

## MUSIC FOR THE STEWARD

NONE of us musicians aboard the Messageries Maritimes liner Porthos, on which, in 1929, I made several trips to the Far East as violinist and orchestra leader, knew for sure when Nam, our little Annamite cabin steward, had come aboard. As a rule, Annamites were employed as stateroom stewards, but we seldom had the same ones for a full voyage. Some would desert in nearly every port, and others would be taken on as replacements. There were various reasons for their desertion—dissatisfaction with the food, with their quarters, their treatment, their pay—but the main reason was that they believed that laziness was a virtue and that no male should work more than ten weeks a year. Once, in Saïgon, the *commissaire* had all the gangways guarded by armed seamen, but the Annamites simply jumped into the water and swam ashore. Those who deserted the ship in their Indo-Chinese home ports of Saïgon, Tourane, and Haiphong frequently would send their more active wives and daughters as deputies, and the *commissaire* and the *mâtres d'hôtel* would have a terrible time explaining to the ladies that all the jobs aboard were for men.

On one trip we musicians started out from Marseille with an ugly-faced, cadaverous Annamite steward, who amused himself by playing hide and seek with our slippers and putting the bass fiddle into the bathtub. Our orchestra consisted of Artie, a sloppy, thin, cheerful pianist from Yonkers; Etienne-Marcel, a kindly, dignified, white-bearded, sixty-two-year-old Belgian bass and golf player; and myself, as violinist and *chef d'orchestre*. We were supposed to have a cellist, not a bass player, but Etienne-Marcel had a friend at the hiring bureau, and that, he said, was more important than being able to play like Pablo Casals.

Neither Artie nor Etienne-Marcel nor I was of the orderly musician type, which is rare anyway, and by the time we reached Port Said our two connecting first-class staterooms, particularly the outside one, in which we slept, looked like a setting in a slapstick comedy. The Annamite didn't bother to make our beds, which were always cov-

ered with sheets of music, dirty socks, empty bottles, ties, and strings. We usually woke up in the morning with little pieces of colophony in our ears, and seldom went to bed without putting a foot into our tropical helmets, which the Annamite, following another of his odd whims, always put upside down on the floor in the middle of the room. We were never on time for our concerts because part of our equipment—it might be a few pages of music or one of Artie's shoes—was always missing. The Annamite steward was the offspring of a long line of famous basketweavers from Pnom-Penh, in Cambodia. To keep practiced in the family skill, he produced little ashtrays and match holders, eking out a meagre supply of straw with my discarded violin strings. Two days before we reached Singapore, the Annamite disappeared. So did my entire supply of A and D strings. Those of the passengers not entirely knocked out by the heat and too many gin slings were slightly surprised to hear me play nothing but Bach's "Air on the G String" at every performance, morning, afternoon, and evening, until we reached port.

ONE morning, halfway between Singapore and Saïgon, Artie, Etienne-Marcel, and I came down to our staterooms after the apéritif concert. The cabins had been vacuum-cleaned, the beds made, the soiled laundry disposed of. The burned-out bulb over the mirror in the outside stateroom had been replaced. The bathroom was spotless and fresh towels hung from all the racks. The bathtub was filled to the brim and a little Annamite was peacefully lying in the cool water, whistling Dvořák's "Humoresque." He sat up, smiled at us, and

introduced himself as Nam, seventh son of An-Ba, of Tourane, Indo-China. He said he had decided to work for us as cabin steward because he was mad about music.

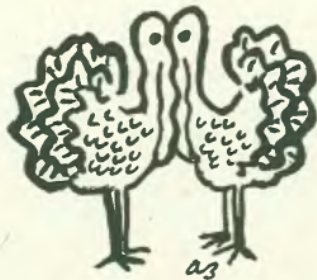
Nam refused to say when and how he had come aboard. All we found out was that he had worked, in quick succession, half a day each in the kitchen, the dining-room pantry, for the second-class *mâitre d'hôtel*, and in the doctor's cabin. He hadn't liked any of those jobs and had casually quit. This wasn't diffi-

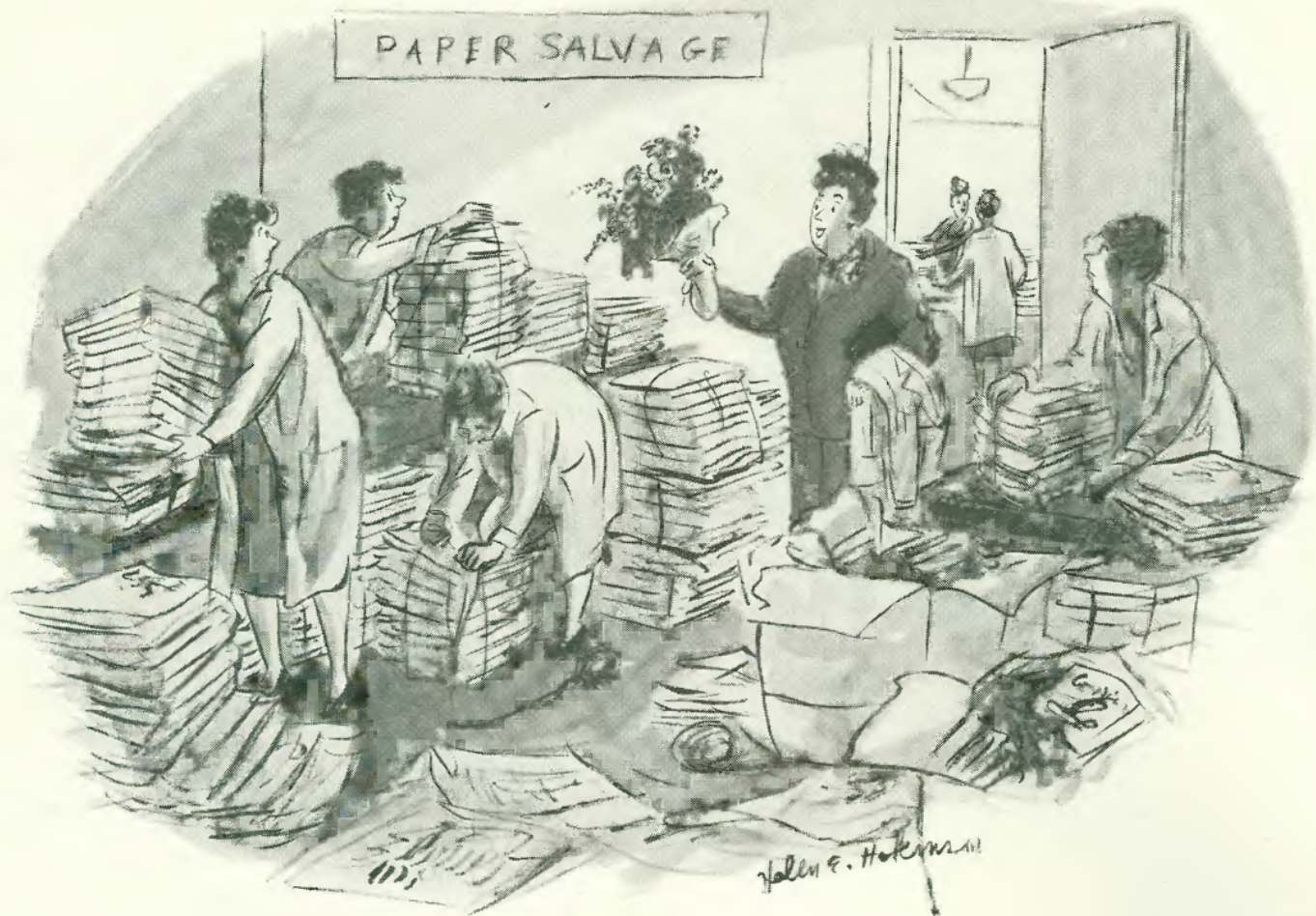
cult. To the European eye most Annamites look alike, and among the eighty on our ship it would have been almost impossible to keep track of any particular man.

Nam got dressed, cleaned the bathtub, and started polishing the brass knobs of the portholes, an unheard-of refinement. My colleagues got so excited that they proposed to keep Nam under guard inside the rooms so that nobody could steal this jewel from us. Artie said he wouldn't mind carrying down his food. Nam smiled a gentle, wistful smile and said there was no chance of hiding him because he was too well known among the other Annamites aboard. "I am," he said, bowing with poise, "*une personne bien connue*. My uncle is a member of the Superior Council at Saïgon. My grandfather was an adviser to Emperor Tuduc of Tongking."

Nam was frail and small and weak, with a melancholy, effeminate face and a finely shaped head. He had shiny black hair and very fine hands. Like most Annamites, he chewed betel all the time. Barefoot, always dressed in an immaculate steward's white uniform, he noiselessly slipped in and out of our cabins. He was always there when we needed him. He mixed Martinis and highballs, helped Etienne-Marcel with his tie, and was the first steward I'd ever had who didn't ruin my white shoes with cleaning fluid. We were the only people aboard the Porthos who had plenty of crushed ice in our thermos bottles every night, fresh bed linen twice a week, and a ladder for the upper berth, which Artie occupied, always in place when it was needed. Nam's fame as the perfect steward spread fast and the *mâtres d'hôtel*, the *commissaire*, and finally the *commandant* himself tried to steal him from us. Nam was the only person aboard to defy an order of the *commandant* and get away with it. He simply threatened to "go off" if he weren't allowed to work for the musicians. That settled the matter.

Among other things, Nam took care of our musical library. This was one of the orchestra leader's main duties, but beyond Suez, when the heat became intolerable and every superfluous movement meant utter exhaustion, I hadn't the strength to look after the music. The library, supplied by the steamship company, contained five hundred pieces—arrangements of opera arias, fantasies, overtures, chamber music, and dance music. In Marseille the music sheets were given to me neatly stacked in six





*"I thought a few flowers would brighten up the place."*

or seven files. By the time we reached the Gulf of Aden, we couldn't play "The Barber of Seville" overture because the violin part was missing. The two middle pages of "Schön Rosmarin" were gone too, and such an important piece as the "Lohengrin" third-act prelude couldn't be played because Nam's predecessor had torn the piano part into strips and stuffed the shreds into the crevices around the cabin doors to prevent the arrival of a certain tenacious species of bug which, in honor of the Porthos, we called the Musketeer.

Nam spent long hours putting the music in order—even torn-out pages were always put back in the right place—but he never told us how he had learned to read music. He was polite, efficient, and clean. He kept on taking his bath in our bathtub, and always left his tiny wooden sandals before the shower curtain. He slept in a corner of our inside cabin, which was used as a storage room for our equipment.

One evening before dinner, as Artie and I came into the corridor leading to our cabins, we heard strange and horrible sounds coming out of our rooms. When we entered the outer cabin, we found Nam standing in front of the mirror, holding my violin under his chin and trying to use the bow the way he had seen me do it. He was watching himself in the mirror with the fascination of a Moslem staring at the Great Mosque in Mecca, totally deaf to the ugly noises he was producing. The violin was much too large for him and he had to stretch and strain his arm to keep the instrument up. He blushed and smiled in his shy way when he saw us and then he made a confession. He'd come aboard because he hoped to be near the musicians and learn about music. He wanted to play the violin, the piano, and the clarinet. His family had no sympathy with this outlandish desire. "They would be horrified to know that I'm working here as *garçon*," Nam said. "I told them I was offered a schol-

arship and a free trip to France by the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient. My people are very proud of their great past. But they are poor today. Most Annamites are poor since the French moved into Cochinchina, in 1862. I couldn't afford to take music lessons in Saïgon."

Artie, who was something of a skeptic, told Nam to forget these delusions of grandeur. "You are getting worse than the Russian émigrés in Shanghai," Artie said. "Soon every one of you will pretend to be Annamite noblemen."

Nam looked so deeply hurt that, in an effort to cheer him up, I offered to give him violin lessons. I didn't regret it. He was an amazing pupil. He worked so hard that I often feared he would drop to the floor, together with my violin. In Shanghai, at a little pawnshop, we bought him a cheap, three-quarter-size violin and an inexpensive bow. He was overjoyed when we made the presentation on our return to the

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ship. He held the instrument in his hands tenderly, as though it were a Stradivarius. "Merci," he said, and once more, "Merci!" He went to the end of our corridor and began to practice. He practiced unceasingly for hours, until the passengers complained about the weird noises. After that, he carried his violin up to the bow of the ship. There he would sit huddled on a heap of rope and practice innumerable extended tones on all four strings, as I had shown him how to do. His bare feet would beat time to the monotonous rhythm of the waves breaking against the hull. By the time we arrived in Yokohama, he was able to play simple Sevcík finger and box exercises; by Hong Kong he could play the first nine bars of the "Marseillaise," and not too badly, either.

Nam missed very few of our concerts. Nearly every morning from eleven to noon, when we played in the open air for the *apéritif* crowd, and during the evening concert, from eight to nine, he came up on deck. He stood behind the piano and stared at me in intense concentration, trying to remember every movement of my fingers. He arranged with the first-class barman to help serve drinks and clean up the tables during intermissions. This made his presence on deck legitimate. When he especially liked a piece, he would raise his right thumb and forefinger and smile at us in

grateful appreciation. His favorite piece was Dvořák's "Humoresque." He frequently asked us to play it, and when we did he would stand and listen raptly, his head tilted to the left.

Shortly before we arrived in Saïgon, Nam announced that he would not be with us during the Porthos's stay in the harbor because he had to see his family. He packed his little violin and promised to be back before the ship sailed. We protested and pleaded, but to no avail. While the Porthos was being tied up to the pier in Saïgon, we looked everywhere for Nam but couldn't find him.

"He'll never come back," Artie predicted gloomily. Etienne-Marcel nodded and sighed. We went down to our staterooms. The water bottles were full of crushed ice and the bed covers were tight and without wrinkles. Etienne-Marcel lay down on his bed, then got up at once and straightened out his bedspread. Somehow, the room seemed desolate and empty. Artie pointed at the mirror and said, "That's where he always used to study himself when he played. His bowing was quite amazing. The other day he told me he was about to learn the third position."

Etienne-Marcel rubbed his white beard and said, "*Il était très gentil*. I wish we could play once more the Dvořák 'Humoresque' and see him raise his thumb and forefinger."

For a long time no one said anything. Then Artie sighed and suggested we all go to the hotel and have a drink. Etienne-Marcel said *merci*, he didn't feel like drinking. Artie and I went ashore. It was almost midnight, but the heat was still heavy and humid. Our rickshaw coolies gasped as they ran and big, dark sweat stains appeared on their light-blue garments. The boulevards were bordered by trees and the open-air cafés on the Rue Catinat looked *bien parisien*, with little tables and basket-work chairs under the awnings on the sidewalks, but *Le Matin* and *Le Petit Parisien* in the newspaper kiosks were thirty days old and the goods in the always-open stores were covered with mildew.

THE air-cooled bar of the big hotel was dim and wonderfully comfortable. Several white, ghostlike figures, showing the symptoms of advanced tropical decay, were slowly sipping whiskey-and-sodas. In the rear of the room a four-man orchestra was playing Toselli's "Serenade." The cellist, a man named Hohenfels, who had worked for me aboard the Messageries Maritimes liner d'Artagnan, got up and came over to shake hands with me. He was a tall, impressive-looking man in his forties, with sharp features and gray temples, and carried himself in a military manner. He had been a major in a

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famous Kaiser-Königliches Dragoner regiment, one of Austria-Hungary's most exclusive outfits in the first World War. After the armistice, he had faced the collapse of his world rather calmly. He had gone to Paris, given cello lessons, and at night played at the Grands Boulevards cafés. On Mondays he never accepted any *cachet* but played chamber music with three Sorbonne professors. After eight years of placid living, he had suddenly got restless and taken a job with the Messageries Maritimes. He and I made several trips together—to Tunisia, Réunion, Madagascar, China, and Japan. On one voyage a beautiful Russian girl had come aboard our ship in Singapore. Her name was Tanja and she was travelling to Saïgon with her father, who looked like the perfect anarchist.

He had a black beard, bushy eyebrows, and burning dark eyes, and, since he seldom spoke, people suspected him of sinister brooding. His friends knew that he really was a kindly, bashful person who liked nothing better than to read popular medicine books and play golf. He wanted to live in England, which he said was one vast golf course, but he wouldn't leave his daughter alone in the Orient. Tanja had a very profitable dress shop in Saïgon. Hohenfels fell in love with Tanja and in Saïgon jumped ship. There was no music on the d'Artagnan until we reached Yokohama. There we picked up a Danish pianist who was working in a Yoshiwara geisha house and wanted to go home.

Hohenfels ordered drinks. We sat down next to the decaying colonials,

who were visibly irritated by our high spirits. Hohenfels shrugged. "I've become the town's Public Outcast Number One," he said. "They can't forget that I was their enemy in the *Grande Guerre*. And they were shocked when I married Tanja. They are terribly afraid of her father. They think he's going to form a sabotage ring here in Saïgon which one day will blow up the Opéra. Poor fellow! He is so afraid of fire that he doesn't even use a cigarette lighter."

Hohenfels called the barman and we had more whiskey. He took his straight. His fingers were trembling. "The doctor talks of tropical neurasthenia and high blood pressure," he said, in answer to my questioning glance. "Actually, there's nothing wrong with me that a short walk wouldn't heal. I mean a

walk from the Place de l'Opéra to the Madeleine, breathing that wonderful mixture of acacias, Pernod, and gasoline." He stared into space. "Last night I dreamed I was playing Schubert's 'Die Forelle' quintet. You have the craziest dreams in Saïgon. Where would I get here a bass player for the 'Forelle' quintet? There isn't one anywhere between Singapore and Shanghai."

Artie said, "There is a good one aboard the Porthos and he'd love to play the 'Forelle' quintet. And our *chef d'orchestre* here"—he nodded at me—"will play the viola part." Hohenfels uttered a high-pitched yodel, which he explained later had been the attack cry of his Kaiser-Königliches Dragoner regiment. He walked over and spoke to his musicians and then hurried out of the room. After a few minutes he came back with a dapper little man, whom he introduced to us as M. Berthold, manager of the hotel. Hohenfels was greatly excited. The following evening, he explained to Artie and me, his or-

chestra was scheduled to give a *concert classique* in the hotel ballroom, in honor of the Société Franco-Annamite, of which many prominent natives and the colony's leading officials were members. Instead of Bizet's "L'Arlésienne" suite, which was to have been the main feature of the program, he would play, with our help, the "Forelle" quintet. He said he could borrow a viola for me from a Saïgon physician who was an amateur musician. I cautiously ventured the opinion that this change in program might not meet with unanimous approval. Hohenfels shook his head. "On the contrary. Monsieur Berthold here is Swiss. He likes good music. Naturally, we can't pay you anything, but you three men will be guests of the hotel, American plan. You get the best rooms. The food is excellent."

"Does your American plan include drinks?" Artie asked.

I protested, but M. Berthold assured Artie that such an arrangement would be satisfactory. We broke up after agreeing to meet for a rehearsal at ten the following morning. When we, except Artie, assembled again at the

appointed time, M. Berthold admitted that I'd been right in protesting against the too inclusive American plan. We found Artie sleeping under a table in the air-conditioned bar, in no condition to play the piano part of the difficult Schubert opus. We carried him upstairs to his room, and there was no rehearsal.

THAT night there was a colorful crowd in the ballroom of the big hotel—Cambodian women in blue and maroon silk dresses, noisy half-caste men, French officers in white uniforms, tired, patrician-featured French women in Parisian gowns. There were also a few Japanese men in atrocious cut-aways.

The hotel's Annamite headwaiter beat a large Chinese gong and everybody sat down. There was a general spirit of fraternization in the audience. Annamite men were flanked by French officers and French women discussed the latest Paris fashion news with Annamite ladies. A high government official, representing M. Pierre Pasquier, *le Gouverneur-Général*, took his seat in the first row, next to a dignified old Annamite in a mess jacket. I noticed that a few seats in the first two rows were still vacant.

Hohenfels' orchestra played the "Marseillaise" and a couple of short pieces. Then Artie, Etienne-Marcel, and I took our places on the platform, together with Hohenfels and his violin player. Somehow, it seemed unreal to be playing Schubert's "Die Forelle" quintet in that Saïgon setting—the Annamite women with their jet-black teeth, the French officers, the heat, and the scent of tuberose, hibiscus, and *nuoc-nâm*, the Annamite fish sauce that one smells everywhere in Indo-China. The large doors at one side of the ballroom were open, and our *pianissimi* were drowned by the sounds of the tropics from outside—the shouts of the coolies, the pad-padding rickshaws, and the noise of the crickets. Hohenfels was blushing with excitement, but he played very well. There was great applause after the first movement. We got up and bowed to the audience. By now the ballroom was crowded. The first rows were occupied by what seemed a group of socially prominent Annamites and important officials. I heard Artie whistle softly through his teeth. "Look at the third man from the right in the second row," he whispered. "I'll go on the wagon if it isn't Nam."

I followed his glance. The lights in



"I was going over the stock and found these. Do you think we ought to write Herbert Hoover for an offer?"

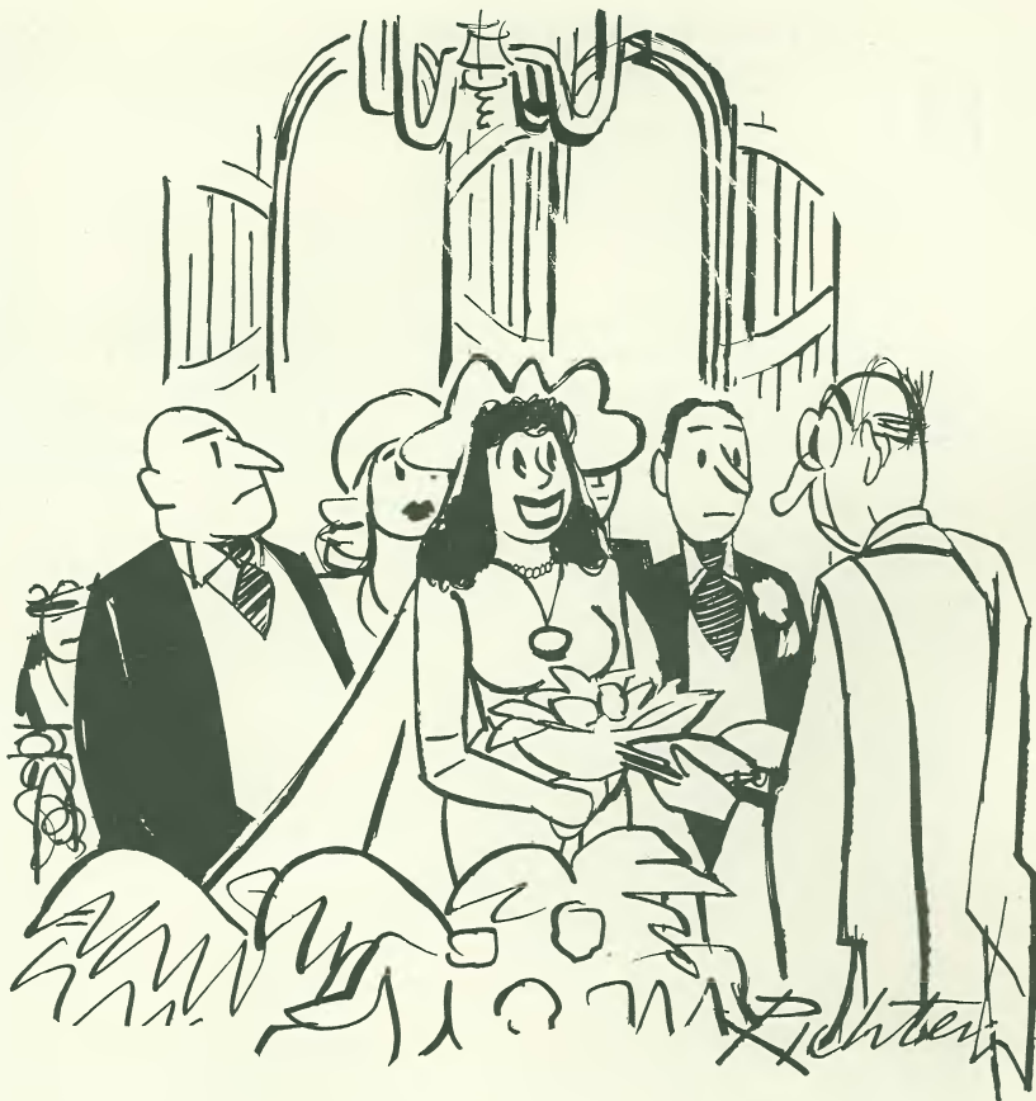
the auditorium were dim and it was a few seconds before my eyes became adjusted. Then I saw Nam. He was sitting in the second row, next to a French *capitaine*. He wore a stiff shirt and a white mess jacket. He smiled at me, his unmistakable, gentle smile, and raised his right thumb and forefinger. The *capitaine* respectfully addressed him and Nam nodded and said something with an air of unaffected dignity.

"*Nom d'un chien*," Etienne-Marcel said, whipping his bow through the air. "He's a little prince all right. And we imbeciles treating him like a shoe-shine boy. No wonder he walked out on us."

There was great applause after the quintet, too. Nam got up, holding up his two fingers and smiling at us, as he had always done at our concerts. The old Annamite next to the high official in the first row turned around and gave Nam a severe, disapproving glance. Nam sat down. People kept applauding and Hohenfels said nervously, "What now? We haven't got any encores." Etienne-Marcel pointed down to where Nam sat and said, "I think we have one. You fellows all know Dvořák's 'Humoresque.'" Hohenfels and his violin player nodded, somewhat flabbergasted. "All right, then," Etienne-Marcel said, and he, Artie, and I began to play. The others fell in after four or five bars. I glanced down at Nam. He sat on the edge of his chair, tense and rigid. The French *capitaine* was talking to him, but Nam was not answering. His eyes were wide open and his head was tilted to the left.

When the concert was over, our first impulse was to find Nam, but we were intercepted by a frosty old colonel who took us in hand and led us to the official representing *M. le Gouverneur-Général*. Everybody wanted to shake hands with us. When we were able to break away and look for Nam, he was gone. It was getting late and near sailing time, so we said goodbye to Hohenfels and hurried to the ship.

**B**ACK aboard the Porthos, we ran down to our staterooms. We stopped on the threshold with a foolish



"He does."

feeling of disappointment. Etienne-Marcel's bed was unmade, the water bottles were empty, sheets of music were scattered all over the place. We stood there for a while, glum and angry at ourselves. Then Artie said it was time to play the "Marseillaise" for the departure and we went on deck. We looked down at the pier, where people were waving handkerchiefs and shouting *bon voyage*. The ship began to move.

"He could have come out to the harbor to say goodbye," Artie said. "After all, we didn't treat him badly. He got a violin and all the free time he wanted." Etienne-Marcel whipped his bass bow through the air, silently staring at the pier as it slowly receded into the night. It was very hot and we stayed on deck while the Porthos plowed down the slow, smelly, jungle-bordered Don-nai River.

At dawn, when the deck chairs were

heavy with dampness, we went down to our staterooms. We stepped through the doorway and then stood transfixed. The music had been put away and the water bottles were full of crushed ice. Nam's little wooden sandals were standing in the bathroom before the shower curtain. Nam himself was fast asleep in the corner on the floor of the rear room. He had on his steward's white uniform. Instead of a pillow, he had his small violin case under his head.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

## CONSOLATION IN WAR

Happy the dead!  
If we do ill,  
They will not know we lied.  
Happy the dead!  
If we do well,  
Their death is justified.

—LEWIS MUMFORD