# Soft Soap/The Leg

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## Soft Soap

### THE MEETING

I kept glancing at the man sitting opposite me one or two table away, for he somehow brought back memories, though I was certain I had never known anyone so far up the social scale. He looked well-to-do and respectable, a prosperous businessman, yet he made me think of banners with Flemish emblems and Flemish slogans, and poetic young men with beards and sloppy felt hats. There was a small ribbon in his buttonhole – it would be some decoration or other – and, beside him on the table, an elegant pair of gloves. No, I'd never mixed in the circles he'd mix in, but still I couldn't keep my eyes off him. Where had I seen him before?

'Waiter,' he said all of a sudden, 'have you got real Guinness?'

'Oh yes,' came the casual answer.

'Bottled in Dublin, the real stuff?'

The waiter didn't answer, just turned round, with his back to him, and bawled out: '*Un stout, un!*'

As soon as he said 'the real stuff', I knew it was Laarmans. His voice hadn't changed in ten years.

'How are you, Laarmans?' I asked, as he tasted his stout.

He put his glass down, stared at me, and recognized me at once.

'Well, I never!'

A moment later he was sitting at my table, and he ordered a second bottle of stout without asking whether I wanted it or not. From his recollection of my pas he apparently assumed that there would be no question about it. When I looked doubtfully at the bottle, for I was thinking I would have to order another round and I found Guinness rather too extravagant for my pocket, he asked me at once if I would prefer a glass of wine 'or something.'

This was a different Laarmans from the one I remembered. I'd known him as a shabbily-dressed idealist with long hair that made his collar greasy, and a big pipe with a bowl shaped like a death's head, and a heavy walking stick that he waved menacingly whenever he'd drunk too much or marched in a demonstration. No one else could shout Flemish battle-cries as loudly as he used to, and he had been arrested twice, to my knowledge, for crimes he hadn't committed, simply because he looked such a dangerous character.

He flicked open a slender silver case and offered me a gold-tipped cigarette, an Abdulla I think, anyway an expensive brand.

'So what are you doing these days, Laarmans?' I finally asked him.

He thought for a moment and laughed.
'What am I doing?' he echoed. 'Well, how can I put it? It's all rather involved and it's difficult to explain in just a few words. Ten years ago I asked Boorman that same question and he tried to explain it to me then. But I needed a few months of practical experience before I got the hang of it.'
He ordered two more bottles.
'I'm paying,' he reassured me.
'Did you get into the Honours List?' I asked.
He glanced at the ribbon in his lapel that gave an odd lustre to his appearance.
'Oh no,' he said offhandedly and quite loudly.
I looked around, concerned in case any of the obviously very respectable group at the table not very far from us might have heard.
'Don't worry,' Laarmans said with a calm glance at the group, 'it's not a decoration at all. If it was, then... But I wouldn't try it. Sooner or later that sort of trick lands you in trouble. Maybe it's the same as a real one, there are so many of them that you can hardly wear a bit of ribbon without copying something that's been thought of already, even if you pick the most unlikely colours.'
Laarmans had always liked to talk, but now the flow of words had an accomplished smoothness and I was impressed by the shrewd way he answered questions I hadn't put into words.
'And your long hair, Laarmans?' I said, 'and your poems? Or don't you write poetry any more now?'
'And my pipe?' he laughed. 'You remember it, don't you? What a pipe that was! A really fine pipe! And that hat! And my walking stick! My God, that walking stick! And all the rest you never saw... my underwear and my socks!'
He looked straight ahead, as if he was peering back into the past.
'Yes, that's all over and done with,' he mumbled.
There was a brief silence.
'And what about the Flemish cause? And how's the general political situation?' he asked.
I assumed that he had been living abroad and I told him that as far as I could see nothing had changed very much, that bankers and businessmen still spoke French, like most of the Flemish did anyway when they were trying to make an impression in public, that the Liberals were still on top in the City Council, and that the Catholics still had the pick of the jobs in the Ministries.
Yes, he knew that as well as I did, he was living here in the city himself.
'But what about Flanders for the Flemish?' he asked insistently.
'You know, demonstrations, marches with walking sticks and sloppy felt hats, and fights, or at least a lot of noise. Do they still do that, or aren't you mixed up in it any more?'
I gave a vague answer and asked him again what he was doing these days.
'Soft-soap,' he said.
He saw that I wasn't any the wiser from his answer.
'Well that's what it is. Talk them round, and get them to sign and when they've signed they get the lot delivered.'
'What do they get delivered, Laarmans?' I asked. I was becoming curious.
'All the copies they've ordered,' he said.
He laughed again?
'Their copies of the *World Review*,' he added, apparently by way of explanation.
'Let's see,' he went on, 'tomorrow's Sunday, and I can knock out that article on Monday easily enough. If you're really interested I'll you the whole tale. I always rather liked you, you know. Drop round tomorrow, we can open a bottle of the best. Is that a deal? Sixty Boulevard du Japon. Don't be frightened off by the name-plate. Any time after three you're more than welcome.'

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# The Leg

## AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

It was certainly an imposing name, the General Marine and Shipbuilding Company, but I hadn't trudged all that way through the mud and slush from the end of the tramline just to stand in front of a window labelled 'Inquiries' that stayed shut though I'd rapped hard on the glass and coughed impatiently to attract attention. I had to see the manager, and I was going to see him, and after that the whole building and everything in it could blow up for all I cared. So, just once more, and this time with a bang to wake the dead. That did it. The window did finally yawn open, and when I bent down to make sure I could be heard I saw a face that I just gaped at.

'Yes, it's me,' he said, in answer to my silent question. 'I do the foreign correspondence here. Well, what are you staring at? Am I a freak or something? I can't talk now' – he jerked his head at the office behind him – 'but we finish in a quarter of an hour. Can you wait for me at the gate? I'll get you seen to straight away. Who was it you wanted? Mijnheer Henry? I'll tell him. Till half pas, then.'

I finished my talk with Mijnheer Henry just before the day's work was over at the General Marine and Shipbuilding Company, so I went and stood on the opposite side of the street to wait till the half hour struck. Suddenly there was a screech that nailed me to the fence I was leaning against, and before the steam whistle had stopped a crowd came streaming through the gate. And there was Laarmans. He threaded his way out of a small group and a few moments later we were walking down the street side by side.

I took a good look at the one-time director of the *World Review of Finance, Trade and Commerce, Industry, Art and Science*. He certainly had changed. He didn't have his left hand in his pocket any more, there was the beginning of a beard, and now he had a pipe again instead of the gold-tipped cigarettes he'd pushed across the table to me so casually in that house in the Boulevard du Japon. He was wrapped in an overcoat with a cape that seemed to be intended for all kinds of weather, and he was wearing heavy shoes he could swing along in without bothering to dodge the smaller puddles.

'It wasn't my fault it ended the way it did,' he explained suddenly, as if he felt that I couldn't bring myself to ask what had happened because his new status seemed to me such a come-down. 'Boorman hoisted me up and Boorman hauled me down. Blessed be the name of Boorman.'

I kept respectfully silent, and he gave a short laugh:

'It's a crazy story. Drop round on Sunday. Seventy Verdussenstraat. Wife and kids, but that doesn't matter. We'll find a quiet cornet to sit in. We don't have many visitors, and it'll do me good. And how did you get on with our Mijnheer Henry? Did you talk the miserable little bastard into buying anything?'

## AT THE VEGETABLE MARKET

And Laarmans started his tale:

'It's quite a while ago, but you'll probably remember I told you about that character of a woman who wouldn't let me make her a present of the last instalment she had to pay. Well, she was the cause of it all, and that's how Boorman found out that something you've done can't always be shrugged off and forgotten. It's there like a slow-working yeast, and it can start bubbling up years afterwards when you're sure the past has been washed clean. But our paths crossed again, and it was a collision that toppled me off my director's perch and blew me like a withered leaf into a quiet

niche in that gruesome shipyard. But not only that. It set me thinking. I got to wondering whether our thoughts and our deeds and misdeeds mightn't trail behind us, never far away, a sort of retinue that grows and grows the more we shrivel up, just as much with us as our own children of flesh and blood, there are all the time, and probably still there whispering and whispering long after our mouths have been shut forever.

But to keep the story. It was one of those things you never expect, and if that squashed tomato hadn't been where it was, nothing would have happened.

I told you, didn't I, that Boorman used to take a day off from his pill business about once a month and come into Brussels to settle up with me. These visits gave me a chance to profit from his advice, and we would walk along while he did most of the talking and he'd point every now and then to a shop or a name-plate. The meant 'Have you tried them yet?', and I'd either say yes or note the address without interrupting him. He knew exactly which places to pick, and whenever I followed his suggestions I did much more business than when I trusted to my own judgement.

A few months before the accident with the tomato his wife had died, and he was doing his best to have a wild fling, he didn't have much success. He looked so sad and sorry for himself that even the least choosy whores didn't fancy him as a customer. I soon realized that I'd made a mistake in assuming that her departure was a long-awaited relief for him. The blow seemed to have hit him hard, and I noticed that it wasn't easy for him to get his thoughts off that shadowy figure he'd always kept in the background. Every time I saw him she cropped up somewhere in the conversation. As long as I'd known him he'd never once mentioned her by name, but now he talked about Martha as if I'd had a share in her too. He seemed to forget that I'd never seen her more than half a dozen times, and then only for a moment or so when she came downstairs to the Museum if the maid was out and she had to get some tinned food for the kitchen. He'd suddenly point to a woman going past and say that she looked like Martha in that hat or that dress or with those shoes on. Even an umbrella in the window of a shop he said I should try for the *World Review* had, he discovered, the same bone handle as the one he'd given her for her last birthday present.

Occasionally we used to go out to dinner together when his loneliness seemed to be too much for him, and he would look through the menu for some favourite dish of Martha's as if she was sitting at the table with us. Then one day I saw he had a trinket dangling on his watch chain, and he confided to me later that he had had it made from a brooch she'd worn for years over her noble bosom. I didn't dare ask him, but I was beginning to suspect that he'd had her embalmed, just as she'd done with her sister, because he developed a rather unusual interest in the mummies in the Egyptian section of the National Museum. Anyway, she didn't go short of floral tributes. Three times when I was with him he bought expensive wreaths that caught his eye in florists we happened to pass.

He advised me not to accept any payments in foodstuffs, because with all the talk about vitamin deficiency he'd got the idea into his head that Martha had eaten too much out of the tins from the Museum of Domestic and Foreign Products. He'd often stop and gaze at a travel agency poster of the snow-capped Jungfrau, so white and inviting. For forty years he'd been promising her a trip down the Rhine, and now it was too late.

'When you've got to run a business there's never any time,' he mumbled, 'but more than likely the Rhine's overrated.'

'She wouldn't have liked the Rhine,' I said to console him. 'Those trips are so tiring. It's only a very ordinary river, so you needn't think she missed anything.'

But what seemed to trouble him most was that he hadn't taken her often enough to the cinema. Apparently just before she died she'd told him she loved watching films.

'It's sad,' he lamented, 'you never realize these things until it's too late.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' I agreed – as I usually did.

One ill-augured morning the sorrowing widower had come to Brussels very early and we happened to wander into a side-street off the Chaussée d'Anvers not far from the Rue de Flandre where the

Lauwereyssen foundry was and Fat Jeanne leaned out of her window. The vegetable market was packed. There was a long row of barrows each with its yelling hag, and on the road and the footpath a crowd of housewives pushed and shoved as if there was a food shortage. On the corner there was a new building going up. It was seven stories high already, and looked as though it would be a fine bit of architecture when it was finished.

As soon as he saw it Boorman took a couple of steps backwards to get a better view. I moved aside for a man with a mattress on his head who was trying to make his way through the mass of bargaining women. At the same moment I heard a shout and a clatter as in a bowling alley. When the mattress had got past I saw Boorman on the ground between two vegetable barrows. Under him a bulky female, and near by a black crutch with a red velvet arm-pad, a cabbage and some lettuce, and a shopping basket on its die. A couple of dogs, woken by the noise, started barking like the hounds of hell, and one of the barrow women was so surprised that she stopped yelling. I dived in between the barrows, put the scattered vegetables back into the shopping basket, and picked up the crutch. By then Boorman had managed to get up and was very gallantly trying to lift the large female who'd broken his fall. That wasn't so easy. She pushed her legs out like someone having a first swimming lesson and I heard a sharp tapping on the cobbles. Then I saw that she had a wooden leg. I laid the crutch against a barrow, grabbed her under the arms, and the two of us finally hauled her upright.

'Put that in her basket too,' the barrow woman who'd nearly been knocked over as well shouted to me. She pointed with her chin to a lettuce I hadn't noticed and then went on yelling her prices and wares.

The large female Boorman had fallen on didn't seem to be hurt. I brushed the dust off her coat, handed her the crutch and then her basket and raised my hat.

'I'm terribly sorry, Mevrouw,' Boorman said, all confused, 'I must have slipped, and I hope you will forgive me. Can I perhaps be of any help? Would you like me to call a taxi?'

The woman with the crutch just looked hard ad Boorman.

'I'll certainly forgive you for this, Mijnheer Boorman,' she said after a long silence 'It wasn't your fault. But that dirty trick of yours, giving me nothing but talk instead of capital for my limited company, that I'll never forgive. You asked if you could be of any help. Yes, you can. Get out of my way, that's all.'

She gave a laugh that was more of a sneer, and the, without waiting for an answer, she squeezed between two of the barrows to the footpath. She turned with a stamp of her crutch, stood still for a moment, and moved off like a boat riding the crest of a wave.

Boorman's face went red and then pale as a sheet. He watched her till she was out of sight.

'That, on top of everything else,' he mumbled, implying, as far as I could gather, that he already had enough to bear with the loss of the Martha.

'Well, they've chopped it off,' I said. 'The holy ointment didn't help.'

But this remark of mine, the sort of comment he'd normally make himself, didn't raise the slightest smile. He turned into the first street we came to, walking along in a dream, not even glancing at shops or name-plates, and soon he shook hands and said he was off home early. At that moment I had a vague feeling that my days as director of the *World Review* and the Museum of Domestic and Foreign Products were numbered.