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Saint Peter's Snow



A Novel by

LEO PERUTZ

SAINT PETER'S SNOW

By the same author

BY NIGHT UNDER THE STONE BRIDGE
LITTLE APPLE
MASTER OF THE DAY OF JUDGMENT
THE SWEDISH CAVALIER
THE MARQUIS OF BOLIBAR
LEONARDO'S JUDAS

SAINT PETER'S SNOW

Leo Perutz

*Translated from the German
by Eric Mosbacher*



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*Dedicated to the memory
of one who reached perfection
and departed early*

ONE

When the night released me I was a nameless, impersonal something with no conception of past or future. I lay, perhaps for many hours, perhaps only for a fraction of a second, in a state that was a kind of insensibility, which then gave way to something I can no longer describe. If I call it a shadowy awareness of myself coupled with a sense of being totally undefined, I have inadequately indicated its special and peculiar quality. It would be easy to say that I floated in a void, but those words mean nothing. All I knew was that something existed, but I did not know that it was myself.

I have no idea how long that lasted, or when the first memories came back. They popped up inside my mind and promptly faded again, I could not hold them. One of them, in spite of its nebulous nature, was particularly painful or frightening—I heard myself breathing heavily, as if I were having a nightmare.

The first memories that stuck were completely trivial. The name of a dog I had owned for a short time occurred to me. Then I remembered that someone to whom I had lent a volume of my edition of Shakespeare had never returned it. Then the name of a street and the number of a house in it flashed through my mind, though I could not connect it with anything in my life, and then I saw a motorcyclist with two dead hares on his back driving along the deserted village street—when had that been? I remembered stumbling and falling as I avoided him, and when I got up I noticed that I was holding a pocket watch, it was just eight o'clock, and in falling I had broken the glass. I had dashed out of the house without hat or coat and with the watch in my hand . . .

That was the point I had reached when the events of the previous weeks came crashing down on me with indescribable violence, the beginning, the end and everything in between at the same time. They came crashing down on me like the beams and masonry of a collapsing house. I saw the people and things I had lived among, they were immeasurably huge and eerie, gigantic and terrifying, like people and things from another world. And there was something inside me that was about to explode with a devastating effect; the idea of a happiness, or some fear connected with it, or despair and agonising desire—all those words are weak and feeble. It was the thought of something that could not be borne even for a second.

That was the first encounter of my awakened consciousness with the tremendous experience that lay behind me.

It was too much for me. I heard myself shriek, and I must have tried to throw off the blanket, for I felt a stabbing pain in my upper arm, and I succumbed to—no, I took refuge in—a faint that was my salvation.

When I awoke for the second time it was broad daylight. This time self-awareness arrived without any transition. I realised I was in a hospital room, a friendly, well furnished room obviously intended for paying or otherwise privileged patients. An elderly nurse sitting by the window was crocheting and occasionally sipped a cup of coffee. In a bed against the opposite wall was a man with a stubbly chin and sunken cheeks, and his head was covered in white bandages. His big, sad eyes were fixed on me, and there was a worried look on his face. I think that for a few moments I may have caught sight of myself in a mirror as I lay there, pale, emaciated, unshaven and with my head bandaged, but it may have been the patient who shared my room while I was unconscious. In that case he must have been moved from the room in the next few minutes without my noticing it, because when I opened my eyes again he and his bed had gone.

Now I could remember everything. The events that had brought me here stood out in my mind sharply and clearly, and now I saw them in a different light. Their oppressive, monstrous quality had gone. Much of what I had been through still struck me as weird, much of it was puzzling and inexplicable. But nothing that had happened frightened me, and the people involved no longer loomed in my mind as huge, terrifying phantoms. In the bright light of day they were of human proportion; they were human beings like me and everyone else, they were creatures of this world. Almost unnoticeably and as a matter of course they linked up with my previous existence, the days, the people and the things, they merged with them, were part of my life and were inseparable from it.

The nurse noticed that I was awake and rose to her feet. Her expression was one of smug simplicity and as I watched her now I was struck by her resemblance to the old woman who had suddenly emerged like a fury from the crowd of angry, protesting peasants and threatened the old priest with a breadknife. "Death to the priest," she had yelled, and it seemed strange that she should now be in my room, simply, quietly and demurely looking after me. But when she came closer the resemblance vanished. I had made a mistake. When she reached my bedside I saw that her face was that of a total stranger. I had never seen the woman before.

She noticed that I wanted to say something and raised her hands in a gesture indicating that I should spare myself the effort, as talking was not good for me. At that moment I had a sensation of *déjà vu*, the feeling that all this—the bed, the hospital room, the nurse—was not new to me and that I had been through it all before. That, too, was an illusion, of course, but the reality behind it was no less strange. I now remembered that in the Westphalian village where I was the doctor I had frequently had a kind of second sight, foreseeing in many respects the circumstances in which I now found myself. That was the truth, I could swear to it. Such phenomena have been noted in Westphalia since time out of mind.

"How did I get here?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. Perhaps that was a matter she had been forbidden to talk to me about.

"How long have I been here?" I persisted.

She seemed to be thinking it over.

"This is the fifth week," she replied after a while.

That was impossible, I realised. Outside it was snowing, it was still winter. I must have been brought here only a few days ago—four or perhaps five. It had been snowing that Sunday, my last day at Morwede, and it was still snowing. Why was she lying to me?

"That can't be right," I said. "You're not telling me the truth."

She looked perplexed.

"It may be six weeks," she said hesitantly. "I'm not sure. This is my fifth week in this room. Before that another nurse was here. You were here when I came."

"What's the date today?" I asked.

She acted as if she had not understood.

"What's the date today? What's today's date?" I repeated.

"March 2nd 1932," she said eventually.

March 2nd. This time she was telling the truth, I could tell. The date fitted in with my calculations. I had started work as the village doctor at Morwede on January 25th, and had worked for a month in that small Westphalian village before that ill-fated Sunday. I had been here for five days, now I was sure of it. Why had she lied to me, and who had told her to? In whose interest was it to make me believe I had lain unconscious in this hospital bed for five whole weeks? There was no point in pressing the woman any further. When she realised I was not going to ask her any more questions, she told me of her own accord that I had regained consciousness several times. Once, when she had dropped a bowl which

changing my bandages, I had asked who was there, without opening my eyes. Later I had several times complained of pain, and also asked for something to drink, but each time had promptly relapsed into coma. I could not remember any of this.

“Very few do remember afterwards,” she said, and went back to her seat by the window and her crochet work.

I lay with my eyes closed, thinking about what had now come to an end—come to an end for ever. She was alive, I knew, she had escaped the dreadful last hours and the retribution—my certainty of that was as solid as a rock. The bullet meant for her had struck me. People of her kind did not perish. Whatever she did, no matter how great the guilt she took upon herself, there would always be someone to fling himself between her and avenging fate.

But I also knew that it was over, and that she would not return. Her path would not lead her to me a second time. Never mind. She had been mine for one night, and that night remained with me, no one could take it away from me, it was embedded in my life like dark red almandine in a piece of granite. That night had linked me with her for ever. I had held her in my arms, felt her breath and her heart-beat, and the trembling of her limbs, seen the childish laughter with which she woke. No, it was not over. What a woman gives in such a tremendous night she gives for ever. Perhaps she was someone else's now—~~I could contemplate the possibility without sorrow. Farewell, Bibiche.~~

Bibiche was the name she used when she talked to herself. “Poor Bibiche.” How often had I heard those affectionately complaining words on her lips. “You’re angry with me and I don’t know why. Poor Bibiche.” That was what she wrote in a note that a small boy brought me—how long ago had that been? And once, when we hardly knew each other, at the time when she acted as if she were indifferent to me, and had accidentally burnt her hand with a drop of acid, she had looked at her little finger in pain and surprise and exclaimed: “It hurts, you’re unkind to Bibiche.” I laughed at her, and she looked at me coldly and dismissively. But that was all over, and I should never see that look again. It had been all over since that night . . .

I heard footsteps and opened my eyes. The medical superintendent and his two assistants were standing by my bed, and behind them a man of Herculean proportions in a blue and white striped coat was pushing the bandage trolley through the door.

In spite of his disguise I recognised him at once. The huge, powerful body, the weak, receding chin, the deep-set, watery blue eyes were those of Prince Praxatin, the last of the house of Rurik. He had grown a moustache, so I could not see the scar on his upper lip, his flaxen hair fell over his brow instead of being brushed straight back, and his hands were brown and uncared for—was it he or wasn’t it? It was he, there was no doubt about it. The way he tried to avoid my eyes told me everything. He had found a safe refuge here, playing the part of a hospital porter under an assumed name, and did not want to be recognised. Well, so far as I was concerned he could continue his pitiful existence as long as his conscience allowed him to, I had no intention of giving him away, he had nothing to fear from me.

I heard the medical superintendent’s voice.

“Awake? Good morning,” he said. “How do you feel? Better? Any pain?”

I did not answer, but went on staring at Prince Praxatin. This made him feel uncomfortable, and he had turned away; now I saw something I had not seen before, a bright red scar that began behind his right ear and extended to near his chin—a reminder of the night on which he betrayed his friend and benefactor.

“Do you know where you are?” the medical superintendent asked.

I looked him in the face. He was a man of about fifty, with lively eyes and a beard flecked with grey. He obviously wanted to find out whether my mind was clear yet.

"In a hospital," I said.

"Quite right," he said. "You're in the town hospital at Osnabrück."

One of the two assistants bent over me.

"Do you recognise me, Amberg?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Who are you?"

"But you must remember me," he went on. "Think again. We both worked for six months in the Bacteriological Institute in Berlin. Have I really changed so much that you don't recognise me?"

"Are you Dr Friebe?" I asked tentatively.

"So you do recognise me. At last," he said with satisfaction, and began removing the bandage from my upper arm and shoulder.

This Dr Friebe had been a colleague of mine at the Bacteriological Institute, and he knew her too. I badly wanted to hear her name on his lips, but some instinct told me not to mention her.

I pointed to the bullet wound on my arm.

"Was it a bullet wound?" I asked.

"What did you say?" he said with his mind on what he was doing.

"Did you have to extract the bullet?"

He looked at me in surprise.

"What bullet are you talking about?" he said. "You have lacerations and contusions on your arm and shoulder."

I grew angry.

"Lacerations and contusions?" I exclaimed. "That's nonsense. The arm wound is the result of a revolver shot and the shoulder wound is the result of a stab. Even a layman could see that. And besides . . ."

The medical superintendent now intervened.

"What are you suggesting?" he said. "When pedestrians ignore their instructions our traffic police don't attack them with knives and revolvers."

"What do you mean?" I interrupted.

"You must remember that just five weeks ago at two o'clock in the afternoon you were standing as if in a trance in the middle of heavy traffic in the station square here in Osnabrück and you didn't move, though the policeman directing the traffic and the drivers yelled at you, but you took no notice . . ."

"That's right," I said. "I saw a green Cadillac."

"Good gracious," the medical superintendent exclaimed. "It's true that there's only that one Cadillac here in Osnabrück, but for you, coming from Berlin, a Cadillac's no novelty. You must have seen an enormous number of Cadillacs."

"Yes, but that one . . ."

"And what happened then?" he interrupted me.

"I crossed the square towards the station, bought a ticket and got into the train."

"No," said the medical superintendent. "You never reached the station. You walked straight into a carriage and were knocked down. The base of the skull was broken and there was brain haemorrhage, and that was the state you were in when you were brought here. You were in a bad way, the outcome might have been different, but now you're out of danger."

I tried to read his face. He could not have seriously meant what he said, it was absurd. I had got into the train, read two newspapers and a magazine, and dropped off to sleep. I woke up when the train stopped at Münster and got out and bought cigarettes on the platform. I arrived at Rheda at about five o'clock, when it was beginning to get dark, and from there I went on in a sleigh.

"I beg your pardon," I said quite diffidently, "but the head wound is the result of a blow with a blunt instrument. It was done with a flail."

"What are you saying?" he exclaimed. "Where on earth is threshing still done with a flail? Machinery is used everywhere in the country nowadays."

What was I to answer? He was not to know that there was no machinery on Baron von Malchins estate, where the corn was still sown, cut and threshed as it was a hundred years ago.

"Where I was until five days ago they still use flails," I said eventually.

He exchanged glances with Dr Friebe.

"Where you were until five days ago?" he said incredulously. "Really? Well, it will have been as you said. A blow with a flail. Very well, don't worry about it. Such unpleasant experiences with flails are being forgotten. Try to switch off, you need rest. You must tell me all about it another time."

He turned to the nurse.

"Biscuits, tea with milk, sieved vegetables," he told her, and he left, followed by his two assistants. The last to leave was Prince Praxatin, pushing the bandage trolley. He cast me a timid glance.

What was the meaning of this? Was the medical superintendent play-acting for my benefit, or did he really believe in that car accident? What had happened had been quite different, as he very well knew.

My name is Georg Friedrich Amberg and I am a physician. That is how the report on the events of Morwede that I shall write one day when I am physically fit enough will begin. But that will not be just yet. I am not in a state to put pen to paper—I've been told to rest and to switch off, and in any case I can't use my injured arm. All I can do is to imprint in my memory every single thing that happened and to hold it fast, so as not to lose even the most insignificant detail. For the time being that is all I can do.

I shall have to go a long way back in my story. My mother died a few months after I was born. My father was a historian of repute. His speciality was the history of Germany up to the Great Interregnum. In his last years he lectured at a university in central Germany on the investiture struggle, on German military organisation at the end of the thirteenth century, on the meaning and significance of feudal tenure, and on the administrative reforms of Frederick II. When he died I was fourteen. He left nothing but a handsome but rather limited library—apart from the classics, it consisted of historical works only. I still have some of his books.

I was looked after by a maternal aunt. She was a pedantically strict, reticent woman who rarely came out of her shell, and we had little to say to each other. But I shall be grateful to her all my life. I hardly ever heard a friendly word from her, but she managed her slender means so well that she enabled me to complete my education. Even as a boy I was fascinated by my father's subject, history, and there was hardly a book in his library that I had not read several times. But shortly before my school-leaving examination when I announced that I wanted to be a historian, i.e., an academic, my aunt vigorously opposed it. To her pragmatic mind historical research was a vague and useless activity, remote from the problems of real life. She insisted on my going in for a practical profession, with my feet firmly planted on the ground, and she put it. That meant either medicine or the law.

I jibbed at this, and the result was violent arguments. One day my aunt in her pedantic way worked out with pencil and paper the financial sacrifices she had made for my sake in the course of years. And that I gave in—what else could I do? She certainly had my welfare at heart and had undergone real deprivations for my sake, and I could not disappoint her. So I became a medical student.

Six years later I was a doctor of average knowledge and ability, like hundreds of others. I had had a year's hospital experience, and had no patients, no money and no connections and, worst of all, no sense of vocation for medicine.

As the result of an experience to which I shall return later, during my last year as a medical student I had adopted certain habits that I could not really afford. Wherever the fashionable world went, I went too. Extravagant I was not, but this change of life-style involved extra expense which the occasional fees I earned from private tutoring was insufficient to cover. So I often had to sell valuable books from my father's library. In early January that year I was once more financially embarrassed. I had a number of small debts I could not meet. Shakespeare and Molière were the only classics left in my father's library and I took them to a second-hand bookseller who was a friend of mine.

He offered me what I thought was a fair price, but he called me back from the doorway and pointed out that the Shakespeare was incomplete—the volume containing the Sonnets and *The Winter's Tale* was missing. For a moment I was dismayed, because I knew it was not at home, but then I remembered that I had lent it to a colleague some months before. I asked the bookseller to wait till the afternoon and went off to get it back.

My colleague was out, so I decided to wait for him. Out of sheer boredom I picked up the morning

newspaper that was lying on the table.

~~It is not without a certain interest to put yourself back into the situation you were in during the~~ minutes immediately before an unexpected event that turned out to be a crucial point in your life—to a yourself where you were and what you were thinking about. Well, I was sitting in an unheated room freezing in my light-weight overcoat, for I could not afford a proper winter coat. Without particular interest and just to pass the time, I read a story about the arrest of a man accused of attempted murder in a train, an article on the nutritional value of coffee, and another on apparatus gymnastics. I was annoyed with my colleague for his irresponsible failure to return the book, and also by a grease mark on the page of the newspaper I was reading—obviously my colleague had been reading it at breakfast and bread-and-butter had come into contact with it.

The next thing that happened was banal, almost to the point of triviality. My eyes fell on an advertisement, that was all.

The administration of Baron von Malchin's estate at Morwede, district of Rheda, Westphalia, invited applications for the position of village doctor, minimum income guaranteed, together with free accommodation and heating, preference given to applicants with a good all-round education.

It did not strike me immediately that I might be a possible candidate for the job. What attracted my attention was the estate owner's name. I found myself muttering Baron von Malchin and von der Bork and it struck me that it was the word Malchin that had reminded me of the full name and title, that was familiar to me, though I could not remember where I had heard or read it.

I pondered. My memory sometimes follows strange paths. A tune occurred to me, an old song I had not thought of for many years. I hummed it, and then hummed it again, and I was back in the oak-panelled room with the table loaded with books, and I was sitting at the piano and playing the song, and then the words, which were banal enough, came back to me: "Your love is all I need, I do not ask for more," they began. My father was pacing up and down the room, with his hands clasped behind his back, as usual, and a chaffinch was twittering in the garden. I went on playing. "It's not for me to plead for faithfulness as well," the song went on. "Baron von Malchin and von der Bork," a voice announced. My father stopped and said: "Ask him in," and I got up and left the room, as I always did when my father had a visitor.

It only occurred to me much later that that visitor and the owner of the estate at Morwede were not necessarily the same person, there might be a number of persons with that name. I read the advertisement again. Then I went to the desk and wrote a letter applying for the job, briefly mentioning my father; I left a brief note asking my colleague to return the book immediately, and went to the nearest post office and posted the letter.

There was no answer for ten days, but when at last it came it was satisfactory enough. Baron von Malchin wrote that he regarded it as an honour to have known my father personally, and he was happy to be able to be of service to the son of a scholar whom he highly esteemed and whose premature death he deplored. He wanted to know whether I would be able to start work that month. I would have to travel via Osnabrück and Münster, and a car would be waiting for me at Rheda station. There were some formalities to be observed. Would I please send my medical diploma and confirmation of my year hospital experience to the office of the local authority.

When I told my aunt that I would be leaving Berlin that same month and beginning work in the country, she accepted it as a matter of course and as something she had been looking forward to for a long time. All we talked about that evening was the immediate practical things that had to be done, such as completing my wardrobe and procuring the necessary surgical and obstetric instruments and a supply of medicines. There was still some jewellery left by my mother: an emerald ring, two bracelets and

couple of old-fashioned earrings. We turned all this into cash, but the amount failed to come up to my expectations and so, painful as I found it, I had to sell many more of my father's books.

On January 25th my aunt came with me to the station, and she insisted on paying for the provisions for my journey. When I said goodbye to her on the platform and thanked her for everything I saw something like emotion on her face for the first time, and I think she even had tears in her eyes. When I got into the train she turned resolutely and walked away without looking back. That was what she was like.

At midday I arrived at Osnabrück.

THREE

I used the hour and a half wait for my connection to walk round the town. There is an old square the called the Great Freedom of the Cathedral and a sixteenth-century fortified tower called Civil Obedience. My curiosity was aroused by these two apparently conflicting names between which there nevertheless seemed to me to be some connection, and I made my way towards the Old Town. But chance willed that I saw neither the square nor the tower.

Was it really chance? I have heard that it is possible to set ships in motion and steer them from a distance of many kilometres by means of electric waves. What unknown force was it that took control of me and caused me to forget what I was looking for and to make my way through the winding streets of the Old Town as if I had a definite objective, and to go through the doorway—it was the doorway of a house through which there was a public right of way—leading to a little square with a stone saint in the middle and pork butchers' and greengrocers' stalls all round it? I crossed the square, went up some steps and turned into a narrow side street, and stopped outside an old curiosity shop. I thought I was looking at a shop window, and did not know I was looking into the future. But why an unknown will granted me this peep into the future I do not know and cannot explain to the present day.

It was chance, of course, nothing but chance. I have no inclination to ascribe ordinary events to transcendental causes, I refuse on principle thus to attribute to things an importance to which they are not entitled. I prefer sticking to solid facts. There are certainly many old curiosity shops in the Old Town and I had stopped in front of one of them, the first to which I came. Among all the bric-à-brac in the window, the glasses, the Roman copper coins, the wood-carvings, the porcelain figures, there was nothing surprising in the fact that a marble relief attracted my attention, it was bound to do so because of its size alone. It was obviously a copy of a mediaeval work and represented a man's head—a head with bold, almost wild and yet noble features. On his lips there was the fixed, remote smile to be seen on a Gothic carvings, but I knew that this was not the first time I had set eyes on that disproportionately long face furrowed by passion and its strong but finely formed brow. I had seen it before somewhere, I had come across it in a book, perhaps, or on a cameo, but whose face it was I could not remember, and the longer I looked at it the more uneasy I felt. I knew that those powerful features would not let me go, but would follow me into my dreams. Suddenly this carving filled me with a childish fear. I didn't want to look at it any longer, and turned away.

My eyes fell on a pile of dusty books and papers held together by a piece of string. I could see the title of the top book, which was *Why is Belief in God Disappearing from the World?*

What a strange question. Was it justified, stated like that? And at what poor and inadequate answer had the writer arrived? What commonplaces did he offer the reader? Did he blame science? Technology? Socialism? Or ultimately even the Church itself?

Though all this was basically a matter of indifference to me, I could not dismiss the book from my mind or the question its title asked. I was in an unusually nervy state. Perhaps it was anxiety about the new environment in which I was about to be plunged, perhaps I was nervous about life in the country and a job I did not feel up to—perhaps it was this suppressed fear that made me seek a diversion for my thoughts. I felt I must find out now, straight away, why belief in God was disappearing from the world. It was obsessive. I wanted to go into the shop and buy the book—I was prepared to buy the whole pile of books and pamphlets if the dealer refused to sell me that single item—but it did not come to that because the shop was shut.

It was the midday break. I had not thought of that. The dealer had gone home for lunch. I felt hungry myself, and my mood went from bad to worse. Was I to wait until he chose to come back and open up again—and perhaps end by missing my train? Why had I walked into the town instead of remaining at the station and quietly eating my lunch? That would have spared me all this annoyance. The shop owner might come back at any moment, of course, no doubt he lived somewhere in the neighbourhood, in one of those tall, airless houses with dirty grey façades and windows covered with grime, he was probably sitting behind one of them hurriedly eating his lunch—or perhaps he had not left the building at all but had gone into another room and locked the door to avoid being disturbed during his meal.

I noticed a bell-pull by the door and pulled it, but no one answered.

So he's having his midday snooze, I said to myself angrily, and suddenly I had a clear picture of him in my mind. He was a bald old man with a stubbly beard, and was lying on a sofa, snoring. He had drawn the blanket up to his chin, his greasy stiff hat was hanging on a nail by the door, and he was fast asleep, leaving me to wait until he came round. I shall do nothing of the sort, I said to myself. Why is he in his shop just at the time when strangers are around? He doesn't seem to care very much about disposing of his wares. Very well, then. I don't have to buy the book.

I took one more nervous, surreptitious look at the Gothic relief, as if I were doing something guilty and left.

When I got as far as the passage through the house it occurred to me that I could have the book sent to me. There was not much time to spare, but I hurried back. The shop was still shut, but I noted the name and address.

The man's name was Gerson, and very likely the book is still in his window. I could have spared myself the trouble of going back, because I never ordered it. I could not foresee that I would find the answer at Morwede to the two questions that plagued me, why belief in God was disappearing from the world and who the dead man was whose features were reproduced on the marble relief.

Ten minutes before the train left I was in the station square, and it was there that I had the unexpected encounter with the green Cadillac. To put it in a nutshell, it came from the right while I was waiting for a signal from the policeman directing the traffic. A woman was at the wheel, a woman I knew.

FOUR

Now, lying in this hospital bed with my right arm stretched out on the bed-cover as if I were asleep or anaesthetised and my eyes seeking for a resting place among the red lines and angles and stars of the pattern on the wall—now, at this insignificant moment, I feel my heart beating and my breath stopping just because I'm thinking of Bibiche. But then, in the station square, I was quite calm—in fact I was surprised at how calmly I took it. I think I felt the encounter to be not remarkable in the least but perfectly natural, and the only surprise was that it had taken place so late, at the last moment, in fact.

In Berlin I had been looking vainly for a whole year for this woman at the wheel of a green Cadillac. And now, just when I was about to begin a new life of which I had few expectations and hardly any hopes—the future seemed to offer me nothing but a grey and pleasureless monotony—the city that I was leaving as one leaves a cold and selfish lover, the city with its hard and hostile features for the first time showed me a kind and gentle smile. See what I have for you, it called after me. You see that I think of you. And you want to leave me? Was I to turn and go back? In that case it was too late. Was that the meaning of this encounter? Or was it only a parting message from the world I was leaving behind, a mocking farewell, a last fleeting wave from the other bank?

It was neither the one nor the other. It was a finding again and a prelude to something bigger. But that was something I dared not think about.

*

At first all that was known about her at the Bacteriological Institute was that her name was Kallistris Tsanaris and that her subject was biochemistry, and what we found out about her later was little more than enough. She had been brought to Berlin from Athens at the age of twelve and lived with her mother, who seemed to be an invalid, in a villa in the Zoo quarter. She moved only in the most exalted circles. Her father, a colonel in the Greek army who had been aide-de-camp to the king, was dead.

That was the extent of our information, and we had to be content with it, for she talked to none of us about her personal affairs. She kept a certain distance between herself and everyone else and, if she ever exchanged a few words with anyone, it would be exclusively about practical matters, such as a bunsen burner that was not working properly or the desirability of procuring another high pressure steriliser.

On her first appearance in the institute everyone sat up and took notice, and we all did our best to make an impression on her. She was paid every possible kind of attention, she was asked about her scientific interests and plans, and she was offered advice and help. Later, when we realised that all these approaches were met with the same cool indifference and reserve, interest in her diminished, though it did not completely disappear. She was said to be proud and arrogant, spoilt and calculating and, of course, stupid. In her eyes academics did not count, it was said—to be noticed by her you had to own at least a Mercedes. In fact her disinclination to any form of friendly contact seemed to be restricted to the laboratory. When she left in the evening there would always be a cavalier waiting to help her into his car. Each of these admirers had his own car, and we got to know them all by sight and had appropriate nicknames for them. It would be known, for instance, that on the previous evening she had been called for by the Patriarch Abraham, or had been seen in a box at the opera with the Grinning Faun. The Patriarch Abraham was a white-bearded old gentleman of distinctly Semitic appearance, and the Grinning Faun a very young man with a perpetual smile who always seemed to be enjoying himself.

There were also the so-called Mexican Brewer, the Big Game Hunter and the Kalmuck Prince. On the evening when she had been working late the Big Game Hunter appeared in the laboratory and asked for her. We knew she was in the changing room, but we treated the man as an unwelcome intruder and told him severely that persons unconnected with the institute were not allowed in the laboratory, and that he must wait outside. He took this quietly and left—greatly to my disappointment, for I had the reputation of being a first class fencer and would have dearly loved to cross swords with him, not so much out of jealousy as because I hoped in this way to play a part in her thoughts or at least draw attention to me.

Towards the end of the term I was ill for a few days and had to stay at home, and when I returned to work she had left. She had finished the work she was engaged on, and I was told that she had said goodbye to every single one of her colleagues and had even asked after me. She had mentioned her future plans only in the vaguest way, and the general view in the institute was that she had given up her studies and was about to get married to the so-called Kalmuck Prince. I did not believe this, because she had seemed exceptionally keen on her research work and betrayed a quite unusual, almost morbid ambition. Moreover, the individual whom we called the Kalmuck Prince had not been seen waiting for her outside the institute for two months. He and his smart Hispano seemed to have fallen out of favour.

For six months I had worked in the same room with her from morning till late afternoon, and for the whole of that time, unless my memory deceives me, I had not exchanged more than ten words with her apart from good morning and good night.

At first I was convinced she would turn up in the laboratory with a new research project. I was unable to believe that the time when I had been able to see her every day, hear her voice, follow her walk and her movements with my eyes, was over for good. Only after weeks of vain waiting did I begin to look for her.

No doubt there are exact and reliable ways of tracing a person in Berlin, discovering his or her address and daily habits. A private detective agency would probably have taken only a day or two to do this. I had to set about it differently. My meeting with her had to be by pure chance, or at any rate that is what it had to seem to be.

In the evening I walked through smart restaurants even the names of which I had never heard before. When you have no intention of remaining in a place like that, you have the feeling that you are attracting attention and mistrust even before you walk in. I generally acted as if I were looking for a friend, a table or a friend whom I was expecting. When waiters approached I would mention a made-up name such as Herr Konsul Stockström or Herr Assessor Bauschlot and would be told they were sorry, they didn't know the gentleman, and I would walk out looking peeved. Sometimes I would order some little thing. On one such occasion the waiter surprised me with the information that Herr Konsul Stockström had just left—"a tall, thin gentleman, isn't he, sir, with horn-rimmed spectacles and hair parted in the middle."

I looked for Bibiche among the couples at *thés dansants* in the big hotels, I waited to see the cars drive up at theatres on first nights, I went to the private view when art exhibitions were opened, and I was among the invited guests when new films were shown. With a great deal of trouble I managed to secure an invitation to a reception at the Greek embassy, and when she was not there I felt disheartened for the first time.

I remembered that a colleague had told me he had once seen her in a bar. I went there and became a regular customer. I sat there for hours over a cocktail, night after night, with my eyes fixed on the door waiting for her to walk in. At first, whenever it opened I felt a slight shudder of expectation, but later I did not even look up. Without noticing it, I had grown accustomed to the sight of people of no interest to me coming through it.

The results of my searches were more than paltry. I had a number of popular dance tunes in my head and I knew the names of most of the new plays. But I had not seen Bibiche.

Once I saw the Big Game Hunter. He was sitting alone at a table in a wine bar, smoking a big cigar and gazing straight ahead of him. He looked noticeably older. Seeing him sitting alone like that, I had the quite definite feeling that he too had lost track of Bibiche and was chasing after her in his roadster all over Berlin, always on the look-out and always restless. I suddenly felt sympathy for the man I had once wanted to cross swords with and nearly rose and shook hands with him. We were fellow-sufferers after all. He did not recognise me, but my searching gaze seemed to make him feel uncomfortable. He changed his seat and sat so that I could not see his face. Then he took a newspaper from his pocket and began to read.

I looked for Bibiche until the very last day. Strangely, the idea that she might have left Berlin did not occur to me until I got to the station and asked for a ticket to Osnabrück.

And at Osnabrück I saw her in the station square. The green Cadillac she was driving stopped bare ten paces away from me. She wore a sealskin coat and a grey Basque beret.

At that moment I was happy, completely happy. I did not even want to be seen and recognised by her, it was enough that she was there and that I saw her. The whole thing lasted only a few seconds, I think. She adjusted her beret, threw away a cigarette stub and drove off.

Only when she moved slowly away and then accelerated did I realise I ought to do something, jump in a taxi and follow her, no, not to speak to her but only to avoid losing sight of her again. I wanted to know where she was going and where she lived. At the same time I realised that I was no longer a master of my time, that I had undertaken an obligation. My train was leaving in a few minutes and a car would be waiting for me at Rheda station. Never mind, you must follow her, a voice inside me cried. But it was too late. The green car disappeared into one of the wide streets leading to the town centre.

Farewell, Bibiche, I muttered to myself. This is the second time I've lost you. Fate gave me a chance and I missed it. Fate? Why fate? God put you in my way, Bibiche, God, not fate. The question why believe in God was disappearing from the world shot through my mind, and for a moment I saw in my mind's eye the staring marble face in the antique dealer's window.

I started, and looked about me. I was standing in the middle of the square and there was a terrible din all round me, taxi drivers shouted at me, a motorcyclist dismounted right in front of me, swore and shook his fist at me, the policeman regulating the traffic signalled to me several times, but I could not make out what he wanted me to do—was I to stop or go on, or go right or left?

I stepped to the right, and dropped the newspapers and magazine I had under my arm. I bent to pick them up, but there was a honk behind me and I jumped aside. No, I must have picked them up, because later I read them in the train. I picked them up and jumped aside, and then—what happened?

Nothing at all. I reached the pavement, took my ticket, and collected my luggage, all that's obvious. And then I got into the train.

At Rheda station a big four-seater sleigh was waiting for me. A lad who did not look in the least like a coachman to the nobility took charge of my luggage. I turned up my coat collar and pulled the rug over my knees, and off we went through flat, desolate country between bare roadside trees and across snow-covered fields of stubble. The dreary monotony of the landscape was oppressive, and the failing light increased my gloom. Travelling always makes me drowsy, and I fell asleep. When the sleigh drew up at the forester's lodge I woke up. I heard a dog barking, and when I sleepily opened my eyes the man who now sweeps the floor in my hospital room and behaves as if he had never seen me before was standing by the sleigh and smiling at me. Prince Praxatin was wearing a short fur jacket and high boots, and immediately noticed the scar on his upper lip. It had been sewn badly and had healed badly. What sort of wound had that been? It looked like the result of a jab by a big bird.

"A good journey, doctor?" he said. "I sent you the big sleigh because of the luggage, but I see you have only these two small suitcases."

This man who was now slinking out of the room with a broom under his arm spoke to me with friendly condescension, as if to a subordinate. I naturally took him to be the owner of the Morwe estate and rose to my feet.

"Have I the honour of addressing Baron von Malchin . . . ?"

"No, I'm not the baron, I'm only his estate manager," he interrupted. "Prince Arkady Praxatin—yes, I'm a Russian, a leaf torn from the tree by the gale, one of those typical *émigrés* who always tell the same story, in Russia they owned I don't know how many *desyatins*, as well as a palace in Petrograd and another in Moscow, and now they're waiters in some restaurant—except that I happen not to be a waiter, but to be earning a living here on this estate."

He was still holding my hand in his. Behind what he was now saying there was a gloomy indifference and a trace of the kind of self-irony that is embarrassing to a listener. I wanted to introduce myself, but he seemed to regard this as unnecessary and did not give me a chance to speak.

"Manager, agent, bailiff, what you will," he went on. "I might just as well have become the estate chef. Perhaps that's the field in which my talents really lie. At home my *piroshki*, my mushrooms in cream sauce, my game soups with individual meat pies were famous throughout the neighbourhood. Life was still worth living in those days. But here, in this country, this neighbourhood . . . Do you play cards, doctor? Baccarat, perhaps, or *écarté*? No? What a pity. This is a lonely waste, as you'll find out for yourself, there's no social life here."

At last he let my hand go, lit a cigarette and looked up dreamily at the evening sky and the pale moon while I shivered and covered myself with the rug. Then he went on with his monologue.

"Never mind the loneliness, it's all right with me. But life here is an ordeal. Sometimes when I dress in the morning I say to myself, you live this dreary life, but it's your own fault, you wanted it. That was when the Bolsheviks arrested me—not to my dying day shall I ever know why—I feared for my life, I trembled with fear, prayed to God on my knees, I'm young, I said, take pity on me, I want to live. Go to the devil, God said to me, you're just the martyr to the faith I want, so go away and live. And this is the life I'm living. Others—they too sinned, piled up evil in their hearts, played and drank and squandered their gold and silver and wept far too little about their sins—and now they're actually happy, living like peasants, satisfied if they have a little moonshine to drink with their groats. They don't think. But I spend all my time thinking about myself, that's my illness, doctor, I think far too much. You don't

sympathise with those Reds, do you, doctor?"

I told him I took no interest whatever in politics. He must have detected the irritation and impatience behind my answer, because he took a step backwards, struck his brow with his hand, and began reproaching himself.

"Here I am, standing about and talking, actually talking politics, while there's a sick child in the house—what will you think of me, doctor? The baron, my friend and benefactor, said to me: 'Arkad Fyodorovich, go and meet the doctor and, unless he's exhausted by the journey, ask him to stop off on the way and see a patient, a little girl here in the forester's lodge. She has been feverish for two days. It may be scarlet fever.'"

I got out of the sleigh and followed him into the house. Meanwhile the coachman unhitched the horses to allow them to move. A young fox emerged from the kennel in which it was chained and howled at us furiously. The Russian aimed a kick and shook his fist at it.

"Quiet, you thrice damned fiendish bastard, get back into your hole," he shouted at it. "You've seen me often enough, you ought to know me by now, but you still don't, you useless beast, you're not worth the food you eat."

We went into the house. A poorly lit corridor led to a dark, unheated room in which I could see practically nothing, and knocked my shin painfully against the edge of a chair. "Straight on, doctor," the Russian said, but I stopped and listened to a violin being played in the next room.

It was a melancholy tune that forms the first bars of a Tartini sonata in which ghosts flicker, and grips me whenever I hear it. A childhood memory of mine is associated with it. I'm in my father's house, everyone has gone out and left me alone. It's getting dark, everything's quiet, only the wind whistles quietly in the chimney, and I'm afraid, because everything all round is bewitched, and I'm full of the childish fear of being alone, and of tomorrow, and of life itself.

For a moment I stood there like a small, frightened boy close to tears. Then I pulled myself together. "Who plays the first movement of the sonata here in this lonely house?" I asked. As if he had been reading my thoughts the Russian answered:

"That's Federico. I thought I'd find him here. He hasn't been seen since early morning. Instead of staying at home and doing his French, he's here playing the fiddle. Come along, doctor."

The violin playing stopped when we went into the room. A middle-aged woman with pale cheeks who looked as if she had been up all night, rose from the foot of the bed and looked at me with anxious expectant eyes. The dimmed light of a petrol lamp fell on the quilted bedcover and the pillows and the thin face of the little patient, who must have been thirteen or fourteen. A blackened oak figure of Christ held its arms outstretched over the bed. The boy who had been playing the sonata sat motionless on the window ledge with his violin on his knees.

"Well?" said the Russian when I had finished examining the patient.

"You're right, it is scarlet fever," I replied. "I'll send a notification of infectious illness to the head of the district." "The head of the district is the baron, and I keep his diary," the Russian said. "I'll fill in the form and send it to you for signature tomorrow."

While I washed my hands I gave the woman the necessary instructions for the night. To show that she would forget nothing of what I said she repeated it in a voice in which there was anxiety and tension; she did not take her eyes off the child for a moment. Meanwhile the Russian turned to the boy who was still sitting motionless on the window ledge.

"Now you see what an embarrassing position you've put me in, Federico," he said. "You're forbidden to come here, but you take no notice and come here every day, you hurry here as if driven by the wind. And the consequence of your disobedience is that you're now in a sick-room and perhaps you've already

caught the scarlet fever. What am I to do? I shall have to tell your father that I found you here.”

~~The boy's voice came out of the darkness. "You won't do that, Arkady Fyodorovich," he said. "I know you won't do that."~~

“You know that? Are you quite sure of what you’re saying. Are you actually threatening me, perhaps? What are you threatening me with? Federico, I’m talking to you absolutely seriously. What do you mean by what you have just said? Tell me.

The boy did not answer, and his silence seemed to worry the Russian. He took a step forward and went on: “You sit there in the dark just like an owl. You sit there threateningly and say nothing. Do you by any chance think you’re frightening me? What have I to be frightened of? Certainly, I’ve often played cards with you, not for my own pleasure, but for your entertainment. And as for the paper you signed . . .”

“I’m not talking about trente et quarante and I haven’t threatened you,” the boy said with a trace of pride and indignation in his voice. “You won’t say anything, Arkady Fyodorovich, simply because you’re a gentleman.”

“So that’s what you think,” the Russian said after a moment’s reflection. “Very well, let us assume that for your sake I once more behave like a gentleman and say nothing, that doesn’t alter the fact that you’ll be here again tomorrow.”

“That’s quite certain,” the boy replied. “I’ll be here tomorrow and every day.”

The little girl’s hand appeared from under the bed cover and she said quietly without opening her eyes: “Are you still there, Federico?”

The boy slid noiselessly from the window ledge.

“Yes, I’m still here, Elsie, I’m still here with you. And the doctor’s here too, and you’ll soon be well again and able to get up.”

Meanwhile the Russian seemed to have made up his mind.

“It’s impossible,” he announced. “I can’t let you go on with these visits. I can’t take the responsibility in relation to your father . . .”

The boy cut him short with a gesture.

“You have no responsibility, Arkady Fyodorovich,” he said. “I take full responsibility myself. You know nothing, you have never seen me here.”

So far I had been more amused than irritated by the way the Russian negotiated with this adolescent but now it seemed to me that it was time for me to intervene.

“Young man,” I said, “the situation is not as simple as that. As a doctor I have something to say. By staying in this room you have become a carrier of the illness. You have become a danger to everyone with whom you come in contact. Do you understand that?”

The boy did not answer. He was standing in the dark and I felt his eyes on me.

“So,” I said, “you will be isolated and under observation for two weeks. I shall see to that, and of course I shall have to inform your father.”

“Are you being serious?” he said, and I noted with pleasure that his voice had changed and had lost some of its confidence.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m dead tired and in no mood for joking.”

“No, you mustn’t tell my father,” he said quietly but firmly. “For heaven’s sake don’t tell him you met me here.”

“Unfortunately I have no choice in the matter,” I said as calmly as I could. “I think we can go now there’s no more I can do here today. Besides, you don’t strike me as having much spirit, young man. At your age I used to face a punishment I deserved with rather more courage.”

For a while there was silence in the room. The only sound was the feverish child's quick breathing and the hiss of the petrol lamp.

"Arkady Fyodorovich, you're my friend," the boy said suddenly. "Why don't you help me? You stand there and allow me to be insulted."

"You should not have said that, doctor," the Russian said. "You should not have said that, really. You must realise that he really is in a difficult situation. Our concern should be to help him. Don't you think it would be sufficient if we disinfected all his clothes and his underwear?"

"Yes, it might be," I admitted. "But you yourself heard the young gentleman say that he would be coming here again tomorrow and every day."

The boy was leaning against the window ledge, looking at me.

"And if I promise you not to come here again?" he said.

"Do you always change your mind so quickly?" I said. "What guarantee have I that you will keep your promise?"

Once more there was a silence, and then the Russian said: "You mustn't do Federico an injustice, doctor. You talk like that because you don't know him. I do. Actually I know him very well. If he gives his word, he keeps it, I vouch for that."

"Very well, then. He'll give me his word . . ."

"I'll give it to you, Arkady Fyodorovich," the boy interrupted me. "I'll give it to you, because you're my friend and a gentleman. I shall not come to this house as long as Elsie is ill. Will that do?"

The question was directed at the Russian, but I answered.

"Yes," I said.

The boy approached noiselessly, like a shadow.

"Can you hear me, Elsie?" he said. "I shan't be coming here again, I gave my word, you heard me," he said. "I had to. You know that if father finds out that I've been here with you he'll send me away from here, a long way away, perhaps even to strangers in the town. That's why it's better that I shouldn't come. Do you hear me, Elsie?"

"No, young gentleman, she can't hear you, she's asleep," the woman whispered.

She took the lamp and put it on the table. It now shone on the boy's face, and I saw it for the first time.

My first reaction was shock. If anyone, the Russian, for instance, had asked me a question I should not have been able to answer.

I felt pressure round my heart, I dropped my thermometer, my knees trembled, and I clutched the back of a chair for support.

After the bewilderment of the first few moments, when I was able to think more calmly again, I told myself it must have been an optical illusion. My nerves were on edge, my senses must have deceived me, my memory must have played a trick on me. The boy's face must have been covered up by the memory of another face that had haunted me all day long. A troublesome obsession that I must get rid of quickly.

The boy bent down, picked up the thermometer, and handed it to me. His face was now turned towards me and I saw it in a different light, and seeing it for a second time like this left no possible doubt in my mind that what I had seen was no illusion. Incredibly, the boy's features were those of the Gothic marble relief I had seen a few hours before among a lot of other junk in an antique dealer's window in Osnabrück.

What took me aback was not so much the external resemblance as the facial expression, which in both cases was the same. There was the same extraordinary juxtaposition of unbridled violence and dignified

charm that had astonished me in the marble relief. True, the nose and chin were different: they were gentler and less sharply defined. It seemed to me that a person who had these features would be capable of both of the wildest and gentlest impulses. The only new and surprising thing about this face was the big blue eyes, which were full of silvery reflections, like irises.

By an effort of will I had been able to drag myself away from the marble relief in the shop window but here I went on gazing at that face and those eyes as if under a spell. My behaviour was absurd perhaps, but neither the boy nor the Russian seemed to notice what was happening inside me. The Russian stifled a yawn and said: "Are you ready, doctor? Shall we go?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Federico and said: "The sleigh's outside. The big sleigh. There's room for more than three, so you can come with us, Federico."

"Thank you, but I'd rather go on foot, I know a short cut," the boy replied.

"You know the way only too well. Only too well," the Russian said teasingly. "I've no fear of losing your way." The boy did not answer. With his violin case under his arm he went over to the bench and looked at the sleeping child. Then he took his cap and coat and nodded at me as he walked past me and out.

"You offended him, doctor," the Russian said as the sleigh moved off. "You did it deliberately, I saw your eyes flash. You've made an enemy of him. It's bad to have made an enemy of Federico."

We left the wood and were driving in the dark across snow-covered fields, and the wind sang its sad tunes in the telegraph wires.

"Who is Federico's father?" I asked.

"His father? His real father is a small artisan somewhere in northern Italy. Federico comes from very humble circumstances. But the baron adopted him, and perhaps loves him even more than his own child."

"So he has a child of his own?"

The Russian was rather surprised. "Yes," he replied. "Your little patient, doctor. The child in the forester's lodge. Didn't I mention that your patient was the baron's little girl?"

"No, you didn't. But why does he let his child be looked after by others?"

I realised that I had no right to ask such a question.

"I beg your pardon, I didn't ask that question out of idle curiosity, but as a doctor," I said.

The Russian produced a box of matches from his fur coat and tried to light his cigarette. This took some time. Eventually he replied: "Perhaps the forest air is better for the child's health. It's always mist in the village. The mist hangs about right through the autumn and winter. Look."

He pointed with his hand that was holding the cigarette to the scattered village lights, which seemed to be shining out of a thick, milky-white veil.

"It creeps into the village from the moor and the damp meadows. It's always there, day after day and night after night. It's even worse than the loneliness, it causes the gloomiest thoughts, it makes the soul sick. Perhaps you really ought to learn to play cards, doctor."

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