

# Stefan Themerson

## I

① This is a beginning of a long journey.

Young reporters, photographers, T.V. people have just come to think there will be more news value in Mrs. Jermainia Lee than in General Piesc. Which ~~is~~<sup>is</sup> a pity, because his bushy eyebrows and thick <sup>gray</sup> moustache would photograph so well. And so would his eyes which <sup>one falls in love with</sup> ~~it will be~~ <sup>it will be</sup> impossible to <sup>not stare at</sup> ~~out stare~~.

③ On the other hand, though, Mrs Lee, a 32-year-old mother of five, is seven months pregnant, and has been doing the Pools since she came from Dominica in the ~~Caribbean~~ Caribbean six years ago, ~~and she~~ <sup>and she</sup> puts her ~~withstanding~~ <sup>withstanding</sup> the Pools down to her extra-sensory perception. **MOTHER'S POOLS WIN AFTER DREAM** will make a good headline.

② Take it that

## General Piesc

### OR THE CASE OF THE FORGOTTEN MISSION

Stefan Themerson

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Obscure Publications 2006



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Scans of the first page of the manuscript and the author (wearing a white coat) were generously provided by the Themerson Archive.

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## GENERAL PIESC



OR



## THE CASE OF THE FORGOTTEN MISSION

This is the beginning of a long journey. Young reporters, photographers, T.V. boys and girls, had just come to think there would be more news value in Mrs Jermainia Lee than in General Piesc. Which, in a way, was a pity, because his bushy brows and bristling grey moustache would have photographed so well. And so would his eyes which, one felt, no camera lens could outstare. On the other hand, though, Mrs Lee, a 32 year old mother of five *and* seven months pregnant, had been doing the Pools since she came from Dominica in the Caribbean some six years ago, *and* put her winning the Pools down to her extra-sensory perception. MOTHER'S POOLS WIN AFTER DREAM would make a good headline.

'General Piesc, did *you* have any premonitions?'

'No.'

'Mrs Lee had. She dreamed twice that she won the Pools.'

'So I heard.'

'And you didn't?'

'No.'

A girl reporter stepped forward:

'General Piesc, could you tell us what the first words you said were when you got the news?'

'I think I said "Good Lord!"'

They were standing in the ballroom of a big Park Lane hotel. A music-hall comedian had just presented the cheques to the winners. Champagne glasses emptied.

The evening paper man said:

‘You have no objection to your name appearing in the press, General?’

‘None.’

‘But you don’t feel... let us say... particularly eager...?’

‘That is correct.’

The evening paper man lifted his empty champagne glass:

‘Well, good luck, General. We’ll not mention your name. We shall say the fifth winner is a mystery man from London who has scooped the lion’s share of the pay-out with £129,740 and wishes to remain anonymous.’

‘That will be excellent. And now, if you will excuse me...’

But the woman reporter barred his way:

‘Just one more question, General, if I may. Off the record. To satisfy my own curiosity.’

‘Yes?’

‘Will you tell us what you are going to buy? I mean the first thing, the thing you wouldn’t have bought otherwise?’

General Piesc didn’t smile.

‘As this is off the record, I suppose you want to know the truth —’

‘I dare say, a man with your present fortune, General, can afford to tell the truth.’

‘Richesse oblige.’ said the photographer.

General Piesc still didn’t smile.

‘The other day I saw in a shop, in Piccadilly, a mackintosh,’ he said. ‘Light in colour, almost white. With exceptionally large pockets. I am going to buy it now.’

'Ha, ha,' said the evening paper man.

'What does he need the large pockets for?' said the photographer.

'I believe we've missed something there,' said the woman reporter.

\*

It is easier to describe a falling stone, or a flying bird, or a man who is running somewhere or other, than the same stone but motionless, or a bird suspended in midair, or a man standing. General Piesc was standing in the middle of his room. But there are so many ways one can stand. If, from the main staircase, one approached the front door and peeped through the key-hole, one could easily be under the impression that there was, somewhere in the room, but beyond one's field of vision, a portrait-painter who had arrested the general in that particular posture in order to catch the moment when, all orders having been dispatched, there is nothing more to do but wait. That, however, was not the reason for his standing motionless in the middle of the room. In a sense, the reason was quite opposite. The orders hadn't been sent. Not yet.

There were three hooks screwed to the door. His soft hat and a leash (she took the dog with her but forgot the leash) were hanging on one. His shopping basket on the second. He didn't take off his new (almost white) mackintosh to hang it on the third hook. His hands in the pockets of the mackintosh, he stood, motionless.

Opposite the door, there was a window. Through it, one could see the branches of a few trees in the semi-circular garden squeezed between the rows of houses built along one street and two crescents. On the left of the window — bookshelves, from floor to the ceiling. Then, in the next wall, another window, and,

still further to the left, a large double bed in the corner. Above the pillows, a post-card size Black Madonna from Wilno. Between the bed and the front door — an upright piano, its left shoulder against the wall, so that when you entered the room and looked left, you wouldn't notice the bed standing behind it. If you looked to the right, you would see the entrance to a little kitchen. And, in the further corner, to the right of the first window, a flight of stairs leading up to the bathroom and a little storeroom above the kitchen. Under the stairs — a writing desk.

Philosophers, those who take it for granted the events in the physical world are continuous and as densely ordered as the imaginary points on a straight imaginary line, would find it hard to explain why he took his hand out of his pocket and moved towards the desk at that particular moment, and not an infinitesimal fraction of a second later, or earlier. But he was there, at his desk, now. He opened the middle drawer and took out his passport. It was a British passport. He looked at it for a long while, and then put it into his breast pocket. The passport in his breast pocket meant liberty, and the wads of banknotes in his left trouser pocket meant freedom. A passport protects your rights, money gives you the means to exercise them. That afternoon, the bank clerk stood up when General Piesc showed him the cheque. He stood up and invited him to the manager's office. And the bank manager had made him sit in a leather armchair while preparing for him a deposit account, transferring some money to his current account, and counting out bundles of new crisp notes in cash.

'Is your car waiting for you, General? Or would you like us to call a cab?'

This reminded him of General Galliéni who in 1914 requisitioned all the Paris taxis and had soldiers driven in them up

to the battlefield on the river Marne, — the subject of his, Gentleman Cadet Piesc's, first essay (On Using Machines Instead of Horses) which he had had to write when at the Military Academy, Warsaw, many years ago.

'No,' he said, 'I think I shall walk.'

With no haste he walked to Kettners, Soho, where he had a solitary luncheon at a table covered with immaculate white linen which reminded him of his parents' home. From Soho he walked to Piccadilly. There was that familiar shop window there, with a small aquarium full of greenish water in which a tall, yellow riding boot stood like an upright fish, demonstrating its impregnability. And, at the back, the mackintosh with large pockets. He bought it. On his way home, he stopped at an ironmonger's and asked for a padlock, a staple and a hasp. And now, in his room, with his new mackintosh still on, he took out of his pocket the padlock and the staple and hasp and put them on the top of the desk. 'What did she (Ewa) see in Dr. Brzeski?' He took the passport out of his breast pocket and looked at it again to check for how long it was valid. 'What did she see in his (Dr. Brzeski's) white, smooth, shining skull with two enormous ears attached to it like wings?' He opened the passport and looked at his own photograph. No, he decided, he didn't feel a day older than when the photograph was taken. He put it back into his breast pocket. Then he slid out the second drawer. Some old documents: a little fancy case with gold cuff-links; a pair of spurs he never used, not in this country, anyway; his decorations, little crosses and ribbons he never pinned on — not now, not to his tweed jacket, anyway; a service revolver and a box of cartridges. He took out the revolver and put it in his mackintosh pocket. Then he took the cuff-links out of the fancy case, dropped them into the drawer, selected one single cartridge, squeezed it into

the little nest in the fancy case and slipped it into his mackintosh pocket. By the bedside, the telephone rang. He slid the drawer in and walked across the room. The telephone stopped ringing. He turned and walked to the bathroom. The bathroom was above the kitchen. When he was in the middle of the stairs, the telephone started ringing again. He went back. Somebody must have been trying to phone him but the crossed lines brought him some other people's conversation: 'But you told me you would be there,' the man said, 'I told you I might be,' the woman said, 'I thought you told me you would' 'Well, I'm sorry, I wasn't' 'But I want to see you' 'So do I' 'Do you?' 'Of course I do' 'When?' 'Whenever you like' 'Tonight?' 'I'm sorry I can't tonight' 'What about tomorrow?' 'Tomorrow I am very busy' 'O...' 'I'm afraid I'll be very busy the whole week' . General Piesc put the receiver down. He went back to the bathroom, found his shaving kit and the toothbrush and put them into the left pocket of the mackintosh. Then he took off his shoes and changed his socks. The telephone rang again. He waited a moment, but it didn't stop ringing. Shoeless, he went down. 'May I speak to Mrs. Piesc?' he heard a man's voice, 'I'm afraid she is not in,' he said, 'Could you tell me please when she'll be in?' 'I'm afraid I don't know' 'O...' 'She is not in London' 'O, could you tell me please when she is expected to be back?' 'I'm afraid I don't know' 'O, I'm sorry...' . — 'There is nothing to be sorry about,' General Piesc said on his way back to the bathroom. When he was half-way up, he stopped. Would she have left him, would she have gone, and with whom?, with Brzeski!, if... well,... let's put it bluntly, if he (General Piesc) had won all that money not now but a fortnight ago? That is a hypothetical question, he answered himself. He put his shoes on. Then he found another pair of socks in the bathroom cupboard and put it in his mackintosh pocket. To fold socks so that

you didn't need to fight with them when putting them on was, once upon a time his batman's, then Ewa's, conjuring trick. He did try to repeat it but gave up. He switched off the pilot light in the geyser, checked the taps, and went down into the room.

There were five bookshelves fixed to the wall on the left of the window that overlooked the garden. Starting with Clausewitz on the top left, and ending with some music sheets at the right bottom. He looked at them now, yet felt nothing. They were all strangers. They were like people, some clever, some not, but none was a friend. 'Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer! I'll burn my books!'. He turned round, but there was nobody there. Was it the voice of the pigeons on the other side of the window, the pigeons pretending to be parrots? He knelt on the bed, unpinned the postcard size Black Madonna from Wilno and put it into his wallet. Still in his mackintosh, he walked round the bed to the other side of the piano. He opened it. The Prussian general Clausewitz couldn't possibly have heard of Chopin. Clausewitz died just when Chopin was settling in Paris. Everybody who was somebody settled in Paris. 1830. The Insurrections and the Great Emigration. He struck the keys. He tried to play Chopin backwards. To hear the chords but to kill that romantic tune. Upstairs, somebody's angry broomstick knocked on the floor. A bit of plaster fell from the ceiling on to the keyboard. General Piesc stiffened. He stood up, took his soft hat from the hook on the door and put it on. General Piesc was perhaps the only general who had a thin plate of gold fitted in his cranium. He was told once not to let anything hit his head accidentally. He was advised to wear a bowler hat. That he wouldn't do. Whatever other people's customs, within his sets of what-one-does and what-one-doesn't a bowler hat was not the sort of headgear an officer could wear. A bank clerk, yes. A merchant,

yes. But not a soldier and a gentleman.

In his mackintosh and soft hat he stood now in the middle of the room and thought about Mrs. Lee who had premonitions. He didn't have any. From the top of the desk he took the staple and the hasp and screwed them into the door-frame and the door outside. 'No more milk', he wrote on a scrap of paper and put it into an empty bottle. Then he locked and padlocked the door and went out.

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Hands in the pockets of his new mackintosh, he walked, or rather marched, along the street like a man who knows where he is going. When he hailed a taxi, one would have thought that it had appeared from round the corner not by chance but because he needed it at that precise moment. 'Heathrow Airport', he said getting in, and one wouldn't have been surprised if the driver had answered 'Aye, aye, sir!' As they started, his body became one with the body of the cab, aware of every change of gears, ready for every swerve; his buttocks deep in the upholstery of the seat, his spine erect, his eyes watchful, he rode more like a cavalry soldier rides his horse than like a passenger who lets himself be driven. And yet, on his way back (because he did go back soon afterwards), he did let himself be driven like an ordinary fare, only half aware of the taxi, the traffic, and the cabman's footwork. The abrupt change of his mood (if it is all right to call it a change of mood) occurred at the airport, in front of the booking office. Suddenly, he stopped, turned round, and started walking back to the taxi rank. He spotted the same cab and waited till it came to the top of the queue.

'Have you been unlucky, gov'nor? Have you missed the plane?' the taxi man asked when told to go back to London.

‘No,’ General Piesc said. ‘I have changed my mind.’

‘You’ve got an expensive mind, gov’nor, if you don’t mind my saying so.’ He looked in the back mirror and asked ‘Where exactly do you want to go?’

‘Paddington Station,’ the general said curtly.

The man was too young. He must have been born after the war.

\*

The maid put the tray with his early morning tea by his bed, went to the window, drew back the curtains, and the first thing he saw when he woke up was a seagull, high up in the sky, carrying a fish, and then dropping it suddenly. Extraordinary! Did something happen in the outside world that frightened the seagull so that it opened its beak to give a cry, or did something illogical happen in the seagull’s own head?

‘Good morning, sir,’ the girl repeated cheerfully. ‘Your early morning tea, sir. Another lovely morning, sir. Breakfast till half past nine, sir,’ gently, she closed the door behind her.

For a moment, he thought that he didn’t know what it was all about. And so, quickly, before the thought had time to frighten him, he rejected it, jumped out of bed, opened the window, and filled his lungs with air.

Half an hour later, when fully dressed he left the room and, in high spirits, shut the door vigorously behind him, he heard a loud knock from inside. It startled him. He turned the knob and went in again. His mackintosh was hanging on the door, and it was obviously something heavy in its pocket that had struck the door’s panel as the mackintosh swung when the door shut. He put his

hand in the pocket of the mackintosh and took out the gun. The gun? He put it back, hung the mackintosh in the wardrobe, locked it, and took out the key. But when he saw the puzzled expression of his face in the wardrobe mirror he turned back hurriedly and went down to the breakfast room.

What he needed now was a drink, preferably a glass of vodka. Wyborowa. But this they wouldn't understand. Grapefruit, kippers, toast, marmalade, coffee. 'Holy Mother of God, put in a word for me. Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, make Him return it to me. Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, make the seagull dive and catch it again from the air. Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, I beseech you, put in a word for me.'

'Is your coffee all right, sir?' The headwaiter stood beside him, delicately took the cup of coffee out of the general's hand, and put it on the saucer.

'Excellent, thank you.'

How long had he been sitting there, holding the cup suspended in the air in front of him, and staring at it? His bushy brows frowned, his back straightened. 'Now then,' he said to himself, 'go to your room, lie down, till lunch-time, have a light meal, then go for a stroll. And this is an order.' He went up to his room, lay down till lunch-time, had a Dover sole and a glass of white wine, and went for a stroll along the coast. A drunken sailor was coming towards him. General Piesc crossed the road; there was a narrow alley in front of him, it led him to another street, where, in a first floor window of the house just opposite the alley, he saw an enormous white hand painted on the window-pane.

A LETTER FROM PRINCESS ZUPPA TO  
GENERAL PIESC

Palazzo Zuppa  
Verumontanum  
Roma

My dear dear dear General! I received your letter and I laughed and laughed and laughed. Oh, please don't don't don't be angry with me my dear dear Jan, it's only that your sense of humour is different, that's all. I showed your letter to my dear friend Dr. Goldfinger, he also did *not* laugh, but he also is a Pole, like you, educated on those abstract nouns garlanded with the whole adjectival flowershop of your romantic literature, he said I was a silly bitch, — but wouldn't my being a tragic bitch aggravate things for everybody? Your reality and mine are different, there are potatoes in your proud vodka and there's the sun in my wine, I always laugh when something extraordinary happens and, Good Lord!, wasn't it extraordinary, what happened to you?

Yes, supposing you had, supposing you *did* have a beautiful idea, whatever it was. It came to you like a flash of lightning without the thunderclap. 25 years ago. You nursed it in you for a quarter of a century. You knew what to do and how to do it. It was your mission. You didn't tell anybody anything about it but you

went on carrying it in yourself till the moment came when you had the freedom and the power to accomplish it. Your mission. Because you knew that the moment would come. A miracle. Two miracles. And they came. The first: your wife let you free. The second: that enormous sum of money you won. So you bought yourself a white mackintosh, put a pistol, or was it a revolver?, in your pocket, and you . . . went. To realize your idea. To start fulfilling your mission. And then you saw a seagull in the sky, and the seagull opened its beak, and the fish fell back into the sea. And you got up and you couldn't remember what your mission was. It vanished. Like that fish in the sea. And you torture your poor brain trying to remember, to bring the thought to the surface, and — nothing. Now, dear dear Jan, don't tell me this isn't funny. Could a thing like that have happened to anybody but a Polish general? To plan carefully something for twenty five years, and then, when the time comes, forget what it was! You say that you know that you went to the airport, but you didn't buy a ticket and you don't know where you intended to go. Then you find yourself in that little seaside resort but you don't know why you ever went there. So what do you do? Dio mio! You see a hand painted on a window-pane of a strange house and you go in, to consult the palmist. Dearest! Even Dr. Goldfinger —, no, no, *he* didn't laugh, but, yes, he frowned. Whether the Cardinal laughed or not it's hard to say. He is so incredibly old and so incredibly slow that a ha ha ha from him would sound like three long sighs. Because, of course, I recounted your story to the Cardinal. You asked me for help, and I asked him, and he was very much interested in your clever observation that the little table between you and the palmist-girl was very narrow, and that her looking at the palms of your hands was a sort of decoy because the real communication was taking place under the little table where your knees were touching her

knees. "An old fox," his Eminence said, when I told him that after the session you took the palmist-girl for a walk. "Why doesn't he come with her here, to Rome, for me to bless them?" he said. You see, he is a tolerant and lovable soul, my Cardinal, and he is, how do you say it in English? perspicacious? He thought the key-word to your problem is the word 'birch-tree'. You see, dear Jan, he was quite taken by that palmist-girl who pretended to look at the palms of your hands but used that psychologists' old trick of reciting words at random and noticing your reaction, and especially that to measure it she used not a stop-watch but your and her knees. He said it was significant that when she pronounced the word 'birch-tree' you felt an electric shock in your knees, and he thinks that the fact that you are not sure whether the electricity was flowing from your knees to hers or from hers to yours is of lesser importance. The importance, his Eminence said, lay in the word 'birch-tree' which, he said, had three psychological connotations:

The first, he said, the birch-tree was the tree of the Polish landscape. Not to confound it with a weeping willow. The weeping willow was Chopin and the 15<sup>th</sup> Prelude D flat major, you couldn't possibly imagine a cavalry stallion or a ploughman's mare posed by a weeping willow. Among birch-trees, — yes. You could. Did your nostalgia for the Polish landscape have something to do with that mission of yours? — he asked.

The second significant thing about the birch-tree, he said, was that one could peel its trunk and get beautiful thin sheets of white skin, and write on them love letters or poems. Some avant-garde poets in the Russian revolution used to write their poems on bark-skin peeled off some birch-trees, for lack of paper, presumably. (I didn't remind him that Apollinaire wrote three poems to Madelaine

on *écorce de bouleau*. If you have read the Cardinal's biography\* you would know why to remind him of Apollinaire would be rather tactless).

And the third significant thing, he said, was either the Finnish *sauna* or the Russian *banya*, he wasn't sure which as it recalled his memories from the time when he was a bit younger, some 70 years ago, (for him being 70 years younger is 'a bit younger') and travelled a lot in all parts of the world. Anyway, both *sauna* and *banya* are heat or steam baths where they beat you with birch-tree twigs, and it might have been that when the electric current went from your palmist-girl's knees to yours, or vice versa, — it might have been that this happened because the word 'birch-tree', had a cathartic, cleansing effect on your body or your soul or both, the realization of which might, or might not, help you to remember the nature of your mission. Having said all that, his Eminence gave a sound which could have been taken for a titter if it were much quicker, and then he asked:

"How many battles has your general fought?"

I remembered what you told me once, dear Jan, when you were justly embittered, and depressed, and, I'm sorry, I gave his Eminence the same answer:

"As many as he lost," I said.

That seemed to sober him. Because till that moment he seemed to be in a somewhat facetious mood somehow.

"You may smoke, if you wish," he said, which was a special favour because he knew that I smoked cigars, but I knew that cigar smoke reminded him of incense and, at his age, he had become allergic to incense, so I took one of his slim cigarettes which had his initials embossed in gold on the long filter tip. "What did you

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\* S.T.: *Il Cardinale Pölättio*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1969.

say his name was?" he asked.

"It is spelled P,I,E,S,C," I said.

"Sounds like *piscis* or *pesce*," he suggested.

"No," I said. "Nothing to do with Fish. Dr. Goldfinger, who hasn't at all forgotten his Polish, told me that there is a cedilla under the E, which makes it sound a bit like the French *un*, and there are softening accents above the S and the C, and the word sounds like nothing on earth (except in Poland of course) and what it means is *il pugno*, a fist, *ein Faust*."

When his Eminence heard that, he lifted his hand, clenched his beringed fingers into a fist, and looked at it thoughtfully.

"My dear Principessa," he said at last. "People have wrong ideas about Faustuses. All Faustuses are rather unpleasant characters. They give the impression that they have some sort of lesson to teach, a message to reveal, a mission to perform, and what they really are up to is Power, Gold, Meat, and Sex."

To which I objected:

"Ah no! Ah no!" I said. "Not *my* general! My general is a very lovable person, and he is in trouble, and we must help him!"

Well, my dear Jan, his Eminence is no fool, you know?

"Do you mean we must help him to try to remember what his mission was, or must we try to help him to forget that he ever had a mission?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "whichever is good for him, and just."

It took some time till he answered:

"Dear Principessa, you have linked together two words which do not necessarily march in pairs. No, we don't know enough of this case to venture an opinion on what is good, what is just, or both, or neither, and for whom."

There was another long pause. He pressed the button, one of

the buttons of his modernized Rybka-armchair, and when a drawer sprang out, I helped him to take out the old casket inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and from the casket — the famous (nearly a hundred years old by now) bit of boot-lace. He took the bit of boot-lace and pressed it to his nostrils. Then he asked me to put it back. I knew, of course, what was the significance of that particular boot-lace. The philosophical significance.\*

“We understand,” he said, “your general was born in that part of the old Russian empire which was called the Basin of the Vistula as, at the time, the name of Poland was already, and must have been still, erased from the map.”

“He was born some time before the first world war, in a country house, not far from Warsaw, but Poland had already become Poland again just as he was reaching his teens,” I said, not quite certain of my arithmetic and my history.

“My dear Principessa,” he said. “Will you have the kindness to reach for the volume of *Who’s Who* that is on the shelf just behind you?”

His incredibly old age makes him speak and move so very slowly, yet, surprisingly, his reading is quite quick.

“We see,” he said as soon as he opened the fat volume on one of the P pages, “we see that your general was educated at the Cadet Corps . . .”

“O yes,” I said hastily. “I know. He told me once a funny story how, when he was at the military college, he wrote a letter to his mother asking her for some money because he had inadvertently broken a trajectory of a projectile and had to replace it . . .”

“How disarming . . .” the Cardinal said. “But you know, my

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\* see: S.T.: *Cardinal Pölätiö* (p.22-23), Gaberbocchus, London, 1961.

dear,” (and here his Eminence again showed how catholic, eclectic, and encyclopedic his knowledge was), “the Cadet Corps in Warsaw was not an ordinary military college. We happen to know more about it because our mother’s father’s cousin was one of its first pupils. In 1765 that was. When the school was founded. By King Stanislas Augustus. It was called ‘The Knights’ School’ then. And one of the other pupils there, at the time, was, you know who?, Kosciuszko!”

“Dear, dear Eminence,” I said. “I have travelled more around the world than I have travelled in time, and my knowledge of geography seems to be better than my knowledge of history. I know Kosciuszko county in Indiana, and another one in Texas, I know Kosciuszko City in Attala, Mississippi, and Kosciuszko Mount, the highest in Australia, but who the man himself was — escapes me.”

“Dear, dear Principessa,” he said. “Kosciuszko was a Polish soldier and patriot. He had a snub nose. A love affair drove him to America where he fought for the Colonists. When he came back he led the Polish insurrection!”

His Eminence took a sip of milk from the thermostatic glass nestling in the arm of his chair, while I wondered what all that had to do with you, my dear dear Jan. But it proved that he knew what he was talking about.

“The Poles are curious children,” he continued. “They boost the legend in which he is depicted as a snub-nosed hero who armed glebae adscripti peasants with scythes, their blade on end on the long wooden pole. But they play down the fact that he was a good engineer, studied the art of constructing dikes in the Netherlands and built fortifications in Saratoga and West Point. They boost his fights for national freedoms but play down his Universal Manifesto

which gave some freedom of movement to Polish serfs and reduced their working days for the landlord, and his Last Will in which, — later on, again in America, — he empowered his friend Jefferson to use all the wealth he was leaving in the United States to buy the freedom of American negro slaves. Well, my dear Principessa, I don't know what he thought *his* mission was but by the end of his life he must have taken his cue from Jonathan Swift's dictum —

*And he gave it for his opinion, that whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together —*

because he retired to follow agricultural pursuits in Switzerland where the cousin of my mother's father used to see him riding a white horse in the streets of Soleure, a little town on the river Aar. There he died, but he was buried in Cracow, under a great mound piled up by the hands of his compatriots. Did God put two souls into his breast also, I wonder . . .?"

He took another sip of milk, half-shut his eyes, and, looking at me through his white eyelashes, asked:

"Dear Principessa, do you think that what your general Pisk, or Fist, or Faust, planned as his mission was: Cultivating a Garden to make two ears of corn grow where only one grew before, or riding on a White Horse, all across Europe, to his native Warsaw or Cracow?"

When he said that, I shivered. My breasts felt cold. My knees felt wobbly. His Eminence could not, of course, see my knees or

my breasts but he was so clever with the cleverness of the trunk of an age old tree, if you see what I mean . . .

“You know of something that you do not tell me, Principessa,” he said.

What I didn't tell him, what I didn't mention to him, was your black son. Why didn't I? I don't really know. But when he uttered those words about your riding a White Horse across Europe, I instantly saw a different picture, and I shivered, because what I saw was a picture of you riding not a White Horse but a Black Horse, and not to your Warsaw or Cracow but to Bukumla. Now, my dear General, my dear Jan, I don't know if that vision of mine has anything to do with the Case of your Forgotten Mission, but if there is the slightest possibility that it has, I implore you to listen most carefully to what I'm going to tell you now. Last year I drove all across Africa in a jeep, with Dr. Goldfinger. Yes, we stopped in Bukumla and I saw your son. He isn't a little boy any more, you know? He must be about 35, mustn't he? And he is completely black. And when I say completely black I mean completely black. Beautifully completamente, interamente nero. Like his mother. Now, don't think that I expected him to have your blue eyes, your blond hair, your pink skin. I did not. Nevertheless, it was a bit surprising not to find any traces of you in his *Body* (except the shape of his lips, perhaps?). As to his *Mind*, well I don't know. I don't know much about all those genes and chromosomes, though Dr. Goldfinger tried hard to explain as much as he himself knew about it, which didn't seem to go far beyond what that Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel observed when crossing his garden peas. And as for those clever modern boys, Yesenck and what's the other's name? Jonsen or Jenson? the American, I don't need Dr.

Goldfinger to tell me that it's poppycock. I mean: sciocchezza. For a laywoman like myself the real point is whether the genes for black skin and the genes for stupidity (if there is such thing?) are located on the same chromosome (and, if so, so closely that they will be inherited together). Eventually, *idem*, (I mean: ditto), for the genes for white skin and the genes for superwisdom. A laywoman like myself dismisses the expertise of all the clever boys who are not qualified to answer the question in matter-of-fact, chromosome-sharing, down-to-earth terms. So, you see, what I am going to say is not prejudiced by anything at all. No. The point is, my dear Jan, that I want to warn you, but don't know exactly how to do it, so you must be indulgent about my words, but must must take seriously their essence. What I mean, my dear dear dear Jan, is that you mustn't ever, and I do mean you must never never never dream of going to Bukumla, either on a horse, white or black or dappled, or on a bicycle, or on foot. This is serious. And when I say 'serious', you know me, I mean serious. If what you had in mind was that you would become to your son what Aristotle was to Alexander the Great, or Machiavelli to his imaginary Prince, or Clausewitz to his Prussian Kronprinz, — what an illusion! Once you put your foot in Bukumla you will never leave it alive. Not that you would be allowed to stay there alive. And that not because you are his father. People there can have as many fathers as they please. But because you are white. And he, the chieftain, the leader, the national hero, the boss, cannot afford to have a white father. Well, that's how it is. Nobody there knows that the little Napoleon's true father was a European. Except Amala, of course. All the others who knew have disappeared. Mysteriously. In the jungle. In the sea. Or on the only motor-road that they have built. She herself told me all about it. And it was she who, as soon as she learned that he knew that I knew, implored me to leave the

miserable country at once, for my own sake. No, you wouldn't recognize her. She is as beautiful as ever, and carries herself with great dignity, but one can see that she never laughs. Indeed, how can she ever laugh, knowing that she is the mother of that big brute, your son. I myself cannot believe that I am his half-sister. I, princess Zuppa! Good Lord! How many bastards did you engender during that last big war, dear dear Jan, dear general, dear dear father?

I never call you that, but this is a special occasion. Just to tell you, my dear, not to be silly. Just in case there is some relevance in what his Eminence and I have fancied about your mission. You see, we don't want any saviours any more. All saviours disrupt normal evolutionary processes, which anyway will go their own way. The way may be tragic. It usually is tragic. But what all saviours do when they start meddling with it, is to make the tragedy more painful. They are all so benevolent, and saintly, and clever, those great thinkers, and believers, and doers, all those males (they are always males, have you noticed?) who think they know everything better, who believe they know what is the thing. The Greek males thought geometry was the thing. Dr. Zamenhof thought Esperanto was the thing. Jesus Christ thought love was the thing. Karl Marx thought the dialectical loaf of bread was the thing. And geometry produced bazookas, and polyglotism produced more quarrels, and love produced hatred, and two loaves of bread produced greed. And none of these great things has proved to be more (what is the right word?) efficacious (?) Than what I, in my female way, would like to call 'good manners'. Good manners are the base principle of Evolution. Because only those animals survive whose mothers don't eat their children. And in this hungry world of cells devouring each other, not eating your own children is already good manners. You may call the fact:

DECENCY. The Innate Biological Decency. It has enough virility and reality in itself to become a legitimate basic term in philosophy, and science, and public life. Alas, philosophers, and scientists, and statesmen (of many of whom, my dear Jan, I possess a rather intimate knowledge and thus know what I'm talking about) do not treat *decency* as they do other demonstrable though invisible things. But you, my dear Jan, you are a man of the world, you have encountered the reality of experience, you are old enough to know that all ideas, all ideologies, all missions, all Aims corrupt good manners, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important, more real, than the common, unspoiled, Decency of Means. And so, my dear dear General, my dear dear Jan, this is my plea: don't sacrifice yourself for the future generations. They are already here. I, I am the future generation. And my life depends not on the loftiness of your aims but on the Decency of your Means.

O.K., O.K.! I started writing this letter by laughing at your *idée fixe*, you may end reading it by laughing at mine. So be it. But don't misunderstand me, my dear Jan. I do not suggest that you go to Cracow or to Bukumla and sermonize with St. Paul 'Let all things be done decently and in order'. Of course you can't do that. But I'll tell you what you *can* do. You can start by preaching to yourself and take the nice palmist-girl to a *decent* dinner. And then you can bring her over here, to Rome, and stay with us. I and Dr. Goldfinger shall be most happy if you do.

Your affectionate daughter

*Sofia Zuppa*

P.S.: When the seagull lets its catch fall back into the sea, and

then dives and reappears with a fish in its beak, how can it be sure it is the same fish?

P.S.2: If by any chance you thought your mission was to come to Rome and kidnap the Holy Father, forget it. He has already been kidnapped. By the spiritual forces of *Realpolitik*.

Z.

A LETTER FROM MISS PRENTICE TO  
PRINCESS ZUPPA

*Sunday*

My dear Princess Zuppa,

I am Prudence, the 'palmist-girl', as you called me in your kind letter to the General. He gave me the letter to read and now I feel it is my duty to write to you and tell you what happened and how it happened. It is all so strange. I was trained in palmistry for two years at the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart in Wales, and yet I felt like a novice when the events became so much more complicated than I could predict from the lines of his hands. Dear Princess Zuppa, I don't know what would have happened, and what would *not* have happened, if he hadn't received your letter, nobody can tell us that. We can only talk about things as they *were* at the time. And, at the time, your letter was a blessing for my, for our, dear General, dear Jan.

You see, I didn't know, and still don't know, how much reality there was, and how much fantasy, in that idea of his that he had some sort of mission or message and couldn't remember what it was. I told him once that if he had worked out a plan of action in all the details, as he said he had, he must have written down some of his thoughts and wouldn't it be a good thing to go back to his flat in London and look at the notes, but he said he never

committed any of it to paper as his wife would surely have found it and read it and that's what he didn't want to happen, no, all his thoughts had been in his head before they suddenly vanished. But he was convinced that they would come back to him as suddenly as they had gone, only he couldn't be sure when. And the other thing he was quite certain was that as soon as he remembered what his mission was he would need all the money he had. So he left that comfortable hotel on the beach, moved to a little dingy room in one of the back streets, and started to economize. I admired him but my sadness was still greater than my admiration when I saw him climbing with such old-fashioned dignity the gloomy narrow stairs to his little room. At times, I shivered at the thought that if it lasted much longer, he might become like those lonely old people who starve themselves to death, and then it is discovered that they have left a great fortune, hidden and untouched. But I couldn't do anything about it. Though I already loved him, or rather precisely *because* I already loved him, I couldn't possibly talk to him about his money. And it was then, one morning, that a miraculous thing happened. Your letter arrived. Its effect on him was magical. I think it was the question that you put in your postscript that shook him the most. "How will the seagull know that it is the same fish?" How will he, the general, know, supposing he now finds what his idea was, that it is the same forgotten thing he was nursing in his mind for a quarter of a century? For a moment I feared that the thought would throw him into some sort of hopeless despair. But the opposite proved to be the case. He had a sense of humour, as you surely must know, and he often smiled, though he smiled sort of under his moustache, without showing his teeth, as if he was mocking himself. This time, however, he laughed. Full-heartedly.

"Well, my dear," he said, 'it's nice to have a clever daughter, cleverer than the most clever of the cardinals. Moreover, it may

well be that she is quite right.”

And in the evening of the same day he took me to dinner to the poshest hotel restaurant in town, and I still remember the extravagant menu, it was vodka and caviar to begin with, then Fillets of Sole in a Turban, Roast Saddle of Mutton with Asparagus and Dutch Sauce, A Ring of Partridge with chestnut purée, Blue Stilton, we drank Pouilly Resèrve and Chateau Mouton Rothschild 1968, and then we had Bombe Napoleon III, Mocha and port, and though I’m not a snob, at least I don’t think I am, I was proud to be seen with him by all those posh people dining there, and I think he was pleased to be seen in the company of a young female, meaning myself. And all that so sudden —, and as a result of reading your letter, as if there were some uncanny magic in it. Three days later, he took me to London in a new white Mercedes he had just bought. I thought we would go to his flat, but when we were passing Richmond he said let’s go up the river, he always wanted to live on the river, in Warsaw he could see the river from the window in his bedroom, and though the Thames is different from the Vistula, he said, the Vistula being a wild unruly woman that freezes in winter, drowns people in spring, and puts flowery garlands on her wavy hair on the Night of St. John, and the Thames is a man, a he, a tidal old brown god into whose water you *can* step twice because it flows down to the sea and then up again, yet a river is a river and he knows of a good hotel on the river, and that’s where he wanted to go, and we went, and the days we spent there were the happiest days of my life. And I do think that he too was quite happy.

*Tuesday*

I wrote that last sentence two days ago, but it was too much for me. I couldn’t go on. I had to stop, and now I have to force myself to come back to writing this letter. So much sadness after so much happiness! Well, but enough about my feelings. Let me just relate.

That evening he put on his white mackintosh, he simply loved that white mackintosh, he used to call it his trench-coat, and he said "Let us go for a walk". I loved walking with him. We talked, though often we just walked silently, but it was a silence full of understanding, and when we did talk —, how curious, I just cannot remember what we were talking about, I remember the feeling but don't remember the words, strange, the only thing I know for sure is that, since he received your letter, he never mentioned anything that would have something to do with his forgotten mission, except once perhaps, when he asked: "You wouldn't say that I am mad, would you Child?" He never called me Prudence, he always called me Child, which I liked very much. "No," I said, "I would sooner think that the rest of the world is mad". And that was all. And it pleased him. And, yes, one night he must have had a nightmare, he woke up with a start and said something in Polish. "Say it again in English," I said. And he said "Great powers do what they must. You do what you must. But why the hell don't you do it decently?!" And his voice when he was saying it was new to me, a stern, military voice, commanding, demanding an answer. And then the expression of his eyes changed, as if they only now began to see, "Oh, it's you, Child . . ." he said softly, and went back to sleep, and in the morning when I mentioned it, he didn't remember a thing. There were, of course, vast stretches of his world which were incomprehensible to me, and big extents of my world which were incomprehensible to him, but we were taking each other as we were, not trying to squeeze the other into our own framework, and those incomprehensible patches, whether Polish or English, seemed to be of no importance, and only those that we could understand felt real.

And so that evening when he put his white mackintosh on and said "Let's go for a walk", I put mine on and we went, a long walk

along the river, it must have been some three miles or more, water on both sides (the river on our left, the waterworks and those enormous reservoirs on our right) most of the time, and not a soul most of the time, down to Hammersmith Bridge and then on and on to Putney Embankment. The Thames was at high tide, its liquid mirror reflected the grey sky and that reflected greyness seemed to be swelling up to the level of the greyness of the asphalt of the embankment, and the few swans floating on the surface of the liquid part of the greyness came close to the edge of its solid part where we were standing, their yellow hostile beaks staring at our knees as if they wondered whether to attack them. We turned away, crossed the embankment, walked up to the High Road and then turned right, into a quiet narrow street. It was empty and featureless. One couldn't imagine anybody being born in one of its dwellings, or loving it. Two small shops on the left — an antique dealer's and a grocer's — both closed. On the right, a white windowless wall, of a factory? And further up, opposite, another little street, as narrow and as empty and as drab as the first. Suddenly, I can't explain it, but I knew there was no reason to go any further. He didn't say a word, but I knew that in some sort of way that was the place. Perhaps its very drabness brought him some memories from his past? I don't know. But I felt that was the place all right, though it wasn't the time. And there was no reason to be there at the wrong time. We went back to the embankment. The swans were still there bobbing up and down on the turn of the tide. Across the road, in the big red-brick building, there was a pub. We went in. Large ornamented windows were covered with a thick layer of dirt, and to look through them at the swans and the river was too depressing. So was the smell of stale beer. Next to the entrance to the pub, as we had noticed before, was a little door, half-opened, and behind it a narrow staircase leading down to the

basement. And a bright sign, saying *Bierkeller — Löwenbrau (Munich) — all welcome*. “Let’s go there, Child,” he said. “I have no prejudice. I shall practice what you preach”. I didn’t know at the time what he was talking about. I wasn’t aware that I had been preaching anything at all, but I said all right, let’s go, and we went.

After the greyness outside, it seemed so bright and clean in that cellar, all the walls and the ceiling were whitewashed and there was a picture of a tree with golden leaves painted on one of the walls, and the inscription in Gothic letters:

*Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,  
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum,*

and we sat at a rustic table carved in wood and ordered some beer (they served only Löwenbrau) and sausages (frankfurters and sauerkraut), and at the far end of the room there was a piano but I don’t remember the pianist, and I don’t remember who was yodelling there, but I do remember the man playing the accordion. He was a shortish, stocky man in lederhosen and a little brown hat with a feather.

Dear Princess Zuppa, I’m giving you all these details though at the time I didn’t know they were of any importance and that I would have to reconstruct them in my mind. Well, but that’s how it is.

“I bet their names are Lorelei, Gretchen, and Brünnhilde”, the General said.

I turned my head a little. At the table on my left and slightly behind me, I saw three strikingly blond women and a man in shirt-sleeves and a waistcoat.

“I bet you’re right,” I said, and we both laughed.

All the women in that place seemed to be blond, and so were the men, except the two sitting under the painted tree with golden leaves. They were wearing turbans. But I don't know whether they were Indians or Arabs. I recognize people better by the palms of their hands than by their faces.

We ate our frankfurters, drank our beer, the German sentimental song was being warbled to us from the far end of the room, we looked into each other's eyes and felt happy. Then the warbling stopped and after a minute the accordion started a new song. The effect of it on my poor Jan was terrifying. His pupils shrank, the tip of his nose was white, his jaws set hard, his spine stiffened. The man in shirt-sleeves started singing:

*Outside the barracks by the corner light,  
I'll always stand and wait for you at night.  
We will create a world for two,  
I'll wait for you the whole night through,  
For you, Lily Marleen.*

It took me all that time to realize that it was Lily Marleen and that for him, for our dear Jan, our dear General, Lily Marleen was something different from what it was for our fathers and grandfathers who picked it up from the Germans when they conquered them, under Montgomery, at El-Alamein. For our dear Jan it was not a soldiers' fighting song. For him it was a Nazis killing song, the song they sang when marching hostages to slaughter. And it didn't seem to make much difference that all that happened so long ago, before we, you Princess Zuppa and I, were born. You are his daughter, Princess Zuppa, then you are half-Polish, but you have never been to Poland, have you?, you are Italian, so do you understand them?, I mean the Poles? Some

people say they are like the Irish. No, they are not. There is something in them that is like nothing on earth. Well, I don't know, I don't understand this world, perhaps there is something like nothing on earth in me too, and I hate things that are like nothing on earth. I hate, I HATE them, why don't they leave us alone, those things that are like nothing on earth, WHY?

I know something about palmistry, professionally, but I don't claim to know anything about telepathy, and so I wasn't sure, if it was not a coincidence then what?, was it my hatred, or was it the high tension of Jan's nerves, that spread along the Bierstube and made the accordionist stop in the middle of the bar? He put his accordion on a little red stool by the piano, turned around and approached the nearest table. He must have said something jocular because the people there chuckled. Then, casually, he moved to the next table, and the next one, but — as soon as he started — I was quite sure that it was ours that he was aiming at. And so it was. He raised his little hat (it had a silly little feather sticking out from behind its ribbon): "Good evening, madam. Good evening, sir," he said. "May I join you for a moment?"

Jan's English was rather good, but he wouldn't have recognized the man's accent. I knew at once that he wasn't a German. He was either a Scot who had spent some time in Australia, or an Australian of Scottish parentage.

"Please do," I said, and he took the empty chair, turned it round back to front, and sat on it.

"I hope you are enjoying yourselves," he said.

"Very much," I said quickly, and looked at Jan. He took a deep breath, and said:

"May we offer you a drink?"

"That's very kind of you," the man said. "But I don't drink when I'm working. Unless, perhaps, a tomato juice?"

We ordered a tomato juice, and he said:

“I hope you don’t dislike the music?”

I knew there was something he wanted to ask or say but I didn’t know what it could possibly be. He started talking about the music he played, mostly folk-songs in his own arrangement, or some old off-copyright pieces. “Was ‘Lily Marleen’ off-copyright?” I asked, just to say something. O, he said, and gave me such a complicated answer about the copyright law that I didn’t understand whether it was yes or no, and then he insisted that he doesn’t play new music, that’s to say unless the public asks him for something special, which puts him in an awkward position, but that doesn’t happen very often, and then he usually switches after a few bars to a pot-pourri of bits that are off-copyright. And then he turned to the general and said:

“May I ask you a straightforward question, sir?”

“You may ask,” Jan said non-committally.

“Are you a copyright man?”

“Am I what?!”

“You haven’t been sent here by the Performing Rights Society?”

“Certainly not. And please explain that extraordinary question.”

“O good. Thank you, sir. I’m glad. I really am. Well, you see, sir, you don’t look like one of this crowd here,” he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, “you look distinguished, which made me think that maybe you’re a musician, a copyright man, the Performing Rights Society does send their people to places like this to catch us playing pieces that are not off copyright yet and then they ask us to pay royalties. You imagine a place like this, if these beer-drinkers had to pay royalties, they’d chuck me out and get in a juke-box.” He stood up. “I’m much obliged to you sir, and



door on which was written HERREN. The pianist at the far end started a tune from 'The Merry Widow' (Lehar, off-copyright).

*You may study her ways as you can  
But a woman's too much for a man,*

the man in shirt-sleeves at the table on my left started singing, but Lorelei stopped him.

"All right," she said, "all right. So my grandfather was killing the Poles, so does it follow that I must go to bed with a Pole?"

"But he is so handsome, Liebchen, and so rich!" said Brünnhilde.

Lorelei put her handkerchief to her nose. Her nose was bleeding. She got up and moved quickly to the door on which it was written DAMEN. After a while, Brünnhilde also got up and followed her. Gretchen and the man in shirt-sleeves trinkled their Bierglasses.

Jan didn't come back for a long time. That didn't make me anxious. Men of his age have many of those little ailments they prefer not to talk about. But when he finally reappeared, one look at him made me wonder.

"Are you all right, John?" I asked.

"Perfectly," he said. "But some fresh air will do us good."  
And so we paid, and left.

The night was so dark, so dark. And the way was so long, so long. And the only I reproach myself with is that I didn't insist strongly enough that we should take a taxi. We would have done so if I had said that *I* was tired, but I didn't. And he said that a walk would be nice. It was. On the way down the river we had the river on our left and the waterworks on our right, and everything was

grey; now we had the river on our right, the water reservoirs on our left, and everything was black. Wet. And cold. We must have been walking for about an hour till we noticed a bench by the footpath. We sat down. The moon must have been somewhere but we couldn't see it. Jan's beloved white mackintosh was the brightest patch in this mass of darkness. The tiny points of light on the other bank, across the river, some moving, some stationary, seemed to belong to a different world, the world of houses and of motorcars. The world of people. On our side of the river there was the world of blackness, the world as it really is when nobody invades it. The odd thing is that I don't remember whether we were talking or not. We must have said something but I don't remember a single word. I only remember sitting there with him on the bench, the still water of the reservoirs behind us, the lazy black water of the river, making up its mind which way to flow, in front of us, and the dark sky above. And then, suddenly, in the wet cold silence, the sound of footsteps on the path from the right, and, all at once, two dark forms of men, big and tall, standing before our eyes.

"Time?!" asked the one who was facing Jan.

"It must be well past midnight," Jan said quickly.

"What do you mean – must be? Get out your watch and look!"

And then a number of things happened. They must have been happening rapidly, in quick succession, but I witnessed them in a sort of slow-motion way, like in a cinema. First, the other man, the one who was facing me, snatched my handbag and jumped a few steps back; slowly, the white shape of the general's mackintosh loomed up; I couldn't see his right hand but it must have dipped into the mackintosh's pocket because it came out not with the watch but with the gun; the man who was facing him stepped back; the gun fired, it sounded like a dry branch of a dead tree suddenly

breaking; the man with my handbag dropped the handbag and ran away, to the left; the other man turned and ran in the same direction; Jan put the gun back in the pocket of his mackintosh and sat down; I went to fetch my handbag, then came back and sat beside him; the smell, not unlike that of burnt incense but sharp, unpleasant; my right hand found Jan's left hand and grasped it.

"Are you all right, Child?" he asked.

"Yes, I am. And you?"

"I'm fine, Child. I am perfectly . . ." he stopped as if searching for the right word, and then said ". . . happy."

I was squeezing his hand and wouldn't let it go. And that's how we were sitting there, hand in hand, on that bench, in the stillness of the night, I don't know for how long. It was so dark that it wasn't at all darker when I closed my eyes, and I don't know whether I had my eyes open or closed when I heard a sigh, and it sounded like a sigh of relief.

"Jan," I said.

Our hands were clasped together so strongly that I didn't know whether it was mine that was squeezing his or his hand that was squeezing mine and I had to use my left hand to free my right hand from his, and when I did so, his hand fell down on to the bench.

"Jan," I said, "say something."

Well, my dear Princess Zuppa, that was how your father died. And if you hear those fantastic stories made up by the journalists, and the police, and the politicians, or his wife who is so rich now, you will know what to think about them.

I tried to shout "Help! Help!" but I don't know how far my voice carried, across the river to the few specks of light, or only as far as my breath? I was no longer sure where I was exactly in that

remote place. Should I go to the left or to the right? Which way would be quicker to find a trace of mankind at this time of night? I hesitated, when in all that darkness a still blacker shape appeared on the path on my right. A stray dog. Keeping its distance, it walked in a semi-circle in front of us, then it stopped and growled. "Go and bring somebody here," I said. It snarled at me. "Go away!" I shouted. It snarled at me, ready to bite. I'm not sure any more whether it was really there or whether I had imagined it, but I *am* sure that what your friend the Cardinal said must have come back to me at that moment, because I told the dog: "Go away, go away, God put two souls in his breast but you shall not have either of them. Off with you!" And I crossed myself. And the dog barked and turned round and vanished. And now I knew that I couldn't leave him there alone for a moment, I had to defend him against the powers of darkness, I had to prop up his body and not let it fall, I had to hold him and to sit with him on the bench and wait.

It was some time after the sun had risen that a man from the waterworks passed by. The river police launch appeared later. They gave me a hot drink. They were nice. That's to say, till they found the gun in the pocket of his mackintosh. Then they started asking questions. Lots, lots of questions.

Well, that's all. And now, my dear Princess Zuppa, we shall never know what his mission was. Was it a white-horse mission, or a two-blades-of-grass mission. Or what? What mission can it be, to accomplish which one arms oneself with a gun loaded with one solitary bullet?

Yours very sincerely

*Prudence Prentice*

A LETTER FROM DR. BRZESKI TO  
MISS PRENTICE

Dear Miss Prentice,

Mrs. Piesc asks me to write to you to say that it has been ascertained that the white Mercedes motorcar which the late General bought not long ago was registered by him in your name. Consequently, Mrs. Piesc considers it to be your property which you may collect at your convenience at the garage of the hotel.

At the same time, Mrs. Piesc wishes to express her view that it would be most advisable not to talk to any journalists about the recent events.

May I add words of my personal sympathy.

Yours sincerely

*Dr. Brzeski*

A LETTER FROM MISS PRENTICE TO  
DR. BRZESKI

Dear Dr. Brzeski,

Thank you for your letter. Please tell Mrs. Piesc that I have already successfully resisted all the attempts of the Press to interview me and I do not intend to change my attitude.

My brother, The Rev. Paul Prentice, will collect the car when he is in London, which will be one day next week.

Yours sincerely,

*Prudence Prentice*

FROM THE CHANCELLERY OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF BUKUMLA TO PRINCESS ZUPPA

The Secretary acknowledges the receipt of Princess Zuppa's communication in which she advises his Excellency of the demise of General Jan Piesc. As the name of the said general is not known to his Excellency, it is suggested that the said communication might peradventure have been directed to the wrong addressee.

Confidential.

MEMO

from..... to.....

Close the file and forget the whole thing.

This edition is limited to 60 copies.

This is number 6.



