

Excerpt from *Cities & Countries* by Roman Payne.

A broke and abject Alexis finds work in a basement slaving for scraps with criminals and fiends...

Alexis turned back to the stocking-maker once the latter was seated again in his chair with the blonde woman's foot once again in his lap. "I'm looking for someone named Dominique. He said his address was thirty-one Stratsnoy Boulevard. That is..."

"Well, that's your problem right there!" the stocking-maker broke in, cutting him off mid-sentence, "This is thirty-one Stratsnoy *Avenue*! Stratsnoy *Boulevard* is in the seventh district! You're in the fifth now. Wrong place, guy!"

Alexis inhaled tiredly and exhaled wearily; and then prepared to turn around and set off again. The stocking-maker, who by now seemed to have lost complete interest in Alexis, returned his full attention the slender leg of the blonde. With his hands gripped around her calf, he pulled off the stocking he had put on, and threw it across the office into one of the many piles.

"Are you a stocking-maker?" Alexis asked suddenly.

The fat man turned to Alexis, slid his chair back and shouted, "Do I look like a goddamned stocking-maker?! Do you want to get smacked in the face?!" Just then he grabbed an object of some kind off his desk and hurled it past Alexis into the corridor. It was apparent he was aiming and a sooty-faced dough-kneader who had come back behind Alexis to snicker. The fat man looked back at Alexis and addressed him.

"I'm the boss here. And those dirty rogues are my workers."

"What are they working at?" Alexis asked.

"Damn, guy! Can't you see I have a lady here? You came at the wrong time. Anyway, it must be midnight. What do you want?"

"Well sir, I'm sorry...but you can see I'm dressed in rags and have no shoes or socks. But, believe me, I'm not a beggar. My clothes were stolen, and my money too. And now I need a place to sleep and some work. Can you offer me work? I'll do anything, I don't care what the job entails. I'll even wash dishes. Anything!"

“Listen, crumpet,” the boss turned to his lady-friend, “Go on for now. I’m going to talk to this guy...what are you called?” he asked, turning back to Alexis.

“Alexis, sir...I’m called Alexis. What are you called?”

“Boss,” the boss replied, “but you don’t call me, I call you. This here’s the Fifth Central Bread Production Plant. I’ll be honest, it’s not the nicest job and it only pays one sovereign a week. Starting out, you get the dirtiest work – sweeping ashes out of the furnace.”

“And to sleep?” Alexis asked.

“There are bunks. All the men sleep in the same room. I don’t advance anything. You get one bread roll a day. Eat two and I kick you to the curb. You’ll get a bunk. Wash your linen in the sink. Oh, and watch out for the other men. They’re all a bunch of rogues. But you’ve got nothing to steal, so that’s not a problem. Next week when you get paid, buy yourself some shoes and socks.

Thus, for some time, Alexis worked, slept and slaved away in the ashes at the Fifth Central Bread Production Plant in the Great City. His work began at five in the morning and went without a break until late into the evening. The work entailed shovelling fuel into the immense furnace and sweeping the soot out of it. While he performed these tasks, the other men worked entranced at the nearby tables, mindlessly kneaded dough to make cracknels, batards, and loaves of rye bread. The only sounds came from the repetitious shovelling and the blazing furnace. No one spoke or ever had anything to say.

In the beginning, Alexis’ nights were sleepless, spent with insomnia awake on the hard bunk, thinking over the sorrowful road his life had taken. In the workroom, there were no windows; but in the basement bunkroom, there was a tiny window up near the ceiling. It was covered in bars and the glass was covered in soot, yet Alexis could see through it, a small obscured white light shining in the night sky which he mistook for the moon. It was actually just an incandescent security bulb out in the alley.

While Alexis remained awake, the other men slept and snored loudly in their bunks. The room smelled stale and musty from the body odour of filthy men. There were bedbugs in the linen.

‘How dirty I feel,’ he thought as he lay awake, one of the first nights spent in that basement, ‘What a boy I was...have been all along...and how I thought myself already a man.’ While looking at the white light glowing through the film of soot on the dirty window, he played back his recent past. He tried to retaste every failure, every misery. This, and this alone, brought him pleasure. ‘...So broken, I am...so dirty...so weak. Here, I thought fame and power would come easily. And here I am now, fettered in a cask of ashes – to weak to move. Why now, even if the world came to me offering fame and power on a silver salver, I wouldn’t be prepared to take it.’

Thus his first nights were spent in this kind of mournful sleepless reflection; but soon, even that came to pass. Eventually, the long days of gruelling labor took their toll and he no longer had the energy to lie awake at night. The time came when, as soon as the work was finished in the evenings, as soon as he'd thrown his sooty apron in the corner with the rest of them and had eaten the one bread roll he was issued per day – a meagre meal which he consumed slowly and carefully, offering almost religious gratitude for each small bite – he would go straight to sleep a thoughtless, dreamless sleep on his hard bunk – where, just like the other men, he too snored loudly and filled the room with the stale odour of musty sweat.

He also stopped shaving. His face grew a ratty beard. His head itched from the lice that infested all the men there. The soot from the furnace stained his hands, his feet. He began to cough up thick black phlegm. Chronic pain riddled his throat as well as his back. Not having money or energy or the will and desire to see anything around town, he rarely left the basement, and he never left the fifth district of the city – an area made up entirely of textile factories and abandoned buildings with sorrowful broken windows. When he wasn't working or eating his daily bread, he slept. And he slept more than the other men, who usually stayed up for a couple hours after work playing cards and sniffing hearth-cleaning fluid. In the short sleep he was allotted, he found all he really wanted...oblivion.

These other men didn't take an immediate liking to Alexis and rarely spoke to him. Likewise, he didn't trust them and always made sure to stuff his yellow handkerchief in the crotch of his trousers while he slept so no one would steal it. After the first couple days, however, one of the men made a gesture of friendship towards Alexis. The man's name was Chippel. He was a dwarfish specimen. His face bore the scabs of syphilis. He apparently felt sorry for Alexis, having no shoes or socks; and so one early morning just before work began, Chippel left the basement and went outside. A half hour later, he came back with a pair of shoes and offered them to Alexis. They were worn out, of sad leather, and one size too big for Alexis, but he appreciated having something to wear on his feet. He thanked Chippel for the gift and his kindness and decided that when he received his first pay of one sovereign at the end of the week, he would go out and spend at least half of it on a pair of socks.

As soon as Friday, the day to get paid, came around, the boss issued each man an envelope containing his weekly sovereign. Chippel was the messenger sent by the boss to distribute the pay. When Chippel came in the bunkroom with the box of envelopes, he handed one to each man – each man except for Alexis.

“You forgot about me,” Alexis said, turning to Chippel.

Chippel passed him off.

Alexis demanded his week's pay.

“Let me remind you,” Chippel responded before the audience of the other men, “that you agreed to pay me one sovereign for those shoes.”

Alexis looked down at the floppy shoes on his feet. What gall, this villain! He looked back at Chippel with angry eyes of disbelief, "For these shoes?!"

"Yes, those," Chippel replied, "You didn't have shoes, and I sold you shoes – one sovereign! These men are my witness that you didn't have shoes...the shoes came from me!"

Alexis huffed angrily while stepping on the heels of the shoes to kick them off his feet... "Then, damn it, take the shoes back! Take them and give me my money!"

"I don't want the shoes," laughed Chippel mockingly, "I have my own shoes!"

Alexis was furious. "Give me my goddamned money!" he demanded.

"Not a chance," replied Chippel with complete calmness, "It's my money. I had to pay for those shoes. One sovereign, I paid. So you need to pay me back one sovereign!"

Then broke in some of the other men who were gathered around. They began to jest, "Did'ya really pay for those shoes?" ... "Huh, Chippel? Did'ya steal 'em, or did'ya pay for 'em?!" they were having a great time. Chippel turned to them and bared his teeth with a proud smile, as though tremendously pleased to be the object of such a jest.

"Oh, I paid for them, boys!" he joked back, "I tell you I paid for them!" Alexis eyed this odious creature and was about to leap for him and tear his ears off. He looked at the other men who were standing in a semi-circle around the two. Judging from the looks of them, they were not going to offer Alexis any support.

"Give me my money," Alexis drew out in a slow and forceful tone, "Give it to me, or else I'll..."

"Or else you'll what?" asked Chippel. And he took a step close to Alexis. "Or what? Or you'll tell the boss?" And as soon as Chippel said this, the other men began to slowly advance towards Alexis. They wore with fiercely threatening faces. Some rolled up their sleeves, making fists with their sooty scarred hands. It was clear how this situation was turning out. Alexis, realizing he could not win, and so he backed off and let Chippel keep his week's pay without further protest.

That night, Alexis lay beneath his thin blanket fuming with anger. He was bitterly hungry and had looked forward to having his pay so he could go out and buy a real meal. Now he would have to wait at least another week for something to eat other than a bread roll. While he lay on his bunk, he was kept awake by his anger and his hunger, as well as by the raucous the other men were making as they sat around on the floor of the bunkroom playing cards. Alexis noticed that on this night, the bottle of whiskey the men passed around was a large one. No doubt Alexis' money that paid for that whiskey. Regardless, Alexis was alone and hungry without money or companions, while the men had all just been paid and so were very merry together and stayed awake drinking and gambling into the night.

After this event, Alexis retreated even more into himself; and not only did he not speak with the other men, as before, but now he refused to even look at them. He simply

continued working as usual – sweeping the furnace and stocking the fuel. With only one bread roll a day to eat, he grew extremely gaunt and became stricken with poor health.

That was the beginning. After more time passed, Alexis grew accustomed to his role there at the Great City's Fifth Central Bread Production Plant. Not only had he already started to work like the other men, punching the time clock in the same drone-like mechanical way, muttering the same solemn swearwords while bitterly putting on his dirty apron, but he also believed he was beginning to resemble these men in appearance with their dry skin, scaly from malnutrition; their ugly faces, distorted from misery; their long filthy fingernails and gaunt and hunched-over bodies. He fancied he even began to think like them, with their low ideals, their criminal preoccupations, their cynical apathy.

Then came the day that a new man was hired on. He was younger than Alexis, naïve to the type of work, and was given the dirtiest task of sweeping out the furnace. This-upon, Alexis was promoted to the ranks of the other men, and he too began the mindless work of kneading dough, rolling it out to make cracknels, batards and loaves of rye bread. This new position, though infinitely beneath the ideals he'd held for himself long ago at that forgotten previous time of his life, he took on with a relative amount of pride, now able to look with scornful malice on the fleas crawling in the threads of his clothes. He no longer had to sweep ashes out of the furnace.

This gradual yet tremendous change that occurred within Alexis, the complete evaporation of his desire for greatness and his wish to live an extraordinary life, ran its course without his even being conscious of it. Whereas, in the very beginning, he had made plans to get himself out of this situation, thinking each week he would spend a couple thalers of his pay on cheap but substantial food to supplement his daily bread rolls – while saving the bulk of it to buy suitable clothes to go look for better-paying and more respectable work; in the end, he squandered all and saved nothing – although he did manage to find once a cheap pair of trousers that, though ragged, were not torn to shreds so much as those that he first entered the basement with; he also came upon a pair of decent socks to wear with his floppy shoes one evening while wandering the desolate alleys around the textile factories. In the end, his money ended up being spent in the same way the money of the other men working there at the Fifth Central Bread Production Plant was spent: a few careless thalers here and there on food items, with the rest of it going to liquor rations which he and the men drank every night after work to ease the physical and mental suffering that came with the burdens of life and labour in the basement.

Though Alexis continued to harbour disdain for the other men, and while they never did take a sincere liking to him, they all eventually grew to tolerate each other; and soon Alexis began to spend his off hours in their company; and every night resembled the one before it. Come eight o'clock in the evening, once the fifteen hour shift of mindless work was over, Alexis would pitch in his ten thalers along with the rest of the men, and one of

them would go to the liquor store and come back with a bottle. Each would receive his share and Alexis would sit on the floor and drink while watching the other men's card games.

All introspection vanished from Alexis and he gave almost no further thought to his situation. He rarely recalled his memories of leaving his family and country to emigrate to the Great City, and forgot altogether his initial ambitions. His passions were dead. Gone were the impressions of idle days of yore. Memories like that sunny afternoon he ate soup on a terrace on Chancellery Prospect with two young charming girls were gone for him. All this was dead, as if they were someone else's memories. Now, he but lived and worked, slept and slaved away without any thought for the past, present or future.

It was on a stifling morning in summer when the air was particularly stagnant and musty in the bunkroom, Alexis awoke ill, sweating in the oppressive heat. He suffered from his chronic sickness from alcohol. Sick in the gut and nauseous, he got out of his bunk and went to begin his shift along with the other men who were already standing at their tables, hunched over as they mindlessly rolled out dough. It was at the time when this new young worker had just been hired on. He was an eager lad with ugly crossed eyes. He had rosy cheeks and lips that seemed to be always wet with saliva. It appeared that he was an orphan in the world, and he glued to Alexis from the first day when the latter was assigned to train him for his job. Alexis was annoyed by the stupidity of the lad, always repeating the same questions... "Where again do I put the ashes once I've swept them out?...How again do prep the fuel to put in the furnace?"

On this particular sultry summer morning when Alexis was more than usually ill and bitter-tempered, he lost his patience quickly when the new worker came to his table early piping his questions. Alexis decided he'd had enough of the little chicken...

"Listen guy," he snapped at him, "If you start squeaking again today, you're going to be sorry. I'm gonna explain to you once again the furnace. But first, you have extra work to do. You're going to clean the bunkroom. All our sheets are filthy." He raised his voice, "D'you realize, we have to sleep in that filth at night after listening to you squeaking all day? It's alright, don't look like a dumb lost lamb, just go clean up the bunks. Yes?...good, I'm glad you like that idea. The sheets and blankets in sink, powdered soap down below. But pay extra special attention to bunk number eleven – that's my bunk." ... "While the sheets are hanging up to dry," he continued while the young worker stood balancing on his shovel nodding stupidly, "...while they're hanging up, scrub the floors in the bunkroom. Once the beds are made up, return here and I'll show you the furnace. But keep in mind the work's gonna lag on. It'll be a while before you're finished."

The lad eagerly obeyed and disappeared off into the bunkroom to carry out the orders. After he left the furnace room, Alexis turned and snickered with his lip curled up at the other men with thought the whole affair was quite funny as well; then his mouth dropped into its usual empty and sunken appearance, as he resumed his task – hunched over

his table rolling and kneading, rolling and kneading, while the listless and dreary hours passed on into more hours, also listless, and also dreary.

None of the men were in the habit of anticipating the end of the work day. There were no clocks on the walls. The signal for the end of the day was the boss's ringing of a bell in the corridor which came at eight o'clock in the evening. But no one waited for this or looked forward to it. The end of a work day just meant the beginning of another gloomy evening spent with whisky that was so cheap that it always made one sick, followed by a night of oblivious sleep which would be disrupted all too quickly and painfully at five in the morning when it was time to begin a new day of work. When the end-of-work bell in the corridor rang, the men would awake from their trances, drop whatever dough was in their hands, and march silently to the bunkroom.

It was on the evening of the day when the new lad had been ordered to clean the beds and the floor, that Alexis was stirred from his trance earlier than usual.

"Sir...I'm finished, but yours is bed eleven, right?" It was the lad. He was standing wide-eyed before Alexis' worktable.

"Yeah," Alexis replied, "what of it?"

"Well, it's just that I found these on the floor under the mattress when I was shaking it out." He held his open palm out. "I wouldn't want you to lose them."

Alexis looked in the palm of the lad's hand. He was holding his yellow silk handkerchief and a crumpled up piece of blue paper. The handkerchief was soiled and covered in dust. Alexis took these items from the lad's hand with disinterest and stuffed them in his trouser pocket. He then nodded in the direction of the shovel and told the lad to get to the furnace and get to work.

"But you said you would help me understand the furnace," the lad said.

"I told you the first day you were here," Alexis replied.

"But I still don't understand it."

"You simply sweep," replied Alexis, "sweep and sweep and when you're done, keep sweeping." And with that, Alexis fell back in his trance, resuming to knead his dough.

At the end of the shift that night, as usual, the men went into the bunkroom to eat their bread rolls and ration out the night's supply of whiskey.

Seated on the floor, while cutting the deck of cards, Chippel laughed and said to the other men with a mocking smile, "That was sure nice of the new lad to pay double his share for the whiskey, eh gentlemen?" He unscrewed the bottle and poured out doses of whiskey into the men's cups who were seated in a semi-circle around him.

"Where is the squirrel?" one of the men asked.

"Oh! Ha-ha!" Chippel howled with malicious joy, "We sent him on a little errand, you see, boys! We told him to go across town to the Upper-East End, 'cause it's there where

the bottle of whiskey is on hold for us. 'Already paid,' I told him, 'you just have to go to the East End liquor store and pick it up!'"

"But the bottle is here," Alexis said, naïvely.

"Exactly!" Chippel laughed, "and it'll be gone by the time he gets back!... 'cause it's gonna take him a while. He's not gonna find a liquor store on the street I told him!"

"Funny as hell!" Alexis laughed.

The other men laughed too.

"Hey, you're alright!" Chippel suddenly said, turning to Alexis.

Alexis smiled. Chippel continued... "You know, I thought at first you were a complete cod. But you're not at all... you're one of us!" he smiled, "a comrade like the rest of us."

Alexis pushed his cup forward to be refilled with whiskey when Chippel offered. Chippel slapped him with friendliness on the shoulder and Alexis slapped Chippel's shoulder right back. That evening Alexis remained in the circle with the other men. Not as before, an outsider, drinking while quietly watching the card game over someone's shoulder, but rather he sat in the circle with the other men, as one of them, and they all drank and played cards together. On this night, there was a copious amount of whiskey and the men got more than usually rummy. They talked and told stories; and for the first time on this night, Alexis learned each of the men's histories.

One spoke about his leaving his seaport town in Nova Scotia, near Halifax, where his father wanted him to be a fisherman like he and his grandfather. But the man, then just a boy, wanted to travel the world, and so he did. He saw a few things and eventually ended up here in the basement.

"And you wouldn't want to find better than this basement?" Alexis asked.

"Well," the man responded, "It's better than prison."

Another talked of leaving Mexico where he grew up in poverty with his mother and younger sister who both worked as whores. He had depended on his sister to feed him. His mother was too old and wasn't bringing in money. Then came the night that he ended up following one of his sister's clients out into the street after he left her room. There he attacked him, beat him up severely and stole his money. With the money, he bought a ticket and sailed across the ocean with ambitions of earning a fortune so that he could return to Mexico and provide for his sister and mother so they wouldn't have to work as whores anymore and his family could be respectable.

"What happened?" Alexis asked.

"That was twenty-five years ago," the man responded gloomily, with a bowed head.

Another man kept wanting badly to tell the story of his life and started and stopped many times but could never get it going. He didn't know the language very well. All he

managed to explain was that he was born in Portugal and that his mother had been very beautiful and she always smelled like taffy. “Taffy,” he said over and over, “she smelled taffy!”

Some of the men asked Chippel to tell his story, but each time they did, he simply laughed and bared his teeth at everyone, saying “Oh, you know boys! Ha-ha! You know my story, alright, dontch’ya boys! Ha-ha!” And the table would be turned to someone else.

The last story Alexis listened to was one of patricide. One of the men explained how he’d killed his father with a hunting knife. After, he ran away to the Great City where he wouldn’t get caught.

“But why did you do it?” Alexis asked, “was it simply that you wished you’d had another father instead?”

“Another father?” the man replied in a voice of bewilderment, “Why another father? I would have just had to kill him too!”

All these stories filled Alexis with disgust. They seemed to awaken in his a certain kind of thoughtfulness for the past, the present and future that was deeply mournful and melancholic and soon he could hear no more. Abandoning his cup of whiskey, he left his place on the floor and walked over to his bunk. Leaning on the thin mattress, he looked up at the tiny soot-covered window up by the ceiling. He studied the obscured white light coming through the dirty pane of glass. For the first time on this night, he remarked that it was in fact not the moon, that it was merely an incandescent bulb in the alleyway. He had been deceived. The whiskey swirled in his head, with floating thoughts and emotions. With his gaunt hand rippled with weakened veins, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the wad of blue paper the new lad had returned to him that afternoon. He uncrumpled it and studied the address written on it in ink that had faded. “Stratsnoy,” he muttered aloud, thinking hard about this word. He then pulled out the yellow handkerchief. It too was worn and ripped and stained with soot and grime. Neatly, with slow methodical and exacting movements, he took the handkerchief and laid it on his bunk where he flattened it out and tried to press the wrinkled out and pinch together the parts that had been torn.

That night, Alexis didn’t finish his dose whiskey; neither did he return to listen to the dissolute stories of the other men’s lives; neither did he retreat to his bunk to seek oblivion in sleep. After having heard of the whores, the prisons and jails, the patricide, these impoverished tales of lost dreams, broken hopes and years gone by...after hearing all this, Alexis laced up his floppy shoes and left the basement to take a walk in the balmy summer night. It had been a long time since he had left the basement. He walked down Stratsnoy Avenue, past the rows of abandoned buildings and dilapidated textile factories, and left the shambles of the fifth district of the city. He crossed the river. The streets took him to the closed-up marketplace where he remembered that once, long ago on a bright cold day, he had observed with such innocent amazement and joy for living, the goods being sold, the busy Great City shoppers, the happy vendors, the girls in white dresses carrying flowers. He

passed the marketplace and continued on west until he entered the seventh district; and there he stopped and asked a stranger for directions.

“Where are you trying to go to?” the stranger asked.

Alexis searched through his pockets. His memory wasn't what it used to be. He looked for the blue paper. “Oh, Christ!” he exclaimed then in a feeble voice of great sorrowful regret, “I forgot my yellow handkerchief!” □