# CORPS DE BALLET

MOST people go to Monte Carlo to lose their money playing roulette, *trente et quarante*, or *chemin de fer*, but when I was there, in the spring of 1930, I didn't gamble. Indeed, I hardly ever set foot in the Casino, not because of moral principles, but because I was broke. I was a musician, but jobs were scarce and most of the time I couldn't afford to pay the ten francs for a *billet du jour* at the Casino. I lived in Monte Carlo because Barcelona had invited me to share his apartment, which was in a quiet, picturesque street leading up to the Beau-Soleil district.

Barcelona was a Spanish accordion player. He came from Barcelona and had a hard-to-pronounce Spanish name, like Araquistain or Güiraldas-Gutiérrez, so at the Café des Quat'z' Arts, the Paris musicians' exchange where I had met him some months before, everyone called him Barcelona. He looked like a leftover from the Inquisition, a big, tall man with a hard, Goya-like face and dark, burning eyes that exerted a great fascination on the female clientele of the Côte d'Azur. He played the accordion because it was the only instrument a man can play lying on his back. Barcelona was not a lazy *type*, but he adhered to the theory that the horizontal position of the body is the healthiest one. "People lie down to get a rest, they take baths stretched out on their backs, and they are buried horizontally," he used to say. "Recumbency is healthy for your blood circulation and prolongs your life."

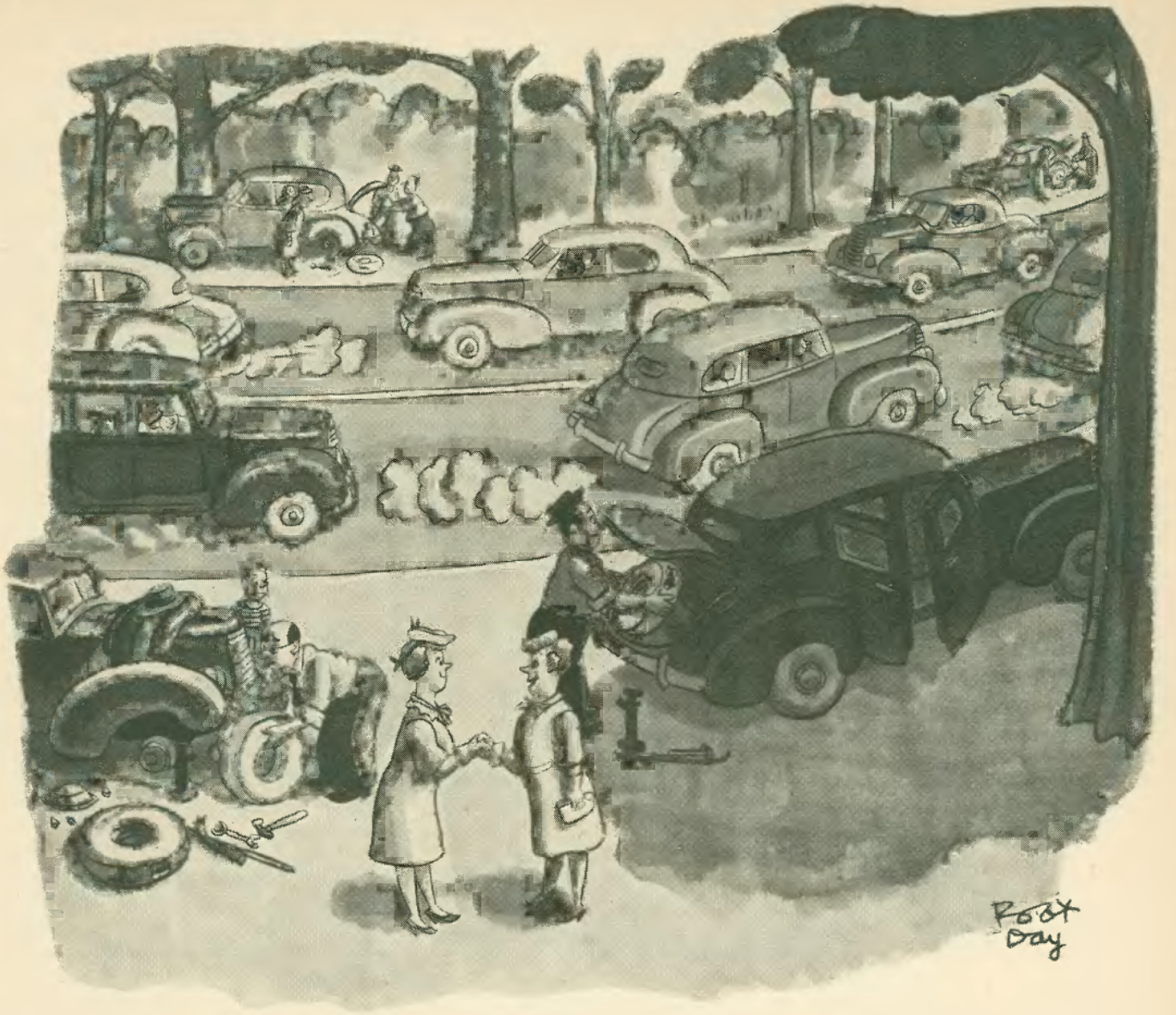
There was only one thing Barcelona worried more about than maintaining recumbency, and that was his silky, shiny, bluish-black hair. It was thinning out rapidly, which is bad enough for any man but tragic for a musician. Barcelona's peculiar tragedy was getting bald one-sidedly; the hair had stopped growing on the left side of his head only. He said it was the consequence of a strange disease he had caught during a summer in Panama City. Few people knew of his trouble because always, even at night, he wore a Basque beret which he pulled down over the left side of his head. He tried everything—massages, sun-tan lamp, ointments, scalp treatments. Twice a week I had to help him wash the left side of his head with oil, soap, and a mixture of lemon juice and rum. Afterward, Barcelona would lie down on a couch, his head wrapped up in a towel marked "Negresco, Nice," and practice the accordion, which he held on his stomach. He was an excellent accordionist, but he seldom kept a job because people couldn't get used to his strange habit of lying down on the platform behind the double bass and the battery, with a pillow stuck under his head. Night-club customers are a narrow-minded species of mankind. They would raise hell and Barcelona would get fired. He finally came down to Monte Carlo because somebody had told him that the mild Riviera climate would be good for his hair. His apartment didn't cost him anything. As far as I could make out, a whole year's rent had been paid in advance by a well-to-do English lady from Leicester, who had lost her cool, Anglo-Saxon sense of balance when she met Barcelona. Shortly afterward, the lady had returned to England in something of a hurry. It seems that her husband, back home, had heard rumors about her attachment.

WHEN Barcelona wasn't busy with his hair or practicing on the accordion, he was watching the ballet. He was a great admirer of the dance, and he hung out at the Monte Carlo Opera House, where one of the Ballets Russes was having its season. I don't know which one; I've never been an expert in those things. But Barcelona was. He had seen forty-seven performances of "Les Sylphides" and sixty-three of "Spectre de la Rose," and he knew every step of "Firebird" and "Damnation de Faust." At the Opera House he was acquainted with all the coryphées, usherettes, musicians, *premières danseuses*, stagehands, prima ballerinas, and janitors. With them he discussed *entrechats*, glissades, arabesques, *pas de chat*, *ronds de jambe*, *fouettés*, and *pas de bourrée* the way most people in Monte Carlo discussed roulette systems.

It was through the ballet that Barcelona made the acquaintance of Monsieur Roberti, an elderly gentleman from the Near East. Roberti was also a great admirer of the ballet, or, more specifically, of the young ladies in the Corps de Ballet. He was short and fat, had a saccharine voice, a black mustache, and carefully brushed black hair, and always wore white spats and patent-leather shoes. Nobody knew much about Monsieur Roberti, but everybody knew something. He was said to own a power plant in Pointe-à-Pitre, on the island of Guadeloupe, a house of ill fame in Beirut, and a bakery in Lyons. He was popular among the coryphées of the Corps de Ballet, possibly because he used to give them little *cadeaux* from Cartier. He also was the *directeur* of the radio station in Nice. This was strange, because French radio stations are government-owned and under the management of P.T.T., the Ministère des Postes, Téléphones, et Télégraphes, but, then, nothing was impossible on the French Riviera.

One evening, I went with Barcelona to the ballet, and afterward, when we were standing outside the stage door, Monsieur Roberti, who was waiting for his lady of the evening, struck up a conversation with us, and in due course invited us to perform at his radio station. He couldn't pay us any fee, he added somewhat hastily, there being no funds allotted by the Ministry for musical programs, but after the program he would drive us to Nice in his carrot-colored Alfa Romeo convertible and set us up to dinner at the Negresco. "If it's *gigot rôti* with *choux-fleurs*, I'm your man," Barcelona said. They shook hands to close the deal, and then Monsieur looked inquiringly at me. I had some misgivings. At that time, French radio was in its juvenile-delinquency stage and most musicians would rather have been caught taking a cold bath at seven in the morning than playing in front of a microphone. There was a vague superstition among the Quat'z' Arts crowd that "radio does things to you." It was said that if a violinist went on the air he would never again be his old vibrato self. Then I thought of Monsieur Roberti's carrot-colored Alfa Romeo and the beautiful scenery along the Grande-Corniche, of a dinner at the Negresco, and I, too, accepted.

We asked Monsieur Roberti when we were expected to play. He shrugged. "Any day, any time," he said casually. There was no program schedule, he explained. That is, while a program was published every day in the *Eclaireur de Nice et du Sud-Ouest*, no one, including the radio people, paid any attention to it. Monsieur Roberti said, "Saturday between five and six will be fine. Gives us just time for the *apéro*. Besides, there are few fire alarms around that time of the day." It was not




*"Our name is Brooks, and if you're ever out Westport way drop in and see us."*

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until the day of the performance that we understood what he meant by that.

Monsieur Roberti picked us up on Saturday afternoon in his convertible. We sat in the rear. The front seat was occupied by Monsieur Roberti, who drove, and a blonde whom he introduced as Mademoiselle Nina and described as one of the most promising coryphées of the Corps de Ballet. Nina gave a husky little laugh and shook hands with me. She smiled at Barcelona. "I've seen you at the stage door," she said to him, "but you never did seem to pay any attention to me." My friend pulled his beret further down on the left side of his head and said, "All men are fools at times." Nina swung around on her seat toward him and pulled up her knees. Her skirt was very tight and, as it went up, we saw a pair of extremely well-formed knees.

"Nina performed for the Czar when she was a little orphan of eight," Monsieur Roberti said, his voice dripping with molasses and compassion.

Barcelona nodded in deep sympathy. Then he bent over to me and whispered, "What a fool I've been to waste my time with a prima ballerina when Nina was there," and that was the last thing he said to me or to Roberti. From then on he talked to Nina only. She was very beautiful. She spoke French with a heavy Russian accent. She told Barcelona that she had studied with the great Diaghilev. She admired Lydia Lopokova and Mordkin, and in no time she and Barcelona were engrossed in choreographic shoptalk. After a while she seemed to realize that I, too, belonged to the party, and she asked me where I was from. When I said, "*Tchécoslovaquie*," she began to cry and said that she came from the old Bohemian town of Kolin.

Monsieur Roberti stopped the car, patted her damp cheeks and took out of his pocket a small velvet case with "Cartier" inscribed on it. He opened the case, revealing a small but beautiful gold pin shaped like an arrow. "For you, *chérie*," he said and gave it to Nina.

She said, "Thank you, *mon chou*," and kissed Roberti on his forehead. He started up the car again. Then Nina turned around and asked Barcelona to put the pin on her black blouse, which was very tight too. We were high above the cliffs overlooking Villefranche and Beaulieu, amid scenery that had always enchanted Barcelona,

but now he didn't pay any attention to it. Neither did Nina.

MONSIEUR ROBERTI stopped the Alfa Romeo in front of a fire station in Nice and we all got out. It turned out that Radio Nice was installed in a kind of attic above the large hall where the *pompiers* kept their fire engines. We walked up a dark, squeaking, winding stairway and into the attic. Moldy, musty-smelling curtains hung haphazardly all over the place. There were several desks and chairs, a broken-down harmonium, an old piano, and several empty beer bottles. It was obvious that the Ministry of P.T.T. didn't much care about musical programs. A glassed-in control room occupied one end of the attic, and sitting in there was the radio engineer, who also, it turned out, acted as announcer, technician, and general handyman. He was a morose character with a neurotic, deeply furrowed face and a harried look in his eyes. He was, I learned later, permanently haunted by the ghost of fire alarms. Not long before, a local lady artist had been singing Schubert's "Ständchen," and as she began, pianissimo:

*Leise flehen meine Lieder*
*Durch die Nacht zu dir ...*

bells started ringing, *pompiers* ran around cursing and shouting, and the fire engines raced out of the hall, shaking the whole building.

Barcelona and I had made a makeshift arrangement of three short pieces —Chaminade's "Serenade," Albeniz's "Malagueña," and Debussy's "La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin"—for violin and accordion. The engineer came out of the control room and told us that we'd better get ready, and Barcelona stretched himself out on the floor in the middle of the studio, adjusted his beret, and asked for a pillow. There was no pillow in the studio, so Nina ordered Monsieur Roberti to run and get one of the beautiful yellow leather seat cushions out of his car. When he came back with the cushion, Nina gently slipped it under Barcelona's head. At this point the *capitaine des pompiers*, a heavy-set, bearded man with a red nose, came upstairs for a chat, and Monsieur Roberti implored him to disregard all fire alarms during our performance. The *capitaine* put the end of his beard into his mouth and chewed meditatively. "I will disregard all private calls," he said finally. "But if the house of M. le Préfet des Alpes-Maritimes or of M. le Maire is on fire, we shall respond."

The engineer said that he was going into the control room to announce our program. "When you see the red light," he said to Barcelona and me, and pointed to a bulb on the wall of the control room, "and I give you a sign, you begin."

Monsieur Roberti invited all visitors to listen to the concert in the control room, but Nina refused to leave the studio. She sat down next to Barcelona and said that she was going to stay right there. Monsieur Roberti didn't even attempt to make her leave, and walked into the control room. I tuned my violin and put my sheets of music on a desk near the mike. Barcelona pulled up his right foot, crossed his legs, and, by way of warming up, began to play "Always," looking at Nina through half-closed eyes. She looked back at him. They had forgotten Radio Nice, our performance, and most certainly Monsieur Roberti, who was staring through the glass front of the control room, his face expressing consternation. Barcelona finished "Always" and sang "Ay-Ay-Ay."

"You sing beautifully, *drahoušku*," Nina said, sotto voce.

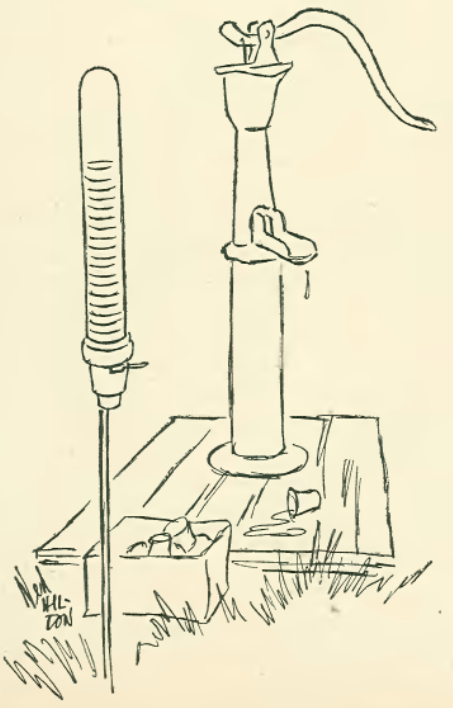
"'*Drahoušku*,'" he said. "What's that?"

"*Chéri*," she said.

"*Chéri*," Barcelona hummed. "*Chéri*, sweetheart, *amor*, *drahoušku*."

Nina said, "*Chlape milý*," and gave a deep sigh. Through the window of the control room, the engineer was making frantic signs. The *capitaine des pompiers* seemed to be excited, too, and both he and Monsieur Roberti were making wild grimaces at us. I turned to Barcelona and said, "Look, what the hell goes on there?"

He shrugged. "Go away," he said.



"*Please*." He turned over on his side toward Nina and started to sing, softly, Manuel de Falla's "Jota":

*Dicen que no nos queremos*
*Porque no nos ven hablar ...*

In the control room, Monsieur Roberti scribbled something on a piece of paper and the engineer held it against the window. I went over and read, "You are on the air, *imbéciles*. You've already been announced. The red signal is out of order. Go ahead, *pour l'amour de Dieu*."

I tiptoed back to Barcelona and shook him. Nina looked up and, in Czech, called me something terrible. I put my violin under my chin and began playing alone. Barcelona came in after a few bars. All went well except for the second part in Chaminade's "Serenade," when Barcelona stopped playing while he kissed Nina's hands.

Afterward, the *capitaine des pompiers* said it had been swell. He had enjoyed Nina's sighing very much, and why didn't Monsieur Barcelona sing professionally, with his beautiful baritone? People started calling up the station and inquiring about the love dialogue before the first piece of music and about the woman who sighed so wonderfully. One listener, who identified himself as Mr. Stejskal, a Czech tailor, said he would like to meet the girl who had used that rude language. "It made me feel very homesick all over," he said.

Later, Nina, Monsieur Roberti, Barcelona, and I had apéritifs at the Casino de la Jetée-Promenade and dinner in the great dining room of the Negresco. Most of the other diners were dignified dowagers from the United Kingdom and prosperous, bored-looking American businessmen, and the place was as cheerful as a crematorium on a rainy November evening. At our table the mood was strained, since Monsieur Roberti was annoyed with Nina.

During the meat course, Nina announced that *she* was going to perform over Radio Nice. "I think I'll dance in front of the microphone," she said dreamily. "I'm going to do the dance of the firebird from Stravinsky's 'L'Oiseau de Feu.'"

Monsieur Roberti dropped a piece of very tender *gigot rôti* on his spats. "But you *can't* perform on the radio, *chérie*," he said. "They can't see you."

"In America they have tap dancers on the radio, don't they?" Nina said. Then, raising her voice, she went on, "*Je veux danser pour la radio! Je veux, je veux, je veux!*"

A hush fell over the large room. The dowagers looked shocked; the bored executives seemed pleased. Nina's voice

reached a fortissimo such as hadn't been heard at the Negresco since the last carnival. Nina threw her spoon on the floor and said that if Monsieur Roberti wouldn't let her dance over the radio, she would scream right away, and she meant *scream*. The headwaiter hurriedly summoned four assistants, who took up a defensive formation around our table, so the people wouldn't see what was going on. I think Barcelona saved the Negresco management from a Grade A scandal by suggesting that he would be glad to watch Nina's dancing and give a sort of running commentary for the listeners. It sounded preposterous then, but today I realize that Nina wasn't crazy; she was simply fifteen years ahead of her time.

NINA danced over Radio Nice the following afternoon. All the studio windows had to be blacked out because she refused to perform in daylight. Two big lamps were set up, their glare shining into the control room. The microphone was placed in a corner so Nina wouldn't bump against it, and Barcelona bedded himself down next to it. Nina was dressed in a tight, flaming-red dress. All the *pompiers* on duty and several off duty came up to look at her. The *capitaine des pompiers* put his nose into the air and breathed deeply the scent of mimosas that followed Nina.

All of us except Nina and Barcelona crowded into the control room. The engineer made various manipulations, gave a signal, and then over the loudspeaker came the melodic, soft voice of Barcelona. "Messieurs, mesdames," he said, "this is the first performance in the history of Radio Nice of Igor Stravinsky's 'Firebird.' Madame Nina, one of the brightest young stars of the Ballet Russe of Monte Carlo, is going to perform for you the dance of the firebird."

The engineer started the studio phonograph and put the needle on a Stravinsky recording, but he was excited and for a moment there was a terrible scratching noise. We looked through the glass partition, but there was little we could see in the dimness behind the two lamps which were shining into our eyes. "She is the flaming bird rising out of the ashes," Barcelona said. He sounded excited. "Floating through the air, a leaping flame, light and bright. Watch her pirouettes, her *entrechats*." Nina whirled past the glass window, an ethereal shadow, and then the dimness of the studio swallowed her again. "And now she winds herself up in a great spiral of pirouettes. Faster and faster she is turning. She goes into a *rond de jambe*, a glissade; now she is pirouetting with incredible speed . . ."

The music grew wild and so did Barcelona's voice as he continued in his pirouette-by-pirouette description of the "Firebird" dance. Not since the Carpentier-Dempsey fight had there been anything so exciting. We could not hear Nina's dance steps any longer. And Barcelona's voice was now drowned out by Stravinsky's cacophonous rhythms. Once, though, during a sudden pianissimo, I thought I heard a soft sigh and Nina's husky voice saying, "*Miláčku.*"

When the music ended, we went into the studio. Nina was kneeling on the floor next to Barcelona. He was sitting up and had his arms around her and was looking into her eyes. He kissed her. The Basque beret had slid down his head, and Nina's hand was gently caressing the left, the completely bald side of his head. Monsieur Roberti yelled that he was going to set the studio on fire and God help the *pompiers* if they tried to put it out. He rushed out and clattered down the squeaking stairway, and a moment later we heard him drive off in his Alfa Romeo.

Nina, Barcelona, and I had to take the slow, filthy train back to Monte Carlo. We could afford only third-class tickets. Through the open windows came a lot of coal dust, but I don't think that Nina and Barcelona noticed it. The light in the carriage was dim. And, besides, the train went through several tunnels between Nice and Monte Carlo.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG


*"If this was the Army, I'd have two hundred and eighty points."*

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## 4-F

Collared in untidy suit,
The civil man performed his chore,
Fawned on the beat of the soldier's boot,
Incidental prisoner of war.

No gala stripes or ribboned chest
Will annotate his lowly bit;
He was the clown of coat and vest,
Weak of knee and weak of wit.

Tubercular, with punctured ears,
Hobbling through the broken rubble—
Oh pity for his sickly fears
And fancies, his domestic trouble.

Scrawled on collapsed prophetic wall
He reads of postwar ruin and wreck,
And feels the arch of triumph fall
Horse-collarwise around his neck.

—W. W. GIBSON