

### **Cartaphilus – a compromised meeting**

Once the weather got better and the fog dissipated, people started promenading down the main street in the evening; the paterfamilias in order to meet other family heads and discuss politics; the ladies to display their latest items of clothing and to comment upon the town's dramas of passion; the young men and the young ladies to make acquaintances and to plan engagements or, until then, at least to set up a picnic day, when the weather allows it. After the long, endless days of the wet season, their small world, squeezed in between the cold walls of their homes, numb with anticipation and boredom, was starting to stir back to life, with fresh senses, seized by a still dull murmur, somewhat coy and cautious, as the fair weather could always worsen. This murmur, which had to be mastered and veiled, was becoming a way of pleasing and a sort of complicity, a small adventure, thus enriching itself with delight. Pillars of thin bluish smoke smelling pleasantly and familiarly of spices, were rising up from some gardens as a sign that the thrifty townsmen were pruning the trees and burning the dry wood and the garbage gathered up over the winter. The traders were running them close, airing and tidying up their shops; they were fixing the shelves, painting the woodwork, washing up the show cases and filling them up with adequate merchandise for the season. Stinging nettles along with nosegays of snow-drops and violets had been displayed on the stalls in the market place for quite a while and now it was the time for salad, spinach and early radishes. Streets were being cleaned, roofs were being mended, trees were being white washed, new scents were floating in the air, mysteriously, and a kind of natural, spontaneous goodwill had grown among people, something indefinite which made them go out into the street, make themselves seen, look for each other, chatter and be joyful with no apparent reason.

Those were the days that they strolled all through the town, up to its farthest slums and its most hidden corners, on the alleys that often dead-ended against fields or some high hedge, which was an opportunity for the judge (as he insisted to take these walks) to discover that there was more to the town than the snug at "Concordia" and the inspector's office with the few streets and buildings around them, but sooner, or on the contrary, it was the multitude of small houses and narrow alleys, many of them unpaved and with no electricity, hidden until then behind a wall of fog, places at the outskirts swarming with a gay and yet sad filth, territories foredoomed to resignation and ignorance apparently, where you could see ragged children with sunken cheeks and burning eyes playing barefooted in the mud, stone-still old people, seated on the little benches in front of their houses for an eternity, ill-clad, unshaved men walking stooped with their daily burdens, tarts with violent perfume and lipstick on which stared daringly straight into your eyes, or old women, obese, which exchanged the most obscene curses over the fence .... The magma, the plankton on which the rich and the poor of the day feed, the mass of anonymous illiterates, blood donors during the time of war and tax payers during peace time, the hidden, unseen face (out of decency or shame?) of a world that ceaselessly calls itself progressive and philanthropic.

What was he looking for? There was something upsetting in his insistence, a suspicious, maniacal fervour, otherwise inexplicable, that the clerk started to perceive the sources of, only after the judge decided to tell him about those eye seizures. He

had read the story and a sentence caught his attention and asked the clerk to tell him what was the reason why he had written that sentence, if any at all.

“<<There are things that we can only see in the dark or with the eyes closed>>, or something like this, isn't that what you wrote?”

“With no reason at all”, the clerk said, “it came to me like that”, and the judge, without arguing or asking any further, only noticed the possibility, in fact the inevitability, of the subsequent question:

“Where did it come from?”

As, he added swiftly, he himself could see things during the seizures which, he confessed just then, were somewhat ... pleasant, made him feel well. That is why he has been avoiding, well, postponing to see a doctor. When the seizure was over, he was under the impression that he lost or left something there, a dear thing whose lack he painfully experienced.

“It's like a dream”, he was trying to explain, “very clear, coherent, with a very precise signification and yet not a simple dream, it is itself a living thing, an organism that is born, evolves, lives its destiny independently from me and dies before it meets me – because, as soon as the seizure is over, I forget everything. I couldn't even say it is my own dream, it only happens around me, in some indefinite place, but what's even stranger is that, although during the seizure I can't see anything, I don't need my sight, on the contrary, I believe it would get in the way, in those moments my sight would actually be a handicap”. (...)

The declining sun was spreading a clear, autumn-like light over the houses, a buttery light which reminded the clerk of the walks of yore that he would take with the other judge, on the dam. The alley they were walking kept narrowing until, after they turned the corner, they noticed it stopped up against the underbrush hedge and thistles of a quite cemetery that looked as an old, genuine lithography. Dry stalks of iris, poor flowers in whose matter the remains of a frozen time was still present, were hanging over the turned up layers of earth. Among the few thin, barely grown trees, the first blades of grass pushed up, incredibly green against the grey earth. The smell of mud and coal and the humid air indicated the vicinity of a swamp. An inappropriate place for a grave yard, the clerk thought to himself, where the corpses hardly festered. But the judge thought something else

“It's a beautiful grave yard”, he said.

The clerk nodded out of politeness, unconvinced. He couldn't understand what could be beautiful about a grave yard, even less, about a poor people's grave yard , surrounded by a thorny hedge. He tore a creeping stalk at random and lifting it up to his eyes, looked at it carefully, trying to guess what plant that was when it had been a plant.

“That's shave grass”, he said and threw it over the hedge.

A concerned woman's voice burst out in the middle of a yard where colourful laundry hung on a rope to dry. She was calling for her child, probably lost in the garden. The dog barked back twice then stopped. The slum was already asleep, with all its worries, behind the small window panes with simple gauze curtains, in low-ceiled rooms where it reeked of lye and the light was always hazy, under shingled or thatched roofs, steepened as hayricks, reaching out their shadows over muddy yards, now emptied of all living things, over which the strange lonely sky was the ruler. Here the inhabitants went to bed early, so they could wake up at day break, before it was broad day light, to go to work.

The fresh cool air of the evening could be smelled down the battered alley with yellow, clayey earth mixed with slag, a country side road that only the electric poles on the side of it reminded of the minimal conditions of town life. The town as such, was somewhere else. There wasn't anything more for them to do but to return there. The judge gave the signal when he took the watch out of his pocket and looked at it.

"We have been followed", the clerk said.

He saw him leaned against the pole of the street lamp smoking carelessly, at the other end of the street, striking one of those cinema-poster poses. Before he got up to him, he shouted in an almost cheerful voice, pretending to be detached:

"I've heard people speak of you these days! ..."

Balab smiled sceptically, squirted a precise thin spit right in front of his boots, then turned to them as if blocking their way. He was wearing a red, tight, short-sleeved T-shirt so as to make his muscles obvious.

"Are you looking for someone?"

"Not for you."

"Could I make a guess?"

"Don't be a smart guy", the clerk told him off, remembering that they are the law. Then, towards the judge, in a normal tone, somewhat officially, "this is Balab, he escaped a few weeks ago."

"Why did they lock him up?", the judge wanted to know.

"Murder, mister judge" Balab answered to him and started ahead, his hands in his trouser pockets, after he had made the cigarette butt fly over their heads with a fillip, knavishly. "At least that's what they told me in court."

"What do you want?" the clerk asked him, unnerved because he had to speak to the gypsy's broad back, wondering how he wasn't cold only with the T-shirt on.

"Nothing. I only wanted to meet the new judge."

"Is that why you escaped from prison?"

Balab stopped, turned around and displayed disdainfully his teeth. He had a mermaid tattoo on one of his biceps whose tail moved as the muscle moved, as if it were swimming. He said tentatively:

"Maybe ..."

"Who helped you?"

"Would you believe me if I told you? It's the one you are looking for". His grin covered his whole face as he sensed the judge budging, and after a well timed pause, added with a sly friendliness "I can take you to him if you liked."

They made no answer but Balab wasn't expecting any particular answer from them. He started walking again, knowing for sure that they will follow and for the same reason he didn't address any more words to them, suddenly making them feel very much alone. They walked a few streets like that clueless as to where they were going. The dimming light of the dusk made the distances seem bigger and drove them further away from the town which had become abstract, fictitious. At a certain point Balab stopped and turned to them.

"You must stay behind from this point on, so it wouldn't look like we're together."

They accepted quietly without understanding, nevertheless, neither why they weren't supposed to be seen together nor why they accepted that they weren't supposed to. There, the street split into something that looked like a fork; they had walked down its tail and kept walking on one of its tines that pierced the thick shadow of the evening.

They were now in that area in between the outskirts and uptown, always agitated, dirty, reeking of fried meat and steel. Short, grey bungalows were opening their doors

right on the side walk. Beyond the large windows, ostentatiously lit, screams, fights and baby cries could be heard. Every now and then a silhouette was hurriedly crossing the street, going out and coming in, slamming the doors behind it. Papers and garbage, fallen from the overfilled litter bins, brought by the wind, laid near the walls and alongside the curb. A gang of children dashed out of a nearby yard shouting like warriors and waving same bates over their heads; surely they were heading for a fight with some other kids on a neighbouring street.

Balab had disappeared. As soon as they turned the corner of the street, which seemed to be the fashionable area [corso] of the neighbourhood, they looked pointlessly to find his red, short-sleeved t-shirt which, until then, had been their guide.

“He tricked us”, the clerk concluded spitefully.

The judge didn't answer, letting him continue mentally his reasoning. In fact it was he who stopped them and had made the proposal. Maybe he had hidden some place and was watching them to observe their intentions. Waiting for a better idea to come to them, they scrutinized the whole of the street trying to guess the reason why Balab had taken them so far and abandoned them. The few stores had their shutters down, only the small workshops of some craftsmen and, of course the pubs, were still open. There were two pubs, one of them only a few yards away. In front of it, on the sidewalk, leaned against the wall or seated right on the stairs, some teenagers were whispering and smoking passionately bad tobacco. Their cheeks would sink and their eyes would get bulgy with a bitter, overwhelming satisfaction.

“Let's go in here”, the judge suggested.

Only a few tables were taken up. Sad men wearing work clothes were sitting, bent over their mugs of beer, silent or just getting silent as the two men came in, some strangers. They sat in a more retired place where they could watch the whole parlour. The boy behind the counter, not used to waiting on tables, came eventually and asked them what they wanted. They ordered a drink of rum. He turned around and hid in the store room behind the shelves, where he spent several minutes. Apparently he couldn't find the rum.

“I thought for a moment that the lady in mourning clothes would come to our table”, said the judge.

“What woman?” said the clerk surprisedly. “There was no woman.”

“It means you haven't seen her... There was a woman dressed in black. She disappeared.”

The judge moved his finger in the air to show him how the woman disappeared, the elbow leaned on the table. He then dropped his palm as if it had become too heavy.

An old man in a loose, worn out trench coat, from across a table near by was staring at them. He had a gracious smile on his face, unchanged, or maybe it was a grin that looked like a smile, frozen on his face. Every now and then he poured soda in his glass which he drank with an expression of utmost pleasure. When they turned to him, sensing they were being watched, he passed, casually, his hand over his forehead.

“There was indeed a woman in black”, he confirmed in a feeble voice, that doddering voice of teenagers.

They paid him no mind. In fact they didn't even know when he had come and sat at the table near them. They were following him with the tail of their eyes pretending not to have heard him. The old man rummaged through the pockets of his too loose a trench coat (or maybe his body was too small for that coat) and eventually found what he was looking for, a cigarette. He got up and came towards them, cigarette in hand, holding it up to his mouth, ready that is, to light it.

“Do you have a match?”

The judge hastily took out the box of matches and reached it out to him. But the old man was in no hurry. Smiling confusedly, he sat on the empty chair in front of them and, before lighting his cigarette, liked it at both ends. He shook the box and listened to its rattle.

"I've got something for sale" he whispered. He spoke rarely and cautiously.

"We won't buy" the judge promptly answered.

"Perhaps you would at least like to see ..."

The hand holding the matches left hanging in the air. With his other hand he took out of his pocket something wrapped in newspaper and placed it on the table with a swift, spasm-like movement.

"Go away! Away!" the clerk huffed at him. It seemed to him that everybody in the pub was secretly watching their bargain.

"After I light up my cigarette", said the old man suddenly taking a respectable and proud attitude. He slowly and somewhat demonstratively lit up his cigarette, left the box of matches on the table, then picked up the parcel and shoved it back into his pocket, stood up and headed for the door slowly but determinedly. He was wearing yuft boots that went up above his knees. He walked out of the pub towards an unknown purpose, without looking behind.

"You don't even know what he was hiding there" said the judge.

"Why the hell is that boy taking so long in there?"

The clerk stood up unnerved and went to the counter. He saw the boy sitting on a case of empty bottles through the bead curtain that covered the store room door.

"Are you coming with that rum already or we can forget about it?"

The waiter lifted his head exhaustedly and looked at the clerk with enmity.

"We don't have any rum."

They shouldn't have entered that den. Or they shouldn't have stayed after having seen that Balab wasn't there. He had tricked them, fooled them like they were babies. The clerk went back to the table humiliated by the boy's meanness. "I think we'd better go", he said. The judge lifted his eyebrows and looked at him with his eyes half open trying to remember something. He said nothing. He remained still on his chair listening carefully to a far away noise that he alone could hear. At one of the tables some one accidentally broke a glass and the people there laughed a little half-heartedly. The door opened and Balab was standing in the threshold. He shouted at them from there:

"I've been looking for you through the whole neighbourhood, where the hell have you been? I thought you got scared and ran away." He came and sat at the table panting like a horse. He smelled of sweat too.

"You said you would take us to somebody and you left us standing in the road like some fools", the clerk reproached him.

"You saw him but you didn't recognize him. Am I to take the blame for the police chasing me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"He wanted to sell you a broken doll found in the trash bin but you wouldn't buy it. There is nothing I can do, you're really stupid. That was Cartaphilus."

There followed a long silence. The clerk's back started to hurt out of so much tension. Balab's last word caught him bent over the table and he wouldn't move so he wouldn't draw the attention to him. By chance, the people at the tables around them stopped talking.

"Would you repeat the name?", asked the judge.

“Cartaphilus”, said Balab, this time in a low, calm voice. “Cartaphilus, the Jew. I thought you knew him. He’s Sadim’s friend, if you had bought the doll, he’d have taken you to him.”

“You mean to say Sadim is still alive?”

Balab rose his both arms to the ceiling astounded at the question.

“Some say he is still alive”, the clerk cut in.

“I see”, said the judge, “I’m beginning to understand...”

“When he is about to turn one hundred years older, Cartaphilus meets Sadim”, Balab resumed, “and Sadim gives him something so he wouldn’t die, he makes him younger...”

In fact, there was nothing more he could say to them. All three of them felt like prisoners in that pub, trapped in a shell. Balab’s face shrank as if he had drank something sour when he heard horse hooves on the pavement.

“It’s me that they’re looking for”, he said.

The police got inside in the following moments but Balab had already disappeared.

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