

The Dancer Malige

What there is to tell about the dancer Malige is a story that begins in August 'thirty-nine, in the last days of the month, in a small country town — scarcely describable for sheer inability to survey it at a glance.

In the center, as everywhere in such small towns, there's a rather large market place, completely empty. Now not only during the day, in this hot month, when you'd rather slink along close to the low gabled houses than cross the square — than, losing your breath, squeeze yourself through this soft yet massive block of glowing air, which, as though trimmed and fitted, fills up the rectangular square right up to the façades of the rows of houses enclosing it.

Even in the evenings, when it comes over a bit cool from somewhere, from the lake

situated in the northwest or the moist meadows in the direction of Paradise village and farther down towards Venedien, you prefer to keep close to the houses, which you can enter if you like and rest; evening is a tired time, and you'd be alone in the spacious square. And then too the moonlight soon comes and makes the cobblestones shine so strangely.

What reasons don't you find not to have to cross the market place, alone, in this year of 'thirty-nine.

In late summer. Which is very warm. When what there is to tell about the dancer Malige begins.

He's stuck in the barracks on the edge of town, dressed up as a soldier, sitting at the table with others; they're playing cards, a usual sight around the usual barracks table, it's almost a bore how the cards arrange themselves over and over again in his hand into a curious fortune telling, a bold numerical magic, of course it's a trick, easy to explain and can be learnt and yet it is unreal. It could be that it promotes a good mood, it could be, but certainly not in a game, where it's a matter of less than a penny despite Blömke's offer for one penny skat.

That's Malige and now to Blömke and besides, Kretschmann and Naujoks. The others in front of the lockers, busy with boot

polishing, for a walk in town. Blömke flings down the cards. Can't play with you, he says. And Kretschmann and Naujoks nod their agreement. So when the others are out, they will shift over to the canteen and drink beer awhile and talk, until Blömke has gotten into a rage and, instead of the cards he leafs the fifty mark bills on to the table and lets whoever wants to, get boozed up. Then Reservist Blömke, with the rank of Private, is advanced in a flash, to Mr. Blömke who everyone knows runs a coal business.

That's the fifth day it's gone that way. Barracks duty: Exercising, right about, left about, rifle cleaning, boot inspection. Half the barracks is crammed full of reservists. Innkeeper Zelt draws himself up with both hands on the railing because of a wretched charley horse; Kretschmann is a longshoreman, porter in the provincial capital, he's not bothered by handling the rifle or the wooden stool; Naujoks has an even temper, when the officer at inspection points to a spot on the rifle barrel with indignant disgust, he says: Man, don't you know rust when you see it, Lieutenant Sir?

They're older people, reservists, as was said, called up and brought together here in this provincial town. They talk a lot about war too, but more about manly virtues, German virtues, they don't believe very much

in a new war, there are towns down towards the East Prussian lake district which still carry traces of the last one. So you think: a military exercise, like the ones you've had. After all, there's this non-aggression pact, that should be able to reassure you. But Blömke is a businessman, he takes Malige aside. If a guy eats up cigar butts like a pig, he says, and the dancer finishes it off, then he pukes. Yeah okay, says Blömke, but if again and again . . . ? To which the information of an experienced man goes: Then they'll think you've got stomach ulcers. And that's really all Blömke needs to know.

A couple of days later the top sergeant and young officers are dashing around all worked up, the new units, the companies divided and filled up with reservists are being loaded, partly on to trucks, partly on to trains, again there's a big mess while distributing and trying out the gasmasks "30," as the thing is called. That can't mean anything good, says Kretschmann, at the very most to drive people nuts.

Ach, Malige, what's all that? You've had your work, the last one in Lunapark, before that in Bremerhaven, before that in Copenhagen in Tivoli, that's why you fill out still another slip: last stay abroad, your work, called strong-man show: one-armed hand-stands on a green bottleneck, at any rate in

the last years, before that, bottom man in a human pillar in a variety show, but really a dancer; one believes it when one sees you, slim, with a gait of the most natural conspicuousness, the tips of the toes turned a little too far out. Tell us the truth, Malige, instead of horsing around.

Just shut your trap. That's Lieutenant Anflug's boyish voice, to be heard on the street in Mlawa, they are over the Polish border and Private Malige wanted to throw in a word or two, that would stick like sand in the teeth, in answer to Anflug's he-man speech about Polish riff-raff and kikification, a chaser as it were, to non-commissioned reserve officer Benedikt's barracks lecture: The Reich as a Power for Order in Europe. But what did he actually say, this dancer? He goes into a Polish house and plays the piano. Is that all?

And Kretschmann, potted, runs around a wooden stall brandishing his bayonet and nails a hen to the ground. And non-commissioned officer Markschie buys it from him, for cigarettes. And Naujoks has a conversation with Poles. And Zelt traffics in bread. And what if the older people don't know anything? Wiechert says: You certainly don't believe that the war'll be over tomorrow, do you?

That, here, is a little town on a little river,

the one bank flat, the one lying opposite with moderate slopes of shifting height, a scattered village, or many villages, municipal buildings simply in between, hospital, school, something like that, a Catholic church, a synagogue. The people here aren't used to much good, it seems, and aren't so ingenuous as they make out: sidling around the soldiers, using their hands and a few scraps of German.

Lieutenant Anflug resides on the high bank. There his signal corps vehicles are set up, switchboard and cable vehicles, and first aid Lance Corporal Maschke is on the way in that direction, and Malige, whom he meets on the wooden bridge, joins up with him, on account of Blömke's sick call, about which Maschke tells him: Stomach ache, but with fever.

Maschke, on short legs, knows, as a druggist, how to interpret symptoms. Malige, too, thinks: Stomach ulcers. Didn't he always hog half of my pack — oh well: charcoal tablets. And then they went up the slope diagonally.

Up here a little breeze is blowing. Beginning of September. You can pivot around and look back at the town. Maschke does that for a moment, maybe would do it longer, but turns around immediately, Malige had said: Hey look — not louder than normally,

but still in such a peculiar tone that it simply makes you turn on your heels.

Down on the bank a bunch of Jews, black caftans, beards, black hats, around a cable drum which they're trying to load up on themselves and yet set down again for a renewed attempt, old men, and now three or four of them drag the drum up the slope, reach about halfway up, and Anflug climbs down towards them and kicks the thing out of their hands. Probably supposed to be carried. It rolls down there. Stop it, shouts Anflug. Well it's not supposed to sink in the river, is it.

That's a good one. Anflug hauled over the Jews from the synagogue where they had assembled, the whole lot. Now what's the point of this: letting it roll down, carrying it up again, letting it roll down again? Learn to work, opines Anflug. Maschke finds it strange.

Probably Malige too. Because he jumps forward, has now brought his legs into a ballet position, like some sort of a procession, skips, Charlie Chaplin steps, suddenly standing still, bends forward, two steps back. Past Anflug, who should have seen it, but had something else to do, forward to the edge of the slope. And now — now this is really true art — with the same sequence of steps down the incline, not a bit faster, slow motion as

it were. The guy's gone nuts, Anflug shouts. He can't overlook that — this funny farm show.

Maschke lets his Blömke be Blömke, namely sick. He runs to the slope, stands, sees: Malige has arrived down below, spreads his arms, moves them like wings, a green bird in a swarm of jackdaws, apparently calls upon his audience, the old gents down there, to take their seats, he, Malige, will present himself in a gratis performance, but he actually says "produce" as they do in the trade. He has already taken hold of the cable drum, lifted it up like a magic box from where doves will fly out and afterwards a parasol, opening by itself, anyway just as light — and is still in his dance step, his head thrown back. And now, carrying the drum in front of him, as if he had to hold on to it or else it would fly off, he advances up the incline, not a bit slower or faster.

At the top Anflug flounders, he puts one foot forward, grabs for his field cap, for his belt, has begun to scream, scream, screams like an animal — orders or something — a meaningless jumble. And Malige, he sees, dances up to him, closer and closer, a couple of yards more, with head thrown back and mouth open.

Over from the vehicles the whole platoon comes running — Kretschmann, Zelt, Wie-

chert, Markschies, Naujoks — stand, look across to the approaching dancer, step over to the side as he pops up over the incline, before the edge again takes another step back, lets the four tiny steps follow, and now, arrived on top, the cable drum in his arm, the skip for good measure. To Anflug's cries, who has whipped out the pistol, loses the magazine while cocking, lets it suddenly drop, wheels about, runs off, still screaming.

That's actually the whole story. At the beginning of a war. On a Polish river bank. Above a town which soon will go up in smoke. At the beginning of a war which goes on for a long time. In which Blömke gets his discharge notice because of stomach ulcers, and two years later is called up once more. In which Naujoks dies, as a result of a bullet, and Kretschmann dies a hero's death in the basement of a brewery, where he drowns a fortnight later. In which innkeeper Zelt procures himself a dog, a terrier by the name of Lady, but that's already in the year following, in France.

Lieutenant Anflug is removed. Transferred to another unit. Impossible conduct. And the story with Malige is for the moment forgotten at the beginning of the war. Maybe he'll live a long life. Then he would most likely be in a cabaret at the front, with his ability, probable, or at any rate possible,

although they prefer to take ladies. I don't know. I only know what I've related.

At very most there remains: that it becomes evening, after this story. That on the high bank, a little bit behind the motor vehicles, stacks of straw stand and gleam strangely, as the moonlight dips down on to them. While the mist comes up over the river. And that nothing would stop you from going over the bridge and through the town, now in darkness — were it not that you would meet yourself, here of all places, in this Polish town, without even finding a reason for it.