

The Smuggler

Victor Canning

Everyone likes Tasso—even the Chief of Police who has just had to arrest him.

The Great Man stood at the window of the Winter Palace. Across the paved courtyard, beyond the long sweep of ornamental railings and the still line of gray-uniformed guards, lay the wide bowl of the only harbor the island possessed. He raised a hand and scratched the back of his neck and the movement made the early morning April sun, reflected from the blue of the Adriatic,¹ glint on the gilt oak leaves of his epaulettes.

A respectful three paces behind him the Chief of Police stirred uncomfortably and said, "That's his boat coming in now. For a year this has been going on, and until now we have never known which of the many fishermen it might be. This time our information is reliable."

"Denunciation?" The word was harsh and bitter.

"Yes."

"Anonymous?"

"Yes."

"You have suspected him?"

"He and every other fisherman on the island, but until now I would have said that he was the last man . . ."

The figure at the window turned and a pair of cold, brown eyes regarded the Chief of Police shrewdly. They were eyes which missed nothing.

"You sound almost regretful. You like him?"

"Everyone on the island likes Tasso."

The Great Man walked past the Chief of Police towards his desk and from the shadow of the curtains at the window rose the brown and black length of his great Alsatian. As his master sat down the dog dropped heavily to the floor at the side of the desk.

"Your men are waiting for him?"

"Everything is ready."

"Go down yourself and arrest him and bring him here. Do not question him. Say nothing to him. Bring him here."

The face of the Chief of Police showed his surprise. A large hand with a thick gold ring waved at him, and the ghost of a smile passed across the face of the Great Man. "Bring him here. For once I have time on my hands. I am curious to talk to a man who has found a soft corner in the heart of a Chief of Police. Such men are rare."

The Chief of Police would have spoken again but the cold, brown eyes had grown colder and the ghost of a smile had gone. The Chief of Police saluted and left the room.

The Great Man lit a cigarette, eased his short

1. *Adriatic*, a sea between Italy and Yugoslavia that forms a northern arm of the Mediterranean.

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powerful bulk back into the wide chair, and his left hand dropped to the neck of the Alsatian, the squat fingers teasing at the dog's thick fur. After a while there was the clatter of heavy boots on the wide marble stairway outside the room and then the door was opened. Tasso stood on the threshold, behind him two armed guards and behind them the Chief of Police. The Great Man eyed them in silence for a while and, in the long pause, the cries of the stall holders from the market along the quay front seeped faintly into the gilt and velvet stretches of the room.

"Let him come in alone," he said suddenly.

The doors closed behind Tasso, and the fisherman came slowly down the room. The dog by the chair side stirred, beginning to rise, but the firm fingers tapped its head gently and the animal relaxed.

Tasso stood before the polished desk. He was a short, powerful man, much like the other in build. His eyes were brown, but with a warmth in them, his face tanned and creased with years of the sea, and about the wide lips clung a subdued smile. He showed no fear, nor embarrassment, though he knew well the identity of the man before him, had seen him resplendent at ceremonial parades and known those cold, brown eyes from a thousand photographs in a thousand public places. He stood there with his shabby blue acket swung open to show a dirty red shirt, his rousers flaked with fish scales. In the lapel of his acket he wore a half-opened yellow rose.

"Your name?"

"Tasso Susvid."

"Age?"

"Fifty-three."

"Occupation?"

"Fisherman."

"And smuggler."

"No man willingly puts his initials on a bullet."

The frank brown eyes watched the plume of smoke rising from the other's cigarette.

"You have been denounced."

"The innocent as well as the guilty are often denounced."

The Great Man stirred comfortably and the ghost of a smile came back. "Let us assume that you are a smuggler for the moment."

Tasso shrugged. "Why not? I have time on my hands. My fish are caught and my wife will sell them."

"Why do you smuggle? It is against the interests of our country."

"If I do it—and we merely pass time with this game—it is to make myself more money. The better off the citizens of a country are, the better off the country."

"There are times when you smuggle out enemies of our country. A man who does that merits death."

"Why not a reward? Surely a country is healthier without its enemies?"

The lips of the Great Man tightened and for a moment his eyes narrowed. Then he laughed gently. "What do you bring in so valuable that it outweighs the risk of death?"

"Cigarettes."

"We make our own."

"But the one you smoke now is American."

"What else?"

"Whisky."

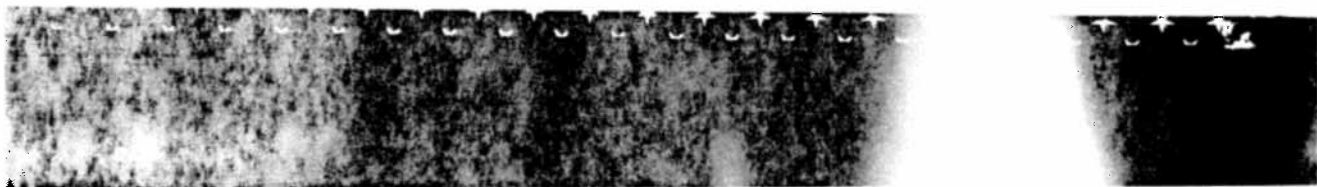
"I prefer our own rakia."²

"I agree, but there are people in the capital who think differently. There are also nylons and perfumes."

"For the women in the capital?"

Tasso smiled and shook his head. "For any woman. Every goat girl on this island covets a pair of nylons, and if you tend goats you have need of perfumes."

2. *rakia*, a strong drink of southeast Europe made of grain and grapes.



The Great Man smiled, almost openly now, and said, "And all these things you bring from over there?" He nodded toward the sea.

"If I were a smuggler I should bring them from there, yes."

"How long would it take—in your boat?"

"Ten hours across, four hours there, and ten hours back. Twenty-four hours."

"When did you go out on this fishing trip?"

"At nine o'clock yesterday morning."

The Great Man glanced at a clock on the wall. "It is now half-past nine. It's odd—your trip lasted exactly twenty-four hours."

"I ran into bad weather last night and we had to heave-to."

"We?"

"My son works the boat with me."

"Your boat is being searched now."

"They will find nothing."

"You have a radio? Maybe someone warned you . . ."

"There is no radio. No one warned me. Remember, we are only pretending that I am a smuggler."

"It is a game not without its dangers. During the war, you were a partisan?"

"Yes, I fought. Later, because I know the coast, I was a pilot for the Allied³ naval forces."

"You like the English?"

"They understand the sea, and they keep their heads in an emergency. Both qualities I admire."

"Who doesn't? But even so, everything is passing from their grasp. In politics, in art, in commerce and in sport they are being swallowed up."

Tasso shrugged his shoulders. "In all these things, perhaps. But I like them still because of all these the one thing they will really care about is sport. Only being able to draw with our National football team yesterday—they will find that hard to swallow."

"You are interested in football?"

"Every man on this island is. My son is captain of the town team."

"He will be proud when you are shot for smuggling."

"The bullet has yet to be marked. Remember this is a private game between us."

"You are denounced. The game is finished."

"Denounced by whom?"

"I don't know, but I should say your wife."

"Why?"

"She is a woman. Women notice small things . . ." A large hand rubbed gently across a broad jaw for a moment and the thick gold ring caught the light from the wide windows. "Four hours over there is not long, but it is long enough for a man to forget his wife. You wear a fresh rose in your lapel. A man who lands from sea after twenty-four hours with a fresh rose in his coat gives himself away. After a ten-hour trip from over there it would be fresh. Maybe your wife has noticed it and grown jealous of the one who pins a flower to your coat before you leave. Jealousy makes all women dangerous. Yes, I think it was your wife who denounced you."

Tasso smiled and raised his hand to the rose. "I am fifty-three. At thirty-three my wife was often jealous, but those years have gone. We are still playing our game. Look—" Tasso tossed the rose on to the desk. The movement made the Alsatian rise quickly, but a broad hand went out to restrain it. The Great Man picked up the rose and saw that it was artificial, made of wax-coated silk.

Tasso said, "It was the gift of an American nurse during the war. Ask any man in this town and he will tell you that I always wear it. After six years it is still fresh."

The Great Man was silent for a moment, turn-

3. *Allied*, referring to the Allies—the countries that fought against Germany, Italy, and Japan in World War II.

ing the rose over in his hand. Then he looked up and smiled.

"A man who holds my power can resent the mistakes he makes. Out of hurt vanity I might take revenge and none would question my right. A snap of my fingers and our friend here . . ." he looked to the Alsatian, "would tear your throat out. I should let him, for you are too frank and your tongue too ready."

But the smile still played about Tasso's mouth and he slowly raised his hand to the back of his neck, saying, "If you should try—there would be two throats cut. The dog's and your own." From the back of his coat he pulled a knife and placed it on the desk. "The Chief of Police is a conscientious man, but your presence here flusters him. He was so anxious to get me up here that he made a bad job of searching me."

The Great Man picked up the knife and gently ran the edge of the blade on his thumb. Then he said reflectively, "There are a thousand men who would have liked the chance you've just thrown away."

"I am a fisherman, not an assassin."

"And also a smuggler. Some instinct told you to bring your goods before coming in."

"I am a fisherman."

"No. I may have been mistaken about your wife, but not over the smuggling. Yesterday evening you were over there."

"I was at sea—hove-to."

The Great Man went on, turning the knife in his hands as he spoke. "You left this island yesterday morning with your son. According to you,

you have been twenty-four hours at sea, seeing no one and without a radio."

"That is what I said."

"And you landed here a little less than half an hour ago and were brought straight up to me without a chance to talk to anyone?"

"That is so."

"And yet you knew that our National football team had drawn with the English team? The game was played in London yesterday afternoon, after you left here. You heard the result over the radio when you landed. Both you and your son would be interested in the result. If you had been at sea twenty-four hours without a radio you could not have known the result. It is forbidden to be over there, but you went as you have so often gone."

Tasso's face never altered. For a moment the two men stared at one another. Then Tasso nodded slowly. "The game it seems is finished."

But the Great Man smiled and shook his head. "No, I have enjoyed the game too much to have it finish this way." He stood up. "You are free to go. What I know I shall keep to myself, and you will have no trouble with the Chief of Police."

"Why do you do this?" Tasso's face showed surprise.

The other put his hand for a moment on Tasso's shoulder. "You made a mistake, one mistake that could have meant death. That can happen to the bravest and cleverest of men. It might happen to me one day. If it does, I shall know I have a friend on this island with a boat. A man never has too many friends."