

Mr. Sigerson

by Peter S. Beagle

I'm very proud of this story—written for Michael Kirland's anthology *Sherlock Holmes: The Hidden Tears*—because it's my first mystery tale, and so far the only one.

I love reading mysteries, all sorts, and envy their authors almost as much as I envy musicians. I'd give a great deal to have the special mindset that creates a good mystery plot, and then populates it with characters whom the reader feels don't draw their existence only from the plot. I'm no Holmes expert (though I've known the stories from childhood, and read them all aloud to my children); but I felt I knew the man well enough to chance presenting him through the eyes of a narrator who not only doesn't worship his brilliance but doesn't particularly like him. As much as anything I've done recently, I truly enjoyed being that crotchety, sardonic concertmaster, who admires Sherlock Holmes solely for his musical gifts, and to hell with the rest of the performance.

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My name is Floresh Takesti. I am concertmaster of the Greater Bornitz Municipal Orchestra in the town of St. Radomir, in the Duchy of Bornitz in the country of Selmira. I state this only because, firstly, there is a centuries-old dispute between our ducal family and the neighboring principality of Gradja over boundaries, bribed surveyors, and exactly who some people think they are; and, secondly, because Bornitz, greater or lesser, is quite a small holding, and has very little that can honestly be said to be its own. Our national language is a kind of untidy Low German, cluttered further by Romanian irregular verbs; our history appears to be largely accidental, and our literature consists primarily of drinking songs (some of them quite energetic). Our farmers grow barley and turnips, and a peculiarly nasty green thing that we tell strangers is kale. Our currency is anything that does not crumble when bitten; our fare is depressingly Slovakian, and our native dress, in all candor, vaguely suggests Swiss bell-ringers costumed by gleefully maniacal Turks. However, our folk music, as I can testify better than most, is entirely indigenous, since no other people would ever claim it. We are the property of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or else we belong to the Ottomans; opinions vary, and no one on either side seems really to be interested. As I say, I tell you all this so that you will be under no possible misapprehension concerning our significance in this great turbulence of Europe. We have none.

Even my own standing as concertmaster here poses a peculiar but legitimate question. Traditionally, as elsewhere, an orchestra's first violinist is named concertmaster, and serves the conductor as assistant and counselor, and, when necessary, as a sort of intermediary between him and the other musicians. We did have a conductor once, many years ago, but he left us following a particularly upsetting incident, involving a policeman and a goat—and the Town Council has never been able since to

locate a suitable replacement. Consequently, for good or ill, I have been conductor *de facto* for some dozen years, and our orchestra seems none the worse for it, on the whole. Granted, we have always lacked the proper—shall I say *crispness*?—to do justice to the Baroque composers, and we generally know far better than to attempt Beethoven at all; but I will assert that we perform Liszt, Saint-Saens, and some Mendelssohn quite passably, not to mention lighter works by assorted Strausses and even Rossini. And our Gilbert & Sullivan closing medley almost never fails to provoke a standing ovation, when our audience is sober enough to rise. We may not be the Vienna *Schauspielhaus*, but we do our best. We have our pride.

It was on a spring evening of 1894 that he appeared at my door: the tall, irritating man we knew as Herr Sigerson, the Norwegian. You tell me now that he had other names, which I can well believe—I can tell you in turn that I always suspected he was surely not Norwegian. Norwegians have *manners*, if they have no cuisine; no Norwegian I ever knew was remotely as arrogant, implicitly superior, and generally impossible as this "Sigerson" person. And no, before you ask, it would be almost impossible for me to explain exactly what made him so impossible. His voice? His carriage? His regard, that way of studying one as though one were a canal on Mars, or a bacterium hitherto unknown to mankind? Whatever the immediate cause, I disliked him on sight; and should I learn from you today that he was in reality a prince of your England, this would not change my opinion by a hair. Strengthen it, in fact, I should think.

Nevertheless. Nevertheless, he was, beyond any debate or cavil, a better violinist than I. His tone was richer, his attack at once smoother and yet more vivid; his phrasing far more adventurous than I would ever have dared—or could have brought off, had I dared. I can be as jealous, and even spiteful, as the next man, but I am not a fool. He deserved to sit in the first violinist's chair—my chair for nineteen years. It was merely justice, nothing more.

When he first came to my house—as I recall, he was literally just off the mail coach that sometimes picks up a passenger or two from the weekly Bucharest train—he asked my name, gave his own, and handed me a letter of introduction written by a former schoolmate of mine long since gone on to better things. The letter informed me that the bearer was "a first-rate musician, well-schooled and knowledgeable, who has elected, for personal reasons, to seek a situation with a small provincial orchestra, one preferably located as far off the conventional routes of trade and travel as possible. Naturally, old friend, I thought of you..."

Naturally. Sigerson—he gave no other name then—watched in silence from under dark, slightly arched brows as I perused the letter. He was a tall man, as I have said, appearing to be somewhere in his early forties with a bold, high-bridged nose—a tenor's nose—in a lean face. I remember clearly a thin scar, looking to be fairly recent, cutting sharply across his prominent left cheekbone. The mouth was a near-twin to that scar easily as taut and pale, and with no more humor that I could see. His eyes were a flat gray, without any hint of blue, as such eyes most often have, and he had a habit of closing them and pressing his right and left-hand fingertips against each other when he was at his most attentive. I found this particularly irksome,

as I did his voice, which was slightly high and slightly strident, to my ear at least. Another might not have noticed it.

I must be honest and admit to you that if the dislike at our first encounter was immediate, it was also entirely on my side. I do not imagine that Herr Sigerson concerned himself in the least over my good opinion, nor that he was even momentarily offended by not having it. He accepted the insulting wage St. Radomir could offer him as indifferently as he accepted my awe—yes, also admitted—when, by way of audition, he performed the Chevalier St-Georges' horrendously difficult *Etude in A Major* at my kitchen table, following it with something appropriately diabolical by Paganini. I told him that there was an attic room available at the Widow Ridnak's for next to nothing, upon which he thanked me courteously enough and rose to leave without another word, only turning at the door when I spoke his name.

"Herr Sigerson? Do you suppose that you might one day reveal to me your personal reasons for burying your considerable gifts in this particular corner of nowhere? I ask, not out of vulgar inquisitiveness, but simply as one musician to another."

He smiled then—I can quite exactly count the times when I ever saw him do such a thing. It was a very odd entity, that smile of his: not without mirth (there was wit and irony in the man, if not what I would call humor), but just below the slow amusement of his lips I felt—rather than saw—a small scornful twist, almost a grimace of contempt. Your Herr Sigerson does not really like human beings very much, does he? Music, yes.

"Herr Takesti," he replied, graciously enough, "please understand that such reasons as I may have for my presence here need in no way trouble St. Radomir. I have no mission, no ill purpose—no purpose at all, in fact, but only a deep desire for tranquility, along with a rather sentimental curiosity concerning the truest wellsprings of music, which do not lie in Vienna or Paris, but in just such backwaters and in such under-schooled orchestras as yours." I was deciding whether to rise indignantly to the defense of my town, even though his acid estimate was entirely accurate, when he went on, the smile slightly warmer now, "And, if you will permit me to say so, while I may have displaced the first violin,"—for I had already so informed him; why delay the plainly unavoidable?—"—the conductor will find me loyal and conscientious while I remain in St. Radomir." Whereupon he took his leave, and I stood in my doorway and watched his tall figure casting its gaunt shadow ahead of him as he made his way down the path to the dirt road that leads to the Widow Ridnak's farm. He carried a suitcase in one hand, his violin case in the other, and he was whistling a melody that sounded like Sarasate. Yes, I believe it *was* Sarasate.

I had mentioned a rehearsal that night, but neither asked nor expected him to attend, only a few hours off the train. I cannot even remember telling him how to find the local beerhall where we have always rehearsed; yet there he was, indifferently polite as ever, tuning up with the rest of the strings. I gave a short, awkward speech, introducing our new first violin to the orchestra (at my prompting, he offered the transparently false Christian name of Oscar), and adding that, from what I had heard at my kitchen

table, we could only gain from his accession to my former chair. Most of them were plainly disgruntled by the announcement—a flute and a trombone even wept briefly—which I found flattering, I must confess. But I reassured them that I had every intention of continuing as their devoted guide and leader, and they did seem to take at least some solace from that pledge. No orchestra is ever one big, happy family, but we were all old comrades, which is decidedly better for the music. They would quickly adapt to the changed situation.

In fact, they adapted perhaps a trifle too quickly for my entire comfort. Within an hour they were exclaiming over Sigerson's tone and his rhythmic sense, praising his dynamics as they never had mine—no, this is not jealousy, simply a fact—and already beginning to chatter about the possibility of expanding our increasingly stale repertoire, of a single fresh and innovative voice changing the entire character of the orchestra. Sigerson was modest under their admiration, even diffident, waving all applause away; for myself, I spoke not at all, except to bring the rehearsal back into order when necessary. We dispersed full of visions—anyway, they did. I recall that a couple of the woodwinds were proposing the Mozart Violin Concerto, which was at least conceivable; and that same trombone even left whispering, "*Symphonic Fantastique*," which was simply silly. He had them thinking like that, you see, in one rehearsal, without trying.

And we did make changes. Of course we did. You exploit the talent you have available, and Sigerson's presence made it possible for me to consider attempting works a good bit more demanding than the Greater Bornitz Municipal Orchestra had performed in its entire career. No, I should have said, "existence." Other orchestras have careers. We are merely happy still to be here.

Berlioz, no. They cannot play what he wrote in Paris, London, Vienna—how then in St. Radomir? Beethoven, no, not even with an entire string section of Sigersons. But Handel ... Haydn ... Mozart ... Telemann ... yes, yes, the more I thought of it, there was never any real reason why we could not cope decently with such works; it was never anything but my foolish anxiety—and, to be fair to myself, our national inferiority complex, if we are even a nation at all. Who are we, in darkest Selmira, operetta Selmira, joke Selmira, comically backward Selmira, Selmira the laughingstock of bleakly backward Eastern Europe—or so we would be, if anyone knew exactly where we were—to imagine ourselves remotely capable of producing real music? Well, by God, we were going to imagine it, and if we made fools of ourselves in the attempt, what was new in that? At least we would be a different sort of fools than we had been. St. Radomir, Bornitz, Selmira ... they would never have seen such fools.

That was the effect he had on us, your Mr. Sigerson, and whatever I think of him, for that I will always be grateful. True to his word, he made absolutely no effort to supplant my musical judgment with his own, or to subvert my leadership in any way. There were certainly those who sought him out for advice on everything from interpretation to fingering to modern bowing technique, but for all but the most technical matters he always referred them back to me. I think that this may have been less an issue of loyalty than of complete lack of interest in any sort of authority or

influence—as I knew the man, that simply was not in him. He seemed primarily to wish to play music, and to be let alone. And which desire had priority, I could not have told you, then or now.

Very well. You were asking me about the incident which, in my undoubtedly perverse humor, I choose to remember as The Matter of the Uxorious Cellist. Sigerson and I were allies—ill-matched ones, undoubtedly, but allies nonetheless—in this unlikely affair, and if we had not been, who's to say how it might have come out? On the other hand, if we had left it entirely alone ... well, judge for yourself. Judge for yourself.

The Greater Bornitz Municipal Orchestra has always been weak in the lower strings, for some reason—it is very nearly a tradition with us. That year we boasted, remarkably, four cellists, two of them rather wispy young women who peeped around their instruments with an anxious and diffident air. The third, however, was a burly Russo-Bulgarian named Volodya Andrichev: blue-eyed, blue-chinned, wild-haired, the approximate size of a church door (and I mean an Orthodox church here), possessed of—or by—an attack that should by rights have set fire to his score. He ate music, if you understand me; he approached all composition as consumption, from Liszt and Rossini, at which he was splendid, to Schumann, whom he invariably left in shreds, no matter how I attempted to minimize his presence, or to conceal it outright. Nevertheless, I honored his passion and vivacity; and besides, I liked the man. He had the snuffling, shambling charm of the black bears that still wander our oak forests as though not entirely sure what they are doing here, but content enough nonetheless. I quite miss him, as much time as it's been.

His wife, Lyudmilla Plaschka, had been one of our better woodwinds, but retired on the day of their wedding, that being considered the only proper behavior for a married woman in those times. She was of Bohemian extraction, I believe: a round, blonde little person, distinctly appealing to a particular taste. I remember her singing (alto) with her church choir, eyes closed, hands clasped at her breast—a godly picture of innocent rapture. Yet every now and then, in the middle of a Bach cantata or some Requiem Mass, I would see those wide blue eyes come open, very briefly, regarding the tenor section with the slightest pagan glint in their corners. Basses, too, but especially the tenors. Odd, the detail with which these things come back to you.

He adored her, that big, clumsy, surly Andrichev, even more than he loved his superb Fabregas cello, and much in the same manner, since he plainly felt that both of them were vastly too good for him. Absolute adoration—I haven't encountered much of that in my life, not the real thing, the heart never meant for show that can't help showing itself. It was a touching thing to see, but annoying as well on occasion: during rehearsal, or even performance, I could always tell when his mind was wandering off home to his fluffy golden goddess. Played the devil with his vibrato every time, I can tell you.

To do her justice—very reluctantly—she had the decency, or the plain good sense, to avoid involvements with any of her husband's colleagues. As I have implied, she preferred fellow singers to instrumentalists anyway; and

as Andrichev could not abide any sort of vocal recital ("Better cats on a back fence," he used to roar, "better a field full of don-keys in heat"), her inclinations and his rarely came into direct conflict. Thus, if we should chance to be performing in, say, Krasnogor, whose distance necessitates an overnight stay, while she was making merry music at home with Vlad, the clownish basso, or it might be Ruska, that nasal, off-key lyric tenor (there was a vibrato you could have driven a *droshky* through) ... well, whatever the rest of us knew or thought, we kept our mouths shut. We played our Smetana and our Gilbert & Sullivan medley, and we kept our mouths shut.

I don't know when Andrichev found out, nor how. I cannot even say how we all suddenly knew that he knew, for his shy, growling, but essentially kindly manner seemed not to change at all with the discovery. The music told us, I think—it became even fiercer, more passionate—angrier, in short, even during what were meant to be singing *legato* passages. I refuse to believe, even now, that any member of the Greater Bornitz Municipal Orchestra would have informed him. We were all fond of him, in our different ways; and in this part of the world we tend not to view the truth as an absolute, ultimate good, but as something better measured out in a judiciously controlled fashion. It could very well have been one of his wife's friends who betrayed her—even one of her playmates with a drink too many inside him, I don't suppose it matters now. I am not sure that I would want to know, now.

In any event, this part of the world offers certain traditional options in such a case. A deceived husband has the unquestioned right—the divine right, if you like—to beat his unfaithful wife as brutally as his pride demands, but he may not cut her nose or ears off, except perhaps in one barbarous southern province where we almost never perform. He may banish her back to her family—who will not, as a rule, be at all happy to see her—or, as one violist of my acquaintance did, allow her to stay in his home, but on such terms ... Let it go. We may play their music, but we are not altogether a Western people.

But Andrichev did none of these things. I doubt seriously that he ever confronted Lyudmilla with her infidelity, and I know that he never sought out any of her lovers, all of whom he could have pounded until the dust flew, like carpets on a clothesline. More and more withdrawn, drinking as he never used to, he spent most of his time at practice and rehearsal, clearly taking shelter in Brahms and Tschaikovsky and Grieg, and increasingly reluctant to go home. On several occasions he wound up staying the night with one Grigori Progorny—our fourth cellist, a competent enough technician and the nearest he had to an intimate—or with me, or even sprawled across three chairs in that cold, empty beer-hall, always clutching his cello fiercely against him as he must have been used to holding his wife. None of us ever expressed the least compassion or fellow-feeling for his misery. He would not have liked it.

Sigerson was perfectly aware of the situation—for all his air of being concerned solely with tone and tempo and accuracy of phrasing, I came to realize that he missed very little of what was going on around him—but he never commented on it; not until after a performance in the nearby town of

Ilyagi. Our gradually expanding repertoire was winning us both ovations and new bookings, but I was troubled even so. Andrichev's play-acting that evening had been, while undeniably vigorous, totally out of balance and sympathy with the requirements of Schubert and Scriabin, and even the least critical among us could not have helped but notice. On our way home, bumping and lurching over cowpaths and forest trails in the two wagons we still travel in, Sigerson said quietly, "I think you may have to speak with Mr. Andrichev."

Most of the others were asleep, and I needed to confide in someone even the chilly Mr. Sigerson. I said, "He suffers. He has no outlet for his suffering but the music. I do not know what to do, or what to say to him And I will not discharge him."

Surprisingly, Sigerson smiled at me in the pitch darkness of the wagon A shadowy, stiff smile, it was, but a smile nevertheless. "I never imagined that you would, Herr Takesti. I am saying only—" and here he hesitated for a moment, "—I am saying that if you do not speak to him, something perhaps tragic is quite likely to happen. What you may say is not nearly as important as the fact that he knows you are concerned for him. You are rather a forbidding person, concertmaster."

"I?" I demanded. I was absolutely stunned. "I am forbidding? There is no one, *no one*, in this orchestra who cannot come to me—who *has* not come to me—under any circumstances to discuss anything at all at any time. You know this yourself, Herr Sigerson." Oh, how well I remember how furious I was. Forbidding, indeed—this from *him!*

The smile only widened; it even warmed slightly. "Herr Takesti, this is perfectly true, and I would never deny it. Anyone may come to you, and welcome—but you do not yourself go out to them. Do you understand the difference?" After another momentary pause, while I was still taking this in, he added, "We are more alike than you may think, Herr Takesti."

The appalling notion that there might be some small truth in what he said kept me quiet for a time. Finally I mumbled, "I will speak to him. But it will be no help. Believe me, I know."

"I believe you." Sigerson's voice was almost gentle—totally unnatural for that querulous rasp of his. "I have known men like Andrichev, in other places, and I fear that the music will not always be outlet enough for what is happening to him. That is all I have to say."

And so it was. He began humming tunelessly to himself, which was another annoying habit of his, and he was snoring away like the rest by the time our horses clumped to a stop in front of their stable. Everyone dispersed, grumbling sleepily, except Andrichev, who insisted on sleeping in the wagon, and grew quite excited about it. He would have frozen to death, of course, which may well have been what he wanted, and perhaps a mercy, but I could not allow it. Progorny eventually persuaded him to come home with him, where he drank mutely for the rest of the night, and slept on the floor all through the next day. But he was waiting for me at rehearsal that evening.

What are you expecting? I must ask you that at this point. Are you waiting for poor Herr Andrichev to kill his wife—to stab or shoot or strangle the equally pitiable Lyudmilla Plaschka—or for her to have him knocked on the head by one of her lovers and to run off with *that* poor fool to Prague or Sofia? My apologies, but none of that happened. *This* is what happened.

It begins with the cello: Andrichev's Fabregas, made in Lisbon in 1802, not by Joao, the old man, but by his second son Antonio, who was better. One thinks of a Fabregas as a violin or a guitar, but they made a hand-ful of cellos too, and there are none better anywhere, and few as good; the rich, proud, tender sound is surely unmistakable in this world. And what in God's own name Volodya Andrichev was doing with a genuine Fabregas I have no more idea than you, to this day. Nor can I say why I never asked him how he came by such a thing—perhaps I feared that he might tell me. In any event, it was his, and he loved it second only to Lyudmilla Plaschka, as I have said. And that cello, at least, truly returned his love. You would have to have heard him, merely practicing scales in his little house on a winter morning, to understand.

So, then—the cello. Now, next—early that fall, Lyudmilla fell ill. Suddenly, importantly, desperately ill, according to Progorny; Andrichev himself said next to nothing about it to the rest of us, except that it was some sort of respiratory matter. Either that, or a crippling, excruciating intestinal ailment; at this remove, such details are hard to recall, though I am sure I would be able to provide them had I liked Lyudmilla better. As it was, I felt concern only—forgive an old man's unpleasant frank-ness—for Andrichev's concern for her, which seemed in a likely way to destroy his career. He could not concentrate at rehearsal; the instinctive sense of cadence, of pulse, that was his great strength, fell to ruin; his bowing went straight to hell, and his phrasing—always as impulsive as a fifteen-year-old in June—became utterly erratic, which, believe me, is the very kindest word I can think of. On top of all that, he would instantly abandon a runthrough—or, once, a performance!—because word had been brought to him that Lyudmilla's illness had taken some awful turn. I could have slaughtered him without a qualm, and slept soundly after-ward; so you may well imagine what I thought of Lyudmilla Plaschka Murderous fancies or not, of course I favored him. Not because he suffered more than she—who ever knows?—but because he was one of *us*. Like that—like *us*. It comes down to that, at the last.

He sold the cello. To his friend Progorny. No fuss, no sentimental self-indulgence—his wife needed extensive (and expensive) medical care. and that was the end of that. Any one of us would have done the same; what was all the to-do about? At least, the Fabregas would stay in the family, just to his left, every night, while he himself made cheerful do on a second-hand DeLuca found pawned in Gradja. There are worse cellos than DeLucas. I am not saying there aren't.

But the bloody thing threw off the balance of the strings completely. How am I to explain this to you, who declare yourself no musician? We have always been weak in the lower registers, as I have admitted: Andrichev and that instrument of his had become, in a real sense, our saviors, giving us

depth, solidity, a taproot, a place to come home to. Conductor and concertmaster, I can tell you that none of the Greater Bornitz Municipal Orchestra—and in this I include Herr Sigerson him-self—actually took their time from me. Oh, they looked toward me duti-fully enough, but the corners of their eyes were focused on the cello sec-tion at all times. As well they should have been. Rhythm was never my strong suit, and I am not a fool—I have told you that as well.

But there are cellos and cellos, and the absence of the Fabregas made all the difference in the world to us. That poor pawnshop DeLuca meant well, and it held its pitch and played the notes asked of it as well as anyone could have asked. Anyone who wasn't used—no, *attuned*—to the soft roar of the Fabregas, as our entire orchestra was attuned to it. It wasn't a fair judgment, but how could it have been? The *sound* wasn't the same; and, finally, the sound is everything. Everything. All else—balance, tempo, interpretation—you can do something about, if you choose; but the *sound* is there or it isn't, and that bloody ancient Fabregas was our sound and our soul. Yes, I know it must strike you as absurd. I should hope so.

Progorny gave it his best—no one ever doubted that. It was touching, poignant, in a way: he seemed so earnestly to believe that the mere pos-session of that peerless instrument would make him—had already made him—a musician equal to such a responsibility. Indeed, to my ear, his timbre was notably improved, his rhythm somewhat firmer, his melodic line at once more shapely and more sensible. But what of it? However kindly one listened, it wasn't the *sound*. The cello did not feel for him what it felt for Andrichev, and everyone knew it, and that is the long and the short of it. Musical instruments have neither pity nor any notion of justice, as I have reason to know. Especially the strings.

Whatever Progorny had paid him for the cello, it could not have been anything near its real value. And Lyudmilla grew worse. Not that I ever visited her in her sickbed, you understand, but you may believe that I received daily—hourly—dispatches and bulletins from Andrichev. It very nearly broke my peevish, cynical old heart to see him so distraught, so frantically disorganized, constantly racing back and forth between the rehearsal hall, the doctor's office, and his own house, doing the best he could to attend simultaneously to the wellbeing of his wife and that of his music. For an artist, this is, of course, impossible. Work or loved ones, passions or responsibilities ... when it comes down to that, as it always does, someone goes over the side. Right, wrong, it is how things are. It is how we are.

Yes, of course, when I look back now, it was remiss of me not to go to Lyudmilla at the first word of her illness. But I didn't *like* her, you see—what a sour old person I must seem to you, so easily to detest both her and your hero Mr. Sigerson—and I was not hypocrite enough, in those days, to look into those ingenuous blue eyes and say that I prayed for the light of health swiftly to return to them once more. Yes, I wanted her to recover, almost as much as I wanted her to leave her husband alone to do what he was meant to do—very well, what *I* needed him to do. Let her have her lovers, by all means; let her sing duets with them all until she burst her pouter-pigeon breast; but let *me* have my best cellist back in the

heart of my string section—and let *him* have his beautiful Fabregas under his thick, grubby, peasant hands again. Where it belonged.

Mind you, I had no idea how I would ransom it back, and reimburse Progorny (sad usurper, cuckolded by his own instrument) the money that had gone so straight to Lyudmilla's physician. And kept going to him, apparently, for Lyudmilla's condition somehow never seemed to improve. Andrichev was soon enough selling or pawning other belongings—books to bedding, old clothes to old flowerpots, a warped and stringless *bouzouki*, a cracked and chipped set of dishes—anything for which any-one would give him even a few more coins for his wife's care. Many of us bought worthless articles from him out of a pity which, not long before, he would have rejected out of hand. I wonder whether Sigerson still has that cracked leather traveling bag with the broken lock—I think the motheaten fur cloak is somewhere in my attic. I *think* so.

None of us ever saw Lyudmilla Plaschka at all anymore—the doctor, a Romanian named Nastase, kept her quarantined in all but name—but we read her worsening condition, and the wasteful uselessness of each new treatment, in Andrichev's face. He shrank before our eyes, that bear, that ox, call him what you like; he hollowed and hunched until there seemed to be nothing more to him than could be found inside his cello. Less, because the Fabregas, and even the DeLuca, made music of their emptiness, and Andrichev's sound—there it is again, always the *sound*—grew thinner, dryer, more distant, like the cry of a lone cricket in a des-ert. I still squirm with bitter shame to recall how hard it became for me to look at him, as though his despair were somehow my doing. My only defense is that we were all like that with him then, all except his com-rade Progorny. And Sigerson, remote and secretive as ever, who, never-theless, made a point of complimenting his playing after each performance. I should have done that, honesty be damned—I know I should have. Perhaps that is why the memory of that man still irritates me, even now.

Then, one late summer afternoon, with Sigerson's comment, "We are more alike than you may think, Herr Takesti," continuing to plague me, I determined to pay a call on Lyudmilla Plaschka myself. I even brought flowers, not out of sympathy, but because flowers (especially a damp, slightly wilted fistful) generally get you admitted everywhere. I must say I do enjoy not lying to you.

Andrichev's house, which looked much as he had in the good days—disheveled but sturdy—was located in the general direction of the Widow Ridnak's farm, but set some eight miles back into the barley fields, where the dark hills hang over everything like thunderheads ripe with rain. I arrived just in time to see Dr. Nastase—a youngish, strongly built man, a bit of a dandy, with a marked Varna accent—escorting a tattered, odorous beggar off the property, announcing vigorously, "My man, I've told you before, we're not having your sort here. Shift yourself smartly, or I'll set the dogs on you!" A curious sort of threat, I remember thinking at the time, since the entire dog population of the place consisted only of Lyudmilla's fat, flop-eared spaniel, who could barely be coaxed to harass a cat, let alone a largish beggar. The man mumbled indistinct threats, but the doctor was implacable, shoving him through the gate, latching and locking it, and

warning him, "No more of this, sir, do you understand me? Show your face here again, and you'll find the police taking an interest in your habits. Do you understand?" The beggar indicated that he did, and meandered off, swearing vague, foggy oaths, as Dr. Nastase turned to me, all welcoming smiles now.

"Herr Takesti, it must be? I am so happy and honored to meet you, I can hardly find the words. Frau Lyudmilla speaks so highly of you—and as for Herr Andrichev..." And here he literally kissed his fingertips, may I be struck dead by lightning this minute if I lie. The last person I saw do such a thing was a Bucharest chef praising his own veal cutlets.

"I came to see Frau Lyudmilla," I began, but the doctor anticipated me, cutting me off like a diseased appendix.

"Alas, maestro, I cannot permit sickroom visits at the present time. You must understand, her illness is of a kind that can so very, very easily be tipped over into—" here he shrugged delicately—"by the slightest disturbance, the least suggestion of disorder. With diseases of this nature, a physician walks a fine line—like a musician, if you will allow me—between caution and laxity, overprotectiveness and plain careless negligence. I choose to err on the side of vigilance, as I am sure you can appreciate."

There was a good deal more in this vein. I finally interrupted him myself, saying, "In other words, Frau Lyudmilla is to receive no visitors but her husband. And perhaps not even he?" Dr. Nastase blushed—very slightly, but he had the sort of glassy skin that renders all emotions lucid—and I knew what I knew. And so, I had no doubt, did Volodya Andrichev, and his business was his business, as always. I handed over my flowers, left an earnest message, and then left myself, hurrying through the fields to catch up with that beggar. There was something about his bleary yellowish eyes...

Oh, but he was positively furious! It remains the only time I ever saw him overtaken by any strong emotion, most particularly anger. "How did you know?" he kept demanding. "I must insist that you tell me—it is more important than you can imagine. How did you recognize me?"

I put him off as well as I could. "It is hard to say, Herr Sigerson. Just a guess, really—call it an old man's fancy, if you like. I could as easily have been wrong."

He shook his head impatiently. "No, no, that won't do at all. Herr Takesti, for a variety of reasons, which need not concern us, I have spent a great deal of time perfecting the arts of concealment. Camouflage lies not nearly so much in costumes, cosmetics—such as the drops in my eyes that make them appear rheumy and degenerate—but in the smallest knacks of stance, bearing, movement, the way one speaks or carries oneself. I can stride like a Russian prince, if I must, or shuffle as humbly as his ostler—" and he promptly demonstrated both gaits to me, there in the muddy barley fields. "Or whine like a drunken old beggar, so that that scoundrel of a doctor never took me for anything but what he saw. Yet you..." and here he simply shook his head, which told me quite clearly his opinion of my

perceptiveness. "I must know, Herr Takesti."

"Well," I said. I took my time over it. "No matter what concoction you may put in your eyes, there is no way to disguise their arrogance, their air—no, their *knowledge*—of knowing more than other people. It's as well that you surely never came near Lyudmilla Plaschka, looking like that. That doctor may be a fool, but she is none." It was cruel of me, but I was unable to keep from adding, "And even a woodwind would have noticed those fingernails. Properly filthy, yes—but so perfectly trimmed and shaped? Perhaps not." It was definitely cruel, and I enjoyed it very much.

The head-shake was somewhat different this time. "You humble me, Herr Takesti," which I did not believe for a minute. Then the head came up with a positive flirt of triumph. "But I did indeed see our invalid Lyudmilla Plaschka. That much I can claim."

It was my turn to gape in chagrin. "You *did*? Did she see *you*?" He laughed outright, as well he should have: a short single cough. "She did, but only for a moment—not nearly long enough for my arrogant eyes to betray me. There is a cook, especially hired by Dr. Nastase to prepare nutritious messes for his declining patient. A kindly woman, she let me into the kitchen and prepared me a small but warming meal—decidedly unhealthy, bless her fat red hands. When her attention was else-where, I took the opportunity to explore that area of the house, and was making a number of interesting discoveries when Lyudmilla Plaschka came tripping brightly along the corridor—not wrapped in a nightgown, mind you, nor in a snug, padded bed-jacket, but dressed like any hearty country housewife on her way to requisition a snack between meals. She screamed quite rightly when she noticed me, and I was rather hurriedly removing myself from the premises when I ran into the good doctor." He made the laugh-sound again. "The rest, obviously, you know."

I was still back at the moment of the encounter. "Tripping? Brightly?"

"Frau Plaschka," Sigerson said quietly, "is no more ill than you or I." He paused, deliberately theatrical, savoring my astonishment, and went on, "It is plain that with her lover, Dr. Nastase, she has conceived a plan to milk Volodya Andrichev of every penny he has, to cure her of her non-existent affliction. Perhaps she will induce him to sell the house—if he has sold his cello for her sake, anything is possible. You would understand this better than I."

A sop to my own vanity, that last, but I paid it no heed. "I cannot believe that she ... that *anyone* could do such a thing. I *will* not believe it."

Sigerson sighed and, curiously enough, the sound was not in the least contemptuous. "I envy you, Herr Takesti. I truly envy all those who can set limits to their observation, who can choose what they will believe. For me, this is not possible. I have no choice but to see what is before me. I have no choice." He meant it, too—I never doubted that—and yet I never doubted either that he would ever have chosen differently.

"But why?" I felt abysmally stupid merely asking the question. I knew why

well enough, and still I had to say it. "Andrichev is the most devoted husband I have ever seen in my life. Lyudmilla Plaschka will never find anyone to love her as he does. Can she not see that?"

Sigerson did not reply, but only looked steadily at me. I think that was actually a compliment. I said slowly, "Yes. I know. Some people cannot bear to be loved so. I know that, Herr Sigerson."

We became allies in that moment; the nearest thing to friends we ever could have become. Sigerson still said nothing, watching me. I said, "This is unjust. This is worse than a crime. They must be stopped, and they should be punished. What shall we do?"

"Wait," Sigerson said, simply and quietly. "We wait on circumstance and proper evidence. If we two—and perhaps one or two others—set ourselves to watch over that precious pair at all times, there is little chance of their making the slightest move without our knowledge. A little patience, Herr Takesti, patience and vigilance." He touched my shoulder lightly with his fingertips, the only time I can recall even so small a gesture of intimacy from him. "We will have them. A sad triumph, I grant you, but we will have them yet. Patience, patience, concertmaster."

And so we did wait, well into the fall, and we did trap them, inevitably: not like Aphrodite and Ares, in a golden net of a celestial cuckold's designing, but in the tangled, sweated sheets of their own foolishness. Lyudmilla Plaschka and her doctor never once suspected that they were under constant observation, if not by Sigerson and myself, what time we could spare from music, then by a gaggle of grimy urchins, children of local transients. Sigerson said that he had often employed such unbuttoned, foul-mouthed waifs in a similar capacity in other situations. I never doubted him. These proved, not only punctual and loyal, but small fiends for detail. Dr. Nastase's preferred hour for visiting his mistress (married himself, there were certain constraints on his mobility); Frau Andrichev's regular bedtime routine, which involved a Belgian liqueur and a platter of marzipan; even Volodya's customary practice schedule, and the remarks that he grumbled to himself as he tuned his cello—they had it all, not merely the gestures and the words, but the expression with which the words were pronounced. They could have gathered evidence for the Recording Angel, those revolting brats.

"I have discovered the time and destination of their flight," Sigerson told me one morning when I relieved him as sentinel—as spy, rather; I dislike euphemism. He had gained entrance into the house on several occasions since the first, knowing the occupants' habits so well by now that he was never surprised again. "They are interesting conspirators—I discovered the trunks and valises stored in a vacant, crumbling out-building easily enough, but it took me longer than I had expected to find the two first-class railway tickets from Bucharest through to Naples, and the boat vouchers for New York City. Do you know where those were hidden?" I shook my head blankly. "At the very bottom of the wood-pile, wrapped quite tidily in oilcloth. Obviously, our friends will be taking their leave within the next two or three weeks, before the nights turn cold enough for a fire to be necessary."

"Impressive logic," I said. Sigerson allowed himself one of his distant smiles. I asked, "What about the money they've swindled out of poor Andrichev? They'll have hidden it in some bank account, surely—in Italy, perhaps, or Switzerland, or even America. How will we ever recover it for him?"

If only Sigerson could have seen his own eyes at that moment, he might have understood what I meant by the impossibility of masking their natural lofty expression. "I think we need have no concern on that score," he replied. "Those two are hardly the sort to trust such liquid assets to a bank, and I would venture that Lyudmilla Plaschka knows men too well ever to allow her spoils out of her sight. No, the money will be where she can quickly put her hands on it at any moment. I would expect to find it in her bedroom, most probably in a small leather travel-ing case under the far window. Though, to be candid—" here he rubbed his nose meditatively "—there are one or two other possible locations, unfortunately beyond my angle of vision. We shall learn the truth soon."

We learned it a bit sooner than either of us expected; not from our unwashed sentries, but from the owner of the livery stable from which we always hired our traveling wagons. He and I were haggling amiably enough over feed costs for our customary autumn tour of the provinces, when he mentioned that his good humor arose from a recent arrangement personally to deliver two passengers to the Bucharest railway station in his one *caleche*, behind his best team. It took remarkably few Serbian dinars to buy the names of his new clients from him, along with the time—eleven o'clock, tomorrow night!—and only a few more to get him to agree to take us with him when he went to collect them. Treachery is, I fear, the Selmiri national sport. It requires fewer people than football, and no uniforms at all.

I wanted to bring the whole matter before the police at this point, but Sigerson assured me that there would be no need for this. "From what I have seen of the St. Radomir constabulary, they are even more thickwitted than those of—" did he stumble momentarily? "—the gendarmes of Oslo, which I never thought possible. Trust me, our quarry will not slip the net now." He did preen himself slightly then. "Should Dr. Nastase offer physical resistance, I happen to be a practitioner of the ancient art of *baritsu*—and you should be well able to cope with any skirmish with Frau Andrichev." I honestly *think* that was not meant as condescension, though with Sigerson it was hard to tell. A month of surveillance had made it clear to us both that Lyudmilla Plaschka, when not on her death-bed, was certainly a spirited woman.

A full rehearsal was scheduled for the following night; I elected to cancel it entirely, rather than abridge it, musicians being easily distressed by interruptions in routine. There were some questions, some grumbling, but nothing I could not fob off with partial explanations. Sigerson and I were at the livery stable by ten o'clock, and it was still some minutes before eleven when the *caleche* drew up before the Andrichev house and the coachman blew his horn to announce our arrival.

The luggage was already on the threshold, as was an impatient Lyudmilla

Plaschka, clad in sensible gray traveling skirt and shirtwaist, cleverly choosing no hat but a peasant's rough shawl, to hide her hair and shadow her features. She had, however, been unable to resist wear-ing what must have been her best traveling cloak, furred richly enough for a Siberian winter; it must have cost Volodya Andrichev six months' pay. She looked as eager as a child bound for a birthday party, but I truly felt my heart harden, watching her.

I stepped down from the *caleche* on the near side, Sigerson on the other, as Dr. Nastase came through the door. He was dressed even more nattily than usual, from his shoes—which even I could recognize as London-made—to his lambswool Russian-style hat. When he saw us—and the coachman on his box, leaning forward as though waiting like any theatregoer for the curtain to rise—he arched his eyebrows, but only said mildly, "I understood that this was to be a private carriage."

"And so it is indeed," Sigerson answered him, his own voice light and amused. "But the destination may not be entirely to your liking, Doctor." He came around the coach, moving very deliberately, as though trying not to startle a wild animal. He went on, "I am advised that the cuisine of the St. Radomir jail is considered—" he paused to ponder the *mot juste*—"questionable."

Dr. Nastase blinked at him, showing neither guilt nor fear, but only the beginning of irritation. "I do not understand you." Lyudmilla Plaschka put him aside, smoothly enough, but quite firmly, and came forward to demand, "Just what is your business here? We have no time for you." To the coachman she snapped, "The price we agreed on does not include other passengers. Take up our baggage and let them walk home."

The coachman spat tobacco juice and stayed where he was. Sigerson said, speaking pointedly to her and ignoring the doctor, "Madam, you know why we are here. The hospice is closed; the masquerade is over. You would be well-advised to accompany us peaceably to the police sta-tion."

I have known people whose consciences were almost unnaturally clean look guiltier than they. Lyudmilla Plaschka faltered, "Police sta-tion? Are you the police? But what have we done?"

My confidence wavered somewhat itself at those words—she might have been a schoolgirl wrongfully accused of cribbing the answers to an examination—but Sigerson remained perfectly self-assured. "You are accused of defrauding your husband of a large sum of money by feign-ing chronic, incurable illness, and of attempting further to flee the country with your ill-gotten gains and your lover. Whatever you have to say to this charge, you may say to the authorities." And he stepped up to take her arm, for all the world as though he were an authority himself.

Dr. Nastase rallied then, indignantly striking Sigerson's hand away before it had ever closed on Lyudmilla Plaschka's elbow. "You will not touch her!" he barked. "It is true that we have long been planning to elope, to begin our new life together in a warmer, more open land —" the elbow found his ribs at that point, but he pressed on —"but at no time did we ever consider

cheating Volodya Andrichev out of a single dinar, zloty, ruble, or any other coin. We are leaving tonight with nothing but what is in my purse at this moment, and supported by nothing but my medical talents, such as they are, and Frau Andrichev's vocal gifts. By these we will survive, and discover our happiness."

Yes, yes, I know—he was not only an adulterer and a betrayer, but a very bad orator as well. And all the same, I could not help admiring him, at least at the time. Even bad orators can be sincere, and I could not avoid the troubling sense that this man meant what he was saying. It did not seem to trouble Sigerson, who responded coolly, "I will not contradict you, Dr. Nastase. I will merely ask you to open the small traveling case next to Lyudmilla Plaschka's valise—that one there, yes. If you will? Thank you."

I may or may not be a forbidding personality; he could certainly, when he chose, be a far more commanding one than I had ever imagined. I would have opened any kit of mine to his inspection at that point. Dr. Nastase hesitated only a moment before he silently requested the key from Lyudmilla Plaschka and turned it in the dainty silver lock of the traveling case. I remember that he stepped back then, to allow her to open the lid herself. Love grants some men manners, and I still choose to believe that Dr. Nastase loved Volodya Andrichev's wife, rightly or wrongly.

There was no money in the traveling case. I looked, I was there. Nothing except a vast array of creams, lotions, salves, ointments, unguents, decoc-tions ... the sort of things, my doddering brain finally deduced, that an anxious Juliet, some years the senior of her Romeo, might bring along on an elopement to retain the illicit magic of the relationship. I had only to glance at Lyudmilla Plaschka's shamed face for the truth of that.

To do Sigerson justice, his resolve never abated for an instant. He simply said, "By your leave," and began going through Dr. Nastase and Lyudmilla Plaschka's belongings just as though he had a legal right to do so. They stood silently watching him, somehow become bedrag-gled and forlorn, clinging together without touching or looking at each other. And I watched them all, as detached as the coachman: half-hoping that Sigerson would find the evidence that Volodya Andrichev had been viciously swindled by the person he loved most; with the rest of myself hoping...I don't know. I don't know what I finally hoped.

He found the money. A slab of notes the size of a brick; a small but tightly packed bag of coins; both tucked snugly into the false lid of a shabby steamer trunk, as were the tickets he had discovered earlier. The faithless wife and the devious doctor gaped in such theatrically incred-ulous shock that it seemed to make their culpability more transparent. They offered no resistance when Sigerson took them by the arm, gently enough, and ordered the coachman to take us back to town.

At the police station they made formal protest of their innocence; but they seemed so dazed with disbelief that I could see it registering as guilt and shame with the constables on duty. They were placed in a cell—together, yes, how many cells do you think we have in St. Radomir?—and remanded for trial pending the arrival of the traveling magistrate, who was due any

day now. The doctor, ankles manacled, hobbled off with his warder without a backward glance; but Lyudmilla Plaschka—herself unchained—turned to cast Sigerson and me a look at once proud and pitiful. She said aloud, "You know what we have done, and what we did not do. You cannot evade your knowledge." And she walked away from us, following Dr. Nastase.

Sigerson and I went home. When we parted in front of my house, I said, "A wretched, sorry business. I grieve for everyone involved. Including ourselves." Sigerson nodded without replying. I stood looking after him as he started on toward the Widow Ridnak's. His hands were clasped behind him, his high, lean shoulders stooped, and he was staring intently at the ground.

Our tour began the next day—we did well in Gradja, very well in Print, decently in Srikeldt, Djindji, Gavric and Bachacni, and dreadfully in Boskvila, as always. I cannot tell you why I still insist on scheduling us to perform in Boskvila every year, knowing so much better, but it should tell you at least something about me.

But even in foul Boskvila, Volodya Andrichev played better than I had ever heard him. I detest people who are forever prattling about art in terms of human emotions, but there was certainly a new—not power, not exactly warmth, but a kind of deep, majestic heartbeat, if you will—to his music, and so to all of ours as well. He said nothing to anyone about his wife's arrest with her lover, nor did anyone—including Sigerson and his friend Progorny—ask him any questions, nor speak to him at all, except in praise. We did not see St. Radomir again for a week and a half, and the moment we arrived Andrichev tried to commit suicide.

No, no, not the precise moment, of course not, nor did it occur just as the wagons rolled past the town limits. Nor did anyone recognize his action for what it was, except Sigerson. As though he had been wait-ing for exactly this to happen, he leaned swiftly forward almost before Andrichev toppled over the side in a fall that would have landed him directly under our team's hooves and our wagon's iron-bound wheels. A one-armed scoop, a single grunt, and Andrichev was sprawling at our feet before the rest of the company had drawn breath to cry out. Sigerson looked down at him and remarked placidly, "Come now, Herr Andrichev, we did not play *that* poorly in Boskvila." The incipient screams were overtaken by laughter, quickly dissolving any suggestion of anything more sinister than an accident. At the livery stable, before shambling away, Andrichev thanked Sigerson gruffly, apologizing several times for his clumsiness. It was early in the evening, and I remember that a few snowflakes were beginning to fall, a very few, twinkling for an instant in his mustache.

This night, for some unspoken reason, I passed up my own house and walked on silently with Sigerson, all the way to the Ridnak farm. The Widow and her sons were already asleep. Sigerson invited me into the back kitchen, poured us each a glass of the Widow's homebrewed *kvass*, and we toasted each other at the kitchen table, all without speak-ing. Sigerson finally said, "A sorry business indeed, Herr Takesti. I could wish us well out of it."

"But surely we are," I answered him, "out and finished, and at least some kind of justice done. The magistrate has already passed sentence—three years in prison for the woman, five for the man, as the natural instigator of the plot—and the money will be restored to Volodya Andrichev within a few days. A miserable matter, beyond doubt—but not without a righteous conclusion, surely."

Sigerson shook his head, oddly reluctantly, it seemed to me. "Nothing would please me better than to agree with you, concertmaster. Yet something about this affair still disturbs me, and I cannot bring it forward from the back of my mind, into the light. The evidence is almost absurdly incontrovertible—the culprits are patently guilty—everything is properly tied-up ... and still, and still, *something*..." He fell silent again, and we drank our *kvass* and I watched him as he sat with his eyes closed and his fingertips pressed tightly against each other. For the first time in some while—for there is nothing to which one cannot become accustomed—I remembered to be irritated by that habit of his, and all the solitary self-importance that it implied. And even so, I understood also that this strange man had not been placed on earth solely to puzzle and provoke me; that he had a soul and a struggle like the rest of us. That may not seem to you like a revelation, but it was one to me, and it continues so.

How long we might have remained in that farm kitchen, motionless, unspeaking, sharing nothing but that vile bathtub brandy, it is impossible to say. The spell was broken when Sigerson, with no warning, was suddenly on his feet and to one side, in the same motion, flattening his back against the near wall. I opened my mouth, but Sigerson hushed me with a single fierce gesture. Moving as slowly as a lizard stalking a moth, he eased himself soundlessly along the wall, until he was close enough to the back door to whip it open with one hand, and with the other seize the bulky figure on the threshold by the collar and drag it inside, protesting, but not really resisting. Sigerson snatched off the man's battered cap and stepped back, for all the world like an artist unveiling his latest portrait. It was Volodya Andrichev.

"Yes," Sigerson said. "I thought perhaps it might be you." For a moment Andrichev stood there, breathing harshly, his blue eyes gone almost black in his pale, desperate face. Then with dramatic abruptness he thrust his hands towards Sigerson, crossing them at the wrists and whispering, "Arrest me. You *must* arrest me now."

"Alas, all my manacles are old and rusted shut," Sigerson replied mildly. "However, there is some drink here which should certainly serve the same purpose. Sit down with us, Herr Andrichev."

A commanding person, as I have said, but one who did not seem to command. Andrichev fell into a kitchen chair as limply as he had rolled out of the wagon, only an hour or two before. He was sweating in great, thick drops, and he looked like a madman, but his eyes were clear. He said, "They should not be in prison. I am the one. You must arrest me. I have done a terrible, terrible thing."

I said firmly, "Andrichev, calm yourself this instant. I have known you for a

long time. I do not believe you capable of any evil. Drunkenness, yes, and occasional vulgarity of attack when we play Schubert. Spite, vindictiveness, cruelty—never."

"No, no one ever believes that of me," he cried out distractedly. "I know how I am seen: good old Volodya—a bit brusque, perhaps, a bit rough, but a fine fellow when you really get to know him. A heart of gold, and a devil of a cellist, but all he ever thinks of is music, music and vodka. The man couldn't plan a picnic—let alone a revenge."

Sigerson had the presence of mind to press a drink into his hand, while I sat just as slack-jawed as Lyudmilla Plaschka and Dr. Nastase themselves at the sight of the money they were accused of swindling from Lyudmilla's besotted husband. Andrichev peered around the glass at us in an odd, coy way, his eyes now glinting with a sly pride that I had never seen there before.

"Yes, revenge," he said again, clearly savoring the taste and smell and texture of the word. "Revenge, not for all the men, all the deceptions, all the silly little ruses, the childish lies—they are simply what she is. As well condemn a butterfly to live on yogurt as her to share the same bed forever. Her doctor will learn that soon enough." And he smiled, tasting the thought.

The words, the reasoning, the *sound*—they were all so vastly removed from the Volodya Andrichev I was sure I knew that I still could not close my mouth. Sigerson appeared much cooler, nodding eagerly as Andrichev spoke, as though he were receiving confirmation of the success of some great gamble, instead of receiving proof positive that he and I had been thoroughly hoodwinked. He said, "The doctor made it different."

Andrichev's face changed strikingly then, all the strong features seeming to crowd closer together, even the forehead drawing down. He repeated the word *different* as he had the word *revenge*, but the taste puck-ered his mouth. "That fool, that wicked fool! For that one, she would have left me, gone away forever. I had to stop her." But he sounded now as though he were reassuring himself that he had had no choice.

"The money," Sigerson prompted him gently. "That was indeed your money that I found in the steamer trunk?"

The furtively smug look returned to Andrichev's face, and he took a swig of his drink. "Oh, yes, every bit of it. Everything I could raise, no matter what I had to sell, or pawn, or beg, no matter how I had to live. The cello—that was hard for me, but not as hard as all of you thought. One can get another cello, but another Lyudmilla..." He fell silent for a moment, looking at the floor, then raised his eyes to us defiantly. "Not in this life. Not in my life. It had to be done."

Nor will we find another such cellist, I thought bitterly and selfishly. Sigerson said, "It was you alone who spread the story of Frau Andrichev's chronic mortal illness. She and Dr. Nastase knew nothing."

"Progorny was a great help there," Andrichev said proudly. "It was easy to circulate the tale, but difficult to keep it from reaching Lyudmilla's ears. Progorny is a real friend—" he looked directly at me for the first time—"though he will never be a real cellist. But I am happy that he has the Fabregas."

I realized that I had been constantly shaking my head since he began speaking, unable truly to see this new Volodya Andrichev; trying to bring my mind into focus, if you will. I asked, lamely and foolishly, "Progorny put the money into the trunk lid, then?"

Andrichev snorted derisively. "No—when would he have the opportunity for that? The tickets under the woodpile, that was Progorny, but all the rest was my idea. The police were prepared to stop them on the road—" here his voice hesitated, and his mouth suddenly rumped, as though he were about to cry—"just when they were thinking themselves safe and ... and free." He took another deep swallow. "But you two made that unnecessary. I had not counted on your interference, but it was the last touch to my plan. Having two such reputable, distinguished witnesses to their crime and their flight—even having one of them find the money—*that* closed the door behind them. That closed and locked the door."

"Yes," Sigerson said softly. "And then, with your plan successful, your revenge accomplished, your faithless wife and her lover in prison, you attempted to kill yourself." There was no question in his voice, and no accusation. He might have been reading a newspaper aloud.

"Oh," Andrichev said. "That." He said nothing more for some while, nor did Sigerson. The kitchen remained so quiet that I could hear the tiny rasping sound of a mouse chewing on the pantry door. Andrichev finally stood up, swaying cautiously, like someone trying to decide whether or not he is actually drunk. He was no longer sweating so dreadfully, but his face was as white and taut as a sail trying to contain a storm. He said, "I do not want to live without her. I can, but I do not want to. The revenge ... it was not on her, but on myself. For loving her so. For loving her more than the music. That was the revenge." Once again he held his hands out to Sigerson for invisible manacles. "Get her out of that place," he said. "*Him*, too. Get them out, and put me in. Now. Now."

Lyudmilla Plaschka and Dr. Nastase were released from prison as soon as the magistrate who sentenced them could be located. This is a remarkable story in itself ... but I can see that you wouldn't be interested. Lyudmilla Plaschka threatened to sue her husband, the court, the town, and the Duchy of Bornitz for a truly fascinating sum of money. Dr. Nastase must have prevailed, however, for she hired no lawyer, filed no claims, and shortly afterward disappeared with him in the general direction of New South Wales. I believe that a cousin of hers in Gradja received a postal card.

Volodya Andrichev was formally charged with any amount of undeniable transgressions and violations, none of which our two St. Radomir lawyers knew how to prosecute—or defend, either, if it came to that—so there was a good deal of general relief when he likewise vanished from sight, leaving

neither a forwarding address nor any instructions as to what to do with his worldly goods. One of the lawyers attempted to take possession of his house, in payment for unpaid legal fees; but since no one could even guess what these might have been, the house eventually became the property of the Greater Bornitz Municipal Orchestra. It is specifically intended to accommodate visiting artists, but so far, to be quite candid ... no, you aren't interested in that, either, are you? You only want information about Herr Sigerson.

Well, I grieve to disappoint you, but he too is gone. Oh, some while now—perhaps two months after Volodya Andrichev's disappearance. As it happens, I walked with him to catch the mail coach on which he had arrived in St. Radomir. I even carried his violin case, as I recall. Never friends, colleagues by circumstance, we had little to say to one another, but little need as well. What we understood of each other, we understood; the rest would remain as much a mystery as on that very first evening, and we were content to leave it so.

We were silent during most of the wait for his train, until he said abruptly, "I would like you to know, Herr Takesti, that I will remember my time here with both affection and amusement—but also with a certain embarrassment." When I expressed my perplexity, he went on, "Because of the Andrichev matter. Because I was deceived."

"So was I," I replied. "So was the entire orchestra—so was everyone with any knowledge of the business." But Sigerson shook his head, saying, "No, concertmaster, it is different for me. It is just different."

"And that is exactly why I recognized you in your beggar's disguise," I responded with some little heat. "It is always somehow different for you, and that so-called *difference* will always show in your eyes, and in everything you do. How could you possibly have guessed the secret of Volodya Andrichev's revenge on his wife and her lover? What is it that you expect of yourself, Herr Oscar Sigerson? What—*who*—are you supposed to be in this world?"

We heard the train whistle, so distant yet that we could not see the smoke rising on the curve beyond the Ridnak farm. He said, "You know a little of my thought, Herr Takesti. I have always believed that when one eliminates the impossible, what remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth, the one solution of the problem. In this case, however, it turned out the other way around. I will be considering the Andrichev matter for a long time to come."

The train pulled in, and we bowed to each other, and Sigerson swung aboard, and that is the last I ever saw of him. The mail coach runs to and from Bucharest; beyond that, I have no idea where he was bound. I am not sure that I would tell you if I did know. You ask a few too many questions, and there is something wrong with your accent. Sigerson noticed such things.

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