

The Monster of Montorio

János Gusztáv rested, contemplating the early morning, as straws of sunlight etched themselves across the crystal glass resting on his bedside table. With its dominance of the daylight hours established the naked sun then retreated, leaving just dapple shadows thrown by the outside shutters to dance along the yoke of his evening shirt shrugged over the chair by the balcony window.

Two days ago he had returned to Northern Italy after a delay longer than he cared to consider. After sighting the mediaeval spires of Verona - as he had once before, though now later in life and no longer a proud Hussar - his galloping pace, maintained from Trento, slackened to a trot and he left the main road for the quieter farm tracks. He had no wish for attention and concealed himself beneath a single breasted Greatcoat. Entering the old city, its foundations buried in antiquity, János Gusztáv was reminded of the elegance of the fine masonry, deep burnt red, and cake flat, bonded with lime mortar almost the breadth of the course itself. It was exposed on many administrative buildings, worn with authority; masked with fine salmon Tufo stone on others; marble on the rest. The whole city was hard and solid, lacking the animate feel of wood, which made the place, especially at this time of year he reflected, as cold as the local people.

János Gusztáv rose from his bed and two strong feet were placed firmly down, experienced soles to challenge the domain of the cold floor. He stood and stretched tall, cupped his face and rubbed vigourously, bringing a blush back to sleeping cheeks. He then attended the dresser to fill the bowl with cold water. János Gusztáv finished his ablutions with a trim of his prestigious moustache. His clothes still carried the dust and dirt of three recent countries, and his boots, faithful remnants from another life, long worn and loved, gave him comfort against the brisk Venetto January.

It was still early, his careful movements upheld the silence on the stairs and aided him in stealing a breakfast before the Widow Monraele had even woken. He took cheese with bread for breakfast and raided what little heat the stove retained overnight to drink back a cup of tepid water flavoured with almond and honey. Dropping the bolt on the door as quietly as the frosted iron would allow, Gusztáv stepped out into the cobbled streets of the old city. He then lit his pipe and watched the weaving tobacco plume mix with the condensation from his breath.

At eight, just as the Basilica di san Zeno called out to the first of that day's pious souls, the high brick walls of the neglected mediaeval Castelvechio guarded only a youth, Andrea Magni. He stood waiting, clapping his hands to keep out the cold. On spotting his employer striding purposefully down Via Roma, his clap hinted to prayer as his arms moved to heaven, gesturing the slightest *Signim Crucis* before he could be seen to wave. For Andrea Magni, service for János Gusztáv meant that, at least for this week, the tall jovial boy could avoid his religious duties, even if it meant fetching horses, translating and standing in the cold.

Magni had been recommended to Gusztáv by the venerable Father Martinez over dinner in Vienna that last October. The boy's language skills were proven in the eyes of the church and though he spoke no Hungarian, the priest was confident he could converse adequately enough in German. Martinez was sure he would serve as an excellent

translator and guide to his old friend. These responsibilities discharged, the priest then pressed János Gusztáv over his plans to return to the country. He too had heard the stories about the village of Montorio. He then ventured his counsel on the matter - *some things should be left undisturbed*. Through a bellow of pipe smoke and a silent salute of cognac, the priest received his reply.

With the boy stretching his back to appear older and more worthy than he was, János Gusztáv allowed him the military familiarity of linking arms as they walked through the city fort and out across the torrenting River Adige on the fine Ponte Scaligero. For a military man such defensive structures were always welcoming, even if now they came with memories of past events. The tall elegant merlons, of fine red brick on white marble arches, held the morning light at bay, only surrendering thin slithers of the shaded foot-way to the invading sunshine at points where archers once stood.

From the bridge, their promenade swung northward along the tree lined road towards the Piazza Arsenale. Andrea Magni squinted against the sun flickered through the empty branches of the mature maples, as he followed the same line of intense questioning, about the great capitals of Europe, as he had done the day before. As with the previous morning, the thrust of Magni's inquisitive *lunge* was parried by the experienced blade of the older man's terse replies. The conversation ceased in a single sweep of Gustav's hand as the tree line revealed a solitary standing figure. The dark blue and red etching identified him as Carabinieri. His hat, the distinctive two pointed Lucerna, was unusually, held by his side, his other arm placed inside his breast pocket. Gustav quietly cautioned Magni to be precise in his translation with the stranger, as the two old war-horses moved to square off against each other. Andrea Magni stood between the two men, trying as best he could to emulate their gravitas. It was not a friendly conversation. Lieutenant Antonio Vertti would only use formal Italian with the young man, forsaking the usual city dialect. Magni struggled to move the nuances of the conversation between this high form and Gusztáv's guttural loose German. The wounds of the Austro-Hungarian marshalling of the region were deep. Lieutenant Vertti considered the meeting little more than a military courtesy between old soldiers, but it was clear to János Gusztáv that the Carabinieri thought the problem to be only a local issue and had no comprehension how far the stories of the wild animal of the village of Montorio had spread.

The meeting ended curtly. Nothing more would be discussed. The Carabinieri would not interfere in Gusztáv's activities. Andrea Magni was dismissed leaving János Gusztáv to his thoughts. Lunch was taken early. He considered it light and lacking in enough meat for his Hungarian palate. The wine though was more than adequate, as was the cheese. Pleasant enough that another bottle and plate passed across his table. What affairs remained for Gusztáv were taken care of in the short hours that followed the long lunch. His lodgings were cleared and several articles and letters of record were completed. An activity that he had repeated on many previous occasions.

Under the clear blue sky of mid-afternoon Andrea Magni returned with horses. Mounted, they crossed the Adige again, this time towards the East over Ponte Navi, then through the outer districts of Verona and onto the straight road to the village of Montorio. Quickly the cream and salmon stone fronted houses and fine masonry edifices dwindled as the riders moved into a bare landscape of, muted brown and green, arable land. Table flat out to the distant Dolomites, the view was broken only occasionally by elegant stone farm estates and vine terraced hills. Here even at the warmest part of the day the sun could only hope to melt the ground frost on the frozen earth, it painted instead, the bare frosted branches with the faintest hint of spring.

The radiance of the sun had started to retreat, loosing to the cold steel blue of early dusk, as they approached Montorio. Andrea Magni could understand why János Gusztáv had come here. This was a town that resided with death and János Gusztáv was a man who had clearly lived with it. The square was empty, but for a brief scurry of an old man, leaving his hand cart to a rolling stop, as he was pulled roughly through the last open door. That too, then became firmly shut. Magni observed to a silent János Gusztáv that it was like a mouse running from a cat. With the last bolt hammering down, the silence took hold. The stories were true, Montorio was shut before time.

As the day prepared to surrender its kingdom, János Gusztáv returned to the square after completing a reconnoitre and sat silently looking upwards towards Castel Montorio perched on the hill outside the town. As a soldier János Gusztáv had known many boys that did not become men, and many men, who did not become fathers. Andrea Magni, he had decided, would not be one of them. He took from his bag a purse of coins and two letters of recommendation, should he ever decide to leave the auspices of the church and venture out into the Austro-Hungarian empire. There were still people who associated the name of János Gusztáv with honour there and they would accept this boy on his word. Despite simple protestations Andrea Magni acquiesced and departed the company of Gusztáv, leading the spare horse back to Verona. Leaving a lone figure in the centre of Montorio square.

A final pipe. There could be no distraction when the trouble came. The smoke colouring amber as it rose up higher than the man, and met the last fingers of sunlight. As yellow turned to blue, to steel and then to black, what colour remained in the world became bleached as the first wailing cry made its way down from Castel Montorio. The echoing howl pitched into the hills and back, hanging across the valley as a wretched mist. In the middle distance the final doors and windows could be heard to bolt shut with urgency.

János Gusztáv dropped his bag in the dirt next to a tree, re-lit his pipe and let the smouldering aroma waft around him for the final time as the warmth left the air. The night winds had awoken and brought another cry down from the hill that made the pipe smoke cower behind his back. Closer. As the stories had said, it hides up by the castle in the day and comes down to hunt us in the night.

János Gusztáv knew the call of a hunter and this was not it. This was a wretched cry of pain. It was a familiar sound to him. The wail, an unearthly eruption from deep inside, had brought him here. It had spoken to him from countries away. It was a call that many heard. The sad story of Montorio had been told in the Royal Courts of Europe, the Parliaments, the industrial powerhouses, the legions vast, and fallen though to the rank and file. It was a story of incredible pain and injustice. It was a story that Gusztáv knew well. It was a story he was responsible for.

From the top of the hill, the creature become, veered across the gravel road and back again, an arm flung out to steady its movement. It once had a name, a normal calling, but not this night. At this time it was known by its call, a wail that darkened the sky.

János Gusztáv lowered behind a wall, watching the menace approach down from the castle, the heated fire from its anguish searing yellow the white walls of the houses as it came into the town. The thunder from a legion of cannon could not hide the noise the creature made. It was an elemental din. Its awesome shape moved as one enormous mass in the night. Throughout the streets it reeled, forcing doors and testing shuttered

windows. Each material sound drowned by the weeping churn of pain exhaled from the monsters throat. Over lapping its limbs a dark mane drenched the moonlight waves before casting them down to black.

Inside the monster, liver, heart and lungs had become twisted in a fearful tempest driving a transformation. Outside, hands and feet had become lioness pads, its skin hardened to leather, translucent to the light. The face in dark light, striped with black hair and contorted to a mask of sneering in self loathing, tightened for its fearful scream. The creatures eye's cowered in their sockets, looking inwards, glaring down into the dark malaise, aware of the outside, but only distracted, unconcerned by the world around. An animal pain kept the monsters attention. Its howling refrain kept the town's folk.

As János Gusztáv watched the darkened movements of the reckless foe, he silently mouthed the last words of his mentor, the Danish Hussar Tomas Olafsson *"What we become on a battle field cannot be defeated by steel or shot, it is a different fight."* Many soldiers fought as warriors, but few lived on as men. The hulking Nordic Olafsson was one of the few who overcome his past. As he had done with the young Gusztáv - taking a boy to fashion a leader - he again now guided the man with more wisdom. As he had used the Viking sagas to distract the youth in the night before battle, Olafsson had now planted the seed of redemption in his protégé. János Gusztáv would tackle this great beast as a Viking would, as Tomas Olafsson had done.

Out in front on Via Olmo, the awful black lurched hard against a shuttered window and stopped, the mass of the beast splintered the wood panels, leaking the gas light interior out in to the dark. It stopped in its bulk, a menacing silence before erupting a rapturous howl of physical pain. Hunching forward it disclosed the iridescent orange tip of a fire poker hanging out from the gap in the pane. Gusztáv had seen enough unfold before him, there was no need for this to continue. Removing the clothes from his torso, a once great man stood out from behind the wall and made his way to the centre of Montorio square, where he called out a name into the night.

He called again.

The wretched turmoil ahead stopped. It turned to look blindly behind itself before exhaling skywards a new pained yawl. He called the name once more. The thunder shifted and the noise lessened. It moved straight on to him.

They started facing from a cannon distance, then at musket range, a swords length, then close combat, an arm, a hand, enclosing, an embrace, a hold, a scrambled mess. Limbs struggling for purchase and a twist of white skin and black mass folding in on itself. The man, a match for the fearsome foe. The monster a lesser form when so enclosed by him. But still the battle raged on. From feet to floor they grappled, shifting, squalling, rolling, pawing. The man holding the beast at bay, its moves shifting from attack to flight. Limbs of the creature beat down on János Gusztáv. Sharp nails bearing flesh from his back. Legs coiled seeking to break the embrace. His hold was tight, he would not let go.

Gusztáv was unarmed!, how could he come to battle a hideous beast the Carabinieri Lieutenant Antonio Vertti had enquired with a wry smile, without armour, sword or gun. János Gusztáv was not without armament, he knew this cry from many places, he understood it and had brought the only weapon he needed to disarm this raging foe in battle. Ten words whispered into its ear.

"My love, you are safe, let us face this together"

The growl raged on but the blows ceased, the furious limbs took down their anger, forcing their strength against his chest. All the creature's might resisted the hold, but János Gusztáv would not let go. He uttered more words into its ear.

Through the darkening hours they continued to tussle, the furious howl transformed in the beast as more was spoken. János Gusztáv, as Olafsson had urged, was in a battle with his past and with each confession a change occurred in the beast as it did in the man. The armoured dermis softened to the touch, its pigment melted from translucence to opaque, to ghostly pale, and slowly with much reluctance the animal pads unclenched to reform hands and slender feet.

The howl followed the beast's mutation becoming a vociferous sound, more human in its volume, but still from a place that they both knew, and from where the village hid from. János Gusztáv had returned from this place. His horrors were different, but he knew its voice. He held the creature transforming. Held tight as it, became her, and held her until she was empty. Through the freezing night he held her close, giving her strength through his words. Till the fearsome creature had all but departed and in its place, in his arms, was a woman he had once loved, that he still loved.

Through the blackest hours the monstrous howl had become the ugliest cry. A volcanic pain from the darkest place. A place she had been exiled to for far too many years. He had called out to her in the night and now waited for her return. Eventually the outpour became a breathing judder. The judder subsided to a faltering breath, until eventually the emotion turned, as the hours of darkness pushed forward until finally the black sky let blue find the first wash of yellow.

All this time he held her. He kept vigil whilst she returned to life. All the time he spoke small words to her, caring sentiments bringing forth a gentleness from himself that had long been forgotten. He stared into her eyes until they looked back into his, as the warmth from the sun crept down from the gables, colouring the walls of the houses and then bringing them both back into the day. His words of love continued to be spoken until she finally managed a laugh as his hand brushed her cheek.