Crackling Skulls

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An extract

Original title De knetterende schedels
Publisher Uitgeverij Vrijdag, 2020

Translation Dutch into English
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Hercules kneels

It shouldn't have been possible, and yet I saw it with my own eyes.

A hefty radiator unit raised above his head, Vukovic stormed, fuming, through the common room. He had ripped the bulky metal fixture from the wall with a few hard jerks and, armed with this menacing weapon, set out in pursuit of the yowling Sneyers, who desperately sought cover, of all places, under my chair.

Janos Vukovic was a hulk of a man with phenomenal strength. Elaborate tales of his herculean exploits made the rounds in the asylum, and they were only half-embellished. His feat in the penitentiary was legendary, when he bashed three warders' heads together at once, knocking them out cold. Less wanton but equally impressive was when, on a wager, he hoisted the billiard table by one end to shoulder height and then dragged it to the far end of the room. Tearing out the radiator added a new achievement to his track record of exceptional brawn.

Vukovic's nickname among the inmates was the Gypsy King. This romantic sobriquet was likewise only part-fantasy. While no one knew for sure where or when he was born, the general consensus was that he belonged to a restless tribe of nomads that had fanned out from the Macedonian plateau to these lowlands.

Like Hercules, Samson, and other delirious strongmen, Vukovic was kind at heart. He even seemed rather embarrassed by his enormous frame and the explosive energy it bottled up. His sluggish movements gave the impression of safeguarding that energy against unwanted jolts, the way a truck driver maneuvers his ten-tonner packed with dynamite. He was a good-natured man, Janos Vukovic, but when he did blow his top, the dynamite blasted, leaving behind a heap of smoldering rubble. This happened occasionally in the asylum and also, alas, once on the outside.

So Vukovic menaced me with that leaden and leaking radiator raised above his head, while Sneyers cowered under my chair.

Everyone around took to their heels, and given time and the chance, I would have done so myself. I was, however, busy rereading Flaubert, and while it is always an enjoyable read, L'éducation sentimentale was at that wretched moment of little use. I had never exchanged a harsh word with the Gypsy King, but from his bulging eyes it was clear he would not bother to spare me if he could annihilate that rat Sneyers, and me along with him.

At that moment Gerrit-with-the-lopped-off-fingers, in a fit of providential covetousness, mustered all his courage and launched a rear attack. It was the chance of a lifetime. For months, perhaps years, he had jealously ogled the Gypsy King's exquisite headdress: a vintage World War I

infantryman's hat. A genuine 'side cap' with a red tassel dangling merrily at the front. An ornament worthy of a king.

Gerrit slyly circled him, calculated his pounce like a cat, and in one swipe snatched the cap off the head of the unsuspecting Vukovic. The Gypsy King stiffened, nonplussed and defenseless, not even sure who the bandit was.

Just then, the reinforcements arrived. Six guards stormed the common room, poised for attack, armed with jangling handcuffs and thick billy clubs.

But it was no longer necessary. Janos Vukovic, the he-man Vukovic, slowly lowered the chunk of metal and sank to his knees, weeping, imploring the god of the gypsies to release him from this inhuman ordeal.

Then, contrary to all logic, something even more extraordinary happened. So extraordinary that it took my breath away as if I were witnessing a miracle. Gerrit-with-the-lopped-off-fingers, who under other circumstances might not shy away from murdering in cold blood to score such a coveted prize, shuffled closer and silently handed over the side cap to the kneeling Gypsy King, who then truly broke down, now out of pure gratitude and joy. Vukovic donned his ornament and carried the severed radiator out back to the courtyard without giving Sneyers a second glance, the red tassel dangling merrily from his crimson head.

Letter to the King

Sire,

As a frontline soldier during the Great War, fourteen months in the trenches at the Yser, eight months in a field hospital with one leg shot off above the knee, and a chest full of medals, I, Corthals, Jeroom, Corneel, Alfonsina, sixty-six years old, take the humble liberty of addressing Your Majesty to inform you that this cannot continue.

Wrongly locked up for the past nine years on a false accusation by Abspoel, Gustaaf, who entirely without evidence swore under oath to the tribunal of East Flanders that I raped and strangled his underage daughter Rosalie, I consider it my duty to inform Your Majesty that I, grand invalide and decorated as stated above, am slowly but surely being poisoned in this asylum.

For nine years I have silently and patiently suffered to be taunted and provoked in the most underhanded manner, without any justification.

A veteran of 1914–18 can tolerate much, and I endured worse ordeals on the Yser. That November night at Ramskapelle, for instance, I will never forget: my leg shattered, I lay in the mud and the dark, wailing like a beast, while shrapnel, enough to drive a man mad, whistled over my head, and the next morning when the medics, still terrified out of their wits, carried me into the operating room and the doctor said, 'You'll just have to clench your teeth, Jeroom Corthals, because the truck with morphine and other medicine was shot to smithereens last night two kilometers from here,' I suffered more in a few hours than in the past nine years.

That in my first year here, when I was in such a state because of the false allegation of Abspoel, Gustaaf, they strapped me and my one good leg to the bed and more than once forgot to bring me food, even though I've always had a hearty appetite—so be it.

That they did not grant me leave to attend the funeral of my eldest brother Kamiel, who died of throat cancer, because the doctors said the grief could give me a breakdown at that open grave; I, veteran of '14–'18 who stepped over hundreds of corpses without batting an eye

and singlehandedly took out three badly-wounded Germans with my bayonet, why would I have had a breakdown at the sight of a neatly nailed-down coffin, even though my beloved brother was lying in it? Don't make me laugh! Again: so be it.

That they put me in a straitjacket and let three men beat me after I, overwrought with nerves, had grabbed the warder Jean-Marie Delamar by the throat and kept on squeezing until he was, like Rosalie, nearly gone, which would have been his just deserts. Fine. Water under the bridge. I am not one to dwell on bagatelles.

But now that they are slowly, slyly murdering me, the time has come for me to speak out. The comrade who sits here writing this for me, because I left school at the age of nine and as a veteran of the front I can hold a rifle far better than a pen, says I should direct my complaint to the Investigating Magistrate or the Crown Solicitor in Ghent, but I know better. Over the years I have written and written, enough to drive one mad. Lawyers, investigating magistrates, crown solicitors, ministers, chairmen of patriotic organizations. Do you think, Sire, that I have received a single answer? I seriously doubt whether my letters were even read with appropriate care.

Therefore I have decided to resort to heavy artillery and appeal directly to Your Majesty, the highest Authority, and the grandson of the dear departed Soldier-King Albert, under whose command I allowed that leg of mine to be shot off.

It's like this, Sire. For three weeks now I have been given drops. For my nerves, says the doctor, but I have had a nervous condition ever since childhood. Nine years in the asylum have shattered my nerves, and now all of a sudden they come up with these drops. And to what effect? They sap my energy, each day more than the last. At times the room spins, and my heart ticks like a clock after walking just twenty meters. I used to be able to walk twenty kilometers on that one leg and then hold my breath for half a minute, effortlessly.

At first they brought the drops in a glass of water. I laughed out loud at them and hurled the glass through the window. In the days thereafter they snuck the drops into the soup, into the mashed potatoes, into the minced beef, and maybe even into the pudding, which they know I love.

I refused to eat until, after two days, I turned cross-eyed from hunger. I have already mentioned having a hearty appetite, Sire. 'If you won't eat, we'll jab the drops into your backside,' they said. 'And how many men will you bring to do it?' I asked. 'Ten, if need be,' was their answer. I ask you man to man, Sire, is this not craven? Ten men against one crippled veteran.

I started eating again anyway, grudgingly. And now here I sit: lethargic, with buttermilk in my eyes, sawdust in my one leg, and a shooting gallery in my heart. Another three weeks of this and I'm a gone goose.

Now, I ask you, Sire, can you turn a blind eye to these torments of a war veteran who sacrificed a leg for the fatherland?

Of course, this is all the fault of the warder Jean-Marie Delamar, who cannot stand the sight of me since I leapt at his throat in legitimate self-defense, and who has encouraged the doctor to quietly do away with me. He stands there leering whenever I eat my soup or my pudding, and when I give him a dirty look he bursts out laughing. If I did not feel so tame, I would hold his face in the soup until he choked in it.

I wished to inform you of this, Sire, in the hope that you will call for an investigation into this matter. For if the King does not stand up the just treatment and the lives of His war veterans, then I ask you: why then did we win the War of '14-'18?

With the utmost respectful and sincerest regards, I undersign, your humble servant,

Jeroom Corthals.

The instructions of Prometheus

Daniel smoked only three, at most four days a month, but then he smoked like a chimney from morning till night, let's say non-stop, the longest cigarettes I have ever laid eyes on.

The first week of every month he invariably placed the same order at the canteen: seven pouches of 'Louis Doize extra légères, sans filtre' and three packets of 'Riz-la-Croix automatique gommé' rolling papers.

He used the papers to roll triple-length cigarettes, which he meticulously stored in a flat, red-lacquered paintbrush box emblazoned with a Chinese dragon, a cherished possession he carried with him at all times.

He smoked those improbably long cigarettes without the least ostentation. He sat calmly alone at his usual, trusted spot at the table and exhaled, with quiet and earnest devotion, rhythmical blue puffs, like an imperturbable Arab silently sitting at his hookah while meditating on Allah's unfathomable wisdom.

Nothing in Daniel's ascetic expression betrayed even an iota of emotion or satisfaction while he smoked. Only his eyes took on an oily luster, like the trance of an epileptic when a seizure is coming on.

I often observed him at a distance. He appeared oblivious to any other presence in the overfull common room. Sometimes his measured, ritual gestures reminded one of the unhurried ceremony of a high priest who, in brocade robe and with beringed fingers, swings the censer while his thoughts waft upwards, along with the smoke, to loftier regions.

After breakfast a guard would give Daniel a light for his first cigarette. He did not have to ask. The guard, his acolyte, stood like a gangly choirboy in his white coat in the dining room doorway and automatically produced a box of matches from his pocket.

And so Daniel commenced his monthly smoking marathon lasting three, sometimes four days. He placed the paintbrush box holding his pre-rolled stockpile on the table before him like a miniature tabernacle and smoked his three-staged cigarettes without inhaling. With one yellowed fingertip he carefully flicked the ash into a tin soapdish next to the paintbrush box and used the stub to light the next extra-long cigarette. I have never seen a more thorough demonstration of chain smoking. This perpetuum mobile was interrupted only for meals and sleep. After each requisite interlude, the guard would silently offer him a new light and Daniel would silently continue his marathon.

Equally essential to the ritual was the presence of old Roupcinsky. He remained unwaveringly at Daniel's side for the duration of the smokefest. He sat next to him at the table, attentive and reverential, watching in rapt attention through the cloud of his cataracts and with a feverish blush on his cheeks while the long cigarettes slowly burned, then pounced like a hawk on its prey when a stub was deposited in the soapdish.

Roupcinsky was mad about cigarette stubs. He far preferred a handful of stubs to an entire pack of cigarettes ever since the warders forbade him to break whole cigarettes into pieces. The nicotine-drenched remains in the soapdish allowed Roupcinsky to chew lavishly for a week. He, too, always carried a tin box with him, for the stubs. Queen Fabiola's image smiled from the lid, but Roupcinsky's banged-up tin was less attractive and more profane than Daniel's red-lacquered paintbrush box with the clawing Chinese dragon.

Daniel was in the habit of taking an early afternoon stroll around the flowerbeds of the courtyard. He walked stiffly, because he lifted his rheumatic knees too high. To see him walking there with his long cigarette reminded one of a quivering heron with a scrap of white driftwood in its beak. Roupcinsky stuck to him like a suckerfish and, leering and chewing, plucked the smoldering butts from amidst the dahlias and poppies as though they were glowworms.

Daniel's periodic smoke-mania was made possible by a providential sum of one hundred fifty francs, which was deposited by postal order in his name with calendric punctuality on the first of every month. The maecenas was one Baroness Hélène Boxtyns de Lichtendaal. The stipend had been coming in for years, and no one in the asylum was able to trace the origins or nature of this mysterious relationship.

Daniel never spoke of the baroness. He signed the postal order in elegant, aristocratic handwriting without further comment, as though this payment was his rightful due. Then he promptly placed his order with the canteen, puffed down his supply in three days, and did not touch a single cigarette for the rest of the month.

For Roupcinsky, the first week of the month was a treat. The brown juice constantly dribbled down his chin. For the next three weeks he paid Daniel no notice, but he impatiently counted the days until the first of the month, when he would again station himself and his Fabiola tin at Daniel's side, gloating with pleasure.

In vain I wondered why Daniel would go through his supply of cigarettes in a few days, and after that seem to suffer no craving whatsoever. It couldn't have been the nicotine high, for whenever I offered him a cigarette, he always refused it haughtily, almost with contempt. Maybe he would smoke no other brand, I thought. So in the third week of the month I bought a pouch of Louis Doize and a packet of Rix-la-Croix in the canteen. But when I, quasi-nonchalantly, tried to slip it to him, he gave me such a terrifying look that I hid away the unwelcome gift at once, as though it were something obscene.

And yet I was not to be discouraged. My constantly rekindled, insatiable curiosity was determined to find out why he would obsessively smoke such long cigarettes and then suddenly stop.

'Daniel,' I asked one day when he appeared well-disposed, 'why do you smoke such long cigarettes?'

He looked at me with the eyes of a lizard. Every time he looked at me this way, it felt like a flock of startled pigeons flapped past above my head.

'I am following the instructions of Prometheus,' he whispered.

'Who is Prometheus?' I asked.

'Prometheus is a spy,' he replied, pausing for a moment to let his words sink in. 'But you mustn't tell anyone,' he added conspiratorially. 'It's a secret between you and me.'

I promised I would not, but my further efforts to get to the bottom of the enigma went nowhere. Was he familiar with the story of Prometheus and his hollow reed? He must have heard or read somewhere that the myth had something to do with fire. But what role the Baroness Hélène Boxtyns de Lichtendaal played in the affair remained a mystery. He did not utter a word about her, and I dared not press him for fear of driving him yet further into his shell.

Did the baroness in one way or another suspect that the secret, thanks to the inquisitiveness of a brazen outsider, had been breached? Och, I'm just telling myself fairy tales.

But the fact of the matter is: on the first day of the following month no postal order arrived, nor the first of the month after that. The mysterious source of funds appeared to have suddenly run dry.

Daniel sank, day by day, into an ever more somber mood, and I feared that a crisis was imminent—the way the corners of his mouth trembled was the writing on the wall.

The crisis did not come, but at times he sat across from me at the table, his empty paintbrush box in front of him, glowering at me so blackly, so hatefully that it gave me the shivers. It was pure

coincidence, naturally, but I felt ill at ease and a bit guilty for having stuck my nose into his secret bond with Prometheus.

After six weeks I could stand it no longer. I bought three pouches of Louis Doize and two packets of Riz-la-Croix, rolled a dozen extra-long cigarettes, and deposited them without a word on the table next to the paintbrush box.

And then came Daniel's crisis. He let out an earsplitting shriek, ran through the common room on his spindly legs, disappeared into the cupboard behind the kitchen, and drank a quarter of a bottle of Eau de Javel before the guard could intervene.

He was rushed to the hospital, his insides on fire and a greenish froth on his lips.

Fortunately, the damage from the bleach was minimal. Leonard, who lay in the same hospital with prostate troubles, wrote just a week later that Daniel had recovered quickly and gorged himself on oranges, which was surely a good sign.

Shortly thereafter, one of the guards informed me that Daniel, thanks to intervention by his family, would be transferred to another asylum. Was it on the instruction of Baroness Boxtyns de Lichtendaal? I never found out.

After that, I saved my cigarette stubs in a cardboard box for Roupcinsky.

Trumpet

Never before had I heard anyone play the trumpet like Honoré. Not that you could call it playing. It was more a groaning and grumbling and wailing and practically cursing through the instrument. Howling, drawn-out, discordant tones, so shrill and mistuned that it cut you to the quick. The lamentations of Orpheus on the loss of his Euridice could not have sounded more woeful.

This trumpet was Doctor Poulard's idea. While paging through dossiers he discovered that Honoré had played the trumpet before being admitted to the asylum. Doctor Poulard regarded this as important. He subscribed to the widely-held psychiatric opinion that creative aptitude manifested in one's youth and aborted for whatever reason should be stimulated, with patience and, if necessary, gentle insistence, for this was a positive way—according to the psychiatrists, at least—of releasing tension. He who once painted, must resume painting, no matter if by now he could not face another tube of paint. Who once partook of music as a pastime but had long come to the conclusion that installing kitchen cabinets was a more lucrative profession, must be nudged back to the spurned Polyhymnia. It is a wonder that Doctor Poulard never encouraged me to write. He was probably unaware that in my youth I had tried my hand at love poems.

After some searching, one of the guards found in his attic a long-disused, copper-colored instrument, something between a piston bugle and a cornet, for the sake of simplicity a 'trumpet', and Honoré was beseeched to release his tensions upon it. During the day he was given a place all to himself in the dining hall, and the doctor eagerly awaited the results of the experiment.

This experiment was of particular interest because since entering the asylum, Honoré had not uttered a single word. His vocal and auditory organs were in perfect working order, but for some reason known only to him, if reason there was, he stubbornly refused to engage in any form of dialogue. Perhaps that ornery, impermeable silence was a form of passive resistance. Or maybe nothing much happened anymore behind that forehead anymore that warranted being put into words.

Given this apathy, Doctor Poulard saw it as a positive sign that Honoré was prepared to blow the trumpet at all, even though that blowing had nothing to do with music, nor was there any indication, from the onset of this exercise, of any lessening of tension.

'Keep at it,' said Doctor Poulard. 'We're on the right track.'

For a full week Honoré sat in the refectory torturing that instrument. The low notes were bearable. At times it sounded like a passing steamboat. The strident high-pitched tones, however, made us wince and gave the warders migraine. Honoré might be releasing his own tension, but in the restless dining hall, tensions rose by the day. Even the startled birds indignantly gave the garden a wide berth.

Doctor Poulard found it curious and also rather disappointing that after a week, no civilized sound could be coaxed out of the trumpet.

'Nevertheless,' he said, 'there it is, in black and white, in his dossier: *son oncle et sa belle-soeur déclarent qu'il joue de la trompette*.'

Then the guard recalled in a flash that in some parts of Wallonia, specifically in the Borinage, whence Honoré hailed, it was sometimes said of an idiot that 'he played the trumpet.'

Doctor Poulard thought this an excellent joke and the guard, who knew his manners, laughed heartily along with him.

'Absolument fantastique!' exclaimed Doctor Poulard.

He went to the dining hall, where Honoré sat in his corner diligently blowing, and kindly patted the patient on the shoulder. Then he suddenly grabbed the instrument and hurled it across the room, in the hope that the shock would elicit some sort of response.

That hope went, as before, unfufilled. Honoré looked in silent astonishment from his empty hands to the guard, and from the guard to Doctor Poulard, like a sick animal unable to say where it hurts.
