

THE ZIPPELIUS SECRET

I

“It’s a girl!” cried Conrad Zip triumphantly, lifting the faintly-moaning little creature that the midwife had just placed in his large hands above his head.

Take note that he would have exclaimed every bit as gladly if it had been a boy. What gladdened his heart, above all, was the child, the little beloved being born to him and his wife, the beautiful Mieke Peeters, whom he had married scarcely 15 months before, and who was at that moment smiling, fully recompensed for the pains she had endured by her husband’s joy...

To tell the truth, she had been almost afraid. It had been such a long time ago that Conrad had told their neighbor Michel Pernaert that it would be a sturdy boy, and he had made plans, exercising his masculine energy on advance, dreaming of putting a sculptor’s mallet in his hand, throwing him into confrontation with a block of marble and shouting at him: “Make art!”

Well, it was a girl, that’s all! Conrad was delighted, and a child-like smile spread across his benevolent beardless face, crowned with red hair. His happiness radiated forth broadly, simple and frank.

He held the whimpering baby over the bed and said: “Say thank you to Mama.”

Thank you for being born? Thank you for being alive? He was evidently no pessimist.

Conrad Zippelius, at first called Zippel and then, by definitive abbreviation, Zip, had arrived in Paris four years before, alone and penniless, with a very small pension of 100 francs a month given to him by an uncle who lived a long way away in his birthplace, Blankens—a village unknown to geographical nomenclature, on the shore of the North Sea, at the extreme limit of France.

Conrad was only slightly acquainted with the village and even less so with the uncle. Orphaned at the age of six, he had lived, as they say, from hand to mouth, as a lodger in the house of a curé in the neighborhood of Dunkerque, learning various things without knowing any of them, having but one desire: that he be left alone in some corner with a knife and a block of wood.

Officially, he deciphered the *Epitome*, and even the *De viris*;¹ at 15, he plunged into the fluid waters of the gentle Virgil...but he lacked conviction, and the stanzas of Horace remained dead to him. Tacitus frightened him; that laconism wounded him, like a kind of harshness.

He was gentle; he loved nature, flowers and vast horizons. He was a dreamer, possessed of a passion for reproducing, by means of a pencil or a chisel, everything that caught his attention. The inevitable artist-laureate of numerous academies, who was passing through the region, had seen his sketches and had declared that his forehead was marked with the seal of genius. Since Conrad, though French and very French, was Flemish in origin, no one doubted that he was destined to rejoice in the glory of a Rembrandt or even to borrow from Scandinavian genius the inspiration of a Thorwaldsen.²

In truth, Conrad was a very quiet boy who liked to carve wood that was not too hard and make pretty drawings of pretty faces; he was no Michelangelo. While very young, he was praised, encouraged and urged on, and for a few years felt the enthusiasm of a false vocation. Absolutely reasonable, however—and by virtue of that, perhaps a true artist—he understood

¹ The anonymous *Epitome de Caesaribus* and *De viris illustribus urbis Romae* by the Abbé Lhomond were texts describing the lives of various Roman emperors used in the teaching of Latin in French schools.

² The Danish sculptor Bertel Thorwaldsen (1779-1844).

from the beginning that he was not a creator but a first-rate copyist, imagining nothing beyond what he had seen, but adept at reproducing it, and even of adding to the copy a suggestion of originality. He was an archetype of intelligent modesty.

The curé, who was collaborating with the Bollandists,³ paid very little heed to him, not out of indifference but more by virtue of confidence. He was sure of the boy; if ever he lost sight of him, he was certain of finding him in some meadow, molding the clay soil or in search of some gouache effect. Conrad was utterly ignorant of the effusive possibilities of familial love.

The curé sometimes talked to him about his father—a mad ceramicist, apparently, who had wasted his life searching for a lost color. His mother, according to what he was told, was a shrewish woman who had hastened her husband's death by reproaching him day and night for squandering his resources in costly experiments that were, in her view, ridiculous.

Monsieur le Curé was very calm. Once placed under prohibition for having attempted to discover in Christ's teachings more than the Catholic Church desired, but now submissive—or, rather, broken—the worthy man had taught his pupil the greatest science of all, which is called resignation.

“There is only one word that is useful in life,” he had told him, “and that word is...*Amen!* If ever dolor strikes you, my child, if some catastrophe falls upon you, when the initial moment of surprise has passed, only pronounce that word: *Amen!*...and go on your way.”

And saying *Amen!* the curé had died.

Of his family, Conrad knew nothing more, except that, being called Zippelius, he was of Dutch descent. According to what he had been told, he had a whole host of uncles and cousins. Why did one of those uncles, whom he had never seen, give him that pension of 100 francs a month? He had no idea, and, moreover, having a mind not much inclined persistent reflection, did not worry about it. The curé, questioned discreetly on one occasion, had replied evasively. It appeared that the branch of the Zippelius family in question did not enjoy an excellent reputation. No details. When necessary, the curé made the sign of the cross and kept quiet—so quiet that he passed on without having said another word.

Conrad found himself severely embarrassed and sought advice from a resident of Dunkerque, who urged him strongly to go to Paris.

Why not? Conrad asked himself. *Amen!*

Being a man of simple tastes, he found very modest lodgings near the Jardin des Plantes and, furnished with a few letters of recommendation, looked for work. Chance favored him marvelously. Almost immediately, he met a worthy Fleming who sold as 17th century originals pictures painted in lamp-black in the poor quarters, and antiquities whose origin was all the more authentic for the fact that Monsieur Hans Peeters would have been able, if necessary, to identify their author. It was, at any rate, a good trade, which prospered.

Conrad painted sunsets over the Zuyder Zee and manufactured stoneware; his blue eyes looked longingly at Mieke—little Marie Peeters, who was surely the best child in the world, and whom the handsome youth, being by no means intimidating, did not frighten at all. He was then 25; she was 20. Monsieur Hans asked for nothing more than that he should not seem to be throwing his daughter at any suitor whatsoever, and the marriage was made. *Amen!* And, in truth, Conrad had no need to make any appeal to his customary resignation. Mieke was as good a wife as she had been a winsome bride, and the newly-formed household set about gently drifting down the stream of life.

³ The Dutch Jesuit Jean Bolland (1596-1665) was entrusted the task of compiling the *Acta sanctorum*, a massive and supposedly-definitive collection of lives of the saints, with abundant annotation. The project was continued after his death by a continually-renewed group of scholars, the Bollandists, whose work was plagued by numerous interruptions and controversies over the centuries; it is still being updated.

The Flemish masters were in demand at the time, and sword-hilts were much in vogue. Conrad worked hard, having acquired an incomparable dexterity. Furthermore, he had a friend, Michel Penaert, a second-hand bookdealer by trade and a collector of old stamps, who had furnished more than one model. His personality was no less placid than his own, and accorded admirably therewith.

And now Conrad was the father of a little daughter, whom he named Monique, because she was born on May 4, the day when the Church celebrates the mother of Saint Augustine. Father Peeters, delighted, talked about ceding his business definitely to his son-in-law, wishing to visit the museums of Holland before he died, in order that he might, at least once, see some authentic canvases. Two more months—the time necessary for Mieke to recover completely—and it would be a done deal.

It was all smiles in the young household, therefore, and Conrad found himself perfectly happy.

On September 8, Monique, having reached her fourth month without difficulty, was suckling avidly at her mother's breast when the postman came into the shop and, espying Conrad, who was putting the final touches to an 18th century ewer, said: "A registered letter, Monsieur Zippelius."

Conrad uttered an exclamation of surprise. He never received personal letters, the commercial correspondence being all in the name Peeters. But the envelope bore his name, correctly spelled, with the postmark of Bollezeele, a little village not far from Dunkerque.

Conrad signed for it, and went over to Mieke. "Who can be writing to me from there?" he said, his voice a trifle anxious.

"Open it, my love, and you'll know immediately."

Conrad observed yet again that Mieke gave good advice, carefully introduced the blade of a paper-knife into the flap of the envelope, and sliced it open.

The letter bore this inscription in the corner: *Office of Maître Vanlenberghe, Notary at Bollezeele (Nord)*. It read as follows:

Monsieur, I have the honor of informing you of the death of Monsieur Jean-Martin Zippelius, who, by an authentic testament deposited in my office, had appointed you his sole heir, under certain conditions that I shall hasten to make known to you on the day when it pleases you to present yourself at my office, the reading of the aforementioned conditions having to be made before witnesses, according to the express wishes of the deceased.

I shall also place myself at your disposal for any supplementary information of which you might have need.

I have the honor, etc.

"Uncle Jean is dead," said Conrad, sadly. He had a good heart.

"You didn't know him?"

"No."

"And he's left you everything he possessed!"

"I didn't even know that he possessed anything. However, he's always treated me benevolently, for he's the one to whom I owe the small pension that permitted me to live."

"Didn't you ever write to him to thank him?"

"The curé who brought me up always told me that Uncle Jean's strict instruction was never to hear mention of me. If I had written to him, he would have cut off my income."

"What a strange uncle! What are you going to do?"

"What do you think I should do?"

"Will it require a very long journey?"

"A few hours by rail." He added, with a sigh: "But I'm so well set-up here! Then again, have I any right to this inheritance? Is it worth the trouble of a displacement? Not to mention

these conditions of which the notary is making a mystery, as if it weren't simpler to tell me straight out whether it's this or that."

"But if he's obeying your uncle's instructions..."

Conrad felt worried, although he would certainly not have been able to say why. It was as if his heart were being gripped by anguish—but of what was there to be frightened? Ordinarily, the unexpected news of an inheritance is given a more joyful welcome. After all, what it might be was of scant importance; it was still an unanticipated windfall.

"And we must think of Monique's future," the mother of the family added.

In sum, the best thing was to ask the advice of Father Peeters and his friend Pernaert. Conrad agreed to that immediately. He had just observed, for the first time in his life, that it would be very difficult for him ever to make a decision by himself—and that humiliated him slightly.

His father-in-law and his friend immediately fell into agreement. An inheritance was always worth acquiring. Conrad repeated in vain that he had no need of it, that he earned a good living and was not ambitious. He did not have the right, especially now that he was a father, to neglect his interests.

After all, it was doubtless only a matter of two or three days' absence. Before deciding to make the journey, however, one further precaution was indicated by the tenor of the notary's letter; that was to write to him in order to ask him to be so good as to supply the supplementary information that he declared himself ready to impart on request.

What information?

Here, Father Peeters intervened. The notary must be a reasonable man, understanding the way of the world. Nothing was simpler than to explain the situation to him. One was married, the father of a family, and one had a little business that was not doing too badly. Now, in business, it is always imprudent to absent oneself, even for a few days. In all conscience, did Maître Vanlenberghe think that the inheritance was worth the trouble of a displacement that might be very onerous? That was all perfectly reasonable, and a provincial—which is to say, eminently staid—notary could not take exception to such well-justified questions. It was understood that, above all, Conrad was absolutely determined to respect the wishes of his late uncle, but were they really so strict in this regard that a journey was indispensable?

When the letter was written and approved by his two advisers, Conrad felt his conscience lightened. He took Monique in his arms and said to her, cheerfully: "Don't worry, little one, it's Papa's work that will ensure your future."

Three days later, Maître Vanlenberghe's reply arrived.

Far from taking exception at what he deemed a prudent measure, he approved wholeheartedly of Monsieur Conrad Zippelius' hesitations, and, to set his mind at rest, he replied methodically to his various questions:

Firstly, Jean-Martin Zippelius' fortune amounted to approximately 600,000 francs, some in land and property and some in securities and cash, the latter representing a capital of 425,000 francs.

Secondly, the notary could not offer any indication as to the conditions imposed on the heir, there being a formal requirement for him to hand over, in the presence of witnesses, certain sealed envelopes, and also a sealed box.

Thirdly, if Monsieur Conrad Zippelius were to refuse, for any reason whatsoever, to come to the undersigned notary's office, the latter was under instruction, firstly, to burn the sealed envelopes and the little box on a bonfire in the public square of Blankens. As for the fortune, it would be distributed to the poor in the borough of Dunkerque.

Finally, the letter concluded with this laconic postscript;

I believe I have a duty to bring it to your attention that Monsieur Jean-Martin Zippelius was always considered to be an eccentric, and that he committed suicide.

That postscript was a very minor matter, but on reading it, Conrad once again experienced an exceedingly painful impression.

But that was childish. At the figure of 600,000 francs, Father Peeters and friend Pernaert were possessed of wide-open eyes, which had not returned to their normal state by the time they had finished reading.

As for Conrad, the excitement to which the strange adventure gave rise was now complicated by a sentiment that was entirely new to him. It was like a fever of curiosity, which overwhelmed him, rising from his heart to his brain with the intoxication. Into that placid nature, the notion of an unknown to pursue imported a singular activity. Had it not been for the matter of the sealed envelope and box, Conrad might perhaps, in truth, have thought very little of the half-million that seemed to have fallen from Heaven—assuming that Heaven could have anything to do with the actions of a suicide.

And that very suicide, so brutally announced, without a word of explanation or even of polite regret, intrigued Conrad more than he could possibly have explained.

Words once muttered by the curé, echoes of a distant past, passed rapidly through his memory: “All lunatics, those Zippeliuses! You’ll be the first sane man in the family!” And again, a memory that appeared to emerge from the most distant depths of the past: “No Zippelius has ever been able to die like everyone else.”

Conrad was convinced that he was not endowed with any imagination; he willingly declared himself to be the calmest individual in Creation...and yet, now, he had a sort of quasi-dolorous trepidation in the most secret fibers of his organism. Strange, confused ideas were stirring in his brain; he seemed to see the laughing face of Uncle Zippelius in a tenebrous half-light, awaiting his decision with an expression of disdainful scorn at the corners of his mouth.

“I shall leave tomorrow!” he cried, abruptly, in a defiant tone, like a coward who has suddenly decided to brave danger. No other expression could describe what the psychologists of today would have called his state of mind.

Yes, he had an irrational, but absolutely clear, intuition of a peril to be braved—and also a certain pride in having been chosen by Uncle Jean-Martin to confront it.

Sealed envelopes and a little box with wax seals were not very frightening in themselves—but when sheep bolt, the Devil alone knows where they’ll stop.

Mieke thought the departure a trifle abrupt; she would rather Monique had at least cut her first tooth; but Father Peters—who felt uneasy, not because he was an egotist, to be sure, but because he wanted to see his daughter, Madame Zippelius, in possession of all that ready cash, which was already tinkling pleasantly in his ears, without delay—affirmed that Conrad, in making haste, was fulfilling his duties as a husband and father.

Pernaert felt sad; he told himself that Zippelius, when he became a virtual millionaire, would abandon the little shop where they had had such pleasant conversations. But he was not envious, nor did he take it personally. It was quite natural that Conrad was desirous of settling the matter as soon as possible.

But to depart tomorrow! What time were the trains?

Michel ran to the little café next door to borrow a timetable, and they began to work through it conscientiously.

To start with, there was no station at Bollezeele. It was necessary to get off at Esquelbecq and take an omnibus, whose journey would last more than an hour. Mieke, who had never left Paris and considered it a long journey to go beyond the bridges, pulled a slight face. Think of it! An entire day on the railway and a coach!

But Zip, ordinarily so unenterprising, replied curtly that he would not die of it. Had he not made a similar journey not long ago, without feeling the slightest fatigue? Dunkerque was, however, more than six leagues away.

“If Madame Mieke wishes,” said Pernaert, “I’ll go with Zip.”

But Conrad flared up. Was he a child, then, that he needed to be accompanied? Father Peeters thought him very bold, and encouraged him. It was scarcely necessary; Conrad was utterly determined. If necessary, for the first time in his life, he would have asserted his authority.

It was, however, unnecessary for him to take that stand, because, fundamentally, everyone was of the same opinion. While they were all talking about the notary’s letter, Conrad’s impatience had communicated itself to Mieke.

It was settled: Zip would take the train the following morning. As soon as he had seen the notary, however, he would write immediately. He would not, of course, prolong his stay any more than was strictly necessary.

Mieke placed Monique in her husband’s arms and set about packing the necessary luggage. While the infant slept, Zip marched back and forth within the shop, his eyes lost in a strange and indefinable vision. In truth, it seemed to him that, for several hours, he had been living another life—as if another individual, asleep until then, had suddenly awakened within him. No, it was not the familiar Zip who was dreaming thus, without being able to know what he was dreaming about. His brain did not have its habitual lucidity, and his heart was squeezed by anguish.

All lunatics, the Zippeliuses! Was he too about to resemble the men that the old curé of Dunkerque seemed once to have regarded with a sort of fearful disdain, as if he were speaking of individuals outside the customary norm?

Conrad suddenly woke up; the child was babbling, but not unpleasantly; it was like a song. He kissed her, and, at that moment, was tempted not to leave, even for an hour, the nest where he was so comfortable.

Mieke came back in. Everything was ready. Then she took back the infant, who pushed out her lips, a gourmand of life. She was very pretty, Mieke—and Monique too! Well, the uncle’s half-million would serve to provide them with a tranquil and happy life. Why should Mieke not have beautiful silken dresses, like so many other wives? And why should Monique not sleep in a crib entirely swathed in lace?

And Conrad shook off his final hesitation, like an uncomfortable burden.

Amen!