

I

Diana's apartment was small but modest. White walls and practical furniture: a sofa bed, a small tubular desk, a swivel chair and a small case filled with books spoke of a single, working girl, with a practical mind. Having just finished writing a review of an exhibition, Diana was swivelling round in her chair cheerfully when the phone rang.

- Hello, is that you uncle?

- You absolutely must come over to my place – said the voice in the receiver. I have been working on a curious case and I think you'll be able to help me a bit.

- Are you working on some new strain of pumpkin? The famous detective became a vegetable designer in his old age – Diana joked.

What a stupid idea! – uncle burst out – I've got a new case, it has to do with art, and that's why I need your advice. After that, I'm going to come back to my gardening.

- What is it then? – asked Diana softly.

- STARLINGEL! – yelled the uncle – Do you know it?

- And what would that be?

- That's exactly what I want you to tell me. It's about shoes. I can't talk any longer, anyway it's not a matter that can be discussed on the phone. Come over for tea at five.

II

Uncle lived on the third floor of a high-class, modernist, tenement house. The spacious apartment had a pleasant terrace on the western side, where uncle grew flowers. He used them to make bouquets according to a handbook by Constance Spray – master of that skill. He, as well as that English lady, considered the art of arranging flowers to be the most egalitarian of all.

The idea of having a tea on the terrace gave Diana a warm feeling. She stopped by the cake shop nearby to buy some sweets. The cookies were expensive, but the owner ensured they were made using a traditional recipe, and only the best ingredients, without a trace of baking powder.

Diana didn't wait for the elevator and climbed the marble stairs, bearing in mind the current calorie content of her bag. Yet she felt she could afford such a luxury from time to time, thanks to her good metabolism, regular visits at the swimming pool and everyday walks. She brushed her short, fair hair off the forehead and, she was just about to ring the doorbell when the door opened itself and the superintendent walked out of the apartment. He looked exhausted, but his tired eyes recognized Diana. The superintendent bade her good day and made his way towards the elevator.

Through the slightly open door she entered the study and looked around with appreciation. The study, as well as the rest of the rooms, had an immensely modernist decor. In fact, one could say the whole place glittered with chrome. It seemed that the bright, orderly room was empty, but Diana

was quick to guess that her uncle was sitting on an angular chair, of an uncompromising shape, with his back towards the door. He sank into it completely, which wasn't surprising considering his small height. He was holding a red court shoe in his hand.

- Good day uncle – said Diana in a sweet voice.

- Oh, you're here already – uncle murmured – will you make some tea? Diana went over to the tiled, white kitchen and put the kettle on.

- And what is it about this shoe? – she called. Uncle minced to her. He put the court shoe on the wooden table top and pointed his finger at the writing inside.

- I can't quite remember the name now. But I think you have written an article about shoes or fashion for some women's magazine, do you happen to remember this company? – he asked in the hope that she did. Diana took the shoe in her hand and read the writing aloud – STARLINGEL. Yes, it's an abbreviation of the names of its owners and probably one of them is called STARLING but I don't have the faintest idea about 'GEL'. By the way, it's a nice shoe, from the twenties I guess. And look at those small feet, size 36.

- Hmm, small indeed. In fact, this would fit.

- Fit in what? – Diana asked.
Uncle stroked his moustache.

- Fit the footsteps that the police discovered in an apartment belonging to a woman whose body was found yesterday by the river. Her name was Tamara Bielowa. A Russian, aged 35, she was a proprietor of a fashionable place called 'The Spring', just by the river.

- And why are you dealing with this case?

- Her friend, Count Napoleon Wiernicki asked me to take care of it for the sake of her past – she used to be a stripper once – now he's afraid that the police would discontinue the investigation and consider the whole thing to be a mafia business. Her place was popular with various people: youngsters bored with their decent friends, businessmen working from dawn to dusk, office workers looking for sensation. And the attraction there was the possibility to see the scum of every description – thieves, crooks, drug dealers, even murderers from the front pages of newspapers.

- Have you seen the post-mortem report already?

- Drowned, high alcohol content in blood. She was wearing a swimming suit. Her dress was found on the riverside. She had no purse. In her apartment, we have found court shoes which did not belong to her, and footsteps on the table in the living room. Most probably made by the owner of this very pair of shoes. The problem is that this Cinderella lost two at a time, so it will be hard to trace her.

- Who was the last person to see her on that night?

- Cloakroom attendant, but he told the police he didn't remember anything from that evening.

III

- I know that you have a hard job and there's a lot of people passing through, but perhaps you remember someone? – asked Diana as she was pressing a green bill into cloakroom attendant's pocket.

- Do you have any idea of how much vodka is being drunk here? Rivers – murmured the gray, wizened man – That's how they live here. This is unfair! Such a luxury while there's so many people starving.

- Yes, I know it's incredible, but is there any way you could remember who accompanied Miss Tamara that night?

- The Countess? Well, it was that pimp of course.

- And who is that exactly?

- A young guy, does nothing but spends money here every night. Geezer wears a white suit all the time, that's why they nicknamed him Persil. He goes around by cabs. You should ask the cab drivers.

- And perhaps you remember some part of their conversation?

- She was drunk as usual, and he was talking on the phone, using some kind of a code I think. He's a shady guy.

- A code?

- Yeah, he said something like: let's meet at NP, or PN. Anyway, it had to be about something illegal if he used initials, it cannot be otherwise.

IV

Paying visits to nightclubs can be a dangerous task for a single lady. At that time uncle is usually sleeping. Besides, he would look somewhat amusing in his patent leather shoes and tailored suit, accompanied by a young woman. That's why Diana took a friend to help her. Elsa Scarpelli was a novice fashion designer, but the choice quickly turned out to be *spot-on*. As befitted a granddaughter of a shoe tycoon, Elsa immediately deciphered STARLINGEL and announced it was an abbreviation of Starling and Squirrel.

- It was an extremely expensive company and it didn't exist for a long time, but their shoes could last for *ten* years. Very durable with a classic look. – Elsa explained.

They were standing next to a club to which they weren't admitted even though they looked all right: high-heeled shoes and fashionable striped skirts. Elsa even had an eccentric, shoe-shaped hat. – Entrance by invitation only, it's a closed party – grunted the skinny guy by the door – It was rubbish! A few minutes earlier they had both seen Persil coming in without any invitation. The evening was getting cold and the girls, treading in one spot, observed

people walking down into the club in the basement.

- That's UTOPIA – said Diana – we would have to be beautiful boys to get inside.

- And wear expensive shoes – added Elsa.

- You fool, keep your head down or he'll see us! – whispered Diana kneeling behind a car.

All of a sudden, Persil appeared. He had a seemingly shabby look and windswept hair, but this nonchalant appearance was a thing he carefully planned at home. His "Spat out of the washing machine" suit was creased and worn, his trouser legs frayed by the designer, and his shoes were bathed in champagne. Persil leaned against the bonnet and lit a cigarette. A cab arrived in a moment. He got into it lazily. Before he closed the door he said to the driver. To Nova Popularna, Chmielna 5.

- This is it! NP! The girls screamed with satisfaction.

V

Except for two police officer and some lame homeless with a dog, Chmielna was empty. The girls turned into a passageway and found themselves in a small yard by a neo-renaissance villa with a terrace. While still in the passageway, they saw a curious neon light in the shape of the letters N and P. A shining code which the man working in the cloakroom mentioned.

Walking up to the terrace, they climbed the stairs flanked by two impressive street lamps, and through a glass-panelled door with decorative bars they looked inside. The interior, filled with soft light, was full of paintings and still people. Then, the girls spotted and heard a beautiful singer – the cause of this stillness. 'I've got the feeling, the feeling's gone.'- those were the words of a jazz hit they heard, Diana indeed had the feeling that she could learn something here. And not necessarily about Persil, who happened to be sitting in the middle of the room.

During the break between songs, the girls sneaked inside, avoiding the possible trouble with invitations again, and headed towards the counter straight away. The concert had ended and the bar opened.

- Two quince liqueurs please – said Diana firmly. - Tickets? – said the bartender with a Scottish accent.

- Oh. Now this is bad – Thought Diana. But before she actually said anything, Elsa came up with two tickets she just bought at the counter right next to the bar.

- We can trade those for drinks – she explained gladly.

The crowd started pouring out onto the terrace, the yard hummed with conversation and some free tables appeared inside. The girls sat on a wooden bench with figures of rams carved on it – a thing undoubtedly inspired by folk art. The place had some more furniture – stuff made of dark wood, decorated with highland ornaments, most of it had inscriptions and pictures carved with a sharp tool. This collection of expressions made by people who used the furniture was constantly growing, and so, Diana and Elsa were also

asked to write something. Diana hesitated, her art historian's instinct has always told her: Do not destroy! Preserve the works of artists and designers! She could still remember the disgust she felt at the sight of an art nouveau table painted green, which she saw in the apartment of her friend from the Academy of Fine Arts. But on the other hand, art deco designer Syrie Maugham didn't hesitate to paint Adam and Chippendale chairs white, so that they fitted into her stylish living room. But then, she was creating a style for the upper classes. This interior has class as well – thought Diana – white walls with a black painting stressing the architectural order, curtains with a Mackintosh motif of geometric roses. And those paintings on the walls, superb. Diana looked at the dynamic composition of cones, triangles and similar vorticist drawings. While Diana was busy deriving pleasure from art, Elsa threw her shoe-like hat on a pseudo-art deco peg and began destroying a table of a dubious artistic value.

- Now, that's a lot better – she announced.

- And what did you write? – asked Diana rhetorically as Elsa has always written some feminist watchwords.

- 'It's a crime to buy sex for money.' Good, don't you think? – Elsa laughed.

VI

Early afternoon was extremely calm at NP. Two young men put a table on the terrace, where they sat smoking cigarettes and sipping beer. On a small sofa, under a painting with a piano sat a pale girl. Her eyes were wide-apart. She was with a slight build and had small feet, which she put on the sofa not bothering to take the shoes off. She wore her dark, smooth hair in a bun, and resembled a gazelle, carefully listening for her hunter. And the hunter was soon to come. It was Persil. The girl, with a trembling hand, showed him something in the newspaper. Persil knitted his brows and frowned. He reached for cigarettes but the packet was empty. He walked up to the bar slowly and bought two cigarettes – sold there separately. Both of them smoked.

- Trouble – thought Diana and smoked one as well.

She sat looking through the open door at people who appeared in the gate, walked into the yard, up to the terrace and finally entered inside. She saw some of them yesterday. Those were entering briskly, while newcomers examined the place in hope of seeing someone they knew. There were also those who got there by accident, following their herd instinct with others. Those stopped at the doorstep and glanced at alcohol bottles and empty tables, but one could see they didn't feel comfortable there. A moment of nervous laughter, a few shakes of the head, and spruced up forty-year-old ladies with fat guys in suits were leaving. Their heads craned towards the neon sign which remained of no importance to them. Get back to 'The Spring' – Diana thought – wooden, folk-like décor of that place is something that'll suit you well. Suddenly she spotted her uncle at the bar, he put a ticket on the table top and asked

- and what's inside this angular bottle?

- Well – sighed Diana – knowing his weakness for edges, he'll order it

regardless of the contents. A moment later, he was sitting next to Diana, sipping grass-flavoured vodka with apple juice.

- They got here some nice glasses – he began the conversation – did you know that the cost of engraving the NP logo is a few times higher than that of the glass? And by the way, I would readily buy one as a souvenir.

- They aren't selling anything as yet – said Diana – Persil was here yesterday, as soon as he got drunk he wanted to buy everything, including the empty liqueur bottles.

- Yeah, I think he can afford it. It is said he likes collecting things.

- So it is said. But today he's got other things on his mind, some trouble.

- Undoubtedly.

- You know something about it?

- Yesterday police picked up a certain homeless who was hanging around here. An interesting case. He's a collector too, very devoted to his passion and, as usual in such cases, deprived of moral values.

- The lame one, with a dog? What is he supposed to collect, and what on earth does it have to do with Persil? - It does, both with Persil and the countess. This morning, I visited his apartment in Prague district with the superintendent. Quite a way from here, isn't it? Well it seems that this old man is a blackmailer. He goes downtown and hangs around in bars to take pictures. We've found hundreds of photographs in his place, some of them were taken in 'The Spring'. An impressive study of characters and post-alcohol behaviour. It would surely make a fine exhibition. This man traded discreditable pictures for money. If someone refused to pay, he called the police under the pretext of loud noise which disturbed his sleep. Finally, the police became interested in the old man himself. Well, what goes around, comes around.

- Is it possible that he was taking pictures on that night when the Countess drowned?

- I suppose so, but I did not find those pictures. Apparently they have already been traded. – uncle lowered his voice – we have to pay a visit to Persil's place. Napoleon gave me keys to the kitchen door. They employ the same cleaning lady.

VII

Persil lived in a neo-renaissance tenement in the city centre. He had a nearly 200 square meters big apartment on the top floor, without elevator. Elsa stayed in the yard with a whistle on her neck. She was supposed to blow the whistle in case she saw Persil coming. Though this was unlikely to happen, as recently he was hanging about NP until the closing time, that is until midnight. The apartment was dark and neglected – yellow door frames, filthy windows, ruined parquet floor with splashes of paint. There was a pile of cardboard boxes and pictures at the end of a corridor. Massive, wooden

furniture in the living room was decorated with ornaments which looked like from some Medici palaces in Florence.

- Overwhelming – mumbled uncle.

Diana turned a torch on in order to take a better look at a picture above the sofa.

- Amazing – she whispered. The picture was a portrait in the renaissance style, though it was painted quite recently. It showed a young woman in profile with a blue sky in the background. Behind her back, on sprigs with little green leaves, sat a small black bird, the woman had also a squirrel on her lap. – I know a very similar painting by Hans Holbein, I've seen it at the National Gallery in London – said Diana slowly.

Those were exactly the same animals, they were connected with the surname of the depicted person, what a coincidence it's STARLINGEL! – cried Diana – That's her! She resembles the girl I've seen this afternoon at Nova Popularna!

All of a sudden they heard Elsa's whistle.

- He'll be here in a minute – whispered Diana.

- I have an idea – said uncle – let's hide behind that picture in the corridor.

VIII

- Would you like some tea Irena? – Persil asked.

- I don't know – answered Irena sitting sadly on the sofa – I've just lost an antique brooch and didn't get any money in return – she sighed and started to cry.

- Let's sell this apartment – said Persil calmly.

- Are you insane, you want to get rid of grandpa's keepsakes? – she opposed.

- You never liked the place anyway. Let's buy something smaller and more modern. You'll have a living room like Syrie Maugham – he tried to calm her down.

- If we won't be behind bars – said the girl bitterly.

- And why should we, we're innocent.

- But you don't have an alibi, they won't believe that you actually left her outside the bar. – moaned Irena – And I left my shoes at Tamara's place. They'll find me sooner or later.

- So what? They'll find out that an ex-stripper was giving Miss Starling belly dance lessons. Then Miss Starling got drunk and lost her shoes.

- Oh, cut it out! Tamara was a pro and I'm just a dilettante.

- Do you want to see the pictures which that old man took?

- Did you pay him a lot?

- Not at all, and I think I know why. You can see on that photograph that while Tamara was leaving to take a swim she had a belt and a purse.

- She liked that golden constructivist broche by Nadia Leger so much she didn't want to part with it, even underwater.

- Don't be kidding, that old crook must have taken it. You know that Tamara was found in her swimming suit only, at least that's what the newspaper said.

IX

Behind a table in *Nova Popularna* sat Diana, Elsa, Persil with Irena and Napoleon. In a minute came winded uncle. He said hello to everyone and ordered a beer.

- We've been lucky. We've managed to get your property back Miss Irena. Here is your broche – uncle pulled a bakelite box out of his briefcase. Irena opened her mouth in astonishment and was unable to say a word for some time. Then she thanked along with Persil. Finally she wanted to pay.

- We won't accept anything from you – answered uncle – solving this mystery alone gave me enough pleasure, besides I've been hired by the Count – and he looked at Napoleon who nodded his head. – As you may know – uncle addressed the rest – on that fateful night Miss Tamara left the club with Mr. Persil. You got into a cab and drove away, while Miss Tamara went down to the river to hide the brooch she received earlier on, in the club, from Mr. Persil. I have found the taxi driver who took you that night, he confirmed that you have left Miss Tamara soon after midnight.

- Fortunately, Persil breathed with a sigh of relief.

- Yes, but – uncle moved on – selling a stolen brooch to a Russian collector is not a thing the police will like.

- Stolen? – Irena was surprised – my dad bought it at auction in Paris.

- I have learned that the brooch had been stolen from the Museum of Decorative Arts in Poznan a few years ago.

- Perhaps it would be better if you offered it to the Museum? That way we can exclude it from the whole case. – Diana advised diplomatically and everyone agreed.

- But what about the old man? – Asked Napoleon

- The old man won't say a word – said uncle – it's in his best interest. Tamara, as I suspect, was trying to hide the brooch in her underwater hiding place. Unfortunately she didn't make it. She drowned. The old man, who counted on discreditable photos, was sneaking on the riverside. It is said that he tried to rescue Tamara, but when he failed, he searched her and took the purse. He confessed to me in secret that he planned to sell it to the Russian guy but

the police caught him. During the arrest he was wearing the brooch on his tattered jacket, but nobody paid attention to it as they were looking for the pictures he used for blackmailing.

- And you believed that man? – interrupted Napoleon.

- I had been working as a detective for most of my life. – said uncle – practice makes perfect. Now, let's focus on what should we tell the police.

- And can I at least have my shoes back? – asked Irena.

- But of course – said uncle – there should be no trouble with that. But speaking of trouble - where's my beer? Diana, get some more of those tickets, I think we'll stay here a bit more.