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Death and the Compass

For Mandie Molina Vedia

Of the many problems on which Lönnrot's reckless perspicacity was exercised, none was so strange—so *rigorously* strange, one might say—as the periodic series of bloody deeds that culminated at the Villa Triste-le-Roy, amid the perpetual fragrance of the eucalyptus. It is true that Erik Lönnrot did not succeed in preventing the last crime, but he did, indisputably, foresee it. Nor did he divine the identity of Yarmolinsky's unlucky murderer, but he did perceive the evil series' secret shape and the part played in it by Red Scharlach, whose second sobriquet is Scharlach the Dandy. That criminal (like so many others) had sworn upon his honor to kill Lönnrot, but Lönnrot never allowed himself to be intimidated. He thought of himself as a reasoning machine, an Auguste Dupin, but there was something of the adventurer in him, even something of the gambler.

The first crime occurred in the Hôtel du Nord, that tall prism sitting high above the estuary whose waters are the color of the desert. To that tower (which is notorious for uniting in itself the abhorrent whiteness of a sanatorium, the numbered divisibility of a prison, and the general appearance of a house of ill repute) there came, on December 3, the delegate from Podolsk to the Third Talmudic Congress—Dr. Marcelo Yarmolinsky, a man of gray beard and gray eyes. We will never know whether he found the Hôtel du Nord to his liking; he accepted it with the ancient resignation that had allowed him to bear three years of war in the Carpathians and three thousand years of pogroms and oppression. He was given a room on R Floor, across the hall from the suite occupied—not without some splendor—by the Tetrarch of Galilee. Yarmolinsky had dinner, put off till the next day his examination of the unfamiliar city, set out his many books and very few articles of jewelry on a bureau, and, before midnight, turned

off the light. (Thus testified the tetrarch's driver, who was sleeping in the adjoining room.) On the fourth, at 11:30 A.M., a writer for the *Yiddische Zeitung* telephoned Yarmolinsky, but Dr. Yarmolinsky did not answer. He was found lying on the floor of his room, his face by now slightly discolored, his body almost naked beneath an anachronistic cape. He was lying not far from the door to the hallway; a deep knife wound had rent his chest. A couple of hours later, in the same room, standing amid journalists, photographers, and gendarmes, police commissioner Treviranus and Lönnrot serenely discussed the problem.

"No need to go off on wild-goose chases here," Treviranus was saying, as he brandished an imperious cigar. "We all know that the Tetrarch of Galilee owns the finest sapphires in the world. Somebody intending to steal the sapphires broke in here by mistake. Yarmolinsky woke up, the burglar had to kill him. —What do you think?"

"Possible, but uninteresting," Lönnrot replied. "You will reply that reality has not the slightest obligation to be interesting. I will reply in turn that reality may get along without that obligation, but hypotheses may not. In the hypothesis that you suggest, here, on the spur of the moment, chance plays a disproportionate role. What we have here is a dead rabbi; I would prefer a purely rabbinical explanation, not the imaginary bunglings of an imaginary burglar."

Treviranus' humor darkened.

"I'm not interested in 'rabbinical explanations,' as you call them; what I'm interested in is catching the blackguard that stabbed this unknown man."

"Unknown?" asked Lönnrot. "Here are his complete works." He gestured to the bureau with its row of tall books: *A Vindication of the Kabbalah*; *A Study of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*; a literal translation of the *Sefer Yetsirah*; a *Biography of the Baal Shem*; *A History of the Hasidim*; a monograph in German on the Tetragrammaton; another on the divine nomenclature of the Pentateuch. The commissioner looked at them with fear, almost with revulsion. Then he laughed.

"I'm a poor Christian fellow," he replied. "You can take those things home with you, if you want them; I can't be wasting my time on Jewish superstitions."

"This crime may, however, belong to the history of Jewish superstitions," Lönnrot muttered.

"As Christianity does," the writer from the *Yiddische Zeitung* added, scathingly. He was nearsighted, quite shy, and an atheist.

No one answered him. In the little typewriter, one of the agents had found a slip of paper, with this unfinished declaration:

The first letter of the Name has been written.

Lönnrot resisted a smile. Suddenly turned bibliophile or Hebraist, he ordered one of the officers to wrap up the dead man's books, and he took them to his apartment. Then, indifferent to the police investigation, he set about studying them. One book, an octavo volume, revealed to him the teachings of Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the sect of the Pious; another, the virtues and terrors of the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable name of God; yet another, the notion that God has a secret name, which (much like the crystal sphere attributed by the Persians to Alexander of Macedonia) contains His ninth attribute, the eternity—that is, immediate knowledge—of all things that shall be, are, and have been in the universe. Tradition reckons the names of God at ninety-nine; while Hebraists attribute that imperfect sum to the magical fear of even numbers, the Hasidim argue that the lacuna points toward a hundredth name—the Absolute Name.

From his erudition Lönnrot was distracted, a few days later, by the writer from the *Yiddische Zeitung*. The young man wanted to talk about the murder; Lönnrot preferred to talk about the many names of God. The journalist filled three columns with the story that the famed detective Erik Lönnrot had taken up the study of the names of God in order to discover the name of the murderer. Lönnrot, accustomed to journalists' simplifications, did not take offense. One of those shopkeepers who have found that any given man may be persuaded to buy any given book published a popular edition of *A History of the Hasidim*.

The second crime took place on the night of January 3, in the emptiest and most godforsaken of the echoing suburbs on the western outskirts of the capital. Sometime around dawn, one of the mounted gendarmes that patrolled the solitudes of those blocks saw a man, wrapped in a poncho, lying in the doorway of an old paint factory. His hard face looked as though it were wearing a mask of blood; a deep knife wound split his chest. On the wall, across the red and yellow rhombuses, someone had chalked some words, which the gendarme spelled out to himself. . . . That afternoon, Treviranus and Lönnrot made their way to the distant scene of the crime. To the left and right of their automobile, the city crumbled away; the sky expanded, and now houses held less and less importance, a brick kiln or a poplar tree more and more. They came to their miserable destination; a

final alleyway lined with pink-colored walls that somehow seemed to reflect the rambunctious setting of the sun. By this time, the dead man had been identified. He was Daniel Simón Azevedo, a man of some reputation in the old slums of the Northside, where he had risen from wagon driver to election-day thug, only to degenerate thereafter into a thief and even an informer. (The singular manner of his death seemed fitting: Azevedo was the last representative of a generation of outlaws who used a knife but not a revolver.) The chalked words read as follows:

The second letter of the Name has been written.

The third crime took place on the night of February 3. A few minutes before one, the telephone rang in Commissioner Treviranus' office. Keenly secretive, the guttural voice of a man came on the line; he told the commissioner his name was Ginzberg (or Ginsburg) and said that for a reasonable fee he was willing to reveal certain details of the two sacrifices, Azevedo's and Yarmolinsky's. A cacophony of whistles and party horns drowned out the informer's voice. Then, the line went dead. Without discarding the possibility of a prank (it was carnival time, after all), Treviranus made inquiries and found that the call had come from Liverpool House, a tavern on the rue de Toulon—that brackish street shared by a popular museum of wonders and a milk store, a brothel and a company of Bible sellers. Treviranus telephoned the owner of the place—Black Finnegan, former Irish criminal now overwhelmed, almost crushed, by honesty. Finnegan told Treviranus that the last person to use the telephone in the tavern had been a tenant, one Gryphius, who'd just gone out with some friends. Treviranus drove immediately to Liverpool House. The owner had the following to say: Eight days earlier, Gryphius—a man with sharp features, a nebulous gray beard, and a nondescript black suit—had rented a room above the bar. Finnegan (who generally put the room to a use that Treviranus had no difficulty guessing) had named an exorbitant rent; Gryphius had unhesitatingly paid it. He almost never left the room; he had both lunch and dinner there and hardly ever showed his face in the bar. That night he had come down to Finnegan's office to make a call. A closed coupe had stopped in front of the tavern. The driver hadn't left the driver's seat; some of the customers recalled that he was wearing a bear mask. Two harlequin figures got out of the car; they were short, and no one could fail to notice that they were drunk. They burst into Finnegan's office, party horns bleating, and threw their arms around Gryphius, who apparently recognized them but greeted them somewhat

coldly. They exchanged a few words in Yiddish—Gryphius in a low, guttural voice, the harlequins in a sort of falsetto—and then all went up to Gryphius' room. Fifteen minutes later the three men came down again, quite happy; Gryphius was staggering, and seemed to be as drunk as the others. Tall and unsteady, his head apparently spinning, he was in the middle, between the masked harlequins. (One of the women in the bar recalled the yellow, red, and green lozenges.) Twice he stumbled; twice the harlequins steadied him. The three men got into the coupe and disappeared in the direction of the nearby pier, with its rectangular water. But just as he stepped on the running board of the car, the last harlequin scrawled an obscene figure and a sentence on one of the blackboards in the entryway.

Treviranus looked at the sentence, but it was almost predictable:

The last letter of the Name has been written.

Then he examined Gryphius-Ginsburg's little room. On the floor, there was a brusque star, in blood; in the corners, the remains of cigarettes, Hungarian; on a bureau, a book in Latin—Leusden's *Philologus hebræogræcus* (1739)—with several handwritten notes. Treviranus looked at it indignantly, and sent for Lönnrot. Lönnrot did not take his hat off before plunging into the book, while the commissioner interrogated the contradictory witnesses to the possible kidnapping. At four they left. Out in the twisting rue de Toulon, as they walked through the dawn's dead streamers and confetti, Treviranus said:

“What if tonight's story were a sham, a simulacrum?”

Erik Lönnrot smiled and in a grave voice read the commissioner a passage (which had been underlined) from the *Philologus'* thirty-third dissertation: *Dies Judæorum incipit a solis occasu usque ad solis occasum diei sequentis*. “Which means,” he added, “‘The Jewish day begins at sundown and lasts until sundown of the following day.’”

The other man made an attempt at irony.

“And is that the most valuable piece of information you've picked up tonight, then?”

“No. The most valuable piece of information is the word Ginsburg used.”

The afternoon papers had not overlooked these periodic deaths and disappearances. The *Cross and Sword* contrasted them with the admirable discipline and order of the last Hermetic congress; Ernst Palast of *The Martyr* denounced “the intolerable delays of a clandestine and niggardly

pogrom, which has taken three months to wipe out three Jews”; the *Yiddische Zeitung* rejected the horrifying theory of an anti-Semitic conspiracy, “though many insightful spirits will hear of no other solution for the triple mystery”; the most famous gunman of the Southside, Dandy Red Scharlach, swore that in his territory no crime such as that had ever taken place, and he accused Police Commissioner Franz Treviranus of criminal negligence.

On March 1, this same Treviranus received an impressive-looking sealed envelope. He opened it; it contained a letter signed “Baruch Spinoza” and a detailed map of the city, clearly torn out of a Baedeker. The letter predicted that on the third of March there would not be a fourth crime, because the paint factory in the west, the tavern on the rue de Toulon, and the Hôtel du Nord were “the perfect points of a mystical, equilateral triangle”; red ink on the map demonstrated its regularity. Treviranus read over that argument-by-geometry resignedly and then sent both letter and map to Lönnrot’s house, Lönnrot indisputably being a man who deserved this sort of claptrap.

Erik Lönnrot studied the map and letter. The three locations were indeed equidistant. Symmetry in time (December 3, January 3, February 3); symmetry in space, as well . . . Lönnrot sensed, abruptly, that he was on the brink of solving the riddle. A drawing-compass and a navigational compass completed that sudden intuition. He smiled, spoke the word Tetragrammaton (a word he had recently acquired), and telephoned the commissioner.

“Thanks for that equilateral triangle you sent me last night. It was what I needed to solve the puzzle. Tomorrow, Friday, the perpetrators will be in prison; we can relax.”

“Then they’re not planning a fourth crime?”

“It’s precisely because they *are* planning a fourth crime that we can relax,” Lönnrot said as he hung up.

An hour later, he was riding on a Southern Railway train toward the abandoned Villa Triste-le-Roy. South of the city of my story flows a sluggish stream of muddy water, choked with refuse and thick with the runoff of tanneries. On the other side is a suburb filled with factories where, under the protection of a Barcelona gangster, gunmen prosper. Lönnrot smiled to think that the most famous of these criminals—Red Scharlach—would have given anything to know about his clandestine visit. Azevedo had been one of Scharlach’s gang; Lönnrot considered the remote possibility that Scharlach was to be the fourth victim, but then rejected it. . . . He had virtually solved the problem; the mere circumstances, the reality (names, arrests, faces, the paperwork of trial and imprisonment), held very little interest for

him now. He wanted to go for a walk, he wanted a respite from the three months of sedentary investigation. He reflected that the explanation for the crimes lay in an anonymous triangle and a dusty Greek word. The mystery seemed so crystal clear to him now, he was embarrassed to have spent a hundred days on it.

The train stopped at a silent loading platform. Lönnrot got off. It was one of those deserted evenings that have the look of dawn. The air of the murky plains was wet and cold. Lönnrot began to walk cross-country. He saw dogs, he saw a van or lorry in a dead-end alleyway, he saw the horizon, he saw a silvery horse lapping at the rank water of a puddle. It was growing dark when he saw the rectangular belvedere of Villa Triste-le-Roy, which stood almost as high as the black eucalyptus trees that surrounded it. The thought occurred to him that one dawn and one sunset (an ancient glow in the east and another in the west) were all that separated him from the hour yearned for by the seekers of the Name.

A rusty fence defined the irregular perimeter of the villa's grounds. The main gate was closed. Lönnrot, with no great expectation of finding a way in, walked all the way around. Back at the impregnable gate, he stuck his hand almost mechanically between the bars and came upon the latch. The creaking of the iron startled him. With laborious passivity, the entire gate yielded.

Lönnrot made his way forward through the eucalyptus trees, treading upon confused generations of stiff red leaves. Seen at closer quarters, the house belonging to the Villa Triste-le-Roy abounded in pointless symmetries and obsessive repetitions; a glacial Diana in a gloomy niche was echoed by a second Diana in a second niche; one balcony was reflected in another; double stairways opened into a double balustrade. A two-faced Hermes threw a monstrous shadow. Lönnrot walked all around the outside of the house as he had made the circuit of the villa's grounds. He inspected everything; under the level of the terrace, he spotted a narrow shutter.

He pushed at it; two or three marble steps descended into a cellar. Lönnrot, who by now had a sense of the architect's predilections, guessed that there would be another set of steps in the opposite wall. He found them, climbed them, raised his hands, and opened the trapdoor out.

A glowing light led him toward a window. This he also opened; a round yellow moon defined two leaf-clogged fountains in the dreary garden. Lönnrot explored the house. Through foyers that opened onto dining rooms and on through galleries, he would emerge into identical courtyards—often the same courtyard. He climbed dusty stairs to circular antechambers;

he would recede infinitely in the facing mirrored walls; he wearied of opening or half opening windows that revealed to him, outside, the same desolate garden from differing heights and differing angles—inside, the furnishings in yellowing covers, chandeliers swathed in muslin. A bedchamber stopped him; there, a single flower in a porcelain vase; at the first brush of his fingertips, the ancient petals crumbled. On the second floor, on the uppermost floor, the house seemed infinite yet still growing. *The house is not so large, he thought. It seems larger because of its dimness, its symmetry, its mirrors, its age, my unfamiliarity with it, and this solitude.*

A stairway took him to the belvedere. The moonlight of the evening shone through the lozenges of the windows; they were yellow, red, and green. He was stopped by an astonished, dizzying recollection.

Two fierce, stocky men leaped upon him and disarmed him; another, quite tall, greeted him gravely:

“You are so kind. You have saved us a night and a day.”

It was Red Scharlach. The men tied Lönnrot’s hands. Lönnrot at last found his voice.

“Scharlach—you are looking for the secret Name?”

Scharlach stood there, impassive. He had not participated in the brief struggle, and now moved only to put out his hand for Lönnrot’s revolver. But then he spoke, and Lönnrot heard in his voice a tired triumphance, a hatred as large as the universe, a sadness no smaller than that hatred.

“No,” he said. “I am looking for something more fleeting and more perishable than that—I am looking for Erik Lönnrot. Three years ago, in a gambling den on the rue de Toulon, you arrested my brother and saw that he was sent to prison. My men rescued me from the shoot-out in a coupe, but not before I’d received a policeman’s bullet in my gut. Nine days and nine nights I lay between life and death in this desolate symmetrical villa, consumed by fever, and that hateful two-faced Janus that looks toward the sunset and the dawn lent horror to my deliriums and my sleeplessness. I came to abominate my own body, I came to feel that two eyes, two hands, two lungs are as monstrous as two faces. An Irishman tried to convert me to belief in Christ; he would repeat, over and over, the goyim’s saying: All roads lead to Rome. At night, my delirium would grow fat upon that metaphor: I sensed that the world was a labyrinth, impossible to escape—for all roads, even if they pretended to lead north or south, returned finally to Rome, which was also the rectangular prison where my brother lay dying, and which was also the Villa Triste-le-Roy. During those nights, I swore by the god that sees with two faces, and by all the gods of fever and of mirrors,

to weave a labyrinth around the man who had imprisoned my brother. I have woven it, and it has stood firm: its materials are a dead heresiologue, a compass, an eighth-century cult, a Greek word, a dagger, the rhombuses of a paint factory. . . .

“The first term of the series was given me quite by chance. With some friends of mine—among them Daniel Azevedo—I had figured out a way to steal the tetrarch’s sapphires. Azevedo, however, double-crossed us; he got drunk on the money we had advanced him and pulled the job a day early. But then he got lost in that huge hotel, and sometime around two o’clock in the morning he burst into Yarmolinsky’s room. Yarmolinsky, who suffered from insomnia, was sitting at his typewriter typing. As coincidence would have it, he was making some notes, or writing an article perhaps, on the Name of God; he had just typed the words *The first letter of the Name has been written*. Azevedo told him to keep quiet; Yarmolinsky put out his hand toward the bell that would wake everyone in the hotel; Azevedo stabbed him once in the chest. The movement was almost reflexive; a half century of violence had taught him that the easiest and safest way is simply to kill. . . . Ten days later I learned from the *Yiddische Zeitung* that you were trying to find the key to Yarmolinsky’s death among Yarmolinsky’s writings. I read *A History of the Hasidim*; I learned that the reverent fear of speaking the Name of God had been the origin of the doctrine that that Name is omnipotent and occult. I learned that some Hasidim, in the quest for that secret Name, had gone so far as to commit human sacrifice. . . . I realized that you would conjecture that the Hasidim had sacrificed the rabbi; I set about justifying that conjecture.

“Marcelo Yarmolinsky died on the night of December third; I chose the third of January for the second ‘sacrifice.’ Yarmolinsky died in the north; for the second ‘sacrifice,’ the death should take place in the west. Daniel Azevedo was the necessary victim. He deserved to die; he was a man that acted on impulse and he was a traitor—if he were captured, he could destroy my plan. One of my men stabbed him; in order to link his body to the first one, I wrote *The second letter of the Name has been written* across the rhombuses of the paint factory.

“The third ‘crime’ was committed on the third of February. It was, as Treviranus guessed, a mere sham, a simulacrum. I am Gryphius-Ginzberg-Ginsburg; I spent one interminable week (supplemented by a tissue-thin false beard) in that perverse cubicle on the rue de Toulon, until my friends kidnapped me. Standing on the running board of the coupe, one of them scrawled on a pillar the words that you recall: *The last letter of the Name has*

been written. That sentence revealed that this was a series of *three* crimes. At least that was how the man in the street interpreted it—but I had repeatedly dropped clues so that *you*, the *reasoning* Erik Lönnrot, would realize that there were actually *four*. One sign in the north, two more in the east and west, demand a fourth sign in the south—after all, the Tetragrammaton, the Name of God, YHVH, consists of *four* letters; the harlequins and the paint manufacturer's emblem suggest *four* terms. It was I who underlined that passage in Leusden's book. The passage says that Jews compute the day from sunset to sunset; the passage therefore gives one to understand that the deaths occurred on the *fourth* of each month. It was I who sent the equilateral triangle to Treviranus. I knew you would add the missing point, the point that makes a perfect rhombus, the point that fixes the place where a precise death awaits you. I have done all this, Erik Lönnrot, planned all this, in order to draw you to the solitudes of Triste-le-Roy."

Lönnrot avoided Scharlach's eyes. He looked at the trees and the sky subdivided into murky red, green, and yellow rhombuses. He felt a chill, and an impersonal, almost anonymous sadness. The night was dark now; from the dusty garden there rose the pointless cry of a bird. For the last time, Lönnrot considered the problem of the symmetrical, periodic murders.

"There are three lines too many in your labyrinth," he said at last. "I know of a Greek labyrinth that is but one straight line. So many philosophers have been lost upon that line that a mere detective might be pardoned if he became lost as well. When you hunt me down in another avatar of our lives, Scharlach, I suggest that you fake (or commit) one crime at A, a second crime at B, eight kilometers from A, then a third crime at C, four kilometers from A and B and halfway between them. Then wait for me at D, two kilometers from A and C, once again halfway between them. Kill me at D, as you are about to kill me at Triste-le-Roy."

"The next time I kill you," Scharlach replied, "I promise you the labyrinth that consists of a single straight line that is invisible and endless."

He stepped back a few steps. Then, very carefully, he fired.



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