

Extract from the novel by Andrij KOKOTYUHA Full Moon

Написав Andrij KOKOTYUHA
Середа, 08 жовтня 2014, 09:39



Extract from the retro-detective novel by Andrij KOKOTYUHA *Full Moon*

Translated by *Patrick John Corness*

“How can you explain it, Comrade Lieutenant?”

Somov looked up at Levchenko. When the latter made his report he ordered him to present it orally. But as Andrij was speaking he skimmed the written pages, gradually sinking back down in his seat. By the time the report was completed the captain was resting his shoulders on the back of the chair, leaning back as far as possible, twiddling in his fingers a neatly sharpened pencil and giving him a severe look.

“It’s all set out there, comrade captain,” said Levchenko guardedly. “I’ve nothing to add to what has just been said. And then ... You were present, comrade captain. You saw it all for yourself.

Firstly, in the pursuit led by Andrij they had come across an abandoned Willis. At the time they wondered what sort of a place this was – with that old wall. It was pleasant round there; they even felt relaxed. Levchenko was accustomed to confiding in him. Suddenly, within a very short time, strange events had started to occur round there. Suddenly, he thought of Polina Stefanivna; after all, she lived quite near by. He, the chief of police at Sataniv, was a lodger in

her house. Who knows, what if the gangsters had singled out that house some time ago? Their only possible course of action was to go back to the last place the police would search for them, if they were going to search at all. Maybe at this very moment the frightened elderly librarian was being held hostage, waiting for her chief inspector to return home after an unsuccessful hunt.

However, he soon dismissed such fears. Instead, he focused on working out which way the gangsters might have gone. He gave orders for the soldiers and the police who were with him to spread out and comb the woods. They did find traces of blood, though they were unable to do so immediately, so his fear that the fugitives might attack Stefanivna, who was on her own, vanished altogether.

Lieutenant Borisov made a feeble attempt to convince his namesake that a police raid late in the evening, actually at night, especially in the forest, could turn out to be a waste of time. Levchenko gave talk like this short shrift. He agreed with Borisov: he was not in a position to give orders to the platoon commander. But then he recalled that the operation was planned jointly. Shooting had taken place, indeed it was a real battle and they had both suffered casualties. So considerations as to how and when it would be more appropriate to pursue the enemy were simply not an issue.

Anyway, later it turned out that the gangsters had not managed to get very far. Lieutenant Borisov came across the bodies. When he saw them he cried out. He ought not to have reacted this way on finding dead bodies; after all he had been on the front lines for eighteen months, after his accelerated officer training.

“I saw it,” said Somov.

Suddenly, he unexpectedly sat bolt upright in his chair. He abruptly snapped his pencil and threw the pieces in various directions. He leaned forward and barked, momentarily losing his composure:

I want to hear about it from you, Levchenko, Do you hear? You're the chief of police! You've been working on it a long time! Or haven't you?

Andrij did not speak. Somov, feeling that he had snapped and that he looked undignified in the eyes of the junior officer and indeed of the police officer as well, stood up and straightened his tunic. He went to the large rectangular metal safe, which was waist-high to him. Opening it, he took out an already started bottle of state-produced vodka, and two tea glasses in their holders. He put them on the table and briskly half-filled both glasses. Unceremoniously he ordered Levchenko to drink up. With a gasp, he emptied his own glass and immediately lit a cigarette. He waited for Andrij to follow suit. Only after that did he sit down again at the table and continue, now more calmly:

“I need theories, lieutenant.”

“I threw all police forces into the elimination of Teply’s gang,” said Levchenko. “You and I identified this particular problem as a priority. There were no orders to catch a mad wolf. As I recall, we didn’t even take that seriously.”

“You have a poor memory, lieutenant. Not that of a professional.

“Why?” burst out Andrij.

“Because I didn’t mention any wolf to you. Old wives’ tales. I assumed that posing as the so-called murderous beast the remnants of a band of German nationalist henchmen who have settled somewhere in the forest are attempting to spread terror. In other words, this so-called werewolf is within the competence of state security.”

“All the more reason for us in the police not to have dealt with them,” said Levchenko with obvious relief.

“But you must have your own theory about what happened,” insisted Somov stubbornly.

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“Let me repeat it one more time. Three gangsters, having suffered one casualty, decided to sit it out. They can’t have got very far into the depths of the forest, because they are slowed down by the man with gunshot wounds. Everything points to their having paused to catch their breath. Possibly to discuss plans for further activities. They had little chance of making their way out without ammunition for their automatic pistols. One of them has a knife – that’s their only weapon. That’s the one who recognised me – I still can’t understand how ... our paths can’t ever have crossed before. Only now will we be able to establish the identities of all three, as we know... ...”

“You’re going round in circles,” said Somov, interrupting him.

“Yes, I did warn you that I would have nothing new to say. You asked what happened. I’m sketching a preliminary scenario. Now it’s night-time and the perimeter is surrounded by Borisov’s soldiers. At sunrise, when visibility improves, it will be possible to proceed with our investigation. We’re bound to find some footprints. Then we’ll get the answer you need.”

“But will it be the one I need?” asked Somov, raising his eyebrows. “Am I the only one who needs all this?”

“I’m sorry, Comrade Captain, I’m afraid I have no idea what you what you want to hear from me now.”

“All right. Let’s go over it once again. What do you think actually happened there?”

Andrij struggled to contain a deep sigh.

“Tentatively, at first blush, it looks like this. First of all they attacked the man who had become separated from the main group, needing to relieve himself in the bushes perhaps. After killing the first man, the assailant revealed himself. He came out of hiding and began to chase a victim, who had started to run. He caught up with him and killed him, then he returned to deal with the wounded man. That’s all.

“Cut his throat,” pointed out Somov.

“Bit him to death”

“Just with his teeth?”

“I don’t know. The bodies are in the morgue. Neshcheret is examining them. Conclusions about the manner of the murder will be drawn later.”

“You say the handwriting is the same as in other cases of the so-called werewolf attack?”

“It’s similar, Comrade Captain. We’ve already spoken about that, haven’t we?”

“More than once or twice,” Somov readily agreed. But tonight the timetable has changed slightly. Don’t you think so, lieutenant? Three killed. One after another, all at once. Not a local woman, a defenceless woman or a young girl. Armed men, experienced gangsters, tough criminals. Two of the three were able to offer resistance. Even though there were no firearms there; you can’t just get them for a song, as they say. Are we saying that a large forest animal bit their throats, all three of them? One after another?”

“I have no explanation yet.”

“Ah!” Somov meaningfully raised a finger. He re-filled the glasses with vodka, beckoned to Andrij to come closer to the table, swallowed the vodka without clinking glasses and invited Andrij to follow suit, then he continued, clearly quite excited as his imagination grew and he became increasingly agitated. “I’ll do my utmost to get this out of you, lieutenant! Just tell me! Because I know, I worked it out straight away. I want to be clear that there is someone who follows my way of thinking, and will support me if it comes to it. Do you support me?”

“If it comes to what?”

“Just tell me straight. Do you believe it is an enormous wolf, or even that werewolf of local folklore, that is killing them all?”

After what he had seen in the forest Levchenko remembered a conversation with Doctor Neshcheret and the wolf fur found at in a clearing, near the human footprints.

“I don’t believe in fairy tales, comrade captain, he replied, as though making a report. “Or in superstition.”

“Good man! But what do you believe in?” Without allowing him to interject, he continued: “The same as me. Props, lieutenant, intimidation. The enemy is not asleep in the rear. He is on the alert. Not satisfied with killing someone, he works disguised as a wolf, you see. He plays, you might say, on human fears and prejudices. Oh yes, and on the pernicious influence of religion.”

“What has religion got to do with it?”

“Levchenko, you aren’t local, are you? I’m not from round here either. But during my military service, in small towns or villages like this, and what have you, I’ve seen all sorts, frankly. The further you go from the big cities, where Soviet power has long since become firmly established and where there are no priests, the more complicated the situation becomes. For centuries, lieutenant, for centuries, the clergy have been brainwashing people. Especially here. The closer to the west, the nearer you get to formerly bourgeois Poland, the more intimidated people are. They’ll believe in anything, Comrade Lieutenant. The bourgeois nationalists use it against us, and against them.”

“Against who?”

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“The people, lieutenant, the local population. The people have experienced the horrors of occupation. The Nazis shot, raped, burned and butchered. Then the Red Army under the wise leadership of Comrade Stalin undertook the victorious offensive. What remains for the agents of fascism and the German mercenaries who escaped justice? That's right, to instigate guerrilla fighting here. And so that legitimate authority in these small settlements could not rely fully on the people they have to be demoralised. That's what's going on, lieutenant!”

I wonder whether he believes it himself, thought Levchenko. He found the answer immediately: Exactly, he believes it. He's definitely not kidding. Somov was on a roll, but it was unlikely to be the drink talking. This seasoned officer could take his drink. No, what it's really about is how far the head of the department of the NKVD is correct in his rather fantastic assumptions.

In other words, how far he, the chief of police, with knowledge shared only with Anton Savich Neshcheret, was ready to play along with Somov. Supporting the same theory.

“Let's suppose that's the case,” he ventured cautiously, feeling the drink starting to cause a slight buzzing in his head, “then I have a question, comrade captain. Seriously.”

The occupant of the office, glancing at the remains of the vodka in the bottle, nodded to himself and poured out what was left of it into the glasses.

“Well, then.

Why did the nationalists, or whoever it is we have hiding in the woods, attack the three gangsters? Actually, how many of them could there be? It was not an individual acting on his own; there were at least two of them. Are we talking about another armed group in this region?”

“I agree. This is exactly the train of thought I anticipated from you, lieutenant. I have to yell at you to make you think straight.”

Andrij, finding it best to ignore this remark, went on:

“If the victims and the murderers are all gangsters, they are unlikely to be mutual enemies. That means they killed their own. In other words, they played into our hands, either deliberately or unwittingly. Something doesn’t stack up here; what do you think?”

Somov frowned, as though it had only just occurred to him. Then he picked up his glass, shaking his glass invitingly:

“You raised the question yourself, so you’ll have to find the answer. “No initiative goes unpunished” as they say!. You will give me your reply as soon as possible, lieutenant. God knows what went on between them there and how it turned out. Perhaps they are accomplices. What if they were planning to raid the warehouse together? And the guys in the forest, seeing that the criminals had messed up, and that they also had one man wounded, took out the undesirable witnesses in one fell swoop, intimidating people into the bargain. But you, I hope, gave strict instructions to everyone to keep their mouths shut, to avoid spreading panic unnecessarily?”

“Exactly. A briefing was held.”

“Remind them anyway. Anyone who starts blabbing or breathes so much as a word about werewolves will play into the hands of the enemy and will by the same token become an enemy of the people, by spreading propaganda. We are at war. Do I need to spell it out that I am authorised to order summary execution for such acts of provocation?”

“I don’t think so. They all heard what you said today.”

“No harm in repeating it,” said Somov stubbornly.

The telephone sprang into life. The captain looked at it as though he was seeing it for the first

time, then he emptied his glass in one gulp, walked round the desk and picked up.

“Hello. Somov speaking.”

As he passed by, he forced Andrij to step aside and move to the opposite end of the desk. As the rule was, no documents were lying about unnecessarily, for strangers to see. Just one sheet of paper was visible under the massive inkstand, clearly a trophy left behind by the previous owners.

Glancing at it, Levchenko recognised his own handwriting.

“I will report on the results within twenty four hours, comrade colonel!” promised Somov to someone in the ebonite receiver, resting his backside against the desk, standing with his back to Andrij.

Something caught his eye.

Furtively glancing to see if the captain was about to turn around, Levchenko lifted the inkstand.

With the tips of his fingers he dragged the sheet towards him.

“No, comrade colonel! Georgij Teplov was not identified as one of the casualties!” bellowed the captain.

Andrij cast his eyes over the familiar list. He had drawn it up himself, on the orders of Somov. The latter had not given his reasons. He merely gave orders to note down everyone who had shown up in Satanov since the beginning of September.

Nothing out of the ordinary, routine data collection. It is the raison d'être of the NKVD to examine such data. Somov, being busy with this case, had not been in a great hurry for it. Andrij, who also had more important matters to deal with, gave the necessary instructions to his subordinates. It was not a matter of first priority, but it had to be done.

Eventually, he received a list of fourteen people.

Now he was looking at it.

Surname number eight was underlined.

Twice, actually.

“Yes, exactly, comrade colonel!”

Sensing that the conversation would be concluded at any moment, Levchenko replaced the sheet of paper.

When Somov hung up and turned round, Andrij followed the former's example and drank up his vodka.

“You can go now, comrade lieutenant. Where to now?”

“To work on your theory. Our doctor has probably investigated the injuries by now. He is no forensic expert, but he will certainly be able to tell us something.

“Let’s hope he’ll say something sensible. Go on, don’t hang about! The corpses have to be sent to Kamyanets. Identification and all the rest of it. Instructions will be handed down to us later. Meanwhile, carry on working as usual.

Levchenko saluted, then turned round and left.

He could not work out why a minor detail had stood out for him.

The secret service agent had underlined the surname of a certain Igor Petrovich Volkov, thinly the first time then once more, heavily.

He had even pressed hard, crushing the slate pencil.

Had also seen Somov break his pencil in his presence when his nerves suddenly snapped.

A very similar situation.

For some reason, no other names were underlined ...

Details.

Someone somewhere spoke of the devil being in the detail. We need to ask Stefanivna. Or Larysa; both are well-read.

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And anyway, it's rather suspicious that the captain is paying special attention to Igor Petrovich Volkov.

The list is on the desk, before the eyes of comrade captain of State Security.

There is more to this.

Interesting.

The translation was reviewed by Svitlana and Bogdan Babych