

Sample chapter:

Intercessoress of Snakes

VOL. I The Autobiography of Stephan Bagradian 1902- 1929

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Intercessoress of Snakes



VOLUME I OF THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
STEPHAN BAGRADIAN
1902-1929

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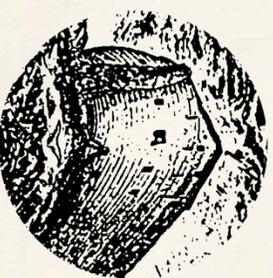
VOL. V- THINGS BY THEIR PROPER NAME

Intercessress of Snakes

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Chapter 43

Since my escape attempt, I was now held in a perpetual state of filth. I was chained to my easel during the day and slept in a cave at night. But life was better.

The reason was easy— I gave up. I stopped hoping. I stopped thinking. I filled my mind with the day's work and that was it. I had nothing to read, which was fine, as I had no lamp to read by anymore and was put to work during daylight hours. I slept whenever I was taken to the hollowed out chamber in the cliff where my "room" was and turned off my brain. There was no space for me to dream. The days passed quickly.

The second and more important reason that my life was better was because the camp became busier and I was not the only source of amusement for the soldiers. With workers, whole blocks started coming up. The city was being platted with stakes and signs for streets. Drivers would be fined if they veered off of the imaginary roads through imaginary buildings to take a short cut. Every day, horse-drawn carts and truckloads of people would arrive. At first, they were filled with the workers' families but soon patriotic settlers with their enormous families followed.

The increasing roar of machines and people slowly drove off the shepherds and the monks. The camp grew a gate and guards. Vice, in the form of gambling and alcohol, started creeping around the edges of the site. There was a low hum during the day that started to extend into the night. The absolute silence that had been Ani's companion for a thousand years left forever.

This was good for me. I became less and less of a celebrity, as there was better entertainment to be had. Also, with more people coming in, it was hard to explain

my raggedy condition. Inhumanity is easier to pull off with a small crowd. Over the long fall and winter, my rations increased, I received a couple of blankets to protect me from the creeping cold and I stopped being beaten as frequently. I was producing reliably, but the Republic was not rewarding me for my efforts. This was propaganda, how do you explain a beaten man living in a cave to settlers who want to believe in your state? Armenians, after living for 1500 years under the capricious and often brutal Turks needed a place where no one was treated unfairly. Contrary to what you might think, brutalized people don't really want prolonged revenge. They want a place where brutality does not happen.

My tormentors were also nicer because they cared less. The fantastic and improbable idea of building a new country and a new city was coalescing. A critical mass had been attained and there was a confidence that the seed would take root. My apostasy did not seem very threatening, all of a sudden.

My work was being appreciated; my paintings were being used to decorate municipal buildings and to illustrate brochures. But the actual state of the state was starting to overtake the symbolic fictions of the country. The staff and plaster phony props that I was making to make people believe that we had a real country were now being supplemented by a real structure. My paintings of a fictionalized Armenian Democratic Republic were creating a real one.

The capital of Ani was growing block by block. There were permanent buildings coming up everywhere. Foundations were being dug (ruining who knows how many archeological sites, much to the anger of the resident archeologist, Ashkharbek Kalantar), steel girders were being pounded into the earth to shore up

future towers. For the first time since arriving, I did not recognize every face in camp. In fact, the camp of Ani was no longer being called camp. It was now 'The City'. There was now a constant stream of vehicles moving materials and earth everywhere, with plumes of dust rising over the whole area. Women stopped being a novelty and were part of the everyday life.

I started to be considered tame and newsmen and diplomats were ushered into my studio as evidence of civilization coming to this barren place. I was part of the real estate tour— nice Armenian families from the coast who were contemplating buying a lot in the new city were shown my works in progress.

I had demonstrated that my spirit was truly beaten out of me and my studio actually became a fixture on the tour of the city for anyone passing through. Partially this was for the exoticness of what I was doing, partially this was because there was nothing to really see in Ani to make people think that they should quit their job, sell everything and move to a barren field with a few new buildings and a lot of ruined churches. What the ADR was counting on was the particular racial habit of Armenians to intoxicate themselves with their own mythology. And they were right. When families visited, they did not see a muddy field of construction and barracks, they saw a city that rivaled London or Budapest. Once, I even heard two men in a gully arguing over which lot to buy would be closest to the subway.

Nationalistic salesmen and a substantial advertising budget had lured Armenians from all over the globe. “Buy a stake in your future! History Awaits! It is Hye Time!” read the billboards in Anatolia and magazine advertisements printed in diaspora publications all over the world. The image that went with the ad was of a

smiling family in front of a Tudor style tract house. There were no houses of any style in Ani at that time. When I first saw the ad, I groaned. I thought I would have to learn to paint images of English style middle-class houses. Thankfully, I was always seen as a grand painter, the grindstone illustrators were used for real estate sales.

Most of the visitors were from Anatolia, but I met Armenians from Poland, Russia, the United Kingdom and even one from the Malay straits. As a race, we had been wandering all over the globe for millennia.

When the men, women, and children were herded into my studio, I would work and politely answer questions as they came. Questions were infrequent as people never know what to say to artists and the tour guide never let them come too close. I looked forward to these tours as my chains came off on visiting days, which was a relief for my ankles, which were ulcerated and raw. I also had a nicer set of clothes for visiting days.

Every time a new group came in of polite mustached fathers, layered in clothing mothers, assorted aunts and grandmothers and children, I would as carefully as I could, scan each face hoping that none of them were here to save me. I was done with that. The fear of an eminent rescue was my major source of anxiety. I had not been beaten severely for months and I had been shown a ledger that stated that I was actually working down my debt. If I kept at this, I was told in a hushed tone by Mrs. Hagopian, I would be released in 1931- just six years away. And at the rate of building, I would not live in my little cave forever.

One night in October, as the hot plains were cooling down and giving way to freezing nights, the burlap cloth that was the door to my hollowed out room in the cliff opened. I looked on as a yellow hand, holding a brass lamp pushed its way into my room. This hand and lamp were followed by a serpent of a man's body. Capping the sinewy body was Sarkis' sharp head. Looking around with pursed lips, he carefully positioned himself in the few centimeters of free space in my room where he was not touching anything that might soil his clothes. It was a real balancing act. Say what you will about Sarkis, but he was fastidious with his outfits.

I was groggy, it was dark, I had no idea of how long I had slept. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I looked at Sarkis. He looked better than the last time I saw him. He was still wearing the uniform of a prisoner but it was made of better material than the standard issue. There were no holes in his clothes, he wore shoes. Sarkis had found a place for himself as a dealmaker again.

Sarkis' raspy hiss brought me back to the present. There was no introduction or greeting, "Tomorrow, three of your friends, will visit. They will go on a tour of the city, they may or may not say hello to you. You are not to panic and try to escape when you see them— if you do see them at all. Do not whine or give any sign that you know what is happening. Don't be the fuck up."

I nodded, trying to take this in and figure out what was happening. It was a lot to process: visitors, rescue, 'they'...

"In other words, try not to be yourself."

I was too confused to be angry with Sarkis. This was his skill.

He continued, "Listen. Tomorrow, just before dawn, your friends will come for you. I will be busy distracting the sentries. Just follow them. It is important that you are quiet and quick."

I was too dry mouthed and overwhelmed to ask why he was helping me.

Another quality of Sarkis was that he could read minds.

"I am only here because of the goodness of my heart, Bagradian." He then made the sign of rubbing his thumb and forefinger together. His eyes slitted and the corners of his mouth pulled back in what I knew was Sarkis' attempt at smiling.

I was dizzy. Only after he had exited did I start getting a sick feeling.

I did not sleep. I stayed awake rolling over the possibilities of who was coming. Who cared enough? Manuk? I had a hard time seeing him here. Markus? Maybe, but he was so timid. Burliuk? Impossible. Xidra...

I stayed awake until the light started to change the sky from inky dark blue- the blue that the Russians call 'sinyii' -to the day blue that the Russians call 'galuboy'. My mind kept whirring. I needed to play everything perfectly today. I was anxious to be rescued but mostly dreaded it. Today, I needed to everything right.

My mind gave up and I fell asleep after a few hours.

I next remember faintly registering that reveille was sounding, the camp was now a city but it still had a wake-up call. I could not open my eyes. I told myself I would be up in a minute but I let the warm waves of sleep wash over me.

Reveille sounded again. This time it was five centimeters from my right ear. I bolted up, clutching my right ear, which felt as if it had been burst- narrowly avoiding the bugle, which was being blown next to my head.

A big private looked at me with indifference as if to say 'nothing personal' as he clapped his hands twice and said, "Chop, chop!"

His comrade grabbed my shoulder and yanked me out of bed before casually clouting me with the bugle, while sneering, "Would the effendi like tea or coffee with his breakfast this morning?"

The two men took every bit of space in my cell but I thought I should start moving. As I was getting up, I was rewarded with another bop to the head. Streaks of light flashed in front of my eyes.

"We have a message" the big private said as he grabbed the nape of my neck and stood me up, brushing my clothes off like a butler in an English comedy.

"The message is..." said private number two, the brutal bugler, who was a less meaty version of the first private— but what he lost in size, he made up for in hair. He had it growing out of his ears, his neck, and his and forearms. He was freshly shaved as evidenced by the toilet paper attached to a nick on his neck, but the foundation of a beard had already sprouted.

He ground his fist into my stomach. As I staggered forward, he caught me and whispered in my left ear- the one that was not ringing- "The message is: wake up on time, so we do not have to get you."

"Now." The big private was pointing outside with his thumb. The hairy private left and I followed.

They were dirty from packing into my cave, so it least I had that small victory.

I was marched to my studio, which was a short walk for a change. My studio was moved, depending on the subject I was working on. As the current work was

totally contrived and not based on any of the real landforms of Ani, it was currently placed near my cave for convenience. The men opened up the fourth wall of my studio, as it was basically a large tent, to let light in and in five minutes I was painting.

Before, when I painted in Constantinople, I'd have an elaborate ritual that could stretch for hours as a necessary warm up before putting my brush on the canvas. I'd read a newspaper, eat a pastry, I'd play a song on my phonograph, and I'd make coffee in my jazzve and drink it. Then I might read some correspondence and write a few letters. It might be eleven or noon at this point so I'd get something to eat in the shop downstairs and perhaps buy a second paper. Only after I had exhausted every possible thing to do would I sit down in front of my easel. It was common for me to work from 2 to 4 PM, at which point I'd go to a cafe.

The ADR taught me how to start painting the moment I reached my studio. Now, I recharge whatever paint I thought I'd use on my palette, pick out the size of brushes I needed for the immediate work, uncap the turpentine and linseed oil and start. I did not need any of the old foreplay routines to get started. I just sat and painted. I painted and took a break to eat and continued painting until the light got bad.

That morning, my head clanged from my private reveille and the clouting that I had from Private Big and Private Hairy Bugler. I was also tired. But I was able to start immediately on the current painting, which was nearing completion.

This painting was a large, heroic-sized work, fully plotted out with two Army men- a mounted officer and a lower ranking aide valiantly looking out towards a

cloudy future. This was my fictional moment of scouting the location of Ani. Ani has never been 'not scouted'. But the committee wanted a painting showing the scouting of Ani, so I made up a scenario. Two unnamed men, horses, and a mountain- it worked.

I placed a fictional ruined Armenian chapel on the side of a nonexistent mountain in the painting for the two explorers who never existed to discover.

I was past trying to con Corporal Mikoyan and Mrs. Hagopian. I was actually working in almost all of my waking hours and did not need to try to trick either of them. Their visits actually annoyed me, because they slowed me down.

I was still beaten, but rarely. And that was just a formality, to keep the troops' morale up. The beatings still hurt, but I did not dread them. There was nothing that I could do to prevent being whipped, so I just submitted. I think that this was less fun for the men, so they seemed to happen less regularly.

The "Scouting of Ani" was more or less finished and my models with their horses had been put back to work (a relief for all three of us, as after the initial thrill of getting time off of soldiering to pose for me, they were bored). I was in my tent studio with nothing but the noises of a city under construction to keep me company.

My canvas was stretched over a frame that was attached to a wooden scaffold, with adjustable arms to lower or raise the work. If I wanted to work on the bottom of the painting, I could raise it up as high as a meter and a half. My paints- HKS Royal Talens- the good stuff imported from Holland- were laid out on top of a rolling cart, where a brush rest was built to my specifications. My palette was large, about half a meter, and rested on a special arm of the rolling cart. I had a wooden platform on

the ground that was moved with the studio, so my working area was stable. The open canvas walls were coated with a thin white paint, which reflected and amplified light extremely well. I have never had such a good set up before or since, really- this was the nice thing about living in the middle of an army of carpenters.

Work cleared the fuzz out of my head and before I realized it, it was ten o'clock. I had driven the excitement of the night out of my head when a bored Pytr Mikoyan came with his notebook and had me escorted to my cave to change into my clean visitor clothes and to have my chains removed.

When I returned, I resumed working on to bring up the color of one of the shadows cast by a horse. I did not turn around when I heard people entering the back of my tent studio.

“And here we have one of the most promising talents of our Republic”.

I heard Colonel Hagopian enter with several people. I capped my turpentine tin and grabbed a rag to wipe my brush clean and then turned to face them. I did this slowly to calm myself, as I had no idea what was going to greet me.

Behind Colonel Hagopian there was a soldier, who I recognized as one of the especially keen bastinado enthusiasts. The soldier was holding the canvas flap of my tent studio open for four men who were filing in. First came the poet boxer, Arthur Cravan and after him was a very familiar looking stocky man in a raccoon coat. The stocky man was followed by a man writing in a notebook and he was followed by the angular Marcel Duchamp.

I had no feelings at all. I just focused on wiping my brush over and over again with my tired rag.

Marcel, who was every inch a Norman conqueror in physiognomy and demeanor, strode past me and looked sagely at my canvas, without giving me even a nod of his head.

The slick haired, thick-lipped, vaguely feminine-looking man, in his raccoon coat, said to the man with a notebook: "Now, the art I love is the art of cowards. This is the opposite of cowardly art."

If he only knew, I thought.

The writer scribbled down raccoon coat's bon mot and licked his pencil's tip drawing in his breath to ask a question. But he was beaten to the punch, "The art of the future is made by cowards who risk nothing. This..." He swept his arm grandly and I thought that he had a lot to say for looking at my painting for all of 14 seconds.

I was forced to do this art. And I hated everything about how I was forced, but my paintings were still my children. I did not like where the art critic was headed. I have never like the vivisection of critics. The only thing worse is the pretention that comes with most critics.

Colonel Hagopian cleared his throat. He was not an interrupter, but he was a stickler for decorum. In this, he was a good match for his wife. But where she was fat, he was nothing but wire. You could string a tennis racket from the cords that appeared on his neck every time he had a thought.

"Mr. Bagradian, may I introduce a pair of distinguished guests- Mr. Duchamp, a curator and art enthusiast, Mr. Cravan- a poet, Mr. Ter-Margaryan, of the Ararat

Reporter and Mr. Picabia.... an artist." As he said this last name, Hagopian's mouth turned down. Apparently, Picabia had outlasted his welcome in just a few hours. I knew Francis Picabia from gossip, but this was my first meeting with him. Francis was a talented painter but his real passion was for fast cars, his own voice, food, and women- in that order. In a field of bombasts, he stood out, which was saying something.

Arthur Cravan (he was never "Arthur" or "Mr. Cravan"; for some reason he was always called in completion: "Arthur Cravan") came up to me and gave me a sad look. The ex-boxer was not the best actor that they could have chosen for this rescue mission. Looking at myself through his eyes, I became conscious of how my collarbone was poking out of my shirt. How torn and dirty my clothes were, as he eyed me. He clasped my shoulder and said,

"Oh filthy fate,
that you are reduced to this state."

Marcel quickly covered for Arthur Craven. If Colonel Hagopian understood that we had a prior acquaintance, I would be in trouble.

With that precise and economical precision of his, Marcel said with the absolutely minimum of effort needed to expel a few words- "But you have an artist here who is writing the future." Marcel could talk in a whisper that a whole room would hear, without moving his lips.

Ter-Margaryan, the slight Armenian reporter, dressed in a wool green checked suit, nodded and wrote down that seemingly weighty yet undecipherable statement. I imagine him looking at his notebook later in the evening, trying to make heads or

tails of what the artists had said and then throwing it out. The most successful artists, in my experience, are very good at throwing out statements that seem wise and irrefutable when uttered but fade into nonsense when you try to put them under glass.

Colonel Hagopian, who had seemed agitated when Picabia had started in, paused to ponder Marcel's crypticism and then gave up, not wishing to look the fool.

Arthur Cravan, half closed his eyes, put one hand over his barrel chest and began to recite:

“Ennui, your dog, stretches across our knees,
As twin solitary remorse grows as a disease
At our hearts, a worm gnaws a half-eaten sausage
And night continues its uncomfortable passage
Mistily confused by the eyes of a disguise,
Its cloudy veil distorts all lies
On the periphery, the Persians are shot
My aim is not so hot
And I stroll for a long time, walking around
Our memories stored in an ancient gallery, unfound.”

Arthur Cravan opened his eyes and sleepily smiled through broad lips,

“I came up with that this morning, what do you think?

Or is this better discussed with a drink?”

Francis nodded and said, “I have just the thing in my Mercer Raceabout”.

Colonel Hagopian was famous for being a teetotaler. But he seemed to be relieved at the idea of Francis leaving us.

“Mr. Bagradian, do you want to make any statement to our guests, or the press?”

I knew I had to answer the Colonel, but everything was so overwhelming.

Suddenly I was back in my Bohemia of Constantinople with all of the eccentric impractical people I knew. It was like the last few years had never happened. Despite Sarkis having warned me that I would see people I might know today, there was no part of me that actually thought that this would happen.

I started to cry. I was crying because I knew this was a real rescue attempt and it was the best I was going to get. This sad attempt had probably been born out of a late-night session of booze and braggadocio. They must have recruited Arthur Cravan because he was strong- as if that mattered when invading an army camp. Was he going to fight the whole Armenian Army? Francis was most likely picked to help because he had a car and was a thrill seeker. Marcel, I guessed went because he liked spectacle. I knew then that there was no way that this could succeed. They would be fine when this failed. Exiled at worst- but I would be beaten severely and humiliated beyond anything I had known. I hated artists more than ever.

“Well, you know how artists are, gentlemen.” Colonel Hagopian's face had turned from his normal pallor of yellow to red to white and now was green with restrained fury at my tears. He had given me yet another chance to put myself in the good graces of the ADR and I had failed.

He was furious because my real job, as official court painter for the new country, was to give them legitimacy. All countries are fiction until enough outsiders and a slightly lower percentage of residents agree that the country is, in fact, a nonfictional entity. At this moment the paper that the country produces are no longer scraps of paper, but get magically transformed into currency or stamps or passports. I was making the fiction of the ADR real through my monumental paintings documenting the birth of our Anatolian Republic.

As such, I was no different than the Armenian Democratic Republic's new passport office, postage stamp printers, or the designers of currency. One thing that you never want to happen when you bring visitors to your new post office, mint, or passport office is for the workers to start crying. It undermines your credibility.

The colonel continued, scrupulously not looking in my direction, "Artists are temperamental. We should let Mr. Bagradian continue, as we can see, we have upset his schedule."

On that note, Francis came back with a bottle of Haig whiskey, which from appearances, he had already taken a large pull off of. He passed the bottle to Arthur Cravan, who waved him off- Arthur Cravan was a believer in fitness through vegetarianism and teetotaling. The others refused because it was still morning.

The colonel marched out, in arm with Ter-Margaryan who was being persuaded to tear out and throw away the few pages of notes that he had scribbled in my studio.

Marcel shot me an arch look and followed the colonel.

“What did I miss?” Francis said, wiping his wide forehead with a blue polka dotted handkerchief while loosening his silk bow tie.

“There were tears spilled on this nascent ground

But to greener pastures, we are bound.”

Arthur Craven said, as he glumly took leave.

The solider, grinned a slick little smile and licked his lips slightly while eyeing my feet.

“Here I am, Bagradian.”

It was Marcel in a ridiculous disguise; it was cold and dark out. He was supposed to be some kind of Bedouin, I guess. He had a fake mustache and a sheet wound around him.

I was ready, as I had been unable to sleep at all, again. This time my insomnia was not due to nerves but to the particularly vicious bastinado session I had received in lieu of dinner.

I stifled a groan and looked for my possessions, but then I realized that I owned nothing.

There was the start and stop chugging of Francis’ Mercer Raceabout outside. It was a cold night and the engine was not catching.

Arthur Craven’s cut the chains that attached me to my rope bed with a large cable cutter.

“Move with haste

Or, our efforts will all be for waste”

Francis' oval of a body was furiously cranking the lever inserted in to the front of his four seater, which they had pushed over to my cliff, as to not wake up anybody.

I groaned. There has never been a successful escape in the history of the world in a bright yellow vehicle.

Finally, the engine caught. Francis started laughing and with surprising agility, leapt in to the front seat and donned an aviator's leather helmet, which spoiled the effect his Arab robe disguise was supposed to have.

"Come" Marcel said, and gently steered me to the car. Arthur Cravan was already sitting in the front seat. His vanity and a passing resemblance to Valentino had given him the most ridiculous outfit of all- his slicked back hair and a satin robe with an outsized dagger tucked a rope belt, made him look like a double for the "Sheik of Araby", but not like anyone who had ever set foot in Arabia.

These clowns did not even realize that they were aping costumes of people who lived hundreds of miles south. No one in this area had ever dressed like that. The local costumes were much less fun I suppose.

"You have not been taking care of your appearances, Bagradian," Marcel muttered in my direction as the engine caught and started sputtering.

Arthur Craven vaulted into the front passenger seat. I hobbled as fast as I could to the rumble seat. Marcel was already there, slouched back and with his eyes closed, ready to sleep. Here we were, in a military camp, committing treason, slowly starting to bounce along on primitive shocks, along unpaved roads, and he was

sitting next to me smashed in in a rumble seat that would have been difficult to fit one person in, ready to sleep.

Francis was big, Arthur Cravan was two meters tall and 110 kilograms of bone and muscle, so they were as uncomfortable as we were in back. It would have made an interesting picture- two giants in the front of the car and two bone men in the back.

Francis was gunning his Mercer Raceabout through the construction jungle of the city, which was not waking up, despite the incredible racket the six cylinders was kicking up. Arthur Cravan white knuckled the sides of the open car.

Francis smiled as he gripped the wheel with both hands. I was worried about being bounced out of the car.

The air was cool and felt wonderful. I started to relax a little- there was something delicious about this.

We dodged a new building coming up. Once I yelled "lookout!" when we nearly hit a thousand-year-old remnant of a wall, which I saw only because of the donkey looking sourly at me over the top of it.

Marcel started snoring.

We gunned by a group of soldiers who were sitting by a fire. One of them waved. We wove past the new construction crew barracks that were newly built on the northern part of Ani. The air was shifting to let us know that dawn would soon be there and a few lights were on, in what I guess was the kitchen. Still, there were no gunshots or shouts or general alarms sounding.

Finally, we reached the northern checkpoint out of Ani and Francis cinematically smashed through the entry checkpoint's striped wooden plank that blocked entry. A confused and sleepy "Hey!" came from the guard hut and we disappeared into the night.

After gunning along the dark road for 15 minutes, Francis broke the silence and smiling, reached back to pat my knee which was pressed up against the back seat. He then opened the glove box and grabbed a cigar.

Francis, the Cuban-French hybrid, leaned back and yelled at me, "We brought some robes and gum Arabic to affix whiskers to you. We will pull over and disguise you."

Arthur Cravan, the Swiss boxer with a British passport who acted like an American added,

"A disguise in the night

Will assure our flight."

I was incredulous and yelled over the roar of the road, "We are in a flamboyant roadster..."

Francis interrupted, "Not any car, this is the acme of beauty in motion— a Mercer— a perfection that"

"With three people, disguised as Old Testament prophets! How can..."

Marcel with his eyes shut said, though his lipless mouth, "Don't worry Bagradian. We have a 'Loy' up our sleeve."

Francis chewed his cigar with a frown.

Marcel was referring to the unreal Mina Loy, who was waiting for us. She was a type that barely exists outside of fiction. She was well-bred, wealthy and willowy; a British poetess, who had met and married Arthur Cravan while he was dodging conscription in Constantinople, during the Great War. She was famous for her feminism and anti-fascist sentiments. As a couple, they were famous for their loud and indiscreet sex sessions in whatever party or nightclub bathroom they happened to find themselves.

We traveled a good two hours before pulling off of the main road on to a rough, winding lane. The sun just was up hidden behind clouds and it smelled like it was going to rain.

Francis parked behind a flat-topped mud-walled house, next to two nondescript weathered cars tucked away from sight. A small babbling creek ran behind the structure. We had skirted the town of Kars and had, with an astounding brush of good luck, not run into any shepherds or early morning merchants traveling the roads that Francis had mapped out. We had sustained no flat tires as well. In those days, flats were daily annoyances. I was beginning to feel optimistic again.

As I unfolded myself out of the too small car, I nearly fell over as my legs were asleep and my feet were still damaged. Arthur Cravan rubbed his calves and performed a minute of calisthenics; Francis grabbed a canvas tarpaulin and covered his auto with it. Marcel lit his pipe and urinated under an apricot tree.

After his quick session of toe touching, Arthur Cravan strolled up to the homestead whose windows were dirty and still lit with lanterns and called out,

“Mina! Fabienne, Joella! Your conquering knight
has returned from the fight!”

A woman’s voice responded, “You’ve used that one before.”

A girl of about ten and a teenager ran out and hugged Arthur Craven. Mina, and two people I was to learn were Mina’s friends- the Pontic Greek/ Armenian mystic George Gurdjieff, and his Polish wife, Julia Ostrowska - all walked out to shake our hands.

Who brings their children to a rescue mission? Who makes a rescue, a lark for fun? Artists do. I was beginning to be put off by “fun” that all seemed to be having. They had no idea what this meant to me.

The terrible feeling I had about my saviors was slowly returning like a hemlock poisoning- the fear of being returned to Ani started in my fingers and was slowly radiating towards my heart.

“Enough of the nice formalities!” Francis boomed, “It is time to celebrate.”

Mina firmly gripped my hand and said, “I do hope that you are worth the trouble, Mr. Bagradian. It has been an awful bother coming all the way out here.”

“Oh, I rather liked the adventure.” Julia added, “Constantinople has gotten so boring now that the armies are gone”.

It had started to rain. The inside of the rude house was actually quite snug. There was a fire in the middle of the room. Mina was braiding her teenaged daughter Joella’s hair. Arthur Craven had Fabienne on his knee. Although Fabienne was a normal sized child, she looked like a ventriloquist’s dummy on his giant lap.

Mina looked me in the eye and spoke, "I don't have time for my husband's manner of expressing himself and I know that M. Duchamp will not tell me anything at all, so both of you- M. Picabia and Mr. Bagradian will need to fill us in on your dramatic rescue."

Mr. Gurdjieff and Julia were at the table with Francis and me. Marcel was lying on the couch with a wet towel over his eyes, his right arm hanging limply over the side of the couch.

Mr. Gurdjieff was stroking his theatrical Cossack mustache. He looked at me with his deafeningly intense eyes, which were made more dramatic by his shaved head.

"Yes, you have become something of a cause célèbre back in our city of Constantine, Mr. Bagradian. If I was not raised near here I may not have had a winning ticket to be part of the rescue."

With this, the poison of doubt about the rescue reached my heart. I needed to sit down. I asked, "There was a lottery to rescue me?"

The little Fabienne Loy-Cravan said excitedly, "Oh, we had a raffle and sold cake to raise funds for this!" The older Loy-Craven, Joella, added, "Mother said that if father was going, she was going too. And we said that if mother was going, we were also! At the party M. Duchamp drank lots of champagne and climbed out on the flag pole from the 5th story above the street."

Did any of these people know that I was being tortured? There are so many worlds that go on simultaneously, unaware of each other's existence. I was sleeping on a rope bed in a cave with a burlap blanket while they were having a cake party

and congratulating each other for their humanitarianism. They were fighting boredom while I was fighting torture.

Francis had been waiting for his chance to speak, "Listen well, little Loys: This is a story truly worth telling! After sneaking our way into camp with cunning and subterfuge, we overcame Bagradian's elite guard with a combination of guile and brawn. We were forced to fight our way out. It is a miracle that my beautiful Mercer was unsinged by the fusillade of bullets that chased us out of the army camp!"

Mr. Gurdjieff, thumped the table with both of his fists. "It is as I predicted! The guards were in a waking sleep, but you had the unified mind-body of the fully conscious, and could move in between their bullets! This is truth. You did not dodge the enemies' fire as much as it jumped out of your way. This is the power of being conscious in a world of sleepers!"

Julia, in her soft Polish accent asked, "And everyone is unharmed?"

"Without a doubt, we are without a scratch

the thuggish brutes were no match

A true foe in us they met

And they will not soon forget."

A "harrumph" in response to Arthur Cravan's boast came from the couch where Marcel was lying with a wet towel over his eyes, but he did not offer anything to counter the fabrications of Francis and Arthur Cravan.

It turned out that the farmhouse where we were hiding had been one of Mr. Gurdjieff's childhood homes. In a lucky chance of fortune, he had lived in this area in his semi-itinerant youth and was able to make the rescue more plausible. Entry to

the camp was explained to me as being easy. The ADR was anxious for international recognition and welcomed anybody who wanted to look around. Aside from a few journalists such as Lowell Thomas, not many non-Armenians had taken them up on this so far.

I looked around at the empty bottles and dirty dishes that filled the farmhouse and guessed that the rescue group had been staying there at least a week.

“But how did you get out of the city?” I asked in between mouthfuls of bread dipped in olive oil. I had just had a glass of wine, my first in a year, and I already felt drunk.

“How is...”

I wanted to ask about Xidra, but could not.

“...everybody?”

Mina laughed “Everybody is fine.” She looked at me and deadpanned, “But somebody and anybody and nobody in particular might be less than fine. It all depends on the body.”

Mina gave a pat to Joella Loy-Cravan’s head and stood up, pouring herself a glass of retsina. She sipped it and continued in the baritone of a street-corner preacher with her story about leaving the city, “And we drove out of Constantinople. Hallelujah! Amity reigns over the land. Everyone has a piece of the pie now! And after the Great War, we will have a Great Peace! The Turks have contented themselves to their little corner of Constantinople to Nicaea, the Fascist Greeks have their kingdom to the south and the socialist Greeks have their Black Sea Empire...”

Mr. Gurdjieff said with a wink to his wife, "For it takes one Greek to build a mountain and two to tear this same mountain down!" She sighed and looked away. Apparently, it was not the first time she had heard this. He laughed and said "So much for the 'Great Idea' of a united Greek world. The problem with Greeks is that we can't just have one great idea. From zero Greek states a hundred years ago, we now have three.

Mina saw that this information was new to me and started talking seriously, "The Druze and Alwaitie people have a place in the sun next to the state of Damascus and the allies are watching over the remaining territory in between. If the French and British did not hate each other so much, they would just divide it. But now they are just holding fast, pretending to administer it for the Kurds."

"Don't forget the Romaniote Anarco-Syndicalist State of Rhodes!" said Fabienne.

"Oh, yes, there is also a state for the Hebrews that has popped up like a mushroom after a rain since your absence" said Julia.

"Yes, they are a government made up of New York and Russian radicals. And no one much likes them. They are too Jewish for the Allies, too left for the Soviets, too much on Greek islands for the Greeks and not religious enough for the Zionists..." Fabienne added, "But they do have a pretty flag."

This was my first encounter with Bohemian child rearing techniques, where children feel that they have a right to be included in adult conversation. Fabienne's precociousness was starting to grate on my nerves.

Mina agreed and added, "We have enough food in Constantinople, but there are shortages of everything. It feels like the exodus of religious relics to the Greek states props half of our economy up. There are no duties or customs and not that many border guards."

Mr. Gurdjieff nodded, "Everything is in flux."

Mina finished her glass of retsina, "So, you see, Mr. Bagradian. We just drove here. No one is at war anymore. The armies have gone home. We crossed three new countries and a territory on our way here. And since we are well dressed, well spoken, and Mr. Picabia has a nice car, we had no problems. Everyone is making up laws and customs as they go along."

Mr. Gurdjieff said, "Everything is in flux. The world is waking up from the parasite of sleep."

I was beginning to have that horrible feeling, of hope again, which always seems to signal disaster. I asked, "And how are we getting out of here?"

Mr. Gurdjieff fixed me with his great eyes and said, "In my travels in the East, I learned the fourth way, which is the full application of all the previous knowledge systems known by man. This is how we rescued you and how we will continue to be successful. Not through a permanent system of plans but through a fluidly of action that relies on no set systemic methodology but rather a frank assessment of current conditions. As long as we continue to be awake, we will achieve your liberation."

Julia, reverting to the Catholic habits of her youth, clasped her hands together as he talked and lidded her eyes, the way you would if the shroud of Turin started stigmata-ing in front of you. This was the right wife for Mr. Gurdjieff.

Mina informed me of the concrete details. The plan was to hole up in the farmhouse to rest until nightfall. The Cravan family would drive Francis' Mercer Raceabout as a decoy lead. It was assumed that the family's British passports would allow them safe passage, despite driving a flamboyantly distinctive getaway vehicle.

Mr. Gurdjieff and his wife would follow with Marcel in their Ford Model A, and finally, Francis and I would tail end the caravan in the battered Fiat 501 that I saw when we pulled up. Each vehicle would be separated by 30-minute intervals. In the advent of a particularly bad checkpoint, a stopped vehicle would serve as a visual warning to the one behind it.

Francis stuffed the last of a loaf of round peasant bread in his mouth and put a map on the table. He pointed to the middle and said, "We will be out of the ADR by tomorrow morning, but we will still not be secure from spies and reward seekers. Let's rendezvous here, at the Sarmoung Monastery, where Mr. Gurdjieff has vouchsafed us safety with his friends in the Sufi Brotherhood. We can spend the night there. Once we are in the French protectorate, on the next day, we will be able to breathe easy."

"Do not doubt- doubt is the food of the sleeping." Mr. Gurdjieff stood up and brushed his sleeves and added "And speaking of food, Mr. Picabia, you need to eat not like an animal but like a human if you ever wish to break the bonds of habit. I drink and drug, but I use it to pray— not to dull myself."

I wondered how long they had been cooped up in this farmhouse together. It took an hour of convincing for me to dissuade them from going in disguise. This was

the part of the escape that they were most excited about. Fabienne called me a “wet blanket” before storming out.

“A soft embrace with no pain-
for soon, we will see each other again.”

The blue-black night was on the Anatolian plain and we were saying our goodbyes in the increasing cold.

“Father. Stop please!?” Joella said to Arthur Cravan and then gave me a firm little handshake. Fabienne Cravan, still mad about her aborted costume (she had bargained her way into a harem dress, but with the veil removed) refused to wave goodbye as Mina wheeled the car out. Mina was the first woman I knew who drove. The fact that Arthur Cravan was a giant brute of a boxer who had famously spent a few rounds with Jack Johnson might have been the reason that he was never threatened by his feminist wife’s masculine habits.

Mina gritted her teeth and yelled “To the city” as she peeled out into the night.

“Pleasant greetings again do us await....” Arthur Cravan waved and spoke but his voice was overpowered by the Mercer’s slow backfiring.

“Take care of her!” Francis yelled. He had informed us that his Mercer Roundabout was the 87th racing car he had owned in his 40 some years of life and was his favorite.

We waited thirty minutes and then Marcel, Mr. Gurdjieff and Julia Ostrowska were off. There were no goodbyes this time.

We were left with the Fiat 501, which Francis had spent part of the day “souping up”.

As the lights from the Model A disappeared off into the night, I tried to destroy any clues as to who had been staying in the farmhouse. I burned newspapers and cigarette packets and paced. Francis fiddled with the engine under a kerosene lantern.

Francis came into the farmhouse and tapped his pocket watch. I went out back and climbed in the hard top. He started to crank the motor to get it running and then came around to the passenger side of the car and rapped my window to get me to roll it down.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” I asked, climbing out of the car. We walked around to the front of the farmhouse while the Fiat was sputtering and looked down the little lane that led out to an immense Anatolian darkness.

Coming down the road, we could hear heavy vehicles coming towards us without their headlights on.

Francis paused and said, “Merde” before running back to our little car.

He jumped in, backed it up and turned it towards our only exit and put his meaty foot down on the accelerator, flush with the floor. We sped towards the road. The military transport vehicles had now turned their headlights on and were stopped. There were four trucks lined up side-by-side, blocking not only the road but also everything around the road. We had nowhere to go.

A thicket of uneven Berdan, Martini–Henry, Mosin–Nagant and Mauser rifles faced us.

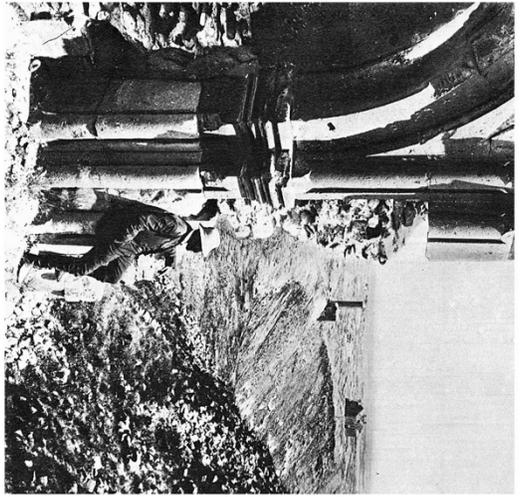
A familiar nasal voice called out from behind a middle vehicle, “Your easy life is over, as of now Bagradian.”

I looked at Francis, who was taking this in calmly and asked, “Did you tell Sarkis where you were taking me?”

“We gave him money, he helped us do this, I don’t understand....”

I got out of the car and walked over to the truck with my hands up. Francis to his credit did not hide or run. He just watched behind the wheel as I was put in chains and loaded on to the truck.

Colonel Hagopian walked over to the driver’s side of the Fiat, where Francis was sitting. He rapped on the window with his chrome Lebel revolver. Without waiting for the window to be rolled down and without hesitation, he shot Francis Picabia through the window and cleanly in his forehead. The big man’s body slumped forward and hit the Klaxon, which continued to sound as we drove away. The sound of the horn, fading in the distance was his last gesture.



When I first arrived at Ani, this is what it looked like. A barren, lost place with a real soul.

The ancient Armenian poem fit it well:

ODE TO THE
CITY OF ANI

Ani sits and weeps,

There is no one to say: "Don't cry, don't cry".

You think it's nothing, let her stay and cry,

Oh! When will I hear "Don't cry, don't cry"?

I am on fire with so much pain, I burn,

I have no one loyal to trust.

Who would approach this wretch?

Who will ever say "Don't cry, don't cry"?



Less than a decade years later, Ani fully transformed in to a decadent mess of concrete and soulless modernism masquerading as sophistication. Gone are the hermits, monks and shepherds who tended the silent nights where the only sounds that could be heard was the wind rustling across the Anatolian plain. And what did we get in return? An urban jungle where fascists used to parade ceaselessly and now religious zealots grow beards. Progress and "making meaning" out of the meaningless are two things that I despise.



Mashtots Boulevard, Oil on Canvas 1927, 120 x 90 cm

The new Republic wanted to show how modern they were, so they had me paint a woman driving a car in Ani. Of course, this picture is all imagination. I left before the city was built up.

By 1926, whole blocks started coming up in Ani. The site was platted with stakes and signs for streets. Drivers would be fined if they veered off of the imaginary roads through imaginary buildings to take a short cut. Every day, horse-drawn carts and truckloads of people would arrive. At first, they were filled with the workers' families but soon patriotic settlers with their enormous families followed. The increasing roar of machines and people slowly drove off the shepherds and the monks who had been the primary occupants of the area for hundreds of years.

Building the New Road Past the Old Cathedral, Oil on Canvas 1927, 110cm x 90

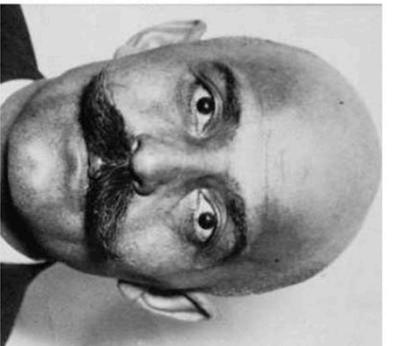


The Forgery, Oil on Canvas 1926, 100 x 70 cm

Paintings that the Armenian Democratic Republic disliked, they gave away to friendly countries. Sadly, after the Autocephalous Patriarchy took over, these unloved paintings were the only ones that survived. The religious fanatics burned all of my works that they could find when they took over the country. This painting survived as it was deemed "too Soviet" and was presented to Birobidzhan in 1931 as a token of friendship by the ADR. It was reacquired by collectors who spotted it in the 1970s rotting in the mayor's office.

Modern pollution has obscured this view, on all but the clearest days for years. When I was at Ani, Mt. Ararat was always visible until nightfall.

Mt. Ararat from Ani (study), Oil on Canvas 1925-26(?) 40 x 30 cm



My second rescue team.

Clockwise, from the top left:

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, the famed Greek Armenian opponent of sleep, who believed that all of mankind's problems could be solved if we only woke up from our walking slumber. He was far to enthusiastic to readily offend. After I found out that he had to make ends meet by selling rugs after the war, I forgave him for the disastrous mission.

Julia Ostrowska, Mr. Gurdjieff's 3rd wife and Boswell. Without her, no one would have heard of him. A thick boned quiet woman who carried a quiet authority with her.

Seated in Francis' Mercer Raceabout: Marcel Duchamp, Arthur Cravan, Mina Loy and Francis Picabia. They made the worst rescue team imaginable as they were enjoying themselves too much. This is the last known photograph of the rogue Francis Picabia.