

QUEEN OF ILLUSIONS



PART ONE: PYGMIES AGAINST A GIANT

CHAPTER I *Stepan and Sefra*

“Take that, Sefra the Turk!”

“Here’s a punch on the nose, Stepan the Bulgarian! A cowardly boy who beats up a woman!”

“A woman? A girl! You’re a woman the way an egg is a chicken!”

And the pugilists went back at it even harder.

They were two children of thirteen or fourteen. Stepan, the boy, was well-built, with an energetic wiriness; his very black eyes punctuated a face already tanned by a life outdoors. Sefra, the girl, was sturdy and a little slow-moving, but sweet and graceful even so. Everything in her round face smiled—her lips, her eyes, and her fine nose with its sensitive nostrils. Her lithe, sinuous manner had that mysterious charm that can’t be pinned down in some exact description, but whose influence is undeniable.

Right now, both of them were boxing madly. The battle was an unexpected result of the war then going on in Europe, between Turkey on the one hand and the Balkan states—Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece—on the other.¹ Sefra believed she was Turkish; Stepan considered himself Bulgarian. *Inde irae.*²

We’ve said “believed” and “considered,” because the two combatants had no definite knowledge about their own origins. They’d met in the camp of some sort of nomadic group that had emigrated to the United States. They’d earned their living as part of that roving band, sometimes as carnival acrobats,

¹ The First Balkan War, 1912-13.

² “Therefore, anger” (Latin).

sometimes as fortunetellers, as temporary farm workers, as cowherds or shepherds, as messengers, etc., etc.

For the past month, they'd been on their own. The band to which they'd belonged had suddenly vanished. No doubt some dirty trick carried out by a few of them had obliged them to put a safe distance between themselves and the police of the nearest city: Oakland, a suburb of San Francisco.

The children, who'd been hired on at a farm, had no regrets over the departure of their old companions. Nomads are not people who form close ties. In fact, the children now felt freer and happier. But then a newspaper, the something *Daily*, falling into their hands by chance, had informed them of the fierce struggle whose bloody arena was the Balkan Peninsula.

Impossible to explain why these foundlings, knowing nothing of their origins, their elusive families, their enigmatic homelands, had declared themselves to be: he a Bulgarian, she a Turk. After all, the *friend* you've chosen becomes closer *family* than any other. It's therefore possible that someone devoid of nationality could feel as much loyalty as anyone to the nation he's chosen for himself.

In any case, Stepan and Sefra brought down on each other a hailstorm of blows, every punch delivered with enthusiasm. They looked beet-red, their hair was tangled together, their whole beings tensed with the heat of battle.

"Take that, stupid Bulgarian!"

"Take that, Turkish barbarian! And see how you like this, you ridiculous idolater of the crescent moon and the green banner!"

"Here's your change, you cross worshiper!"

"Muslim dog!"

"Christian jackal!"

With those last insults, they suddenly stopped hitting each other. The same idea had occurred to them both. The words "Bulgaria" and "Turkey" meant something to them: they were expanses of land, of forests, mountains, rivers. But the vocables "Christian" and "Muslim" seemed to them to have no definite sense.

Admitting her own ignorance, Sefra murmured, "You're fighting because you're a Christian; do you even know what that means?"

"Sure! It means putting a red cross on your sleeve." Stepan had seen a photo illustration of a group of army medics. "And you," he went on, "what does it mean to be a Muslim?"

She shrugged her shoulders regally. "You put a crescent on your sleeve, and there you are."

"But why a crescent?"

"And you, why a cross?"

They stared at each other, scratching their heads, with doubt in their eyes and their gestures. They smiled awkwardly. Finally, at the same time, they said, "My word, I don't know!"

They lowered their heads, a little ashamed now of having fought without understanding better the cause of their quarrel. Then Sefra burst out laughing, and Stepan joined her in a hilarity as inexplicable as their earlier anger.

"Shall we make peace? It's silly to fight without knowing why."

"You're right."

They shook hands and hugged warmly.

Then she murmured slyly, "You see, Stepan, to earn our living, it'd be better if Turkey and Bulgaria were allies."

That idea brought cheer to their young faces once again.

This conversation was taking place in the main courtyard of the Leslow farm, six miles outside Oakland, a large square bounded on one side by a wall topped with a railing and pierced by a gate opening onto the road. Aligned with that wall, to left and right of the gate, stood the stables, barns, sheep pens, dairies, etc., all of them separated by narrow alleys leading to secondary courtyards, and to haylofts, woodsheds, storage sheds, and tack rooms.

Opposite the gate, on the fourth side of the square, stood the farmhouse, with the comfortable and welcoming simplicity of its long ground floor beneath an attic roofed in glazed tiles of green and blue arranged like a checkerboard.

At the door appeared a woman, no doubt the farm wife, because the children called out, "Mrs. Slane!" She seemed the embodiment of sadness. Tall, hollow-cheeked rather than slim, her head bowed as if by the weight of heavy thoughts, Mrs. Slane had a gentle, resigned face framed by hair that surely

had gone prematurely white. Her eyes, which were widened by the habitual tension of her eyelids, expressed worry—the same anxiety that afflicts the eyes of a doe when the baying of the hounds echoes through the forest.

What could she be afraid of, on this farm so close to California's great metropolis? What could she have to fear?—she who'd wronged no one, and who, when she first met Stepan and Sefra after their companions had abandoned them, had said with the simplest charity, "Come in, children. I'll keep you busy, and I'll find a way for you to earn your keep and your daily bread, and even a little weekly pocket money."

With her hand she shaded her eyes, which tears had ringed with dark circles. Seeing that the children were now reconciled, she motioned for them to come to her. A shiver made her voice tremble. "I warned you that you might have to hide."

"Yes, Mrs. Slane. You said the boss doesn't like new faces. Is he coming to the farm?"

"He's on his way."

"Ah!"

"So climb up into the attic, and take along some bread and bacon and cheese and cider. He might stay the night here. Anyway, a few hours of patience will be enough. Once he's gone, we can relax for weeks, maybe even months."

As she spoke, a fog of tears filled her eyes and she sounded embarrassed. Everything about her hinted at an unspoken and unspeakable sadness. Impulsively, the two little foundlings seized her thin, pale hands and brought them to their lips. She understood what was going through their young minds. Kissing them both tenderly on the forehead, she said, "Come. Let's hurry. I tremble at the thought of him catching you here."

"Is he really so awful?" muttered Stepan.

The farm wife's only answer was to lift her arms to the sky and nod her head in despair.

Then she gently led Sefra into the house, with Stepan following. Each of them received a loaf of bread, a rasher of bacon, one of those goat cheeses that in that region are called—who knows why—"oak cheese," and a jug of amber-colored cider. All that was done feverishly. At every moment Mrs. Slane started, listened for sounds from outside, and once she was reassured she hurried on with the task. "Come, come!" she said again.

Carrying their provisions, the two little guests at the farm went to a storeroom for firewood located behind the kitchen, with its vast hearth. A ladder led up through a trapdoor in the smoke-blackened ceiling. Stepan and Sefra climbed the rungs and hopped into the attic.

"Shut the trapdoor," called Mrs. Slane, "and make sure no sound gives away your presence."

She took away the ladder and carried it outdoors. The trapdoor closed silently. In semi-darkness, because daylight reached the attic only through narrow vents spaced far apart, the two young companions in misery found themselves alone amid sacks of preserves, dried vegetables, and smoked meat and fish, all hanging from the roof beams or piled on the floor. Farm provisions filled the attic, though it was more than thirty meters long by a dozen wide.

As if they were stunned by this adventure, Stepan and Sefra stood still a moment, gazing in amazement at the sacks of green beans, lentils, and dried peas, the fruit drying on straw-covered shelves, the brown smoked hams.

Finally, Stepan muttered under his breath, "So this Mr. Slane is an ogre?"

Sefra started. "An ogre! I've heard that ogres eat children! You think...?"

"Of course not. I was just trying to say he must be mean."

"On that count, good Mrs. Slane's terror leaves no doubt... And then, you must've noticed how pale she is, how sad... Earlier, just at the thought of him catching us, she was shaking like a leaf."

"It's true."

There was a silence. Sefra sat on the floor, with her legs folded like a Turk. Stepan propped himself against an enormous sack of potatoes. He seemed to be thinking, weighing the pros and cons of an idea. That interior debate resulted in him exclaiming, "Even so, I'd like to meet the fellow! Wouldn't you?"

She shook her head desperately. "No, no... He'd beat us, maybe throw us out..."

But he stuck to his idea. "So you wouldn't care to show your gratitude to worthy Mrs. Slane, who took us in and gave us a home?"

"How would we show that by meeting the man?"

"I don't know yet. But if we knew what kind of man he is and why he makes her tremble, we might be able to think of a way to rid her of this tyrant... Because only a tyrant could terrorize such a sweet, good woman."

Stepan's suggestion seemed to galvanize Sefra. The fear she'd exhibited just a moment before suddenly disappeared. She stood up and came to him, her eyes shining and her round cheeks blushing.

"Tell me what to do. I'll do it."

The two vagabonds showed their loyal nature.

"Tell me what to do," she repeated.

He shrugged. "You're in too much of a hurry, Sefra." With comical solemnity, his sententious tone echoed some voice he might well have heard long before. "Girls are impulsive—they want to arrive before they've left." She was getting ready to object, but he cut her off. "Come on, let's not quarrel. To take action, we need to know in what direction."

"Of course," she agreed, mollified.

"So the first step would be to find out the reason for Mrs. Slane's terror."

"Well, we already know that!" Sefra exclaimed impetuously. "She's terrified of Mr. Slane."

"Yes, but why?"

She lowered her head, baffled by the question, whose sharp logic required an answer more precise than she felt able to give.

Stepan didn't push his victory too far. "Well, my dear friend, we're in the attic, separated from the ground floor by nothing more than pine boards laid across the ceiling beams."

"Thanks for the news," said Sefra jokingly.

"Mrs. Slane told us to make no noise. And you don't have to make noise to look and listen."

"Look at, listen to... what?"

"Mr. Slane. The man's got to talk, make threats. Well-adjusted ears can therefore figure out his thoughts."

"Okay, and then?"

"When we're in his... confidence, then we can decide."

She clasped his hands warmly. "You know, you're a good Bulgarian."

"And you're a sweet little Turk."

"So we're agreed—we're going to spy on Slane?"

"Absolutely."

"But how...?"

Stepan gestured triumphantly. Pulling Sefra by the hand—which he was still holding—he led her to one of the small vents. Through the narrow opening they could see the farmyard, the rustic gate, and beyond it the road to Oakland.

"This is how we'll see him," he said slowly. Sefra nodded her approval. Then Stepan stretched out flat on the floor and pressed his ear to the boards. "To hear him," he explained.

She clapped her hands in delight—but stopped that noisy display as soon as he said, "Shh! No noise allowed."

She apologized, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Her eagerness to help him made her as pliable as a glove. This little vagabond girl, who half an hour earlier had been exchanging fisticuffs with her companion, now submitted to his authority. He'd become a master in her eyes, now that he'd found a way—no matter how chancy—to give concrete form to the infinite gratitude they felt for the goodness radiating from Mrs. Slane, who was so frightened by the still-unknown Slane.

"Horses!"

"A carriage!"

The two exclamations burst from their childish lips. They quickly took off their heavy hobnailed shoes. Then, barefoot, slipping across the attic floor like shadows, they went to the opening they'd chosen as their observation post.

Just then the courtyard gate opened. A light carriage drawn by a pair of horses pulled in.

"There are trunks in the carriage."

"Three people on the front seat. Two men; one of them must be our enemy, Mr. Slane."

"Oh!" murmured Sefra. "You call him our enemy?"

"Sure, since we can already blame him for bringing Mrs. Slane to tears."

“That’s true,” she conceded.

They both fell silent as they intently watched the fast-moving scene taking place in the courtyard.

With fearful haste, Mrs. Slane approached the carriage now stopped in the middle of the open yard. Geese, chickens, turkeys, ducks, guinea hens, surprised by the sudden appearance of the carriage, fled in all directions with harsh cries.

The travelers got down. As the children had observed, there were three of them, a woman and two men. One of the men drew all of their attention, since it was obvious at a glance that the other one couldn’t be the boss: he wore clean but unfashionable clothes and had a thick, unruly beard. His wife might be pretty, but she was certainly odd: tall, slim, almost excessively lithe... and then that face—dark-complexioned, with red lips and velvet-black eyes beneath black hair. They must both be employees, subordinates of some kind—that was clear from their behavior. They bustled around their companion: a tall, spare man with a hard, domineering face, and graying hair under a soft felt hat.

If the children had still been in any doubt, Mrs. Slane’s behavior would have resolved it. She hastened forward, forcing a smile onto her sad face. She did her best to inject some joy into her broken voice. “Ah, Mr. Slane! I’m delighted by this visit, which I couldn’t have hoped would come so soon...”

The man shrugged. “Oh, so you weren’t hoping for it, Edith?... Well, I’ll take you at your word... and thank you for your welcome.”

The poor woman opened her mouth to answer, but he rudely interrupted her. “Let’s cut the chitchat, Edith. I haven’t got much time, and I need to stick to the point. Have the luggage of my friends Derrick and Freda unloaded. Have them served generous refreshments. As for us, we need to talk.”

“Talk?” Mrs. Slane echoed the word in a choked voice. She’d grown paler.

“Yes, talk. But hurry up, please—the clock is ticking.”

The words were commonplace, but the emphasis he put on them gave them the weight of an order that couldn’t be disobeyed. Mrs. Slane bowed her head, and her whole body seemed to slump. She called for servants and supervised the unloading of the large leather-bound trunks and their delivery to a room at the far end of the house.

Derrick and Freda—since those were the names of Slane’s traveling companions—followed a maid who led them to the dining room, where the refreshments ordered for them were served.

With a commanding gesture, Slane grabbed his wife’s arm. “Come to the parlor. The doors are padded. That way what we say won’t reach any ears but ours.”

She considered him with a certain anxiety, but he seemed not to notice. With no apparent effort he pulled Mrs. Slane toward the house.