For a long time,” continued Laboux, sighing, „I went from one garrison to the other, and with money and all sorts of stories I tried to induce the deserters to the Aboudir oasis. Aboudir is on the border, and the soldiers could easily sneak over, past the not over-alert French border guards. I myself went over with the last group. Among them was the corrupt Baron Lingeström too, the father of this character. Dizard's revolution won because of a traitor. Mala Padan was killed, but Abe Padan, the fifteen-year-old heir to the throne, and a few loyal tribal chiefs escaped together with a small company of legionaries. They took the gold stocks of the country along with them, and I was there too, seriously wounded. You know the rest. Lingeström and his associates, among them this Portenif, killed the tribal chiefs. One of them, however, escaped with Abe Padan. I was wounded and helpless, what could I do? To all appearances I was one of the gang. In Aboudir, where de Bertin had been working together with me in secret, all of them were captured. Then we pretended that the two of us, de Bertin and I, stole the gold together. Because otherwise the Republic of France would have had to hand it over to the new ruler, Dizard. I was returned to diplomatic service, and that's how the affair finally fizzled out. The gold and the heir apparently disappeared. In the meantime Abe Padan became twenty years old. He had been living in secret in Morocco, where he received a very good education. The time for the settling out of accounts with Dizard, the usurper, had arrived. For this the gold the two of us had been guarding would have been most necessary.”

„And how did the gold... get into the car?” asked Annette.

„It is a very complicated problem to ship this quantity of gold. To take it from here to Africa, past the border guards to Ifiris, is a difficult task. And then the idea occurred to us: the treasures should be worked into the parts of a car. An engineer on military technology, Captain Goulain, did the work personally, with two of his officers.”

„All would have gone without a hitch,” said de Bertin, „had that Lingeström not turned up.”

„The devil sent him,” nodded Laboux in fury, gulping down a glass of cognac. „His father wrote that damned letter. And one fine day that character came walking in here. He looked like a decent man. I couldn't tell him the truth, since a scandal, particularly now, would have been disastrous. So I promised him that I would give him his share of the 'stolen' gold. I gave him some of mine and...”

„And you blabbed to him!” shouted de Bertin.

Laboux reddened to the ears.

„Well, it's so difficult for a gentleman to accept appearing to be a thief!”

„And,” said Annette, „the car... you gave it to him... for me...”

They kept silent.

„Well,” spoke up Laboux finally. „There will be one less African country friendly to French colonialism. The fourteen-carat roadster would have been needed for Abe Padan to supply arms to those tribes loyal to the king...”

„And... what's happening to Gorchev?”

First de Bertin looked at Laboux.

„I spoke with a captain,” he said finally. „He is Pierre Boussier, an official in the ministry of war. He checked his papers for me. Gorchev reported in Marseilles last night, and was already *en route* to Oran.”

Laboux didn't say a word in reply. He just continued to stare at the carpet. He had no reason to object to de Bertin's steps. He himself had given two thousand francs to an NCO of Captain Dauville, who was travelling to Oran with Hector Potiou as a drill-sergeant, to report to him occasionally on Gorchev.

„My God,” said Annette, „and now it is on my conscience that the automobile is gone...”

de Bertin answered with feigned gaiety.

„Eh! Those very able diplomats of ours will just have to find another method of doing away with Dizard! Come! Let's get out of here, because my nerves can't stand it!”

„I'm not going anywhere... where Gorchev can't go either,” Annette said obstinately.

„Quiet! While I'm here you can be at rest. Pierre Boussier promised that he would take care of Gorchev during his African trip. Captain Boussier is touring Africa as a representative of the war ministry, and he will be in Oran in two weeks' time. I told him that Gorchev is someone very close to me. If you come with us to the Cafe Negresco immediately, then I'll even write him a post-card.”

„I'm coming, I'm coming.”

Laboux still didn't speak. Gorchev's tragic stupidity rested on his conscience comparatively heavily.

„Hey, André!” called the general, clapping. „We've had enough of this gloom, children!”

André stepped in. The swelling on his eye had become richer with a few shades of opal and lapis lazuli, while the opening of the eye itself was as narrow as a line drawn by pencil. Laboux gave orders as was his habit.

„Have the car prepared...” He bit off the rest. The car! Where was that now? He sighed.

„Telephone,” said the general, „for a taxi.”

„Yes, sir.” He turned back at the door. „Should Parker take the car into the garage?”

„Oh, try to understand,” spoke Laboux to him, „I sold the Alfa Romeo. It has a new owner.”

„My dear sir! Mr. Gorchev was either most merciful, or absent-minded when he hit me, because he didn't blind me completely, and therefore I can confidentially say that the car is standing outside at the gate. I saw it with my one eye...”

They all went flying outside.

The general dashed out of the gate first, and jerked back. Annette screamed. Laboux's eyes popped out. „What???”

The car stood by the pavement in good shape, only its bonnet slightly dented, and the blood-stained feathers of a duck that had been hit, stuck to the hood.

...Somewhere on the automobile's rubber floor a black monocle lay. The celluloid had cracked off slightly in one place.

Chapter Ten

I

„Mr. Vanek,” said Gorchev, putting down the newspaper, which gave the news of Annette Laboux’s kidnapping. „You will now rise to the height of your career as a private secretary.”

„Am I not there already?” asked he in cold surprise.

„I expressed myself incorrectly. Until this moment you have been working in the height of the clouds. But now you must go to the stratosphere!”

„I would willingly go, but I must know the more detailed address, because I’m not that familiar with Marseilles. I think that that department store is there, in the neighbourhood of the railway station, no?”

„That’s it!”

„What should I bring?”

„Nothing. I’ll take care of all that...You see, I know the solution to the crime that the newspapers reported. I know where Annette Laboux is!”

„She isn’t in the telephone directory. The only actress is that Zwilling girl. Isn’t it possible that you had an affair with *her* after all, and now the lady doesn’t want to know about you?”

„It’s possible,” Gorchev agreed enthusiastically, because he had decided that he would never again argue with his secretary. „I therefore will now depart with your exit permit, and you will wait for me here. There’s no one here who knows me, with the exception of a butcher...”

„A butcher?! I know him! Isn’t his name Krompach?”

„His name is Zagarosky.”

Finally everything was running smoothly! Gorchev knew what to do if he wanted to end this conversation with Mr. Vanek quickly.

„You will receive four hundred francs, Mr. Vanek, if you replace me here till one o’clock in the morning. The important thing is that you appear at roll-call. I will return before we depart, to take over my duty.”

„I’ll do it most willingly for you, because these people can’t punish civilians. But I have none of my belongings with me.”

„Everything you might need in the Legion is on the shelf above my bed.”

„For this short period all I will need is patience.”

If he could have seen into the future he would surely not have said this. But as I have already mentioned in another part of this novel, man was created, in his own interests, without the ability to see into the future.

Ten minutes later Gorchev departed from Fort St. Jean in civilian clothes that could have afforded a comfortable abode for more than one individual.

These clothes had been worn by his secretary but a short time before.

Mr. Vanek appeared in army trousers of schoolboyish length after the change in clothes, the cap balanced on the top of his head, and his coat reaching to his elbows. The buttons went flying off it. The first thing he did was to address a colonel who happened to be passing through the courtyard. He raised his cap politely.

„Good day. My name is Petrovich. Could you please tell me, Sergeant, where the sleeping quarters for the staff are?”

The colonel thought for an instant that the garrison had mutinied and would immediately butcher everyone.

„You see,” continued Mr. Vanek gaily, while looking at one of the colonel’s medals, holding it between his fingers, „I’m not familiar with the barracks. Excuse me...” He added that because he had accidentally ripped off the Order of Merit, First Class.

„Who are you?” asked the colonel, still in a state of shock.

„I’m a new employee of the defence forces. My name is Van... My name is Van Petrovich.

The colonel suddenly began to laugh so heartily that Mr. Vanek backed in fright.

„My dear son,” said the grey soldier, with sincere sympathy. „Tell me, for the love of God, how could you have possibly joined the army?”

„But that’s beside the point, please...”

„Pull all your will-power together, and quickly, or you will have a terrifying life. It’s a big thing to speak to a superior officer here. Try and pull yourself together a bit like a soldier.”

„I know all about it from the newsreels, but we aren’t drilling now, are we? So what’s the reason for being childish?... D’you have a match, Sergeant?”

The colonel began to laugh again. Then he shook his head sadly.

„My God!” said the colonel. „What makes your kind of person even dream about putting on a uniform... I feel sorry for you from the bottom of my heart! Do you know that after you have been a soldier for two days you’ll be put in irons for that, and on a twenty-four-hour duty?”

Shaking his head sadly, he went on his way. Mr. Vanek looked after him furiously.

„How am I to guess from all that where the sleeping quarters are?... Oh well... Hello, Corporal!”

He called to the sergeant. To Verdier. The Lion turned like lightning.

„What’s your name?”

„Petrovich.”

„Insolent liar! The letter P’s haven’t been given their uniforms yet. But your number is enough, 27...”

„Please, that’s beside the point,” said Mr. Vanek impatiently. „Why do you have to keep ask questions like that?!”

The Lion found number 27 on his list, and let forth the greatest yell of his life.

„Help!” called Mr. Vanek in fright.

„Gorchev! You are Gorchev!!!”

„So what? Didn’t I say that?”

The Lion smiled.

„And I am the crackercrumbler,” he said, stressing the word significantly.

„Pleased to meet you, I’m Mr. Vanek. Tell me something, Mr. Crackercrumbler, where is the bedroom in this place, and where can a man light a cigarette?”

The Lion didn’t pounce. Quite on the contrary, with a smile of helpfulness he took out his lighter, held it out, then took Mr. Vanek by the arm.

„I’ll take you to the sleeping quarters myself. One must deal with you politely! You haven’t been sworn in yet, have you?”

„It can be done later, if you don’t have time now. I really don’t think it all that urgent.”

„But I can hardly wait for it. This way, please!” he pointed to the door. „After you.”

An old legionary who was standing nearby covered his face at the terrifying sight.

„You are a very pleasant NCO,” said Mr. Vanek chattily. „You know novelists have said so many ridiculous things about the Legion that I can only think that I have been pleasantly deceived.”

At the time the butcher was moving. The unreliaables were being moved out. He carried a large yellow suitcase, and knocked into Mr. Vanek. The secretary never dreamed that the suitcase belonged to Gorchev. He spread himself out on a bed and slept. He became quite nervous when a pimply-faced Breton threw him down on the floor without a word. Dusk was falling. He would have been happy to see Gorchev sooner than arranged.

The bugle sounded.

Roll-call!

They all rushed out to the courtyard, Mr. Vanek among them. Roll-call...

Corporal Gent read the names from a list. Sergeant Verdier stepped up beside him. The names rang out through the silence, one after the other. And then Mr. Vanek stepped out, and took hold of the corporal’s arm.

„Excuse me for interrupting you, but didn’t anyone look for me?”

Deadly silence. But before Gent had the opportunity to kill him, the Lion turned toward the new recruit with a friendly smile.

„No, dear Gorchev, no one has looked for you. And what should we have done if they had looked for you?”

Gorchev! Corporal Gent had been tearing his hair trying to remember the name of the person who had given him the explanation about the relation of ‘little sister’ and ‘godmother’, but hadn’t been able to remember. Gorchev - that was it!

„Yes. He’s Gorchev,” smiled the Lion. „Talk to him nicely, Gent, because he hasn’t been sworn in yet, which means that according to military law, the rules do not apply to him.”

The corporal nodded understandingly, and then continued reading the names. But Mr. Vanek took hold of his arm again.

„Excuse me, but if they should happen to look for me...”

„Quiet!”

This was spoken by a lieutenant who stepped over.

„Excuse me, sergeant...”

„Recruit! You are an imbecile! What kind of impudence is this? Even if you were never a soldier, you might have learned manners as a child!”

Vanek grumbled something, but otherwise remained silent. After the roll-call the sergeant said:

„Those listed as unreliable, go to Block Number Four. The others get ready, we leave at eleven o’clock. Dismissed!”

Mr. Vanek rushed to the gate, and stretched his neck to see between the slats.

„Get away from here,” said the corporal on duty.

„All right, all right. I won’t bite the gate. Everyone here is always nervous. Why, I really don’t know!”

„Get lost!”

„I heard you! I’m not deaf. Are you the gate-keeper here?.. If anyone should be looking for me, my name is Petrovich...”

„Get the hell out of here, or I’ll have you in irons!”

„You can iron soldiers?... Nice methods you have here, is all I can say.”

With this Mr. Vanek went off to his sleeping quarters. The butcher had already dragged himself off with the unreliaables, and that this qualification should be taken seriously was proved by the fact that he simply stole Gorchev’s elegant and well furnished suitcase. But the wooden box, on which Cortot had written ‘Ivan Gorchev’ and had tied together with a string - he left behind.

However, Mr. Vanek, who only knew that the luggage with everything in it necessary for a legionary was on a shelf above the bed, was a little surprised to discover only a cigar box with a name written on it. Was it possible that everything that a legionary could need would be in it? Hadn’t Petrovich been mistaken again?

Someone spoke up next to him.

„I have not had the opportunity to introduce myself so far. My name is Egon Wurfli, dancing and etiquette teacher.”

„Pleased to meet you. Van... Vantage point is good here. There’s someone else here called Egon. I’m Petrovich.”

„Isn’t Gorchev your alias?”

„No, Petrovich is my alias, Gorchev is the real one.”

„And Tintoretto?”

„What did you say?”

„I said, Tintoretto.”

Mr. Vanek blinked uncertainly for a moment.

„Are you Italian?”

„I’m Swiss.”

„I'm sorry but I don't speak Swiss...” He took down the cigar box. „Interesting bit of luggage,” he said.

Mr. Wurfli smiled understandingly.

„I don't want to pry...”

„There's no need to. All I have to do is cut the string, and that's enough, like this... Hm. Tell me something. Is this a complete legionary outfit?”

And he took out the contents of the box: two used foot-cloths, a piece of string, a few picklocks, as well as a corkscrew, and an impressive number of cigar butts.

„It's possible,” said Wurfli. „I haven't been given the supplies yet.”

„Why is a corkscrew necessary in the desert?” speculated Mr. Vanek. „And why do soldiers have to be supplied with picklocks and cigar butts?”

„Maybe they use the liquid in the tobacco as medicine. The soldiers in Africa all get scurvy.”

Mr. Vanek shook the box nervously.

„I didn't get any. Or if I did, someone stole my scurvy out of the box.”

Mr. Wurfli stretched his neck curiously.

„Is the symbol in it?”

„What should I do?” asked Mr. Vanek in surprise.

„Put the three parts together.”

„What parts?”

„Those that you keep in the box.”

„The cigar butts?”

„Please, don't joke with me. Put the three parts together and play something.”

„All right,” said Mr. Vanek with the reassuring smile of the benevolent psychiatrist, „I'll put the string onto the foot-cloth and play with that... Why isn't there an electric razor here? Hello! Officer!”

Corporal Gent had come in; he boiled with fury at being shouted at.

„Listen to me, you donkey... You're going to see a miracle tomorrow!”

„Why, what happens tomorrow?”

„You take the pledge tomorrow,” shouted the corporal.

„But, I'm married already!”

Then the bugle sounded.

„Assembly,” shouted Corporal Gent and made off to the courtyard hurriedly. Mr. Vanek followed, and so did the wooden box. He looked around nervously. Gorchev was nowhere to be seen

„How interesting,” said Wurfli. „All artists are mad.”

„Quite possible.”

„Musicians, and painters as well.”

„And ballet dancers, and stone carvers. Tell me, don't you have any other problems?”

He looked around in all directions... Not a sign. Another roll-call followed, then they were led on to the dock, to a boat. Gorchev still wasn't there. It was already late at night. The steamship whistled. The gangway was taken back on shore.

„We're leaving,” said the lieutenant to Verdier.

„Can't we wait a few more minutes?” asked the secretary.

„Get going, or I'll have you locked in an asylum.”

„Interesting,” Vanek said nervously, when they had started. „They make such a big fuss over everything... as if the Sahara would run away if they didn't hurry...”

On board the ship he stood by the rail. And still hoped, even though dawn was approaching. He paced up and down nervously. What would come of this? Maybe Gorchev would still arrive. But Gorchev just didn't come. The ship sailed. Then a sailor stepped over to Mr. Vanek.

„Someone sent this a half hour ago. Told me to give it over to number 27.”

Gorchev wrote to his replacement:

Honoured Mr. Vanek,

Due to circumstances beyond my control I am unfortunately unable to return. I shall replace you in Oran. Until then your pay is two hundred francs a day, which, beginning tomorrow, I shall place in a bank on your name, and the receipt will be transmitted to you. I ask you to have a little patience.

Your grateful employer,

Petrovich

So the steamship carried Mr. Vanek off to Africa.

II

Gorchev rushed out of the fort in Mr. Vanek's peculiar clothing, to the Old Port, sat down without hesitation in the first deserted car he came across and, according to his habit, began one of his wonderful expeditions which reminded of the invasion of the ancient Barbarians.

He had to rush to be able to keep his promise, and relieve Mr. Vanek, who stayed in his place, like a certain gentleman in a dramatic poem of Schiller, who replaced his friend in the condemned cell, while the sentenced man took part at his sister's wedding feast. He drove at full speed, and with relative good luck, because the little Citroen lasted almost till La Ciota, which is about twenty miles from Marseilles. However, at the fish wharfs there were no pleasant saloon cars, only lorries with the morning catch.

Within a short time Gorchev was on the road to Toulon with a shipment of fish. The strong lorry held out well, with only the bonnet dented by a lamppost, in the course of which incident the pupils of a girls' school had been sprinkled with dead fish. Otherwise the trip went without incident to Toulon, where Gorchev pulled on the handbrake, and well satisfied stepped out in a shop window on the poultry market.

But who can measure these things correctly to the last hairs-breadth? And besides, only cast the first stone at Gorchev, if you can catch him. Because he was off at once. After a half-hour race most of the crowd fell back, with only about eight or ten amateur long-distance runners holding out. These he waited for, beat them up, and then hurried off only to come across a policeman who was posted in a distant street.

„First, tell me where you got those clothes?”

Gorchev's clothes were conspicuous to others as well. These others stood around him, too.

„Just come along with me to the police station... A fine character!”

„I'm looking for the 'Texas Restaurant'...”

They almost lynched him for this line of defence. The policeman led him onwards. Meanwhile Gorchev anxiously thought of Annette, not to mention Mr. Vanek, who, like Schiller's highly improbable hero, awaited him as a hostage, and was probably up to all sorts of ridiculous antics.

Luckily they passed by way of a viaduct stairway, and here he could push the policeman down onto three workers cementing the road, so that he was incapable of going further. Gorchev's style of running, speedy and straight as an arrow, was arresting. His individual style gained many followers, but none could catch him up. Shortly he swung into the dockland, and all his pursuers fell back.

My God! Was he never going to find out where the 'Texas Restaurant' was?

Some six men were talking together in a group. Maybe if he were to kneel down before them or threaten with a gun, he would find out where the 'Texas Restaurant' was.

„Well, hello! It's my young sailor... What are you doing in those clothes?” It was Alec Lonesome!

„Good day, sir. I'm pleased to see you again,” said Gorchev, abashed.

„Who is this brat?” asked an individual who looked definitely shifty.

„A greenhorn rushing to his doom. I took him under my wing, because it sometimes feels good to try to balance the scales. Where did you sneak off to last time, kid?”

„I was afraid of you, sir,” answered Gorchev with childish naivety.

They laughed at this, they liked this sweet-faced, innocent boy. A taciturn highwayman named Drugich slapped him on the shoulder, in a friendly way, so that Gorchev's watch went flying out of his pocket.

The fact that they immediately found him to be to their liking was his undoing.

„Now stay with me and relax. I won't hurt you, you little runt,” assured Alec. „It's only sensible to do something good to protect and put guts into a weakling. We could use it as an argument in our favour at the final reckoning in the next world.”

„What would a kid like this do by himself in the docks,” said a bicycle thief called Jasmin good-naturedly. Drugich, the taciturn one, again slapped the boy on the shoulder reassuringly, so that half a dozen fountain pens and a few car parts went flying out of his pocket.

„I joined the Legion,” he said to get rid of them. „I have to report this evening.”

Alec growled.

„What kind of stories are you telling? Have you gone mad?!“

„You only think you’re going to report. Poor boy!“

„Completely mad! That’s hell!“ they all exclaimed.

„Please let me go, gentlemen!... I beseech you... I have to report.“

He wanted to run, but they tripped him up, and Drugich, the taciturn highwayman, hit him over the head with a ladder, knocking him out.

III

When he regained consciousness, he was sitting in a chair, in a tiny musty place, with Alec, the taciturn Drugich, and Jasmin next to him. They were sipping wine.

My God, what time must it be?

„Well, brat, are you awake?“ asked Jasmin, the bicycle thief, speaking with difficulty, and avoiding his R’s like a lispng lord, but this was the result of a quarrel the year before when half of his jaw had been broken.

„This isn’t what I would call a nice way of handling someone,“ complained Gorchev.

„We should learn our methods from you. Huh?! From now on you are in my care. Whether you like it or not, we’ll protect you! What an idiot!“

„And how long do you want to keep me a prisoner?“

„Until you come to your senses!“

It was hot in that stuffy little room.

So much so that the silent Drugich swallowed a pint of wine.

„But I don’t want to hide. Let me go.“

„Do you know that if you talk too much we can lock you up in this room for a year?“

„Why? Is this a prison, where you lock up honest people?“

„No! But there is only one exit, and that is guarded.“

„What sort of a place is this then?“

„The ‘Texas Restaurant’!“

At long last! He still didn’t know where he was, but it was abundantly clear that he had arrived.

„You’re surprised, aren’t you... This is where the Chief’s gang stays, our cooperative. And this special room is his. Tonight forty thousand francs cross our palm, and of that you’ll get two thousand.“

„On condition,“ said Jasmin, „that we succeed in bringing that character into this room and all tied up.“

„That’s fixed. Fishy is never wrong,“ said Alec. „And when he’s here, then we finish him off!“ he finished the sentence with a vivid gesture of the hand.

„Who are you going to kill here?“ asked the boy.

„Ivan Gorchev.”

„Is he still alive?” asked the Russian in wonder.

„Yes, but it won't happen to him again! That's enough! Come on, boys.”

„That's right. We have to get the car put on the 'Shifty Shark'!”

Drugich, who was silent by nature, pulled the rope that he used for a belt tighter, and they left. Alec called back:

„Don't try to escape, the guards don't let anyone past the end of the hall, if he isn't with someone known.”

And Annette? What had happened to Annette? They had kidnapped her. But who? No one else than that dumpy one, the shaggy Portenif, and Lingeström, whom - by the way - he would knock silly the next time they met. My God! And Mr. Vanek?

As he reached that point in his thoughts the individual called Portenif, who was shabby (which is a description softened to go into print meant to convey the fact that the outlaw did not trouble himself about his appearance), entered. Apart from this he was also completely drunk.

He glanced at Gorchev without interest. He hadn't seen the Russian in the dark when they had attempted the attack on the general. He only knew what Alec Lonesome had told him in the moment they had met in the bar, viz. that the gang had undertaken the protection of a sweet greenhorn, simply because he had joined the Legion.

„The Chief will be furious when he finds out that you brought him to his hide-out,” was Portenif's opinion, and refused to be convinced of the contrary, despite Alec Lonesome's confused theory about the balances in the other world and all that implied.

„Such reasoning is ridiculous,” he answered, shrugging but he was so drunk that he didn't argue, but went into the hide-out instead.

„And, did they catch him?” asked Gorchev.

„Who?” he asked blankly.

„Gorchev.”

„Yes, they're already bringing him...”

„What?! They caught him?...”

„The villain was drinking alone, thoughtlessly, and Fishy grabbed him with his men...”

The Russian hiccupped, flopped, and his eyelids pulled together tiredly. Could they have possibly caught him while drinking, in such a way that he didn't know about it?...

„What's Gorchev done?”

„He's an insolent crook. Probably the man of an enemy gang. But when he's sitting in here, like you are now, I'll take his eyes out one by one with my pocket knife.”

„Why do you want to bother with every one of his eyes separately? Why not all of them at the same time!”

„Don't be impudent, brat,” Portenif said, and sat down, too drunk to stand on his feet. He poured himself some wine and drank it. „If I ever...” he took hold of Gorchev's neck quite

loosely, „get him between my two hands like this... well then... that will be the happiest day of my life!”

„It’s a pity that the neck at hand is only mine.”

„We’re lucky that he wasn’t able to ruin our plans. Because since we got the girl and traded her... with that rotten Laboux for the car, and... the car... is hidden...”

„Well, then... everything’s all right...” answered Gorchev, feeling slightly better. The important thing was that Annette was free!

Portenif suddenly fell forward, knocked his head against the table, and fell asleep.

He dozed off deeper and deeper. Gorchev looked at the wall clock in despair. It would soon be evening! And poor Mr. Vanek would await him in vain... Portenif fell to the floor with a tremendous crash. The swine!... unfeeling murderer!...

One quarter hour went by after the other, and Portenif snored. It was impossible to go out because the end of the hall was more than likely guarded, and that was where the exit to the bar was. And Alec Lonesome and his friends would not take him out of there...

Finally a flat-faced hump-backed individual appeared.

„Bring him in... We’ve caught the miserable crook,” and he turned to the boys gaily. Forty thousand francs hit our palms! We’ve caught Gorchev!”

In through the door, tied up, they dragged Cortot, the homesick criminal.

Chapter Eleven

I

They threw the unconscious legionary into the corner; then tried to bring some life into Portenif, with little success.

„Hey, you old thief!”

Snores.

„Leave the drunken rat. The Chief comes, pays, and he can take his Gorchev.”

Meanwhile the silent Drugich amused himself by occasionally ducking Portenif’s head into a bucket of water. Finally Portenif got to his feet, unsteadily.

„What... what do you want?!” he stammered.

„We brought him, here he is!”

„Who?!”

„Gorchev! There’s the crook!”

And they pointed to Cortot. Portenif took out his pocket knife. Probably in order to be true to his promise, to remove the prisoner’s eyes one by one. But Alec shoved him back.

„Only after we’ve been paid. Until then don’t damage the prisoner.”

Portenif fell to the floor again. He either fell asleep, or fainted. Drugich took Gorchev’s coat off the chair, and covered him with it.

Now the dumpy one stepped in who, though his taste wasn’t the best, was fond of men.

„The Chief sent a message that the car be put on board the ‘Shifty Shark’. At once!”

„Ho! But first the ‘Shifty Shark’ has to be taken from the Quai de Beiges to the ‘Pharaoh’, because we’re not allowed to start the car.”

„That takes too long! First give us the money, Aldous!”

The dumpy one who, it could now be seen, was half-caste, answered haughtily.

„The Chief will be coming here to pay you off, when he takes Gorchev. Even if you have someone assigned here!” He kicked Cortot.

„This creature’s dead!”

„Like hell,” answered Jasmin. „You don’t think we’re going to damage the goods, do you?”

„Jasmin, you stay here, and collect the money,” directed Alec Lonesome. „Within an hour and a half we can embark the Alfa Romeo. We trust the honesty of the Chief. If we’re disappointed, we still have the Alfa Romeo with us,” was the wise counsel of Alec.

Meanwhile, the taciturn Drugich amused himself by trying to enliven Portenif with kicks, but the experiment turned out a failure. So he covered him up again with Gorchev’s coat, took his cap, and left.

The others followed him. Only Jasmin, Aldous, the two Gorchevs, and the unconscious Portenif stayed behind.

„I'm going to the 'Black Star',” said Aldous. „The Chief will come after me anyway.”

„I'll go too,” said Jasmin. „Brat, you can't leave here anyway, past the guards, so take care of the prisoner. If they leave the money with you, don't accept anything less than forty thousand...”

Cortot was amazed when he came to himself. His head buzzed, and the real Gorchev was washing his face.

„What... what happened...? Where...?”

„Man! How did you get here?”

„I was drinking with Hector Potiou... enjoying myself..., and then..., alone...”

„But you boarded ship this afternoon in Marseilles!”

„No... um...” he stammered. „Potiou took me.... for his orderly, and... we would have travelled together... now... from here... from Toulon...”

Gorchev dimly remembered something of this private journey... Portenif's snores were a frightening accompaniment to this peculiar meeting.

„Answer me... can you stand?” When it was proved he could, Gorchev quickly wrote something, and handed it over to Cortot.

„They'll probably let you out of here, once it's proved that you aren't Gorchev... It's also possible that it will never come to that. The important thing is for you to keep quiet.”

„And... this writing?”

„Once you're freed, get this to Marseilles, to the 'S.S. Constant'. You may still reach it, if the ship sails late. It's for Private Number 27.”

Cortot pushed the paper into his pocket, numbly.

At that moment the door opened, and Baron Lingeström stepped in, with a pistol ready cocked.

Behind him was a broad-shouldered, grey-haired serious man.

The Chief!

II

The baron flipped a quick glance over Gorchev.

„That's him... everything's in order.”

„And who is this?” asked the Chief, pointing to Cortot.

„Jasmin said that they're keeping some character, incapable of taking care of himself, locked up here, after he escaped from the Legion,” said Lingeström impatiently.

„We'll take care of that!” shouted the Chief. „You'll get the army after us with stupid things like that. No prisoner can be brought here without my permission!”

„That isn't important now,” shrugged Lingeström, and looked hard at Gorchev. „First let's finish with this, if he doesn't come to his senses. Bring the car over to the courtyard gate. Once I'm gone you can take Gorchev for a ride.”

„Let me first get Aldous for that, I don't do things like that alone.”

The Russian understood very well what was meant by taking someone for a ride. One bullet, and the lifeless traveller would go flying out of the moving car, into the sea... But what was the other possibility? There *was* one! They didn't know that the bandits thought Cortot to be Gorchev. How could they possibly think of that?

„And if you don't find Aldous?” Lingeström asked the Chief.

„Why shouldn't you find him,” said Gorchev. „He went to the 'Black Star'.”

The Chief looked him up and down squinting.

„I'm glad you're not nervous,” he growled, and then turned to Cortot. „You louse! Now you're going to get thrown out! And if you ever come anywhere near me again, I'll knock you off like a dog! Get out!”

He grabbed Cortot's collar, and dragging him along, threw him out in the alley. Cortot ran to the nearest barracks, his heart in his mouth, but first he sent Mr. Vanek's letter on its way.

III

The two stood in the room together facing each other: Lingeström with a loaded revolver, and Gorchev grinning.

„Well, Mr. Gorchev?” said Lingeström sarcastically, after a short silence. „What do you think of this? What?... Oh, and you might as well take note of the fact that I'm not a thief.”

„If you'll excuse me for saying so, how could I have suspected that?”

„Don't be insolent. You are a clever rascal. In the beginning even I was fooled into thinking that you were some young scatter-brained madman!”

„And now?”

„Now I know that you are Abe Padan's man.”

„What did I do?” asked Gorchev in fright.

„Do you deny that you are Abe Padan's man?”

„That wouldn't be a smart thing to do,” he answered after a short hesitation, „as long as you've got it figured out already...”

„And did you know Mala Padan too?”

„Hm... only in passing... I was well in with the whole Dalai family and...”

„Do you want to join the Portuguese?”

„Well,” pondered Gorchev, „I wouldn't mind... but still, no. Anyone who is on speaking terms with you can't be decent. I'll stay by the old one.”

„I must warn you that Dizard is a hard man, and Aboudir is a long way off.”

„Really?... I hadn't thought of that. But I'll manage to get there somehow.”

„And Ifiris? Serving Abe Padan’s interests you won’t even get as far as Aboudir, not to speak of Ifiris, that’s certain now...”

Gorchev pondered silently. He seemed to be weighing the situation.

„Well,” asked Lingeström, „what do you think?”

„I’ll tell you quite honestly. You resemble a certain private secretary called Mr. Vanek in a terrifying way.”

„All right! It’s all right. If you think I care, you’re wrong.”

Portenif moved. And the Chief arrived at the same time.

„I paid Jasmin the money,” he said. „Aldous is waiting outside”.

„You did well. Take care of that man for me!”

„All right...” He stood in front of Gorchev. „If it hadn’t been for you, we would have already received the money from the Portuguese.”

„Don’t be silly, he hasn’t a penny to his name,” motioned Gorchev. Heaven only knows why, but he couldn’t make himself believe that he was about to die. He lit a cigarette.

„You can make jokes for a last time.”

„So you’re going to kill me?”

„I will be your death,” said the Chief.

„I’m going to have an ugly death.”

„Get going!”

„Wait! Lingeström... Give me five minutes to think it over! Maybe I’ll join the Portuguese...”

„What’s the guarantee?”

„I’ll put myself completely into your hands, and you’ll do what you want with me,” said Gorchev sighing as he flopped into a chair. „Please... leave me... alone...”

The Chief looked at him in contempt. He had seen men like this break down many times before.

The Chief went out with Lingeström. At the end of the long corridor they turned to the right, towards the bar. There were two guards at every exit. The left-hand exit led to the courtyard.

„He’s broken,” said the Chief.

„Yes, it seems so.”

They drank a few gulps... then they returned to the room. But only Portenif snored on the floor, Gorchev had disappeared.

...He had escaped, which was incredible!

Chapter Twelve

I

The ensuing scene took place after the arrival of a company of new recruits in the courtyard of Fort St. Thérèse in Oran. Those who don't believe it can still find the notes according to which the arrival of a bespectacled, black moustached, new recruit called Gorchev, justifies the stomach trouble of Captain Furion, company commander. A year later it became so fierce that the captain was sent into retirement. However, supposedly it started on this day.

The day was a clear one, and it began without any incident. A group of new recruits arrived from Marseilles; they were sworn in, and then lined up in the courtyard of the fort. The sergeant licked his lips.

„What did that Gorchev say to you?” he asked the corporal.

„He called me ‘little sister’, and later explained that his godmother couldn't be his little sister.”

„He called me crackercrumblor. „We'll have a chance to speak to him about that,” nodded the Lion pleasantly, and he glanced at the soldier in question with relish. At the moment, before basic training, and in the midst of inspection, the two NCOs couldn't do anything. But they weren't in a hurry. Five years is a long time.

The sergeant smiled threateningly. Mr. Vanek smiled back shyly, and nodded his head in a friendly way. It was then that the company commander arrived, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the nodding new recruit.

„Private!”

„What's the matter?” asked the private, pleasantly, so they would find him likeable.

The company commander stepped back, his eyes popping out.

Gent, the corporal, began to whisper behind Mr. Vanek.

„Moron! You're standing before the commander! Salute!”

„Excuse me,” said the new recruit, coming to his senses. „I don't understand the marks of rank yet,” and he raised his cap. „I respectfully salute you... my name is Van... Van Petrovich but that's not important...”

The company commander looked at him, as though he had seen a ghost. Perhaps this was the only example in all history of a soldier raising his cap in way of greeting.

Behind the captain, Sergeant Verdier, pale as a corpse, showed Mr. Vanek how to salute. At that Mr. Vanek raised his cap at him too, and said in a surprised tone:

„We've already met! How are you?”

„Attention!” shouted the captain stupefied. „What is this?! A lunatic asylum?”

„I don't think so,” answered Mr. Vanek uncertainly.

„Attention! What sort of attention is that?”

„Please, what's the sense of it all?”

„What’s your name?!”

„Van... Van Petrovich.”

„Dutch?”

„Me?”

„Don’t ask questions!”

„All right, but you can’t carry on a discussion like that!”

„Why did you say, Van Petrovich?”

Mr. Vanek stepped forward, and with the gesture of a conductor, he stopped the corporal, who was about to speak.

„Sorry. I’m Gorchev. I withdraw the rest.”

The commander closed his eyes for a second, wearily, and took a deep breath.

„Sergeant! Take this man for interrogation! And propose ten days *salle de police!* That will end his lack of discipline!” He measured Mr. Vanek. „In the entire history of this fort, you are the first new recruit to be punished on the day of his arrival! You should be ashamed of yourself!” Then he turned to the NCOs. „You too! Dismiss! The NCOs will come with me to receive assignments!”

And he left. The NCOs followed. A young lieutenant, who had until then surveyed the proceedings in silence, now stepped over.

„Listen to me, my friend. You know that there are dogs especially bred for hunting, and special cows that have been brought about through careful examination and choosing of parents. Well, unfortunately, you are the result of complete petty bourgeois breeding!”

„Are you an animal breeder, sergeant?”

„No. I was once a psychologist. You, my friend, are of a very unfortunate mental disposition. Do you know what an anti-soldier is?”

„Of course. A Napoleon statue made of porcelain in antique style.”

„You are a civilian to the last drop of your blood,” continued the officer, with a sigh. „You are so thoroughly civilian that you can’t possibly understand the army, any more than a deaf man can understand Mozart. I’m terribly sorry for you. Did you understand me?”

„For the most part,” answered Mr. Vanek. „The only thing that’s not clear is what connection it all has with specially bred cattle, and ancient porcelain cups?”

„You are an unhappy creature,” the lieutenant said sadly and nodding his head, went on. Mr. Vanek rushed up the stairs and stepped to a door on which was written:

Battalion Office
Major Ribou
No entry without permission!

He opened the door, and lifted his cap to the major sitting there.

„Good day, Corporal. Did any mail come for Mr. Gorchev? New recruit... Second Company...”

The major stood up, and looked him up and down.

„Private! I'll have you in irons for this!”

„Why is everyone so nervous here!? I'm sure there's a letter waiting for me, just look round a bit. The name's Petrovich.”

„Get out of here,” said the major quietly. „I'll see that your NCO is punished for this too! Get going!”

‘Everyone here is so nervous,’ he thought, as he descended the stairs. When he reached the courtyard there was another assembly taking place. By the time he got down they were already standing. Mr. Vanek walked along in front of the line, like a general, and looked the rows up and down.

„Private! What are you doing?!” shouted the captain.

„I'm looking for my place... Between a lanky peasant and a man with a red moustache... Aha!... here it is... let me in!”

„You scoundrel!”

„All right, all right! I'm already in my place! What are you getting so nervous about?!”

„Tomorrow at eight you go for interrogation! Twenty-two days in the guardhouse, with double sentry! We'll teach you in a short time... don't worry...” the captain panted exhaustedly. „There's never been anything like that!”

The lieutenant he had spoken to before came towards them and Mr. Vanek, smiling, while in line, lifted his cap.

„Good day.”

„What are you doing?”

„I was greeting the *veterinary*.”

„Put him in irons!”

I don't want to go into more detail. On this day many NCOs and officers took to tranquillizer and other drugs as the result of Mr. Vanek's military conduct, while the guilty one sat on the floor of his cell, with his wrist chained to his left ankle. With bitter haughtiness the prisoner said to the departing corporal:

„Nice way of dealing with people, is all I can say.”

When the company lined up on the drill-ground for the first time, Sergeant Verdier, with that delightful slow tempo in which a gourmet makes detailed preparations before eating a particularly delicious meal that has been placed before him, pulled his moustache twice, and then spoke:

„Now?... step out, you, there...”

Mr. Vanek had been frightened by his surroundings, and he had quickly become conscious of the fact that there was trouble here.

So he stepped forward, modestly, with a friendly smile on his face.

„Tell me,” asked the sergeant calmly, „who am I?”

Mr. Vanek racked his memory, and finally the sergeant's name tinkled in his ears. Therefore he shouted out delighted:

„You are the highly respected and much loved Sergeant Crackercribler!...”

And he looked around smiling, as though hoping for some slight recognition.

„You rat!” answered Verdier, his face pale. „For that you will now take the light machine gun, and run with it up the hill, where you will take up a position of observation!... *En avant... marche! Pas de gymnastique!*”

Now even Mr. Vanek admitted that this was no joke.

His tongue hung out, and in the hundred degree heat, he tumbled over four times, but he ran. Finally he took a position of agonized attention on top of the hill, panting bitterly, and feeling innocent in his humiliation, like a martyr.

The sun burned steadily on the observation post, and Mr. Vanek, only semi-conscious, decided to get an umbrella.

With this Mr. Vanek’s drill training and calvary began.

Later, equipped with a good sized searchlight, Mr. Wurfli, one-time owner of the Ballhaus in Zurich, appeared, panting.

He, too, had sinned. And now they panted next to each other. It was hot: 40° C - or, if you prefer, hundred F - in the shade. Only there was no shade on the observation post. Only heat.

„Why is the sergeant angry with me?” asked Mr. Vanek later.

„Because of the crackercribler. In some parts of France, crickets are called crackercriblers. And crickets are only insects, whereas the sergeant is the Lion.”

„How should I have known that? All I can see is that he’s some kind of big bug...”

„Artists have a hard time in military life.”

„That’s for sure,” answered Mr. Vanek, and he shrugged his shoulders. What did this man constantly want with artists?

„Painters are like that, musicians too.”

„And furthermore stone carvers, and ballet dancers...”

„Wouldn’t you subscribe to what I say?”

„For a man to add his signature to something, the first thing he has to know is his name. And in this respect the situation is somewhat tangled...”

When they returned to the group and learned a few basic rules, the sergeant again pulled on his moustache with the same delightful movements as the gourmet we mentioned, who stretched the time, before beginning a particularly delicious meal.

„Private!” he spoke to the secretary again. „Now tell me who I am?”

„Uh... the Lion!”

„That’s better than the crackercribler. How would you call me, using another name?”

„You are the king of the beasts!”

„Rat! *You* are the king of the beasts, get that?”

„Yessir. I am Petrovich, the lion.”

„For that insolence, tomorrow you will report to the first lieutenant, and get ten days in the guardhouse!”

Mr. Vanek arrived back in the fort in a state of deathly exhaustion, and muddy to the neck. He could hardly wait to eat, and to lie down a little. When he entered the room, Corporal Gent faced him. The NCO immediately recognized that his man had arrived. That impudent one, who had called him ‘little sister’! And who had given him the explanation about a godmother. He swallowed... and then spoke up in a dull studied monotone.

„Wait a minute, my friend... Tell me, what’s the difference between an elderly godmother, and a younger little sister?”

„Exactly as many months as there are between the births of the two ladies,” answered Mr. Vanek with great precision.

„Yes.” nodded the corporal, and his eyes looked off somewhere in the distance, but he continued in a cold sing-song. „And what about your little sister?”

„She got married in Krems, Austria! I just received notice that she’s expecting a baby.”

„And what about the godmother? Huh?!”

Mr. Vanek didn’t understand the whole thing, but he answered politely.

„They’ve decided on the wife of the captain of the Krems ferry. She is a gentlewoman held in high esteem there. My brother-in-law writes...”

„Attention! So that you won’t forget the difference between a little sister and a godmother, you’ll go down to the storehouse, and help bring up the furniture for Pavilion Number Two... and then we’ll talk some more.”

As Mr. Wurfli did not deny himself the pleasure of one of his incomprehensible statements about artists, Mr. Vanek grabbed his rifle, with the bayonet on it, from off the wall and begged that the men let him go, so that he could kill him.

„But Mr. Tintoretto,” shouted Mr. Wurfli, „the musician is exactly like all other artists, for instance, painters...”

„And stone carvers, and ballet dancers, too, you nightmare!”

And fate gave an even harder blow to the secretary. A major came in the opposite direction, while he was *en route* to the storehouse. Mr. Vanek, by way of salute, raised his cap.

„At your service, lieutenant.”

„Sergeant!” roared the major. „Have this idiot brought up for two days in irons!... Dismiss!”

Mr. Vanek rushed off. But first, with frightened respect, he raised his cap, and stammered,

„Good-bye...”

II

When Lingeström and the Chief left the room, Gorchev looked about, uncertainly.

‘Now to escape! But how?’ ... Portenif, covered with the white sailor coat, snored rhythmically. He stepped out of the door. Dingy hallway... Guards stood at the end of the corridor who would only let him out in the company of one of the gang.

Then a door opened with a terrific bang, and Jasmin appeared. He was a little drunk...

„Who’s that,” he said, seeing the shadow.

„Psst...” said Gorchev. „I’m Chervonets, the kid...”

„What are you loitering about here for?”

„The Chief threw me up against the wall, and said that I should get the hell out of here, because when he gets back he’ll kill me. And the guards won’t let me out.”

Jasmin cursed.

„The trouble we have with you... Come on!”

„And what happens when the Chief comes back?”

„Come on...”

He took Gorchev down the hallway, opened the door leading to the garden, and said to the guards in passing:

„The boy is with me.”

One more minute and they were on the street.

Jasmin went along with the boy to the square at the end of the street where there was a traffic policeman, and a tramway route.

„Listen to me, Jasmin,” said Gorchev, when they were surrounded by traffic. „Sit down next to me and I’ll tell you a secret.”

They sat down. Gorchev clipped his black monocle into his eye self-importantly...

„Understand this. Briefly, I tricked you. I am Gorchev. And the Chief wanted to kill me a moment before!”

„Ha, ha. That’s good. They say that every slap delivered by Gorchev is so perfect that his art should be taught at the college of bullies. And you of all people...”

„Listen! The reason I told you the truth is because I don’t want them to kill you. You freed me! You see, the Chief had already got out the car, to take me for a ride. And I’d probably be a dead man by now, if you hadn’t taken me past the guards.”

„What!” Jasmin jumped up. „The whole thing is a big lie, and you’re coming back with me!”

Jasmin grabbed the boy’s arm, but Gorchev quickly slapped him, in such a way that Jasmin hit the arm of a bench, and bounced off head first into a puddle. It took a long time for him to revive, with a slightly dazed smile.

„Now will you believe that I am Gorchev?” asked the Russian.

„Well,” Jasmin answered hoarsely, „there must be some truth to the story after all.”

Gorchev put the monocle even tighter into his socket, and left the bandit behind.

Jasmin accepted the good advice. On that day he disappeared without a trace, avoiding the revenge of the Chief, and never again returned to Toulon.

Gorchev, despite the fact that every bone in his body ached as he thought of the probable fate of Mr. Vanek, rushed to the docks first. The Alfa Romeo, for which the ‘Shifty Shark’ was coming, was at the Quay de Beiges. Maybe he wouldn’t be too late. He dashed on.

He arrived in time. The 'Shifty Shark' hadn't arrived yet. But the car was there. As they had described - under the canvas. Beside it, the taciturn Drugich sat on the ground, and slept, leaning against the bumper.

Drugich banged his head terribly hard when the bumper moved out from under him at sixty miles an hour...

Gorchev was not even halfway to Nice, and had just driven onto the pavement to avoid a car coming in the opposite direction, when a feeling of terror knifed through him.

His wallet!

He had left his jacket in the room! He had removed it because of the heat. The last one to have it was the taciturn Drugich, who had covered Portenif with it!

There were practically a hundred thousand francs in it!

Chapter Thirteen

I

De Bertin, Laboux, and the girl stood around the recovered Alfa Romeo in amazement.

„How did the automobile get here?” Laboux asked the butler, who had withdrawn to the background.

„Perhaps the person to whom you sold it, is somewhere nearby.”

„What? Oh... I don't think that its new owner came with it!”

„My cousin,” was André's opinion, „had a St. Bernard dog, and after he had sold him to a butcher, he came back twice. Of course, that sort of sentimentalism in a car is more difficult to believe in.”

„You're right,” nodded Laboux. „Nowadays, miracles only occur in the minds of mentally unstable butlers.”

„Excuse me, sir. But the other theories are just as improbable. If a car can travel without a driver, then it is capable of everything. It can be quite as faithful as a St. Bernard.”

„Once you've finished with your inaugural address to the academy, you can go to the kitchen. André,” answered Laboux.

They walked around the newly recovered vehicle in amazement.

„Look,” gasped Annette suddenly, and pointed to the seat.

A monocle with a black rim lay on the seat. Laboux picked it up, looked at it and in a state of dizziness, noticed that the celluloid had chipped off in one place, where the naked wire could be seen.

They stared at it open-mouthed.

„Gorchev's monocle!” shouted Laboux.

„But you yourself saw that he was in uniform at Fort St. Jean. Wait!”

The general rushed into the house, and telephoned Marseilles. None of them quite knew why it was that this part of the mystery was more interesting to them than the amazing re-appearance of the fourteen-carat roadster. The conversation was short, and succeeded in making the whole story as clear as mud.

„Captain Harriot, please... Hello! A legionary called Gorchev, who has been in the artillery barracks, and arrived on the 18th from Nice, was with a group ready to leave this morning. Get me some sort of information on whether this man left for Africa yesterday afternoon, or last night.”

A pause.

„Yes... Yes... I understand... Thank you...”

„Well?” asked Laboux, his voice cracking, as the general put down the receiver.

„This was the answer: Ivan Gorchev, Private, Number 27, boarded ship, and has been *en route* to Oran more than half a day.”

„And the monocle?” asked Annette excitedly.

„Inexplicable.”

They remained silent for a long time. Some buried unease weighed them down.

In came André with his usual haughty reserve.

„Sir, there is a policeman here.”

„What?!” asked de Bertin in alarm. „Another crime?”

„Today has been an exceptional day in that there has been no robbery, burglary, or any other event of the kind,” reported André. „However, it’s only three o’clock in the afternoon, so there’s still time left.”

„What does the policeman want?”

„He says that the car standing before the gate ran clean across the flower beds of the Place Magenta, as though there was no one at the wheel. I was called to order for a similar theory a short time ago, sir...”

„I believe it now,” retorted Laboux furiously... „Even that the faithful car escaped home! What’s more, I’m willing to believe that the unfortunate car was stricken with hydrophobia because it hit you!”

André stood with his head raised: his deeply wounded pride made him blush enough to look like a highly coloured whisky advertisement...

II

Gorchev returned to Toulon on the first train quite obsessed as to where his coat might be.

It would be dangerous to return to the scene again, but if he had to? Without the money in his coat he wouldn’t be able to pay Mr. Vanek his overtime.

It was late afternoon when he arrived at the ‘Texas Restaurant’. First he peeped in carefully. Well, just look at this. There the silent Drugich stood, his head bandaged, with the barman pouring something into his glass. Well! He’d take the chance! What could happen? He opened the door. The taciturn Drugich shouted.

„Hello. It’s the Chervonets brat! I heard the Chief threw you out yesterday!”

„Are you the one that Alec Lonesome picked up?” asked the barman. „Then I advise you to disappear. If the Chief comes, he’ll shoot you!”

„Why should he shoot me?” asked the Russian, in his whining way. „Isn’t it enough that he threw me out?”

„He’s pretty angry with you,” explained the barman, „because Jasmin joined up with that Gorchev, who was caught yesterday, and led him out past the guards.”

Hmm. So they had no idea that the person they thought to be Gorchev was the one thrown out by the Chief, and that he had escaped with Jasmin.

„Then, I’m leaving already,” he stammered, frightened. „I’d just like my coat, which you covered Portenif with yesterday.”

„I remember,” answered Drugich, „but we shipped out Portenif on the ‘Shifty Shark’, because he was dead drunk this morning.”

„How long has that man been drunk?”

„Oh, at least twenty years... Well, come along with me, I’m going to the ‘Shark’. We’re off to Africa because of a stolen car.”

„You’ve been in trouble over that all along, haven’t you?” asked Gorchev.

„Yes, but no more trouble from now on. The Chief has come up with a stroke of genius that hasn’t ever been invented for the cinema...”

„But... they’re certain to be watching the car...”

„Now you listen. The plan is a dead-certainty. Even if the whole British Navy were taking care of the Alfa Romeo, that old, reeking ‘Shifty Shark’ will take it to Oran!”

Gorchev hoped this was an exaggeration. But he was mistaken. Drugich told the truth word for word. An entire navy couldn’t have figured out the Chief’s brilliant plan. The Alfa Romeo, instrument of so much trouble, sailed away to its destiny in the bowels of the ‘S.S. Republique’...

III

On the quiet Quai de Beiges, next to a stone pier that reached out deep into the water, that ancient and treacherous ship, the ‘Shifty Shark’, lay at anchor. Who would have believed that an old clipper like this would become the hero of a marine adventure to be talked of throughout the world for years to come?

The crew of the ship was no more than four men. But they were worth something. An experienced judge, only on first impressions, would have given each of them ten years. Alec Lonesome was the captain knowing his responsibilities and in order to get himself the proper respect, he put on shoes for the occasion.

The hunch-backed Fishy played the accordion by the main mast. The others listened.

It was six o’clock.

Now Drugich, the Taciturn, followed by the boy whom, as we have heard, the Chief had thrown out of the ‘Texas Restaurant’, walked up the narrow plank which led to the deck of the ship.

Drugich with the boy caused a great sensation. Alec Lonesome didn’t conceal his joy.

„So you came back after all, you blockhead?!”

„I covered Portenif with his coat last night,” said Drugich. „it’s what he’s after.”

Excuse me,” spoke up Gorchev, in fright. ‘Couldn’t you : me along with you?’

...Gorchev had to go to Oran anyway to replace the unfortunate Mr. Vanek, so why not on the ‘Shifty Shark’, where he could at least keep his eye on the Chief?

„Silly idea,” said Fishy to Alec Lonesome. „The Chief will shoot the brat.”

„It’s all because you were fool enough to join the Legion,” shouted the ‘Captain’.

„Next to Alec Lonesome, I’m not afraid of anyone,” said Gorchev toppling with enthusiasm.

„Logic in that,” nodded the ‘Captain’. „Wait a bit and we’ll discuss it...”

What happened to Gorchev after that was like a bad dream. At seven o’clock Alec informed him that they would take him with them. But on one condition. He must accept a potato crate in the tool house of the ship as his quarters, and promise not to come out unless the Chief was asleep.

A few minutes before nine he was in the crate, and mischievous centipedes were chewing him unfortunately seeing him merely as a tremendous potato. At fifteen minutes past nine, arrived with a bottle of whisky, and a few smoked fish to make Gorchev’s bare burrow a little more homelike.

The Chief arrived at about ten o’clock. With hawk nose, blue eyes, grey hair, and tanned face, even these days he looked like a polar explorer, returning to civilization after many years. A skinny big-eared, shy-looking young man accompanied him.

„This is Mr. Gafirone,” said the Chief. „He is travelling with us too.”

„This is only possible if you share the same cabin,” said Alec. „The ‘Shifty Shark’ isn’t set up for carrying passenger traffic.”

„Only one cabin?... That’s too bad.”

„That wouldn’t be so bad, but there isn’t even one cabin, and there’s only one closet for storing wood,” answered Alec.

The Chief looked over the whole ship and finally returned to the toolhouse.

„This is where I’m going to live,” he said. „Bring me my suitcase.”

And he sat down on the potato crate.

No one dared speak.

„Well, what are you staring at?”

„Where are you going to sleep?”

„On this crate!”

He put down his wrinkled up travel blanket, and lay down immediately. What could be done here?...

IV

Gafirone went to see the Chief. It was the following day. The Chief was stretched out on the crate half awake. Gorchev was in the crate half alive.

„Have a seat,” said the Chief and sat up. „We’ve hardly had a chance for more than a few words.”

„Thank you,” said the skinny individual with the big ears. „Will we be together on the tour as well?”

„No. The owner of the car will accompany you, Mr. Gafirone.”

‘Where’ve I heard that name before?’ wondered Gorchev, inside the crate.

„Why is it important for him that his car breaks a record?”

„The gentleman made a bet with a friend,” explained the Chief, „that the car is able to make good time, even in the desert.”

Now we have a surprise. Mr. Gafirone took out a small lacquered box in which all sorts of tiny scissors, tweezers and nail-files were kept. He laid these out in front of him.

„You don’t mind if I manicure my nails while we talk? As many racing drivers, I began as a motor mechanic.” He snipped with the small scissors. „My unexpected career has put me into the position where my nails, which suffered so dreadfully in the repair shop, can now get tender care, poor things.”

He sighed. And filed.

‘Beyond a doubt, this bloke is mad,’ thought Gorchev, surrounded by the playful centipedes guessing that he must have heard of him or read of him as a racing driver.

„That’s nice of you,” answered the Chief.

„But even today my nails have not forgotten their mourning time. My care is in vain, the sad past shows on them! Oh, how often the poor things break, how short I have to cut them. If I didn’t believe that some day they would be the pink nails of a gentleman, I’d be dead by now.”

And he filed on. He even bit his cuticles with his sharp teeth.

An unhappy man, but he saw the future of his nails through rose-tinted glasses.

„If, through an error of mine, something wrong happens at the start,” he said, picking at his cuticles with a tiny stick, „I shall repay fourteen thousand francs, because I consider honesty more important than anything else.”

„So do I,” answered the Chief. He was not struck by lightning.

„But I get the twenty thousand francs in any event.”

„Don’t consider this a race. Your job’s to take a car somewhere at racing speed.”

„What condition is the car in?”

„It’s a first-class Alfa Romeo, with a special heavy frame, like that of a land-rover.”

„Wonderful,” answered the racing driver. He spread out his hand, like a duck’s foot, and then touched each of his nails with a tiny brush, spreading a drop of polish over each of them. „It’s good to have a heavy car on the desert.”

„In Oran you will move into the ‘Hotel Imperial’. You will most likely meet your employer the following day.”

„And where will I meet him?”

„He will visit you in the hotel. His name is Baron Lingeström. He will also give you the money.”

„One thing I must tell you in advance,” said the ex-mechanic who was now a racing star, „I haven’t been bought. If there is something I don’t like, then he can keep his money.”

„Baron Lingeström is a decent sort, a good chap. You’ll be satisfied with him.”

Now he sprinkled a buckskin cloth with powder, and used it to shine his once neglected nails.

„Here,” said the Chief. „Here is the exact map.”

Gafirone looked at the map studiously, but continued filing.

„So,” continued the Chief, and his eyebrows twitched, because he couldn't stand the sound of filing, „you will follow this black line, to reach Ifiris, the free African country. You'll take Baron Lingeström here with the car.”

„And what is the other line, the red one?”

„If you should accidentally cross over the red line, that's the end! It leads to the Prophet's Slipper!”

„And what danger are we in from a slipper?”

„The Prophet's Slipper is a peculiarly shaped dried up lake, where Baron Lingeström's greatest enemy, a tribal chief called Abe Padan, lives. That's where the other road, marked in red, leads to. Here is the map, sir, please take good care of it.”

„Thank you. Will it disturb you if I do some repainting?”

„My dear sir! Why do you want to repaint the map?”

„I was speaking of my nails!”

He opened the bottle of polish, and placed his implements before him. In the meantime Gorchev was collecting centipedes, and all available insects into a matchbox, as though he were preparing to classify all the members of the biological world.

„You will receive forty thousand francs from me before going ashore. Baron Lingeström will meet you in the 'Hotel Imperial'; he'll take care of the rest.”

„But I warn you, if this is a game that isn't clean, I shall get out.”

„I told you that there is nothing to worry about. The work is clean. The important thing is that you are careful, particularly with an individual called Gorchev.”

„Who's he?”

„A dangerous crook. But we're safe from him while aboard this ship.”

„Interesting,” mused Gafirone, „how many insects there are on you.”

The Chief looked down, howled with terror, then began to dance and jump. He threw off his clothes, then his shirt, as though he had gone mad.

A legion of centipedes and other insects scurried with some sprightliness in all directions, in his hair, pants, on his body. They stung hellishly.

While they had been speaking, Gorchev had collected the bugs untiringly and when his box was filled, allowed the furious bugs to escape through the cracks in the crate exactly at the spot where the Chief's ankles and trouser legs could be seen.

Chapter Fourteen

I

They were nearing the African coast and all that which awaited them at the end of this peculiar voyage, another stretch to be filled with mad turns and impossible developments all because of a diabolical automobile. The crew of the 'Shifty Shark' was together that evening in the toolhouse. The Chief had moved his sleeping quarters to the other end of the ship, and had thoroughly rubbed himself with some insect repellent just to be sure. The attack of the centipedes he noted among the most horrible experiences of his life and his body was blistered for quite a week later. So - there was nothing to fear from him. But there was another problem which gave these commissioned rogues much thought. That lonely, helpless boy worried them. While they discussed matters, Drugich the Taciturn sold them cheap whisky from his constant supply.

„I think,” said Alec to the taciturn Drugich, „that if I don't leave that helpless brat to his fate, in the other world they'll count it on my record, as a balance to that furnace stoker.” And after thinking for a short time, inhaling his pipe deeply, he added, „Perhaps even the postman... Even if he delivered money...”

It was interesting to see how the sad-faced boy brought out memories long asleep, and stirred up the settled cup of conscience in them. They would most willingly have poured out every one of their unperformed good deeds on him, burning with passion, so that they could open a door to sympathy somewhere in the place where there is a list of all wicked things that a man has done, and where sooner or later a man has to appear for the final stock-taking.

Brassfoot, the knifer, moped about sadly for days wondering what could be done with the boy. The godforsaken, lonely 'Chervonets-kid' with his helplessness, and sad, frightened blue eyes had become their main concern.

„I say,” suggested Fishy, „that we must teach him to become a dealer in stolen goods. You don't need strength for that. It's simple commerce and pays well.”

„No good, because they'll cheat the nitwit,” was Alec's opinion. „He should become a ship's cook. No one would dare to beat him up, because replacement is scarce and everyone'll be on good terms with him, to get at what's at the bottom of the pot.”

„That's an idea,” nodded the taciturn Drugich. Having decided, Fishy struck up a tune on his accordion.

During this time there was a constant guard over the Chief, because they were afraid that he would take out his anger at Gorchev on the boy. If the leader of the gang reappeared, Gorchev was to return to the crate, to his familiar centipedes. How unthinkable that the helpless boy was Gorchev himself?

But this unexpected twist was lurking for a later date.

Gorchev was useful in many ways. In the evenings, accompanied by Fishy and his accordion, he sang. Gorchev taught them a few pretty songs of the Volga. He would whistle the melody, while Alec Lonesome supplied the bass, Brassfoot the tenor, and the taciturn Drugich the whisky.

It was only years later that it came out that the beautiful Volga songs were selections from the Finnish people's historical Kalevala epos, translated into Esperanto.

By the time they reached Oran, Gorchev was able to prepare dinner by himself, and delight all with the taste of the bean stew into which four pounds of beef and one whole compass were cooked. But he wouldn't box with anyone for anything in the world.

...When the harbour of Oran came into sight, Gorchev was sitting by the cabin porthole, with Alec smoking his pipe next to him. He had managed to retrieve his coat from Portenif who was suffering from intoxication and had been moved to the ship's hold. Both looked towards the 'S.S. Republique', which docked next to the 'Shifty Shark'. The shore was far away, and only the large ocean liners stopped this far out.

„That's the ship carrying the car...” mumbled Alec, „and some general and his pal.”

So de Bertin and Laboux had travelled on the 'Republique'. And more than likely Annette as well.

But why were these people hiring a racing driver if the Alfa Romeo was in Laboux's possession? And what was the 'brilliant' plan which Drugich mentioned? And, mainly what in heaven was this whole Alfa Romeo thing about, to cause such a furious battle? That's what Gorchev was wondering about.

Meanwhile, the unloading began on the 'Republique'. The staring dockers had no idea of the surprise that was in store for them, and what peculiar events the day had yet to yield. Now Laboux came on deck of the ship.

Aha! Laboux was watching the unloading. The tremendous crane lifted itself time after time, humming, out of the hold of the ship, then starting up, it would swing its way out to the side, as though taking its load over the open seas, and eventually it reached the pier which stuck out at a right angle, towards the dock.

Now a tremendous blue Alfa Romeo was hauled out of the hold of the ship!... The crane rattled to one side of its little control tower, and the wonderful car, swaying, travelled above the surface of the water...

„Boy...” whispered Alec, stiffly gazing at the swaying car, which had stopped for an instant in the air. „Boy... kid...” his voice was hot and raspy, his eyes shone. „Listen and... and then forget what I tell you, or I'll break your neck. That is the most valuable car in the world...! It's made of fourteen-carat gold!”

Gorchev gazed into the air, with open mouth... Then he cried out in fright!

„The chain's breaking!”

A second... and the fourteen-carat Alfa Romeo dropped into the open seas, a tremendous cone of water spurted up, splashing tremendously, and the car was swallowed into the depths of the ocean leaving not a trace...

II

This event with the demonic car was a remarkable one. Complete outsiders were also inflicted by it, and went through aimless suffering.

One of those afflicted in this way was the meek Mr. Vanek. In the barrack room his bed was used for ironing underwear, because he himself was never there, even by accident. You understand that all his time was spent in the guardhouse, being punished which was why they ironed on his bed. In the Legion, not even a bed could be wasted. In the mornings Mr. Vanek ran lap after lap in the sun, then marched out for training, in the day, his prisoner mate, Mehar, a one-eyed Turk, beat him regularly, after every meal, as though he needed it to keep his digestion. Mr. Vanek had had some sort of misunderstanding with the tremendous Turk, which could never be cleared up, because Mehar could only speak his native language. When Mr. Vanek was first taken to the cell, the one-eyed giant was already a prisoner. First he would fall on his face, then stand up, his arms spread wide. The secretary watched with interest, and later asked him how often he completed this exercise daily.

The Turk shouted several consonants at him.

„Please,” said Mr. Vanek, „I understand something about these things, because my cousin had a physical training school, and the students there would perform so-called Dalcroze movements together in the open air, until a municipal health officer interfered, and thus put an end to the situation.”

At this Mehar became a little more calm, and later he even smiled in a friendly way.

But now the trouble came! Mr. Vanek mentioned that the weather was nice.

This is what he should never have done!

What was it that the Turk misunderstood? It was never known. But the remark about the weather brought him into an indescribably nervous state. He beat his chest with both hands, screaming curses at something, and cried real tears.

„But,” stammered Mr. Vanek, „if you wish, I’ll withdraw it, and admit that the weather is generally dry, stormy. If you would like, even that we can expect ground frost...”

„You... dog... you unbeliever...” he roared, grabbing him by the throat. „It looks... you don’t know, who I am?!”

„Please...” stammered Mr. Vanek. „Tell me what kind of animal you are, and I shall be pleased to address you as you wish...”

The guard, who happened to be bringing dinner, saved Mr. Vanek’s life. There wasn’t much left to be saved, because Mehar, the giant Turk, while crying real tears with his one eye, was beating his cellmate’s head and back against the cell door, cursing him throughout.

In fact, Mehar beat up the secretary many times, because at the sight of him he became so depressed that he couldn’t control himself.

But it never became clear what sort of misunderstanding there had been over the weather.

The secretary fully understood that if he did not find an interpreter in time, then sooner or later the Turk would finish him off.

Meantime Gorchev had sent a message that Mr. Vanek would need a certain patience, but that he, Gorchev, would arrive. And he enclosed the cheques. Mr. Wurfli, who had been driven to despair and then into the Legion, by the institution of five o’clock tea, felt, for some

mysterious reason, that he must stick to Mr. Vanek. For this reason he frequently molested the already worn-out secretary.

„We are better men,” he whispered in secret on the training field, in a puddle where they happened to be lying. Because if the sergeant gave the order to lie down, Mr. Vanek was generally on the edge of either a puddle or a ditch.

„Believe me, here in this puddle we are awful.”

„Please, please, speak in the singular.”

„Why? I don't look much better than you do. We are brothers under the skin, believe me!”

„Do you mean by this that you are my spiritual cousin, or grandmother? Just what is my connection to you?”

„Artists like dancing.”

„Certainly,” Vanek answered, shrugging his shoulders.

„Musicians and painters as well.”

„Furthermore, stone carvers and ballet dancers.” ‘Why does he constantly say that?’

„Listen to me,” whispered Wurfli, and slid closer to Mr. Vanek in the puddle, where they lay.

„We could escape together.”

„My dear sir! A correspondent may die, but he will never break a contract!”

„Were you a correspondent, Mr. Tintoretto?”

„Don't ever use that awful word again if you want ever to converse with me in a puddle.”

„27, you are a louse!” roared Verdier as Mr. Vanek sadly whispered to the dancing master:

„That's me again. Why don't you leave me alone?”

„How dare you talk during training?!”

„I only whispered...”

„Attention! You will report! You will ask for ten days *salle the police!*”

„I still have two weeks of the old one.”

„Quiet!”

„I'll have a backlog for years to come...”

„For that you'll do fifty knee bends, one, two...”

Life went like this. Mr. Vanek didn't have a minute for the canteen, barely spent time as a free man, and on his first leave he ran right into Marshal Marigon, who was always in low spirits because he had a bullet in his hip, which, in cases of nervousness or change in weather, would move about. The marshal was passing a printing shop, when he noticed the bespectacled private, as he returned the greeting of the owner. And lifted his cap! He couldn't let that pass without a word, because at that sight, the bullet in his hip moved.

„Private! You're mad! Put your cap on!”

„Thank you, but I don't feel cold. And anyway, a soldier should be able to stand all weather,” Vanek answered with a friendly smile.

„Private! Who am I!?”

Mr. Vanek looked both to the left and right in fright.

„Tiger?... Wait, if not, I'll... figure it out...”

The bullet turned again in the marshal's hip. A soldier was standing before him, all his buttons dirty, as though he had sewn the remains of some ancient coin found in an archaeological discovery onto his coat. His arms hung either side of his stomach, parallel to his axis. His hat he held in the vicinity of his thigh, like a postman. *Nom du nom!*

„Private! Put your cap on immediately! You're mentally ill.”

„As you wish, Regimental Doctor, Sir,” Vanek stammered, and put on his cap. „I am a new employee here with the army...”

„In which fort do you serve? Give me your particulars!”

What happened next the marshal told us, even years later, in a veiled voice, while the bullet moved about stabbing in his hip...

The private simply reached into his pocket, and produced a visiting card, which he handed over. The grey-haired soldier was so shocked that forgetting all else, he put on his glasses. He didn't want to believe his eyes when he saw the following:

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | <i>Edouard B. Vanek</i> | |
| | <i>private</i> | |
| <i>Foreign Legion</i> | | <i>Fort St. Thérèse</i> |
| <i>Oran</i> | | <i>Telephone 37-36</i> |

The marshal's eyes stiffened.

„Get going! I'll have to investigate! Go back to the barracks. Report at headquarters that we met.”

„Who's interested there in my private affairs? There's so much to do always...”

„Get along with you! Idiot! Beat it!”

„Beat what?” he asked innocently, with which the dialogue ended. The marshal threatened him and left deathly pale. All he saw, when he turned back, was the legionary politely lifting his cap...

Chapter Fifteen

I

They sat on the terrace of the summer home in Oran in complete silence. De Bertin had gone to every authority to ensure that the automobile would be lifted immediately from the sea. Unfortunately things were slowed by the fact that at the spot where the automobile has sunk, the sea was more than a hundred yards deep. In order to lift out the Alfa Romeo a salvage ship was necessary; the nearest was anchoring in Brest harbour, and it took a full day before the admiralty directed the ship to Oran to retrieve the sunken car...

„Being late is dangerous now,” said Laboux. „If Abe Padan’s men don’t receive arms in time, the entire revolt will be crushed.”

„Where would the car have to be taken to?” asked Annette, who was rather quiet, and pale.

„To the Prophet’s Slipper. This is a rocky place near Aboudir oasis, which is where Abe Padan’s camp is.”

„And why does the Portuguese leave them there?”

„That place is inaccessible from Ifiris. He would have to go through French territory, because a neutral zone cuts off Ifiris’ northern boundary, and only unarmed civilians can travel through there.”

„How will Abe Padan attack?”

„Hm. He would be able to cross the French zone at night... Dizard hasn’t a chance, because the French border guards overlook only those people they don’t want to see...”

Annette remained silent. André served tea, and though not obviously, but only by a certain tense expression, he showed as much as was proper that he had been sad to hear of the loss of the car.

„What are you thinking of?” Laboux asked his daughter.

„Nothing. Rather... of poor Gorchev...”

„He’s all right. De Bertin inquired,” he said gently.

„The company left Oran on the first day,” interrupted the general. „They are a few miles from here stationed in the training camp at Bores-Bouledin. Sergeant Douville has again received two thousand francs to take care of him, but I’ll admit to you, Annette, that Laboux gave it.”

„I... I’m very sorry that... that this ridiculous...” he couldn’t continue. Annette jumped up and kissed him. But a tear dripped from her eye.

Sergeant Douville did take care of Private Number 27, and Cortot was completely mystified by the goodness of this NCO, who was not an old friend, like Hector Potiou, but who even gave him twenty and thirty francs for whisky. If he had known that Douville was keeping him in alcohol with a minute part of the money sent to him, he would have thought differently of this goodheartedness.

„And... what will happen once he’s trained?” asked Annette.

„De Bertin will do everything to see that he isn't sent to the desert... He is in constant contact with the company commander, too, who already knows that Gorchev is an important person for some peculiar reason.”

„For some reason!” cried the girl plaintively. „For the reason that I love him, and that I'll never love anyone else!”

Laboux became pale, and remained silent. Gorchev's rash step had left a tremendous weight on his conscience.

„Fate,” he said after a short while, „has punished me bitterly for being tough with him. But I was right! I can't give my daughter to the first young man who comes along!”

„He did not just come along!” shouted Annette. „And I love him! You might as well know that I'll marry him!”

„No! Gorchev is an adventurer! I maintain my stand!” he shouted, slapping the table. André placed the cups on to a tray with a haughty face, so that his employer's bad manners should not be advertised by the unpleasant sound of clinking porcelain.

„I love him!”

„I won't accept that! And I'll stick it out. No matter what the future brings!” shouted Laboux, turning red.

And the future, as though following a cue in a stage scene, brought something, least expected, and which increased their sadness over the unfortunate loss of the automobile tenfold. André brought in the mail, with his head raised stiffly, as though a long-time foe of all letters.

In one of them, the company commander in Bores-Bouledin informed them in a few sympathetic words that Private Ivan Gorchev, due to a sudden heart attack, had died...

II

The death of the alcoholic Cortot was partially brought on by the goodheartedness which Douville had shown with Laboux's money. Hector Potiou left him to come and go as he pleased, Douville gave him the money, and so it was no surprise that he was drunk day and night. And what the prison doctors had predicted years earlier, came to pass. During the double quick pace training, his heart gave out. This was something that Cortot had expected when he joined the Legion. He returned to France to die, and at least he was able to end his life in the arms of an old friend, Hector Potiou, on French territory, and drunk...

After some injections Annette regained consciousness, and opened her eyes-although she felt that it would be better to keep them closed forever.

Laboux sat in an armchair, his back bent. This event had broken him. The smell of ether spread through the room, like the smell of Mephistopheles' sulphur, after the departure of the doctor.

„You must be strong,” said de Bertin. „We must be calm in our misfortune. This uncontrollable man was following his destiny, though he deserved a better one.”

Laboux was tormented by his conscience. Such a pleasant, gay chap, and just because of a poor joke...

„When do they bury him?” asked de Bertin.

„This afternoon.”

Now Annette stepped to them. Determinedly, simply, and calmly she said,

„You didn’t want anything wrong... and...” but she couldn’t continue. She wept.

Then they started out toward the training camp by car. It was a cloudy, sad day. The fog was seeping in from the open sea, mixed with the warm air. There must have been a tremendous storm somewhere, far beyond the bay, out on the open sea.

The cold north wind which had been blowing for days, sent drops of mist into their faces; everything was damp. In this state they arrived at Bores-Bouledin, to take part in the sad legionary funeral. The training camp consisted of barracks in no order whatsoever, puddles, and sodden palm trees.

The company commander showed them the barrack where Gorchev had lived, his bed, and his belongings. Next to the bed, on the floor, was a slab of tobacco. At this the general became a little suspicious. The poor boy hadn’t looked the kind of person who chewed tobacco.

„Please show me his belongings,” de Bertin asked the commander.

„The sergeant had them taken to the storehouse.”

The company commander had things to do. He turned over the guests to Hector Potiou, who became terrified when the general asked to see Gorchev’s belongings. Now there would be trouble. He well knew that Cortot was not Gorchev.

They went down to the storehouse, where Potiou placed a large yellow suitcase before them. The nameplate, Ivan Gorchev, hung from it. And among the few fine pieces of clothing were about a half dozen photographs.

It was certainly our hero!

The young man’s pleasant, joyful face smiled at them from the picture, in his slightly improperly slanted straw hat.

It was beyond a doubt... Even a person who had only seen him once would recognize him. This was Gorchev.

Hector Potiou stood pale as a ghost. He could have told them that the person on the picture had never been on duty there and that the yellow suitcase had been sent to Cortot in the mail by a butcher. This was the character who had stolen the suitcase from the real Gorchev in Marseilles, and who had been reported in revenge, by another soldier. The military authorities had punished the butcher and then forwarded the suitcase to Cortot, since he was serving under the name of Gorchev. If Sergeant Potiou were to tell them, then they would begin to investigate the entire Gorchev history, which could lead to trouble. So he stood, terrified, pale, and silent. Laboux chewed his lip. Annette sobbed. Later they went out to the tiny legionary cemetery, where the sad ceremony took place. The coffin was ready to be lowered, and in nice white letters, written on it was,

*Ivan Gorchev,
Private*

Lived 22 years

Annette couldn't remove her eyes from the inscription, and large tear-drops flowed down her face. At least someone was mourning for that Cortot, who certainly himself didn't leave many people who would have done this. The only honourable thing which no man on earth is too low for, is to have someone mourn for him when he dies. Even if it wasn't for his person, and not for his body that the tears flowed, the old ruffian would have surely glowed, had he, through some metaphysical means, been present at his funeral on the right side of his coffin, with so many fine people mourning him. Had he been in this unlikely situation, he might have been sad that Colette, the waitress at the 'Gay Paris Pavilion', was not able to see this final tribute, the gentlemanly surroundings, dressed in sadness. That is if even after death people like to boast of their important friends, which isn't likely, but isn't impossible...

III

Laboux's heart was pressed with a heavy weight of self-accusal for Gorchev. He sat up in bed.

It was a stifling night. Damp, miserable.

A sharp stab began at the corner of his eye, and ran down to his heel, making a boundary over one third of his skull, as though he were wearing a cap of cramps, on the top of head, rakishly over to one side.

The bedclothes dampened in the steamy, putrid air and the walls of the room breathed a smell of rotting.

He went to the window.

Stifling...

Damp roofs, lamps bobbing in a sea of fog could be seen in the choking night. That peculiar southern air-current stroked his face with heat, although there was no wind. His heart struggled and beat twice as fast, losing its rhythm. His eardrums beat from within, for the throbbing of an artery in his neck, and a blanket of fog, smelling of basements, came in, thicker and thicker.

Stifling...

He drank some cognac... Facing the window, on the cinema screen created by the fog, he saw a shaking picture, as if an ancient lantern were projecting it:

| |
|---|
| <p><i>Ivan Gorchev,</i> <i>Private</i></p> <p><i>Lived 22 years</i></p> |
|---|

Get up! Walk!... He couldn't stand his daughter's look, he couldn't stand his own thoughts. It looked like his malaria would break out anew. He must be feverish.

He dressed and left home fast.

The wind howled and thin veils of fog stretched out in the bad-smelling, warm night. The storm of the sea had broken here, on the African shore... From somewhere in the direction of the docks, he could hear the sound of an accordion. The screech of a few sirens mixed with

the music. The damp treetops shone here and there, as the headlights of cars racing by, touched them.

He went into a bar. If ever in trouble, he tried to escape from his gentlemanly life. He mixed with the sailors, and with other simple people. At other times he had felt good here.

„A cognac!”

The bartender looked at the well-dressed guest suspiciously.

„What are you gaping at! Bring me that cognac, you idiot!”

„Yes, sir,” he answered, his suspicion disappearing immediately.

The accordion was joined by a zither. The stink of Caporal mixed with that of the barrels of wine. After the eighth cognac he relaxed slightly. He enjoyed the smell of the jackets which smoked from the steam of the fog, and the damp rubber coats.

He stepped out into the airless, dim night, his head burning. Washed out faces appeared through the mist, a shiny police hat... a creeping, rattling lorry. The distant ship sirens fought with the whistling of the wind.

He was a bit dizzy. He must be drunk, he thought. At the traffic light on the corner he became certain that he was drunk... damp car bonnets shone, waiting for the light to turn green... long honking from a side-street. The grave inscription again appeared before Laboux's hot eyes... lived 22 years... He was dizzy.

And now, at the corner, the sunken automobile, the big blue Alfa Romeo turned in...

Its brake squealed... There, next to the handle, was the triangle mark, which he had scratched into the paint... and at the steering wheel, the dead legionary, Gorchev!

His cap, his cape, his uniform jacket could all be seen, and in the light of the neighbouring car, his face too!

The dead soldier driving the sunken automobile! Driving right past the red light. Why should a ghost worry about traffic lights? Laboux just stood there, stupidly, his head reeling!

‘Hey! Gorchev! Forgive me! I didn't want this!’

This was a soundless cry, which he sent toward the vision swimming away into the fog. He knew well that he was drunk, and if he went over to the blurred outline of the car, it would disappear into nothing together with Gorchev.

Unclear human figures, shadows... through streaks of mist, he was still able to see it disappear, and see the familiar ember of the dimly lit rear lights shining back like opals. Then it turned the corner at a daring angle and disappeared.

But the sound of distant crashing could be heard coming back from the corner. Oh, God, had he killed that boy? Does the body really have some sort of impregnable basis, more than matter? Which is less than nothing?

Confused, he started off in pursuit of the vision that had swum past, along the steaming, flat, bustling street.

A dead man was driving the car at the bottom of the sea.

Laboux wiped his perspiring forehead. Had this affair sent him mad? He went, still a little drunk, staggering in the fog, straight home. This was more than drunkenness, more than fever. This was a hallucination. Complete deception of his senses.

He turned into the square, and was home.

He threw both his hands before himself as protection, and turned cold and shaky with fright.

Before the villa stood the big, blue Alfa Romeo, immaculate!...

He stood stiffening. And he wanted to shout but no sound came from his throat. 'God! Just keep me from going mad!'

He sat down on the wet steps, panting, and looked at the automobile, willing the phantom to vanish... but in vain. He held his bent head between his palms, then looked up again. In vain.

The automobile stood there, and thick raindrops pattered on the blue body.

IV

Events had reached a speed where they refused to even allow a breath to that speck of dust in the whirling hurricane ring which was called Gorchev. He watched through the porthole of the toolhouse, while the Chief and Gafirone departed. When the two passengers had finally gone, the 'Captain' came for him.

„Now we are going ashore,” said Alec. „I hope that you don't still want to join the Legion?”

„No, no,” answered Gorchev quickly, because in this corner of the world, he feared only his good Samaritans, among whom the taciturn Drugich had gone so far in his sympathy to knock him out with a ladder. „I want to visit a relative, and then I'll be back.”

„Come to the 'Three Headworms' restaurant this afternoon. We'll wait for you there.”

„What *are* you still waiting for, if the sea has already swallowed the car?”

„Don't you worry about that! And we have to wait anyway, because Lingeström, Aldous and Portenif will be arriving on the 'S.S. Magdalena', and it will be tomorrow noon by the time it docks.”

Gorchev liked his well-wisher's Bohemian releasedness, and the ease with which they all got over the loss of the Alfa Romeo. They were hard men.

They took leave of one another on the shore. The taciturn Drugich gave him a special slap on the shoulder, just to show his affection, and knocked his cap off. But never mind! The important thing was that he had got rid of them.

The first thing he did was go to the central post office, to see if any *poste restante* letters had arrived for him.

When he opened the one, he became momentarily dizzy. What was this?

Edouard B. Vanek
Private Secretary
Foreign Legion (Africa)
Head office: Oran
Fort St. Thérèse
Branches:
Algiers, Fez, Morocco, etc.

Dated July 22, 19.
Bank account number:
BANQUE DE FRANCE 1701
Cables:
Vaneklegion

To Mr. Leo Petrovich, director
ORAN
Poste restante

In reply to your letter of the 18th, inst. I have the pleasure of notifying you that on examining my accounts, the following unpaid amounts were discovered:

| | |
|--|--------------------|
| My raise in salary, from the 1st of the month | 1,000 francs |
| My bonus for replacing you, from the 2 nd of the month | 8,000 francs |
| total | <hr/> 9,000 francs |

This unpaid amount has surely escaped your notice. I therefore request that it be forwarded to my company as soon as possible.

At the same time I should like to call your attention to the fact that my situation in the French defence forces is such that delay cannot be brooked. I am awaiting your immediate appearance at my unit, because in the event of this not happening I shall be forced to continue serving, to my great sorrow, not only because this would lead to extremely sad effects on the above army, but that I will be forced to take the necessary parade and running steps, in such an event. I am shaken by your delay, but I shall be pleased to carry out your assignments in future.

With enduring respect,
Edouard B. Vanek
Private and Private Secretary

Chapter Sixteen

I

The old fortress of Oran was built barely a few hundred years ago, on a strip of land which jutted out of the shore at an angle. In the opinion of the tourists, the view of the sea is arresting.

The Sultana Corridor is under the crumbled terraces of the fortress. The Moor leader Abu ben Masnir had his unfaithful favourite guarded here, in chains, so that this extremely radical measure would protect her from temptation. Was he successful in keeping her fidelity or not? Who could answer that today? The secrets of the dark ages and fickle women have never been fully discovered by anyone. One thing is certain, and that is that this ground-floor hall was not generally frequented by visitors, because there were too many bats, spiders, centipedes and harmless snakes likely to be around.

Gorchev viewed this place as suitable for the change of clothes with Mr. Vanek, with whom he had arranged a rendezvous in the fortress.

„Don't be angry with me, my dear sir, for my being late," Gorchev excused himself when they had shaken hands. „Circumstances beyond my control, you know, and I feel that I have paid you for it..."

„Did you think that this sort of thing can be repaid by money?"

„Well, to be honest," admitted Gorchev, „I did actually."

„You were quite correct," Mr. Vanek nodded dejectedly.

„Now I shall put on your clothes and join the company. You can't be prosecuted as a civilian, and I cannot be sent away. They can only hold me responsible for my absence."

„I must warn you that they know many interesting things there," said the other sadly, emptying his pockets. „There's a dancing teacher who constantly talks of artists, but he's useful occasionally because he knows the names of the more important animals. The corporal has something against the wife of the captain of the ferry-boat in Krems, Austria, and the sergeant will kill you if you don't call him the King of the Crackercrumblers. Generally speaking, these are the most important things for you to know. There will quite possibly be a Turk called Mehar there, who will occasionally beat you for meteorological reasons, but in time you will become used to that."

Meanwhile Mr. Vanek removed his clothes, and Gorchev dressed in the military uniform. He pulled the trousers up to his armpits, and the jacket hung and swayed on him like an overcoat. But this was unimportant. However, Mr. Vanek was in worse circumstances. As he wrestled with Gorchev's canvas pants, they split. But completely. Into two pieces.

„You wait for me here," Gorchev acted immediately, „until I bring you clothes from the first old-clothes-man I see." Mr. Vanek looked around anxiously.

„I shall spend several most unpleasant weeks here before you look me up again."

„Don't joke. You don't imagine that I would do a thing like that? I'll be here in a minute. Don't be nervous," said Gorchev and departed.

A minute later Mr. Vanek was not at all nervous, but when two and a half hours had gone by, he began to feel disturbed, and when it slowly became dark, he decided that he would attempt to step into contact with the outside world. He stepped out of the door to wave to someone. All the clothing Mr. Vanek had was a coat. He waved with that.

A Norwegian balneologist, in the prime of life, but with her face already showing signs of a nearing autumn, happened to be going in that direction with her camera; she immediately fainted. She was treated for sunstroke for two days because she was incapable of telling anyone what her trouble was. Later, the singing teacher of a girls' orphanage came along, and similarly accosted by the sight of Mr. Vanek, broke his umbrella on him.

Mr. Vanek, broken in spirit, and exhausted, sat down again on the stone bench, like a melancholy sultana, who gained weight in captivity, and lost her beauty, incidentally because the jealous sultan had her hair cut off.

...Mr. Vanek was convinced and endeavouring to accept the fact that he would remain there until Gorchev returned someday that he would use raw snakes for nutrition, that he... when a police detachment arrived, on the trail of the report made by the singing teacher.

As Mr. Vanek trotted along with the police guard, wrapped in a horse blanket, barefoot, but in chains, reminding one of a painting called 'Hermit, Caught in the Act' by a mad artist, he thought that there was no reason for an honest confession. If he were to betray Gorchev, he would not even receive money for his suffering, and who knows if they would believe what had happened?...

Ah! It was indifferent now...

When he arrived at the guardhouse, he noticed Mehar, who was doing an exercise involving frequent bending down. He quietly sat down in the corner, and when the Turk turned for a second, Mr. Vanek, with a modest smile on his face, said „The beating can wait until you've finished. I'm in no hurry Proceed, Mr. Lunatic.”

II

What happened to Gorchev? Why had he forgotten about his secretary, whose life was falling into such ruins? Because of the view. For if there hadn't been such a wide panorama of the sights in the colourful harbour and the bay, from the terrace of the old Oran fortress, then the secretary would never have caused the balneologist lady's sudden nervous breakdown and the singing teacher's umbrella would still be in perfect condition. Above and beyond this, the efforts of a good many honest and dishonest men would have reached a different conclusion, the conflict between King Abe Padan and the Portuguese Dizard would have come to a different end. Furthermore, the history of the people of Ifiris would have been different.

But Gorchev stretched out for a minute on his elbow on the terrace, and came to the conclusion that the stone jetty besides which the 'Republique' and 'Shifty Shark' were docked, reached out from underneath the fortress.

And suddenly he noticed that on the jetty next to the 'Republique' was the Chief. He recognized him by his broad shoulders and grey hair. Then the hump-backed Fishy, and that knock-kneed... Drugich! And there was Alec! An official-looking individual wearing a flat cap was with them, and he was studying some sort of freight-bill, which the Chief had given him.

Gorchev watched excitedly. Shortly afterwards one of the cranes began to operate. It lowered its chain above the 'Republique'. After a slight pause it lifted something out of the hold of the ship, a car covered by canvas. Its four wheels could be seen! A wall of fog approached from the direction of the sea! The car swaying held fast to the chain.

Gorchev didn't know, he only felt what this was, and his heart beat wildly.

The fourteen-carat roadster! This was the fourteen carat roadster! The voice shouted inside of him, although it couldn't be, since it had plunged into the sea! No! Something else had happened here! He ran... Meanwhile the sun dimmed, and the invading fog poured in from the open seas, parading over the streets, houses, people... Poor Mr. Vanek, what would happen to him? Ah! He could help him later. The car had to be dealt with now, now, now...

Gorchev reached the dock. In the distance he could see that the bandits were approaching the shore, from out on the pier. He watched them from the door of a warehouse. The car was placed on the shore. Drugich removed the canvas, Gafirone sat in behind the steering wheel, and warmed up the motor. The rhythm of the motor pounded in Gorchev's throat.

Now the headlights of an approaching taxi became bigger through the fog. They lit up the car, and the Russian cried out against his will!

A tremendous blue Alfa Romeo emerged, causing the mud to spray up high.

It was the fourteen-carat roadster!

III

Gafirone, on the orders of the Chief, sat in the Alfa Romeo, in front of the 'Hotel Imperial', and filed his nails.

He had to sit there for half an hour. Then they would start on their way. He was rubbing his outspread fingers, and whistling softly. The racing driver worked on his nails with thought, and very precisely, while studying the effects of his art from different angles, between the strokes of the brush. After the final stroke he quickly shook his hands at each other, as though clapping, but thought better of it in the last second, before his hands could touch one another.

Someone opened the door of the car. A young soldier stood there, at attention, but in a baggy, wide uniform.

„You are Gafirone, the motoring champion?”

„Yes.”

„Will you please follow me?”

„Where?”

„To headquarters.”

„Why?”

„Is this blue Alfa Romeo your car?”

„No... um... but... the gentleman to whom it belongs...”

„Will you please follow me. It is probable that it is only a formality. We'll go on foot. The car stays here...”

The champion motorist followed Gorchev, as pale as a ghost. He should have known that this was not a clean business.

They reached the front of a formidable building... The soldier opened a tiny gate, and Gafirone stepped in. A curtain separated him from the rest of the corridor.

„Wait here, until I've spoken to the Major.”

And he passed through the curtain. Gafirone waited... waited... Twenty minutes went by. Finally someone dressed as a nineteenth-century halberdier papal body-guard stepped out, and was startled at the sight of the champion.

„Who are you looking for?”

„The... the Major.”

„What major? This is the stage entrance to the Oran Classical Theatre. Hey!”

Gafirone shot out like a madman, and dashed into people all along... but just continued running!

Too late!... The Chief fumed with rage before the hotel. There was the duckbill-nosed 'Captain', and the rest of the characters with their neglected appearances. Only the car was not there.

Gorchev had arrived ahead of the Chief, by returning to the hotel by taxi. He then simply climbed into the car... started the motor and the car began its phantom passage.

At the corner he knocked over a newspaper stand, and half an hour later he stopped in front of Laboux's villa.

IV

„What happened?” asked Brassfoot, when Alec Lonesome came for them to the 'Three Head-worms' restaurant, so that they could go to the main square to wait for the Chief, together.

„That Gorchev,” he answered, gritting his teeth. „May he go lame. He stole the car. He made the champion look like a fool.”

„He was a fool anyway,” was the opinion of the taciturn Drugich, who only considered it worthwhile to speak in exceptional cases.

„Now at least you might tell us the story of the car, which sometimes 'falls' into the sea, and then gets stolen.”

„The Chief had another car, exactly like the fourteen-carat one, loaded on the 'Republique' at Genova,” explained Alec. „They said it was the car of Gafirone, the champion driver, and had it covered with canvas. In the hold it was placed right next to the car of that Laboux. The man in charge of the hold was in our pay. Before unloading, he cleverly put our canvas on Laboux's Alfa Romeo. And naturally, from among the two cars which were next to each other, they took the one without the canvas to be Laboux's car. And that was ours, with Laboux's fourteen-carat roadster standing next to it, covered by the canvas. And when the chain broke with the car, they were certain it was theirs.

„How could we know that the crane's chain would break?”

„The man in charge of the hold put a one thousand pound weight that was used as ballast under the seat of the exchanged car. That was exactly six hundred more than the chain could take, together with the weight of the car. So it had hardly lifted it when it broke.”

„It was a marvellous plan! And then comes a scoundrel like that...”

„Is this Gorchev a giant?” shouted Brassfoot.

Meantime they had reached the main square, in front of the fortress. If a person goes according to instinct in Oran, then it is certain that his feet will bring him here. The fog had sifted away and the rain had stopped. Drugich, as is general with introverted people who do not make friends easily, was a gourmet because the solitude of eating was in accordance with his temperament.

„Where is that Chervonets brat?” asked Fishy.

„I hope he hasn't gone mad again and made for the Legion?”

In that instant a tremendous vehicle stopped beside them. It must have been a furniture van, or something like that.

„Listen! I have no time to explain. We're leaving in this vehicle in an hour, we have only to wait for Lingeström.”

„We're going to earn money by shipping things?”

„Shut up! The fourteen-carat roadster is ours! This vehicle here is worth even more than our other plan! And Gorchev will be in it soon, I swear that!”

„But what is this vehicle?”

„You'll find out! Now we need another car, because Lingeström has arrived with the half-caste and Portenif. Wait here!”

And he immediately jumped off the tremendous van, boarded a cab that was passing by, and raced off.

„Do you understand that?” asked Brassfoot.

„We have to leave it to him,” hummed Alec.

„He has brains, we have to admit that.”

Drugich sniffed at a tremendous pineapple.

„What kind of vehicle can this be?” stared the hump-backed Fishy. But before they could consider that question, Brassfoot shouted aloud.

„Hey there! Look at that blockhead...”

Gorchev was rushing back to the fortress from Laboux's villa, because of the tremendous stress of circumstances on Mr. Vanek in that chamber of the fortress.

Suddenly there stood Alec, Brassfoot, the hump-backed Fishy, and the silent Drugich smelling a pineapple, next to him. They surrounded him.

„Hey! Chervonets! What sort of behaviour do you call this?”

Gorchev stepped back, in terror. My God I These people were going to hold him up, and there sat Mr. Vanek in a négligé, in the chamber of the sultana.

„Have you gone mad, you brat?”

„Leave me alone, I..”

Now he was prepared, in the interests of Mr. Vanek, to hit.

But the taciturn Drugich took the pineapple away from his nose, and, to forestall all further argument, hit Gorchev over the head with that noble fruit. The young man lost consciousness.

When he revived, he was lying on his back in a tremendous lorry which was racing along at full speed, and someone was sneezing in his face.

He turned in that direction dizzily, and was amazed to see a friendly lion, bending over him from quite close. This wouldn't have frightened Gorchev unduly, except that he noticed a sign waving on the lion's cage, like some sort of visiting-card. It read:

ANTONIUS WENDRINER

artiste and beast of prey
Feeding the lion, reaching into the cage
or frightening the animal in any way
is strictly prohibited!

He closed his eyes, because he would have liked to wake up. However, the wild beast named Antonius Wendriner sneezed in his face again, and he was forced to sit up. But this lasted only a second, because at what he now saw, he fell, as though Drugich, according to his old habit, had quietly hit him over the head with something.

V

Mr. Vanek survived his short stay in the chamber of the sultana without court martial, but he was locked up quite a bit because of that event and other misunderstandings. His list of sentences became so long, that one day he spoke these words:

„If such a thing as inheriting sentences exists, then my great-grandchildren will also have to do time for my deeds.”

Mr. Vanek, as generally happened with the very proper, formality-respecting petty bourgeois, having lost the flow of his old way of life because of the changed surroundings, became more neglectful, filthy and ragged than even the one-eyed Mehar, who since then had beaten him up frequently because of his pronouncing on the weather. Mr. Vanek had become used to this, as to the many other things he didn't understand why they belonged to the daily routine of a colonial army.

Aside from this, Mehar was also constantly receiving punishment, because he liked to drink, and only stopped when he dropped to the floor.

Even now they were imprisoned together, and Mr. Vanek was preparing to go to sleep on the dirty, insect-ridden stone floor. After dinner Mehar had beaten him up, and now they were retiring for the night.

But Mr. Wurfli appeared unexpectedly on a visit.

„You’ll have a good night tonight...” he whispered from the door. „I spoke to the colonel’s orderly. I think I’ve helped you.”

„Look, Mr. Madman,” answered Mr. Vanek bitterly. „I have enough trouble as it is without helping me.”

But the secretive dancing teacher departed without a word, and Mr. Vanek closed his tired, hot eyelids with a long sigh.

My God! How much suffering!

But an hour later they dragged him from sleep. It was the commander of the guard.

„Get up! You’ve been called up before the colonel!”

„But...” he defended himself in fright. „What could I have done while sleeping? I tried to lie at attention, and I was sleeping quite modestly.”

All in vain. He had to go. They took him to the colonel’s private apartment, where there were guests that evening.

There he stood, facing the illustrious guests, a little frightened, and blinking from the glare of the lights.

„I am in need of a clever soldier this evening. Someone told my orderly that you are our man,” said the colonel cheerfully, and the cold ran down Mr. Vanek’s spine.

„Please...” he stammered. „I... I am really very pleased...”

„Well, my friend,” said the colonel, „then everything’s all right. You will be our musician.”

Mr. Vanek staggered in fright, like someone who had been hit in the chest.

„I’ve heard that you are an artist. In case you don’t know it, Private, I too am an artist. A poet.”

„Congratulations...” stammered Mr. Vanek standing there uneasily.

„Well? Is there anything you want to say?”

„Well... I’ve been so badly worn by the prison and a Turk fond of Swedish gymnastics that I couldn’t even lift a bow...”

„Oh, you play the violin too?”

Tears flowed down Mr. Vanek’s face, big, bitter tears, and he said,

„Yes... I can do many things... Play the violin, paint, know the names of animals... I am really a very versatile soldier.”

The guests were astounded at the sobbing man. A grey-haired officer wasn’t ashamed to push over a chair towards the suffering, dismally neglected warrior.

„Sit down, my friend... Sit down calmly...”

The colonel motioned with his eyes, and his orderly served the stricken man with food. For a broken man, Mr. Vanek ate with a surprisingly good appetite. The guests, all old colonial people, eyewitnesses to many African tragedies, looked at the secretive legionary silently and gloomily. Laura de Pirelli, the Italian-born star of the Oran opera-house, gave Mr. Vanek a long, sad, but very warm glance.

The opera singer was a bit plump, and as is generally the case with ladies susceptible to putting on weight, she was a romantic.

„Tell me, my friend,” she spoke to the dramatically interesting soldier, who, with an expression of pain on his face, was eating roast beef. „What is it you miss the most?”

„A little mustard... or a pickle,” he sighed unhappily, and his whole face smiled when he received it.

„What is your name?” asked the colonel.

„Van... I have a real name and an alias. And I can't think of either one.”

A major slapped a book on the table, and on the basis of the number sewn to his coat, he established his name.

„You are Ivan Gorchev.”

A tall, blond captain now stood up from somewhere in the background.

„Ivan Gorchev! My God! You, you... in Nice, you were in contact with...”

Mr. Vanek nodded bitterly.

„That's right. In Nice I was in contact with! Even in intercourse! The company doctor was quite correct!”

Pierre Boussier, because he was the captain, stepped to the front, took a close look at Mr. Vanek and again said,

„My God! Gorchev!”

Mr. Vanek sighed. It was clear to him that his neglected appearance had caused this emotional cry from the captain.

„Will you go out into the entrance hall for a moment.”

Mr. Vanek went out into the hall, and leaning on an officer's coat, he fell deeply asleep on a chair.

The following day the owner of the coat disinfected his apartment, his entire family, and himself in terror, but it still took months before he had completely eliminated the prolific consequences of Mr. Vanek's short but sound sleep.

Meanwhile the captain said the following in a soft voice, within the room.

„Gentlemen! This man is the Ivan Gorchev whom General de Bertin called to our attention with such warm words. We all know who Gustave Laboux is. And this Gorchev is Laboux's daughter's fiancé... The girl wrote me in secret. It is completely mystifying that despite the respect due to the general, this poor unfortunate, careless gentleman should be found in a situation like this.”

„It's about time,” said the captain finally, „that that Sergeant Verdier stopped endangering the good name of the colonial army with his low brutality.”

At about midnight, a guard woke Mr. Vanek.

„Will you please return to the guardhouse.”

Mr. Vanek, far from all that he had known in life before the army, and near to lunacy, didn't notice the peculiar change in the guard's tone, and he merely followed him through the dark courtyard in silence.

„There was a big investigation while you slept. The officers, the sergeant and the corporal were all questioned. They were soundly reprimanded because of you.”

„Maybe because they forgot to have me executed?”

„On the contrary... but you'll see for yourself,” assured the guard opening the door of the cell. „Unfortunately, we didn't know who you were beforehand.”

„And now do you know who I am?”

„I certainly do.”

„Well, then, may I ask you to tell me, too. I don't think it will hurt if you put me in the picture, too.”

„All right, all right,” said the guard secretively. „One day the truth will be out. The general will come, and you will again be whom you were.”

„That's what I'm afraid of,” said Mr. Vanek in despair, stepping into the cell.

... In his dreams, he was conducting an opera performance with two paint brushes in his hands. On the stage Laura de Pirelli sang, and a one-eyed Turk tamed all sorts of scoundrels with a long pole. Then a general appeared in the dark theatre, and in a harsh voice announced that no one was to leave the premises until the police arrived, because during the intermission someone had lost a very valuable Gorchev. Mr. Vanek began to run, but Mehar was after him with a loaded crackercrumblers in each hand. The wife of the ferry-boat captain in Krems, Austria, ran like a fury in the front row, in fact she was the instigator of the whole thing. „Help!” cried Mr. Vanek, knowing well that if caught, he would have to play the violin, but then someone stuck a foot in front of him, and he fell hard. Mr. Wurfli had done it, and he excused himself, feeling very unhappy while they quickly tore Mr. Vanek to pieces. „Don't take it amiss, Mr. Tintoretto, but you did say that the stone carvers and ballet dancers”... Mr. Vanek screamed terribly and woke up, just before he was choked.

It was only after a long struggle that he was able to get air, because, as it was later established, Mehar, the one-eyed giant, slept quite deeply, and had spent a part of the night on Mr. Vanek's face.

Chapter Seventeen

I

When the fourteen-carat roadster again took to the road, with Parker driving, two other cars accompanied them. In each one there were eight Arabs, armed with hand grenades and machine guns apiece.

They were spahis „on leave”. That morning a sergeant had announced in the barracks to sixteen old recruits that if any of them were in the mood to go on an excursion with him, that person would get two weeks leave, and anyone who didn't want to go would receive the same amount of detention, with twenty-four hour duty every other day.

This sweet invitation had the effect that all sixteen men discovered in themselves a tremendous desire for this excursion and for the company of the measuredly sweet sergeant; so in the afternoon, dressed in burnouses, they escorted the valuable car.

De Bertin and Laboux had not solved the secret of the car that had emerged from the sea. It was impossible to begin an investigation into the delicate question, and there was no time to be lost. They too were certain that the car had been exchanged in the ship's hold, for an outwardly identical Alfa Romeo. But how had it returned? All they had to satisfy themselves with was the fact that the car was simply standing in front of the villa, as the pale and slightly drunk Laboux had announced, and whose condition made it imperative that they should not question him about it. His face was a little yellow, and he had had very much to drink. Moreover his malaria had attacked him again.

„I think that our trip will not be a smooth one,” he said with some misgivings, when they had been on the road for two days.

Annette barely spoke. She sat in one place for days, and stared before her. Gorchev's spirit was with them, in Annette's sadness.

„They are going to do something,” said de Bertin with feigned joviality.

And he was right. The participants to this safari which had started without much trouble could really not even imagine what kind of fantastic events were awaiting them.

Annette occasionally took over from Parker on the beautiful highway which led from the Atlas pass, through the desert. She was pale, and barely ate for twenty-four hours, but sat by the steering wheel, her hand sure.

De Bertin smoked a cigar, and occasionally gazed at Laboux, and then at Annette, through the rear-view mirror. He felt the silent, deep conflict between father and daughter. In one bitterness, in the other self-accusal. It was terrible!

„May I ask you,” asked Laboux once. „Have you ever known personally one of those so-called... spiritualists?”

„What?... Once in Avignon I was quartered at the home of a neurasthenic carpenter, and he did some of that stuff.”

Laboux looked ponderingly at the waves of yellow sand as they moved on.

„Have you ever thought...” he continued, each word dragging from him, „that after death there may be... something... after all?”

De Bertin looked at his friend in stupefaction.

„I think that you have been badly hit by that malaria,” he answered, anxiously.

„Yes. It’s possible. Yesterday I had a fever too.”

He took out a cigarette paper from somewhere, wrapped a few quinine tablets in it, and swallowed it. This is the way legionaries take this medicine.

The season which Abe Padan had picked for his revolution was an unfavourable one for his European friends. The sandstorms caused by the trade winds and the mist that came down from the Atlas were things that not even the bedouins stood easily.

By the time they reached the nearest oasis, Laboux was shaking with fever, but he refused to rest for two days.

„Abe Padan must receive his arms in time.”

All argument was in vain with that stubborn man. He gulped down a large dose of quinine, and sat into the Alfa Romeo.

„We can be on our way, Sergeant,” he said to the commander of the spahis.

A slight air current moved through the stifling heat, but that was enough to fill the air with dancing grains of sand, which got into lungs and eyes irritatingly.

By afternoon the two deep shadows under Laboux’s face bones had become red, and he was delirious.

„You will stay in Aboudir with two spahis, because your father won’t be able to continue,” said the general to Annette, who was washing her father’s face with vinegar and water.

Annette agreed in the name of the sick man as well. She well knew that no slight trouble would have this effect on Laboux’s iron constitution.

„The affair with that unfortunate young man has been very hard on him,” said de Bertin.

„And I know very well that Father didn’t want to do any harm,” she answered sighing.

Two tear-drops suddenly fell from the girl’s big clear eyes. The edge of her mouth jerked downwards a few times, and then she broke into sobs.

De Bertin nervously tapped a cigarette to the top of his cigarette case. A damned situation.

They travelled on with a tailwind, and the car was followed by the dust raised by its own wheels, like a canvas covering it.

They had long departed from the highway, and the Alfa Romeo ran along a winding caravan trail, with the soldiers’ cars running fifty yards ahead of it. The road through the Sahara to Aboudir led through a rocky bowl of a valley. The relentless particles of sand, for who knows what ages, had been running themselves against the rocks with the stamina of hatred, and these, broken down, sunk their ruins like tiny reefs, into the sand.

This desolateness of the bare landscape was stressed by the ruins of an ancient city, clumps of stone, collapsed arcades, remains of walls, like half-buried torsos.

In the valley the dust funnel disappeared, and the blank reflection of the tremendous desert blinded them. The air seemed to sway, as though, far off in the distance, some fine, smoky something lay before them... Now the spahis' cars reached that spot and...

... Parker shouted loudly... The brake screeched, de Bertin grabbed at his pistol...

Too late!

The soldiers' cars, as though they had run into an invisible barrier, turned over suddenly. No one fell out, the people just remained a mass in the cars which lay on their side on a sand dune... This is all the passengers of the fourteen-carat roadster could see, but they also met their fate soon.

A peculiar click was heard. The slowed-down roadster turned over and slid to one side, rattling and crackling... The steel net, similar to the one with which Hagenbeck caught lions and tigers, would not allow them out...

These specially treated metal filaments were almost invisible against the desert sun and three vehicles had been caught in them.

Armed Arabs appeared from behind the dune. The Chief led them.

„Stay quiet,” he shouted. „We can kill you all on the spot!!! Let them out of the net one by one, and tie them up!”

It would have been equivalent to suicide for anyone to try to defend himself. Within a few minutes they lay there next to each other in the sand, blinded by the sun shining vertically down on them.

The aggressors galloped away, and the prisoners could clearly hear that the car raced off with them.

The fourteen-carat roadster had been stolen after all!

Chapter Eighteen

I

The following is a transcription of a conversation that took place in the commissariat of the Fort St. Thérèse, Oran.

CHARACTERS:

(Sergeant Verdier and Private Balukhin, regimental scribe. Five o'clock in the afternoon, at this time the sergeant generally looks over the petitions.)

VERDIER:

(Comes. He looks worn out. He has lost some weight within the last few weeks.)

BALUKHIN:

(Jumps up.)

VERDIER:

(With dull good will.) Just sit down, you swine. (He opens his jacket and blows.)

BALUKHIN:

(Places papers before him.) Gorchev, Private, Number 27 asks for leave tonight.

VERDIER:

(With an ominous growl, which causes the edges of his moustache to quiver.) All right...

BALUKHIN:

The same Private, Number 27 asks for a special diet for his illness.

VERDIER:

(The edges of his moustache quiver, his eyes turn a dull red, and his nostrils widen rhythmically.) It's signed...

BALUKHIN:

Number 27 asks to be placed on sick leave for two days, because he is suffering from rheumatism.

VERDIER:

(His moustache quivers constantly.) Signed! And now (with suspicious fatherly voice) my dear, good Balukhin, you completely decrepit, shifty, impudent head-executioner... If you make one more statement about Private, Number 27's requests, I will take the largest sized horse-shoeing wrench in existence, and beat your head to a pulp. (A blood-curdling shout, similar to the mad grave-robber in a Grand Guignol, which is uttered at the end of the act, and around which the entire work is based.) You won't make a fool of me, you ambushing scribe! You can sign the petitions of Number 27 yourself! (Pause. The sergeant collapses into a chair.) What else is there?

BALUKHIN:

(Swallows. Takes out a slip of paper, his hand shaking.) ...Private... Number 27... asks for leave tomorrow...

VERDIER:

(Is broken. Motions with his hand. Collapses in the chair.)

BALUKHIN:

(Finishes.) Because he wants... to go... to... the baths...

VERDIER:

(With good-natured sadness.) Don't bark, because I'll stamp you out, you dishonest, double-dealing trainer of dog-catchers... (He muses, staring at the floor, worn out. Finally some decision ripens within him.) Well! (He stands up.) Now you listen to me. Should Number 27 ask next time that two Negro servants carry him during parade in a sedan-chair, I will sign this of course, and if in a few minutes he comes up with the request that his frolicking lady friends be allowed to accompany him on the autumn manoeuvre, at government expense, there must be nothing done to prevent this. As a matter of fact, we shall anticipate his petition. And today the trumpet-major will receive orders that the dawn reveille be played on a harp, because there is the possibility that Private Number 27 might accidentally wake up, and appear at the roll-call!... And when you are done with that, hang a notice on the gate of the fort saying the following:

Elderly, provincial postmen, grooms, and pensioners with rheumatism will find a comfortable home if they join the French Foreign Legion. Special favours granted to complete idiots, as well as special treatment from bustling dry-nurses with the rank of NCOs... That that thundering...

The rest of the conversation has only been documented for those interested in forceful expressions in the French language.

It's possible that the sergeant exaggerated a little, but it was undoubtedly certain that Mr. Vanek's situation, ever since Captain Pierre Boussier intervened, in the name of de Bertin and Laboux, had changed favourably. The officers had seen so many dramas of unsuitable individuals come to disastrous ends, through the merciless conditions of the Legion, that in this case they willingly made an exception. It was entirely unimportant if one weak character, who happened to be there by mistake, who knows how and why, wasn't smashed by the ruthless machinery of the African army.

For the sake of such an outstanding colonial officer as General de Bertin, one could really make an exception. What was needed for this? One dressing down to a sergeant, one tap on the shoulder of the private, and now the situation looked this way, for example, on the training field:

„tion!” roared the NCO. „Right-turn!” Immediately afterward in a much tamer voice, „This, of course, refers to you, sir, Private Gorchev, as well, if you aren't tired.”

„No, no...” answers the private with a modest smile. „Let's just continue. It's best if a man learns everything.”

In the afternoon Mr. Vanek would go into the city. Upon meeting him at the gate, Corporal Gent would swallow painfully, and in a completely hoarse voice, would say,

„Will you please, sir, Private, Number 27, and... about turn... or something like that... and come with me, you blockhead... you block capitals, your name in block capitals!”

He would return with Mr. Vanek to the soldiers' hall. Then he would let his voice out, but so that every windowpane shuddered.

„Scoundrels! If something on this, this what-d'ye-call-him, his shoes, jacket, or anything else is out of order, then everyone can mourn for his leave for the next four weeks. The devil take this kind of blockheaded scoundrel... That doesn't refer to you, sir, Private Number 27, the devil take it!”

The entire population in the soldiers' hall was in charge of Mr. Vanek's person, and they treated him with solicitous care. Each day four men were selected, as the so-called 'Gorchev detachment'. One cleaned his shoes, another his clothes and weapons, the third kept his bed in order, but he was rarely satisfied with that latter.

„Look, Mr. Wurfli,” he would explain with fatherly patience, but with that muffled irritation in his voice which characterizes a person who with difficulty can control himself, „these have to be stuffed into the end of the bed, so that there are no wrinkles in the blanket. I myself could do it that poorly.”

After he had dressed spotlessly, and had even smoothed his moustache with a tiny brush, according to habit, he lifted his cap to his dormitory mates, and departed. Before that, he looked into the commissariat to see if any mail had come for him.

The officers came upon the unfortunate man's secret in a short time. He most likely used to belong to the better circles, but had become somewhat unbalanced here in Africa. The colonel was particularly convinced of this, when at a meeting with Mr. Vanek in the city, the latter raised his cap by the peak, and greeted him, smiling:

„Well, hello, Mr. Colonel! What lovely weather we're having today!”

For this was the remnant of his incurable civilianism - the forever beautiful ceremony of raising one's cap as the spontaneous expression of so very many relations, and opinions, with one gesture, which might be deep, might go in a wide sweeping arch, might be fleetingly graceful, but at any rate the relation and opinion of the cap tipper towards the person whom he greets with that reflex movement contained within it.

... One evening Mr. Vanek happened to be sitting in one of the restaurants with the expression of stern secretive men on his face. He gazed into the blue cigar smoke, looking as though the everlastingly buried memories of a peculiarly eventful life were haunting him within. In fact, this reminiscence was of Gorchev. This is the letter he had received from Gorchev:

Edouard B. Vanek

Substitute-Private

ORAN Poste restante

In answer to your letter dated this month, how-should-I-know-what-date, it is with pleasure that I report that meanwhile we have met at the Oran fortress. It is with great respect, but even greater dissatisfaction, that I must admit that I was unsuccessful in settling my dealings with you.

At our last meeting, you remained in the Oran fortress in a none too complete state of attire, as I had stated the probability of my immediate return.

I have the pleasure to inform you that in the meantime I had to depart from the city because of some weighty object with which I was hit, with some urgency, on the head.

Referring to the contents of your letter, I am pleased to report that not a penny of your salary can be denied you. As a matter of fact, I shall honour the injuries that you have received, grandly at the cost of my own bank account.

I am sorry that as you wrote, you were shaken by my delay, but please believe me when I say that I was unable to help myself.

In the hope that our relationship will in the end be only useful and pleasant, I close my letter of inst.

In the future too, I shall compensate the disturbance you suffered for which I am obliged to you.

Yours truly,

Ivan Petrovich

On this pleasant night, the Oran seaside shone in the moonlight in front of the terrace of the restaurant. Mr. Vanek was thinking how much he should charge up to Gorchev on account of the injuries he had received since joining the Legion. In his muse he heard a voice behind his back, a pleasant bell-like, fine woman's voice.

„Am I disturbing you?”

A strange lady stood beside him, in a pale, shining silk evening dress. She was elegant and undoubtedly a lady.

Mr. Vanek pushed his chair back and raised his cap with deep respect.

„How could you possibly disturb me... a beautiful lady? My name is...”

„Petromsky, if I know correctly... Don't you remember me? I'm Laura de Pirelli...”

The lady was outstandingly beautiful. And it did seem that he had seen her before. Mr. Vanek stood up immediately, and lifted his cap again.

„My name is...”

„Don't you remember me?... I'm Laura de Pirelli, the singer.”

„I... I have... already met with you somewhere... Yes.”

„We met at the Colonel's, on the night when you were called in to perform.”

„Believe me, I would have willingly played, but the only instrument that I understand is blowing through a comb that has been covered with waxed paper, and there just wasn't any around.”

From this they plunged into deep personal conversation.

„My dear sir,” said Laura de Pirelli, among other things. „I have had an exquisitely sad feeling ever since I saw you there. There is a woman somewhere behind your tragedy! And only a woman can build again that which another woman has destroyed!”

„That was a beautiful sentence,” nodded Mr. Vanek. „You must have been reading the works of celebrated writers, when offstage...”

„And what was your profession before?” asked the singer.

„Correspondent at a sanatorium near Nice. I had an outstanding position. The sanatorium was under the direction of Professor Louvier.”

„And why did you join the Legion?”

„That... is something I cannot tell you.”

The lady who was inclined to be romantic looked meditatively at Mr. Vanek.

„There is something peculiarly attractive in your gaze. Have you ever been told... that you are suggestive?”

„Here in the Legion I have been told many things. But I don't remember if anyone ever said that.”

Later they drank champagne, and the secretary unbuttoned the neck of his jacket, because both of his eyeballs were pulsating painfully. After all Mr. Vanek was a man! Not exactly the epitome of masculinity, but then the singer, in neither age nor weight, could boast of being the ideal of femininity.

„You... should escape...” whispered Laura de Pirelli, with some heat, and the quantity of champagne consumed added its own caloric content.

„Madame, I must answer you with the same words I used for Mr. Wurfli, a slightly mad good Samaritan who is a dancing teacher and disseminator of etiquette: a correspondent will never break the contract he has signed!”

„We could go to Italy!...”

„It's impossible,” he said sighing, „despite the fact that I truly like Italy...”

„You also adore the many, many flowers of Italy, and the parks of orange blossoms?”

„Those too. But particularly the macaroni, and the spaghetti with tomato sauce.”

Mr. Vanek spent a very pleasant evening in the company of the singer, but he refused to hear of deserting.

„Think it over...” whispered the singer after several more glasses of calories. „If you were to escape, we could always be together, and I could sing to you.”

„I could get used to the latter in time, but my financial reliability would be ruined by a break in contract. I will not desert.”

However, life demanded that Mr. Vanek had his financial trustworthiness put to a real test.

II

The roads to misfortune are impossible to predict.

Mr. Vanek lived a truly pleasant and idyllic life in the Legion about which so many horrible legends were spread throughout the world. In the eighth week of training, he had still not become efficient enough to be ready within ten minutes of the call for marching in the courtyard. Often the company would wait a quarter of an hour before Mr. Vanek appeared.

„Hasn't anyone seen my belt?” he asked, having lifted his cap, at which Corporal Gent's teeth gnashed loudly.

„Will you please stand in the line?” said the Lion softly, who had been suffering from trouble with his gall-bladder, even though he had successfully completed three campaigns in the Sahara, and hadn't been on the sick-list for as much as a single day...

But the colonel and other officers clapped Mr. Vanek on the shoulder, and were ready to forgive him.

Mr. Vanek's form of parading was such that a spahi captain on holiday, and unfamiliar with the local customs, prepared a number of photographs of Mr. Vanek's parade steps, and these he sent to the ministry of war, with a memorandum which urged the immediate reorganization of the colonial army.

At target-practice when it was Mr. Vanek's turn to aim at the target, the company swiftly dispersed, the sergeant commanded 'down!' and everyone ran for cover.

It looked as though Mr. Vanek was quietly going to gain weight here, when fate stepped in.

Pierre Boussier was tool of fate, that same Boussier, the tall, blond captain who had launched the Gorchev legend about Mr. Vanek and had continued his tour of inspection the following day. Now he returned to Oran, and on the very first day when he appeared in the fort, he was informed about everything.

„Please,” said the colonel, „when you have a chance, report to de Bertin that we took this meek little Gorchev into our care. He really needs it, because he's a helpless man, not made to be a soldier.”

„My God!” shouted the captain, striking his forehead. „I forgot to let you know! I was in contact with de Bertin on a military matter, and the general wrote to me that Gorchev was dead, that he had attended his funeral, and that beyond a doubt the real one, whom he had visited in the artillery barracks in Nice! This is another Gorchev!”

Now the colonel was in a dilemma. For the sake of a military hero one could take care of a stupid person, but one couldn't take care of someone for the simple reason that he was stupid. Besides, the affair could become ridiculous if it leaked out. The officers held council. That unfortunate creature was not to blame... but still the affair must be ended. And so, one of the lieutenants was selected to do just that, carefully, but with military speed, to put an end to the comedy.

The lieutenant handled things cleverly. He went over to the barracks to hold inspection. He went from one room to the other, and finally reached the one in which Gorchev lived. Naturally Sergeant Verdier and Corporal Gent followed him everywhere. The soldiers were working on cleaning their belts and rifles, with the exception of Mr. Vanek, who had purchased a portable record player, and was lying on the bed, eating salami, and playing an American dance tune for himself. When the lieutenant entered he stood up. But the record continued to play merrily.

„Private,” shouted the officer. „What's that?”

„Slowfox.”

„Stop it immediately!”

„The sergeant doesn't like the slowfox?... I have a tango too...”

„You idiot! Sergeant! What's happening here? Why do you make exceptions here?!”

„If you'd like,” stammered Mr. Vanek, „I could play you some military marches.”

„Listen to me, sergeant! You cannot punish that idiot for all this, which I’ve just now experienced. This is the shame of the NCOs. But if in three days’ time I notice that you make even a hair’s breadth of difference between him and the others, then you will be kicked from here, straight to the first assault party headed for the Sahara! Is that clear?!”

„Yes, *mon lieutenant!*” answered Sergeant Verdier, and his eyes began to glow with a flame of intoxication.

„*Oui, mon lieutenant!*” mumbled Corporal Gent, and his chest began to rise from joyful excitement.

The lieutenant departed. Using the possibilities given, he had handled the situation humanely, so that the unfortunate individual should not be punished for what had happened until then. He wasn’t the guilty one. No one was guilty. But the Legion had long become the sort of place where someone pays for every mistake, even if no one made the mistake in the first place.

With reference to Mr. Vanek’s tragedy, perhaps it would be better, in the interests of my more sensitive readers, that I do not go into further detail about the subsequent events. Let it suffice that when the lieutenant had disappeared around the deserted corridor, the fifty-two-year-old sergeant and the forty-three-year old corporal hugged and kissed each other and then did two or three double dance steps to the left and right, which according to Mr. Wurfli, in the language of the trade, were called the *chassé*.

... Who was that wearily staggering, half collapsed individual, filthy beyond recognition, making a trip from the pump to the washroom with a bucket for the twenty-fifth time, over a distance of four hundred yards there and back? You guessed it, Mr. Vanek was the man. Mr. Vanek who half an hour before reveille was awakened so that he could practise properly getting his things into order for marching. During the afternoon rest period Mr. Vanek learned to correct the tiny errors he made during a parade, from a corporal with very raw manners.

And Mehar, who didn’t understand French, but had some sixth sense, it seems, because he sensed Mr. Vanek’s fall, reestablished his old threatening habits, caused by Mr. Vanek’s sole reference to the weather, which had insulted him so.

This is how Mr. Vanek’s situation stood, and now he himself stood, with a bucket in his hand, broken in spirit, beyond consolation, not even minding that Mr. Wurfli spoke to him,

„You see, this is life. Up and down... The fate of a soldier is not to be envied.”

„That’s particularly true when half-wit dancing teachers can be found in the surroundings.”

„You are an ill-tempered creature! From the very beginning I have tried to be friends with you, and you haven’t returned it. Tell me, have you ever thought about why it is that all musicians and painters are ungrateful?”

„I hadn’t thought about it, but if you like, I shall, although in my opinion, ballet dancers and stone carvers are no more grateful.”

„I would have shielded you. Your fate turned bad, when they discovered that you are not Gorchev.”

„And if a person isn’t Gorchev, does that make him a dog? You aren’t Gorchev, and they still don’t torture you.”

„You unfortunate soft-headed bedouin,” spoke up Sergeant Verdier suddenly. „Don’t waste yourself here in the courtyard! Pull yourself over to the stable and groom the Captain’s horse!”

The sergeant left, and Mr. Vanek looked after him with melancholy disdain.

„That’s his entire culture...”

„Believe me,” said the dancing teacher, with compassion, „this kind of NCO would not be found in the Legion if attendance of dancing and etiquette courses were made compulsory. Like the smallpox vaccination, for example. Believe me that this is true, my dear Mr. Tintoretto, if you allow me that address.”

„Let’s rather say that I will put up with it, since it seems to be your obsession.”

„Russian musicians are peculiar people.”

„Yes,” answered Mr. Vanek, shrugging his shoulders. „I knew one who played the accordion, and collected cigarette boxes.”

„Do you collect something too?”

„Pardon?... I don’t collect anything, nor do I play the accordion.”

„What do you play?”

„Dominoes. But only rarely and...”

„Private, you utterly depraved scoundrel, you dirty rascal! If you don’t go to that stable immediately... I’ll have you in irons. What are you barking about here with this clown?”

„I was asking for advice, because I’ve never groomed anything, and I thought that the dancing teacher knew something about the care of horses.”

„Yes? Well then both of you go to the stable! You’re to groom all three horses!”

When the stable door closed behind them, Mr. Wurfli turned to the secretary furiously.

„Tell me something, why do you recommend me to the sergeant?! He hates me enough as it is!”

„If dancing and etiquette teachers were forced by law to attend their own lessons, that would be better than smallpox and typhoid vaccinations together.”

After that they no longer spoke, but rubbed the horses for two hours. Then the sergeant came, looked around, and asked with disingenuous amazement, why they hadn’t begun to work yet. When he was told that these damp, messed up horses had gone through the grooming, he didn’t believe his ears.

„In your opinion is this grooming? Answer me honestly.”

Mr. Vanek looked with understanding eyes at the sad quadruples.

„For a beginning it’s quite hopeful,” he answered with timely recognition.

They toiled for another four and a half hours. During which Mr. Vanek decided that he would escape from the Legion!

„I hate to break a contract,” he said to Mr. Wurfli, „but after the way they have treated me, they can count on me no longer. I shall escape!”

„It’s possible that they won’t even look for you,” answered Mr. Wurfli, obviously agreeing with this decision.

„I shall go to Italy, and work, and a lady shall go with me!!”

„And your music?”

„At the moment she only wants to sing. But I don't even mind that. Macaroni and spaghetti in tomato sauce make up for most things.”

The following day Mr. Vanek disappeared from the fort, and while the radio gave out his description every three hours, he again lived in the surroundings he was used to, with Laura de Pirelli, in a comfortable wardrobe, which the singer made as homelike for him as was possible.

Chapter Nineteen

I

It is possible that the passengers and escorts of the fourteen-carat roadster would all have perished, if André hadn't borrowed the collection of cocktail recipes from Boudoin, a chef in Oran. What happened was that in the instant of the turnover, the book fell forward, and the butler, who had been sitting on the middle seat, immediately reached after it, since he had accepted the responsibility for the treasured, handwritten book.

It so happened that André, following the book, rolled under the driver's seat, and hidden there, went unnoticed by the bandits. After the attackers had galloped off he reappeared suddenly, with Boudoin's cocktail recipes under his arm, in proper butler posture, except for a bleeding nose, and deprived of two thirds of his clothing.

„If you have no objections, Messieurs, I will free you from the ropes.”

A number of them answered him, and not politely. It was late evening by the time the worn-out party arrived at Azoumbar. The telegraph cable had been cut, and the forces at the oasis consisted of two Arab policemen.

What could be done, now? Laboux was put into bed with a high fever.

„Fate was against us,” muttered de Bertin.

Annette didn't say anything. She was thinking of something else. God's vengeance. The girl was utterly exhausted... After wishing all a good night, Annette staggered to her room and de Bertin did the same.

Laboux lay with his eyes open, in the musty mud-walled room, while a smooth snake looked at him from the ceiling. His temples were throbbing with fever, and in the oppressive silence of the oasis night, some bird cried occasionally, Iquiwiwi!... Silence... Iquiwiwi!...

His eyes burned, and the mouldy yellow walls tended to fall towards him... 'Gorchev'... he moaned quietly, and when the door opened, he knew well... It was him... He had come...

Iquiwiwi...

II

It really was Gorchev who entered. In a torn and dirty uniform, and accompanied by a sluggish and sleepy lion.

„Good evening,” he said smilingly. „You keep quiet, Mr. Wendriner.”

Before the burning eyes of the sick man the whole vision was obscure and so was the big, pacing lion. But he was not afraid.

„You're in a pretty bad way, Laboux,” said the pert ghost. „We won't fight today.”

„Why did you die?” whispered the sick man.

„What?...” said the wandering spirit in amazement.

„And now shall I always see you? Those eyes, that face...”

„So? Am I ugly? Listen to me, Laboux, I'll get the automobile back one more time.”

„You were there then too!” panted Laboux. „I saw you in the fog.”

„Really? How interesting. Phew, Mr. Wendriner... I can't keep that decadent old beast in order,” he said, as the lion licked the outstretched hand of the sick man. „He won't hurt anyone. He's an old performer, poor thing, and I think that he's a vegetarian to boot, because in the gate he ate a pot of green paint.”

„No... no!” stammered the sick man. „This... this is impossible...”

„I was surprised too, but it's possible that he thought it was spinach.”

Laboux, in the terror of over hundred-degree fever, almost laughed at the odd sight of the soldier and the timid lion... But the grave came into his mind... the military funeral.

„Gorchev...” he said, „...what does... death mean? What happens to a man after he dies?”

„If at all possible, he gets buried. Why do you ask? Tell me, how did you get to be so sick?”

„Malaria.”

„Listen to me. I'm not going to give the roadster back to you any more, because they'll steal it again. But I'll take it to that Dalai Pala or whatever his name is, myself, to the Prophet's bedroom shoe or what. But I don't have a map...”

„Oh... if only you could... It isn't far. There's a map, with the route marked out, in my coat...”

„Where?”

He went over to the chair, and took Laboux's wallet out of his pocket, and from this removed the map.

„Hey, Mr. Wendriner! Don't sleep on the job,” and he turned to Laboux highly irritated. „You've never seen a performer so lazy. He acts as though he were my grandfather.”

He kicked at the lion, at which Mr. Wendriner stood up with great difficulty, and looked at him waiting for further instructions.

„Gorchev... forgive me... for refusing you my daughter.”

„I'll never forgive you for that. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

„My daughter said... that she... would never marry.”

„Make note of the fact that I am going to marry your daughter. One fine day I'll come at night, and take her away with me!”

Laboux sat up, his eyes wide.

„No,” he rattled in terror. „God be merciful!”

„What are you shouting about? Why are you so upset about my marrying your daughter? I don't have leprosy! Look!”

„No! Say that you won't take her!” rasped Laboux, his eyes popping. „Oh... please... forgive me and... say that you won't take her!”

„And I'll still take her, you old fogey!”

„I won't have it!”

„Look at him shouting... Come, Mr. Wendriner, and spit out that slipper. A fine lion... he eats salad, paint, and textiles.”

„Gorchev... Forgive me...”

„Never! I'll come for the girl, you old braggart, and I'll take her with me.”

The sick man pulled all his strength together and cried out, so that the vision would disappear, and then exhausted and shaking, fell back on the pillow...

De Bertin and the girl dashed in at the same time.

„What happened?!”

„Father!”

Laboux panted feverishly, his lips cracked.

„He was here... I spoke with him...”

„Who?”

„Gorchev?”

Annette shook. De Bertin sighed.

„Take a dose of quinine,” he said, weighed down by thoughts.

If was difficult to calm the invalid.

„He came here... with a lion... He said he would... take the car... to Abe Padan...”

„Yes, yes, just sleep...”

„But if I say... I saw him... the lion took one of my slippers.”

Annette went to the door slowly, and sadly gazed out into the night. She took a few steps down the corridor. ...In the moonlight desert the poorly kept palms of the oasis swayed sadly, with their dusty crowns...

„Be a man, old boy,” said de Bertin. „Your conscience is bothering you because of poor Gorchev. Where is André? André!”

Instead of the butler, Annette came in, deathly pale.

„Peculiar,” she said, „I found this outside, by the oasis...”

She held a badly chewed slipper in her hand.

Iquiwiwi, screeched the bird... It was a stifling night.

„Where are you... André! Hey!”

They finally found him, in the neighbouring room, under the bed.

„I've become unused to this, but I'll get into my stride.”

„What happened to you? The corner of your mouth is bleeding!”

„I woke up at the sound of a cry, and ran to Monsieur Laboux. I ran into someone who knocked me down.”

„Did you see who it was?”

„No, but the punch reminded me of the beatings of the deceased Mr. Gorchev.”

De Bertin wanted to swear, but the words became stuck in his throat. He noticed a metal button on the floor, with a grenade with seven flames in the middle. A legionary had been here!

„Let’s go to sleep,” he said hoarsely.

None of them did sleep that night.

III

When Gorchev regained consciousness, he felt the kind of motion that a ship makes. He could hear nothing, could see nothing, for he was covered up. What had happened? Had he died? He began to move, to try to climb out of the blanket. Someone poked him hard in the side.

„Hey, kid!”

They took the cover off him. No, he wasn’t in a cemetery after all, as a matter of fact, just the opposite. He was inside a lorry, and his benefactors, who would occasionally hit him over the head with the first thing that came into their hands, now stood around him, so that he could see nothing. Alec’s grim but friendly face looked at him, while next to him, the taciturn Drugich poured whisky from a watering can.

„Listen to me,” whispered Alec. „We’re travelling in a lorry, and the Chief doesn’t know that you’re here, because we covered you with a blanket. So be quiet! He and Lingeström are going in a separate car, Aldous is driving it. But the two cars are side by side... They can get here any second.

„We cut a few holes in the blanket so that you can see. In a short time they will be going ahead with the small car, so wait patiently...”

Gorchev wanted to answer something, but the taciturn Drugich covered him again as though he were a dear departed relative, and putting the sole of his foot on the boy’s chest, quietly pushed him over to the wall. Gorchev didn’t understand why he hadn’t hit him over the head with the watering can. It seemed that this Drugich was getting old, or something...

The holes cut on purpose made it possible to see comfortably the good-sized lorry.

In the neighbouring cage he noticed again that a certain lion called Wendriner, with wrinkled skin and wisely blinking eyes, was lying a little wearily as he placed his good-sized jaw on his spread out forepaws. The mighty beast was at this time completely toothless.

In the cage facing him a newer and more surprising sight greeted him.

Before the bars a tremendous sign swayed:

SCARLET WENDRINER

*Jackal and Ballerina
Six and a half years old*

And Scarlet Wendriner, jackal and ballerina, no matter how he looked at her, was Mr. Gafirone, the world-famous racing driver, who sat in the cage in a very sad mood, taking immense care of his nails. Gorchev found this very peculiar. There was also a third cage,

where they kept steel nets for catching wild animals. This also had a sign: Herman Wendriner, golden eagle. The fourth cage was comparatively the most interesting, because on it there was this sign:

EMANUEL TIMOTHY WENDRINER

*Royal tiger and Conjurer
(Bengal catch, untameable)*

The animal in the cage was much meeker than the sign led one to imagine. Emanuel Timothy Wendriner (royal tiger and conjurer), no matter how Gorchev looked at him, was an ordinary roast piglet, with a lemon in its mouth. This family of bloodthirsty Wendriners was a peculiar menagerie. Not that he had ever heard of them before. But did Brehm or the Encyclopaedia Britannica, for that matter, ever mention the Wendriners as being frequently encountered in Africa, no doubt haematotherma, vivipara and with lemons in their mouths?

However, what would happen if Gafirone the champion driver were to recognize him? He undoubtedly knew that the mysterious individual who had arrested him was one and the same Gorchev, whom in that case his friends would simply tear to pieces just as Antonius Wendriner, or especially Emanuel Timothy, in their younger days, had torn a graceful gazelle into a number of uniform bits in a brotherly way. For this reason he was happy that the blanket was covering him. It looked, too, as if the Chief and Lingeström were not nearby, because his 'friends' began to speak to him.

„A nice sugar-doll you are! You certainly did a good job of fainting!”

„What is this car?” he asked, in a voice stifled on account of the blanket, as would the spirit of the other world in a play.

„The Chief bought it from Hagenbeck,” answered Alec, „complete with first-class equipment for catching wild animals.”

„Do you know how to catch a wild animal?”

„I don't,” answered Alec, „but that Drugich must have learned how somewhere, because in the vicinity of Amba oasis he hunted down a whole roast pig.”

„And who is this Wendriner?” he asked.

„Everybody. Wendriner was Hagenbeck's first animal-tamer, and he named his favourite animals after the members of his family. He gave the proud name of Antonius to the lion because it was his own!”

„The lion?”

„He's very old, poor thing. He's a walking bathroom mat, or apt to be put beside your bed as a carpet.”

„Where are you dragging me off to?” asked a complaining voice, obviously Gafirone's.

„You're going to drive the Alfa Romeo, and I will urge you on. You'll see what a splendid record we'll get out of you, even if you happen to die in the attempt.”

„This is an unlawful way of handling things. You have locked up a living man in a cage!”

„My dear sir,” said Brassfoot politely, „you have only to say the word, and we’ll kill you. Don’t feel badly about it.”

„Doesn’t it occur to you, in the first place, that I’m bored?!”

„We’ll put in a squirrel swing, and a birdbath... Boo!... Wicked, wicked Scarlet Wendriner!”

„Get out of here with that steel rod!...”

The lion stuck his nose out towards the blanket covering Gorchev a number of times, as though instinctively he felt that here was a man with a heart who would understand him. He was an old, tame artiste, this Wendriner, and every bump frightened a hiccup out of him.

In the evening the champion driver was sound asleep in his cage, at which Gorchev finally dared to sit up. The lorry was standing in the middle of the desert. They stepped out to go for a walk...

„They’re going ahead with the small car, and directly before Aboudir, at the ruined city, we will meet.”

„And how do you want to catch them?”

„With the net, my boy. You can’t beat the Chief for being brilliant, nah!”

This was something Gorchev was forced to admit to himself. His heart was heavy as he gazed at the desert, where the yellow blanket of sand separated itself from the falling night with a pale glow. The wicked were going to win again... This general was a hero, and a clever soldier, but he couldn’t fight against scoundrels, because no matter what they did to him, he would always remain a gentleman. At times like this, that sort of attitude is a handicap. In the distance, tiny moving dots neared the campfire... The jackals, hyenas, and all sorts of Wendriners screeched in long, drawn out yells...

„Even that champion driver won’t necessarily see you. We’ll always cover you up,” said Alec.

„Wouldn’t it be possible to cover him up?” asked the boy.

„That’s a good idea,” nodded Fishy. He immediately went in, and covered Scarlet Wendriner’s cage with a canvas.

Gafirone slept deeply, and even smiled in his dreams. No doubt he dreamt of long, narrow fingernails, pink, and gentlemanly.

„And exactly why are you working for the Chief?” Gorchev asked Brassfoot.

„What silly questions you do ask. For money. If we are successful in getting the gold to Dizard, then we get fifty thousand francs apiece.”

„And if you aren’t?”

„Then... a fee of fifty francs a day... Be careful.”

A spotlight neared. But it wasn’t the Chief’s car approaching, but that of the spahis. And behind them, with tremendous light, and with a soft, soft hum, the fourteen-carat roadster raced past them.

...He saw them ...Annette was behind the wheel, and Gorchev could have reached the girl had he stretched out his arm... But how pale she was, and how sternly she stared at the road... Perhaps she was ill?

He never dreamed that the girl was mourning him, very bitterly...

IV

The immense van ate up the miles, hours, days, with this peculiar group inside it, and with the strange equipment which looked as though it belonged there even less.

Gorchev felt that his dangerous and grotesque adventure with this oversized lorry was coming to a crucial point. The end to all problems, oppositions of will and plans was hanging in the air. This was the last round of the bitter struggle, when neither side would ask for or give mercy, because everything had been staked on the winning number. Gorchev felt that the decisive turn, the battle of life and death was nearing, in this affair of the fourteen-carat roadster, but even he never imagined the lightning speed with which the events would occur.

The first two days passed by in comparative calm. The whole thing seemed like a peaceful excursion, if one ignored Gafirone's complaints, after his cage had been covered.

Gorchev happened to be alone in the van, when the others met with the Chief and Lingeström at a nearby oasis. The first thing he did was to give water to the beast of prey, in return for which Wendriner licked Gorchev's hand, and with a good-natured nod and wink made note of the attention.

Gorchev had become very friendly with the old artiste, since he had a wide nose, and a sad expression on his face, which reminded him of Mr. Vanek. The lion, on the other hand, saw a clown from Teplitz-Schonau in Gorchev, from the romantic period of his younger days when his teeth and appetite had served to enjoy horse-meat. This clown, on the day of his benefit performance, had bought Antonius Wendriner an entire horse, for which reason he was registered everlastingly in the beast's memory.

Wendriner almost burst into tears when the young man put fresh water before him. What an attentive colleague! Because in Mr. Wendriner's mind, the living creatures in the world could be divided into exactly two main categories: the populous families of the performers - these were the colleagues - and the ushers.

„Just drink, Mr. Wendriner. I think that you won't be working for this circus long anyway.”

Mr. Wendriner hung his head sadly from left to right, as if he were answering, ‘You're telling me!’

And at that time neither of them knew how quickly and inescapably Mr. Wendriner's fate was to come to pass in the rush of improbable events.

At seven o'clock Gafirone woke up under the canvas in the inky darkness.

„Hello,” he shouted. „Why did you cover my cage? Give me something to eat!”

„The feeding of caged champion drivers is prohibited,” answered Gorchev in a deep, disguised voice.

„Who is talking?”

„The lion.”

„Don't joke! What's your name?”

„Antonius Wendriner. I'm an artiste and a beast of prey. By having been placed in the cage, you understand the language of the animals. Let's have a chat.”

„Won't you take off this canvas?"

„As if by magic, you guessed it."

The sound of a file could be heard.

„You take care of your nails in the dark too?" asked Gorchev in horror.

„Of course. Practice makes perfect. Who are you, who is speaking?"

„Emanuel Timothy Wendriner, the roast pig. Bengal catch, but it's all the same. Roast pig is good no matter how you catch it."

„Stop those awful jokes! Who are you, and what have you been taken here for?"

„That's something you should know," he answered, and handed a cup of water to the lion. The animal twitched his bushy tail, and lifted his blinking bloodshot eyes gratefully to the boy. He was probably thinking: 'What a pleasant young Wendriner he is...'

„So... you won't give me an intelligent answer?" asked the racing driver, while his scissors clipped away industriously.

„Mr. Gafirone!" said Gorchev. „I would make a suggestion to you: avoid spending your life in prison."

„What did you say?!"

„That's the smallest sentence for spying, but they might easily hang you."

„My dear sir... even as a joke..."

„I should like you to know that in one of the cages are hidden a number of most serious military secrets, which they plan to send abroad with you in the Alfa Romeo!"

„My God! Who are you?!"

„Scarlet Wendriner, the spotted hyena..."

„Please... don't joke!"

„Leave my incognito in peace, Mr. Gafirone, and listen to me! You are supposed to take abroad with you in the Alfa Romeo the cipher key to the secret fleet manoeuvres of France's colonial air command stations."

„My God! I should have suspected... But what can I do?"

„At the proper moment I shall free you, and with this car, you will race to the north, at breakneck speed."

„Delighted, if I'm freed!... Sir! Who are you?! But if you answer that you are Herman Wendriner, golden eagle, you're liable to be cursed."

„And why can't I be that proud poultry with the Christian name of Herman?"

„Because *I am* the golden eagle!" he answered triumphantly. „This morning they changed the disgraceful sign at my request!"

Gorchev nodded his head.

„I didn't think that a bird like that would manicure his own claws."

Now the sound of approaching engines could be heard, and Gorchev pulled the blanket over himself with lightning speed.

Chapter Twenty

I

„Now, get going quickly,” said Lingeström, when Alec and his companions had jumped out of the small car. Shortly afterwards, under the leadership of Portenif, the robber band, a few Arab scoundrels, arrived on camel backs. Then came Aldous, driving the Chief’s car.

„You follow us with the lorry!” said the Chief. „You won’t have any trouble. Now you will proceed towards the place where the wind has cleared a way, we’ll cross over and get ahead of them, and stretch the nets!”

„Then?”

„In half a day we get to Aboudir, we go through without stopping, and run straight ahead to Ifiris. Be careful, because there is a dried-out bed to the left of the river as well, which is on French territory, where you would run right into Abe Padan’s hands.”

Meanwhile they brought the steel nets out of the depths of the lorry.

After that everything went quickly. They uncovered Gafirone, who really was bent over in his cage like a tremendous golden eagle, or rather, more like some sort of owl, which blinked in terror, his neck pulled in, from the sudden light. His pink nails almost rattled on the bars of the cage held so tightly in terror.

„Mr. Gafirone! Prepare to take the steering wheel shortly. Three people will be sitting in the back, with pistols.”

„But why... why must you drag me into this?”

„I warn you to obey without argument, otherwise I will shoot a hole into you... Follow us to the ruined city, slowly. By noon they will be there too.”

The Chief, Lingeström, Portenif, Aldous, and the Arabs rushed away. Dawn was breaking...

Fishy changed gears, and the van raced, rattled and rumbled away on its worn-out springs and compact tires. „Cover up the Golden gentleman,” said the taciturn Drugich. „No!” shouted Gafirone, but they poured a bucket of water over him, which quieted him, while he dismally endured the darkness. Gorchev, however, threw off his blanket and sat up joyfully.

And now he was anything but joyful. „When do we arrive at the scene?”

„About noon.”

The truck threw itself about so much that Mr. Wendriner began to hiccup again. Gorchev scratched the back of his neck to calm him, which made the old fellow feel indescribably good... What should he do? Gorchev pondered in despair. He felt that he had been appointed by fate to guard Laboux’s mission... He couldn’t figure out anything clever. He lay on his back, and closed his eyes. His hand hung in Mr. Wendriner’s cage, and the care-worn king of the beasts began to lick it quietly, methodically and tenderly, as a cradle song, so that Gorchev fell asleep. He had a confused dream of Mr. Vanek... A nightmarish picture repeated itself: he was with Annette and their secondary-school-aged children on an excursion visiting the fortress of Oran; the relevant part of the guide-book read:

Sultana Corridor

A dark haunt, where Moorish king Masnir guarded his mistress. For a number of years a scantily dressed gentleman has been waiting for someone, and for an entrance fee of your choice, he may be seen. His two-yard white beard is original!

...Gorchev startled awake.

The van was empty. They were standing by the roadside. He sat up quickly. Gafirone's cage was covered.

„Hullo!” shouted Gorchev.

„Mr. Golden...”

„What do you want?”

„Have they gone?”

„Yes... Half an hour ago. And now I know that you are a brat, who is *chergolets!*”

‘This is another Mr. Vanek,’ thought Gorchev.

„Listen, I'm hungry,” said the golden eagle.

„That is the least of my worries. I would like to get out of this mess, because you will all be shot or something.”

„My dear sir! Pull me out too.”

„I'll think about it.”

He took the roast pig out of the cage, and gave half of it to the lion, that half to which the head belonged, with the half lemon. The elderly predator bit at the meat without interest, he barely ate. However, he licked at the lemon for a long time... Old performer. He had a lack of acid... Was it possible that this living bathroom mat was the same as Wendriner, the king of the beasts?

Gorchev sat sadly on the floor of the van. By now perhaps Laboux and his companions were wriggling in the steel net... And he sighed... Time passed slowly. His brain worked. Wendriner was licking at the lemon next to him, perhaps he didn't have a lack of acid after all, but was only a gourmet, as elderly gentlemen generally are.

...It was late afternoon. Gorchev, for the first time in his life, felt that he was nervous. He paced the floor. His nervousness spread to the lion as well, who looked anxiously at his beloved master.

In Gafirone's cage, the cuticle scissors clicked frequently, as though a wristwatch were ticking...

„Look, Mr. Wendriner, I shall set you free...” said Gorchev to the lion. „At this moment you are my only good friend, whom I can help... Go, and walk on the warm sand again, on your trembling feet, and let your tired eyes be greeted by the violet dawn of the Sahara. Stretch yourself out, so that your old bones crackle, and walk for the last time in your homeland.”

He rolled the cage to the door, and opened it. But Mr. Wendriner didn't move. He simply didn't believe in the situation. When Gorchev gently poked his side, he finally stepped out of the cage, a slightly staggering poor King Lear of the beasts, old and tired from the many years of wandering, and in the evening of a life of disappointments.

He looked around the desert suspiciously.

He squinted his big, bloodshot eyes like a cat, and with swaying feet, and a hanging head, he went, slowly, stepping through the desert. Then he stopped, looked back at Gorchev, and started again, but hanging his head deeply, as though ashamed of himself for something...

The Russian decided! He rushed back to the van. He opened the steel door of the vehicle by pulling aside the steel rods that held it.

„Hullo, Mr. Gafirone! Your hour has come!”

II

What hour had come?

The characters in the play found out very shortly. By evening the group returned.

„Let’s go!” shouted Alec. „Fishy, start the motor! Gafirone, you go with Portenif...”

Gafirone obediently stepped out of the cage, and went. The others jumped into the van, and... the hump-backed Fishy didn’t want to get inside, but he was grabbed and thrown in!

Bang!

The door slammed shut, and someone on the outside put the heavy cross-bars designed to guard tigers, into place, and the engine began to hum...

„Hey... What’s happening? Hullo!?” they shouted, and pounded on the door. In vain...

Portenif wasn’t even halfway with Gafirone, when the tremendous Hagenbeck van caught up to them. From the driver’s seat someone hit Portenif over the head with a monkey wrench, so that he was immediately knocked unconscious. The car stopped.

„There... And now the way we discussed it,” said Gorchev. „Sit up beside me, and let’s go!”

The bandits pounded rhythmically, Gorchev whistled, and Gafirone sat next to him, like Herman Wendriner, golden eagle, but much more sadly. It was a dark night... The bonnet of the Hagenbeck van rattled, and the sound of the heavy turning of the wheels could be heard, as the vehicle floundered in the sand. Then it braked and stopped.

Meanwhile the waiting gang-leaders were becoming impatient.

„Go and meet them, and find out what’s up with Gafirone,” said the Chief to Aldous.

The half-caste set off, and the minutes passed without his return. The Chief and Lingeström waited impatiently.

„Where the hell is he?!”

„They have to be late now, when we’re almost there!”

„Yes. It certainly is very embarrassing!” said someone in the dark, hitting the Chief over the head so that his knees gave way. „Don’t move, Lingeström, or I’ll shoot. This is Gorchev!”

„What!?... What do you want here?”

„We shall immediately leave for the nearest officers’ club...”

And five hard fingers took hold of the baron’s throat. The fourteen-carat roadster was Gorchev’s again.

III

„My dear sir,” said Gafirone gratefully, „thank you.”

„Now you will take the rest of the bandits to the nearest oasis. There you will be safe from them. I locked the door on them from the outside. Not even a tiger could break out of that van. Listen.”

Terrifying pounding could be heard in the night.

„Well?”

„First we rest a little. Then you will start out with the van.”

„And?”

„And receive a reward.”

They sat resting for a while, and in the meantime the moon rose... In the silvery light a ghostly sight appeared before them!

On the near bumper of the van, raising his two front feet high, a sad lion sniffed at the door.

„Mr. Wendriner!”

Gafirone jumped into the van shaking. The lion staggered over to Gorchev who had shouted in surprise. Poor thing... His legs shook, he was panting, and looked pleadingly at the Russian, who patted the tattered remains of the once proud mane.

„So, you came back, Mr. Wendriner?... That’s all right, old man... Come on.”

And because Gafirone refused to come out of the van for anything in the world, Gorchev himself went to the oasis, to report the happenings to the owner of the automobile...

IV

But Mr. Wendriner didn’t leave his side for an instant. In the morning Aboudir oasis awakened to a great sensation. There was a van there, in which men were pounding on the walls. And next to the car trembled Mr. Gafirone.

Now it came out that Gorchev was alive. Alive! Annette couldn’t speak. She just twisted her handkerchief. She trembled, her face pale. Laboux lay, his eyes closed. Perhaps he was praying.

„Who are you?” the general asked Gafirone.

„Golden... or rather, Wendrin... I am a champion driver...”

Now his nervous system gave out, and he began to cry. Annette cried too, and fell into Gafirone’s arms, but now no one paid any attention to this either.

Laboux just lay in bed, his eyes closed, and no one could figure out what he felt and what he thought...

The general couldn’t wait for this period of feelings to be over with. He had to know what there was beyond the joyful news that Gorchev was alive.

„Please, my dear Mister Racing Driver,” shouted the general finally, „tell us everything.”

„I... can't. Mr. Gorchev... wrote it down... and... here...”

„At last... Please! Give it to me already!” He handed him the letter.

My dear General,

I respectfully report that in the interests of higher military matters, I have escaped from my company, and am *en route* to the Prophet's Sandal with the Alfa Romeo. I shall tell His Highness Baba Paladala that you send him your love.

The real reason for my absence will be kept a secret from my superiors in Fort St. Thérèse, Oran, the general may rest assured of that.

I shall deliver the two real criminals to His Highness Padalati Malatada, while the other meek rascals, if I may ask for this much reward for their goodness to me, may I hope be freed from the van which I have, as it were, enclosed with this letter, because without their help the Alfa Romeo would have been in the hands of the Portuguese long ago.

In the hope that due to the good-heartedness of the general, my absence from Fort St. Thérèse will not be taken as too serious a matter, I close my letter, and express my sincere respect.

Enthusiastically yours,

Ivan Gorchev

Private No. 27.

And now all mystery cleared away from the general's mind (or at least he thought so). In reply to his inquiry by telephone, the Marseilles fort informed him that there were two Gorchevs there at the same time. Number 27 had been sent to Fort St. Thérèse, from where de Bertin received the information that Ivan Gorchev had escaped approximately two weeks earlier.

„Now I understand everything!” shouted the general enthusiastically. „I myself shall write of the events to the minister of war!”

„I too shall write!” shouted Laboux, who seemed to have completely recovered in the meantime. „It's a question of my son-in-law!”

Annette pulled herself out of the arms of the sobbing racing driver, and continued crying on her father's shoulder. Gafirone made an attempt to throw himself into André's arms, but the butler refused even to consider it.

Chapter Twenty-one

I

The monster called the Alfa Romeo had been made harmless. With its golden parts removed, it could never again harm anyone. It gave its soul to the victorious army of King Abe Padan, who were able to arm themselves through it.

And Gorchev?

The peoples of the African oases still hand on the legend of a ghostly ragged soldier, who, accompanied by one lone lion, wandered through the desert, and beat up everyone who refused to support him with food on his mysterious journey...

He slowly neared the borders of the Sahara and in the distance the faded peaks of the Jebel-Sagro mountains began to be seen. Ivan Gorchev sat beside the campfire, feeling satisfied with himself, in the company of his staid lion.

He yawned.

„You see, Mr. Wendriner,” he said, stretching himself out on the soft sand. „Now that the whole thing has ended, I have to admit that that Laboux is right. It doesn't hurt to become more serious before one gets married. I know that at the wise age, which you have reached in not the very best of health, this subject doesn't sound interesting enough to you. You are a cautious predator, Mr. Wendriner, and for this reason I respect you, even if I am not in agreement with the resignation with which you accept slavery as a permanent condition, rather than loneliness in the desert.”

The lion shrugged his shoulders, and conveyed a disturbed state of mind.

„Look, Mr. Gorchev,” he said, in a slightly melodious, resigned tone of a tired shopkeeper. „I am an old artiste, and I would very willingly sit down in the Cafe Ring, with jugglers whose hands shake, and with circus barkers suffering from laryngitis, to whom I belong in spirit. But I can't take off my skin! And today, who is it who would sit down in a cafe to play piquet with a lion?...”

„What is this! You can speak, Mr. Wendriner?”

„No. You are dreaming. But that's really indifferent. Believe me, there is nothing nicer than to be an old artiste. In Klagenfurt, Austria, I knew one Edmund Glatsch, famous for his 'Death Wheel' number, who used to go to the 'Cafe Rathaus Keller' with his two crutches and three Pekingese, after falling from the trapeze. And he was happy though his wife fought with him daily. She was called Mea Mitta, the magic wonder, whose secrets were such that the most famous professors in the world were unable to solve them, though in my opinion, the lady in question should have been choked to death... There... The most beautiful part of life is the golden old age of a show business man. Because in our trade, age has an inverted meaning. While an artiste is young, he stands very close to death. He might die any evening, or even during the matinee, with lowered admittance fees. Death Wheel Glatsch drinks his coffee daily with the agent of an orchestra named Trautmann, whom he teaches about racing...”

„Your tone surprises me, Mr. Wendriner...”

„Surprises you, surprises you...” growled the beast sadly. „You don’t know much about it, I must say. You see, a namesake of mine, Herman Wendriner, joined up with Captain Splendid and his forty dancing seals to form a theatrical agency, and every morning they drank medicinal water in the well-room of the Margareten Quelle... What importance does it have that I am the King of the Beasts? Helfheisen was the Emperor of the Bicycles, and now he is a caretaker in a house in Kopfenberg, Austria, under the name of Jerabek. An artiste’s world is his billboards.”

„But there was a time when you hunted in the wild and the gazelles escaped frantically at any mention of your name, that the terrible Wendriner was approaching. You, according to La Fontaine, value liberty higher than life!”

Mr. Wendriner lit a cigar, placing the end into a paper cigar-holder that became browned, deep in thought.

„I shall tell you something, Mr. Gorchev, as someone who has toured the world as King of the Idlers. I don’t know who the usher that you mentioned was, but he was never at our circus. But listen now to my secret. I was born in the Schönbrunn Zoo, Austria, and am a lion of Viennese descent. I was brought by train to Africa, and taken in a steel net from the Sahara to Fez, to my naive buyer. I travelled!... It is better if I don’t speak of it! It happened in this way, because a lion caught in the desert is more expensive. I, my dear sir, am the only lion who was brought to the Sahara as an import item. I am not a true Wendriner. In the Schönbrunn Zoo I had heart palpitations if the peacock screeched. *Wo sind die schönen alten Zeiten?...*” he sighed unhappily, and then he put on his pince-nez and began to read the ‘Abend-Express’ of Vienna, Austria.

Gorchev awoke shouting in alarm...

Dawn was breaking. Mr. Wendriner slept beside him, wheezing asthmatically.

II

Mr. Vanek spent the majority of his time for ten days in the singer’s wardrobe. In the meantime, Laura de Pirelli had electric lighting installed into the lower shelf, and saw to it that he had sufficient reading material. They made plans for travel all day long, except in the afternoon, when the lady practised her singing. The lady was most studious. She practised for hours.

On the tenth day, Mr. Vanek stepped out of the wardrobe, in the midst of a singing lesson.

„Good day,” he said. „Now I shall depart.”

And before the dazed singer and the terrified instructor could say a word, the secretary, God only knows why, departed, his feelings insulted, and went directly to Fort St. Thérèse.

„Report me to the sergeant,” he said determinedly, standing before the sentry, „and tell him that I misunderstood you all This Legion is an excellent haven.”

Mr. Wurfli happened to be on guard duty, when the hand cuffs were placed on Mr. Vanek.

„Why did you report voluntarily?” he asked, whispering.

„It’s a mitigating factor. They will shoot me in a much gentle way.”

„Do you know that Mehar is in the guardhouse?”

„Has he been out while I've been away? I like that Mehar very much.”

„But he always beat you up.”

„However, he never sings. And that is an all-important factor!”

Mr. Vanek had sat in the guardhouse for six days, when a sergeant and a lieutenant appeared.

„Here is your parade uniform. Put it on.”

„I understand... I am to be shot...”

„It's quite possible. The whole garrison has lined up in the courtyard,” said the sergeant, but the lieutenant motioned him quiet.

„The places higher up know where you were for two weeks You suffered greatly.”

„Particularly in the afternoons.”

„Quiet! No details were given of your absence. You remain silent about it as well. I believe you understand me?!”

Mr. Vanek blushed, dropped his eyes, and thought he understood.

When they led him out to the courtyard, he looked about with tears in his eyes.

Execution!

The entire population of the fort stood at attention. The sun shone in his face, and Mr. Vanek held his head high, in order to enjoy it fully for the last time.

Trum-trum-trum-trum.....

The drum... So deserters were executed without sentence. His sad eyes fixed themselves on the green colour of a group of trees,

Trumpets! „*Aux armes! Aux armes!...*” Now the escort would arrive!... He wouldn't let them cover his eyes. Let them see how an Edouard B. Vanek could die... But his knees gave way a little, and his tongue was very dry.

The trumpet became quiet... But... this was the colonel who now stepped before him.

„Private, Number 27! Ivan Gorchev! You disappeared from the fort for two weeks! You suffered and endured staggering physical and mental strain during that time.”

‘Particularly the singing,’ thought Mr. Vanek, and he nodded sadly.

„The President of the Republic has awarded Ivan Gorchev the Order of Merit!”

...And while the colonel pinned the Order of Merit on the jacket of the flabbergasted Mr. Vanek, the tricolour began to climb, the trumpet called, and the rows of soldiers looked at him, at attention...

At a distance, on a terrace, Annette, de Bertin, and Laboux stood, shocked, pale as death, and incapable of words.

III

It would be impossible to clear up the situation. God forbid anyone touching it. They would get Mr. Vanek discharged somehow. And Gorchev must be kept from reporting to the Legion. Gorchev only reported to Alec Lonesome with a hundred thousand francs. He took this from the Chief and Lingeström, who would no doubt find that they could get along very well without it, in Ifiris, in the phosphate mines where they were serving their sentences of hard labour.

Mr. Vanek was discharged on the day before the wedding. Sergeant Verdier celebrated this day by arranging a big banquet in the canteen.

„Sir,” inquired Mr. Vanek of Gorchev when he reported to him, „what shall my duties be?”

„In the garden of the Laboux villa a tired artiste is living out the peaceful days of his old age. Your job, old man, will be to take care of him.”

„My name is still Vanek, and I wish you would make note of this, since I have received the Order of Merit for my sufferings.”

„Do you feel that you deserved it?”

„Certainly. You did not hear the lady sing.”

Meanwhile de Bertin found information on Mr. Vanek. He had been in an asylum in Nice, however, not as a correspondent, but as a patient. One day he had disappeared from the swimming pool, in the assistant professor's bowler hat. They had been searching for him ever since.

...Annette bent her head toward Gorchev sadly.

„I'm frightened, Ivan... Your blood won't let you rest.”

„That's foolish.”

„I shall always be afraid that you will leave me one day. That you will go back to the desert, to the sea. I'll tremble if you are so much as an hour late coming home.”

„Don't be afraid. I'll never be late. Your fiancé was a ghost, but your husband will be a homebody...”

And all of Annette's fears were finally dissolved by the birth of Ivan Gorchev, Jr. whom the other members of the family, Antonius Wendriner, and Mr. Vanek, gladly accepted into their happy little circle...

