

HEIMITO VON DODERER

Divertimento No. VII
The Trumpets of Jericho

*Translated by
Vincent Kling*

*Let tugging at beards be practised quite early
To make the thud of the impact more burly.
Violent deeds against men you don't know
Extinguish a fire before its first glow.
The epigrammatical fist will attend to
Threats our weak natures might otherwise bend to.*

Part One

1.

When I stepped into the entry of the building, I recognized him in spite of the semi-darkness. He was a man from the tavern whose nose had caught my attention as testimony of something obscene; it came to a ragged point and seemed intent on dripping. I had come into this entry by mistake and had no business in the building; however, as soon as I caught sight of this man, retired from the railroad, I knew what he was after here. Paradoxically enough, the eight- or nine-year-old girl he was now edging up to would not have been at all necessary for me to know that a nose like his, here in this generally accessible if poorly lighted place, couldn't help acting on anything that might happen its way. I turned around, since I'd noticed that this entry wasn't the right one and that I'd walked through the wrong door. It was uncertain what I'd seen or even if we had so much as recognized each other. It appeared beyond doubt, though, that the screaming and cursing now audible in the entry behind me were being directed against the retired man. The expressions were filthy. He'd been caught in the act. I found I was already out on the street, and I rushed away.

2.

He appeared two days later in a small café where I'd never seen him before. He came in, looking all around, and steered his way toward me, while at the same moment there arose and became firm in me the decision to torment him in some unusual way. We'd never spoken in the tavern, but he knew full well who I was, and I knew the same about him. And at this moment I knew much more besides – namely, why he'd come here in the first place. He wanted to have a drink but didn't want to be seen in the tavern. He was afraid. So then he walked up to me, addressed me by my title, gave expression to his astonishment at finding me here, asked if I came here often, and finally if he could sit with me. I nodded curtly.

3.

This episode was repeated during the next two weeks; almost every time I'd be sitting in the café, the nose would sooner or later appear. It would then lead the conversation at my little table. The subjects were general, to be sure; even so, this protective layer was penetrated as a result of the process which in physics is called diffusion. "Language has the damnedst tendency toward truth," as Gütersloh puts it somewhere. "Doctor," said the retired man, "you've been around everywhere. You've seen quite a lot." "Quite a lot," I rejoined curtly. "Even a fleeting impression can be significant under certain circumstances."

"Right," I said, "and it doesn't always have to be the nicest of impressions." "I'm sure you're a good judge of people," he remarked after a brief pause, "but it's possible to get a false picture of the other person in these fleeting impressions." "Not if one remains on the solid ground of facts," I said ruthlessly, and, "One has to keep separate what one has seen de facto from what one just imagines." "And are you always able to do that, Doctor?" "Yes," I closed, tersely and decidedly lying (we're usually too long-winded when we lie).

4.

Each time I saw him he seemed to be doing worse. I didn't sound him out in any way. He kept moving his hands around the table. In the event of total diffusion, in the event that the protective layer of our conversations were to dissolve entirely, I was prepared to proceed from brevity and terseness in my answers to complete silence, to giving no answer at all in case he asked a more or less direct question. We forget this possibility too much in our ordinary dealings; every question fascinates us and we start right in with an answer. It's completely a matter of our own discretion, however, to answer or not to answer. In order to be able to hold fast to this insight, I had set up for myself an extremely complicated association of thoughts, and I was just then working at it, but working at it in vain, and for this reason I was feeling distress or bad conscience. What I had in mind was to let this weight drop down on me at once, thereby sealing my lips if he should try to make sure of me. Retreating this way into an inaccessible territory, I cut off the thread of conversation.

5.

It wasn't very long before we found ourselves at the point where my preparatory measures could be put to the test. "Didn't you notice anything two weeks ago, Doctor?" he asked. I quickly grabbed my problem like a bone and retreated with animal solemnity to the doghouse of thinking. By the time he added, "We did happen to run into each other, after all," I had already stepped onto another level and put myself into a predicament, the kind that will turn up in that particular doghouse every time. His question was a stimulus far too weak to penetrate through to me or into my shell. Therefore, my silence didn't grow to be the end-product of exertion but merely the by-product of it on a completely different level. I needed to do nothing to keep my mouth shut. It stayed closed by itself. And in such a way, specifically, as to take from the silence any possibility of its being an answer or of standing there in place of one. It was not a hair more than just – no answer; simply nothing. The action - it deserves this name in spite of everything, because it called for very intense activity, if on entirely different ground – was too much for his frayed and shredded powers. He broke down; that is, everything broke out of him onto the stone tabletop; he might actually

have been dirtying it. His manner of speaking now was the extreme opposite of my silence just before. I had provoked him, voicelessly, without uttering a sound. He said everything.

6.

During my exertion of thought – like a nimbus around it – I had grown vividly conscious that we were in the midst of autumn, in its clear weather that motioned outdoors, far-sighted like old people, whereas spring, by comparison, always ran straight into the nearest corner to boil its psychological oats in seething pressure cookers. Outside, autumn was reclining on the broad sidewalks; one could see it without catching sight of a single brown leaf. It was reclining there, the spirit of a wanderer, a stranger to the city, wanted to wander through forests. The material covering the banquettes here was flesh-pink. This little place was almost empty. It had grown sunny outside. The railroad retiree was now saying it all. The girl's parents – they were the ones who'd been screaming and cursing in the entry – preferred a silent way of dealing with the matter, one involving cash, to a loquacious way, one involving the police. In fact, they held themselves within the bound of a demand that could just be fulfilled by the retiree and that was measured for him like a garment, as it were. For now, two hundred fifty, by October 20, at eight in the evening. In case of non-payment by 8:15, filing of criminal charges by mail.

7.

It was now that date, though only four in the afternoon. And he had scraped two hundred ten together. As a married man on a reduced income, he was held strictly in check. The money lay before him on the table. He counted it through twice. On his temples, on his forehead – to the extent that one could be spoken of – and on his cheekbones, moisture appeared, sweat; the wetness of weakness. I imagined with satisfaction that his feet were probably sweating as well. Right now I wanted him to stew in his own juices. I lowered a curtain by picking up a newspaper and disappearing behind it into the doghouse without reading. This action was successful, also.

When I took out my notebook after a while and began to write, I'd forgotten my intentions regarding the retiree. I'd become neutral. I wound up actually reading the newspaper and was able to thank the circumstance of there being this time, for a change, not just foolishness, but a superb literary essay for a relaxed postlude to the preceding exertion. In the room the light had been turned on long before, and from outside the deepening dusk pressed a dark radiance against the window panes.

8.

With verve I now surged forth toward the retired man from all the way at the rear. During this whole time, incidentally, he had hardly even attempted a charade of pretending to read, but instead sat slumped forward after putting away the two hundred ten, his gaze fixed on the tabletop. "Herr Rambauser," I said, "you may have the money from me to make up your shortage, and you may have it right away." He immediately swore his trustworthiness concerning repayment. "That will not enter the question," I said, "because there is something I want you to do for me in return for the money." "I'll do anything," he answered rather tonelessly; his exhaustion was apparently causing him to lose the last of his nerve. "The action which you are to perform is quite inconsequential," I said, purposely resorting to an inflated manner of expression because I was fully aware of its intimidating effect on individuals of his type. "Nonetheless, its execution must be correct and in precise conformity with my instructions. You are to leave the café now, and I shall follow after a short interval. In front of that building entry - you know which one, where the tavern is - you are to come to a stop and then make three deep knee bends with your arms held straight out in front of you. This exercise is to be performed slowly. Bear in mind that I shall be located not very far behind you, observing your movements. Upon completion of this exercise I shall pass you on the sidewalk without taking notice of you in any way. I shall then betake myself to the Café Greilinger, located somewhat farther along the same street, and shall await you there. Assuming that the three knee bends have been performed slowly, deeply, and completely, you will there receive in payment from me the sum you require to make up the difference. I ask you now to repeat exactly what you are to do."

9.

This repetition seemed to cause him the greatest torture, and that was just how I'd expected it to be. His own words ran down his body, viscous, cold, and thick; and when I finally dismissed him so that he could carry out my wishes, he seemed almost relieved. I followed him promptly. The street, which went slightly uphill, was full of people, as it was the end of the business day. For some moments I considered it impossible that he would do as I had demanded. Right afterward I was seized with a notion to take to my heels, to run away, to disappear, but I now found myself completely bound, even chained, to him. He had by now reached the designated spot, stopped, stood still. And then he went into a squat. He thrust his arms forward the way one learns to do in gym class. This exact conformity to prescribed regulation had an absurd effect. Hardly anyone looked at him, not even when he went into the second squat; perhaps

they thought he'd dropped something and was picking it up off the ground. As he went into the third squat I walked by, passing him so close that he lost his balance and had to support himself with his left hand on the ground. Almost no one was sitting in the Café Greilinger; to the left, at the rear, total emptiness lay over an extended assemblage of chairs and red banquettes. I gave the waiter my order as I passed by, entered the vacuum on the left, and took a seat all the way in the rear. Rambausek was soon there, walking up to me. I watched him coming. He was now totally confounded, as I could tell at first glance. I was sitting on a banquette, hands in my pockets, legs outstretched. Now he was near, the retiree. Suddenly I noticed that his eyes made a leap at me, gobbling up entirely the last small distance between us, as it were; the next instant he was reaching for my throat with both hands. He had walked up rapidly and was standing in such a way that my outstretched legs were between his feet. I did a split, and he fell into the booth facing me. His eyes were still bulging, but now their erection went flaccid. His gaze broke. "Excuse me, Doctor," he said, "I tripped over your legs." "So it seems to me, also," I said. The waiter was just coming with my coffee. I ordered a double cognac and soda for Rambausek. Then I handed the money over to him. He put it away carefully after counting through the total amount once more. Then he drank greedily and smoked the cigarette I offered him. "Don't let me keep you, Herr Rambausek," I said after he had finished his drink. "The matter has been taken care of to my satisfaction, and I thank you." "And I thank you so very much more, Doctor," he replied, now getting up. He hesitated a moment, but I kept my hands in my pockets, so he just bowed (not at all badly, either) and walked away. I watched his back. He was putting his hat on, and just then I observed the hair coming down his neck and the back of his head in general. Now I sensed the creaturely in and about him. I had gone too far. In these moments I went into a deep eclipse. A few days later he greeted me on the street with great deference. And it was hardly to be concealed that he was already growing beyond my stature simply by doing that.

Part Two

1.

Above the city, close by the bank of the river, there sits in the water the wreck of a steamer that was struck in the war. From a battered casing – underneath still today a ship and not to be regarded as anything else! – the long black cylinder of the smokestack, jutting aslant into the air, calls across the river and the far-flung gray-green of its banks like a final frozen wail of the siren, only mute. Below, when the water is shallow, everything already lies in part on dry land and is beginning to sink into the ground through a weight that can no longer be borne up and carried by the river. A part of the once fish-sleek ship bottom is missing: destruction burst in just behind the paddle box. But fore the stem stabs upstream and lies in the water – after the outcalling smokestack the part of the ship that has most preserved the form of activity.

2.

I came here often that autumn. I would study the wreck in detail and at length. It came to seem strange to me that no children, especially boys – who ran around all up and down the river-bank - played on the wreck. It had to be an appealing idea. In all likelihood it had been strictly prohibited by the police, and very sensibly, too, for if one of those little fellows had ever fallen into a hole in the superstructure or through the gaps in the torn ship's body into the interior, where there were rustling sounds and drafty winds, it wouldn't have been easy to get him back out. The children played on the pier. The girls made almost more of a din than the boys. Their voices sounded to some extent older, more adult, certainly bearing a greater resemblance to women's voices than do the sounds of a boy whose voice has yet to change from the speech organ of a child to that of a man. Among the girls, though, there were many sounds up in the treble that were no different from what one hears in grown women. "Good afternoon, Doctor." This was such a voice.

Besides, she wasn't so very small any more, around nine or ten.

3.

I must confess that the girl's voice annoyed me somehow, threw me onto the defensive, made me bristle. "Where do you know me from?" I asked, not without firmness, while I turned to her and looked her straight in the eye. Her game had been interrupted. Her friends were scrutinizing me attentively. The facial expression of the girl who had spoken shocked me in the deepest part of myself: with her mouth drawn askew, it was one belonging to an attractive,

stupid, but cunning person walking around in the guise of a schoolgirl, so to speak: a strongly unsavory something. Her little face was sharp and fine. "My parents live in the house where the tavern is," she said, and named the name of the owner. Not until just then was any connection established with the part of the city where I made my home, which was an hour's streetcar ride from here. "And what are you doing here?" I asked in a severe tone. I marveled at how large her eyes were and how long her lashes; she was, on close examination, an extraordinarily beautiful child. "I live out here with my aunt now and go to school here." "Why not at home with your mother?" I asked. Along with her little mouth, she set her whole upper body askew. All the girls began laughing and scampering away.

4.

I stayed behind near the wreck, alone. The afternoon, not yet far advanced, filled everything with a neutral quiet – strange to say, the atmosphere was similar, in a fundamental plexus, as it were, to one back at school when a boy would go into the empty gymnasium for some reason, perhaps because he'd lost his handkerchief there. And there it was. Near the climbing-poles. Here, though, the river came unceasingly flowing from behind the mountain on the left, under the empty sky. There was a rustling in the wreck. I felt anguish, impossible to tell the reason, impossible to tell the cause. Melancholy ate into me like a poison.

5.

I lifted my eyes – and saw standing over the masses of water like a gold-green garden full of joy the new-departed summer out over the wooded mountains, beyond the saddle surmounted by the westward-leading stretch of railroad with two tunnels. The place beyond is called Eichgraben. After the second tunnel the track starts down the mountain; a different rhythm comes into the wheels, beating and echoing, as the forest echoes from the train and then breaks off, for now one is riding in the clear, out over the viaduct, after which, approaching the small station, the brakes grind.

6.

The green is billowed, warm, and frothy, the veranda high, the forest much farther off than the eye can reach from this favorable spot. There was another one, though, lying much lower. For my part, I was living in a summer cottage that belonged to the villa above – at the bottom of the valley, by the brook, in the high grass. I awoke early, since the walls were largely of glass. The birds were twittering.

I leapt out of bed, went outdoors undressed through the wet meadow in the morning sun. Right here, at the river, at the wreck, even now, this girl had just been. My head sank; I heard the rustling in the bottom of the ship again. Something was following me here; I was pulling a thread behind me, and it was tangling itself around my feet. I stared fixedly at the demolished paddle box of the steamer, as if I could read from these remains how matters stood in the fundamental plexus of my being.

Part Three

1.

Right after the business with Rambausek – from that very day on, in fact – there was no stopping a downhill slide; no matter what I did to stem it, deeper and deeper it went. Like ships in the legendary weed-choked sea around Atlantis, I stayed stuck, my powers of work crippled, kept turning around in place, putting forth effort fruitlessly, brooding by myself for days on end, smelling almost with my bodily nose the miasma of my spiritual putrefaction. Nor did wine help; it mixed with the rottenness, and then it spoiled, too. And in its lying sparkle it became a sham, a mirage of a better condition, more and more so until, led along on its leash, I found myself in worse company than I had ever been in, ever in my life.

2.

Also, rowdiness gained the upper hand, and the right companions for it were soon found. In no time we stopped drinking in the tavern, doing it only in my apartment instead; we gave up drinking our admirable local wine, turning instead to ice-clear, piercing, powerful, pungent spirits, soon fizzing in just a dash of soda from the chilled bottles, for form's sake only, and not even hitting the glass most of the time. The floor was often flooded. Wrangling and bickering broke out. Even during the day there would be people staggering drunk through my foyer. I had old weapons hanging on the walls at the time, bows and quivers, swords and rapiers – not just decorator pieces, either. No, these were the real thing. After they got loaded, the men would pull down the swords – I took part also - and would fence with hard clashes, no longer just for fun or in a happy spirit. Those not quite so drunk, but similarly armed, would join in with blows of their own, but then one man was stabbed in the arm and the wound was bandaged by one of our cronies, a doctor, a surgeon. Someone could have been killed. To my horror, the rapiers were missing their tip-guards; perhaps the drunkards had removed them.

3.

So we brawled on, squandering huge amounts of money, to say nothing of time, raucous by day and by night, bellowing when we sang. Perhaps it was all made even worse by the complete absence of women at our gatherings and thereby of any moderating influence on our gross ways. It would be very fair to ask this question concerning my living arrangements at the time: how could I get away with acting like this in a city apartment building, right in the midst of its many

occupants? Well, I did. The flat roof was over me, and the floors below me consisted of offices and businesses and were thus totally deserted at night, the time when our flagrant bingeing and rampaging would mainly burst out, after all. On the other hand, however, I didn't have this very spacious apartment floor all to myself; it was divided into two parts. And with that I come to the topic of my neighbor.

4.

She was easily the most gracious old lady – just under seventy – I had ever seen. Slender and yet full-figured, spry and yet dignified, a face like a little mouse under her beautiful white hair, bright and with an untiring ability to get things done efficiently, she took care of all the housekeeping for her son and the young woman he'd recently married, because the newlyweds were away at their respective jobs all day long. Their home sparkled with cleanliness (of course I'm leaving out of account my own rooms, where the same domestic had been slopping around for years). Frau Ida – that's what I'm calling this neighbor of mine, though that wasn't her real name – would easily have been a match for any chef de cuisine in the kitchen, and she showed the greatest energy and stamina in her work.

Her kitchen was a spotlessly clean laboratory of gastronomy. We had often chatted there. My totally open liking and admiration for her evoked a friendly attitude from this wonderful lady in return, and we soon developed the best of neighborly regard.

5.

At the time when these boisterous uproars were getting started at my place, Frau Ida was alone. The young couple hadn't been able to take their vacation until late that year, and they'd traveled to southern Italy for a month. Now my neighbor was by no means one of those people who are touchy about noise – quite the reverse, and to an astonishing degree. She'd often confirmed this peculiarity of hers with a laugh. Still, she was in no way hard of hearing. Now, at the beginning of our dissipation, not long after October 20 and Rambauser's three knee bends, that is, matters did not reach their full momentum right away. Yes, there was bellowing enough. Still, we drank in my second room, farther to the rear; moreover, I had taken great pains to install soundproofing insulation when I moved into these quarters, not for the purpose of boozing and brawling, but rather, at the time, for the sake of work. What had once served virtue, however, was now standing vice in good stead.

6.

Even so, drunkards would stumble through the shared foyer at night, which was unavoidable because of their need to pass water. They babbled to themselves, naturally, reeling around and bumping into one another; and one time Doctor Pretzmann – the man who had dressed the stab wound – kicked another man in the behind for not moving away from the toilet fast enough to suit him. A fight broke out immediately; the ruckus, now audible in my rooms, drew into the foyer a river that could no longer be dammed, that emptied into the beginning fight and made it general; it was as if more oil were being poured onto a fire, so that about twenty men wound up in the brawl, everybody throwing punches at anybody he happened to find in arm's reach and no one knowing why.

7.

One can well imagine that I was deeply concerned for my wonderful Frau Ida after this incident. Walking past her to the bathroom late on the morning of the following day, I saluted her courteously in my bathrobe, but that little mousie gave no sign of anything amiss; she looked as fresh and crisp as ever and gave me a friendly greeting in return. I couldn't understand why she hadn't protested and demanded quiet the night before, since the disturbance had been barbaric. Whatever it was that would now and then come creeping through my door by day, drink something, and then stagger back out, it had at all times been meticulously polite in a grinning way when it would meet this delightful little person, making deferential nods and somewhat unsteady bows. So Frau Ida must have been aware of how it was with me. But she didn't let on. After this nighttime brawl in the foyer, my comrades, drunk even by day, now took special care to observe forms of the utmost propriety toward the worthy lady; perhaps conscience was pressing them as well. Here in my rooms she was always being praised. The little lady appealed to all. The first time these tributes produced a kind of sinister foreboding in me was at noon one day when I ran into one of the hangover victims – a young lad from a patrician family, by the way, polished and secure in his manner, but just plain drunk all the time – standing in the foyer and holding a conversation with Frau Ida – not at all badly, either. Even at this point, strange to say, I suspected that nothing good would come of this.

8.

Somewhere right around this time Frau Ida told me that an old friend of hers was sick. The seventy-five-year-old lady was alone in a relatively large apartment and was suffering from both neuralgia in her leg and some kind of cardiac inadequacy, often almost incapable of any movement at all; even so, she stubbornly refused to hear any talk of hiring a nurse. So Frau Ida had to be on hand a great deal; fortunately, that was possible for her just now because household matters weren't so demanding of her presence.

Sometimes, when the pain in her friend's leg grew severe, the woman would undergo great anxiety and would fear being alone more than anything. This was the essence of what Frau Ida told me. I listened very nicely, with attentiveness but also with uneasiness. For all the clamor at the surface, I was more dead than alive in my depths, and that was exactly what I became conscious of while listening to Frau Ida's story in the kitchen. And of more than that. I felt fear – fear of an avenging wrath that could suddenly topple me into old age and sickness out of the midst of the way I was living now. In fact, while this pleasant lady was speaking, I felt myself separated from death only as if by a thin wall placed where it was by mere chance.

9.

In my rooms the men soon came back to the subject of the "delightful little lady," the "mousie" – they were calling her that already!

The topic gained an obstinate footing. The chief spokesman was that young man who'd been chatting with Frau Ida. I'm saying "chief spokesman" but would rather have just gone ahead and said "ringleader." Doctor Pretzmann seemed to be constantly adding fuel to the fire, too. Frau Ida's family name might well have been capable of stimulating an association of thoughts that could lead to the Old Testament. And once someone had uttered the phrase "the trumpets of Jericho" – it came out unforeseen, the upshot of some wretched association, tumbling out among the drinkers – the whole situation showed its reverse side all of a sudden, as when a medal is turned over. The trumpets of Jericho: it was our watchword of disaster. I saw myself confronted with a ripened plot, a wild conspiracy.

Someone drove the hesitant souls over the brink by crying, "We've got to show greatness, outdo ourselves, put on a manful display, be ready to do something outrageous with a show of effortless ease."

10.

I resisted only weakly; I was dazed and as if crippled. Possibly in the depths of my heart I was hoping that, through everything now being arranged and set afoot with the greatest haste, the plug could be knocked out that was blocking the channel of my life, that these arrangements might be the force needed to knock the bottom out of the barrel soon. That same young man mentioned twice already lost no time in going to the office of the musicians' union, and soon the trumpets were here, three of them – two tenors and a bass, along with their players. They were to play the triumphal march from Verdi's Aida. Fine with me. Doctor Pretzmann handed out twenty repeater pistols which would go off with an appalling bang; needless to say, they were fake weapons. Everybody was shouting at once; everybody was talking about the "little mousie." How cute

she'd look there in her little bed with the trumpets blaring, with the pistols banging: surely as if crippled for shock. Did she wear a little nightcap? How sweet she was, that dear little lady! Around midnight the musicians arrived in total silence. Their fee was high, and that was the end of it as far as they were concerned; they seemed altogether indifferent to everything else, and their demeanor was as businesslike as it could possibly be. They were just supposed to play for us, so they brought along their folding music stands and carefully laid their expensive instruments, now in black cases, in a corner secured for them. Then they drank with us. Brass players like to drink.

11.

The young man now arranged everything with great haste and care. He was aided by Doctor Pretzmann, who was also the one to take the musicians aside and carefully impress upon them that they were to lock the door from the inside after we had all gone out into the foyer, thus locking themselves in. They were then to proceed immediately to their playing and, without worrying about anything else going on, to play the same march continually and collectedly, and to start again from the very beginning each time. I held Doctor Pretzmann under the tormenting suspicion of not really being drunk and of merely feigning intoxication from the very start. A few times already he'd suddenly stepped out of character; for instance, the time when he'd had to dress that wound; it was peculiar, come to think of it, that he had bandages right there in a leather bag in the foyer – just by coincidence, he said. It seemed to me sometimes that he was trying to make fools of us all, or was it his idea that he'd be able to study the effects of alcohol abuse here? It strikes me in retrospect that he was more interested in forcing matters to extremes to see how far we would really go. Tonight, before this campaign of ours, the drinking hadn't been too heavy, which meant that our creeping out into the foyer, even though we were twenty in number, was accomplished with nearly perfect noiselessness. We put on all the lights in the outer room, softly opened the door to the landing, and illuminated it brightly as well. All this was required – as that loudmouth had stubbornly insisted and actually carried through – by "the greatness of the situation" and would furthermore allow everyone room with no crowding; all could take part in the manful display. So we stood there, pistols at the ready in our hands, noiseless and motionless, all squeezed together at Frau Ida's door. It was 1:25 in the morning.

12.

Now the trumpets rang out with purest intonation, clear and sonorous; with truly moving beauty and in all its majesty, Verdi's brass music, humble but strong, pierced the silence of the night. A few minutes later we burst into little mousie's

bedroom, roaring and firing the pistols wildly. The light switch next to the door was not easy to find right away. The men leading up the rear kept crowding inside, shooting the whole time, even when the light had already come on in every corner of the room and we found it unoccupied and the mahogany bed unused and still made. The last shots were still thundering in the foyer, but whoever looked around in here put his hand down. Soon we were gathered, all twenty of us, as noiseless and motionless here as we had been at the door earlier. Verdi's chords commanded everything again, for the trumpeters played on stalwartly. When they stopped for a few seconds, however, so that they could begin playing the triumphal march from the beginning again, we could hear a quick succession of clapping sounds, as if someone were being rapidly boxed on the ears (and we weren't very far from feeling that way now, to tell the truth): these were the superintendent's bedroom slippers, and he was now coming on the run, with the greatest hurry, up the windings of the staircase. The next moment, albeit with considerable caution, he came up into the foyer, which was now filled with gunpowder smoke. When he got to us, he stood there completely frozen; a tall, thin man with eyes wide open like little lighted windows. The trumpets resounded. The smoke from the innumerable shots was hanging in little mouse's bedroom like a perfectly straight but falling board, going out into the foyer.

13.

Amid the incessant sound of the trumpets the riot police now showed up, summoned by the superintendent's wife over the telephone as soon as the shooting had started. Their boots tramped up the stairwell, which had already become active enough as it was. With that striking sharpness that characterizes the crime units of all large cities – because of selectivity and rigorous training – the squad stormed into our apartment with its leader at the head, and soon thereafter we were standing with our hands raised (absurdly enough, the superintendent, too), facing the barrels of their automatic weapons. The trumpets resounded. We'd had to drop our pistols. Now they were recognized for what they were. The automatic weapons were lowered, the safety catches put back on. Since the players had not been silenced by pounding and loud shouting, several policemen broke the door down. Finally, Verdi's chords stopped. "Whose apartment is this?" the squad leader asked. Naturally I had to give my name. Doctor Pretzmann smirked in a vulgar way. And did I know these persons? "My guests," I said, and, "This is the superintendent." By this time, of course, the squad leader had grasped that he was dealing with a prank here. We weren't even arrested; instead, our names were taken from our identification papers and written down. The musicians', also; three elderly gentlemen, by the way. They were very embarrassed. The riot squad withdrew. This matter had several rather boring and unpleasant consequences for us all, to put it mildly. True, there

wasn't even a question about violating the ordinances concerning licensed firearms, but there very definitely was one about disturbing the peace, and to the most egregious extent. We were fined in accordance with the statute dealing with "gross nuisance" but given suspended sentences because of its being a first offense. The musicians got off scot-free.

Part Four

1.

Even with all this, the plug wasn't out. I'd been deluding myself. There's not really any direct connection – as one might believe - between the incidents just related and the fact that I changed apartments soon after; it wasn't a permanent move, anyway. A friend, the painter Robert G., had gone away to Paris for several months. I was taking care of his place now. It was what he very much wanted, and he'd been eagerly requesting me to. That fit quite nicely into all my dubious plannings and contrivings, too. I honestly thought the plug was out, and an external change appeared just the thing to emphasize the point. What's more, one could safely say I'd made something of an ass of myself in the house where I was living. We'd behaved incredibly. Let some grass grow over it. I thought of trying a fresh start, and I was convinced that one had already been brought about by my moving and not drinking any more (I ran away from my bad companions, all the way to the outermost edge of the city; now it would be hard for anything to creep in or stagger out where I was). Again and again we fall prey to the superstition that our lives can be parceled out according to our own calculations, through external arrangements and a moral sewage system. So we tear ourselves loose from one fix only to get into another.

2.

I sent my cleaning woman out there with some things and had her build a fire for the evening; it was still winter, even if a mild one. It was already dark when I went into the studio. The servant had provided too much of a good thing. The room was highly overheated; incubating temperatures prevailed. I knew that the slanting glass wall at the front had large ventilator panes with iron frames, and I opened both. The air pouring in was damp. I knew I was not far from the river, though over the city, high above the water. This room appealed to me, if with a certain degree of severity. It would be pertinent to say here that the painter was not part of this crowd of boozers, an observation practically self-evident about a real artist. His worktable, made of unplanned wood and heavy, square supports, looked as if it had a great deal of use. At one end, objects belonging to his craft were lying in a kind of drill-field order (which prevailed here in general). I noticed three pencils arranged parallel and sharpened to needle points. They were lined up with such strict order that I would hardly have dared to move them. There were no pictures here, not a sign of one anywhere. Perhaps he'd sent them all off or taken them with him to his exhibition in Paris.

3.

I hadn't even sat down yet. I stood there in my hat and coat. Entrance was still in me, first ingress and impression, which enters into us much more than we ourselves enter the room into which we step. I hadn't even seen the pencils yet, for example. It smelled of turpentine and varnish. I had been in the adjoining bedroom before this. Next to the bed, its metal frame painted white, was a very low but broad light-blue table serving as a stand; pencils and pads of paper at the ready in drill-field order. I felt envy. At this moment I forgot completely that I was the owner of a quiet and orderly apartment, beautifully suited to work and reflection. I saw only its floor in front of me with pieces of broken glass and puddles of soda. Here I stood before an invisible wall of crystal like someone defiled by a felony, the felony of wasting time. The winter months, now nearing an end, dropped from the ceiling like heavy weights onto my shoulders. In this moment I heard a heavy rattling sound, perfectly rhythmic, that filled the room: huh-huh-huh-huh-huh-huh. It wasn't coming from me. It was outside. Fear leapt into my chest like a stick shoved down my throat. It was outside. I turned toward the ventilator windows. A railroad whistle blew; the rattling stopped. Now I realized for the first time that the train station was near the river below; it had been a shunting locomotive. I quickly drew up an easy chair. I recognized at the deepest level that – having touched not one drop of anything alcoholic for quite some time now – I had boozed away my guts and my brains. We can give our vices a good swift kick and get rid of them that way, all right, but not of the destruction they've wreaked. I clenched my teeth, and tears started into my eyes. Then I said a single word out loud. It hung under the ceiling light for the length of a split second, and then it burst and filled the room with a bright echo. What I had said was – Rambausek.

4.

Down below at the river-bank the next day. Fog seals off the river. As far as one's gaze reaches, the rapid movement of the water can be seen. The fog-filled emptiness stays still. Inside the wreck is a rustling that decays as it moves outside. The prow lies deep in the water; in shallowness it stuck out sharply. The tall, slant, black cylinder of the smokestack keeps calling across the river still - a final wail of the steamer, left hanging in the air and then smothered. But it no longer opens up the width of the river. The fog packs everything in padding.

5.

I came here often late that winter and throughout the spring. I always studied the wreck in detail and at length. Now that it was foggy and gloomy, no children

were playing here, but they showed up again two or three weeks later. I turned my back to them, didn't bother about them. Nobody took any notice of me. I studied the broken body of the ship and looked out over the river. Now a view lay open to the other bank. Everything was gray on that side and on this. The water flowed swiftly. Time hung in neutral quiet between winter and spring as if between death and life. I was distinctly sickened by the emptiness here: it had nothing to say to me. I went away and stayed away. When I came back after all in two weeks – I was acting in relation to this river-bank somehow like a drunkard in relation to a tavern he would gladly stay away from if only he could – when I came back, then, after two weeks or even more, there were sunlight and calm winds – the water blue, the hills out in the clear. Children were shouting. I caught sight of isolated, tiny, emerald-green points on the deck and superstructure of the wreck: first green on earth borne through the air. I gazed for a long time at these points gleaming so bright among otherwise gray-rotten colors. As I turned to go away, five people came along in a row, three women and two men; they saluted me and came to a stop. I remained where I was. Now we were all gathered.

6.

The only one I recognized was Rambausek, who introduced me right away to his wife, a markedly beautiful woman, really, even though tawny and slender in a way that did nothing for me. The other couple greeted me with no hesitation. The man I had seen in the tavern at one time or another, but never the woman. And yet she addressed me as "Doctor." One is known without knowing; everyone is known, but no one knows how well he is known (it's uncanny). I was immediately baffled in this woman's presence; she introduced me, saying my name loud and clear to her husband's sister. So this was the "aunt." I found out that her little niece was living out here with her again, now that it was spring. This whole group with Rambausek was totally unfathomable to me. They had blackmailed him, and now here they were taking a walk with him and his wife. Maybe they were still blackmailing him; maybe they were blackmailing him on a steady basis. I couldn't fit the little girl's father and aunt into the situation at all. They were individuals without any real exterior aspect; they seemed to be made of some substance that had long since grown unrecognizable, drifting emulsified among alleyways and stairways in outlying sections of the city. But take note of this: you can't put anything whatever past lower-middle-class people of their sort – in front they have no face, but in the back of their heads they have an assassins' den and oftentimes an ape house, one mad with malignity as well. I heard that the little girl wasn't playing here at the landing-place but was taking her needlework lesson instead. That took a weight off my mind. The mother, beside whom I was now walking, was enough for me. She turned her face and her full attention to me. She seemed to be plucking each

word out of my mouth. She looked like the wreck of her daughter, only this wreck was overgrown with fresh green on every side. Brightly gleaming, trumpet-yellow gourd blossoms on a heap of dung and shards. Under her (incidentally modest) clothes, her body gave its testimony in single, separate, and stressed statements – a high bosom, or rather, one wants to say, two high breasts; and everything else was like that, too, left and right, above and below, front and back. We went over the roadbed, thus drawing away from the river. And it was here, on the road, where everyone suddenly left us - by "us" I mean Frau Jurak and me – the husband, the aunt, the Rambausek couple. I'd said I didn't feel like going for some wine and had been seconded by the Jurak woman; the others all seemed in a hurry to have a drink, however; they were quite eager about it. Herr Jurak took me aside and said in a low voice that he'd be very grateful if I could help see his wife part of the way home, perhaps to the streetcar. We laughed for a moment, in masculine collusion, as it were. "Not too much, Karl!" she called after him. He waved with a smile and disappeared uphill with the others. Frau Jurak and I set off on our way.

7.

Ten minutes later we were sitting together in the most secluded corner of a café located on the square where she was to have boarded her streetcar, and twenty minutes later we were already on our third glass of wine. In one way or another, we started going too far from the very first moment on, so to speak, and the nearness of her heavy thighs and the outpouring invitation of her body's pliability soon provoked me to grope and grab her in no uncertain terms. She allowed my unambiguous and downright vulgar pawing to go on with no resistance or opposition; she paid not the slightest attention to it and talked to me about the weather while I hefted her weighty left breast in my hand. Her eyes were those of her small daughter – open too wide, slit too wide, too moist, slithery, in a manner of speaking. It was late when I realized that she was my superior by far in drinking; I had not expected this at all, and, what's more, I was feeling disgust for the wine anyway. I had been the one to call for wine in the first place, taking the lead, as it were, but now she got into her stride, and I diligently fought the liter bottle on the table by constantly pouring wine into her glass. She went along with it, too.

Through all this, though, Frau Jurak's behavior didn't grow the least bit livelier. She sat on her solid foundation, allowed herself to be kissed with no fuss, warded off none of the pawing, and drank. When the liter was done, she got up in a hurry. We rode into the city, and I went to her door with her. I was nearly sick from the wine (when I reached home I vomited). She disappeared into the entry.

There I stood, a stranger in my own neighborhood, in front of the door next to the tavern. We hadn't said a word about whether and when we wanted to meet again.

8.

After I'd vomited over the toilet bowl at home – which went smoothly and cleanly, for I wasn't drunk in the slightest – I sat down on Robert's bed next to the low, light-blue table. I felt as if I had dirtied this apartment, a highly venerable site, because there can be no four walls more upstanding than an artist's. The most magnificent palace is a junk shop by comparison. Even so, I was thinking about how to carry things yet further. I was already picturing the Jurak woman to myself with her behind wobbling and her mouth full of the stupidest questions. Not here, though. It should be in my own apartment, which, oddly, I now saw before me again the way it had been this past winter, with slivers of broken glass and puddles of spilled soda. It was as though I were gazing onto the ground of my misery, but it wasn't the real ground, the ground cause. I couldn't unearth it. My work had been going at full tilt for a good while again, and I was comfortably fixed in a material way. Outside, in the west (I now imagined that foreign lands were any region lying beyond Eichgraben, a place where isolated spots gleamed with an intense green, as on a map), publication of a voluminous work of mine was imminently forthcoming, a work for which I felt I could expect considerable acclaim. Here, however, above the city, I was living in an undeniably attractive area, and a familiar one, too, as I had lived there previously for several years. Oddly enough, though, that was exactly why I was now living like someone who's a stranger in his own house. It was also like a stranger that I'd been standing on a street in my own neighborhood yesterday evening, feeling somewhat sick, in front of the Jurak woman's door. No, I could find ground nowhere any more; I was at home nowhere any more. The floors floated like a raft on a river of fear, and just yesterday Frau Jurak had climbed up onto this raft with me. It was of no use to me to say that I should carefully size up an advantageous situation like a beautiful country place in which one shouldn't be wandering around aimlessly. To put it in blunt terms – a good standard of living can have an utterly oppressive effect if virtue is missing from the innermost chamber of the life in question, filling it and, in the end, benefiting it.

9.

With a gravity, an absorption, an obsessiveness which aren't even remotely comprehensible outside the state of entanglement I was in but whose workings rely on the disproportionate degree of its intrication, I pondered how there had never been any swamp odor of decay at the wreck down below. But how could

there have been? The water rushed, flowed, and passed rapidly there. Yet the swamp odor was present as soon as I thought of it. As though someone had fetched up, fished up, dredged up something like rubbish from the bottom of a pond, broken umbrella frames, single boots – muddy trash mixed with organic matter, smelling like slime, just the way it came up and out, in no way dry, clean rubbish, far too wet for that, too moist, slitty, slithery, sliding, dripping; but the word rubbish usually makes us think of attics, which are quite dry anyway. These remains here were wet, far too wet. For moments at a time I was absorbed in such images, sitting on Robert's bed next to the low light-blue table. Robert was in the west, far beyond Eichgraben. He was in Paris. Now I faintly heard the shunting locomotive as it wheezed again. One of the ventilator windows in the next room was wide open, and the door to the studio was ajar. How snug it was here; how frighteningly snug and sad. Earlier I would have run away from anxieties like these, from my own apartment, perhaps into the tavern; and here in this neighborhood there were many much more pleasant little taverns of this kind, all of which I was familiar with from earlier. But although this evening, the one after the meeting with Frau Jurak, was not the only one I had spent here in this fear-filled way, sitting on Robert's bed next to the light-blue table, I never once thought of going out. Wine could not help me.

10.

I hadn't been back in my old apartment since moving. If I needed anything, I sent my cleaning woman, and she paid all the bills in my name. She was also able to pick out and bring the right manuscripts and books when I needed them; as a result of my pedantry, which had developed into a sickness in just those years, everything pertaining to my work stood in numbered rows. Several weeks had gone by since I'd had occasion to send the woman there, incidentally. My daily outings had lately begun extending as far as my old neighborhood, though I never went inside the building where my apartment was. In these excursions – they were still always streetcar rides – the section of the city called Liechtenwerd (which is still called that today) was a kind of intermediate stop. It was only recently that I'd discovered Liechtenwerd. I avoided the wreck and now came here instead. A square with an extensive view, where I found a small café, was located about halfway between my old and new lodgings. Here I was stuck hanging in midair for a while, and when I would leave home after eating – a time when my habit was to take a walk – Liechtenwerd Platz and the small café were the only destinations I could state, so to speak (although I soon overshot them). From a heightened and open vantage point, my eye ranged freely over railroad installations reaching almost farther than one could see – bundles of tracks radiating out from one another, sheds, rows of cars which looked in the distant sunlight like lines of little red dice, puffs of steam exhaled by patient shunting engines, and behind, swallowed by smoke and steam, parts

of the city going out to the river; all of it looking as if girded and held in place by the transverse viaducts of an elevated rail line. Taken all together, it was a formidable sight, a kind of artificial landscape extending far like a natural one, a dense chord resounding with all the gravity of our time, of our general condition, or whatever you want to call it. But there in the small café I sat, truly submerged and buried deep, severed from everything and everyone, especially from my two homes, the one out at the river, the other in the city.

11.

Even so, it wasn't very long before something sucked me into the place, as it were. I was strolling through the streets of my old neighborhood. The first acquaintance I happened across there was Doctor Pretzmann. He came ambling down the street, not far from the tavern, at a leisurely pace, swinging his handsome bag of thick tan leather, in his left hand. "By the way, the old lady died," he said after we had exchanged greetings. "For the love of God, which old lady do you mean?" I cried. "That friend of your landlady, your dear Frau Ida." "Oh, that one," I said, "the one who had something wrong with her leg?" "Yes, but that wasn't the cause of death," he observed nonchalantly. "Your Frau Ida really got worn out by the whole business through the fall and winter. She spent almost every night for two months with the patient – at my suggestion, I might add. A nurse was always adamantly refused, but finally we were able to get the patient to go into a hospital." "Excuse me, Doctor, then you knew at the time – I mean when we forced our way into her room – you knew that Frau Ida wasn't even there?" "Certainly I knew that," he said lazily. "Otherwise I would never have allowed the whole thing to happen. The consequences would have been – well, let's just say unimaginable. Everybody knew it, for that matter, except you, of course. Now I have to go over there," he added, pointing to a house on the other side of the street. We said our goodbyes.

12.

I walked slowly down the street. There was still plenty I would have liked to ask Doctor Pretzmann; he had vanished far too quickly.

At this moment I had to draw to their full conclusions two insights, both like deep and painful gashes I myself was responsible for inflicting. The first was that whoever has to do with matters of the spirit should realize through the onset of vice and the spread of impermissible freedoms that he has been outside of himself for a long time – whereas others do not have to leave their own ground in that way – and that thus he is stupider than any of his cronies; second, that in order to become a crony of this kind, widespread stupefaction must already have him in its grip; in a word, that only by toppling over can he be or do what others

can perform standing up. The amazing extent of the stupidity I had been in and probably still was in gave its own clearest illustration by the fact that I had never hit on the perfectly obvious idea of asking myself where my charming Frau Ida had spent that crucial night. The answer to a question I hadn't so much as thought to ask had just now had to be imparted to me by Doctor Pretzmann. He who buries his one talent doesn't get to keep even it. Others know how to find it, dig it up, and play football with it. Relentless are the mechanical workings of life. When I had reached that point in my thoughts and in my walk to the small café where I'd once sat with Rambausek, I ran into Frau Jurak.

13.

She was going to take a ride, having promised to go and meet her daughter at the landing-place when the little girl was finished playing. She wanted to stop at her apartment first to drop off her purchases, though. She'd just been shopping – she pointed to a large bag. Was I thinking of taking a ride, too? I was? Well, if I didn't mind, I should wait at the streetcar stop for just a moment; she'd be right there. With that, she hurried off and was back again in a very short time. We got stuck halfway, and twenty minutes after our departure, so to speak, we were sitting, knee-deep already, in the small café on Liechtenwerd Platz. Here, too, we'd been able to slip into a rather discreet spot off in a corner, but new patrons were entering the little place more and more frequently, for the most part unassuming elderly gentlemen who didn't take seats where we were but instead passed through and disappeared, apparently into an adjoining room, perhaps a club room of some kind. I asked the waiter when he brought our liter of wine, and I found out that this was a group of stamp collectors holding their regular meeting and exchange of stamps, closed to the public. Latecomers kept passing through. Because of these men walking by, I was forced to behave somewhat decently, but I had no idea what I was supposed to do with this woman - she was drinking freely again – or even what business I had with her at all, if I didn't behave indecently. Sitting here like this was justified only if I could act like a pig; it was a waste of time otherwise. At the moment this was a bit too clear to me for comfort. It showed like a bone through a situation that had grown shockingly emaciated all around it. While I was discovering that I could no longer fend off this clarity, it became very plain to me by a glance out the large window that we were already standing deep in spring, not far from its rapid bursts of heat. The sun now breaking through outside made the pale green leafage of three small trees out on the square light up, fixed and strong like colored paper, and cleaved the masses of smoke and steam beyond, over the expanse of railroad, so that distant details and rust-red rows of cars emerged shimmering from the mist. Since the collection of stamp collectors now seemed to be fully assembled, I escaped from the deserted beach of my present situation through some manual manipulations, which were accepted in a way already

familiar to me. While I was doing this, still another man came by, a late-arriving member of the group. Because Frau Jurak was sitting with her back half-turned toward the door, I saw him first; still, she and I jumped apart rather quickly. It was Rambausek. As he vanished around the corner, that bare fact relented a little more than facts ordinarily do: it might have been Rambausek. Tearing after him was impossible; I'd missed my chance, anyway. So now it had me. Now he was on me like a clothespin on my neck. I was hanging there like a not quite clean shirt. Having undergone this distasteful metamorphosis, I could no longer play a mean hand with Frau Jurak. So we left pretty soon. The afternoon leaned down. The liter was all drunk up.

14.

My rage against Rambausek became boundless. What did this animal want in the little café on Liechtenwerd Platz? What was he doing collecting stamps anyway? Or was he skulking after me? If he should try putting pressure on me – well, he'd see what kind of pressure I could apply; he'd think I'd put the thumbscrews to him! So I went on, thinking the most treacherous thoughts – I would beat stamp collecting out of him, along with all his other "little hobbies" as well, that son of a bitch! We'd now reached the outskirts of the city; we got off the streetcar and walked across the square leading to the landing-place at the river. We went over the road bed.

Now the view opened out onto the mighty width of the flowing water; it hurried, it hurried towards us and past us. Like a piercing tone in brass ascending from the orchestra pit, the pale green, shining only in some few spots just shortly before, had almost ascended to the dominant here; yes, it swelled on all sides in the slanting sun to a sustained pedal point of green and gold. The wreck thrust its dead smokestack aslant against the blue sky and the drifting sun. Frau Jurak suddenly began running. It wasn't a high-speed run to meet somebody – the little girl, for instance. Her backside was making strenuous and vehement motions, like the rump of a horse being whipped up to a full gallop. Without saying a single word, she had instantly and abruptly left me behind as something totally pointless, so to speak.

15.

And now I too began to run, not so as to keep up with the Jurak woman, but because I likewise had just grasped that an ambulance was parked on the river road by the wreck and that next to it a throng of people was moving to and fro, resembling for some seconds a dark monster that had crept up out of the water. In this throng, in the midst of which they were waving something pale, Frau Jurak had already disappeared. Now I came up to the crowd. The little girl, gulped down, so to speak, into the inside of the ship's belly while climbing

around on the wreck – she'd been pulled back out, with great risk to his own life and just in the nick of time, by none other than Rambausek – had now had her wet clothes removed and was being chafed all over her body. Resuscitation efforts, as they are called, were fortunately not necessary in her case (but they were for Rambausek, who was lying stretched out farther back on the bank and whose body was being submitted to uniform, rhythmic motions under the guidance of a doctor; he was being "exercised," one could say, to use a word more modish than elegant). The little Jurak girl had stopped vomiting water long before, but both accident victims were faced with the immediate danger of pulmonary infection – the river was still very cold. They put the child into the ambulance, in which the mother was permitted to ride along to the hospital; it was to come straight back here to take Rambausek in case the resuscitation efforts should meet with success. After all, "rescue," as it's called, has no more business with dead people.

16.

Resolutely leaping in after her, he'd been able, by exerting himself to the utmost, to pass the girl, just then starting to lose consciousness – from the shock as much as anything else – up to two policemen who were just boarding the wreck on the double.

Through the same gap that had swallowed her up, the child soon emerged again into the light of day. But her weight had caused Rambausek to lose his footing in the sludge, and he was dragged down into darkness by the gurgling water. Luckily for him, there were two valiant men already on hand to save him; they instantly flung themselves in after him, but it wasn't until several minutes had passed that they had any luck in even finding him, because he'd sunk almost entirely. If they hadn't been equipped with flashlights, their attempts would have been hopeless. But now they finally hauled the unconscious man up between them and at last brought themselves to safety with great effort. This is how it was that Rambausek was now lying outstretched on the river bank. His arms were being pumped in rhythmic motion. He still wasn't showing any signs of life.

17.

I sat down as close to him as I could get and studied him as well as possible, considering that the ambulance attendants busy around him were hindering my view. I could see his head very clearly, though. It encompassed everything. His body was merely a vermiform appendage. The thing lying here on the bank was a nose, elongated, raggedly pointy, and filled with the kind of seriousness that stupidity always spreads over its repulsive little secrets. This nose had become a very important mark of punctuation in my life; it closed, among other things, a

declarative sentence that had the proper noun "Jurak" as its subject. But with this nose the man had begun to bore into my life; and in my life it had emerged to me as something foremost – not for the first time in the dark building entry, either, but much earlier, in the tavern. It signified the handle on the phenomenon Rambausek, as it were, a handle I should have gripped, a handle by means of which the phenomenon could have been summarized and attended to from the start. It had been left undone. Instead, I'd caused knee bends to be executed; it then grew no more possible to stop the downhill slide than to stop the trumpets of Jericho and the explosion of the pistol shots.

18.

Now, however, what was pertinent shot into me, and the true and effective key to the situation gleamed and glinted. Of course we always take it out of the past, which alone can unlock the gate of the present to us. I leapt back years, with a splash and a bang, back into the midst of my youth. It had been a lonely – for that matter an entirely empty – street along which, striding on the sidewalk opposite, an elegantly dressed man around thirty, thus about the same age as I, with an idiotic expression on his face, went walking along, sporting an extraordinarily thick, full beard. Here and now occurred an a priori matter that could be attended to in a flash, an epigrammatical summarizing of the emergent phenomenon that was ensuing in advance, as it were; made concrete, moreover, through language grounded in factuality. Here it became plain that life continues to pass only because we are incapable of giving it the comprehensive definition for which it is waiting unredeemed; but stammering of mouth, inept of hand, we compel it to go on writhing its way from one fat volume of chronicles to another. Just for now, though, this once, it wasn't waiting in vain, and on one narrow segment, at least, its imploring plea was immediately answered. I crossed the street on a slant, caught up to the bearded man from behind, and as I passed him, I got a powerful grip on his beard with my whole hand, balled it up into a fist, and gave a short but exceptionally powerful tug downwards, which made the bearded man stumble. I passed by him then: my back was already miles high and wide, an unbroken but retreating wall of flat refusal, total indifference, absolute certainty: that was how I really did feel. Tugging at his beard had opened up a wide marginal gap between me and encompassing life for a few moments, and it would have been impossible for anyone to leap across it; and if anyone had wanted to try, it would have been easy for me, from the Archimedean point on which I was standing, to make him fall. But behind me it remained altogether quiet. And I walked away. If he hadn't kept quiet, my polite astonishment would have annihilated all protest. Without hesitation, nay even with alacrity, not without due deliberateness and a certain vigilant self-importance, I would have gone to the nearest police station with the bearded man, who would have been fuming or perhaps even raving with anger, and there

I would have acted even more polite and much more astounded, in doing which I would – by means of a whispered aside made in passing to one of the police officers – surely have dispatched the man whose beard had been tugged, precisely in light of his own eruptions of rage, by delivering him into the hands of psychiatrists, whose skill, as we all know, consists of taking any healthy persons they can get into their clutches and driving them completely out of their minds, forthwith and ad hoc, so that their professional opinions will turn out to be accurate when all is said and done.

19.

Otherwise the beard would have bored into my life exactly the way the nose lying here before me now had succeeded in doing, and maybe even deeper. Today I had no doubt of that whatever. Who knows but that matters might have developed into a hairy overgrowth of my entire being, into a kind of infiltration of beard, into the existence of an immense patch of bearded eczema. Or would I myself have become very extraordinarily bearded in some irreversible way? However, the epigrammatical fist – our only true and consistently effective weapon against mankind – had summarized all this evil in advance and had attended to it with a powerful pull. I no longer had to live it. But this one here, Rambausek, I had had to live. No tug at the nose had been given – but there it was and had been all along, literally right in front of my nose, totally inescapable and downright thrusting itself at me.

20.

Now, however, I was disposed at least to discern, to understand, and to lend expression to this understanding: I now concerned myself with this ultimate if belated and thus useless state of having understood; with this intellexisse; with this state of wanting to have understood. They were just stopping work on Rambausek. Instantly I was by his side. I grabbed with my whole hand, pinched his nose, and tugged forcefully. The next minute he opened his eyes. The paramedics lifted him up a little, and then he sat up on his own - gagging, choking, retching, and vomiting water. He kept moving his hands around in the air. Yes, he was alive. I moved away from the group at once, leaving him to the doctors and ambulance attendants. I walked along the bank, over the roadbed, on and on toward the square - where Frau Jurak was to have boarded her streetcar – and here, just as the double flute of the returning ambulance sounded (and its task was to take away a living Rambausek now, not to leave a corpse lying there!), something soft fluttered past me, left, right, and above my hat; a fanning of the air was around me, and I now saw that a startled flock of pigeons behind me was just beginning to soar aloft into the air above me on a slant.

21.

The evening sun was still glowing in a weft of radiance when I reached home and found a telegram from Robert in the mail slot. He would be back within a week. It was high time, too. I'd been thinking of leaving this apartment, for I was already feeling equal to or worthy of my own again. This one now seemed to me like an ammunition clip from which all the bullets have been fired; everything was done here; there were no loose ends. Further, I'd often felt compelled of late to get out of bed even before daybreak and go to the work table in the studio – from there one can see far out over the river – and I would once again experience the coming of daybreak in a manner suitable for workers in the spirit, ahead of anyone else in the violet light of dawn. Now the infiltration by Rambašek dropped away, and I recovered on the same evening in just a few hours. Now I knew that I finally might travel, could travel, would travel – to the west.

22.

No complications arose for either Rambašek or the little Jurak girl; pneumonia did not set in. I was even able to visit him in the hospital; I'd already gone three or four times anyway to find out about his condition. I sat at his bedside as if at a kind of catafalque of a nose lying in state. The infiltrate, now precipitated out, was lying quietly on his back. His nose seemed to be approximately as long as the bed, and whatever else of his body was present struck me as inconsiderable. But I was mistaken. All at once his silence became eloquent and rich with interconnections without one word being uttered. I'd leaned my hand on the edge of the bed; without saying a word he laid his on mine, and then he squeezed or fondled my hand a little. It was conciliating. There is no doubt we'd needed this final mark of punctuation. I left. On the streetcar I could still feel his hand on mine, which I'd rested lightly on the seat. I found myself in a condition of absence of the kind often associated with the presence of our best moments. The lingering feeling was light and warm on my hand, as if a small bird, puffing out its downy breast, had settled there. The feeling became so physically real that it made me look. And in fact something light and warm was lying on my hand; it was the hand of a little girl about four years old. Sitting between me and her mother, she was self-forgetfully staring in amazement out the window opposite, where the exceptionally tall truck that transports the City Theater's props and stage sets was just driving past, swaying slowly as it went. Yes, the scene changes. Do you hear the bell? I had caught sound of mine; I knew what hour it had struck. Throughout most of the ride the child's hand remained lying on mine; a heavenly bird had come to roost in me.

23.

Early the next morning I was walking through the long cars of the express train headed west. I found a comfortable seat in a second-class coach and went out into the corridor, to the left in the direction the train would be taking. A day of blue and gold sparkled into the smoky terminal up front. I opened the window. We were gliding out. This route goes as far as Paris. Soon the rails begin to climb, sweeping gracefully upward. The hills sweep upward as well. The houses sit on the hills, often quite dense. The air assails one more strongly; so, too, the smoke; the echo of the moving train grows brighter; a forest valley opens out. We have come far. We are before the saddle surmounted by the stretch of railroad with two tunnels. Twice the mountain washes out its mouth with us as if it would be gargling from a glass. After the gargling the ride goes faster, downhill. Tempo marking: *alla breve*, and up to this point, while going uphill, a little more intricate, something like $12/8$ time. It echoes, it hurries: a final movement. Now it must soar upward – why had we been living at all if we were not at least to become free in the finale? There it is reached: left and right everything drops away and leaves us. We rise as in an elevator; we are outside, above, aloft: the viaduct. Eichgraben. O green and fertile valley, soon will be filled the tops of the trees, the foam of the forests, the far edge of the hill. From deep within my breast, as from the innermost chamber of my life, there came in answer to the rhythmic pounding of the train rushing downhill a grunting or puffing sound, the kind we sometimes hear in horses when they're first spurred into a gallop or intensified in their pace.

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