

The cloud

By Gianluca Cinelli

1.

The two-seater dived steeply into a big cloud for cover. Georges guessed at the Hun's intention and decided to fly across the cumulus to catch up with him on the other side. Those unfortunate chaps wouldn't have enough time to say their last, quick prayer. One instant before entering the cloud's halo, Georges saw Lieutenant Bozon-Verduraz skirmishing with three or four enemy scouts. For a second, he hesitated, wondering if he should fly to his rescue. But his wingman was a good, experienced pilot. Thus, Georges put down the nose of his SPAD and disappeared into the mist.

The cloud seemed endless. The altimeter marked 900, dropping. He had lost 3,500 metres already. Finally, he came out beneath the cumulus and scanned the sky for the Hun, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Not today!" he thought with a grin.

Now he could re-join Bozon-Verduraz and fly towards Bergues. However, as he flew back gaining altitude, the sky was empty in all directions. "How strange," he thought, for the land beneath him didn't look familiar. The dark strip of the no-man's-land had disappeared! He had lost all sense of orientation and feared that he had come out of the cloud far beyond the enemy lines. The countryside looked odd. Not only was it well-harvested, but it was also interspersed with buildings, warehouses and factories. Even more puzzling was the network of roads crisscrossing the countryside, all grey and striped with white lines. Georges shook his head. His nerves were really collapsing. Sleep had avoided him for days. Two years of service and seven forced landings were exacting their toll.

Suddenly, his hunter's instinct brought him back to reality. Four machines were slowly flying far below, and despite the distance, he spotted a French Nieuport and an Albatross. Slowly circling like a leaf in a windless morning, he descended unnoticed. He could now

recognise the British colours on the upper wings of the third machine. It was one of those new Camels he had spotted, once or twice, over Ypres. The fourth machine, instead, was new to him. It was a small German triplane, wicked-looking as it wobbled nervously.

His instinct recommended attacking the latter, for it looked way more agile and treacherous than the Albatross. After all, the idea of hunting such an exotic prey excited him. Brownish and striped, the machine really made a nasty little beast.

He was about to dive when he hesitated, feeling confused. The pilots below were flying too quietly. Instead of fighting, they slowly circled in the late-summer afternoon like fish in a bowl. And worse than that, he now realised that something with the aerodrome below them was wrong. Instead of the usual Bessonneau hangars and wooden barracks, there were stalls crowded with people, and dozens of bright-painted vehicles parked on an adjacent piece of land.

Georges dived on his target nonetheless, throttling down the engine until he levelled his SPAD twenty metres behind the triplane's tail. It was a perfect manoeuvre. The enemy pilot's head filled his Chrétien gunsight, and with that thrill of horror and excitement he always felt in similar moments, he opened fire.

A mortifying "click" came from both his Vickers. The other pilot turned his head and saw him, and with a steep right-turn, he half-rolled his plane with an agility that Georges had never seen in any other German scout. A moment later, the beastie was sitting on his tail. Feeling the cold sweat running under his shirt, Georges quickly pondered how to outmanoeuvre his deadly foe. He knew he could not just dive. Bullets were faster than his *Vieux Charles*.

His survival instinct made him raise his hand to signal that he had a gun stoppage. He had spared a Hun, in similar circumstances, many months before. The guy had waved to say he was unarmed, and flying upside-down above him, Georges had let him go. Now he hoped to receive the same courtesy. With relief, he saw the enemy had understood. As the Hun commanded him to land, they slowly went down in circles.

2.

The SPAD came to a stop before a crowd of oddly dressed people. With a sigh, Georges turned off the engine, unfastened his belt and removed his goggles. The audience on the stalls cheered, waving and wooing. Georges stared at them in fright. A small mob surrounded his aeroplane. They didn't look like ground personnel or soldiers. Many of them wore shorts and odd, coloured shirts without buttons, on which he could see all kinds of writings and drawings. A savage-looking guy, with a ruffled beard and long hair, had his arms covered in coloured tattoos. Almost everyone held a strange, flat, black object as if looking through it. They looked like high-tech troglodytes, and Georges, unwilling to leave the cockpit, regretted having left his revolver at the base. However, the mob didn't look particularly ferocious. They just stood there, looking and smiling. In the end, he found some courage and climbed out of the aeroplane. The strangers cheered as he stood at attention and saluted:

"Captain Georges Guynemer, 3rd Squadron of the French Air Forces. I surrender."

No one spoke for a few seconds. His captors seemed more puzzled than eager to seize him. Eventually, assuming they had not understood what he said, the pilot spoke again:

"I surrender. I'm your prisoner. Do you speak French?"

"Of course," a big-bellied man with a thick moustache replied. "Is that part of the show?"

Georges felt humiliated in front of his less-than-warlike captor.

"She is a beauty!" cried another young man, getting closer to the SPAD. Georges's heart sank.

"It's the most extraordinary replica I've ever seen," the young man continued, looking closely at the stork and the number 2 painted red on the fuselage. The yellow canvas was stained, while stitches and patches were visible here and there.

"Your performance, sir, was terrific," the man with the moustache said. "I've been to many airshows, but this one will remain unforgettable."

Georges looked around. These people were not German soldiers, and he had no idea what an airshow was. It rather looked like Carnival, with the flags and costumes. He had often heard about pilots

who got lost inside the clouds. But how about those machines still buzzing over his head? Sudden anger rose in his eyes.

"Where am I?" the pilot asked.

"This is the Moorsele airfield. You should know it, since you joined the airshow, albeit uninvited... and I must admit that it was somewhat reckless..."

"Reckless? Do you think that's a joke? There's a war, for Heaven's sake, and you're playing the Flying Circus!"

"A war? What are you talking about?"

The unfortunate pilot stomped the ground in anger and flung his leather cap away. He felt like he was losing his mind, and the sun made him sweat under his heavy flight suit.

"I'm leaving. I'm no longer your prisoner," he said solemnly, but his lips trembled with disdain.

Meanwhile, the triplane's pilot had reached the group to greet the stranger.

"Great flying, cowboy! You gave me the hell of a fright!" he cried. He spoke French with a foreign accent.

"Thank you for sparing my life," Guynemer replied with equanimity. "Chivalry is fading in this mess of a war."

The other pilot looked puzzled, so the man with the moustache explained:

"The guy claims to be Georges Guynemer."

"No kidding! Howard Maloney, my pleasure. You fly wonderfully, and your machine is a beauty!" the Australian cried playfully.

Georges shook his head and collected his cap from the ground. Then, he walked away.

"Where do you think you're going, sir?" the moustached man cried.

"To fight for the Fatherland. You may resume your children's play."

"Marcel, you ought to see this!" cried another youngster, who had fetched a ladder and, perched on its top rung, was examining the machine guns.

"What's going on?" Marcel asked.

"These weapons are loaded," the young man said gravely.

"You must be joking!"

"I wish I was. What's wrong with that fool?"

"It's about time to find it out. Go call the police," Marcel said and turned to Guynemer.

"Sir, would you explain why your guns are loaded?"

The pilot looked at him with disgust and replied:

"Get out of my way, sir. I have more important things to do."

"Do you understand the gravity of your actions?" Marcel insisted.

"What's going on?" asked Maloney.

"Those guns are loaded," the youngster said.

"What the hell!" Maloney shrilled.

For a second, the French pilot wavered, stepping back towards his SPAD. He was surrounded, and everyone looked on edge. Then a strange vehicle arrived with whirling, blue lights on its roof. A man and a woman, clad in black, got out of the car and rushed to the scene. On their jackets, the words *Police* and *Politie* were written in white.

"What's going on here?" the woman asked.

Marcel began to explain. It did not take long before the agents cuffed Georges and pushed him inside the car. He went quietly. He only regretted leaving behind his *Vieux Charles*.

3.

Georges looked out at the amazing things he saw along the way: cars, scooters, buses, and bicycles scared him no less than the advertisement signs, the women wearing trousers, and the several coloured people walking by. There were no soldiers on the streets, no convoys and no guns. It seemed that the war was far, far away. At

times, an almost inhuman voice came from the dashboard with crackling static noises, as if someone was speaking from the land of the dead. The cops did not pay it any attention. The vehicle itself was astounding. The soft, comfortable seats smelled good, and the doors were covered in a strange material Georges had never seen before. It was neither metal nor wood. It was hard but somewhat pliable, and it had no smell at all. The nails would not scratch it. And then, there was the pretty girl sitting in the front seat, silent and serious. She smelled good and kept her long, blond hair combed up in a tiny chignon. She looked fresh and young, and Georges could not stop wondering how she could have become an army auxiliary. The vehicle proceeded across that fantastic world, smooth and fast, amazingly isolated from the external airstream and noise. What if he could have flown like that! What a dream would that be, sitting alone in a warm, closed cockpit, away from wind, rain, noise and cold. The wonders he was looking at were, however, an ominous sign that something terrible had happened to him.

"Right-oh kid," said the male agent, stopping the vehicle. "Get out. Chief Inspector Coppens awaits you."

Georges clasped his leather cap and goggles. Inside the building, he was escorted to an office and asked to take off his flight suit. He happily obeyed, for he was sweltering. Beneath the suit, he wore a blue jacket buttoned up to the chin, light-blue trousers and a beautiful pair of knee-high boots. Without the heavy suit, the boy looked thin and fragile like a scarecrow. Two rows of ribbons stood out on his left breast. Captain's rank insignia were embroidered in gold on his sleeves.

"Are we already at Halloween?" an agent smirked.

Formalities were short. His papers confirmed he was Captain Georges Guynemer, born in Paris, in Rue de la Tour 89, on December 24, 1894. The document was crumpled and handwritten in blue ink. A watermark read "Aviation". The agents were amused.

"All right, kid, show is over. Now tell me your name and what you are up to," said a middle-aged man with a harsh voice and deep-blue eyes.

"How dares an NCO address his superior in such a tone," Georges asked superciliously.

"For your information, I'm no NCO. I am Chief Inspector Coppens. So, I will ask you once again, Captain Camembert..."

"Guynemer! Guynemer!" the pilot cried in exasperation.

"Don't you have any other papers? Valid ones?"

"These are my papers, why wouldn't they be valid?"

"Because they're... This is like the Monopoly money, as good as props. I want to see the real papers. Are you French?"

"Of course! And I would like to know where I am detained."

Chief Inspector opened Georges' wallet and extracted some coins, which he observed for a while. Then, he left the room with agent Leon Mersault.

"What do you think?" Coppens asked.

"I don't know, he's weird. He must have taken this pilot thing very seriously."

"Sure he has! Look at these francs. For Christ's sake, they were issued in 1916! That kid is insane. I want him seen by Doussy or Maertens as soon as possible."

"I'll call them right away. In the meantime, what do we do with that plane? We cannot leave those weapons there, unattended."

"No, we can't. Go back to the airfield with Bruno and have those machine guns dismantled. Then, bring them back here. In the meantime, I'll wait for the shrink."

4.

Agent Yvonne Lagarde accompanied Georges to a small room furnished with a sofa, a table and two chairs. Her perfume was the most delicious thing he had ever dreamt of. She had green eyes and a gentle, pale face with small, ruby lips. She didn't look like a soldier or a cop at all. She was kind, too.

A heap of old magazines were piled by the sofa. Browsing through the pages full of coloured images, he convinced himself, with growing disquiet, that the land he had reached was not the same one he had left. It seemed that the world had radically changed. Everything looked colourful, fun, attractive and luxurious.

Women looked beautiful, clean, lean, and sexually exuberant. Men were tanned, tall, well-built and looked dreamy and self-confident. Homes were comfortable, large, and full of light, and the families that inhabited them looked happy and healthy, especially the kids. Cars were shiny and massive, clothes were colourful and casual, and food looked juicy, rich, and full of flavour. He could almost smell the aroma of grilled steaks! Despite the many ads luring readers into getting a loan and buying sleeping pills, life shown in those magazines was an endless extravaganza. How was that even possible? Three years of war had killed and maimed millions of young men, families were famished, and cities and villages had been shelled to dust. Who were these shiny, happy people who enjoyed their bright lives without the least hint of preoccupation?

The food he eventually received didn't look like that in the magazine. It was incomprehensible and smelled unpleasantly. A bottle made of an unknown light, transparent material, contained a coffee-like beverage, but as Georges sipped at it, he almost threw up. The cold liquid was unbearably sweet and so full of bubbles that it made him cough and sneeze. The food came in three white boxes. The first contained some kind of smelly stew. In the second, he found vegetables covered in a thick, yellowish gravy. And the last box brought cold, fried meatballs, whose texture made him think of glued sawdust. Agent Lagarde explained that the food came from the "Tandoori Palace", the best Asia-Fusion bistro in the neighbourhood. Georges didn't know what to say. What European army fed its servicemen colonial food?

Everything looked foreign and strange. The walls were not made of stone, brick or wood. They sounded hollow and fragile if knocked upon, as if made of plywood. The most bizarre objects were plugged into white sockets screwed into those puny walls. He didn't understand those things, as well as he ignored the nature of the black, flat objects that everyone carried in their pockets. He had noticed the brightly coloured images on their surfaces and the sounds and human voices they emitted as if they were some sort of ultramodern telephones. It was a marvellous and frightening sight. He saw people tap on the flat surfaces with their fingers. They used them to write! What a mind-blowing invention! His captors possessed a technology against which the whole Entente wouldn't stand a chance. Georges

had to break free and go back to inform the Command of the threat. But how?

5.

At half past three, a kind man came to visit. He was tall, lean and bald. His eyes, quiet and vigilant like those of a shepherd dog, pierced Georges like a bayonet. He was unmistakably a doctor.

"Wonderful uniform," he said, closing the door and laying his bag on the table. "I understand that your aeroplane is a marvel, too."

Georges squinted up at him in anger, thinking of his SPAD, and asked:

"Where am I?"

"You are in Moorsele, Belgium, right out of Courtrai."

"What nation holds me captive? Who are you?"

"My name is Koop Maertens, and I am no soldier. There are no soldiers here. This is a police station, and you are no prisoner of war. You are being held because of your performance at the airshow."

"There we go again. I don't know what an airshow is, nor of any performances. How many times do I have to repeat the same fact? You must believe me. Something terrible has happened. I don't know where I am, everything is so absurd. If you are not my enemy, why don't you let me go? I must cross the lines and warn the Higher Command that we are in grave danger."

Maertens let him speak. The boy was clearly affected by some serious form of hallucination, although he sounded calm, reasonable and rather civilised. He would not sedate him for now. He wanted to hear more and be sure he was not playing the fool.

"So, you would be Captain Georges Guynemer? Correct?"

"Finally!"

Maertens took his phone and tapped on it. Then he read aloud:

"French pilot of the Great War, recipient of the Legion d'Honneur for his fifty-four confirmed victories, on Tuesday..."

Maertens continued reading in silence: *on Tuesday, 11 September 1917, Georges Guynemer disappeared in a cloud over the Belgian town of Poelcappelle while chasing a German two-seater. Neither his body nor his SPAD XIII were ever found.* Maertens scratched his forehead. The resemblance between the boy and the man portrayed on the webpage was unsettling.

"If you excuse me, I'll be back in a minute," the psychiatrist said and left the room, closing the door. He rushed to the Chief Inspector's office and stormed in without knocking.

"So? Already done? Did he tell you his name?" Coppens asked.

"No. He keeps repeating the same story like a broken record."

"What a jerk."

"There's something odd that I don't understand", Maertens said.

"What's that?"

The psychiatrist handed his telephone over to him. Coppens quickly scrolled, and the wrinkle on his forehead deepened.

"What am I reading?"

Before Maertens could reply, agent Leon Mersault entered, followed by another cop, Hubert Bonnard, who had just arrived from the polygon.

"Oh well, I can use good news," Coppens said.

"Hold your horses, Chief Inspector," Bonnard began to say. "I've seen those weapons. They're Vickers, cal. 7.7, 400 rounds per minute, synchronised with the propeller."

Coppens stared at him impatiently and asked, "Vickers? What does that mean?"

"It means, Chief Inspector, that they belong in a museum. No factory produces such things anymore."

"I talked to Marcel," Leon said. "He examined the aeroplane as soon as we left. He found serial numbers on the weapons, radiator and compressor, and he claims it's stuff from 1917."

"Codswallop," the Chief growled, standing up. "You want me to believe that the boy is a pilot of the First World War who vanished into a cloud a hundred years ago?"

No one replied.

"Are you insane? That faker is pissing himself laughing, while we discuss if he is the ghost of... whatshisname."

"Georges Guynemer," Maertens said.

"Whatever. Tell him to cut the bullshit. He's already in trouble. It takes me a second to charge him. In the meantime, plane and guns are out of bound. Leon, search all flight licences issued over the last five years in Belgium and France."

"I have an idea," Maertens said. "I can't rule out, professionally speaking, that the boy might be affected by a multiple personality syndrome, which would explain why he claims to be someone else. Now, there's a monument in Poelcappelle dedicated to that Guynemer. If we showed him the monument, we could convince him that he is experiencing delusions. Even if..."

"What?", Coppens asked with a dull face.

"He really looks like him."

"I don't care. Give your theory a shot. Lagarde and Mersault will drive you there."

6.

Maertens and Yvonne Lagarde escorted Georges to the car, where Leon was waiting with the engine on.

"Where are you taking me?" Georges asked.

"There's something you should see in Poelcappelle," Martens replied, sitting next to him.

Georges knew that Poelcappelle lay in the midst of the battle, razed to the ground. But he didn't say anything. In a few minutes, they reached the town. Georges stared in awe. Poelcappelle had been rebuilt and thrived with life. Mersault drove along Wallemolenstraat until they reached Guynemerplein.

Maertens pointed at a stone pillar with a bronze stork on its top. Leon pulled over, and Maertens walked with Georges down to the monument, where they read the inscription carved there in 1923. The boy looked around in astonishment, for nothing looked real any-

more. The town should have been a pile of rubble, not unlike Ypres, Langemark, St. Julien, Bixschoote, and Passchendaele.

Anguish rose to his throat. Never had he heard of any road named after someone alive, let alone a monument! He shook his head, confused. His big eyes looked around, clueless. He felt his heart pounding in his throat. He stared at Maersten with horror and realised he was dead.

7.

The psychiatrist pulled him gently back to the car. Georges felt dizzy. He had always believed that when one dies, the soulless body remains cold and numb just like a thing. On the contrary, he could feel everything around and inside his body and was aware of his thoughts as if nothing had changed at all.

He looked at the unlikely version of Paradise offered by the streets of Poelcappelle. He did not understand how it could have happened. Maybe, he thought, he had collided with another machine in the cloud. Or maybe the Hun anti-aircraft gunners got him. He had no idea.

"This makes no sense!" he suddenly cried, startling the other passengers. "This is not 1917!"

"It's not, indeed," Lagarde said. "Why don't you stop playing?"

Maertens showed Georges his telephone:

"Look here. Does it mean anything?"

Georges saw the picture of a yellow SPAD VII, with the stork and the big red 2 painted on the fuselage.

"That's my old *Vieux Charles*! I haven't seen it for months."

"Would you like to see it again?"

"I'd most like that, yes," Georges said, desperately looking for something real to cling on.

Maertens leant towards Leon and said into his ear:

"I think it's time to pay a visit to the Museum of Air and Space."

"But that's in Paris! We cannot pass the border without a permit," the cop replied.

"Leave that to me. I'll speak to the Chief Inspector. Will you just drive, please?"

A few minutes later, after a short and unpleasant conversation with Maertens, Chief Inspector Coppens called his French colleague, Inspector Arnaud Boyet, to inform him of Maertens' plan. Boyet did not have the time to protest. Coppens agreed with him that the whole thing was just ridiculous, but as long as it made the problem disappear, he was perfectly happy with it.

8.

Maertens bought a pair of blue jeans, sneakers, a white T-shirt and modern underpants for Georges. The young man looked at those clothes with perplexity, but said nothing. At the end of such a long, strange day, it was hard to say how he felt. The nervous strain had a soporific and depressing effect on him. His sleepiness was suddenly broken by fits of agitation, especially after the car had been engulfed by Paris' traffic. The boy looked overwhelmed and sadly thought about his forsaken youth.

"Why did you bring him here, doctor?" Inspector Boyet asked Maertens, as they arrived at the Police station in Dugny.

"I believe I can help that boy," the doctor replied.

"I see. And would you be so nice to share your theory with me?"

"I plan to take him to the Air and Space Museum tomorrow, to show him the aeroplane of that Guynemer he claims to be. Afterwards, we'll visit the Centre Pompidou and the Musée de l'Armée."

"Lovely! A nice holiday."

Maertens squinted, but he felt too tired to argue:

"I don't expect you to understand. All I ask for, is that you let me try. I need one day."

"Look, I have to run a Police station, and this city is no Belgian village. You've caused already enough havoc, crossing the border on a foreign police vehicle with two armed officers. Do you get that? Let's

keep it quiet. Your escort will leave immediately, and tomorrow, agent Picard will escort you on your little family trip. But if I have no name and address by the evening, I'll be forced to send your patient to the psychiatric ward. I can't keep him here, nor can he go to jail without charges. Coppens doesn't want him back. He said that if the boy is a Frenchman, as he claims to be, then he's a French problem. Of course, there's no Guynemer at 89 Roue de la Tour. One thing matters to me: making sure he's not going to become *my* problem. Am I clear?"

Maertens didn't say anything. Boyet looked at him for a while, then he shook his head and walked away.

The two Belgian policemen annexed Maertens' report to their file before leaving, and Yvonne said goodbye to the boy with unexpected warmth.

9.

That night, Maertens remained awake in his hotel room, observing all the portraits of Guynemer he could find on the Internet. The likeness between the boy and the pilot disconcerted him. He had heard of cases of multiple personality accompanied by astonishing somatic changes. But this Guynemer case bordered on the supernatural.

In the morning, Agent Picard picked up Maertens. Georges was already in the car, as he had slept at the police station.

"How you doing, kid?" Maertens asked him.

Georges nodded in silence. Maertens stared at him in awe. He thought about a picture he saw in the night, where a sharp Guynemer leans over the nose of his aeroplane. And now, he saw the same stern and tense expression on the boy's long face.

Picard drove to the airport and finally the museum, ahead of the opening time. A man and a woman greeted them at the entrance, and without further ado, they led the guests to the Great War Hall. Maertens had kept the reason for their visit secret. He had just said they were shooting a documentary. Georges looked around in awe, especially when he saw the aeroplanes parked in the hall or hanging from its high ceiling. Finally he saw his old yellow SPAD VII parked on a fake piece of muddy ground. Next to the machine, there was his

picture. As he saw his old, dear *Vieux Charles*, Georges slowly walked towards the machine, as if in a dream. She looked worn-out and discoloured, as if more than rain and sun had withered her wings and the slender body, already gashed and pierced by bullets and splinters. It looked incredibly old and fragile.

"What happened to her? What is she doing here?" he asked, getting close to the aeroplane, like someone who reaches out for a sick friend.

"I'm sorry, you can't get close to it... don't touch it!" the woman cried, but Maertens held her.

"Wait. Let him."

"No way! It's forbidden to touch any item, especially that one. Do you know how old it is?"

"I do."

Georges, after all, dared not touch his *Vieux Charles*. He stood by her as if some invisible screen separated them forever.

"Why is she here?" he asked again. "Why does she look so... ancient?"

The woman looked puzzled. Maertens asked, "Did you bring the other items?"

On a trolley, they showed a small sepia portrait of Guynemer, some pictures and one medal.

"By Jove, I know that picture!" Georges cried. "Monsieur Farré has visited all the bases to portray us pilots and our machines. Everybody knows him."

"What's he talking about?" mumbled the woman, staring at him. Then she pressed her hands to her mouth, as if she had seen a ghost: "That's impossible..."

"Thank you very much for your time," Maertens hurriedly said, and without waiting for any reply, he dragged away Georges, followed by a clueless Picard.

10.

In the following hours, they visited both the Centre Pompidou and the Musée de l'Armée. Maertens showed Georges more portraits, medals, postcards, and stamps. One painting even depicted an angel extracting him – or his soul – from the cockpit of his falling machine, in an epic apotheosis. He was also shown the bent Spandau machine gun he had recovered from the wreck of his forty-third victory.

"I remember that," Georges commented. "It was February 16 or 17. My father was there with me when that picture was taken."

Finally, he was shown his personal box and the red-and-blue kepi. On the box, a label had been glued with his father's name written on it.

"That's my stuff... but why did they write my father's name on the box?"

Maertens hesitated a while before answering.

"They sent it to him, after you disappeared."

Georges looked at the tips of his shoes, mournfully. He remembered the chase, the cloud, and his thoughts went to his parents, their grief, the infinite sadness that had survived in those soulless objects.

Martens felt sympathy for him. The idea that Captain Georges Guynemer had returned from the dead after one hundred years was crazy, and yet there was no other explanation. Who would believe him? He wanted to spare the boy further suffering, but what could he do? How could the boy live in a world he didn't belong to? He was just a memory, a glorious one, but a memory.

A few visitors stopped looking at the paintings and other items, without paying any attention to them. Georges was standing before his box and dared not touch it. He could feel neither pride nor gratitude.

"I never asked for this," he said, pointing at the relics he had been shown. "I don't care of those things anymore. Can I go now?"

"Where do you think you're going?" Picard held him.

Maertens freed Georges' arm and said, "Agent Picard, would you mind if talked to him alone for a moment?"

"All right. Five minutes. I'll wait outside."

"Do you still need these things?" the museum's employee asked once the cop had left.

"No, thanks. You can take them back," Maertens said.

"As for me, you can throw them away," Georges added.

The man looked at him, scratching his forehead, and said:

"Look, I know I should mind my business, but I just wanted to say that I believe you. This thing that you did, coming here from somewhere else across time and space, well, it's something one reads in books and sees in movies. You know, when different universes come to touch for some mysterious reasons, gates open on both sides and things can get through. But what happens here is no longer the same there, on the other side, God knows why. I've worked in this museum for twenty-five years, and I was just twenty-five when I started. This place and job are half my life. That can't be all! With all the places to see and things to do, people to meet, and thoughts to think, how can someone live just one life? There must be many other me, living lives I can't even dream about. Our infinite souls speak to each other in ways we don't understand. So, there's no reason to be worried. Tomorrow you might be somewhere else, where the war never existed. And maybe, our souls will meet again over there and speculate on the impermanence of all things. Ironical, isn't it? Sorry for my intrusion, and fare thee well, young wanderer!"

The man pushed his trolley and walked away without turning back. Maertens and Georges looked at him vanish down the corridor.

"What was he blathering about?" Maertens asked.

"I don't know. But I'm sure that I'm not the madman. I was thinking, though, that I had a strange dream a few days ago. It was a quiet dream, without war, fear, or screams. I was in the future, a hundred years ahead, and I saw a marvellous new world. But I was no longer myself, if you know what I mean. Does it make any sense to you?"

"It might. Why don't we talk about it in front of a beer? We can order pizza."

"Pizza? I heard about it once, from an Italian cavalryman I met in Reims. His name was Baracca, he was training to become a pilot."

"You must have plenty of stories to tell. Girls like that, you know?"

Georges smiled and said, "I'm glad I spent these hours with you."

"It was my pleasure. I'll lead the way out."

Maertens walked along the corridor feeling happy and confused. He was relieved to feel the sunlight and the fresh September air on his face. Picard, standing by the car, tossed away his cigarette.

"Where did you leave him?" he cried.

Maertens looked around, bewildered. He had left the museum alone.

11.

On a train bound for Ypres, Maertens brooded. The boy had tricked him, and now he sniffed trouble in the air. He was ashamed and angry with himself for having agreed to play that silly make-believe masquerade. It was an incredibly stupid thing to do, the worst professional blunder of his life. Maybe it was high time to take a break and travel somewhere far away. His vibrating telephone awoke him from his ruminations.

"We have to talk," Coppens said in a stern tone. Maertens gulped.

"Chief Inspector, listen to me, please. I know I screwed up, I lowered my guard for a second. But I'm sure we'll find him..."

"What are you talking about? I can't hear you, where are you?"

"On a train. Didn't Boyet call you?"

"He didn't. Look, that damn aeroplane has disappeared."

"What?" cried Maertens, thinking that the boy had managed to return there, God knows how, sneak into the deposit, and fly away! That punk was a little devil! Chief Inspector Coppens, meanwhile, continued:

"The funny thing is that no one has come to retrieve it! For Christ's sake, how can such a big thing vanish? Can you explain that to me? Where are you? Where's the boy?"

Maertens was listening as in a dream, and when the signal was finally lost, he remained perfectly quiet in the silence of the coach, gently rocked by the hypnotic clickety-clack of the wheels.

He looked at the quiet countryside fading in the long, purple twilight. He saw for a moment a distant black speck in the clear sky. It looked almost still, floating in the air. Maertens watched it vanish into a cloud, lined in gold against the sunset. He looked and waited, but nothing came out of that cloud ever again.