

# STORIES OF HORROR



HANS HEINZ EWERS

# **BERSERKER**

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## **BOOKS**

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These stories were taken, in slightly abridged form, from the volumes 'Die Besessenen' (1909), 'Nachtmahr' (1922) and 'Der Zauberlehrling' (1910), all published by Georg Müller Verlag, Munich.

## The worst betrayal

He was called Stephe. That was because his predecessor was called that; the old gravedigger, far too lazy to get used to a different name, had told the new assistant: "I'll call you Stephe."

That happened in Egypt. Not on the Nile - in the state of Illinois. In the southern part: it's called "Egypt" because a wild mixture of bad races live there. Bad, inferior races - or what the Americans think of as such: Croats, Slovaks, Hungarians, Czechs, Wallachians, Slovenes, Russians, Greeks, Italians and Ukrainians. But the Yankee doesn't know these names; all he hears is that they don't all speak English, but some confused jumble - it's like Babel after the Tower of Babel.

And Babel, yes, that was in Egypt, wasn't it? Or somewhere around there. That's why he calls the vast land Egypt.

The American is the master. He owns the country, he owns all the Mines and smelters and collieries. The "Egyptians" are his slaves. The Negro slaves in the South have been free for half a century - they no longer have to work; but the whites, whom Europe spit out, have to work. And if they don't want to, if they go on strike, then the master brings out the machine guns. Shoots a few dozen dead, imprisons others - in the name of freedom. In Egypt and all over the country.

Of course, some of the Egyptians are clever. They scrape together a little money, then more and more. Eventually they become Americans and masters themselves. Freedmen: not socially equal, o

No - but economically. And they are the worst; they know best how to squeeze the last juice out of the slaves.

The name of the small town where Stephe lived didn't sound Egyptian at all. Nor did it sound English or Indian. It sounded German: Andernach. Palatine and Rhenish farmers had once lived here many years ago - nobody could remember when that had been. But they had long since moved away, one family after another, when industry arrived and with it the Egyptians. And only very few of the old settlers had stayed behind, two or three German names: they had also long since become Americans. Rich gentlemen.

Nevertheless, the town looked different from all the others around it. No wooden shacks, no corrugated iron huts. Real brick houses, overgrown with vines; gardens all around, apple trees, pear trees, cherry trees. The lower races understood the difference quite well; they didn't destroy anything; they built houses and gardens; they felt a bit like people in Andernach - much, much more than anywhere else in Egypt.

Outside, in front of the town, was the cemetery. It was even more German than the town. There were big oak trees and some weeping willows. Almost in the centre, up a small hill, were the German graves, and you could read the names: Schmitz, Schulze and Huber. All the stones were very simple, but well cared for, so that the ivy that covered all the ground did not overgrow them anywhere. The cemetery didn't actually belong to anyone, no religious community and none of the Egyptian tribes. They all used it - and paid the old gravedigger for it: he was the master.

Twice a year, the city's bank paid him a cheque, wired from Chicago, or was it from San Francisco? When the Germans

moved away, they sold their house and garden one by one - but not the cemetery. Nobody could sell it - and so nobody bought it. But someone from Andernach, some Schmitz or Huber or Schulze, who had long since died, had made a good bequest: the old gravedigger received interest for his work. So he was the placeholder of the dead who paid for themselves, was the lord of his land - and the Egyptians regarded him as such. He sold them tombs, took as much or as little as he wanted, prescribed crosses and stones and pillars according to his taste and from his workshop.

He was a Bohemian, Pawlaczek was his name. He had come over early, had lived here with the Germans and had now long been the oldest in the city. He had forgotten his Czech for forty long years, then painstakingly found it again when the Egyptians came. And he threw his German and English into a pot and made a greasy mash out of it. He had a workshop for gravestones and five Italian stonemasons in it. He had six gardeners and just as many gravediggers.

One of them was Stephe.

Stephe was not Egyptian. Stephe was an American. His real name was Howard Jay Hammond, he was from Petersham, Mass. and he was forty-three years old when this happened to him.

The person who wrote it down, in fragments, as he retrieved it from Stephe, who partly experienced it himself, was Jan Olieslagers from Limburg. Dutch nationality - but a Vlame. And, in culture and education, German. He had worked in the German interest during the war, but was considered very suspicious when the United States also struck. Right and left, Germans in the country were arrested and thrown into prison, many of them his good friends. Jan Olieslagers

longed little for the penitentiary - thought it appropriate to disappear from New York for a while.

So he came to Andernach in Egypt. There were large paint factories near the town, where Olieslagers introduced himself. He knew very little about chemistry - but he was good at giving the impression that he understood something. He knew, only very superficially, the managing director from New York; he knew that he was addressed as "Doctor" and had anything to do with the German cause. So he thought he had made a very good catch: a great German chemist who had many a knew the secret. But you could hold your hand over him for a while - what was wrong with the one German? He certainly couldn't do any harm here in Andernach. Of course, he made the most of his advantage, paid the new chemist just enough to live on and gave him a small room in the factory.

Jan Olieslagers was loitering around the laboratory, not moving a hand. Finally confronted, he explained that he would not consider working under anyone. He had to have his own rooms - and nobody was allowed to interfere with him. And so great was the respect for German science here, as everywhere else in the country, that his wishes were honoured and everything was done to achieve great success through him as soon as possible.

The Vlamme had a good memory. He was quick to pick up on words, picked up a few nice phrases; soon he was reading a colourful erudition from the books in the factory library. Then he sent out orders - this and that had to be procured from all over the world. And so he went on for weeks and months.

He didn't socialise with anyone. He only went out in the evening to stretch his legs - then usually came to the cemetery.



He had met Stephe there.

This story is made from what Jan Olieslagers wrote down.

Jan Olieslagers spent many an evening sitting with Stephe on the stone bench under the old lime tree. Stephe had a secret - which annoyed the Vlamen.

He felt it: it was something special; he wanted to know. But Stephe didn't say much at all; the two of them sat for hours without speaking a word. Olieslagers couldn't quite get close to the guy. He searched and searched and couldn't find a door anywhere. Stephe didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't chew and he didn't have anything to do with women. - What can you do with someone like that?

It would have been difficult for Jan Olieslagers to say what drew him to Stephe during those months. There was nothing remarkable about him. If he had ever needed a passport, it would have been written in: Hair - brown. Forehead, nose, chin, ears - ordinary. But he was pretty - there was something that made him pretty.

One thing was certain: there was something that constantly preoccupied this man. It was always there, stronger sometimes and often only very faintly - but it never left him. Or only when, at rare intervals, Jan Olieslager succeeded in directing Stephe's thoughts to something else. For example, when Stephe, broken off, without context, allowed his weak memory to snatch the smallest fragments from his past life.

Yes, he came from Massachusetts; from Methodist parents. Hadn't learnt much, left home early, roamed all over the country. Had been everything you could be without being able to do anything. Lift boy, dishwasher, note distributor, stoker on a steamer of the big

Lakes, cowboy in Arizona, usher in cinemas. He had worked in all kinds of factories and on just as many farms, from Vancouver to San Augustin and from Los Angeles to Halifax. Nowhere had he  
He had held out for a long time; in between he had moved around again and again as a strikebreaker and vagrant. But now, over two years ago, he had discovered his profession: he liked this job in Andernach and would stay here for the rest of his life.

As Stephe said this, little flickers flickered in his eyes and a smile crept laboriously across his lips. Then he sat again and pondered, not saying a word.

Olieslager realised: this was it. It was the heavy gate with seven bars - and behind it crouched the strange animal.

Then came the draft. All men had to report for military service, from eighteen to forty-five years of age.

Stephe became restless - and this restlessness increased with each passing day.

"Why don't you want to become a soldier?" asked Olieslagers.

Stephe shook his head, very firmly. "No," he grumbled, "no."

And another time he said: "That's it - I don't want to leave here."

Sunday morning he knocked on the door of the laboratory, closed it carefully and made sure that the Vlame was alone. Then he came out with his request. He would have to turn himself in on Wednesday. Let the doctor give him something to make him appear ill. Unfit. He didn't want to leave here. He couldn't.

Jan Olieslagers didn't think about it for long, he agreed at the moment. He only had one condition: for payment, Stephe had to tell him what was actually keeping him here?

Stephe looked up at him, suspiciously enough. "No," he said at last. And left. The next day Olieslagers visited him in the cemetery. This time he talked to him for a long time, tried to persuade him with all his might. But Stephe didn't want to.

"Look!" cried the Vlame. "You have a secret. I'm curious, I want to know. So tell me. It costs nothing. And on Wednesday, no man is more unfit to be a soldier than you." Stephe shook his head calmly. Got up from the bench.

But the next morning he was in the laboratory very early. He pulled notes out of his pocket, two hundred and thirty dollars, money he had saved. The Vlame showed him the door.

Then, in the evening, he came back to the cemetery. He didn't meet Stephe on the usual bench, so he waited for a while, then went to look for him. He finally found him sitting on a fresh grave, brooding to himself. He called to him: "Come, Stephe."

Stephe did not move. Then the Vlame approached and slapped him on the shoulder. "Get up! Come on! I will give you what you want!" The gravedigger slowly stood up. "In a moment?" he asked. "Tomorrow is Drawing."

The Vlame nodded. "Does digitalis grow anywhere?" Stephe didn't understand him. - "Foxglove, I mean." Stephe led him, breaking the flowers at the Vlame's behest.

"Where do you live?" asked Jan Olieslagers.

Stephe went ahead. They came to the small stone ossuary in the middle of the garden of the dead. Stephe pulled a large key out of his pocket and unlocked it.

They entered. There were a few spades, hoes and shovels in one corner and empty sacks in the back. There was nothing else in the room. -

"This is where you live?" asked the Vlame.

Stephe unlocked a second door that led into a small room.

"Here," he nodded.

A camp bed, a small table, a few chairs, a washbasin on top of one. An old suitcase, a broken clothes rack, a small iron stove. Nothing hung on the walls.

"Have you got any spirit?" asked Olieslagers. "Make yourself some tea with the stuff. Drink it before you go to bed." He explained to him exactly how he should do it and how he should behave at the medical examination.

Stephe repeated everything, loudly and several times. Then he unlocked the suitcase, took his money and offered it to him again.

The Vlame shook his head. "Leave it alone, Stephe. I'm doing it for you because I'm your friend!"

Went out.

Stephe ran after him outside. His hand held a small coral necklace. - "Do you want this, sir?" Jan Olieslagers looked at it.

"Where did you get it?" he laughed. "From a bride?" Stephe nodded.

"And where is she?" asked the Vlame.

"Dead," said Stephe.

Olieslager gave it back to him. "Neapolitan," he murmured, "one from Egypt." But he asked no further. "Keep it, Stephe, as a Souvenir! - I don't want anything, I told you! Not even your Secret - if you don't say it yourself. Don't forget what you have to do - and good luck tomorrow. Come to me in the laboratory and tell me."

Then he walked away with long strides.

Stephe came up to him late enough. He was pale and trembling, but a satisfied grin was on his face. "Free!" he shouted.

The Vlame congratulated him. "Sit down, my boy! And now let's get the poison out of your body as quickly as possible - or at least render it harmless!" He had no idea whether this was necessary or what he should do to achieve this. But he thought to himself: alcohol certainly can't do any harm. And perhaps it would also make him talkative.

So he mixed whisky. Stephe drank, swallowing one glass after another like medicine. But he didn't say a word. The Vlame was disappointed enough, but he didn't let on. He talked to him like a sick cow, poured him more and more; forced him to pour down astonishing quantities. Stephe drank.

As he left, he thanked me. His tongue slurred and his body staggered, his legs gave out. But only his body was drunk; what he said was quite reasonable. Olieslagers heard him fall down on the stairs, came after him and helped him up. Then he grasped him firmly round the waist and dragged him home with difficulty.

When they reached the cemetery gate, Stephe pulled himself together. "Thank you, sir," he said.

Stephe never read a book, never a newspaper. Everything outside the He was completely indifferent to the cemetery. He knew that there was a war going on somewhere in the world. Who was at war and why and for what did not interest him.

But from now on, he had an eye for everything that concerned his friend. He showed a certain interest, which eventually went so far that he even asked questions. What was he doing in the city? Why he was here? Did he earn a lot of money?

Olieslager told him. Clearly, simply, so that Stephe soon realised. He felt sure that he would never betray him.

But it wasn't a desire to speak out in the Vlamen's case. It was something else. Stephe was obsessed with a thought - and every day Jan Olieslagers was more and more tickled to find out what it was. It was as if he himself was possessed by this addiction. He felt that his questions would do him no good, so he was careful not to show this crazy desire, which was nevertheless the only thing that made him to the cemetery every day. He never asked a question, he never made a The slightest allusion. But when the gravedigger asked him, he gave him a precise answer, surrendering himself completely to him. "Look, Stephe," he said, "this is my secret. I'm telling you because you're my friend and because I trust you."

Stephe nodded. He understood quite well: when you have a friend, you have to trust him. But he still didn't say a word.

Then came the day when all the splendour in the laboratory came to an end. The director had sent for Vlamen and told him that he finally had to see some results. Nothing had happened so far, absolutely nothing! He gave him a clear ultimatum: either he had to come back within the next The director didn't doubt for a moment that he could do it. Or else he would have him arrested. He had made detailed enquiries in New York and knew exactly what he had been up to in recent years.

So let him make up his mind. And he should bear in mind that the factory would make a new complaint against him: that he had smuggled himself in here to steal chemical-military secrets.

to find out. That is necessary - you have to explain your whereabouts somehow.

Jan Olieslagers, actually only surprised that this conversation had not taken place months ago, remained very calm.

"You're right, sir," he said. "And since I can only choose between prison and the opportunity to do something positive for you, I would have to be a fool if I preferred prison. But one week is not enough. I need four weeks."

"I'll give you two weeks, sir, and not a day longer," said the director. "Good morning!"

A fortnight to go - the Vlame was quite happy with that. Only time - and every day was a gain. He locked himself in his laboratory. Smoked. Las.

That evening he was at the cemetery. He told Stephe everything, word for word, as it had happened.

"I have to go!" he concluded.

"If only I had any idea how and where!"

He pondered aloud; Stephe sometimes nodded or shook his head. He might even interject a word or ask a question.

"Canada?" he suggested.

Olieslager laughed. "Is also at war. On the same side as the States - the two are one today. And the Mexican border is so manned that no dog can get through! No, I'll have to stay in the country, crawl into hiding somewhere in a big city. If only I wasn't so goddamn famous! A hundred thousand paid secret agents are working all over the country - and a few million volunteer spies are helping them - they've been looking for me for almost a year."

The two found nothing. When the Vlame left, Stephe squeezed his hand for the first time.

The next evening, Stephe was waiting for him on the bench. "I've thought it through, sir," he said. "You don't have to go. You have to stay here!"

The Vlame looked at him in astonishment. "Here? Where here?"

Stephe moved his arms round in a circle. "Here!" he repeated. "Three helpers have been drafted. The old man will take you at once; will be glad to get some help."

"As what?" asked Olieslagers. "As - a gravedigger?"

Stephe nodded.

The Vlame smiled. That didn't seem so stupid. Gravedigger? Well, at least that didn't require any specialised knowledge, like being a chemist!

And in an instant he saw the way to make the leap. Twelve days - bah, that was more than enough!

They talked for a long time that evening. They didn't ignore the slightest detail. And they only argued back and forth about one point: who should pay for the new clothes Stephe was to buy. The Vlame didn't want to admit it, but Stephe got his way: he would pay for them with his own money. He would give it to his friend.

Early in the morning, the great chemist Dr Jan Olieslagers made a small explosion in his laboratory, which caused little damage but was quite loud. People ran together and banged on the locked door; the director was also with them. When the door was finally opened, they found the man with his head completely bandaged; only his nose, eyes and forehead were visible.



"What happened?" asked the director.

Olieslagerers held the door in his hand. "Come in," he replied. "But nobody but you!" He pushed the others back and locked the door. "What has happened? What can happen in any laboratory every day! I've burnt myself!"

"I'll send the doctor," shouted the American.

"You'll send the devil!" replied the Vlame. "Do you think I have time to bother with doctors now? - I've got twelve days left - twelve days - and I'll be finished then, you can count on it! Everything else is none of your business - you couldn't care less if I burn my snout!"

"Good, sir, good!" laughed the director. "Just as you like! - Do you need any help?"

"Don't let a cat come in!" the other one shouted. "That's all I need!" - Then he came to his senses. "I'd like one thing, sir! I won't go out of these rooms for twelve days, give me instructions that food, drink and whatever I want will be brought here. And that all my orders are obeyed immediately - before all others."

The director nodded. "Let it be done, sir!" He went to the door and turned back once more. "If you can manage that - it won't be your pity, sir!"

Jan Olieslagerers closed the door carefully behind him. "But if you can't squeeze it out - you'll lock me up in the penitentiary, won't you?"

He carefully covered the windows, then took the cloth off his face. Jan Olieslagers sat in his room for twelve days, eating and drinking, smoked and read. He didn't have many wishes, but the director sent him whisky, wine, cigarettes and all kinds of delicacies. The bandage lay

always stood close to his side and he carefully put it round him every time before he opened the door.

He didn't touch any of the stuff lying around on the table. He had only taken a small mirror over from the bedroom. He picked it up every few hours, carefully observing the stubble sprouting on his chin, lips and cheeks.

With satisfaction

he realised that they were much darker than the blond hair on his head and were growing much faster than he had expected.

On Friday afternoon he sent a short letter to the director.

"Come and see me in the laboratory tomorrow at twelve o'clock."

The director came - and found nothing. Jan Olieslagers was gone with a few things. The report was filed immediately, and a very thorough search was made for the man throughout the forty-eight states.

Everywhere - except in the small cemetery in Andernach.

Jan Olieslagers had moved during the night just before sunrise. Stephe was waiting for him and immediately helped him change his clothes. A few clumsy

Soldier's boots, thick trousers, blue jumper, jacket, cap and overalls were ready.

They spent a few hours making it all look a little dirty and used. As soon as the old gravedigger came out of his house, Jan Olieslagers approached him and offered him his services.

"Where did you come from?" asked the old man. "Who sent you here?" - But he didn't expect an answer and quickly continued: "Do you speak German?"

"Yes!" said the Vlame.

The old man rubbed his wrinkled hands. "I thought so! Want to crawl into hiding, eh, for the war? - That's all right with me! - Twenty

the week - I'll call you Mike." - Then he shouted through the bushes:  
"Stephe! Stephe!"

He came and the old man said: "There's a new one. His name is Mike, like the old one. - You can take him to work right away."

Stephe grinned: "Yes, sir!"

But once again the old man held her back. "Where do you live, Mike?"

The Vlame said: "I don't know. Can't I use the other man's room? Mike have?"

"Just arrived?" grumbles the old man. "Early train? - That's clever - and straight here?! No, you can't have Mike's room - he's staying in town with his wife! - You'll have to search around tonight, you'll find something." The new Mike asked: "Isn't there an empty room out here?"

But the old man shook his head. "No. Nothing at all. Everyone lives in the city. Only Stephe lives here."

Stephe jumped in: "He can stay with me."

So Jan Olieslagers moved to Stephe, into the small room by the ossuary in the centre of the Andernach cemetery in Egypt.

He made the room a little more homely. He sent Stephe into town, bought a camp bed and a few other things. He also drew wires and connected them to those in the leg house so that he could light a small lamp. So he could read in bed.

Stephe showed well that he was his friend. He was always up half an hour early, got water, cleaned clothes and shoes. He did all the little errands in town.

As they worked together, Stephe managed for two, making the unfamiliar work easier for his friend wherever possible. During these weeks Jan Olieslagers observed nothing special about Stephe.

Then, one evening, Jan Olieslagers noticed a certain restlessness in Stephe. He had some free time that afternoon; he had gone out for the first time and strolled through the streets of the city. His beard had grown strong by now; he no longer had to fear being recognised. When he returned, Stephe was sitting on his bed, talking to himself. In front of him, uncorked, was a full bottle of whisky.

"You drink, Stephe?" he asked.

"No, Mike," stuttered Stephe. He now sometimes called him Mike, as the others did. Then, after a while, he continued: "For you, sir!"

He stood up heavily, completely unable to suppress his excitement.

Olieslager thought: I should drink. He wants to make me drunk. He smiled. "Come on, friend, let's drink."

They sat down, mixed the glasses and drank. Stephe barely sipped, he didn't like it at all. But Olieslagers did his friend a favour, drank heavily. He chatted, first about the city, what he had seen there. Then he talked about all sorts of things, about New York and other cities. Stephe made a great effort to listen, then let it go; that, What occupied him did not release him for a moment. Slowly, the Vlame felt a slight drunkenness, which he exaggerated to his heart's content. He laughed, sang, stood up and staggered. At last he acted very tired and threw himself on the bed. He had a book handed to him and declared that he still wanted to read.

Stephe had to put a full glass next to his bed. He emptied it leisurely and read while Stephe slowly undressed. Olieslagers felt him watching him, not taking his eyes off him. At last he dropped his book, closed his eyes, yawned, sighed and turned round.

Played possum; pretended to be asleep.

Stephe sat down by his bed. Took his hand, lifted it, let it fall again. Blew lightly on his eyelids. Then, convinced that his friend was now fast asleep, he switched off the lamp.

Olieslagers slowly opened his eyes. But he saw nothing - it was dark in the room.

But he could hear Stephe getting dressed again, piece by piece. Trousers first, then boots - quietly, very quietly - jumper and jacket.

Now Stephe walked through the room, opened the door, removed the key. Went out and locked it from the other side. His footsteps echoed as he walked through the ossuary - and out from there into the cemetery.

Then everything was quiet.

The Vlame pondered. Should he follow him? The door was locked, but he could have climbed through the window. But Stephe would be out of the churchyard by the time he got dressed. And then: it was clear that Stephe wanted to protect himself from any observation. That was why he had bought the whisky, that was why -

And he needed Stephe - he was his protection now. Had to remain his friend, not become his enemy. If he was completely sure that Stephe wouldn't notice -

But he would notice. He was suspicious anyway and sober, while he himself was drunk enough not to be sure of avoiding noise.

No, it was better for him to lie still.

Then he heard footsteps outside again and listened sharply. The door to the leg house opened, then closed again. Something was happening inside.

A walk. A shuffle. And again nothing. A speaking, half-loud, he couldn't understand what it was. Silence again.

This went on for hours. Every now and then a noise that he couldn't decipher. And then a voice. He thought it was Stephen's voice, but maybe that was just because he thought it was there. He couldn't tell how many people there were. The words that reached his ear were torn off, sometimes he had to wait half an hour for one. And he couldn't understand a single one.

At last the sound of heavy footsteps again, an opening of the door to the cemetery - this time it remained open. And, fading, the footsteps outside -

Jan Olieslagers had been sitting upright in bed, working very tensely with one sense. When he heard nothing, nothing, nothing at all, he heaved a sigh of relief. Breathed heavily, as if released. Stared into the darkness for minutes. Then let himself fall back. Fell asleep.

Stephe was standing in front of him when he woke up. He had pulled the blanket back a little and was touching his arm with infinite care.

"Get up, sir!" he begged. "It's high time."

He handed him his clothes and put water down for him to wash. Jan Olieslagers looked at him as he dressed: Stephe looked clean and freshly washed. As they went out to work, he took a quick look round the ossuary - it looked exactly as it had the night before. The old sacks in the back corner and their hoes and spades in the front, which they always put there and took out again in the morning.

Nothing spoke of Stephen's night-time experience. But there were a few sprigs of flowers lying around.

They had to work hard that morning, three new trenches had to be dug. While the spade was used, the clay dumplings were thrown out of the pit, stitch by stitch it ate its way deeper into the

Earth, Jan Olieslagers thought. He searched his memory from the moment he came home last night. But as he searched, he could hardly find anything tangible. Stephe wanted to make him drunk, that was quite clear, wanted that for the sole purpose that he should sleep soundly and not notice anything of what was going on next door in the night.

But what was going on there? Stephe left - and came back some time later. With someone? With one? With two? He had heard footsteps - but he couldn't have told how many people there were. He had heard talking - but only a few unintelligible sounds in long pauses - and only once had he recognised Stephe's voice exactly. After all, Stephe had a visitor. For while it was true that Stephe often enough talked to himself, all alone, it was equally certain that it was always only the faintest whisper, a mere movement of the lips to support ponderous thought.

Stephe had a visitor, that was certain, and a visit to boot, which he wanted to hide. That was also the reason that kept him on this burial ground in Egypt - this nocturnal visit to the ossuary!

How that sounded - 'this nocturnal visit to the leg house! Jan Olieslagers smiled - if you lived close by, there was nothing grey about it. The corpses were always buried in the little chapel laid out at the other end of the cemetery. The ossuary was only used in very rare cases, for accidents, suicides or crimes. As long as he had been here, it had only once housed the body of an old man - and then only for two hours one afternoon. So the ossuary was basically nothing more than a

an empty room that could be used occasionally to - But what empty room couldn't have done that?

Jan Olieslagers thought about everything he knew about Stephe. He had never seen him speak to a stranger. Of course, he looked at every woman and girl, smiling quietly to himself - but he never spoke to one and knew none. He occasionally spoke to the old gravedigger and the other labourers, but even then only the bare essentials, what was necessary for the work. He only talked to him about other things here and there.

Nevertheless, one thing was certain: he wasn't Stephe's only friend. Stephe had others. Rare, mysterious ones.

And more than ever, the Vlamen was gripped by a burning desire: he had to find it.

Had to find out what filled this brain that was digging next to him.

He spoke little to Stephe that week. The thought wouldn't leave him, clung to him, wouldn't let him go. During the day he walked around like a Drunk with sleep, he lay sleepless in his bed at night, always obsessed by the tormenting idea: I must find it. And this torment grew stronger with every hour; the secret of the other ate corrosively into his skull.

Stephe probably noticed. She stared at him, fearfully, for minutes.

Once, in the middle of his work, he plunged the spade into the ground. Suddenly asked: "What's bothering you, sir?"

Then Jan Olieslagers said: "Why should I lie? It's the same thing that's bothering you, Stephe!"

Stephe did not answer. He stood there, motionless. At last a groan wrestled its way out of his chest.

But not a word. Not a single word.



In the evening, while Stephe was preparing dinner, the Vlame lifted his valise onto the bed. He unlocked it, rummaged around and took out his razor. He opened the case, screwed the razor together and played with it. A pretty thing, gold-plated, flashing brightly -

Then he thought to himself: what did he want with it? He had to think before it occurred to him - oh yes, for Stephe!

"Stephe!" he called. "Come here!" - He shoved the thing into his hand. "Take it, you'll love it. I don't need it now. But you shave every day and your razor is bad and very sharp."

"No, no!" stammered Stephe.

Olieslager insisted. "Yes, you must take it. Didn't you give me everything I have on my body? Am I not your friend?"

Stephe did not say thank you. They ate in silence and went to bed in silence.

But the next morning, the Vlame saw from his bed how Stephe opened his box, how he took a new blade and shaved himself with great care. He carefully cleaned every single part.

"Give me my suitcase!" said Jan Olieslagers. Then he took the powder compact and the box of soap. "Here, Stephe, I forgot about this. It's part of it."

- They had to work hard these days; another assistant had joined the soldiers and more people seemed to be dying than usual. They had to go out early, cover the open graves, then dig new holes and lower the coffins during short funeral ceremonies. Very late they finished. They memorised the names of those they had buried throughout the day; repeated them at dinner, as a sign of the hard work that had been done. Then it was forgotten again.

"Orlando Sgambi, 58 years old; Jan Srba, 22 years old; Ferencz Kovacz, 60 years old -" said Jan Olieslagers.

Stephe nodded: "Anka Savicz, 19 years old; Alessandro Venturini, 78 years old, Ossip Si -"

"Yes, yes!" Stephe grumbled and poured the tea. "Eleven today, eleven."

The Vlame felt the labour in his bones. He had slept little this past week and was now tired to the point of falling over.

"Shall we sit on our bench for a while?" asked Stephe.

"No!" he replied. "I want to go to bed."

"Good!" said Stephe. "Me too."

They undressed. Olieslagers saw Stephe working around, brushing his clothes, cleaning his boots. Then he too lay down; the Vlame heard his quiet breaths and finally, as always, a soft whisper in his sleep.

And he fell asleep himself, very soundly.

He woke up in the middle of the night. He heard something - listened up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes with difficulty. Something was speaking. He listened

Stephen's bed - no, it didn't come from there. Nothing again - then, suddenly, two or three torn words. Next door, from the leg house. And it was Stephen's voice that spoke. He tore away the covers, threw out his legs, sat on the edge of the bed. Now footsteps beside him, a shuffling and dragging. And once more a bright word from Stephe -

What was he saying?

Then the ossuary door closed - he heard the footsteps outside. He was up in a flash, ran to the window and pulled it open. There he saw, through the summer night,

Stephe was walking. He was carrying a heavy woman in his arms, wrapped in white sheets - ah, a woman!

And Jan Olieslagers realised, in a tenth of a second -

"Anka Savicz," he mumbled, "19 years. Anka Savicz -"

He pressed the window cross with both hands, spellbound. He felt the coolness of the night on his bed-warm body, shivered, chattered his teeth. Listened out.

Finally again - Stephe's footsteps. He half turned round, but Stephe didn't come yet - the footsteps went round the ossuary. Then a heave and a grind - the swing of the old pump. And the water splashing brightly into the bucket.

A rubbing and brushing. The splashing of water.

And again footsteps. Now the door of the ossuary opened - now it closed. Three steps - and the door opened.

He didn't see Stephe, didn't recognise anything in the darkness.

"Anka Savicz -" he whispered. "Where is she?" "At home," it said from the darkness.

He understood it well. At home - with himself - in the coffin - and in the grave -

He didn't answer. He went to bed, burrowed his head into the pillows and pulled up the covers. His temples drummed and his lips twitched. Then he gritted his teeth. Sleep, he thought, sleep, sleep!

Stephe realised that he had to speak now. But this did not happen, neither the next day nor the day after that; yet it seemed to the Vlamen as if he were only waiting, indeed, asking to be asked. But he did not ask him. He gave him a couple of silk neckbands, a leather belt, a beautiful knife, all sorts of little things that made Stephen's eyes sparkle. He sat with him on the bench in the evening after work, told him long stories - it was as if his friend, closed off for so many years, was now slowly learning to listen. And finally - to speak himself.

Then, when Stephe began to tell the story, it was difficult and infinitely laborious. What Jan Olieslagers later wrote down on a few pages was the result of many weeks. Stephe completely lacked any sense of coherence - and the simplest intermediate questions asked by the Vlame often confused him so much that he was unable to pick up the thread again. Although the phenomenon of his mental life had developed quite logically, Stephe did not understand a bit of this whole development.

He was not faced with a strange conundrum: that alone seemed quite natural to him and the only understandable and right thing to do. But he had not the slightest sense of cause and effect, was often barely able to distinguish between what had really happened and what he had only experienced in his mind. In addition to this, some quite trivial The events of the day had stuck in his memory, while other highly important events had slipped his mind so completely that it seemed utterly hopeless to recall them. Neither

Stephe could remember neither his father's nor his mother's name, but he could remember the name of one of the teachers at his school - who was himself

had never given lessons. He remembered a job as a dishwasher in a hotel in St. Louis - a position in which he did not stay for three days, during which time not the slightest unusual thing happened - very well and was able to describe it precisely,

what the room looked like, where he was working, who was working with him, yes, he could trace the mark on the plates - even though that had happened eleven years ago.

On the other hand, he couldn't say two sentences about his life as a Cowboy in Arizona, although he had lasted almost a year there, and that only briefly, before he found his profession as a gravedigger.

Jan Olieslagers made notes every evening about what Stephe told him and every night he organised and sifted through the growing material. It seemed to him as if he was working on an ancient manuscript written in a strange code, the key to which nobody knew. Letter by letter he had to guess with difficulty - then he found a word - and finally a sentence -

It is true that this work gave the Vlamen great pleasure - like an explorer who succeeded in finding a strange, horrible flower in a tropical jungle. One whose name is known only to a few - and that no one had seen for centuries. *Νεκροφιχή* was *the* name of his flower.

The public prosecutor would have called it a crime, the doctor would have called it madness. For Jan Olieslagers, it was neither one nor the other. The thought of judging Stephen's actions morally or even aesthetically never occurred to him. He realised that there was only one way to understand them: to think with Stephen's brain and feel with his psyche.

And that's what he tried to do.

So what the Vlame wrote down - even if it is incomplete, even if it may contain some errors - nevertheless grew much more from Stephen's soul than from that of Jan Olieslager.

Howard Jay Hammond from Petersham, Mass. knew little about women. When he was still a stoker on Lake Michigan, he had once visited a brothel with his mates. Years later, when he was on a coal mine in Kansas, he had become involved with a woman again. At the time, he lived in the only room of a married mate; he was a real miner and always worked the night shift deep in the mine. Hammond, however, worked above ground and during the day. And it made

It was as natural that the woman should find her way to his bed at night as to her husband's in the morning. She was by no means young or beautiful - not at all.

He had known a woman once or twice more in his life, for a very short time.

But a feeling of pleasure, of joy, of love had never awakened in him.

It only breathed and lived when Howard Jay Hammond became the gravedigger Stephe.

- One morning - and the soft spring sun kissed the young leaves - Stephe stood in the pit into which he had just lowered a coffin. Usually he never listened to what the priest said - that morning he listened attentively. It seemed to him as if the man had a special message - especially for him. The pastor spoke what one speaks at an open grave. But then came what was meant for Stephe.

Oh, the grief of the parents, and the inconsolable widower! Oh, the two little orphans left behind! Oh, this blossom of womanhood, broken by rough storm winds at a young age! The  
The pious man raised his voice, wiped his lips, sobbed very movingly and painted the pain of his relatives and friends and the whole community. He painted a picture of this young woman, described the virtues of her soul: charity and piety, love of children, love of husband, love of mother. Praised in glowing colours the goodness and beauty and the rare charm of the deceased.

That was it.

(Jan Olieslagers wrote down: 'Will the realisation ever dawn on this shepherd of souls that he was the great Galeotto? He who most infamous matchmaker of all time?')

- This phrase stuck in Stephen's mind: 'The goodness and the beauty and the rare charm of the departed'. - He was to close the grave that evening. He stood in the pit, lifted out the wreaths and flowers that lay on the coffin for the time being. And noticed that one or two screws on the coffin were loose.

That happened often. He mechanically took his screwdriver out of his pocket to tighten them. But he used his instrument on other screws, not tightening them, but loosening them. He didn't do that - something inside him did. He unscrewed all the screws and lifted the lid off the coffin.

Then he stared at the dead woman.

What did she look like? Stephe had long forgotten, probably within the next quarter of an hour. Only the banal words of the clergyman remained in his memory, and only with these could he describe her to his friend: 'The goodness and the beauty and the rare charm of the deceased.

Stephe stared at the dead woman. A curl had fallen over her face and he stroked it back. (The colour? - Oh no, he didn't know the colour.) But his hard fingers touched those pale cheeks. Moved up and down over her face. First one hand, then both.

Then he closed the coffin. Screwed all the bolts tight. Climbed out of the grave, closed it.

This was Stephen's first tender adventure in the garden of love.

Until then, Stephe hadn't cared who was buried. There was something dead in the coffin and it had to be dug up.

But now he listened to the words that were spoken at the grave. Or, often enough, not at the grave, but in the small chapel by the north end of the cemetery. Many ceremonies took place there; then

the coffins were often left overnight, only to be buried by the next of kin in the morning.

And sometimes it was young women and girls -

He was the only assistant who lived in the cemetery; it was his duty to take one last walk round every evening before going to bed. Also: to look into the chapel.

He went into the chapel. He stepped close to the coffin, looked at the dead women. He adjusted the flowers, smoothed out a crease in the shirt.

And slowly, infinitely slowly, over long nights, he learnt, like an adolescent boy, the tenderness of love.

Learned from quiet teachers. Quiet, gentle, very kind ones.

The rough groping of his hard hands became a delicate Stroking; from his lips came, unconsciously, tender sounds. Sometimes even a word.

He caressingly touched those pale cheeks, the forehead, even the hands.

But he never lifted his eyelids.

It all came naturally. He never set out to do this or that: he did it - and only realised it when it was done.

His hand stroked her neck and nape. His fingers tremblingly pushed back the leilah, groping fearfully over the swelling breasts -

Then, once, his head bent down. And his mouth kissed -

He didn't know what it was that he was kissing for the first time. The shoulder perhaps - or the cheek - or -

He didn't know that. It was a very big thing in his life - but he didn't know what it was.



Stephe cut flowers in the graveyard and brought them to his beloved at night. He pushed the others aside and put *his* flowers in their hands -

Once, when they were still alive, these women belonged to other people. Parents, husbands, fiancés. But now no one else. Only him.

Stephe had a very strong feeling about this: they came to him, belonged to him, to him alone in the world.

But this was not domineering, not tyrannical. They were not creatures that his whim commanded - they were rare beings that he served.

And which - nevertheless - were his. Belonged to him, to him alone.

The first one to invite him to the bridal shower was a young, black one. He knew that she had black hair - but he had forgotten her name. She was not lying in her coffin in the chapel. She was already in the open pit.

Stephe went to her in the night. Undid the lid - and it was a very tedious job, because it was a cheap, poor coffin and because bad nails were used next to the screws, which bent.

The black-haired girl lay there. He gave her his flowers. He stroked her and covered her with tender kisses. He spoke softly to her.

Then she asked him: "Take me with you!"

"How did she ask you?" Jan Olieslagers had asked. And Stephe said:

"She asked."

"Is that how her lips moved?" Stephe shook his head.

"Then she asked with her eyes?"

But no, no - he had never opened anyone's eyelids, never.

"How did she ask you, Stephe? How?"

But there was no other answer. "She begged me - she begged."

She begged him - - and he picked her up. Carried her through the quiet paths of the cemetery, into the ossuary. Laid them down on the old sacks -

This was their wedding bed.

But he scattered many daffodils over it.

Dead women love flowers -

She was the first, this black woman. Then came someone called Carmelina Gaspari - that was the one who gave him the coral necklace.

"She gave it to you?"

Stephe nodded.

"How then? How did she give you the necklace?"

He didn't know that. His eyes searched around helplessly. "She - she - gave - me -"

And a blonde came. And one with red hair. One called Milewa, one

-

They no longer needed to ask; Stephe now knew. He went out in the night, to a grave or to the chapel. Took his booty, carried it over to the ossuary. Kept them for that one night.

He never forgot to scatter flowers. And that was strange: they told him which flowers they wanted. One wanted roses, but only very red ones. And the other: Lilies, tall, snow-white ones that grew behind old Pawlaczek's house. Jasmine asked for one, and again a large bell of wysteria, which grew above the stonemason's workshop. Deep blue irises from the old graves of the Germans, lime blossoms from the tree above her bench, laburnum growing beside the gate -

But never, never wanted a tuberose.

They 'told' him - how they 'asked' him, how they 'gave' him. They spoke the language of the dead - and Stephe understood.

Stephe was a child when he came to Andernach in Egypt.

A woman made a boy of him - she lived on in his heart - with her 'goodness and beauty, with the rare charm of the departed'. Then he saw for the first time with marvelling eyes.

And a youth grew out of the boy in the silent nights in the chapel. He learnt the dreams of the dead.

Now Stephe was a man - now he knew. Knew surely and strongly.

Out there - it might be different. He didn't understand that. It was none of his business, whatever it might be. His world was here - in the Andernach cemetery.

And this world was created just for him and belonged to him alone. Absolutely and without objection.

He, Stephe, was their only master.

But then a new secret revealed itself to him.

He never searched, never pondered, as his friend, the Vlame, did. Like the flowers of the graveyard around him, all mysteries were revealed to him. The open rose smiled at him, at some hour, some good day.

Nothing ever seemed strange and wonderful to him. It was all so simple, so obvious. Only flowers burst open: that was all.

And the Vlame thought:

There are some whose love is so strong that it grows beyond life, right into the realm of death. So strong that, for one a little while, calls the dead back to life. Many poets have sung about this. Helge, the dog killer, had to return from the land of the dead,

back to the hill where Sigrun was waiting for him. Had to, had to, pulled by her great love. A dead man the wife favoured for one night.

And the mother in the "shroud" came to his mind, who called her dead son back night after night - just like Sigrun called her husband. Lenore, who rose from wild dreams at dawn and longed for the dead Wilhelm to return to life. Poe's shadowy figures Ligeia and Morella, who - strange! - were just other names for his "Lost Lenore".

Jan Olieslagers didn't need the legend or the poetry. He had heard of such cases often enough and knew at least one himself quite well. That of his base. She was young, barely eighteen, when her husband, a handsome lieutenant, died in a racing accident. As a widow, she was very quiet and calm, didn't make a big fuss and lived her life like that. Only, on the twentieth of every month, when evening fell, she shut herself up in the little Indian room of her parents' house. That was the day and the room where she had once got engaged. And then, when dusk fell, her lover would come. Her love drew him out of the realm of the dead and brought him to life for a brief hour. Only a few knew about it: her parents, her cousin and a few friends.

She was completely healthy and normal, his base. Not the slightest thought ever flew beyond the mundane. Just this one hour a month -

Later, ten years later, she met someone else and married him - she hasn't been back in the room since. She had three children and was happy enough.

But she never forgot. When she saw her cousin again during long breaks, she talked to him about it. Only with him.

Then he spoke Novalis' lines to her, quietly:

"Oh suck me in, my beloved, powerfully,

that I can fall asleep and love. I feel the  
rejuvenating tide of death,  
My blood is transformed into balm and  
ether. I live the days full of faith and  
courage and die the nights in holy fervour."

She did not answer. She held out her hand to him in silence.

Jan Olieslagers often thought about it on those nights. It was all based on a strong feeling that didn't allow any other thoughts or feelings to arise alongside it. Unhappy - oh, weren't they rather very unhappy? Happy ones? - were possessed by this one wild fire, denied death, forged a will of steel, gave birth anew out of themselves to the lost dead, found, like Orpheus, the key to the gate of the shadows to seek Eurydice.

The great will of life reached into the realm of the dead. That was the secret.

But here it was very different.

Stephe was ruler in the gardens of death. But now he grew, grew - and his power was so great that it reached far into all life.

That came when the Stolinsky brothers were buried, two Polish diggers who had died in a blast. Stephen's gaze fell on a very young girl standing close to the grave. He saw her for a long time, then he smiled.

Knew: 'She will come to me. She's mine.

From now on, he looked closely at the rows of sufferers, to whom he had never given the slightest glance. Even if one of them was hiding behind black jackets and skirts, Stephe found her.

And he saw the women and girls who came to the cemetery to decorate the graves. He looked at each one, measured them for a long time. Sometimes he smiled; that was when he felt: 'She will come to me. Even when he went into town on rare visits, he looked after the women. Up and down the streets, into the doors and windows. "That one", he whispered, "that one!"

But his great day came before Easter; that was the Day of the Dead. All the graves were decorated and there were weeping women at all the graves. Stephe walked through the paths, hour after hour, stopped for a while, looked around and smiled.

A big love market - lots of good goods. But only one person knew about it - he, Stephe.

Is it really just him?

It was as if the others knew too - the women and girls. Not knew - no.

But felt, sensed - something terrible.

And that had to do with the gravedigger's look and his smile.

As a result, Jan Olieslagers saw that look many times and that smile many times. He observed it closely, much more closely than anyone else. But although he was the only one who knew its meaning, he was never once able to work out why it was possible for anyone to have even the slightest impression of it. For there was nothing horrible or frightening in his look, nothing heart-breaking or devilish in his smile. It was a friendly, quiet look and a kind smile.

Nevertheless, the women and girls understood with a special sense. Yes, half children understood, little things with long fluttering hair and short skirts.

In the chapel, during prayer, a young woman fainted under this gaze. That was only once, and Jan Olieslagers thought that there might be another reason. Perhaps. - But it was quite certain that the girls avoided him as soon as Stephe came along, that the children - oh no, never the boys - hid behind their mothers' skirts, that the young mothers made a cross when they saw him. Even old women were afraid, shrank back, uttered a short cry.

It went so far that the girls ran into the houses when Stephe walked through the streets. Whether people talked about it in the town, Jan Olies camp, as he avoided talking to anyone there. Only once did this strange fear have a small effect on Stephe.

The result was annoyance. Stephe came home from work and saw a couple standing by a grave, a recruit and his girl. They turned their backs on him and broke a few ivy vines. Suddenly, as if she had felt his gaze, the young girl straightened up quickly, turned round and cried out. The soldier, who heard the cry of fear and saw his bride pale and tremble, asked: "What is it?" She pointed to Stephe and whispered: "That one! Him!" - Then he approached Stephe with clenched fists and shouted at him: "You goddam scoundrel - how dare you take my bride - my - -" But he didn't finish his sentence. Stephe did not reply a word and his look was so calm and mild that no one could have found anything impertinent or offensive. The soldier interrupted himself, lowered his arms and stammered: "Excuse me, sir - I'm sorry!" - Stephe went on calmly.

Stephe was hardly aware of his strange power. He already knew that this was the case, but he didn't attach any importance to it, did not care. It's true: he smiled - but this smile

was certainly not one of conscious, proud satisfaction. And not once could Jan Olieslagers detect even the slightest sign of a conscious will to rule.

When he, in his meditations,

Stephe called him the great ruler of the land of the dead in Andernach, the inescapable tyrant - that was only the way he felt in his own mind and not in Stephe's. It only seemed complicated when he thought about it, but it became simple and natural the more he tried to familiarise himself with Stephe's world of ideas. When he realised all

inhibitions - and it was quite certain that Stephe had not a single one - then those thoughts and actions became those

of a child, a quiet child who played his own games. So strange, so

monstrous, of course, that the man of the world Jan

Olies camp seemed like the deeds of a black god.

All these women and girls were like buds. They grew and ripened and blossomed to their fullest - - that was when they died, one today and another tomorrow. It was when they travelled out of the city, here to him, for whom alone they bloomed, to Stephe. And Stephe, who loved the flowers, broke them -

Then the flowers wilted - and Stephe threw them away. Forgotten them, completely and utterly. He didn't even know their graves, none -

'That's very strange,' thought Jan Olieslagers. "Where is Carmelina Gaspari resting?" he asked. Stephe shook his head:

"I don't know."

"And where is Milewa? - Or Anka Savicz?"

No, no, Stephe didn't know any of the graves. It never occurred to him, to decorate one of them with flowers. That was the gardener's job - he was a gravedigger. But: he knew the resting place of the old German Jacob well



Himmelmann or that of the factory owner J.T. Campbell - oh, he knew a whole series of graves.

'He's very unfaithful,' thought Jan Olieslagers. And pondered: 'Is a child faithful to its toys? He loves them with all his heart - and throws them away the next moment.

Then also: 'Is a god ever faithful to the rubbish he plays with?

But God is true to himself, just as the child is.

And when, one day, Stephe became unfaithful to himself, all divinity fell from him. And all childishness.

And he became a human being. And felt like a human being. And acted like a human being.

That's when everything broke.

This happened in the late Indian summer, which in Egypt extends deep into November. Until then, he lived his own life of the night alongside the people of Olieslager.

He felt light after all his confessions. His friend was a good confessor and Stephe felt that he loved him precisely for the sake of his secrets. He always remained the subordinate, always did his friend every little service he could think of. He

He looked for mushrooms for him in the meadows and large blackberries, and put flowers on his table. He soon realised how much importance the Vlame attached to cleanliness and made sure that everything was always spotlessly clean. This went so far that Stephe, who had spent twenty long years avoiding dirt or

He had never taken care of his own body and now washed it and kept it clean - not out of his own instinct, but only for the sake of his friends.

They lived well together during this time. And Stephe only stayed alone on such nights - then he said to his friend: "She will come to me tonight!"

The Vlame asked: "What flowers does she want?" "Water lilies," said Stephe,  
"from the little pond." - Or: "Lilacs, lots of lilacs!" They went out together to fetch them. They carried them into the ossuary, spread the old sacks on the stone floor and scattered the flowers over them.

Then Olieslagers went into the room. He went to bed and tried to sleep. Las. Smoked, played a game of chess with himself. Also listened - against his will - to

He tried that a few times. But it didn't work - it didn't work at all.

Then on one such night he walked around, through the cemetery and across the meadows. And another time he carried his bed out, set it up in the little honeysuckle arbour and lay down there. But he did not sleep. He always thought he heard the sounds coming from the ossuary. He thought he saw -

Once he reflected: 'It's only because I *didn't* see it - so it appeals to my imagination. I've seen worse things than that - and it has given me I don't mind. I'll go, I'll watch - then my nerves will calm down.

He hurried to the leg house. He grabbed the handle and held it in his hand.

Didn't open the door. Walked past - heard Stephen's voice - came back. Five times - six times -

Finally escaped, opened the door hard enough. The small bulb lit up the room. He saw a figure lying on the sacks, among yellow roses. And Stephe was kneeling in front of her.

He called him. But Stephe heard him as little as he heard the door open. He stepped closer, now he could see his friend's face clearly.

Stephe stared at the dead woman - all his features were tense. He clasped his hands together - it was obvious that he was listening intently.

Then a quiet "Yes" came from his lips and another "Yes" - Ah, the dead woman told him - and Stephe listened.

A quarter of an hour - half an hour - Jan Olieslagers leant against the wall, counting quietly to get an idea of the time. But he couldn't.

"Yes," Stephe whispered. - And once he heard: "Darling."

Then there was a twitch in Stephen's body. He bent forwards and backwards. Sounds came from his lips, confused, broken off, unintelligible. Jan

Olieslagers gritted his teeth, clenched his hands and closed his eyes to gather all his nerve.

Something was going on, and he had to find out what it was. Again it sounded "Yes!" Louder than usual.

The Vlame looked up. Then he saw the dead woman sit up, both He stretched out his arms towards Stephe. But he saw - at the same time - that she was lying still and stiff on the sacks, as before. That she did not move and was very dead.

And still moved and still lived and offered both arms to the beloved and the naked breast -

Jan Olieslagers gripped his temples with both hands. He saw one thing and the other at the same time.

He saw both, both -

He walked backwards, towards the door, slowly, step by step -

He saw Stephe raise his arms, spread them out, just as the dead woman did. How he leant forward, like her, slowly pushing his head forward - like she did -

She - who nevertheless lay motionless, rigid and stiff on the floor -  
Then Stephe screamed. He grabbed her with both hands, pulled her to him, threw himself over her -

Jan Olieslagers ran across the paths, came to the gate, climbed over. Stopped, caught his breath. Then, with long strides, walked round the cemetery.

Circling him, three times and once more. 'Like a watchdog,' he thought.

He thought about what he had seen and soon found the explanation.

What he saw, Dr Jan Olieslagers, was what was. It was the dead woman lying there dead. But what he saw at the same time: the dead woman standing up, opening her arms and pulling Stephe towards her - he didn't see that with his eyes.

All these weeks he had tried to think his way into Stephen's soul, to feel like him, in order to understand the miracle.

And he saw, that night, how Stephe saw - felt, how he felt.

Now he understood well what Stephe meant when he said: "She gave me the coral necklace." Or: "She asked me -" Or: "She said -"

It was like this: these dead people spoke to Stephe. And Stephe listened. And did what they asked.

What did it matter that he, Olieslagers, *also* saw that this truth was a lie? *At the same time, he saw it* - as if in a daze. A lie only for him - and yet the only truth for Stephe.

And - perhaps - the last. For now it happened that Stephe was unfaithful.

The most ridiculous, the most banal, the most stupid thing of all happened: Stephe fell in love. Fell in love, rightly and wrongly, like a

A merchant's apprentice or a soldier's boy, into a lively, healthy, rather pretty girl.

Gladys Paschitsch was her name. An Egyptian child - but one of parents who were clever and therefore soon very rich. Her father already had a handsome fortune before the war and had increased it a hundredfold during those years. The Italian Egyptians called him Pesce Cane and the others probably had other names for him. The Americans called him "Profiteer" and if there had still been Germans living in Andernach, they would probably have called him a "pusher". His dollar bills were very greasy and dirty, from the sweat of labour and the blood and tears of his special compatriots like all other Egyptians - but they were no less valuable for that. The Paschitsch family had long been very American - that's why their only daughter was called Gladys and why she attended a popular women's college in New England.

Stephe had already seen her two years ago when she was still at school. Now she was at home on holiday.

An aeroplane had crashed; there was a small celebration in the chapel. Many patriotic speeches for the hero, who wasn't actually a hero yet, but could have become one and therefore certainly deserved all the laurel wreaths. Gladys Paschitsch was also there and presented a large wreath with huge ribbons from a women's club.

Stephe saw her again and fell in love.

Not that he acted as another lover might have done. He did nothing different from what he always did. He told his friend: "She will come." And he waited for it.

But - and that was it - he only thought about her. And forgot about the others. He neglected them, no longer cared about them. He scratched their

I closed the graves like empty pits, hardly glanced into the silent chapel at night. And the ossuary remained empty.

Gladys Paschitsch travelled back to her college, came home for a week at Christmas and then again at Easter.

And Stephe remained faithful to her all this time. "She will come!" he said.

Gladys came to the cemetery several times at Easter time. They were in the meantime, a number of recruits from the neighbouring training camp had died - the women's club took care of these graves. That's how Stephe came to see them.

It is certain that Gladys Paschitsch felt the same anxiety that overcame all women when Stephe was around. But she was a "College girl", self-confident, independent and - educated. And she knew that was - stupid stuff. So she walked firmly towards Stephe and spoke to him. Jan Olieslagers saw her forcing herself to speak to him calmly - asking him completely indifferent questions about the soldiers' graves. Stephe remained silent, almost submissive. But still the student's hands, but she heaved a sigh of relief when she said "Good evening" after a few minutes.

"What did she tell you?" asked the Vlame.

Stephe mumbled: "She will come -"

But it didn't seem as if Gladys Paschitsch wanted to hurry. She remained very healthy and her step was firm and light.

- Jan Olieslagers was dissatisfied. Stephe bored him. And in the end, this story with Stephe was the only thing that had brought a little variety to the rat trap he was stuck in. He once tried to shake Stephen's ridiculous fidelity through the other, telling him miracle stories about how beautiful the dead woman lying in the chapel was -

Stephe shrugged his shoulders. What business was it of his?

Once Jan Olieslagers came back from the city. He told him that he had seen Gladys with a captain. She was engaged to be married soon. Not a word of it was true, but he wanted to arouse his jealousy.

But Stephe remained completely indifferent. That didn't interest him a bit. Let her kiss someone else, let her give herself to him. She would come to him after all.

And the Vlame realised: Stephe loved Gladys Paschitsch, oh yes! But: in the living he still only loved - - the future dead woman.

The one alone. He waited for her through the long winter, spring and summer. He remained faithful to her and for her he fasted and mortified his body. For she would come - she had to come. He knew that for certain.

And she came, Gladys Paschitsch.

In the late summer of the last year of the war, an epidemic swept across the continent that people called Spanish influenza. It was just a flu, the newspapers said, albeit a very dangerous one. Many Corpses turned blue-black - the newspapers wrote nothing about it. But everyone knew. And people died. And the gravediggers had work to do.

The Spanish flu also came to Egypt. Also to Andernach. A hundred soldiers were given to help the old Pawlaczek; they cut boards, knocked coffins together. They drove them through the town in carts, collected the corpses, dug graves and covered them up. During the day, at night - non-stop. And Stephe and Mike and the others - each commanded a dozen American soldiers. They made noise and

and the silent graveyard echoed with their roar. It wasn't very patriotic what they were singing.

The old ossuary was overflowing with guests, just like the chapel; coffins were always being brought in and others taken out.

All peace and quiet was over. Jan Olieslagers thought that perhaps a quiet prison cell would have been better. But Stephe smiled to herself - the great dying was here and she would come - she had to come.

Every morning and every evening, when he read the newspaper, he had to look through the columns with the names of the deceased and read them out loud. Stephe knew her name well: Gladys Paschitsch.

But it was not in this column where Olieslagers first found the name. Rather on the front page - and it was an entire article that spoke of her. That's how full the name sounded in the city. She was ill, it said. But there was nothing serious to fear.

But by the evening she was dead.

Now Stephe was in a rare state of restlessness and excitement, which increased with every hour. She had to come - it was the strictest. The medical police ordered that all corpses should be removed from the flats as soon as possible. But the morning passed and the afternoon and the evening -

Then, after ten o'clock, old Pawlaczek came to the leg house. "Mike!" he called, "Stephe!" Stephe put down the boiling kettle, his hands trembling. "She's coming," he whispered, "she's coming." Ran out to the Baas.

He was right. "She was coming" - was already approaching from the city. Such was the weight of Paschitsch's wealth that his will made the unthinkable possible: a night celebration in the chapel. Now it was time to clear out the chapel; the old man took Stephe with him,



while he sent Mike out to fetch a dozen soldiers who were camped in quickly pitched tents by the churchyard gate.

The full coffins were carried from the chapel to the charnel house, stacked three and four high, the tubs of plants and shrubs that were set up for every ceremony were dragged in and everything was arranged as it should be. Finally the funeral party arrived, one carriage after another. They laid out the coffin, which was already closed. Stephe knew it well: it was the magnificent coffin, richly studded with silver, that had adorned the mortician's shop window in the town for years. Now it had finally found a buyer, and it seemed to Stephe as if it should have been this way and as if no one else should have been allowed to rest in this coffin.

But the ceremony had not yet taken place. We first had to wait for the priest, then for the chairwoman of the women's club, then again - the carriages travelled back and forth from the town.

It was two o'clock by the time they started; and then it took a very long time. Stephe stood with his friend in the doorway of the chapel, waiting. Suddenly he turned round: "I have to cut flowers," he said.

Jan Olieslagers asked: "Did she tell you?" Stephe nodded: "Yes - gladioli. Lots of gladioli."

He came back, both hands full of flowers, hiding them under a stone bench in front of the door. "Aren't they ready yet?" he asked.

But someone else spoke and someone else - ah, this festivity never seemed to end!

At last the priest came out; he got into the first carriage with the parents. Infinitely slowly the people came and drove away. Others had to wait a long time for the carriages to come back from the town, they

to pick him up. Stephe was so excited that he couldn't stand still for a second, talking incessantly to himself. He was behaving very conspicuously.

"Go to your bench, Stephe!" the Vlame advised him. "I'll wait here. When the last one is gone, I'll call you."

Jan Olieslagers sat down on another bench right next to the churchyard gate and occasionally walked back to the chapel, just as the last of the victims had done. He saw the members of the women's club. Then he saw a couple of soldiers carrying a strong yellow box into a car and driving off with it. He also saw the director of the chemical factory; he passed close by but didn't recognise him.

Then old Pawlaczek approached him. "They're all gone," he grumbled. "Close the gate, Mike."

Jan Olieslagers jumped over the graves. "The chapel is empty, Stephe," he shouted. "Come - she's waiting."

Stephe stood up, staggering. "I want -" he began.

"What do you want?" urged the Vlame.

"She wants it, she -" stuttered Stephe.

"What does she want?"

And Stephe said: "Not in the chapel - not in the ossuary. In - in our room -"

Olieslagers didn't like that very much. He was tired enough, wanted to sleep for a few hours - at least try to sleep. But Stephen's eyes were begging and pleading, like a child's eyes. He patted him on the back of his shoulder: "Good, Stephe, good! Just - hurry up, look, it's dusk already! - I'll take your flowers over with me."

"Thank you, sir, thank you!" said Stephe.

Stephe ran into the chapel; the Vlame took the gladioli. He carried them over, scattered them over Stephe's bed and across the floor. His bed

he moved close to the wall.

Then Stephe arrived, trembling all over - with empty arms.

"What's happened?" asked Olieslagers.

And Stephe whispered: "The coffin is empty!"

For a moment the Vlame recollected himself. Ah, that was what the soldiers had carried out!

The beautiful large silver-studded coffin was just a showpiece - and the box inside contained the deceased! She was probably supposed to be buried somewhere else -

He told Stephe; he didn't understand him straight away. He had to repeat it twice before Stephe understood.

"Where then? Where?" he asked. "Where is she to be buried?"

"How should I know that?" his friend replied.

Stephe stammered: "I - I -." Then he went to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked the Vlame.

Stephe said, "They stole her. I have to find them." And left.

Jan Olieslagers called after him, but the other didn't hear him. He thought: 'Now he's going to do something really stupid. I have to protect him - he's my friend.

But what should he do? He undressed, washed himself, got dressed again. He put a few oranges in his pockets, put on his cap and went out. The cemetery gate was closed, he himself had the key in his pocket - that's how Stephe had climbed over. He opened it carefully and closed it behind him. He made his way to the town - Stephe must be there.

He peeled his oranges and ate them. He thought about it. If Gladys Paschitsch was to be buried somewhere else, it certainly couldn't be in Andernach. This cemetery was the only one in the small town; there was no other option. But then - yes, then they would have to

early train, the one that went up to Chicago. He knew every single one of the few trains well, always ready to leave on the next one if he was spotted. The express train left at five thirty-two.

He looked at his watch - he had to hurry. He walked faster, sometimes ran a little way - glanced sharply across the straight path to see if he was perhaps

Stephe in front of him. But he didn't see him - he had certainly run all the way to the town. He turned off the main road and took a short cut to the station square. It was light enough now, he looked at the large station clock: eighteen minutes to departure.

He walked through the waiting rooms and across the platforms. There were only

There were few people there, and he didn't see Stephe or anyone else who seemed to have anything to do with a body transfer. He went back to the road - a few cars pulled up. Black men and women in mourning clothes got out. He recognised Father Paschitsch and his plump wife, he also recognised Dan Bloomingdale, the town's first lawyer, whom he had often seen in the churchyard. An officer and a couple of soldiers got out of the next car, and from the third

some ladies and gentlemen with funeral wreaths. And he saw Stephe approaching from behind across the wide square. He waved to him, then followed the mourners into the station concourse. Everyone went into the waiting room, only the soldiers hurried into the baggage room. He saw them load the large crate onto a trolley and drive it to the platform.

The train rattled in, the soldiers pushed their trolley towards the baggage car; three gentlemen walked behind, their arms draped with wreaths. The lawyer spoke to the train driver and showed him the official documents authorising the transfer.

At that moment, Stephe arrived, completely out of breath, unable to speak a word. He groaned, sobbed and grabbed the coffin box with both hands.

"Hands off!" shouted the officer.

Stephe tore at the coffin as if he wanted to drag it away. Foam dripped from his lips and a deep roar burst from his chest.

Two soldiers grabbed him, Stephe pushed them back.

"Robbers!" he roared, "Thieves! Sons of bitches!" They threw themselves at him - shouting, pulling and pushing. They pulled him to the ground - but he continued to shout: "Robbers! Sons of bitches!"

But Dan Bloomingdale, the lawyer, didn't want a scandal.

"Let him go, people!" he ordered. "Can't you see he's gone mad? A mad lover!" He turned to Stephe: "Well, my boy, what is it? - Did you love her?"

For the moment, Stephe seemed tame. "Yes, sir," he stammered, "yes, sir!"

"Well," the lawyer reassured him, "that's understandable, she was a pretty child - some people will have loved her! But you have to realise: she's dead now! Dead, like a rat! Dead as a mouse!"

"Yes, sir, yes!" Stephe whispered very softly.

"Yes - -" Then he came to his senses; modestly, like a boy, he asked: "May I go with you, sir?"

The lawyer shook his head; you could see that he was having a hard time with sympathy for this wild lover. "I don't know, my boy - really, I don't know if it can be done - maybe -"

Stephe interrupted him with a new thought: "Sir - if you'll just tell me where she'll be buried - I want to carry flowers - flowers."

The lawyer grabbed his hand and squeezed it: "You're a good boy, really, a good boy! Buried - well, she won't be buried, you see! We're going to Chicago - to the crematorium. She'll be cremated!"

It was as if someone had hit him on the head with a heavy axe. Stephe staggered, roared like a bull and fell over - one of the soldiers caught him.

"Ver - - verbra - -!" he moaned. "No - no! She mustn't - she won't - won't -"

Dan Bloomingdale picked up the cap that had fallen to the ground and put it on Stephe's head. "Yes, my boy, she wanted it! I'm a lawyer, you see, and a notary - I drew up her last will and testament! Look here" - he reached into his pocket, took out a piece of paper out - "look here - she dictated it herself! She determined that she should be burned -"

Stephe opened his eyes wide - and his lips - but no sound came out. They lifted the coffin box into the luggage trolley and carefully placed Stephe on the trolley. He dropped his arms and stared straight ahead.

The departure signal - and the people crowded into the carriages. Only the soldiers stayed behind, slowly walking away. And the train departed.

Jan Olieslagers stepped over to Stephe and pulled him upright. "Come on, Stephe, come on!" He led him into the waiting room and ordered coffee. But Stephe didn't touch anything.

"Come home!" said the Vlame at last. Stephe shook his head. Then he spoke, quietly and calmly - no, he would never go to the cemetery again.

"Where to?" asked Olieslagers.

"I don't know," said Stephe.

"Shall we drive away?" said Olieslagers.

"You and me - together? Anywhere!"

He didn't wait for the answer. Drove out to the cemetery, packed his things and Stephe's - two small suitcases. Came back to town - found Stephe motionless on the same chair.

"She betrayed me!" he muttered. "Betrayed -" And he repeated this word as if nothing else had room in his brain.

Jan Olieslagers took tickets for the ten o'clock train. He forced Stephe to eat a little, brought the cup to his mouth, fed him like a child -

"Betrayed -" whispered Stephe "betrayed -"

They got on the train. Jan Olieslagers said: "We're going to Chicago. Later to Baltimore. There -"

Stephe replied: "Betrayed - she betrayed me -"

The Vlame was very tired: he did the maths - it had now been thirty hours since he had slept. He leant back and nodded off.

He woke up again and again and looked at his friend. "Betrayed -" he heard. And when he finally fell asleep and slept very deeply, it sounded in his ears: "Betrayed - she betrayed me - betrayed me." -

The conductor shook him awake. "Chicago!" he shouted. "Get out, sir!" Jan Olieslagers stretched up. "Where's Stephe?" he asked, "where's my friend?"

"Get off!" said the conductor. "In - in -" He couldn't remember the station. But it had been four hours ago, or five.

Jan Olieslagers looked around - Stephen's suitcase was also missing. So that's what he had taken with him -

He never saw him again.

## Sibylla Madruzzo

The gendarme received Frank Braun noisily, sitting at the table with the landlord while Teresa served the food. He proudly showed off his new helmet and said that he never wanted to forget the night in his life when he drank the old one. He looked admiringly at Frank Braun - yes, that was a bloke!

Frank Braun was in no mood to sing and drink. Drenker's speeches bothered him, so he distracted himself. "The old beggar woman is your girlfriend?"

The border guard said: "Of course she's my friend. But she's not that old: a few years younger than me and at least ten years younger than Raimondi!" He repeated this three times so that the innkeeper could understand him.

He nodded in confirmation. "She just looks so old."

Drenker laughed. "Sibylla looks eighty, or a hundred, or a hundred and twenty. It's all one thing. And yet it's true that all three of us were in love with her!"

Frank Braun was glad that the wine and the helmet were finished. He held him tight. "Three? Who was in love with the old woman?" he asked.

"Ho, not the old one - the young Sibylla!" Drenker improved him. "The three of us were in love with her: Raimondi, Ussolo and I - three dashing imperial hunters! Never had a better lover in Val di Scodra - what Raimondi? - But it ended badly and poor Sibylla is still dragging her back today. For then, sir, she was slender and She was as straight as a pine tree and no girl was prettier in all of Tyrol - when poor Ussolo perished so miserably, she got the crack."



"So tell me!" urged Frank Braun.

"Tell - yes, it's a whole story!" exclaimed Drenker. "But dry?" He poured the last drops from the bottle into his glass.

Frank Braun told the landlord to fetch a few bottles of Vino Santo from the Toblin Valley. He placed them close to the gendarme. Drenker wanted to pour it for him, but he refused. "No, thanks, I don't want to drink today."

Drenker shook his head. "Strange people you learned gentlemen are! One minute they're drinking like ten old ship captains and the next not a drop! - There's no sense and reason in it."

"No," Frank Braun confirmed, "there is absolutely no sense or reason in it. - But now drink, Drenker, and tell me about young Sibylla Madruzzo's lovers." The gendarme blew his nose and lit his pipe. He raised his glass to his lips, drank and clicked her tongue in praise.

Then he began. He spoke loudly, hastily, in choppy sentences. Always he turned to the innkeeper, shouting: "Wasn't it like that, Raimondi?" He nodded mutely or grumbled a "Yes!" between his teeth.

Aloys Drenker said: "That was probably thirty years ago. All three of us were in Bolzano and we were the best friends in the world. Ussolo - he was also from Val di Scodra; his people's house stood where it goes up to the Kreuzplatte. Now it's long gone - poor Ussolo lies in the churchyard and his relatives are all over in Argentina. There's nothing left of the whole clan! - So the three of us were Kaiserjäger in Bolzano; Ussolo and I were sergeants - but Raimondi had just become a sergeant. What, mate? - Well, when the two of them were on leave, they went home and I went with them a few times. Because you know, I didn't have a home, my blessed

I found my mother in the ditch and quickly died of the shock. So I was pushed around and beaten by strangers, and I only felt well when I was in the company. The Kaiserjäger - that was my family - and a pretty one at that,

Raimondi? Go to hell, there's no better troupe in the whole world! All right, I went down to Val di Scodra a few times with my friends - once with Raimondi and twice with Ussolo. Well, you can imagine the looks on people's faces when we arrived! The whole village was enamoured of us. And the three of us - all three of us - were infatuated with Sibylla and everyone did their best to please her.

But none of us said anything, neither to the others nor to the girl. Everyone thought about it, and everyone made a plan, but none of us came out with it. All three of us wrote to her and she wrote to us - but, you know, always together to all three of us. Then, one winter evening, when we were sitting together in the canteen at Gossensasser, Ussolo said that he wanted to take his leave and stop capitulating. I think I'm touched by the blow and I ask him if the devil is poking him. There it comes out! He says that he loves Sibylla and wants to marry her and live with her and cultivate his land in Val di Scodra. He had already written to his mother - because his father was dead - and she had agreed that he should take over the farm. Then Raimondi drove off! Don't be ashamed, old man, it was like that! - Because you know, back then he knew the beautiful

Not yet Maria, the Brixen schoolmaster's daughter, who later became his wife and Teresa's mother. Back then, his only thought was Sibylla and always Sibylla! - Wasn't that right, old man? - So, he drove off to Ussolo and said that he shouldn't think about the girl. He had to have her and nobody else! And he was the older one and he was a sergeant - I couldn't hold on any longer. Older

or younger, sergeant or not, it doesn't matter, I said. And I love Sibylla, too, and I want her and don't give a damn about the foul flags. I shouted and Raimondi roared and Ussolo howled and before we knew it we were in each other's hair and fighting so hard it was a joy. A lieutenant intervened and interrupted the fun; then all three of us had enough time to think about our love and our stupidity. When we came out, our excitement had cooled considerably and we now realised that it was stupid to quarrel over the girl, who could only be had by one of us. So we decided to leave the choice to Sibylla herself and to go all three of us to Val di Scodra for our next holiday in September. In the meantime, it had been agreed that no one should write to her in particular, so we wrote letters together and sent her a joint present for Christmas and Easter. Well, it wasn't much, a silk headscarf and a silver buckle - but Sibylla has kept them to this day, and the letters too. Well, spring came and summer arrived and we all felt a bit uneasy. Everyone was suspicious of the other two and every few days one had to swear to the other that he had certainly not written a letter behind their backs. At last the manoeuvre came, and then the day when we were given leave. It was hard enough for all three of us to get away, as Raimondi and I were in the same company - but in the end we managed - I'll never forget that journey! Nobody spoke a word and everyone made a face as if they wanted to eat the others alive. I think it was only the uniform that kept us together, otherwise we'd have started fighting like we did that night in the canteen.

At that time, there was still no post down into the valley and if there had been, we wouldn't have waited for it. We set off and arrived late at night. Raimondi went to his parents, I went home with Ussolo. But I didn't sleep a wink, I was always afraid my mate would get up to go to the Madruzzo's house. But he felt the same way. It was barely light when we set off to fetch Raimondi, for fear that he might beat us to it. We had hardly got to the front of the house when he came out - obviously with the same thoughts as us. Now we realised that it was far too early to go to Sibylla, especially as it was a Sunday. We went back to Raimondi's house, made coffee and had breakfast. Then Ussolo stood in front of the mirror - we had rushed so much when we got up that we had hardly combed our hair. He did his hair and made himself beautiful - and it turned out that we were still good friends and comrades after all. Raimondi fetched everything he had, boot polish, brushes, combs, even moustache wax, and we helped each other to make ourselves look as handsome as possible. The Kaiserjäger must be smart, eh Raimondi? Time went by faster than we thought. Then Raimondi's parents arrived and we had to have coffee with them again. At last we set off, cut a few more roses in the garden for the caps and then we went to the Madruzzo's house. But before we got there, Ussolo called out. "Here she comes!" And sure enough, there she was in front of us in the olive garden, laughing. She was in her Sunday finery, and she was so clean and pretty that my heart was full of laughter. But my heart was pounding so hard and I felt so afraid that I hardly dared to go a step further. But the two companions did not fare well either different and they stopped like me. Says Raimondi: "Friends, I'm the oldest!" "Yes," I say, "you probably are - but -" But he whispered:

"Shut up and listen to what I say! We have agreed that the one she wants shall have her. But the other two should not be enemies, but good friends as before." - 'Are you so sure of yourself?

I thought. But I was also sure of myself, because I was sure that she was laughing at me and not at the others. So I said, "Put your hand on it!" and struck it. Ussolo said nothing, but he also shook hands. "All right then," said Raimondi. "Forward, march! - And I'll speak because I'm the older one and a sergeant!" - I didn't like that at all, but there was nothing more to say, because he walked ahead with long strides and we had to run to keep up with him. We saluted him with our hands on our caps and Raimondi wanted to start a speech. But nothing came out. We stood silently in front of her and stared at her. Then

Black Sibylla laughed and held out her hands to us and asked how we were and said it was nice that all three of us had come on holiday together. She thanked us for the letters and the presents and said that she had woven a watch chain for each of us from her hair.

So we chatted, but we didn't actually say anything and only Sibylla laughed and chatted, and we stood there like stupid peasants and stared at her. I realised that it would be a disgrace for us imperial hunters and nudged Raimondi to speak. But he did,

as if he didn't even realise. Then I whispered to Ussolo: "So talk!" - The Ussolo talked too - but what! He stuttered and told me where we had been during the manoeuvre. I wanted to speak, but I couldn't either. If only the others hadn't been there, I could have done it quite easily.

I felt. So I based my plan on that. I told Sibylla that the three of us had something to discuss alone for a moment. She laughed and wanted to go home straight away, but I told her that she would like to wait a little while, so she went into the olive garden a little way off. Now I said

told the two of them that they were donkeys - and me too: all three of us were donkeys! And it couldn't go on like that. I took three blades of grass and held them in my hand: whoever pulled the longest should be allowed to speak to her first - alone.

They agreed. The sergeant pulled first, then Ussolo: he found the longest stalk. But I had the smallest one, so I got it last. Well, I consoled myself, as I was convinced that the two Wälschen would get a basket and that she would wait for me. Meanwhile Ussolo went to Sibylla and we both sat down on the grass, turned our backs to them and waited. A soldier, you know, is used to waiting, you learn that when you're on post. But even though there were two of us, I've never had a wait as long as this one. "Are they still not ready?" I thought. Neither of us said a word; I could see Raimondi looking stolidly ahead of him. Suddenly he said: 'Now I can't stand it any longer. The Ussolo could be finished by now!' We turned round, but the two had disappeared. So we got up and walked a little way into the olive garden, looking left and right, but saw no one. I shouted half aloud and then louder: "Ussolo!" But no one answered. Then Raimondi shouted as if he had three regiments in front of him: "Ussolo! Ussolo!" - Now the guy answered:

"Yes! Yes! We're coming!" And they came running straight away. Ussolo laughed all over his brown face and held out both hands to us. "Forgive me, comrades, we had really forgotten all about you!" Then, seeing our puzzled and angry faces, he took up a position in front of Raimondi, put his hand on his cap and said: "Sergeant, please report: Sergeant Ussolo and his bride Sibylla Madruzzo." And the girl made a very serious face and a deep curtsy. Later I once saw the Sibylla asked which of us had made a more stupid face,

Raimondi or me. But unfortunately she hadn't paid attention to that, so it will never be possible to tell. But they were both stupid - that I swear!

Raimondi took hold of himself first. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pretty, silver-studded wallet, which he gave to Sibylla and congratulated them both. Then I took out the earrings I had bought for her and gave them to her as a bridal gift. Ussolo slapped his head and exclaimed: "Jesus Christ - and I completely forgot to give her my present!" With that, he pulled out a pretty little watch. So all three of us had secretly brought her something, but only Ussolo got it. - Poor chap, if he had known how short his happiness would be! Then we left the two of them alone and I went home with Raimondi. We were quite depressed, but nevertheless we felt relieved that at least the previous unbearable situation was over. We decided to be quite brotherly to the two of them, like true comrades who had been loyal friends for so many years. But it was not as easy as we thought; every time we saw Ussolo and Sibylla in their great happiness, we became envious, and it was obvious to us how little we had in common. We didn't begrudge them that much. So we thought it would be best to leave for Bolzano before the holiday was over. If only we had done so! But Ussolo urged us and pestered us to stay, at least until the next Sunday. It was church fair in the neighbouring village - in Cimego, you know, seven hours over the mountains towards the border. The gendarmerie station is there now, and I live there.

Ussolo had invited us there; he had relatives there, and to whom he wanted to show off his beautiful bride - and us, his friends from the Kaiserjäger. We didn't really feel like it, we weren't in the mood for parties and church festivities. But Ussolo did not give in and Sibylla

helped him with pleas, so we let ourselves be persuaded. So we wanted to go to Cimego to say goodbye there before travelling back to the regiment. We decided to set off at night, rest in a charcoal burner's hut on the way and arrive early in the morning in the neighbouring village.

Now I have to say that Ussolo liked to drink. Not that he was a drunkard, but he could take so little and after a few glasses he became very funny and sometimes wild. And now in his joy as a bridegroom, and at home on holiday among old acquaintances and friends who invited him to have a drink with them, he was merry every evening, making noise and running riot through the streets. Sibylla didn't like that at all, because she had known what drinking meant since she was a child. Her father, old Carlo Madruzzo, had the thickest throat in the village, and hardly a day went by without her feeling his heavy, drunken fists. It was no wonder, then, that she was not very fond of her bridegroom's bottle; she reproached him, and he promised her not to touch another glass, but in the evening he was drunk again. So it was that Sibylla hated the wine that Ussolo drank even more than that which flowed down her father's throat. So when we set out on Sunday night - it was dark and there was not a star in the sky - Sibylla arranged it so that she went with me, while Ussolo and the sergeant went a little way ahead. Raimondi and Sibylla carried lanterns; their sweetheart carried a heavy basket in which he had packed fish in fresh leaves, which he had caught in the lake that evening and now wanted to take to his uncle in Cimego. I was carrying the rucksack that Ussolo had also packed; it contained bread, ham and sausage, plus five bottles of good wine. That was what Sibylla was after. When we came to a spring half an hour later, we stopped. She stopped and asked me to give her the rucksack. She waited another



She waited a while until she thought the other two were far enough away, then she took out the bottles and opened them. She asked if I wanted another drink, and I took a few good draughts. Then she poured out the wine, one bottle after the other. I tried to stop her, but she laughed and said I could do without the wine for one night, there would be enough in Cimego tomorrow. She filled the bottles to the brim with water and carefully corked them again; we were both looking forward to the face Ussolo would make when he discovered that his wine had turned to water.

We strode out briskly and soon caught up with the others. We shouted our soldier songs and the beautiful Sibylla sang in between. So the hours passed. A couple of times Ussolo suggested that we should have a glass of wine now, but I didn't go for it and told him that he would have to wait until we reached the resting place in the charcoal burner's hut.

We had set off at nine o'clock and were thus able to reach the hut comfortably at around three in the morning. There we wanted to fortify ourselves and then stretch out a bit; we had our coats and there was a warm blanket for Sibylla, which Raimondi was wearing. Then, after a few hours to descend the last stretch into the Cimego valley. It was cold enough on the way, and Ussolo put his coat on his bride. But we were all happy and in a good mood, and as we marched together, one behind the other in single file, or even arm in arm if the path was too long.

was a little wider, it seemed to us as if the beautiful rose did not belong to him alone, to Ussolo, but to all three brothers together.

It was one o'clock when we walked through the Bonzol gorge. Raimondi led the way with the lantern, I was behind him. Then came Sibylla and Ussolo brought up the rear. Suddenly I heard him swearing; he was

slipped and lay on the stones. But he jumped up again straight away. I turned and looked after him, Sibylla's lantern illuminated him brightly enough.

"Damn cattle!" he shouted, and I saw him holding a small snake in the light. He grabbed it by the tail and smashed its head against the rocks.

"Did she bite you?" the girl asked anxiously.

He laughed and said he hadn't noticed anything. We all went up to him and saw that his face and hands were a little bruised from the fall. Sibylla cleaned him up with her cloth. Then he picked up his basket again and we walked on; this time he walked behind Raimondi and I was the last.

Not even five minutes had passed when Ussolo stopped, his teeth chattering; he was shivering with frost and asked Raimondi to lend him his coat. He put on the coat and put the blanket that was meant for Sibylla over his shoulders, but he was still freezing. I called out to him to go out and he did so. After a while, I saw him leaning against the rock with his hand, as if he were drunk. But he said nothing and so I kept quiet so as not to frighten his bride. This went on for a while, then he was seized by vertigo again; he staggered forwards and would have fallen a long way if Raimondi had not supported him. He put the basket down and struggled to hold himself up on the rock face.

"What's the matter with you?" cried Sibylla. He shook his head and tried to laugh.

"Nothing," he said. "I don't know -"

The sergeant held the lantern in his face. Then he grabbed his left hand and examined it closely from both sides. "There, you donkey," he shouted, "of course she bit you!" We pushed closer and I realised

A very small wound close to the pulse; a droplet of blood came out, barely bigger than the head of a needle. The hand and the joint were swollen, and quickly became more and more swollen, almost under our eyes. Raimondi, who had undergone a Samaritan course, quickly reached into his pocket and grabbed a cloth. Then his eyes fell on the rucksack, he put the cloth back in and ordered me to cut the cords. We untied his hand above the wound and pulled the cord as tight as we could so that it cut deep into his skin. Meanwhile Ussolo was staggering back and forth and we had to lay him flat on the ground.

Raimondi said: "That's the first thing. Now we have to suck out the wound." Sibylla immediately threw herself over her groom, but Raimondi pulled her back. He shone a light in her face and immediately pushed her away: she had a small crack in her lip and could even poison herself, he said. Then he pulled me close, told me to open my mouth and searched with his lantern. "You can do it!" he shouted.

So I took Ussolo's hand and sucked with all my might. My saliva ran together and I spat it out to the side, as if I was tasting the poison with my tongue. But it may have just been my imagination. I sucked until Raimondi pulled me away. "Now he has to drink," he said. "The more, the better. Everything we have. That keeps the heart working fast."

He reached into his rucksack and uncorked the first bottle. I heard a soft cry from Sibylla, she held tightly to my arm. She stammered softly: "O Madonna - Madonna!" And I understood that she was going to Mother God and asked her to perform a miracle. I was so frightened and confused that I prayed quietly with her, and I remember to this day that I really hoped at that moment that the water would

into wine again. But unfortunately, miracles no longer happen today, like at the wedding in Canaan!

Ussolo put the bottle to his lips and drank greedily - but immediately he spat it all out again. "Water!" he moaned. Raimondi took a sip himself, shook his head and threw the bottle into the ravine. He probably thought it was an accidental mistake and opened the next bottle. Sibylla trembled and dared not say a word in her mortal fear, and I was so depressed by my complicity that I could not utter a single syllable.

Ussolo took another sip and spat it out again. Raimondi took the next bottle and cut off its neck, saw that it was also full of water and threw it away. Now I took heart and said what had happened. But I said that I had made the bad joke and didn't say a word about Sibylla - - to this day I'm glad I did. Raimondi shouted that I was a criminal, but Ussolo said weakly that he knew I hadn't meant any harm. He held out his other hand to me as a sign of forgiveness and said that it wasn't so bad and that he would soon be able to get up again. I talked too and tried to comfort him, but Raimondi pulled me up and shouted that there was no time to talk now. He took his penknife, stuck the sharpest blade into the flame of the lantern and ordered me to take mine and do the same. When his knife was red-hot, he cut into the wound and enlarged it. Then he took my knife and I had to hold the other one in the flame; thus he kept changing and cutting and burning into the wound. Poor Ussolo suffered terribly, he tried to bite off his pain like a good soldier; it was miserable how we tortured him - so completely useless. The

Sibylla knelt in front of him and held his head, and he groaned and gritted his teeth.

At last the sergeant had finished. We realised that we couldn't go one step further with him, so it was best for one of us to run to Cimego for help. I didn't know the way, so Raimondi went; he hoped to get caustic potash and ammonia from the priest. He took his lantern and walked out quickly, and after a short while he was gone.

The place where we were lying was miserable enough. The rock face rose up on the right - the ravine fell away on the left, not exactly steep, but still uncomfortable enough in the dark. The path in between was very narrow. I rolled up one coat and gave it to Ussolo as a pillow; he lay on the other coat. I spread the blanket and the third coat over him. But he was still freezing; one chill shook him over the other. After a while he began to struggle for breath, he gasped, and it was as if his lungs could only work with difficulty. He said nothing, only moaning softly at times. Sibylla knelt in front of him; she didn't say a word either, she seemed to be completely frozen. So I chattered away, telling him that the torment was over and that the sergeant would soon come with good help. Then I knew nothing more and said the same thing again - I think I must have said it a hundred times that godforsaken night. But it didn't matter what I said, neither of them listened.

Sometimes the breathlessness subsided, then it would attack him again; the dizzy spells also returned regularly.

One hour passed after another. Night fell and the mists crept down from the mountains. Day broke, and the cold, damp early morning wind blew through the gorge. Sometimes, when it lay there calmly, we thought that

He thought he was getting better, but he was soon overcome by severe trembling again; he was also unconscious for a few moments. The carpus of his hand was stabbing and very painful; the hand was terribly swollen and the sore spot looked deep blue-red. At about six o'clock in the morning he got

Cramps, he lifted his body and let it fall back heavily. Then his muscles tore, the fingers of his healthy hand cramped and his legs jerked forwards. We held him with

But soon the shortness of breath started again and with it the shivering.

It was eight o'clock; Raimondi must have been back by my reckoning. Ussolo had become a little quieter by this time and seemed to be slumbering, so I thought it best to set off in search of the sergeant. So I jumped up and ran along the path that led to Cimego as fast as my legs could carry me. After an hour or so, Raimondi came to meet me, with him were the priest and three boys from Cimego.

"Is he still alive?" the sergeant shouted. I nodded and turned round with them. Raimondi looked like a savage, his beautiful uniform covered in dirt from top to bottom, his face and hands stained with blood and sweat. He had misstepped, fallen and smashed his lantern in the process. Now he had searched for his way in the dark, lost his way and only realised at daybreak that he had entered the wrong valley. So he had to go back and only found his way to Cimego with the help of a goat boy he met on the way. There he had immediately fetched the priest from mass and then walked back with the people. While he was still telling me, we suddenly heard a wild, terrible scream. We recognised Sibylla's voice and ran on frantically. Raimondi was far ahead, behind him jumped the priest of Cimego, the black

He raised his cassock with both hands. He was a good man; if he couldn't come at the right time with his medical supplies, he hoped that as a priest he wouldn't be too late to administer last rites to the dying man.

But it was too late for both. As we came out of the gorge, we saw a dead man lying close in front of us. His face was horribly distorted and his eyes were bulging out of his sockets. His right hand was clutched tightly in his coat, his legs pulled up against his body. Sibylla stood in front of him, upright but with her body bent forwards - just as she was walking and standing now. At first we paid little attention to her, only concerned ourselves with Ussolo, rubbing him, pouring wine into his open lips and holding ether under his nose. But we soon realised that it was all too late and that he was finished. We spread a cloak over him and turned to his bride.

We asked her how he had died, but she gave us no answer. We pressed her and saw that she understood us; her lips moved, but her mouth was silent; she had lost her speech. Her eyes remained dry, not a tear fell, and not once in all those years - not even at his grave - was she able to cry. The priest took her in his arms and tried to lift her up; he couldn't and asked me to help him. We all helped - - but she remained as stiff as she was - her upper body facing straight ahead. We didn't want to believe it, grabbed her roughly and tried to force her: it was impossible.

I still don't know what happened in those last two hours that Ussolo was alive. I often asked Sibylla about it later, begging her to write it down for me. But she put her hands in front of her face, shuddered and shook her head - so I finally gave up.

It must have been terrible - you could see it on her face! Her

Her features were distorted and rigid, it was as if she was looking into open hell. And this expression of horror did not fade, it remained; only over the years, as her skin became wrinkled and brown, as she aged, far before her time, did the expression gradually fade.

But the terrible spasm that broke her body did not subside, nor did she ever regain her speech. - We made stretchers and carried her and Ussolo to Cimego - where he is buried.

This is the story of the beautiful Sibylla and her poor bridegroom."

The gendarme puffed and drank three large glasses of wine to stifle his emotion. Frank Braun asked: "And didn't they make any attempt to cure her?"

"Not trying?" Drenker laughed. "We did everything we could, Raimondi and I! - When we carried her back to her home village, her old man was drunk, as usual. He was shouting and swearing and would have loved to hit her in his blind rage. That's when Ussolo's mother took her in. Later we drove her to town, but the doctor said he couldn't help her, that she would have to go to Innsbruck, where she was hospitalised for years and years. They tortured her with all kinds of drugs and experimented on her. But nothing could be done and finally she was sent home again - crooked and stiff as she was. - In the meantime, her father had died - drowned in the lake when he was once again completely drunk; her inheritance consisted of debts. She then went back to live with Ussolo's mother and still lives in the dilapidated hut, although the old woman has also been dead for a long time. - She doesn't need much, and begs for the few kreuzer They travelled the country road together on post days. - She has become a crooked, old, ugly beggar, but as long as Aloys Drenker lives, he will be good to her."





## The game box

That evening, I waited long enough for Edgard Widerhold. I was lying in the long chair, the boy was slowly moving the fan behind me. The old man has Indian boys who followed him here some time ago. And their Sons and grandsons. His boys are well educated; they know how to serve us.

"Go, Dewla, tell your master that I am waiting."

"Atja Sahib." He slipped away silently. I lay on the terrace, dreaming out onto the bright stream. For an hour, the weeks-old Clouds melted away, no tepid rain had fallen for an hour. And the evening sun cast broad stripes in the purple mists of Tonkin.

Down below, the junks rocked and came back to life. The people crawled out; with round shovels, mops and tamarind brooms they threw out the water, dried and cleaned the sampan. But no one spoke; they worked silently, almost inaudibly; hardly the slightest sound penetrated up to the leaves and tendrils. One

A large junk sailed past, packed with legionnaires. I waved to the officers lying in the sampan; they thanked me wistfully. They would probably have preferred to sit with me on the wide veranda of Edgard Widerhold's mighty bungalow rather than travelling up there, for days, weeks through the hot rain, up to their miserable station. - I counted -

There were at least fifty legionnaires on the junk. Certainly a few Irishmen and Spaniards, Flemish and Swiss - - and the rest: Germans. Who might be there? No water drinkers, but boys on whom Tilly and

the great Christian had his fun. Surely there are arsonists, robbers and murderers among them - what better way to wage such a war? They know their trade, you might think. And then there are those who come from above, those who disappear from society, who disappear into the murky waters of the Legion. Pastors and professors, high nobility and officers. After all, a bishop fell during the storming of Aïn-Souf and how long ago a German warship from Algiers carried the body of another legionnaire? and paid her all the honours - of a royal prince?

I lean over the parapet: "Vive la Légion!" And they shout back, roaring loudly from slimy drinking throats: "Vive la Légion! Vive la Légion!" They have lost their fatherland and their family, house, home, honour and money. They only have one thing to replace all that: esprit de corps - - Vive la Légion!

Oh, I know them. Drunks and gamblers, protectors of prostitutes, deserters, escaped from all camps. Anarchists all - who don't know what anarchism is, who rebelled and fled from a compulsion that was unbearable. Criminals half and half children, small brains and big hearts - real soldiers. Landsknechts with the right instinct that plundering and desecrating is a good thing and their honest trade - for they are recruited to kill, and those who are allowed to do great things are also allowed to do small things. Adventurers who came too late to this world, this world of today, which demands individuals strong enough to forge their own paths. Each of them was too weak to do so, collapsed in the middle of the thicket, could go no further. A flickering will-o'-the-wisp tore him from the broad path long ago, and he couldn't go his own way - - somewhere it was missing, he doesn't know where. Everyone failed, a miserable, helpless plank. But they find each other, join together, form a great, proud

Ship: Vive la Légion! She is mother and homeland, and honour and fatherland. Listen to them shout: "Vive, vive la Légion!"

The junk moves out into the evening, towards the west, where in the second bend the Red River rolls into the Bright Stream. There it disappears, steering deep into the mists, far into this land of purple poisons. But they fear nothing, these blond, bearded men, not fever and not dysentery and even less the yellow rebels: they have enough alcohol and opium and their good cans of leprosy - what more do you need? Forty of the fifty perish, but those who return take a new contract: for the glory of the legion, not for that of France.

- Edgard Widerhold came out onto the veranda.

"Are they over?" he asked.

"Who?"

"The legionnaires!" He went to the parapet and looked at the river.

"Thank God, they're gone. May the devil take them; I can't see them."

"So?" I said. Of course, like everyone else in the country, I knew the strange relationship the old man had with the legion and I wanted to try to find out why. That's why I played the

Astonished. "So? And yet the whole legion fancies you! It was a captain of the Second Legion who told me about you years ago in Porquerolles: if I ever came to the Bright Current, I would have to visit Edgard Widerhold."

"That was Karl Hauser from Mühlhausen."

"No, it was Dufresnes."

The old man sighed: "Dufresnes, the Auvergnate! He's drunk many a glass of Burgundy here."

"Like everyone else, right? Until suddenly, eight years ago, the house, which was called 'Le Bungalow de la Légion', closed its doors and Mr Edgard Widerhold, le bon Papa de la Légion, set up his supply station in Edgardhafen."

This was the little harbour at Widerhold's farm, two hours further down the river. The old man had even managed to get the postmark to read "Edgard harbour" and not "Port d'Edgard". - His House had been closed to the Legion since that time, but not its heart and its hospitality. Every legion junk that passed by stopped in Edgard's harbour and the steward brought a few baskets of wine on board for the officers and crew. There was always a business card from the old man: "Mr Edgard Widerhold very much regrets not being able to receive the officers this time. He kindly asks them to accept the following gift and drinks to the well-being of the legion himself. And the commander always replied that he was grateful for the kind gift and hoped to be able to thank the donor personally on his return.

But it never happened again, the door of the large house on the Bright River remained closed to the legion. A few more times, officers came in, old friends, whose drinking voices had often echoed through the rooms. The boys took them to the veranda and served them the best wines - but the old man never came out. So they stayed away; the legion slowly got used to the new relationship. Already there were so

There were some who had never seen him, who only knew that in Edgard harbour you stop, take wine on board and drink to the health of a crazy old German. Everyone looked forward to this single interruption to the dreary rainy journey on the Bright River and Edgard Widerhold was no less popular in the legion than before.

When I came to him, I was the first German he had spoken to in years. He had seen - oh, he must have seen some down there in the river. I'm convinced that the old man is behind some curtain, looking out every time a Legion junk passes by. But he spoke German to me again. I think that's why he's keeping me, always inventing something new to delay my departure.

The old man is not one to shout for joy. He grumbles at the Reich like a reed sparrow. He is very old, but if he lived in Berlin, he would have to be ten times as old to be able to do all the time that his *lèse majesté* insults alone have earned him. He scolded Bismarck for letting Saxony live and not taking Bohemia, and the third emperor for letting himself be talked into Heligoland for the East African Empire. - And Holland! We must have Holland if we want to live, Holland and its Sunda Islands. It's a must, there's no other way; we'll die if it's not done. Then, of course, the Adriatic! Austria is a calculated nonsense, a monkey business that disgraces any decent map. We own its German lands, and since we can't have the door shut in our face, we must also have the Slavic chunks that block the Mediterranean, Carniola and Istria. "Get me the devil," he cries, "I know we'll get lice in our fur! But better a fur with lice than freezing to death - without fur!" - Today he is already travelling under the black, white and red flag from the German Trieste to the German Batavia.

Then I ask: "And the English gentlemen?"

"The English?" he shouts. "The English shut up when you hit them!"

He loves France and grants it a broad place in the sun; but he hates the English.

That's the way it is with him. If a German spits venom and bile about the emperor and the empire, he's happy and joins in the scolding. If a Frenchman makes jokes about us, he laughs, but immediately returns the favour and tells the latest stupidities of the governor in Saigon. But if an Englishman dares to make the most harmless remark about our silliest consul, he gets angry. That was the reason why he once had to leave India. I don't know what the English colonel said, but I do know that Edgard Widerhold took the riding crop and gave him a eye out. That was forty years ago now; it could have been fifty or sixty. He fled then, went to Tonkin and sat on his farm long before the French came into the country. There he hoisted the tricolour at Bright Stream, sad that it wasn't the black, white and red flag flying from the mast, but glad that at least it wasn't the Union Jack.

Nobody knows how old they actually are. Those who are not eaten by the tropics in the middle of their young lives are dried out. They make him weather-hard and firm, create an armour of yellow leather that defies all rot. That was Edgard Widerhold. He may have been in his eighties or nineties, but he spent six hours a day in the saddle. His hair was white, but his

His long pointed beard kept its yellow-grey colour. His face was long and narrow, his hands long and narrow, and each finger was armed with large yellow nails. Longer than a matchstick, hard as steel, sharp and curved like the claws of a predator.

I handed him my cigarettes. I hadn't smoked them for a long time, they had gone bad from the sea air. But they tasted good to him - German brand.

"Aren't you going to tell me why the legion was banned from your bungalow?" The old man didn't move away from the parapet. "No!" he said. Then he clapped his hands: "Bana! Dewla! - Wine, glasses!" The boys set the table, he sat down next to me and pushed the newspapers over to me. "There," he continued, "have you read the post yet? The Germans have won the motor race in Dieppe. Benz and Mercedes, or whatever the cars are called. Zeppelin's finished with his balloon - he's taking a walk over Germany and Switzerland, where he's going. wants! - Look at the last page, chess tournament in Ostend. Who has the prize? A German! - Really, it would be a pleasure to read the papers if only they didn't have to report on the Berlin gentlemen. Read it, it's blatant what -"

But I interrupted him. I didn't feel like listening to "what stupid things these monstrous blockheads had done again". I drank to him: "Cheers! - I have to leave tomorrow."

The old man pushed his glass away. "What - tomorrow?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Schlumberger is coming round with part of the third battalion. He can take me with him."

He banged his fist on the table: "That's mean!"

"What?"

"That you want to leave tomorrow, hell! It's a mean thing to do."

"Well, I can't stay here forever," I laughed. "It'll be two months on Tuesday -"

"That's just it! I've got used to you now. When

If they had ridden off after an hour, I wouldn't have cared." But I didn't give in. For God's sake, he'd had enough guests here and seen them leave, one after the other. Until new ones came -



Then he started up. In the past, yes, in the past he wouldn't have lifted a finger to keep me longer. But now, who would come now? Two a year and a German every five years! Since he could no longer see the goddamn legionnaires -

Then I had him again. And I told him that I wanted to stay another eight days if he told me the story of why -

Now that was another mean thing to say. What - - a German poet trades his goods like a merchant?

I went for it. "Raw product," I said. "Mutton wool from the farmer. But we spin the threads and weave colourful carpets."

He liked that and laughed. "At three weeks, I want to sell the story!"

I learnt to act in Naples. Three weeks for a story - that's an outrageous price. And I was buying a pig in a poke and didn't even know whether I could use the stuff at all. Also

I would get a maximum of two hundred marks for it and had already been here for two months and was supposed to stay for another three weeks - and I hadn't written a single line yet. My work had to be paid for, and I'm not getting my money's worth anyway, he's ruining me and - -

But the old man kept his advantage. "My birthday is on the twenty-seventh," he said, "I don't want to be alone then. So eighteen days - that's the limit! I won't tell the story for less than that."

"As far as I'm concerned," I sighed, "it's a deal!"

The old man held out his hand to me. 'Bana,' he shouted, 'Bana! Take away the wine, clear the glasses. Bring goblets and get us some champagne.'

"Atja, Sahib, atja."

"And you, Dewla, get the box of Hong-Doks and the tokens."

The boy brought the box, placed it in front of me at a hint from his master and pressed a spring so that the lid popped open. It was a large box made of sandalwood, whose fine fragrance filled the air at the moment. The wood was inlaid with tiny leaves of mother-of-pearl and ivory, and the sides showed elephants, crocodiles and tigers in dense foliage. But the lid bore a depiction of the crucifixion; an old print may have served as a model. But the Saviour was beardless and had a round, almost full face, which nevertheless had an expression of terrible agony. The engraving on the left side was missing, as was the cross; this Christ appeared to be crucified on a flat board. The board at his head did not show the letters: I.N.R.I., but the others: K.V.K.S.II.C.L.E.

This depiction of the crucified was of an uncanny naturalness; it reminded me involuntarily of Matthias Grunewald's picture, even though it had nothing in common with it. The artist's innermost conception was rather a fundamentally different one: it was not immense compassion and empathy that seemed to have given him the strength to go to the extreme probability of the horrific, but rather a passionate hatred, a voluptuous immersion in the torments of the sufferer.

The work was produced with unspeakable labour: the magnificent masterpiece of a great artist.

The old man saw my enthusiasm. "It's yours," he said calmly.

I grabbed the box with both hands. "You want to give me this -"

He laughed. "As a gift - no! But I sold you my story and that box there - it's my story."

I rummaged through the tokens. Round, triangular and rectangular mother-of-pearl plates with a deep metallic lustre. Each one bore a small picture on each side, cut out in the large ones, chiselled in the fine lines.

"Do you want to give me the comment?" I asked.

"You're playing with the commentary! If you organise the stamps nicely and put them in order, you can read my story like in a book. But now close the lid and listen. - Pour, Dewla."

The boy filled the goblets and we drank. He tamped his master's short pipe, handed it to him and lit it.

The old man drew and pushed the pungent smoke far away from him. Then he leant back and beckoned the boys to take the fans.

"You see," he began, "it's true what Captain Dufresnes told you, or whoever else it was. This house deserves to be called the legion's bungalow. The officers drank here - and the people downstairs in the garden; often enough I invited them onto the veranda. You know that the French have been ridiculing our ridiculous

Do not know differences of rank, except for service, every commoner is so good

like his general. And that's even more true in the colonies, and even more so in the legion, where many a superior is a peasant and many a commoner a gentleman. I went downstairs, drank with the crews in the garden and whoever I liked I let come upstairs. Believe me, I

I met many an oddball there, many a devil and many a child who longed for mum's protective skirt. That was my big museum, the legion, my thick book that told me new fairy tales and adventures.

Because the boys told me they were happy when they caught me alone to pour their hearts out to me. You see, it's really true that the legionnaires loved me, and not just because of the wine and the few days' rest they had here. You know the people, you know that everyone considers what he sees to be his good property; that no officer or commoner can leave the slightest thing without it disappearing in the twinkling of an eye. Well, in more than twenty years a legionnaire has stolen something from me only once, and his comrades would have beaten him to death if I had not asked for him myself. You don't believe that? - I wouldn't believe it either if someone else told me, and yet it's literally true. - People loved me and they did it because they felt that I loved them. How that came? Jesus, with time. No wife, no child and alone out here all these years. - The Legion - that was the only thing that gave me Germany back, that made the Heller Strom German to me, despite the tricolour.

I know that the decent citizens of the Empire call the Legion the last dregs and rejects of the nation. Prison fodder, worthy only that it should perish. But this scum that Germany contemptuously spewed on my shores, this excrement, no longer good for anything in the beautifully regulated homeland, carried dross of such a rare colour that my heart laughed with joy. Cinders! They are not worth a penny to the jeweller who sells heavy diamonds in thick rings to master butchers. But the child collects them on the beach. The child and old fools like me, and crazy poets like you, who are both: Children and fools! For us these cinders have a value, and we don't want them to perish.

But they are perishing. Certainly, one by one. - And the way they perish, miserably, miserably, agonisingly, that is what is unbearable. A mother may see her children die, two or three. She sits there with her hands in her lap and cannot help them, cannot. But it will pass and one day she will get over the pain. But I - the father of the legion - saw a thousand children die, every month, every week they almost died away. And I couldn't help, couldn't collect any more dross: I can't watch my children die any more.

And how they died. At that time, the French were not yet as deep in the country as they are today. The last station was only three days' journey up the Red River, in Edgard harbour itself and all around it lay endangered posts. Dysentery and typhus were a matter of course in these damp camps, along with tropical anaemia here and there. You know this disease, you know how to die of it. A very slight fever, that barely makes your pulse beat faster, day and night. You don't want to eat any more, you become as moody as a beautiful woman. All you want to do is sleep, sleep, sleep - until finally the end is slowly approaching, which you would like to see coming so that you can finally get a good night's sleep. Those who died of anaemia drew the jackpot, those and the others who fell in battle.

God, it's certainly no pleasure to die from a poisoned arrow, but it happens quickly, in a few hours. But how many died like that - hardly one in a thousand. And the others, who occasionally fell alive into the hands of the yellow bastards, had to pay bitterly enough for the luck they had. There was Karl Mattis, a deserted Deutz cuirassier, corporal of the first company, a splendid young man who did not shy away from the greatest danger. When the Gambetta station was attacked by thousands of troops, he and two others took it upon themselves to sneak through and carry the news to Edgardhafen.

bring. During the night they were attacked, one was killed. Mattis was shot in the knee. He sent his comrade on his way and covered his escape for two hours against three hundred black flags. At last they caught him, tied his hands and legs together and tied him to a tree trunk over there on the shallow bank of the river. He lay there for three days until the crocodiles ate him, slowly, piece by piece, and yet more compassionately than their two-legged compatriots. Six months later, they caught Hendrik Oldenkott from Maastricht, a seven-foot giant whose incredible strength became his undoing: in a frenzy, he had killed his own brother with his bare fist. The legion was able to save him from prison, but not from the judges he found here. We found him down in the garden, still alive: they had cut open his body, removed his intestines, filled his abdominal cavity with rats and skilfully stitched it up again. They gouged out the eyes of Lieutenant Heudelimont and two commoners with red-hot needles and found them half-starved in the forest; they chopped off the feet of Sergeant Jakob Bieberich and then made him play Mazeppa on a dead crocodile. We fished him out of the river near Edgardhafen, and the poor fellow had to spend another three weeks in hospital before he died.

Is the list long enough for you? I can go on, name after name. People don't cry out here anymore - but if I had shed a few tears for everyone, they would fill a barrel bigger than the one in my cellar. And that story in the toy box is just the very last drop of tears that caused the barrel to overflow."

The old man pulled the box over to him and opened it. He rummaged through the tokens with his long nails, took one and handed it to me. "There,

You see, that's the hero!"

The round mother-of-pearl stamp showed the image of a legionnaire in his uniform. The soldier's full face bore a striking resemblance to the image of Christ on the cover; the reverse of the stamp bore the same inscription that was at the head of the crucified man:

K.V.K.S.II.C.L.E.

I read: "K. von K., soldier second class of the Légion Etrangère."

"Right!" said the old man. "That's him! Karl von Kö -" He interrupted himself: "No, let's leave the name alone. By the way, you can easily find him in an old naval register. He was a sea cadet before he came here. He had to resign from the service and the fatherland at the same time; I think it was the silly paragraph 132 of the penal code that broke his neck: usurpation of office. The very young boy had gone on a very long beer trip with a student friend of his, met a brave Schutzmann and drank under the table. They had a tussle over who would be allowed to play guard - the sea cadet won, took off the drunk's uniform and put it on himself. Then he stormed into the quiet alleyways and arrested whatever else was lurking about in the night-time keel. Meanwhile, in the pub, the staid civil servant with the

With the help of many cans of ice-cold water emptied over him He put on his sailor's uniform out of necessity and tried to slip away home quietly. Which, of course, he thoroughly failed to do: the youngest disciple of Christian seafaring caught him, arrested him and dragged him to the police station, where the cornered security guard identified himself as - the sea cadet - by means of the papers tucked into his coat. You may, Doctor, imagine the further course of this beautiful story of the sea cadet who arrested himself - the good city

Kiel laughed about it for three days. The end was a rather sad one: the sea cadet received a nasty charge of usurping authority and was allowed to take off his pretty uniform for good. He didn't wait for the trial, fleeing far away from the glorious paragraph 132 of the penal code. No paragraph in the book is too stupid not to promote the Legion.

Oh, he was a bloke like velvet and silk, the sea cadet! Everyone called him that, mates and superiors alike. A disparate boy who knew that his life was gambled away and now made a sport of always playing "va banque". In Algiers he defended a corsair alone; when all the charges had fallen, he took command of ten legionnaires and a few dozen goumiers, holding the hole until replacements arrived weeks later. It was then that he received the braid for the first time; he received it three times and lost it again soon afterwards. That's the way it is in the legion: sergeant today, commoner again tomorrow. As long as they're out there, it's fine, but this unbound freedom can't stand the city air, some wild prank is going on at the moment. It was also the sea cadet who jumped after General Barry in the Red Sea when he slipped on the gangway and fell into the water. To the cheers of the crew, he fished him out, unconcerned about the giant sharks.

His mistakes? He drank - - like all legionnaires. And like all of them, he was after women and sometimes forgot to ask permission first. And then - well, he treated the natives a good deal more en canailles than was absolutely necessary. But otherwise a splendid boy for whom no apple was too high. He was clever; in a few months he spoke the gibberish of the yellow gang better than I have in all the time I've been sitting in my bungalow. And he hadn't forgotten the manners he learnt in the nursery, even in the Legion. His



My mates thought I had a crush on him. Well, it wasn't that bad, but I liked him a lot and he was probably closer to me than the others. He was in Edgardhafen for a year and came here often enough; he drank a huge hole in my wine cellar. He didn't say "thank you" after the fourth glass - like you do! So drink up - Bana, pour!

Then he came to Fort Valmy, which was the outermost station at the time. It takes four days to get there by junk, crawling through the eternal meanders of the Red River. But as the crow flies it's not that far, I want to ride there on my Australian mare in eighteen hours. He came here seldom enough, but I saw him from time to time, as I sometimes rode there to visit another friend. That was Hong-Dok, the maker of this box.

Are you smiling? Hong-Dok - my friend? But it was him. Believe me, you'll find people here who are like you, few, very few of course. But he was one, Hong-Dok. Maybe he was more.

Fort Valmy - we want to ride there once; Marsouins are lying there now, no longer legionnaires. It is an ancient, incredibly dirty town; the small French fort overlooks it on a hill by the river. Narrow, cramped alleyways, miserable, wretched houses. But this is the city of today. Once, centuries ago, it must have been a great one, beautiful city until the Black Flags came from the north and destroyed it, those damned Black Flags that are still causing us so much trouble. The pile of rubble around the city is six times the size of the city itself; anyone who wants to build there today has the stones for nothing. But in the middle of these miserable ruins, close to the river, stood a large, old building, almost a palace: Hong-Dok's house. It

has stood there since time immemorial, even the black flags have spared it out of some religious shyness.

The rulers of this land, Hong-Dok's ancestors, lived there. He had a hundred ancestors and another hundred and another hundred, more than all the ruling houses of Europe put together - but he knew them all. Knew their names, knew what they did. They were princes and emperors, but Hong-Dok was a woodcarver, like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. The Black Flags left the house standing, but nothing else, and the rulers became as destitute as their last subjects. So the old stone house fell into disrepair under the red-flowering hibiscus bushes.

Until a new splendour lit it up again when the French arrived. For Hong-Dok's father had not forgotten the history of his country, like all those who were to be his subjects. And when the whites took possession of this land, he was the first to welcome them to the Red River. He rendered extraordinary services to the French, and in gratitude they gave him land and cattle, paid him a salary and made him a soldier. made him a kind of civil prefect over the city. That was the last small happiness of the ancient house - today it lies in ruins, like its neighbourhood. The legionnaires smashed it to pieces and left no stone unturned; they took revenge on the sea cadet because the murderer had escaped from them.

Hong-Dok, my good friend, he was his murderer. Here is his picture."

The old man handed me another token. It bore the name Hong-Dok in Latin letters on one side and the image of a native of the noble caste in national costume on the other. But the design was cursory and imprecise, not remotely comparable to the fine work of the first token.

Edgard Widerhold read my face. "Yes, it's worth nothing, this badge, the only one of them all. Strange, as if Hong-Dok had disdained to take the slightest interest in his own person. But look at this little work of art."

He flicked me with the claw of his index finger another mother-of-pearl plate. It showed the image of a young woman who was also beautiful to our eyes; she was standing in front of a hibiscus bush, her left hand holding a small fan. It was a masterpiece of unprecedented perfection. Again, the back bore the name of the model: *Ot-Chen*.

"That's the third character in the Fort Valmy drama," the old man continued.

"Here you have some acting supporting characters, extras." He pushed a few dozen stamps over to me, showing large crocodiles on both sides. In all positions: some were swimming in the river, others were sleeping on the bank, some had their mouths wide open, others were flapping their tails or stretching up on their forelegs. Some were stylised, but most were depicted naturally; all the pictures showed

an extraordinary observation of the dangerous armoured lizards. Once

again, snapped by the yellow claws of the old man, new Tokens over to me. "The location of the action," he said. One token showed a large stone house, apparently the artist's home; others depicted rooms and sections of a garden. The last showed views of the Bright Stream and the Red River, one of them seen from Widerhold's veranda. Each one of the marvellous plates evoked my bright delight; I took sides with the artist and against the sea cadet. I reached out to take more stamps.

"No," said the old man, "wait. I want you to see everything in order, nicely as it should be. - So Hong-Dok was my friend, like

it had been his father. They both worked for me throughout the years, I was probably their only customer. When they became rich, they continued to cultivate their art, only now they no longer took money. My father even went so far as to insist on giving me back every last penny of the money I had paid him over the years, and I had to take it if I didn't want to offend him. So I got all those cupboards full of things you like to admire for nothing.

The sea cadet got to know Hong-Dok through me, and I took him to his house once. - I know what you mean: the sea cadet was a womaniser and Ot-Chen was worthy of being desired. - Wasn't he? And I could have guessed that Hong-Dok wouldn't stand by quietly?

No, no, I couldn't foresee anything! You might have thought so, but not I, who knew Hong-Dok so well. When it had all happened and Hong-Dok told me, up here on the veranda - o much more calmly and quietly than I speak now - it still seemed so impossible to me that I could hardly believe him. Until then, in the middle of the stream, a piece of evidence floated up that left no room for doubt. I have often thought about the matter and believe I have some of the strange reasons that drove Hong-Dok to do what he did. Some - who can read entirely in a brain that has been perpetuated through a thousand generations, saturated to overflowing with power, art and the all-pervading wisdom of opium?

No, no, I couldn't foresee anything. If someone had asked me at the time: "What will Hong-Dok do if the sea cadet Ot-Chen seduces him, or another of his nine wives?" - I would certainly have replied: "He won't even look up from his work!"

Or, if he is in a good mood, he will give Ot-Chen to the sea cadet." That's what the Hong-Dok I knew had to do, that and nothing else. He once caught Ho-Nam, another of his wives, with a Chinese interpreter: he thought it beneath his dignity to say a single word to either of them. Another time it was Ot-Chen herself who cheated on him - so you can see that it wasn't a special fondness for this particular woman that guided his actions. The almond eyes of one of my Indian boys, who had ridden with me to Fort Valmy, had taken a fancy to little Ot-Chen, and although the two could not speak a word to each other, they were soon in agreement. Hong-Dok found her in his garden, but he did not lay a hand on his wife, nor did he allow me to punish the boy. All this affected him as little as any dog that barked at him on the

Street - as soon as you turn your head to the side.

It seems completely impossible that a man of Hong-Dok's unshakeable philosophical calm could have lost his senses for even a moment and acted in a sudden surge of emotion. Moreover, the rigorous investigation we carried out with his wives and servants after his escape established that Hong-Dok had carefully considered his actions down to the last detail and carried them out. According to this, the sea cadet spent three months in the stone house by the river and maintained his relationship with Ot-Chen throughout this time, of which Hong-Dok was aware after only a few weeks through one of his servants. Nevertheless, he let both of them go about their business quietly and used this time to mature the gruesome nature of his revenge, which he himself had certainly already decided upon at the first moment.

But why did he perceive the same act as a bitter offence on the part of the sea cadet, which barely elicited a smile from him when my Indian boy committed it? I may be mistaken, but after much searching I believe I have found the winding path of his thoughts.

Hong-Dok was a king. We laugh when we find the letters on coins and cannons: D.G., Dei Gratia, and most of our European princes laugh no less at their divine rightness. But imagine a ruler who believes in it, who is truly convinced that he is the Chosen One! I know the comparison is not quite right, but there is a certain similarity. Of course, Hong-Dok did not believe in a god, he only believed in the teachings of the great philosopher; but he was absolutely convinced, and rightly so, that his family was the chosen one, towering sky-high above all others in the region. Throughout eternity his ancestors had been rulers, unrestricted autocrats. A prince in our country who is only somewhat sensible knows very well that in his country many thousands of people who are much smarter, much more educated than him. Hong-Dok and all his ancestors knew the opposite with equal certainty: a huge gulf always separated them from the masses of their people. They alone were rulers - all others were slaves. They alone had wisdom and education - they only saw their equals when envoys came in long years from the neighbouring kingdom by the sea, or far away from the south from Siam or even over the mountains of the wild Meos Chinese mandarin. We would say that Hong-Dok's ancestors were gods among humans. They probably felt differently: they felt like humans among dirty animals. Do you understand the difference? A dog barks at us - as soon as you turn your head to the side.

Then came the barbarians from the north, the Black Flags. They took the land and destroyed the city and many other towns around it. They only stopped at the ruler's house and did not harm anyone who belonged to it. A quiet, peaceful country became one that constantly echoed with murder and manslaughter, but outside the palace on the Red River the noise was silent. And Hong-Dok's ancestors despised the rough gangs of the north just as they had despised their own people; nothing filled the monstrous abyss. They were animals, just like the others - but they were people who knew the wisdom of the philosophers.

Until a flash of lightning struck the mists of the river. Strange white fellows came from distant shores, and Hong-Dok's father recognised with joyful astonishment that they were human beings. He felt the difference between himself and the strangers, but this difference was insignificant compared to the difference that separated him from the people of his country. Like some other Great Tonkins, he felt at once that he belonged to them and not to the others. Hence his ever-ready assistance from the first moment, which consisted above all in teaching the French to distinguish between the quiet, peaceful native population and the warlike hordes of the north. And when they then appointed him civil prefect over the region, the population regarded him no differently than the real, ancestral prince. He had freed them from the Alp of the Black Flags, the French were only his tools, foreign warriors whom he had summoned: thus he was regarded by the people as a ruler, just as unrestricted as his ancestors, of whom half-forgotten stories told.

This is how Hong-Dok, the son of the prince who was to rule himself, grew up. Like his father, he saw the Europeans as human beings and not as stupid

animals. But he had more leisure, now that the fortunes of the old palace had been restored, to take a closer look at these strangers, to learn the differences that existed between himself and them and among them. In constant contact with the legion, his gaze became as sure as my own: to recognise the commoner who was a master and the officer who was a servant despite the golden braids. For it is education more than birth that distinguishes the master from the servant in all the East. He saw well that all these warriors stood towering above his people - but not above him. If his father had regarded every white man as his equal, Hong-Dok no longer did, and the closer and more closely he got to know them, the fewer friends he found,

whom he equalled. They were certainly marvellous, unconquerable warriors, each one worth more than a hundred of the dreaded Black Flags - - was that a glory? Hong-Dok despised the craft of war as much as any other. They could all read and write - he didn't care about their characters, of course - but there was hardly anyone who knew what philosophy was. Hong-Dok did not demand that they should know the great philosopher, but he expected to find some strange, different, but equally profound wisdom. And he found nothing.

These whites knew less about the basis of all things than the last opium smoker. But there was one thing which astonished him greatly and which gave his respect for them a great blow: their attitude to their religion. It was not the religion itself that he disliked; the Christian cult seemed to him just as good as the others he knew. Now, our legionaries are nothing less than pious and no dutiful priest would admit even one of them to the sacrament. And yet sometimes, in minutes of great danger, some chopped-up prayer for help tore itself out of their chests. This caught Hong-Dok's eye - and he found that these people really believed,



that perhaps impossible help could come to them from some unknown quarter. Now he continued his search, - I forgot to tell you, that Hong-Dok spoke better French than I did - he befriended the good military priest of Fort Valmy. And what he found there, strengthened his belief in his own superiority. I still remember quite well how he told me about it one evening in his smoking room, how he smiled when he told me that he now knew how *the Christians actually took their worship. And that even the priest had no understanding of the symbolic.*

The worst thing was that he was right; I couldn't say a word back to him. We Europeans believe - or we don't believe. But the Christians who keep the faith of their fathers as a beautiful garment of deep symbols, you can look for them in Europe with a lantern and here in Tonkin you certainly won't find a single one. But this was the most natural thing for this scholar of the East, the most self-evident thing, indispensable for a man of real education. And when he did not find it at all, was not even understood by the priest in his thoughts, which seemed the simplest to him, he lost a large part of his admiring respect. In some things the Europeans were superior to him - but in things to which he attached little value. In others they were equal to him: but in the great main thing, in the deepest realisation of all life, they were far, far below him. And this contempt caused a hatred to develop in him over the years, which slowly grew the more the foreigners became real rulers in his country, the more they advanced step by step, taking all power into their strong hands. In his region they no longer needed the pseudo-rulership they had given his father and later him; he felt that his

father had been mistaken and that the role of the old stone house on the Red River had been played out for ever. I do not believe that any bitterness ever sank into the feelings of this philosopher, who lived life as it was; on the contrary, the realisation of his own superiority may have been a source of joyful satisfaction to him.

The platform he created over the years for his dealings with Europeans was a very simple one: he withdrew as far as possible, but treated them with conviction as his equals in all outward appearances. Only the house, which was closed behind the angular, yellow forehead, he would not let anyone look into, and if he did open it to me from time to time, it was out of an attachment that he had absorbed almost with his mother's milk, and which aroused my keen interest in him.

always kept his art alive.

Hong-Dok was like that. He couldn't be moved for a moment when his wives got involved with the Chinese interpreter or my boy. If these little extravagances had had consequences, Hong-Dok would simply have had the children drowned, but not out of hatred or revenge, just the way you drown young dogs - you don't want them. And if the sea cadet, when he took a liking to Ot-Chen, had asked him to give them to him, Hong-Dok would have done so immediately.

But the sea cadet came into his house as a gentleman - and he took him his wife like a servant. That very first evening, Hong-Dok realised that this legionnaire was made of nobler stuff than most of his comrades; I could see that from the fact that he was a little out of his polite reserve towards him. And in further dealings - I am only inferring this - the sea cadet will have acted towards Hong-Dok in the same way as he would towards a lord of a castle in Germany whose wife he would have liked. He pulled out all the stops of his brilliant

and he certainly succeeded in bribing Hong-Dok in the same way that he always charmed me and all his superiors: one had to become fond of this clever, fresh and splendid man. And Hong-Dok did so, to the extent that he descended from his high throne, he, the ruler, the artist, the wise disciple of Confucius, that he made friends with the legionnaire and loved him, certainly loved him more than he had ever loved any other person.

Then a servant brought him the message - and he saw from the window how the sea cadet was enjoying himself with Ot-Chen in the garden.

So that's why he came to him! Not to see him - just because of her, for the sake of a woman, an animal! Hong-Dok felt shamefully betrayed - - o not at all like a European husband. But that this stranger had feigned friendship for him and that he had given him friendship again - that was it. That he, in all his proud wisdom, had been the fool in the face of this lowly warrior who secretly, like a servant, pursued his wife. That he had wasted his love on something so pitifully beneath him.

You see, that's what this proud yellow devil couldn't get over.

A boy came up from the garden, bringing freshly picked mangosteen. The old man pushed them over to me and ate one of the delicious fruits himself - slowly and in silence. Then he continued:

One evening, his servants carried him to the bungalow. He got out of the palanquin and came up to the veranda smiling. As always, he brought a few gifts, small ivory fans, exquisitely carved. There were a few more officers there, and Hong-Dok greeted them very kindly, sat down with us and was silent; he hardly spoke three words until after a

hour the gentlemen took their leave. He waited until the trot of their  
When I got lost in the river, he began very calmly, very sweetly, as if he  
had the very best news to tell me: "I've come here to tell you something. *I  
have crucified the sea cadet and Ot-Chen.*"

Although making jokes was not Hong-Dok's style at all, I only had  
this feeling when I heard this astonishing message:  
There was a joke behind it. And I liked his dry, matter-of-fact tone so much  
that I went straight into it and asked him just as calmly: "So? And what else  
have you done with them?"

He replied: "I sewed their lips shut." This time I laughed:

"Oh, you don't say! - Such

Did you show them kindness? - Why is that?" Hong-Dok spoke calmly  
and seriously, but the sweet smile left his face.

Not the corner of his mouth. "Why? I caught them - 'in flagrante delicto'."

He liked the word so much that he repeated it. He had heard or read it  
somewhere, and it seemed to him tremendously ridiculous that we  
Europeans should attach any particular importance to it when a rogue is  
called a rogue.

just as he was doing it: as if it didn't make no difference whether he was  
caught doing it, or before or after. He said this with an important emphasis,  
with a slight exaggeration that really showed his mocking contempt: "In  
flagrante delicto. - Isn't it true that in Europe the betrayed husband has the  
right to punish the robber of his honour?"

This sweet mockery was so certain that I could not find words to answer  
him. He went on, always with the same friendly smile, as if he were telling  
the simplest thing in the world: "So I punished him. And as he is a  
Christian, I thought it best to give him a Christian punishment.

I thought that would suit him best. - Was that right?"

I didn't like this strange way of joking at all. I didn't think for a moment that he was telling the truth, but I had an uncomfortable feeling and wished that he would soon come to an end with his Gossip. I believed him, of course, that the sea cadet had become involved with Ot-Chen and I thought that he was once again using this example to demonstrate our European concepts of honour and morality ad absurdum. So I simply said: "Of course! Quite right. I am convinced that the sea cadet very much appreciated this small gesture."

But Hong-Dok shook his head almost sadly: "No, I don't think so. At least he didn't say a word about it. He just shouted."

"Did he shout?"

"Yes," Hong-Dok said with his sweet melancholy regret, "he cried a lot. Much more than Ot-Chen. He was always praying to his god and in between he was screaming. Much worse than a dog being slaughtered. It was really very unpleasant. And that's why I had to have his mouth sewn shut."

I'd had enough of these jokes and wanted to push him to finish. "Is that all?" I interrupted him.

"I had them seized and bound, then undressed. After all, his God was naked when he died on the cross, wasn't he? Then their lips were sewn shut and they were crucified; then I had them thrown into the river. That really is all."

I was glad that he was finished: "Well, what's that all about?" I waited for an explanation.

Hong-Dok gave me a big look, as if he didn't quite understand what I wanted. He declaimed in a mock pity for himself, which he mocked again: "Oh, it was just the poor deceived husband's revenge."

"All right," I said, "all right! But now tell me what you're getting at! When's the punchline?"

"The punch line?" He smiled gleefully, as if this word suited him immensely. "Oh, please, just wait a little." He leant back in his chair and fell silent. I didn't feel the slightest desire to penetrate him any further, so I followed his example.

He could finish his silly murder story whenever he wanted.

We sat there for half an hour, nobody said a word. Inside the room, the wall clock struck six times.

"Now, now she has to come," Hong-Dok said quietly. Then he turned to me: "Would you like the boy to fetch your glasses, please?" - I waved to Bana and he brought my binoculars. But before Hong-Dok had grabbed one, he jumped up and leant far over the parapet. He stretched out his arm to the right, towards the Red River, and shouted triumphantly: "Look, look, here it comes - - *the punch line!*"

I took my binoculars and looked through them intently. Completely, At the very top, I noticed a small dot floating in the middle of the stream. It came closer, I saw a small raft. And on the raft were two people, two naked people. I involuntarily ran to the far end of the veranda to get a closer look. A woman was lying on her back, her black hair falling loose into the water - I recognised her, it was Ot-Chen. And a man on it - I couldn't see his face, but I could see the red-blonde colour of his hair - - ah, the sea cadet, the sea cadet! Long iron hooks had hands pinned to hands, feet to feet, poking deep

in the planks; thin dark streaks of blood ran across the white wood. Then I saw the sea cadet raise his head, shake it, shake it wildly.

Of course, he made me a sign - - - they were still alive, still alive! I dropped the glass and lost my senses for a moment.

But only for a moment, then I screamed, shouted, called out like a madman to my people: "Get down to the boats!" I ran back across the veranda - - there stood Hong-Dok, smiling sweetly, endearingly. As if to ask, "Well, isn't the fun good?"

You know, people often laughed at me because of my long nails. But at that moment, I swear to you, I realised what they were good for! I grabbed the yellow scoundrel by the throat and flung him back and forth. And I felt my claws penetrate deep into that cursed throat -

Then I let go of him and he fell to the ground like a sack. I chased down the stairs as if possessed, all my men after me. I ran down the bank to the river and took the first chain off the peg. One of the boys jumped into the boat, but he jumped straight through the bottom, standing in water up to his hips: the centre plank had broken out. We ran to the next boat, to the third - one after the other - all up to their hips in the water.

All of them had long planks cut out of them. I shouted to the people to get the big junk ready. We climbed up head over heels. But just like in the dinghies, we found large holes in the bottom, we were wading deep into the water; it was completely impossible to move the junk even a metre from the shore.

"The servants of Hong-Dok!" shouted my Indian supervisor.

"They did it, I saw them sneaking around by the river."

We jumped back onto the shore. I gave the order to pull one of the boats ashore, empty it and quickly slap a plank on the ground.

People ran into the water, pulling, pushing, pressing, almost collapsing under the weight of the mighty boat. I shouted to them, looking out over the river in between.

The raft passed very close by, oh, barely fifty metres from the shore. I stretched out my arm as if I could have grabbed it with my hand - -

- What do you mean? - Swimming? Oh yes, on the Rhine or the Elbe! But in the Heller Strome? And it was in June, I tell you, in June! The river was teeming with crocodiles, just as the sun was setting. The disgusting beasts swam closely around the little raft, I saw one that lifted itself up with its front legs, its long black snout nudging the crucified bodies. They sensed their predator and impatiently accompanied him downstream.

And again the sea cadet shook his blond head desperately, I shouted to him that we were coming, coming - - -

But it was as if the cursed river was in league with Hong-Dok; it held the boat tightly in its tenacious clay fingers and would not let it go. I jumped into the water too, pulling with the people. We pulled and pushed, barely lifting it out inch by inch. And the sun sank and the raft floated down, further and further.

Then the warden brought the horses. We put ropes around the boat and whipped the animals. That's how it went. One more pull and one more - shouting and whipping! The boat lay on the bank. The water was flowing out, people were beating new planks on the ground. - But it had long been dark by the time we left.

I took the oar, twelve hands were heavy in the oars. Three men knelt on the ground, scooping out the water, which kept coming in. Nevertheless, it rose and we were soon up to our calves in water;



I had to send two and two more of the oars away to draw water. We made infinitely slow progress -

I had large pitch torches, so we searched with them. But we found nothing. A few times we thought we saw the raft in the distance, but when we got closer it was a floating tree trunk or a crocodile. We found nothing. We searched for hours and found nothing.

I landed in Edgard harbour and made some noise. The commander sent out five boats, including two large junks. They searched the river for three days. But they had no more luck than we did. We sent Telegrams to all the stations down by the river. Nothing - nobody saw him again, the poor sea cadet.

-What do I think? Yes, well, the raft got stuck somewhere on the shore. Or it drifted against a tree trunk and wrecked. Either way, the black reptiles got their prey."

The old man emptied his glass and held it out to the boy. He drank again, quickly, in one go. Then he slowly stroked his huge nails through his dirty grey beard.

"Yes," he continued, "that's the story. When we came back to the Bungalow, Hong-Dok had disappeared and his servants with him. Then came the investigation - I've already told you about it - it revealed nothing new.

Hong-Dok had fled. And I never heard from him again until one day this game box arrived; someone brought it in my absence. People said it was a Chinese merchant; I had him traced, but in vain. Why don't you take a look at the pictures you haven't seen yet?"

He pushed the mother-of-pearl plates over to me: "This one shows Hong-Dok as his servants carry him to me in the palanquin. Here you can see me and

him on our veranda myself, here you can see me grabbing him by the throat. There are several stamps depicting us trying to refloat the boat, and others depicting our nighttime boat ride. One picture shows Ot-Chen and the sea cadet being crucified, and others show their lips being sewn shut. There is Hong-Dok's escape; here you have my clawed hand and on the back his neck with the scars."

Edgard Widerhold waved to the boy and had a fresh pipe made. "Now take your box," he said. "May the tokens bring you good luck at the poker table - there's enough blood on them."

And this story is very true.



## The last will and testament of Stanislawa d'Asp

It is true that Stanislawa d'Asp treated Count Vincenz d'Ault-Onival miserably for two whole years. He sat in the parquet every evening when she sang her sentimental songs and travelled after her to a different town every month. She fed his roses to the white rabbits with which she appeared on stage, she pawned his diamonds to invite her colleagues and the parasitic bohemians. He once picked her up from the gutter as she staggered home drunk with a small journalist. She laughed in his face: "Why don't you come with us? You can keep the lights on for us!"

There was no vile insult she spared the count. Words picked up from the foul beds of stinking harbour brothels, gestures so shameless that they would make any pimp blush, scenes that a sure prostitute's instinct sensed from books that an Aretin would deny - he was sure of that if he only dared to come near her.

The lights at the variety theatre loved him and felt infinite pity for the poor fool. They took the money the prostitute squandered, but they hated her all the more and despised her, this whore who compromised her honest artistic status, whose art was a sham and who had nothing but her dazzling beauty. And the older of the "Five Hobson Brothers", Fritz Jakobskötter from Pirna, once smashed the bottle of red wine on her head so that her blond hair dripped thickly with sticky blood.

Then, one evening, when she was once more so hoarse that she could scarcely get a sound past her dry lips, when the theatre doctor, after a cursory examination, rudely told her that she was in the last stage of consumption - which she had long known - and that she would be in the devil in a few months if she went on living like this, she sent for the Count in her dressing-room. She spat when he entered and told him that she was now ready to become his mistress.

When he leant down to kiss her hand, she pushed him away and laughed. But the short waves of venomous laughter tore through her lungs and she bent over in a choking cough. Then, barely still again, bent over her make-up and powder puffs, she swallowed, whimpering over the silk handkerchief. The count quietly put his hand on her curls; then she jumped up: "So take me!" She held the handkerchief under his nose, full of blood and yellow slime. "There, my lord - I'm still worth that!"

Such was Stanislaw d'Asp. - But it cannot be denied that the prostitute became a lady overnight. The count carried her through Europe, took her from one sanatorium to another. She did what he said and what the doctors said; she never complained and never said the slightest word back. She didn't die; she lived for months and years and recovered, very slowly, but more and more. And gradually she let her eyes rest on the Count from time to time. With this calm, with this quiet, eternal life, a gratitude grew in her.

When they left Algiers, the doctor said it was possible that she would one day be completely well again. The count turned away, but she saw his little tear. And suddenly, to make his joy even greater, she touched his hand. She felt him tremble; then she smiled:

"Vincenz, I want to get well for you." That was the first time she

spoke his name, the first time she called him you, and the first time she touched him. He looked at her - then he rushed away, no longer master of himself. But as she looked after him, the bitter bile rose in her. -

"Ah, if only he didn't want to cry."

And yet her gratitude and pity for him grew. A sense of guilt, a sense of duty to return this immense love. And then there was a kind of respect, a great admiration for this strange love that had given birth to a second for a whole human life. When she sat in her beach chair and dreamed out over the waves, she probably thought about it. Then she realised that nothing was impossible to this love; that she had found something as wonderful, as marvellous as centuries can only give once. And when she began to love - and when she loved - *she did not love him, but only his great love.*

She didn't tell him that, she knew he wouldn't understand her after all. But she did everything she could to make him happy. And only once did she give in: No!

That was when he asked her to be his wife.

But the count did not let up and they wrestled for months. She said she would write to his family if he did not stop asking her; then he wrote himself and announced his engagement. First came a cousin, then an uncle; they called her charming and very understanding, but him a stubborn fool. The count laughed and said he would do what he wanted. Then his old mother arrived, and Stanislaw d'Asp played her great trump card. He knew what she had been and could tell his mother himself. But then she showed him her papers,

said that her name was Lea Lewi and that she was an illegitimate child. And she was Jewish and would remain so all her life. So when Count Vincenz d'Ault-

Onival, the Marquis of Ronval, the pious son of the most Christian house in Normandy, still wanted to marry her, let him do so. Then she went out and left him alone with the dowager countess.

What she was doing was well thought out. She knew the count well and knew how much he lived in his childhood faith, knew that he did not get up and go to bed, did not take a meal without saying his prayers. Oh, very quietly, very unobtrusively, and no stranger would notice. She knew that he went to Mass and to confession, and she also knew that he did all this out of the deepest, innermost feeling. And she also knew how attached he was to his mother, how he loved and adored her. She would now speak to him, a wise old woman, and tell him once again how impossible this marriage was, how he was making a fool of himself in front of his people and how he was making a fool of himself.

sin against his mother and his faith - -

She stood on her balcony and waited. She knew every word her mother said, said it herself. She could have been there and told her that she only gave all the reasons quite clearly, quite convincingly. Yes, there should be a world of impossibilities between her and his love, and then - then he should - - -

Then she remembered something. She ran through the room and over to the count's. She tore open the door and burst into the twilight, hasty, breathless, gasping for words. She stopped in front of the old lady; the syllables jumped out hard and edgy: "And my children - if I ever have children - shall be Jewish, Jewish like I am!"

She didn't wait for an answer, ran out to her rooms and fell heavily onto the bed. There, now it was decided! Oh, of course, it must have brought him down, this stupid big boy, this sentimental aristocrat from a strange world, this Christian orderly with his faith and his love. And she felt a great

Satisfaction that she had finally found a gate, too ironclad, too strong for this immense love that she always felt and yet never fully understood.

She knew she would leave him now, would go away, back to the variety theatre, to the brothel, or jump down the Sorrento cliffs - it was all the same. But she felt strong and great in her early instincts, which had once made her spit on him and slap him with dirty words. The count had gambled and she was a harlot again, a wretched, miserable harlot, and no power in heaven could ever pull her out of all that filth.

Then the door opened. She jumped up from the bed, secure in her old laughter. Phrases that she had long since forgotten began to twitch in her brain, o she knew how she wanted to receive the count.

It was the old lady. She approached the young woman very quietly, sat down on the bed and pulled her towards her. Stanislawa heard her words, but hardly understood them. She felt as if a soft organ was playing somewhere in the distance. And these sounds spoke to her and she only felt what they wanted.

Let her do whatever she wanted; anything, anything. But may she marry her son, may she make him happy. She herself, the mother, had come to pray for him. Because his love is so great - -

Then Stanislawa stood up and said: "*Because his love is so great.*"

She allowed herself to be led over to the count. She let herself be kissed by him and by his mother. She felt that this was redemption and recovery. In body and soul. *Because her life was now a vessel for a precious content: faith in his great love.*

Stanislawa married the count. It was a strange life that she led in those months. She didn't love him, she understood that. But it was as if she were crouching quietly on soft furs in front of the fireplace; and this light glow gently caressed her cool flesh. She was always tired, so

She was dreaming away in the half-sleep of his warming love. He kissed her hands when she smiled contentedly, so softly to himself; he thought she must be happy now. But it was not happiness that made her smile, it was always the thought of this incomprehensible love, which was as infinite as the world, and in which she floated, carried lightly by warm breaths, a leaf playing in the midday winds. During this time, all her longings died, all distant pasts disappeared. And her faith grew, and she knew well where and that there would be nothing in all days that his love could not do for her.

Sometimes, but only very rarely, she insisted on this strange love, this mysterious force that could do anything. In Auteuil she put a few Gold pieces on some bad horse. "Don't take it," said the count, "it's worth nothing." Then she looked at him, full, with a long look: "But won't it, Vincenz, it will win? - I want it to win." And as they ran the race she did not look at the horses; she only looked down at him in the saddling-place. She saw how he clasped his hands, how his lips moved softly. She knew then that he was praying. Then, as the favourites broke out right and left and the

When the pathetic outsider took first place, she understood that it was his work and the power of his great love.

Then came the time when Jan Olieslagers entered her life. He was a friend of the Count's from school and had remained so throughout the years. He travelled the world and you never knew where he was. But then came a Postcard from him somewhere, from Cochinchina, Paraguay or Rhodesia. Now he was in Europe and the count had invited him to his castle at Ronval.



It all happened very quickly. Vlamen liked this woman and he was used to taking what he liked. Once, much later, someone reproached him for taking her like that, his good friend's wife, whom he didn't even love. Then he said: "He was my friend - but didn't that make him an ass? And then: Has any woman ever possessed my lips alone?

Why should he be the sole master of hers?" - He took Stanislaw as he rode the count's horse, as he drove his machine, as he ate his bread and drank his wine. What he did was natural and uninteresting. And basically it was just as natural that the woman gave herself to him, without resistance, overnight.

Not as if, even for a second, the old harlot in her had awoken. Jan Olieslagers conquered the Countess d'Ault-Onival and not Lea Lewi. And perhaps she would hardly have cared for him and certainly would not have fallen in love with him, while he set the countess on fire down to the smallest pulse. Not because he was a good rider - the count rode much better than he did. But because he was a different person on horseback, oh, a

quite different from the one she had just seen. The count was always the same, whether he was hunting or sitting at the bridge table. And this man was always different, whatever he did. Everything was a game to him, but he played everything equally well. He took nothing in the world seriously; although he was interested in everything, nothing really seemed worth his interest. Only that he was there and alive. That was the centre of his attention, and this single instinct was so ingrained and strong that it was unconsciously transferred to his surroundings.

Perhaps that was the reason for his victories. He was quickly forgotten when he was far away; but when he was there, he was the master.

Stanislaw d'Asp found a new and wider world in him. A world full of riddles and secrets, full of closed doors and gates that he

made no sign of opening it. With the Count everything was simple and clear; she walked there as if in a quiet castle park. She knew every flower-bed and every rose-bush, and at the back the mighty oak, which no western storm could uproot, stood proud and upright: his great love. But with the other, she was walking in a bewitched maze. She walked along a path that seemed beautiful to her, more beautiful than one in the castle park. It seemed to lead infinitely far and yet it ended after a few steps, cut off by impenetrable holly hedges. She turned onto another path and some foolish animal was blocking it. And she couldn't find her way out and almost staggered in the heavy scents that strangely awakened her sleepy senses - -

-

But the Vlame sought nothing from this woman. And one evening, at supper, he said that he had spent delightful weeks in the quiet castle and that he was heartily grateful to his friend and the amiable countess. But that he had to go away now, out into the world again, and that he was leaving tomorrow for Bombay. He said all this lightly, but it was as true as he said it. The Count urged him to stay, but the Countess did not say a word. Only when they got up, and the count gave orders to the servants to leave, did she ask her guest to follow her into the garden.

And there she told him that she was going with him. Jan Olieslagers was on a

He was prepared for the scene, but not for it; so it happened that he fell a little from his security, and, seeking words and reasons that might bear some semblance of reason, said something that he might otherwise have avoided. He did not like to tell her that he did not want her company, that she was nothing to him, and that at most she inhabited a little lost chamber in the great castle of his memories. That she was some flower, plucked in passing

for the buttonhole, good for the afternoon, until you change your suit for dinner. - Then he found one that seemed useful to him because the countess must know that something was true about it. And then the other might also apply. So he sent a few phrases first, with feeling and good manners: that he had fought long and that his heart was almost breaking. But he was used to the big life and

would certainly know that he could no longer do without it. But his fortune was hardly enough for him and would not be remotely sufficient for the Countess's demands. They were both so attached to luxury and comfort, and any deprivation would - - And one day they would have to part, and that was precisely why he was leaving now, so as not to make the parting even more painful - -

As always, he believed in what he was saying for the moment; so convinced was he that the countess took him seriously in every syllable. She was silent when he put his arm round her. His upper lip curled a little, just a few more words - don't cry - fate - reunion - sigh and Tears - - so and then it would be good.

But the countess eluded him. She lifted herself up and looked him full in the face; then she said calmly: "Vincenz will give us what we need." He was speechless, stared at her, gurgled half-words: "Wh -? - You're mad - -" But she didn't hear him anymore and slowly walked towards the castle. And so sure was she of her cause, so sure in her strong faith in the Count's almighty love, which would also make this sacrifice, the greatest, for her - so rock-solid in her unshakeable trust, that she turned round on the steps and called out to him with a smile: "Just wait for me!"

Her last gesture was so regal that Jan Olieslagers was able to almost appealing again. He walked up and down in the moonlight,

looked at the castle to see if he could see any lighted windows. But he saw none. He went close to hear any voices, a scream, a hysterical sob. But he heard nothing. Not for a moment did he think of going in, he had an instinctive aversion to anything unpleasant. He only wondered how he could get rid of this woman if the count was mad enough to give her to him and furnish her. How he could get rid of her without being crude or brutal.

A few times

he laughed, realising the hilarity of the whole story. But it wasn't strong enough for him to really enjoy it. Then he became bored; after he had considered everything from all sides and yet found no solution, he gradually lost interest. And finally, after wandering around for hours in the quiet park, he felt as if it was no longer any of his business. As if it had happened ages ago, or had happened to someone else and not to him. He yawned, then went into the castle, through the long corridors and up the stairs to his room. He undressed, quietly whistled a street song and went to bed.

The valet woke him early, told him the car was ready and helped him pack. Jan Olieslagers didn't ask him about the master, sat down to write to the count. Three letters in a row - but he tore them up again. And as the car roared through the park gate, out into the morning mist, he sighed a relieved "Thank God!"

He travelled to India. This time he didn't write any more postcards. - But after a year and a half, he received a letter that had been travelling after him for months. The envelope bore his Paris address in the Count's hand and contained

the printed announcement of the countess's death. Jan Olieslagers replied immediately, writing a beautiful, intelligent letter with which he was very pleased. He forgave himself nothing in it and yet was open and unreserved; it was a letter that must have made the impression it was intended to make. And he felt a sense of satisfaction when he put it in the box, as if he had done something. But he received no reply until a year later, When he returned to Paris months later, he received a second letter from the Count.

It was brief but sincere, almost cordial, as in the old days. The count asked him to come to him in Ronval as soon as possible, as a friend from their youth. It was the countess's last will and testament.

Jan Olieslagers frowned, there was certainly nothing pleasant about this journey. He felt no trace of curiosity about the outcome of this family drama, which had long since ceased to affect him. It really was a remnant of childhood friendship when he finally made up his mind.

The count was not at the railway station. But the servant who drove him to the castle asked him to come straight to the library, where the count was waiting for him. After this reception, Jan Olieslagers was certain that his new stay in the castle would hardly give him any pleasure. So he did not go to the count at once, but, feeling that everything unpleasant would be experienced soon enough, went to his rooms, which the valet had ordered him to take, bathed very slowly, changed his clothes, and then, feeling hungry, had himself served in his room. It was already quite late in the evening when he sighed and decided to go and see his old friend.

He found him sitting in front of the fireplace. There was no book or newspaper nearby, and yet he must have been sitting there for hours; the ashtray in front of him was overflowing with cigarette butts.

"Ah, here you are at last," he said quietly, "I've been waiting for you for a long time.

Do you want a drink?" This greeting was reasonably pleasant for Vlamen and he clinked glasses with his friend. Three or four glasses of heavy Burgundy - then he regained his old confidence. He blew the cigarette vapour into the fire and felt quite comfortable in the wide club chair. And it sounded almost benevolent when he said:

"Now tell me!"

But he immediately regretted this grand tone and almost felt sorry when he heard the intimidating words: "Sorry - but wouldn't you rather tell me first?" Jan Olieslagers was about to become sentimental, to apologise - mea culpa.

The count saved him from this. Before the other could stammer a single syllable, he began again: "- No, no! Forgive me, I don't want to torture you. Stanislaw told me everything."

The Vlame repeated somewhat uncertainly: "She told you everything?"

"Yes, of course, when she came out of the park with you. By the way, I should have told myself all that. It would have been a miracle if you hadn't loved her."

The friend shifted in his armchair.

"Just keep quiet. And that she had to love you was just as natural. So it was my fault; I shouldn't have asked you here then. So I made you both unhappy. - And myself as well. - Forgive me."

The Vlamen became very uncomfortable. He threw the cigarette he had just lit into the fire and lit a new one.

"Stanislaw said that you loved each other. She asked me to give you the means you lacked. Wasn't that great of her?"

The other swallowed the words that were trying to form on his lips. He barely managed to stammer out: "Jesus -"

"But I couldn't. I didn't realise at first how strong and great her desire was. I refused her and let you go. How unhappy you must have been, my poor friend - can you forgive me? I know how one suffers for her and I know how one must have loved her, this woman!"

Jan Olieslagers bent over, grabbed the fire tongs and plunged them into the logs. His role in this game was unbearable, he wanted to put an end to it. He said brusquely:

"Hell, I know it too."

But the Count continued, always in a quiet, suffering tone: "I believe you know that. But I couldn't - couldn't let her go. I had not the strength. Will you forgive me?"

The other one jumped up and brutally hit him in the face: "If you don't stop being silly now, I'm going out immediately."

But the count grabbed his hands: "Excuse me, I don't want to torture you any further. I just wanted to - -"

Jan Olieslagers realised that his friend was possessed, so he gave in. He returned the handshake vigorously and sighed: "In God's name, then, I forgive you!"

And the other: "Thank you." Then they fell silent.

After a while, the count stood up and took a large, framed photograph from a table. He handed it to his friend: "Here, for you."

It was a picture of the countess on her deathbed. Laid out; on either side the marvellous chased silver candlesticks, a gift from the thirteenth Louis to some ancestor. A black pearl wreath hung over the bedpost, casting a slight shadow over the face of the dead woman. Perhaps it was this shadow that gave the impression that a living person was lying there. Of course, the eyes were

She was closed, her features rigid and her expression not at all that of a slumbering woman. But a strange, mocking smile played across the half-open lips -

The lace shirt was closed tightly at the neck, the wide sleeves fell down to the ankles. And the long, slender hands, folded over the chest, lightly clasped an ivory crucifix with almost transparent fingers.

"She's become a Catholic?" asked the Vlame.

"Yes, she converted on the last day," the count confirmed. "But you know," he continued more quietly, "I think she only did it to be more certain of my oath."

"What oath?"

"Oh, the day before she died she made me swear that I would literally carry out her last will. It's nothing special, it just concerns her burial in the castle chapel; she told me that straight away, even though I'm only supposed to open her will today."

"Isn't she buried yet?"

"Oh no! Have you never been to the chapel in the park? Almost all my ancestors were first buried in the small cemetery that surrounds them. It was only after years that they were dug up again and the bones were kept in large urns of burnt earth. It's an old Norman custom, which the chronicle traces back to Roger the Red; I think it was introduced because hardly any of these adventurers were to be buried.

died at home. The comrades at least brought the widow's bones. In our ossuary rests Philip, who fell before Jaffé, and Autodorn, who was called the Provençal because his mother was a Countess of Orange. King Harold slew him at Hastings. There also rests the bastard Richardet, whom the Calvinist Henry had executed because he was killed by twenty



years too early, Ravallac later succeeded better. His own father wove the broken corpse from the wheel at night, which later earned him the counties of La Motte and Croixau-Bailly as atonement when the king entered Paris and became a Catholic. They all rest there, my ancestors, men and women, and none is missing. - I would certainly have buried Stanislaw there, even without her request. But she mistrusted me - after that had happened - perhaps she thought I would deny her this honour. That's why she made me swear."

"She mistrusted you?"

"Yes. So much so that my promise and my oath into her hand didn't seem secure enough. She tossed and turned in her pillows and sighed and gnashed her teeth for hours. Then suddenly she sent me away to fetch the priest. I sent for him, she could hardly wait for him to come. When he finally came, she asked which oath was the most sacred for a Christian; he replied: "The one on the crucifix." Then she went on to ask him whether the church could release him from an oath made to an unbeliever. The old country priest became embarrassed, he stammered, said that every oath was holy, but that the church might, under certain circumstances - - Then the countess grabbed him with both hands, pulled herself up and screamed: "I want to become a Christian!" The priest hesitated and didn't answer straight away. But the countess tugged him, almost shook him and shouted again: "Don't you hear? I want to become a Christian!"

The Count had not raised his voice for a moment, but he was choking and a small sweat stood out on his forehead.

He took the glass that his friend handed him and emptied it. Then he continued:

"The priest instructed her, kindly, quietly, in a few words. He spoke to her quietly about our faith without tormenting the terminally ill woman too much. Then

he baptised her and at the same time gave her Extreme Unction. When the sacred acts were over, she once again took the priest's hands. Her voice sounded so gentle, so happy, like that of an angel, as she said to him: "I beg you to give me the crucifix." The priest gave it to her and she gripped it tightly with both hands. "Father," she said, "what a Christian swears to me on this crucifix must he keep?" - "Yes!" -

"Unbreakable?" - "Unbreakable!" - She fell back heavily into the pillows. "Thank you, Father. - I don't have any money, but I'll give you all my jewellery. Sell it for your poor."

That evening, she didn't say another word. But in the morning She invited me to her bedside. She told me again that her last will and testament was locked away in her writing case. I should only open it after three years, and in your presence."

"In my presence?"

"Yes. She made me kneel and demanded that I swear to her once again to fulfil her will faithfully. I assured her that I would certainly keep my vow of yesterday, but she did not give in. She made me raise my right hand and place my left on the crucifix she was holding; slowly she spoke the words to me, which I repeated. So I swore twice."

"Then she died?"

"Yes, after a few hours. The priest came again and spoke to her. But I don't know if she listened. Only once, when he said that there would be a resurrection even after the death separation and that she would probably see me again, did she half turn round. "Yes, Father, you may

believe: *he will certainly see me again.*" Those were her last words. She smiled softly as she said them; and she kept that smile as she fell asleep."

The count stood up and went to the door: "Now I want to get her will."

Jan Olieslagers looked after him. "Poor chap," he murmured, "there's going to be some devilry in there." He took the carafe and poured the glasses high.

The count brought a leather writing case and opened it. He took a small envelope and handed it to his friend.

"Me?" he asked.

"Yes. The countess wanted you to open it."

The Vlame hesitated for a moment, then broke the seals. He tore open the envelope and read the steep lines on the purple sheet aloud:

*The last will and testament of Stanislaw d'Asp*

I want what is left of me to be taken out of the coffin three years after my funeral and buried in a urn in the castle chapel. There is to be no ceremony of any kind, nor is anyone to be present except the gardeners, Count Vincenz d'Ault-Onival and his friend Mr Jan Olieslagers. But it shall be an afternoon when the sun shines; and before it sets, my remains shall rest in the urn in the chapel: *a memento of the Count's great love for me.*

Ronval Castle, 25. VI. 04.

Stanislaw, Countess d'Ault-Onival.

The Vlame handed the sheet to the count: "Here - that's all."

"I knew it; that's exactly what she told me. Did you think it would contain anything else?"

Jan Olieslagers walked with long strides through the wide room.  
"Frankly - yes - didn't you say that this kind of burial was an ancient custom of your family?"

"Yes."

"And that you would have done Stanislaw's this honour under any circumstances?"

"Absolutely!"

"Why on earth would she make you swear twice, and in such a solemn way, to something that is so obvious?"

The count took the picture and looked at it for a long time. "My fault," he said, "my great fault. - Come, sit down, I will explain it to you. -

You see, the countess believed in my love for her. The first time this love failed, when she asked me for something big, it was as if she was falling into an abyss. When I refused her what she asked me for that night, she didn't want to believe what I said and thought I was only joking. She was so convinced that my love had to do what she asked.

And when she saw how weak I was and how I couldn't let go of her; when she lost the only thing she believed in, a strange change happened to her. It seemed as if I had taken the substance out of her life; she faded away, slowly, like a shadow when the sun goes down.

At least that's how I thought I understood it all.

She didn't leave her room for months. She sat on her balcony, silent, dreaming, gazing out into the tall trees. During this time, she hardly spoke to me, she didn't complain; it was as if she had been brooding over some secret. Once I met her here in the library, she was lying on the floor and eagerly searching through all kinds of books. But I don't know what she was reading; she asked me to go out.

Then she wrote a lot, a few letters every day; and soon parcels arrived from all sides. The first ones contained only books, I don't know what kind; she closed them and burned them before she died. But I know that they were all about toxicology. She studied them eagerly; through whole nights I walked round the park and saw the dull gleam of her lighted windows.

Then she wrote again, and this time

small, strange boxes, mostly sent by registered post as samples. They bore the names of the senders: they were Merck in Darmstadt and Heusser in Zurich and other well-known poison companies. I was gripped by a great fear, I was afraid that she wanted to poison herself. At last I took heart and asked her. She laughed: "Die? No, it's not to die! It's just - to keep me better!" - I felt that she spoke the truth, and yet her answer did not reassure me.

Twice, parcels arrived that had to be collected from customs in the city; I asked if I could collect them myself. I thought she would refuse, but she replied lightly: "Why not? Go and get them!" - One parcel, from which an extraordinarily pungent but not unpleasant aroma emanated, contained an extract of bitter almonds, the other, which came from Prague, a shiny pasta that was

called "porcelain make-up". I know that the Countess used this glaze; for months she spent hours every day applying it. And it is certainly thanks to this strange make-up that her face, although the consumption increased to an alarming degree, nevertheless retained its old beauty. Her features became rigid, like those of a mask, immovable and eternally the same; but she remained beautiful and pure until her deathbed. Even death could not change them."

He handed the picture back to his friend.

"All this, it seems to me, is proof of how much she had broken with this life. Nothing occupied her mind any more, and even of you, forgive me, she never spoke a word. Only her own beautiful body, which she knew must decay in a short time, seemed to her worthy of interest. She hardly paid any attention to me either, since her belief in my love had died out; indeed, it sometimes seemed to me as if a strange, fierce hatred shone in her eyes, much worse, much more terrible than that with which she used to persecute me. - Is it any wonder that she distrusted me? Anyone who loses faith in just one saint will soon deny the Crucified One and the Blessed Virgin! - That is why, I believe, she made me swear these strange oaths!"

But Jan Olieslagers was not satisfied. "That may be all," he said, "It explains your love, if need be. But it does not in the least explain the strange desire to be buried in your castle chapel."

"She was a Countess d'Ault-Onival -"

"Oh, go on, she was Lea Lewi, who called herself Stanislawia d'Asp! And she should suddenly have had such a longing for the urns of your feudal ancestors?"

"But you can see that it was like this and not otherwise!"

The Vlame took the will again and scrutinised it from all sides. He read it again and again, but he could not find the to find the slightest oddity in it. "Very well," he said, "I don't understand."

Jan Olieslagers had to wait four days in the castle of Ronval. Every day he agonised that the funeral should take place. "But it's not possible," he said

said the Count, "you see how overcast the sky is." - Every letter of this will was a strict law to him.

Finally, on the afternoon of the fifth day, the clouds disappeared. The Vlame urged and the count gave his instructions. None of the servants were allowed to leave the castle, only the old gardener and the two assistants had to take shovels and spades. They walked through the park, around the quiet pond. The sun shone off the black slates of the chapel, played on the white nodding birch trees and cast the shimmering shadows of their branches on the smooth paths. They stepped through the open door, the count took a drop from the holy water font and crossed himself. The people lifted a heavy stone slab, then descended into the crypt. The large red urns bearing the coat of arms of the Counts d'Ault-Onival were lined up on either side. High crowns closed them and they all wore a heavy copper plate around their necks on silver chains with the names and dates of the dead.

There were some empty urns at the back. The count silently pointed to one, the people took it and carried it out of the tomb.

They went out of the chapel and walked between the graves under the birch trees. A dozen mighty stone slabs lay there, bearing the names of faithful servants of the count's family, whose peace they guarded from all sides even in death. But the countess's grave bore no stone; here many hundreds of deep red roses bloomed in luxuriant splendour.

The gardeners went to work carefully. With deep pricks, they loosened whole pieces of the surface, carefully lifted them out with all the rooted roses and placed them to one side, next to the urn. To the Vlame it seemed as if they were peeling the living skin from the grave; here and there a rose fell to the ground, torn off like a drop of blood.

Now the black earth lay there and people were digging. Jan Olieslagers took the count's arm: "Come, we'll walk up and down in the meantime." But the count shook his head, not wanting to leave the grave for a moment. So the other went alone.

He walked slowly around the pond, stepping back under the birch trees from time to time. It seemed to him as if the gardeners were working incredibly slowly, the minutes crawled by. He went into the orchard, picked currants and gooseberries; searched the beds for a late strawberry.

When he came back, he saw two of the people standing in the grave up to their shoulders; now it went faster. He saw the coffin lying between them; they took the last remnants of damp earth from it with their hands. It was a black coffin with strong silver fittings, but the silver had long since been removed.

The wood had turned black and was rotten and sticky, badly affected by the warm dampness of the ground. The count took from his pocket a The old gardener was given a large white silk cloth in which to collect the bones.

The other two down there were turning the screws; there was an ugly screeching sound when the tool slipped. But most of them were loose enough in the rotten wood that you could lift them out with your fingers. Then they lifted the lid a little, gently pushed the ropes underneath and knotted them tight. One of them jumped out of the pit and helped the old man pull up the lid.

At a hint from the count, the other took off the white sheet that covered the corpse and a second smaller sheet that only covered the head.

There lay Stanislaw d'Asp - *and she was lying there as she was on her deathbed.*



The long lace shirt that enveloped his whole body seemed damp and showed black and rust-coloured stains. But the fine hands rested on the chest as if moulded from wax, holding the ivory crucifix tightly. And her face was as little changed as the crucifix itself. She did not lie there like a living person, like a slumbering one - and yet nothing gave the expression of death. She seemed to be a wax doll, moulded by an artist's hand. Those lips were not breathing, but they were smiling. And they showed a slight red colour, like the cheeks, like the earlobes, from which two large pearls dripped.

*But the pearls had died.*

The count held on to the birch trunk, then sat down heavily on the high pile of heaped-up earth. But Jan Olieslagers was in the grave in one leap. He bent down low and lightly tapped the dead man's cheek with his nail. There was a very fine, soft sound, as if he were touching old Sèvres.

"Come up here," said the count, "what are you doing?"

"I have discovered that your countess's Prague porcelain glaze is an excellent thing; it should be recommended to every coquette who still wants to present a Ninon at the age of eighty!" His voice sounded raw, almost spiteful.

The count jumped up and stepped close to the edge of the pit.

"I forbid you to speak like that! - By all the saints, can't you see that this woman did this for me? - And for you too - for both of us! - We should see her again, beautiful as she was - even in death!"

The Vlame clenched his teeth. He hesitated, but he swallowed his words.

Then he said dryly: "It's all right; we've seen them. - Now put the lid back on, people, and close the pit."

But the count interrupted him: "Are you foolish? Do you forget that we have to bury them?"

"This woman does not deserve to rest in the chapel of the Counts d'Ault-Onival." He spoke calmly but defiantly, emphasising every word. The count was beside himself:

*"You say that - at the grave of this woman? This woman whose love went beyond the grave - -"*

*"Your love? - Your hate!"*

*"Her love, I say! She was a saint -"*

Then the Vlame shouted loudly in the Count's face:

*"She was the most infamous whore in all of France!"*

The count shrieked, grabbed a spade and swung it in the air.

But before he could pounce on his friend, the gardeners caught him.

*"Let go!" he shouted. "Let go!"*

The Vlame did not lose his composure.

*"Just wait a moment," he said, "then you can beat me to death if you want."*

He bent down, undid the button at the neck and tore the shirt wide from the dead woman's body. "There, Vincenz, look here!"

The count looked down in rapture. The slender arms lay naked before him, that infinitely fine neck bent, the white little child's breast rested there. And the lips smiled, always smiled, seemed to invite him to wedding bliss - -

He knelt down at the edge of the grave, folded his hands and closed his eyes. "Holy God in heaven, I thank you that you let me see this picture one more time."

Jan Olieslagers threw the cloth over the body again. He climbed out of the grave and placed his hands on his friend's shoulders. "Come on, Vincenz,

Now let's go to the castle."

The count shook his head. "You go, if you want. - I have to bury her."

Then the Vlame squeezed his arm with all his might. "So wake up at last, Vincenz! Do you still not understand? - *How are you going to do that* - - bury her?"

The count stared at him uncomprehendingly, then the other continued: "There is your urn - and its neck is quite narrow. And there lies the countess - -"

The count turned pale. "I have to bury her," he muttered tonelessly.

"But you can't bury them."

"I have sworn it." The words sounded very muffled: "I have sworn it. I must bring 'what is left of her in the urn to the chapel before sunset today'. That's what it says in her will. I swore it on the crucifix."

"But you can't, hell, you can't."

"I have to do it, I have taken two sacred oaths."

Then the Vlame blurted out: "Even if you had sworn a hundred thousand oaths, you can't do it. If you don't want to cut her body into little shreds - -"

The Count screamed, his fingers tightening around his friend's arm: "What are you saying?" The other replied, as if to ward off the possibility that the thought had sprung from his mind: "Well, there's no other way. - And that was her intention - - that was what she wanted with her last will." He put his arm round his friend's shoulders.

"I beg you, Vincenz, come now." Like a drunkard, the count allowed himself to be led, but only a few steps.

Then he stopped and broke free. As soon as the teeth came loose he spoke softly. "It was her intention - and it must be carried out; I have

swore it." And the vllame felt that he must now remain silent, that every word here was useless.

The count turned, his gaze falling on the red sun that lay low in the west. "Before sunset," he shouted, "before sunset! It's urgent." He approached the gardener. "Have you got a knife?" The old man took a long knife out of his pocket.

"Hot?"

"Yes, Count."

"So go and cut them up."

The old man looked at him in horror. He hesitated, but then said: "No, Count, I can't do it."

The count turned to the two lads. "That's how you do it." But they stood still, lowered their eyes and didn't move.

"I order you to do it, don't you hear?" They remained silent. "I'll chase you out of the service today if you don't obey."

Then the old man said: "Sir, forgive me, I can't do it. I've been in the castle for fifty-four years and -"

The count cut him off: "I'll give a thousand francs to whoever does it."

They didn't move.

"Ten thousand francs." No answer.

"Twenty thousand."

The youngest of the lads, who was still standing in the grave, looked up at the count.

"Do you all want to take responsibility, sir?"

"Yes!"

"With the judge?"

"Yes!"

"And with the vicar?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Give me the knife, old man, and hand me the axe! I'll do it."

He took the knife and tore away the cloth. He bent down and raised his arm. But then he jumped up and threw the knife into the sand. "No, no!" he shouted. "*She's laughing at me.*" With one leap he was out of the pit and ran, ran with long strides into the bushes.

The count turned to his friend: "Do you think you loved her more than I did?"

"No, certainly not."

"Then you'll be able to do it easier than me."

But the Vlame shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not a butcher. - And besides - - I don't think that was her intention either."

Saliva dripped from the corner of the count's mouth. And yet his lips were dry, pale, paler than the linen. It sounded like the last Question of a condemned man, pleading, imploring: "Your intention was - that I - I myself - - -?"

There was no answer. He looked to the west. The blood-red sun sank lower and lower. "I must, I must, I have sworn it."

Then he jumped into the pit. His hands clenched: "Holy Mother of God give me strength." He raised the axe and swung it high above his head, closed his eyes and let it crash down with all its might.

The blow was missed. The edge struck the rotten wood, splintered and split it to the ground.

And the countess smiled.

The old gardener turned round; hesitantly at first, then faster and faster he ran off. The other lad followed at his heels. Jan Olieslagers looked after them, then he too walked slowly, step by step, towards the castle. Count Vincenz d'Ault-Onival was alone. He hesitated, wanted to shout, to call out to the others. But something closed his lips.

And the sun sank and sank - she called to him - he heard her call.

And the countess at his feet smiled.

But it was this smile that gave him the strength. He knelt down and took the knife from the ground. His hand trembled, but he thrust, thrust, into the neck that he loved so much, loved above all else in this world.

Then it was as if a release came over him and a great laugh. He laughed so loudly, so shrilly into the quiet evening that the branches of the birch trees trembled, twisting to and fro in deadly fear. It was as if they were sighing and sobbing, longing to get away from this dreadful place. And yet they could not, had to stay, had to see and hear, held fast by mighty roots - Jan Olieslagers remained standing there by the pond. He heard this laughter and laughter that never ended, heard the axe fall and split and the knife grind. He wanted to go on, but it held him tight, irresistibly tight, as if he was rooted to the spot like the birch trees. His hearing sharpened beyond belief and through the loud laughter he thought he could hear the bones cracking, the tendons jumping and the muscles tearing.

But in between - a different tone. Light, silvery, like a woman's lips. What was it?

Now again - and now - - that was worse than the blows of the axe, worse than the count's maniacal laughter.

It came again and again - more often and more clearly - - what was it?

And then, suddenly, he knew: - - *the countess laughed.*

He screamed and jumped into the bushes. He put his fingers in his ears, opened his mouth and half-laughed to stifle any other sound. He crouched there like a shot deer, not daring to let go of those animal sounds, not daring to take his hands off his head. He opened his eyes wide, stared out at the path, at the stairs, at the open door of the chapel - - -

Motionless, immobile.

He waited, breathless; but he knew well that this fear had to come to an end. When the last shadows behind were lost in the darkness of the elms - when the sun had finally set - - -

The shadows grew longer and longer, he saw them grow. And his courage grew with them. Then he dared: he closed his lips. He heard nothing. He lowered his arms. Nothing.

Quiet, all very quiet. But he still stood still, waiting in the sheltering branches. Then he heard footsteps. Closer and closer - close to the side.

And he saw Count Vincenz d'Ault-Onival walking in the last deep red of the setting sun. He was no longer laughing, but on his fixed face was a single grin of extreme satisfaction. Like this, as if he had just made a wonderful, tremendous joke.

He strode along the path with strong, firm steps, the heavy red urn in his upraised arms. Carried the remains of his great love to the tomb of his fathers.





## About Hanns Heinz Ewers

Ewers became very close to the National Socialists. His earlier important stories and novels arose from genuine physical and metaphysical passion. Ewers, born in Düsseldorf in 1871, became famous not only through the mass circulation of his books, but also as the publisher of the 'Galerie der Phantasten' (Gallery of Phantasists), which he founded at Georg Müller Verlag.

# **BERSERKER**

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## **BOOKS**

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