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Str. Tudor Arghezi 15

Sector 2, București, România

tel. : 021 316 82 08; fax 021 316 82 21

difuzare@paideia.ro

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MATEIU CARAGIALE

**GALLANTS
OF THE
OLD COURT**

TRANSLATED FROM
THE ROMANIAN AND NOTES
BY CRISTIAN BACIU

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Que voulez-vous,
nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient,
où tout est pris à la légère ...¹
Respect pentru oameni și cărți

WELCOMING THE GALLANTS

... au tapis-franc nous étions réunis.¹

L. Protat

The vow I had made to myself the very day before to return home early came out an absolute mess, as it wasn't until about noon the next day that it happened.

Sunken between the sheets, I took no notice of the night creeping in. I had completely failed to keep a tally of the time. Indeed I would have slept on like a log but for this letter bustling in, tugging at me to undersign for receipt. Now, if you try to wake me up all you get is a sullen, sulky, surly lump. No signing in, thank you. Just a grumpy grunt to drive them away.

I fell into a doze again, but it was hardly meant to last. That nuisance of a letter was back in no time, along with the sudden torturous glare of a lamp. The villain of a postman had deemed fit to sign on my behalf. Predictably, he had to go with no token of my gratitude for it.

¹ *What do you expect, we are here on the doorstep of the Orient, where things are taken the easy way...* The words are attributed to Raymond Poincaré (French conservative statesman, five times Prime Minister and one term of office as President of the French Republic between 1913 and 1920), over a conflicted railway business between the Romanian government and a French company. During the lawsuit, Poincaré stood in defence of the French party.

¹ *...at the bistro we flocked together.* The quote is supposedly assigned to L. Protat, an obscure early 20th century French pornographer.

I hate letters. The only bright news a letter has ever brought me was from my good old friend Uhry once. I do loathe letters. At that time, I used to burn them as they came.

The newcomer had little better to expect. A glimpse of the handwriting gave me a fair guess of the content. I was, by now, fed up with that home-made bland mash of counsel and reproof I was being served regularly with every beginning month—counsel to engage with manly drive on an earnest working course, and reproof for steadily failing to do so. It ended with the inevitable wish that God might hold me in His protection and all.

Amen to that! My pitiful condition was enough argument against any progress on any kind of course. As it was, I hardly managed to stir in my bed. My limbs disjointed, the small of my back dismantled, I felt like jelly. For a scary moment, my hazy mind invited the dire picture of apoplexy.

Well, no—not that far. But I'd gone far enough though: for a good month's time, silently and breathlessly, thoroughly and intently, I had been drifting away in drinking, philandering, and gambling. The past few years had amassed a host of vicious waves that tossed my frail lifeboat about, trying me almost beyond stretch. Poor in my defences, I

ended up in utter disgust and a lust for forgetfulness in the foul way of the flesh.

The trouble was I'd made a headlong dash for it and felt I would soon have to admit defeat. In any case, my state of supreme exhaustion that night was less than could have snatched me out of bed, had even a fire broken out in the house. At least, that was how I felt.

And yet—there I was, all of a sudden, upright in the dead centre of the room, gaping in apprehension at the clock, with an abrupt memory of Pantazi expecting me for dinner. How fortunate indeed, to have been intruded upon by this family letter I now glimpsed in grateful acknowledgement. To think I could have missed an appointment with my most precious friend!

I got dressed and went out against weepy weather, remindful of winter setting in. There had been no rain to account for the overall pervasive dampness: eaves and leafless branches dripping, thick cold sweaty beads trickling down tree trunks and railings. The most inspirational weather for a drinking spree. The sight of rare amblers, like spectral illusions in the misty air, most of whom swaying in liquorous perplexity. Out of a tavern and down the steps came a lanky figure and collapsed to rest in a shapeless lump. I looked away in disgust.

The meeting place for that night was a far-off bistro, all the way to Covaci¹, so I hired a cab. It proved a wise choice, as I found the other invitees upon the second round of brandy, and our entertainer already on the third. I showed surprise at their early advent, but Pantazi explained he had come straight from home, while Paşadia and Pirgu had taken the shortest route from the "club", and what with the weather being too nasty to dally over appetisers...

Pantazi ordered another round of brandies. The cheers we muttered while clinking glasses sounded desperately cheerless. I feared I might doze off again. Compared with the vulgar merchants' party nearby, which was gaining steam—after all, it was Saturday—our table looked rather like a funeral feast.

The borscht, properly served with sour cream and green peppers, was downed in sullen silence, all eyes glued to the bowls. Pirgu, in particular, seemed to be consumed by gloomy thoughts. I was preparing to engage some conversation gambit when the fiddlers started on a waltz for which I

¹ One of several most popular streets in 19th-early 20th down-town Bucharest; the cobbles and walls of Covaci St. could spin a rich yarn of romance, dejection and mystery. A must-see for visitors, Covaci has been restored to preserve at least some of the flavour of its days of local glory.

knew Pantazi had a soft spot. It was a slow, sensual, sad flow, almost funereal in its tones; a languid sway that carried a wavering, wistful, infinitely woeful key to leave a dolorous mark on any listening ear. The rumour in the room fell into dead silence as the deep magic of the melody went gliding across the bridged cords of the fiddles. Sinking to a lingering lower timbre, gently subdued to the sound of painful tenderness and chagrin, the music overflowed with wistful redolence of agonising fantasy.

Pantazi wiped his teary eyes.

'Ah!' said Pirgu to Paşadia with a suave look and a silky voice, 'this is the music I'll have them play as I usher you to your eternal resting place. A rare treat to season the prime of my life—how graceful, how radiant, how ravishing! I hope you won't let me lay in waiting too long for it, will you... And there I am, yours truly, basted in wine, and master Pantazi by my side, me bidding such a heart-rending farewell of my irreplaceably lost friend that the audience can't hold back the scalding tears pouring down their melancholy-ridden cheeks...'

Paşadia remained silent.

'Oh yes,' Pirgu purred on, 'to think of the splendour of it all! I'll be the one to carry your accolades resting on a velvet cushion. And then, when they dig you

out seven years on for funeral office, I'll bet they'll see the same neat, spruce, pompous figure, not a single white hair on your crown, embalmed in quicksilver and spirit like a bell pepper in salt and vinegar...'

Riding on stray thoughts, Paşadia lent him no ear, and my deep disdain for Pirgu made me hate to see him get away with it.

Left to my own devices in Bucharest at a fairly young age, I had tried to refrain from random acquaintances. In fact, I had carefully selected my company, and Gorică Pirgu would have never been part of it, had it not been for his close companionship with Paşadia, to whom I looked up in supreme reverence.

Paşadia—a morning star, no less. Some strange quirk of nature had bestowed on him one of the most exquisite frames a human brain has ever been blessed with. As chance would have it, I've met with many of those who are looked upon as the country's elite, but few were they who could boast such a rich collection of wonderfully balanced virtues as this underdog of fate, who had wilfully lent himself to public oblivion. And there is no other, to the best of my knowledge, who might have invited so much vicious rancour from his own kind.

This, I had heard, he owed to his appearance, in part. But then, what

a stately head! Some passionate, disquieting daemon seemed to slumber within, given away by the features of his weathered face, lips pursed in frozen disillusionment, flared nostrils and a hazy viscous look slithering between heavy eyelids. His voice, little more than a muffled drawl, sounded weary with sullen disgust.

His life, of which he rarely deigned to disclose a piece, had been a full record of bitter struggle. Born to parents of a certain influence and wealth, he was given to be raised among strangers and then dispatched for studies abroad. Upon return, all he met with was implacable hostility, rejection and betrayal. Little was left but had been plotted against him. His works, the sacrificial offering of his youth, had been confronted with fierce, as it was unjust, criticism while everybody was striving to silence him down. At the end of many a bleak year strewn with dire ordeals enough to crush a giant, Paşadia had come out in callous armour. Far from a submissive character, his self-possession and fortitude had sailed him safely through the darkest moments. While relentlessly following his path, he had managed to turn even the direst of circumstances to his own advantage. With unrivalled patience and endurance he had lain waiting for his lucky strike, grabbed it

as it came and squeezed his rightful due out of it. At the end of a lot of trouble, once he made his mark he indulged in ruthless, as it was perversely delicate, retaliation; he could freely have his fling now, sending ripples of perplexed confusion and awe through the round of his former detractors; the path to fame and glory was finally smoothed out for him. At this point, when he could reach out for anything and have it, he stepped back. To my mind he might have taken this decision, if only in part, in self-awareness of his own passionate nature: he might indeed have been afraid of his darker side, of the murky daemons that occasionally managed a cynical stab through his icy social shield. A grain of granted power added to the poison piled up in his calloused heart would have sparked disaster. For he trusted nothing like virtue, honesty, goodness, and had no mercy or compassion for human weaknesses, to which he appeared to be a perfect stranger.

His stepping down from politics was less of a surprise than the abrupt turnabout in his lifestyle. At an age when others would rather settle down in compunction, Paşadia—until then, a living example of moderation—suddenly plunged into reckless debauchery. Did he do it in careless, defiant exhibition of hitherto hidden practices? Or was

it the outburst of what was bred in the bone, for too many long years stifled by his hunger for success? For it is hard to reasonably expect of anyone to have leapt overnight from the lamb's fleece into the wolf's hide. Rarely had I met a gambler of such lofty, majestic appearance, a more dedicated philanderer, or a more distinguished drinker. And yet, there was not the least trace of the classic degenerate about him: soberly elegant, of rare distinction in garb and gab, he remained the same perfectly western-looking man of the world, from top to toe. No one could have been better qualified to chair a High Assembly or an Academy. One could hardly relate the stately figure sauntering in erect dignity on his evening promenade, closely followed by the cabby dutifully bridling his horse at idling pace, to the sordid, sleazy establishments in which this impeccable gentleman would bury himself through the deep of the night. This man's life story confounded me greatly, as I sensed it was driven by some intense spiritual torment of impenetrable mystery.

If I have indulged in a fairly lavish portrayal, it is only to conjure up once more the figure of this noble character, whose memory I hold in high regard. For I must confess to the rare privilege of having also known a very different

Paşadia, in stark contrast to the night rambler through the round of the most infamous of Bucharest's joints. I used to meet this alternate avatar at a no less unconventional station.

A God-forsaken back alley not far from Mogoşoaia Bridge¹ led to a shadowy unkempt garden that embraced an old, bleak, inhospitable-looking house in which even the most remote nook breathed a reflection of the landlord's stern humour. I would find him there in his study, a place of privacy inviting to introspection, a tight refuge against the world. The room was a display of timber-coloured wall cloth, walled-in wardrobes and cases, and heavily curtained windows. I lost count of the hours I spent there, riveted in the large armchair by the host's fascinating discourse—a perfect marriage of deep sense and balanced, elevated style which arrested the auditor's attention in silky magic chains. But Paşadia was also an accomplished wordsmith on paper, for many masterful pieces had come from under his pen in his younger years. He was incredibly widely read. No one had I met with a better command of history, the study of which had nourished

¹ What is known today as *Calea Victoriei* (Victoria Avenue) in central Bucharest used to be called *Podul Mogoşoaiei* (Mogoşoaia Bridge) because it was originally paved with wood.

and polished his innate genius of a flawless judge of character. He relished in foretelling the nearing miserable downfall to this or that notable who were at the peak of their career, and I will never forget the cynical glint in his eyes as the ominous words came out.

Paşadia Măgureanu! His affection for me was like a gift from Holy Providence, and I am proud to have been a disciple of this illustrious, adamant rebel. Of all the faults and flaws the mob would hang to his effigy, I could only consent to one: his indulgence of Gorică. Indeed, I couldn't forgive him that.

Gore Pirgu was the ultimate rascal. His silly ludicrous antics, remindful of an impudent jester, had gained him the reputation of a smart fellow, doubled by that of a jolly good fellow—which was indeed amazing, for all he was really good at was gleeful offense and mischief. This devilish offspring's heart hosted an amalgam of a dog catcher and a grave digger. Corrupt to the bone from early age, addicted to pilfering and coin pitching, later wallowing in lechery with the maidservants, prowling about in the company of pimps and swindlers, he had been the Benjamin of Cazes Coffee House and the Cherub of call houses. I felt disgust at the thought of probing further into the deplorable nature of this morbid individual who had a singular