

The Slingshot by Michal Vrba

Translated by David Short

I withdrew into my shell. New Year's Eve came and went and 1942 began. The next few months are a blur and it's hard for me to write anything about them, because in my memory they are all diffuse and unremarkable.

Spring came. Horst remained forgotten somewhere in the past, but my hankering after the blood of ginger-headed bean-poles came back. As if I'd got withdrawal symptoms. What was I missing out on? Another act of revenge? An urge to put my apparent unconcern to a new test? The pleasure of shooting? Perhaps all of that, or perhaps I was also bothered by the scant fare of my last action. The Horst guy, and in his cups – no big deal, that.

This time I didn't want the punishment to be purely random. This was the first time I had a plan.

My next target was an easy choice. Someone I saw on a daily basis.

I could hardly have set myself a greater challenge.

Herman Glocke.

The devil's sidekick. The sidekick of the very devil whose fate was sealed, by a most fantastic set of coincidences, only two hours later. How many similar flukes have made tiny changes to history as known, or misaligned it ever so slightly without anyone ever getting to know?

But more of that anon.

So, Herman Glocke. The veriest embodiment of evil. A grey-haired, yet barely forty-year-old man of military bearing, which wasn't common in the department. He wasn't employed in our office, he wasn't even subordinate to our management, but to the Gestapo, which I only chanced to discover some time after his arrival.

He had an office to himself one floor up. He rarely attended meetings and apart from his constant eavesdropping and unpleasant expression his presence wasn't much in evidence.

I never asked anyone what he was doing in the department. He was obviously feared by even some of my German colleagues. Without his say-so not a single character got printed. His expression was cold and impenetrable, his lips permanently clamped together, and his diction curt.

Who's to say whence the winds of history had blown him in, possibly from some part of the Sudetenland, given that he spoke excellent Czech. He rarely spoke, and then only to me, but apart from the hard edge to his accent he spoke flawlessly and he had a fine understanding of even the most demanding of written Czech texts. Perhaps that was why he'd been installed here, with me.

My contact with him was confined to brief, barked orders, like when he brought back a badly drafted piece of work of mine, from which he would gnaw out with precision any passages that were too refined or vague, much as a wolf plucks the soft tissues out of his downed prey.

He lived somewhere in a residential quarter of Bubeneč, or perhaps Dejvice. I don't know for sure, but I would often meet him on the way up or down the flight of steps leading up from the river to the Letná Plain.

He didn't use a company car, but walked the same way every day, striding confidently. Early in the morning he would direct his brisk, steady steps towards the stairway, looking neither right nor left, head erect like a soldier, as if coming to save, if not to rule the world. His boundless self-assurance was in the same mould as that of the Reichsprotektor, just as they were matched in their insensitivity to their surroundings, the greater part of which lay beyond their powers of discrimination.

And they both had no inkling that this account of what made them alike was far from complete...

There were those steps that led from Letná down to the Embankment, but there was also a network of footpaths. I often went that way, on days when I left for the office early so as to take the long way round.

By now I was regularly surveying every spot, looking for the perfect place of concealment, safe from the eyes of both my future victim and any chance passers-by. At the second bend in the stone staircase, thirty metres or so from the top of the hill, there was some dense shrubbery on the outer side, right up to the retaining wall running beside the steps. From the bend you could see down onto people starting up from the river. And from the top I could surely reach the bend long before any unwanted presence could have climbed that far up.

The only suitable spot, and close to the heart of the city. All I had to do was wait for that one day, that one moment, when no one would be coming up and only He was heading down.

Then by his sacrifice he would take upon himself all the guilt of the ginger-headed bean-pole. And if it all worked out, Glocke would have paid for the fact that, cast out by both sides, I'd have become his unassuming and least likely judge and executioner.

On my daily round I would always pause at the rim of the hill and gaze out on the panorama of Prague with the expression of one seeing that beautiful sight for the first time.

But in reality my eyes were fixed on a chance pedestrian coming from the bridge towards the foot of the long stairway. Once he'd vanished behind the trees on the hillside, I would hurry down to the second bend, to my chosen spot, and slow down ahead of him. I mentally counted the seconds before my practice target appeared and passed me by, unobserving, and with no inkling of the task he had just performed.

There was plenty of time, five, sometimes as many as seven minutes.

I also computed the time it would take me to reach the second bend in the steps at a brisk pace matching the gait of Herman Glocke.

For the third part of my preparations I had to keep my eyes peeled for the rare juncture that would match the fatal one. Meaning one with no one coming from the bridge, but also no one approaching down the avenue leading along Letná towards the steps.

Then I ran down to the second bend and hopped over the low stone side wall. Beyond it there were scattered clumps of that shrubbery. The ground level was about half a metre lower than the sandstone landing on the steps and, together with the metre-high side wall, provided the ideal height for a marksman's hiding place. And it also afforded the chance of resting the weapon comfortably on the smooth surface of the sandstone blocks that made up the wall.

I made my way to my spot on the slope that didn't face the centre of the steps, but where its outer corner cut into the hillside. I knelt down so as to not to be visible from the other side and waited for a non-existent figure coming upwards, clutching an imaginary catapult and nut. The real catapult was held tight against the stout trunk of a nearby bush, wound round by its elastic, and three nuts were pressed into the soil at the very foot of the wall.

Once the silent, invisible silhouette of a man had passed the bend of the first landing to reach the twelve steps leading in my direction my heart began to pound; in my highly charged mind I summoned up the sound of jackboots descending the stone steps and then I drew an imaginary catapult, rose silently to my feet and rested my hand on the sandstone wall.

The flicking sound of the catapult as supplied by my feverish imagination invariably made me jump and I knew it was going to be difficult...

This isn't the helpless, vomiting Horst. This one's bound to be carrying a gun. If he spots me, or if I miss, that'll be the end of me. He's sure to be unerring in the handling of a gun and this skill will, paradoxically, be my salvation, my deliverance from the meat-hook somewhere in the Gestapo cellars.

He mustn't spot me, even if he comes straight towards me. So I placed myself almost in the very corner. My assumption (please God it's right!) was based on a man's natural instinct: Glocke, otherwise inattentive, could be assumed to focus on the steps ahead of him, or to turn intuitively towards the view down across the city rather than sideways along the slope.

I'd given little thought to what might come next. I might beat a retreat along the contour of the hill. Indeed, I had already checked for pathways through the shrubs behind me, but still suspected that, when the time came, the instinct of self-preservation would direct me itself, whatever plans I might have made.

Despite my rock-solid determination, I was repeatedly beset by waves of fear, even utter terror at the irrevocable moment when what couldn't be stopped would finally happen and I would have to go through with it.

Above all, no pussyfooting...

(...)

On Friday 22 May I set off to work with a funny idea in my head.

Today I'm going on my first hide hunt! Like a poacher!

The day, despite the cool of morning, had that pleasant scent of the start of summer. The cold air in my lungs put a spring in my step and brought composure to my mind. I giggled again at the association – my first hunt from a hide, like a poacher! – and I strode on towards Letná via my customary detour.

I sat at an angle on the last bench close to the steps, withdrew some papers from my briefcase and pretended to be looking for something in them.

At the far end of the grassy area, the silhouette of a sturdily erect figure appeared, approaching me along the avenue at a steady pace. Like a machine.

Vermin, I thought as a fitting extension of the joke, but this time I wasn't laughing. My heart was thumping again.

I quickly rose and glanced down the hill. As far as I could see, there were, at the bends and on the steps, no more than five people, three singletons and a couple. They were all mounting the last stages just below me. The lower sections by the river were out of sight.

The nearest figure approaching the steps at the very bottom was a woman, but she was only half-way across the bridge over the Vltava.

I could barely temper my haste and passed the last man coming up, an elderly office worker by all appearances, two steps at a time.

I dropped across the wall, quickly unwound the elastic of my catapult from the shrub stem and began digging the nuts out of the soil with my fingers. I knelt down to wait. My heart was beating an alarm, but then for a fraction of a second it stopped. My whole frame was shaken by an appalling thought... that I'd overlooked something...

And then it hit me – how stupid, so stupid of me!

I'd no idea how long it would take Glocke to cover the length of the avenue before reaching the top of the steps, so how long it would be before he began his descent...

I'd planned all my steps to perfection. But I'd forgotten about his... I might have reckoned on heading down the steps a short while before him, but now I hadn't even thought to check how far he'd got before I set off.

My determination evaporated completely. All that was left was – mortification, ludicrous mortification. I leant against the wall and slid to the ground. Aren't you the very opposite of a hero? Aren't you the most stupid of all that's stupid! I berated myself.

I heard the polished jackboots come tramping down the sandstone steps. The sound was louder than I'd have expected. And the rhythm of his footsteps faster. I froze in my corner like a terror-stricken animal and cleaved to the wall in a convulsion of panic.

I wouldn't have fired a shot, I realised to my horror, I wouldn't even have fired...

The regular clumping of boots faded and died. And right then I caught the sound of other people's voices as they greeted someone, presumably my Gestapo man, with a thunderous Heil Hitler! I waited until the unknown parties had passed me the other side of the wall, then took a cautious peek.

Climbing the steps and chatting amiably together were two German soldiers. I clasped both arms to my chest; the beating of my heart was painful and almost cracked my ribs open. The soldiers' chatter faded and died in the bend of the stairway.

If not for my blunder and fear, I'd doubtless have been dead by then... Oh, what a ridiculous, inept caricature of an avenger I am! In vain I tried to catch my breath and restore my calm.

My first hunt from a hide! Like a poacher!

It was the worst night of my life. In recent days I'd been through so much misery, fear and fatigue. But it bore no comparison with the hours of torment spent in the rain on the bank of that stream. The combination of cold, rain, exhaustion and resignation had brought me to the very brink of the abyss of insanity.

I can still remember the plaintive wailing, hysterical laughter and grievous wheezing of my chilled lungs.

Frozen stiff and soaked through, I crawled a little way further beneath the broad leaves of burdock, but the heavy rain easily got through this flimsy refuge and kept pounding away at my broken body.

It was endless, with no liberation in sight. I curled up tight, propped my rucksack under my head and groaned quietly as I shivered unstoppably. Faster and faster I exhaled the cold, damp air, while time slowed down until it came to a complete stop.

The end was nigh.

The story of the last few years slowly unfolded before my eyes. I had a flash of inspiration – so this is where death meets the life to come...

Perhaps it was the end I deserved, having hurt so many people, my parents, wife, people I'd written about, people I'd brutally shot at.

I'd never thought so level-headedly about that business with the catapult: until this night I'd been the poor wretch, they being just the victims of righteous revenge, of my legitimate wrath against the entire world.

But now they were promenading before my eyes like the figures on the astronomical clock in the Old Town Square, and I was sorry for them. I begged each and every one of them for forgiveness, many times over. It would surely have afforded them considerable satisfaction to see the state I was in. The last one in particular would doubtless be very glad to see me...

But the eternity of the night and the eternity of my self-torment did come to end. About an hour before dawn, at a rough guess, it stopped raining. I was lying there motionless as a corpse. It got lighter and I could finally see the gully in which I lay. I couldn't fathom how I could have got down there in the dark without breaking my neck. All the sides around it were extremely steep.

The temperature started to rise and restore me finally to life. I hauled myself to a spot which the sunlight could reach, unimpeded by the shadows of trees, and the instant my body suddenly stopped shaking with cold after so many hours, I fell fast asleep at last.

(...)

This day in this city something great is going to happen... Or it will be the end of me.

Slowly and silently I rose so that only my head from the eyes up projected out of the bushes over the wall. I kept my eyes on the top part of the steps. At the same time I clutched the catapult pouch with its steel nut and drew it back to medium tension.

Another twenty seconds passed.

When he appears in the top bend, I'll count to three so that he'll be roughly half-way down the twenty steps. And then... aim just slightly below his head, not too low; at a distance of five metres I didn't have to bother about the projectile's flight time, which was minimal, but I did have to allow for the forward and downward movement of the target.

From somewhere above me came the familiar clip-clop of polished jackboots. I crouched as if my back were weighed down by a lead weight, and stopped counting.

From the mental images of this moment that I'd kept summoning up like a film during the many days leading up to it, I should now be watching the top bend in the steps until the first boot tip appeared from behind the corner. Then I should bend down one last time and count to three.

But instead I remained crouching as I listened, stock still, to the gentle clump of the boots. It sounded so loud! Fear had sharpened my senses.

Something odd happened to time as well. It neither slowed down nor speeded up, I can't describe it – it seemed more to be expanding sideways...

Maybe that was due to the instant that I'd fantasised about so many times (that of punishing the ginger-headed bean-pole!) and that was now here and irrevocable, or it might have been due to the extreme nervous tension, or maybe to the similarity and dissimilarity between the real moment and the version I'd played over a thousand times in my mind, or maybe it was just down to the rapid breathing that had gone on for over a minute now...

Time expanding sideways...

As the first cadence of footsteps ended, Herman Glocke disappeared behind the ornate sandstone column at the bend. He was but three strides away from the next section of steps, a mere second perhaps, brief and at once endless.

In that second of silence fear was pushed into the background and a ridiculously inappropriate, yet painfully beautiful memory flashed up before my eyes.

I was sitting in a wicker armchair on the patio decking of the cottage near the Hamry reservoir, it was a glorious day and the rays of the sun shone between the trunks of the pine trees all around. On another chair on the grass a few metres away my wife had just closed her book and smiled at me with a smile... just like the one that other time...

It had come like a kick on the shin and for a moment my eyes clouded over. The image was like a single defective frame pasted into a second-long film by an unknown and misguided editor. Herman Glocke's arrival on the scene wasn't due for another twenty-three...

I gripped the catapult, poked my head above the wall and rested the hand that held the catapult on its smooth surface. The drama being played out before my eyes was a heart-stopper.

Up there on the steps, less than ten metres away, Herman Glocke, Herman of the Gestapo, took the first step towards our shared destiny.

The cold eyes beneath his military cap were fixed on the steps ahead of him, but you couldn't tell the exact direction because their steely expression was unchanging. He took four more steps. In a flash I drew back the catapult and aimed at the top of his chest, just below his neck.

Before he completes the step, this is where the middle of his face will be.

As I'd drawn ready to fire some branches behind me had moved with a gentle rustle.

Suddenly he was staring right at me... Herman Glocke...

In that split second he slowed imperceptibly and raised his left hand to the chest-high gap in his coat. Somewhere there his gun was waiting.

In that enclosed space, the swish of the catapult sounded like a whipcrack. At that short range the nut flew through space at the speed of light and...

...and missed the Gestapo man's face...

But it did hit Herman Glocke... somewhere... lower down...

In that expanse of peculiar time I could see throughout the silent and unnaturally fast projectile. I saw its entire trajectory as it flew, side on, through the air, heading straight below his chin, and I saw it land, on the throat of the man before me, losing there all its crushing energy. It came to an almost complete halt.

And then it fell onto the steps, as if Herman had dropped it in an absence of mind.

The sight of Glocke himself was no less impressive. His head jerked back, just as I'd seen it with Horst. His hand, instead of going for the hidden gun, carried on up to his neck, joined at once by his other hand. His leather briefcase went tumbling down the steps. His sturdy military legs came unstuck, but still managed, unguided by their master, to complete the shaky descent to the landing where, on the flat, they lost their momentum.

It was like watching a ghost. There, at the instant when he tripped, almost beside me, perhaps only a couple of metres away, stood Herman Glocke miraculously arrested in space.

The man who had promised to see me dead...

Though by now death had taken up residence in his wide-staring eyes. He presented the image of a stiff, grey dummy. His lips alone were still moving, fast, as he tried in vain and in shock to draw breath past his shattered hyoid bone (as someone explained it to me later).

The man, his hands at his throat, bent backwards as he tried one last time to regain his balance, then his legs got entangled and he fell helpless, bashing his face into the wall behind which I was standing, watching in awe the ghastly scene to which I had supplied the script. Taking fright at how close it all was, I jumped backwards. The body hit the ground with a thud. I quickly bent double and listened. A throaty bubbling noise reached me from across the wall.

I have to get away, now!

I wanted to flee there and then. I was seized with panic and alarm bells were ringing furiously inside my head. Quick, leave now!

But HE was still alive. And he'd seen me...

Less than five seconds had passed since my shot. Seconds of eternity. I got another nut and scrambled up onto the wall. The pounding of my heart kept lifting me up off it as it hammered away at the sandstone.

He was lying on his side, curled up in a ball, both hands to his throat, concealing it from view, his face purple and so swollen that his firm features were completely obliterated. As if he'd been poisoned by a gas. Eyes agape and covered in a grey film that had stolen their lustre. Blood streamed from his mouth, little bubbles forming in it round his lips. His body kept jerking regularly, but with less and less intensity.

I left him as he was, hopped across to the steps and grabbed the fateful nut from the ground. I crept back into my hiding place, gathered up my own briefcase, tucked the catapult and remaining nuts in it and ran.

I ran like mad, as if the ginger-headed bean-pole was at my heels, zigzagging through the bushes along the hillside, dashing tree branches aside as I ran and then turning to head downhill. I might have heard a woman's voice cry out. Or I might have just dreamed it. I ran headlong down the slope and, finally spotting the top edge of the shipping channel, I stopped beside it and looked round.

A little way off was my salvation. A little flight of steps was set into the embankment wall ending in an iron gate. The gate stood half-open.

I made a reasonable job of hastily stuffing the catapult in among the branches of the nearest tree. Five minutes later, a man of no particular distinction was crossing the bridge to his job in the city; only his pounding heart and a few young leaves stuck to his coat might have told of the wickedness he'd just committed...

I tossed the leftover nuts off the bridge into the river...

In a few hours time they'll come charging into the office! And start searching and asking questions.

Suddenly the way Glocke had looked at my coat on the office coat-stand on Friday came back to me. That searching look he had. Who knows what he put down in his notebook on my account? Or had he opened a file on me?

Being interrogated by his Gestapo colleagues will be much worse than those moments on Letná. Or I mightn't even cross their mind, I naively reassured myself.

Three seemingly endless hours after my encounter with Glocke a real commotion broke out at the office. I heard colleagues running up and down the corridors and shouting things to one another. I crossed to the door, placed my ear against it and listened. I was too scared to open it. The nervous wave of voices the other side of the door grew even louder.

Finally, curiosity got the better of me and I opened the door a crack and glanced into the corridor.

Two German colleagues were just passing and I caught part of what they were saying:- "...they don't know, an assassination attempt perhaps... but he's alive... they've taken him to Bulovka hospital."

I quickly shut the door. I was so shot through with fear that it made me buckle at the knee and stuff one fist in my mouth.

He's alive...