

CHAPTER IV

WITH THE SUNSET AT THEIR BACK

NEXT day at Tarchin he took the train for Konzitsa.

Jean was like that. Liable to alter his plans at a moment's notice and with no apparent reason. He had intended to walk all the way to Ragusa—well, the distance from Tarchin to Konzitsa is only twenty-five miles or so and it saves a long tramp over hills if you take the train. The map showed that.

It was the second day after leaving the train, and near Grabovitza, that he fell in with a gipsy encampment on the right of the road.

He had seen and met with gipsies both at Serajevo and on the road, girls, old women, long-haired men, filthy, in rags and brown as berries, but he had not met in with any of their encampments. They generally kept away to themselves, but here in a gully by the mountain road was one of their hives fully exposed.

The sight of the huge smoke-stained tents repulsed Jean. It seemed to him that there was something evil about them, something sinister and secret—houses always moving, yet old, perhaps, as the pyramids, sheltering in the darkness of this canvas, who knows what, in methods or ways of life?

All the same, he stopped.

An old woman, strayed from the encampment and leading a goat, held him by her grotesqueness. He took his seat on a boulder and taking out his sketch book, set to.

She was nothing loth and had evidently been

through the business before, and, as he sketched, children came round to look and beg for halfpence.

Then, when he had finished, a thought came to him. In the train yesterday, having nothing else to do, he had made a sketch from memory of the old soldier and the girl, touching it with colour. Perhaps it was Stein's question, "Why did you not draw him as well as her?" that had moved him to do this, at all events, now that it was done it had its use.

He was still on the road to Mostar, and it occurred to him that the gipsy folk might give him news if the girl and the old man had passed that way.

He did not care much whether they had or not, he was not pursuing them or, at least, so he fancied, or would have fancied had he questioned himself on the matter.

No, this thing, as far as they were concerned, was really a sort of game to relieve the monotony of the road.

Would he catch up with them, or would he not? Round the next turning or over that hill, would he see them in the distance? Had he over-run them by taking the train to Konzitsa?

He showed the picture of them to the old woman with startling effect.

Her mouth flew open. Then she laughed and nodded, then she pointed along the road in the direction of Mostar.

No language was required to make her meaning plain.

They had passed and evidently recently. Jean gave the gipsy a few dinar, then, having pocketed his sketch book, he went on his way.

So he had not over-run them by taking the train. They were a day in advance of him or nearly so, and they had passed by here recently; it was quite possible that they had taken the train too.

It amused him to speculate on this just as it amused him to keep a look out at road turnings and from high ground.

Near Kljuni, next day getting towards evening, he saw them. Surely it was they!

Far off on the road, with the sunset at their back, two figures—yes, without doubt, that was Cavani, and that was the girl.

It had clouded up suddenly as it does among the hills and a great rainbow spanned the country, a triumphal arch beneath which the girl and the man seemed to walk. Then the storm light darkened and the thunder rolled. They were gone in the suddenly sheeting rain that passed so quickly that on its passage there was sunset enough left to show still the road.

Desolate now.

They had perhaps taken shelter in some place that he could not see and afterwards found some Han for the night, for at Kljuni there was no sign of them nor on the road next day.

It was the day after, towards noon, that he felt the conviction suddenly come to him that he had outstripped them, that he was no longer following them, but that they were following him.

He reckoned that he had been going too quick not to have caught up with them, and lo and behold, that evening as he came into Mostar he found that he was wrong, for there at the door of a kavana on the right of the road was the girl evidently newly arrived.

She was standing with the back of her hand across her eyes as she gazed across the road at some object on the other side, and within the house Jean could see Cavani, old soldier of Napoleon, seated at a table with a mug opposite to him.