

CHAPTER XI
The Teacher's prophecy concerning the destinies of the tribe of Judah

ON A LOVELY APRIL EVENING we forgathered once again in the Teacher's Paris studio on the seventh floor of one of the new buildings in the Grenelle quarter. We stood for a long time by the large windows, admiring the beloved city with its unique, insubstantial, unreal twilight. Schmidt, too, was with us, but I tried in vain to convey to him the beauty of the dove-grey houses, the stony groves of the Gothic churches, the leaden reflections in the slow Seine, the chestnut trees in flower, the first lights in the distance and the touching song of a hoarse-voiced old man with his barrel-organ underneath the window. Schmidt said that all this was excellent for a museum, but that he had detested museums from childhood; one thing that did enchant him was the Eiffel Tower, so light, so slender, swaying in the wind like a reed, the indomitable iron bridge to another age silhouetted against the tender blue of an April night.

Amid such peaceful talk we awaited the Teacher, who was dining with some important businessman. He soon came in and, after putting away in a small safe a pile of documents which had been thrust untidily into his pockets, said to us cheerfully:

'Tonight I've done good work. Things are looking up. Now we can rest and chat for a while. But first, before I forget, I must draw up the text of the invitations, and you, Alexey Spiridonovich, will take them tomorrow to the Union printing works.'

Five minutes later he showed us the following:

Solemn Performances
of the
Destruction of the Tribe of Judah

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will take place shortly in
Budapest, Kiev, Jaffa, Algiers
and many other places.

The programme will include, apart from the traditional
POGROMS

— a public favourite —

a series of historical reconstructions in
the spirit of the age,
e.g. burning of Jews, burying same alive, sprinkling of
fields with Jewish blood, as well as modern methods of
'evacuation'; 'removal of suspicious elements'; etc., etc.
This invitation is extended to cardinals, bishops, archi-
mandrites, British lords, Roman noblemen, Russian
liberals, French journalists, members of the Hohenzollern
family, Greeks regardless of profession or trade, and all
others wishing to attend.

Time and place to be announced later. Entrance free.

'Teacher!' Alexey Spiridonovich cried in horror. 'This is unthinkable! The twentieth century and such vile doings! How can I deliver such a notice to the Union—I who have read Merzhkovsky!'

'You are wrong to think that the two are incompatible. Very soon, in two years' time perhaps, or in five years', you will be convinced of the contrary. The twentieth century will turn out to be a very jolly and frivolous age, without any moral prejudices whatsoever; and the readers of Merzhkovsky will be the most enthusiastic audience at the performances. The diseases of mankind, don't you see, are not the measles of infancy: they are old, deep-seated attacks of the gout, and certain habits have been formed in the course of time concerning their cure. You don't break a habit in your later years.

'When, in ancient Egypt, the Nile went on strike and drought

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set in, the wise men would remember the existence of the Jews, who would be summoned and slaughtered to the accompaniment of prayer; and the earth would be sprinkled with fresh Jewish blood: "May famine pass us by!". Naturally this could not replace either rain or the Nile in flood, but nevertheless it gave some satisfaction. Even at that time, it is true, there were some cautious people of humane views who said that killing a few Jews wouldn't do any harm, of course, but sprinkling the earth with their blood was a bad idea because this blood was poisonous and would produce thistles instead of wheat.

In Spain, whenever there was an epidemic—of the plague or the common cold—the Holy Fathers would solemnly proclaim forgiveness for the "enemies of Christ and mankind" and, shedding profuse tears (not, however, profuse enough to put out the pyres) would burn a couple of thousand Jews. "May the pestilence pass us by!". The humanitarians, fearing the high temperature of the fire and ash which the wind wafted everywhere, would whisper guardedly in each other's ears—lest they be overheard by some stray Inquisitor—"Wouldn't it be better just to starve them to death?" . . .

In Southern Italy, during the earthquakes, people would at first run away to the North, then come back cautiously, one by one, to see whether Mother Earth was still shaking. The Jews would also run away—in fact before anyone else—and also come home—later than anyone. Naturally, the earth shook either because they—the Jews—had wanted it or because it—the earth—had not wanted the Jews. In either case it was advisable to take representatives of the tribe and bury them alive, which was done with all speed. What did the progressive folk say? Oh yes: they were very much afraid that the buried Jews would make the earth shake still more.

"There, my friends, is a short excursion into history. And since humanity is to experience both famine and pestilence, as well as a goodly amount of earth-shaking, I am merely looking ahead in a commonsense way by having these invitations printed in advance."

"But Teacher," Alexey Spiridonovich retorted, "aren't the Jews men like ourselves?" During Jurenito's excursion he had sighed loud and long and wiped his eyes with his handkerchief, but moved to a place fairly far from my side, just in case.

"Of course not! Are a football and a bomb one and the same thing? Do you think the tree and the axe can be brothers? You can love the Jews or hate them, you can regard them with dread as fire-raisers or with hope as saviours, but their blood is not yours, nor is their cause your cause. You don't understand? You refuse to believe? Very well, I'll try to make it clear to you. The night is calm and cool; let us amuse ourselves with a rather childish game over a glass of Vouvray. Tell me, my friends, if you were asked to keep just one word from the whole of human language—namely "yes" or "no"—and discard the rest—which word would you choose? Let us begin with the oldest. You, Mr Cool?"

"Of course I'd choose "yes": the affirmation and the basis. I don't like "no", it's immoral and criminal. Even when a workman I've just sacked entreats me to take him back to work I do not say to him that harsh and bitter word, "no"; I say "wait a while, my friend, you'll be rewarded for your sufferings in the next world". When I show my dollars, everyone says "yes" to me. Destroy any words you like, but leave the dollars and the little word "yes", and I'll undertake to cure humanity of all its ills."

"I'd say that both "yes" and "no" were extremes," said Monsieur Delet, "whereas I like moderation in all things: the golden mean, you know. But still, if the choice must be faced, I'll say "yes". "Yes" is joy, *élan*, what else? Everything! Madame, your poor husband is dead. A fourth class funeral, *n'est-ce pas?* Yes! *Gargon*, a Dubonnet! Yes! *Zizi*, are you ready? Yes, yes!"

Alexey Spiridonovich, still shaken by what had gone before, could not collect his thoughts, made moaning noises, jumped up several times, sat down again and finally yelled: "Yes! I believe, O Lord! Communion! The sacred "yes", the "yes" of Tur-genev's pure young girls! O, Izai! Come, O dove!"

Schmidt, who found the whole game completely ridiculous, declared briefly and in a businesslike manner that the dictionary should really be revised with a view to expunging certain unnecessary, archaic words such as 'spirit', 'sacred', 'angel', etc.; 'yes' and 'no', however, must be retained, being serious words. Last night, if he had had to make a choice, he would have chosen 'yes' as a word having an organising function, something like a good river.

'Yes! Si!' replied Ercole. 'On all pleasant occasions in life they say "yes"; you only hear "no" when you're being thrown out on your ear.'

Aysha, too, preferred 'yes'. When he begged Krupto (the latest god) to be kind, Krupto said 'yes'. When he asked the Teacher for two sous to spend on chocolate, the Teacher said 'yes' and gave him the money.

'Why don't you say anything?' the Teacher asked me. I had not replied earlier, afraid of vexing him and my friends.

'Teacher, I cannot deceive you. I would keep "no". Candidly speaking, I'm always rather pleased when something goes wrong or breaks down. I'm very fond of Mr Cool, but it would give me pleasure if he were suddenly to lose all his dollars; yes, simply lose them like a button, down to the last one. Or if Monsieur Deler's clients mixed up all the categories. Imagine what would happen if the man with a class 16 burial—three years' tenure, you remember—suddenly got up and cried: "bring out your scented handkerchiefs, I want the luxury class!" When the purest young girl who has been running round this dirty world picking up the hem of her skirt, making a great to-do of her virginity, meets a resolute tramp in a little wood outside the town, that's not bad either. Or when the waiter slips and drops a bottle of Dubonnet: I love that. Of course it's as my great-great-grandfather, that clever fellow Solomon, said: "There is a time to gather stones and a time to cast them". But I'm a simple man, I've got only one face, not two. No doubt someone'll have to gather them, maybe Schmidt. As for me, believe me I'm not trying to be original if I say in

all conscience: destroy "yes", destroy everything in the world, and then "no" will remain of its own accord.'

While I was speaking, all my friends who had been sitting next to me on the sofa moved into the opposite corner. I was left by myself. The Teacher addressed Alexey Spiridonovich:

'Now you see that I was right. A natural division has taken place. Our Jew is left alone. You can destroy all the ghettos, wipe away all the reservation boundaries, dig up all the frontiers, but there's nothing to fill those ten feet which separate you from him. All of us are Robinson Crusoes, or convicts if you prefer; the rest is a matter of personality. One man will tame a spider, study Sanskrit and lovingly sweep the floor of his cell. Another will bang his head against the wall: crack! a bump—another crack! and another bump, and so on: what'll prove stronger, the wall or his head? The Greeks came along and looked round—the place could have been more comfortable to live in, it's true; without disease, or death, or suffering, something like Olympus. But it couldn't be helped, this was where they had to live. And so, to keep their spirits up, they decided to proclaim every discomfort, including death (you couldn't abolish the discomforts anyway), as the greatest boon. The Jews came along and crack! it's the head against the wall at once. "Why is this place as it is?" You have two men, why shouldn't they be equal? But no, Jacob finds favour, Esau's out in the cold. And so it begins: the undermining of heaven and earth, of Jehovah and the kings, of Babylon and Rome. The ragged beggars who spend their nights on the steps of the temple work away, concocting a new religion of justice and poverty, as though mixing an explosive in a cauldron. Now just watch unconquerable Rome go flying head over heels! The poor, ignorant, dull-witted sectarians come out against the beautiful order and wisdom of the ancient world. Rome trembles. The Jew Paul has conquered Marcus Aurelius. Yet ordinary people, who prefer a cosy little house to dynamite, begin to settle down in the new faith, making the bare hut homely and pleasant. Christianity is no longer a wall-beating

machine, it has become a new fortress. Terrible, naked, destructive justice has been replaced by human, comfortable, india-rubber mercy. Rome—the world—has withstood the onslaught. But seeing this the tribe of Judah repudiated its child and started undermining once again. At this moment there's undoubtedly someone in Melbourne, sitting alone, sapping away, not in deed but in thought. Again they're mixing something in the cauldrons, again they're preparing a new faith, a new truth. Forty years ago the gardens of Versailles shivered with the first access of fever, just like the gardens of Hadrian long ago. Rome prides itself on its wisdom, the Senecas write their books, the brave cohorts stand ready. It trembles again, Rome the unconquerable!

'Israel has borne a new child. You will behold its wild eyes, red hair and little hands that are as strong as steel. Having given birth, Israel is ready to die. A heroic gesture: "there are no more nations, I am no more, but *we are*". Oh, naïve, incorrigible sectarians! They'll take your child, wash it, dress it, and it'll become exactly like Schmidt. Once more they will say "justice", but they'll replace it by expediency. Once more you'll go away to hate and wait, beat your head against the wall and moan "how long?" I will tell you: until the day of your madness and theirs, until the day of infancy, a distant day. Meanwhile the tribe will be drenched once more in the blood of partition in the squares of Europe, giving birth to another child which will betray it.

'But how should I not love that spade in the thousand-year-old hand? It digs the graves, but does it not turn up the soil of the fields too? It will be shed, the blood of Judah, the invited guests will applaud, but (remember the whispers of long ago?) the blood will only make the earth still more poisonous. The world's great medicine!'

And the Teacher came up to me and kissed me hard on the forehead.

CHAPTER XII

The Teacher's mysterious travels and the disciples' frivolous behaviour

THOSE WERE DAYS of an exceptional brightness: it was as though sky-blue enamel and liquid gold had been poured over the grey streets. I have seen many springs, southern and northern, tender, blissful and cruel, but that spring wasn't a mere season—the latest in a succession of myths—but something vehement and festive, lavishing—though it was spring—all the sweetness of autumn's anticipation of death, something unique. A late spring, and one which imperceptibly, without thunder, without tears, slipped into a confused and airless summer.

For the first time since the memorable night at the Rotonde I felt lonely, weak and lost. The Teacher was always leaving Paris for Germany, for Vienna, for London. He categorically refused to disclose anything about these trips, so that I never did find out why he had hurried to meet a certain big industrialist in Berlin or what he had done for a whole fortnight in dear old, gay old Vienna. Dressed in his loose travelling coat, carrying the inevitable briefcase, changing from one continental express train into another, he appeared to me now as a hunter prowling round the capitals of Europe to flush the beast out of its secret lair, now simply as my aunt Marya Borisovna fussing about before the guests arrived for a birthday party and rushing every other minute, from the kitchen into the room prepared for dancing.

'What's the Teacher up to?' I would think in torment as I sat at the Rotonde, which I now valued all the more highly as the scene of my conversion. Was he creating a new religion? Or preparing to blow up the palace of some magnificent rajah? I would paint wild and glorious pictures in my imagination:

expeditions to Central Africa, sermons of a new Savorarola in the Place de l'Opéra, ecstasy descending upon the House of Lords, with all the lords, carried away on a spontaneous impulse, tearing off their robes and joining in an innocent game of leapfrog. But all these images would fade as soon as I remembered the terrible diagrams on the Teacher's walls, somehow reminding me of Schmidt as he trampled the curly pink petals of budding hyacinths with his large boots that looked rusty with age.

I began to drink a great deal and, following the good advice of a friend of mine—a young sculptor—I would swallow two or three grains of hashish from time to time in my anxiety to comprehend the events. Alas, reality receded further and further. At the Rotonde I would fancy myself now an ichthyosaurus, and stamp on the hats of the artists' models in prehistoric rage; now the Rajah whose palace the Teacher planned to blow up, and write letters to insurance companies, insist on ritual salutations from the café proprietor, and shed bitter tears. None of this surprised anybody; the wave of lunacy had flooded everything that springs, including the little café in Montrparnasse. I found myself constantly in the company of a striped zebra which implored me to repaint its hide in cubes, a fat painter who insisted that he was in his seventh month and would give birth to a prophetic ape in a hat with ostrich feathers—the feathers, he said, tickled him terribly—and a mulatress who had run away from a music-hall and swore that Bergson the philosopher had commanded her to conquer Polynesia, but meanwhile—for no apparent reason—slapped my cheeks with slices of roast beef stolen from the counter. I painted the zebra with ink, gave friendly advice to the painter, and when the mulatress slapped me I wept: why was she so horrid? Why wasn't my palace insured? Why had there been the flood? Why must I suffer here alone, forsaken by the Teacher? And anyway, was this I at all? And I would feel my sweating, hairy chest under my shirt, and having assured myself that it was indeed I—Ilya Ehrenburg, Ilyusha, the poet,

'Erenbourg?—I would protest and suffer more bitterly than ever.

During one of his brief stays in Paris the Teacher found me under a seat at the Rotonde, confiscated the magical grains, fed me with scrambled egg and took me back to our friends. He left for England the same day and left us instructions not to separate: if we insisted on going off our heads, we should do it together, all seven of us. I saw at once that something was wrong with my friends too, though—it is true—without the zebra or hashish. They were all obviously upset and dispirited by the Teacher's absence. Monsieur Delat complained that the Universal Necropolis was in a bad way; Mr Cool was bored; Schmidt could not work owing to the disorganising nature of the Paris spring; the others need hardly be mentioned. Having managed somehow or other to get to the bottom of my own condition, I proposed—in view of the general discontent and the Teacher's absence—that we should treat ourselves to a thoroughly dirty time, as I sensed very well that the opportunity of that never-to-be-repeated spring ought not to be missed. Monsieur Delat started saying something about moderation and his age, but not very energetically, for—lacking *élan*—he was fond of watching others amuse themselves and sometimes, despite his meanness, went so far as to stand his clerk Lebain a dinner in return for the right to stay to the end in the private room of the restaurant.

And so Mr Cool tore out yet another leaf of his cheque book (mentioning the 'changing of water into wine' as he did so) and we went on the razzle. Gradually we collected all kinds of people, with some of whom we spent whole weeks at a time without knowing their names or even their nationalities. Two of them, however, remain firmly fixed in my memory. The first, a Polish poet called Ozarewski, was brought along by Ercole straight from the police station, where both had spent the night: the Italian because, feeling hot, he had attempted to bathe in one of the fountains of the Tuileries; the poet on the insistence of an old and virtuous concierge whom he had molested after emptying a

bottle of madeira, insisting that she should transform herself into a Bacchante and cry 'Evoe!' with him at the house door. Ozarewski was very proud, wore his black hair shoulder-length, despised all earthly things so much that he hardly touched the ground as he went from tavern to tavern—which meant that he skipped about on tiptoe despite his forty years—and generally looked down on all that was materialistic and coarse. He claimed descent now from a Spanish grandee, now from Osiris himself, spoke a high-flown language, exacted utter veneration from everyone—which is why he regarded any restaurant bill as an insult: 'the poet drinks the golden-framed liquid, his song struck from quivering strings is ample recompense'—and wrote poetry on all inappropriate occasions. Furthermore, to use coarse and materialistic language, he was a terrible womaniser and could not let a single skirt pass by, regardless of its owner's age, without trying his luck. He succeeded best of all with very innocent Polish girls who came to study at the Sorbonne, knew his poems about 'celestial love' by heart and regarded it as a special favour of Providence to be singled out by the 'genius of the black locks'. Ozarewski had been thrashed more than once for his 'celestial loves'—on one occasion (with wet goloshes) to the point of losing consciousness—but he did not lose heart. He amused us greatly by bravely accosting old American women, little girls playing in the Jardins du Luxembourg and café singers already booked by other gallants, and repeating more or less the same thing to all of them, namely: 'fire—god—Osiris—come tonight'. Once when we were just finishing a three days' drinking bout at Versailles he caught a glimpse of an appetising-looking wench in a dairy and, on his return to Paris, immediately sent her the following telegram: 'You are a lotus shall wait 11 p.m. hôtel du cheval blanc room no. 16 your troubadour'.

The other, a bankrupt banker from Venezuela, a Señor Maduros, was an old friend of the Teacher. Wherever he was, in whatever company, a pack of cards would always appear on a chair, on his lap, on a street bench. He would play any

game for any stakes. It was said that his real name was Capandez and that he had become Maduros after an incident at Monte Carlo where, by agreement with the croupier and two officials of the Casino, he had performed a small operation before the beginning of the game, bending back the diving slats on the tables. After that, having won 180,000 francs, he had fled not only from the police but also from his associates in the venture, and had successfully managed to spend his winnings in San Sebastian in three days. He was a dark and very elegant gentleman, but he shaved badly and used to put powder on his black bristles, as a result of which he looked pale blue in the face, a peculiarity which he regarded as extremely smart. While we drank, Maduros would play cards with all and sundry: other customers, waiters, once even with a policeman, and when no one at all was left he would play snap with Ayscha for an orange or a cigarette. Under our very eyes he lost about 300,000 francs, a house in Venezuela, a villa at Ostend and his wife (it should be mentioned that Maduros was not only completely broke—he used to have to borrow two francs from Mr Cool for his dinner—but also single); as for his winnings, if you did not count the astronomical figures which always remained no more than figures, they amounted to round about fifty francs, someone's mistress and a large sporting dog, which never left our side and insisted on bones for his dinner from dear Mr Cool, the universal provider.

When the first pale lights appeared on the boulevards, we would all gather in a small café in the rue Faubourg Montmartre, and would soon go on from there in a noisy crowd. Huge green and crimson spiders ran all over the walls on their electric paws, exhorting us to drink Cointreau. Well-built youths and biblical old men in red top-hats called to us 'If you want happiness—come to the Royal!' And a mad motor car, growing and flashing its yellow eyes like the archangel's speed, made straight for us, urging us to smoke Navy cigarettes. Obediently, we would go to the Royal, drink Cointreau, smoke Navy cigarettes. Hundreds of waiters, important-looking,

bald and wise like Roman Stoics, rushed about, overtaking each other, juggling with bottles, pouring something into glasses as they ran, jangling coins. Oh, those pyramids of bottles, long as ninepins, round as balls, with their mysterious seals or their Seville beauties—green, yellow, red, white bottles, bottles of all imaginable colours! Behind the counters, alchemists in white aprons, using English instead of Latin, would concoct strange mixtures. Victory columns, hundreds of *colomes de Vendôme* built of plates and saucers, grew up on the tables. Rumanians, Hungarians, Negroes howled through their trumpets, tore the strings of their instruments in a frenzy, wheezed and growled. Then the women would come running out—a mysterious tribe, almost faceless, with fringes of hair hanging over their eyes, with brightly-painted targets for kisses, with bare breasts, with well-padded hips agleam with sequins, shot silk, gems and ribbons. They descended like locusts, chattering, jumping on to the tables, dancing between the bottles, falling on the customers' knees, twisting feverishly, suddenly leaping up again and coming to rest somewhere in the corners, on the deep sofas. And the men would leap up too, their waistcoats stained with wine, their top-hats squashed; they would circle aimlessly, rustling the banknotes taken from their wallets, and finally run away, taking with them two women, three, ten, without counting them.

We would walk along the streets and they would overtake us, those passionate throngs, now in pairs as for the quadrille, now in a dense spiral line. We would go into the small bars and the same bottles would tilt again at once, the soups rattled, the red-dipped girls rushed forward, the toes of their shoes struck the zinc counter, they pressed themselves against us and dragged us to their rooms. At every step the hotels leered at us, as though exposing to the streets their huge, dirty, sagging beds. Paris stank of powder, alcohol and sweat.

We would go to the market and stare till we felt sick at the enormous carcasses, the mountains of eggs and cheeses, the vast slabs of butter, the monstrous lobsters and the flowers

crushed into colossal bales. Then the day-shift would rush out into the streets. Hordes of motor cars deafened us with their screaming and hooting, stunned us with the smell of petrol, heat and dust. Outside the big stores that were as large as cities, on the broad pavements, fierce crowds of women rummaged among the piles of bright dress-lengths, the pyramids of silks, the oceans of ribbons and laces: sweating, greedy women intoxicated by the rustling, swishing, cracking of the fabrics.

At noon the odours from a thousand kitchens, the smell of grease, fish and onion pervaded everything. On restaurant terraces, to the right, to the left, everywhere, men with purple necks masticated steadily, with perseverance, picked their teeth, munched, belched. Then we would go to bed and, waking in the evening, find the same madness.

This was the fifth of surfeit, the despair of wealth, the deep sleep of plethora. Too many rags, too many poets, women, flowers, bottles, too many people! Too much of everything! Meanwhile the sun—inexorable, bright, almost hostile—poured bucketfuls of corrupting heat on the bodies, the crumpled flowers, the bald heads. Just one more day, it seemed, and not apocalyptic thunder, no, sheer apoplexy would strike the town that had over-eaten, over-drunk, over-slept on its colossal feather bed.

On one of those July nights the Teacher returned at last to Paris and went with us to visit a night-club. On the way I gave him an incoherent account of everything—the advertisements, Ozarevski's adventures with the ladies, my own horror of Paris—and ventured to ask him what he was doing, whether he had not forgotten me and all of us, and what was going to happen next. He was not angry but only said briefly: "Things are going well, but better tell me more about that poet." The Teacher had changed dreadfully during the past three months; his face was drawn, his shoulders stooped and his temples were clearly marked with grey. He did not joke with Ercole, did not tease Mr Cool, did not even kiss Aysha. In the tavern—

where he ordered a fresh glass of whisky every quarter of an hour—he would now sit in a gloomy silence, now order us to do all kinds of queer things. He made Monsieur Delet and Schmidt drink *Bridenschafft* while he laughed unaturally. Aysha, gentle tender Aysha, had to demonstrate how he would stab Alexey Spiridonovich to death with a table knife. Then the Teacher suggested that we might shoot a stray cat, but this we all resolutely refused to do and Mr Cool declared solemnly that 'none of us would shed any blood, even that of an animal'. This the Teacher for some reason found terribly amusing, he cried 'bravo!', clapped his hands and ordered Alexey Spiridonovich to write Mr Cool's words down on the wine list. All this completed my confusion and dismay.

Next morning the Teacher and I were walking in a quiet little street in our quarter. A woman was pushing a baby in a pram towards us. The baby was smiling merrily and senselessly, and when the pram drew level with us it stretched out its hands towards the Teacher, enchanted by the shiny knob of his cane. The Teacher stepped back to the wall and began to babble helplessly, as if he were a child himself: 'I can't! Grown-ups, all right, but children, why children? Perhaps better not? Drop it! Rum, rum! A bullet in the head!' Never, either before or after that day, did I see our stern, unbending Teacher in such a state. Afraid, I cried: 'Tell me, oh won't you tell me what the matter is? What is it you want to drop?' But Jurénito, seeming to recover at once, mopped his forehead with his handkerchief and said to me with his usual perfect calm: 'It's simply weakness. Pay no attention. I'm overried, and then there's this heat.'

But in the evening, when we were all sitting under the plane trees on the terrace of a lighthearted café, a boy ran past yelling wildly, selling *La Presse*. Mr Cool beckoned to him, wanting to read the racing results, but a moment later he thrust the sheet smelling sharply of printer's ink at me and boomed: 'The Austrian Archduke's been assassinated! What d'you think of that?' The Teacher asked him to repeat his

words and calmly took the newspaper. For a long time he sat in silence. We had already forgotten the news—which, after all, was a matter of complete indifference to us—and Mr Cool was singing the praises of the mare Irida when the Teacher remarked in a dispassionate voice: 'So there's to be a war? This seemed to us so laughable, so absurd, that we all started protesting at once. Monsieur Delet expressed the feeling of us all when he declared: 'A war can happen somewhere among the savages, in the Balkans, say, or in Mexico, but not here! You've forgotten, my friend, that this is Europe!' Mr Cool argued that humanity was, after all, too moral to go to war, and that, besides, war was an unprofitable business. Erocole assured us that if they hadn't succeeded in forcing him to get up from the road, what power on earth could make him fight? Alexey Spiridonovich spoke, cloudily as always, about 'the spirit'. Aysha, however, announced that he had heard a lot about war at home in Senegal, and it wasn't a bad thing at all. The Teacher did not argue, but, after sitting with us a while longer, said he felt tired and went home by himself.

As for us, we forgot all about war and stayed long past midnight, chatting about perfectly peaceful matters such as a joint trip to Corsica, the qualities of various cheeses, and Erocole's latest infatuation with a Hungarian woman in a circus who went in for lifting sixty-stone weights. Aysha alone, who had evidently enjoyed the game invented by Jurénito, reminded us of the Teacher's words when we were parting for the night: laughing, shouting and jumping up and down he started to show us once again how well he could stab Alexey Spiridonovich or the shy, quiet Schmidt.

Stormy parting—I react to
the war in a variety
of ways

SOON WE UNDERSTOOD that the Teacher was not joking. I shall not describe the days of waiting: they are still too fresh in all our memories. Our feelings between the appearance of one special edition and the next, ranging from hope at any price to dull despair, were shared during those days by a hundred million people of all tongues. The fatal 30th of July came at last. All doubts vanished, everyone understood the irremediable and, abandoning all thought, rushed headlong into the whirlpool.

In the evening, without prior arrangement but all driven by the same impulse, we gathered at Jurcino's to part for a long time, perhaps forever. I was shocked to see Monsieur Deler: he appeared completely unhinged, shouted that he would kill Schmidt if he dared to show himself, sang the *Marseillaise* and insisted that Jurcino should immediately go off to fight for civilisation. But Schmidt did show himself, absolutely calm, even to the point of saying something about it being 28 degrees Centigrade in the shade, and Monsieur Deler did not kill him. Instead, unimaginable things began to happen, and Jurcino's studio was transformed into something between the Austrian *Reichsrat* and an ordinary Russian market when somebody has pinched a pie from a peasant woman's stall. Everyone shouted, cursed, sang and interrupted one another to fling accusations all round. Ercole yelled that war was glorious and that he would fire the biggest gun of all. At whom? We'll see, but fire he would! *Evviva!*

Under the influence of the shouting, Aysha lost his head, snatched up a paper-knife and demanded to be told there and then whose throat he should cut, Mr Cool's or mine. Monsieur

Deler explained to him firmly that he was a French Aysha and must therefore cut Schmidt's throat. Carried away by this prospect Aysha decided to go into action at once, so resolutely that the Teacher wisely locked him up in a small closet.

Alexey Spiridonovich wailed, clutching his head in his hands: 'This is the day of redemption, bright and pure! Russia! Messiah! The cross on St Sophia! Brother Slavs!' He rushed towards Schmidt and, whimpering, embraced the German: 'My foe! My brother! I love you, and just because I love I must kill you! Do you understand? I do not kill, but as I kill I die, sacrificed; we shall defeat Germany! Christ is risen!' And he kissed Schmidt, who pushed him politely out of the way, wiped his face with his handkerchief and tidied his hair with a little comb.

Mr Cool, moved by the whole spectacle, including Aysha, said in a friendly way: 'I'm neutral. But I, too, am beginning to understand that war is neither as immoral nor as unprofitable as we used to think'.

I sat there, utterly crushed by what was happening. Suddenly I realised that all the ghastly symptoms which had pursued me for many years were humdrum, petty and everyday compared with this reality. Aware of this, I ceased to think altogether, ceased to feel or live an individual life, and lost myself for a long, long time.

When, exhausted, they had all quietened down a little, Schmidt said: 'Dear friends, I feel no hatred towards any of you, although you are my enemies. The thing's very simple. We must organise you'. He went up to the map of Europe on the wall and, as it were, cut off with his finger a quarter of France, an eighth of Russia and a few minor countries in between. 'For the time being this is all that's to be directly annexed; the rest will merely be put under systematic pressure. Of course the operation isn't particularly gentlemanly, but there's nothing for it, you'll never organise yourselves of your own free will. And so, *auf Wiedersehen*. I hope to meet you in one of the new provinces of the German Reich.' Saying this,

he shook the Teacher's hand, bowed to us all and left the room. A dreadful din started up once more. Monsieur Delet released Aysha and insisted that he should run after Schmidt and cut his throat in defence of civilisation. But Aysha, who had calmed down in solitary confinement, preferred to crack walnuts with a Mexican idol on Jurenito's couch.

This time it was the Teacher who restored order. He told us in a kindly way that he could understand us all and was glad to be with his friends at such a time, but unfortunately his train was leaving in an hour and he must soon bid us farewell, possibly for a long while. 'The inevitable, the inexorable has happened. Do not think this is only going on for a week and then it'll be the Royal once again. No, this heat-tormented day is the ultimate end. Look back once more before it is too late. Say goodbye to all you have known in the past. Not a leech, but an opened artery. You think my words are strange, but could you have believed yesterday in what is happening today? What, then, shall I say of tomorrow? Shall I cry the familiar, hallowed, comfortable words "motherland", "honour", "victory", "in the name of", "in the name of"? What's in a name? They are working for a master without a face, without a spirit, unborn yet infinitely cruel in the womb. And you must work for him too. Go where necessity takes you. Threaten, fire, drink wine, weep, do everything you must do. I'm going away, but we shall meet again. When? I do not know. Goodbye, friends.'

Taking a small suitcase, filled mainly with papers, the Teacher went out, asking us not to accompany him to the station. After him all the others left too. I remained alone with Aysha in those rooms which still seemed to retain the Teacher's breath. All night I gazed at his terrible maps, at the stone gods, at the short, burnt-out pipe he had forgotten to take, bearing the imprint of his strong teeth. Aysha, rolled into a little ball at my feet, kept munching the endless nuts, from time to time heaving a long sigh: 'Ai! The master's gone to war! Ai, Aysha!' Outside the window, till the morning, there were songs, paperboys shouting, drums beating, the tramping of soldiers on their way

to the station, and some woman's piercing cry: '*Jeun, jeun!*' The morning came. Alas, daylight did not help me to understand, to realise, to start living somehow, anyhow. There began a long existence resembling the weeks spent by a typhoid fever patient in a hospital bed. All around me I saw the same feverish eyes and heard the same delirious talk which, in the end, became everyday speech. When, today, I survey my past and come to those months, I see a gaping hole. I cannot remember any actions, thoughts or words; I merely stand and wonder how I ever managed to scramble out of it.

My friends went their various ways. Mr Cool, carried away by the promise of grandiose orders, left for New York, promising, however, to come back soon. Monsieur Delet was mobilised and sent somewhere in the South to guard railway bridges. He wrote to me that he had been posted to Avignon to take charge of the military cemetery; in addition, aflame with enthusiasm but unable to fight in view of his age, he took to journalism and published articles in *L'Aube d'Avignon*, and also started various patriotic undertakings. Ercole, remaining without means of support, tried lying down in the middle of a Paris street, but was quickly sent back to Italy. Aysha was called up and, after a short period of training in a southern town, where he was taught how to handle arms other than a table knife, he went off to the front.

Then came Alexey Spiridonovich's turn and mine. We could not return to Russia, and one morning we went together to the Palais des Invalides to sign on as volunteers in the French army. He ran all the way in a state of exaltation, talking about martyrdom and heroism, the sword of Christ and Merezhkovsky, Constantinople and something else. On the way he kept dropping into various bars, having a quick one and trying to embrace the *patron*: 'Allies! Brothers!' I walked in silence, rather subdued, feeling nothing but the unbearable heat and self-annihilation. I went because it was the easiest way out. To put my belly in the way of someone's bayonet or to stick my own bayonet through someone else's belly seemed to me at that

time considerably simpler than to wake in the morning, to pay an honest sou for my newspaper, read about the slitting of bellies and, while reading, order a cup of coffee and a *broche*.

The square was crowded with thousands of people carrying flags of different countries. They were all singing their national anthems at once, and the sun, the bright scraps flying in the wind and the wild dissonance of voices made one's head reel. We found the Russians: they were already making war on each other, waving all kinds of flags—Russian tricolors, flags that were just red, flags that were red with inscriptions to explain their redness, French flags, and finally flags that were quite incomprehensible and complicated in their design. Following the example of the others, they also tried to sing, but as soon as they started up any song it was drowned at once in a roar of protest. Then they stopped arguing and began simultaneously to perform *God Save the Tsar*, the *Marsellaise*, the *Internationale*, *From a Far-Off Country* and even *Do not scold me*. The impression this produced was a strong one, reminiscent of Negro music, and perfectly in harmony with the general confusion, heat and discord of this crowd of many races.

Soon, however, this horror was replaced by a peaceful scene in the public baths. Holding up my pants I went to try my luck at a certain reception point, where various heroic bodies were being measured, prodded and banged with little hammers. A doctor put his stethoscope against my ribs, barked quickly 'No good! Next one!' and I was left with my heroism, free to put my shirt on in a corner and go away to read *Le Matin* and eat sweet rolls. I bade a touching farewell to Alexey Spiridonovich, who was sent off next morning with his Saint Sophia and a group of suspicious-looking Spaniards for training in Touraine. At the station he suddenly announced that Jurénito was a traitor, for he was a 'neutral at heart, and all neutrals are concealed Germanophiles'. He also asked me to return to him the old rules of the 'Society for the Search of Man' and the wine list of the Royal on which he had noted down Mr Cool's memorable aphorism.

But, alas, Jurénito had disappeared without trace. He had not left anyone his address and no one received any letters from him. The studio stood empty, and no one came to tidy away the crumpled newspapers or shut the open trunk. At first I went there often to abandon myself to sweet memories of the many evenings spent in that depressing, abandoned barn. But I was forced to stop these visits owing to a number of unpleasant events. Paris at that time was in the grip of an epidemic of spy-mania. German agents were discovered in cafés, in offices, in kindergartens, and even in people's own homes—usually in their wives' wardrobes. Professors of gynaecology, wet-nurses, cemetery keepers, one's own cousins and many others were suddenly revealed as traitors. When, finally, a map of the two hemispheres, scribbled all over in pencil, was found at the house of an elderly teacher of geography, and a second-hand compass of German origin among the wares of a junk-shop keeper at the *Marché aux Puces*, suspicion reached its highest peak. The concierge who harboured a dislike of Jurénito—or rather, not of him but of Ercole, who had treated her staircase with insufficient respect—reported to someone that the Teacher had led a questionable life, the people who had come to see him had been odd and obviously without a situation, and they had all talked together in a foreign language, probably German. After this the police arrived, and although there were no serious consequences—for the denunciation was childish and nonsensical—I was forced to leave the dear, deserted temple.

That autumn and winter I waited passionately for the Teacher. In the street I would look back over my shoulder, in my room I would listen for footsteps on the staircase and lie in wait for the postman. Where was he? At the front, perhaps commanding a division? Arrested? In prison? Drowned while crossing the ocean on his way home? Shot? Killed in action? Why, then, had he abandoned us to burn in this eternal fire? Why, then, was I alive? I protested, I demanded, I waited, but no answer came.

I can see them now, those stormy nights when my fitfulness,

rudderless cockleshell was tossed by all the winds. Outside they were firing, shouting that the Germans would take Paris, running towards the stations with their velvet curtains, their canaries, their chamber-pots. At night I would imagine that Schmidt had come into my room and had begun to organise me: 'Herr Ehrenburg Elias! stand up! pull your stomach in! right turn! two food pills! three litres of beer! enjoy yourself! left turn! Frau Hase! lie down!' I would leap up from my bed and run downstairs to the concierge to assure myself that Schmidt was not there.

Then I began to have a real, physical sense of killing. All about me people were preoccupied, to the exclusion of everything else, by this trade which had hitherto been forbidden. I would read 'three, five hundred, ten thousand killed', 'bayoneted', 'blown up', 'stabbed to death', 'asphyxiated', 'buried', 'sunk', 'killed, killed, killed'. The newsboys screamed on the boulevards: 'everyone bayoneted!' The waiter commented: 'not bad firing, at 75 metres'. The woman in the grocer's shop croaked: 'encircled, routed, wiped out!' Opposite me lived a quiet little old man. All day he would read the papers, and late in the evening he would invite me round and start stabbing a picture postcard of some moustached German—hung up specially for that purpose—with an old blunt poker. Another neighbour, a Monsieur Inny, a piano tuner, insisted that I should show him how the Cossacks used their lances. I couldn't, I didn't know, I didn't want to, but he kept on saying: 'they cut, they pierce, they spear', and one night I ran into his room in my underwear with a little cane, shouting 'Hurrah' and began to drill away at his soft, spreading belly until he howled 'bravo!'

Then I began to doubt whether I wasn't, perhaps, a German. At first, together with everyone else, I started looking for German things all around me. They smashed the Maggi dairy, but hadn't I bought cream cheese there several times? Wagner? He wasn't there, but hadn't I listened to Wagner, read Goethe, looked at Dürer? I threw away my razor with its incriminating inscription. I tore all the buttons off my trousers, for they were

obviously the enemy's; I was ready to tear up the trousers themselves, but Monsieur Inny talked me out of it. Someone in the house next door still dared to play Bach. What was that? I ran, I asked, they showed me an article in a paper: Bach wasn't a German, Bach was practically a Frenchman. In my despair I didn't want to believe them. Next came the most dreadful thing of all: I began to suspect myself. It started after the girl at the post-office, where I received my letters *poste restante*, had given me some friendly advice: 'Your surname isn't too good, better change the ending'. I would have been glad to, but I didn't know how, and so, heaven knows why, I sent an application to Moscow, to the magistrate of the Homovniki district. But the surname was nothing. Something more serious was yet to come. I accidentally came across a copy of the provincial paper *Petit Niçois* in which the leader clearly stated that Germans can be recognised by a special smell peculiar to them. It wasn't said what the smell was; anyone would know as soon as they smelt it. After reading this I began to sniff at myself, but it's difficult to catch your own smell; all I could be sure of was a smell of tobacco and cheap eau de cologne, for I had shaved that morning. Still, if I didn't smelt it, others would. I could not wait; coming home late at night, I woke up the concierge and very politely asked her to smelt me. This proved a failure, I was obliged to move to another room, and my smell continued to be a mystery to me.

In suffering, in torment and uncertainty I survived until the spring. Having no money I starved steadfastly, sold all my belongings—remaining only with a pair of dubious trousers and a tall, broad-brimmed hat—and was obliged to take on night work at Ivy station, where I had to push trolleys loaded with crates. The crates were marked 'with care' and my workmates said there was china inside, but I was convinced that it was ammunition. Coming home in the mornings, stretching wearily, I would shout: 'Too short! too wide! crash! bang! sixty-three men blown up'. The work was hard, particularly as my appearance—and especially the hat—amused my workmates and

they pooled their money out of kindness to treat me to cheap rum. With my last ounce of strength I would push the trolleys, no longer with my hands but with my belly, while the alcohol made the rails jump, the crates fell off and huge iron monsters exploded. I fell to the ground.

To the Paris suburb where I had moved they brought wounded men, their faces bandaged with lint, groping, blind, hopping on crutches. Then someone else came flying and dropped bombs, not the ones I carried on the trolleys but other ones, German ones. I saw a little girl in a light-blue dress with her legs torn off above the knee. And the hoarse newsboys still screamed: 'killed, lost, blown up!' I choked with the stench of blood, anaesthetic and printer's ink. I no longer wanted for anything. I had forgotten there had ever been a man I had called Teacher.

CHAPTER XIV
The Labardan mission—
155 mm. guns

ONE MAY MORNING, as I was sleeping restlessly after a night's work in the dirty backroom of a suburban hotel, the landlady came to wake me in a state of great excitement: 'A gentleman's asking for you! He's come in a car!' I was not yet fully awake when a highly elegant man with an unbearably familiar face entered the room.

'Don't you recognise me? It's I—Julio! I got back to Paris last night. I've had such trouble finding you!'

Yes! Yes! It was the Teacher. He had put on weight, was deeply sunburnt and had grown a small moustache. I gazed at him in silence, avidly and with elation, recovering from my madness with every moment. It almost seemed to me that nothing had happened, and that Juvenio had come to fetch me to visit a Florentine church or an Amsterdam tavern.

'But Teacher, have I dreamt that you've been away? Where have you been so long? At the front?'

'What, me? No, I was mostly fishing and eating grapes and figs on the Balearic Islands. On July 30th I went straight from Paris to Majorca. There was nothing for me to do in Europe. Everything was getting done by itself. I couldn't be a military leader and didn't want to be a pacifist. My mind could only flounder helplessly in all this chaos. Besides . . . besides, there are wonderful grapes in Majorca, large and fragrant, something like Isabellas but better. And trout in the streams. You cast your line . . . I haven't read the papers for nine months. Now it's different, the chaos is beginning to take on shape, the madness is turning into everyday life. I can't sit by the stream any more. Come along, my dear chap, get dressed, we must get down to work. I'm the *chargé d'affaires* of the Republic of Labardan now, you know, and you're my secretary.'

And the Teacher took out of his briefcase some huge sheets

of parchment with red seals, which turned out to be diplomatic passports and frightened me so much that I covered my head with the blanket. But all the same I did not dare to argue and only pointed at my trousers. Jurénio said: 'That's not so terrible, we'll drive to a tailor's at once and then to the shops. What's much worse is that you want to talk about what you've been through. If you can't stop suffering altogether, at least try to keep quiet. I'll do all the talking and if anyone asks you anything say something innocuous, like "merci".'

Next day we drove up to the palace which housed the Ministry. In the appointments book, between a Mr Wild—an American shipowner—and representatives of the Portuguese press I read 'Labardan Mission'. Trembling, I gazed at the thunks in their raspberry-red tail-coats and said *merci* to the most important-looking one out of sheer embarrassment, for really there was no need. The Minister, on the other hand, turned out to be not at all frightening but very amiable indeed. The Teacher told him solemnly that Labardan wished to join the Allies and therefore requested him to give a precise formulation of their aims.

'Our aims are known to the entire world,' said the Minister. 'We are fighting for the rights of all, even of the small nations, to determine their own future; we are fighting for democracy and freedom.' The Teacher was visibly moved by this declaration and did not conceal his enthusiasm. I, however, had already read about this in the newspapers, and I attributed the Teacher's excitement to the fact that he had read no papers on his island, or else to the special diplomatic reception we had been given. I modestly said '*merci*' and we bowed ourselves out.

In the evening the Teacher drew up a suitable statement and ordered me to send it to the world's most important newspapers. Here is the text:

'The Government of the Republic of Labardan cannot remain neutral in the great struggle between barbarism and civilisation. Conversations with representatives of the Allied Powers have finally convinced the Labardan Government of the high aims

of the defenders of the right. All nations, even the smallest, will be granted the freedom to dispose of their own destinies. The Poles, the Alsations, the Georgians, the Finns, the Irish, the Egyptians, the Indians and dozens of other nations will be liberated from the yoke. Oppression of peoples of other races will cease; there will be no more colonies. Finally, after the Allied victory, freedom will be established in despotic Russia. The Government and people of Labardan cannot hesitate any longer. They proudly join the ranks of fighters for the true cause.'

But not a single French newspaper published our declaration. All of them confined themselves to a brief note to the effect that Labardan had broken off relations with Germany. The telegrams sent to the foreign press were returned marked 'stopped by military censorship'. To round it off, various ranks from the Prefecture called repeatedly at the hotel where we were staying and showed an interest in us which was obviously inspired by something more than the desire to show goodwill to representatives of a friendly Power. I asked the Teacher why a rational interpretation of the Minister's word had led to such unpleasant results, but he advised me not to weary myself with abstract questions but, instead, to fetch him all the Paris papers. An hour later a heap of articles and reports marked with red pencil lay on his desk, e.g. 'Constantinople for Russia', 'The German colonies and the Japanese', 'The Rhine—a French river', 'Italy's historical rights to Dalmatia', and so forth. The Teacher said to me:

'It's my own fault. I was guilty of unpardonable vulgarity in taking the Minister's lofty imagery literally, like a simpleton. Once, in America, I did look through the "Brief Manual for Beginners in Diplomacy", but I was studying electromagnetics, Persian and shorthand at the time, so that I must have been preoccupied and did not absorb even the rudiments of the trade. There's nothing for it, we must hurry up and rectify our mistake. Off to the Ministry!'

This time we were not received by the Minister but by an official—judging by his extremely self-important mien, not a

very high one. Politely yet firmly Jurenito stated the conditions on which Labardan could join the Allies:

(1) A watchmaker, a citizen of Labardan, had, as proved by historians, resided in the town of Nuremberg in the 17th century. Nuremberg with all the adjacent territories, including Munich, must therefore pass under Labardan control.

(2) The vital interests of Labardan demanded colonies. The place most suitable for colonisation was Hamburg.

(3) Although Labardan had no common frontier with Germany, the threat of a new war would endanger it unless certain strategic changes were introduced into the map of Europe. The cession of Smyrna, the Prater in Vienna and Baden-Baden would ensure the national security of Labardan.

The official heard this with attention, suggested that we should visit the front with other guests of honour in the meantime, made us a present of a dozen postcards with views of localities destroyed by the Germans, and promised to keep the Minister informed of further developments.

The next day we left for the front in the company of a manufacturer from Barcelona, a Peruvian journalist and a very polite lieutenant. This lieutenant spent a long time choosing a part of the front where there would be nothing resembling war. But we never got even as far as that. As soon as the Peruvian heard the distant rumbling of guns he began to complain of strong stabbing pains in his stomach, said that he was fully satisfied with the tour and was now in a hurry to get back and send a cable to his paper. We had two cars, and the Peruvian drove back in one of them. The manufacturer, on the other hand, was very brave and kept explaining to the lieutenant that if the Spanish had been in the place of the French, Berlin would have been taken long ago. After driving a little further we lunched with a most charming general. Then we had tea with another general, and dined with a third. Everywhere toasts were drunk, including one to 'Labardan, our new friend'. The next day we moved a little further in the direction of the front and, at last, saw a battery of guns. Hearing that this spot

was within range of heavy shells, the manufacturer changed his tune at once, demanded a helmet, gave me his family's address and absolutely refused to drive any further. He did not even get out of the car, and the lieutenant tried in vain to distract him with talk of the superiority of French firing over German. 'But the Germans fire too, don't they?' moaned the Spaniard, and called for a sheet of paper to write a last letter to his wife.

We walked away a little. Everything was quiet and very peaceful. The Teacher got into conversation with the officer commanding the battery, who suggested that they might start firing in order to acquaint us with the process of an artillery duel. Normally it began two hours later. The huge, long-necked monsters stood in a row. Tiny gnomes fussed round them, bringing up shells, pulling ropes, running clear. The monsters bowed down, spat something black high into the air—it was visible only for a split second—and fell back, exhausted. In reply there was the roar of an express train rushing into the glass hall of a main line station. That was a German shell.

The Teacher looked long and respectfully at the enraged monster, blazing, filled with fire and will-power. 'You may laugh at God and poetry, at freedom and the motherland,' he said to me, 'but you must bow down in reverence before a gun. Not only the death of a hundred men or more, but also the black, inescapable future comes flying out of its mouth.' Then he added: 'And by the way, talking of freedom, have you noticed how they've all forgotten about it, except perhaps the professional journalists? Just as these men have subordinated their feelings, thoughts and days to the wise machines, so the whole of Europe is today under the rule of a single iron law. Freedom—simple freedom, not the solemn one that you find in the constitutions, "freedom of speech, conscience, movement" etc. etc., no, freedom to live, to think about taking a boat out on the lake, to swot flies with a towel, to write verse, to hang yourself with a necktie for love—this human freedom has been forgotten by everyone. It has become an anachronism. A splendid development! It never existed anyway, that freedom,

there was only a counterfeit, a doll, a toy. It couldn't exist as long as the lie was there. Of course the war has already killed hundreds of thousands of people, but it has also, with a single iron breath—with a shell spat out like this one—destroyed the vile waxen beauty in the shopwindow, freedom in corsets and a playful *décolletage*, no lower, of course, than the prescribed number of inches.'

At that moment we heard the heartrending cry of the Spaniard, who had gone through all the torments of the anticipation of death and had now reached the stage of the death-rattle. There was nothing to be done. We turned back towards Paris.

At home disagreeable news awaited us. It turned out that the telegram containing our declaration as well as the proud demands for the annexation of various territories, had landed at the police Prefecture instead of going to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, an outstanding geographer—a member of the Academy—after carrying out the necessary investigations had reached the conclusion, which astonished him and us alike, that the State of Labardan did not exist. There was an island called Labrador and there was Lapland, but neither was a republic. His report was published in the Sunday edition of *Figaro* and also reached the Prefecture, owing, no doubt, to the French nation's universally recognised love of geography.

A policeman called on Jurenito and began a conversation which, judging by its clear-cut nature and the impossibility of an ambiguous interpretation, was by no means diplomatic. He said something unpleasant to me as well, but I, remembering the paper with the red seal which was still in existence and the Teacher's instructions, let drop for the last time my diplomat's 'merci'. The position was obviously very bad indeed but, thanks to the Teacher's resourcefulness and tact, it all ended with a few awkward minutes and a friendly deputy's visiting card.

CHAPTER XV | The 'champion of civilisation' and Aysha's necklace

JULIO JURENITO soon won universal respect by his warm sympathy for the Allied cause, his eloquence and his organising ability. He was better than anyone at arranging patriotic matinees, bazaars and concerts. The lovely Vicomtesse de Bouran, after getting 100 francs for a carnation 'to provide sensible entertainment for our poor *poilus*', went on for a long time arousing the jealousy and envy of her friends with tales about the amazing Mexican. He helped to open a *tir à pigeons* of hitherto undreamt-of dimensions, where ladies inspired by a sacred enthusiasm and young men of good society suffering from incurable heart trouble were able to fire, if not at the bloodthirsty *boche*, then at least at well-fattened pigeons which had forgotten how to fly. The entrance money went to the wounded warriors. Nor did Jurenito forget the unhappy refugees: for them, he organised an exclusive fancy-dress ball at the house of the Marquise de Ghibier. The salon was transformed into a battlefield by the efforts of Gaparanda, a fashionable painter; the guests were dressed as soldiers, baggy-trousered zouaves, turbaned Indians, sailors and nurses. Plain army rum was served by Senegalese waiters in glasses shaped like grenades. The champagne was chilled in buckets which reminded you of artillery shells. Intimate nooks and corners were fenced off with barbed wire. Rockets were let off incessantly in the garden. The net takings for the benefit of the refugees amounted to eighty francs. Jurenito, the guiding spirit and faithful lieutenant of ladies unable to bear social inactivity, was instrumental in setting up many useful institutions: in one of them—'Home from Home'—female inhabitants of villages destroyed by the war were given a clean bunk and a nourishing supper consisting of soup and boiled millet for a mere ten hours or so of unskilled work; in another—'The Sugar Lump'

—all babies whose fathers had been wounded not less than three times were given a lump of sugar once a week entirely free of charge.

Best of all, however, Jurenito liked to organise deputations to all kinds of monuments. There were glorious pilgrimages to all the equestrian and pedestrian statues in the Paris squares. Soon dissatisfied with Paris, he took to touring the provinces. In that way he honoured fourteen 'Republics', nine 'Liberities', four Gambettas, eleven Joans of Arc, Marshal Ney, several abbés who had discovered quinine, an unknown nude woman (possibly another 'Liberty'), Alfred de Musset and a bronze soldier at Poitiers. During those months the Teacher's outward appearance became known throughout the civilised world, for daily, in thousands of cinemas, after the baby which reconciled an erring couple or the sapphire robbery in Hindustan solved by an intrepid detective, there would appear on the screen a tall gentleman in a state of visible emotion and to the rhythmic strains of the *Marseillaise* deposit a large beribboned wreath at the feet of yet another monument.

The last of these demonstrations was the most successful. It happened at the beginning of October. The Teacher prowled through Paris in dejection, looking in vain for just one more statue that he had not used. 2,806 pilgrims had exhausted the resources of the Capital of the World. He even began thinking about taking trips abroad, where virgin soil awaited him: whole fleets of British admirals with unpronounceable names, Vittorio-Emanuele and the rest of them, Skobelev, anything you like and in any quantity. But once, quite unexpectedly, walking through a narrow street in Mouton-Duvernét, the Teacher started and came to a halt. Before him in a dirty courtyard, next to a workshop manufacturing zinc bathtubs, stood a statue—damaged if you will, dusty and bereft of its pedestal, but a real undiscovered statue for all that. It represented a person of male sex holding something like a book in one hand and the remains of a pair of scales in the other.

There followed a serious scientific investigation. An abbé

who was an archaeologist and worked on the staff of *La Croix* declared that this was the Archangel Michael weighing the sins of France and announcing her salvation. On the subject of the archangel's costume (he was dressed in a frock-coat) he delivered a special lecture entitled 'Religious presentations and clairvoyance of our great medieval artists'. Another archaeologist simply asserted that this was an ancient Gaul and that the objects in his hands were not a book and a pair of scales but an archer's bow and a bearskin. The statue, he claimed, was of very early origin, and the frock-coat had been added during the Restoration in the middle of the last century.

An entirely different opinion was maintained by the concierge of the house in whose courtyard the statue was discovered. According to her vulgar and ignorant fancy, this statue had been commissioned some ten years previously from Monsieur Becque, a monumental mason, by the widow of Monsieur Crabe, the owner of a large colonial goods shop in the rue Froideveau. At the widow's request the mason had represented the shopkeeper with his beloved scales and his accounts ledger. But when the statue was finished, the frivolous widow had suddenly married the manager of a travelling circus, gone off with him and never collected the statue. Monsieur Becque had abandoned his workshop four years ago (the same workshop where they were now making zinc bathtubs) without paying the concierge, but leaving her instead the statue of Monsieur Crabe and an old bald-headed tomcat. Such was the version of the concierge, worthy to be recorded for its puerile ignorance. But the Teacher was not satisfied either with the findings of the two archaeologists. He advanced his own hypothesis, which defeated all the others. The statue was a champion of civilisation, holding a 'declaration of human and civil rights' and the balance, symbol of eternal justice. Having thus determined the identity of the figure, Julio Jurenito announced that a solemn pilgrimage to the statue of the 'champion of civilisation' would take place on October 28th. Invitations were sent to many scientific societies and sports clubs, as well as to

academic delegations of the Allied and neutral countries.

The day was very fine, sunny and warm. The entire courtyard was filled with important people. The concierge, at last, was shamed into silence. Every face bore a look of concentration. The Academy of Sciences, the 'Circle of Young Swimmers across the Seine', the military attaché of Montenegro, the 'Society of Patriots Outside the Call-up Age', actresses from the *Sans-Préjudice* theatre and others made speeches and laid wreaths. The concierge's own words were unexpected and touching: 'Forgive me, Monsieur Crabe, or rather Champion of Civilisation! I used to see you every day behind your counter and here, in my own courtyard. But I did not know that your scales were the symbol of justice, nor did I ever glance into your big book on the tall desk. Now that so many fine gentlemen have come to visit you, I understand it all. Receive my modest gift!' And she threw a few freshly-picked asters at the statue's feet.

Jurento was the last to speak. I was surprised to see him for the first time without a wreath on such an occasion. How could this have happened? Hadn't the Teacher planned all the week for the festive day? He spoke with expression and profound feeling, as follows: 'Dear Champion of Civilisation! After so many beautiful speeches I shall not recall your heroic actions of the past. In these tragic days your image shines like a beacon for the entire world. Here, in this lowly courtyard, a never-to-be-extinguished lighthouse burns in the night of the universe. You drew up the divine declaration, and in order that your written words should not remain a dead letter you dispassionately took up your balance to weigh every man's rights according to merit. But now the savage barbarians, those Goths, those modern Atlases, cannibals, despots, have raised their threatening arms against civilisation, against the sacred rights of citizen and man. You have not yielded. Rallying other, younger nations round you, you have hoisted the banner of struggle in the cause of humanity, mankind, protection of the weak. I have not brought you any flowers. What flower is worthy

of lying at your feet? Not these flowers, surely, grown in peaceful hothouses and gardens, but only those plucked on the field of battle. I am certain that one of the millions of our heroes will bring you the highest gift—his victorious trophies wrested from the vanquished barbarians!'

The Teacher did not finish his inspired speech. Pushing aside the crowd, and even throwing an all too venerable academician off his feet, a Negro in army uniform came running towards Jurento, his right sleeve dangling empty. It is hard to convey my astonishment and joy when I recognised him: it was our dear little Aysha! Meanwhile he was kissing the Teacher's hands and waistcoat. When he had finished kissing and recovered his breath, he began to speak:

'Master! Good master! Aysha find you! You speak well, and your god a good god.'

'If Aysha still have his arm, Aysha make a god like that too, but Aysha's arm gone. Aysha in the war. Oh, terrible! At first Aysha silly. The corporal, very good gentleman, want to kill Aysha. Aysha very frightened. The guns go hoo-hoo-hoo! Then Aysha jump out, throw down rifle, take knife, shout and run. Remember, Master, you ask Aysha how he stab with knife? Aysha run, see a German, two, five, ten, many Germans, Aysha cut off all heads. Then a Frenchman catch five Germans, not know what to do with them, silly Frenchman. He say to Aysha, take them to general. Aysha not silly. Good corporal teach Aysha, Germans enemies, you must kill Germans. Aysha kill five more with knife. Then the guns again, boum-boum! Aysha understand. Angry god, clever god, Aysha must save himself, put "gri-gri" on heart. Aysha pull out teeth of all dead Germans, make "gri-gri", put on heart. Then ball from gun fall straight on Aysha, bad ball. "Gri-gri" on Aysha's heart, Aysha not die, only cut off arm. It hurt, Master! Aysha always wear "gri-gri" now! Aysha love "gri-gri". Master says this is good god. Master not know what to give his god. Aysha love Master! Aysha give away "gri-gri"!'

Aysha took out of his pocket a large necklace made of yellowed

human teeth, skilfully bored through and strung on a light-blue thread. The Teacher, turning towards the statue, declared solemnly: 'Great Champion, I give you your brother's heroic gift—the gift of a modest, nameless fighter in the sacred cause of world civilisation. I place this naive and beautiful gift in the balance, poised today at the turning point of history. May its weight equal that of love, sacrifice and humanity!'

It was an unforgettable moment. Many were sobbing, even men, even the military attaché of Montenegro.

The next day descriptions of the ceremony and of Aysha's gift were published in all the reputable newspapers, and a week later, Aysha, who had once again installed himself in the Teacher's flat, received a telegram informing him that the University of Lisbon, impressed by his selfless heroism in the defence of civilisation, had decided to grant him a doctor's degree *honoris causa*. But Aysha, far from having his head turned by all these honours, merely went on, grinning, to beg the Teacher for money to buy chocolate creams. He was very distressed about his empty sleeve. Then Jurénito bought him a special artificial arm made by an American firm called Ullima. Aysha was very proud of his new arm and even used to say that if it didn't hurt so much he would cut off his other, real arm just to get another Ullima. The only thing he could not do with his Ullima was to make new gods. The Teacher advised him to follow his example instead and go to see other gods, i.e. various Paris statues, which Aysha thenceforth began to do with great zeal. His interpretation of these gods was personal and highly unexpected: the Republic was, in his opinion, a goddess of fertility—'in belly is baby, in breast is milk'; Liberty was a goddess of dancing—'lots of fun, goes flying chop-chop'; Danton—'good god, cut off head, very satisfied', but Rodin's *Thinker* was 'bad god, sitting down with stomach-ache, and so forth. However, he visited them all frequently and without distinction, bringing them buttons, old feathers, and even chocolate tinfoil, which he himself adored.

Sometimes, in the evenings, during those years of colossal

disaster, sitting in the cosy dining-room at the round table under the lamp with the Teacher and Aysha, I would forget all I had been through and feel myself one of a close-knit, tender, inseparable family.

CHAPTER XVII | Mr Cool's economic empire

DISSATISFIED with ideological and philanthropic activity, the Teacher decided to turn to practical work. First of all he resumed his chemical investigations, seeking with exceptional patience and persistence new and hitherto untried methods of killing human beings. The asphyxiating gases and liquid flame punnys of which he had written in 1913 now looked like childish toys. He pinned all his hopes on certain radiation effects of electric waves and radium. The viscountesses and marchionesses were forgotten; he did not leave his study for days on end. He complained to me of the shortage of funds: he was a mere 300,000 dollars short to buy the amount of metal needed for his experiments. Still greater difficulties were occasioned by the lack of subjects for tests, since neither rabbits nor dogs would do instead of human beings for the purpose. Jurcenio approached the authorities with a request for a few prisoners of war for his important experiments, but this was refused out of prejudice.

One day the Teacher came to me looking gay and animated: despite all difficulties he had found a method which would considerably ease and expedite the destruction of mankind. He explained the rudiments of his invention to me but, by reason of my innate stupidity in all things connected with physics and mathematics, I didn't take any of it in, except the fact that it was possible, by means of some sort of light-waves, to kill no less than fifty thousand people along a 100-mile front. If only Mr Cool were here, he'd help me to put my invention into practice! the Teacher cried sorrowfully, realising that neither I nor Aysha could furnish him with the funds required to make the complicated apparatus. After the refusal he had met with he no longer wished to make a direct approach to the authorities. We looked for Mr Cool in the churches, the brothels and the clubs. We asked for him at the Bible Society and in various banks, but no one knew his address. Once, almost without hope

after a long and futile search, we were sitting in a little bar near the Gare du Nord drinking bad wine when a young soldier just arrived from the front joined us. He had been on a sector adjacent to the British and had many amusing things to say about them.

'How clean they are, and how foolish! In the first place, they wash every day; and not only their faces, but their whole bodies. What d'you say to that? Then they go to church, and there they sing as cheerfully as if they were in an *estaminet*. Then there are some who don't wear trousers but only skirts. I used to think that underneath, at least, they'd have pants. I even had an argument about it with an English general's kitchen-maid. Well, she looked when the general's batman was walking upstairs. Nothing! Now what d'you say? And then, as soon as they arrive, the first thing they ask for is French wine. One of them was given some vinegar, and he drank it off without batting an eyelid: "Yes!" And when they're going home they all go to the *parfumeries* to buy scent for their wives. At Amiens there's a queue all day long. You wouldn't believe what they'll buy—insect-killer for perfume, fretwork tools for a manicure set. "It's French", they say. Funny chaps. Another thing: the English airmen drop arrows and on them there's writing—hymns, I suppose. Have a look—I'm taking one home for my little boy.'

The soldier showed us an arrow on which was written in English: 'Brother, enter into the Kingdom of Heaven'. Seeing this, the Teacher in great excitement cried: 'That's Mr Cool! I know it!' and ran off to the British consulate to get our passports stamped.

During the next few weeks we tried to trace Mr Cool through the Ministry of War and various supply departments. I couldn't say that this occupation was to our liking. We were suspected of being German spies, arrested, and closely interrogated. We were asked what Jurcenio's uncle, who lived in Mexico, had done in 1898 and whether my cousin in Novgorod-Sevensk owned any landed property. Then they made us open our mouths wide

and looked inside for something other than teeth and a tongue; washed us with a stinking liquid which was supposed to bring out secret writing on our skin; and finally, after an energetic intervention by the Mexican ambassador, they released us. To make up for it, on the day of our arrest we discovered the address of the factory in Missouri where the arrows were made.

We sent a cable at once. The Teacher was so certain that our friend had something to do with the arrows that he addressed the cable directly to his name. No reply came and we decided to go to America. Two hours before our ship was due to sail the Teacher received a telegram from Calais: 'Waiting Hotel Britannic Cool!'

We found Mr Cool up to his ears in work. He greeted us with a cry of 'Hi!' and an energetic movement of the foot which rested on his desk, and asked our permission to conclude his most urgent business. We sat down and listened to his conversations with various callers and over the telephone, but I still could not make out precisely what our enterprising American was doing. I learned, however, that sheep in Australia were suffering from an infectious disease, that Bournonville cars had 108 component parts, that Spanish girls had exceptional endurance, that tear-gas was cheap to produce and a number of other useful things.

Having dismissed the last caller—who, for some reason, had brought a huge round cheese with him—Mr Cool engaged in friendly conversation with us. First of all, pointing towards the East, he said in a peaceful, almost patriarchal tone: 'I've got a lot of ground to cover these days. It's almost too much for me. Oh, my friends, what a great thing is war! It is restoring Europe's health!' Then he initiated us into the various branches of his amazing economic empire. He supplied everything the five continents could produce. Dozens of ships were unloaded daily in Calais, in Dieppe, in Boulogne. Frozen sheep's carcasses were brought from Australia, shells and motor cars from America, coffee from Brazil, rice from China, squat donkeys from North Africa. Apart from these official supplies, he also

engaged in private enterprise, first and foremost in his favourite field: a large-scale network of brothels in all the towns in the rear of the fighting. Local forces being insufficient for the purpose, he imported women from Ireland, Spain and the South of France. Then he had opened a factory making cheap wreaths out of beads decorated with national insignia. Finally, not forgetting his basic, profoundly moral goal, he had organised a number of mobile church huts, which could be adapted for showing films and dispensing tea to soldiers. He also printed and distributed vast numbers of copies of Bible commentaries, and had even managed, owing to the absent-mindedness of Headquarters, to put his encouraging inscription on those arrows, although they formed part of an army contract.

Mr Cool ended his story with words of deeply-felt optimism: 'War is improving mankind. Never-have-the-dollar-and-the-word-of-God-been-so-closely-linked-as-they-are-today. Therein lies the promise of redemption!'

The next day Mr Cool decided to show us something of his 'economic empire'. We obtained the necessary passes and drove off in a car in the direction of St Paul. An endless procession of lorries loaded with Mr Cool's gifts was crawling along the straight highway—with shells, carcasses, machine-guns, condensed milk, lint, poison-gas containers, and also those for whom all this was intended: namely, soldiers freshly arrived from England. In the other direction came empty lorries; in a few of them lay those who had already done their bit, bandaged and immobile. Soldiers with flags controlled the traffic at the intersections. It was just like Piccadilly. Everything had the simplicity of genius. The carcasses were cooked. The soldiers ate the soup. The shells were brought up to the guns. Then, at the appointed moment, the guns were fired, the soldiers came out of the trenches and occupied an area of a hundred square yards. After this some were buried, others bandaged and laid in lorries, while yet others had some more soup. A report was sent off to Headquarters. At Headquarters they drew up a communiqué and sent fresh orders. More soldiers, sheep's carcasses,

shells etc. were brought up. So it went on, day after day, month after month, year after year, and Mr Cool, conscious of his service to the common cause, had every reason to feel proud.

Then we went back towards Rouen and saw some of our friend's other achievements. We were struck by the practical nature and the beauty of his wreaths at the vast cemeteries, with their graves set in serried rows. In a small town where British, French and Belgian troops were quartered we admired a marvellous brothel with a tremendous turnover capacity, where different days were set aside for different nationalities. Perfect order reigned. And our hearts were deeply touched by the religious sermons of Mr Cool's colleagues addressed to soldiers as they peacefully wiped their bayonets on the grass, their day's work done. Here is what they said: 'Brothers! You know the commandment: thou shalt not kill. Killing is forbidden, they send you to prison for it. But it is the duty of every Christian to defend his country and obey his commanders. Brothers! Be patriotic, annihilate the Teutons, the faithless foes of Christ. And keep off drink'. All this was profoundly moving and reminded me of the long-past visions of poor Francis as he spoke to the villagers of Umbria.

After thanking Mr Cool for the pleasure he had given us, Jurenito told him about his invention and his hopes. To my surprise, Mr Cool, far from welcoming the Teacher's brilliant discovery, was actually put out by it.

'I beg of you, my dear fellow,' he said to Jurenito, 'do not tell anyone about your invention for the time being. If killing becomes so simple and easy, the war will end in a couple of weeks and my economic empire will collapse. My own country is only just getting ready to fight. Let's keep your idea as a last resort. I'll give you the means of making your apparatus if you'll promise me not to use it for the present.'

Having reflected a little, the Teacher agreed. The things he had seen during the past few days, he said, certainly deserved development and promotion. I know that shortly afterwards he made his apparatus and left it with Mr Cool. When, a year

later, he wanted to use it after all, Mr Cool procrastinated, saying that he had transferred it to the United States and could not trust anyone to bring it back, and so forth. I took it that Mr Cool was moved by financial considerations, but on one occasion he remarked that the Germans could be finished off with French bayonets, whilst Jurenito's magic would be better left for the Japanese. The course of future events was such that the Teacher never mentioned his invention again; but, be that as it may, I know for certain that the apparatus and the explanatory texts are in the hands of Mr Cool.

When he had wrung the promise he wanted from Jurenito, Mr Cool cheered up again, gave an attentive hearing to various improvements proposed by the Teacher in the military sphere—new gases, fast tanks, etc.—and suggested that Jurenito should henceforth work with him on expanding and modernising the business. The Teacher expressed his full agreement. Then the question of what to do with me and Aysla came up. Neither of us understood anything about military technique and we had no organising ability whatever.

In the end it was decided that Aysla should take up selling the beadwork wreaths; Mr Cool thought that his artificial arm, his medal, black skin and resounding title of Doctor *honoris causa* of Lisbon University would be a great asset in marketing these patriotic objects. As for me, I was offered a post as cashier in one of Mr Cool's brothels at Amiens.

Three days later I was sitting behind a little table in the entrance hall of a fair-sized detached house, handing out—according to price—tickets by the hour or the night, as well as an instructive leaflet *God is Love*. I sat there all the evening and all night, watching the impatient gestures of those who came in and the yawns of those who went out. From the adjacent rooms I heard snatches of military marches, laughter, sometimes curses and groans. Sometimes a woman would give a piercing scream. Once a soldier who had had one over the eight started shooting at a portrait of the Queen of the Netherlands which hung, unaccountably, in one of the rooms.

Generally, however, it was pretty quiet. Sometimes I would meet the women; they found the work tiring, but were satisfied with the conditions. Many of them fell ill and were taken away and replaced by new ones. I would wake at about six in the evening, have a meal, skim through the papers and set off to work. There, staring dully at the soldiers going by, I would tear off tickets and in the intervals write bits of my book, *Poems on the Eve*, which was later favourably reviewed by many reputable critics, including V. Y. Bryusov. A month later, however, I could no longer write poems and had developed a total indifference to everything. On one occasion the Teacher came to see me. I emerged from my stupor and began complaining of the boredom, the stench, the beastly piano-playing, the drunken hiccups of the clients. 'I can't go on like this any longer! What's it all for?' I cried.

'My friend, remember how, at the peaceful Rotonde among the models got up in fancy dress, you used to dream about a bomb, a tiny bomb to destroy it all? Now you're working in the enormous factory where thousands of bombs are made daily for the destruction of millions of people.'

I did not argue, but only gave a piteous sob and tore out a ticket for the latest arrival.

CHAPTER XVII

Senegal the blessed—
different interpretations of
the French word 'poire'

TODAY IT SEEMS to me that if the Teacher had not come to Amiens at the beginning of 1916 and rescued me I should have gone quietly out of my mind. When he turned up at the establishment where I was working, my indifference to the whole world was already so great that I handed him a ticket without looking up. In reply the Teacher said in a commanding tone: 'Get dressed and hand the cash box over to the manager. We're going to Paris.'

In the car I found Mr Cool and Aysha. It appeared that all were tired out by strenuous work and needed a prolonged rest. Where? In San Remo? In Biarritz? In Seville? Aysha suggested: 'Come with me to Senegal? We found the idea both amusing and attractive. Besides, Mr Cool wouldn't be wasting his time there: export of human raw material, etc. It was decided. Brest. The steamship *Providence*. The sun. Aysha jumped for joy. Aysha was happy, he was going home, he would be able to show off all his things—his Ultima arm, Mr Cool, his diploma with its seal, the chocolate piglets he was taking home as presents.

It is hard to convey the full sweetness of deep and complete rest, blissful dozing in the shade of a simple hut, the pleasant coolness of the river which seemed to be washing me clean of the dust, smoke and filth of my native Europe. Once upon a time I was young and frisky, I was in love, I went to meet my love with a posy in my hands, I wrote verse, I flushed with delight when some provincial hack penned words of encouragement: 'Not too bad; a poet by the grace of God!—in short, I experienced pleasure. But only for five weeks in my whole life have I been simply and completely happy, those five weeks long ago, on the banks of the broad Senegal river.'

I forgot it all—war, art, my relatives and friends left in the North. I am convinced that, had there been policemen in the Negro villages and had one of them come running to inquire into my identity, I would have grunted incoherently in reply or slapped him amicably on the belly instead of saying anything at all, or else run away to hide myself under the piles of dried rushes, for I no longer remembered my own name. I never left Aysha's side; together with him I bathed, drank sheep's milk, ate fresh figs and greasy, half-cooked biscuits, and when he began to say his prayers in the *bangga*, i.e. the gods' menagerie near the hut, I would also crawl on my belly before the enchanting idols made of wood, birds' feathers, shells and fish-scales and wail 'oo-hoo-hoo' as he did. Aysha quickly abandoned his European costume, retaining only his white piqué waistcoat; he was very picturesque in that get-up with his gleaming artificial arm. True, he would sometimes exchange a few words with his fellow tribesmen, which I could not do. But I did not envy him and was not sad; here, I understood more without words than during the most intimate heart-to-heart talks with white men.

I asked the Teacher whether it would not be better if we followed Aysha's example, left off our trousers and remained for ever in that promised land. But the Teacher replied: 'It is unworthy of man to look back. Childhood is a happy time, but what would you say of a mature man who snatched the rattle from a baby's hands in order to play with it himself? Never say of those who have not yet passed through the ages of corruption that they are happy, but rather pity them. Aysha will don his trousers again. Not thunder will sweep across this country, but the rattle of the motor-cycle, the machine-gun and the typewriter. Enlightenment will come to our simple-hearted friends, and they will set up Mr Cool's brothels and Monsieur Delet's hierarchic cemeteries where the charming *bangas* stand today. And we who are now resting in this prehistoric Trouville will be called in to help them. Another lost paradise. But it's only the first step that counts; it isn't as if we weren't used to it.'

I started to protest—why should we help them? Surely we ought to resist, etc. But the Teacher said that we had come to rest and not to argue, that I wasn't looking at all well, and wouldn't it be nice to go and bathe?

Mr Cool caused us a certain amount of worry. At the beginning, in the villages of the coastal strip, he enjoyed himself greatly. But the further we travelled up the river in the direction of Aysha's home, the more often he would express astonishment and even indignation at the local customs. He said that Africa was even worse than Europe. His dollars did not make the least impression on the Negroes, and not one of them had heard of the Bible. Finally Mr Cool, feeling insulted, demanded that we should go back at once. But Aysha, very anxious to visit his home, pacified Mr Cool to some extent by explaining that instead of bits of paper with pictures of American presidents on them they had special shells, and instead of the Bible they had marabout amulets. Though willing to overlook such lack of culture, Mr Cool was constantly pulled up short by things he could not comprehend. The Teacher received from one of the local chiefs a bow carved in ivory, which Mr Cool valued at three dollars despite the crudeness of the work, yet no shells were given in exchange. Aysha, too, would go behind the palm trees entirely free of charge with black women who yet were not his lawful wives.

'What shocking disorder!' Mr Cool would cry. 'I see only now how well-run Europe really is. Colossal energy is needed to bring even a little enlightenment to this country.'

Since energy was a thing Mr Cool always had in excess, he got down to work at once. Having drummed together the inhabitants of the nearest village called Shango, he explained to them with Aysha's help that the chief object of their worship should be dollars, i.e. gold, i.e. shells. But a terrible trial awaited the tireless preacher. The Negroes turned out to be followers of the Borra religion which teaches that the human body is sometimes entered by evil spirits which must be exorcised by all possible means. To Mr Cool's undoing they proved to be no less zealous

in the observance of their moral duty than he himself. Having heard his sermon and looked at the American as he confirmed Aysha's words by nodding his head importantly, they decided that their poor guest was inhabited by the evil spirit Aladyenou. They formed a close circle round Mr Cool and started exorcising the spirit. To do this, they came in relays for two days and two nights, wearing hideous masks, singing, dancing, screaming, striking brass gongs, drumming on skins stretched between poles, thumping on wooden boards with dried pumpkins suspended from them, plucking at the teeth of huge metal combs and at strings attached to coconut shells: in other words, they did all they could to frighten Aladyenou. Mr Cool tried to break away, struck out at them, screamed and shouted for all he was worth, but this only encouraged the Negroes, who believed that the spirit was running riot before abandoning the human body, and they sang and played the more loudly. By the third morning Mr Cool fell silent. I think he was beginning to go mad, for he just sat on the ground and smiled a meaningless and blissful smile. Then, convinced that Aladyenou had been cast out, the Negroes dropped their instruments and brought Mr Cool sweet bamboo-juice to drink.

We went on and at last reached the valley where stood the village of Alaroun, Aysha's home. But instead of huts we saw only the traces of a recent holocaust. There were no people. In a field nearby we found a little piccaninny of about five years old who was sucking the udder of a peacefully grazing she-goat. Seeing us, the little boy tried to run away, and when we had caught him he was unable or unwilling to tell us anything. Aysha wept, threw himself on the ground, dug up the soil with his hands and kissed it. But great though his grief was, we decided to turn back.

Soon we found some soldiers of the Foreign Legion encamped in a small village. They told us that during the last round-up of recruits the people of Alaroun had rebelled and had viciously attacked the camp at night, killing two soldiers. This outbreak, provoked no doubt by the perfidious Germans, had been quickly

put down, the culprits had received exemplary punishment and the village had been burnt to the ground.

One of the larger huts was used as a field-hospital. In it lay two soldiers, one wounded during the suppression of the mutiny, the other suffering from the local fever, his head hidden under his blanket. After chatting with the first about some interesting episodes in the battle, we were preparing to go away when the man on the next straw mat began to cry in perfect Russian: 'Little Negro! Oh you poor little black one! From the height of my divine ego I assert the dignity of man. A drink, a drink!' I ran towards him and snatched off the blanket. Before me lay Alexey Spiridonovich. He gazed at me with unseeing eyes and went on babbling in delirium.

We stayed on in the village waiting for the sick man to recover. Six days later the fever abated suddenly. Alexey Spiridonovich came to and was overjoyed to see us sitting at his bedside. For some reason he was frightened at first on seeing Aysha, but the latter treated him with extreme tenderness, kissed the tips of his hair and gave him a large coconut as a present. Having fortified himself, Alexey Spiridonovich immediately expressed a desire to tell us the story of his life and started with the earliest impressions of his infancy. But the Teacher reminded him that we knew all that almost as well as he did himself, and said it would be better if he confined himself to the last few years.

Alexey Spiridonovich's tale, as always, was long-winded, full of philosophical digressions and deficient in facts, but very sad. Together with other Russians dreaming of sacrifice, St Sophia and freedom, he had been posted to the Foreign Legion. The sergeants and corporals had reproached and humiliated them at every step, saying 'Remember, you've come here to eat the Frenchmen's bread'. Alexey Spiridonovich's arguments that the front was not exactly a comfortable restaurant had no effect. With the Russians there were other legionaries: the Frenchman Eric, who had transformed himself into a Belgian, had spent twelve years in Marseilles peacefully trading in women and was

now working to get himself a clean set of papers; Hunn, a German from Dresden who had murdered his aunt, fled to France and joined the Legion. Hunn swore to everybody that he was either a Pole, an Alsatian or a Holsteiner, but that in any case he could kill Germans as well as the next man. Then there was Jopras the Spaniard, who despised all occupations except war and bull-fighting. He was found unsuitable for the latter on account of natural obesity and clumsiness and, therefore, having robbed a jeweller in Salamanca, he chose the Legion as his future field of activity.

These and similar warriors called the Russians *poine*, the dictionary meaning of which is not only 'pear' but also 'simpleton', and subjected them to all sorts of experiments, drawing on skills acquired in civilian life. Having been in action and spent a year in the trenches under these conditions, the Russians timidly asked the army authorities to transfer them to ordinary French regiments. This request was found more than suspect and it was decided to cure the Russians of their whims by shooting ten of their number. When the criminals began to cry '*Vive la France!*' before the firing-squad it became clear to everyone that here was a dangerous mutiny, and the survivors were hastily despatched to Africa. Among them was Alexey Spiridonovich. In Africa he mended roads, cleaned someone's boots, rounded up Negroes, suppressed Arabs and, while doing all these things, wondered what had become of sacrifice, Christ and St Sophia.

Three weeks previously he had been sent with all the others to put down a Negro revolt. One Negro, quite black and very young, looking just like Aysha, had rushed at him with a lance. He had fired. He thought the Negro was dead. Then fever, and he remembered nothing more.

Hearing this, Aysha began to squeal, jump up and down and weep, 'That was Aglakh, Aysha's brother!' Alexey Spiridonovich also burst into tears and appealed to Jurento for help.

'Tell me, how can this be? I wanted to save Russia and humanity, sacrifice myself, defend Christ, and instead of that

all I've done is to kill a Negro. Why? What for? I am a man. The divine principle is within me. How can I have fallen so low?'

But the Teacher refused to believe in sacrifice, Christ or the divine principle. He said sombrely: 'You're the wretched slave of Mr Cool, and Mr Cool is the slave of his blue book. The book knows well enough why you should kill disobedient Negroes. It's time you dropped your metaphysics and learned some elementary arithmetic instead. It's both simpler and safer.'

As for Aysha, the Teacher calmed him down by stroking his curly pate and saying: 'It wasn't Alexey Spiridonovich's fault. He had a good corporal too. Alexey Spiridonovich only wanted to put a little cross on the roof of Aia-Sophia, that's a sort of house, you know. But the corporal said "You must fire at Aglakh". You've got your Ultima and your diploma, but Alexey Spiridonovich hasn't got anything. Look, he's crying.'

After these words Aysha disappeared and came back with a long pipe made out of the calabash fruit. He gave it to Alexey Spiridonovich and said: 'Aysha want to give you his arm, but you with two arms, not know where to put it. This very good pipe. Aysha make it. Aysha love you.'

Alexey Spiridonovich recovered slowly. The fever was complicated by a disease of the liver, and Jurento began to take steps to have him discharged from the army. Two weeks later Alexey Spiridonovich was sent to a military hospital in Toulon, travelling on the same boat as we, thanks to Jurento's efforts, and there he was found unfit for further service.

Aysha
Spiridonovich

The Pope blesses the GBD—
Fra Giuseppe

GR^{eat} D^{is}a^pp^oiⁿt^meⁿt^s awaited Mr Cool on his return to Europe. Without its master's loving eye, his economic empire had got into a frightful state of neglect. Almost all the war orders had passed to his competitors. Four ships with valuable cargo had been sunk by German submarines. Some Frenchman or other had invented a new type of funeral wreath with ribbons instead of cockades, which was both cheaper and more attractive. Finally, Mr Cool's zealous missionaries had, with the help of the authorities, closed down eleven brothels of which he himself was the owner.

'The idiots,' he told us in indignation, 'they did not understand that my houses are centres of morality and that the two enterprises cannot exist one without the other!'

All these misfortunes had such an effect on Mr Cool that from a fanatical patriot he was suddenly transformed into an energetic and consistent champion of peace.

'War ruins morals and destroys the national economy,' he said.

We readily agreed. Alexey Spiridonovich, after his experiences in Senegal, could no longer bear to hear the word 'victory,' bought books by Tolstoy and proposed to become a vegetarian. Poor orphaned Aysha also thought less highly of the 'kind corporals'. As for me, I had always, in the weakness of my nature, preferred platoonic destruction in verse or in fiery talk at the Rotonde to Mr Cool's ideal economy. So it was that all four of us favoured peace, of which we hastened to inform the Teacher.

Jurenito's first response was to laugh merrily and without a trace of malice. 'My simple-hearted boys, do you really think it's so easy to end war? No one can do it, not even those who started it—diplomats, leaders, industrialists, emperors, advan-

turers, nations—no one at all. I'm not too fond of war myself. It was different at first: madness, animal fury, leaps and roars, the sudden familiarity with death, the crash of all earthly goods; in short a magnificent upheaval. Now everybody's got too used to it. Never mind if we're all doomed to death; in the meantime it's good sport. But war has become humdrum. Believe me, it's easier for me to overthrow the German Empire, send 15 million people to the next world, change every school map on earth, than to give a thorough airing to this stuffy, filthy but cosy kennel in which mankind chooses to exist. It isn't that people have adjusted themselves to war, but the war has adjusted itself to people. From a hurricane it has become merely a disagreeable draught. They catch cold, but they manage to carry on somehow. As for putting an end to this adjusted, established war, you can't do it. It's a microbe, a slow and cautious one but one that knows its business. This war has come to stay for decades, perhaps for centuries. Don't laugh—there'll be peace treaties and all sorts of idyllic pleasures in between. The war will change its forms, like a stream that sometimes runs underground. It will resemble an almost repulsively delightful peace. The sick man will go out into the garden to water his pinks until the next attack of recurrent typhoid fever lays him low. The war'll cease to be war, it will install itself cleverly in men's hearts, so that the town boundary, the garden fence, the bedroom threshold will become the front. Started in a fit of apoplexy from a surfeit of irrational force, of unjust, predatory, stolen, lying wealth, it will end only when it has destroyed that in whose name it was begun: hypocritical culture and the Leviathan of the State.'

'For all your practical ability,' Mr Cool objected, 'you've always shown an unfortunate tendency towards utopianism. Why talk of things which obviously won't happen until after we're dead? Let's think instead how we can achieve even a little peace. If those who started the war can't end it, surely there are other forces.'

'What forces?'

'The religious organisations in the first place; say even Rome, despite all its shortcomings. Then the convinced pacifists who used to organise all those meetings and conferences before the war. And then those—' (Mr Cool stumbled before uttering the dreadful word) '—those socialists. Of course they're an immoral lot and want to destroy all that is sacred, but in this particular case they may be very useful.'

'Your hopes are without foundation, Mr Cool. As you know, the Christians—to whom, unless memory fails me, you also belong—still continue to work away at their various empires similar to yours, alas, so cruelly destroyed. The pacifists, it's true, talk very beautifully and movingly about peace, no worse than Alexey Spiridonovich, but when they're under the command of "good corporals" they'll slit the bellies of other pacifists with all the zest of our peace-loving Aysha. As for the socialists, their role in wartime reminds me strongly of the occupation—a most respectable one, may I add—recently pursued by our dear Ehrenburg, who tore off tickets at the entrance to your establishment and wept for his prehistoric virginity to the strains of the polka.'

Mr Cool, and Alexey Spiridonovich after him, tried to argue. Strange to tell, both of them, who until recently had seen nothing but patriotic fervour and a thirst for victory all round them, now—after their personal misfortunes—saw the very reverse and assured Jurenio that the nations desired peace. 'All that's needed is a unifying centre. It's our duty to find it.'

The Teacher then said that he did not believe such a search would serve any practical purpose, but being always glad to assist our enlightenment he suggested that we might verify this by undertaking a series of excursions to Rome, Geneva and the Hague, all the more so as these trips would be useful to him, too, in his study of further stages in the disease of mankind.

The decision was taken: we were going to Rome. Mr Cool did not particularly approve of the Catholics—all those tall stories instead of morality—but he had great faith in the power

of the Church. Besides, they're Christians after all! He took with him a new machine-gun, GBD type, a particularly deadly weapon made from the Teacher's drawings: let the Pope look upon this instrument of hell and be horrified. (That apart, candidly speaking, wouldn't it be a good idea to show the GBD to the Italian Minister of War?) Alexey Spiridonovich prepared a speech, for which purpose he scribbled mercifully all over the collected works of Solovyev, Dostoevsky and someone else. Aysha went straight to the heart of the matter.

'What's that, the Pope?'

'Christ's Vicar.'

'What's a vicar?' All right. Aysha understands. 'What does Christ like, war or peace? Then His vicar love peace, too.'

And, worn out by so much ratiocination, Aysha could think no further. He jumped about in the railway carriage crying: 'There'll be peace, peace, peace!' It was lucky there were no strangers present. The word peace—now the most indecent and criminal word in the human vocabulary—would have cost us dear.

As for the Teacher, he prepared no speeches and did not argue or listen: he was once more deep in his boring figures—economic conditions, decay of industry, the inevitable crisis—and, tearing himself away for an instant from grey newspaper columns or a sheet of paper covered with writings, he would give a scarcely perceptible but satisfied smile.

We found Rome very little changed after three years' absence. The poverty of Trastevere still more undisguised, the gaudy flags on the uneasy ruins still more absurd—a purely quantitative difference. Wasting no time, we applied at once for an audience with the Holy Father, but this turned out to be a very complicated matter. The Teacher was on the point of resorting again to the successful device of the yard-long passports with red seals, but I protested, remembering my loss of the gift or speech and that profoundly inexpressive *merci*.

'You may see the Holy Father at Easter,' a clerical personage of high rank informed us with contempt.

'But I'm busy!' cried Mr Cool. 'I can't wait. I own three arms factories.'

'Oh, in that case you may see His Holiness tomorrow. I didn't know with whom I had the honour of speaking.'

The next morning we entered the audience room. On Mr Cool's orders, and despite the protests of the Swiss guards, Aysla bravely wheeled the machine-gun in behind us. Someone announced loudly: 'Signor Cool, owner of arms factories, and friends.'

We saw a very sweet wrinkled old man seated in a high arm-chair, who addressed us with the deep feeling of a loving grandfather. 'We bless your useful labours. We wish you the success due to your zeal and beg you not to forget the Holy Church and its orphans.' Having said this, the little old man jabbed the point of his shoe at the faces of each of us in turn (we guessed what was required of us and kissed the shoe) and also, no doubt through absent-mindedness, at the upthrust muzzle of the GBD machine-gun.

When this ritual was over we wanted to proceed with the conversation, but were very quickly and neatly transferred into the next room by the same Swiss guards. There we saw, not the Pope, but a cardinal, who explained: 'You do not talk to the Holy Father. The Holy Father does not speak, he pronounces. But I can answer any questions you may wish to put.'

We were particularly interested in the activities of the Holy See during the war years. These turned out to be very wide and varied. Hundreds of translators were working in the chancellery. To save time, all good wishes, blessing and prayers were translated and sent out simultaneously to all the fighting nations. The representatives of the Church were given instructions on how, say, to celebrate thanksgiving services after a victory, but on some of the instruction leaflets it said 'The crowd disperses, exclaiming "*Vive Dieu! Vive Joffe!*"', on others '*Hoch Gott! Hoch Hindenburg!*' and so forth. In the event of a decisive victory or defeat it was recommended to explain the first by God's grace and the prayers of the 'holy

apostolic', the second by God's punishment for insufficient fervour in the service of the 'holy apostolic', etc. Catholics everywhere must support the war until its victorious conclusion. The task was a complex but a grateful one: these were days of trial, of religious revival. 'War is a beautiful thing if you know how to understand it.'

'But it says "Thou shalt not kill"', Alexey Spiridonovich groaned.

'Of course it does, my son; and no one can abolish the Fifth Commandment. But the Scriptures are a holy book, you have to know how to interpret it. The Church in its mercy has relieved you and its other children of that impossible task by taking the whole labour of understanding and interpreting the divine truth on its selfless shoulders.'

'But can there be several interpretations of "Thou shalt not kill"?'

Alexey Spiridonovich refused to give in, but I, remembering the experience of the Labardan mission and knowing the unpleasant consequences to which a passion for interpreting lofty matters may lead, tugged at his sleeve and succeeded at last in dragging him away.

Mr Cool turned out to be a better diplomat. After lavishly praising the activities of the Holy See and of the cardinal himself, he modestly asked what we—one true Catholic, one Protestant, one Greek Orthodox, one idolater and one Jew (but a very well-behaved one, so that you could scarcely tell)—could do to restore peace in Europe in accordance with the desires of all mankind.

'I, too, long for peace,' said the cardinal, 'and I pray for it every morning, noon and evening, and even at night. Meanwhile I would advise you, if your country's affairs are going badly—which I venture to guess by the fact that you are so anxious to have peace—to give this charming object, I mean this infernal weapon, to my friend the bishop of Vienna, who is known for his passion—a most innocent one, to be sure—for collecting as yet unknown specimens of such bric-à-brac.

This would, of course, provide you with the means of settling down in comfort and praying undisturbed for the restoration of universal peace.'

However, Mr Cool was—as can be seen from the preceding chapters—a man of principle, and he rejected the tempting proposition politely but categorically. Then the cardinal suggested that we might become commercial travellers for the Holy See and deliver various useful articles to the Allied countries. Although this would not bring peace any nearer, Mr Cool, being devoted to the work from childhood, did not refuse, and the cardinal, having given us his blessing, sent us to see Fra Giuseppe, a Dominican monk in charge of the sale of the aforesaid articles.

After passing through many rooms and corridors we entered a large hall resembling the floor of a department store. In one corner there hung all sorts of small crosses and medals supposed to protect soldiers from death and wounds. A large number of grateful letters from those who had experienced the protective properties of these objects on their own person, gathered into a fairly thick volume, bore witness to their efficacy. In another corner were all the requisites of military chaplains—mobile chapels equipped according to the last word in modern technique, portable altars, and even explanatory drawings for the performance of various rites, such as sprinkling batteries with holy water, blessing airmen about to drop bombs, etc. In a third corner were *ex voto* offerings, i.e. gifts to be presented to the Virgin Mary and other favourite saints after a successful attack. For those who had remained unharmed there were toy soldiers in various uniforms, for those who had been wounded but had since recovered there were wax arms and legs on a thread, for ships' passengers saved from torpedoes there were delightful model boats, and, finally, for governments which had won the war there were magnificent relief maps of Europe with adjustable frontiers to meet any eventuality.

We examined with great curiosity all these devices which so obviously refuted the malicious statements of the unbelievers

that the Church had become petrified and no longer showed any signs of life. Engrossed, we did not even notice when Fra Giuseppe—the man we had been waiting for—came into the room, and were startled when we heard a great yell of 'Signor! Dear, dear, Signor!' We looked round in a fright, and the ancient walls of the Vatican witnessed once again a scene of that tender, guileless, brotherly reunion which so befitted them. Fra Giuseppe was none other than our own jolly Erocole. He was dressed in a habit with a rope tied round his waist; in his hand he carried a cypress-wood rosary, and his head gleamed with an immaculate tonsure.

'So, my friend, you have shaken the dust of the sinful world from your feet and have dedicated yourself to the salvation of your soul?' Mr Cool asked solemnly.

'That's what you think!' And Erocole, remembering the *via Pascudini*, spat contemptuously upon the ancient holiness of the marble floor. 'What was I to do? There's a war on.'

We happened to know for a fact that no mobilisation orders for the replenishment of monasteries had been proclaimed anywhere, and were therefore at a loss to grasp the connection between the war with Austria and our friend's unexpected get-up. For him, however, that connection was obviously a reality because he did not even attempt to explain it to us. Instead, he began to plead with the Teacher to engage him once more as a *cicerone* and take him away to some other country, for the excess of holiness surrounding him had made him depressed, bad-tempered and desiccated like those 'English asses' of old, who, alas, no longer came to visit Rome.

The Teacher insisted that he should first satisfy our legitimate curiosity by explaining all, and particularly the tonsure. Erocole made a mysterious gesture with his finger, looked round to make sure no one was near, and took us into the next room, which was unbelievably dirty. We sat down on the bed—resembling in colour and shape the *via Pascudini* dear to Erocole's heart—and began to drink wine produced by Erocole and bearing the highly suitable name of *Lacrima Christi*. While

we drank, Ercole told us his story, which he interspersed generously with exclamations, oaths and assurances that he wasn't lying.

When he had first come back to Italy it had been all great fun. Everybody had wanted war, gone about the streets with flags and shouted 'Evviva!' Once they had even smashed a scoundrelly Austrian's shop, and Bambucci had got away with two candlesicks and a bronze lizard. Then war had been declared and Ercole had been called up. That hadn't been too bad either. One beautiful lady had given him a bunch of flowers and ten soldi. Also he had gone into all the *trattorie* and drunk a lot of wine. But then! Then! What a scandal! He had been swindled. A hundred thousand devils! What kind of a war was that? A slaughterhouse, that's what it was! Not only had he, Ercole, had to fire, but others had fired at him, and not half! Ercole wasn't fool enough to sit and wait till he was killed. He had seen wounded men. Yes! And dead men, too! With his own eyes!

From the mere memory of these horrors Ercole lost all his strength and fell silent. Only after drinking two glasses of wine was he able to resume his tragic tale. He had decided to run away, or rather not run at all but simply go back to the *via Pascudini*. They had grabbed him as if he'd committed a murder, kept him in gaol for three months, and then sent him back to the same place. Ercole had understood that you had to use cunning to get out of this, but how? He had consulted his comrades. The fools! The jackasses! They had suggested all sorts of idiotic things—for instance, that he should put a bullet through his own hand. Did you ever hear of such a thing? Not an Austrian's hand, not a general's, but his own! As if he had a hundred hands! Imbeciles! No, he had thought of something worth two of that. He had stood on the slope of a hill—not a very high one—and at the first shot he had slid down on his behind, laid himself flat and started to yell for all he was worth: 'I'm dying! A priest!' They had picked him up and taken him to the field-hospital. The doctor: 'What's the matter with you?'

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'A bullet grazed me and I slid down into the precipice.'

'What bullet? There isn't a trace.'

'So you want there to be traces? Maybe you'd like me to be dead? I tell you a bullet grazed me and threw me down, and then it flew on. When they picked me up I couldn't walk. I'm lame!'

He had even tried to limp with both legs, but it hadn't come off. The doctor, though of course he was a bloodsucker and wanted Ercole's death, hadn't really been too bad; he hadn't asked too many questions and said Ercole had concussion. Word of honour!

'So they sent me on leave, three months of it. Well, I wasn't fool enough to go into that rat-trap for a second time.'

'I got back to Rome. But would you believe it? First of all, those bandits everywhere want to see your documents. Secondly, not a single English ass, so that you could die of hunger without any bullets at all. I had to find something. Of course I could have become a newspaper editor. A respectable gentleman said so when I was telling them at the *osteria* what a wonderful thing war was, what a hero I'd been and how everyone ought to volunteer for the front. For I'm not a traitor, I'm no Austrian scum, I'm an honest patriot. I still say *Evviva Italia!* But in order to be an editor you've got to be able to write and know all sorts of other tricks. So that wouldn't do.'

Then he had met a monk who had fallen in love with a terribly rich *signorina* and wanted to elope with her. They had made a deal. The monk had become Private Bambucci on authorised leave, Ercole had become Fra Giuseppe, an itinerant monk of the Dominican order. Splendid; but you've got to eat even when you're dressed up in a habit. He had tried collecting for the decoration of churches in the Holy Land. But those mean godless swine, may the devil boil them in rancid oil! He hadn't collected enough for a litre of wine in a whole day. And the prices!

Then he had taken a medal off his neck and sold it to a soldier for two lire, saying it would protect him from bullets.

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Then he had bought three more medals for one lira, and so the business had been launched.

He would take up a position near the railway station and shout: 'Attention! Dear defenders of the fatherland! Do you know what a bullet is? It roars and whistles, it makes a great noise and penetrates the body, rips up the intestines, pierces the heart, the liver and the navel. But there is a sure protection against it: this image of Saint Catherine of Siena. Put it on your breast and no bullet will touch you. It will bounce off the holy image and fly back towards the damned Austrians. Look, here is an image with the traces of a bullet upon it. You can see it has come to no harm. Three hundred letters of thanksgiving lie in my cell. Hurry! These are the last of the images blessed by the bishop himself. None of the others are worth a single soldo. Hurry! One lira! One lira!'

And they had come and bought.

The abbot of San Giovanni, who happened to be passing that way, had taken favourable notice of Ercole and sent him along to see the bishop, who in turn had sent him to the cardinal. His talents had been duly appreciated and he had been entrusted with the running of the little shop inside the Vatican. That was the whole story. Oh yes, the most important thing: the tonsure. He had had a lot of difficulty with that. He had been afraid to go to the barber's, and so he had bought an old razor at the market for ten soldi and had been obliged to scrape the crown of his head himself. A beastly job. Altogether he wasn't satisfied. Whenever anyone came into the shop he had to finger his beads and mutter under his breath as if he were saying his prayers. You weren't supposed to lie down or spit, except in the most exceptional circumstances. Altogether it wasn't a life but a perpetual penance. The devil take it! I say, signor, aren't you planning a revolution, even a very little one? That would be much more fun than fighting a war or fingering those horrid little wooden balls.

'On the contrary,' the Teacher replied, 'we are in an extremely peaceful frame of mind. We actually came here to seek peace.'

'Never mind,' cried Ercole, 'if not a revolution, let's at least have peace and get back to the via Pascudini. I'm your man!'

He threw off his habit and we were amazed to see with our own eyes the power of tradition among the Italian people. Ercole retained the stratifications of many epochs upon his body, to wit, the primary rags which he had worn for a shirt in happier days, the striped pants given him by the Teacher, and a uniform tunic of military cut.

As we went out through the age-old gates of the Vatican, without peace but with our Ercole in his eclectic costume restored to us and with the machine-gun being dragged along by Aysba, we afforded a few moments' pleasure to the Swiss guards who, no longer amused even by their own garb, were almost falling asleep with boredom.

The same night we took the train for Paris.