LEGEND IN STEEL

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As long as men seek perfection there will be tall stories. That all but impossible birdie, the ancestor who turned the tide at Mingo Church, those thirty-five kilometer marches through the Argonne—such matters may be, of course, no more than whistling to keep one's self-importance up. Translate them, however, from self-interest to race interest and boasting becomes legend, to be cherished in bright remembrance.

The birdie, great grandfather's perspicacity, and those long marches are, in a manner, part of a world removed from the commonplace. But they are so only in less degree than are the exploits and excellencies of our heroes of romance. We forget that Hector and Achilles, Ulysses and Agamemnon may have been petty tribesmen engaged in a struggle to control trade routes to the north. For us they are examples of intrepidity, fortitude, and the will to live—exaggerated out of all human proportion, to be sure—like nothing else in race record. They represent an approach to perfection, a summation of our thoughts about ourselves. What difference if that thinking is mere wish fulfillment? We cannot live by the commonplace alone; and since we lack perfection, we must in our humble way contrive a substitute. The tall story and the legend are part and parcel of a world that ought to be.

The jump from individual bragging and race legend to Gregor Ipanovich and his stories of Joe Magerac is but from here to there. In this time of high-pressure production and the necessity for all-out effort comparable to nothing before in our history, the stories Gregor told me seem of far higher significance now than they did in those peaceful days early in the century. I knew Gregor thirty-five years ago. He was stencil man and straw boss of a gang of truckers in the warehouse of a steel mill; I was a shipping clerk. His duties consisted of stencilling the names and

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1 The author, professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh for some twenty years, based his article on personal experience. Prior to completing his college training, he was employed for several years in various sections of the Monessen plant of the Pittsburgh Steel Company.—Ed.
addresses of consignees on kegs of nails or reels of barbed wire and fixing tags on rolls of fencing or bundles of plain wire, the while he kept an eye on the truckers and their distribution of the load in the car. When the trip from the stock pile to the loading platform was long and the men were on their way to and fro, there were brief intervals of idleness during which Gregor would talk to me. I say talk. As a matter of fact his speech was an intricate confusion of Slavonic, German, English, and gestures. "Number 9 track ready"; "Car sealer come pretty quick"; "How soon dinner time"; "Hurry up"; "Now we go home"—these phrases comprised most of his English. None the less he got along. He understood his simple job very well, and was effective enough in handling our gang, so effective, in fact, that we usually loaded some eighty tons during a ten-hour turn. We talked, as I have said, but it was not until after an incident, trifling, no doubt, on the surface, but more or less embarrassing to me, had occurred that he ever revealed an interest in anything beyond the immediate.

One night in March, during the spring rush, we were working overtime loading a thirty-ton order of galvanized wire. The material had to be hauled from the galvanizing shop, about two hundred yards away, in truck loads of some three thousand pounds—a long, slow, and very heavy task for our crew. The weather was cold, the huge piles of steel products standing about us there in the warehouse seeming to hold and intensify the chill. Gregor had difficulty in fixing the tags on the bundles and my fingers were rigid as I tried to record the weight of each load. We danced about, slapping our sides and blowing on our hands while waiting for the trucks. When they did arrive, we both lent a cold hand in placing the wire to speed up our circulation.

The cold, the long haul, the growing lateness—before we were half finished we began to expect momentarily the whistle of the freight engine coming to draw Number 9 out into the yard—all this together with sheer bad luck contributed to the unlucky accident, I suppose. At all events, just as the last truck load was starting across the iron plate that bridged between the platform and the car, the handle-man gave the front wheels a tremendous jerk and one of the nails holding the plate in place gave way and the truck sank, to turn over and become wedged in
the gap left by the plate as it fell to the track. Naturally the wire followed the plate. A ton and a half of material out of place and only a minute or two to go! Nothing remained but to lift it bundle by bundle and place it in the load. Before we were well started, the train crew appeared, the car sealer bustled up to clamp his precious zinc strip on the door; and to make things completely bad, old Bob Rayburn, the chief shipper, ran out of his office to shriek orders in his excited, profane way. The gang fairly fell over one another in their efforts, for the moment confounding confusion. A loss of fifteen minutes, a delayed train, much bad temper, and a great deal of sweat even in that intense cold! In the end, however, all was serene. All, that is, except poor Gregor. He had driven the nails that held the plate, and in some carelessness had used one six-penny among the customary four ten-penny nails;—as he should have expected, it did not stand the strain.

Old Bob had seen at once what had happened; what he said to me has no place in a respectable publication—the responsibility had been, after all, really mine. But Gregor knew that he had slipped. And so, after Bob had slammed his way back into his office and we were preparing to ring out for the night, Gregor tried to apologize, but finding difficulty in phrasing his thought he finally sighed in his melancholy Slav way and in his grotesque speech—which I am unable even to suggest—said, “If Joe Magerac had known, he would have helped. For men like us work is very hard and we make mistakes, but for Joe Magerac everything is an easy, one-hand job.”

“Joe Magerac!” I exclaimed. “Who is he? What would he have done?” And on our way out, past the chattering nail mill, the softly rumbling wire mill, and the rod mill with its stabbing whistle, Gregor began to tell me about Joe Magerac. Why, I do not know except that some sort of bond seemed to have been created between us during old Bob’s outburst. Gregor, blaming himself for the mishap, felt that in some fashion he must make amends. All too infrequently has anyone caught a glimpse of what goes on behind the eyes and the sometimes inscrutable faces of the simple laborers in industry. Until that night, to me at least, they had been unimaginative creatures who in the sweat of their brows earned a morsel of bread and at times a drop of polinka. I changed my
mind, however, as Gregor in his grotesque speech revealed the rudiments, at least, of a character worthy to stand alongside the heroes of no matter what romance; for it symbolized ideal accomplishment, summing up as it seemed to do the hopes and the will to succeed—far short though most of them fall—of a body of men whom all of us have realized lived among us but very few have come to know.

Joe Magerac—the name has no significance as far as I could learn—was born of the mists that hover over the lakes and mountains of the “old country,” and of the coal and iron of America. He is thus endowed with the strength of the earth but also with the elusiveness of air. He is as large as occasions demand but as fleeting as mist in the sun. He moves with the speed of light; rather, he seems to occupy whatever space he chooses without moving from spot to spot. He is at times the immovable body, and at times the irresistible force. He appears in the midst of workmen taxed beyond their powers and with an effortless push or lift overcomes their difficulty; only, when they look around to see who has helped them Joe Magerac is nowhere to be found.

In the course of time Gregor told me a great deal about him. One of the stories had to do with an incident in the open hearth. Gregor had heard it from one of his countrymen when first coming to work in the mill, but the man had long since wandered off to Rankin or Homestead—Gregor could not remember which. About four o’clock one afternoon Number 6 furnace was, as usual, ready to tap. The men were all in their places, ready to add sand or dolomite in case the slag should harden too rapidly. The plug was removed and the first splashes of molten steel struck the bottom of the ladle. But something was wrong with the flow. The heater was back on the floor peering through his blue spectacles at the white hot charge to see what was damming the stream. He finally began to poke about with his long rods and things improved somewhat. The flow was not normal, however.

When the ladle was about three-quarters full, it all happened. A menacing hiss and the rear wall of the furnace split just above the vent, cascading a torrent of steel, bright as liquid sunlight, into the huge pot. Since none of it escaped to threaten the workmen or be lost upon the floor, nothing seemed amiss—the wall itself could easily be repaired. But
the craneman had no sooner lifted the ladle to place it over the ingot molds—the story deals with open hearth practice now long outmoded—than a crack started up near the brim. The sudden pressure had been too great and the ladle, designed to receive a gradual flow, had developed a defect. The crack widened with the motion of the lift. Another second and the whole heat would have poured down upon the men. With a single, concentrated shriek of terror they wheeled in flight. Yet they stopped upon the instant, stopped and stood as if transfixed, motionless like figures painted upon the shadowy wall of the open hearth shed.

For one among them—whom later no one could remember ever having seen before—appeared to assume the proportions of a giant. Torso, shoulders, head, arms were magnified enormously and thrust upward upon shaft-like legs to tower above the fifty-ton ladle as if it had been a saucepan. The giant grasped the lips of the crack, one great hand upon each, and ground them together so that at once the ladle was made whole again. Not a spark remained visible, not a splash of fluid steel overflowed. Order was restored. Aware of their escape from the scalding death, the men, who but instants before had shrieked in terror, now shrieked with joy. But they fell as suddenly silent. The ladle was being moved along in normal fashion. There was no giant anywhere. They looked at one another with eyes for the moment insane. Were they awake? Or did they dream? All that remained to remind them of what had passed was a thin mist of steam that arose from a puddle where some of the hot metal, in the beginning, had fallen.

Whenever during the days that followed some trifling emergency arose I would wish for Joe Magerac, but Gregor would only smile; nothing short of imminent disaster involving life as well as property would bring him, it seemed. And then one morning just as we were starting to work, the runner laid an order for five hundred kegs of eight-penny common nails upon my little movable desk. Such an order was the simplest we handled. It meant that Gregor had only to touch each keg with the stencil and brush and see that the kegs were placed in ten rows of twenty each in both ends of the car, leaving five rows to be placed across the middle to hold the others in place; my part being merely to see that among the five kegs each trucker brought nothing but eight-
penny common was included. Gregor was delighted at beginning a day in such fashion. He laughed and said, "No Joe Magerac this job. But one time he helped with eight-common. On barge." And then because there was ample time between trips from the car to the stock pile, he could tell me the story.

The company maintained warehouses in various cities to facilitate local shipments. One of these was located in Memphis. The stock was loaded in a huge covered barge and shipped down the Monongahela, the Ohio, and on to its destination upon the Mississippi. The barge held some forty carloads, or twenty thousand kegs. Upon this occasion the whole order had consisted of eight-penny common, the nail, of course, in largest demand. The kegs were loaded in cars in the usual fashion and pulled down to the loading wharf a mile or so away, there to be reloaded in the barge. The work was not unpleasant, for the most part in the open air instead of in the vast, gloomy warehouse, and the men always enjoyed it. There was seldom a mishap beyond an occasional smashed finger if the kegs hurtled down the slide too fast—from the trestle to the hold of the barge—or beyond an infrequent ducking, when one of the men in an awkward movement fell overboard, much to the glee of his friends.

On the last day of this particular job, according to Gregor, because of spring floods the river had swollen so much that the barge was almost level with the trestle instead of lying, as it should have lain, much lower by reason of its lading. Furthermore, pressure of the water and its more violent motion had caused the mooring ropes to fray. In the midst of a sudden downpour of rain, the men on the trestle stampeded across the shute into the barge for protection.

Their sudden, added weight rocked the barge, heavy though it was. It swayed away from the wharf and the mooring ropes parted—to permit the unwieldy and uncontrollable craft to be sucked swiftly into the flood current. There was no steering gear aboard, nothing in any way to be used either to stop the barge or to control its direction. It gathered speed with every passing moment and everybody aboard knew that there was every chance of being wrecked in a crash against the close-set pylons of a bridge not a hundred yards downstream. But, in mad career one minute, in the next the barge stopped and remained stationary. Then it
seemed to be propelled backwards. Gradually it was pushed back to the point from which it had started. A dozen men jumped out upon the wharf to make it fast with the badly frayed ropes, and one of them, glancing toward the middle of the river swore he saw a swimmer who turned his head toward the shore and waved a gigantic hand. But all anyone else could see was a faint mist rapidly dissolving in the rain.

Eventually Gregor told me about the time when Joe Magerac saved a workman’s life by catching a filled ingot mold when the crane that was carrying it jambed and broke the chain; about his using his fingers for twelve-gauge dies when all the dies in the wire mill would draw nothing but runouts; and the long story about the tram of pig-iron that broke loose from a donkey engine and started down grade toward the main office. In fact he had many stories, some of them not without a grotesque, obscene humor. But the exploit I have always liked best had to do with Joe Magerac’s rescue of a small boy who carried water for the men engaged in building Number 12 blast furnace.

Gregor had forgotten the boy’s name, and he was certain that his family had moved away soon after the event—I never could manage to tie him down in matters either of narrators or witnesses. The small boy was something of a pet among the men on the job. They permitted him to do about as he pleased, go where he wanted to, and ask anyone questions—so long as his water bucket was at hand and freshly filled. One afternoon toward quitting time, he decided he would mount a long ladder rising from the ground all the way to the gadgetry at the top of the furnace. The work was almost completed. Number 12 was about ready to be blown in, but some of the scaffolding was yet in place and a number of ladders remained. This one alone reached the top, however, some eighty feet from the ground.

The boy was almost half way up before anybody noticed what he was doing. Then one of the riveters saw him and shouted for him to come down. The boy merely looked around and laughed. The riveter continued to shout and in a minute or two a crowd had gathered and the whole group began to shout. But for a time the boy paid no attention, going on up rung by rung until he was sixty-five or seventy feet from the ground. The shouting increased as he proceeded, and once more he
turned to look down at the excited crowd. But as he did so he became ill. Dizzy with a sense of height and growing faint, he stopped where he was and merely hung on. As the men watched they saw him slump against the ladder. If he fainted completely he would fall the long way to the ground. The crowd plunged into a turmoil of activity. Some ran for another ladder. One or two rushed to telephone the fire department for a net. Everybody shouted, some offering advice, others exclaiming in fear. Finally, the riveter, a man used to climbing about in high places, placed a foot upon the ladder, thinking perhaps that he could reach the boy before he should fall.

But before he could mount two rungs, a dark, powerfully built workman appeared whom nobody seemed to know—the bystanders, Gregor explained, were all mechanics engaged in construction work and so were alien to the steel itself; hence they could not have been expected to recognize Joe Magerac—nevertheless it was he. Nobody else could have done what he did. For, brushing the riveter aside, Joe Magerac lifted the ladder slowly so that the ends of the stringers rested upon his thighs. Then, grasping the third and fourth rungs, he turned the ladder about in order to clear the towering furnace and brought it very gently to the ground, the almost unconscious small boy near the top describing a wide arc as he was brought to safety. Many hands lifted him as he reached the ground, and he was taken into the company hospital, where he was soon brought around in good order. In the excitement of the rescue nobody thought of the rescuer. When at last somebody did look around for him, he was not to be found. The whistle blew about that time anyway, and everybody went home. Several of the men noticed, however, that the steam rising from the whistle was very dense that day and seemed to remain longer in the air than usual.

Tall stories, to be sure. It may be that Gregor made them up and that the vague repetitions of them that I now and then heard from other men were only echoes of his yarns. I doubt that they were Gregor's own. I rather think that they sprang from the common source of legends—pride in the thought of what men might do if their powers were extended to perfection—and were the accumulated thoughts of many men. Steel is a mighty force in the lives of those who know it. Why should it not lend itself to romance?