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Vošicki

Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić



4.

Koprivnica, 1909

The train let out a long, piercing whistle, announcing its arrival. Vošicki watched the fields rolling by on the other side of the window. They were bare, greasy and sodden, as they usually are in October, even though the morning promised a sunny day. The landscape reminded him of the photographs of a high tide: the sea seemed to have retreated, taking everything away, and instead of the seagulls, the crows rammed themselves into the sky. He watched it all with a growing chill in his heart; *it was hard to believe what corners of the world the Imperial and Royal railways had reached, etched above his native Ledeč and these fields alike.*

The wheels of the train rattled on, the plumes of dense, black smoke billowed up into the sky releasing their ghastly crows, and then the brakes screeched, and the train slowed down. In the distance, Vošicki saw the houses that reminded him of small game, of rabbits shivering in fear, huddled together between the furrows, waiting for the danger to pass. It was not much unlike his native village, and just a few years ago that sight would not have saddened him and shaken him that deeply. He would have quickly adjusted to it all, and his impression would have been different. Like this, he saw the streets three steps away from a knee-deep mud puddle, he saw the afternoon, almost deadly silence of the late autumn landscape, with something that called itself a town pressed into it like a cigarette butt into an ashtray – a few church-towers like the arms of the drowning calling for help; a waggon drawn by the cows that stared blankly at the carriages rolling by; the tarnished sheaves of corn stalks; the people who went to school for several years only, and only until the winter chill; the ducks in dysentery puddles, the manure mixed with straw flowing in lazy rivulets everywhere he looked. He was coming there to publish books in a language he didn't know.

He quickly reached the ditch, or rather a quagmire full of pondweed, and turned left. To his left was a meadow, and to his right a row of wooden fences with gardens and back sides of the houses beyond them. He came to the hotel's outbuildings and its hole-in-the-ground cellar, and after a few more steps he was in front of the hotel at the corner of the street. As he walked towards the entrance, in the distance he saw the main town square that he found interesting. At its far side was a rather big building, clearly the town hall, with the late baroque houses to the left, which was no surprise; the surprise was a park to the right, with its still young greenery touching the square. A hotel employee was busily sweeping the street in front of the main entrance,

and two men were approaching from the opposite direction. One of them was doctor Kasumović, the head of the town's hospital for a whole decade, who had received a gold signet ring from the emperor Francis Joseph himself, as the best student at the Vienna University; the other was Blind Francek. In one hand he carried a stick with pretzels on a string, which he held like an umbrella; in the other he had a cane to feel his way along the street. His shoes were soaked, as well as the legs of his trousers, but he seemed to have gotten used to it. Then the ground began to quiver. The sweeper shook his head with disapproval and stopped his work. He lowered his chin on the top of his broomstick and looked up the road and towards the town. The rumble was now loud and clear. Vošicki finally saw a man leading a herd of a dozen or so horses tied to one another. He was riding bareback, almost at a gallop, and the muscles of his torso showed under his shirt, tense with the effort of keeping the balance. The long manes of the horses fluttered, and their strong bodies glistened. They jostled each other, powerful and untamed. Vošicki liked that image. He thought it was a sign. As the horses galloped by, the bareback rider whistled and shouted something incomprehensible.

„America, will you ever stop with your nonsense!“ the sweeper cried to him, but the rider didn't hear him.

He looked wild and free. He looked exactly like the America in Karl May's novels that Vošicki had procured from Dresden. He looked the way Vošicki wanted to look. He rumbled down Varaždinska Street, which led from the hotel to the cemetery at the edge of the town, and Vošicki followed him with his gaze. He suddenly felt he had come to a place where it would be possible to live.

„Excuse me“, he cleared his throat and repeated in his head the words he had learnt by heart, „can I ask you...“

„I know what you want“, the sweeper raised his hand to stop him, irritated that Gross had been right. „You need to see my boss.“

„I beg your pardon?“

„*Mein Chef*“, the man pointed at the hotel entryway.

„*Er besitzt auch ein Hotel?*“ Vošicki was slightly confused.

„*Ja*. Yes. The boss owns the hotel. He is in charge of everything. But you'll have to wait, 'cause he's busy right now with some guys from Nagyatád.“

Vošicki nodded, and the man resumed his sweeping.

„What are you selling? Pomades? Cleaning supplies and brushes? Today everybody sells one magical thing or another.“

„Nein. Boohs.“

„Boohs?“

„Yes.“

„Are they magical?“

„Of course“, Vošicki quickly replied.

„I'm Štef. Nice to meet you“, the sweeper wiped his hand against his apron and offered it to Vošicki.

„Čeňek. Nice to meet you too“, Vošicki said and added: „Vincenc.“

„Oh, you're Vinko. Now I know who you are. Why haven't you said you are here to see Merhaut?“

5.

Koprivnica, 1911

The inn was packed. The waiter walked around with a tray of drinks held high in his hand. The landlord walked from one table to another, shaking the hands of the men, kissing those of the women. In a corner on the left side of the room a chair was placed, surrounded by several coat stands connected with richly decorated garlands. That chair was called *funny jail*, and one would end up in it if they were accused of something – of pinching another man's wife or singing a serenade under someone's window – and was free to go only by paying the bail: a litre or more of wine. Full of lollipops, nuts and little red bows, the garlands stretched out in every corner of the room, at some places coupled with the decorated pine branches, which exuded the familiar, pleasant fragrance of the woods. Despite all these ornaments, the left wall was dominated by a rather big water-colour painting – it was actually a coat of arms, similar to those that loom over the guests in the houses of noble families and speak to them with the fierce vanity of the long-past centuries. It was divided in three equal sections. The upper third showed a bunch of grapes cloaked in the leaves of vine, bursting with juices at the peak of ripeness, with plump, dewy berries, as if it had been just plucked off the grapevine. In the middle section a lyre with tight strings and voluptuous body was ready to abandon itself completely to the skilful fingers. The lower third was filled with a woman's leg in a shiny black stocking. Underneath that all, from the left to the right, girding the coat of arms, but not smothering it, a silk ribbon proudly boasted the motto of the royal lineage of inn lovers: *As long as we are kicking up a fuss!* In the opposite corner of the room soft music was playing, as a prelude to welcome speeches and good wishes. The musicians were all from the same family. The pater

familias Martin stood a step or two behind the members of his household. In his hands big enough to start a watermill he held two beaters wrapped in linen, with which he coaxed the softest tones out of a cimbalom. When he opened his arms striking the outer strings of his instrument, the rest of his family seemed to spring out of his chest and limbs. On one side there was his wife Jaga, rocking her double bass vigorously like two Hungarian women dancing a czardas on a moonlit sandbank, with two young men beside her, both tall, both strong and broad-shouldered like the rafts over the river Drava, very similar to each other, but not brothers – a son and a son-in-law, who had unsheathed their bows and now brandished them at their audience, threatening them with their playful violins. When they struck up the first chords, the world scattered over the plowland like ashes.

Suddenly, a pig burst into the room and dashed among the tables, followed by the old Švarc woman who tried to catch it. The guests moved their chairs aside and blocked its way, but the little bastard skilfully dodged them.

„Is it the time already?“ somebody cried, having not noticed it right away, but everybody knew it was a joke.

„Happy new year!“ somebody else added happily.

„Mita! Mita!“ the innkeeper called out to Dimitrije Ožegović, Vošicki's age mate and the informal manager of the hotel ever since he returned from Prague without his medical degree. He took to drinking there and continued it here, running the hotel almost without a salary, solely for his food and accommodation. And drink, of course.

They finally managed to catch the pig, and the old Švarc woman rebuked it strictly as she carried it out of the room.

Vošicki looked around the room. The former mayor Matija Malančec was sitting at a table close to the table where the young Ivan Kraljević from the Peasant Party, who was allegedly in good relations with Stjepan Radić, had settled with his company. Josip Vargović wedged himself between the two of them, having been removed from the position of the town mayor not two full weeks ago. Most of the guests liked his being there – those who supported him considered it a proof he could live with defeat, and those who couldn't stand him were happy for a chance to mock him. His wife was outraged by his removal from the position, but she held her head high, convinced that sooner or later things would fall into their rightful place, and that her husband would again

rule the town. In that, her proud profile that night proved prophetic. Their son Aleksandar was with them. What affected him was not so much his father's defeat as the plum brandy that kept coming to their table. The party at their table started a heated debate soon after their arrival, and we all know what happens when accusations and rounds get in full swing.

„Who's that man?“ Vošicki asked Javand, who was unbuttoning his waistcoat.

„Hermann“, the other man replied curtly.

„That's what I thought.“

„A *prima vista* moron. He behaves as if he were a man of authority. They can appoint him the commissioner a hundred times over, but he is damn wrong if he thinks we are going to let him get smart with us. Now is better“, he added when he undid the last button and relaxed a little.

„A Hungarophile“, doctor Fišl remarked and nodded, because that said it all. But then he changed his mind and added: „An idiot.“

Two weeks ago Vargović was suspended from his office, because he had ordered that the People's Progressive Party leaflets should be confiscated, stating that they were „bloody pro-Hungarian“. His position was promptly taken by Hermann, poor thing, who was under the delusion that his position gave him importance. He even had the cheek to show up at the party at the last moment, and arrogantly refuse the invitation to sit at the *monkey* table. He pointed at the table in the middle of the room, which was traditionally Šavor the Tailor's table.

It all started just after midnight, when the pig, this time by protocol, burst into the room again, with a red and green bow tied around its neck. It dashed among the tables, squealing wildly to the peals of laughter echoing around. The men bent down to try and catch it. Gajski the Carpenter, mister Rozman's fellow board member, had the clever idea to take a piece of an apple from a garland and wave it in front of the terrified pig's eyes, when one of the gentleman, to the horror of his mother-in-law, threw himself down on the floor and managed to catch the pig by its tail, but only for several brief moments. Everybody in the inn was having an amazing time, and they all eagerly participated in the hunt. It is hard to say who actually did it, but somebody stomped their foot against the floor when Marička (the pig had been given a name in the meantime) appeared in front of them, thus forcing the poor thing to change its course completely. The whole room swayed in the rhythm of the tune played in full throttle by Martin the cimbalom player and his band. Jaga hit her double bass as if it had failed to come home for three days in a row, and the two young men drew their bows over the strings of their violins quickly, but gently. It was bedlam in the room, and nobody knew if Marička was running

in the rhythm of the music, or the rhythm was chasing her. The innkeeper Švarc stood to a side with such a smile on his face, that the waxed ends of his pointed moustache tickled his eyes. Marička veered towards the table of the commissioner Hermann. She was already very close to him, when he slowly stood up. He waited for everyone to turn their gazes at him, and then he folded his belt, sniffed in such a way as to suck all the moisture out of the air, calmly drew his pistol and flicked the safety off. A sudden hush fell over the room. Mrs Jakub Rozman dropped her spoon of aspic. Marička squealed until Hermann's outstretched hand pulled the trigger, and the pistol went off. The pig collapsed on its side. The blood gushed forth from its belly and flew in a calm rivulet across the floor. Hermann put his pistol back in its holster, knocked with his knuckles on the table and left the room followed by his suite. Švarc signalled to the musicians, and the first chords had already found their way out of the wombs of their instruments, when a faltering cry snuck after the commissioner's back.

„What has that poor creature ever done to you!“

One after another, voices rose from all sides, throwing serious threats at the hog killer who had already left. Until Aleksandar Vargović stood up from his chair. He lifted his arm high in the air, wagged his finger and shouted: „*Abzug Magjari! Abzug!* Away with Hungarians!“

That exclamation was met with cheers of approval, and some of the present even applauded, ignoring those among them who were always and everywhere making mental or real notes of who did and said what. Then doctor Fišl shouted bravely:

„*Abzug Magjari! Ab-zug!* Do you think I'm afraid of you? Away with you! Just get out of here!“

Vošicki felt a sinking feeling nestle in the pit of his stomach, tug at his veins like a sacristan at the bell ropes on major religious holidays and roar in his head, because the police commissioner Raizner was looking in their direction and scribbling something on a piece of paper. To make matter worse, doctor Javand then stood up as well and repeated only once, solemnly pronouncing each letter like a leading opera singer: „*A b z u g* Magjari. Shame on you!“

At that, the commissioner Raizner headed towards them pursuing his duty, and God only knows how it would all have ended, if the dead drunk Vargovic's son hadn't blocked his way and told him he could go no further.

All things considered, it ended rather well. The young Aleksandar got three days in jail to have something to boast about among his friends, while the pharmacist Fišl and doctor Javand got away with just a fine, and the story itself went around the town in ever bigger circles, until finally somebody claimed that the Czech Vošicki had also shouted „*Abzug Magjari!*“

10.

Koprivnica, 1923

He recognized him from afar, before the curve of his bulky body could be clearly discerned. He could feel the energy of a man striding towards what was important to him with firm resolution and without hesitation. He was looking forward to their meeting and he could almost understand why the young writer Miroslav Krleža must have taken it as an insult and defeat to be getting off the train at this station.

Every step by the fruit and vegetable stalls behind which the women vendors stood motionless like rooted to the spot was like a personal Calvary to him; he almost couldn't believe that he was really there, as though just two steps earlier he had walked down Ilica Street and then made a wrong turn that got him here; it seemed that somebody had plotted to snatch the streets of Zagreb from under his feet, just like a couple years ago, when the train to Duga Rijeka, a village at the foot of the Kalnik mountain, where his wife Bela got the position of a teacher, took him by the familiar, slanted villages. To be honest, he felt a certain affection for the provinces (after all, his beloved grandmother was a country woman), but that affection faded as he drew closer to them, and especially when he was doing it with a manuscript in his pocket. While all those ideologically correct apes stood crowded around the literary fountain in Zagreb, he crawled through the backwoods, up to his knees in mud, hoping that one of his works might be published here where the life seemed not to have heard of Bede the Venerable and the reckoning of time, of motion and transience, so that everything stood motionless like dead in this town for which he already knew that it was going to remain a neuralgic spot in his biography for as long as he lived.

In Duga Rijeka he used to go for hours-long walks, to get away from the small village, from the mooing cows and bleating sheep, and all those fathers who thought they had something worth writing about, or rather that they themselves were that something, because just like him, they often felt stranded on a wrong cliff. He hadn't published a single line for years, since that bloody year 1920, and this Vošicki, he had to give him that, was actually crazy to have invited him to come.

Some ten years passed since he had entered the literary world at the beginning of 1914, thinking he was passing over the threshold of the holy door. His one-act play *Legenda* was published in instalments in *Književne novosti* literary magazine. With those pages in his pocket as the at long last obtained identity card that gave him the full voting rights, he went from one literary circle to another, ready to polemicize, never be wrong and tell again and again to everyone willing to listen that Matoš had read his play and expressed the de-

sire to meet him, but he refused. A month after the last instalment was published, Matoš died, and that story anchored itself firmly between him and the shore on which the readers, or at least the listeners, were standing. Nobody could check any longer if it was true, or just a fabrication of the young, talented writer, whose long, baroque sentences were sometimes easy to get lost in and difficult to navigate back. He was twenty-one, and every atom of oxygen he inhaled into his lungs gave him strength. But everything was almost lost when the wretched Austro-Hungarian Monarchy declared war on Serbia. He, a man of letters, was reduced to a common soldier, and it seemed to him that everything had gone to hell, a feeling that would stay with him for years.

And now, almost a decade later, he was walking through the park in Koprivnica, watching the strangely content faces on which he saw only selfless stupidity and boorishness in its authentic, amorphous shape, because that was his outlook in both literature and life. With the impatience of a choleric he dismissed them all as he was passing by, a man after man, a woman after woman, not giving them the time to address him, because he'd had his fair share of dealings with their kind.

He sketched and dismissed them with ease, as they came along. This man because of a piece of spinach between his teeth; he could serve as a terrific model for the character of an insurance agent, maybe a representative of the British Lloyd, who harvests the spinach from between his teeth with the nail of his pinkie, as he utters the words he finds important, such as *a hundred pound sterling*, the words for which the stablemen envy him endlessly, the words that send shivers down the washerwomen's spines as he breathes them down their necks. The woman over there he tried to forget before he had even noticed her, because he knew, in the pit of his stomach he sensed that she was about to bring her thumb to her nostril and blow out the sticky, greenish mucus stretching between her frontal bone and the mushy grey matter that floated vaguely in the solution in which there were no serious signs of life, which would then disappear forever in the dust from which everything grew again. In the end she would wipe her upper lip with her apron and ask with honest interest „Will the gentleman buy something?“, shifting the carrots and potatoes on her stall. She was a small woman, undernourished for someone who sold fruit and vegetables, with the eyes that darted around stupidly. Her destiny in a novel would definitely have to be a tragic one. Abandoned by everybody, by her husband who just didn't return home one day, she would have to die alone. If she was a mother, her child had probably ran away from her as well, because all children avoided her, toothless and evil as she was. „Like Maia“, Krleža wrote down in his notebook, „who was impregnated by Zeus and then wrapped the baby in blankets, but the baby

ran away when she fell asleep. Her son is Hermes, the thief who stole Apollo's cattle and is the protector of thieves. She is a scrawny, stooped witch, the bogey parents scare their children with." Then there was a man who doggedly repeated the word *pharmacy*, as if drinking its freshness from the well of wisdom over and over again. Krleža wrote him off with a blink of an eye, together with the rest of them who laughed stupidly, not knowing themselves why they were laughing. „As if they had seen a cow on a tree“, the image flashed in front of his eyes, and he wrote it down and then put his notebook into his pocket. The people around him grinned like idiots, without hiding their rotten teeth and foul-smelling gums. Finally, he first heard then saw the man who was telling how one day on the Galician front, just a few days before Christmas, the *atillery* suddenly fell silent, and a record playing on the *gramophone* was heard from the distance, and nobody knew where exactly it was coming from, but the gentle sound that spilled over the fields was somehow sacred and so on. The man pulled one sentence after another out of his magic hat containing the usual kitsch of a provincial coachman, picked up from the shop assistants he drove from the railway station straight to a brothel. The rickety house just across the shrine in the street was a story in itself, with the red lanterns that made one wonder who had died, when the truth was that all these people were actually dead, even though they breathed, spat and farted, moving through the life with the instincts of a two-headed calf. He could sketch this sorry town in three rough strokes. In all fairness, that all was *kleinkariert*, small-minded, but not significantly different from the majority of our sad provinces, so why waste the words? He should just take a deep breath and pass as painlessly as possible by these Potemkin facades, behind which several families of amateurs were trying unsuccessfully to give a convincing performance of bourgeois life, as if, just a few meters away from their high-ceilinged parlours, the outhouses were not slanting with the hearts carved into their doors that squeaked so loud that their creaking could be heard all the way to the pavilion.

The Tsar was not packed yet, but it would soon be. Vošicki chose a corner table, and they both sat with their backs to the wall.

„As long as we're kicking up a fuss“, Krleža read off the painting with his second glass of wine. „Nice. I could use it.“

He was slowly relaxing, taking off his marble mask. He lifted his glass in a toast to their collaboration and started a new subject.

„You know, Vošicki, I was watching our women vendors out your window today. They were standing like tor-

tured soldiers on a leave of absence in front of those tree trunks covered with piss, hiding from the August heat under their crowns, and I thought that they could be just as well standing on an ancient Greek or Roman square, for their postures seemed to suggest that selling cucumbers was the most important thing since the creation of the world, the only and the right way of existing; seeing them so upright and round like baroque statues, I couldn't help but thinking that, if they were aware of their power and if they multiplied their sorrow and their anger, they could bring the world down to its knees."

"An interesting image, even if you don't believe in it completely", Vošicki said. „Still, I am fascinated. Some people stare pensively out that same window for days, and all they can come up with to say is: It's going to rain. Or: It's hot. But I'm afraid you'll have to come here more often, to understand the character of these people and what drives them."

"The character?" Krleža laughed. „Human character is everywhere the same. People are just trying to drag as much as possible into their cave and they watch over their belongings in constant fear they will lose them. Besides, I got too know people like these long time ago and far too well. I can say I've known them all my life. Indeed, it is people like these that are inscribed in my being. You probably don't know it, but I am a man from Varaždin, so to speak. Various toponyms from that area, in which my ancestors fooled their time away, grow and multiply in me like ulcers. You know me, and you know that I haven't come into being by myself, but by my ancestors, like everyone else. I am the offspring of those Krležas who rolled in the mud of the river Krapina and enjoyed the blood-red sunsets of the Križovljan parish, after which, at dawn, the church organ filled its bellows and abandoned itself to its player's long, caressing fingers, the same fingers that are now inside me and find their expression in my pen. Those notes settle in me, the same way they settled on those fields and blackened roofs, under which generations are huddled together feverishly around the stove, as if someone might take it away if they ease their grip for just a moment. You may think I'm joking, but I am intimately familiar with the Čakovec-Sveti Urban region. My grandmother Terezija Goričančeva died in Varaždin not long ago, in March this year, at the age of eighty five. We Krležas are bastard sons. I've heard you have remarried, and I bet it was a huge scandal. But what does it mean to have a second wife, when you think of a thousand years distant light of the stars that saw us home only yesterday night? Just imagine, those same stars shone a thousand years ago, to help the crones find their way to a pigsty, pour the slops into the trough or empty a bucket of faeces behind the house? And people worry about what those same neighbours would think? That is why I can so easily admit, and mind you, it has nothing to do with this wine, that the gentleman you are sharing this honest table with is no less but a bastard son! Cheers!" He lifted his glass and they toasted. „We Krležas have

long rid ourselves of the rusty cage of monogamy. The one who did it was my grandfather and namesake, the man shaded with the bronze pathos of the afore mentioned Križovljan parish, who stepped into the social back light in a somewhat awkward manner. Yes, Fric Krleža, a common organ player in Varaždin area, who would have thought that? I will tell you, Vošicki, because our heads are on the block together, and that is a clear proof that you are a man of spirit: that grandfather of mine was a philanderer *par excellence*. He had five children and he ruined the lives of two fine ladies, one of which was nobody else but the niece of his Eminence the parish priest and already a mother of three. That is, she already had three children before she met my grandpa Fric and to rile her uncle the parish priest even more, had his, what?"

„I don't know. A son?"

„Exactly, a son! But not just any son! A bastard son, Vošicki my friend, a bastard son. That bastard son is my father, Miroslav Fric Krleža. Yes, life really writes all kinds of stories, my dear *amice*. And I bet that those of us who enjoy the favours of Apollo's Muses, at least the good among us, have the most incredible stories in the ragged bundle of their heritage. Therefore, my friend, you have the honour of sharing the table with Miroslav Fric Krleža the third, the biggest speculator of the Križovljan parish."

16.

Koprivnica, 1942

Mrs Ružić took the opportunity to ask Nemeč for a moment of his time, to discuss a private matter with him, and since her husband was two days after that incident with the ottoman still adamant that he was not going to talk to him (he called in sick and just lied in bed), she went to see him alone.

She was ten minutes early, and since the secretary was not there, she just let herself in and was surprised to see the manager of once Rosenberg's, and now Nemeč's store in Nemeč's office. Both men looked at her in a way that left no room for doubt she had interrupted them in a confidential conversation. She got terribly confused. The truth was on her side, but she didn't expect she would have to throw it, so to speak, at his face. She knew what he was like, *he would turn it all to his advantage and even lie that what she was saying never happened!* Suddenly it all seemed so vulgar and repulsive, and for a moment or two she could understand her husband's attitude. Nemeč greeted her with what seemed like kindness, but she smiled back at him with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. He should know he had crossed the line, the county commissioner or not. It was rumoured that he was going to be replaced at the first opportunity, anyway. A moment

later Nemeč asked the manager to leave the two of them alone. When she saw Rosenberg's notebook, and the new one, Nemeč's, she again shuddered with unease. On the other hand, *why should she feel embarrassed? Nobody was denying what those notebooks said.*

They sat at the desk and she immediately picked up the notebook, without any respect, rudely like a common washerwoman. Coldly and matter-of-factly, he asked her if the amount was right, and she confirmed it with a nod.

„That will be settled as soon as my husband gets his salary. I think you of all people understand that.“

„But here you are, in my office...“

That remark caught her by surprise, and while she stammered for words, he continued: „I thought it wouldn't hurt to check it anyway.“

„Still, what your manager did was absolutely unnecessary and vulgar, not to say disgusting“, Mrs Ružić protested.

It could not be denied that the manager was too eager and far from tactical in carrying out Nemeč's order to stop giving the goods on credit, primarily because the income from the camp was absurdly low now that the camp was almost empty and facing the closure. He didn't allow Mrs Ružić to have a look at the list, but humiliated her in front of other customers, saying that *she wouldn't see it until she settled her old debts*. She was furious, but she kept it to herself.

„Debt? You consider that a debt?“ she snorted with disdain. „Well, it may be a debt for someone uncivilized like yourself, who doesn't understand the ways of a refined society. Allow me to advise you to look up to the old Europe, where it is normal to pay the bill at the end of the month.“

„It's been two months since you settled your bill.“

„You missed the point, my darling.“ That reply came to her so naturally and with such confidence, that all other customers smiled derisively at the manager, thinking he had gotten what he deserved.

Nemeč now admitted that he had to warn the manager, who had definitely crossed the line of polite behaviour.

„Consider it solved. You will pay when it is convenient to you“, he said and pushed the notebook aside.

She thanked him, but not before she told him that some people might think it a trifle, but she simply had to sort that matter out, if for no other reason, then because of the close business and friendly relations between him and her husband.

„Because of our mutual respect, Mrs Ružić, having your best interests at heart, I will allow myself the

freedom to draw your attention to certain, so to say, *irregularities* I have come across in Rosenberg's books, that could lead to unnecessary embarrassment", Nemeč said.

„What?“ she popped her eyes. „That has all been settled“, she waved her hand as if to chase that notebook away like an unfashionable poodle. „We paid that Jew to the last penny.“

The commissioner raised his arm to calm her down and interrupt her.

„It is solely a legal matter, a matter of certain oversights that were undoubtedly inadvertent errors.“

„I'm not sure I know what you mean“, Mrs Ružić replied, but her stomach protested, because she could guess what he was talking about.

„I mean the outbuilding...“

„The outbuilding?!“ she jumped to her feet. „You mean that shed?“

„Yes, I guess you can call it that.“

Her heart missed a beat. The bloody *arrhythmics*, just when she started to think she had seen the last of it. Her beating heart climbed into her throat like a small crab, then fell heavily back into her lungs; her once powerful breasts heaved visibly. This whole thing had made her gasp for breath, and she knew that panic would seize her now, and that she wouldn't die only if she ran out of that office right away.

„That's our shed. It's all legal, ask Rosenberg.“

„Now, now, Mrs Ružić, that was very naughty from you“, he teased her. „Besides, even if he were here, he would hardly be competent and qualified enough for the real estate matters.“

Mrs Ružić started again, in a different pitch, like at a choir rehearsal.

„We have the documents saying it's all legal.“

Nemeč interrupted her, still polite: „I'm afraid there has been an oversight on your side. Unintentional, of course. You see, I've consulted the lawyers and it is their unequivocal opinion that you couldn't have bought Rosenberg's shed for the simple reason that he had no legal right to sell it.“

Mrs Ružić gasped for air; she grabbed hold of the back of her chair with one hand, and waved the other in front of her face.

„Would you like a glass of water?“

She shook her head, no.

„It was all done before the new law...“, she said when she calmed down enough to find her voice again.

Nemeč opened his arms.

„Look, you are saying it was, others are saying it wasn't. The contract date seemingly supports your

claim, but you have to admit it was the time of big changes. Besides, someone malicious may say that the date could be falsified. For that reason, taking in consideration the wider picture, as far as we're concerned, that shed is still Rosenberg's property."

„You mean, your property."

„You can look at it like that, if you want."

Mrs Ružić was boiling inside, but she knew that the times required strategic thinkers. *Nemec was a has-been anyway, everybody said that. Not only because he was a worse thief than Jews.*

The shed was, of course, still his. On top of that, the camp was closed, and Ružić lost his job. He went from pub to pub, claiming it was the worst imaginable thievery. At first, she used to tell him to keep his mouth shut, but then she gave up. He became the town's laughing stock, the new Gross, and she realized she could live without him. People said he had lost his mind. But then, people said all kinds of things.

Mark my words, Nemec is preparing a revenge.

Vošicki is thinking about starting a business with Nemec. He was at the post office, asking about the prices for deliveries from Leipzig.

Have you heard about the Wolf girls? I've heard it from that good-for-nothing, Vuk Pavlović. It's not nice to say it, but Olgica Wolf was killed in a street in Zagreb in broad daylight, and the other sister shot herself in the head when the Gestapo came for her.

Is it true that Raizner has been shot?

Just think of the fate the Ožegovićs have met. Mita died from a heart attack, and Dušan ended up in Danica concentration camp.

The parliament was dissolved because of that memorandum the representatives had signed, the one against Pavelić's giving Dalmatia to the Italian frog-eaters.