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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?*

*

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.*

*

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.

*

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 it 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.