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Opening extract from

The Rebel Legionnaire

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ONE

Paris. November 1961

Panier à salade was the affectionate name for the black corrugated steel Citroen van which the French police use for transporting prisoners. I suppose they call it ‘salad basket’ because of the steel netting over its windows.

I was in the back of one with my father-in-law. We were handcuffed, sitting towards the front; and two armed guards were sitting beside the back door; smoking and gazing at us. We were being transported to the headquarters of the *Mouvement Pour la Communauté*, a euphemistic title for the dreaded Gaullist political police – the *Barbouzes*. They were waiting for us, or more particularly for my father-in-law, who had changed from being a much decorated Foreign Legion officer, to becoming a much chased after OAS terrorist. The OAS or *Organisation Armée Secrète*, was the underground offspring of the abortive French army putsch in Algiers, in April 1961; and still fighting for French Algeria – *Algérie Française!* The OAS was in every part of French society including the army, navy, and air force, and was a danger to the government.

The guards didn't look too aggressive, they were only doing a day's work, and many of them were OAS sympathisers. They couldn't disobey orders, but they had offered us a cigarette.

I looked across at Yves, who was staring at the dirty steel floor, probably wondering how much information he could withhold from the Barbouzes. He had changed; six months of living underground had taken its toll on him. Before, he was a war hero who fought with the Legion at Bir Hakeim alongside the British Eighth Army, and then on to Tunisia, Sicily, Italy. After the war he went through the horror of Dien Bien Phu in Indo China before finishing up in Algeria.

Yves suddenly looked out of the window as we rounded the Arc de Triomphe, and entered Avenue Foch. Was he thinking of the glory he had contributed to the French army? This was the third time he had disobeyed orders; the first time being his refusal to follow the Vichy government in 1940, and the second being his support of the army putsch in 1958, which brought General de Gaulle back in power. In each case he refused to obey orders he considered wrong for France; he would not accept the dishonourable armistice with the Germans in 1940, and in 1958 he would not accept handing over Algeria – or what he considered to be a part of France – to the Arab terrorists. The third disobedience was the logical follow up of the second, because de Gaulle – who had been called back to keep Algeria – now wanted to give it to the same terrorists.

Yves was a man of convictions and was ready to die for them. It was something that I admired in him, because it had become a rare human quality. He might die this time, if it was true that the *barbouzes* used methods of “interrogation” that were sometimes mortal. I wondered whether he was thinking of his family; his devoted wife, and his adorable daughter who was my wife..

I was considered part of that family now, as Yves had become a father figure to me, replacing what little I knew of my own father who was killed in the Normandy landings when I was ten. Yves rapidly took his new surrogate role with his usual passion, accepting the challenge of fathering an Englishman lost in the complicated and different world of Parisian society. I was eternally grateful for all he had done for me, and was more worried about his future than about mine. Thanks to him, I had come to love France, and was fascinated by her culture. A whole new world had opened to me.

I was still a British citizen, so surely they would not torture me? I could not believe how I got myself into this mess as the noisy Citroen heaved its way through the Porte Maillot and into the Bois de Boulogne park, where the leafless trees silhouetted against the depressing heavy clouded sky. I cast my mind back to that bright summer day in June 1959, when I first met Marianne in Northwood in the West London suburbs. It was only two and a half years ago, but more had happened to me in that time than in most peoples lives.

It all started because of a cry for help from our neighbour Ivy Rayner. She was obliged to have a French girl for the weekend on the pressing demand of her husband's employer; a French bank. Her name, Marianne, surprised me because I thought it was only used to epitomise the French Republic. She lived in Algiers, where her father was stationed with the 1st Parachute Regiment of the Foreign Legion. He was a friend of the chairman of the London Crédit Lyonnais, who helped him find her a course to perfect her school English, before she started work. So she was sent on a course for foreigners in Surbiton Grammar school, during the summer holidays.

Ivy, who was a great friend of my mother, came straight to

the point. 'Would you like to take a French girl out over the week-end, Max?' she cried over the garden fence.

I was perplexed and hesitated as I had had disasters in blind dates before. In any case I was not hard up for female company at that moment, since I had become the lecherous owner of a secondhand white Ford Consul convertible with a white leather interior. I even painted white flanks on the tyres and my big brother Sam called it a passion wagon. I was doing very well at the Young Conservatives' Club where I was one of the few unattached males, so I decided to stall with a little humour.

'Is she attractive?' I asked, smiling.

'So attractive my husband can't take his eyes off her. He took her to see "At the drop of a hat" last night, knowing full well that I don't like musicals, but I went just to spite him. She's twenty two and has just finished her medical studies. I've told him, if he doesn't stop staring at her, he can do his own cooking but he doesn't seem to care.' A cloud came over her eyes, and her smile changed to sadness.

This could be interesting, I thought. My mother, my brother, and I had just been to Normandy to visit my father's grave, and I found that I liked France very much. I was good at French at school and was amazed at how much came back to me. We asked where the grave was in the Imperial War Graves Commission's office, but we soon got lost, and I was the one who saved the situation by speaking to the local workmen. I decided to risk it.

'Well, I'll do it as a favour to you Ivy, just to save your marriage'

Ivy made a false sigh of relief, but I could see she was suddenly much happier. 'That's very self sacrificing of you Max. I'm sure the Lord will reward you'.

She didn't know how right she was.

So it was agreed that I should collect her the following day after lunch.

I was excited, dashed back into the house, and upstairs to my brother Sam's bedroom where he was building a model of a building his firm was designing. He was four years older than me, an architect, and although there were too many on the market, he had at last got a job as a draughtsman in a London office. After seeing the difficulty Sam had to find work, I had opted to be a quantity surveyor, because few people found that work interesting, and the pay was just as much. But I was told afterwards that they all go mad at forty!

His bedroom was bigger than mine and he had arranged it as a den with drawing board, record player, and a table for modelling. Sam replaced our father, whilst still remaining a friend, and I confided in him.

'I've got news, Sam, I'm taking an attractive French girl out tomorrow.'

He looked up at me quizzically, still holding a small sheet of Balsa between his fingers. 'What about Kay?'

'Oh, I've only just met her, and she's told me she's getting engaged, but she still wants to see me. I'm glad I'm not her fiancé,' I said with conviction.

Sam laughed. 'How did you meet this French girl?'

'Ivy Rayner asked me to take her out tomorrow. It seems that Charlie has fallen in love with her. She's three years younger than me and has finished medical college. She's here to perfect her English.'

Sam now became interested, and not a little envious. 'You lucky bugger, why didn't she ask me?'

'Because she thinks you're going strong with Jennifer I suppose. We all think that, the whole street knows.'

Sam had been going steady with Jennifer for six months now, and Mum was beginning to get excited, because Sam was twenty nine and she was eager to offload her children. After our father was killed in a glider crash during the Normandy landings, she had brought us up alone, working in Careras cigarette factory; manually loading exactly twenty cigarettes from a conveyor belt into countless packets. She loved us dearly, but looked forward to a more restful life.

‘How do you know she’s attractive?’ he said sullenly.

‘Because I’m optimistic; you know me, I dive in head first. Always look on the bright side of life, but perhaps we can see her in the garden. Come into my bedroom.’

We lived in a typical semi-detached suburban London house which we had scraped and saved to pay for. Dad had had a good job with a house builder before the war, and managed to buy one of their houses, taking on a big mortgage. Fortunately, it was still standing at the end of the blitz, and since then, inflation and Mum’s war widow’s pension had paid off the mortgage. We were thus able to buy a bigger semi, with three bedrooms, in the commuter belt, in a quiet secluded cul-de-sac.

My bedroom was at the back, and where we could see the back garden. They were sitting drinking tea with Marianne. We could only see her from the back, but she got up to serve Ivy and Charlie, showing us her slim but curvaceous figure. She was dressed in a fine light blue top and a tight fitting grey skirt cut just above the knees, and her shapely legs were shown off by sheer beige stockings and stiletto high heels.

‘I’ll have to see her front another time,’ said Sam, ‘but if it’s as good as the back, I’ll expect a full report from you tomorrow.’

* * *

I was supposed to collect Marianne after lunch, but my impatience was such that they had not finished when I arrived. Ivy contentedly took me into the lounge to wait, but I could see Marianne through the part open connecting double doors. Ivy and Charlie were out of my sight and I couldn't stop myself staring at her; I could understand Charlie's infatuation. She was very attractive with a round face, full cheeks, small full lipped mouth, small straight nose, big blue grey-eyes, immaculately made up, and chestnut hair, cut fairly short. She looked up and smiled at me now and again, and was not embarrassed by my stare; although Charlie was talking to her continuously in French, just to irritate Ivy, and impress me. I decided there and then that I would work on my French.

At last Ivy brought her into the lounge followed by Charlie, who was looking seedier than ever after a lifetime in a City bank. He did not even greet me and continued to talk to her in French, but Ivy cut him short, staring at me knowingly.

'Marianne, this is Max, who asked me if he could take you out when I told him about you.'

Ivy had passed the responsibility onto me. Charlie glared at me.

'I'm very pleased to meet you,' she said with a low melodious voice.

'I am too,' I blustered, shaking her hand, and feeling like the King of the World, in that uniform suburban living room.

It was the thunderclap as the French say for love at first sight. I stood there still staring at her, until I was startled into consciousness by Charlie's French. I don't know what he said but

it made her laugh. Her laugh was musical and showed perfect white teeth.

‘Take a seat, Max, Marianne will be ready in a minute,’ said Ivy with a self contented smile, and they went off to do the things that women do before going out into the wide world. I sat down on the settee opposite Charlie, for five long silent minutes. During that time, I looked around me at the furniture and decoration. It was better than ours, but that was to be expected from a bank manager. If he was trying to intimidate me, he was wasting his time, because I was floating on clouds. I knew that my life had taken a decisive turn.

‘Marianne speaks good English,’ I said at last, when I had come down to earth.

‘Yes, she has a gift for languages, she speaks Arabic as well,’ he muttered between his teeth.

That did intimidate me, but I was prepared to do anything – even learn Arabic if necessary. Charlie looked at me disdainfully, turning the page of his French newspaper. I looked at him and wondered what Marianne thought of him. He was a short man of fifty with balding hair, a beer belly, and a constipated complexion.

I had worked out my programme for the rest of the day. It was a beautiful June day with a clear sky, and I was going to take her to see the gliders soaring on the hot air currents at Dunstable Downs. Then we would spend the evening in Soho.

At last she reappeared. We said goodbye to Ivy, and I proudly walked her down to the front gate where my impeccably clean car was waiting with its hood down. I was sure all the neighbours were watching, as she glided in her high heels like a Dior model. She didn’t seem impressed by my car, but she smiled at me as I opened the door for her.

She was wearing a two piece dark blue suit, with an above the knee tight skirt, which she had great difficulty pulling down to hide her thighs when she was seated. Her voice was deep with a charming accent, and her blue-grey eyes were gentle but enthusiastic and eager to see everything. On her head, she wore a light blue cashmere beret, which brought out the blue in her eyes but she had to take it off as the car hood was down.

We spoke a lot to find out as much as possible about each other. I had to explain my job as a quantity surveyor, which was not easy as it did not exist in the same form in France. Nobody knew what a quantity surveyor was anyway.

‘We’re sort of building economists, preparing all the documents that are necessary for a building contract, advising the architect on costs, and settling up final accounts. It’s tedious, but we have to know all about construction, building regulations, building law, etc., and we do get out on the building sites sometimes. One day it will be easier when we have computers like they now have in America.’

She seemed interested in my monotonous life, although she was born in Paris, and lived on the Left Bank. Her father was posted to Algiers, where she went to a Catholic private school, before being sent to medical college in Paris, to study physiotherapy. She had finished her studies, and was soon to start a job as a physiotherapist in a new hospital in Boulogne sur Seine, Paris.

‘I was lucky to be able to study for a profession,’ she said, ‘because women are still considered only good for keeping the house and family in France; especially in Army families, where all the wives can do is organise coffee parties to talk to the other wives about their husbands’ careers. I insisted because I saw the lives my mother and grandmother lived, and that was not for

me. My mother thought I was stupid, but my father agreed in the end. I wanted to be a vet, but my father couldn't afford the long studies, so we compromised on physiotherapy.'

We at last left the monotonous suburbs behind us and came into the countryside. Here, I was able to relax and glance at her whilst driving. I could see she was happy, as she was humming tunes, which I thought I recognised.

'Are you humming French songs?'

'Yes. Would you like me to sing one for you? I know a lot by heart, because I used to buy vocal scores from street buskers – we couldn't afford records in those days. I could sing you : *la Seine, Sous le ciel de Paris, la Petite diligence, à Paris dans chaque faubourg, Sur les quais du vieux Paris, Quand Paris s'éveille, Sous les Ponts de Paris, or Mademoiselle de Paris.*

'How about *la Seine*,' I suggested, watching the enthusiasm in her eyes. It was an enthusiasm that one sees in professional singers, and she did sing like a professional – without music! I had difficulty in concentrating on the road.

'You sing very well.' I said admiringly.

'Do I? I don't know because I usually only sing to myself; but I feel at ease with you.'

I was pleased to hear that. All was going well. I noticed that although she sang to me, she still retained her natural dignity: and this reminded me of my mother. I asked her to sing me all her songs, but she hadn't finished when we arrived at Dunstable Downs, as I parked the car on the top of the hill overlooking the airfield. There were three or four other cars parked there, but mine was the only drop-head, so we had a grandstand view as the slender gliders came up to us on the air currents rising up the hill. Some of them started to do aerobatics, looping-the-loop and falling in spins. I often came here alone to think about my

father who had been in the Glider Pilot Regiment during the war, and as I watched, my eyes became wet as they usually did when I thought of him.

‘Max? You look sad all of a sudden, what’s the matter?’

I looked away from her and tried to brighten my face. ‘Oh, I’m thinking of my father. He volunteered to be a glider pilot in the Army during the war, but his Horsa crashed in the Normandy landings. He was excited about it when they called for volunteers, but I saw much less of him after that because I was evacuated. I didn’t know him much except that he loved to fly in gliders. Now I watch them up there and imagine it is he who’s flying in a warriors’ paradise.’

This time I could not keep my tears back, and I felt embarrassed. She was looking at me with a mixture of pity and admiration; had I aroused her maternal instinct perhaps?

‘I’m sorry’ I said, wiping my eyes, and thinking what a fool I was.

She continued to stare at me and at last took my hand in both of hers, moving closer to me on the bench seat. With a sad smile she said ‘I love my father too, and I pray whenever he goes on a mission. I don’t know what I would do if he were killed.’ She looked straight into my eyes, and my heart missed a beat.

I gazed back at her and felt drawn to those beautiful eyes: I couldn’t kiss her yet, we had only just met, and I didn’t want to spoil everything. But I had to do something so I lowered my head, our foreheads touched, and I held on to her hand for several long seconds.

‘Look at that red one,’ she said, straightening up and pointing to a glider descending rapidly. ‘Max, you’re not looking!’

‘Huh. Oh sorry,’ I mumbled, conscious that I was still staring at her. The glider was coming straight for us in a dive, and

then reared up in front of us only twenty yards away, to climb and turn away over the valley. We heard the swish of the air rushing over the wings, and if the pilot had done it to impress us, he had succeeded. Marianne let out a shriek and laughed gleefully.

* * *

We spent the evening in pubs in Soho, and ate toasted continental sandwiches; which were a newly invented delicacy. I didn't see anything continental in them, but I didn't care. I was happy, and so was Marianne.

When I brought her back to Ivy's house it was midnight, and I asked her if I could see her again. At first, I saw an enthusiastic reaction in her eyes, but it was immediately followed by a sudden clouded expression, as though she had had an afterthought.

'I'm sorry, but I have a boyfriend, and I don't think it would be advisable. I only came with you because Ivy insisted: although I told her I was practically engaged.'

A pain struck the middle of my chest, and I felt as though I had lost a person dear to me. These last few hours had been the happiest of my life. Why hadn't Ivy told me? What a fool I had been to think that such a beautiful, charming, and interesting girl could be for me.

'Oh I'm sorry, I didn't know.' I said, trying not to look too dejected.

There was a long embarrassing silence. An owl hooted from the big oak tree behind our garden, and the clouds separated to show the full moon. I stared despondently at my car's steering wheel, and wished that the earth would swallow me up. I looked

up and was surprised to catch her staring at me, but immediately looking down at her handbag. This gave me courage, and I decided I would put up a fight: damn her fiancé!

‘We could still be friends though. I could show you around, and you could help me polish up my French,’ I said, realising that my tone of voice sounded as though I was imploring.

Her face brightened, and her eyes became enthusiastic again. ‘But I don’t want to put you to any trouble. I’ll pay my share.’ She was looking at me straight in the eyes, and her head had come forward close to mine. Suddenly she took me by the shoulders and kissed me on each cheek.

‘So we are just friends then?’

‘Yes,’ I said trying to mask my disappointment. ‘Can I collect you tomorrow at the same time?’

‘That would be formidable.’

I looked quizzically at her, and she sensed something was wrong.

‘Don’t you say formidable?’ she asked, worried.

‘Yes, but it means impressive and slightly frightening.’

‘Oh, it’s not the same in French then. Everybody uses *formidable* now, meaning wonderful, since Bridgitte Bardot uses it so often.’

But I thought that, perhaps what I was going to attempt would indeed be formidable in both senses.