

THE COMPLETE
WORKS
OF
ANDRES LASZLO SR.

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THE SEAL CASTLE

I can affirm that the group that used to gather in the Turkish Baths of *Dohany Street* was an utterly heterogeneous one. I had been living there for four months and, although, in the beginning, I did everything I could to maintain my integrity, my efforts soon turned out to be futile. As the second week went by, it had started to sink in that I was not the only one living in this place. The others – my fellow seals, who just like myself, inhabited the place – also seemed to have noticed my presence, and seeing me day after day it didn't take them long to seek out my friendship.

However, I would act untruthfully, misleading my much-respected readers, if I left them with the impression that I, with great ardor, tried to become friends with everyone after a fortnight. I am a man of few friends and somewhat unsociable.

Just so that you shall understand the situation a little better, you need to know; first, that I am working as an actor at Budapest's distinguished *Teatro Cité*, something I feel ought to make you impressed.

However, as things presently stand, my income is surprisingly and unbecomingly low, which is why I have not been able to organize myself exactly as I would have preferred. The rent of a flat with two bedrooms would consume double my income and, concerning re-rentals, I consider them unbearable, and paying for such, would easily gobble up half of my salary. Besides, I would have had to endure the grunting of the landladies, complaints about bedclothes getting dirty too soon, accusations of consuming too much electricity, causing scratches on the furniture, late visits, and many other petty concerns that a true artist cannot abide to be bothered by.

Also, these women tend to demand as much as a month's rent in advance, before even giving one the time to settle in, which, in my humble opinion, must be considered a behavior that is both unbecoming and humiliating, given that they have no right to distrust a gentleman whom they yet have not gotten to know.

The Turkish Baths establishment, considered as a solution to housing problems, undoubtedly offers considerable advantages. The fee, in which "a complete continental breakfast" is included, is a *pengő* and five *filler*, but ten tickets cost no more than seven *pengő* and a half, which, including a tip of ten or twenty-five *filler*, results in a monthly rent of no more than twenty-five *pengős*. My choice to stay in this establishment thus ought to be viewed in light of these in my opinion quite mitigating factors.

The majestic public bath-building opens at five o'clock in the morning, a fact that excellently well matches my way of living, given that I am of a nocturnal disposition, a condition that is forced upon more or less every artist in Budapest. This opening time explains why I would rarely leave the café – or club, rather – before that time. This also serves to explain why I was getting to the Turkish Baths with extreme punctuality, being, more often than not, the first person to arrive at the magnificent entrance to the building.

Nevertheless, of late, several times I have failed to be the first to reach the entrance since *the Panther* – or, to be more precise, *the Panther of Nubia* – has beaten me to it. Most cafés close at four o'clock in the morning, so he must head directly from there to the Turkish Baths, rather than continue to some club.

The building is as spacious as it is beautiful, and its architecture is based on a lovely, if heterogeneous, mix of early Romanesque and late Rococo, all built in a style that is typical of the Northern Balkans. In its interior, there is a big lounge, a small common room to have breakfast and to read in, a barbershop, an ironing *cum* laundry shop, a resting lounge with sixty upholstered divans and, finally, two big pools and eight smaller, kept at temperatures between eighteen and fifty degrees. As a complement, the building also counts two vapor chambers: one with dry air and the other with humid.

This is where I live: my home.

These ten pools remain more or less my exclusive property until six or half-past six in the morning, because, although there are plenty of people arriving shortly after myself, these all come to have breakfast, and, in case that they at all will appear by the pools, they do so only much later.

Therefore, this time is absolutely mine, and during it, I can dive into my thoughts and pools, which is forbidden, with total serenity.

During the brief walk – that separates the smoke of the café from the vapor of the Turkish Baths – I will more often than not develop a headache from the cool and seemingly strangely fresh air, to which I am not used. However, the pain does not last for very long because the still and completely pure vapor – together with the irresponsible xylophonic rhapsodies, played by the water drops as they detach themselves from the roof and plonks into water or floor – do not take long to dissipate the discomfort of my migraine.

Around six o'clock, like flocks of birds, the hoards start arriving: groups of drunks and a few merchants from the nearby market. Thus that precious quietness inevitably stops, quickly turning into a continuous ruckus that I find exceedingly annoying.

Those in charge do as much as they feel is warranted to maintain order and silence, a mission entrusted to the keepers that at the entrance make every effort to appease the alcoholic euphoria characterizing much of the early morning clientele. Inside, a large number of signs warns about the risks concomitant with diving into the pools head first, as well as other dangers. There is also a sign that reminds the bathers that the use of loincloth is mandatory.

As soon as the Panther arrives, he heads to the restroom where he sleeps until the *Margrave Ubul* arrives. He then is awoken by the Margrave, whereupon the nobleman for half an hour receives a lesson in the English language. After a while, he retires to the restroom where he will continue resting until noon because that is when the ladies' bath time starts.

The Panther's fate has been a very cruel one. He was an artist, a true artist, but as such, his luck matched the color of his skin. Until a few years earlier, he had been a boxer who had been widely renowned and much talked about, and the position as his coach and manager had been one fought over intensely in all of Central Europe. I can affirm, without exaggeration, that there is not a single city, no matter how small, in the vast Balkan territory, that he had not visited to display his noble art.

The theory behind his trade was a surprisingly simple one. He had soon realized that to assure himself of a constant and substantial income, he needed either to win every encounter or to lose them all. That led him to choose, wisely and practically, the latter approach, quickly turning into the favorite "we-love-to-hate-boxer" of the patriotic public, the impresarios, and the local fighters of said part of Europe. Naturally, so as not to be rubberstamped a pushover, he had to change his artist name quite often. Thus, towards the end of his career, on Mondays, he was *the Lion of Libya* in Constanza, *the Jaguar of Sumatra* on Wednesdays in Belgrade, and on Saturdays, he was knocked out in the ninth round in Sofia, as *the Tiger of Tangier*. It was perfectly logical that those matches that he lost due to a "technical knockout," were remunerated with considerably larger purses. His income thus continued to grow, and in an even more encouraging way, his savings, that gave interest and were well protected in one of the banks of Budapest.

It was common knowledge among his rivals that he could only be knocked out "technically." A proper knockout could not be had for any prize, and was allowed only on rare exceptions, and then either because he did not want to miss his train, or because he felt that his adversary seemed a nice person and could do with a break.

Life was turning out so simple for the Panther – simple, rewarding, benevolent, and encouraging – and he had managed to gather almost all the money he needed to buy that

little farm that he so long had wanted to possess on the banks of the beautiful *Danube*. However, then one day fate, tired of doing good, decided to take away his place on the shore of the river and instead to do him bad. "Bad" reached him in the shape of a woman with the fateful name of Fatima. Magnetically and lustfully, in a nightclub located on one of the roads leading off *Nagymezo Street*, she danced the belly dance, in front of tourists and locals alike. It could be that she danced for everyone, but the Panther felt that she danced for him, and nobody else than him.

The Panther, who had entered the establishment together with his manager, was immediately mesmerized by the girl's sensual contortions, oozing with eastern eroticism. With that little girl from Ujpest, he had fallen in love at breakneck speed, and after having drunk eight glasses of apricot brandy, he proposed that very same night.

The girl asked him to give her some time to think about it, probably because she felt uncertain about who would pay for her drinks if she had said "no."

The next day he arrived at the nightclub, sober, and from there, naturally and spontaneously, the relationship had moved on.

Meanwhile, the savings of the Panther suffered gravely, registering more extractions than most dentists could notch up in a year. Finally, after a thousand demonstrations of affection, Fatima agreed, for the time being, to become the fighter's fiancée.

During the first weeks of the romance, he paid the university registration fee for the girl's little brother, her overdue rent bills, and the three last installments on her father's bicycle. He then made possible the extraction of her mother's wisdom teeth; he rescued a clock with a gold chain from *Monte of Piedad* that had been pawned fifteen years ago by the girl's grandmother. He also became a business partner in the ornament business *Noel Trees*, owned by a distant uncle of his inamorata, by investing three thousand *pengős*.

Fatima then accompanied him on his first tour, which started in Bratislava. Despite agreeing not to watch, the girl placed herself in the first row, right next to the ring, to witness the fight.

It was already late in the fourth round when the boxer spotted his fiancée. The score had probably been two to one against the Panther, seemingly on its way to becoming three to one, and his opponent was looking for a good punch to claim the win by the agreed technical knockout.

However, the instant he noticed his girlfriend, sitting there, right in front of him, he could also see that she was quite excited, something he was not used to seeing. The Panther's heart started to beat violently, and, indecisive, he dropped his guard. His Moravian adversary immediately noticed what was going on, and he considered that it was worthwhile to take the opportunity and go off the script; he faked it with his left, whereupon he threw a punch with his right towards the midriff of his enemy.

However, his decision to take this line of action had been taken a fraction too late, and a left hook from the Panther – improvised, but not at all lacking in strength – landed on his opponent's chin in such a way that it probably made him lose consciousness before reaching the ground. Though it probably isn't true, it was said that he flew, much like an inebriated pigeon, out over the ropes of the ring, landing on the judges' table, which ended up breaking into pieces, just like the poor man's tibia and soon also the Panther's career, which had been doing quite brilliantly up until that point.

In the Romanian city of *Jassy*, the encounter lasted for less than two rounds and in Bulgarian *Varna*, no more than two minutes and four seconds. When they so arrived at the last stage of their tour, *Kragujevac*, the local impresario was waiting for them at the station to communicate to the Panther that their champion felt indisposed. Then, after paying him his fees, he advised the Panther to hang up his gloves for good. That was how it happened that, as he returned to Budapest, he found not only that his bank account was nearly depleted, but also, as nobody wanted to hire him, that his career was over.

He spent a couple of months living off what little remained of his fortune, in the belief that the exotic dancer would return from Stockholm to join him. Fatima did send him a

telegram, a postcard, and a photograph that he framed and hung above the headboard of his bed. However, after that, his beloved stopped communicating with him.

He tried for some time to train by himself, seriously, and to become a true “international.” However, he was thirty-six years of age, and due to the excessive amount of spices in the *Magyar* cuisine, he suffered from permanent heartburn.

His ex-manager, who was not really into fairy-tails, was already on a Balkan tour, together with a new revelation: a Ukrainian lumberjack, whom he presented as *The Siberian Bear*, a title that he soon had to change to *The White Siberian Bear*, to avoid the possibility of confusion.

As for the Panther, he ended up wandering the streets of Budapest.

His friends all did everything they could in order not to meet him, thus avoiding to be reminded to pay back what they owed him: loans often of a considerable amount, given by the Panther when Lady Luck had allowed herself to be ridden high.

Nonetheless, one of those friends had a great sense of humor, and with a straight face, he gave him this advice; “You are like a black angel of great patience and a warm and generous heart. Why don’t you go to the station to comfort those travelers who lose their train?”

The Panther took the advice seriously and headed to the North Station where he spent two days roaming around inside the building until the porters told him to go away.

Later, once again following his humorous friend’s advice, he went to the Natural Museum, this time to sell his skeleton.

In the beginning, the secretary of the Anthropological Department was astonished, but then, after believing himself to have understood the intention of the visitor, he informed the Panther of the museum’s official position:

“Yes, in exceptional cases, we do purchase interesting skeletons. But... how should I put it? Only when immediate delivery can be expected.”

The Panther reflected a few seconds over what he had just been told, whereupon he thanked the man and started towards the door.

The secretary did not understand what was taking place. “Had the man been scammed?” “Was the man trying to scam him?” or “Was the man just disturbed?” In any case, he informed the Panther, as he was about to leave;

“I’d say it would be a much better idea if you tried approaching a private collector.

Therefore, the Panther instead went in search of a private collector.

On the third day, he accomplished his objective, and he did this in the person of the Margrave Ubul.

This gentleman was not a collector in the strict sense of the word, although it was true that he had installed in his house’s living room the skeleton of his favorite Derby-winning racehorse. It was because of this, which was a well-known fact in the down-and-out world that the Panther decided to visit the Margrave.

At the time, the Margrave had already been living in the Turkish Baths for several months. As in several other respects, the Margrave represented an exception also in his reason for staying there, as it was not lack of funds that drove him to live in the Baths, but rather the opposite.

He was a man bored with more or less everything. Born with a distinguished pedigree, assured by his father’s marriage to a distant cousin of equally noble ancestry, even though there had been rumors suggesting that the true identity of the progenitor was that of a much closer cousin.

He spent a considerable amount of his youth in pursuit of novelties, all of which he would later get bored, and soon he started to get bored even of being bored.

Beginning a year or so before moving into the Turkish Baths, his leisure activities had frequently drawn public attention, as they included pursuits such as driving on sidewalks and entering into restaurants on horseback, all just for the fun of it. There had been many other incidents – most of the time reckless, spirited, and quite entertaining – that had assured that smiles would accompany the disapproving head-shaking from the people around him.

This was especially the case as he always paid for the damages he had caused, whether on public sculptures, Venetian mirrors, or others' vehicles.

However, even if most of his pranks were seen as forgivable by the man on the street, from the authorities' point of view, his behavior was unacceptable. In regards to the public servants, he treated non-graduated guards and police inspectors equally informally, which, though it was maybe not exactly a crime, did influence in an adverse way the judgment of said public servants, especially the high-ranking among them. This was something that caused the aforementioned servants, to jump at every opportunity to expose and report the Margrave to their superiors. The incoming police prefect eventually decided to take away all of his driving permits, as well as to impose on him a ban on going back and forth from the north part of the capital, where he resided, without registering his movements or stays. The nobleman – who was not willing to adopt a fake name, not even for a night – thus ended up sort of stranded in the Turkish Baths, since that was the only place on the south side where he could stay without having to fill out any registry form.

And that was also where the Panther found him, and made him his simple offer, with all the respect due to a Magyar aristocrat.

The Margrave treated him nicely and responded to the offer almost immediately, “If you hadn’t spoken Hungarian, I would have accepted you right away as my room servant, my secretary, or as something like that. However, as that possibility has to be discarded *ab ovo*, let’s talk about your bones.”

A deal was swiftly closed: the noble gentleman acquired the skeleton then and there, and he took upon himself to pay for it in installments, committing himself to pay the Panther two pengös every day. In return, the ex-owner of the skeleton was obligated to, at the Turkish Baths, every day between five and seven in the morning: 1) present his bones to their new owner, and 2) Teach the Margrave English for 30 minutes. To make this part of the agreement easier, the Margrave undertook to give the seller of the skeleton thirty tickets for the Turkish Baths each month. Another article of the contract protected the interests of the buyer in case the other part, “henceforth referred to as the asset-carrier,” would try to leave the country. The final paragraph was an addition – or, rather, an official last clause to the Panther’s will – to avoid the troubles that an unexpected death might otherwise cause.

THE CRAB'S RHAPSODY

At precisely six o'clock in the afternoon, I arrived in Paris, and I disembarked from my train at *Gare de l'Est* only minutes later. The thirty-six-hour train journey, sitting atop a third-class pinewood stool, had left me virtually unable to walk. While I was heading towards the station exit, dragging my suitcases along, the legs under me several times threatened not to follow their instructions. In the pores of my skin, particles of soot – produced by burnt Hungarian, German or French coal – had mixed to give my skin the hue of a yet-to-be-embalmed corpse. I felt as if my stomach believed itself a battery topped up with sulfuric acid, and as if my teeth were in the process of rusting.

According to the rules of proper decorum, I greeted the first French locomotive ever manufactured, exhibited in the station. For reasons that I have not been able to comprehend, let alone explain, this old artifact, according to my way of perceiving things, meant to Paris pretty much what the Statue of Liberty meant to New York.

'I've arrived, Alexei,' I told the old locomotive, noticing that, due to the dryness produced by the long journey, my lips had gotten stuck, so that when pronouncing these first words on French soil, they disconnected from each other with a sound similar to that produced when one rips open a letter.

Needless to say, the locomotive was in all likelihood not called Alexei, and as far as I know, it did not even have a name. On its side, it bore only some uncommented numbers, together with a copper plate on which it said that it was the property of the *Gabacho Railroads* and that it, directly after a World Fair where it had been exhibited to show the glory of the French iron, and manufacturing industry had been moved to its current location.

At that precise moment, I was unable to discover even the slightest relation between the artifact and the name that, *motu proprio*, I had just given it because it reminded me much more of a retired Amazon than of a Caucasian duke.

Of course, the locomotive did not respond to my greeting.

I exchanged suitcases between my hands, hoping that this somehow would lighten my burden, and after a few stumbles, I headed for the exit.

It was the first day of September, the year of the Lord, 1938. The sun shone warmly, the people spoke brilliant French, and I resisted with firm determination my urge to go in search of a proper hotel. Between Nancy and Paris, I had prepared myself to resist such temptation and according to the instructions that my superego had given myself, I would stay right here, next to the station: right here in the neighborhood of transporters and merchants where I had stayed the last time I had visited the city. I knew that if I did not immediately take refuge in *Hotel Liberty*, which was only a few hundred yards away, I would have no choice but to take a taxi, at least to *Montparnasse*, which would constitute an unforgivable surrender, with terrible consequences that would be quite easy to foresee.

Montparnasse would also have meant the Latin Quarters – the triangle of the *Dome*, *Coupole* and *Rotonde* cafés: the famous artists' headquarters – where, for the price of no more than the consumption of a single coffee, one obtained the right to communicate uninterrupted with intelligent or at least well-educated people, for twenty-three hours in a row. There one could have kept on discussing art or philosophy for ages, easily forgetting what little French had stuck from one's time at school, as the rare French visitors, more often than not there only by chance, would be outnumbered by foreigners that would communicate only in English at least ten to one. On this occasion, it was, unfortunately, necessary for me to avoid these temptations.

While reflecting thus, I had arrived at the hotel that I had known for years. The owner still remembered me – even my last name, which, quite profoundly, touched me – 'From where are you coming, Monsieur Laszlo?'

'From Budapest.'

'And how was the trip?'

As an answer, I held out my hands that had acquired a beautiful blue-gray color, while trying to produce a smile.

'It does not matter' he replied, trying to comfort me, 'We have constructed a new bathroom just for you. Two years ago, at your last visit, it was under construction; now you can visit it while I fill in the paperwork. I shall order the bathtub to be filled up; you will find that the water is quite warm.'

My room was too small and the bed too big. The wallpaper – which did not pertain to any particular century, certainly not the present, and not any easily identifiable – was an orgy of thick purple stripes, littered with large sensual roses and strange pigeons: pigeons which, for some reason that I could not for my life figure out, had green plumages. *What an exquisite demonstration of good taste!*

Immediately, before it would have been too late, I asked them to remove the porcelain containers from under the bed. Then, without even taking off my coat, I collapsed onto the bed, where I attempted to remove my shoes without undoing the laces or dislocating the heels.

My hands trembled from fatigue and the weight that they were not used to carry: in the palms of my hands the effort had left what would soon become painful blisters.

Under my window what sounded like a saw-mill made a terrible racket, and through the wall, I could hear the splash of water being poured into the tub of the adjacent bathroom.

Where? I asked myself, *will they have put the homemade jam that I hid in the bathroom two years earlier?*

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The hot bath soon restored me to the world of the living, and an hour or so later I was having a light meal on the terrace of nearby café *Tout va Bien*, in the bucolic corner of the *Sevastopol* and *Saint-Denis* boulevards. I had taken along several sheets of paper and a pencil, to make myself a program: to establish, even in writing, the deal that I was about to make with myself since I know better than to put much faith in simple thought or the spoken word, even when these happen to be my own. Back in Hungary, before taking the train to Paris, I had memorized this 'my private contract,' by nailing it with thumbtacks to the side of the nightstand, to have it in view every morning as I awoke. I had already rushed down my first cup of coffee when I decided to check out the balance of my assets.

It owned a modern *Contax* photographic camera device that could well be worth as much as five thousand francs, and it thus constituted the main part of my capital. I also had a bottle of Tokay wine, several kilos of Hungarian salami of the famous *Herz* brand, two pairs of shoes, half a dozen shirts, a gray sport suit, and an old tailcoat. Besides, I had five hundred francs in banknotes, taken out of the country with the special authorization of the *Magyar* currency authorities.

It did not come to very much, and what I possessed would not even have been considered *ample*, had my trip to Paris been only to study or tour for a few weeks, as it had been on the previous occasions. I had already prior to my departure realized that it in all likelihood would prove impossible to convince life to make a good bargain with the owner of so scanty a store.

A loudspeaker – hanging unpleasantly close to my window, outside, swaying in the wind – had informed me of the results of the day's horse races. Then, towards the latter part of my meditations, it began to broadcast a musical program, and the firm chords of the popular song *Dubo-Dubon-Dubonnet* seemed purposely to do its best to restore my faltering self-esteem.

All right, so it could have been more, but that does not matter; I'll simply have to make a greater effort...

I managed to evoke in my memory some classic examples of unexpected triumphs of the will, of which a few had been awarded the *Goncourt Prize*. Meanwhile, the boulevards shone before my eyes in a shade of warm gray, similar to my mother's authentic pearl

necklace, which had been inherited through generations. *I'm going to make it anyway. How could I not find something that suits me in a city as huge and amazing as this?*

At that moment I started to feel dizzy, which in a way was only to be expected, after having spent two nights in a row, sitting up in a third-class train compartment. I breathed deeply for a minute or so, and thus I recovered some of my composure. Minutes later, back at my hotel – after having been informed by the men's room's mirror that my face had acquired the color of the ashes of a burnt-out fire, which nevertheless was an improvement – I was already snoring on what must have been the widest beds of the quite ancient, yet honest, *Hotel Liberty*, on *Rue Nancy*.

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I had rested for no more than three hours; it was eleven o'clock at night when I was awoken by the loud demanding protests of my virtually empty stomach.

I was lying almost diagonally on the bed; I still had my shoes on, and my beautiful tie had been severely deformed.

One by one, I removed my attire, and thanks to some advanced maneuvering, getting back into bed, I managed to adopt the called-for position: by pressing one of the pillows against my vociferous stomach, I got it to shut up. Thus, with renewed efforts, I once more set out in search of the comfortable embrace of Morpheus.

You shall not eat anything until eight tomorrow morning, I told my rebellious organ. Shortly afterward, greatly relieved, I could see that my room once again was beginning to fade away before my eyes.

I had almost managed to fall asleep – which, if that would have happened, in all likelihood would have meant that I the following morning would have found myself some mundane occupation whereupon I would have relapsed into some form of bourgeois lifestyle akin to what up until that point in time had been mine – when something as unexpected as lifechanging happened.

What happened was that the memory of the salamis entered my mind. These salamis – which, in beautiful tin-wrapped packages, were resting at the bottom of the closet – constituted not only the main part of my alimentary backup but also an important part of my financial reserves. Again, the pillow returned to occupy a position under my head, again the hunger pangs reentered my stomach, and the salami was in real and imminent danger, there was no doubt about this. The fact that the smallest of the sausages weighed in at well over a kilo made the situation even worse, because, once started upon, I would have no chance of selling it. From the money that I was expecting to get, even from the smallest, I would be able to live, albeit only quite modestly, for a week.

What shall I do?

I lay face down on the bed, losing the last remnants of my dream, the helpless victim of the unreasonable desires of an empty stomach: a stomach that was already preparing itself to resist any defense-attempt from my superego. This was a resisting force that emanated from a variety of oh-so-powerful digestive juices and enzymes, which now had started to concoct themselves in response to the thought of the meat and the spices, which – smoked, salted, and in this case wonderfully well-matured – constitutes the Hungarian salami.

I would have no bread to accompany it, remarked the ever more feeble voice of responsibility, commenting on the events, all while the noises that came to me from the next room made me realize that my neighbor was cleaning his shoes, while, at the same time, gargling.

I'm sure it would ruin my stomach.

This last argument proved to be a surprisingly powerful one because I managed to recover my initial position. I closed my eyes, and I imagined myself tied to an operating

table, I could see the white-masked face of a surgeon holding a scalpel in his right hand while looking at me with an expression of contempt in his accusing yet kind eyes.

'Salami, was it?'

I nodded.

'Without bread?'

'Yes,' I admitted, feeling profoundly ashamed.

'It's unbelievable!' exclaimed the surgeon in a dry tone of voice. 'Yet, I suppose we'll have to try to save you,' he murmured, behind his white gauze mask. Then, addressing his operating nurse, he said, 'Chloroform!'

With a loud crashing sound, a pair of presumably cleaned shoes were thrown into some corner of a neighboring room, upon which merry voices were followed by military songs, their lyrics soon reduced to a sonorous *ram-pam-pam*.

It then occurred to me to think about the Tokay.

No, not the Tokay, but maybe with some cheap local food, the salami hallucinations would go away. How could I possibly have failed to think of this!

I jumped out of bed, and I began to dress with feverish haste.

As I tied my tie, my mind was already made up. I would find myself something to eat. Then, if after the next day I had not managed to sell the salami and the wine, I would lock away everything, whatever the cost – if necessary in the vault of a bank.

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A nice autumn breeze was blowing. I put on my coat, and on *Boulevard Sevastopol*, I turned towards *La Seine*. I had managed to leave the hotel alone, and the salami remained unaccosted in my room.

I arrived at the market, *Les Halles*, where, just as I remembered, the tastiest and cheapest sandwiches in the entire world were on sale, even at this late hour: hot sausages and chips between two slices of bread, all at the ridiculously cheap price of two francs fifty.

Originally, as I was later to learn, the purpose of these sandwiches, in the early hours of the morning, had been to replace the scores of waiters and the ambulatory market vendors. But then, over time, the foreigners who populated the *Boul 'Mich* and *Montparnasse* areas, seeing in these sandwiches the possibility of a not only tasty but also economical meal, had gotten so fond of them that by now one could count more than a dozen stalls in the short space that separates *Les Halles* from the corner of the nearby boulevard.

With the greatest care imaginable, I slipped the sandwich packet into my pocket that nevertheless turned greasy before my very eyes, and I continued towards the river.

The boulevard was completely deserted, and in this silence, the sudden noise produced as a bistro's mechanical iron curtain was pulled down, reminded me of a machine gun's rattle.

A tired old bus passed me in the direction of *Gare du Nord*.

I took the sandwich out of my pocket, and I began to munch on it as I walked.

Then, as the rain started to fall, silently, after the first few mouthfuls, a pleasant feeling of well-being began to spread through my stomach, soon reaching all the way to my heart.

Paris. Finally, I have come home!

If I felt like it, I could eat in the middle of the bloody street without anyone commenting or giving me a contemptuous look. Nobody was asking me for my documents because here in Paris at this time, even the police officers were sleeping the sleep of the just. They were resting, just as the powers beyond intended them to, so that tomorrow morning they once more would be fit to regulate the traffic in the innumerable corners of the streets and boulevards.

Paris. This is my Paris. I am free!

It was not only the capital of the world but also its center of freedom: it was my city, and it was the city of cities. It was a city in front of which even history stopped and stooped; it was a city where pharmacies looked like jeweler's shops of the last century, where huge steel rails protected pedestrians at street crossings, and where the use of bowler hats was not at all mandatory. It was, quite literally, a city where individual freedom could be felt as if it were an object that could be grasped and touched by one's hands. Here freedom was possible to achieve: not something symbolic, but a tangible possibility, even if in my case it was yet not a reality.

As soon as I get to the hotel, I shall write down these thoughts.

It was a good sign that already on the night of my arrival I had been able not only to demonstrate some magnificent and quite uncharacteristic willpower but also that I had fresh thoughts.

Yes! I decided; I'm going to write these thoughts down in my notebook.

While the sandwich steadily got diminished in size, the rain became even more intense, and – as I in my mind tried to evoke the overture of *El Caballero de la Rosa* – I tried to signal a night bus to stop at *Plaza del Chatelet*. Despite my need to economize, I was not willing to ruin my health just to save a franc and a quarter but the driver didn't seem to notice me.

*

The bronze clappers of Notre Dame Cathedral struck midnight.

It was raining in earnest now, and I took refuge inside the bus station's waiting cabin, which appeared to be empty. The tiny room was in total darkness, and for this reason, at first, I did not realize that I was in the company of a homeless man: a *clochard*. He was lying on the floor in a corner, facing the wall, wrapped in multiple layers of newspaper.

What made me aware of the vagabond's presence was my lack of caution in the dark because on entering, with my left foot, I had brushed the shoe of the sleeping man. However, I had touched him only very lightly.

"Excuse me."

The *clochard* took some time to react. First, the body turned itself and its head towards me; then, from under the foul-smelling layers of paper, appeared what looked like a turtle's head. The head seemed so small and so close to the ground that my shoes must have blocked nearly its entire view.

I had already finished thinking about the incident when, from below, a hostile voice could be heard;

'La France aux français!'

Whereupon the *clochard* immediately resumed his snoring.

Again, I ventured out into the rain.

*

Waiting for a bus to arrive, or for it to stop raining, I took shelter under the colonnade of the *Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt*, where I continued to munch away on my now virtually finished sandwich. In there, under the colonnade, I spotted another night wonderer approaching; he was holding on tightly to the collar of his coat, while he was hurrying along under the columns. He gave me a fleeting glance as he passed in front of me, whereupon he turned his head slightly. Then, as if only after taking a touch-and-go decision, quite abruptly, he turned around, addressing me in Hungarian; 'He who eats in the street is no better than a dog, and his testimony shall not be valid before a court of law. This was proclaimed by the Talmud.'

After a second of confusion, I recognized the man as an old acquaintance that I had last seen in the Turkish Baths of Budapest: it was Teodoro Nyári, the former writer.

I knew him only very superficially, despite having met him several times back in Budapest. Though it had been quite some time since I had seen him last, I was not ignorant of his tragic fate. With an undeniable talent and an exuberant fantasy, he had started his career as a storyteller, but soon his success had caused him to fall victim to the dark side of the profession. His demands on life had started to increase, and he had developed an unforgivable and insatiable passion for hot meals, for changing shirt regularly, and even for Italian silk ties. Things like that, in our *Magyar* homeland, were not supposed to be enjoyed by simple wordsmiths. The only exception to this rule was a handful of theatrical authors, and then only once their talents had been confirmed by international success.

Nyári had begun his career as a journalist, writing a weekly column dedicated to finance. This column had soon become quite popular, but as a result of his opinions' violent nature, the man had been forced to give up both his column and his position.

During the last months of his stay in Hungary, the grapevine had it that he was making a dishonest and precarious living by cheating at cards; then he had disappeared from Budapest, someone had said to the French Riviera, but it seemed nobody knew to exactly where.

And now, at this very moment, there he stood, right before me – as large as life, in a shabby coat – smiling, as if with a lot of kindness.

'Shake a fag, man?'

'What did you say?' I asked, quickly ridding myself of the associations that Nyári's sudden appearance had produced in my mind. *What is the man trying to communicate?* Was it possible that in such a short time I had stopped understanding my maternal language?

'Will you give me a cigarette? If you have one left that is.'

Without answering, I handed him my silver cigarette case.

Before choosing a cigarette, like the expert he no doubt was, he fingered through the tightly packed row. The moment he lightened the *fag* he had chosen, he muttered;

'Memphis!'

'Memphis?'

Nyári began to puff away, silently and content, at that gift Hungarian cigarette, as if it was a pleasure almost forgotten.

'Yes, Memphis,' he repeated, without giving the slightest indication that he was about to answer any of the numerous questions that undoubtedly were painted on my face. However, Nyári was a very practical man, and he immediately stopped wasting time, instead opting to attack me in the most direct manner imaginable; 'When did you arrive?'

'This afternoon,'

'Directly from Budapest?'

'Directly.'

'Via Germany?'

'Yes.'

'Have you seen... Did you notice anything particular along the way?'

'Yes, Hitler.'

'Adolf Hitler? What you tell me is very interesting. Where did you see him?'

'Everywhere. Everywhere and in everything: in the passengers, in the railway employees, in the chimneys of the factories. Today Hitler is not only a symbol: he is Germany.'

'And this, all this – your new German *Weltanschauung* – you have discovered all by yourself: by your own observations and efforts?'

'My friend, if you want to amuse yourself, go to the editorial office of *L'Action Française*.'

'Forgive me, but I think you have not understood me.'

'Don't bother to give me any explanations, please.'

'I want to... May I continue asking you questions?'

'You may.'

'Do you believe there will be a war?'

'With whom?'

'The Germans.'

'Without any hesitation, yes. Their deepest conviction is that the only ammunition that they are still missing will be delivered to them by Mr. Chamberlain himself.'

'I find that hard to believe; I think you exaggerate.'

'You think whatever you like; I'd be overwhelmed by delight if I were to find myself incorrect.'

'And yourself? Why did you leave? Did they harass you back in Hungary?'

'Not at all. Or rather, not yet.'

'Are you Jewish?'

'I don't know. I haven't seen my birth certificate since I left my father's theatre company.'

'Well put.'

'I would be interested in your personal opinion: what do you believe.'

'About the war?'

'About the imminence of war.'

'Do not.'

'Do not?'

'Do not believe.'

'Why not?'

'Maybe... Well, maybe because... because, as you know, my background is that of a music critic.'

'I know that. But I don't know what that has to do with it.'

'It's very clear. Music and mathematics, as you undoubtedly are aware of, are very close disciplines, or if you prefer, intimately related species. War, as is equally well known, does not depend on sentimental factors, but is a function of intricate mathematical calculations. The demigod of Herr Hitler and the not-so-cultured German public is the sonorous trombones of the most suspect of composers: Herr Wagner. On the other hand, the Germans upper class, in general, swear allegiance to Bach, who according to them is still the only true musician ever to have lived, and who has calculated everything with total accuracy. Do you understand me?'

'Of course.'

'The German elite, in general, will never be able to represent the Führer's point of view or that of the majority of the German people. And, it will be able to do so even less after a few years of disappointing war effort.'

'If I hadn't taken into account that you are holding on to my silver cigarette case, I would have told you to your face that you are totally bonkers.'

'Where did you get that silver stuff from?'

'I'll tell you if it interests you.'

'No my friend; I'd rather you'd speak of things that will excite me.'

'How could I; I never read the newspapers or, to be more precise, I never read anything about international politics.'

'Why not?'

'Because the reporting seems to be full of unexpected and often illogical facts and contradictions; something like the works of a *vaudeville* author from the turn of the century. Thus, to the reflecting reader, nothing ever becomes clear.'

'Why on earth did you leave Hungary and a safe job?'

'That I can tell you without any difficulty. Exactly one week ago, I was summoned to the Ministry of Public Affairs in Budapest. There I climbed the long stairs with an inexplicable yet overwhelmingly feeling of imminent disaster, and the feeling only grew stronger as I approached the office of the undersecretary of state, who, as you probably know, had only just been appointed. Two and a half hours later, I was allowed before the august presence of this undersecretary. An usher – his uniform adorned with gold

trimmings, which probably weighed at least ten kilos – accompanied me with martial steps to before the desk of the potentate.

‘Behind the polished surface of approximately six square meters of mahogany, the ruddy figure of the undersecretary of state, who is also – again, as you probably know – the head of Musical Affairs rose to greet me. He then put in my hands a pair of sausages, both dripping of fat that I have brought with me here to Paris, whereupon he invited me to sit down, and without wasting any time, he began to flatter me. He explained that he was a great admirer of mine and that his interest in me had resulted from reading several essays and articles that I had written.

‘He stuttered a bit when he spoke, sometimes in an intentionally Tuscan dialect, while repeatedly, under the table, he wiped the sweat off his hands on his socks. Finally, he came to the purpose of why he had summoned me to this meeting. He revealed that he had recently started an action – or, *a project*, I think he called it – of immense importance. The eventual success of this project would – and of this, he was in no doubt whatsoever, would go down in history as the main 20th-century contribution to music as an art form – once and for all cement the position of music ahead of lesser activities such as sculpting, painting, and writing. Leaping quickly from his seat – maybe taken aback by my skeptical smile, his hands holding on to drawer of the enormous table – he stood up. He did this with such energy that, as he bent his upper body forward, it seemed as if he was about to try to lift the entire table, presumably to show me that he wasn’t the coach potatoes that he appeared to be. However, that was not what happened because that extreme posture of his body was followed not by a show of prowess but by a theatrical pause for effect, and his blue-gray eyes looked at me with great purpose, yet in a slight haze.

‘This is my proposal,’ he began. ‘You, one of the most outstanding representatives of the musical tradition of our country, shall help me in the drafting of a bill that shall advocate the elimination of the treble clef in musical notation. Instead, it shall be proposed that said clef be replaced by the universally well-loved and respected swastika.’

‘For several seconds I figured I must have misunderstood him, or that he was joking, or that I had lost my mind. After having assured me that out of all my companions and competitors, I had been the one to be selected to be taken into his confidence, he consulted his wristwatch, whereupon he swiftly terminated the audience. I expressed something that was intended to sound like gratitude for his extraordinary kindness of taking me into his confidence, assuring him that I just needed to reflect a little on the subject before answering. I actually cannot recall exactly how I left the building of the Ministry, but the next day I obtained a French visa. I said goodbye to the staff at the paper, and here I am.’

While I had explained the background to why I was now in Paris, it seemed it had stopped raining.

Nyári did not comment on my story, and instead of answering me, he extended his right hand out into the open air – I had been right: it had indeed stopped raining – and with his left hand, he took me by the arm; with gentle violence, he pushed me down the stairs.

‘Do you want to dine for free?’ he asked.

He surprised me with his unexpected way of formulating his invitation, and mainly because of this reason, I needed a few moments to answer.

‘I’ve already had dinner,’ I said. ‘Anyway, I thank you for your kind invitation.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, my friend! It’s dinner with tablecloths and everything: heated dishes and chilled glasses. And, so that there shall be no doubt in your mind, let me tell you that it is not I who invite; I am a simple intermediary and co-beneficiary.’

‘Then I accept with pleasure.’

‘Do you have five hundred francs?’

How did that get out? I thought, before answering, ‘Yes?’

‘You will have to change them to be able to dine for free.’

‘They are already changed,’ I replied. The National Bank of Hungary gave it to me in dollar bills.

‘Still, you will have to change them.’

'Change them? Why? Into what?'

'Into chips.'

'Where?'

'At the casino. To enter.'

'What casino?'

'The nearest. And please don't play innocent with me. After all, we do have some shared knowledge of gambling.'

'I never gambled in Hungary; not in proper casinos.'

'Well, in Paris you will have no choice.'

'Why is that?'

'Because it's the only possibility of getting a free dinner.'

'What if I lose?'

'You cannot lose because you are not going to play. You must not play under any circumstances; that's the trick. Dinner is the bait; the way that clubs here in Paris try to hook players.'

'So what am I going to do with the chips?'

'When you leave, you change them back into money.'

'Will they not get suspicious when I change the same amount?'

'You will change it at two or three different times. Anyhow, it is not possible to keep an eye on everyone.'

*

We crossed the island of *Ille de la Cité*, climbing silently up *Boulevard Saint-Michel*. There they were, all my old friends: every tree, every portal, every café, and every monument, and with a smile, I was greeting everyone.

'Have you come here often?'

'Quite often.'

'Do you like the city?'

'What city?'

'Paris.'

'Paris is not a city.'

'It's not? What is it then?'

'Paris is Paris.'

As we arrived at *Café Dupont*, I realized that the entire place had been refurbished and redecorated since my last visit, and I stopped before the revolving door; 'Can I invite you in for coffee?'

'We must have dinner first. This café won't close all night. We'll return.'

'I beg you to forgive me, but I have changed my mind. I no longer want to go to the casino; I have come to Paris to work, and not to have free dinners.'

'To work? Why? And what do you intend to work with? If you don't mind me asking?'

'I don't know yet. Actually, I don't care.'

'Precisely for that reason, you should not stop accompanying me. We are almost there; it's just a stone's throw away, on Montparnasse Boulevard, so stop talking and come with me.'

'Maybe next time.'

'Today there are prawn *hors-d'oeuvres*.'

I held out my hand smiling.

'I'm delighted to have reconnected with you; I am sure we will see each other again.'

He shook my hand, somewhat saddened.

'Tell me...', I said, 'but do so honestly: would it benefit you if I accompanied you?'

He looked attentively at the tip of his nose before answering, 'It would.'

'How much?'

'One percent of the total, plus the meal.'

'Of the total of what?'

'Of what you would change.'

'Why didn't you tell me right away? You should have started with that.'

And so we continued, walking along together side by side, towards my friend's commission and free prawn hors-d'oeuvres.

*

We stopped before a large house, solidly bourgeois in appearance. Soon the door opened as if by itself, at least without my companion having pressed any bell, or pronouncing the usual *S'il vous plait!* Nyári smiled at my astonishment as he politely allowed me through, whereupon the door closed again in the same automatic manner, with the same mysterious silence as before.

'They open it from above,' Nyári told me in the elevator. They operate it using an electric motor.'

'And how do they know that we are here?'

'They observe us through a window.'

'So they constantly watch the street?'

'Yes, and there are plenty of reasons for that.'

In a wide and clean anteroom, they took our coats that clung to our bodies because of the rain, and we soon found ourselves in front of a register-office.

A gentleman with a white beard and dressed in black, made me sign first a register book, and then two forms by which I applied for membership in the club, something that was accepted thanks to the signature of my companion. The bearded gentleman then took my five hundred francs, and with a cordial handshake, he welcomed me as a new member.

The ceremony was then brought to completion as five chips were placed in my hands, and before I had the time to commence a speech of gratitude, my friend had taken me by the arm and dragged me towards the entrance door to the gambling rooms, on top of which I could read:

AVETE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CHE ENTRATE

We entered a large dining room, where a gentleman dressed in white tails greeted us with a deep bow. He then accompanied us to a small table; once we had seated ourselves, he had already disappeared.

All the tables were mounted on what can best be described as highly stylized clouds. The waiters serving us were also dressed in whitetails, and the female part of the staff, also dressed in white, sported a small and very discreet pair of wings.

I'm in heaven!

They served us a set menu without asking a single question, and the entire service was carried out in absolute silence.

'What do you think about the frescoes?' I asked, 'Are they original?'

He looked towards the ceiling. At a dizzying height, the roof was covered with numerous pictorial compositions that did nothing whatsoever to distract the harmony of white that reigned throughout the dining room. My friend, receiving his soup, declined to give his opinion.

Depicted on the closest fresco, on top of a large pink cloud, a small orchestra was playing, its members distributed over the *canvass* with plenty of artistic licenses. They all wore well-known faces: the flutist was Mozart, the pianist Chopin, and the violinists: Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven. Then I discovered other familiar faces: Schubert, Haydn, and, placed in front of an oversized drum, Wagner. After that, identifying the remaining faces became more difficult. Before the orchestra, on a little pile of clouds of his own, stood the

orchestra's conductor, dressed in a blue tail: instead of a baton, he wielded a marshal's baton. Before him lay an unopened music score with a title that I could not read. Not without some surprise, I recognized the marshal as Massenet. Not wanting to strain my eyes, I turned my gaze away from the fresco. When I did, I saw Nyári winking at me, and I could no longer suppress my stupid question,

'I don't know what they're playing; I cannot read the title on the score.'

'If you were as tall as you are naive, you'd be able to kiss the moon without rising from your seat.'

With saddened eyes, Nyári watched the waiter take away the plate of soup I had not even tasted. Meanwhile, I noticed a second large painting that represented a detachment of marching soldiers. They marched in perfect rows of four on top of a great rainbow that the painter had reduced to three colors. The soldiers – marching along on a tricolored blue, white, and red arc – seemed to have been assembled a little at random, originating from several different places and times, each wearing an outfit representing this. In the first two rows, I discovered the faces of El Cid, Hannibal, Alexander, and Frederick the Great, Genghis-Khan, Attila, and Julius Caesar. The third row of soldiers was already getting lost in the steep decline of the rainbow, but in front of the column was, mounted on a large white horse, again somewhat surprisingly, Marshal Foch.

'If you don't want the meat,' my compatriot told me, 'take it home to the cat.'

'I'm sorry, but I don't have a cat.'

'Me neither, but if we don't eat it, it will be going back to the kitchen. Rather than that, I will take it with me, and if necessary, I shall find some cat to feed.'

'I don't see Napoleon,' I observed. 'How is that possible? What have they done with him?'

'I suppose you could try *Les Invalides*. Do you have any sandwich paper?'

Absentmindedly, I put my hand in my pocket.

'No. I'm sorry, I said, 'Actually, it's quite rare for me to carry a sandwich-paper on me. What do you want it for?'

With his eyes, he pointed towards the kitchen door, from which a waiter carrying our dessert was approaching.

'Give me your meat ... Under the table.'

With the fork, I pierced the warm roast beef, and under the table, I slid it towards him. He quickly pulled the slice of meat from the fork, and as the waiter arrived his left hand had returned onto the table.

As the waiter left with our dishes, my companion began to eat the cake with his left hand, because with the right he was still holding on to the piece of meat under the table.

'The first thing you must learn is that you cannot go around Paris without carrying some greaseproof paper in your pocket. Fortunately, I still have my last expulsion order to wrap it in.'

He consumed the cake with extraordinary ease, while at the same time, under the table, onehandedly wrapping the piece of meat in the document, all while I contemplated the third fresco.

It depicted an outdoor school with benches, a chair, and a large tree from which was hanging all the letters of the alphabet: I couldn't keep myself from checking. The nocturnal landscape, rather than the usual clouds, used stars as its background. In the center was the constellation of the Big Dipper, and corresponding to its seven stars were the faces of seven great writers. In the bright faces of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, and Dostoevsky the light of spirituality shone as they were trying to answer the question of their master. The sixth student, who not to have been unable to answer the questions, was kneeling by the least luminous star of the constellation. I identified the shamed student as Keats. The professor, who had placed his chair right on top of the Sun itself, was, of course, the lunatic believing himself to be Victor Hugo.

I had not even realized that, as I sank into contemplation, I had absent-mindedly eaten my dessert, but the voice of my table companion swiftly restored me to reality.

'That is a French heaven. As soon as I finish the cake I shall take you to 'Hell'; it's much more picturesque.'

'Wait a moment, please,' I said. 'I have not yet been able to take in this room fully,' and with that, I started looking at the fresco, painted on the ceiling directly above our heads.

'Don't waste your energy trying to understand it: it is a cycling race through the Milky Way. If you are capable of deriving any pleasure from looking at it, you are already pretty close to becoming French in spirit, which is something that I would consider, of course, to be quite an unwise thing to aim for.

I obeyed the voice of prudence, and with silent resignation, I followed my fellow compatriot towards Hell.

We turned into a narrow and poorly lit corridor, from which came the sound of table action: the sliding of chips, the monotonous exclamations of the croupier – '*Messieurs, faites vos jeux!*' and '*Rien ne va plus!*' – interrupted by the spin of the roulette wheel.

At the end of the corridor, above a door and hidden by a curtain of black velvet, I spotted an inscription formed by red letters on an ivory-colored background:

LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CHE ENTRATE

We entered, nevertheless.

In the center was situated the gambling table, that looked as if placed inside a big open mouth. A soft twilight lit up the room that was illuminated only by three lamps which, as if in a painter's workshop, all hung very low, close to the table. The walls were clad with purple wallpaper and decorated with large frescoes, surrounded with phosphorescent glass tubes. The dress code in Hell was formal and no wings seemed to be allowed: the dominating color, of course, was red. The only one who wore a tailcoat was the employee in charge. Red was also the color code of the other employees: shoes, shirts, and ties.

We sat down at the end of a large oval table, and immediately we were thrown some small notebooks, an action performed by the croupier from the center with great precision.

'What is this for?' I asked.

'It's for those who want to play according to some system; you can write down the numbers and colors that come up.'

I nodded.

'Now you must change one of your chips.'

'I've already changed.'

'But now you must change one of your big chips for smaller ones.'

'I told you I do not want to play, and you told me...'

'Don't worry. You will not have to play, nor should you. Sit down at the table, look at the cards that are dealt, and then scribble down something in your notebook. Within half an hour the game will have become so intense that nobody will know whether you have played or not. You will then change your chips back into money, and you will be able to go home safely. This is something you then can repeat every four or five days, which represents six to eight dinners per month.

'That many?'

'At least! And the most important thing is that I can introduce you to more than a dozen places like this.'

He now spoke with sudden urgency and authority that made me feel as if I ought to be eternally grateful to the man; then suddenly he got up.

'I'm sorry, but I have to leave. Tomorrow at eight o'clock, go to the *Dome*.'

'Do you intend to leave me here?'

'I have no choice. There is something I have to do.'

'And what if something happens here; if they refuse to...?'

He interrupted me; 'Don't be silly! After all, you are not a child, and you do have at least some gambling experience. Nothing bad will happen to you as long as you abstain

from playing. And, if you can manage to, don't talk to anyone. Above all, do not talk to anyone sitting next to you at the table.'

'Why?'

'Because they would try to sabotage you.'

'Why would they do that?'

'You have very little understanding of this world, my friend. They would try to make you lose everything, or even to borrow money.'

'From me?'

'Well of course!'

'The players?'

'These are not players!'

'What are they then?'

'Heaters.'

'And what is that?' I asked, scared, as seeing that my friend's patience seemed to be at its end.

'A player is a creature that enters, changes his money into chips, sits down, plays, and gets up – he very rarely, if ever, changes money into chips a second time – and leaves. However, such a rare and highly valued creature is rarely willing to sit down at an empty table. Contemplating the possibility of doing so, the ancestral memory of tribal life awakens in him, or her, the survival instinct. Such animals are frightened of being alone and single-handedly having to face the overwhelming force of the foe.'

'The foe?'

'The casino, the table, the employees... Therefore, the subject needs to be provided with companions, and the management of any gaming club worth the name has enough sense to supply him with such 'fellow players.' Here, they give them chips to the value of one hundred and fifty francs, against the payment of only one hundred francs, but only on the condition that they dedicate themselves to play the game until a table is full and to be present whenever the need of their services occur.

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that if you had the slightest idea of how difficult it is to launch a table...'

'But what if they lose the one hundred and fifty francs: then what?'

'They never do. They only lose fifty. The hundred they are not allowed to touch. It's only window dressing: chips that look good on the table.'

'And you are sure about this?'

'Totally.'

'And then?'

'Then these heaters advise the real players and try to make them feel comfortable. And if someone wins...'

This time I was the one to interrupt,

'...They encourage them to play on?'

'Precisely!' Then he observed me with a wry smile, 'At least you are not incapable of learning.'

'I'm glad you noticed. But, could one not win with them?'

'Win with what?'

'With the fifty.'

'No; they must lose that amount. The inspectors control that very carefully.'

'And what if they win?'

'Over and above the fifty?'

'Yes.'

'That's different. That is what is thought of as the main benefit; everyone has the right to take away his or her winnings above 50; to take it home.'

'Does that make economic sense?'

'It does, after a while, because the next day, unfailingly, they will return and use them when their given fifty are used up.'

'What if they win again?'

'Then they will bring their winnings back on the third day, and the fourth, the fifth or the sixth. It does not matter. In the end, they will bring everything, and eventually, they will lose it in one fell swoop. Yet, despite that, the next day they won't spend a single franc apart from the 50 they have been given. Human nature is like that. Does that make sense?'

'Not one bit.'

'I had sort of assumed you'd think that.'

Meanwhile, people had started to gather around the table; several heaters and some real customers had arrived, and this time not through the hall leading from *Heaven*, but from the door I assumed was leading to the street.

Nyári, after making me once more promise that I would follow his instructions not to bet, disappeared towards the exit.

Hesitantly – it felt awkward, being left alone in this place – I got up, and I continued over to the nearest gaming table that was located in the corner of a room whose ceiling was supported by snowy white marble columns. In the fresco above, a huge bed had been painted, lit up by camouflaged purple lights. In it lay Henry VIII, so thin and decrepit that he appeared to be made up of nothing but skin and bones: the British monarch was surrounded by his eight wives.

I felt for him a sincere pity.

The next work of art depicted Romeo and Juliet. The lovers, who were tied together back to back, held glasses of orange juice or maybe some alcoholic beverage in their hands. I could not say who the faces belonged to.

When I arrived at the third partition, I noticed that the person in charge of the game room had followed me from one table to the next and that his face wore an anxious look. However, I did not allow that to bother me, as I did not intend to get deprived of the enjoyment presented me by these amazing frescos.

I soon found myself facing another work of art, this time depicting a library with rows upon rows of books. It seemed as if I was looking at every copy ever published of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* – there were no other publications.

Next to a writing desk stood a man of a certain age, with sideburns: the owner of the library. The man's fascinated stare made it appear that he was deep in the reading of one of the volumes.

There were neither pen nor paper beside him on the table, but out of a window, in the far left corner, a black cat was jumping, its path describing a hyperbolic trajectory through the air.

The last fresco was located right behind the gentleman in the tailcoat, who was observing and following me; in it, Monsieur Voltaire, seated in a large padded and comfortable-looking chair, was chained to his seat. In front of him, cross-legged, sat Frederick II of Prussia, relaxing on what seemed a supremely comfortable couch. The emperor appeared to be reading out aloud from a voluminous manuscript. Voltaire's face conveyed an expression of such unspeakable suffering that it contrasted starkly against the emperor's euphoric smile.

I tried to interpret the message that the artist was trying to convey, but without success, despite devoting several long minutes, applying all of my interpretative skills. Then I suddenly realized that someone had sat down at the table right next to my chair and the chips that I had left in front of it. I started to walk back towards my seat, that now another person seemed set on taking away from me. Yet, not being able to overcome my curiosity, I stopped next to the gentleman who had followed me, and I asked him about the meaning of the picture.

'What is it you do not understand?' He inquired with great politeness.

'What is the Emperor of Prussia doing in Hell?'

'It's not like that,' he replied, smiling. 'He is not really in Hell but only there as a visitor. Because for the Emperor, it constitutes the greatest pleasure imaginable to be in the presence of Monsieur Voltaire; a sentiment unfortunately not shared by Monsieur Voltaire.'

‘I see,’ I said. ‘Yes, I do remember something about that. But, precisely because I do, I don’t understand Voltaire’s reaction. Why does he seem to be suffering so terribly? Was he not a friend of the monarch? I think I remember that it was he who incited the emperor to write.’

‘He suffers because although Frederick the Great managed to master the German language quite well, he insisted on writing in French, and, what is worse, he is reading it out aloud to Monsieur Voltaire in this his native language.’

I swiftly returned to my seat at the table.

The game must have been very exciting. The expressions on the faces were changing continuously, and the croupier seemingly had to raise his voice in order not to lose control of the table.

The heaters were disappearing one after another, leaving their places to real players. Then all of a sudden, I started to feel overwhelmingly tired. Where was Nyári? Without him, I did not know how to get out of this place. With what facial expression, and with what attitude, ought I proceed, considering that I had not even attempted to play?

As the minutes went by without any Nyári, I realized that I did not need to play for very much to *pay* for my dinner, and without giving it much thought I launched a fifty-franc chip on black.

Unfortunately, it came out red, and then red again came up as I increased my bet to one hundred francs. The bank then took also my two hundred-chips, and the green zero the last 150. The four plays that had removed from me virtually all the money I had, had not seemed to require much more than a minute.

In the meantime, a player that suddenly had appeared beside me was reflecting over my strategy with gestures of obvious disapproval, and although he had no obvious reason to do so, he mercilessly shook his head in disgust.

‘You are tired,’ he told me, ‘it would be better if, at least for today, you stopped playing.’

‘You are right,’ I heard myself answering the stranger, in the tone of voice of a man who has his friends already waiting for him in the lobby.

‘Let’s go, if you want, we’ll have a coffee in the bar,’ the other man invited. ‘The streak will change. I have lost quite a lot as well.’

We then went to the bar but the hot strong coffee only made my excruciating weariness feel even worse, and if I had only dared, I would have rested my head on my interlocutor’s shoulder, thus in all likelihood allowing myself immediately to be overcome by sleep.

When he learned that I had no money left, he immediately offered me his assistance. He informed me that he had a friend who would be willing to give me a small loan, something his friend did only offer to very special people. Of course, it would require some guarantee in the form of some physical objects of intrinsic value. This friend of his could be awoken even at the latest hours of the night, or the earliest of the morning; in some cases, it appeared that the man was willing even to buy the objects that otherwise would have constituted the guarantee.

‘So we don’t have any time to lose,’ he concluded, with an animated gesture. Because, by chance, the lender happens to be here in the casino tonight. I saw him only a short while ago in the library; in only a few minutes, we should be able to conclude the transaction, so then you will be able to recover your losses. That way, maybe in an hour from now, you will be able to forget everything that happened. Yes?’

‘But I don’t have anything of value. All I own in this world is at my hotel: a photographic device... some Hungarian salami and a bottle of Tokay wine.’

‘Wait here a moment please; I shall try to convince my friend to accompany us to your hotel.’

I only very confusedly remember what happened next, and I am afraid I have to admit that I might not remember every detail or even the correct order. A taxi transported all three of us to my hotel. Only my instinct, upbringing, and background caused me to bargain bravely, and with much tenacity. We eventually wrapped up my groceries – i.e., my salami

and my wine – and the buyer hung my camera around his neck. He then made me sign a piece of paper with the number of my passport on it, whereupon he gave me two and a half thousand francs, after which the same taxi brought us back to the gambling house.

They woke me up when the car came to a stop at the casino's street entrance. They made me pay for the taxi, and before they left, they recommended that I should play with caution, whereupon they left me alone.

All this happened at approximately four o'clock in the morning.

*

I found my way back to my old table full of people, and a high, sort of electrical, tension seemed to prevail around it.

When I, by now completely exhausted, returned to the table, only the croupier seemed to notice my arrival, immediately understanding my requirements, he ordered a seat to be vacated, to make room for me.

As I sat down, red was winning for the fourth time in a row. It seemed logical that I would bet a hundred francs on black, with the virtually foolproof plan that I would continue playing black, doubling up, until I recovered what I had lost.

For the fifth time, it came out red.

As also the next spins came up red I soon found myself betting chips of a value of five hundred francs.

And, when suddenly I had no more chips left, red continued to come up another six times in a row, as if Lady Luck wanted to comfort me a little so that I should not believe that it was me personally, that she was annoyed with.

I stood up indecisively.

So exhausted was I, that I cannot account exactly for what happened next. Nevertheless – despite my state of mind: my conscience more than a little murky, and close to falling asleep – yet I could sense that something irreparable had just transpired.

I went down the stairs, staggering like an alcoholic who had done nothing but drinks for twenty-four hours. The Sesame Gate was already open, waiting for me to pass through it, and as I did, it closed behind me with a discreet sound.

A warm early morning wind was blowing fresh air into my surprised lungs. I experienced a feeling of slight vertigo, and as I sat down on the stairs of a nearby building, I closed my eyes.

If just someone, no matter who would just have given me a good slap... The waiter in the snowy white tuxedo, the elegantly dressed man in charge of the playroom, Voltaire, or at least Nyári himself... Would they not have had ample reason to do so? Without a doubt, if they had done so, they would have found me eternally indebted and appreciative. In that case, if they had, I would have explained to them that I intended to change career – that I had arrived in the capital of France intent on becoming a serious merchant, an honorable businessman – and that the loss of those three thousand francs would mean nothing less than the collapse of my entire project, and thus of my existence.

None of them had understood...

Yet, even if they had, they probably would have allowed me to go on ruining myself. It seemed as if the entire world conspired against me and was my enemy... Actually, giving the issue a second thought, poor Voltaire should not be blamed: as his hands were tied he could not have helped me even if he had so desired.

At that moment, someone poked me on the shoulder.

As I opened my tired eyelids, I saw that it was not a hand that rested on my shoulder, but a truncheon. At the other end of the nightstick, I detected the hand of a young and friendly-looking police officer, and next to him a milkman with a basket full of bottles.

'Has he been robbed?'

'It doesn't appear that way.'

'Have you drunk?'

'No, I don't drink.'

'Have they hurt you?'

'Yes; they have hurt me. Many people.'

'Who and where?'

'That I don't remember exactly. But it was extremely easy because I always agreed to do precisely what they wanted me to.'

The officer removed from my shoulder the truncheon that had accompanied me even as I had stood up, and shook his head impatiently.

'What I ask is whether they have hurt you in any illegal way.'

'Not at all: nothing like that.'

'Do you have an address?'

'Of course.'

I gave the name of my hotel.

'Should I accompany you?'

'Thank you, but I'll find the way alone.'

'Go then.'

'To home?'

'Yes, the Metro is already operating.'

'Good, but first I'm going to have a coffee.'

'Where?'

'In the *Dupont-Latin*, in *Boul Mich*.

The officer exchanged a glance with the milkman, each wearing a confused expression.

'Drink whatever and wherever you want,' he said, 'as long as you don't find yourself here again.'

And with that, the officer continued his round.

The milkman beckoned me to climb up into his cart.

I felt possessed by anger. I turned my back to the place where my intended future – nay, my entire existence – had come to so abrupt an end, and, ignoring the invitation, I set off for the bar.

A horn honked as the milkman passed me.

*

The café was almost empty, but in the left corner sat a couple – two students: he Chinese, she Japanese – talking animatedly in English, under the long aquarium that extended around the entire premises; it was inhabited by golden minnows.

At the table next to me sat a lady of a certain age with her hair dyed platinum blond, before her, the remains of a white coffee and a cake almost untouched. With impressive pedantry, she was consulting a railway guide while introducing the raisins that she extracted from the cake into the mouth of a huge white rabbit, whose head protruded out from a handbag, placed in her lap.

The red hands of the wall clock pointed to six, plus twelve minutes, and the double espresso that I had just taken started to take effect. *How do I get out of this mess?*

I could not go back to the hotel since I did not have enough money to pay for the room. I did not know anyone in Paris. And, even if I had known someone, I had so far never been capable of asking anyone for anything. I called the waiter, and I was about to pay for my drink when I saw Nyári enter through the revolving door. With a threatening expression on his face, he made directly towards me.

'What have you done, you moron?'

'So you haven't found out?'

'Of course, I've found out! You've lost more than three thousand francs.'

'Your information service works wonderfully well; with amazing accuracy and with the speed of the summer lightening,' I said, with faint irony.

'How could you commit such an act of idiocy? Have you lost your mind? In your sad little world, as in mine, such a quantity of money represents a true fortune.'

I nodded sadly while making it clear that I intended to proceed towards the door.

'And why did you lie to me? Why didn't you tell me you had more than five hundred francs?'

'I didn't lie. Last night, as we met, I had no more than five hundred francs.'

'And the rest? Where did you get the rest from?'

I explained my sad story in detail: that before I left Budapest, I had exchanged my piano for a camera, and some bottles of Tokay since the Foreign Currency office wouldn't give me more than five hundred francs in cash.

'But at least, you still have some valuable items left?'

'Nothing.'

'Money?'

'Twenty-six francs.'

'I wouldn't say that it is a very significant amount.'

'Me neither.'

'Do you have friends, relationships, acquaintances?'

'No one.'

'And back in Hungary?'

'Neither.'

'What are you going to do, then?'

'I don't know.'

'How much do you pay... or, rather, how much will you not be paying at your hotel?'

'Seventy.'

'A month?'

'No, per week.'

'It's crazy! You cannot stay there another minute.'

'I admire your clear-sightedness.'

'Look, we'll have plenty of time tomorrow for jokes, don't you think? Now you'll have to rest and sleep a little somewhere.'

'Somewhere?'

'Somewhere. Don't be afraid: you will not die of hunger or lack of sleep, at least not tonight, but let me first think a little.'

'For as long as you like.'

Meanwhile, a group of four people who all seemed to be in excellent spirits entered the café. One of them greeted my compatriot in a friendly manner as they continued on their way to the bar.

Nyári's eyes immediately started to light up, much like those of the poacher, having spotted a huge deer.

'Now listen very carefully, and do whatever I say. And, do it with the greatest accuracy and without even attempting to think.'

'I'm very tired.'

'Don't be. This will be something very simple: what I will ask you to do will not be at all complicated.'

I lowered my head, surrendering to his will, while his right hand approached my chair.

'Put this card in your pocket,' he said.

A queen of spades was handed me, attached to a string.

'What shall I do with it?'

'I will now go up to the guys that just arrived and, if I have any luck, I will leave with them in a few minutes. You pay right now and wait outside, out of sight. Then, as soon as you see me leave with them, you follow us. Make sure that they don't see you; keep at a distance of at least thirty meters, because there's no risk that you'll lose us.'

I nodded, hesitantly.

'Now try to concentrate. You do know the main entrance of the Luxembourg Park, right?'

'Of course.'

'That's where we'll be heading. You will find that we will enter it, and then, soon afterward, we'll stop to look at a card hanging from a tree branch. Now, as soon as we have moved away from there, you will go up to the card, and you will find a queen of clubs suspended from a string just like the one that is attached to the card that you are carrying in your pocket.

'And then what?'

'Quickly, trying not to be seen, swap the cards, and then disappear as quickly as you possibly can.'

'And all this, what's the purpose?'

'This is not the time to satisfy your nevertheless totally legitimate curiosity,' Nyári said, getting up from his seat.

'And what should I do then?'

'Go back to your hotel, pay for the first night and get your things; within an hour I'll be waiting for you at my place, which is where, in the future, you too will live.'

'But you know that I don't have any money...'

'That will be taken out of your account.'

'How much?'

'Is that not the same?'

'It isn't.'

'Thirty francs a week.'

'And where is your hotel?'

'A stone's throw from here. On *Rue Monsieur-le-Prince*.'

'As what is it called?'

'Same as the street: *Hotel Monsieur-le-Prince*. Now, please excuse me, but we don't have a moment to lose. Bye.'

'*A reverdecí.*'

And indeed, Nyári and the group did leave the café together, after only a few minutes. I obediently followed them, sticking to the walls of the houses, carrying in my pocket the pierced queen of spades, attached to a string.

*

I opened the door to my new room, and – without seeing, or at least not noticing, anything – I slept for a solid twenty-four hours.

When I awoke, the midday sun shone deliciously through the window. Awakening from that sun, in the heart of *Quartier Latin*, I did not feel half as bad as I had excellent reason to.

I stretched pleasantly in the bed that replied with some threatening squeaks, whereupon it grabbed my ankles. My newly opened eyes started to explore the room, which was tiny and whitewashed, with a window so small that not even a child could have climbed in or out through it.

I realized that I had managed to fit into the tiny iron bed, worthy of Procrustes, only because I had pushed my legs through the vertical bottom bars. The pleasant aroma of a cigarette immediately helped me out of my semi-consciousness. When, with the butt of a second cigarette, I had lit a third, I began to comprehend my new situation with some clarity.

I looked for a phone, but it was conspicuously absent, and only then did I realize that the room also lacked a wardrobe. Only one hanger with four hooks hung from a screw inserted into one of the walls. Where the bedside table ought to be, my two suitcases, one

on top of the other, had been placed. On top of them: a few cigarettes, an empty water glass, fifty francs in bills and a sheet of paper with a few lines of hurried handwriting:

Water and a pot are under the bed. If Sleeping Beauty ever wakes up from his cozy sleep, come see me in room number 6. If you do not find me there, go to the café at two in the afternoon and wait for me. Yours, affectionately, Nyári.

I shaved quickly, washed in the basin that was the smallest I had ever seen, and, through the dark corridor, I hurried along to Nyári's room, which was empty.

His alarm clock – inside a phosphorescent quadrant, squeezed in between the books on a shelf in the wall – suggested that it was five to two.

I closed the door and started to look for the exit. I could not find it, and I was about to knock on the first door when I saw someone coming down the murky hall. I approached him and, when I got a few steps closer, I realized that the man was walking with his hands on his back and extending his legs upwards.

'Excuse me, would you please tell me how to get out of here?'

'Continue straight ahead,' the strange individual answered, without batting an eyelid, 'until you get to the end of the corridor, then stop, and take a left.'

'Many thanks.'

'You're welcome. As you can see, I'm exercising.'

The corridor was indeed very poorly lit, and only because of the exercising person's voice and built, did I conclude that it must be a youngster.

'Yes, I see that. It seems to be a very good and healthy exercise.'

'Precisely,' he affirmed, striking a formidable kick at the door before which he had stopped.

'Eh?' Someone asked from inside.

'Fiukatk, tornászom' shouted the young athlete in Hungarian, though with a foreign accent, addressing the person inside, whereupon he continued kicking the door, again and again, while without further difficulties I found the way out.

*

As I arrived at the café, Nyári was already waiting for me at the counter. In front of him was a half-consumed cup of white coffee and around his shoes lay shells, corresponding to at least half a dozen eggs.

He received me with a smile; 'Have you rested well? Has all the backlog of sleep been taken care of?'

'For the time being, yes. Did you leave money in my room?'

'Who did you suppose it was from? The League of Nations?'

'I just wanted to say thank you.'

'You don't have to give them back; there's plenty more in your account.'

'How could anything have entered into my account?'

'The day before yesterday, with the change of the cards.'

'Explain please.'

'It's too long a story to explain right here and now.'

'Why is it too long?'

'I'll tell you another day.'

'How much does my room cost?'

'Thirty francs a week. I already told you once.'

'I'll pay for a week in advance.'

'I've already paid for it a week. Otherwise, you would not have been allowed in.'

'Could you then invite me to lunch?'

'With me?'

'Of course, with you.'

'Don't develop any delusions of grandeur. We are not at the 'Negresco.' You'll have to go to the counter all by yourself, but there you can get yourself a whole lot of protein here for just two francs.'

'Two? That's the price of a white coffee.'

'It isn't. The coffee costs one fifty, fifty is the tip.'

'So what?'

'Get something to eat and don't talk so much.'

'What do you want me to order?'

'Whatever you want. Choose from whatever you see. There were all kinds of sandwiches, boiled eggs, sardines, sweets, pasta, and slices of cheese. What more could you want?'

'Nothing,' I stammered. 'And you... what... what have you had?'

'A couple of eggs. I don't remember what more. Just pick what you want.'

Somewhat frightened, I pointed at a pair of sausages.

Beside us, more than a dozen students were making a formidable amount of noise, speaking in half a dozen different languages; all of them, apparently, language-students from the nearby *Sorbonne*. None of them spoke in French except when addressing the waiter.

Sitting at the tables, the drinks were more expensive than at the bar; therefore, except for the area next to the counter, the place was almost empty.

Nyári ordered a white coffee, while I was eating; after having finished the sausages, I continued with hard-boiled eggs. 'Could something unpleasant happen to me?' I asked, with what I figured had to be a very artificial smile. 'I don't know why you wanted those queens exchanged, but...'

I could not continue speaking, because part of an egg had gotten stuck in my throat, and I started coughing convulsively.

'Of course, something terrible could happen!' Nyári replied. 'Especially if you continue to commit blunders similar to this last one.'

My face, which by now undoubtedly had acquired a purplish-blue color, must have shown him that I didn't understand because he continued, smiling, while under the pretext of giving me a comradely pat on the shoulder, slapping me so hard that the egg I had failed to swallow found its way back into my mouth. Only employing a virtually superhuman effort did I manage to stop it from escaping out onto the counter.

'What?'

'For example, by doing what you just did,' continued Nyári 'by creating a scene with your clumsiness, thus attracting the attention of the waiter and the visitors who then, of course, will be more likely to remember your face.'

'I'm okay,' I said, annoyed, realizing that some of the egg-remains now were entrenched in my nose.

'Gargle with some coffee.'

I obeyed.

'Has the hunger subsided?' he asked.

'It hasn't.'

'Then, continue the feast.'

'Thanks; that's the only thing that I am interested in right now.'

'Because something I said?'

'Because I'm angry.'

'With whom?'

'I don't know,' I said, 'but I'll have another coffee.'

'Right. But not here but at a table. Or, better, wait here until I've paid; that way you'll learn something.'

With great calm, he approached the cashier.

'Two white coffees,' he said.

'Three francs.'

Of a five-franc bill, two were returned, and he swiftly gave one to a waiter who acknowledged the tip with a loud 'Merci Monsieur,' he then took me by the arm and led me to the table we had been sitting the day before yesterday.

'What had you planned to do in Paris?'

'I have not come here with any specific plan. I think I had the idea of opening a store or maybe a small factory.'

'With a capital of three thousand francs?'

'The things I had were easily worth five thousand. And now it turns out that these gangsters...'

'...Even if it had been five, six, or even ten thousand, it still wouldn't have been enough. Did you really believe, that with such a ridiculously small amount, you could have started a business, or set up a factory?'

'Well, yes, on a modest scale, of course,' I said, a little embarrassed.

'Modest scale...'

'Yes, *very* modest scale.'

My friend took a deep breath and, after a brief pause, he continued,

'Since, as in your first night in town you have already lost your small shop or factory, would it not be a good idea not to spend another word on this futile enterprise? Shouldn't we instead turn our attention to something more practically viable and thus more interesting? What do you know how to do?'

I was stunned by his question, 'What do you mean?'

'I ask what you can do, besides opening stores and setting up small factories.'

'But I don't know the first thing about shops or factories...'

'So, why did you come to Paris with that idea in your head?'

'I thought that to become a proper capitalist, I had to. Of course.'

'Why of course! With three thousand?' he exclaimed, visibly losing his patience.

'With five thousand, and didn't you yourself say that this amount was a true fortune?'

'I?'

'Yes, the day before yesterday. Right here.'

'Yes, maybe, but still not enough to do what you had in mind.'

'So...'

'So let's leave this, please! Let's just leave it,' he said, taking his hands to his temples, 'because if not, you'll end up driving me crazy, or at the very least giving me a migraine.'

'Very well, let's leave it, but don't forget that it was you who started talking about this.'

'Okay, it's was me. And so I will also be the one to end it. I just beg you to answer one single question: what do you know?'

'Know?'

'How to do?'

'Music.'

'And nothing else?'

'Isn't that enough?'

'Of course, it is. For the love of God, don't get offended, do you play any instrument?'

'Of course. I graduated from the Budapest Conservatory.'

'Magnificent. What instruments?'

'Piano and violin. I also play the cello, and I know a little about most wind instruments.'

'So what you play best is the piano?'

'Yes.'

'I guess only classical music...'

'Only?'

'Don't be prickly.'

'I'm not! But I simply cannot suffer these modern compositions...'

I could see that he was about to answer something rude but then he changed his mind and, getting the attention of the waiter, he ordered two more coffees.

'And now what do you want to do?'

‘I don’t know.’

In the aquarium above our heads, two large fish had started to engage in a battle. I turned my face in the direction of the splashes, and I could feel, rather than see, that my protector was deep in thought. After what seemed like a quarter of an hour, he finally regained the use of his tongue.

‘Listen to me, Prince Fantastic... Although not directly – rather, only in a very indirect and innocent way – I do feel responsible for your misadventure of the day before yesterday. We need somehow to assure ourselves of your continued subsistence, even if only a very marginal such. It is essential to ensure a few weeks of survival, so my plan is this: every day, in the same way as today, I shall take care of your lunch. I shall also pay for your hotel and, I shall give you ten francs a day for cigarettes, coffees, and other small expenses. This I will do until you find something better.’

‘I’m very grateful!’ I said, very affectionately. ‘And in return, what do you want me to do?’

‘Nothing that costs you any effort. Two hours of daily work.’

‘Doing what?’

‘From three until five o’clock in the mornings you must wait for me, sitting in this café with the queens of diamond and spade in your pocket, each with strings attached. Then, if you see me accompanying someone, you will follow us and change the card for another – spades for clubs: heart for diamond: black for black and red for red – just as you did last night.

‘And that’s it?’

‘Yes. With time, we shall find you something better to do, and this will free up the entire day for you; it will allow you to go in search of some more profitable business.’

Again, he paid for our coffees, giving another tip; then he took farewell, and, like a man in total command, he tapped me on the cheek, whereupon, with the attitude of a true patron, he exited through the revolving door.

DOÑA JUANA

PART ONE

It had already started to get dark, and the beams from the lighthouse were intermittently and monotonously blinking away the shadows of the late summer evening, the beams' dazzling whiteness accentuating themselves, making the darkness surrounding them appear ever denser.

Juanita's house was situated close to the lighthouse, and its flashing dressed the house first in light, then in shadow. It was as if an immense black hand immediately followed by an equally immense white – quickly, repeatedly and alternately – tried to protect the place from whatever the other hand represented.

There was a party going on inside Juanita's house, and much of its interior was so well lit up that one could not notice the lighthouse's beams – that more often than not managed to penetrate no further than to the gardens that surrounded the house.

Perhaps it was in retribution for this that the music from inside the house – excellently performed, yet somewhat monotonous – was not allowed to reach the lighthouse but only to the rocks that made up its garden. The music from inside Juanita's house came from an orchestra that had been given no other instructions than to entertain and try to make it as difficult as possible for the guests not to dance. This bridge between lighthouse and Juanita's house – a bridge made up of music, and light – stretched out through the night to cover the patch of land that separated them. Amidst this coming and going of sound and light, the night was gathering momentum, and its ever more powerful darkness seemed to make the lighthouse's beams grow ever longer and more powerful.

The trees of the house's garden – experiencing one false sunrise after the other in which the chirping of birds was replaced by the sound of the orchestra – must have felt annoyed by the light and the sound, because they waved their branches angrily in the evening breeze. Though the part of the lighthouse's rock garden that faced away from the sea could not help but listen to the orchestra, the music was not strong enough to reach the lighthouse itself, overpowered as it was by the sound of waves pounding the shore below. To a lighthouse keeper, the orchestra would have come across as little more than the song of a distant mermaid, complaining about the lack of wooing sailors.

On the ground floor of Juanita's house was situated a room that was not at all lit up from inside, something that allowed the lighthouse' intermittent beams to penetrate through the windows. It was the library, which for the whole day, probably because of the party, had been deserted. Not a single person had sat down in any of its armchairs to read or relax; nobody had even crossed its threshold. Perhaps that was why Juanita chose it as her refuge: she felt unwell.

It was already quite late when, silently pushing open the door, Juanita entered. She was still wearing the dress that she, with much care and caution, had put on for the party many hours earlier; she could not decide whether she was more tired, angry, bored, or anxious. The orchestra was still playing along, but Juanita simply could not bear listening any longer. For a moment, in the darkness, she just stood there, indecisively, behind the door that had silently closed behind her. She raised her hand to reach for the switch, and she turned on the light.

The large chandelier, made up of white and purple glass prisms was suddenly lit up, but the glaring light from the powerful electric light-bulbs was so strong that it hurt her eyes and without even having let go of the switch, she turned it off again. Then, back in the darkness, she went across to one of the bookshelves where she tried to locate the book she was looking for, by nothing but the faint light of the lighthouse. She stayed there for several moments, leaning her forehead against the spines of the books, trying to read the titles. Her hand was held high – hovering like a hawk above, waiting for a rabbit to break cover – ready to pull out the title she was looking for. However, in the poor light, it proved

impossible to make out the hardly visible gold letters of the old titles to locate the book she was looking for.

She went over to a side-table where she turned on a small portable lamp, and carrying it along she returned to the bookcase; she held it up in front of her to better see the titles, and she soon found the book she was looking for. Once she had it in her hand, she pushed it to her bosom. *I so wish you were here to help and guide me*, she thought; then she returned to the table, and put the lamp on top of it, and sat down. With a sigh of satisfaction, she put the book down in her lap and stretched out her legs. A few moments later, though now feeling much better, she decided that her shoes were too tight and – almost without moving, and with great care – she half released herself of them, using only the wiggling of her toes.

Now, feeling a whole lot better, she leaned back in the armchair and rested her head against it, but as she did, her bun bothered her. She rubbed the back of her head against the chair's headrest with increasing force until she managed to undo it, and as her hair fell over her shoulders, she decided that she probably felt as well as she could hope to feel this wicked night. She sighed once more, took some large tortoiseshell glasses out of her pocket and put them on. She then opened the book – *Now, Don Juan, let's try to find out whether you intend to help me or not* – and began to read.

*

Juanita did not have time to read for very long because suddenly there was an approaching murmur of voices that made her pay attention. Someone was coming down the stairs that led into the adjacent room, and she swiftly put out the light to make herself invisible. That turned out to be a wise thing to do because the couple stopped right in front of the entrance to the library.

It was Juanito, her fiancé, and The Girl that, hand in hand, were escaping the company of the other guests; they too obviously in search of a refuge where, without witnesses, they would be able to resolve a situation whose importance was reflected in both their faces and it had been so the entire day, as well as the previous.

They were both dressed in black ties; she wore a white dress that emphasized the childishness of her figure, but an overcoat draped over her shoulders, and a gray crocodile skin handbag both tried to send a message suggesting the opposite. They had come down the steps silently, and now they let go of each other's hands.

'So...' asked The Girl, turning to him and giving her question a sense of both concern and resolution. 'So...?'

'So what?' he asked, pretending to be distracted by something at the top of the stairs.

'Have you decided?'

The question had been too specific not to receive a clear and definitive answer. 'I can't,' answered Juanito, in a voice that was as suggestive of stubbornness as it was of discomfort.

It seemed as if she was about to start crying as she asked. 'So you're not coming?'

Juanito, following The Girl into an adjacent room, answered, now more softly, 'But sweetheart, don't you understand that one cannot resolve things by simply running away from them?'

Deeply hurt by Juanito's words, The Girl shouted with sudden disdain, 'Oh, for Pete's sake! I'm not trying to force or oblige you to do anything... I mean if it's too much for you... I... I mean, at the end of the day, it wasn't I that started all this.'

'What do you mean, 'you didn't start all this!''

Juanito had raised his voice, speaking nearly violently, and in the library, Juanita could clearly hear that the sentence had been formed much more like an exclamation than the question that the word order suggested it to be. She trembled as she – barefoot, and making sure not to make a single sound – tiptoed up to the door that separated the living room from the library; she put her ear against the door so as not to miss a single word.

'Don't be so insolent!' exclaimed The Girl. 'Do you hear me? Ah! You just proved that what we think about you Spaniards is all perfectly true. You talk, and you talk, but that's all. You all seem full of passion and love and then, then what? Nothing!' Finally managing to contain herself she added, 'This very afternoon, at the tennis court, you assured me that you would come with me: that you would follow me, and that you would do so to the World's End if necessary. And I, the poor fool, believed you! If you had been serious, you would have arrived with your passport in your pocket.'

'Don't be like that! I haven't been dishonest with you! I really have decided to come with you... To elope with you to...' he hesitated for a moment and then, suddenly in a much warmer voice – a deep and burning voice that Juanita had never heard him use before – he added; 'Here's my passport,' patting the back pocket of his trousers, 'but... I've thought it over, and it can't be tonight. I can't run away with you tonight: I simply cannot.'

'Don't you want me anymore?'

'Want you?' M... me?' he stammered for a moment and then added decidedly, 'I've never said I wanted you.'

The Girl, apparently totally taken aback, shouted, 'What!'

'I'm in love with you, deeply in love,' Juanito explained, 'but I don't want you. Those two are not the same thing.'

'Where's all this coming from?' The Girl asked, sarcastically, and she immediately went on, now in an even more cynical voice, 'And her, your precious Juanita, are you in love with her as well?'

'Well no, but her I really want, and that's sort of the problem.'

'Well, you're not explaining yourself properly! And as I've never known you to try to be subtle, that makes me suspicious.'

At first, Juanito did not answer, and as he finally did, it seemed as if he was talking to himself rather than to The Girl, 'We've been betrothed since we were children. We had hardly started to walk and now...' at this point, it seemed as if he suddenly recalled that he was talking to The Girl, and, seemingly surprised; he went off in a fit of rage, 'How could you possibly understand these things? The one thing I'm sure about is that I can't just go up to her – coldly, uncaring, with a suitcase in one hand, my passport in the other and a smile on my lips – and say, 'Listen, Juanita, I'm leaving... Yes, I'm running away with this girl that I've only known for five or six days. Can I have your blessing?' or something along those lines.'

'You're suffocating yourself under a pile of old-fashioned, sentimental rubbish,' replied The Girl with disdain. 'We're not in a museum, are we? And the arguments you're making are full of contradictions. In any case,' she added, ironically, 'don't worry; I won't force you to walk away from this posh mansion, and I've never proposed you'd do such a thing. But if I wanted to say something important, then I would say, 'Now the time has come for you to choose between love and want, assuming there is such a great difference between them!' And worst of all is that I've already spoken to Daddy about you, and he has prepared a cabin for you on our yacht, sending an important actor home by airplane, and as we are assumed to arrive in Gibraltar tomorrow, you'll have to be on board no more than half an hour after he signals us. And now I'm going; I don't want them to worry about me. I'll send a car to collect you,' and then she held out her hand, 'Well, I suppose I'll either see you later or never again then. Your move, darling.'

'Please, honey!' shouted Juanito, trying to contain himself, 'If you keep going on like that, as much as I love you...' but then, seemingly realizing that he might have gone too far, he added softly, 'I'm just asking you to give me some time, not much, just forty-eight measly hours. Leave and don't worry about it; I'll get everything sorted out, and we'll meet in Gibraltar. But you have to understand that whatever my feelings are, I will not behave like a pig.'

'No my darling,' replied The Girl, 'and I am not trying to make you act like one; on the contrary, I'm trying to make you act like a proper man.'

'Now listen!' shouted Juanito, again furiously.

The Girl looked at him, seemingly realizing that she had replied unbecomingly and, trying to erase the effect that her words had produced, she started flirting with him and, trying to flatter him, she continued, 'Come on, don't be like that. I didn't mean to offend you, just to make you understand that every time that something good in the world has been achieved, it's been out of love and not out of consideration or pity. What's more, you know that as well as I do.'

'Well,' replied Juanito, still upset, 'all that is very good, but you need to understand that we've spent our entire childhood and adolescence together: that we've always been there for each other, one for the other, in a way that has been so special, so special that... We were sweethearts, and we've always been sweethearts: do you understand? And that's how, together, we've grown up. At the end of the day, she's never stopped being the one thing in my life that is steady, decent, and pure. No matter what I've gotten up to – whether I was in the military, flying around in airplanes, entering competitions, or simply out rumbling all night – there has always been an image of certainty living deep inside me. Inside me has lived an image without a single shadow: and that image is of her, Juanita, deep in some book, trying to find answers to whatever bothered or interested her, with her enormous tortoise glasses. And though I wouldn't always think of her, she has always been living there inside of me; I carry her with me because she's a part of who I am.'

Juanita hadn't missed a single word of the conversation, and she had looked intensively at the door that separated the library from the living room. Then, as Juanito uttered those last words, she couldn't help but lower her head. All her emotions, everything she felt at that moment, was reflected in that slight head movement, yet what in particular it was that had caused it was something that she herself wouldn't have been able to explain. It could be the humiliation that she had undergone as she had heard him make his feelings clear, but it could equally well have been resignation or even a feeling of tenderness as she had noticed a certain sweetness in those last words that Juanito had spoken, especially when he had referred to her myopia and her glasses.

'And her, do you love her too?' asked The Girl.

Juanita again lifted her head to pay attention.

'I want her!' answered Juanito, 'I've already told you that!'

'Is she in love with you?'

'Of course, she is!'

'What do you mean 'of course'? 'asked The Girl. 'A moment ago you were telling me about how big a difference there is between wanting someone and being in love with them.'

'Don't dissect my words, woman!' Juanito exclaimed. 'When I'm distinguishing between want and love, I'm talking about men. Women are very different. With them, it's impossible to make a distinction.'

At that moment, the hoarse sound of a yacht's siren could be heard ringing out cleanly and clearly over the sound of the orchestra.

'Daddy must be getting irritated,' said The Girl, 'I have to go now, but I'm very sad that I'm about to lose you for no other reason than your silly stubbornness.'

'The day after tomorrow I will be in Gibraltar,' answered Juanito, trying to put an end to the argument.

'We're leaving at around midday tomorrow, so the day after tomorrow we will be well on our way to the Azores because he has to be in New York next Monday. So... Well, let us know what you decide...'

Juanito, unable to control his impatience, yet did his best to do so.

She ran her fingers through his hair and while adding, 'What a situation! But let's be clear about whom it is that's creating it!'

'You are so incredibly unfair!'

'If she loves you as much as you say she does – and if you can speak to her in total confidence, as you say you can... – then, not only would she completely understand, but also, she would be urging you to leave with me.'

For a moment, Juanito considered the possibility that what The Girl was suggesting could actually be true, 'Yes, perhaps Juanita would understand my feelings and accept it. Do you really think so?' he asked. 'Perhaps...'

'Do you want me to talk to her?' she asked, sweetly and swiftly. 'Where is she?'

'I don't know. Probably in her room,' The Girl got ready to go upstairs, when Juanito stopped her, 'No! Don't! I'll tell her.'

Then the yacht's siren sounded again; this time even louder and more impatient than before. The Girl was trying to say something when Juanito took her arm, 'You just leave. Don't worry. Send a car as soon as you get there. I'll be on board with my suitcases and, God willing, her pardon, within an hour.'

'Are you sure?'

'Totally.'

'That's why I love you!' she exclaimed, happily. The two of them embraced and, then, breaking up the embrace, she added, 'I must leave now! Goodbye, Juanito!' She looked back at him from the door; smiling, she wrapped herself theatrically in her overcoat and said, as she raised a hand, 'Goodbye Juanito, see you soon Don Juan!'

*

In the library – as she could hear them leave: first The Girl and then her fiancée – Juanita went back to her seat and took off her glasses. The tremendous sadness that she was experiencing reflected itself in her short-sighted eyes, and as her tears fell onto the book that she had come to gather advice and inspiration from, they peered into the dark surrounding emptiness, and she whispered in a desperate voice, "Don Juan"... Is that really who you are?"

At that moment, from the other end of the library, a clear, if slightly drowsy, a voice responded, 'Yes that is who I am.'

Juanita had felt certain that she had been alone, and she was equally sure that no one could have entered the library while she had been eavesdropping. Startled, she looked around, but everything remained in darkness and blurriness. She put on her glasses, lit, and then raised the lamp, leaned forward, and pointed it towards where she figured the voice must have originated.

The man, with both hands protecting his eyes from the light, responded, 'Stop that! What are you on about?'

Though Juanita couldn't identify her interlocutor, she could see that he, apart from being handsome, was dressed in tails, quite appropriately.

As he began to approach her, she again asked, 'Who are you?'

'Don Juan.'

'What Don Juan?'

'Well... just Don Juan.'

'I would like to know more precisely who you are.'

'The majordomo told me the same thing when he let me in.'

'And what are you doing here?'

'Sleeping.'

'In the library?'

'I'm one of those rare individuals who have a conscience light enough to sleep in a library even in the dark. Also, it's been at least a century since I frequented this place, and I've returned despite the fact I am not at all certain that it's a very good idea.'

Juanita looked at him, somewhat frightened until she recalled what she had just overheard. Hurriedly, she reached out for her bag on the table, and with a voice full of emotion, though she was trying to control herself, she whispered, 'Excuse me, but the guests...'

‘Yes, they must be missing you by now, mustn’t they?’ interrupted Don Juan, ‘But rather than going back to entertain them, you’d really prefer to remain hidden in this place where you can weep and hide so that the young man who’s intending to leave you can’t find you.’

‘How do you know about that?’ asked Juanita, intrigued. ‘Have you been eavesdropping?’

‘I heard it all.’

‘Sleeping, were you?’ asked Juanita, now with a sad smile, and suddenly feeling a little less unsure of herself.

‘Yes,’ replied Don Juan, smiling, ‘When I sleep, I often hear words of love, and when I wake up, I can recall and repeat every word I’ve heard.’

The man’s response made what little self-assurance Juanita had recovered, vanish instantly. Resolutely, she got ready to leave the library. ‘Well then,’ she said, ‘I’m going back to see to the guests!’

‘I’ve always been an ardent admirer of feminine heroism,’ replied Don Juan, not even pretending to sound serious.

‘Poke fun at me all you want,’ said Juanita, proudly, ‘I prefer to face the music and to give him the blessing that he is about to ask for.’

Don Juan smiled and, now with even more irony than before, he exclaimed, ‘Such nobility! Such Stoicism!’

‘Enjoy yourself on my behalf as much as you like!’ replied Juanita haughtily, now at the point of tears. ‘I’m more self-sacrificing and noble than you can imagine, and I’m about to be so despite that I am now finally understanding how much in love with him I am.’

‘For now, yes.’

‘For now, from before and for always.’

‘No, that’s not true. Wake up to reality. You only fell in love with him the moment you learned that someone else wanted him and when you realized that your sweetheart intended to leave you for this other.’

‘You don’t know a thing about us. You’re from another world. You’re from; I know not where you are from...’ Juanita answered, lowering her head and focusing her eyes on a particularly elaborate bookend. She noticed that although by now she had regained most of her outward equilibrium, she still could not control her feelings, something that made the situation feel very awkward. She now found herself in front of this stranger with the same name as the fictional character that she had gone to the library to seek advice from: a stranger who had no reason or right whatsoever to be there. At first, the man had frightened her; appearing as if out of nowhere and saying that he had heard every word that had been spoken. However, that fear had by now been canceled: at first only by the great sorrow that she felt but by now also by her curiosity. She glanced at the man, sort of inviting him to say something.

Don Juan said nothing.

‘I feel like I’ve been ripped into two...’ she started as if about to commence a lengthy soliloquy, ‘As if... as if he was as much mine as I was his. I never imagined that it could end like this: that some foreigner one day would come along and simply rip us apart and take him away... What can I have done to deserve such a terrible fate?’

Don Juan at first did not answer, yet he did look at her curiously. He had followed the words that she had spoken attentively, although with a slightly ironic smile. Then, having reflected over the rhetorical question, he suggested, ‘You could always join a convent.’

‘What?’

‘Forgive me – anemia, insomnia, barbiturate poisoning, existentialist novels, too much wine and each year the prescription for your glasses going up a quarter of a diopter – you’re right, not a good idea.’

Juanita had not really listened and when she continued it was, just like before, mainly to herself, ‘And when I think that within an hour, the pair of them will be together under the starry night sky, holding each other, dreaming about the future... And then, her, dressed

in white like a baby doll, in the town hall of 'Chinchinati'... And him, dressed in the morning coat that we had made at Father's tailors. It's unbearable!' Stunned, she allowed herself to collapse into an armchair, whereupon she broke into tears.

Don Juan, now suddenly with a very serious demeanor, went up to her.

'I'm genuinely surprised that your immature ramblings have managed to move me,' he said, 'I'm surprised that well into this century there is still a nearly fully grown woman opting to sob, rather than to say *'en garde'* or at least to think straight.'

Juanita did not seem to have heard these last comments, and she resumed her soliloquy. 'What I really ought to do is to go look for a knife in the kitchen and then to put an end to it all.' then she raised her head to acknowledge Don Juan's presence; the man was looking at her with what seemed to be nothing other than curiosity. 'How could I ever be able to forget him? How would that even be possible?' she asked, looking up as if expecting the answer to be written on the ceiling.

'As to your second question; because actually, you don't love him.'

'What can I do? My God, what can I do?' exclaimed Juanita, without taking any notice of Don Juan's silly interruption, yet she did take note that it had rather suggested a question.

'And as to your first question, though it probably wasn't directed at me,' continued Don Juan, politely, 'Many things; it all depends on what you want to achieve.'

Juanita raised her head and looked at him. Possessed by a violent desire to have an outburst, she screamed, 'The impossible!'

'That he doesn't leave?'

'Of course!'

Don Juan smiled. The curiosity that the girl had awoken in him was now being further stimulated. Though he had not expected the answer, he had considered the possibility that she might answer as she had just done, 'And that seems impossible to you?'

Surprised, she exclaimed, 'How couldn't it be impossible under these circumstances! What could I possibly do? Ask that he stays out of compassion? Beg him? Humiliate myself? Such actions would point me in a direction, and to a future, I would not have. I'd rather he left!'

'Bravo! Well said! But having as clear a mind as you obviously have, why don't you use it to make him beg you to let him stay?'

ONLY THE LANDSCAPE
CHANGES

1. THE LITTLE WOODEN HORSE

He wobbled a little for just a moment, getting close to losing his balance and falling off the round platform upon which he was balancing. It must have been close to midnight. The moon, which he would have to challenge to escape, was hiding behind a big dark cloud. There was not a biped in sight when the little wooden horse finally decided that the time had come for his big move. He was going to escape from the itinerant amusement park, the unpleasant bipeds, and the merry-go-round on which he had spent his entire life. Though sometimes, the bipeds would take all the horses down to be fixed if we got dented and we would be painted if our color was scratched – this always felt nice. But sometimes they wouldn't be so nice, and instead, put all of us in a small room where we would wait for many days; but eventually, they would take us in large boxes on wheels to a new place where they would put up the merry go round once more and fit us all on them.

After the last trip of the day, the operator had prepared to straighten out the bent brass bar that served both to support the horse and to keep him locked into the position of servitude that fate had allocated him, *My stick and my carrot all in one...* However, the operator had failed to put the bar back in place this evening, because just at the moment when he had finished straightening it out, the director of the amusement park had come over to the operator's truck with a big glass bottle filled with something the bipeds called moonshine. They drank for several hours, making merry noises, and when the director finally left on unsteady legs, night had fallen, and only a handful of visitors had remained.

Being freed from the vertical brass bar, the horse, not wanting to draw attention to himself, had remained in his allocated position as the leading horse in the front row, patiently waiting for the last remaining visitors to disappear. It had been over an hour since the last visitors had left the park, and through all that time the little wooden horse had waited, motionless, on the edge of the merry-go-round's wooden base, fearing that his escape would awaken the operator who was presumably sleeping inside his old truck, which was parked right next to the merry-go-round.

The operator had started to snore very loudly, the coast seemed clear, the wind was favorable, and the little wooden horse silently leaped off the merry-go-round. Without making the tiniest sound, he made it out of the amusement park and began trotting carefully down the wide highway. He could not understand why his legs felt as weak and trembling as they did. They had never felt like that before. *I am not that frightened...* he thought to himself. The most worrying consequence of this trembling was that he found it much more difficult to keep his balance than he had anticipated, and the hole in his back constantly reminded him that he would no longer be able to rely on the support that the brass bar had given him. *They are so clever.* It seemed that he had to gather every ounce of energy and willpower just to keep himself upright while putting some distance between himself and the park area. *How do I get up if I fall?*

As he stopped, he turned around to look back at the existence he was leaving behind. He could only just make out the merry-go-round under the sturdy trees that surrounded it. His keen ears did not detect a single sound, at least none that suggested that his escape had been noticed. Behind him, at a distance, he could see the headlights of a vehicle approaching.

Above him, a tired shooting star lingered in search of a place to rest for the night. *It seems that no one is satisfied with their lot in life,* he thought, objectively and in a sort of

philosophical way; at least, that was his impression of how he was thinking, even though the word 'philosophical' wasn't one that he felt all that comfortable with. Maybe this dissatisfaction applied as much to things with will and desires – things such as small wooden horses – as they did to things inanimate. *I wonder whether that shooting star would be happy with a life where it was held captive and in place by a brass bar.*

Suddenly, a beam of light struck him from behind, projecting his shortening shadow in front of him sharply. For a moment he stopped dead in the middle of the highway, bemused, but as the sound of the approaching vehicle impinged on his consciousness, he trotted as quickly as he could down to the path that ran parallel to the highway, where he hid inside a grove of saplings, exhausted. He watched how the vehicle – a big truck – drove past his hiding place and away, swiftly becoming smaller as the night and the highway enveloped it. In there, leaning against the lower branches of a little tree, he felt much more comfortable, and he suddenly realized what had exhausted him had not been running, so much as constantly having to make an effort to keep his balance and not fall over.

Though still exhausted, he no longer felt dizzy and was able to think clearly about what lay ahead. First of all, he would have to get out of the village unseen as swiftly as possible; if he was spotted before getting out, he would in all likelihood be captured and taken back to the merry-go-round. The reason for this was obvious: all of the biped-children in the village would recognize him, and out of nothing other than the pure wickedness that characterized most young bipeds, they would catch him and return him to the merry-go-round, the operator, the brass bar, the black horse who was his neighbor, and his slavery.

Once more he was on his way. Soon he found that he could improve his balance by imagining that the brass bar still ran through his back. This worked, allowing him to move his limbs much more freely and easily than before. His thighs virtually stopped giving him cramps, and he was practically galloping as he lunged forward, heading out into the great unknown.

A large cloud split itself into two, and the moon emerged between them, providing them both a pronounced silver lining as it reclaimed its celestial hegemony, smiled broadly, and made a wind that rustled the bushes.

He then trotted past a group of frogs who were sitting on big floating leaves, basking in the moonlight in the middle of a small roadside pond. As he approached, they were engaged in what must have been a tremendously intense argument, but the little wooden horse could not understand a word. Then, as he passed them, he saw them dive off their big leaves and into the water, and with a smug smile he observed their cowardice: they had not even taken the time to close their mouths before they jumped. *I am sure they have never dared to venture further than a few jumps away from their little pond.*

A sudden strong breeze from the side disturbed what had turned into a confident gallop, but only for a few moments. He immediately regained the mental picture of the brass bar running through his back. *As long as I can imagine that, no wind will ever be able to topple me over*, he thought, and he continued his journey with renewed purpose and strength.

A little while later he passed a white milestone, and the sight delighted him so much that he only just managed to keep himself from whinnying out loud. He had reached the town limit, and he was thus out of immediate danger. At that distance, even if he did meet someone, there would be a good chance that he wouldn't be recognized and thus brought back. *Though it's a great pity that I do not know the way.*

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He had recognized the milestone because he was escaping along the same route by which the company had entered the town; though, from there onwards, he had no idea as to the route. *I should have paid better attention as we arrived.* He had not given much thought to how he would go about getting to where he was heading, being preoccupied with the urgent need to reach the town limit. Having reached his first goal, he didn't have the slightest idea

of which direction to take to reach his final destination. *But if it is true that we are born to be free, then maybe freedom itself will guide me*, he reflected.

Actually, that sounded quite plausible. Though he did not know how to get there, he had heard his destination spoken of several times: the continent where horses lived freely or at least lived under no other rules than their own. In that place, horses didn't have to work for anyone. *At least not as long as one can avoid being captured by the red bipeds who had feathers growing from their heads instead of hair*. As the horses in that place normally had no dealings with the bipeds, they were not subjugated to the will or whims of any amusement park owners or annoying biped children. The children riding on his back, and on the other animals', had often spoken about this continent, and it was to seek out this marvelous place that he had made his great escape. Though he did not know how to get there, he knew that the name of the continent where this horse-paradise was located: 'America.'

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It was not that the little wooden horse hated the bipeds or even the biped children. How could he, especially as feelings of hatred were alien to him, and something of which he was incapable? It was more that he never had felt even the slightest bit of affection or sympathy towards them. The way the bipeds behaved simply did very little to impress him, and to the little wooden horse, all of them looked the same. Well, he could tell big from small, male biped from female, and child from... No, he did not even want to think about them; not now, when he had finally managed to escape the slavery they had imposed on him.

Of late, he had not had very many dealings with them, because most of them seemed to prefer to visit the bearded lady or the dwarf theater, or to destroy balloons with air guns. Moreover, of those who did get onto the merry-go-round, most favored the lions or the dragons. *As if they were any better than us!* Many of the bipeds poured liquids down their gullets with repetitive motions, and if one of these happened to stray onto the merry-go-round, it would often quickly get off with an upset stomach, throwing up the liquid it had just poured down; sometimes, if the biped did not manage to get off quick enough, the liquid got spewed over the horse's mane. The merry-go-round was indeed losing out to the other amusement activities; that was very clear. Besides, neither women nor young girls liked the merry-go-round, because the animals were uncomfortable for them to sit on, and they claimed that there was nowhere for them to put their legs and at the same time keeping their dignity. Therefore, the little horse's knowledge of bipeds was limited mainly to males, especially male children, towards whom the little horse of late had indeed begun to feel something nearly akin to hostility. In his mind, he held them as the main cause of the miserable existence that he had just escaped.

These male children were loud, ruthless, filthy, and capricious, and the presence of such a child was a constant danger to the physical and mental wellbeing of whichever animals they sat on. If it got onto the animal of its own free will, which was not always the case, it would immediately start kicking its mount in the belly or the flanks, often accompanying the barrage with totally inappropriate shouts of "Giddy-up!" or "Get a move on!" designed to make the animal move faster. *How can they be so stupid that they believe we can run faster when we have brass bars stuck through our bodies?* If some grown-up biped had put the boy on the little horse's back against the boy's will, then the child would invariably start shouting in desperation and cling on to the horse's mane, tug at his hair or grip onto his neck with sticky fingers, dirtying his shiny body. And, even worse, sometimes a child would wet himself in the saddle, leaving behind a stench. It was undoubtedly a sad, demeaning, and unfair world that the little wooden horse was now leaving behind.

His next-bar neighbor, the black horse, was probably already regretting that he had not taken him up on his offer to join in the escape. The black horse's bar had also been removed to be straightened, so he too had had the opportunity to flee the tyranny of the bipeds. *Now,*

he is old enough to take charge of his destiny, so why should I pity him? the wooden horse thought to himself, although his harsh words did conceal a certain amount of sympathy. Yet, the black horse would have to acknowledge that his neighbor had done everything in his power to convince him to come along.

The little wooden horse, galloping along in a vacant and somewhat pensive mood, felt as if he was flying through the deep night. Things were going well, and even the breeze seemed to be cooperating; it had stayed with him, pushing him on from behind to assist and encourage his brave escape. However, the moon had reached its zenith a little too soon for comfort, yet there it seemed intent on resting for a while before continuing its journey across the night sky. An old rabbit fled in terror and took refuge inside the trunk of a long-dead tree, and the little horse could hear it breathing heavily in there.

All these things – trifling little events that on the surface were of very little interest – served to fortify him, and with each new experience, his belief in himself and his chances of success grew stronger. If the old pink elephant with the recently replaced trunk which had stood left and nearly opposite of him in the inner row could see how gracefully he cut through the night air...

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Suddenly a little male biped on a bicycle appeared, moving over to the right side of the road as he spotted the little horse, *What is a little biped doing out bicycling in the middle of the night?* The biped looked at length and with surprise at him as he passed by, then it laughed in a hiccupy way and playfully sounded the bicycle bell. After that, both bicycle and biped swiftly disappeared, but the little horse immediately came to a halt. This sudden stopping happened against his will – *Well I didn't want to stop, so why have I?* – and took him by surprise.

Frightened, initially close to panicking, he examined the situation, and as he was able to keep his head cool in this awkward situation – a situation in which he felt certain that most if not all of the other animals on the merry-go-round would have lost theirs – it didn't take him long to understand what had happened. *An atavistic phenomenon*, he concluded, *which probably happens to everybody with a job like mine: an occupational hazard. This trivial incident, a mere blip, mustn't be allowed to become the cause of failure. All I need is another cyclist.*

It was a swiftly constructed diagnosis, but it was neither exaggerated, in any way rushed nor incorrect. During his life on the merry-go-round, the ringing of a bell had signaled both the beginning and the end of his 'trips,' and in all likelihood, this had caused his reaction to the ringing of the young biped's bicycle bell. The little wooden horse, unable to move, fell into a bad mood; it seemed his path was strewn with stupid obstacles. Neither his loss of balance nor this involuntary halt had occurred to him whilst he had been planning his escape. *How different reality is from theory!*

He was stuck there for a long time, unable to move. An old male biped passed by, shaking its head and looking accusingly at the bottle in its hand, and an old rabbit eventually ventured up to stand on its hind legs and sniff at him. As night began to shrink away, a few stars seemed to flicker at the little horse compassionately. In a nearby field, the breeze whipped the dust up into a cone and then scattered it amongst the bushes that lined the road. The little horse tried to keep a positive mindset despite his precarious situation. *That bicycle: with a bit of luck, it will return*, he thought, still paralyzed, and forcing himself not to look at the old rabbit, that now had positioned itself right in front of him, sniffing at him, nostrils to nostrils, and looking at him with a shameless curiosity and without a trace of the respect that would become a rabbit looking at a horse, paralyzed or not. As if trying to make up for its earlier tardiness, the moon had begun to make haste towards the horizon. The little wooden horse did not like this one bit. *That's all I need*, he thought, because losing

the moon could well in one way or the other signal the failure of his attempt to escape and to reach the continent of America.

Of course, he had never expected to be able to outrun the moon on his escape; he was much too intelligent and knowledgeable a horse to imagine such a thing. However, he had hoped, and partly expected, to be able to keep up with it long enough to keep the night going until he arrived at the continent where horses were their own masters. The disappearance of the moon normally meant that the sun would soon rise and awake the bipeds from whatever nooks and crannies they inhabited. Though he didn't understand precisely why, he knew that if he weren't able to keep up with the moon – following it at its own pace to keep the night going – there would probably be no chance for him to reach his intended destination. Feelings of terror mixed themselves with sadness and growing despair as he contemplated his tense, incapacitated limbs.

Then suddenly there was a noise behind him, far away. The rabbit heard it too, and it swiftly vanished into the old log. A faint ray of light appeared, yet the horse could not hear the sound of a car. The hope that it was a bicycle flared up inside him. Then he heard another sound, that of rubber tires against dirt. As the sound became louder, the light grew in strength, and then there was the sound of brakes engaging. He then could discern biped voices and bits of sentences before he suddenly heard what he had so longed for: the ringing of a bell. It was not very strong, and under normal circumstances, he might not even have noticed it. The ringing was not even directed towards him, but rather at somebody who was throwing away a sack of old potatoes. But that was all it took to free him. Not wanting to hear a second ring, he took off like an arrow.

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The little horse launched himself ahead and towards the moon; his legs were rested, and his spirit once again was high. The dew that had settled on his body dissipated quickly. The memory of the rude rabbit continued to irritate him for a while, but as he continued to gather speed that soon vanished as well. He realized that in the future he would have to pay closer attention to bicycles. Then he thought, *Maybe the red bipeds do not use bicycles*, and allowed himself to surrender to the pleasure of speed. He did not think about anything in particular, and his gaze was firmly fixed on the descending moon as he galloped along faster and faster, soon reaching a velocity at which he had never before traveled. Red and white pillars that trucks parked next to in order to attach a pipe occasionally appeared along the highway; he prudently avoided them, even though they did not represent any real threat as they all seemed to be shut down and sleeping through the night. A bat emerged from behind the chimney of an old house and approached him, apparently intrigued, in a measured and masterful flight.

I will be more prudent in the future, the little horse promised himself. For a while, he tried to look at the moon with one eye and to look out for bicycles with the other but this effort soon turned out to be quite tiring. Furthermore, trying to look at two things at the same time slowed him down, so he swiftly took his eye off the ground, humming to himself to drown out the sound of any distant bells which might ring.

He was a little bothered by the bat that had seemingly decided to become his traveling companion. *It does not matter. No reason to pay it any attention. It'll soon stop following me. I'm sure it won't dare to venture very far from its cave or tower. It might even crash into a tree or something.* It was tracing out ever more complex geometrical figures above him, demonstrating with irritating clarity its superiority at navigating through the air. *Bats must be related to dragons: that would explain why they are so insolent.* Indeed, it did not take long before the bat disappeared, presumably realizing that it had strayed too far from home.

Far away, beyond where the big broad road beneath him took a turn to the left, he discerned what he took for the lights of a big city rising towards the sky. The road then

became wider, joining itself with another big road, which already had some early morning traffic on it. A truck driver was left open-mouthed in surprise at the sight of the little wooden horse, and the driver braked the very moment he came up alongside him. The little horse was also startled, but as luck would have it, ahead of him there was a turn-off onto a horse trail, which he took. The driver, who had brought his vehicle to a full stop, did not follow him. Instead, he restarted his truck again, and the little horse could hear some very impolite and loud shouts from behind. He immediately realized that the change of road had been a good thing. The horse path itself was worse than the nice big road he had just left, being covered in dirt clods, but as his hooves barely touched the ground, they were of no importance. The best thing, as he soon realized, was that no bicycles would be likely to come his way as long as he stayed on this rough path.

His supposition turned out to be correct, and he swiftly covered mile after mile in perfect solitude and harmony. He was regaining his confidence, his nostrils flared, breathing in the wind, and he happily noticed how he was running even faster than before; something he deduced from the fact that the frogs no longer had enough time to stop their chattering as he approached, but only jumped into their ponds once he had already passed them by. A vixen got so frightened by his sudden appearance that she dived into a pond covered with reeds as if to join the frogs. His entire being was smiling as a great feeling of calm and satisfaction came over him. He was convinced that he was catching up with the moon; considering how fast he was galloping it seemed inevitable, and if he could only keep up his present pace, soon the moon would again be high above him. The little horse was ecstatic because once more he was convinced that he was about to make it to the continent where horses were free.

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His life was starting to take on new meaning – or rather, meaning, full stop – and it was not only the future that would become different. The past too – a past that had been laden with nothing but apparent pointlessness and suffering – was starting to take on meaning. The misery he had been through would no longer have been in vain, because thanks to it, at great cost, he had achieved both maturity and wisdom. The experience of his past was what would keep him humble, yet in the future, he would never flaunt either his experience or his wisdom. He would only talk to ask questions to increase his wisdom and experience even further. He would especially ask questions to clear up the one big conundrum that was – and, for as long as he could remember, had been – his main preoccupation and source of disharmony.

*

More than anything else, he wanted to solve, once and for all, the one problem that had denied him and his fellow animals on the merry-go-round the harmony that they all yearned for: he wanted to find the answer to the question “Who is first on the merry-go-round?”. To an observer who did not spend all of his days on the merry-go-round, it might seem strange, or even ridiculous, that a monumental problem could arise from their inability to answer such a simple question. However, the deplorable fact was that this question had kept the small group of animals from reaching a homogeneous unity for as long as the little horse could remember. All attempts to resolve the matter – to reach some form of understanding, or at least some form of agreement – had failed.

As time had gone by, various groupings had formed, all of which had had one thing in common: they had never managed to resolve anything in regards to the crucial issue of leadership. Arguments, quarrels, and harsh words had been the order of the day, all making their already miserable existences as the biped’s serfs even less bearable. The groupings would invariably all eventually dissolve, but only after having caused them all many

grievances, as well as giving life to new groupings that would continue a sort of cycle and thus create certainty that there would be more discord ahead. *How many times did we try to resolve this infernal situation with a vote? How many?* It was painful even to think about it. Whatever promises and compromises had been made had dissolved as voting day approached, like bubbles of soap into thin air. When the vote was taken, each of the animals represented on the merry-go-round would systematically and faithfully vote for nobody but himself – or his species, rather, as there were two of each – regardless of what had been promised or whether the ballot was a secret one or not.

Let's take, as an example, the elephants. They were undoubtedly the largest and heaviest of the animals, but in a way, they were also the most fragile, as demonstrated by the fact that they were both severely mutilated. Their trunks would break off all the time, and it was indeed unusual for the merry-go-round to visit a place without at least one of them having to have its trunk replaced, repaired, or glued back together. The kids all preferred to sit on the trunks rather than on the elephants' backs, and though they weren't allowed to do that, and it was virtually inevitable that at the end of the ride, they would try to slide down the elephants' trunks, at least as long as they were not scared stiff or removed by the adult bipeds. Also, the elephants had tails that made them look pathetic. *Just give me one reason why they should be the first. Because they weigh more than the rest of us together? Because they are incapable of forgetting an insult? Don't be ridiculous!*

And what about the camels? They were superficial creatures indeed; void of intelligence, with a stupidity that was matched only by the malevolence they felt towards their African biped masters. They stayed well clear of getting involved in the business of others – 'detachment,' they called it, though 'lack of intelligence' was a much more likely reason – yet it had to be admitted that their disinclination to communicate reduced the number of arguments that one had to listen to. However, could that be considered a virtue: a positive quality from the point of view of what makes a good leader? Their physical constitution was more than enough to show that they were meant for a life of servitude; had Nature ever created a more comfortable seat for a biped? Furthermore, the African bipeds, during their desert crossings, would use the camels' stomachs as water deposits for themselves. Yet, the camels themselves would claim that they knew dozens of tricks and subterfuges designed to rid themselves of their riders, to leave them to die in the sunbaked desert whenever they felt so inclined. They would also claim that they too had a continent of their own, one called Australia, where they lived in freedom, just as horses did in America, except that the Australian camels had no red bipeds to fear. In any case, they were not capable of proving any of these claims; how could they? Then there was their lack of a pleasing appearance... Well, they could hardly be held responsible for their ugliness, but that such creatures – malicious and shallow 'biped water drinking vessels' with such an appearance – should be first... *Unthinkable.*

Then there were the dragons and their nearly-as-ludicrous case for being the first. They were all superficial gossipers – gifted with incredible oratory skills, true, but that was pretty much it. They had dominated the competition for some time – though admittedly only was because the lions refused to discuss the matter – yet they had never gotten even close to obtaining a majority of the votes. In fact, they had received no votes whatsoever besides their own two. Their claim to superiority, and primacy, was based partly on the alleged fact that they had dominated the world for more time than any other species. This was something that the unicorns had disputed most vociferously, but then the unicorns had been removed from the merry-go-round and replaced by turtles because biped parents objected to the unicorns' sharp horns, even though no accident had ever occurred. The dragons also argued that no other animal in the air, in the sea or on the land could match their pride. At one time their leadership had almost been accepted, at least in part because it had not been easy to dispute any of their arguments. Then, quite recently, it had been discovered that dragons did not exist outside the world of amusement parks, art, and fictional literature: that they were simply mythological creatures to whom the scientists paid no attention whatsoever. However, the unicorns, just before their removal, had unexpectedly claimed that they were

ready to change sides; they had started to support the dragons, even promising to vote for them... It had all been very confusing. *How could something that doesn't really exist lead us?*

And, what about the zebras? The little horse didn't have a very clear opinion of them as they were placed directly opposite him on the merry-go-round, so the central part of the construction prevented him from seeing them. Therefore, what little he knew about them – apart from the few glimpses that he had gathered during repairs, during construction or in the mirror of the hurdy-gurdy – came mainly from very unreliable hearsay. Actually, he had intended to examine his little-known companions before he escaped, but in his excited anticipation of the adventure ahead of him he had forgotten. But these pretentious animals, in addition to claiming to be related to the horses, treated the horses like *their* descendants. To form a picture of them, he had mainly to rely on what the dragons had told him and, as everybody knew, trusting a dragon on a matter of fact was about as clever as believing an elephant when it told you it had forgotten about an old injustice. Anyhow, the little horse pictured the zebras as small beasts with short necks and hairless tails that looked like whips. Also, they had black and white stripes like the biped prisoners that sometimes helped to put up the merry-go-round and the tents. *I mean, to be quite honest about it, how could anyone take seriously the idea of being led by someone who tries to look like a biped prisoner?*

As the wooden boards of the bridge that crossed the stream clattered loudly under his hooves, the little horse for a moment was ripped out of his ponderings. Then, when the path ahead of him forked, he chose quickly, almost instinctively, as he did not want to slow down his pace. He could no longer see the moon: had he really beaten it? Yes, he must have; he was sure that he must have beaten it and left it behind some time ago. *It is all a question of will and patience*, he thought, filling up with pride. But was it possible to beat the moon? Maybe Nature's laws, laws that he did not know of, restricted the moon; maybe it was not even allowed to compete with him. Maybe it was not aware of him galloping through the night, or maybe there was one moon for everyone? *Who knows?* As no biped, bicycle or other distraction appeared, he lost himself again in thoughts about the merry-go-round and about which animals should come first.

The turtles. Thinking about them, he involuntarily slowed down a little. Yes, they were even-tempered, wise, and sensible; there was no way that could be denied. They were also benevolent and indisputably the most modest of all animals, maybe in awe of the unicorns that they had replaced. They were strong, tenacious, and capable of outliving even the elephants. All true, but was there ever another creature as conservative and old-fashioned? They abhorred all forms of change, even the slightest suggestion of it, and they would get dizzy every time the merry-go-round started. They hated speed, which seemed quite paradoxical since their main claim to fame seemed to consist in that one of them had beaten a rabbit in some race a long time ago. Well, even if one granted that one of them had beaten a rabbit in a race, once... *What do rabbits have to do with anything?* Rabbits were not even represented on the merry-go-round. They were stupid and timid creatures. When it snowed, they would, sneak in underneath the merry-go-round under cover of the night and gnaw at the boards until they ran away, presumably scared off by the sound of their own gnawing. Moreover, it would not be rabbits that the leaders of the merry-go-round would have to stand up to, but all animals' one true and common enemy: the bipeds! *I mean, if the turtles cannot even stand up on their hind legs, how could they ever stand up to the bipeds?*

What about the lions? Refusing to be drawn into a discussion, they rejected – angrily, arrogantly and dismissively – virtually any argument against their superiority; most of the time they would not even acknowledge that they could be compared to any other animal, not even to tigers, saying that would be like comparing a light bulb to the sun. They were allegedly strong, powerful, reliable, fast, beautiful, and brave, and some said Nature itself had made them the kings of all animals. Strong? Yes. Powerful? Yes. But lazy as well. Reliable? Sort of, but only when they were not hungry. Fast? Yes, but only over short distances. Beautiful? Perhaps... Brave? Not on your life. Everyone knew that whenever they came across a biped on the savannah, they would run away with their tails between

their legs, even allowing the bipeds to steal their food. They had to be starved half to death before they would attack a biped, and even then they would normally go for a child, a woman, or an old male without a spear. And really, were they beautiful? Well, that was a question of opinion. Truthfully, the female was not ugly, but the male with his large disheveled mane looked almost ridiculous as if he had swapped part of his hide for a bear's fur. However, these were not important issues, as nobody can choose his or her body. The main argument against the lions was that it was not Nature at all – not the animals that make up Nature but rather the bipeds – that had proclaimed lions to be the kings of all animals. The bipeds liked lions; they liked them so much that they even pictured them on their flags and made sculptures of them. *How could anyone trust an animal that the bipeds love and trust?*

And that just leaves the giraffes. Though quite possibly the most absurd of all, their claim was at least different. Rather than directly asserting their superiority, the giraffes claimed that the bipeds preferred them and that those same bipeds who had to be fought could not possibly be wrong; a way of reasoning that in itself ought to be enough to preclude the giraffes from any leadership discussion. Their necks were excessively large, something that not only added to their caricaturesque appearance but also had the consequence that they did not, standing upright, fit under the roof of the merry-go-round. Its designer – obviously for this reason and this reason alone – must have forced them to lean forward, towards and partly over the animals that preceded them. And in addition, there had to be a little more space between them and the animals in front of them than between other animals. Of course, the giraffes did not accept the perfectly logical and straightforward explanation that they did not fit unless bent but instead argued that this extra space had been granted them as a sign of their superiority. The most annoying part of this absurd explanation was that, if one were to accept it, then the last characters on the merry-go-round would become the horses, as they preceded the giraffes. *Horses last! Ridiculous!*

So, that was it; the giraffes were the last animals on the roundabout to be taken into account. How to decide?

The little horse looked towards the horizon. It had changed color while he had been lost in thought; it had lost its pinkish hue and was taking on a vibrant shade of gold and silver. Deep down, maybe on a subconscious level, he realized what was happening. In a way he even... No, he did not want to think about it. Instead, he kept on galloping, instinctively choosing the route towards America every time the road forked, and his focus soon returned to his old companions back on the merry-go-round. *If it was up to me. If I had to decide. Would I then know how to resolve the matter fairly? Perhaps... Yes. If I was able to forget that I was a horse and thus have a vested interest in the matter. But would it be possible to forget that? How would I do that? Let me try.*

Galloping into the brightness of the approaching day – *It could be the sunset: I could have caught up with yesterday* – he made a great effort to control his instincts and all the prejudices that came along with the 'being-a-horse' packet. Once he felt that he had achieved this, he recalled the merry-go-round, and he coldly examined his former companions. *Let's decide, before anything else, what the essential virtues of a good leader are.* That was not very easy to do. *What are they?* Thankfully, the little horse had thought about this important question several times before, and he had come up with the answer. Quite dispassionately, he had decided what the desired qualities were: intelligence, benevolence, understanding, strength, patience, and public-spiritedness. *That's six qualities, and each will be worth one point. The animal that scores the highest number of points will undeniably be the one worthy of claiming leadership and thus the first position on the merry-go-round.* Absorbed in his thoughts, the little horse galloped along.

He began with the elephants, to whom he allotted three points: one for strength, one for benevolence, and one for compassion. To the camels, he awarded only one, for patience. He could not deny the dragons' intelligence, understanding, and strength, but he was not prepared to give them any points beyond that. The zebras, strangely, received exactly the same three points for being intelligent, understanding, and strong. The turtles, despite his

great dislike for them – or, rather, for their conservative disposition – got four points for being intelligent, good-natured, strong, and understanding; maybe he should have given them a fifth, for public-spiritedness, but he decided not to. The lions, as he had chosen to include neither bravery nor beauty, qualities in which they arguably were lacking, scored points for everything except a public-spiritedness. He would happily have gone on without giving the giraffes a single point, but he revised his judgment and granted them one out of fairness and good sportsmanship (although he did not really know for what) maybe for strength.

The only animals left were the horses. This was the most delicate and difficult call to make, and he could only make himself an impartial judge at the cost of a nearly overwhelming effort. He thought about every single point a dozen times. He assessed all of his species' flaws, all of its weaknesses – evaluating and ruthlessly scrutinizing each quality or lack thereof as part of a gargantuan effort to make sure not to commit the slightest of injustices. Finally, whether he wanted to or not, he was compelled to award the horses all six points for their undeniable intelligence, kindness, understanding, patience, strength, and well-developed public-spiritedness. He had reached his decision fairly. Who could doubt his objectivity?

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He raised his head at precisely the right moment to allow him so stop running and avoid a collision with the familiar round object which had popped up right in front of him, blocking his path. *Not again.*

MOTHER UNKNOWN

PART ONE

It had already started to get dark when the police finally released him.

As the officer in charge of the dayshift had explained that he was free to leave - the man had done so with obvious displeasure and, of course, only because his superiors had ordered him to - one of the other policemen had returned his shoelaces, his tie and his electric razor that Kurt contemptuously tossed into a bin. The reluctant first officer then walked him to the door.

Once out on the pavement, Kurt was hit by Tangier's cold and sandy December wind. He pulled up the collar of his overcoat, after which he slowly started to make his way towards the marketplace. It seemed to be getting dark unusually quick; as if the weather was trying to convince the citizens of the town that despite the cold weather it really was situated in Africa. As soon as he was out of sight of the police station, Kurt picked up his pace; the slow stroll that he had forced upon himself had been a show put on for whomever if anyone had watched him from the police station. For a brief moment, he could see the lights from across the Gibraltar Straits. He continued down along a wide avenue, lined with palm-trees until he turned into a small steep street. He raised his pace - he was nearly running, as if afraid of the sound of his own steps - until, arriving at the main marketplace, the violent thumps of his heart forced him to stop. His hands were shaking, sweat dampened his brow, and he felt dizzy. Right next to him, a friendly-looking stone lion was vomiting water into a stone bowl. Kurt sat down on the beast's back, and there he rested while the happy burbling of the water calmed his nerves, and the cold eastern wind dried the sweat off his forehead. He slowly put his laces back on and tied his shoes; he put on his tie and only after adjusting the knot did he light a cigarette.

He wasn't one bit happy about having been arrested and this - him, without any good reason, getting arrested more or less every week - was something that of late had made him feel ever more uncomfortable because by now things had gotten to the point where the arrests had started to interfere with his pigeon business. It had come to the point where, when the guardians of public order left him un-harassed for more than a few weeks, he would start to suspect that this either was some form of a ruse or that he henceforth would owe something to someone's generosity and that this in one way or the other would end up costing him even more, the next time he got arrested.

He looked back down the short steep street, but he didn't see anyone, at least not anyone that seemed like following him. The shops in the market, which were all still open, seemed to greet him with a quiet and sleepy understanding, welcoming him back. From the other end of the square, the snake charmers' music reached him, if not on the wings of the wind, then on those of an almost imperceptible fog.

When all's said and done, I probably will end up a spy, he thought, irritated, and then he added, *at least I probably would if I knew how to become one!*

He quickly listed for himself the countries that he would consider worthy of being taken into consideration and then those that would be happy - or, at least, able - to pay for his services. He gave up his plans on a future in the spy business as soon as he realized that the few and very modest little nations towards which he felt kindness enough to spy for them, probably couldn't bear the costs of a secret intelligence service. Also, he realized that these silly ideas came from nothing but an infantile and unrealistic wish for vengeance.

As the lion's back turned out to be too cold a place to sit for very long, Kurt got up and continued on his way until, distractedly, he stopped in front of a group of musicians.

Yes, it does bother me that two out of every three policemen in this place are suspicious of me, but what should bother me even more, is that my defensive behavior is totally uncalled for. I don't protest their accusations in the way that an innocent would. Should!

Instead, I quietly and unprotestingly defend myself, probably with the tenacity and sincerity of a real spy. That and only that must be the reason why I find myself in this insane situation.

In front of him, squatted down on a mat made of rags, two Moors were beating their drums. A third was playing a short horn while a fourth took upon himself the task of letting what little remained of his nose and earlobes be nibbled away at by the gigantic cobra that was wrapping itself around his body.

Then he noticed two other spectators - two women cloaked in their burnouses, covered up to their eyes - that both seemed to be surrendering themselves, bodies and souls, to this artistic pleasure.

I shall talk with the chief of police, Kurt decided, resolutely. I shall clear up the situation once and for all. And if he won't allow me to see him, I shall write to him. Yes; I will find out his home address and then write to him.

This was as far as his thoughts had gotten when he suddenly realized that the two women, rather than looking at the performers, were focusing their attention on him, and that they did so with rapacious intensity. He tossed half a franc onto the snake-charmers' plate, after which he left hastily. Disagreeable past experiences had taught him that these gluttonous eyes could very well belong to a toothless old woman - or, even worse, to a young man with a lot of muscles and a violent disposition - rather than to the sultry beauty that one might have imagined.

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He didn't have to walk very far to get to the *Boy Bazar*: the extremely narrow alley where a multitude of moneychangers made the pavements virtually unpassable. There, what Kurt thought of like the last unregulated bankers of Europe, worked away intensely, buying, selling, converting, and evaluating currencies, cheques, gold coins, and other precious metals. Without even slowing down, Kurt found out the price of gold and that of the peseta against the dollar. Then he continued to *Café Neutral*, where he immediately spotted his one and only friend in Tangier: the detective who had arrested him that very same morning. There the rascal was, sitting right next to the bar, playing poker with a French jeweler and the father of one of the bankers.

As soon as the detective spotted him, the man got off his chair and quickly headed towards him.

His lips blue from anger, Kurt yelled at him, "And Prometió, where is he?"

"He stayed here waiting for you until just now. He left only five minutes ago; he gave me this to give to you..."

With a gesture of rage, Kurt ripped the three money-containers that the police officer held out towards him out of the man's hand, put them in his pocket, and set off. Then he turned back so as with a nod tell the detective that he expected him to follow. The detective, at first with what seemed like a lack of enthusiasm, did so. But then, as Kurt hurried off, the man seemed to gain some enthusiasm and upped his pace, as if fearful of losing Kurt in the crowd that filled the small square. However, if so, then his fears were unfounded because just around a corner Kurt was waiting to ambush him, his legs spread wide and his eyes sparked with anger.

"You son of a bitch! You pig! What is all this about!" he roared.

"I only did what I had to do," Miniti replied, signaling him to calm down.

"I hope the vultures shall feed on you! You're an embarrassment to the police and your parents; you're a curse on your brothers and the only reason that your poor sister remains unmarried! What is your problem with me, eh? I will make sure that you pay for this!"

The insulted detective grabbed his arm in an attempt to get him out of the square because a crowd had begun to gather around them, but Kurt freed himself and was off. Miniti stayed where he was for a moment, undecided, and then, putting on a big smile, he

shouted in Arabic as if trying to suggest to the crowd that it was just an argument between friends – which, in a way, it actually was - "And you keep off my sister!"

Without dignifying him with a response, Kurt disappeared around the corner, turning into the Moorish district. He was in a hurry, and he still would have to climb the streets for a good while longer before he got to his house on *Amar Hill*. He took the steps of the extremely steep and narrow alleys in threes.

They were less than fifty yards from the top when the detective managed to catch up with Kurt, whom he then followed in silence: in silence, not because he had lost his breath, as his friend had, but because he didn't want to upset further the man, whom a little earlier, he had arrested.

A few minutes later they were walking along the promenade that crowned the hill: the most beautiful, scenic, and quiet place in all of Tangier. Way below them roared the ocean as it attacked the shore and as the rocks replied.

Finally, they arrived at their destination, a snowy-white building in the middle of a palm grove. Kurt rummaged through his pockets, looking for the key to his house. The other man watched him attentively and, seeing that he was growing ever more irritated, he put his hand in his own pocket to take out a key with which he opened the door.

Kurt wasn't one bit surprised that the detective had caught up with him, and he most certainly had no intention of showing any gratitude for the opening of the door. *Bloody moron!*

*

Although he didn't know what would be going on inside the house, Kurt, followed by the detective, kept as silent as he could as they advanced through the small hallway and then into the pitch dark of the studio. Kurt then went to his bedroom door, where he was about to stop to listen. However, that wasn't necessary, because the snoring from inside was quite loud and the moment he heard them, Kurt, precisely knew what was going on. He continued in through the room and into his bedroom where he rummaged around in the drawer of the bedside table until his hand found the flashlight he was looking for. Then, being careful not to wake the snoring person that was sleeping in *his* bedroom, he went out into the garden, followed by the tiptoeing detective. Out there, in its most remote corner, there were two dovecots. Kurt took a deep breath, lit up one of the dovecotes. Relieved, he switched off the light and turned to the detective, "They must have been here for at least an hour."

Kurt reached into the dovecote whereupon, after a brief search, he took out a sizeable carrier pigeon. Then, without saying a word, he handed the torch to the detective, who carefully shone it at the bird that was doing its best to free itself from the hand holding it. Kurt looked worriedly towards the house before he lifted the pigeon's wing. There, in the light of the flashlight, appeared a small container fastened with a thin but strong piece of string. He removed it carefully, before returning the bird to the dovecote; he then repeated the operation with the two remaining birds. Then, whilst the detective counted the money inside the containers, Kurt headed over to the other dovecote. He took out three pigeons, looking like copies of the doves in the other cote - and to each, he fastened one of the containers that he had been given in *Café Neutral*. As he released the birds, they swiftly disappeared into the night sky towards *Tetuan*. The detective returned the three empty containers, and the dollar notes that he had removed from within them without saying a word; they then went up to the garden entrance, avoiding passing through the house. Kurt let the officer out without even shaking his hand, and they wouldn't have exchanged a single word if, from the street, the detective hadn't commented, "I think that finishes this week's business..."

"Don't you think anything, you moron! I can't tell until tomorrow. If you dare, come for breakfast at *Café Paris*. But find out beforehand where and when you distinguished boss

can be found because I shall have a word with him about you. Now, piss off, or your wife will start thinking you're fooling around."

With that, he closed the gate and returned to the house. He quickly went into his bedroom where he turned on the light. On the long thin sofa that stood right next to his bed, was sleeping – on his back, with his legs seemingly stretched out in an attempt to reach out for the floor – a huge Guinean man. The sound-level of his snoring went far beyond the limits of common decency, and his nostrils trembled like those of a thoroughbred that had just won *The Derby*. Kurt tried to wake the man, shaking him several times, but as his efforts yielded him no response, he decided to resort to the drum that was standing next to the bed, and that way he achieved the desired effect in virtually no time at all. The giant got up – actually, he jumped up, sort of – and he greeted his master with a smile that was full of teeth, whiteness, and remorse.

"I think maybe I must have fallen asleep *Monsieur*, the alarm..."

"And that should be the least of your worries. I've already told you a thousand times that I don't want you in my room," grumbled Kurt.

"This... This is the last time it will happen *Monsieur*," he replied, finally breaking the uncomfortable silence that had started to freeze the air between them. Then, whilst speaking, his gaze fell on the alarm clock, and he turned back, frightened towards his master, "It's already 9 o'clock *Monsieur*... I should have left some time ago..." Then he suddenly grew silent, as if uncertain whom to blame. Was it his fault, for having fallen asleep, his master's for having been imprisoned, or the alarm clocks for not going off? However, his master seemed in no mood for such speculations, because with a stern voice he ordered, "Get out of here quickly! By now he's probably gotten tired of waiting; he'll be thinking you aren't coming. Hurry up!" Then, as he walked him to the door, his master added, "Be careful; there's not a single cloud in the sky tonight. Try arranging it so that you start heading back before midnight. And... And good luck.

Once the man had left, Kurt returned to his house. The first thing he did was to get undressed; he then took a warm shower and slipped into bed as quickly as his exhausted body and mind would allow him. That's when he suddenly realized that he hadn't eaten all day, but he wasn't hungry, nor did he feel like getting up. Hugging his pillow, already half-asleep, he reconfirmed his decision, *Tomorrow I shall talk to the Police Commissioner.*

*

He slept calmly through the night and in the early hours of the morning he reached the end of a long and very eventful dream. It had been an amazingly pleasant one, that much he knew, but he could only remember the very last part of it: he had found himself facing an infinitely long row of prison cells, all packed with starving uniformed police officers. Walking past them he was sinking his teeth into an enormous sandwich, all whilst the emaciated officers' hands reached out pleadingly towards him and his sandwich through the bars. Unfortunately, then, just as he was about to take another enormous sandwich out of one of his pockets and readied himself to devour it, a large black raven landed on his shoulder. That put a definitive end to his dream, at least of what he would later recall of it, probably because at that precise moment he passed from sleep to consciousness. He turned over, reflected over what business the black raven had on his shoulder, and then went back to sleep.

While Kurt was sleeping, his servant was making his way first through and then out of the town in the most inconspicuous manner possible, choosing the same route as he always chose. As he arrived at a small thicket that he knew well, he removed his overcoat and hid it under some branches before continuing on his journey, almost invisible in the night. After

a couple of hundred meters or so he upped his cautiousness because he was now entering an international zone, where they - hopefully and probably, yet unfortunately not necessarily - were tired of late-night patrolling. There was still another 12 kilometers to be covered before he would reach his destination: *Barch*, where he would meet an associate from *Tetuan*. Well, he could only hope to meet him, because he was indeed quite late.

It annoyed him that his master had surprised him in his bedroom; If he just knew that it's the only place in the whole house where I can really rest, I'm sure he wouldn't react that way; but how could I tell him that... He didn't like to sleep on the bed that had been allotted him in the workshop because in there the statues terrified him. When he had first joined his master's household, they had come to an agreement regarding where to put his bed, and everything had seemed fine. However, soon he had started to suspect - no, to become convinced, rather - that at nightfall, the statues came to life and set themselves to work not only for their creator but also to get up to all sorts of mischief of their own. He had already on more than one occasion resolved to put the case before his master, but every time he had stumbled on his own pride, as he didn't want to admit his fear of something that everyone else seemed to think of as slabs of dead stone. When it came to religious discussions about beliefs, his experiences were quite depressing: if they didn't make him feel miserable, such would at least make him sad, and on top of it all, it was his religious beliefs that were the cause of his exile. His exiling and the circumstances surrounding it had all taken place back in Guinea, his homeland, a little over a year and a half ago, and it had been the result of what had happened between himself and an unpleasant and self-righteous Spanish prosecutor. Although he had been one of the most respected individuals of his tribe - and even though the reason for the act he was accused of having perpetrated shouldn't have been considered criminal but rather as one of religious practice - the self-righteous judge had sentenced him to death. His explanation and defense - that he hadn't eaten the human flesh to fill his stomach, but rather to comply with an age-old ancestral rite - had mattered little. In the end, neither the dozen or so witnesses, who all had affirmed that he had been a vegetarian ever since he was a boy nor the fact that it hadn't been the flesh of a man but rather of a child - of a baby girl that was so small that she hardly was worth eating for any other purpose than religious ones - had served to overturn the judge's decision. Nevertheless, though he had been condemned to be executed, his tribesmen had helped him to escape. He had fled to Tangier in the hope of a German victory in the big war that was fought between the countries in the North. As he had been told that the Germans were idolizers, just like himself and his tribe, he figured they would be more humane than the Spanish prosecutor in their relations with the natives of the countries they conquered.

Though it was true that he feared the sculptures that his master carved out of solid stone, yet he felt somehow connected to him, possibly because of some sort of instinct. He hadn't really managed to understand it very well, though sometimes he figured that maybe the reason why he felt a connection was that he sensed a wild man in his master too. Or, maybe it was the icons, which nevertheless kept frightening him. As he had first entered his master's service, he had indeed figured that the man was a powerful sorcerer; a belief that, with time, had mellowed until it had turned into an intimate feeling of kinship and care. It wasn't an easy thing to define their relationship, but it most certainly was something out of the ordinary. He didn't earn any salary, and he had never tried to ask for one, nor was he given sustenance. He had found a way of earning what little money he needed to pay for life's necessities by entering the sock trade and combining it with his master's pigeon activities. He carried a pair of nylon socks along with him on each of these outings; he would buy them for 75 pesetas in Tangier, and he'd sell them for 100 to his associate in the pigeon exchange business, who then would sell them on to the Japanese for a higher price. His only so-called benefit, his bed among the sculptures, wasn't really that much compensation because he did indeed do a lot of work for his master. But then, what more could a black man ask for...

The Guinean moved forward through the night of this strange new Northern world; it was so different from his home country, as here all living things were harmless. There were

neither lions nor elephants nor any other kind of quadruped that could threaten him; there were leopards up in the mountains, but nobody had seen a lion around here for at least a man-age. Nor did he have to fear any venomous snakes or those evil insects that in his home country lay in wait to harm you with their poisonous stingers. The only thing he had to fear was people on patrol.

It wasn't that he had any prejudice against white people, but though he wouldn't judge them, he did find them very difficult to understand. They always seemed to be in such a hurry; even when they themselves must realize that to go about things slowly would have been in their own best interest, they just kept rushing along. Even in the middle of the day, in the hottest hours, they flitted around the city, buzzing from one place to the next, doing their chores and visiting cafés. Yet, when they died, all that hurry stopped, and before they got carried to their burial grounds, they would have waited so long that one had to run away from the cars transporting them, covering one's nose. *Maybe it's because they have such small nostrils*, he thought to himself as he concluded his ponderings on the subject, *maybe it's because they can't smell very well*.

White people were strange that much was for sure, and then there was this thing with the pigeons because apart from the nylon socks, he was also carrying three pigeons. Why did his master have him carry these when all he wanted him to do was to exchange them for another three birds? What was making this game even more confusing was that the birds he got in exchange were the same in color, size, and shape as the ones he would hand over. And, it was always the same six birds: the same three being carried to the border and the same three being carried back to Tangier. It was all totally incomprehensible. At first, he had examined the birds carefully, to see if maybe they carried something or if something was written beneath their feathers or under their wings, but though there were signs that they had been carrying something, it had all been in vain. *Maybe it's some sort of religious ritual; maybe they think they are dead men's souls*.

It had begun to drizzle soundlessly when the Guinean reached the border. As he arrived at the site of the rendezvous the man waiting for him explained that he too had gotten off to a late start and hadn't been waiting very long at all. They made the exchange – pigeons for pigeons and the pair of socks for a 100 peseta note – and off they went their separate ways. There wasn't even a moon to throw light on their activities, and on top of that, it began to rain, something that no doubt would keep both the police and the customs officers from patrolling: things couldn't be going any better. Then, after hesitating a moment, he chose a different route for his return; it was a more dangerous one, but then it would cut three kilometers off his journey, so given the favorable circumstances... To avoid further problematic reflections he began to sing to himself silently; a trick he had learned during these dark nightly journeys between Tangier and *Barch*.

The next morning Kurt, just as he had resolved to, went to the police station, but on his way there he stopped at *Café Paris* to have breakfast and to think about the difficult meeting that lay ahead of him: what should he say, how best to say it, and what not to say. He figured that the moment had come for him to, once and for all, put an end to his reputation as a spy. He would explain, totally honestly, that the only reason why he lived in Tangier was that he hated war and that in Tangier because it was an international territory, there wasn't a single soldier. This – in turn, he would explain – meant that he wouldn't have to take part in the war, which he profoundly abhorred. He would explain that in August of 1939, on the terrace of *Café Dôme* in *Montparnasse*, he had written three letters – one to Hitler, one to Mussolini and one to Chamberlain – in which he warned them of the stupidity of war in general and of that that they seemed determined to start in particular. For an entire week, he had waited for a response, but as there had been no reply, he had gradually lost his patience and left for Tangier, and he had done so the very same day that war had been

declared. He was already halfway to the free haven when he realized that he had forgotten to put his address on the envelopes. However, though that discovery had caused him a couple of sleepless nights, it hadn't been enough to change his mind, and he had continued his journey.

Kurt had arrived in Tangier without any money, and in the first year he had gotten by only by making plaster caricatures, for which he had a singular knack. He would make them in the café terraces, often in cooperation with a "bait." However, his clientele, mainly tourists, and sailors, had been diminishing as the war had spread throughout the world. Consequently, by the beginning of 1940, his second year in Tangier, he had found himself heading for a serious economic crisis, and there had been more than one occasion on which he hadn't had enough money even for chestnuts.

At this time, by pure accident, he had befriended a fellow countryman who resided in nearby *Tetuan*, with whom he had organized a form of smuggling, using carrier pigeons. This individual - who must have worked in banking or something similar back in Austria - had explained that in any country that didn't have free currency exchange, the currency of a country that did have a free currency exchange would have different prices in different parts of the "closed" economy. As strange as it seemed, a 100-dollar note, in pesetas, exchanged for more in Tangier than it did in *Tetuan*, which was only 59 kilometers away. As his compatriot had the necessary capital at his disposal, they started their business by putting their trust in dollars and pesetas. To facilitate their currency exchanges, they used carrier pigeons that, as well as being reliable, were cheap. Also, the birds were quick, which removed much of the uncertainties about fluctuations in currency prices. The business on average netted Kurt between 100 and 150 dollars per month; an income on which one could live quite comfortably in Tangier.

As for his beautiful house - how he had come to acquire it would have made for a novel all by itself - it had practically been given him. From the moment that he had become the owner of that house, he had started to dress with impeccable elegance, and he had stopped doing the plaster caricatures. With housing solved and a steady income as a currency broker, he no longer had to demean himself by making an income out of his art.

It wasn't all that strange that everyone thought that he was a spy, even - or, especially, rather - Miniti the detective, who when he didn't try to nail him for espionage was his best friend and the only person in Tangier, apart from the Guinean, who genuinely cared for his well-being. Actually, at one time just a few words from Kurt would have been enough to make Miniti - this unyielding guardian of the public order and a prime example of a nincompoop Moroccan - stop being suspicious. But the words had never been spoken, and today Kurt figured it was too late to say them.

It wasn't out of any bad intentions that the detective continued to make his life miserable, but rather it came from the complex result of a series of feelings that probably didn't seem clear even to the detective himself, or at least not coherent. Miniti was a young man of very mixed blood: his paternal ancestry was Moorish, Arabic, and Jewish, and his mother was Spanish. The maybe most fundamental trait of his character was a panic-like terror of looking or being perceived as ridiculous. He feared that much more than looking unintelligent or failing in getting his man. Even though Tangier feared for its independence - not only due to the dangerous proximity to Gibraltar but also because of the many dubious characters that populated it - Miniti would have had no problems looking the other way, just as he did with the pigeon exchange business, with which he even helped out.

If Kurt had only made an effort to reveal something criminal about his presence in Tangier - that he had done something punishable back in Austria or somewhere else - his friend would gladly have forgiven most crimes, probably including some pretty severe ones. However, Kurt hadn't revealed anything criminal, because he had nothing, absolutely nothing criminal to reveal, and it was truly a shame that he didn't understand his tormentor's worries about being made to look ridiculous, as he no doubt would have, had it turned out that his best friend was an important spy, without Miniti knowing anything about it. Because, if Kurt had understood this early on in their relationship, he would have

realized that then an admission of even a very minor involvement in espionage would have allowed him to avoid a whole lot of bother.

Today it was too late because Miniti would no longer have believed a word he said; he couldn't make himself believe that Kurt – this elegant, educated, and cultured Austrian – had found himself forced to sculpt caricatures of drunk sailors and tourists in the pubs of Tangier. And, why had he demeaned himself by sculpting caricatures when he obviously could earn a much better living from dedicating himself to exchanging currency using carrier pigeons. Actually, these pigeons were one of the main causes of Miniti's suspicions, and that's why he always carefully monitored his friend's behavior whenever a new pigeon exchange was coming up.

However, Kurt was totally aware that he was being monitored: *I'm sure he's convinced that something fishy is going on*, he would say to himself, *if not, why would he go to so much trouble to check out what I am up to?*

Even as he had told Miniti about the currency transactions, the detective hadn't believed him. *Using pigeons when it would have been enough to put a few notes in an envelope and send them by the English post. Don't be silly! There must be messages hidden somewhere.*

In fact, that was in part the cause of the awkward situation, because the good police officer had no idea that neither Kurt nor the man's colleague in Tetuan knew that these English postal privileges existed, nor that the safe arrival of such mail was guaranteed even in wartime.

Yet, even if Kurt and his countryman had known the details about the English post, they might not have chosen to take advantage of it, as they might well have preferred this convoluted procedure of moving pigeons in and out of their dovecotes and have their messengers risk their lives running about where one shouldn't run about in the middle of the night. Another reason that they might have continued their pigeon-exchange, even if they had known, was that if customs had surprised them in the act, then the punishment for illegally swapping pigeons across the border was much less severe than that for illegal currency transactions.

*

The sculptor hadn't finished his breakfast when Miniti sat down next to him without getting greeted in any way, which was very out of character but quite unsurprising. Miniti too was in a seriously foul mood as he sullenly ordered a coffee and apparently allowed himself to get absorbed in the morning paper. He was coming from the police station, and his boss's office, where he had been severely reprimanded for his error of the previous day. Miniti felt like carrying upon his shoulders not only the conviction that the sculptor was an important German spy, but also the weight of all the injustices that he figured his superiors had inflicted upon him since he had first met the Austrian.

Yet, Miniti had to admit, their relationship had started out excellently well, as their first encounter had resulted in that he had gotten the sculptor sent to jail for a full week for peddling his casts in a church. During the previous night Miniti, in his mind's eye, had dedicated himself to rip Kurt's flesh from the man's body with hot tongs, just as the sculptor's ancestors from the opposite shore so often had done to his ancestors just a century or two ago and it didn't for a second occur to him that perhaps his boss, the commissioner, was right when suggesting that he might have been too hasty in arresting the sculptor.

He had been wandering around Kurt's house, motivated by the righteous and uncontrollable desire to catch the man red-handed while doing something wicked, or at least something punishable and spy-related. He had been squatting down next to the house behind a *platano* tree when his intended victim had suddenly left the house, surreptitiously rushing off as if on his way to an important secret appointment.

*

Karl had been on his way to an important appointment, when, suddenly realizing that he had forgotten to shave; he returned inside where he swiftly continued into the bathroom. As he was running out of time, instead of using his normal shaving knife, he got out an electric razor that he had been given as payment for one of his plaster casts, intending to save himself the time that would have been lost from having to lather up with soap. He plugged the machine's cord into a socket, and he started to shave in front of the mirror. The device hummed away delicately, a bit like an amorous cricket that rubs its wings together in anticipation, but neither his stubble nor the blades gave the slightest indication that any shaving was going on. Kurt patiently turned a few screws to get this marvel of a Yankee contraption to come to its senses, but all he managed to achieve was to alter the device's sound, changing its pitch upwards. He kept on stroking his stubbly cheek with the machine until, as if it too had become bored with all this, it gave a few popping noises and with that, it went silent. At that very moment, he spotted a slight movement behind the *platano* tree, *Bloody Miniti*, which did absolutely nothing to get him into a better mood. Kurt looked at his watch, suddenly furious. He was five minutes late already, and he still hadn't shaved. Having examined the electric device one more time he had started to curse it with such skill, creativity, and mastery that it would have made a cavalry sergeant blush. What's more, as was his habit, he swore at it in German.

*

At precisely that moment, the ecstatic detective flung the door wide-open and immediately took charge of the situation. Finally, his long-awaited opportunity had presented itself: he had caught the sculptor with a microphone in his hand and obviously relaying some secret information to the Germans. *Let's see him trying to explain this to the commissioner!* Having overpowered the German spy, he dragged the kicking and shouting man along to the police station, doing nothing whatsoever to hide his victim's identity from the astonished public, nor the crime of which the man was about to be charged with.

Kurt would probably still have been imprisoned if it hadn't occurred to one of the detective's more technology-minded colleagues, on Kurt's suggestion, to go to the evidence locker to check out precisely what sort of microphone he had used.

*

There, right next to his elusive spy-friend who was pretending to be deep in his reading, Miniti fumed. He had no power to prevent the sculptor from doing what the man had declared that he intended to do, especially not in the light of his failure the previous day; *An electric razor designed to look like a microphone... I bet he did it just to make me look ridiculous.*

Meanwhile, Kurt had finished summing up what and in which order to present his complaint, "Did you find out when your boss will be in his office?"

"He's been there for at least an hour," the detective replied dryly.

"Do you think he'll see me?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

Kurt called the waiter over, paid, and got ready to leave when the policeman turned towards him, "What are you going to ask him?"

"First I will ask about the location of the font of youth, and then about the true date of Muhammad's birth."

"Be a smart-ass all you want, because you'll soon not want to be one anymore. If you want to know, I've found out that in your country you were a member of a secret society."

"Really?"

"And a lot else besides! Do you deny it?"

"Why should I? You wouldn't believe anything I said. Anyhow, I was never a member of any society, either secret or public. Now then, would you please be so kind as to tell me what secret society you're accusing me of being a member of..."

"Well... It's something like anti... anti semantic. Yes, that's it, an anti-semantic society!"

"So, that's it then, eh?"

"And who are they?"

"Who?"

"The anti-semantics of course."

They are people who think that the relation between words and what they refer to is arbitrary and therefore meaning itself..." Kurt was quiet for a moment, but then he continued, "The anti-Semites are those who hate Jews more than is appropriate," and with that, he straightened his tie while heading for the exit.

*

As he pushed open the door of the police station, Kurt felt as if his heart had moved down so as now going about its business inside his stomach. Though it was far from the first time that he had crossed this threshold, it was the first time he had done so voluntarily. When he got to the stairway, his legs became reluctant to such an extreme that he had to manipulate them to do his bidding: by grabbing the banister and then sort of lunging his legs, and thus himself, forward he managed to make it into the police commissioner's waiting room. Once he had communicated his name and the motive for his visit to the clerk, there was nothing left for him to do other than to sit down; he suddenly realized that he was drenched in sweat and strangely tired.

He glanced at a file that lay abandoned on the clerk's table and on whose cover a black number had been printed under a lilac-colored stamped text.

At that moment, he felt a slight sting on his right hand, and he slapped it quickly with his left. An old fat fly rose in flight - actually, he had only missed it by the narrowest of margins - after which it circled him a few times, filling the tense atmosphere of the room with a pleasant summer-evoking buzz. Then it turned in mid-air as if stalling, whereupon it made a kamikaze dive right into the inkwell on the table next to him. Kurt showed his approval with a nod of the head. Yet, he still felt unwell, *It would be better if they agreed to grant me an audience another day because in the state I'm in, I'm not going to achieve anything useful*, he thought, whilst he took out a match intending to come to the fly's rescue, but just at that moment, the officer's assistant informed him that the commissioner was ready to see him. Kurt left the fly to its suicidal fate; it wasn't as if it hadn't had it coming, and went into the office. There, apparently waiting for him, sat the man who, for Kurt, represented the supreme power on this earth, and the first sentence of the declaration that he would have to make started to take shape.

The room was typically Moroccan with a few low pieces of furniture, leather cushions with multicolored designs, some frightfully long scimitars and rifles, several engraved mixed-metal trays, etc. Although it was all from the bazaar and modern replicas, except some heavily worn but authentic rugs, the furnishing of the room was creating some hard-to-understand kind of harmony. Behind the desk sat the scrawny Latin-looking commissioner: he wore spectacles, and his upper lip was framed by a thin mustache. On the table, between two telephones, lay several unopened letters, wads of files, and three different pairs of glasses; in the middle of it all stood a small tin of bicarbonate.

The commissioner responded curtly to Kurt's greetings and gestured that he'd sit down in the seat in front of him, then the man turned his attention to the document that he held in his hand. Kurt sat down, crossed his legs, and put his hand in his pocket to take out a cigarette.

As one of the phones rang, the commissioner picked up the receiver, said "Yes, he is," and then put it down again. Kurt took his hand out of his pocket, although without a cigarette and he uncrossed his legs.

It's a shame you're not a relative of mine, he thought, trying to find some kind-looking feature in the person sitting in front of him. The silence, as seconds started to turn into minutes, bothered him ever more, and his initial composure soon melted away irretrievably, as ether spilled onto the floor. In fact, it seemed as if the powerful man had completely forgotten about his presence, apparently being totally absorbed by the document in front of him, which, as Kurt suddenly realized, could very well be the resume of yesterday's events.

God knows how long that horrid situation would have gone on if Kurt hadn't decided to break the silence, "I'm afraid..." and got up. Then, having received no reply to this his attempt at communication, he left the office. In the waiting hall, he paused for a moment, wiped a hand across his forehead, and said something to the office assistant that was busy peeling an orange, about the commissioner not having the time to talk to him. He then threw a glance at the inkwell: it was too late.

That year passed as well.

It was getting dark. Below, the European quarters were feverishly preparing for the New Year's Eve celebrations, each community doing its best to outdo the other.

At the far end of his workshop, Kurt was stubbornly battling away at a Hercules that he was carving out of a white marble slab. He worked wearing his dress coat, and though he would explain this custom to nobody that's what he'd always wear. And, he had taken this behavior even further by never allowing himself to dress up for any other occasion.

At the other end of the room, the Guinean sat on the sofa between a Venus and a Minerva, dividing his attention between his master and the pedestal table upon which the whiskey, the soda, and the ice all stood ready and waiting. All he needed to happen was for his master to put down his tools, because the very moment he'd do that, the sculptor would find that he was sitting there at his side, and then he would most surely offer him a glass.

In the Guinean's life, these were the most pleasurable hours of the day. When his master was working, he wasn't frightened of the statues, and he also felt that he belonged to someone: that he depended on someone and that someone also depended upon him. Also, when working, the sculptor became much kinder than usual and more talkative. *If he only would put down that hammer.*

During suchlike beautiful hours, the Guinean's knowledge of the world would grow immensely. The last evening, for example, his master had spent almost entirely expounding on things Germanic, because his master knew of the insatiable interest that he had for all things related to the Third *Reich*. And he, as an enthusiastic listener, had found out about things that he would never have even dreamt of. For example, he had learned that Germans were hostile to Jews mainly because, just like them, they considered themselves God's chosen people upon the earth and that because of this, they wanted to maintain their purity, again just like the Jews. He had learned that the Germans knew how to produce soaps from the people they killed, but that they still weren't able to do the reverse, although he felt that this was probably only because presumably no attention had been given to the matter. He also found out that when it came to technical matters, the Germans were unbeatable: that they made the fastest watches in the world, and that they, amongst many other things, had invented the printing press. He also learned that it was a wise German who had discovered the wicked little animal that lives in people's lungs, demonstrating that it hated sunlight and pure air; and that they withdrew German nationality from *monsieur* Ehrlich not because his companion Hate was Japanese, but because it turned out that Salvarsan wasn't as miraculous a medicine as it had at first been assumed.

He also had learned that all things considered, it was nothing but fair that the German people took charge of the world; something that would have happened a long time ago if this great nation had only, in the past, been given a leader who was worthy of them. Now that great leader had finally presented himself, because a misunderstood and fooled nation had chosen, through democratic and legitimate elections, the leader that they deserved; a leader with a strong hand who would take them, based on racial and spiritual values, to the height that they deserved to be.

Intoxicated, the Guinean soaked up these brightly colored pieces of information that he so generously had been given with childlike enthusiasm, now feeling even closer both to the sculptor and to *Monsieur* Hitler, his oh so longed for liberator.

The bottles of whiskey emptied themselves at great speed, and the sculptor seemed inexhaustible in his knowledge of interesting things regarding Germany and the Germanic people.

It must have been close to 10 p.m. - the Guinean had just left for the pantry to get another bottle - when the doorbell rang. The men looked at each other, surprised and startled because in this house an unexpected visit virtually always meant bad news. The idea that perhaps the detective had decided to bother them again crossed both their minds, but they both knew that Miniti had his own key and that the man wasn't in the habit of ringing. Of course, perhaps the detective had rung the bell out of discretion, seeing that it was getting late, but that didn't seem very likely. The sculptor shrugged his shoulders whilst the Guinean headed towards the door, picking up the key that was hanging on the wall.

*

Irritated, Kurt threw his chisel and hammer into a corner, before continuing to his bedroom where he took off his dress coat, put on a jumper, and wrapped a handkerchief around his neck; then he started back towards his meeting with the unexpected visitor.

Then, as he entered the studio, after a few steps, he stopped dead, as if beholding a ghost. The Guinean had returned through the front door, leading a blond boy of three or four years of age by the hand. There was a great big smile on the cannibal's face, "It's a little you!"

The little one's features were lit up by a polite smile that looked as if it was trying to mimic that of the cannibal's, but without much success. As the child's gaze fixed itself calmly on the sculptor, it held out an envelope in its right hand.

*

Kurt, who, with a broad smile on his face, had taken a few steps towards the new arrival, stopped dead in his tracks the moment he got a closer look at the child's face. He stopped dead because it was obvious that the man was right and that this was not "any" little boy. It felt as if there wasn't a single drop of blood left in his veins because albeit a miniature version; this young boy was indeed none other than himself. Finally, having recovered a little, he managed to ask in a hoarse and strange voice, "How has he ended up here?"

"I don't know," the Guinean answered, before quickly adding, "but someone must have brought him - he wouldn't have been able to reach the bell, I checked - but when I got to the door, he was already alone."

"You didn't see anyone else?"

"Nobody and I looked everywhere."

The sculptor pulled the child a little closer and, although, in a way he would very much have liked to hold him in his arms, he just found himself staring at him, uneasily. Finally, he asked in French, "Whom are you looking for?"

The child's response was to hold out the letter. Then Kurt asked the same question again - first in Spanish, then in English and so finally in Italian - each time only succeeding

in making the child reach the envelope further out towards him. As he finally took the envelope, the first thing he noticed was that the address was written in German. He ripped it open and started to read:

Lieber Kurt, I've sent you your son, who is my only reason for living. I won't write who I am, nor am I able to tell you the reason why I must give him up because if I did, you would inevitably figure out who I am; a secret that I want and will keep for the good of all of us. You said, maybe as a joke, that having a son would make you happy if only you didn't have to put up with the presence of a mother, do you remember? Well now you have precisely that, and I would very much like you to get along together. I have never managed to get close to him, despite trying everything humanly possible. He's never known anyone besides me, but he has always been and continues to be, a very strange boy. Love him if you can, and, if you can, love him for me as well.

MY UNCLE JACINTO

PART I

The rumble of a plane approaching the landing strip at the nearby airfield of *Barajas Airport* awoke Pepote. As he sat up, still sleepy, he swept his unkempt hair out of his forehead, rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and got up from the narrow bench that served him as a bed.

The daylight that penetrated through the cracks of the shack's walls told him that it was morning. He reached for the alarm clock that was standing on the shelf. The old clock had not made a sound for many years unless violently shaken, and its one remaining hand pointed at a time long passed.

The boy looked in the direction where the roar of the engines was gradually dying away; he moved the thin metal hand of the alarm clock to point at nine. Then he pulled on his trousers, slipped into his shoes, and started to go about his daily chores.

He took the milk pitcher off its hook on the wall, removed the lid and sniffed suspiciously. He immediately regretted his curiosity and, with a grimace, he put the lid back on.

He was just about to leave when he realized that he had no money. Deftly but without success, he searched the pockets of his uncle's jacket and trousers that lay on a chair in the back of the room. He peered around in the darkness and – after having run his hands under the rolled-up horse blanket that served as his uncle's pillow – he had the sad look of somebody acknowledging defeat.

Again, he removed the milk pitcher from its hook and opened the door. It was starting to rain, and his face lit up. Pepote loved rain, and it was even more welcome as rain this time of the year was almost unheard of.

Soon he could hear the water starting to move along the ditch up on the high ground above the back of the shack. The ditch served as an invisible border between their little lot and the high ground above that in some distant past was said to have served as a warehouse for construction material.

He cleaned the pitcher and was just about to clean himself when suddenly he noticed a little rivulet that had started to pour through the wall of the dike and down towards the lot; a memory of Pepote's previous venture into hydro-engineering.

Pepote started gathering stones and rubble and, though often and severely warned not to, he began to block the water's flow and enlarging the opening of his diversion. His engineering efforts immediately paid off, and the "rivulet" swiftly swelled and gathered momentum, pouring down onto the small piece of land that surrounded their little shack.

Then he ran back into the house from which he emerged a few moments later, holding an old and wicked-looking kitchen knife, two pieces of board that had once formed part of the walls, and a wooden spoon. In no time at all, he transformed these items into a waterwheel that started spinning gaily as soon as his deft hands had fixated the wheel's axis between some stones on each side of the rapidly growing redirected stream.

Then the rain started pouring down even heavier than before, much heavier, and he could spend no more time admiring his work. Instead, he gathered up the pitcher, and he quickly set off for the row of houses that were located a hundred yards or so away: towards the bakery, the dairy, and the challenging and unpleasant tasks that he knew now lay ahead of him.

The Baker was sitting in the back of his shop, deeply engrossed in reading the morning papers while his wife was watching how the rain lashed into the front window of the store, creating streams of water that coursed down the glass. As soon as she saw the boy, she turned towards her husband and cried out in anger, "Would you believe it! That fellow has a gall! He has the nerve to send the kid out in the pouring rain!"

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Whom do you think? That dirty old drunkard, of course! Look how the little wretch runs!"

The Baker searched with his toes for his slippers, but something in the news must have caught his attention because instead, he carried on reading.

*

Pepote ran as if chased by the devil because the rain had now turned into a streaming downpour and his thin jacket gave no protection at all.

The baker's wife squashed a fat fly with the tip of her shawl and took up his position behind the counter.

The boy burst into the bakery, out of breath, and called out, "Good morning!" He sniffled up the drips of water running down his face and, a little embarrassed – as he became aware that the water dripping from his clothes was creating a small puddle at his feet – continued, "Two buns, please."

"Is that all?" the woman asked, her motionless arms hanging slackly along her sides.

"That is all," the boy, as if a little surprised, said, but then, after a short pause, he corrected himself, "well, maybe only one."

Then the arm of the baker's wife started moving, and she spread the palm of her hand in front of the boy; there was no doubt as to the significance of the gesture.

Her husband, noticing what was going on, quickly disappeared into the back of the shop.

"I don't have any money. I'll pay you tomorrow," the boy said, embarrassed.

"So, you'll pay tomorrow! Eh?" roared the baker's wife. "I'm afraid that will simply not be good enough! Tell your uncle, that lazy bum, that indecent scoundrel of a man, that there is a limit to everything. If it weren't because I always mind my own business, I would have reported him long ago."

The boy bowed his head. Then, terrified, he discovered that an enormous puddle had formed at his feet. *What will happen when she sees this?* He sorrowfully wondered, as he slowly backed towards the entrance.

"I should have talked to my brother-in-law a long time ago," the baker's wife went on, "he's a policeman, and..."

"I'm afraid I have to do other errands. Goodbye, Ma'am," he called out from the door before he ran off; clinging to the walls, he slunk along towards the next shop, which was the dairy.

The owner, old and with a big mustache, was pushing a tank full of milk from one corner of the shop to another, and he did not even answer the greeting from the soaking wet customer that had quite abruptly entered his store. Slowly and deliberately, he finished what he was doing, and then he cleaned his hands on his apron, before going behind his counter. "And, what can I do for you, *Señor?*"

"A small bottle of milk, please," said the boy, as he placed the open jug on the counter.

The old man hesitated for a moment, but then he took up the jug and, after examining it, poured milk into it. "One-sixty," he said in a low voice, while he adjusted the lid of the jug.

The boy seemed to be expecting that reply, because he quickly answered, "I will bring the money tomorrow. You see I haven't got any on me right now at the moment."

"I accept checks, treasure-bills, foreign currency, and even precious metals or stones as payment," the milkman said, without showing any sign of not being dead serious.

The child, who had not understood a word of all this, stood there questioningly, looking at the center of the big mustache.

The milkman then asked the question that both had known would be coming, "Who's the milk for?"

"Me," answered the boy, "it's for me."

"Well now, then it's different. Drink it up."

"I would rather drink it at home."

"And why would that be?" the milkman inquired.

"It's just that I..." the boy started, "I..."

"It's just that you want to bring him his breakfast! That scoundrel! That loser! Eh?" exclaimed the man. "No, and this time I really mean it! I too have a few glasses of wine now and then, but I'm still capable of earning my living. Early in the morning I'm here cleaning out the shop while your uncle is still rumbling down the streets, stumbling all over the place and stinking drunk."

"You see, he gets ill at night if he doesn't drink, it's his rheumatism."

"Ha! That's a good one! Rheumatism! Let the devil take him! In the end, we all know that's precisely what will happen."

The boy said nothing.

"Now, I don't like milk myself, but I do try to make my living from selling it... nor do I like water," he added as an afterthought, talking with his head almost inside the milk fridge that he had opened to pour more milk inside it. "But if you want to have breakfast, you can drink the entire container. Besides, there's the cash box: help yourself to some money for bread too."

"No. I want to have the milk at home," the boy replied, apparently without losing hope, "I left the money there."

"That is not true."

"It is," the boy said, not very convincingly, "I'm not lying."

"Well then, go back and get it. The rain is easing off, and the milk won't sour before you get back."

"All right..." the boy said, looking mournfully at the jug on the counter, "I will be right back."

Meanwhile, it had indeed nearly stopped raining, and the mailman, soaking wet, came through the doorway. He shook the rainwater off his cape, dropped off a letter, waved amicably at the boy, and went on his way.

A chicken peered out from behind a bush, gazed at the mailman as if angry or insulted and, as if distracted, pecked at a nail, presumably mistaking it for a worm.

Pepote started wandering: he did not know what to do. He was in a foul mood because the day had begun quite poorly.

Then suddenly the voices of boys reached him from a large vacant lot between two run-down shacks. They were all older than he was, and since he did not feel like playing, Pepote just kept on walking.

He had reached the furthest house in the row when one of the boys called out after him, "Hey, you! Wanna make some money?"

"Sure," he answered, his hopes rising, "how?"

"With horns," said one of the boys, one with big ears and many freckles, coming up towards him. "We have a bullfight, and nobody wants to be the *torro*."

"How much do you pay?"

"More than anyone else: twenty-five *centimos*."

"Per what?" asked Pepote.

"Per kill."

"Have you got riders?"

"No, only *banderilleros*."

"Two pairs?" asked Pepote.

"Three."

"Okay."

The boys put a wicker-work bull's head with two horns attached over Pepote's head and shoulders. He then received his payment for ten kills in advance, put the money into his pocket, and took up an aggressive stance; he leaned forward, and the bullfight began.

Soon the sun came out, and Pepote started to feel the discomfort caused by running around with the heavy bull-head in a bent-over posture; his back began to ache, and he was getting uncomfortably warm. Then, as he considered resting a little, he realized he had already earned more than what the milk would cost. He removed the bull's head and handed it over to the smallest of the boys while pointing at the wooden sword wrapped in a red rag.

"Now I want to be the bullfighter."

"Okay," the other boy said, "and how much are you paying?"

"Twenty-five. Just like you paid me."

"You must be joking."

"Well, thirty then."

"Tut-tut," replied the boy, shaking his head.

"Forty."

"No."

"How much then?"

"One *peseta*."

"That's not fair; you only paid me twenty-five *centimos*."

"That's because you are small," the boy explained.

"And... and so what?"

"Do you know the difference in price between a calf and a bull?"

"No..." Pepote had to admit.

"I guessed that much. You ask your uncle and come back tomorrow; then we'll talk it over."

Pepote would have preferred to continue the discussion, but he had suddenly remembered about the milk waiting for him in the dairy. He did not know whether the boy was right about the price or not, but it irked him that he had not been allowed to kill a single bull. *When I grow up, it will be different.*

Thinking along these lines, his steps took him past another vacant lot where two donkeys grazed peacefully. He stopped and watched them; of lately he had been paying them a lot more attention than he normally would. Then he decided to act on an idea that he had been carrying around for a while, and he went across to one of the animals.

He took off his jacket and shook it like a bullfighter's cape, keeping a respectful distance between himself and the donkey's imaginary, yet deadly horns. "Hey! Hey!" he cried out at the animal as if it were a bull and he a *Torero*. "Hey! Hey!" he cried, shaking his outstretched jacket. The donkey seemed to pay no attention whatsoever, and however much Pepote would shake his cape it would stubbornly refuse to be provoked into action; it did not even raise its head. The boy then went over to see if he could squeeze some response out of the other donkey; first from a distance, but then ever closer. This donkey was as unresponsive as the first and Pepote, in a final act of desperation, was just about to get down on his knees in front of the beast in a death-defying posture when the rumble of another airplane could be heard, approaching the airport and getting ready to land. Pepote immediately recognized the "Air France" Douglas plane, and he realized it had to be well past ten o'clock. He slipped his jacket back on and ran towards the dairy, but as he barged into the shop, he found it empty. He counted out the money noisily to be noticed if anyone was close enough to hear, grabbed the pitcher, and ran back towards home.

When he turned the last corner, thus getting into view of the shack, he stopped dead at the horrifying sight. The small lot that made a slight dip in the ground was entirely covered in water. Pepote, overwhelmed by guilt, ran over to the diversion he had created earlier in the morning; the waterwheel was nowhere to be seen. He climbed up to the ditch where he

quickly removed the stones and rubble he had used to redirect the stream's flow, using the material to seal off his diversion. He then took off his shoes and went over to the shack.

It took a lot of effort to force the door open, and as it finally gave way, it did so only by violently snapping off its hinges. The collapsing door nearly hit Pepote and as the milk pitcher slipped from his grasp, the white liquid mingled with the muddy waters.

Once inside the shack, he could hear the uniform, serene, and peaceful snoring of his uncle. Floating around in the water, which rose about ten inches off the ground, were a variety of objects; many of them he had never seen before, and much of what he did recognize, he had given up as lost a long time ago. First, he recovered the old alarm clock; he moved the minute hand back to its proper position, shook it violently, and even got it to make some ring-like sounds. Then he focused on the horse blanket that covered his uncle's ears, pulling and pushing it in the hope that his uncle would wake up.

The only result was that his uncle turned around and that the rest of him disappeared under the blanket. A few disgruntled sounds could be heard, but they soon faded back into nothing but more snoring.

Eventually, after some more pushing and pulling, Pepote got his uncle to wake up.

As Jacinto sat up, he dropped his legs over the edge of the bed, and the moment his rheumatic feet made contact with the water, he roared as if had he stepped on white-hot iron. Jacinto bounced back up into his bed, and from up there he looked around in amazement and horror.

"Where... Where did all this come from?"

"It rained a lot... you know..."

"When?" asked Jacinto.

"Oh, a while ago."

"I didn't hear anything."

"Well, that's because you were sleeping."

"And what did you expect me to do at this time? Can't a man even get some rest in this house?"

"The fact is... the truth is..."

"The fact is that you built another dam," Jacinto filled in.

"I had to do something."

"You had to do something..." Jacinto repeated. "And, you didn't for a moment consider that you could have drowned me?"

Just then, one of his uncle's shoes came floating past, drifting off with the tide that now had turned, and slowly making its way towards the open door.

Jacinto burst out angrily; "Don't you realize that bad things happen when you do the first thing that comes into your head? I've told you a hundred times that water is dangerous! Very dangerous! Haven't I? It is hard to believe that a boy as big as you can be so foolish! If you don't mend your ways, you're never going to grow up into an honorable man... What you deserve is for me to leave you in the street and stop worrying about you."

During the tirade, Pepote had located the other shoe and, after emptying the water out of the pair of them, he sadly and quietly handed them to his uncle, who shrugged his shoulders wearily.

While his uncle, still standing on top of the bed, started to get dressed, Pepote began to prepare for his uncle a dry retreat. He overturned a big table and pushed the now floating wooden structure towards the bed. It took a while but eventually, the *peseta* dropped, and his uncle realized what he was up to. When so finally, after some hesitations and protests, Jacinto settled down into the improvised boat, he did not even try to hide his fears.

The boy handed him an old faded umbrella with a sharpened tip that served his uncle as a barge pole during the precarious passage across the straights that separated them from dry land. When they so finally reached the shore, Jacinto leaped out of the makeshift boat with much more agility than he had shown on embarking, and as swiftly as his legs would carry him, he put some distance between himself and the danger zone.

While his uncle was wringing out the water from the lower part of his jacket, Pepote went off to put on his shoes that he had left next to the now swiftly receding dam.

*

Jacinto's eyes suddenly fell on a letter that had been nailed to the trunk of a tree right in front of him under a big branch: their letterbox. He went a little closer, removed the letter that he found indeed was addressed to him, and with narrowed eyes, he started to decipher its content.

The letter was dated three days earlier, and in it, the organizer of a comic bullfight confirmed what the man said they had verbally agreed upon; that Jacinto would take part in the bullfight that was to be held that very same evening as the *Torero* for a purse of one thousand five hundred *pesetas*. He was asked to arrive no later than nine p.m. Under it, there was a signature that Jacinto recognized. He put the letter back into its envelope, meditated a moment, and then, in a single movement, crunched it up and tossed it over his shoulder.

Pepote, who had now reached his uncle's side, was delighted to find that something in the letter seemed to have distracted his uncle's thoughts from what had just happened. "From social services?"

"No."

"Did it have a stamp?"

"How should I know?"

"What do they want?"

"To make a fool out of me," answered Jacinto somberly, as he started walking.

The boy bowed down to pick up the letter, smoothed it out, slipped it into his pocket, and with a short sprint, he caught up with his uncle.

After a considerable detour, to avoid the local shop-owners, they reached the tram stop. Pepote did not pay any attention to the people around them and did not greet any of his many acquaintances and friends. He was afraid he would not be greeted back, seen accompanied by his uncle; they reached the tram stop without uttering a single word. There they had to wait a good while before a tram arrived with enough people hanging from its side to guarantee them a free ride to *Ventas*.

The open area that surrounded the bullring was deserted, but a single glance was enough to tell them that they had found a goldmine. The previous day there had been a well-attended bullfight, and the audience had left a generous and undisturbed selection of cigarette butts. They swiftly set to work.

The boy gathered the cigarette butts with his hands, whereas Jacinto, with incredible precision, used the sharpened tip of his old umbrella to spear them. Their pockets bulged before they had covered a quarter of the square.

During their work, the boy lost sight of his uncle, and as he eventually found him, Jacinto was standing in front of a bullfighting poster next to the bullring's main entrance. His uncle, apparently greatly distressed, was staring at the poster.

The poster, illustrated with a full-color drawing, specified the program of that evening. In it, in large capital letters, Jacinto's name was spelled out as the *Torero* of the event. "What are they up to?" was the question that finally made their way out of his mouth. At least a dozen times he re-read his name, all while he rolled a couple of cigarette butts into a piece of a newspaper, without even glancing at the boy. Next, he unsuccessfully rubbed a few matches against the matchbox; not realizing it was damp from having been in the pocket of his wet trousers.

The boy, who still felt remorseful about what had happened earlier, pointed silently at the breast pocket of his uncle's jacket: from his search for milk-money earlier in the morning he knew that in it, there were some dry matches.

Without a word, Jacinto rummaged around in the breast pocket, pulled out a match, and rubbed it against the brick wall. He lit his cigarette, inhaled, then looked at it accusingly before exhaling.

Pepote would have gotten back to work had his uncle's voice not stopped him, "Let's go."

PACO NEVER FAILS

PART I

Francisco Garcia – Francisco León García Linares, to be more precise - was an honest and God-fearing citizen in Generalissimo Franco's Madrid of the 1940s. That could well be one possible explanation for the feelings of guilt and regret that overwhelmed him, the very instant he put the revolver that he had just purchased into his pocket. The cold metal that could be felt through the worn lining of his pocket deformed the crease in his trousers and made his gait awkward as it banged uncomfortably against his thigh every second step he took. Francisco slowed down his pace and immediately experienced some relief, something that he took advantage of to examine with more care the situation he was facing and his purchase. The truth was that he was already starting to regret that he had bought the weapon. He had a feeling that his bulging pocket was attracting the attention of everyone he passed and that he at any moment was about to be confronted by some upholder of the law.

When he turned the corner of the street harboring the market, he stopped, hesitating a few moments before a tavern he sometimes visited. From within he could hear the humming sound of a radio transmitter, broadcasting the daily news: as always, these focused on the war. Overcome by a sudden urge, he entered the tavern, ordered a glass of red wine, passed the counter, and continued to the men's room at the end of the corridor.

There he took the revolver out of his pocket and examined it carefully, something he had failed to do as he purchased it. The transfer of ownership had taken place in the flea market; out in the middle of the street with a crowd of sellers, buyers and passer-byes, surrounding and quite possibly observing them.

Aside from the old double-barrelled rifle he had used thirty years or so ago, Francisco Garcia had never held a weapon in his hands, and if asked, he would until a few minutes ago have answered that he never again expected to. This lack of experience was one reason why he was quite clumsy when he now fiddled with the ejector rod and a cylinder that was so dirty from lack of maintenance that it needed a lot of prodding before it would let go of the cartridges inside it. He pointed the weapon at a light globe full of flies and droppings that hung above the washbasin. He did not dare touch the trigger of the old German gun until he had checked twice that there were no cartridges left inside it.

He repeated the maneuver several times, coughing loudly, to camouflage the clicking of the trigger, in case the noise of the radio was not loud enough. He wrapped the revolver in his handkerchief, put the packet back into his pocket, and returned to the counter where his glass of wine was now waiting for him.

Though it was true that he in a way felt quite exhilarated, the emotions that filled him were contradictory. His self-respect had been satisfied, as it had turned out that the strange youth who had sold him the weapon had not tricked him. Apart from the dirty chambers - that he had now cleaned, using his handkerchief and that he planned to lubricate with a drop of olive oil once he got back home - the weapon seemed to be in perfect working order, and that was good. For eighty pesetas, he now held in his hands the lives of six men. Six was the number of bullets inside the rotating thing, and there was no doubt that he experienced an exhilarating feeling of power. What made the emotions inside him contradictory was not so much any precise feeling of having done something wrong, as a vague sensation of remorse; something that Francisco García had begun to feel only minutes after he had paid the young man. *Thou shalt not kill, it's a commandment*, he recalled to himself. Then he paid his wine and set off towards home, lunch, and siesta.

The sun was bearing down heavily, and in the middle of the summer, there are no shadows in Madrid to offer shelter from its rays. The asphalt had been so softened by the heat that that in places it had almost melted and Francisco García took great care to keep his worn-down heels from getting stuck: in places he was quite literally walking on his toes. As every respectable Madrid male citizen of the times, he wore a black suit, a matching black tie, and a white shirt with starched cuffs and collar. It was the outfit of the *petit-bourgeois*, and it would have been a waste of time to try to explain to any *Madrileño* the inappropriateness of such apparel in the middle of the scorching Spanish summer.

In the window of a restaurant, Paco stopped to watch a richly illustrated poster, announcing a bullfight the following Sunday. He noticed the names of the three *matadors*: second division *toreros* all of them, if that. *Even the good toreros have the good sense to stay away from Madrid in this heat.*

"Three novices in Spain's leading bullring and that at the height of the season! That's simply not right!" an elderly gentleman standing next to him commented indignantly.

Francisco García shook his head in agreement and continued on his way.

*

If at least I knew why I bought the bloody thing... he thought to himself on the stairs leading up to his apartment; he climbed them in a slow and measured fashion for fear of ruining the collar of his shirt with a rash movement. There simply was no valid reason. He did not believe he had any enemies for the moment, and - again, so he believed - he had never had any real serious ones even in the past. With no fortune, he wasn't in a position to be envied, he had never harmed anyone, nor had he done anyone much good either, because Paco had early in his life understood the terrifying consequences such initiatives can so easily bring about in sunny and hot-blooded Spain. He had never participated in politics, not even during the Civil War, which he had managed to live through without having to wear a uniform for more than a couple of hours, even though he had lived in Madrid. Like most of his compatriots, he had initially felt some sympathy for the Germans. However, in May of 1935, on the terrace of a café, the employee of a German travel agency had made him aware that everybody from the area surrounding his hometown of Toledo was considered suspect by the National Socialists that assumed most or all of them were of Semitic origins. Francisco, who initially had believed that the man telling him this was pulling his leg, was astounded to find out that his surname, Linares, really and doubtlessly was Sephardic, and that he thus would be considered at least half-Jewish, according to the Nazi laws that defined what it meant to be a Jew.

This revelation swiftly ended his Germanophile sentiments, and after this, he had swiftly changed his position. The burnings of the first few churches and convents had incurred in him such intense disgust that it had cured him of any political interest, or, more precisely, immunized him against such. It was not that he felt attracted to priests - rather, the opposite was true, as these had always inspired in him a certain aversion - but Francisco loved churches.

Towards the end of 1938 - when there were practically no youths left of age to wield a weapon in the capital because by then all were enlisted by one side or the other - he had been conscripted to the Armed Forces despite his delaying tactics, and the fact that he was no longer a young man. However, he had barely put his uniform on when he had managed to obtain an audience with his colonel. Lacking any better argument to get relieved of his new duties, he had simply confessed to his superior what he did for a living. After first having burst out laughing, the colonel had invited him to lunch, and the next day Paco had been returned to civilian status. The honorable colonel, though fascinated with Paco as a person, was not attracted by the idea that the name of himself and his regiment should be associated with that of a recruit with so risqué an occupation.

Francisco García was a famous man, and he had been so for many years. He had turned into a character so legendary that songs were written and sung about him, and endless anecdotes told throughout the country. Everywhere – among young and old, in the countryside, in the towns and in the capital – people called him by his nickname: “Paco.” The claim of Paco, or of “*Paco El Seguro*,” to fame was that he never – or, at least not very often – failed, i.e., “The Paco Who Never Fails”.

He lived on the third floor of an ancient building: a flat with one room and a kitchen. As the years had gone by, he had been forced to stop to catch his breath on his way up the stairs ever more frequently, but he always tried to make sure that there were no witnesses, and if someone surprised him while catching his breath, he would rummage in his pocket, pretending to be looking for his keys.

*

Maria’s husband had barely crossed the threshold of the kitchen, which also served as a living room when she realized that something was wrong: that Paco was in a bad mood. Her husband had dragged his right leg as he entered, and that virtually unnoticeable dragging sound never failed to signal his state of mind.

“Hello, Maria!” Paco said curtly, while his wife hurried over to remove his jacket.

He put his hands beneath the faucet, changed his shirt that was soaked in sweat, put on a pajama jacket, and sat down at the table before a smoking hot plate of stew. The husband and wife did not exchange a single word: not when Maria brought the cold fried tuna that was relatively fresh and which they shared in equal portions. Not even when she served him the steak with French fries, an event that Paco rarely missed to comment upon, did he say anything. Paco ate the meat and Maria the fried potatoes. For the past five years – in other words, since the beginning of the Civil war – she had renounced eating meat, a habit that at the time had affected their modest budget so much that it had threatened to disturb the harmony of their union.

Maria would have liked to talk, but when she noticed that her husband did not even touch the *Cabrales* cheese that she had managed to acquire only with the greatest difficulty, she decided that it would be wiser to hold her tongue.

While she removed the things from the table, Paco took off his shoes and went to the bedroom where, thanks to the drawn curtains, there was a fresher feeling despite the suffocating heat outside.

Unbuttoning his trousers, he suddenly felt himself overwhelmed by sudden and overwhelming sleepiness. His hands let go of the garment and as they did, his trousers, with the revolver in the pocket, fell to the floor, making what to Paco seemed an ear-shattering noise.

Maria poked her head into the bedroom, “What was that?”

Paco pulled his trousers back up, “Nothing,” he said, and for the first time in his life, he started his siesta without removing his trousers.

*

Paco would have had a siesta if only he had been able to sleep, but now the problems that had tormented him before lunch returned and as he pondered upon them, the situation was becoming even more complicated. To the issue of him not knowing why he had bought the gun now were added another and potentially even more troublesome one: where to keep it? He looked around the room, inspecting every single piece of furniture and every nook and cranny in search of a suitable hiding place. The room was not large, the furniture just a bare minimum, and Maria’s diligence as a housewife made things even more complicated. Finally, with extreme care, he pulled out the outdoor stove from under the bed, and he hid the weapon between the metal base and the wooden frame.

He still had a good half hour to rest, and eventually, he managed to nod off a few minutes, thus recovering, at least temporarily, some of his equilibrium.

When he woke up, he quickly got dressed and combed his hair. Though not in a very patient mood, yet he managed to spare enough time to remove half a dozen or so of white hairs that had somehow managed to sneak into his small mustache where they tried to escape detection by hiding among the overwhelming majority of black hairs.

"Anything new?" he asked his wife, as he was about to leave.

"Pacita has sent a message saying she will come at half-past six."

"What Pacita?"

"The lawyer's Pacita."

"Oh, fine! Paco answered as he recalled, "if I am a little late, just tell her to wait."

*

It was no more than a few minutes past four when Paco entered through the revolving door of *Eldorado*. Gutierrez was seated at the *peña's* usual table; Ambrosio was there too, fanning himself with a newspaper, even though he was sitting right in front of the fan. When he noticed that Gutiérrez was there, Paco wrinkled his nose and frowned: he considered this self-proclaimed artist too young to be worthy of the friendship of any serious man. He did not like the man's origins either: Gutiérrez had been born in the Canary Islands, and his father was a filthy rich banana exporter. What Paco liked even less was that the man, loud and clear, proclaiming himself a painter and that he acted as if he was a consummate artist. On the other hand, Paco felt great sympathy for Monsieur Ambroise, whom he held in the greatest esteem. Monsieur Ambroise had been living in Madrid for ten years, and by now, he spoke better Spanish than any of the rest of them, although he still did so with a slight French accent. Sometimes in a distant past, Monsieur Ambroise had been a history teacher at a provincial school in France and historical magazines in Paris still sometimes referred to, or quoted, scholarly articles written by him. Then one fine day Monsieur Ambroise had resigned his position at the school, finished all his business and taken a train to Madrid. He had intended to stay only for a few weeks, or a month at the most. However, the Madrid lifestyle - leisurely and with things temporal being of no or little importance - had seduced the Frenchman to the point where he had decided to settle in the Spanish capital.

Paco had hoped that he would be alone with Monsieur Ambroise and thus be able to have a private conversation with the man. However, that had been an unrealistic hope, because at this hour there were virtually always several people at the table.

"It's so hot!" the so-called painter exclaimed, just to say something, and not at all particularly indignantly, because of the three of them, his shirts were the only that was not soaked in sweat, "Thirty-eight degrees in the shade!"

Paco corrected him with a dry voice, "It's only thirty-six."

"I just saw thirty-eight on the thermometer over the pharmacy."

"In the *Retiro*, it's only thirty-five," Monsieur Ambroise, informed them. They just said so on the radio."

"Yes, but the *Retiro* is a park and full of large trees," the painter replied, "not to mention a lake."

Ricardo, the old eccentric waiter, and Paco's good friend appeared with a coffee on a tray and a glass of brandy half-full. His free hand was outstretched to greet Paco before serving him, "Don't forget that the pharmacy is in the *Puerta Del Sol* and it certainly wouldn't occur to anyone to compare that to a freezer."

"You're right, even the children know that the *Puerta del Sol* is the hottest place in Madrid," Paco said, as he slapped the tabletop with the palm of his hand. He talked in a peaceful manner, rather impersonally, but by his intonation and his slap, he had made it clear that he had no wish to pursue the subject any further.

Through the midst of the already dense smoke that flooded the room, Paco tried to locate Ramón, the bootblack, whom he expected to come along with his daily cigar. He eventually spotted the man who was busy at work at the other end of the large room. Ramón, who was on his knees in front of a customer at the first table facing the entrance, signaled that he would be over as soon as he finished with his present client.

Aided by another man Ramón, expertly and with great energy, was shining the shoes of a young Andalusian wearing a wide-brimmed hat. The spectacle of this young man – drunk as a skunk and leaning back into a red velvet couch – with two elderly men at his feet was an unusual one in Madrid, and probably in Andalusia as well. It seemed to Paco that Ramón must have created this scene quite intentionally; that his purpose for some reason must have been to catch the attention of Paco and the other clients in order to emphasize the originality of his customer and the situation.

The thought of a cigar did not appeal to Paco all that much, especially as he really had decided to deprive himself of this luxury for three or four weeks; the amount of time it would take to recover the money he had spent on buying the revolver. Doing without a cigar was not really a big problem, he smoked them mainly because any self-respecting man in Madrid is supposed to smoke a cigar together with his after-lunch coffee. One smokes a cigar in the same fashion as one has brandy or anisette, and the fact that he really liked neither brandy nor cigars was something he kept to himself. Further analysis of the situation could well have made him ask himself another question: Why did he spend one-third of his income in this place full of insalubrious and downright disgusting smoke? *What a silly question!* Everyone did it; at least everybody who knew how to live.

During these reflections, Ramón had come over with the cigar box, and Paco did not hesitate. If he had been alone at the table or with Monsieur Ambroise – who, after all, was only a foreigner – he might have told the bootblack that he had an itchy throat and would rather pass. However, in front of this so-called painter, he could not expect to get away with so naïve a subterfuge. Expertly, without looking, he fingered the cigars in the box and chose the best, imported from the bloody Canary Islands. The purchasing of a cigar was much more than a question of selecting the best; it was a ritual. With a grand gesture, the payment was then handed to the seller, who in this manner obtained a small but regular income. At the tobacconist, the prices were, of course, a little bit lower, but who buys a cigar at the tobacconist. That would be tantamount to filling one's pockets with nuisances that said pockets had never been designed to hold and which in consequence could be damaged. Thus, one did not buy cigars from the tobacconist, and the same went for matches. One buys matches on the street – even if this, again, means that one will have to pay a surcharge – rather than at the kiosk, the tobacconist, or the newspaper stall. Only miserly old women are the exception to this rule. *If I could only understand why I bought that gun.*

His gaze stopped wandering as it reached Monsieur Ambroise, who was immersed in reading the daily paper. Paco continued with the ritual he had started; he removed the cellophane wrapper from the cigar with nimble fingers and crunched it into a ball. He then put a match to it and tossed the small torch into the almost empty coffee cup. He lit his cigar from the torch amidst the coffee-vapors that now emerged from the cup. The reflection of the thick *solitaire* on his little finger served to enhance the splendor of the ceremony. Yet, Paco was not attempting to provoke any form of reaction to his behavior; as far as he was concerned, this was nothing more than a display of good taste and respect for tradition.

Paco had nurtured a slight hope that he eventually would be left alone with the Frenchman, but when the painter ordered another coffee, Paco settled his bill, got up, and left.

*

In the square of *Plaza Mayor*, he entered an employment agency. He told the drowsy-looking clerk behind the glass partition that he wanted to see the director; he then sat down

on a long wooden bench next to a maid who also was waiting for the director. Paco crossed his legs and tried to prepare himself properly to express the matter he had come to talk about.

The director of the agency - Don Federico, who, although only as an intermediary, was Paco's employer - sat in his office chair, leafing through the Sunday issue of the ABC newspaper; on the wall, there was a yellowing photograph of Belmonte. A stuffed file cabinet, a desk, a chipped ceramic inkwell, a leather-backed armchair, and an old safe - one that Paco from experience knew normally would contain at least one bottle of brandy - were the accessories that together gave this tiny room something of an office look.

Don Federico, finishing reading the obituaries section, carefully cut out the crossword puzzle, folded it neatly, put on his jacket that was hanging on the back of the armchair, and requested his latest visitor to enter.

"How are you?" he asked, "What's up?"

"Everything's fine and how are you doing?"

"Likewise."

Don Federico smiled pleasantly, revealing several gold teeth and then sat up in his armchair with the sort of authority that becomes a company director, "I hope you haven't come to ask me for money."

Paco, a little bothered, sat up in his chair, "I know," he said, "that we normally don't square our accounts until the day after tomorrow, but what can I do: I'm a bit short."

"And, do you think," the director replied, not without irony, "that I have the cash to stop a train, as they say? Please don't try to take advantage of me, my dear Paco."

"I would never dream of such a thing," Paco protested, "and I don't even think like that, you know that." Then he added in a conciliatory voice, to lighten up the situation, "But you also know that for people like me, Tuesdays always seem much longer than Mondays."

"Very well," Don Federico said, magnanimously and resignedly reaching for his wallet. "However, I trust that this is the last time you mistake me for the Bank of Spain. What do we owe you up to today?"

"Six times fifty pesetas," Paco answered without having to calculate, "three hundred."

"I think you are mistaken," the man answered, as he opened a register. "Let's see: Friday it was Lola, right?"

"Correct."

"Saturday... Saturday... Concha, am I right?"

"You are."

"Monday... Monday... Maria Dolores."

"Exactly."

"Tuesday, the other Concha."

"Yes, the fat one."

"Wednesday... Wednesday... I don't see anyone listed here. I beg your pardon, my mistake. Wednesday, Blanquita, right?"

"Yes."

The director closed the register, and he put on a serious face, "In total, five, and not six, my dear Paco. And, five times fifty no matter how many times we add it up, will come to no more than two hundred and fifty."

"It's that I..." Paco replied, uncomfortably, "I had also included today's work."

Don Federico considered several arguments that he could have used, some of them quite powerful and at least one even close to conclusive, but arguing tired him and he preferred to get rid of his inopportune visitor. Thus, he paid Paco the three hundred and was rather surprised when his visitor, instead of getting up to leave, started to explain the real reason for his visit.

"I have wanted to talk to you for a long time now, Don Federico, but I've always left it for some better moment. I am a man of my word and don't usually break my commitments once I have made them. However, you know very well that prices for everything are increasing. Not a week goes by when the prices of this or that do not rise. For months now

the price of fish - I mean, edible fish - has been exorbitantly high. And as far as chickpeas are concerned, it seems as if the people growing them must be using manure mixed with gold."

"Just a moment, I have lots of people waiting for me," Don Federico answered. "If you are telling me this because you want to ask me for a raise, you are wasting your time."

"Well, that's the precise reason," Paco replied, frowning a little. "I am sorry you won't let me finish because I am not a stonemason. I cannot settle for just anything to eat. My work is very delicate, and if I was to see myself forced to renounce my share of meat - and, by meat, I mean first-grade steak - I would have to look for employment elsewhere."

"And, what do you expect me to do? Have the wages for wet nurses increased since the last time we talked? No. What about me? Have I increased my commission? No, I have not, so what do you expect me to do?"

"I haven't come to beg from you," Paco said with indignation, "I am only asking you to understand. Let us talk about this man to man, I mean..."

"Doubtlessly you are right! I am perfectly aware of the fact that you are a hundred percent correct from your point of view. However, I also feel the pinch due to the increased costs of living and the war, as do the nurses. So what do you think I should do about your dilemma? I cannot even offer you any advice... Except, perhaps... Perhaps you could work a little harder."

Paco's face, virtually instantly, turned red as a beetroot, "I am not twenty years old anymore, or thirty. I passed forty some time ago. Most men my age, Don Federico, are quite happy if they can piss properly."

"I wasn't trying to give you any advice," said the director. "I was simply thinking out loud and..."

"Besides, apart from anything else, it isn't the quantity but the quality that counts in my profession. I suppose you do agree with me on that point?"

"I totally agree, but what do we gain by that? Let me think things over. I do not promise you anything because at the moment I cannot see a solution; the only thing I can promise you is that I will consider it seriously."

He accompanied Paco to the door and, reaching the threshold, he added, "There's one thing I have always wondered, but I have always been too... too embarrassed to ask."

"Yes?"

"How can a man carry out a profession like yours and be married at the same time?"

Paco desperately searched for a conclusive and at the same time witty answer, but the other man closed the door behind him before he could think of something appropriate to say.