

TITUS POPOVICI

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TITUS POPOVICI - THE STRANGER

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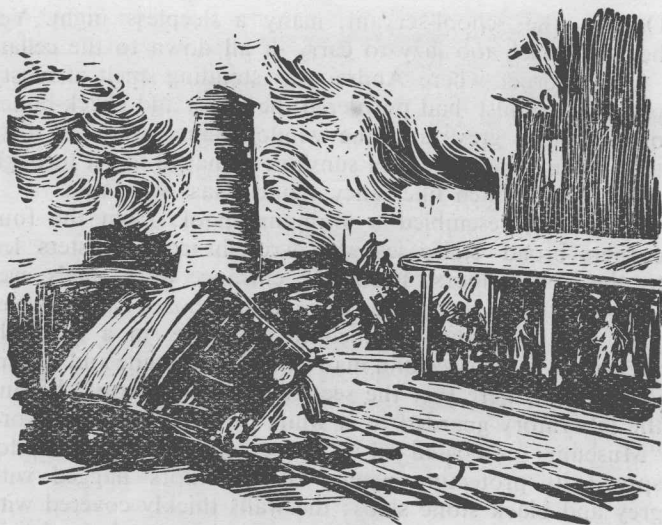
*THE*  
**STRANGER**

**A NOVEL**

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## CHAPTER I

Standing against one of the ungainly pillars that made the entrance hall look like a music-hall lobby, Andrei was waiting for the bell to ring the end of the break. There was not the least danger of his being discovered, the pupils being strictly forbidden to "dirty" the faded mosaic of the main entrance; by contagion, the teachers had also been compelled to observe this rule — a rule two generations old at least — so that the entrance hall was always deserted.

In the dimly lit spaces between the pillars there lay higgledy-piggledy a jumble of models used for drawing-classes: a bust of Alexander the Great, his head gracefully reclining on his left shoulder, Dante's stern profile, a Voltaire with a cunning, gap-toothed grin, old prints black with dust, a stuffed moth-eaten owl and a few broken rusty foils; a pell-mell whose continual increase caused

Oancea, the school-servant, many a sleepless night. Yet he was much too lazy to carry it all down to the cellar.

The corner where Andrei was standing smelt of musty paper; the dust had powdered the noses and cheek-bones of the busts grey, and the window-panes were so dirty that, when a slanting ray of sunshine managed to get through them, they looked like fancy stained-glass windows.

The hall resembled a swimming-pool; from the four corners broad staircases with wrought-iron banisters led to the upper floors. From the entrance door one's eyes fell on the clock that was as large as a cupboard; at a quarter past nine the hands seemed to complete in a strangely accurate way the face of a man with a moustache and square jaws. It was here that the secondary school proper began: the laboratory guarded by a white tin plate with the word "Museum" embossed on it, above which a stuffed condor spread its protecting wings; the corridors flagged with grey and black stone slabs; the walls thickly covered with historical pictures: Prince Dragoş ostentatiously brandishing his mace, Alexander the Good with a white beard that gave him an air of unruffled placidity, Stephen the Great kneeling before the chapel altar, Michael the Brave carrying his battle-axe in his left hand, Carol I. saluting the Turkish volleys ("That's the music I like!"), Queen Maria, the wounded soldiers' mother; zoological plates with dinosaurs, pterodactyls and mammoths; geographic plates: the fauna of every continent (stately lions next to dainty gazelles, penguins and polar bears standing on their hind-legs, crocodiles watching over their eggs in the shade of the pyramids, on the banks of an appropriate Nile), lithographs after Grigorescu's paintings. Finally, above the door leading to the great hall, the portrait of the school patron and founder.

Out of a mahagony frame, the patron sternly scanned the remote vistas of history. He was wearing a laced Hungarian gala costume, a fur-jacket, a fur cap with an osprey adorned with precious stones, and a gold-hilted sword. The painter, Professor Baruția, who had been pensioned off in 1925, had concentrated his entire attention on the rendering of the face, brow and eyes. The biographic data revealing the patron's accomplishments were the following:

the son of a peasant from around the town of Arad, he had been a brilliant law-student in Budapest. The thesis he had written for his doctor's degree was first rate, and had been retained by the Imperial Chancery. Its title was *De iniquitate Unionis trium nationum*, and stoutly defended, in faultless Latin, the right of the Rumanians to enjoy the same privileges as all the other nations under the rule of the King-Emperor. After this promising *début*, the patron had set up as a lawyer, but had never pleaded a case for he was too busy manufacturing theses for undergraduates, the sons of great Budapest families. His fortune increased extremely rapidly, and after the 1848 Revolution, during which only a serious illness had prevented him from playing the leading part he deserved, he entered parliament, where he pursued a policy of moderation, the same as Emanoil Gojdu, the Metropolitan Şaguna, and later on Vasile Mangra, the drug-addicted bishop. When in *articulo mortis*, he left his immense fortune to a foundation bearing his name.

His works were collected in a monograph written by Miss Veturia Pop-Ceica, student of history, comprising, apart from the above-mentioned thesis, a long memoir in French addressed *à la Sublime Porte*, mentioning Kossuth's spurs and Bolliac's treason, as well as some mysterious consular matters; some ten letters addressed to a cardinal at the Vatican, and in the second part six pages of reminiscences: a journey by stage-coach to Blaj, the evocation of his mother, a diatribe against Bishop Bob. "Verses" — about fifteen poems in all — left by the patron in an envelope and handed on his death-bed to the canon abbot of Sîn Giorz, with a special mention that they be opened thirty years after his death, were lengthily commented upon. The poems were "Miscellaneous": a madrigal dedicated to a Roman lady whose three children had all died, cut down by diphtheria:

*Your little birds have found a home  
With God, their heavenly Father;*

closing with

*Console thy grief and dry thy tears  
Take heart of grace, be brave!*



The envelope sealed with the imprint of a signet-ring contained the beginning of an epic: Divus Trajanus leaving Rome with the intention of founding the Rumanian people, a poetic *curriculum vitae*, and love poems which deeply moved Miss Veturia Pop-Ceica, for the patron began as follows:

*The rosy nipple of her breast  
A fount of pleasure is for me.*

Finally, the patron's work included the translation of the Austrian national anthem, but the researchers had unanimously agreed to pass over this fact in silence. The old people who still remembered the anthem had forgotten its author; perhaps they had never known his name. The lines ran:

*Oh Lord, save and protect  
Austria and her Emperor!  
That guided by the sacred law  
He should reign wisely over us.*

Painter Baruția had wonderfully set forth these manifold accomplishments in the portrait of the patron: the shiny bulging forehead, the Socrates-like baldness, the greying locks coiling behind his ears, suggestive of an elderly romantic, the bristly silvery eyebrows, but most of all the large, moist, dark brown eyes devoid of pupil and iris; the imperial side-whiskers as rigid as solidified foam, and the white hand resting on the covers of a bulky in-folio, all produced an unforgettable impression. By a trick of causes and effects, the patron's fame had been consolidated by the prestige of the school which enjoyed a good reputation throughout the country. The pupils were made to study seriously, discipline was very strict, and on national holidays the fêtes given at the "Regina Maria" Theatre were quite important events. The excellently trained choirs were listened to excitedly as the audience knew that the singing-master Toma Corian was mortal drunk. That was why the audience was sitting tensely, looking forward to a catastrophe, and the bigwigs in the stalls could distinctly hear the master flying at the sopranos, lower-form boys who,

gaping admiringly at the chandeliers, had quite forgotten about their singing: "You swine! You'll catch it! I'll knock your blocks off and send the whole lot of you to hell!"

The main attraction was no doubt the drama *The Founder* written by Silviu Burtea, the Rumanian master, especially the last act of the play, a finale that crowned the whole event. The patron lay dying on a camp-bed (in spite of his wealth he led a sober life, like a soldier of his nation) surrounded by his disciples wringing their hands in despair. Then the door would open and a court official as dazzling as a rainbow would bring the patron the highest decoration of the Austrian Empire, the Grand-cross of the Leopold Order, set with diamonds. Chilled with the cold of death, the patron raised himself, leaning on his elbow, and exclaimed:

"I see... I see... how from the mists a country rises like the sun. She... my only love... All my strength... yes, all of it... I have devoted to her. There will still be hard moments... yes... they are sure to come... The brothers will still be temporarily parted... But... never! Never shall the barbarians enslave us!" And he would breathe his last, a smile full of confidence lingering on his purple lips, while the choir in the wings struck up the heroic march "Awaken Rumanian!"

Warmly congratulated by all and sundry, the teacher, a shy and self-conscious young man, was experiencing the intoxication of success: that is why he wrote the play all over again every year, maintaining, however, the main points of the original plot which he continually enriched with new facts issuing from his inexhaustible veneration.

In the corner where he was standing Andrei felt benumbed with the cold. The spring sunshine outside seemed a delusion here. The peeling leather of his satchel had become damp. He tried to take a step, but on the floor the sheets of printed drawings rustled, covering his boots with a fine pollen-like dust. He stood motionless, listening to the subdued noises of the school: a door was banged somewhere (it must have been Drăgan expelling some boy from his classroom), an open window was creakingly swinging on its hinges; from the inner court came screams (some school-

master must have been absent). All this was so familiar! At that moment he would have liked to do something — kick Alexander the Great's curly head, or yell. From Oancea's basement dwelling the smell of fried onion was wafted up in waves. Andrei leaned against a column and closed his eyes. He knew he would ask himself for the hundredth time: 'Now, what next?' He thought it was no use cherishing the vain hope that they would forgive him or take into account his splendid marks. He glanced at the clock: half past twelve. Another half-hour... With a bitter smile he remembered the joy with which the pupils had written on the left-hand corner of the blackboard the days left up to the vacation. There were some who could at any moment tell how long it was till Easter, in seconds and minutes. No, he would not think of this either. To while away his time he opened his satchel, took out all his books neatly covered with blue paper. He balanced them in his hand, set them down on the floor and covered them with drawings representing Laocoon and his sons entwined by serpents. In his satchel there were two slices of buttered bread covered with sour plum-jam. He bit off a piece mechanically, but was unable to chew it. 'Mother,' he thought and set his jaws to keep back his tears. He knew quite well that after the first moments of revolt and despair she was sure to comfort him. 'It is alright, ducky, don't fret...' But with what apprehension they would think of the future! What a lot of shattered hopes! An engineer or a physician... Twenty to one. He felt a pain in his stomach. For a week breakfast, lunch and dinner had been agony. No doubt, for a time his friends would admire him... He counted them, although he knew there were no more than two: Lucian and Dan, his cousin. Traian Mărieș would rejoice openly. He would be rid of a rival, sure of the first prize now, maybe also of a scholarship for the University. The others, he supposed, would just react normally. 'A conceited ass, serves him right!' 'Poor Andrei, fancy him doing such a thing!' 'I'll have to change forms now. Whom shall I crib after?' Then they would forget him, naturally. He hated the whole lot of them, although he'd willingly change lots with any of them, even with the humblest ploughed pupil. This thought humiliated and maddened him. 'Why

the devil am I waiting here like a convict?' It was a quarter to one now. He went on his way with a heavy tread, and the brass-tips on the soles of his shoes rang against the flooring. He mounted the steps and started along the corridors, listening to what was going on inside the schoolrooms. That very moment someone laid a hand on his shoulder. He started and turned round. Lucian Varga had stopped in front of him. Behind his old-fashioned gold-rimmed spectacles the look in his eyes was painfully intense. He did not know what to do with his hands and was cracking his ink-stained fingers.

"Andrei... I've been waiting for you all morning. I didn't even attend the first classes..."

"That was very brave of you," snapped Andrei, feigning indifference; then, scared lest he had hurt Lucian who might turn his back on him and leave, he tried to smile but only managed a grimace.

"I looked for you at your home too... this morning," Lucian went on in an even gentler tone. Then he added anxiously: "Do your people know?"

"No!" answered Andrei curtly, to conceal his anxiety. (Everything had suddenly come back to him and was dreadfully present.)

"And what do you mean to do?" said Lucian in a trembling voice.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Andrei..." With a shy, almost feminine movement, Lucian laid his hand on Andrei's shoulder, then withdrew it promptly: "Don't do anything rash, d'you hear?"

Andrei burst into a peal of laughter. He had never been as fond of Lucian as he was now, Lucian with his ink-stained fingers, his dimmed spectacles, his hair cut short according to school regulations and parted carefully: the very picture of the model schoolboy. His large upper lip made every smile seem shy, like an apology. Lucian went on:

"I'm so glad to have met you! What are you doing this afternoon?" He stopped terrified. The apparently commonplace question had acquired a strange significance.

Andrei shrugged his shoulders. He was just thinking: 'From now on I'll be able to smoke as much as I like.'

"For goodness' sake, Andrei," Lucian got hold of both his hands and shook him, "don't let yourself go... No... it won't..." He could not find his words, but felt he had to speak. He knew he would make a fool of himself, but couldn't help it: "After all, you don't even know what decision they've taken."

"But I do."

"How? Have you heard anything?"

This inquisitiveness irritated Andrei. He answered sharply:

"I suspect something."

Lucian heaved a sigh of relief. He glanced at his wrist-watch and said hurriedly:

"The bell 'll soon go..." He moved up to Andrei, solemnly, as if he meant to tell him some secret: "Andrei... but please... don't tell anybody... Răducanu's going to defend you. He said to me yesterday: 'We haven't the right to desert him. Andrei is an honest-minded young chap!' Andi, you're not alone... At what time...?"

"One o'clock... I won't be late."

He was very glad Lucian had waited for him. Had he turned all those questions over in his mind all by himself, he would have surely collapsed. As it was, to make an impression on Lucian, he had hit on an attitude. That is why he made a theatrical gesture: he took off his school-cap and flung it out of the window, watching it sail in the air, carried by the wind. He laughed. Lucian stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"Listen here... when they've... when they've... I'll be waiting for you. We have lunch only at half past three, when father comes back from the factory. But if you want me to, I'll stay with you the whole day. I've got some money... we might go to a restaurant! If you like, even to the 'Palace'! Then to the pictures," he said trying to look cheerful.

"Alright," said Andrei listlessly. His heart was beating fast. It was time for the bell now.

Lucian came close to him, put his arm round his shoulders, pressing them. Then he turned and ran away with quick, mincing steps. Andrei thought of Lucian's words: 'You're not alone... Răducanu's going to defend you.'

Before the row had broken out, Răducanu had been their form master. He was a small man with an olive-coloured complexion, a very merry person, although at times his laughter and jokes seemed forced. He had managed to get through high school somehow or other, and had then gone to France travelling as a stow-away.

He had attended the courses at the Sorbonne and had earned the money for his studies by washing dishes in the Quartier Latin *boîtes*, acting as guide in the Louvre for Rumanians eager to see the *Gioconda* and the *Venus of Milo*, and by coaching schoolchildren. As soon as the heavy tread of the German topboots was heard in Paris, he returned to Rumania, and headmaster Lucaci who wished to have a picked teaching staff got him appointed natural science master. Răducanu was fond of Andrei, although the latter had no special inclination for the branch he taught. And then, in 1943, when he had thrashed Horciony, Răducanu had hushed up the affair. Maybe... Andrei shrugged his shoulders. Still, it was good to know one was not alone.

The bell rang for the break. The corridor filled with children in no time. The masters strutted along solemnly, the roll under their arm, without taking any notice of Andrei. Father Crăioc made his majestic appearance, treading solemnly (he suffered from gout) and pulling now and then absent-mindedly his grey goatee, for which he had been nicknamed "Billy-goat." A small first-form boy walked close behind him, tugging now and again at his cassock. He was weeping bitterly: "Please, Father... Please... Father... My dad will thrash me."

"Serves you right! Move along!"

"Oh, but Father... I didn't do anything really!"

"I'm through with you. I've given you a four."

The little fellow found an unusual argument.

"Please, Father, priests ought to forgive."

"Oh, just listen to that," said Father Crăioc in his hoarse bass voice. He turned round with difficulty and raised his hand as big as a shovel, the bluish cords of his veins powerfully thrown into relief. "Take care, Popescu, if I ever get my hands in your mane, you'll be left without a hair on your head! D'you get me, you...?"



Forgetting everything, Andrei burst out laughing. He realized his class-mates would be coming out, so he made for the masters' common-room to avoid meeting them. At the corner of the corridor he collided with Traian Mărieș, the greatest squealer in the whole form. The latter turned pale and tried to hurry away, but Andrei intercepted him.

"Hello, parson, how are you?"

"Alright... and what about you?" And Traian began to laugh. He had a jarring laugh like the neighing of a horse; it gave such a bad imitation of genuine merriment that Andrei could hardly refrain from punching his head.

Mărieș looked uncomfortable and was fidgeting with his Latin book. He was dressed in the same shiny black suit, threadbare and greenish at the elbows, one of priest Potra's old cassocks; underneath it he wore a thick woollen jersey made of goat's hair, showing the rumpled collar of his shirt twisted round his weedy neck, on which a big bony face with enormous jaws seemed to be screwed on. The silence between the two of them made him feel awkward, so he laughed again. His thick lips always pink and wet stretched from ear to ear in a grin showing his gums and his small, very white teeth. Andrei frowned at him.

"I say... and what are you up to?" he asked in a muffled voice.

"Oh, just learning, old chap," answered Mărieș mealy-mouthed. "My Latin... Now, don't you think Latin's splendid, old chap? *Vides ut alta stet nives candidum* \*.

Andrei turned his back on him. 'They're all alike, he thought to himself revengefully. 'Just fools and Philistines... They're probably expecting I shall go down on my knees and weep!' he suddenly felt stronger than all mankind. 'I'm sure I won't lose my head. That's the main thing. Later on we'll see.'

At the door of the common-room he saw the inspector who had just come from Bucharest. He was a middle-aged, small and dumpy man with a treble chin, and was wrapped in the folds of a long and wide jacket, the height of fashion.

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\* See how deep lies the pure snow

His name was Ionescu. Andrei could not remember his Christian name, but he knew that, in any case, it was historical and resounding: Hannibal or Herodot. The inspector scanned the corridor critically, examined the gold watch he produced from its leather case, coughed importantly, then entered the common-room. Andrei followed in his footsteps and remained in the antechamber. He went to the window and looked out towards the Mureş, but saw nothing. He wondered: 'Why am I nervous? Have I any hope? Still, if... No! There can be no 'if!' Now I must face the music. Otherwise they will get the better of me and will humiliate me.'

He heard the door open. He breathed deeply, but they were not calling him. It was only Mr. Corian coming out.

"What do you want?" he shouted shrilly, flying at Andrei. "Don't you know it's forbidden to enter the common-room?" Then he recognized him and subsided all of a sudden. "Oh, it's you? Just a moment, just a moment," he said politely to soothe him. (From his tone Andrei realized that all was over.)

Corian went over to the window and then into the corner where the attendance registers were kept. Without minding Andrei's presence he searched the wide and loose pockets of his green checked coat, lost his temper, muttered something, then produced with evident satisfaction from the pocket at the back of his trousers a metal flask as flat as a revolver. He unscrewed the stopper which could be used as a small tumbler and gulping down its contents he said merrily:

"That's what I usually do in the long break. My stomach is not what it should be and... A tonic!" He handed the flask to Andrei: "Won't you have some? From now on... it's all the same to you... you know — and he bent down confidently — I didn't agree in my inner self, but it looks as if your masters had never been young... Youth is romantic... If we ever meet in society, don't bear me a grudge. I — and he smiled leniently — I'm a singing master. Music... *ancilla pedagogiae*... Cheerio!"

He looked at Andrei with pity or maybe only with alcoholic emotion and entered the common-room.



Through the open door Andrei saw the horse-shoe table, the press containing the rolls and the examination papers. The hurriedly closed door dammed the wave of cigarette smoke.

The window let in the warm, almost burning hot rays of the early May sun. The door opened anew. 'Here we are. It's me they are calling!'

"Andrei Sabin is requested to come in," came the stuttering voice of the handwriting master who always offered to act as the common-room attendant.

Andrei left his empty bag on the window-sill and went in. The cut-glass door of the cupboard standing opposite the entrance reflected an unaccustomed image: a white face, dark hair falling in soft wisps around the temples, heavily ringed eyes. Quite expressionless. The very way he had wished to appear in front of them.

He had feared that on entering, all eyes would turn on him searchingly; he had been wrong, however, although the indifference with which they received him was entirely affected. Only the inspector from Bucharest examined him at length inquisitively and with evident disgust. Andrei greeted them with a bow, then stood erect, waiting. The common-room was a spacious octagonal room and, unlike the corridors with their didactic ornaments, here everything was quiet and unobtrusive like in a club patronized by distinguished men. The enormous tobacco-coloured carpet, the high windows veiled with a springtime muslin drapery, created an impression of distinction, quietude and study. A smell of tobacco and leather suggestive of men persisted in the room. As no one paid any attention to him, Andrei looked out of the window. In front of the school, the sports grounds with their dark-red colour stretched out, and in the background rose the cement dyke behind which one could see the shining green tops of the trees rising from the bank of the river Mureş. To the left, almost hidden, the zigzag ditch of the air-raid shelter looked like a common grave.

He was trying to appear quite indifferent to all that was going on in the room, but from the tail of his eye he saw the inspector bend towards Stan, the sociology master, whispering something into his ear. Stan nod-