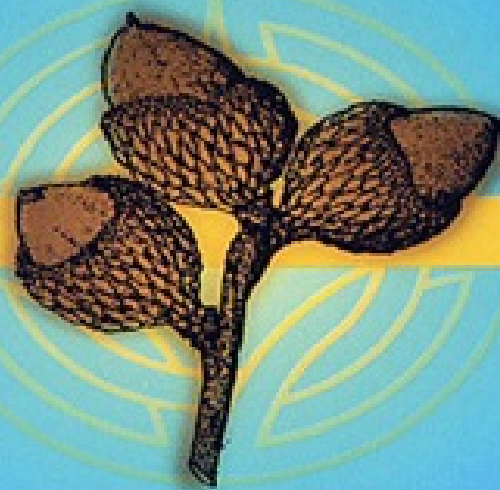


ERICH MARIA REMARQUE

Author of
All Quiet on the Western Front



THE BLACK OBELISK

A Novel of
War's Aftermath

THE BLACK OBELISK

A Novel

Erich Maria Remarque

*Translated from the German by
Denver Lindley*



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The Black Obelisk is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-five

Dedication

Other Books by This Author

About the Author

Chapter One

THE SUN IS SHINING in the office of Heinrich Kroll and Sons, Funeral Monuments. It is April 1923, and business is good. The first quarter has been lively; we have made brilliant sales and grown poor in the process, but what can we do? Death is ineluctable, and such is human sorrow that it demands memorials of sandstone, marble, or even, when the sense of guilt or the inheritance is large, of costly black Swedish granite polished on all sides. Autumn and spring are the best seasons for dealers in the appurtenances of grief—more people die there than in summer or winter: in autumn because the sap has dried up, and in spring because it mounts and consumes the weakened body like too large a wick in too thin a candle. That is at least the conviction of our most active agent, Liebermann, the gravedigger at the municipal cemetery. And he ought to know: he is eighty years old, has buried upward of ten thousand corpses, has bought a house on the river and a trout hatchery with his commissions on tombstones and, through his profession, has become an enlightened brandy drinker. The only thing he hates is the city crematorium. It is unfair competition. We do not like it either. There is no profit in urns.

I look at the clock. It is a little before twelve, and since today is Saturday I prepare to close up. I slam the metal cover over the typewriter, carry the Presto mimeograph machine behind the curtain, clear away the stone samples, and take the photographic prints of war memorials and artistic funeral monuments out of the fixing bath. I am the advertising manager, draftsman, and bookkeeper for the firm; in fact, for a year now I have been the sole office employee in what is, after all, not even my own profession.

With anticipation I take a cigar out of the drawer. It is a black Brazilian. The salesman from the Württemberg Metal Works gave it to me this morning with the intention of foisting off on me later a consignment of bronze wreaths; so it is a good cigar. I look for a match, but as usual they have been mislaid. Fortunately a small fire is burning in the Dutch oven. I roll up a ten-mark bill, hold it in the flame and light the cigar with it. At the end of April there is no longer any real need for a fire in the oven; it is just a selling aid devised by my employer Georg Kroll. He believes that in time of sorrow when people have to hand out money they do it more willingly in a warm room than when they are cold. Sorrow in itself is a chilling of the soul, and if you add cold feet, it is hard to extract a decent price. Warmth has a thawing effect—even on the purse. Therefore our office is overheated, and our representatives have drilled into them as an overriding principle never to attempt to close a sale in the cemetery when it is cold or rainy, but always in a warm room and, if possible, after a meal. Sorrow, cold, and hunger are bad business partners.

I throw the remnant of the ten-mark bill into the oven and stand up. At the same instant I hear a window thrown open in the house opposite. I don't need to look around to know what is going on. Cautiously I bend over the table as though I still had something to do to the typewriter. At the same time I peep into a little hand mirror which I have so arranged that

can observe the window. As usual it is Lisa, wife of Watzek, the horse butcher, standing there naked, yawning and stretching. She has just got up. The street is old and narrow; Lisa can see us and we can see her and she knows it; that is why she is standing there. Suddenly a quirk appears in her big mouth; she laughs, showing all her teeth, and points at the mirror. Her eagle eye has spied it. I am annoyed at being caught but act as though I had not noticed and retreat to the back of the room in a cloud of smoke. After a while I return. Lisa grins. I glance out, but not at her; instead I pretend to wave at someone in the street. As an extra flourish I throw a kiss into the void. Lisa falls for it; she is as inquisitive as a goat. She bends forward to see who is there. No one is there. Now I grin. She gestures angrily at her forehead with one finger and disappears.

I don't really know why I carry on this comedy. Lisa is what is called a terrific figure of a woman, and I know a lot of people who would gladly pay a couple of million to enjoy such a spectacle every morning. I, too, enjoy it, but nevertheless it irritates me that this lazy toad who never climbs out of bed until noon, is so shamelessly certain of her effect. It would never occur to her that there might be men who would not instantly want to sleep with her. Besides, the question does not even greatly interest her. She only stands at the window with her black pony tail and her impertinent nose and swings her first-class Carrara marble breasts like an aunt waving a rattle in front of a baby. If she had a couple of toy balloons she would happily wave them; it is all the same to her. Since she is naked, she waves her breasts; she is just completely happy to be alive and to know that all men must be crazy about her, and then she forgets the whole thing and goes to work on her breakfast with her voracious mouth. Meanwhile, Watzek, the horse butcher, is slaughtering tired old carriage nags.

Lisa appears again. Now she is wearing a false mustache and is beside herself at this with inspiration. She gives a military salute, and I assume that she is so shameless as to have her eye on old Knopf, the retired sergeant major whose house is next door. But then I remember that Knopf's bedroom window opens on the court. And Lisa is artful enough to know that she cannot be observed from the few other neighboring houses.

Suddenly, as though a reservoir of sound has burst its dike, the bells of St. Mary's begin to ring. The church stands at the end of our alley, and the strokes resound as though they fell straight from heaven into our room. At the same time I see outside the other office window the one that faces on the court, my employer's bald head gliding by like a ghostly melon. Lisa makes a rude gesture and shuts her window. The daily temptation of Saint Anthony has been withstood once more.

Georg Kroll is barely forty, but his head is already as shiny as the bowling alley at Boll's Garden Restaurant. It has been shiny as long as I have known him, and that is over five years. It is so shiny that when we were in the trenches, where we belonged to the same regiment, a special order was issued that even at the quietest times Georg had to wear his steel helmet—such would have been the temptation, for even the kindest of enemies, to find out by a shot whether or not his head was a giant billiard ball.

I pull myself together and report: "Company Headquarters, Kroll and Sons! Staff engaged in enemy observation. Suspicious troop movements in the Watzek sector."

"Aha," Georg says. "Lisa at her morning gymnastics. Get a move on, Lance Corporal Bodmer. Why don't you wear blinders in the morning like the drummer's horse in a cavalry band?"

band and thus protect your virtue? Don't you know what the three most precious things life are?"

"How should I know that, Attorney General, when life itself is what I'm still searching for?"

"Virtue, simplicity, and youth," Georg announces. "Once lost, never to be regained! And what is more useless than experience, age, and barren intelligence?"

"Poverty, sickness, and loneliness," I reply, standing at ease.

"Those are just different names for experience, age, and misguided intelligence."

Georg takes the cigar out of my mouth. He examines it briefly and classifies it like a butterfly. "Booty from the metalworks."

He takes a beautifully clouded, golden-brown meerschaum cigar holder out of his pocket, fits the Brazilian into it and goes on smoking.

"I have nothing against your requisitioning the cigar," I say. "It is naked force, and that all you noncoms know about life. But why the cigar holder? I'm not syphilitic."

"And I'm not homosexual."

"Georg," I say, "in the war you used my spoon to eat pea soup whenever I could steal from the canteen. And the spoon stayed in my dirty boot and was never washed."

Georg examines the ash of the Brazilian. It is snow white. "The war was four and a half years ago," he informs me. "At that time infinite misery made us human. Today the shameless lust for gain has made us robbers again. To keep this secret we use the varnish of convention. Ergo! Isn't there still another Brazilian? The metalworks never tries to bribe an employee with just one."

I take the second cigar out of the drawer and hand it to him. "You know everything. Intelligence, experience, and age seem to be good for something after all."

He grins and gives me in return a half-empty package of cigarettes. "Anything else been happening?" he asks.

"Not a thing. No customers. But I must urgently request a raise."

"What, again? You got one only yesterday!"

"Not yesterday. This morning at nine o'clock. A miserable ten thousand marks. However, it was still worth something at nine this morning. Now the new dollar exchange rate has been posted and instead of a new tie all I can buy is a bottle of cheap wine. But what I need is a tie."

"Where does the dollar stand now?"

"Thirty-six thousand marks at noon today. This morning it was thirty-three thousand."

Georg Kroll examines his cigar. "Thirty-six thousand! It's a rat race. Where will it end?"

"In a wholesale crash. Meanwhile we have to live. Did you get some money?"

"Only a small suitcaseful for today and tomorrow. Thousands, ten thousands, even a couple of packages of hundreds. Something like five pounds of paper money. The inflation is moving so fast that the Reichsbank can't print money rapidly enough to keep up with it. The new hundred-thousand bills were only issued two weeks ago—soon we'll need million-mark notes. When will we be in the billions?"

"If it goes on like this, in a couple of months."

"My God!" Georg sighs. "Where are the fine peaceful times of 1922? Then the dollar only rose from two hundred fifty to ten thousand in a whole year. Not to mention 1921—when

went up a beggarly three hundred per cent.”

I look out the window toward the street. Now Lisa is standing across the way in a printed silk dressing gown decorated with parrots. She has put a mirror on the window ledge and is brushing her mane.

“Look at that,” I say bitterly. “She sows not neither does she reap, and our Father in Heaven supports her nevertheless. She didn’t have that dressing gown yesterday. Yards of silk! And I can’t scrape together the price of a tie.”

Georg grins. “You’re just an innocent victim of the times. But Lisa spreads her sails before the gale of the inflation. She is the fair Helen of the black marketeers. You can’t get rich on tombstones. Why don’t you go into the herring business or the stock market like your friend Willy?”

“Because I am a philosopher and a sentimentalist. I shall remain true to tombstones. Well, what about my raise? Even philosophers need to spend something on their wardrobes.”

Georg shrugs his shoulders. “Can’t you buy the tie tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is Sunday. And I need it tomorrow.”

Georg sighs and gets his bagful of money out of the vestibule. He reaches inside and throws me two packages. “Will that do?”

I see that they are mostly hundreds. “Hand over another pound of that wallpaper,” I say. “This is not more than five thousand. Catholic profiteers put that much in the collection plate at Sunday mass and feel ashamed of being so stingy.”

Georg scratches his bald skull, an atavistic gesture without meaning in his case. Then he hands me a third package. “Thank God tomorrow is Sunday,” he says. “No dollar exchange rate. One day in the week the inflation stands still. God surely did not have that in mind when He created the Sabbath.”

“How are we doing really?” I ask. “Are we ruined or in clover?”

Georg takes a long drag on the meerschaum holder. “I don’t believe anyone in Germany knows that about himself. Not even the godlike Stinnes. People with savings are ruined, of course. So are all the factory workers and office workers. Also most of the small-business people, only they don’t know it. The only ones who are making hay are the people with foreign exchange, stocks, or negotiable property. Does that answer your question?”

“Negotiable property!” I look out into the garden which serves as our warehouse. “We haven’t much left. Mostly sandstone and poured concrete. Very little marble or granite. And what little we have your brother is selling at a loss. The best thing would be to sell nothing at all, wouldn’t it?”

There is no need for Georg to answer. A bicycle bell rings outside. Someone mounts the ancient steps. There is an authoritative cough. It is the problem child of the family, Heinrich Kröll, Jr., the other owner of the firm.

He is a corpulent little man with a bristling mustache and dusty trousers, secured at the bottom with bicycle clips. His eyes sweep Georg and me with mild contempt. To him we are office hacks who loaf all day, while he is the man of action in charge of foreign affairs. He is indefatigable. Every day in the gray of dawn he goes to the railroad station and then on his bicycle to the remotest villages: wherever our agents, the gravediggers and teachers, have reported a corpse. He is by no means inept. His corpulence inspires confidence; therefore he

maintains it by diligent beer drinking early and late. Farmers like short thick men better than hungry-looking ones. His clothes help too. He does not wear a black frock coat, like our competitor Steinmeyer, nor a blue business suit like the travelers of Hollmann and Klotz—the one is too obvious, the other too unfeeling. Heinrich Kroll wears striped trousers with a dark jacket, together with a high old-fashioned wing collar and a subdued tie with a lot of black in it. Two years ago he hesitated for a while in choosing this outfit. He wondered whether a swallow-tail cutaway might not be more suitable, but then decided against it because of his height. It was a happy renunciation. Even Napoleon would have been ridiculous in a swallow tail. In his present outfit Heinrich Kroll looks like the dear Lord's diminutive receptionist—and that is exactly as it should be. The bicycle clips give the whole a cunningly calculated appearance of homeliness; in these days of automobiles, people believe they can get a better buy from a man who wears bicycle clips.

Heinrich takes his hat off and wipes his forehead. Outside it is fairly cool and he is not perspiring; he does this simply to show us what a hard worker he is in comparison with our office loafers.

"I have sold the memorial cross," he says with a modesty as unobtrusive as the roar of a lion.

"Which? The small marble one?" I ask hopefully.

"The big one," Heinrich replies, even more simply, and stares at me.

"What? The Swedish granite with double socle and bronze chains?"

"That's the one! Did you think we had any other?"

Heinrich clearly relishes his silly question as a triumph of sarcasm.

"No," I say. "We haven't any other. That's the trouble. It was the last. Our rock of Gibraltar."

"How much did you sell it for?" Georg Kroll now asks.

Heinrich straightens up. "For three-quarters of a million, without inscription and exclusive of freight and packing. They are additional."

"Good God!" Georg and I say at the same time.

Heinrich favors us with a glance full of arrogance; dead haddock sometimes wear a similar expression. "It was a hard battle," he proclaims and for some reason puts on his hat again.

"I wish you had lost it," I reply.

"What?"

"Lost it. Lost the battle."

"What?" Heinrich repeats in annoyance. I irritate him easily.

"He wishes you had not sold it," Georg Kroll says.

"What? What in the world does that mean? Hell and damnation, I slave from morning till night and when I make a brilliant sale all I get in this hole is reproaches! Go out to the villages yourselves and try—"

"Heinrich," Georg interrupts him mildly, "we know you work yourself to the bone. But today we're living in a time when every sale makes us poorer. For years there has been an inflation. Since the war, Heinrich. But this year the inflation has turned into galloping consumption. That's why figures no longer mean—"

"I know that myself. I'm no idiot."

No one says anything to that. Only idiots make such statements. And to contradict them

useless. That is something I have learned on the Sundays I spend at the insane asylum.

Heinrich gets out a notebook. "The memorial cost us fifty thousand when we bought it. You would think that three-quarters of a million would mean a neat little profit."

He is dabbling in sarcasm again. He thinks he must use it on me because I was once a schoolteacher. That was shortly after the war, in an isolated village on the heath—nine long months until I made my escape, with winter loneliness howling like a dog at my heels.

"It would have been an even bigger profit if in place of the magnificent cross you had sold that damned obelisk out there," I say. "Your late father bought it for even less sixty years ago when the business was founded—for something like fifty marks, according to tradition."

"The obelisk? What's the obelisk got to do with this? The obelisk is unsalable, any child knows that."

"For that very reason," I say, "no tears would be shed if you had got rid of it. But it's a pity about the cross. We'll have to replace it at great expense."

Heinrich Kroll snorts. He has polyps in his thick nose and gets stuffed up easily. "Are you by any chance trying to tell me that it would cost three-quarters of a million to buy a memorial cross today?"

"That's something we'll find out soon enough," Georg Kroll says. "Riesefeld will be here tomorrow. We'll have to place a new order with the Odenwald Granite Works; there's not much left on inventory."

"We still have the obelisk," I suggest maliciously.

"Why don't you sell that yourself?" Heinrich snaps. "So Riesefeld is coming tomorrow, well, I'll stay and have a talk with him myself. Then we'll see where prices stand."

Georg and I exchange glances. We know that we will keep Heinrich away from Riesefeld even if we have to make him drunk or pour castor oil in his morning beer. That honest, old-fashioned businessman would bore Riesefeld to death with his war experiences and stories of the good old times when a mark was still a mark and honesty was the mark of honor, as our beloved field marshal has so aptly put it. Heinrich dotes on such platitudes; not so Riesefeld. For Riesefeld, honesty is what you demand from someone else when it's to his disadvantage, and from yourself when you can gain by it.

"Prices change daily," Georg says. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Really? Perhaps you, too, think I got a bad price?"

"That depends. Did you bring the money with you?"

Heinrich stares at Georg. "Bring it with me? What in blazes are you talking about? How could I bring the money when we haven't even made delivery? You know that's impossible!"

"It isn't impossible at all," I reply. "On the contrary, it's common practice today. It's called payment in advance."

"Payment in advance!" Heinrich's fat snout twitches contemptuously. "What does a schoolteacher like you know about it? In our business how can you demand payment in advance? From the sorrowing relatives when the wreaths on the grave haven't even begun to wilt! Are you going to demand money at such a moment for something that hasn't been delivered?"

"Of course! When else! That's when they're weak and it's easy to get money out of them."

"They're weak then? Don't make me laugh! That's when they're harder than steel! After all the expense for the coffin, the pastor, the grave, the flowers, the wake—why, you couldn't

get so much as a ten-thousand advance, young man! First, people have to recover! Before they pay they have to see what they have ordered standing in the cemetery and not just on paper in the catalogue, even when it's been drawn by you with Chinese brushes and genuine gold leaf for the inscriptions and a few grieving relatives into the bargain."

Another example of Heinrich's personal tactlessness! I pay no attention. It is true that I not only drew the tombstones for our catalogue and reproduced them on the Presto mimeograph machine but also painted them to increase their effectiveness and provided them with an atmosphere: with weeping willows, beds of pansies, cypresses, and widows in mourning veils watering the flowers. Our competitors almost died of envy when we produced this novelty; they had nothing but simple stock photographs, and Heinrich, too, thought the idea magnificent at the time, especially the use of gold leaf. As a matter of fact, to make the effect completely natural I had embellished the drawings of the tombstones with inscriptions emblazoned with gold leaf dissolved in varnish. I had had a splendid time doing it; I killed off everyone I hated and painted tombstones for them—for example, the beast who was my sergeant when I was a recruit and who is still living happily: "Here after prolonged and hideous sufferings, having seen all his loved ones precede him in death, lies Constable Ka Flümer." This was fully justified; Flümer had treated me outrageously and had sent me twice on patrols from which I had returned alive only by chance. I had ample reason to wish him the worst.

"Herr Kroll," I say, "allow us to give you another short analysis of the times. The principles by which you were raised are noble, but today they lead to bankruptcy. Anybody can earn money now; almost no one knows how to maintain its purchasing power. The important thing is not to sell but to buy and to be paid as quickly as possible. We live in an age of commodities. Money is an illusion; everyone knows that, but many still do not believe it. As long as this is so the inflation will go on till absolute zero is reached. Man lives seventy-five per cent by his imagination and only twenty-five per cent by fact—that is his strength and his weakness, and that is why in this witch's dance of numbers there are still winners and losers. We know that we cannot be absolute winners; but at the same time we don't want to be complete losers. If the three-quarters of a million marks you settled for today is not paid for two months, it will be worth what fifty thousand is worth now. Therefore—"

Heinrich's face has turned dark red. Now he interrupts me. "I am no idiot," he declares for the second time. "And you don't need to read me lectures. I know more of practical life than you do. And I would rather go down honorably than exist by disreputable profiteering methods. As long as I am sales manager of this firm the business will be conducted in the oldest decent fashion—and that's all there is to it. I rely on my experience, and it has stood us on good stead so far; that's how it will continue in the future! It's a rotten trick to spoil a man's pleasure in a fine business deal! Why didn't you stick to your job of arse-drummer?"

He snatches up his hat and slams the door behind him. We see him vigorously stamping off, knock-kneed and bowlegged, a half-military figure with his bicycle clips. He is in formal retreat to his accustomed table at Blume's Restaurant.

"That bourgeois sadist wants to get fun out of his work," I say angrily. "Imagine that! How can we carry on our business except with pious cynicism if we want to save our souls? The hypocrite wants to get pleasure out of haggling over corpses and actually considers it his hereditary right!"

Georg laughs. "Take your money and let's be on our way. Weren't you going to buy necktie? Get on with it! There'll be no more raises today!"

He picks up the suitcase with the money and casually puts it in the room next to the office where he sleeps. I stow my packages of bills in a cardboard box with the inscription Konditorei Keller, Finest Pastries, Home Deliveries.

"Is Riesenfeld really coming?" I ask.

"Yes. He telegraphed."

"What does he want? Money? Or has he something to sell?"

"We'll find out," Georg says and locks the office door.

Chapter Two

WE STEP OUTSIDE. The strong sun of late April pours down as though a gigantic golden basin full of light and wind were being emptied on us. We stop. The garden is aflame with green, spring rustles in the young foliage of the poplar tree as in a harp, and the first lilac is in bloom.

“Inflation,” I say. “There you have one too—the wildest of all. It looks as if even nature knows that now you can only reckon in ten thousands and in millions. Look what the tulips are up to! And that white over there and the red and yellow everywhere! And what fragrance!”

Georg nods, sniffs, and takes a puff of his Brazilian; for him nature is double beautiful when he can smoke a cigar at the same time.

We feel the sun on our faces and we look at all the splendor. The garden behind the house is also the showroom for our monuments. There they are drawn up like a company behind Otto, the obelisk, who stands like a thin lieutenant at his post beside the door. It is Otto that I urged Heinrich to sell, Otto, the oldest tombstone of the firm, our trademark and a prodigy of tastelessness. Directly behind him come the cheap little headstones of sandstone and poured concrete with narrow pointed socles, for the poor, who live and slave in honesty and naturally get nowhere. Then come the larger but still inexpensive ones, with two socles, for those who are always trying to improve themselves, at least in death, since in life it was not possible. We sell more of these than of the perfectly plain ones, and one doesn't know whether to find this belated ambition on the part of the survivors touching or absurd. Next come the monuments of sandstone with inset plaques of marble, gray syenite, or black Swedish granite. These are already too expensive for the man who lives by the work of his hands. Small businessmen, foremen, artisans who own their own businesses are the clients—and of course that eternal bird of ill omen, the petty official who must always pretend to be more than he is, the honest white-collar proletarian of whom it is impossible to say how he manages to exist at all today since his raises always come far too late.

All these tombstones are still in the class of trifles—it is only behind them that you come to the blocks of marble and granite. First, those polished on one side, with front surfaces smooth but sides and backs roughhewn and socles rough all around. That is the sort for the most prosperous middle classes, the employer, the businessman, the larger store owner, and of course that diligent bird of ill omen, the higher official, who just like his lesser brother, must pay out more in death than he earned in life in order to preserve appearances.

But the aristocrats among the tombstones are those of marble and of black Swedish granite polished on all sides. Here there are no more rough surfaces and unfinished backs; everything has been brought to a high polish no matter whether one sees it or not, even the socles, of which there are not just one or two but often a third put in at an angle; and, if it is a showpiece in the real sense of the word, there is a stately cross of the same material on top. Today, of course, these are only for rich farmers, property owners, profiteers, and clever

business people who deal in long-term promissory notes and so live on the Reichsbank, which keeps paying for everything with constantly replenished and unsupported paper currency.

Simultaneously we glance at the only one of these showpieces that, up to a quarter of an hour ago, still belonged to the firm. There it stands, black and glistening like the lacquer on a new car, the perfume of spring drifts around it, lilacs bend toward it; it is a great lady, cool and untouched, and, for one hour more, still virginal—then it will have the name of Ottobene Fleddersen, landowner, chiseled on its narrow waist in gilded Latin characters at eight hundred marks per letter. “Farewell, black Diana,” I say. “Farewell!” and I raise my hat to it. “To the poet it’s an eternal riddle that even perfect beauty is subject to the laws of fate and must perish miserably! Farewell! You will now become a shameless advertisement for the soul of the swindler Fleddersen, who cheated the poor widows of the city out of their last ten-thousand-mark bills for overpriced butter adulterated with margarine—not to mention his extortionate prices for calves’ liver, pork cutlets, and roast beef! Farewell!”

“You’re making me hungry,” Georg remarks. “Off to the Walhalla! Or do you want to buy your tie first?”

“No. I have time before the stores close. There’s no new dollar quotation Saturday afternoons. From noon today till Monday morning our currency is stable. Why? It sounds fishy to me. Why doesn’t the mark fall over the week end? Does God hold it up?”

“Because the stock exchanges are shut. Any more questions?”

“Yes. Does man live from inside out or from outside in?”

“Man lives, period. There’s goulash at the Walhalla, goulash with potatoes, pickles, and salad. I saw the menu as I was coming back from the bank.”

“Goulash!” I pick a primrose and put it in my buttonhole. “Man lives, you’re right. Whoever seeks further is already lost. Come along, let’s annoy Eduard Knobloch.”

We enter the big dining room of the Hotel Walhalla. At sight of us Eduard Knobloch, the owner, a fat giant with a brown toupee and a floating dinner coat, makes a face as though he had chewed on a bullet in his venison.

“Good morning, Herr Knobloch,” Georg says. “Fine weather today. Gives one a great appetite!”

Eduard jerks his shoulders nervously. “Eating too much is unhealthy! It damages the liver, the gall bladder, everything.”

“Not at your place, Herr Knobloch,” Georg answers genially. “Your noonday meal is wholesome.”

“Wholesome, yes. But too much of what is wholesome can be harmful too. According to the latest scientific investigations, too much meat—”

I interrupt Eduard by giving him a gentle slap on his soft belly. He leaps back as though someone had touched his privates. “Leave us alone and resign yourself to your fate,” I say. “We won’t eat you out of house and home. How’s the poetry?”

“Gone begging. No time! In these times!”

I do not laugh at this idiotic word play. Eduard is not only an innkeeper, he is a poet too—but he’ll have to do better than that. “Where’s a table?” I ask.

Knobloch looks around. His face suddenly brightens. “I’m extremely sorry, gentlemen, but I’ve just noticed there’s not a table free.”

“That doesn’t matter. We’ll wait.”

Eduard glances around again. “It looks as if none will be free for quite some time,” he announces beaming. “The customers all seem to be just beginning their soup. Perhaps if you would care to try the Altstädter Hof or the Railroad Hotel. They say you can eat quite passably there.”

Passably! The day seems to be dripping with sarcasm. First Heinrich and now Eduard. But we will fight for the goulash even if it takes an hour—it’s the best dish on the Walhalla menu.

But Eduard seems to be not only a poet but a mind reader as well. “No point in waiting,” he says. “We never have enough goulash, we always run out of it early. Or would you like to try a German beefsteak? You can have it here at the counter.”

“I’d rather be dead,” I say. “We’ll get goulash even if we have to cut you up.”

“Really?” Eduard is all fat, skeptical triumph.

“Yes,” I reply and give him a second slap on the belly. “Come, Georg, here’s a table for us.”

“Where?” Eduard asks quickly.

“Where that gentleman is sitting, the one who looks like a fashion plate. Yes, the redhead over there with the elegant lady. There, the one who’s getting up and waving to us. My friend Willy, Eduard. Send a waiter. We want to order!”

Eduard emits a hissing sound behind us like a punctured tire. We go over to Willy.

The reason Eduard puts on this act is simple enough. Some time ago one could pay for meals at his place with coupons. One bought a book with ten tickets and thereby got the single meals somewhat cheaper. Eduard did this, at the time, to increase business. In the last week, however, the avalanche of the inflation has upset his calculations; if the first ticket still bore some relation to the price of a meal, by the tenth the value had shrunk substantially. Eduard therefore decided to give up selling books of tickets. He was losing too much money. But here we had been clever. We found out about his plan in time and six weeks ago we invested the proceeds of a small war memorial in the wholesale purchase of tickets at the Walhalla. To keep Eduard from noticing what we were up to we employed a variety of people: the coffinmaker Wilke, the cemetery watchman Liebermann, our sculptor Kurt Bach, Willy, a few of our other friends and war comrades, and even Lisa. All of them bought books of tickets for us at the cashier’s desk. When Eduard gave up selling coupons he expected that in ten days they would all be used up; each book contained ten tickets, and he assumed that any sensible man would buy one book at a time. But we each had over thirty books in our possession. Two weeks later Eduard became uneasy when we continued to pay with coupons; at the end of four weeks he had a slight attack of panic. At that time we were already eating for half price; at the end of six weeks for the price of ten cigarettes. Day after day we appeared and handed over our coupons. Eduard asked how many we still had; we replied evasively. He tried to block the coupons; at the next meal we brought a lawyer with us whom we had invited to share a Wiener schnitzel. After dinner the lawyer gave Eduard a lesson in the law governing contracts and obligations—and paid for his meal with one of our coupons. Eduard’s lyricism took on a darker coloration. He proposed a compromise; we declined. He wrote a didactic poem on “Ill-gotten Gains,” and sent it to the daily paper. The editor showed it to us; it was sprinkled with malicious references to “gravediggers of the nation”; there we

references, too, to tombstones and “Kroll the Shyster.” We invited our lawyer to share a porcupine cutlet with us at the Walhalla. He instructed Eduard in the concept of public slander and its consequences—and paid once more with one of our coupons. Eduard, who was formerly a simple floral lyricist, began now to write hymns of hate. But that was all he could do; the battle rages on uninterruptedly. Eduard is in daily hope that our supply will be exhausted; he does not know that we still have tickets for over seven months.

Willy rises. He is wearing a new dark green suit of first-rate material in which he looks like a redheaded tree toad. His tie is adorned with a pearl and on the index finger of his right hand he is wearing a heavy seal ring. Five years ago he was assistant to our company cook. He is the same age as I—twenty-five.

“May I present my friends and former buddies?” Willy asks. “Georg Kroll and Ludwig Bodmer—Mademoiselle Renée de la Tour of the Moulin Rouge in Paris.”

Renée de la Tour nods in a reserved but not unfriendly way. We stare at Willy. Willy starts back proudly. “Sit down, gentlemen,” he says. “I assume Eduard is trying to keep you from eating here. The goulash is good, though it could stand a few more onions. Sit down, we’re happy to make room for you.”

We arrange ourselves at the table. Willy knows about our war with Eduard and follows with the interest of a born gambler. “Waiter!” I shout.

A waiter who is waddling by on flat feet four paces away is suddenly stricken dead. “Waiter!” I shout again.

“You’re a barbarian,” Georg Kroll says. “You’re insulting the man with his profession. Why did he take part in the 1918 revolution? *Herr Ober!*”

I grin. It is true the German revolution of 1918 was the least bloody there has ever been. The revolutionaries were so terrified by themselves that they at once cried for help from the magnates and the generals of the former government to protect them from their own fitful courage. The other did it. Generously too. A bunch of revolutionaries were executed, the princes and officers received magnificent pensions so that they would have time to plan future riots, the officials received new titles—high-school teachers became academic counselors, school inspectors became educational counselors, waiters were given the right to be addressed as “*Ober*” or headwaiter, former secretaries of the party became excellencies, the Social Democratic minister of the army, in seventh heaven, was entitled to have several generals under him in his ministry—and the German revolution sank back into red plus *Gemütlichkeit*, and a yearning for uniforms and commands.

“*Herr Ober!*” Georg repeats.

The waiter remains deaf. It is one of Eduard’s childish tricks; he tries to disconcert us by telling his waiters to ignore us.

Suddenly the dining room resounds to the thunder of a first-class Prussian barrack-room roar: “*Ober!* You there, can’t you hear?” It has the instant effect of a trumpet call on an old war horse. The waiter stops as though shot in the back, and spins around; two others dash up to the table, somewhere there is the sound of heels clicking, a military-looking man at one of the nearby tables softly exclaims, “Bravo!”—and even Eduard Knobloch, with his dress coat streaming, rushes in to investigate this voice from the higher spheres. He knows that neither Georg nor I could sound so commanding.

We ourselves look around speechless at Renée de la Tour. She is sitting there, calm and

maidenly, wholly uninvolved. But she is the only one who could have shouted—we know Willy's voice.

The waiter is standing at our table. "What may I do for you, gentlemen?"

"Noodle soup, goulash, and pie for two," Georg replies. "And be quick about it, otherwise we'll burst your eardrums, you slug."

Eduard arrives. He can't make out what is happening. He glances under the table. No one hidden there, and a ghost could hardly roar like that. Nor could we, as he knows. He suspects a trick of some sort. "I must urgently insist," he says finally, "that such an uproar must not occur in my establishment."

No one replies. We just look at him with empty eyes. Renée de la Tour is powdering her nose. Eduard turns around and departs.

"Innkeeper! Step over here!" The same thunderous voice suddenly summons him.

Eduard whirls around and stares at us. We still have the same empty smile on our mugs. He fixes Renée de la Tour with his eye. "Did you just—?"

Renée closes her compact with a click. "What's that?" she asks in a delicate silvery-clear soprano. "What is it you want?"

Eduard gapes. He no longer knows what to think. "You haven't been overworking, have you, Herr Knobloch?" Georg asks. "You seem to be suffering from hallucinations."

"But someone here just—"

"You're out of your mind, Eduard," I say. "You're not looking well either. Take a vacation. We have no wish to sell your relatives a cheap headstone of imitation Italian marble, and that's certainly all you're worth—"

Eduard blinks his eyes like an old horned owl. "You seem to be a strange sort of person," says Renée de la Tour in her flutelike soprano. "You hold your guests responsible for the fact that your waiters can't hear." She laughs, an enchanting swirl of bubbling silvery music like a forest brook in fairy tales.

Eduard clasps his forehead. His last support has collapsed. It cannot have been the young lady either. Anyone who laughs like that can't have a barrack-room voice. "You may go now, Knobloch," Georg remarks casually. "Or did you intend to join in our conversation?"

"And don't eat so much meat," I say. "Perhaps that's what's wrong. Remember what you were saying to us a few minutes ago? According to the most recent scientific investigation—"

Eduard turns quickly and rushes off. We wait till he is some distance away. Then Willy's great body begins to quiver with soundless laughter. Renée de la Tour smiles gently. Her eyes are sparkling.

"Willy," I say, "I'm a superficial sort of fellow and therefore this has been one of the finest moments of my young life—but now tell us what's going on!"

Willy, shaking with silent merriment, points to Renée. "*Excusez, Mademoiselle,*" I say. "Tell me—"

Willy's laughter redoubles at my French. "Tell him, Lotte," he bursts out.

"What?" Renée asks with a gentle smile in a soft, growling bass.

We stare at her. "She is an artist," Willy gasps. "A duettist. She sings duets. Do you understand now?"

"No."

“She sings duets. But alone. One verse high, one low. One soprano and one bass.”

A great light dawns. “But the bass—?” I ask.

“Talent!” Willy explains. “And then of course practice. You must hear her sometime when she does a spat between husband and wife. Lotte is fabulous.”

We agree. The goulash appears. Eduard sneaks around at a distance watching our table. His mistake is that he always wants to find out why something happens. That spoils his poetry and makes him distrustful in life. At the moment he is brooding over the mysterious bass voice. He doesn't know what lies ahead of him. Georg Kroll, a cavalier of the old school, has invited Renée de la Tour and Willy to be his guests to celebrate our victory. Later, in payment for our excellent goulash, he will hand the infuriated Eduard four bits of paper whose combined worth today would hardly buy a couple of soup bones.

It is early evening. I am sitting beside the window in my room over the office. The house is low, angular, and old. Like this whole part of the street, it once belonged to the church that stands in the square at the foot. Priests and church officials used to live in it; but for sixty years it has belonged to Kroll and Sons. The property consists of two low houses joined by a vaulted arched entryway; in the second lives Knopf, the retired sergeant major, with his wife and three daughters. Then comes the beautiful old garden with our array of tombstones, and behind that at the left a kind of two-story wooden coach house on the ground floor of which Kurt Bach, our sculptor, has his workroom. He models mourning lions and mounting eagles for our war memorials and he draws the inscriptions on the tombstones which are later chipped out by the masons. In his free time he plays the guitar and wanders and dreams of the gold medals which at some future date will be awarded to the renowned Kurt Bach. He is thirty-two years old.

The upper floor of the coach house is rented to the coffinmaker Wilke. Wilke is an emaciated man, and nobody knows whether he has a family or not. Our relations with him are friendly, resting on mutual advantage. When we have a brand-new corpse not yet provided with a coffin, we recommend Wilke or tip him off; he does the same for us when he knows of a body that has not yet been snapped up by our competitors' hyenas; for the battle for the dead is bitter and is fought tooth and nail. Oskar Fuchs, the traveler for Hollmann and Klotz, even resorts to the use of onions. Before going into a house where there is a corpse, he gets out a couple of cut onions and smells them until his eyes are full of tears—then he marches in, proves his sympathy for the dear departed, and tries to make a sale. For this reason he is called Weeping Oskar. It's a strange fact that if the survivors had only paid half as much attention to many of the departed when they were still alive as they do when it no longer matters, then the corpses would most certainly have foregone the most expensive mausoleum—but that's what mankind is like: they only prize what they no longer possess.

Silently the street fills with the transparent smoke of twilight. There is already a light in Lisa's room, but this time the curtains are drawn, a sign that the horse butcher is home. Next to her house lies the garden of Holzmann, the wine merchant. Lilacs hang over the wall and from the cellars comes the fresh vinegary smell of the casks. Through the gate of our house marches the retired sergeant major, Knopf. He is a thin man and he wears a cap with a visor and carries a walking stick; despite his profession and although he has never read any book except the drill manual, he looks like Nietzsche. Knopf goes down Hakenstrasse and at the

corner swings to the left into Marienstrasse. Toward midnight he will return, this time from the right—that will mean he has completed methodically, as befits an old military man, his circuit through the inns of the city. Knopf drinks nothing but corn schnaps, Werdenbrück schnaps to be exact, nothing else. But on that subject he is the greatest connoisseur in the world. There are in the city some three or four firms that distill schnaps. To us they all taste more or less alike. Not so to Knopf; he can distinguish them even by smell. Forty years of unremitting application have so refined his taste that when it's a question of the same brand he can tell which inn it comes from. He maintains that there are differences between the inn cellars and he can tell them apart. Naturally not with bottled schnaps, only with schnaps from the cask. He has won many a bet on it.

I get up and look around my room. The ceiling is low and slanting and there is not much space, but I have what I need—a bed, a shelf of books, a table, a couple of chairs, and an upright piano. Five years ago, when I was a soldier in the trenches, I never thought I would be so well off again. At that time we were in Flanders; it was the big attack on Kemmelberg, and we lost three-quarters of our company. On the second day, Georg Kroll was taken to the hospital with a stomach wound, but almost three weeks passed before I was knocked out by a shot in the knee. Then came the collapse, and I finally became a schoolmaster as my sick mother had wished and as I had promised her before she died. She was sick so often that she thought if I had an official position with life tenure nothing bad could happen to me any more. She died in the last months of the war, but I took my examinations just the same and was sent to a village on the heath, where I stayed till I grew sick of dinning into children's ears things I did not believe myself and being buried alive amid memories I wanted to forget.

I try to read, but it is no weather for reading. Spring makes you restless, and in the twilight it is easy to lose yourself. There are no boundaries then and you feel breathless and confused. I turn on the light and at once feel more secure. On the table lies a yellow portfolio with the poems I have pecked out in triplicate on the Erika typewriter. From time to time I send a few of these to the newspapers. They either come back or there is no answer; then I peck out new copies and try again. I have only twice succeeded in publishing anything in our local newspaper, and then, to be sure, with Georg's help, for he knows the editor. Nevertheless that was enough for me to be made a member of the Werdenbrück Poets' Club, which meets each week at Eduard Knobloch's in the Old German Room. Eduard recently tried to have me expelled because of the coupons, alleging moral turpitude; but the club declared, in opposition to Eduard, that I had behaved most honorably, just as the business and industrial leaders of our beloved fatherland had been doing for years—and, besides, art had nothing to do with morals.

I push the poems aside. They suddenly seem to me flat and childish, typical of the attempt almost every young man makes at one time or another. I began to write during the war, but then it made some sense—for minutes at a time it took me away from what I was seeing. It was like a little hut of protest and of belief that something else existed beyond destruction and death. But that was a long time ago; today I know that there exists a great deal more besides and I even know that both can exist simultaneously. I no longer need my poems for that; in the books on my shelf it has all been said much better and more convincingly. But what would become of us if that were a reason for giving something up? Where should we

be? So I go on writing, though what I write often seems gray and wooden in comparison with the evening sky which is now growing spacious and apple green above the roofs which twilight fills the streets with a drift of violet-colored ashes.

I go downstairs, past the darkened office and into the garden. The Knopfs' door is open and inside the three daughters of the family sit around the lamp as though in a fiery cage busy at their sewing machines. The machines whir. I glance at the window next to the office. It is dark; so Georg has already disappeared somewhere. Heinrich, too, has gone to the reassuring haven of his customary restaurant. I take a turn around the garden. Someone has been sprinkling it; the earth is damp and smells very strong. Wilke's coffin shop is empty, and there is no sound from Kurt Bach. His windows are open; a half-finished, mourning lieg-covers on the floor as though it had a toothache, and beside it stand peacefully two empty beer bottles.

Suddenly a bird begins to sing. It is a thrush perched on top of the memorial cross that Heinrich Kroll has bartered away. Its voice is much too big for that little black ball with its yellow beak. It rejoices and mourns and moves my heart. For a moment I reflect that its song, which for me means life and future and dreams and everything undefined, strange, and new, no doubt means to the worms that are working their way up through the damp garden soil around the monument nothing but the dreadful signal of lacerating death from its murderous beak. Nevertheless, I cannot help myself; it carries me away, releasing everything within me; all at once I stand there helpless and lost, amazed that I am not torn apart or that I do not rise like a balloon into the evening sky—until finally I pull myself together and stumble back through the garden and the nocturnal fragrance, up the stairs to my piano where I pound and caress the keys, trying to be something like the thrush and to pour out what I feel. But nothing much comes of it and in the end it is only a flood of arpeggios and shreds of sentimental ditties and folk songs and bits from the *Rosenkavalier* and *Tristan*, a hopeless medley till finally someone on the street shouts up: "Hey, you, why don't you learn to play?"

I stop abruptly and steal to the window. A dark figure is disappearing into the night; it is already too far away to hit. And why, after all? He is right. I cannot really play. Either at the piano or at life; never, never have I been able to. I have always been too hasty, too impatient; something always intervenes and breaks it up. But who really knows how to play and if he does know, what good is it to him? Is the great dark less dark for that, are the unanswerable questions less inscrutable, does the pain of despair at eternal inadequacy burn less fiercely, and can life ever be explained and seized and ridden like a tamed horse or is it always a mighty sail that carries us in the storm and, when we try to seize it, sweeps us into the deep? Sometimes there is a hole in me that seems to extend to the center of the earth. What could fill it? Yearning? Despair? Happiness? What happiness? Fatigue? Resignation? Death? What am I alive for? Yes, for what am I alive?

Chapter Three

IT IS SUNDAY MORNING. Bells are ringing from all the steeples, and last night's will-o'-the-wisps have vanished. The dollar still stands at thirty-six thousand, time holds its breath, the crystals of the sky is as yet unmelted by the warmth of day, everything is clear and infinitely clean—it is the morning hour when even the murderer is forgiven and good and evil are empty words.

I dress slowly. Cool, sunny air sweeps through the open window. Like distant sawing, the snores of Sergeant Major Knopf reach me from next door. There is the steely flash of swallows daring through the arch. Like the office below it, my room has two windows—one opening on the courtyard, the other on the street. For a moment I lean against the rear window and look into the garden. Suddenly a dreadful scream breaks the stillness and is followed by gasping and groaning. It is Heinrich Kroll, who sleeps in the other wing. He is having his nightmare again. In 1918 he was buried by an explosion, and now, five years later, he still occasionally dreams about it.

I make coffee on my alcohol stove and pour a little kirsch into it. That's something I learned in France, and despite the inflation I always manage to have schnaps. My salary is never enough for a new suit—I simply can't save up the money for that, it loses its value too fast—but it takes care of the small items and, of course, a bottle of brandy now and then for comfort.

I have margarine and plum preserve with my bread. The preserve is good; it comes from Mother Kroll's larder. The margarine is rancid, but that doesn't matter; during the war we ate much worse. I survey my wardrobe. I have two uniforms remodeled into suits. One has been dyed blue, the other black—there wasn't much else to do with the gray-green material. Besides that I still have a suit from the time before I was a soldier. I have outgrown it a little but it is a genuine civilian garment, not remodeled or adapted, and so I put it on. It goes with the tie that I bought yesterday afternoon and that I am going to wear today so that Isabel will see it.

I walk contentedly through the streets of the city. Werdenbrück is an ancient town of six thousand, with wooden buildings and baroque structures interspersed with dreadful new developments. I cross it and go out along an avenue lined with horse chestnuts, then up a little hill to the big park where the insane asylum stands. There it is, in Sabbath peace, with birds twittering in the trees. I go there to play the organ at Sunday mass in the little church attached to the institution. I learned to play it when I was studying to be a teacher, and a year ago I snapped up the post here as a secondary job. I have a number of them. Once a week I give piano lessons to the rowdy children of Karl Brill, the shoemaker, and in return get my boots resoled and a little money—and twice a week I tutor the idiot son of Bauer, the bookseller, and as a reward I am allowed to read all the new books and am given a discount when I want to make a purchase. Naturally this discount is exploited by the entire

membership of the Poets' Club, even by the shameless Eduard Knobloch, who on these occasions suddenly becomes my friend.

The mass begins at nine o'clock. I sit down at the organ and watch the last inmates coming in. They move forward silently and take their places in the pews. A few attendants and nurses stand between them and on the sides. Everything is done softly, much more silently than in the country churches where I played when I was a schoolmaster. There is no sound except the scuffling of shoes on the stone floor; they scuffle, they do not tramp. These are the footsteps of people whose thoughts are far away.

In front of the altar the candles have been lit. The radiance from outside falls through the stained-glass window, mixing with the candle glow in a soft red and blue, transfused with gold. In this glow stands the priest in his brocaded vestments, and on the steps of the altar his assistants kneel in their red gowns and white tunics.

I pull out the stops for flutes and *vox humana* and begin to play. With a jerk the heads of the inmates in the front rows turn around all at once as though pulled by a string. The pale faces and dark eyes stare expressionlessly upward toward the organ. In the dim golden light they float like bright, flat disks; sometimes in winter when it is dark they look like large consecrated wafers waiting for the Holy Ghost to descend upon them. These people never grow accustomed to the organ; they have no past and no memory. Every Sunday the flutes and violins and basses strike their alienated minds as unexpected and new. Then the priest at the altar begins, and they turn toward him.

Not all the inmates follow the mass. In the rear rows there are many who do not move. They sit there as though shrouded in nameless sorrow and surrounded by an infinite void—but perhaps that is only the way it seems. Perhaps they are in different worlds where there has been no word of the crucified Saviour; perhaps they are absorbed harmlessly and innocently in a music by contrast with which the organ sounds pale and crude. Or maybe they are thinking of nothing at all, as indifferent as the sea or life or death. Only we give meaning to nature. What it may be in itself, perhaps those heads down there know, but they cannot betray the secret. What they see has made them dumb. They could be the last descendants of the builders of the Tower of Babel. Their tongues have been twisted and they cannot communicate what they have seen from the highest terraces.

I peer toward the front rows. On the right side in a flicker of rose and blue I see Isabelle's dark head. She is kneeling in her pew very straight and slim. She did not look around when the organ began. Often she does look around, but today she seems so withdrawn into herself that she hears nothing. Her narrow head is inclined to one side like a Gothic statue. She is not praying, she is some place whither no one can follow her. I push back the basses and the *vox humana* and pull out the *vox caelestis*. That is the softest and most rapturous of the organ registers. We are approaching the divine transformation. Bread and wine are becoming the flesh and blood of God. It is a miracle like that other one, the creation of man out of dust and clay. Riesenfeld maintains that the third is man's failure to do anything with that miracle except to exploit and kill his fellow man in increasingly wholesale fashion and to crowd in the brief interval between death and death as much egoism as possible—although only one fact is really certain from the start: that he must die. That's what Riesenfeld says, Riesenfeld of the Odenwald Granite Works, one of the sharpest, most enterprising manipulators in the

After mass the nurses of the institution give me breakfast of eggs, cold cuts, bouillon, bread and honey. That's part of my salary. It takes care of the midday meal, for Eduard's coupons are not good on Sunday. In addition, I receive two thousand marks, a sum just sufficient to pay my streetcar fare there and back, if that's what I wanted to use it for. I have never asked for a raise. Why, I do not know; when it comes to Karl Brill and the tutoring lessons for the son of Bauer, the bookseller, I fight for one like a wild goat.

After breakfast I go for a walk in the asylum park. It is a handsome, spacious estate with trees, flowers, and benches surrounded by a high wall; one might think he was in a rest home if he did not notice the bars at the windows.

I love the park because it is quiet and I don't have to talk to anyone about war, politics, or the inflation. I can sit in silence and do such old-fashioned things as listen to the wind and the birds and watch the light filtering through the bright green of the treetops.

Those of the inmates who are allowed out are strolling by. Most are quiet, a few are talking to themselves, one or two carry on lively discussions with one another or with visitors and attendants, and many sit silent and alone, heads bowed and motionless as though turned to stone in the sun—until they are herded back into their cells.

It took me some time to get used to this sight—and even now there are moments when I stare at the madmen as I did in the beginning, with a mixture of curiosity, dread, and a nameless third emotion that reminds me of the first time I saw a corpse. I was twelve then and the body was that of Georg Hellmann; a week before, I had been playing with him, now he lay there amid wreaths and flowers, a thing unspeakably alien, made of yellow wax, a thing that, in a horrible way, had nothing more to do with us, that had departed for an unthinkable eternity and yet was still there, a speechless, strange, chill threat. Of course later, in the war, I saw countless dead men and felt scarcely any more emotion than if I had been in a slaughterhouse—but that first one I never forgot, just as one never forgets any first time. He was death. And it is this same death that sometimes peers at me from the extinguished eyes of the madmen, a living death, more bewildering, almost, and more incomprehensible than that other, silent one.

Only with Isabelle it is different.

I see her coming toward me along the path from the women's pavilion. A yellow dress billows around her like a bell of shantung silk, and in her hand she is carrying a broad, flat straw hat.

I get up and go to meet her. Her face is narrow, and one really sees only the eyes and the mouth. The eyes are gray and green and very transparent; the mouth is as red as that of a consumptive or as though it were heavily painted. The eyes, however, can suddenly become shallow, slate-colored, and small, and the mouth narrow and bitter like that of an old maid. When she is that way, she is Jennie, a distrustful, unattractive person, discontented with everything you do—otherwise she is Isabelle. Both are illusions, for in reality she is Geneviève Terhoven and is suffering from an illness that has the ugly and rather spectral name of schizophrenia—a division of consciousness, a split personality—and that is the

reason she considers herself either Isabelle or Jennie—someone other than she really is. She is one of the youngest patients in the asylum. Her mother is said to live in Alsace and to be quite rich but to pay little attention to her. In any event, I have not seen her here since I have known Geneviève, and that is now six weeks.

Today she is Isabelle, as I see immediately. At such times she lives in a dream world divorced from reality and seems light and weightless and I would not be surprised if the sulphur butterflies, playing around us, came and settled on her shoulders.

“There you are again!” she says, smiling. “Where have you been all this time?”

When she is Isabelle she says *du* to me. This is no particular distinction; at such times she says *du* to everyone. “Where have you been?” she asks again.

I make a gesture in the direction of the gate. “Somewhere—out there—”

She looks at me for an instant inquiringly. “Out there? Why? Are you looking for something?”

“I guess so—if I only knew what!”

She comes close to me. “Give it up, Rolf. One never finds anything.”

I recoil at the name Rolf. Unfortunately, she often calls me that, for just as she takes herself for someone else, so, too, does she me, and not always for the same person. She alternates between Rolf and Rudolf, and once a certain Raoul turned up. Rolf is a boring fellow whom I cannot stand; Raoul seems to be a sort of gay deceiver—what I like best when she calls me Rudolf, then she is enthusiastic and in love. My real name, Ludwig Bodmer, she ignores. I have told it to her often, but it simply does not make any impression.

During the first weeks this was all very confusing, but now I am accustomed to it. At that time I had the common conception of mental illnesses: nothing but continuous violent attempts at murder, and gibbering idiots. They exist, of course, and they are more frequent than the other; but just by contrast Geneviève is all the more surprising. At first I could hardly believe that she was sick at all, so playful seemed her alternations of name and personality, and even now that still sometimes happens to me. Finally I realized, however, that in the silence, behind these fragile structures, was a quivering chaos. It did not quite penetrate, but it was close at hand, and this, combined with the fact that Isabelle was just twenty and, because of her illness, sometimes of an almost tragic beauty, gave her a strange fascination.

“Come, Rolf,” she says, taking my arm.

I try again to escape the hated name. “I am not Rolf,” I explain. “I’m Rudolf.”

“You are not Rudolf.”

“Oh yes, I’m Rudolf. Rudolf, the unicorn.”

She called me that once. But I have no success. She smiles, as one does at a stubborn child. “You’re not Rudolf and you are not Rolf. But neither are you what you think you are. No, come, Rolf!”

I look at her. For a moment I again have the feeling that she is not sick at all and is only pretending. “Don’t be boring,” she says. “Why do you always want to be the same person?”

“Yes, why?” I reply in surprise. “You’re right! Why does one want to be? What is there so precious about a person? And why does one take oneself so seriously?”

She nods. “You and the doctor! But in the end the wind blows over everything. Why won’t you two yield to it?”

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