

THE DRINKER

HANS FALLADA

"Fallada deserves high praise for having reported, so realistically, so truthfully, with such closeness to life."

—HERMAN HESSE



HANS FALLADA
THE DRINKER

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The Drinker

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THE DRINKER

Of course I have not always been a drunkard. Indeed it is not very long since I first took to drink. Formerly I was repelled by alcohol; I might take a glass of beer, but wine tasted sour to me, and the smell of schnaps made me ill. But then the time came when things began to go wrong with me. My business affairs did not proceed as they should, and in my dealings with people I met with all kinds of setbacks. I always have been a sensitive man, needing the sympathy and encouragement of those around me, though of course I did not show this and liked to appear rather sure and self-possessed. Worst of all, the feeling gradually grew on me that even my wife was turning away from me. At first the signs were almost unnoticeable, little things that anyone else would have overlooked. For instance, at a birthday party in our house, she forgot to offer me cake. I never eat cake, but hitherto, despite that, she had always offered it me. And once, for three days there was a cobweb in my room, above the stove. I went through all the rooms in the house, but there was not a cobweb in any of them, only in mine. I meant to wait and see how long she intended to annoy me with this, but on the fourth day I could hold out no longer, and I was obliged to tell her of it. Then the cobweb was removed. Naturally I spoke to her very firmly. At all costs I wanted to avoid showing how much I suffered through these insults and my growing isolation.

But it did not end there. Soon came the affair of the door-mat. I had had trouble at the bank that day; for the first time they had refused to cash a cheque for me. I suppose word had got round that I had had certain losses. The bank manager, a Herr Alf, pretended to be very amiable, and even offered to ring up the head office about an overdraft. Of course he refused. I had been smiling and self-confident as usual, but I noticed that this time he had not offered me a cigar as he generally did. Doubtless this customer was no longer worth it. I went home very depressed, through a heavy fall of autumn rain. I was not in any real difficulties yet; my affairs were merely going through a period of stagnation which could certainly have been overcome, at this stage, by the exercise of a little initiative. But I just couldn't summon up that initiative. I was too depressed by all the mute dislike of myself which I encountered at every twist and turn.

When I got home (we live a little way out of town, in our own house, and the road is not properly made up yet) I wanted to clean my muddy shoes outside the door, but today the mat, of course, was missing. Angrily I unlocked the door and called into the house for my wife. It was getting dark, but I could see no light anywhere, and Magda did not come either. I called again and again but nothing happened. I found myself in a most critical situation: I stood in the rain outside the door of my own house, and could not go indoors without making the porch and hall quite unnecessarily muddy, all because my wife had forgotten to put the mat out, and moreover had failed to be present at a time when she knew full well I should be coming home from work. Finally I had to master my feelings: I tiptoed carefully into the house. As I sat on a chair in the hall to take my shoes off, having switched on the light, I found that all my precautions had been in vain: there were most ugly marks on the pale green hall-carpet. I had always told Magda that such a delicate green was not suitable for the hall, but she was of the opinion that both of us were old enough to be a bit careful, and in any case, our maid Else used the back-door and generally went about the house in slippers.

Angrily I took off my shoes, and just as I was pulling the second one off, I saw Magda coming through the door at the head of the cellar steps. The shoe slipped from me and fell noisily on to the carpet, making a disgusting mark.

“Do be more careful, Erwin,” cried Magda angrily. “What a sight this carpet is again! Can you get used to wiping your feet properly?”

The obvious injustice of this reproach took my breath away, but I restrained myself.

“Where in the world have you been?” I asked, glaring at her. “I called you at least ten times!”

“I was seeing to the central heating in the cellar,” said Magda coolly, “but what’s that got to do with my carpet?”

“It’s just as much my carpet as yours,” I answered heatedly. “I didn’t dirty it for fun. But when there’s no mat outside the door ...”

“No mat outside the door? Of course there’s a mat outside the door!”

“There isn’t,” I shouted. “Kindly go and see for yourself!”

But of course she would not dream of looking outside the door.

“Even if Else has forgotten to put it out, you could very well have taken off your shoes on the porch. In any case, there was no need to throw that shoe down on the carpet with such a thump.”

I looked at her, speechless with rage.

“Yes,” she said, “you’ve nothing to say. When you’re told off, you’ve nothing to say. But you’re always telling me off ...”

I did not see any proper sense in her words, but I said: “When have I told you off?”

“Just now,” she answered quickly, “first because I didn’t come when you called, and I had to see to the heating because this is Else’s afternoon off. And then because the mat wasn’t outside the door. With all the work I have to do, I can’t possibly look after every little detail of Else’s work as well!”

I controlled myself. In my heart I found Magda wrong on every point. But aloud I said: “Don’t let’s quarrel, Magda. Please believe me, I didn’t make the marks on purpose.”

“And you believe me,” she said, still rather sharply, “I didn’t intend that you should have to shout all over the house after me.”

I kept silent. By dinner-time, we both had ourselves quite well in hand again, and even managed a fairly sensible conversation, and suddenly I had the idea of fetching a bottle of red wine which someone had given me, and which had been in the cellar for years. I really do not know why this idea occurred to me. Perhaps the sense of our reconciliation had put me in mind of something festive, of a wedding or a baptism. Magda was quite surprised, too, but she smiled approvingly. I drank only a glass and a half, though this evening the wine did not taste sour to me. I got into quite a cheerful mood and managed to tell Magda a few things about those business affairs of mine, which were causing me so much trouble. Naturally I did not refer to them as troubles, on the contrary I presented my misfortunes as successes. Magda listened to me with more interest than she had shown for a long time past. I had the feeling that the estrangement between us had completely disappeared, and in my joy I gave Magda a hundred marks to buy herself something nice; a dress or a ring or whatever she had set her heart on.

Since then, I have often wondered whether I wasn't completely drunk that evening. Of course, I wasn't; Magda as well as I would have noticed it. And yet, that evening I must have been intoxicated for the first time in my life. I didn't sway, my speech wasn't thick. The glass-and-a-half of musty red wine could not have had such an effect on a sober man like me, and yet, the alcohol transformed the whole world for me. It made me believe there had been no estrangement, no quarrel between Magda and myself; it changed my business troubles into successes, into such successes that I even had a hundred marks to give away, not a considerable sum of course, but in my position, no sum was quite inconsiderable. Only when I awoke next morning and all these events, from the forgotten door-mat to the present of the hundred-mark note, passed before my mind's eye—only then was it clear to me how disgracefully I had treated Magda. Not only had I deceived her about the state of my business affairs, but I had fortified this deceit by a gift of money, so as to make it more credible, with something that would legally be called "intent to defraud". But the legal side was quite unimportant. Only the human aspect was important, and in this case the human aspect was simply horrible. For the first time in our married life I had deliberately deceived Magda—and why? In Heaven's name, why? I could very well have continued to keep quiet about the whole thing, just as I had kept quiet up till then. Nobody forced me to speak. Nobody? Ah, yes, alcohol had made me do it. When once I had understood, when once I had realised to the full, what a liar alcohol is, and what liars it makes of honest men, I swore never to touch another drop and even to give up my occasional glass of beer.

But what are resolutions, what are plans? On this sober morning I promised myself at least to take advantage of the warmer mood which had arisen between Magda and me last night, and not to let things drift again into friction and estrangement. And yet before many days had passed, we were quarrelling again. It really was absolutely incomprehensible—fourteen years of our married life had gone by almost without a quarrel, and now, in the fifteenth, appeared that we simply couldn't live without bickering. Often it seemed positively ridiculous to me, the kind of things we found to quarrel about. It was as if we had to quarrel at certain times, no matter why. Quarrelling seemed like a poison, which quickly became a habit and without which we could scarcely go on living. At first, of course, we scrupulously kept up appearances, we tried as far as possible to keep to the point of the quarrel, and to avoid personal insults. Also the presence of our little maid Else restrained us. We knew that she was inquisitive, and that she passed on everything she heard. At that time it would have been unspeakably horrible to me if anyone in town had got to hear of my troubles and of quarrelling: but not much later it was to become completely immaterial what people said or thought of me; and what was worse, I was to lose all sense of self-respect.

I have said that Magda and I had become accustomed to quarrelling almost daily. In point of fact we were really only bickering about nothing at all, just for something to relieve the ever-growing tension between us. That we did so was really a miracle, though not a pleasant one: for many years Magda and I had led a remarkably happy life together. We had married for love, while we were both very minor employees, and with an attaché case each we had

started our career together. Oh, those wonderful penniless years of our early married life—when I look back on them now! Magda was a real artist in housekeeping. Some weeks we managed on ten marks and it seemed to us we were living like lords. Then came that brave time, a time of ceaseless struggle, when I made myself independent, and when with Magda's help I built up my own business. It succeeded—good God, how lucky we were with everything in those days! We had only to touch something, to turn our hand and mind to it and it succeeded, it blossomed like a well-tended flower, it bore fruit for us. We were denied children, however much we longed for them. Magda had a miscarriage once; from then on a hope of children was gone. But we loved each other nonetheless. For many years of our married life we fell newly in love with each other, over and again. I never desired any other woman but Magda. She made me completely happy, and I presumed she felt the same about me.

When the business was running smoothly, when it had grown as much as the size of our town and our district allowed, our interest began to flag somewhat. Then, in compensation, came the purchase of our own plot of land just out of town, the building of our house, the laying-out of our garden, the furniture which was to be with us for the rest of our life—these things which bound us closely together again and prevented us from noticing that our relationship was beginning to cool off. If we no longer loved each other as much as before, we no longer desired each other so often and so warmly, we did not regard this as a loss, but took it as a matter of course. We had simply become a long-married couple: what had happened to us, happened to everyone; it was a natural thing. And as I have said, the comradeship of planning, building, choosing furniture, completely made up for it. From being lovers we had become comrades, and we felt no sense of loss.

At that time Magda had already ceased to be an active partner in my business, a step which we both regarded as inevitable. She had a larger household of her own; the garden and our few fowls also demanded some care; and the extent of the business easily allowed the employment of new staff. Later, it was to become apparent how fatal was Magda's withdrawal from my business. Not only because we thereby lost a great part of our mutual interests, but also it became obvious that her help was irreplaceable. She was far more active than I, more enterprising, also much cleverer than I in dealing with people, and in an easy-jocular way she managed to get them where she wanted them. I was the cautious element in our partnership, the brake, as it were, that checked any too-rash move and made the going safe. In actual business dealings, I was inclined to hold back as much as possible, not to force myself on anybody, and never to ask for anything. So it was inevitable, after Magda's withdrawal, that our business went on in the old way at first, nothing new came in, and then gradually, slowly, year by year, it fell away. Of course, all this only became clear to me much later, too late, when there was nothing left to salvage. At the time of Magda's withdrawal I felt rather relieved, even: a man who runs his own firm demands more respect from people than one whose wife is able to have a say in everything.

Only when we started quarrelling did I notice how estranged Magda and I had become during those years when she had been looking after her household and I had been managing the business. The first few times I still felt quite ashamed of our lack of restraint, and when I noticed that I had grieved Magda, that she was even going about with tear-stained eyes, it hurt me almost as much as it hurt her, and I swore that I would be better. But man gets used to anything, and I am afraid that perhaps he gets used quickest of all to living in a state of degradation. The day came when, at the sight of Magda's red-rimmed eyes, I no longer swore to behave better. Instead with mingled satisfaction and surprise, I said to myself: "I gave it to you properly that time! You're not going to get the upper hand of me always with that sharp tongue of yours!" It seemed horrible to feel that way, and yet it seemed right, it satisfied me to feel so, however paradoxical that may seem. From there, it was only a short step to the point where I consciously sought to hurt her.

At that most critical moment in our relationship, the grocery contract for the prison came up for tender, as happened every three years. In our town (not exactly to the delight of its inhabitants) we have the central prison of the province, which always has some fifteen hundred prisoners within its walls. We had had the contract for nine years. Magda had worked very hard to get it originally. On the two previous occasions when it had come up for tender, Magda had only to pay the prison governor a brief courtesy visit and the contract was ours without further ado. I had always taken this contract so much for granted as a part of my business, that this time I hardly bothered about it, I had the previous tender—whose price-list had been satisfactory for nine years—copied out and sent in. I also contemplated a visit to the official concerned; but everything would go its usual way, I didn't want to see an importunate, I knew the man was overburdened with work—in short I had at least ten good reasons for abandoning the visit.

Consequently, it came as a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, when a letter from the prison administration informed me in a few bare words that my tender was refused, that the contract had been given to another firm. My first thought was: above all, Magda mustn't hear of this! Then I took my hat and hurried off to the governor, to pay the visit now, that would have had some point three weeks ago. I was received politely but coolly. The governor regretted that our long-standing business connection was now severed. However he had not been able to act otherwise, since part of the price-list I quoted had long ago been superseded in some cases by higher prices, in other cases by lower. On the whole, it would probably just about balance out, but my tender had—if I would pardon his frankness—merely made a bad impression on the responsible officials, as if it was all the same to my firm whether we got the contract or not. I learned moreover that a quite new firm, eager to get on at any price and one which had already given me trouble several times before, had once again come on top. Finally, in all politeness the governor expressed the hope in three years' time, they might again be able to resume their previous business connection with my firm, and I was dismissed.

I knew that in the prison governor's office I had not shown any of the consternation, the desperation even, that I felt at this stroke of bad luck; I had disguised my inquiry under the

cloak of politeness and of curiosity about the name of the lucky winner. When I stood outside the heavy iron gates of the prison again, when the last bolt had clashed to behind me, I looked into the bright sunshine of that lovely spring day like someone who has just awakened from a heavy dream, and doesn't yet know whether he is really awake or is still sighing under the weight of the nightmare. I was still sighing under it. In vain the iron gate had dismissed me to freedom; I remained the prisoner of my own troubles and failures.

Now it was impossible for me to go back into town to my office, above all I had to put myself together before I saw Magda—I went away from the town and from people, I walked over the fields and meadows, further and further, as if I could run away from my trouble. That day I saw nothing of the fresh emerald green of the young crops, I did not hear the gurgling of the brooks, nor the drum-roll of the larks in the blue-golden air: I was utterly alone with myself and my misfortune.

It was quite clear to me that this was no small mishap for my business, to be taken with a shrug of regret; the delivery of groceries for fifteen hundred people, even at a modest profit was such an important item of my turnover, that it could not be given up without drastical altering my whole prospects. Compensation for this loss was not to be thought of, other such possibilities did not exist in our modest town. By a supreme effort, it might have been possible to increase the number of retail firms by a few dozen, but apart from the fact that this would by no means be any substitute for my loss, I felt incapable of making any such effort at the moment. For some reason I had been feeling rather low for nearly a year now. I was more and more inclined to let things go their own way and not excite myself too much. I was in need of rest—why, I do not know. Perhaps I was getting prematurely old. It was clear to me that I would have to dismiss at least two of my staff, but even that did not disturb me unduly, though I knew how it would be talked about. It wasn't the business that worried me at the moment, but Magda. Again and again my main thought, my main worry was: it's got to be kept from Magda! I told myself that in the long run I wouldn't be able to conceal from her the dismissal of two of my staff and the loss of the contract. But I pretended that everything depended on her not finding out just yet, that perhaps in a few weeks I would get some substitute or other. Then I had a bright moment again. I stopped, kicked hard against a stone in the dusty road, and said to myself: "Since Magda is bound to find out, it's better she should hear about it from me than from other people, and moreover it's better she should hear about it today than some other time. Every day it's postponed will make confession more difficult. After all, I'm not guilty of a crime, only of neglect." I kicked the stone again. "I'll simply ask Magda to help me with the business again. That will reconcile her to my failure, and I and my business can only gain by it. I really am rather under the weather and could well do with some help...."

But that bright moment quickly passed. The respect of other people, and particularly of Magda, had always been so important to me. I had always carefully seen to it that I was looked up to as the head of the firm. Now, especially now, I couldn't bring myself to forego a single iota of my dignity, or to humiliate myself before Magda. No, I resolved, come what may, to master the affair myself. Also I didn't want the help of a woman with whom I quarrelled almost daily. It was easy to foresee that the bickering would go on in the very office—she would insist on having her way, I would oppose her, she would throw my failure

in my face—oh no, impossible!

I stamped my foot in the dust of the road. I had no idea where my feet had been taking me. I had been so absorbed in my troubles. I was standing in a village not far from my home town, a favourite spot for springtime excursions on account of its charming birch woods and its lake. But on this week-day morning there were no trippers. People were too busy at home. I was standing just outside the inn, and I was conscious of feeling thirsty. I went into the low, wide, rather dark barroom. Previously, I had always seen it full of townsfolk, the bright spring frocks of the women making the room brighter and giving it, despite its low ceiling, an airy appearance. For when the townspeople were here, the windows had been open, coloured cloths lay on the tables, and everywhere bright sprays of birch stood in tall vases. Now the room was dark, brownish-yellow American cloth covered the tables, it smelt stuffy, the windows were shut tight. Behind the bar stood a young girl with unkempt hair and a dirty apron, whispering busily to a young fellow who seemed to be a bricklayer, by his limbs spattered clothes. My first impulse was to turn back. But my thirst, and particularly the fear of being left at the mercy of my troubles again, made me approach the bar instead.

“Give me something to drink, anything to quench a thirst,” I said.

Without looking up, the girl ran some beer into a glass, and I watched the froth drip over the edge. The girl turned off the tap, waited a moment till the froth had settled, and then let another spurt of beer run in, then, still without a word, she pushed the glass towards me across the tarnished zinc. She resumed her whispering with the young bricklayer. So far she had not given me a glance.

I lifted the glass to my mouth and emptied it thoughtfully, gulp by gulp, without once setting it down. It tasted fresh, fizzy, slightly bitter, and it seemed to leave in my mouth a feeling of airy brightness that had not been there before.

“Give me another of the same,” I was about to say, but I changed my mind. I had seen a short squat bright glass before the young man, the kind called a noggin, in which schnaps was usually served.

“I’ll have a noggin of that,” I suddenly said. Why I did so, who had never drunk schnaps in my life, who had a deep aversion to the very smell of it, I really don’t know. At that very moment all my lifelong habits were changing, I was at the mercy of mysterious influences, and the strength to resist them had been taken from me.

Now for the first time the girl looked at me. Slowly she lifted her rather coarse-grained eyelids and turned her bright knowing eyes on me.

“Schnaps?” she asked.

“Schnaps,” I said, the girl took down a bottle, and I wondered if a female had ever looked at me before in such a shamelessly knowing way. Her glance seemed to penetrate right to the root of my manhood, as if seeking to find out how much of a man I was; it seemed positively physical, something painfully, sweetly insolent, as if I were stripped naked before her eyes.

The glass was filled, it was pushed towards me across the zinc, the eyelids lowered again, the girl turned to the young man: the verdict had been reached. I raised the glass, hesitated—and with a sudden resolve I tipped its contents into my mouth. It burned, it took my breath away, I choked, but managed to force the liquor down my throat, I felt it going down, burning and acrid—and suddenly a feeling of warmth spread in my stomach, an agreeable and

genial warmth. Then I shuddered all over. Half aloud, the bricklayer said, "The ones that shake like that are the worst," and the girl gave a short laugh. I put a one-mark note down on the bar and left the inn without another word.

The spring day greeted me with its sunny warmth and its gentle breeze as fine as silk, but I came back into it a changed man. A lightness had mounted to my head from the warmth of my stomach and my heart beat free and strong. Now I could see the emerald green of the young shoots, now I could hear the trilling of the larks in the blue sky. My cares had fallen away from me. "Everything will come right in the end," I cheerfully assured myself, and started for home. "Why worry about it now?" Before I reached town, I had turned into two other inns, and in each of them I drank another noggin to repeat and strengthen the quickly fading effect of the schnaps. With a slight but not unpleasant sensation of numbness, I reached home just in time for lunch.

It was clear to me that now I had to conceal from my wife not only the loss of the grocery contract, but also my drinking. But I felt so much on top of the world at the moment, that I was sure this would present no difficulty at all. I stayed longer in the bathroom than usual, and not only washed with particular care, but also thoroughly brushed my teeth in order to get rid of any smell of alcohol. I did not know yet what attitude I was going to adopt with Magda, but a slight feeling of unease warned me not to be too talkative—to which I felt a strong inclination. Perhaps a serious, calm and collected pose would be best. The soup was on the table already when I came in, and Magda was waiting for me. I lightly gave her my hand and made a few remarks about the lovely spring weather. She agreed, and told me of a number of things that needed doing in the garden, and asked me to bring her from town the following evening certain vegetable seeds which she had just noticed were missing. I promised to do so immediately, and so we got through the soup without a hitch. I was well aware that, even now and then, Magda surreptitiously eyed me up and down, with an unspoken question, but confident that nothing about me was noticeable, and that all was going well, I paid no attention to her glances. I recall that I ate that soup with particular relish.

Else cleared the table, and as she did so she whispered some domestic question to my wife which caused Magda to get up and follow Else into the kitchen, probably to cut up or taste something. I was left alone in the dining-room, waiting for the meat course. I was thinking of nothing in particular; I was filled with a pleasant contentment; I was enjoying life. I had no warning of what I was about to do next. Suddenly, to my own surprise, I got up, tiptoed over to the sideboard, opened the lower door, and there, sure enough, was the bottle of red wine which we had started on that fateful November evening when our quarrels had begun. I held it up to the light. As I expected, it was still half-full. There was no time to lose, Magda might return at any moment. The cork was driven rather deep into the neck of the bottle, but I pulled it out with my nails, put the bottle to my mouth, and drank and drank like an old toper. (But what else could I do? There was no time to get a glass, quite apart from the fact that a used glass would have given me away.) I took three or four long pulls, held the bottle up to the light again, and saw that only a miserable drop was left. I finished that off as well, replaced the cork in the bottle, shut the sideboard door, and tiptoed back to my place. My stomach heaved, upset by the sudden flood of alcohol; it was convulsed as if by cramp, a fiery mist rose before my eyes, and my forehead and hands were damp with sweat. I had a hard job to pull myself together before Magda returned. Then I sat down at table again, feeling pleasantly abandoned to my drunkenness, and only the necessity of at least going through the form of eating, presented any difficulty. My stomach seemed a very delicate thing, ready to revolt at any moment. Each single bite had to be fed to it with the greatest care, and I regretted that the food which I had to swallow for appearances' sake was going to disturb the drunkenness which was quietly making itself felt.

It never occurred to me that it might be a good thing to exchange a few words with Magda. Instead, my mind was busy with another problem, which presented grave difficulties. The wine-bottle was in the sideboard all right, but with the scrupulous way in which Magda ran her household, she was bound to notice within a short time that it was empty. I couldn't

possibly allow that to happen. I must take precautions in time. But how incredibly difficult was! The best solution would be to buy another bottle of red wine this very afternoon, pour about half of it away, and put it in place of the empty one. But when was I to do it, how could I get to the sideboard when I had to be at the office all the afternoon, and Magda always spent the evening together, she with some needlework and I with my newspaper. When? and what was I to do with the empty bottle? Would I be able to buy some wine of the same brand? Did Magda remember what sort it was, what kind of label it had? Best would be to get up secretly at midnight, carefully take the label off the old bottle and stick it on the new one. But supposing Magda were to surprise me at it! And moreover, had we any glue in the house? I would have to smuggle some from the office in my brief-case. The more I thought about it, the more complicated the whole affair became. Already it was absolutely insoluble. It had been easy enough to empty the bottle, but I should have thought before how difficult it was going to be to restore it to its former condition. Supposing I just broke the bottle, and pretended that I had knocked it over while looking for something? But there was no wine left to spill. Or dare I simply half-fill it with water, and put off filling it with wine until some later time?

My head was more and more muddled. While I cast around in my mind, I had quite forgotten not only the meal but Magda as well. So I started, when she asked me with genuine apprehension in her voice: "What's the matter, Erwin? Are you ill? Have you got a fever? Your temperature? You look so red."

I eagerly seized on this pretext, and said calmly: "Yes, I really don't feel quite well. I think I'd better lie down for a moment. My ... my head's throbbing."

"Yes, do, Erwin. Go to bed immediately. Shall I ring Dr Mansfeld?"

"Oh, nonsense," I cried angrily, "I'll just lie down on the sofa for a quarter of an hour, and I'll be all right. Then I must get back to the office."

She led me to the sofa like an invalid, helped me to lie down and spread a rug over me. "Have you had trouble at the office?" she asked anxiously. "Tell me what's worrying you, Erwin. You're quite changed."

"Nothing, nothing," I said, suddenly angry. "I don't know what's the matter with you. A little attack of giddiness or blood pressure and immediately there's something wrong at the office. Business is fine, just fine!"

She sighed softly. "All right, then, sleep well, Erwin," she said. "Shall I wake you?"

"No, no, not necessary. I'll wake up of my own accord—in a quarter of an hour or so...."

Then I was alone at last: I let my head fall back, and now the alcohol flooded right through me in an unrestrained free-running wave. With a velvet wing it covered all my sorrows and afflictions, it washed away even the little new worry over my unnecessary lie about business being fine. I slept.... Slept? No, I was extinguished, I no longer existed.

It is already beginning to get dark when I wake up. I throw a startled glance at the clock: it is between seven and eight in the evening. I listen for any noises in the house. Nothing stirs. I call, softly at first, then louder: "Magda!" But she doesn't come. I get up stiffly. My whole body feels battered, my head is hollow, my mouth dry and thick. I glance into the dining room next door: no supper table is laid, though this is our usual supper-time. What is the matter? What has happened while I slept? Where is Magda?

After some reflection, I grope my way to the kitchen. Walking is not easy, it is as if all my limbs are stiff and bent, they move with difficulty in their joints.

I half expected to find the kitchen empty too, and almost dark, but the light is on, and Else is standing by the table, busy with some ironing. As I come in she looks up with a start, and the expression on her face is no more reassured when she sees who it is. I can well imagine that I look a bit wild. Suddenly I feel as if I am dirty all over. I should have gone into the bathroom first.

"Where is my wife, Else?" I ask.

"Madam has gone to town," replies Else, with a quick, almost fearful glance at me.

"But it's supper-time, Else!" I say reproachfully, though I have not the slightest inclination to eat any supper.

Else shrugs her shoulders, and then says, with another quick glance, "There was a telephone call from your office. I think your wife has gone to the office."

I swallow with difficulty; I am conscious how dry my mouth has become.

"To the office?" I murmur. "Good God! What's my wife doing at the office, Else?"

She shrugs her shoulders again. "How should I know, Herr Sommer," she says. "Madam didn't tell me anything." She reflects for a moment, then goes on. "They rang up shortly after three, and your wife has been gone ever since." So for more than four hours already Magda has been at the office. I am lost. Why I am lost I cannot say, but I know that I am. My knees grow weak, I stumble forward a few steps and slump heavily into a chair. I let my head fall on the kitchen table.

"It's all up, Else," I groan. "I'm lost. Oh, Else...." I hear her set down the iron with a startled crash, then she comes over to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. "What is it, Herr Sommer? Don't you feel well?" I don't see her. I don't lift my face from the shelter of my arms. In the presence of this young girl I am ashamed of my gushing tears. It's all over, all lost, my firm, my marriage, Magda—oh, if only I hadn't drunk that wine this lunch-time, that's what made everything go wrong; without that, Magda would never have gone to the office (a fleeting thought: I've still got to settle that affair of the empty wine bottle, too!) Else gently shakes my shoulder. "Herr Sommer," she says "don't give way like that. Lie down again for a bit, and I'll quickly make you some supper in the meantime." I shake my head. "I don't want any supper, Else. My wife ought to be here by now, it's high time ..."

"Or," says Else persuasively, "would you like to eat a little something here in the kitchen with me, Herr Sommer?" Adding rather doubtfully. "As your wife is out...." By its very novelty, there is something seductive about this quite unheard-of proposal. To eat in the kitchen with Else? Whatever would Magda say? I raise my head and look at Else properly for

the first time. I have never looked at her like that before: for me, she was always merely a dark shadow of my wife in the remoter regions of the house. Now I see that Else is quite a pleasant dark-haired girl of about seventeen, of a somewhat robust beauty. Under a light blouse she has full breasts, and at the thought of how young those breasts are I feel a hot wave run over me.

But then I come to my senses. It's all so impossible. Already this business of letting myself go before Else just now is utterly impossible.

"No, Else," I say, and get up. "It is very nice of you to try to cheer me up a bit, but I had better get over to the office as well. If I should miss my wife, please tell her that I have gone to the office." I turn to go. Suddenly it is hard for me to leave the kitchen and this friendly girl. I notice how pale her face is, and how well her high-arching eyebrows suit it.

"I have many worries, Else," I say abruptly, "and I have nobody to stand by me." Emphatically, I repeat, "Nobody, Else. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Herr Sommer," she answers softly.

"Thank you, Else, for being so nice to me," I add. And I go. Only as I am getting ready for the bathroom does it occur to me that I have just betrayed Magda. Betrayed and deceived. Deceived and defrauded. But at once I shrug my shoulders: that's right! Lower and lower. Deeper and deeper into it. Now there's no holding back!

I made my way cautiously to the office, cautiously, because at all costs I wanted to avoid meeting Magda in the street. I stood on the other side of the street in the shadow of a doorway, and looked across at my firm's five ground-floor windows. Two of them belonging to my main office, were lit up, and occasionally through the ground glass I saw the silhouettes of two figures: that of Magda and of my book-keeper, Hinzpeter. "They're going through the books!" I said to myself with a deep sense of shock, and yet this shock was mingled with a feeling of relief, for now I knew that the conduct of the business was in Magda's capable hands. That was just like her, immediately on hearing the bad news, to give herself a clear picture of the situation by going through the books. With a deep sigh I turned away and walked right through the town and out of it, but not towards my home. What should I do in the office, what should I do at home? Invite the reproaches that were bound to be made? Try to justify what was utterly unjustifiable? Not at all. And while I walked on again into the countryside, which was slowly growing darker and darker, it became painfully clear to me that I was played out. I had nothing left to live for, I had lost my footing in society, and I felt I had not the strength to look for a new one, nor to fight to regain the old one. What was I to do now? I went on, I walked away from office, wife, home town, I left everything behind—but I would have to go home again eventually, wouldn't I? I would have to face Magda, listen to her reproaches, hear myself rightly called a liar and a cheat, have to admit that I was a failure, a failure of the most disgraceful and cowardly kind. The thought was unbearable, and I began to play with the idea of not returning home at all, but of going out into the world, of submerging myself in the darkness somewhere, in some dark neighbourhood where a man might disappear without trace, without a final cry. And while I was outlining this to myself, with some feeling of self-pity, I knew that I was deceiving myself, that I would never have the courage to live without the security of hearth and home. I would never be able to give up the soft bed I was used to, the tidiness of home, the punctual, nourishing meals. I would go home to Magda, in spite of all my fears, I would go back to my own bed this very night—never mind about living in the darkness, never mind about a life and death in the gutter.

"But," I asked myself again, and I quickened my hasty steps, "but what's the matter with me? I used to be a fairly energetic and enterprising man. I always was a little weak but I knew so well how to conceal that, that up to now even Magda probably hadn't noticed it. Where does all this weariness come from that has been growing on me for the last year, paralysing my limbs and brain, and making me, till now a fairly honest man, into a deceiver of my wife, and the kind of character who looks lustingly at a servant-girl's breasts? It can't be the alcohol. I never drank schnaps before today, and this lassitude has been hanging over me for such a long time now. Whatever can it be?" I tried this theory and that. I reflected that I was just over forty. I had heard talk of the change of life in men, but I knew no man of my acquaintance who, on passing forty, had changed as much as I. Then I recalled my loveless existence. I had always longed for love and appreciation, secretly of course, and I had had it in full measure, from Magda as well as from my fellow-citizens. Then gradually I had lost it. I didn't know how it had all happened. Had I lost love and appreciation because I had grown so bad, or had I grown so bad because I had lost its encouragement? I found no

answer to these questions: I was not accustomed to thinking about myself. I walked fast still. I wanted to get to the place where I would find rest from all these torturing problems. At last I stood before my goal, before that same country inn I had visited this fatal morning. I looked through the bar-room window for the girl with the pale eyes, who had passed such a contemptuous judgment on my manhood after one insolent glance. I saw her sitting under the dim light of a single little bulb, busy with some needlework. I looked at her for a long time, hesitated, and with a painful and voluptuous sense of self-abasement, I asked myself just why I had come to her. And I found no answer to this question, either.

But I was tired of all these problems. I almost ran up the paved path to the inn, groped in the dark passage for the door-handle, entered quickly, and with a pretence of cheerfulness cried: "Here I am, my pretty one!" and sat down in a wicker chair beside her.

All that I had just done resembled so little my usual behaviour, was so different from my former sedateness, that I watched myself with unconcealed astonishment, almost with an anxious embarrassment as if watching an actor who has taken on too daring a rôle, and who is unsure whether he will be able to play it convincingly to the end.

The girl looked up from her sewing, for a moment the pale eyes were turned on me, the tip of her tongue appeared briefly at the corner of her mouth. "Oh, it's you," was all she said, and these three words conveyed once more her judgment of myself.

"Yes, it's me, my beauty," I said quickly, with the glibness and arrogance that came so strangely to me, "and I would like one or two or maybe half a dozen glasses of that excellent schnaps of yours, and if you like, you can drink with me."

"I never drink schnaps," countered the girl coolly, but she got up, went to the bar, got a little glass and a bottle, and poured out a drink by the table. She sat down and put the bottle on the floor beside her.

"Anyway," she added, taking up her sewing again, "we're closing in a quarter of an hour."

"Then I'll have to drink all the quicker," I said, put the glass to my lips and emptied it. "But if you won't drink schnaps," I continued, "I'd gladly buy you a bottle of wine or champagne, even, if there is such a thing here. Regardless of cost."

In the meantime she had re-filled my glass, and I emptied it again in one go. I had already forgotten all that had happened and all that lay ahead, I lived only for the moment, for the reserved yet knowing girl who treated me with such obvious contempt.

"We've got champagne all right," she said, "and I like to drink it, too. But I'll have you know that I don't intend to get drunk, nor go to bed with you just for a bottle of champagne."

Now she looked at me again, accompanying her immodest words with a bold insolent look. I had to go on playing my part. "Whoever would think of such a thing, my sweet," I said lightly. "Go and get your champagne. You'll be allowed to drink it quite unmolested. To me," I added, more firmly after I had had another drink, "you're like an angel from another planet, a bad angel whom fate has set in my path. It's enough for me just to look at you."

"It costs nothing to look," she said with a short evil-sounding laugh. "You're a pretty queer saint, but before the night's out I think I'm going to find out what you're so excited about."

With that, she poured me another drink, and got up to fetch the champagne. This time she was away longer. She drew the curtains, then went outside, and I heard her close the door.

shutters, and lock the door. As she went through the barroom again, she said "I've locked up, nobody else will be coming. The landlady's in bed already." She said this in passing, then stopped, and added in an ironic tone, "But don't build your hopes on that." Before I could answer, she had gone again. I used her absence to pour myself out two or three drinks straight off. Then she came back with a gold-topped bottle in her hand.

She put a champagne glass on the table before her, skilfully unbent the wire and twisted the cork out of the bottle without letting it pop. The white foam rushed up. She poured, waited a moment, poured again, and lifted the glass to her mouth.

"I'm not going to drink your health," she said, "because you would want to drink with me, and for the time being, you've had enough."

I didn't contradict her. My whole body was so full of drunkenness, it seemed to hum like a swarm of bees. She put down her glass, looked at me with narrowed eyes and asked mockingly, "Now then, how many schnapses did you have while I was away? Five? Six?"

"Only three," I answered, laughing. It never occurred to me to feel ashamed. With this gift all such feelings disappeared completely.

"Incidentally, what's your name?"

"Do you intend to come here often?" she countered.

"Perhaps," I answered, rather confused. "Why?"

"Why do you want to know my name? For the half hour we sit here, 'my sweet' or whatever else you like to call me, will do."

"All right, don't tell me your name," I said, suddenly irritable. "I don't care."

I took the bottle and poured another drink. Already it was quite clear to me that I was completely drunk and that I should not take any more. Even so, the urge to go on drinking was stronger. The coloured web in my brain enticed me, the dark untrodden jungles of my inner self tempted me; from afar, a soft seductive voice was calling.

"I don't know whether I shall often come here," I said rapidly. "I can't stand you, I hate you, and yet I've come back to you this evening. This morning I drank the first schnaps in my life. You poured it out for me, you stole into my blood with it, you've poisoned me. You're like the spirit of schnaps: hovering, intoxicating, cheap and...."

I looked at her, breathless, myself the more astonished at these words which hurtled out of me, goodness knows where from. She sat opposite me. She had not taken up her sewing again. She had crossed her stockingless legs and had pushed her skirt back a little from her knees. Her legs were rather sturdy, but long, and fine-ankled. On her right calf I saw a birthmark nearly the size of a farthing—it seemed beautiful to me. She held a cigarette in her hand; she blew the smoke in a broad stream through her nearly closed lips; she stared at me without blinking.

"Go on, pop," she said, "you're getting on fine, go on...."

I tried to think. What had I been talking about just now? The impulse to touch her, to take her in my arms, became almost overwhelming. But I leaned back firmly in my wicker chair, clung to its arms. Suddenly I heard myself speak again. I spoke quite slowly and very distinctly, and yet I was breathless with excitement. "I'm a wholesale merchant," I said, "I had quite a good business, but now I'm faced with bankruptcy. They'll all laugh at me, all of them, especially my wife.... I've made a lot of mistakes, and Magda will throw them all

my face. Magda's my wife, you know...."

She looked at me steadily, with that very white face of hers, that had about it something almost bloated. Above her nearly colourless eyes, stood her dark high-arching brows.

"But I can still draw money out of the business, a few thousand marks. I'd do it anyway just to annoy Magda. Magda wants to save the business. Does she think she's better than I am? I could sell the business. I know already to whom, it's quite a new firm. He would give me ten, perhaps twelve thousand marks for it, we could go travelling.... Have you ever been to Paris?"

She looked at me. Neither affirmation nor dissent were to be read in her face. I went on talking, quicker, more breathlessly. "I've not been there either," I continued, "but I've read about it. It's a town of tree-lined boulevards, wide squares, leafy parks.... When I was a boy I learned a bit of French, but I left school too soon, my parents hadn't enough money. Do you know what this means: *Donnez-moi un baiser, mademoiselle?*"

Not a sign from her, neither yes or no.

"It means, 'give me a kiss, mademoiselle.' But one would have to say to you, *Donnez-moi un baiser, ma reine!* *Reine* means queen. You're the queen of my heart. You're the queen of the poison they cork up in bottles. Give me your hand, Elsabe—I'm going to call you Elsabe, my queen—I mean to kiss your hand...."

She filled my glass.

"There, drink this up, then you're going home. It's enough—you've had enough to drink and I've had enough of you. You can take that bottle of brandy with you. You'll have to pay for the whole bottle, saloon price. It's no swindle. Don't you come in here tomorrow saying I swindled you. You poured I don't know how many out for yourself."

"Don't say that, Elsabe," I said, half-blustering, half-whining. "I'd never do such a thing. What do I care about money—!"

"Don't teach me about men! When they're drunk and randy it's all 'What do I care about money!' and next morning they turn up with the police, shouting about being swindled. The brandy, and the champagne, and my cigarettes ... that comes to...."

She named a sum.

"Is that all?" I said boastfully and pulled out my wallet. "Here you are!"

I put down the money.

"And here ...," I took out a hundred-mark note and laid it beside the other. "This is for you because I hate you and because you're ruining me. Take it, take it. I don't want anything from you, anything at all! Go away! I've got you in my blood already, I couldn't possess you more than I do. You're very likely dull and boring. You're not from hereabouts, you're from some city, of course, where you left everything behind—this is just the remains!"

We stood facing each other, the money lay on the table, the light was gloomy. I swayed gently on my feet. I was holding the half-empty brandy bottle by the neck. She looked at me.

"Put your money away," she whispered. "Take your money off the table. I don't want your money ... you'd better go!"

"You can't force me to take the money back. I'm leaving it here ... I present you with my queen of bright brandy called Elsabe. I'm going...."

Laboriously I made my way to the door. The key was on the inside and I struggled to turn it in the lock.

“Hey, you,” she said behind me. “You....”

I turned round. Her voice had become low but full and soft. All the impudence had gone out of it.

“You ...” she repeated, and now in her eyes there was colour and light. “You—do you want to?”

Now it was I who looked at her silently.

“Take your shoes off, be quiet on the stairs, the landlady mustn’t hear you. Come on, be quick....”

Silently, I did as she told me. I don’t know why I did. I didn’t desire her now. I didn’t desire her in that way, at all.

“Give me your hand.”

She switched off the light and led me by the hand. In the other hand I still held the brandy bottle. It was completely dark in the bar-room. I crept after her. Moonlight through a little dusty window fell on the narrow angular staircase. I swayed, I was very tired. I thought of my own bed, of Magda, of my long way home.

It was all too much for me. The only consolation was the bottle of brandy in my hand, that would give me strength. I would have preferred to stop already and take a pull out of the bottle, I was so tired. The stairs creaked, the bedroom door groaned softly as it was opened. There was moonlight in the room, too. A rumpled bed, an iron wash-stand, a chair, a row of coat hangers on the wall....

“Get undressed,” I said softly, “I’ll be with you in a moment.” And more to myself, “Are there any stars here?”

I went to the window, which looked out over an orchard. I opened it a little; the spring air with its soft breeze and its perfumes entered, mild as a tender caress. Under the window lay the sloping tar-papered roof of a shed.

“That’s good,” I said, softly again. “That sloping roof is very good.”

I couldn’t see the moon, it was behind the house-roof above my head. But its glow filled the sky with a whitish light; only the brightest stars were to be seen, and even they looked dim. I was uneasy and irritable.

“Come on,” she cried angrily from the bed. “Hurry up! Do you think I don’t need any sleep?”

I turned, and bent over the bed. She lay on her back, covered to the chin. I stripped the cover back and laid my face for a moment against her naked breast. Cool and firm. Breathing gently. It smelt good—of hair and flesh.

“Hurry up!” she whispered impatiently. “Get undressed—stop that nonsense. You’re not a schoolboy any more!”

I straightened up with a deep sigh. I went to the window, took the bottle and swung myself out on to the shed roof. I heard a furious cry behind me, but I was already letting myself drop into the garden.

“Drunken old fool!” she called from above, and then the window banged.

I stood among bushes. I smelt the scent of lilac. The spring night was perfect in its purity. I put the bottle to my mouth and drank deeply.

I walk and walk. I walk along, singing to myself one of those *Wanderlieder* that I used to sing when hiking with Magda. Then for long stretches I limp on aching feet. I have stubbed my toe against a stone, it is bad going for my shoeless feet. My socks have long since been torn at the ribbons. I come to a stream, clamber down the bank, sit on a stone and put my feet in the water, which shocks me for a moment with its icy coldness. Then it feels good, and sitting on the stone I fall asleep. I wake up shivering, icy. I have fallen from my seat, I walk on. The faster I walk, the longer the road seems to become. The fruit trees along the roadside seem to positively fly past me, yet I seem to be no further on. I don't know where I am, only that I'm a long way from home. I don't know what time it is, only that it's still night. The moon is some two handsbreadths above the horizon. And I walk on. I walk through a sleeping village. Not a light anywhere, everyone asleep, I am the only one abroad. Erwin Sommer, proprietor of a wholesale market produce business. Not now, not now, that was before. The one who was walking through this moonlit night, who is he? Once he was someone—long ago he was. Down and out now, finished, almost forgotten.... At my shuffling step, a dog wakes up in his kennel and starts to bark. Other dogs awaken and now the whole village is barking and I shuffle through it on sore feet, a tramp, and yesterday I was still ... oh, shut up! And I stop in the shadow of the wooden church spire and raise the bottle to my mouth again and drink. That stills the questions, soothes the pain, that is a whip for the next half hour on the road. But there is not much left in the bottle. I'll have to go easy with the precious stuff. I swallow the last mouthful—and it must be a big one—on my own doorstep, before I face Magda. But Magda is asleep. I shall lie down very quietly on the sofa, there won't be an argument tonight. And tomorrow? Tomorrow is a long way off. By tomorrow I shall have had a deep, deep sleep, I shall have forgotten everything that happened today, I shall be the head of the firm again, who had committed a small blunder, it's true, but who is perfectly capable of making amends....

I have hidden the empty bottle in the garden bushes, and now, very quietly, on my bare feet, I mount the steps to the front door. I manage to unlock the door without a sound. I am not a bit drunk now, though I have only just taken one or two long swigs of brandy—the amount was more left in the bottle than I had thought. So much the better. I am all the more clear-headed and certain. I shan't make any mistake, I shan't wake anyone up. How cunning I am. I am tempted to go into the bathroom to bathe my sore feet, but my clear head reminds me that the noise of the taps would awaken Magda, so I sneak into the kitchen. I can wash in the kitchen. Only little Else sleeps next to the kitchen. She's good to me, she comforted me, she is not hard and efficient like Magda. I switch on the light, I look round the kitchen. I choose a large enamel basin, and I think to look into the boiler by the stove, to see if there is any warm water. The water is actually luke-warm still. I am proud of my cleverness. I get the washing soap, the hand-towel, kitchen cloths, a brush. I sit on a chair and put my feet in the water. Oh, how good it feels, how soothing that gentle caress is! I lean back, I close my eyes—if only I had something to drink now, I would be absolutely happy.

There's always something lacking for human happiness, we can never be perfectly content. I've drunk all the red wine, and there's nothing else to drink in the house. Tomorrow I must

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