

## CHAPTER III

## TOWARDS TARCHIN

IN the hills before reaching Tarchin that evening he stopped at a Han for a cup of Turkish coffee, costing a few hellers.

It was an inn of only three rooms, clean and with bunches of dried herbs hanging from the rafters of the room where the stove was. An Austrian gendarme was here, he had come from Tarchin and was going to some post in the hills, and had stopped for a cup of coffee and a cigarette. He advised Jean to stop the night at the Han.

He had never met a Frenchman in these parts before, and he was surprised that a Frenchman could talk German.

"It is clean here," said he, "and cheaper than any inn at Tarchin, they will kill you a fowl for your supper and the wine is good, country wine, better than you will get in the towns. Serajevo, I was stationed there, but I prefer the hills. Ah, you are a painter of pictures, we have had those here too from Vienna and also Munich. But where are your things?"

Jean laughed and produced his sketch book, and little paint box.

He explained that he had come to see the country rather than paint it, and the gendarme taking the book in his big hands fell to criticising the contents, favourably on the whole. Yes, that was the Rathaus, plain enough, just done with a few strokes of a pencil, and that gipsy boy with the goat, good. *Hein!*

but that face—he had come on the picture of the girl—he had seen her surely!

“With an old man, a soldier?” asked Jean.

Yes, that was it. Yesterday evening going to Tarchin he had passed them, a peasant had given the old man a ride on a cart and the girl was walking beside it. She had a little drum. A funny couple, going to play at a fair or something; the old chap had a uniform of sorts and a label on his chest with something written on it, but in a strange tongue.

“That was French,” said Jean.

But why should he have that thing on him written in French, here where no one could read French?

Jean could not say.

The quaint pair of wanderers who had come from France through Bavaria, walking the roads, getting lifts, taking the train when condemned to spend money in that fashion, might, in the big German towns, find people who could read; anyhow, the magic name of Napoleon—but here! Well, the notice was just part of the old man’s get-up, it stood for an appeal to charity—they were too indifferent to remove it—it was a sort of talisman—who could tell?

“Would they have stopped at Tarchin?” asked Jean.

The gendarme thought r. aybe.

Then he handed the book back and winked. At once and without a word between him and Jean, an understanding was established about the girl.

Most unwillingly on Jean’s part.

“You are after that girl,” said the gendarme without a word, and to these speeches without words how can one reply?

And besides, speaking the truth, what could one reply ?

This girl whom he had not thought of as a girl till falling asleep on the hill away back there, how could it be that he was after her all of a sudden ?

Was ever a love affair started in a dream—all the same . . .

At this Han they served the wine not in bottles but from a cask in the cellar, and in a rough-glass decanter. Jean had ordered some more wine up, and the gendarme, nothing loth, joined in the drinking.

Also, he opened his mind about women. He was a connoisseur of the type bred by the army and gendarmerie. He talked of women literally as if they were horses. His affairs had been numerous and it was plain that he was stating facts, not boasting.

Then he rose to go, wiping his moustache. " Well, good luck to you if you meet her," said he, in parting.

The Han was a strange place to be alone in with no one for companion but the old Mussulman in a fez who owned it and who had not two words of German let alone French, and who was now preparing a chicken for his guest's supper.

A strange place, facing the sunset on the Bosnian hills, hills wild and remote from our civilisation and traditions.