

Mick Stern

A Lost Shoe

Josef Dietrich was so shaken and enraged that he didn't notice that his shoe was missing until he was off the train. He was already loping along the platform when he became fully aware of a cold, nubby feeling against the sole of his left foot. Looking down he saw a black sock where he expected a fine leather shoe to be. The remaining shoe looked quite forlorn. "I lost my shoe," he said to his son Georgy, who was grinning broadly, which meant he was absent, inaccessible. As Dietrich turned and made his way back along the platform, pushing against the turbulent crowds and the porters wheeling baggage, a whistle shrilled. The train began to pull slowly out of the station, its steam rising to the great glass roof that arched over two dozen busy tracks. Conductors leaned from the doors of the cars and soldiers still aboard the train shouted at those who were milling around the platform with their duffle bags.

Dietrich could have cried. It wasn't simply the terrible inconvenience, it was the loss of the shoe itself. He had his shoes specially made; he even had his shoe-trees carved to the precise measurements of his feet, so that his shoes would take on their shape and slip on perfectly. And he was no less careful with the rest of his wardrobe. He patronized the best tailors in town. If he happened to run into one his clients before or after a fitting, well, that was not the least advantage of dressing well.

Dietrich was, by profession, a business negotiator. While he was working for his father, who owned a factory, he discovered that he was good at writing letters and speaking to clients. He acquired a reputation for tact, and eventually other manufacturers

began to ask him to handle their more difficult relationships. He could impart an almost classical gravity to the most banal demand for payment. He wrote out all his professional correspondence in a flowing, elegant hand with a fine pen. Typewriters were only good, he liked to say, for filling out police reports. As time went by, it became a standard rumor in the bathhouses and cafés that “they’re bringing Dietrich in” for this or that deal. His clientele grew. When his father died, he sold the factory and bought a large house in the center of town.

He lived alone there, except for some part-time servants. When he was in his twenties, he played the gentleman-about-town, taking afternoon tea in the big hotels and attending concerts at night. Behind the oriental curtains of private dining rooms, he was a ladies’ man. Eventually, perhaps inevitably, he made a girl pregnant. She was from a good family, and was not grateful to be compromised by a casual affair. After a hasty, spiteful wedding, she took to her bed and avoided Dietrich in his own house until she gave birth to Georgy.

From the moment the baby was born, he was silent. He did not howl at birth, he did not cry in his crib, he did not laugh when somebody tickled him.

He didn’t utter a sound.

The mother regarded this affliction as her misfortune rather than the infant’s. She returned to her parents’ house and never came back. Dietrich was tremendously glad to keep the baby and be rid of the mother. He hired nurses to watch the baby, literally watch him, around the clock. Then he called upon every possible specialist in search of some explanation or diagnosis. Each one posited an entirely different cause for the boy’s condition: *malformed larynx ...abnormal frontal lobe...traumatic separation*. None of

them held out any hope for a cure. Later on, Dietrich brought the child to specialists in bigger cities; the only difference was the fees.

It wasn't simply that the boy was mute. The problem was that he responded to the world only intermittently. Sometimes he was sensitive to the noises and colors around him, sometimes not. He didn't always understand what people were telling him, or perhaps he understood only in his own private way. He seemed impervious to all pressure to behave or conform, and only cooperated with others out of sheer generosity. However, his good-will could evaporate if he were tired or upset. Then he became stubborn and unapproachable. He usually had no friends. Other children quickly grew tired of playing with him, because he did not entertain them.

Although Dietrich worried about his son a great deal, his worries gradually became part of his routine. By himself, in his own context, Georgy was no trouble. His nanny could control him most of the time. In the presence of his father he behaved well, out of simple desire to please. In fact, Dietrich did not require much of the boy except that he not wipe his nose with his sleeve. Sometimes the boy came into his father's office and sat on one side of the great antique desk while Dietrich relaxed on the other side, glass of brandy in hand, talking about whatever crossed his mind, even the most obscure details of business law. Georgy's alertness and silence gave Dietrich the impression that the boy was listening to *him*, not merely to his words. The sun was already down and the lamp between them brought out the glow in Georgy's cheeks. Whenever it occurred to Dietrich that his little son would never be able to sit on *his* side of the desk, he shrugged the thought away. It didn't matter. His son would never want for money. He would see to that.

One day, a business associate brought Dietrich's attention to a newspaper article about a nerve specialist who had developed miraculous techniques for giving the power of speech to the dumb—even in seemingly hopeless cases, like Georgy's. Suppressing some obscure misgivings, Dietrich picked up his pen and composed a letter to the doctor, who lived in a distant western capital. Three weeks later he received a reply from the specialist's office advising him that the doctor was available at three month's notice and would be happy to see his son.

Instead of rejoicing at the news, Dietrich felt dizzy and had to sit down. A clamor of doubt and indecision filled his mind. Suppose this doctor could actually cure Georgy? A new Georgy, a speaking Georgy! Would that be an unmitigated improvement?

Dietrich jumped out of the chair and paced the floor while he considered the matter from all angles. Though Georgy was afflicted, wasn't he comfortable? Content? Sheltered from harm? But if he learned how to talk, he would quickly become dissatisfied with his daily routine and no power could keep him from venturing out on his own. And he was unprepared and inexperienced, woefully vulnerable to the first bully or swindler to cross his path. Somebody would take quick advantage of him. Instead of being slowly introduced to human deceit over time, as most people are, he would learn all about treachery in one single devastating blow.

Almost trembling, Dietrich gripped his pen, and wrote back to the specialist, thanking him for his prompt reply and promising to set a date as soon his busy agenda permitted him to take leave of his business.

The person who had originally brought news of the miracle doctor to Dietrich's attention came to visit and of course asked Dietrich if he had secured an appointment. Dietrich mumbled that he hadn't gotten around to it yet. The visitor upbraided Dietrich in

clear ringing tones of moral superiority, pointing out that the doctor was extremely famous and busy, and that Dietrich had better act promptly, or else the doctor would keep him waiting for a long time.

The longer the better, Dietrich thought.

During the next few days, it seemed to Dietrich that half the town was busy telling the other half that he was an uncaring, negligent father. One after another, his family members found some pretext to meet with him, just so they could urge upon him this famous doctor, whom they knew nothing about. Though well-meaning, the family's concept of Georgy's best interests was so crude that Dietrich could find no way to reason with it. The only person who did not exhort or reproach him was Georgy's nanny.

Dietrich did not get angry. He listened politely to all the interferers and told them that the doctor's agenda was filled for an entire year ahead. A year later, most of Dietrich's acquaintances had forgotten the doctor completely, and those who did remember were confronted with Dietrich's considerable skill at verbal evasion. He kept them at distance with his rhetoric. He could do with words what his son did with silence.

At this time, Georgy was twelve. He amused himself constructing complicated jigsaw puzzles and putting stamps from foreign countries in a book. On clement Sundays Dietrich accompanied him to the park and watched him push a model boat around the basin of a fountain with a long stick. There were often other boys playing around the fountain, sometimes roughly, but Georgy's nanny explained to them that they must not tease or push Georgy because he was different. So they left him alone, although they didn't refrain from making loud remarks about his handicap, as if he were deaf as well as dumb. And indeed, Georgy did not hear these remarks. Georgy could *close his ears* when he wanted to, just as easily and automatically as he could close his eyes. Dietrich had

noticed this phenomenon many times. And was he willfully mute also? Had he *decided* to keep his mouth shut? Perhaps—but he could communicate when he needed to. By means of a few economical and inventive gestures, he could indicate that he wanted to go to bathroom, or that he was looking for a particular toy, or that he wished to help the maid set the table for dinner. Sometime, however, he rendered himself completely indecipherable, and responded to every entreaty with a broad, senseless grin.

But the boy's bad moods never lasted more than a few hours, and they were not frequent. In the midst of nerve-wracking business meetings, Dietrich would think about the money he was making for his son's future, and experience a calm swell of complacency. Georgy's condition didn't get any worse as he grew up. He studied under a tutor and even found, now and then, some playmates among the meeker and milder children of the neighborhood. But usually not for long. It was not his dumbness that drove them away but his intense solitude. When he grew tired of the game, he didn't protest or cause trouble—which would only be exchanging one children's game for another—but just withdrew into stony refusal.

When Georgy was seventeen, his nanny got sick and died. The boy went through a long and severe episode of withdrawal. Dietrich was in anguish, also; he had depended on the nanny absolutely. He hired a new nanny but she complained that Georgy didn't want to have fun with her, that he was sullen, unfriendly.

She understood nothing.

Meanwhile, Dietrich's business was not going so well either. Of course it didn't help that he was always half-distracted with worry about his grieving son, but the biggest problems were occurring at a level far beyond his control. The political mood of the country, of the whole region, had become infected with fears and threats. Dietrich found

himself accompanying his clients more and more often to the Ministry of the Army, until a colonel clapped him on the shoulder and said, “No need to see you again, Mr. Dietrich. We’re not haggling anymore. From now on, we set the price and no supplier can legally refuse it.”

War, thought Dietrich, as he shook the colonel’s hand. War was coming. That was only one possible explanation for this new state of affairs. Dietrich tottered home and reassessed his whole situation. War was coming; he was aging; if worse came to worst, Georgy would have to fend for himself. And who would pay any attention to his small silence in the midst of a great uproar?

Dietrich sat down and wrote an urgent letter to the nerve specialist, the worker of miracles, not knowing if he still practiced at the same address, or practiced at all. But he did, and replied promptly. The doctor had decided to see him as soon as possible—in two months’ time. Obviously he believed that international borders were in danger of closing.

Dietrich called Georgy into his study.

“We’re going to take a long trip together. We’re going to see a doctor about fixing your vocal cords. You want to speak, don’t you?”

Georgy nodded his head slowly. In his gaze, apprehension and trust came together into one single, unanswerable query.

“We don’t know if this will work. We’re just going to go and see.”

Dietrich wrote to a hotel near the doctor’s clinic and requested a two-week reservation. Might as well try to make a little vacation out of their visit and show Georgy a great foreign city. It was also a chance to be fitted by some of the finest tailors and shoemakers in the west. All in all, it would probably be the last opportunity for leisurely travel for some time to come.

But when the day of their journey came around, and they stepped out of a taxi at the station, it became immediately apparent that the last opportunity for leisurely travel had already passed them by. The once orderly station was filled with soldiers, mostly brand-new recruits setting out to join their units. When Dietrich and Georgy finally got to their assigned compartment, the conductor refused to honor their tickets. All first-class accommodations had been commandeered by officers; civilian ticket-holders had to travel second class. Indignant, Dietrich dragged Georgy through crowds of khaki-clad young men shouting goodbye to family members, embracing girlfriends, weeping. The station master sat besieged in his cage, surrounded by a terrible din. When he spied Dietrich, he bellowed, “You civilian there, you take whatever seat you can get!” His remark was followed by a burst of derision from patriotic draftees who had come to beg for standing space on the train.

Dietrich made his way back to the train, with Georgy following close behind, toting both their valises. He discreetly bribed a conductor, who quickly made room for them by forcing a couple of soldiers to give up their seats. Even so, the compartment was overcrowded and uncomfortable. They might as well have been in third class.

Finally the train began to lurch, and the discomfort was mitigated somewhat by the idea that they were going somewhere at last. The soldiers who had lost their seats pouted with bored resentment. One of them pulled a flask out of his pocket and waved it around, provoking laughter from the crowded compartment. Georgy leaned forward and peered out the window as the city diminished from factories to sheds to isolated huts where goats grazed on weeds. The flask circulated around the compartment, accompanied by boisterous comments. One of the standing soldiers said to Dietrich, “So, you bought a ticket for this train?”

“Yes I did,” replied Dietrich. “For first class.”

“If you join the army, you can ride for free!”

Dietrich shrugged.

Another standing soldier said, “If you bought a ticket for first class, how come you’re riding here with us?”

“You asshole,” said the first soldier. “First class is for officers and military jerk-offs. Civilians can’t ride first class anymore.”

“Why the hell should they?” cried another. “As long as we’re defending them, let them eat some shit too and travel like we do!”

“I never said it was unfair,” said Dietrich coolly.

“What *did* you say?” asked another soldier sitting across from them.

“Me? I said nothing,” said Dietrich.

“Like hell,” said the first soldier, accepting the flask. “Christ, it’s empty!” He threw it on the floor and looked Dietrich in the eye. “Got anything to drink?”

“No.”

“You going to report us for drinking? You going to tell the captain what we’re doing? Tell him I think the officers in this army aren’t worth a sick pig’s fart.”

“I’m not telling anybody anything. I was in the army myself once.” This was a lie, but Dietrich thought he could pull it off.

“Oh yeah? Where did you serve?”

“Oh, here and there. Where are *you* going to serve?”

“Oh, me? I’m in the . . .”

Another soldier clapped his hand over the first one’s mouth. “You’re not supposed to tell anybody about your assignment, remember?”

“Look, I don’t want to hear anything I’m not supposed to,” said Dietrich quickly.
“I just don’t want to hear about it.”

The train rattled along at a steady, lulling pace. Half of the soldiers lit up cigarettes; despite the open window, the compartment became smoky. The sun was declining. In a couple of hours they would reach the capital city, where Dietrich and Georgy would change trains. Most of the soldiers were probably bound elsewhere—for the border, probably.

After an hour had passed, the first soldier suddenly said to Georgy, “How come you’re not in the army?”

Dietrich said to the soldier, “My son has a medical exemption. He can’t speak. Do you understand that? He’s mute.”

“What a faker! Come on, he can speak!”

Everybody laughed.

“He’s completely mute, and I have documentation to prove it.”

“Is that so? Well, you can wipe my behind with your *documentation*.”

A bigger laugh. Encouraged, the first soldier continued. “I can prove, without any *documentation*, that he can speak.” He leaned over and put his face in Georgy’s face. “You’re just trying to get out of the army, aren’t you? Isn’t that so?”

Georgy’s face went blank. The light in his eyes went out.

“Leave him alone,” said Dietrich quietly.

Ignoring Dietrich, the soldier said to Georgy, “Say something, anything, so I don’t have to drag it out of you.”

“Stop it. The boy didn’t do anything to you.”

“Oh yeah? Well, he’s *sitting* in my *seat*!”

Dietrich rose. “You can have *my* seat if you want. Will that make you happy?”

“I want *his* seat, not yours.”

“Hey!” said another soldier. “You hear what he said? He’s offering you a seat! Sit on it and shut up!”

“So you’re giving the orders in this compartment? What are you—a major general?”

“It’s not a order, it’s a fucking warning!”

A serious murmur arose from the rest of the soldiers. The two men continued to glare at each other until some other soldiers interposed themselves and physically separated the antagonists. The compartment sighed with relief and a few quiet conversations resumed. Outside, the sun touched the horizon and the reddened sky cast long shadows over a wide expanse of farmland.

Meanwhile, the soldier who had taunted Georgy continued to brood. Perhaps the present situation had touched some sore spot in his pride, or perhaps he was just a human landmine triggered to explode at the slightest pressure. In any case, the explosion came at an unexpected moment and caught everybody by surprise. Uttering a wordless jungle grunt, the soldier grabbed Georgy by the lapels, pulled him off the seat and pushed him as hard as he could against the other standing men, unbalancing them. It all happened in a few seconds. An indignant hubbub arose, but the soldier’s voice was louder. “Say something, you little bastard! You faker!” Half a dozen hands gripped the enraged man, but the fury in him was so great that he managed to pull them down in a heap. Dietrich threw himself forward to protect his son but was immediately seized and pulled back. He and Georgy were ejected into the crowded corridor, disheveled and panting. Georgy

tumbled to the floor, falling on his elbows. When his father tried to help him up, he pushed him away.

“Are you alright, are you alright” said Dietrich over and over between gulps of breath, but Georgy didn’t reply; he only stood up and gave a odd grin. His eyes were dull and vague. “The valises,” said Dietrich, still heaving with emotion. He pounded on the closed door of the compartment. No answer. He pounded again. Still no answer. A couple of soldiers in the corridor joined him, rapping on the compartment door until it opened a crack.

“My valises on the luggage rack,” yelled Dietrich. “Two of them!”

The valises were passed into the corridor and the door shut again. The train plunged into darkness for five minutes and emerged in the railroad yard of the capital city. The whistle blew and the train slowed down as it entered into the vast central station, the biggest in the country. The smell and uproar of the terminal added to the confusion of departure as soldiers pushed toward the doors.

A few minutes later Dietrich was on platform, and there he discovered that his shoe was missing. He didn’t know if it had fallen off during the scuffle in the compartment or tumbled onto the track while he was getting off the train. He turned and moved toward the train, but it was already pulling out.

“I lost my shoe,” he gasped to Georgy, but Georgy didn’t even look down, didn’t even seem to realize that people on the platform were staring at Dietrich’s stocking foot with amusement and interest, pointing out to one another the spectacle of an impeccably dressed man wearing only one shoe. It was impossible to conceal. You can cover a stain on your clothes with a strategically positioned umbrella or newspaper, but a missing shoe cannot be dissembled. Not as long as you’re on your feet. Dietrich spotted a bench and

rushed over to it. He sat down on the bench, put the valises side by side on the ground, and hid his unshod foot between them.

Of course—such is the law of bad luck—this was the first time he had ever traveled with only one pair of shoes. He had planned to order several pairs of new shoes as soon as they arrived at their destination. He remembered how he had hesitated in front of his closet before deciding not to pack an extra pair of shoes.

He reached into the inner pocket of his wool suitcoat and took out his ticket and examined it. Fortunately, he had four hours to wait for his connection to the west. That gave him plenty of time to run into town and buy a pair of shoes. But he had to hurry. It was almost dark and the shops would close soon. He turned to Georgy and said, “I have to buy some new shoes. Look at me, I have only one shoe.”

Georgy continued to smile.

“Stop grinning at me like that!” shouted Dietrich, and in that moment was closer to slapping Georgy than he had ever been in his life. But he managed to restrain himself.

“You stay here with the bags. I’ll be back soon.”

No flicker of response.

“I’ll be back, alright? Soon, alright? Stay here until I come back.”

It was obviously not a good moment to leave Georgy alone, but what else could he do? Travel all night and go through the customs of several countries with only one shoe? Border guards needed only the flimsiest excuse to turn people back, especially these days.

“I’m going now,” said Dietrich. “I can’t wait any longer, the shops are already closing. It’s getting late.”

Reluctantly, Dietrich glanced at Georgy and hobbled along the platform till he came to a line of taxis. He approached the nearest taxi from behind, so the driver couldn't see his feet.

“I have to go to a shoe store. The nearest one, please.”

The taxi took a few turns and stopped in front of a dirty, dim window. The street was full of run-down hotels and bars for commercial travelers. Dietrich paid and stepped out of the taxi, moving quickly behind the vehicle to keep himself more or less out of the driver's view.

He steeled himself for the inevitable jokes that would greet him when he walked into the shop, but he never got that far. Before he even got to the door, the window display stopped him cold. He had never, in all his life, ever seen a more hideous collection of shoes: pointed toes, ersatz gold monograms, boot-like heels. Impossible! He would look utterly ridiculous wearing a pair of these cheap and flashy monstrosities—like a street-corner Romeo.

He walked back to the curb, and as he did the unprotected sole of his left foot stepped painfully on a stone. His sock wouldn't hold out long against this kind of wear. He hailed a passing taxi. The taxi driver pointed out, with uncontrollable glee, that Dietrich was missing a shoe, and had probably left it behind in the shop. Gritting his teeth, Dietrich asked the driver to take him to a reputable shoe store. The driver frowned; he didn't know about such things; his wife bought his shoes for him. Dietrich asked him if he knew of any area of the city where one *might* find a good shoe store. The driver considered this for a moment, stepped on the gas, and began to drive. He finally stopped on a clean, wide boulevard illuminated by rows of wrought-iron street lamps. Here were the fancy shops. Dietrich got out of the taxi and hobbled along the street, noting with

rapidly sinking hope that most of the shops were already closed. He asked a lady on the street for the nearest shoe store; she automatically glanced down at his feet and let out a little gasp of pity. She hastily gave him directions to two shoe stores—one in each direction—and hurried away as if he were a pathetic cripple.

Dietrich went loping down the street as fast as he could, but by the time he could make out the name of the shop, he could also see that the metal shutters were down. He turned around and charged in the opposite direction, avoiding all eye contact with the people he passed by. By now it was not only his stocking foot that might attract curiosity; he was also limping, and no doubt looked desperate and half crazy.

The other shoe store was also closed.

He felt a mounting panic, but told himself that this was not the moment to lose his head. He approached the shop and looked at it more carefully. There was an apartment over the shop with all its lights were on. Next to the store was a small alley that looked swept and clean. Dietrich walked down the alley until he came to the back of the store. There was a door that looked as if it gave access to the stairs going up to the second-floor apartment. He smelled cooking. After a moment of hesitation, he knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” shouted a voice from the upstairs.

“I need a pair of shoes! It’s an emergency!”

“We’re closed. Come back in the morning.”

Dietrich pounded on the door again. “I need a pair of shoes right now! I lost one shoe and I have to take the train in a few hours!”

“I said the shop is closed!”

“I’ll pay you double! I’ll pay you anything! I’ve got to have a pair of shoes. I’m walking around on one shoe now and I have to catch a train soon!”

No reply. Dietrich thought he could hear a rapid conference between man and wife.

“Go to the front of the store, and we’ll see.”

“Thank you! Thank you! I’m going right now!”

Dietrich went back down the alley to the front of the store. He waited five minutes, ten minutes. He started to sweat with worry. Should he wait here longer, or did he still have time to go back to the other store and look for *its* proprietor? He cursed himself for not buying something in the shop near the railway station. Right now the idea of wearing two shoes of any kind, even the cheapest, vilest pair on earth, seemed like an unattainable utopian fantasy. He turned around and realized that the eyes of the owner of the store were peering at him from a gap in the shutters. Dietrich opened his wallet and waved some bills.

“Size 40!” he said, stuffing bills into the gap.

The eyes blinked and disappeared. The shutter creaked and rose just high enough to allow two shoes to be shoved underneath. Dietrich seized them greedily, like a starving man falling on food. “Thank you! Thank you!” The shutter slammed to the ground. Amazingly, the shoes were of good quality. Dietrich kicked away his single useless shoe and, kneeling on the pavement, put the new ones on. They fit badly, compared to his usual custom-made shoes, but they would do. He felt an enormous relief, followed by a sense of profound nervous exhaustion. He would sleep well on the train tonight, no matter how noisy or uncomfortable it was.

It took him a long time, almost twenty minutes, to find a taxi, but he arrived at the station with more than enough time to make his connection. He hurried along the platform looking for Georgy, but couldn’t find him. Georgy wasn’t in the main waiting

room either. Puzzled, Dietrich went into the station café and the men's toilet. He couldn't begin to think where Georgy might have gone or why. It occurred to him that perhaps he had just overlooked or somehow missed the bench where he had left Georgy two hours before. He walked along the platform again, looking at every single bench. And he found it. Georgy wasn't on it, but his valises were. They were open and mostly empty. On the ground lay one of his white shirts, trampled by many feet.

“Are you looking for the boy?” said a voice somewhere.

Dietrich turned around and saw an old man sitting behind a cart from which he sold nuts, candy, and apples. Tethered to the cart, a placid horse munched in a feedbag.

“Yes, my son was right here! What happened to him? Do you know where he is?”

The old man made a gesture of dismissal. “In the army.”

“My son isn't in the army.”

“He is now. He was sitting right on that bench when the military police grabbed him and made him sign the papers. Then they put him on the next train out. It's the new law, didn't you hear about it? Everybody between seventeen and forty has to join.”

“But they can't do that! My son is exempt! He's mute! He can't talk!”

With a laugh, the old man said, “You don't have to talk to be a soldier. You just have to salute and get shot at.”

All at once the old man stopped laughing and turned away in embarrassment. A beggar approached holding his hat out, slowed down for a moment, then passed on. Dietrich sank down to the bench and stared at the bright shine of his new shoes.