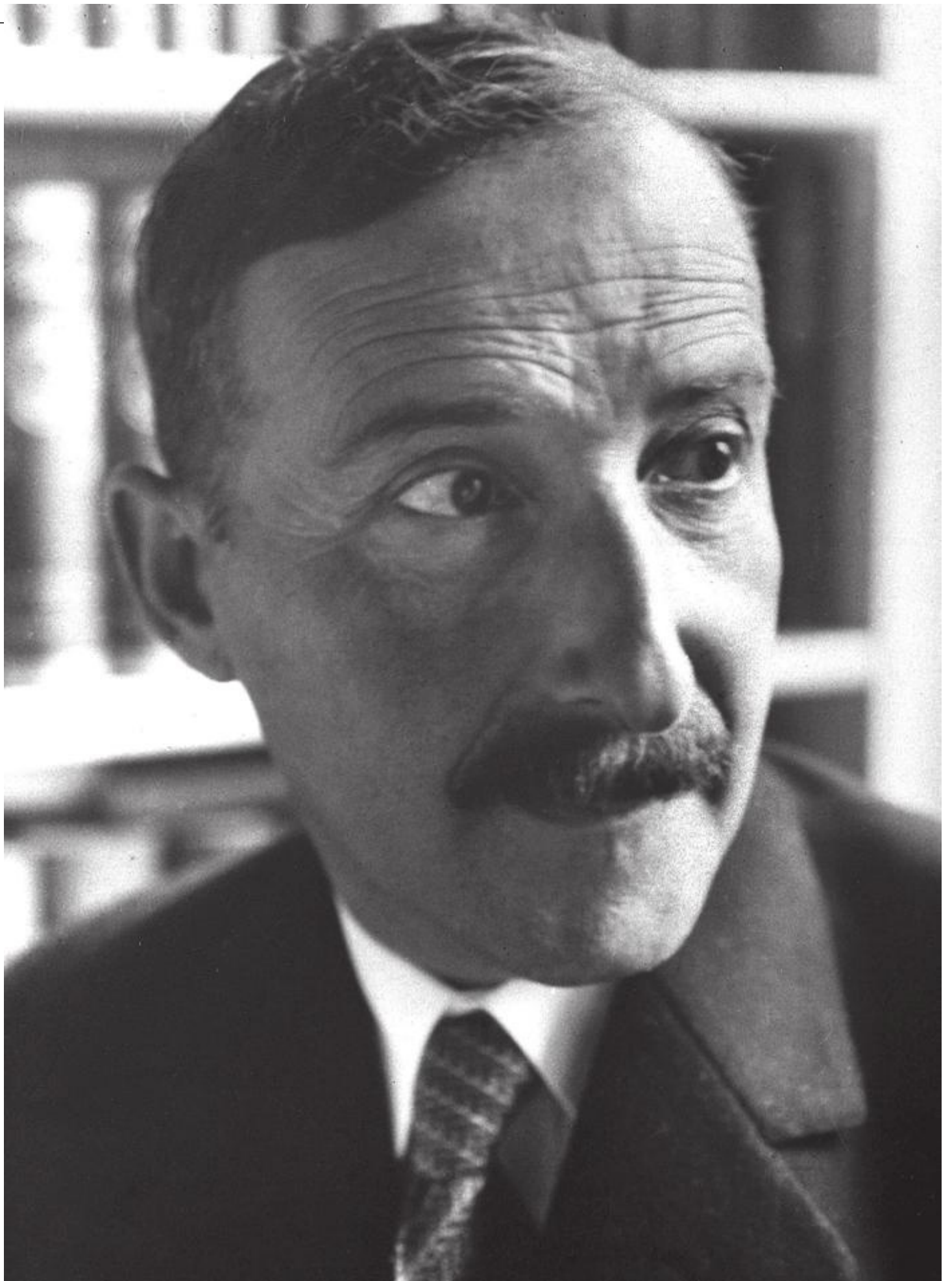


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STEFAN ZWEIG

Amok and Other Stories



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AMOK
AND OTHER STORIES

Translated from the German by
Anthea Bell

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CONTENTS

Title Page

Amok

The Star above the Forest

Leporella

Incident on Lake Geneva

Translator's Afterword

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AMOK

~~IN MARCH 1912 A STRANGE ACCIDENT~~ occurred in Naples harbour during the unloading of a large ocean-going liner which was reported at length by the newspapers, although in extremely fanciful terms. Although I was a passenger on the *Oceania*, I did not myself witness this strange incident—nor did any of the others—since it happened while coal was being taken on board and cargo unloaded, and to escape the noise we had all gone ashore to pass the time in coffeehouses or theatres. It is my personal opinion however, that a number of conjectures which I did not voice publicly at the time provide the true explanation of that sensational event, and I think that, at a distance of some years, I may now be permitted to give an account of a conversation I had in confidence immediately before the curious episode.

When I went to the Calcutta shipping agency trying to book a passage on the *Oceania* for my voyage home to Europe, the clerk apologetically shrugged his shoulders. He didn't know if it would be possible for him to get me a cabin, he said; at this time of year, with the rainy season imminent, the ship was likely to be fully booked all the way from Australia, and he would have to wait for a telegram from Singapore. Next day, I was glad to hear, he told me that yes, he could still reserve me a cabin, although not a particularly comfortable one; it would be below deck and amidships. As I was impatient to get home I did not hesitate for long, but took it.

The clerk had not misinformed me. The ship was over-crowded and my cabin a poor one: a cramped little rectangle of a place near the engine room, lit only dimly through a circular porthole. The thick, curdled air smelled greasy and musty, and I could not for a moment escape the electric ventilator fan that hummed as it circled overhead like a steel bat gone mad. Down below the engine clattered and groaned like a breathless coal-heaver constantly climbing the same flight of stairs, and above I heard the tramp of footsteps pacing the promenade deck the whole time. As soon as I had stowed my luggage away amidst the dingy girders in my stuffy tomb, I then went back on deck to get away from the place, and as I came up from the depths I drank in the soft, sweet wind blowing off the land as if it were ambrosia.

But the atmosphere of the promenade deck was crowded and restless too, full of people chattering incessantly, hurrying up and down with the uneasy nervousness of those forced to be inactive in a confined space. The arch flirtatiousness of the women, the constant pacing up and down on the bottleneck of the deck as flocks of passengers surged past the deckchairs, always meeting the same faces again, were actually painful to me. I had seen a new world, I had taken in turbulent, confusing images that raced wildly through my mind. Now I wanted leisure to think, to analyse and organize them, make sense of all that had impressed itself on my eyes, but there wasn't a moment of rest and peace to be had here on the crowded deck. The lines of a book I was trying to read blurred as the fleeting shadows of the chattering passengers moved by. It was impossible to be alone with myself on the unshaded, busy thoroughfare of the deck of this ship.

I tried for three days; resigned to my lot, I watched the passengers and the sea. But the sea was always the same, blue and empty, and only at sunset was it abruptly flooded with every imaginable colour. As for the passengers, after seventy-two hours I knew them all by heart. Every face was tediously familiar, the women's shrill laughter no longer irritated me, even the loud voices of two Dutch officers quarrelling nearby were not such a source of annoyance any more. There was nothing for it but to escape the deck, although my cabin was hot and stuffy, and in the saloon English girls kept playing waltzes badly on the piano, staccato-fashion. Finally I decided to turn the day's normal timetable upside down, and in the afternoon, having anaesthetized myself with a few glasses of beer,

went to my cabin to sleep through the evening with its dinner and dancing.

When I woke it was dark and oppressive in the little coffin of my cabin. I had switched off the ventilator, so the air around my temples felt greasy and humid. My senses were bemused, and it took me some minutes to remember my surroundings and wonder what the time was. It must have been after midnight, anyway, for I could not hear music or those restless footsteps pacing overhead. Only the engine, the breathing heart of the leviathan, throbbed as it thrust the body of the ship on into the unseen.

I made my way up to the deck. It was deserted. And as I looked above the steam from the funnels and the ghostly gleam of the spars, a magical brightness suddenly met my eyes. The sky was radiant, dark behind the white stars wheeling through it and yet radiant, as if a velvet curtain up there veiled a great light, and the twinkling stars were merely gaps and cracks through which that indescribable brightness shone. I had never before seen the sky as I saw it that night, glowing with such radiance, hard and steely blue, and yet light came sparkling, dripping, pouring, gushing down, falling from the moon and stars as if burning in some mysterious inner space. The white-painted outlines of the ship stood out bright against the velvety dark sea in the moonlight, while all the detailed contours of the ropes and the yards dissolved in that flowing brilliance; the lights on the masts seemed to hang in space, with the round eye of the lookout post above them, earthly yellow stars amidst the shining stars of the sky.

And right above my head stood the magical constellation of the Southern Cross, hammered into the invisible void with shining diamond nails and seeming to hover, although only the ship was real, moving, quivering slightly as it made its way up and down with heaving breast, up and down, a gigantic swimmer passing through the dark waves. I stood there looking up; I felt as if I were bathed by warm water falling from above, except that it was light washing over my hands, mild, white light pouring around my shoulders, my head, and seeming to permeate me entirely, for all at once everything sombre about me was brightly lit. I breathed freely, purely, and full of sudden delight I felt the air on my lips like a clear drink. It was soft, effervescent air carrying on it the aroma of fruits, the scent of distant islands, and making me feel slightly drunk. Now, for the first time since I had set foot on the ship's planks, I knew the blessed joy of reverie, and the other more sensual pleasure of abandoning my body, woman-like, to the softness surrounding me. I wanted to lie down and look up at the white hieroglyphs in the sky. But the loungers and deckchairs had been cleared away, and there was nowhere for me to rest and dream on the deserted promenade deck.

So I made my way on, gradually approaching the bows of the ship, dazzled by the light that seemed to be shining more and more intensely on everything around me. It almost hurt, that bright, glaring, burning starlight, and I wanted to find a place to lie on a mat in deep shade, feeling the glow not on my face but only above me, reflected in the ship's gear around me as one sees a landscape from a darkened room. At last, stumbling over cables and past iron hoists, I reached the ship's side and looked down over the keel to see the bows moving on into the blackness, while molten moonlight sprayed up and foaming, on both sides of their path. The ship kept rising and falling, rising and falling in the flowing dark, cutting through the black water as a plough cuts through soil, and in that sparkling interplay I felt all the torment of the conquered element and all the pleasures of earthly power. As I watched I lost all sense of time. Did I stand there for an hour, or was it only minutes? The vast cradle of the ship moving up and down rocked me away from time, and I felt only a pleasant weariness coming over me, a sensuous feeling. I wanted to sleep, to dream, yet I did not wish to leave this magic and go back down into my coffin. I instinctively felt around with my foot and found a coil of ropes. I sat down on it with my eyes closed yet not fully darkened, for above them, above me, that silver glow streamed on

Below me I felt the water rushing quietly on, above me the white torrent flowed by with inaudible resonance. And gradually the rushing sound passed into my blood; I was no longer conscious of myself, I didn't know if I heard my own breathing or the distant, throbbing heart of the ship, I myself was streaming, pouring away in the never-resting midnight world as it raced past.

A dry, harsh cough quite close to me made me jump. I came out of my half-intoxicated reverie with a start. My eyes, which even through closed lids had been dazzled by the white brightness, now searched around: quite close, and opposite me in the shadow of the ship's side, something glinted like light reflected off a pair of glasses, and now I saw the concentrated and circular glow of a lighted pipe. As I sat down, looking only below at the foaming bows as they cut through the waves or up at the Southern Cross, I had obviously failed to notice my neighbour, who must have been sitting here perfectly still all the time. Instinctively, my reactions still slow, I said in German, "Oh, I do apologise!" "Don't mention it," replied the voice from the darkness, in the same language.

I can't say how strange and eerie it was to be sitting next to someone like that in the dark, very close to a man I couldn't see. I felt as if he were staring at me just as I was staring at him, but the flowing, shimmering white light above us was so intense that neither of us could see more of the other than his outline in the shadows. And I thought I could hear his breathing and the faint hissing sound as he drew on his pipe, but that was all.

The silence was unbearable. I wanted to move away, but that seemed too brusque, too sudden. In my embarrassment I took out a cigarette. The match spluttered, and for a second its light flickered over the narrow space where we were sitting. I saw a stranger's face behind the lenses of his glasses, a face I had never seen on board at any meal or on the promenade deck, and whether the sudden flame had hurt the man's eyes, or whether it was just an illusion, his face suddenly seemed dreadfully distorted, dark and goblin-like. But before I could make out any details, darkness swallowed up the fleeting illumination again, and I saw only the outline of a figure darkly imprinted on the darkness, and sometimes the circular, fiery ring of the bowl of his pipe hovering in space. Neither of us spoke, and our silence was as sultry and oppressive as the tropical air itself.

Finally I could stand it no longer. I stood up and said a civil, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," came the reply from the darkness, in a hoarse, harsh, rusty voice.

I stumbled forward with some difficulty, over hawsers and past some posts. Then I heard footsteps behind me, hasty and uncertain. It was my companion of a moment ago. I instinctively stopped. He did not come right up to me, and through the darkness I sensed something like anxiety and awkwardness in his gait.

"Forgive me," he said quickly "if I ask you a favour. I ... I ..." he stammered, for a moment too embarrassed to go on at once. "I ... I have private ... very private reasons for staying out of sight ... bereavement ... I prefer to avoid company on board. Oh, I didn't mean you, no, no ... I'd just like to ask ... well, I would be very much obliged if you wouldn't mention seeing me here to anyone on board. There are ... are private reasons, I might call them, to keep me from mingling with people just now ... yes, well, it would put me in an awkward position if you mentioned that someone ... here last night ... that I ..." And he stopped again. I put an end to his confusion at once by assuring him that I would do as he wished. We shook hands. Then I went back to my cabin and slept a heavy, curiously disturbed sleep, troubled by strange images.

I kept my promise, and told no one on board of my strange meeting, although the temptation to do so was great. For on a sea voyage every little thing becomes an event: a sail on the horizon, a dolphin

leaping, a new flirtation, a joke made in passing. And I was full of curiosity to know more about the vessel's unusual passenger. I searched the ship's list for a name that might be his, I scrutinized other people, wondering if they could be somehow related to him; all day I was a prey to nervous impatience, just waiting for evening and wondering if I would meet him again. Odd psychological states have a positively disquieting power over me; I find tracking down the reasons for them deeply intriguing, and the mere presence of unusual characters can kindle a passionate desire in me to know more about them, a desire not much less strong than a woman's wish to acquire some possession. The day seemed long and crumbled tediously away between my fingers. I went to bed early, knowing that my curiosity would wake me at midnight.

Sure enough, I woke at the same time as the night before. The two hands on the illuminated dial of my clock covered one another in a single bright line. I quickly left my sultry cabin and climbed up into the even sultrier night.

The stars were shining as they had shone yesterday, casting a diffuse light over the quivering ship and the Southern Cross blazed high overhead. It was all just the same as yesterday, where days and nights in the tropics resemble each other more than in our latitudes, but I myself did not feel yesterday's soft, flowing, dreamy sensation of being gently cradled. Something was drawing me on, confusing me, and I knew where it was taking me: to the black hoist by the ship's side, to see if my mysterious acquaintance was sitting immobile there again. I heard the ship's bell striking above me and it urged me on. Step by step, reluctantly yet fascinated, I followed my instincts. I had not yet reached the prow of the ship when something like a red eye suddenly hovered in front of me: the pipe. So he was there.

I instinctively stepped back and stopped. Next moment I would have left again, but there was movement over there in the dark, something rose, took a couple of steps, and suddenly I heard his voice very close to me, civil and melancholy.

"Forgive me," he said. "You obviously want to sit there again, and I have a feeling that you hesitated when you saw me. Do please sit down, and I'll go away."

I made haste to say he was very welcome to stay so far as I was concerned. I had stepped back, he said, only for fear of disturbing him.

"Oh, you won't disturb me," he said, with some bitterness. "Far from it, I'm glad to have company for a change. I haven't spoken a word to anyone for ten days ... well, not for years, really, and then it seems so difficult, perhaps because forcing it all back inside myself chokes me. I can't sit in my cabin any more, in that ... that coffin, I can't bear it, and I can't bear the company of human beings either because they laugh all day ... I can't endure that now, I hear it in my cabin and stop my ears against it. Of course, they don't know that I ... well, they don't know that ... they don't know it, and what business is it of theirs, after all, they're strangers ..."

He stopped again, and then very suddenly and hastily said, "But I don't want to bother you. Forgive me for speaking so freely."

He made a bow, and was about to leave, but I urged him to stay. "You're not bothering me in the least. I'm glad to have a few quiet words with someone up here myself ... may I offer you a cigarette?"

He took one, and I lit it. Once again his face moved away from the ship's black side, flickering in the light of the match, but now he turned it fully to me: his eyes behind his glasses looking inquiringly into my face, avidly and with demented force. A shudder passed through me. I could feel that this man wanted to speak, had to speak. And I knew that I must help him by saying nothing.

We sat down again. He had a second deckchair there, and offered it to me. Our cigarettes glowed

and from the way that the ring of light traced by his in the darkness shook, I could tell that his hand was trembling. But I kept silent, and so did he. Then, suddenly, he asked in a quiet voice, "Are you very tired?"

"No, not at all."

The voice in the dark hesitated again. "I would like to ask you something ... that's to say, I'd like to tell you something. Oh, I know, I know very well how absurd it is to turn to the first man I meet, but ... I'm ... I'm in a terrible mental condition, I have reached a point where I absolutely must talk to someone, or it will be the end of me ... You'll understand that when I ... well, if I tell you ... I mean I know you can't help me, but this silence is almost making me ill, and a sick man always looks ridiculous to others ..."

Here I interrupted, begging him not to distress himself. He could tell me anything he liked, I said. Naturally I couldn't promise him anything, but to show willingness is a human duty. If you see someone in trouble, I added, of course it is your duty to help ...

"Duty ... to show willing ... a duty to try to ... so you too think it is a man's duty ... yes, his duty to show himself willing to help."

He repeated it three times. I shuddered at the blunt, grim tone of his repetition. Was the man mad? Was he drunk?

As if I had uttered my suspicions aloud, he suddenly said in quite a different voice, "You may think me mad or drunk. No, I'm not—not yet. Only what you said moved me so ... so strangely, because that's exactly what torments me now, wondering if it's a duty ... a duty ..."

He was beginning to stammer again. He broke off for a moment, pulled himself together, and began again.

"The fact is, I am a doctor of medicine, and in that profession we often come upon such cases, such fateful cases ... borderline cases, let's call them, when we don't know whether or not it is our duty ... or rather, when there's more than one duty involved, not just to another human being but to ourselves too, to the state, to science ... yes, of course, we must help, that's what we are there for ... but such maxims are never more than theory. How far should we go with our help? Here are you, a stranger to me, and I'm a stranger to you, and I ask you not to mention seeing me ... well, so you don't say anything, you do that duty ... and now I ask you to talk to me because my own silence is killing me and you say you are ready to listen. Good, but that's easy ... suppose I were to ask you to take hold of me and throw me overboard, though, your willingness to help would be over. The duty has to end somewhere ... it ends where we begin thinking of our own lives, our own responsibilities, it has to end somewhere, it has to end ... or perhaps for doctors, of all people, it ought *not* to end? Must a doctor always come to the rescue, be ready to help one and all, just because he has a diploma full of Latin words, must he really throw away his life and water down his own blood if some woman ... someone comes along wanting him to be noble, helpful, good? Yes, duty ends somewhere ... it ends where no more can be done, that's where it ends ..."

He stopped again, and regained control.

"Forgive me, I know I sound agitated ... but I'm not drunk, not yet ... although I often am, I freely confess it, in this hellish isolation ... bear in mind that for seven years I've lived almost entirely with the local natives and with animals ... you forget how to talk calmly. And then if you do open up everything comes flooding out ... but wait ... Yes, I know ... I was going to ask you, I wanted to tell you about a certain case, wondering whether you think one has a duty to help ... just help, with motives as pure as an angel's, or whether ... Although I fear it will be a long story. Are you sure you're not tired?"

“No, not in the least.”

“Thank you ... thank you. Will you have a drink?”

He had been groping in the dark behind him somewhere. There was a clinking sound: two or three at any rate several bottles stood ranged there. He offered me a glass of whisky, which I sipped briefly while he drained his glass in a single draught. For a moment there was silence between us. Then the ship's bell struck half-past midnight.

“Well then ... I'd like to tell you about a case. Suppose that a doctor in a small town ... or right out in the country, a doctor who ... a doctor who ... ” He stopped again, and then suddenly moved his chair closer to mine.

“This is no good. I must tell you everything directly, from the beginning, or you won't understand it ... no, I can't put it as a theoretical example, I must tell you the story of my own case. There'll be no shame about it, I will hide nothing ... people strip naked in front of me, after all, and show me their scabs, their urine, their excrement ... if someone is to help there can be no beating about the bush, no concealment. So I won't describe the case of some fictional doctor, I will strip myself naked and say that I ... I forgot all shame in that filthy isolation, that accursed country that eats the soul and sucks the marrow from a man's loins.”

I must have made a movement of some kind, for he interrupted himself.

“Ah, you protest ... oh, I understand, you are fascinated by India, by its temples and palm trees, and the romance of a two-month visit. Yes, the tropics are magical when you're travelling through them by rail, road or rickshaw: I felt just the same when I first arrived seven years ago. I had so many dreams, I was going to learn the language and read the sacred texts in the original, I was going to study the diseases, do scientific work, explore the native psyche—as we would put it in European jargon—I was on a mission for humanity and civilisation. Everyone who comes here dreams the same dream. But then a man's strength ebbs away in this invisible hothouse, the fever strikes deep into his bones—and we all get the fever, however much quinine we take—he becomes listless, indolent, flabby as a jellyfish. As a European, he is cut off from his true nature, so to speak, when he leaves the big cities for some wretched swamp-ridden station. Sooner or later we all succumb to our weaknesses, some drink, others smoke opium, others again brawl and act like brutes—some kind of folly comes over us all. We long for Europe, we dream of walking down a street again some day, sitting among white people in a well-lit room in a solidly built house, we dream of it year after year, and if a time does come when we could go on leave we're too listless to take the chance. A man knows he's been forgotten back at home, he's a stranger there, a shell in the sea, anyone can tread on him. So he stays and he degenerates and goes to the bad in these hot, humid jungles. It was a bad day when I sold my services to that filthy place ...

Not that I did it entirely of my own free will. I had studied in Germany, I was a qualified doctor, indeed a good doctor with a post at the big hospital in Leipzig; in some long-forgotten issue of a medical journal a great deal was made of a new injection that I was the first to introduce. And then I had trouble over a woman, I met her in the hospital; she had driven her lover so crazy that he shot her with a revolver, and soon I was as crazy as he had been. She had a cold, proud manner that drove me to distraction—bold domineering women had always had a hold over me, but she tightened that hold until my bones were breaking. I did what she wanted, I—well, why not say it? It's eight years ago now—I dipped into the hospital funds for her, and when it came out all hell was let loose. An uncle of mine covered up for me when I was dismissed, but my career was over. It was then that I heard the Dutch government was recruiting doctors for the colonies, offering a lump sum in payment. Well,

understood at once the kind of job it would be if they were offering payment like that. For I knew that the crosses on graves in the fever-zone plantations grow three times as fast as at home, but when you're young you think fever and death affect only others. However, I had little choice; I went to Rotterdam, signed up for ten years, and was given a big bundle of banknotes. I sent half home to my uncle, and as for the other half, a woman in the harbour district got it out of me, just because she was so like the vicious cat I'd loved. I sailed away from Europe without money, without even a watch, without illusions, and I wasn't particularly sorry to leave harbour. And then I sat on deck like you, like everyone, and saw the Southern Cross and the palm trees, and my heart rose. Ah, forests, isolation, silence, I dreamed! Well—I'd soon had enough of isolation. I wasn't stationed in Batavia or Surabaya in a city with other people and clubs, golf, books and newspapers, instead I went to—well, the name doesn't matter—to one of the district stations, two days' journey from the nearest town. A couple of tedious, desiccated officials and a few half-castes were all the society I had, apart from that, nothing for miles around but jungle, plantations, thickets and swamps.

It was tolerable at first. I pursued all kinds of studies; once, when the vice-resident was on a journey of inspection, had a motor accident and broke a leg, I operated on him without assistants, and there was a lot of talk about it. I collected native poisons and weapons, I turned my attention to a hundred little things to keep my mind alert. But that lasted only as long as the strength of Europe was still active in me, and then I dried up. The few Europeans on the station bored me, I stopped mixing with them, I drank and I dreamed. I had only two more years to go before I'd be free, with a pension and could go back to Europe and begin life again. I wasn't really doing anything but waiting; I lay low and waited. And that's what I would be doing today if she ... if it hadn't happened."

The voice in the darkness stopped. The pipe had stopped glowing too. It was so quiet that all of a sudden I could hear the water foaming as it broke against the keel, and the dull, distant throbbing of the engines. I would have liked to light a cigarette, but I was afraid of the bright flash of the lit match and its reflection in his face. He remained silent for a long time. I didn't know if he had finished what he had to say, or was dozing, or had fallen asleep, so profound was his silence.

Then the ship's bell struck a single powerful note: one o'clock. He started. I heard his glass clink again. His hand was obviously feeling around for the whisky. A shot gurgled quietly into his glass, and then the voice suddenly began again, but now it seemed tenser and more passionate.

"So ... wait a moment ... so yes, there I was, sitting in my damned cobweb, I'd been crouching motionless as a spider in its web for months. It was just after the rainy season. Rain had poured down on the roof for weeks on end, not a human being had come along, no European, I'd been stuck there in the house day after day with my yellow-skinned women and my good whisky. I was feeling very 'down' at the time, homesick for Europe. If I read a novel describing clean streets and white women, my fingers began to tremble. I can't really describe the condition to you, but it's like a tropical disease, a raging, feverish, yet helpless nostalgia that sometimes comes over a man. So there I was sitting over an atlas, I think, dreaming of journeys. Then there's a hammering at the door. My boy is there and one of the women, eyes wide with amazement. They make dramatic gestures: there's a white woman here, they say, a lady, a white woman.

I jump up in surprise. I didn't hear a carriage or a car approaching. A white woman, here in the wilderness?

I am about to go down the steps, but then I pull myself together. A glance in the mirror, and I hastily tidy myself up a little. I am nervous, restless, I have ominous forebodings, for I know no one in the world who would be coming to visit me out of friendship. At last I go down.

The lady is waiting in the hall, and hastily comes to meet me. A thick motoring veil hides her face. I am about to greet her, but she is quick to get her word in first. ‘Good day, doctor,’ she says in fluent English—slightly too fluent, as if she had learnt her speech by heart in advance. ‘Do forgive me for descending on you like this, but we have just been visiting the station, our car is over there’—here a thought flashes through my mind: why didn’t she drive up to the house?—‘And then I remembered that you live here. I’ve heard so much about you—you worked miracles for the vice-resident, his leg perfectly all right now, he can play golf as well as ever. Oh yes, imagine all of us in the city are still talking about it, we’d happily dispense with our own cross-grained surgeon and the other doctors if you would only come to us instead. Now, why do you never go to the city? You live like a yogi here ...’

And so she chatters on, faster and faster, without letting me get a word in. Her loquacity is nervous and agitated, and makes me uneasy. Why is she talking so much, I ask myself, why doesn’t she introduce herself, why doesn’t she put that veil back? Is she feverish? Is she ill? Is she mad? I feel increasingly nervous, aware that I look ridiculous, standing silently in front of her while her flood of chatter sweeps over me. At last she slows down slightly, and I am able to ask her upstairs. She signs the boy to stay where he is, and goes up the stairs ahead of me.

‘You have a nice place here,’ she says, looking around my room. ‘Ah, such lovely books! I’d like to read them all!’ She goes up to the bookcase and looks at the titles. For the first time since I set eyes on her, she falls silent for a minute.

‘May I offer you a cup of tea?’ I ask.

She doesn’t turn, but just looks at the spines of the books. ‘No thank you, doctor ... we have to be off again in a moment, and I don’t have much time ... this was just a little detour. Ah, I see you have Flaubert as well, I love him so much ... *L’Education sentimentale*, wonderful, really wonderful ... So you read French too! A man of many talents! Ah, you Germans, you learn everything at school. How splendid to know so many languages! The vice-resident swears by you, he always says he wouldn’t go under the knife with anyone else ... our residency surgeon is good for playing bridge but ... the fact is,’ she said, still with her face turned away, ‘it crossed my mind today that I might consult you myself some time ... and since we happened to be passing anyway, I thought ... oh, but I’m sure you are very busy ... I can come back another time.’

Showing your hand at last, I thought. But I didn’t show any reaction, I merely assured her that it would be an honour to be of service to her now or whenever she liked.

‘It’s nothing serious,’ she said, half-turning and at the same time leafing through a book she had taken off the shelf. ‘Nothing serious ... just small things, women’s troubles ... dizziness, fainting. This morning I suddenly fainted as we were driving round a bend, fainted right away, the boy had to prop me up in the car and fetch water ... but perhaps the chauffeur was just driving too fast, do you think, doctor?’

‘I can’t say, just like that. Do you often have fainting fits?’

‘No ... that is, yes ... recently, in fact very recently. Yes, I have had such fainting fits, and attacks of nausea.’ She is standing in front of the bookcase again, puts the book back, takes another out and riffles the pages. Strange, I think, why does she keep leafing through the pages so nervously, why doesn’t she look up behind that veil? Deliberately, I say nothing. I enjoy making her wait. At last she starts talking again in her nonchalant, loquacious way.

‘There’s nothing to worry about, doctor, is there? No tropical disease ... nothing dangerous ...?’

‘I’d have to see if you are feverish first. May I take your pulse?’

I approach her, but she moves slightly aside.

‘No, no, I’m not feverish ... certainly not, certainly not, I’ve been taking my own temperature every day since ... since this fainting began. Never any higher, always exactly 36.4°. And my digestion is healthy too.’

I hesitate briefly. All this time a suspicion has been lurking at the back of my mind: I sense that this woman wants something from me. You certainly don’t go into the wilderness to talk about Flaubert. I keep her waiting for a minute or two, then I say, straight out, ‘Forgive me, but may I ask you a few frank questions?’

‘Of course, doctor! You are a medical man, after all,’ she replies, but she has her back turned to me again and is playing with the books.

‘Do you have children?’

‘Yes, a son.’

‘And have you ... did you previously ... I mean with your son, did you experience anything similar?’

‘Yes.’

Her voice is quite different now. Very clear, very firm, no longer loquacious or nervous.

‘And is it possible ... forgive my asking ... that you are now in the same situation?’

‘Yes.’

She utters the word in a tone as sharp and cutting as a knife. Her averted head does not move at all.

‘Perhaps it would be best, ma’am, if I gave you a general examination. May I perhaps ask you to ... to go to the trouble of coming into the next room?’

Then she does turn, suddenly. I feel a cold, determined gaze bent straight on me through her veil.

‘No, that won’t be necessary ... I am fully aware of my condition.’”

The voice hesitated for a moment. The glass that he had refilled shone briefly in the darkness again.

“So listen ... but first try to think a little about it for a moment. A woman forces herself on someone who is desperate with loneliness, the first white woman in years to set foot in his room ... and suddenly I feel that there is something wrong here, a danger. A shiver runs down my spine: I am afraid of the steely determination of this woman, who arrived with her careless chatter and then suddenly came out with her demand like a knife. For I knew what she wanted me to do, I knew at once—it was not the first time women had made me such requests, but they approached me differently: ashamed or pleading, they came to me with tears and entreaties. But here was a steely ... yes, a virile determination. I felt from the first second that this woman was stronger than me, that she could force me to do as she wanted. And yet, and yet ... there was some evil purpose in me, a man on his guard, some kind of bitterness, for as I said before ... from the first second, indeed even before I had seen her, I sensed that this woman was an enemy.

At first I said nothing. I remained doggedly, grimly silent. I felt that she was looking at me under her veil—looking at me straight and challengingly, I felt that she wanted to force me to speak, but evasively, or indeed unconsciously, I emulated her casual, chattering manner. I acted as if I didn’t understand her, for—I don’t know if you can understand this—I wanted to force her to speak clearly, I didn’t want to offer anything, I wanted to be asked, particularly by her, because her manner was so imperious ... and because I knew that I am particularly vulnerable to women with that cold, proud manner.

So I remained non-committal, saying there was no cause for concern, such fainting fits occurred in the natural course of events, indeed they almost guaranteed a happy outcome. I quoted cases from the medical press ... I talked and talked, smoothly and effortlessly, always suggesting that this was

something very banal, and ... well, I kept waiting for her to interrupt me. Because I knew she wouldn't stand for that.

Then she did interrupt me sharply, waving aside all my reassuring talk.

'That's not what worries me, doctor. When my son was born I was in a better state of health, but now I'm not all right any more ... I have a heart condition ...'

'Ah, a heart condition,' I repeated, apparently concerned. 'We must look into that at once.' And she made as if to stand up and fetch my stethoscope.

But she stopped me again. Her voice was very sharp and firm now—like an officer's on a parade ground.

'I *do* have a heart condition, doctor, and I must ask you to believe what I tell you. I don't want to waste a lot of time with examinations—I think you might show a little more confidence in me. For my part, I've shown sufficient confidence in you.'

Now it was battle, an open challenge, and I accepted it.

'Confidence calls for frank disclosure, with nothing held back. Please speak frankly. I am a doctor. And for heaven's sake take that veil off, sit down, never mind the books and the roundaboutness. You don't go to visit a doctor in a veil.'

Proud and erect, she looked at me. For one moment she hesitated. Then she sat down and lifted her veil. I saw the kind of face I had feared to see, an impenetrable face, hard, controlled, a face of ageless beauty, a face with grey English eyes in which all seemed at peace, and yet behind which one could dream that all was passion. That narrow, compressed mouth gave nothing away if it didn't want to. For a moment we looked at each other—she commandingly and at the same time inquiringly, with such cold, steely cruelty that I couldn't hold her gaze, but instinctively looked away.

She tapped the table lightly with her knuckles. So she was nervous too. Then she said, quickly and suddenly, 'Do you know what I want you to do for me, doctor, or don't you?'

'I believe I do. But let's be quite plain about it. You want an end put to your condition ... you want me to cure you of your fainting fits and nausea by ... by removing their cause. Is that it?'

'Yes.'

The word fell like a guillotine.

'And do you know that such attempts are dangerous ... for both parties concerned?'

'Yes.'

'That I am legally forbidden to do such a thing?'

'There are cases when it isn't forbidden but actually recommended.'

'They call for medical indications, however.'

'Then you'll find such indications. You're a doctor.'

Clear, fixed, unflinching, her eyes looked at me as she spoke. It was an order, and weakling that I am, I trembled with admiration for her demonically imperious will. But I was still evasive, I didn't want to show that I was already crushed. Some spark of desire in me said: don't go too fast! Make difficulties. Force her to beg!

'That is not always within a doctor's competence. But I am ready to ask a colleague at the hospital ...'

'I don't want your colleague ... I came to you.'

'May I ask why?'

She looked coldly at me. 'I have no reservations about telling you. Because you live in seclusion because you don't know me—because you are a good doctor, and because,' she added, hesitating for the first time, 'you probably won't stay here very much longer, particularly if you ... if you can get

home with a large sum of money.'

I felt cold. The adamant, commercial clarity of her calculation bemused me. So far her lips had uttered no request—she had already worked it all out, she had been lying in wait for me and she had tracked me down. I felt the demonic force of her will enter into me, but embittered as I was—resisted. Once again I made myself sound objective, indeed almost ironic.

'Oh, and you would ... would place this large sum of money at my disposal?'

'For your help, and then your immediate departure.'

'Do you realise that would lose me my pension?'

'I will compensate you.'

'You're very clear in your mind about it ... but I would like even more clarity. What sum did you envisage as a fee?'

'Twelve thousand guilders, payable by cheque when you reach Amsterdam.'

I trembled ... I trembled with anger and ... yes, with admiration again too. She had worked it all out, the sum and the manner of its payment, which would oblige me to leave this part of the world, she had assessed me and bought me before she even met me, had made arrangements for me in the anticipation of getting her own way. I would have liked to strike her in the face, but as I stood there shaking—she too had risen to her feet—and I looked her straight in the eye, the sight of her closed mouth that refused to plead, her haughty brow that would not bend, a ... a kind of violent desire overcame me. She must have felt something of it, for she raised her eyebrows as one would to dismiss a trouble-maker; the hostility between us was suddenly in the open. I knew she hated me because she needed me, and I hated her because ... well, because she would not plead. In that one single second of silence we spoke to each other honestly for the first time. Then an idea suddenly came to me, like the bite of a reptile, and I told her ... I told her ...

But wait a moment, or you'll misunderstand what I did ... what I said. First I must explain how well, how that deranged idea came into my mind."

Once again the glass clinked softly in the dark, and the voice became more agitated.

"Not that I want to make excuses, justify myself, clear myself of blame ... but otherwise you won't understand. I don't know if I have ever been what might be called a good man, but ... well, I think I was always helpful. In the wretched life I lived over there, the only pleasure I had was using whatever knowledge was contained in my brain to keep some living creature breathing ... an almost divine pleasure. It's a fact, those were my happiest moments, for instance when one of the natives came along, pale with fright, his swollen foot bitten by a snake, howling not to have his leg cut off, and I managed to save him. I've travelled for hours to see a woman in a fever—and as for the kind of help my visitor wanted, I'd already given that in the hospital in Europe. But then I could at least feel that these people *needed* me, that I was saving someone from death or despair—and the feeling of being needed was my way of helping myself.

But this woman—I don't know if I can describe it to you—she had irritated and intrigued me from the moment when she had arrived, apparently just strolling casually in. Her provocative arrogance made me resist, she caused everything in me that was—how shall I put it?—everything in me that was suppressed, hidden, wicked, to oppose her. Playing the part of a great lady, meddling in matters of life and death with unapproachable aplomb ... it drove me mad. And then ... well, after all, no woman gets pregnant just from playing golf. I knew, that is to say I reminded myself with terrible clarity—and that is when my idea came to me—that this cool, haughty, cold woman, raising her eyebrows above her steely eyes if I so much as looked at her askance and parried her demands, had been rolling in billions

with a man in the heat of passion two or three months ago, naked as an animal and perhaps groaning with desire, their bodies pressing as close as a pair of lips. That was the idea burning in my mind she looked at me with such unapproachable coolness, proud as an English army officer ... and the everything in me braced itself, I was possessed by the idea of humiliating her. From that moment on, I felt I could see her naked body through her dress ... from that moment on I lived for nothing but the idea of taking her, forcing a groan from her hard lips, feeling this cold, arrogant woman a prey to my desire like anyone else, as that other man had done, the man I didn't know. That ... that's what I wanted to explain to you. Low as I had sunk, I had never before thought of exploiting such a situation as a doctor ... and this time it wasn't desire, the rutting instinct, nothing sexual, I swear it wasn't, I can vouch for it ... just a wish to break her pride, dominate her as a man. I think I told you that I have always been susceptible to proud and apparently cold women ... and add to that the fact that I had lived here for seven years without sleeping with a white woman, and had met with no resistance ... from the girls here, twittering, fragile little creatures who tremble with awe if a white man, a 'master' takes them ... they efface themselves in humility, they're always available, always at your service with their soft, gurgling laughter, but that submissive, slavish attitude in itself spoils the pleasure. So can you understand the shattering effect on me when a woman full of pride and hostility suddenly came along, reserved in every fibre of her being, glittering with mystery and at the same time carrying the burden of an earlier passion? When such a woman boldly enters the cage of a man like me, a lonely, starved, isolated brute of a man ... well, that's what I wanted to tell you, just so that you'll understand the reason what happened next. So, full of some kind of wicked greed, poisoned by the thought of her stripped, naked, sensuous, submitting, I pulled myself together with pretended indifference. I said coolly, 'Twelve thousand guilders? No, I won't do it for that.'

She looked at me, turning a little pale. She probably sensed already that my refusal was not a matter of avarice, but she said, 'Then what do you want?'

I was not putting up with her cool tone any more. 'Let's show our hands, shall we? I am not a tradesman ... I'm not the poor apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet* who sells his poison for 'corrupted gold'. Perhaps I'm the opposite of a tradesman ... you won't get what you want by those means.'

'So you won't do it?'

'Not for money.'

All was very still between us for a second. So still that for the first time I heard her breathing.

'What else can you want, then?'

Now I could control myself no longer. 'First, I want you to stop ... stop speaking to me as if I were a tradesman and address me like a human being. And when you need help, I don't want you to ... come straight out with your shameful offer of money, but to ask me ... ask me to help you as one human being to another. I am not just a doctor, I don't spend all my time in consultations ... I spend some of it in other ways too, and perhaps you have come at such a time.'

She says nothing for a moment, and then her lip curls very slightly, trembles, and she says quickly, 'Then if I were to ask you ... would you do it?'

'You're trying to drive a bargain again—you won't ask me unless I promise first. You must ask me first—then I will give you an answer.'

She tosses her head like a defiant horse, and looks angrily at me.

'No, I will not ask you. I'd rather go to my ruin!'

At that anger seized upon me, red, senseless anger.

'Then if you won't ask, I will make my own demand. I don't think I have to put it crudely—you know what I want from you. And then—then I will help you.'

She stared at me for a moment. Then—oh, I can't, I can't tell you how terrible it was—then her features froze and she ... she suddenly *laughed*, she laughed at me with unspeakable contempt in her face, contempt that was scattered all over me ... and at the same time intoxicated me. That derisive laughter was like a sudden explosion, breaking out so abruptly and with such monstrous force behind it that I ... yes, I could have sunk to the ground and kissed her feet. It lasted only a second ... it was like lightning, and it had set my whole body on fire. Then she turned and went quickly to the door. I instinctively moved to follow her ... to apologise, to beg her ... well, my strength was entirely broken. She turned once more and said ... no, *ordered*, 'Don't dare to follow me or try to track me down. You would regret it.'

And the door slammed shut behind her."

Another hesitation. Another silence ... again, there was only the faint rushing sound, as if moonlight pouring down. Then, at last, the voice spoke again.

"The door slammed, but I stood there motionless on the spot, as if hypnotized by her order. I heard her go downstairs, open the front door ... I heard it all, and my whole will urged me to follow her ... to ... oh, I don't know what, to call her back, strike her, strangle her, but to follow her ... to follow her. Yet I couldn't. My limbs were crippled as if by an electric shock ... I had been cut to the quick by the imperious gleam of those eyes. I know there's no explaining it, it can't be described ... it may sound ridiculous, but I just stood there, and it was several minutes, perhaps five, perhaps ten, before I could raise a foot from the floor ...

But no sooner had I moved that foot than I instantly, swiftly, feverishly hurried down the stairs. She could only have gone along the road back to civilisation ... I hurry to the shed for my bicycle, I find I have forgotten the door key, I wrench the lock off, splitting and breaking the bamboo of the shed door... and next moment I am on my bicycle and hurrying after her ... I have to reach her, I must reach her before she gets back to her car. I must speak to her. The road rushes past me ... only now do I realise how long I must have stood there motionless. Then, where the road through the forest bends just before reaching the buildings of the district station, I see her hurrying along, stepping firmly, walking straight ahead accompanied by her boy ... but she must have seen me too, for now she speaks to the boy, who stays behind while she goes on alone. What is she doing? Why does she want to be on her own? Does she want to speak to me out of his hearing? I pedal fast and furiously ... then something suddenly springs into my path. It's the boy ... I am only just in time to swerve and fall. I rise, cursing ... involuntarily I raise my fist to hit the fool, but he leaps aside. I pick up my bicycle to remount ... but then the scoundrel lunges forward, takes hold of the bicycle, and says in his pitiful English, 'You not go on.'

You haven't lived in the tropics ... you don't know how unheard-of it is for a yellow bastard like that to seize the bicycle of a white 'master' and tell him, the master, to stay where he is. Instead of answering I strike him in the face with my fist. He staggers, but keeps hold of the bicycle ... his eyes, his narrow, frightened eyes are wide open in slavish fear, but he holds the handlebars infernally tight. 'You not go on,' he stammers again. It's lucky I don't have my revolver with me, or I'd shoot him down. 'Out of the way, scum!' is all I say. He cringes and stares at me, but he does not let go of the handlebars. At this rage comes over me ... I see that she is well away, she may have escaped me entirely ... and I hit him under the chin with a boxer's punch and send him flying. Now I have my bicycle back, but as I jump on it the mechanism jams. A spoke has bent in our tussle. I try to straighten it with trembling hands. I can't, so I fling the bicycle across the road at the scoundrel, who gets up, bleeding, and flinches aside. And then—no, you won't understand how ridiculous it looks

everyone there for a European ... well, anyway, I didn't know what I was doing any more. I had one thought in my mind: to go after her, to reach her. And so I *ran*, ran like a madman along the road and past the huts, where the yellow riff-raff were gathered in amazement to see a white man, the doctor, *running*.

I reach the station, dripping with sweat. My first question is: where is the car? Just driven away. People stare at me in surprise. I must look to them like a lunatic, arriving wet and muddy, screaming my question ahead of me before coming to a halt ... Down in the road, I see the white fumes of the car exhaust. She has succeeded ... succeeded, just as all her harsh, cruelly harsh calculations must succeed.

But flight won't help her. There are no secrets among Europeans in the tropics. Everyone knows everything everyone else, everything is a notable event. And not for nothing did her driver spend an hour in the government bungalow ... in a few minutes, I know all about it. I know who she is, I know that she lives in ... well, in the capital of the colony, eight hours from here by rail. I know that she is ... let's say the wife of a big businessman, enormously rich, distinguished, an Englishwoman. I know that her husband has been in America for five months, and is to arrive here next day to take her back to Europe with him ...

And meanwhile—the thought burns in my veins like poison—meanwhile she can't be more than two or three months pregnant ...

So far I hope I have made it easy for you to understand ... but perhaps only because up to that point I still understood myself, and as a doctor I could diagnose my own condition. From now on, however, something began to work in me like a fever ... I lost control. That's to say, I knew exactly how pointless everything I did was, but I had no power over myself any more ... I no longer understood myself. I was merely racing forward, obsessed by my purpose No, wait. Perhaps I can make you understand it after all. Do you know what the expression 'running amok' means?"

“‘Running amok?’ Yes, I think I do ... a kind of intoxication affecting the Malays ...”

“It's more than intoxication ... it's madness, a sort of human rabies, an attack of murderous pointless monomania that bears no comparison with ordinary alcohol poisoning. I've studied several cases myself during my time in the East—it's easy to be very wise and objective about other people—but I was never able to uncover the terrible secret of its origin. It may have something to do with the climate, the sultry, oppressive atmosphere that weighs on the nervous system like a storm until it suddenly breaks ... well then, this is how it goes: a Malay, an ordinary, good-natured man, sitting drinking his brew, impassive, indifferent, apathetic ... just as I was sitting in my room ... when suddenly he leaps to his feet, snatches his dagger and runs out into the street, going straight ahead towards him, always straight ahead, with no idea of any destination. With his *kris* he strikes down anything that crosses his path, man or beast, and this murderous frenzy makes him even more deranged. He froths at the mouth as he runs, he howls like a lunatic ... but he still runs and runs and runs, he doesn't look right, he doesn't look left, he just runs on screaming shrilly, brandishing his bloodstained *kris*. He forges straight ahead in that dreadful way. The people of the villages know that no power can halt a man running amok, so they shout warnings ahead when they see him coming—‘Amok! Amok!’—and everyone flees ... but he runs on without hearing, without seeing, striking down anything he meets ... until he is either shot dead like a mad dog or collapses of his own accord, still frothing at the mouth ...”

I once saw a case from the window of my bungalow. It was a terrible sight, but it's only because I saw it that I can understand myself in those days ... because I stormed off like that, just like that, obsessed in the same way, going straight ahead with that dreadful expression, seeing nothing to right

or to left, following the woman. I don't remember exactly what I did, it all went at such breakneck speed, with such mindless haste ... ~~Ten minutes, no, five—no, two—~~after I had found out all about the woman, her name, where she lived and her story, I was racing back to my house on a borrowed bicycle, I threw a suit into my case, took some money and drove to the railway station in my carriage. I went without informing the district officer, without finding a locum for myself, I left the house just as it was, unlocked. The servants were standing around, the astonished women were asking questions. I didn't answer, didn't turn, drove to the station and took the next train to the city ... only an hour after that woman had entered my room, I had thrown my life away and was running amok, careering into empty space.

I ran straight on, headlong ... I arrived in the city at six in the evening, and at ten past six I was at her house asking to see her. It was ... well, as you will understand, it was the most pointless, stupid thing I could have done, but a man runs amok with empty eyes, he doesn't see where he is going. The servant came back after a few minutes, cool and polite: his mistress was not well and couldn't see anyone.

I staggered away. I prowled around the house for an hour, possessed by the insane hope that she might perhaps come looking for me. Only then did I book into the hotel on the beach and went to my room with two bottles of whisky which, with a double dose of veronal, helped to calm me. At last I fell asleep ... and that dull, troubled sleep was the only momentary respite in my race between life and death."

The ship's bell sounded. Two hard, full strokes that vibrated on, trembling, in the soft pool of near-motionless air and then ebbed away in the quiet, endless rushing of the water washing around the keel, its sound mingling with his passionate tale. The man opposite me in the dark must have started on alarm, for his voice hesitated. Once again I heard his hand move down to find a bottle, and the sound gurgling. Then, as if reassured, he began again in a firmer voice.

"I can scarcely tell you about the hours I passed from that moment on. I think, today, that I was in a fever at the time; at the least I was in a state of over-stimulation bordering on madness—as I told you I was running amok. But don't forget, it was Tuesday night when I arrived, and on Saturday—as I have now discovered—her husband was to arrive on the P&O steamer from Yokohama. So there were just three days left, three brief days for the decision to be made and for me to help her. You'll understand that I knew I must help her at once, yet I couldn't speak a word to her. And my need to apologise for my ridiculous, deranged behaviour drove me on. I knew how valuable every moment was, I knew it was a matter of life and death to her, yet I had no opportunity of approaching her with so much as a whisper or a sign, because my tempestuous foolishness in chasing after her had frightened her off. It was ... wait, yes ... it was like running after someone warning that a murderer is on the way, and the person thinks you are the murderer yourself and so runs on to ruin ... She saw me only as a man running amok, pursuing her in order to humiliate her, but I ... and this was the terrible absurdity of it ... I wasn't thinking of that any more at all. I was destroyed already, I just wanted to help her, do her service. I would have committed murder, any crime, to help her ... but she didn't understand that. When I woke in the morning and went straight back to her house, the boy was standing in the doorway, the servant whose face I had punched, and when he saw me coming—he must have been looking out for me—he hurried in through the door. Perhaps he went in only to announce my arrival discreetly ... perhaps ... oh, that uncertainty, how it torments me now ... perhaps everything was ready to receive me, but then, when I saw him, I remembered my disgrace, and this time I didn't even dare to touch calling on her again. I was weak at the knees. Just before reaching the doorway I turned and went away

again ... went away, while she, perhaps, was waiting for me in a similar state of torment.

~~I didn't know what to do in this strange city that seemed to burn like fire beneath my feet. Suddenly I thought of something, called for a carriage, went to see the vice-resident on whose leg I had operated back at my own district station, and had myself announced. Something in my appearance must have seemed strange, for he looked at me with slight alarm, and there was an uneasiness about his civility ... perhaps he recognised me as a man running amok. I told him, briefly, that I wanted a transfer to the city, I couldn't exist in my present post any longer, I said, I had to move at once. He looked at me ... I can't tell you how he looked at me ... perhaps as a doctor looks at a sick man. 'A nervous breakdown, my dear doctor?' he said. 'I understand that only too well. I'm sure it can be arranged, but wait ... let's say for four weeks, while I find a replacement.'~~

~~'I can't wait, I can't wait even a day,' I replied. Again he gave me that strange look. 'You must wait, doctor,' he said gravely. 'We can't leave the station without a medical man. But I promise you I'll set everything in motion this very day.' I stood there with my teeth gritted; for the first time I felt clearly that I was a man whose services had been bought, I was a slave. I was preparing to defy him when the diplomat that he was, he got his word in first. 'You're unused to mixing with other people, doctor, and in the end that becomes an illness. We've all been surprised that you never came here to the city ... I went on leave. You need more company, more stimulation. Do at least come to the government building for reception this evening. You'll find the entire colony, and many of them have long wanted to meet you ... they've often asked about you and hoped to see you here.'~~

~~That last remark pulled me up short. People had asked about me? Could he mean *her*? I was suddenly a different man: I immediately thanked him courteously for his invitation and assured him that I would be there punctually. And punctual I was, over-punctual. I hardly have to tell you that driven by my impatience, I was the first in the great hall of the government building, surrounded by the silent, yellow-skinned servants whose bare feet hurried back and forth, and who—so it seemed to me in my confused state of mind—were laughing at me behind my back. For a quarter of an hour I was the only European among all the soundless preparations, so alone with myself that I could hear the ticking of my watch in my waistcoat pocket. Then a few government officials at last appeared with their families, and finally the Governor too entered, and drew me into a long conversation in which I assiduously and I think skilfully played my part, until ... until suddenly, attacked by a mysterious attack of nerves, I lost all my diplomatic manner and began stammering. Although my back was to the entrance of the hall, I suddenly felt that she must have entered and was present there. I can't tell you how that sudden certainty confused me, but even as I was talking to the Governor and heard his words echo in my ears, I sensed her presence somewhere behind me. Luckily the Governor soon ended the conversation—or I think I would suddenly and abruptly have turned, so strong was that mysterious tugging of my nerves, so burning and agitated my desire. And sure enough, I had hardly turned before I saw her exactly where my senses had unconsciously guessed she would be. She wore a yellow ball dress that made her slender, immaculate shoulders glow like dull ivory, and was talking to a group of guests. She was smiling, but I thought there was a tense expression on her face. I came closer—she either could not or would not see me—and looked at the attractive smile civilly hovering on her narrow lips. And that smile intoxicated me again, because ... well, because I knew it was a lie born of art or artifice, a masterpiece of deception. Today is Wednesday, I thought, on Saturday the ship with her husband on board will arrive ... how can she smile like that, so ... so confidently, with such a carefree look, casually playing with the fan she holds instead of crushing it in her fear? I ... I, a stranger, had been trembling for two days at the thought of this moment ... Strange to her as I was, I experienced her fear and horror intensely ... and she herself went to this ball and smiled, smiled~~

smiled ...

Music started to play at the back of the hall. The dancing began. An elderly officer had asked her to dance; she left the chattering circle with a word of excuse and walked on his arm towards the other end of the hall and past me. When she saw me her face suddenly froze—but only for a second, and then, before I could make up my mind whether or not to greet her, she gave me a civil nod of recognition, as she would to a chance acquaintance, said, ‘Good evening, doctor,’ and was gone. No one could have guessed what that grey-green glance concealed; I didn’t know myself. Why did she speak to me? Why did she suddenly acknowledge me? Was it rejection, was it a *rapprochement*, was it just the embarrassment of surprise? I can’t describe the agitation into which I was cast; everything was in a turmoil, explosively concentrated within me, and as I saw her like that—casually waltzing in the arms of the officer’s arms, with such a cool, carefree look on her brow, while I knew that she ... that she, like me, was thinking of only one thing ... that we two alone, out of everyone here, had a terrible secret in common ... and she was waltzing ... well, in those few seconds my fear, my longing and my admiration became more passionate than ever. I don’t know if anyone was watching me, but certainly my conduct gave away no more than hers—I just could not look in any other direction, I had to ... I absolutely had to look at her from a distance, my eyes fastening on her closed face to see if the mask would not drop for a second. She must have found the force of my gaze uncomfortable. As she moved away on her dancing partner’s arm, she glanced my way for a split second with imperious sharpness as if repelling me; once again that little frown of haughty anger, the one I knew already, disfigured her brow.

But ... but, as I told you, I was running amok; I looked neither to right nor to left. I understood her at once—her glance said: don’t attract attention! Control yourself! I knew that she ... how can I put it ... that she expected me to behave discreetly here in the hall, in public. I realised that if I went home at this point, I could be certain she would see me in the morning ... that all she wanted to avoid just now was being exposed to my obvious familiarity with her, I knew she feared—and rightly—that my clumsiness would cause a scene. You see, I knew everything, I understood that imperious grey gaze, but ... but my feelings were too strong, I had to speak to her. So I moved unsteadily over to the group where she stood talking, joined its loose-knit circle although I knew only a few of the people in it, merely in the hope of hearing her speak, yet always flinching from her eyes timidly, like a whipped dog, when they coldly rested on me as if I were one of the linen curtains hanging behind me, or the armchair that lightly moved it. But I stood there thirsty for a word spoken to me, for a sign of understanding, I stood like a block, gazing at her amidst all the chatter. It cannot have passed unnoticed, for no one addressed a word to me, and she had to suffer my ridiculous presence.

I don’t know how long I would have stood there ... for ever, perhaps ... I *could* not leave that enchantment of my own volition. The very force of my frenzy crippled me. But she could not bear any more ... she suddenly turned to the gentlemen, with the magnificent ease that came naturally to her, and said, ‘I am a little tired ... I think I’ll go to bed early for once. Good night!’ And she was walking past me with a distant social nod of her head ... I could still see the frown on her face, and then nothing but her back, her white, cool, bare back. It was a second before I realised that she was leaving ... that I wouldn’t be able to see her or speak to her again this evening, this last evening before I could help her. For a moment I stood there rooted to the spot until I realised it, and then ... then ...

But wait ... wait, or you will not understand how stupid and pointless what I did was. I must describe the whole room to you first. It was the great hall of the government building, entirely illuminated by lights and almost empty ... the couples had gone into the other room to dance, the gentlemen had gone to play cards ... only a few groups were still talking in the corners, so the hall was

empty, every movement conspicuous and visible in the bright light. And she walked slowly and lightly through that great hall with her shoulders straight, exchanging greetings now and then with an indescribable composure, with the magnificent, frozen, proud calm that so enchanted me. I ... I had stayed behind, as I told you, as if paralysed, before I realised that she was leaving ... and then, when I did realise, she was already at the far side of the hall and just approaching the doors. Then ... and I am still ashamed to think of it now ... something suddenly came over me and I ran ... I *ran*, do you hear ... I did not walk but *ran* through the hall after her, my shoes clattering on the floor. I heard my own footsteps, I saw all eyes turning to me in surprise ... I could have died of shame ... even as I ran I understood my own derangement, but I could not ... could not go back now. I caught up with her in the doorway. She turned to me ... her eyes stabbed like grey steel, her nostrils were quivering with anger ... I was just going to stammer something out when ... when she suddenly *laughed* aloud ... a clear, carefree, whole-hearted laugh, and said, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, 'Oh, doctor, have you only just remembered my little boy's prescription? Ah, you learned scientists!' A couple of people standing nearby laughed kindly ... I understood, and was shattered by the masterly way she had saved the situation. I put my hand in my wallet and tore a blank leaf off my prescription block, and she took it casually before ... again with a cold smile of thanks ... before she went. For one second I felt easy in my mind... I saw that her skill in dealing with my blunder had made up for it and put things right—but next moment I also knew that all was over for me now, she hated me for my intemperate folly ... hated me worse than death itself. I could come to her door hundreds upon hundreds of times, and she would always have me turned away like a dog.

I staggered through the room ... I realised that people were looking at me, and I must have appeared strange. I went to the buffet and drank two, three, four glasses of cognac one after another which saved me from collapsing. My nerves could bear no more, they were in shreds. Then I slunk off through a side entrance, as secretly as a criminal. Not for any principality in the world could I have walked back through that hall, with her carefree laughter still echoing from its walls. I went ... I really can't say now exactly where I went, but into a couple of bars where I got drunk, like a man trying to drink his consciousness away ... but I could not numb my senses, the laughter was there in me, high and dreadful ... I could not silence that damned laughter. I wandered around the harbour ... I had left my revolver in my room, or I would have shot myself. I could think of nothing else, and with that thought I went back to the hotel with one idea in my mind ... the left-hand drawer of the chest where my revolver lay ... with that single idea in mind.

The fact that I didn't shoot myself after all ... I swear it wasn't cowardice, it would have been a release to take off the safety catch and press the cold trigger ... how can I explain it? I still felt I had a duty ... yes, that damned duty to help. The thought that she might still need me, that she did need me made me mad ... it was Thursday morning before I was back in my room, and on Saturday, as I have told you, on Saturday the ship would come in, and I knew that *this* woman, this proud and haughty woman would not survive being shamed before her husband and the world ... Oh, how my thoughts tortured me, thoughts of the precious time I had unthinkingly wasted, the crazy haste that had thwarted any prospect of bringing her help in time ... for hours, I swear, for hours on end I paced up and down my room, racking my brains to think of a way to approach her, put matters right, help her ... for I was certain that she wouldn't let me into her house now. Her laughter was still there in all my nerves, I still saw her nostrils quivering with anger. For hours I paced up and down the three metres of my cramped room ... and day had dawned, morning was here already.

Suddenly an idea sent me to the desk ... I snatched up a sheaf of notepaper and began to write her, write it all down ... a whining, servile letter in which I begged her forgiveness, called myself

madman, a criminal, and begged her to entrust herself to me. I swore that the hour after it was done would disappear from the city, from the colony, from the world if she wanted ... only she must forgive me and trust me to help her at the last, the very last minute. I feverishly wrote twenty pages like this ... it must have been a mad, indescribable letter, like a missive written in delirium, for when I rose from the desk I was bathed in sweat ... the room swayed, and I had to drink a glass of water. Only then did I try reading the letter through again, but the very first words horrified me, so I folded it up trembling, found an envelope ... and suddenly a new thought came to me. All at once I knew the right, the crucial thing to say. I picked up the pen again, and wrote on the last sheet, 'I will wait here in the beach hotel for a word of forgiveness. If no answer comes by seven this evening, I shall shoot myself.'

Then I took the letter, rang for a boy, and told him to deliver the envelope at once. At last I had said everything—everything!”

Something clinked and fell down beside us. As he moved abruptly he had knocked over the whisky bottle; I heard his hand feeling over the deck for it, and then he picked it up with sudden vigour. He threw the empty bottle high in the air and over the ship's side. The voice fell silent for a few minutes and then feverishly continued, even faster and more agitated than before.

“I am not a believing Christian any more ... I don't believe in heaven or hell, and if hell does exist I am not afraid of it, for it can't be worse than those hours I passed between morning and evening ... I think of a small room, hot in the sunlight, red-hot at blazing noon ... a small room, just a desk and a chair and the bed ... and nothing on the desk but a watch and a revolver, and sitting at the desk a man ... a man who does nothing but stare at that desk and the second hand of his watch, a man who eats and drinks nothing, doesn't smoke, doesn't move, who only ... listen to me ... who only stares for three long hours at the white circle of the dial and the hand of the watch ticking as it goes around. That ... that was how I spent the day, just waiting, waiting, waiting ... but waiting like a man running amok, senselessly, like an animal, with that headlong, direct persistence.

Well, I won't try to describe those hours to you ... they are beyond description. I myself don't understand now how one can go through such an experience without going mad. Then, at twenty-two minutes past three ... I remember the time exactly, I was staring at my watch ... there was a sudden knock at the door. I leap up ... leap like a tiger leaping on its prey, in one bound I am across the room and at the door, I fling it open, and there stands a timid little Chinese boy with a folded note in his hand. As I avidly reach for it, he scurries away and is gone.

I tear the note open to read it ... and find that I can't. A red mist blurs my vision ... imagine my agony, I have word from her at last, and now everything is quivering and dancing before my eyes. I dip my head in water, and my sight clears ... once again I take the note and read it. “Too late! But wait where you are. I may yet send for you.”

No signature on the crumpled paper torn from some old brochure ... the writing of someone whose handwriting is usually steady, now scribbling hastily, untidily, in pencil. I don't know why that note shook me so much. Some kind of horror, some mystery clung to it, it might have been written in haste, by someone standing in a window bay or a moving vehicle. An unspeakably cold aura of fear and haste and terror about that furtive note chilled me to the heart ... and yet, and yet I was happy. She had written to me, I need not die yet, I could help her ... perhaps I could ... oh, I lost myself in the crazy hopes and conjectures. I read the little note a hundred, a thousand times over, I kissed it ... I examined it for some word I might have forgotten or overlooked. My reverie grew ever deeper and more confused, I was in a strange condition, sleeping with open eyes, a kind of paralysis, a torpid yet turbulent state between sleep and waking. It lasted perhaps for quarter of an hour or so, perhaps for

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