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The Silver Bacchanal

The Silver Bacchanal

by

René Fülöp-Miller

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

by RICHARD AND CLARA WINSTON

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TO MY WIFE *Erika*, TO WHOM I OWE EVERYTHING

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The Silver Bacchanal

I

Arrival

Miscellaneous remnants of our beaten army had been slogging toward our new destination of Drohitz more dead than alive. But as we neared the town, faint sounds of music began to mingle with the monotone drum of our tramping feet. At first it was like music gradually intruding upon the unconsciousness of sleep. Then, as it came closer, the separate notes blended into a familiar melody. Our drooping shoulders stiffened; our numbed senses responded.

If those we had left behind on the road, and those who had died of thirst or wounds on the hill, had been with us, they too would have quickened to the pulse of this music; they too would have straightened up and marched jauntily along. For the city band, which had come out to greet us, was now approaching, blasting away with the joyous force of the national anthem.

Spontaneously, our entire line of march broke into roaring song. All that we had suffered—deprivations, terror, fatigue—was dissipated by the resounding chant from our mob of living corpses!

And not only men but nature herself was swept along. The earth beneath our feet, the trees lining the road, the

fields and meadows, hills and valleys, the very air and the clouds rushed into the torrent of music. It was as though the national anthem had always been reposing in all things, and now magically rang forth.

Led on by the band, which met us and reversed, we reached a meadow beyond the city line. On a wooden platform stood a table decked out with flowers and streamers. At the table sat the frock-coated representatives of the city, flanked on both sides by ladies in festive garb. Behind the table, under a forest of flags, stood deputations from patriotic organizations, school children with their teachers, and groups of citizens.

When we drew to a stop, all the city representatives and the ladies rose, and the flags and banners waved as though blown by a gale.

Adam, will you look at that! I said to myself.

After having lived for months in muddy trenches, seeing nothing but filthy, tattered uniforms, we would have found it a revelation to encounter a single civilian in a clean suit. Out there we had almost forgotten that God had created any faces other than those frozen into masks of savagery and fear; to see a woman's face again, no matter what the vintage, would have been enough to send us into ecstasies.

Here, on the Drohitz parade ground, all these things were flung at us at once on our arrival. Everything a town had to offer in the way of finery and splendor, all the charm of women, girls and children, stood lined up for our reception.

Plunged completely without transition into this blaze of color, I could scarcely believe my eyes. I did not know where to look first, what face to linger on.

But suddenly I became painfully aware of the wretched figure I must cut in my battered uniform and ragged beard. Dismayed, I began combing my beard with my fingers and trying to scrape the crust of mud from my jacket. The others around me were likewise engaged in making themselves a

bit presentable. Our discomfiture, however, lasted only until we noticed that the women and girls were smiling graciously at us—invitingly, in fact.

At first, smiling back came hard. When you have not smiled for months, your rigid features scarcely remember how to go about it. But as soon as the spell was broken, our faces dissolved into grins. What the band music had started and the pomp of the reception had furthered, was completed by these exchanges of smiles. Along with our rigidity, the last vestiges of our torpor were washed away. We belonged to life once more.

After the national anthem had been sung in mighty unison by the greeting citizens and the greeted army, a solemn silence ensued for a few seconds. Then one of the frock coats arose, tapped a gavel three times on the table and announced: "His Honor Mayor Gospoda will address you." The attentive eagerness with which the citizens of Drohitz turned toward their mayor was testimony to their high respect for him.

Mayor Gospoda was a broad-shouldered, corpulent man with cheeks suspended like two fleshy sacks below his eyes. He had that dignity so often attaching to his physical type, a dignity embedded solidly in the flesh, sustained by massive shoulders and swelling middle. Manuscript in hand, he donned his glasses, took a deep, snorting breath, and began reading his speech. But he had scarcely spoken the first words, "Glorious army, honored guests," when a highly embarrassing incident brought him to a halt.

Corporal Barnabas, who stood beside me, had apparently let the cordiality of the occasion go to his head. Suddenly he burst into laughter.

"Barnabas, are you insane!" I whispered sharply to him, nudging him in the ribs.

"I . . . I don't want . . ." he stammered, and I saw that he was struggling to regain control of himself. He wrinkled

his brow and cast his eyes down, trying to print a look of gravity upon his face. But it was all in vain.

Perhaps the matter would have created no stir, and the mayor would have been able to continue his address, if I had not placed my hand over Barnabas' mouth. That misguided effort to bring him back to reason really produced the disaster. Forced back by my hand, the repressed laughter now bubbled forth through my fingers.

Barnabas' laughter spread instantly like a plague, infecting more and more of the men. There is no doubt that the entire company would have burst into a thunder of laughter if Commander Konrad had not come posthaste from his place in the front row, shaken Barnabas by the shoulder, and bellowed at him, "You dummox!" With a shower of similar epithets he brought the other laughers to order.

The urbane manner in which the mayor treated this disturbance showed that he well deserved his constituents' admiration. When the laughter started, he had quietly and with no sign of fluster laid his manuscript aside. He waited patiently until the tempest died down. Then, as Commander Konrad was about to apologize for the unseemly behavior of his men, the mayor good-naturedly waved the apology aside and continued:

"The solemnity of this great historical moment which brings us together here could not have found a better expression than the spontaneous manifestation of rejoicing which we have just heard. You soldiers have truly expressed your gladness of heart that we are today beginning a new chapter in our heroic war. And that gladness"—he had now skillfully led back to his prepared speech—"it is my honorable duty also to express today in the name of our city, indeed in the name of our whole great country."

He spoke with great éclat, and had to pause for breath every few seconds, which brought out with even greater effect the genuine sentiment in his address. "For in this great

hour, Drohitz is the shining symbol of the pride our whole nation feels in our heroes. The regrouping of our glorious army which is taking place in our city will soon lead our nation to sure and final victory. For us of Drohitz, however, upon whose soil the wise counsel of the Supreme Command of our army has ordered this regrouping—for us of Drohitz, therefore, the hour has struck which will one day glow with golden letters in the annals of the country's victories. We are proud and happy to greet you here. Drohitz is yours, soldiers of a glorious army. Hurrah for the army, hurrah for the fatherland!"

"Hurrah for the fatherland, hurrah for the fatherland!" thundered from the throats of hundreds of soldiers. Whereupon the brass band once again struck up the national anthem, and everybody sang along.

I must confess to my shame that hitherto I had been anything but a heroically minded patriot. In fact, I had been a dud at patriotism from birth. Even in childhood my games had been such international ones as catching butterflies and collecting stamps. Pushing tin soldiers back and forth had always bored me. When I started to grow up, I was so engrossed with girls that I gave little thought to historical dates and crucial victories. As a soldier in training, I found that my service to God and country consisted chiefly of doing knee bends, to the accompaniment of invigorating curses. My experiences on the battlefield were likewise not conducive to the breeding of patriotism.

But now all this suddenly changed. The mayor's brief welcoming words had turned me into a burning patriot. While he spoke with such fervor of our heroic services to the nation, everything I had experienced during this war looked different in retrospect. The horrible hill of the dead where I had been stationed shone radiantly as the field of honor. Our panic-stricken flight was transformed into an orderly strategic withdrawal whose sole purpose was to lead us on to

fresh victories. The ragged remnants of a beaten army had suddenly risen anew as a glorious host, and all our sufferings were transfigured into grand sacrifices.

To be completely honest about it, not only the speech but another experience contributed to my change of mind. While the mayor was talking, one of the high-school girls in the welcoming group turned her eyes away from the speaker and smiled at me. She was a brunette and I've always been partial to brunettes. I returned her glance and smile, and we went through the usual ocular maneuvers. When, after the speech, everyone hurrahed, it seemed to me that although we were cheering our native land she was cheering me and I her.

After the singing of the national anthem, preparations for the welcoming breakfast began. Some committee ladies started setting out platters of canapés, homemade pastries and pitchers of refreshing beverages on a long table for the officers. Meanwhile a number of boys and girls rolled up the soup kettles for the enlisted men. A breath-taking odor of stew wafted across the parade ground and tickled our nostrils, palates and stomachs, throwing us all into a patriotic frenzy. When at last the sign for eating was given, we took off for the kettles at as mad a dash as we had made during our flight.

However, I never reached them, for suddenly I found myself face to face with the little brunette. She had broken away from her class and was tripping toward me. Her apricot skin, her black-cherry eyes, her strawberry lips, and her breasts like half-ripened plums reminded me of our orchard in Caran where I had taken Zorika, my first love, by the hand.

For a second the smell of the stew and her heady fragrance contended; the urge to run farther wrestled with the desire to stand still and to take this girl by the hand, as if she were Zorika. After all the privations on the hill I was starved

and thirsty. But my other senses were still more starved, more thirsting, after having been deprived for so long. And here stood this girl, this orchard of a girl, and she was—I cannot express it in any other way—ripe for plucking, for savoring, delicious enough to eat!

For a moment I was too embarrassed to say anything.

"Welcome," she greeted me, and I felt quite giddy hearing a girl's voice again, having a girl so close that her breath brushed across my face.

She, too, seemed disconcerted. "I have so many questions to ask you . . . oh, I'm so excited," she began, as if apologizing. "I'm sure you'll understand. My papa was a general, and he always used to tell me of the heroic life of soldiers in the field. I wished so often that I had been born a boy, so that I could experience all that for myself. Poor Papa, he missed his chance at service this time. He died just two months before war was declared. You do understand, don't you, what it means to me to talk to someone who was out there in the field and fought like a hero?" She paused briefly, and her black-cherry eyes took all of me in appreciatively. "Yes, you're just the way I always pictured a hero from Papa's stories!" she exclaimed. "So young, so straight, with just such a forehead, such a chin! Exactly, exactly!"

Good Lord, how I must have changed in these past few hours, I thought to myself. And feeling her rapturous look linger upon my heroic brow, I pulled off my filthy old cap and began brushing away at it. She touched my arm timidly. "May I hold the cap for a moment?" she asked, reaching for it.

Her touch upon my arm put me in such a dither that I could do no more than stammer, "Certainly, certainly."

"You must tell me all about your experiences," she went on. "It must have been marvelous." As she spoke, she was fingering my cap, and now she covertly pressed it against her unripe-plum breasts. "I have been trying to guess from your

uniform what branch of the service you belong to. Am I right in thinking that . . . No, you had better tell me yourself."

"Gravedigger in the medical corps." The words slipped out of me. As soon as I said it, the Pandora's box of memory snapped open, and all that I had been through on the hill, the horror, the disgust, the whole wretchedness of my experience, emerged. There I stood, soaked to the skin, on that muddy, frigid slope of death that was Hill 317. If only the girl had not pressed me for more details. But she kept questioning me, and so I could not escape from the charnel house of memory. And Heaven knows, what I had to tell her made a miserable tale.

Now you've fouled yourself up; you've ruined the whole orchard, I thought.

But my fears were unfounded. As a newcomer to a rear-echelon patriotism, I simply had no idea of the way enthusiastic civilians regarded the facts of combat. Besides, I forgot that I was talking with a general's daughter who had been raised to honor heroes. And so at first I did not notice, as I told her about my job as a gravedigger, that her excitement was only growing. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes flashed, her breath came faster; all the fruits of the orchard began to quiver, until at last she cried: "How marvelous, how stirring! To return to the native soil the men who have fallen for the fatherland, to see to them in the midst of enemy fire. Oh, how heroic, how grand!"

At once the specters of memory vanished and the elevating feeling I had had during the mayor's speech came flooding back. I could feel my chest swelling, my whole body growing inches in stature, and my biceps bulging. Now I became aware of the fondness in her look. She asked whether she might meet me in the afternoon in Humperdinger's pastry shop on Barett Street, so that she might introduce me to her girl friends.

"I'm afraid I can't manage today, but how about tomorrow afternoon?" I said, rattling off the duties that awaited me. "And above all," I added, "I must get out of this filthy uniform and hunt up some decent clothes, so that I look human again."

She gave me a disappointed look, fell silent for a moment, and then asked shyly whether I would do her a favor. It turned out she wanted my old jacket as a memento of the war.

Never would I have dreamed that this disgusting rag, which I could not wait to be rid of, would be a treasure to anyone. She looked at me pleadingly as she spoke, and I have never learned to say no to a girl. So we arranged that after our new uniforms were issued, she would wait for me at the school gate, so that I could give her the jacket.

The bugles sounded assembly. "Oh, I've been so excited I forgot to ask your name," she said as I indicated that I must go.

"Adam Ember," I said.

"Adam? My Adam," she whispered.

"And your name?" I asked.

"Sarah," she replied. "But to you I'll be Eve."

"Good, Eve, see you soon," I said, and my imagination ran over all the delights of the Fall.

The second bugle blast sounded. I had to hurry to my company. The spicy scent of stew wafted across the field. The kettles were being rolled away. "Stop, stop," I called to a boy who was pushing one. He stopped, opened the lid, dipped the ladle into the kettle and drew it out filled with fragrant, meaty stew. Then the third signal sounded. I must not lose contact with my company, I thought, and ran on.

The sight and smell of the stew had raised such a hunger in me that I scarcely knew what to do. "That's what you get for your Eve, Adam," I said to myself. "Dreams in the head and nothing in the belly. The others were smarter, they took

things in the right order: first the stomach and then the heart." But soon I consoled myself. Suppose I did have nothing in my belly while the others had stuffed theirs; on the other hand, the others would have to march off first, change their uniforms, have their quarters assigned to them, and dispose of all the regulation fuss before they so much as sniffed a real girl and could begin setting up their Eden.

This thought made me feel better, and I could have borne my hunger bravely, if the fellow beside me, who must have had guts instead of brains inside his head, had not gone on and on about the meal. "Man, how that tasted. . . . Makes a guy feel human again. . . ." And when I did not respond at once, he went on: "What do you say? I mean, those were man-sized hunks of meat, weren't they!" And he dwelt upon them with the vividness of a professional glutton.

"Umph," I grunted affirmatively. After all, I could not tell him that . . . He would have thought me stark, raving mad.

We marched into the heart of the city, into the wonderland of civilian life. We were received by people whose innocence of all things military could be read in their faces. Not only did they treat us like human beings, they transferred to us all the emotions they had saved up for their loved ones in the armed forces. A hot torrent of wifely, parental, filial and widowy love washed over us. The few quartermaster corpsmen sent over to Drohitz from the nearby garrison town of Podol, who were to take care of outfitting us and giving us our pay, could not begin to dam this torrent of civilian affection.

The formalities connected with our billeting took place at the school, which until our arrival had served the praiseworthy purposes of useful instruction and the happy games of children. God must have been in His finest creative mood when He invented civilian life, I thought, as I at-

tended the proceedings in the schoolyard. Ladies of society, assisted by town officials, sat at small tables and issued the billeting orders. Before them were spread lists of all available accommodations, with exact details on situation, size and equipment, all neatly indexed. But the entire carefully planned official procedure was thrown into confusion by the ladies' enthusiasm.

Each lady of the committee was determined to outdo all the others. Feminine charm, private connections with town officials, flirtatious looks, genteel but pressing recitals of the unsurpassable advantages of their own houses—the ladies threw everything into the breach in order to win the hero of their choice and snatch him from under the noses of their rivals.

I felt as if I were at a summer resort in the slow season.

"My room has a garden view and is only two minutes from the main square."

"Mine has a private bath and kitchen privileges."

"My room has beds with innerspring mattresses."

Our ragged men stood stunned amid the clamor of rival voices, unable to decide which lady and which room they preferred: the pretty brunette with dimples and garden view, the attractive blonde with private bath and kitchen privileges, or the raven-locked little lady with piquant tiptilted nose who offered her innerspring mattresses with such seductive looks that she seemed to be throwing herself into the bargain.

Dr. Zitrom had promoted me to medical platoon leader; therefore my quarters depended on his. As a result, I was spared the torment of choosing. A tall, suntanned baroness, not exactly in the first flower of youth but with a kind of thoroughbred beauty, had sailed her way into the doctor's good graces. She owned a castle on the outskirts of town, one wing of which had been converted into a hospital. The town ambulance had taken care of our wounded and sick.

They were already on their way to the castle, and I received orders to report for duty there with my platoon at three o'clock, after we had received our new uniforms and pay.

The outfitting took place in the gymnasium, where we were handed fresh underclothing, uniforms, towels and soap. In the dressing room we stripped off our abominable rags. Then we stood in line, waiting our turn at the showers. From the shower room came eddies of popular songs and operatic arias—Lord knows what mysterious relationship there is between showering and singing. At any rate, the songs roused our impatience to the point where it was almost impossible to bear.

At last my turn came. What a pleasure to let the powerful jets of hot water play upon every part of my body and, as it were, wash the war out of me. And clean underwear afterward! The peaceful folk behind the lines know nothing of the profundities of cleanliness, of the marital bond between the body and clean linen.

I rolled up my jacket, which I had promised Eve as a relic, and went into one of the classrooms, which had been transformed into a barber shop. There, with flashing shears and glinting razors, the draft-rejected barbers of Drohitz awaited us. With what patriotic zeal they applied their shears to our heads and their razors to our faces, until the last traces of the front lines had vanished. In no time the classroom resembled a battlefield of fallen beards and shaggy locks.

Freshly shorn and shaven, I went to the canteen, determined finally to fill my stomach. But it was almost impossible to reach the counter. As soon as I took a step forward, someone whose mouth was already full shouted at me, "Don't push!" and elbowed me in the ribs. All the men defended their positions as if they were guarding our native soil from enemy attack. Even the gentlest soul would have lost patience under such circumstances. I gave one tough bird who was blocking my way a violent shove; he tripped

me up with his leg, and I stumbled and fell to my knees. Then fortune unexpectedly smiled on me.

As I started to scramble to my feet, a fat sausage dangled in front of my nose, like a bayonet pointed at the floor. I looked up. The possessor of this sausage had his head tilted back and was emptying a bottle of lemonade down his gullet. Seizing the opportunity, I surreptitiously nibbled half the sausage out of his hand. Then, as I rose to my feet again, a wave of soldiers who had just entered the room swept me plumb up against the counter. The metal counter top cut painfully into my middle, but an empty stomach expecting to be filled with food and drink was not going to grouse about that. Greedily, I stuffed myself till I could eat no more.

Then I wondered how I was going to force my way through the crowd and back to the door. But as it turned out, this was my lucky hour, and I need not have worried about anything. A baby-faced private standing beside me at the counter suddenly fainted from the press. A ham sandwich in one hand, he fell face forward into a plate of cream puffs.

"Help, help!" cried several of the committee ladies who were dispensing refreshments. I helped them clear off the plates, laid Babyface out on the counter, swung over it, and carried the unconscious soldier through the kitchen into the corridor. There we sprinkled him with water until he came to.

Now I had only to collect my pay. I went into the auditorium. It was ages since I had seen any money, and when I entered I was hypnotized by the sight of bundles of banknotes and rolls of coins. Until the crackling voices behind the piles of money began calling out names and numbers, I did not even notice the faces of the paymasters, who sat behind tables covered with long payroll lists.

Payout went in alphabetical order. I watched all the A's,

B's and C's leave the room beaming, with bulging pockets. When the *D*'s came, it seemed to me they would never end. At last the paymaster called, "Ember, 317." The enormous sums of extra pay for front-line service handed to me almost sent me out of my mind.

At the exit stood a table heaped with all sorts of wallets and change purses, gifts from the Drohitz Ladies' Club. I took two of them, as mementos. Then I rushed out to the school gate, where Eve was already waiting for me, and handed her the promised relic.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow," she said. "Can't you really make it today?"

"Unfortunately not—my damned assignment," I replied, and hurried back to the schoolyard to collect my platoon.

We were driven to the Castle Hospital. I reported for duty to the reception nurse in the foyer, and asked to be shown to Dr. Zitrom. The nurse telephoned upstairs, then reported that Dr. Zitrom was engaged in an important conference with the baroness and could not be disturbed at the moment. We were to wait for him in the hospital wing on the first floor.

We climbed up a wide staircase and entered a luxurious salon which formerly must have been the baroness' drawing room. Now, however, it was filled with all the utensils and apparatus of a modern hospital. When we entered, the place was already a scene of bustling activity. The patients lay in freshly made beds, and were being tended by such a horde of volunteer nurses that they were far outnumbered.

Before I could say a word, one of the young assistants called out across the hall: "Head Nurse Jadwiga!"

"One moment, I'll be right there," the head nurse replied. Following the direction of the voice, I saw a stately matron, hair tinged with gray, standing beside one of the beds and issuing instructions to a band of girls. She broke off and literally flew toward us.

"Welcome, welcome!" she exclaimed cordially, as though she had been expecting us all along. She apologized for having to return to her work right now, and promised to devote herself entirely to us later on.

"Melanie," she said, turning to one of the assistant nurses, "will you take care of these good soldiers and show them to their places? I'll be right along."

"Certainly," Melanie said, and to us: "Please follow me."

Our casual glances as we crossed the room were enough to heap amazement upon amazement. Each of the beds was surrounded by eager nurses. Not one, but two were taking pulse and temperature, while others were moistening the patients' foreheads, rubbing their backs, arms and legs with alcohol, applying warming pads or ice bags to painful spots, and moving serving tables with orangeade, tea, sandwiches and feathery pastries beside the beds. As soon as a patient asked for anything, three girls skipped off to bring it to him. A bevy of heads in pretty caps bent over sleeping patients, attentively watching their breathing.

At the bedsides of the convalescents sat friendly gray ladies, amusing the patients with games of backgammon, pinochle, casino, dominoes, or reading aloud. What a world of difference there was between military and civilian treatment of the sick!

"Here," Melanie said, opening the door to the next room, which was still unoccupied. "Seven!" she called in.

With a hearty "Welcome!" a band of nurses rushed forward to meet us. They literally fell upon us, pulled and pushed us to the empty beds.

All this took place so unexpectedly, and the nurses were so agile and firm, that before we knew what was happening we were all undressed and tucked into beds, surrounded by downy pillows and quilts that held us more securely than chains. And already the nurses' hands were gliding soothingly over our faces and backs. No man could have resisted these overpowering caresses. Moreover, we medical corps-

men were sick to death with tending others; what a pleasure it was to be tended ourselves for once.

A serving table of dainties was rolled up. "Tea? Home-baked cake?" How could we be so surly as to refuse?

"A game of dominoes or would you prefer a suspenseful detective story?" inquired a gray lady who had settled down beside my bed.

Dominoes used to be my favorite game, and I had not played it for ages. And I've always liked a good story. I finally chose the latter. The story was a humdinger. The hunt for the unknown murderer held me so spellbound that I forgot everything else, even the war. I don't know why, but from the very first I was on the side of the hunted man. The crisis neared: they were on his track. If only they did not catch him! I held my breath and became so wrought up that I was forced to close my eyes.

"Have you gone clean out of your mind, Adam?" I suddenly heard a voice asking. It was the "still, small voice" that had so often made trouble for me at the front. "Here you are getting all steamed up over nonsense like this, when you ought to be thinking what Dr. Zitrom will say when he sees you in bed. Are you going to risk your next promotion, which ought to be coming along soon?" the voice went on. "You'd better heave your carcass out of this bed."

Small and soft as the voice was, I feared it more than Commander Konrad's loudest roars. Now it rattled me so that I could no longer concentrate on the story. Forgetting all my concern for the criminal, I jumped out of bed, politely but vigorously resisted the flutterings of the gray lady, threw on my uniform—and instantly became Platoon Leader Ember again.

"Out of these beds; we're on duty here!" I bellowed at the others.

The volunteer nurses were completely disconcerted. They simply stared, unable to understand the sudden change in

the situation. "I regret the misunderstanding," I said, turning to them. "But we are not patients, we're medical corpsmen ordered to report here for nursing duty."

"Come on, speed it up!" I snapped at my men. "We haven't any time to lose."

Within a few minutes all the others were dressed except Private Kalabas, who lolled in bed and, quite ignoring my order, continued his game of pinochle. "Kalabas!" I roared. "How about it? Get up, you lazy bum!"

"Can't you wait a bit?" he retorted brashly. "Don't you see I'm in the middle of a game? Dr. Zitrom is still in conference, anyway. I'll finish the game, then I'll come."

"You're on duty; you weren't ordered here to play cards!" I shouted at him.

"Come now, be sensible, Ember. At the front I couldn't play pinochle, and here I'm not allowed to. Tell me, when is a poor devil of a medical aide supposed to play pinochle?"

"I don't know or care. Your business is to obey, and without delay."

"The game is almost done. I'll come as soon as I finish."

"Don't spoil the poor man's pleasure," the gray lady pleaded with me.

"I beg your pardon, my dear lady, but I cannot have any interference in official matters. I tell you for the last time," I went on to Kalabas, "either you get up at once or I'll report you for refusal to obey orders."

"If you report me, you'll have to report yourself too. After all, you were lolling around in bed like the rest of us. So don't put on airs."

His impertinence threw me into such a rage that I preferred to put an end to the conversation then and there. "All right, let him be; he'll pay for this! Come!" I said to the others. They followed me. The nurses looked after us in stunned dismay.

We returned to the reception hall and asked to see the

head nurse. "Good heavens," she exclaimed, utterly shattered when I told her that we had not come to the hospital to be tended, but to tend others. She apologized repeatedly for the misunderstanding and asked us to wait until Dr. Zitrom was available. Meanwhile she offered us easy chairs and refreshments, which I politely declined.

We stood around for more than half an hour, but still Dr. Zitrom's conference was not over. Kalabas had meanwhile joined us.

"You see, Ember, I told you that there was no hurry."

I saw that the others were giving him nods of agreement.

"How long are we to stand around here like damn fools?" they grumbled.

"We're on duty, and that's that," I snapped.

"I won my game," that bastard Kalabas said, grinning at the others.

After a while, loitering about and waiting began to get on my nerves. The busy head nurse was just flying by, followed by a swarm of her girls, and with Melanie at her side. I caught up with her. "Is there anything for us to do around here until Dr. Zitrom is free?"

"Anything to do?" she repeated in surprise. She considered a moment and then said, "Why yes . . . Melanie!" she called.

But Melanie had vanished. Apparently she wanted no more to do with us.

"Adelaide"—the head nurse turned to another assistant—"please take charge of these gentlemen; show them around the hospital and explain our arrangements and apparatus."

As we passed through the ward, Adelaide told us the number of beds, patients and volunteer nurses. But when we came to the room with the still vacant beds, I stopped my men.

"No, thanks, we have already seen that room," I remonstrated.

"Then we will see the lab," the nurse said, somewhat taken aback. There she pointed out all the various vials and flasks, the infusions and decoctions and boxes of powdered drugs. With pride she demonstrated their modern sterilizing apparatus and read off a list of new medicines which the municipal hospital had provided for the care of our sick soldiers. To me, the sight of all this stuff was absolutely staggering. At the front one simply had no idea of the resources available to a proper hospital nowadays.

After the inspection tour was over and we arrived back at the main hall, we again stood around with nothing to do. In the long run it is unendurable just to stand and look on, especially after one has spent months of drilling and drudging at the front.

I wanted to give my men a good example, and repeatedly tried to go up to one of the beds in order to make myself useful. But it is easier to storm enemy machine-gun emplacements than to break through the bustle of volunteer nurses. When I realized that reaching the patients was out of the question, I waited for one of the nurses to pass me, in order to relieve her of whatever she was carrying and do whatever she intended to do. "Can I help you?" I asked. "I'll do it," she replied. It was always the same, with the first, the second, the third. "I'll do it," and they were gone. At last I followed a few nurses into a sterilization room. "Can I help you?" But every time they snatched whatever I had picked up out of my hand, with pretty adroitness, saying, "I'll do it."

I had already given up when an unexpected opportunity seemed to present itself. One of the patients needed his bandage changed. The dressing cart had already been rolled up, and the nurses moved aside for a moment to leave room for it to be brought closer to the bed. I recognized the patient as Sergeant Kovar. During our retreat I had pulled the fellow out from under a pile of corpses, loaded him into the

ambulance, and bound up his wounds. In a word, I had saved his life. Naturally I felt called upon now to give him a fresh dressing.

"Hello, Kovar," I exclaimed, sprinting through the clear passage to his bed. I leaned forward to change the dressing. But at once a dozen women's hands anticipated me. I reached for a fresh roll of bandage, but they snatched it away from me. I was not one to insist on my rights and so I yielded the field. It was just as well. With what gentleness these volunteer nurses applied a dressing: it was enough to shame not only me, but the surgeon general of the army. Moreover, Kovar, without a trace of gratitude, called out to me, who had saved his life: "You see that, Ember? What do you say to the way these nurses change a dressing? I didn't feel a thing. Keep your eyes peeled, you can learn something here."

I stood there abashed. The only art in which I need learn nothing from volunteer nurses, or from anyone else for that matter, was that of burying the dead. And at that moment there was no call for this.

Dr. Zitrom's conference with the baroness seemed to be going on forever. When the head nurse came buzzing by again with her swarm of bees, I stopped her in her tracks. "Head Nurse Jadwiga," I called, "I received strict orders from Dr. Zitrom to report for duty here with my men at three o'clock. We have been sitting here more than an hour. I wish to be taken to Dr. Zitrom at once."

The head nurse was obviously divided in her mind. On the one hand the baroness had made it clear that she was not to be disturbed; on the other hand she felt the awkwardness of the situation and wanted to be rid of us.

"Very well," she said finally, "if you insist. But it is on your responsibility."

She sent one of the assistant nurses to show us to the

baroness' private apartment. I tapped at the door, timidly at first, then more vigorously. At the third knock the baroness appeared. I begged pardon for the disturbance and asked whether I could speak to Dr. Zitrom about an urgent official matter.

"One moment," she said, opening the door to the next room. "Paul, one of your men wants to speak to you," I heard her call in.

"I'm coming," the doctor's voice returned. Through the half-open door I caught a glimpse of Dr. Zitrom heaving himself from a couch strewn with pillows, in front of which stood a small table bearing coffee cups and cognac glasses. Swaying slightly, he approached the door. His face, ordinarily chalk-white, was flushed like poppies.

"Ah, it's you, Ember—what's the matter?" he said somewhat irritably.

I respectfully reminded him of his order and asked for our assignment.

"Oh, yes, of course, the assignment," he growled. "I suppose our discussion will have to be suspended," he said to the baroness. He scarcely succeeded in hiding his annoyance.

The baroness had a solution promptly. "Paul, why don't you give your men the afternoon off? After all, this is their first day in town, and the mayor has arranged a special market fair in honor of the troops. You may not know it, but a market fair in Drohitz is really worth seeing. And don't you trouble your head about the patients. Head Nurse Jadwiga is fully competent to look after things for an afternoon. Besides, you will be right here on call if anything is urgently needed. The boys could use a little recreation, couldn't they, Paul?"

The way she spoke his name, and the look she gave him under her long eyelashes, decided the issue.

"Of course, I'm right on the spot if anything should come up," he murmured. He turned to me. "Very well then, your

platoon may take the afternoon off."

I thanked him, clicked my heels and was about to go when he called me back. The mayor had appointed this evening for a banquet in honor of the officers, and Dr. Zitrom would have to represent the medical corps. He ordered me to be back in time to assume night duties in the hospital during his absence. "No later than seven, Ember. Clear?"

"Yes, sir; perfectly, sir."

When I told my men the good news, they went wild. Forgetting that they were in a hospital, they raised such a cheer that the nurses were appalled at the disturbance. But they mellowed quickly when they heard that we were leaving. They warmly recommended the Drohitz fair and gave us all kinds of good advice. Head Nurse Jadwiga even provided us with a car to speed us on our way.

As soon as we entered town, we were carried along by the throng to the market place. This big square, in the center of Drohitz, was the heart of the city; to and from it the streets and lanes carried the city's life like the veins and arteries of the body. And today was the first big fair since the war began. The horde of troops let loose on the town, hungry to buy things, flaunting big bankrolls, acted like a blood transfusion, reviving the commercial spirit of Drohitz, which had been almost choked by the war.

Ever since my childhood I have been charmed by fairs. But never before had I seen anything like the wild tumult of this market and the colorful display of goods. One wooden booth stood jammed up against the next, one stand beside the other. All the walls were festooned with merchandise, all the shelves and counters heaped with wares. One could barely walk among the bales, sacks, baskets and bottles massed on the ground. The faces of the dealers and peddlers shone like suns risen behind mountain chains of merchandise. And what attention was lavished on the cus-

tomers! Before the war the customer had been the idol of Drohitz merchants. Then he had been overshadowed by the heroes of the army communiqués. Now, however, as a result of our being quartered here, customer and hero had become one and the same. Hence the patriotic watchword of the day—everything for the army!—harmonized with the innate commercial spirit of the Drohitzers.

Only the wooing of lovers is as rich in endearments, significant nuances, sly implications and charged language as the courting of buyers that went on in this market place. Not only the professional dealers and peddlers, but private persons also, old ladies and aged gentlemen in particular, evidently felt it to be their patriotic duty to fetch out, dust off, air and offer for sale the treasures they had kept stowed away in attics or shut up in chests and cupboards. Everything that could be spared in all of Drohitz was on display and for sale.

After life in the field, where the world of things was limited to objects necessary for killing or enduring, and where a man possessed nothing beside his weapons, uniform, mess kit and canteen, it was overpowering merely to behold such an abundance of objects. Added to that was the marvel that one need merely thrust his hand into his pocket and any of the things on the counters and shelves was his, his very own! The craving for possession burst forth with elemental force: to buy something, no matter what: things to eat, things to carry, things one had once owned and things one had never had and always wished for, things one needed and purely luxury items, souvenirs, gifts, trivia and baubles.

To save the hero-customers the trouble of carrying their acquisitions, the merchants had organized a band of boys with carts, who for a small sum promptly transported the purchased goods to the soldiers' quarters. I hired one of these carriers and started on my round.

Intoxicated by plenty, I went—no, I reeled from one booth to the next. First I bought a whole salami, then two

pounds of chocolate, a package of letter paper bordered with forget-me-nots, and two hand-embroidered handkerchiefs. At the next stand I was negotiating for shoe polish, sewing needles and several spools of thread when my frenzied eyes caught sight of a porcelain figurine, a Chinese with a waggling head. A porcelain Chinese exactly like the one who had once rocked his head in Aunt Asta's china closet. As I closed the deal for the Chinese, I became intrigued by two tiny porcelain slippers, a miniature beer barrel, and six blue-and-white angels which were disposed around the Chinese. In the old days, I had always laughed at that china closet of my aunt's with its assemblage of bric-a-brac. But now that I had returned from the barren exile of a thingless world, everything appeared in a new light. The glory in useless objects overwhelmed me. Slippers, angels, whatever else struck my fancy—I had them all wrapped up for me.

The more I bought, the more I craved. What a heady sensation of desire and power buying conveys. Even the haggling took on the quality of love-talk, and paying was something absolutely voluptuous. I bought indiscriminately whatever caught my eye, and there was only one moment when something like common sense gained ascendancy.

I was just buying some violet soap, hand lotion and bath salts when the booth keeper also tried to fix me up with a jar of hair pomade. 'The last I have left; nothing like this stuff will be available again for a long time. Better stock up. Shall I put it in with the rest?" he simpered.

If only he had not used the words "for a long time" and "stock up." For these words gave me a sharp turn. I had already acquiesced, then shook my head again. And as always during such attacks of ambivalent feelings, I heard an inner voice. "Have you gone crazy, hoarding imported hair oil? How long do you think you're going to be here for the regrouping? And then back to the front, where you freeze, hunger and thirst, with or without sleeked hair. Throwing

away your pay for all this trash! A fellow like you who knows by trade how quickly it's all over for a man at the front? What idiocy!"

I rarely listened to the voice of reason, and I seldom let it spoil any of my pleasures. Now that it dragged my military métier into the discussion, it was child's play to rebut it. For if anything challenges the superiority of logical arguments, it is death, which upsets the logic of life, makes all things questionable, the reasonable unreasonable and vice versa.

"Granted," I replied, "that we will be staying here only a few days and then will have to return to the front. Granted even that out there the same fate awaits me as all the others, and that I shall serve out the rest of my stint as a corpse. Just for that very reason I should take my pleasure while the taking is good. For if these few days here are the sum of life, and if as a corpse I cannot sleek my hair and enjoy the Chinese figure's waggling head, what's the use of hanging on to my bankbook? To amass interest throughout eternity?"

"Pack up the pomade!" I told the dealer. And with no more ado I bought a hundred-year calendar, a kind of farmer's almanac so prescient as to predict the next war, a tie pin, a crock of whipped honey, marinated herring, and a monocle —something I'd always hankered for.

I sent my boy off to the castle with all my treasures, and was just about to leave the market when someone touched my arm discreetly.

"May I show you something very special, Captain?" a low voice asked. I hadn't earned the title, but it would have been ridiculous to protest it. So I left it at that and turned toward an elderly lady who now produced a silver-plated snuffbox from her purse. With trembling fingers she pointed out the engraved date: 1866. "A family heirloom," she said. "I would have wanted to leave it to my son, but he has fallen in battle. I can see that you would appreciate such a thing, Captain."

How could I possibly belie the confidence of such a nice old lady? "How much?" I asked.

"Oh," she stammered in embarrassment. "This is the first time I have ever sold anything. I know you are a connoisseur, Captain, and can judge best what it is worth."

This was no time to be petty toward an old mother whose son had fallen while I was still living. So I pressed several large bills into her hand. Touched by my generosity, she presented me with a brooch "for your fiancée." It was obviously impossible to take a gift from an impoverished old lady, so I handed her two more bills. She refused them at first, but was finally prevailed on to take them.

Amid all this furor of buying, I did not notice how quickly time passed. When I left the market place, Main Street suddenly blazed before me, brimming with light. For a moment this produced such a shock that I automatically ducked, closed my eyes and screamed. The terror of the front, where such a sudden flare of light always meant exploding shells and death-dealing rockets, was still in my bones. And yet here I was in the midst of a carefree crowd promenading the sidewalks under the pleasant light of the street lamps.

It was Corso time; here, between six and seven o'clock, the Drohitzers met every evening for a sociable stroll. Never had I enjoyed a promenade so thoroughly. What bliss was in this idle sauntering to the body which for so long had known nothing but crouching, lugging and standing at attention. What a stimulating sensation to have women and girls brush past one on both sides, and to feel even as one avoided colliding with them the light contact of arms, shoulders and hips. And the stirring scent of ash-blond and chestnut-brown hair which the evening breeze wafted to one's nostrils. This was the life.

Wherever I looked I saw another pretty face, now three-

quarter, now profile, now smiling, now provocative. And then, in the shifting current of faces, to encounter here and there one that had already delighted me before, to catch an already familiar smile and respond to it. Praise be to the small town, which invented the evening Corso. Truly, only small-town people knew that the Creator meant the bustle of the day to fade slowly and affably away in the evening. And so they introduced this stroll along the promenade.

Like everything else happening in Drohitz today, the evening Corso had a special quality. In honor of the soldiery the women and girls were wearing their Sunday best. And the prickling excitement and coquetry usually so well dissembled in this prim little town came bluntly to light, as a kind of patriotic tribute to the heroes.

Amid the ripples of ladies surged the animated whispers of the men in uniform: "Man, has she got the stuff . . ." "Take a look at that one . . ." "What legs . . ." The murmuring ran from one end of the main street to the other. The ladies of Drohitz responded with blushes of shyness and smiles of pleasure, the mothers smiling with no less mirth than the daughters who promenaded under their supervision. Groups of teen-age girls walked arm in arm, by threes and fours, making a game of blocking the soldiers' way. Then they would break apart, and the soldiers passing through their ranks repaid them with appreciative looks and remarks. Some girls dropped all reserve in celebration of the day, replying with a nudge or nod, answering unequivocal hints with equally direct invitations.

At first I kept hoping to meet Eve on the Corso. I scanned the scene until my eyes ached, trying to discover in the throng her black-cherry eyes and plum breasts. But there were too many other pretty faces and graceful figures, and at last I gave up. A chubby girl whom I had brushed past and distinctly "made contact" with several times had just responded to my "Beg pardon" with a cordial "Why, certainly."

A few steps farther on, she parted from her girl friend and paused in front of a jeweler's shop. She turned her head toward me as she entered and nodded beckoningly. Naturally, I followed her in. She sent the saleswoman to the rear for something that I might have the opportunity to introduce myself.

"Permit me, dear lady."

"Gladly," she said smilingly, holding out her hand for me to kiss.

Meanwhile the saleswoman had returned with a bracelet, and while the lady paid for it, I happened to notice the clock on the wall.

"Almost seven, good Lord!" I exclaimed in alarm, and tore out of the shop without even bidding her goodbye.

I need not have been afraid of being late. This time I had to wait even longer outside the baroness' apartment before anyone answered my knock. At last Dr. Zitrom came to the door. He looked rather disarrayed.

"You here again, Ember?" he asked crossly.

I respectfully reminded him that I had come to relieve him so that he could attend the mayor's banquet.

"Impossible, altogether impossible," he murmured, more to himself than to me. "I mean, I cannot possibly leave our sick and wounded men without the supervision of the chief medical officer on their first night in a strange city. I must be within call in case anything should come up. Of course, the banquet. Damn it all, what am I going to . . ." He considered for a while. Suddenly his face brightened and he thrust his forefinger into my chest. "I have it! *You* will represent our medical section at the banquet in my place. You'll enjoy that, won't you, Ember?"

"All right," I said uncertainly, "but how am I to explain your absence?"

He obviously wanted to speed me on my way. "Simply say that I was unfortunately prevented from attending because of official matters that came up at the last moment. Clear, Ember?"

"Yes, sir; very clear, sir. I shall do my best to be a credit to our company," I replied, saluted and took my leave.

The baroness certainly has her hooks into Zitrom, I mused. Would she ever let him out of her boudoir again? Not so long as we were stationed here in Drohitz, at any rate. And couldn't this play hob with our hospital duties? Well, after all, it was not my business to worry about that.

What a day this had been for me. In the morning still a living corpse among other living corpses; then Eve's orchard on the parade ground; the bounty of the market place; the womenfolk at the evening promenade; and now, to round it all off, a gala dinner at the mayor's.

I hurried to my room to spruce up. What elegance! Really, this town was a place to live! Especially after I had a chance to unpack and set up all my treasures from the market. Of course there was no time for that now, but at least I would place the Chinese on my night table, so that his waggly head would greet me when I returned home from the banquet.

The first package I opened contained the salami. I reached for the next—toilet articles and the farmer's almanac. But I had my heart set on finding the Chinese, and ripped open package after package. Where the devil was that Chinese hiding? Good Lord, it was already half past eight. I had to give up the search. Leaving a chaos of torn bags and half-opened parcels behind me, I raced downstairs.

Luckily, one of the ambulances was standing ready in the yard. "Orders from Dr. Zitrom—to the casino, fast," I snapped, leaping in.

The driver sped off, and in no time we reached the ca-

sino. Springing from his seat, the driver started to unfasten the stretcher.

"Never mind that," I said. "You can drive back now."

"Oh, I see, a private tour," he grinned, shaking his head. I didn't bother to set him straight.

II

The Banquet

When I entered, a gentleman greeted me: "Municipal Chief of Protocol Magados," he introduced himself. He need not have; his occupation was written on his face, with the narrow forehead like the margin of a document, with the features beneath it like scribbled memos and doodlings. He held a guest list in his hand. "Name, please."

"Adam Ember of Medical Company 317, representing Chief Medical Officer Zitrom who has been detained by official duties."

Magados made a little check on his list and led me into the hall.

The evening was already in full swing. Officers of varied ranks and regiments, together with city functionaries, stood around a serving table laden with canapés and drinks. To judge by the lively temper of the company, a good many glasses must already have been emptied.

I looked around but could discover no familiar faces. Commander Konrad, whom I had expected to meet here, was nowhere in sight. He, too, it would seem, had been unable to get away, perhaps for reasons similar to Dr. Zitrom's.

I was received as if I were Dr. Zitrom himself. A bemedaled officer—the highest ranking one there—bore down upon

me. At first I shrank back in alarm. He had a face like a planned offensive, a beetling, aggressive brow, a hooked nose like a drawn saber, and a furrowed skin like war-torn terrain.

"Senior Commander Mannsteufel! Cordial greetings!" he snarled amiably, and drew me over to the table. There I was plied with drinks left and right; I had no sooner finished one glass when another was filled for me.

"The medical corps must not lag behind!" a middle-aged regimental doctor remarked, and urged me to drink a toast with him.

"Enough, enough," I pleaded when they filled my glass again. "I've surely caught up with you by now!" And in order to escape another barrage of glasses, I started to sing a gay song I remembered from my student days.

She said I could escort her
So I caught her and I taught her
What any Eva's daughter
Likes to know but hadn't oughter.

"Encore, encore!" they cried, clapping for all they were worth. The chief of protocol beckoned to the gypsy violinist, who picked up the melody by ear and accompanied me. At the words "Likes to know but hadn't oughter," the whole company chimed in.

A few minutes later the double doors to the big dining hall were thrown open.

"Dinner is served!" the chief of protocol announced.

Cheerily humming my tune, we entered the hall. At the head of the festive board the mayor and the senior commander took their places. On either side, in order of their ranks and dignities, were seated the officers and aldermen. While a host of liveried waiters began serving, the band played.

The table was covered with a damask cloth and sparkled

with silver, fine china, cut crystal and handsome flower arrangements. A state dinner could not have been organized more munificently. The greatest attraction of all was the remarkable menu, in which the Drohitzers had so eloquently expressed their patriotic spirit. Every product of our native land, all the culinary delights of animal husbandry, agriculture and the fisheries were served here in the various modes in which our provinces specialized. And the drinks? Not only all the wine regions but all the vintages were represented. And while our palates savored the finest morsels, while the nation's history of the past eight years flowed down our throats, our ears rang with the many moods of our nation expressed in music. The band played alternately gay and sentimental melodies, playful, tender, passionate and stirring tunes, jolly medleys of love and marching songs.

At the height of the gala dinner, a large steer from Grivan, roasted on a spit, was brought in. Grivan steers were the pride of our Department of Animal Husbandry. Along with the roast, the moment for the official speech-making had arrived.

Mayor Gospoda arose first. Once again he lauded his heroic guests in the name of the city, and emptied his glass to the health of the victorious army. The aldermen followed his example, while the band played fanfare after fanfare. Then came the senior commander's turn to speak for the army, acknowledge the mayor's hospitality and drink to the health of Drohitz. Whereupon the army officers all jumped to their feet and drained their glasses. Toast followed toast, with cheers after each toast. Before long everyone had toasted everyone else, and still it went on.

I don't know what came over me all of a sudden. I had been contentedly chewing and swilling with the rest. Then, from one moment to the next, as I looked around, the officers and aldermen had vanished and in their places sat the dead of Hill 317. The damask tablecloth became a shroud, the

glittering dishes broken shards, and instead of food the dead were shoveling muddy earth into their mouths.

At the head of the table two dead speakers rose, alternately reviling the army as "abject murderers" and the patriotic city folk as "war profiteers." Their speeches completed, they drank to one another, pledging, "Here is to hell," touching skulls instead of glasses and drinking blood instead of wine. The other dead men rose likewise from their places and toasted one another. After each toast, instead of a fanfare, there sounded the rattle of skeleton chains. Then I realized to my horror that the dead men were turning to me.

"Ember, speak!" they cried. And when I hesitated, they became more insistent. "Ember, have you forgotten us?" they roared into my ears. "Speak, Ember, speak!" They were about to fall upon me, and I knew they would do me harm unless I met their demand.

"May I have the floor?" I asked, rising. Even as I spoke, the hallucinations disappeared. The officers and leading citizens were back in their places. "This glass to the memory of our dead comrades who cannot spend this evening with us!" I cried. All had risen and raised their glasses. I would have left it at that, if some drunken officers had not bellowed, "Long life to them!"

The unseemliness of this vexed me. "To the memory of those," I continued, "whom this murderous war has assigned to underground commands, and who are moldering in their muddy graves while we here gorge ourselves." Determined to obtain for the dead the respect they deserved, I talked myself into such a frenzy that I conjured up in the banquet hall all the horrors I had witnessed as a gravedigger at the front.

My audience grew visibly impatient. They cleared their throats, shuffled their feet and threw angry looks at me. When I paused for breath, I heard a lieutenant whisper to his neighbor, "Must we sit through a funeral oration? That bastard seems to be dead-drunk."

I could feel myself that it was in poor taste to remember the dead at such length during so gay a dinner. But I could not help myself. I was scared stiff that unless I granted the dead their full due, they might return again, and I would have to stay longer with them, perhaps forever.

Even after I had finished my funeral oration and all had resumed their seats, the dismal mood lasted for a while. The guests squirmed in their seats and could think of nothing to say. The spell was not broken until a young lieutenant raised his glass and cried, "But now let us drink to us who are still living!" At this the repressed gaiety burst forth more noisily than ever. Glasses were drained to the last drop, filled and emptied again, and the party grew wilder and wilder.

I felt shut out from the fun. Everyone talked, but no one spoke to me. They behaved as if I did not exist. And even the waiters, who were now serving champagne, passed me by as if instructed to. Then all rose from table and stood around in groups, but no one asked me to join them. I was simply left behind at table. After my initial success I was naturally hurt, and decided to regain my popularity.

I began to sing. I struck up a song whose stanzas began properly enough but invariably ended with smutty rhymes. At first the others hardly listened, but when one altogether unexpected obscene rhyme came in, they dropped their reserve and burst into laughter. My *faux pas* was forgiven and forgotten. They clustered around me once again. The waiter filled my glass, the gypsy set his bow to the strings, and everyone sang along with me, laughing uproariously the while. I fetched song after song out of my memory, and my prestige grew from song to song.

"A chap like you does honor to our medical corps," the doctor said, patting me on the back and blinking his little green eyes at me from behind his glasses.

"I'll apply for your transfer to the Thirty-eighth," a major exclaimed.

"Beg pardon, Major Barbar, he's going to be transferred to our Eighty-sixth," someone interrupted.

"Pay no attention to them," a rather tipsy brigadier general urged me. "If you want a transfer to our Fifty-fifth, I'll see that you get your promotion to lieutenant in no time. I have connections."

It was almost incredible, the enthusiasm these obscene ditties aroused among the officers and the staid town officials. All sang in unison, beating time with their fists on the table. Another glass and another song, another song and another glass!

At times the master of ceremonies interrupted their bellowings to remind the company of the grand and solemn cause in which army and civilian authorities were here so festively united. "To our country and victory!" he would cry, raising his glass. Whereupon all would shout in response: "To our country and victory!" and go back to their singing.

The mayor gripped my arm. "Ember, let's have that song again, the one I liked so much." When I did not immediately guess which one he meant, he prompted: "So I caught her and I taught her." He borrowed the gypsy's violin to accompany me himself. Although he played a bit out of tune, everyone applauded heartily: "First-rate, first-rate, Your Honor!"

"Oh, come, come," he exclaimed. "Why the ceremony? 'Your Honor' indeed! Just call me by my nickname, Albi!"

"Three cheers for Albi!" And once the mayor's title was dropped, all the other ranks and titles tumbled like ninepins when a bowler has made a full strike. Everyone began calling everyone else by first names and pet names. "Nicki! Grutschi! Soldi! Dudu! Mausi!" rang through the hall. All reserve disappeared. Everyone exchanged slaps on the back, pats on the head and pokes in the pit of the stomach.

* * *

The gaiety rose to higher and higher pitch. Everyone sang at the top of his voice, drank till he could hold no more, and flung the empty glasses to the floor with a crash. Everyone babbled, laughed and shouted all at once. Soon no one was listening to anyone else, no one knew what he himself was saying, and before long nothing was left but the mother tongue of drinking parties, a senseless stammering and yammering: "Say you . . . remember . . . ha-ha-ha . . ."

Suddenly Albi jumped on the table top and demonstrated the native hopsa-hopsa dance. He hopped and jumped from one leg to another, pounding his thighs the while and yodeling merrily. From time to time he leaped high in the air, clapping knees and heels together before he landed on the table again. Everything about him bounced: head, cheeks, shoulders and paunch; even his frock coat rollicked as if it were about to bounce away.

He already looked thoroughly done in. His rubicund face had turned beet-red, and the veins of his temples bulged like thick cords. His hair, dank with sweat, drooped over his forehead. Nevertheless, he would not stop.

His solemn welcoming address was still ringing in my ears. I saw him standing so majestically on the platform at the parade ground, in his closely buttoned tail coat, freshly starched shirt front and neatly knotted black tie. He had looked the very essence of a dignity that was embedded firmly in his fleshy eye-sacs, sustained by his broad shoulders and massive build. Was it possible that the mayor of the parade ground and this Albi capering on the table were really one and the same person? His coat had burst open; his crushed shirt front bulged out, and his tie pranced wildly around at the nape of his neck. And with eye-pouches, shoulders and belly bouncing so frenetically, all dignity had lost its foothold.

Inspired by Albi's capers, officers and aldermen had formed a ring and were hopping around the table in a similar di-

sheveled state. In the midst of the wildest frenzy the chief of protocol flung up his arms, signaling us to stop, "For our coun . . . co . . ." he stammered, but before he could finish the word he fell forward on his face. We paused only for a moment. Two waiters dragged him off to one side, and we continued more wildly than before.

We were all dripping with perspiration. Abruptly, Albi threw off his coat and the others followed his example. Now all the company hopped around in shirt sleeves, and everything that had been hidden under the dinner coats and uniforms came to light. The world had never yet seen such a collection of crumpled shirts and collars and soaked undershirts as the hopping town and jumping army now displayed. Soon we threw off our sopping shirts and undershirts also, and continued to dance with naked chests streaming with sweat. From round to round the tempo increased.

Dr. Kapra, the regimental doctor, could scarcely catch his breath, and yet he did not want to lag behind his younger comrades. The town officials, however, gradually gave up. One after another they stole away as inconspicuously as possible, until only Mardi, the senior alderman, and the mayor remained behind with the officers. At last almost all were out of breath, and their legs, too, would no longer move. The hopping had degenerated into a bobbing flexing of the legs in one and the same spot. Many were so weary they could scarcely keep their eyes open. Then, suddenly, the cry rang out: "Let's go to the girls." Impossible to say who had spoken first, for at once all took up the cry. Instantly the whole company revived, were as full of vim as they had been at the beginning of the evening.

"Hey, Albi, is there a decent bordello in Drohitz?" they asked the mayor.

"*Is* there!" Albi snorted, jumping briskly down from the table. "Not another town in the province has anything like our Mashinka!" he boasted. "Isn't that so, Mardi? Folks come

from as far as Sambor. You'll see things that will make your eyes pop. Come on, I'll show you the way." He instantly thought better of this. "No, it won't do. As mayor I simply can't . . . And if Eulalia should ever . . . Out of the question."

"Hey, Albi, don't be a spoilsport; there'll never be another night like tonight," we urged him from all sides.

"I'll give you a guide, but I just can't do it myself. You tell them how it is, Mardi," he appealed to the alderman.

It seemed that Albi was a widower and lived under the domination of his sister. But the officers kept after him. "No one will ever find out," the senior commander pleaded. "It will remain strictly between us, the army and the town. Won't it, Mardi?" The alderman nodded agreement. "You can't refuse to do something for the army."

"I'll discuss it with Mardi," he said at last. The two withdrew to a corner and whispered for a while. Albi returned. "The city council has decided that the city will join the army," he announced with mock solemnity.

"Three cheers for the city, three cheers for the mayor!" everyone shouted in glee.

"One moment." He waved his hand for silence. "I'll guide you and show you the whole works, but then you must excuse me. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

We took Albi and Mardi between us and tramped across the hall, roaring: "To the girls, to the girls!"

The noise aroused the master of ceremonies from his drunken stupor. At the sight of the row of marchers, he sprang to his feet, crying: "For country and flag!"

"Shut up!" the senior commander barked at him. He turned to Albi and whispered, "Make sure we get rid of this pain in the neck."

"Muschi, you can go home," Albi said. And when the master of ceremonies continued to stand unwillingly, pull-

ing a long face, Albi ordered him in his official tone: "Chief of Protocol Magados, your presence is no longer required."

"Perhaps Your Honor may need me after all," Magados demurred.

"For the rest of the evening we will manage without a master of ceremonies, I think." The mayor sportively dismissed him.

We had to clean ourselves up a bit. Everyone made for the washrooms, where the towels gave out and we used napkins instead. Then we donned shirts and coats again. The waiters served strong black coffee and brought in tubs of cracked ice so that we could cool our temples.

"Another cup," the mayor demanded, to sober himself up completely. But the cup dropped from his hand, and the black brew flowed over his shirt front. "Well, now I look a sight," he grumbled. Luckily one of the waiters was about his size, and lent him his shirt. We were ready to go at last.

III

To the Girls

We went down the back stairs, in order to leave the casino as inconspicuously as possible. The mayor led us through a number of dark, winding alleys. Now and then he turned around to warn us against making noise. On tiptoe, we crept like thieves through the old part of the city. "Sh, sh . . ." he repeated again and again. Then he stumbled against a tree and lost his balance. "Mardi," he exclaimed in alarm. But Mardi was nowhere in sight. "What a namby-pamby," Albi scoffed. "He's ducked out on us." We got him to his feet again. Fortunately, the commotion seemed not to have aroused anyone.

At last we emerged from the tangle of alleys and were able to move somewhat more freely. It was a good distance to the red-light district, which lay on the outer edge of the town, near the river. We passed factories, tenements, empty lots and warehouses. At last the first red lanterns appeared. Several of the officers quickened their pace.

"Take it easy," the mayor admonished. "The red lights won't run away from you."

Once within the Mashinka, we could scarcely be restrained. House after house had a red lantern over its door. From some of the houses tantalizing music, singing and babbling of

voices reached the street, even though the blinds were down. At others the windows were open and half-dressed girls leaned over the sills, beckoning to us. Through open doors we could see dimly lit corridors down which the figures of girls flitted. Soldiers were loitering in front of many of the houses, trying to choose. Here and there a door was noisily opened. Soldiers came out, others entered; there was a steady coming and going.

We stopped repeatedly, for any house would have suited us; but the mayor always pulled us along. "No," he advised us, "that place is nothing for gentlemen. The place I'm taking you is the best we have in Drohitz." And as our impatience rose, he placated us: "Not much further to go now. You won't regret it."

We seemed almost to have reached the end of the Mashinka. Only a few random red lanterns could now be seen. At last the mayor stopped in front of a two-story house situated directly on the river. Outwardly it was different from all the others; it resembled a villa with a large front garden. There were heavy drapes at the windows and the carved door was locked. The mayor knocked, whereupon a voice from inside asked for the password. Albi could not remember it.

"I'll call Madame," the voice said.

While we waited, I saw by the glow of the red lantern a sign in large letters: SILVER HALL. Why, this was the very place Ignaz had told me about when we marched together through the mud! I remembered his juicy description of a big blonde so voluminous that her bosom could accommodate a whole army. Mountains of mud and heaps of corpses had since obscured the image, but that name, "Silver Hall," like a magic formula summoned up out of mud and cadavers that blonde's swelling bosom. I pictured her vividly; only her name still escaped me.

The door opened, framing a distinguished-looking elderly

lady who wore a black silk shawl around her shoulders. "What a pleasure, Your Honor," she exclaimed, hastily patting her hair. She drew the shawl tighter around her shoulders and begged us to step in.

"For myself I must say thank you, no, Madame Renoir," the mayor replied. "I merely wished to conduct our guests of honor, the officers of our noble army, here, to our famous Silver Hall. I am sure your house will do everything to satisfy our guests."

"But, sir, you will certainly do me the honor of having one little glass in my house."

"Of course, Albi, come in for a little glass," the senior commander urged him.

"Very well, one little glass," the mayor consented.

We were about to enter when an elderly roué in an astrakhan-collared paletot slipped by us. The mayor shrank back. "Who is that?" he asked anxiously.

"Just a visitor from Sambor," Madame assured him.

"Is there anyone else here?" he asked suspiciously.

"Only a few officers upstairs. Have no fear, Your Honor; I shall arrange things so that you gentlemen will be undisturbed in the Silver Hall. May I ask you to wait here for a moment." She returned shortly. "The coast is clear," she said. "Please follow me."

She led us down a passway. "Here," she said, opening a door. We stood dazzled at the entrance. Before us, like a mirage, lay a room that seemed to stretch on endlessly. Thousands of crystal chandeliers flooded it with a glittering sea of light. Countless marble tables, silver-painted chairs and red plush sofas stood scattered about, and a numberless horde of slender and ample, blond, black, brunette and red-haired girls were strolling back and forth. Such was our wonderment that Madame had to ask us twice to follow her.

Only after we had entered the room and saw ourselves multiplied a thousandfold did we realize that the boundless-

ness of the room, the myriad lights, women and pieces of furniture, were an optical illusion. All the walls were covered from floor to ceiling with glittering mirrors which reflected one another and the objects inside the room endlessly.

It was a bit of a shock at first to find myself confronted by a whole army of mirror images of myself, and I made all kinds of grimaces, deliberately distorting my reflections into comical caricatures, to overcome my jolt.

Only after we had sat down at one of the marble tables did I appreciate the cunning cleverness of the mirror-magic. At a gesture from Madame, the girls came sauntering toward us in their low-cut evening dresses. Immediately my discomfort changed into a sexual excitement unlike anything I had ever experienced before. For the sight I beheld is not ordinarily granted to mortal eyes. What an orgy of voyeuristic pleasure to see a female form from all sides at once, to caress with the eyes all the contours, every line, every swelling curve, every tender hollow—and each multiplied a thousand times over.

A breath-taking lust overcame me. If it were possible I would have seized all these girls at once, engaged in a single amorous act with them and all their mirror images. All the more sobering were the formal introductions to Miss So-and-So and Miss So-and-So, and the maidenly demureness with which they greeted us. They contrived to create an atmosphere which checked even the wildest craving. Social etiquette went so far that the senior commander had to invite the girls formally to sit at our table. And with what respectability they behaved after they sat down—the residents of a Swiss boarding school could not have been more restrained. Not even the champagne ordered by the senior commander succeeded in melting their reserve.

I realized at once, of course, that this was just another of Madame Renoir's clever tricks. She wanted to create the illusion that we were dealing with real ladies who had to be courted before they could be enjoyed. Presumably this would

increase the value of the objects of our lust, and intensify desire.

I sat beside Miss Violetta, and had much to endure. The shy manner with which she turned her prettily painted face to me; the little dimples in her cheeks; her breasts strongly emphasized by her tight-fitting dress; the fine grain of her shoulders—all this transported me with delight. When she tried to engage in conversation, I attempted to speed the intimacy which was not being established aboveboard by direct action under the table. But as soon as my foot touched Miss Violetta's, she discreetly withdrew hers, and when I tried knees, she primly shifted her chair. This, I felt, was an outright insult. After all, the women and girls on the Corso had been altogether different. When you felt them up a little in passing, they smiled and even responded. And those were bona fide ladies of the best families in town. At least they knew what women in the rear areas owed to the soldiers who had gone without everything for months at the front. They had a patriotic sense of duty under their skins.

How long was this farce going to continue? We started dancing—and the music played by the phonograph was a minuet! Really, this was pushing the thing too far! Albi, that idiot who had dragged us all here, might think it all very fine. After all, he was playing the part of an amused spectator, so to speak. He had a bottle in front of him and looked thoroughly tight again; was chewing a fat cigar and gloating over it all. And the others—well, maybe they were better brought up than I, but they were certainly a great deal dumber! They were taking this without protest. Damned if I was going to—not Adam Ember! I hadn't come to this house to dance minuets. If the others were agreeable to such a farce, that was their affair. I had just made up my mind to drop Violetta when the minuet abruptly changed to a waltz. Not the ideal dance for a bordello either, but at least somewhat better.

As we waltzed back and forth and I pressed Violetta closer

and closer, I felt under her dress, which seemed almost a part of her, the jounce of her breasts, the delicious arc of her waist, the tensed legs under the swell of the hips, the animation of the muscles, all the stimulating delights concealed beneath this dress. On top of all this came the pleasure of seeing myself embracing her and her embracing me in all the mirrors. From turn to turn the music took on a more and more passionate tempo. I drew her tighter and tighter against my body, until her body held hardly a secret from me; I felt the pull of her muscles, the pulsations of her veins. A moment later the dance was one great mingling.

Then the lights suddenly went out. The music stopped. In the darkness Violetta slipped from me. I groped for her. The interlude lasted only a second. When the chandeliers flared and the music struck up again, the girls fell into our arms once more, now dressed in nothing but transparent negligees.

In the left corner of the room a mirror-sheathed door opened. Everyone trooped to it, past the office where Madame sat enthroned at a raised desk, entering the couples in her book. There was a traffic jam at the stairway leading up to the rooms. I had just reached the first steps with Violetta when I noticed clinging to the balustrade, a half-dressed man with a chalk-white face who was swaying back and forth.

"Why, it's Commander Konrad," I murmured. Just then he tottered and fell forward unconscious upon a couple who were coming up the stairs. A girl with raven-black hair, who had been at his side, uttered a scream. Alarmed, the couples broke apart and ran to his aid.

The regimental doctor rushed forward, and Madame also came running.

"How did this happen?" Dr. Kapra asked the black-haired girl. She replied that Konrad had been staying with her

since the afternoon, and that they both had been drinking heavily. "Well, no wonder," the doctor commented. "Enough to wear out a bull. Overstrain. There's only one medicine for that: a good long sleep."

"Number nineteen is free," Madame said, sighing with relief. She asked us to take him to the room.

"Pardon me," I apologized to Violetta. "He's my own commander. I'll just see to him and be right back."

Four of us carried him up and laid him on the bed. I stayed for a moment to smooth the pillows and draw a blanket over him. After all, I had served under him on Hill 317. I started to leave, to go for Violetta. But as my hand touched the door-latch, he began to roll back and forth, moaning, so I went over to the bed again.

"Can I do anything for you, Commander? Would you like a glass of water?" I asked.

He did not answer.

I wet some towels and placed them on his forehead and under his neck. He opened his eyes, recognized me, and reached for my hand. "Dummox!" he groaned hoarsely. That was how he used to address me and the whole garrison of the hill. Then his eyes closed again. I wanted to go, but as soon as I tried to relase my hand he groaned once more: "Dummox!"

"You must sleep," I urged him. "Doctor's orders."

I had promised Violetta I would be right back. Besides, I myself was in a hurry. All that ceremonious nonsense in the mirror room had postponed things far too long as it was. No one could ask me to spend the rest of the night holding hands with the commander. After all, I hadn't come here to take on medical duties. Again I tried to free myself, but as soon as I moved my fingers, he gripped me harder.

This was too infuriating. All the others must be in bed with their girls by now; was I to be the only one left out? And all because the commander had been fooling with the

black-haired dame all afternoon. Suppose he was feeling bad now; he'd had his fun already. I was feeling bad, too, because I hadn't had any fun yet. Commander and my superior—all very well. But we were not on any hill here; everyone had equal rights in a bordello.

I made up my mind to fetch Violetta. It wouldn't do to let the poor girl wait any longer. After all, she made her living by her customers. As tactfully as possible I freed my hand, saying, "I must leave for just a moment, Commander; I'll be right back." Then I wrenched open the door, dashed into the dimly lit corridor, and—ran my face into a great, surging, soft mass. I looked up: a wealth of blond hair. And at that moment of contact, feeling the very breasts I had so vividly pictured during that march through the mud, I recalled the name. "Ludmilla!" I exclaimed, overjoyed.

"Yes, my boy, Ludmilla," she said. "Do you want to come with me?"

I followed her to her room: a bed with pink silk eiderdowns, on the wall an oil painting of a satyr with a naked nymph in his arms.

"Who recommended me to you?" she inquired.

I did not want to waste any more time in talking.

"I'll tell you later, come now, come quick," I panted.

Ignaz had not exaggerated; Ludmilla was everything a soldier could wish for. The tearing impatience that seized me now, as she nonchalantly slipped out of her clothes, I had not felt even when my first girl undressed for me.

But it was as though everything conspired against me. I had barely encircled Ludmilla and burrowed into her swelling bosom, when a scream from the next room reached our ears.

Ludmilla raised her head, listening uneasily. "That's Black Narcissus," she murmured, lunging out of my arms.

Damn it all, just at this moment. Couldn't that girl next door have waited a few minutes!

The screaming continued and Ludmilla pushed me vigorously aside. "Stop it," she said. "I must see what's wrong."

A moment later she returned. "Come, help me, I don't know what to do with her," she said. "And above all get that drunken sack out of her room."

Unwillingly, I put on my clothes and followed her. Even in my state of thwarted excitement I was alarmed when I saw the black-haired girl, who had been with Konrad, lying on her bed twisted with pain. On a chair in the corner sat Albi in his underwear, gaping at her with the frightened helplessness of a person too far gone to understand anything. He was a pitiable sight.

"Do what you can for her while I go for the doctor," I said. "But how am I going to find him?"

"Ask Madame; she has everyone listed. But don't leave that fellow here to pester me," Ludmilla added, pointing to Albi.

It was no simple matter to dress Albi, propel him out of the room and help him, heavy and unsteady as he was, down the stairs. I took him to a waiter with instructions that he be given a double espresso to sober up on. "And not another drop of liquor," I whispered. Then I hurried to Madame, who was in her office filling out bills. As soon as she heard that the Black Narcissus was ill, she dropped everything and led me to Dr. Kapra's room.

"Griselda, open the door!" she called, knocking loudly.

"Shh, be quiet; he's gone to sleep," the girl said as she opened the door.

Dr. Kapra was sleeping deeply. I had to shake him several times before he awoke.

"What is it?" he asked drowsily at long last.

"One of the girls is sick."

"It won't amount to anything," he mumbled. "So am I. Leave me alone." He turned to the wall.

Madame persisted. She pulled pillows and blanket away

from him until at last he staggered up. She scarcely gave him time to dress.

We went to Black Narcissus' room.

"Narcissus, darling, what's the matter with you?" Madame screeched hysterically when she caught a glimpse from the door of the girl writhing in convulsions. "Doctor, what is it? Say something."

"I must ask you to wait outside until I have examined the patient," the doctor said. He also asked Ludmilla to leave the room.

Meanwhile, attracted by the commotion, several guests and girls had gathered in the corridor. They peered curiously into the room, and the doctor ordered me to close the door. He examined the girl carefully, frowned, shook his head, murmured to himself: "Well, well, it wouldn't be . . . Is there any carbolic here?" He washed his hands with great care. "Tell me," he asked abruptly, "where have you put the commander? I'd like to take another look at him. Show me to him at once. But first get that crowd in the corridor out of the way—especially Madame. She's a nuisance I can really do without right now."

As soon as I opened the door, I again encountered the soft, beneficent mass of flesh, and above it the flowing blond hair. For a moment I stood stunned; but then I pulled myself together and stepped aside.

"What's the matter with Black Narcissus, my boy?" Ludmilla queried me.

"What's the matter with her?" Madame wailed.

"What's the matter with her?" Everyone in the corridor assailed me.

"Nothing to be worked up about; it isn't serious." I tried to calm them. "But she must have absolute quiet. Dr. Kapra has ordered me to clear the corridor."

Madame Renoir insisted that she must see Black Narcissus.

"I'm sorry, but the doctor won't permit it," I contested.

"I like that!" Madame burst out. "I should think I have the right to attend to my own girls in my own house."

She reached for the latch. I planted myself squarely in front of her, determined to carry out my orders. "I'm sorry, Madame," I said firmly.

Here Ludmilla interposed. Her bosom came barging right into my face. "Come, come, my boy, don't be a stinker. Madame has a weak heart and must not be flustered. Let her in for just a minute."

"Impossible."

"Who do you think you are, baby?" she challenged as she rammed against me the considerable weight of her bosom and thighs and, encouraged by catcalls from her colleagues, attempted to push me away from the door.

I was almost vanquished when, luckily for me, Dr. Kapra came out, closing the door behind him. "For the present no one may enter the patient's room," he announced.

"All but me," Madame panted, gasping for breath.

"Not you either, Madame Renoir. Absolutely no one."

She became more and more overwrought. "We'll see about that!" she shrieked, and once again approached the door.

"In my capacity as a doctor I forbid you to enter."

"What presumption!"

"Dearest Madame, calm down. You know excitement isn't good for you," the girls soothed her.

"Let me alone." Madame fought them off. "I'll show him who gives orders here. You're nothing but a customer," she snarled at the doctor. "Pay for your fun, and get out, you and your whole crew, or I'll have you thrown out!"

Nothing remained of the ladylike demeanor of the woman who had received us. Fists raised threateningly, she advanced upon the doctor in wild fury. A scuffle began. Madame kicked and attempted to scratch, all the while screaming without pause: "In my house! My room! My Narcissus."

Suddenly she began to sway, and one hand flew to her heart. "My drops," she gasped, and fell to the floor.

The girls all screamed at once. "The drops . . . help . . . why can't she see Black Narcissus?" Dr. Kapra tried to do his professional duty. But even before he could touch Madame's pulse, the girls fell upon him. "You let her be, you murderer," they screeched.

"You see what you've done!" Ludmilla bawled at me, and gave me a stinging slap. "Don't you dare try to climb into my bed again, you pig!"

"Bravo, Ludmilla," the girls cried as they helped carry Madame off to her room.

Harrowing as this incident was, Madame's heart attack was fortunate for us. I don't know how we would otherwise have got rid of her and the wild crowd of girls.

"We have no time to lose," the doctor said. He had one of the officers post guard at Narcissus' door and went with me to the commander's room.

Konrad's condition seemed to have worsened considerably since I had left him. He was convulsed with pain, and kept calling, "Water, water!"

I held out a glass to him. "Dummox," he mumbled.

Dr. Kapra was mystified. "What was that he said?"

"Oh, nothing; he knows me from the front."

After the doctor had observed Konrad for a while, he said, "I don't think I can possibly be mistaken. This certainly seems to be . . ."

"Sir, you don't mean it's . . ." I began. But he raised his hand to cut me off.

"For the present, not a word to anyone. At any rate, wash your hands thoroughly in carbolic."

In the corridor Senior Commander Mannsteufel came forward to meet us. "I was looking everywhere for you," he said to the doctor.

"I've just come from Commander Konrad," Dr. Kapra replied.

"What's his trouble?"

"It appears to be a serious matter; we must discuss it. But not here. Let us find a place where we can talk without interruption. We'll need the mayor also."

I offered to fetch Albi.

We went downstairs. The doctor and the commander withdrew into Madame's office. I went to the pantry to see about Albi. He already seemed to be a good deal more sober.

"This rascal would not give me anything decent to drink," he complained, indicating the waiter. "But no matter; it's time we went home anyway."

"The senior commander would like to speak with you first," I said, helping him to his feet.

Dr. Kapra ushered us into the office. "I've just explained to the commander what we have on our hands," he began. There was a knock at the door. "Damn it all, isn't there a single quiet place in this house! See who it is," he told me.

A soldier was standing at the door. He asked whether there was a doctor in the house; a corporal had collapsed in the street outside and was writhing in convulsions.

"There we have it!" the doctor exclaimed, bolting after the soldier.

"Where's the fire?" the mayor asked innocently.

"Perhaps it will be better if he explained it to you himself," the senior commander replied.

Meanwhile Dr. Kapra had returned. He had the corporal moved to one of the rooms. Now he turned to us with a grave expression. "Unfortunately, my fears have just been confirmed. We must instantly take measures to prevent the disease from spreading. The red-light district will have to be quarantined from the rest of the town."

At the word "town" Albi immediately became cold sober. "Do you mean that our town is endangered?" he cried out.

"I must be off to issue the necessary orders."

Dr. Kapra blocked his way. "Sorry, Albi, you're not leaving now. For the present, no one may leave here."

"No one, all right, but after all I am the mayor. It is my official duty to be on the spot in an emergency. I'm sorry, but where the welfare of Drohitz is at stake, I cannot let anyone balk me."

The senior commander intervened. "Albi, you know we all have the greatest respect for you and your town. But you must realize that at the moment the primary concern must be the army."

"As mayor *my* primary concern is the civilian population of my city, and I must do what I think right."

"And for my part, as a soldier I must abide by army regulations and proceed accordingly," the senior commander said with a certain sharpness. "Drohitz is at this moment the seat of the army and is therefore under military command. In the name of the Military Government, Mayor Gospoda, I forbid you to leave this house. After all, you can issue your instructions by telephone from here, as we are doing. We are all in the same boat."

For a moment the mayor looked stunned; then he burst out bitterly: "If only I had not let you wheedle me into this place. Now I'm in for it. What will the people of Drohitz think of me now? For eight years they have looked up to me as to a father. What will they say when they find out that I, their mayor, instead of taking charge am spending my time in a bordello? My entire career is ruined!"

"What does any one man's career matter!" the senior commander upbraided him. "Don't you realize that our whole military offensive is at stake, the victorious termination of this war, and thus the fate of our country? As a good patriot, you must understand that."

"Have mercy!" the mayor pleaded. "Let me return to the city."

"Look, Albi, I hate to say this, but you least of all can leave here," the doctor said gently.

"Why me?"

"Since you press the issue, I must remind you that you were the last person with Black Narcissus."

"What has that to do with it?" the mayor stammered. The meaning of the words gradually dawned on him. "Is she too . . . ?" he asked in horror.

The doctor nodded. Albi paled and began to shake. Dr. Kapra tried to reassure him. "It doesn't mean that you too . . . But we must keep you under observation here for a while."

This remark had a crushing effect upon Albi. He sat stunned, with glazed eyes and contorted features, resembling neither the dignified mayor of the parade ground nor the capering drunk of the casino.

"You had best retire for a while and get some rest," the doctor advised him, "so that you will be fit for tomorrow, when all sorts of decisions for Drohitz will have to be made."

Albi refused at first, but gradually recognizing that in his present condition he could cope with nothing, he agreed. We asked the waiter to find some quiet place for Albi to sleep. "I'll speak to Madame," he replied.

That was all we needed.

"Madame is not well and must not be disturbed," the doctor said. "Can't you take care of this?" He pressed a banknote into the waiter's hand.

"I suppose I can," the waiter consented. He beckoned to the mayor to follow him.

IV

The Battle of the Amazons

"Above all we must . . ."

"Above all we must . . ." Mannsteufel and Dr. Kapra began almost simultaneously.

Above all we had to obtain medicines, sterilizer kits, stretchers, rubber gloves and a hundred and one other things. Also, we would have to bring in some men from the medical corps. Above all, Madame Renoir's house had to be isolated. Above all, we had to find out whether there were any similar cases in the other houses of the Mashinka. Above all, panic had to be avoided. And all these "above alls" had to be tackled at once.

I spoke of the up-to-date medical apparatus I had seen during our inspection tour of the hospital in the baroness' palace, and suggested that the men of my platoon, who were at the moment unoccupied, should be detailed here.

"There is one more very important matter," the senior commander remarked at the end of our discussion. "For the present, the name of the disease must not be mentioned at all, even among ourselves. If the news were to trickle out and perhaps reach the ears of our enemy, the effect upon our planned offensive could be disastrous. So there must be absolute silence. I want you gentlemen to give me your word of honor as soldiers."

We sealed our compact by shaking hands all around.

Dr. Kapra went at once to the telephone to pass on the necessary instructions to Dr. Zitrom. I was told to transmit to the officers up in the rooms the order to come down directly for roll call in the Silver Hall.

While Mannsteufel—a senior commander multiplied a hundredfold—informed the likewise centupled officers of the gravity of the situation, and explained to them that successful defense of our country depended upon the strictest execution of his orders, my platoon arrived with the equipment we had ordered. The officers were instructed to round up all the soldiers in the Mashinka and assemble them in Madame Renoir's garden. All exits from the Mashinka were to be covered by guards, and the streets patrolled. I was directed to take my platoon and search the houses. Anyone who was sick or suspect was to be removed to the Silver Hall.

I started off with my platoon and a group of officers who were already sweeping the district. We stopped all the soldiers we met. "Orders to report for duty; follow us."

From one red light to the next we went, from one den to the next. First we entered the dives where the rude appetite of the enlisted men was served. Here the atmosphere was so thick it could be cut with a knife. The décor consisted of battered sofas and dusty tubbed palms in corners. There were plump and slender girls, some flabby, others with boyish faces, caked with powder. Their cheeks and lips were crimsoned, their eyelids tinted brown and green, their hair dyed blond or deep red. A few girls were costumed in low-necked blouses with short, crackling taffeta skirts which exposed the flowered, pink garters above their knees, or in flesh-colored tricots fitting so tightly that they seemed ready to split, or in light tulle garments, slashed here and there, that unfolded at every movement. Some girls wore high-heeled shoes and nothing else but lace-trimmed pantaloons and plumed hats, with the whole upper parts of their bodies

naked. Recumbent on divans, girls blinked lewdly at the men. The tables were crowded with drunken soldiers who now and then reached for the girls. On the dance floor hips and breasts moved in sensual rhythm to canned music.

In each place our appearance produced general consternation. When the lieutenant in his grating, battlefield voice bawled into the room, "Attenshun!" the order traversed all the well-worn nerve paths of these veteran soldiers. The lascivious looks froze, the lewd gestures petrified, the slavering avidity subsided. On the dance floor the swaying bodies slowed, became stationary—like a waxworks display of rut. Gradually the soldiers gathered their wits together and started to follow the officer to the street.

But immediately furies would dart after them. Here a madam with reptilian glass eyes, there a sharp-nosed weasel with pinched face insisted raucously on being paid for drinks and rooms before the soldiers left.

From the halls we proceeded to inspection of the rooms. We knocked: "Open! Report for roll call." A smell of cheap perfume mingled with the stench of carbolic and sweat took our breath away. Many of the men in the rooms thought our knocking and summons a practical joke, and refused to open. Then we had to break open the doors and drag recalcitrants from their tumbled beds.

From house to house, from den to den, the number of soldiers in our train increased.

In one of the taverns a solo dance was in progress as we entered. The room was darkened except for a spotlight which fell upon the middle of the dance floor, illuminating the tanned body of a girl who was making the most of her nakedness. She scarcely raised her feet from the floor; only her belly and hips danced. From time to time she threw her head back abruptly; the muscles of her throat tensed and her breasts began to sway until at last her whole body was carried along by the rhythm of the movement, whirling in

bacchantic ecstasy. Everyone was watching in rapt fascination. Even the lieutenant waited with his announcement until the dance was over.

We were searching the upper story when one of my men came back with the report that a soldier had been found unconscious in the washroom. I hurried down. An infantryman lay on the floor, face gray, uttering gurgling sounds. It was hard to tell whether he was merely drunk or . . . In any case, I had him carried to the Silver Hall.

Upstairs, the tour through the rooms went on. Once more we reached a door which was not opened in spite of our vigorous knocks.

"Well, I'll show that guy!" a sergeant growled, and kicked at the flimsy door with his heavy boot. A girl lay on the floor beside the cheap dressing table. Under the powder and rouge her little whore's face was sunken and distorted. She lay motionless, eyes dull, nose peaked, her straw-colored hair dangling in disorderly strands. Beside her lay a broken jar of cold cream. Evidently she had been about to make up anew when she collapsed. I rushed her over to the Silver Hall.

In the garden I came upon a sizable band of soldiers who were being lined up by the officers. In front of us, two medical aides were carrying a stretcher into the house. Others were already in the hall of mirrors. In order to provide beds for the new patients, Dr. Kapra had ordered the girls to leave their rooms. Loaded with clothes and paraphernalia, they came downstairs, screeching their protests.

Madame had meanwhile recovered and had posted herself in front of the stairs, a living outcry against this commandeering of her rooms. Her objection was a social one. "This is a house for gentlemen!" she wailed. "How can you bring this gutter rabble into my house?"

The doctor was anxious to avert another attack, and tried to placate her: "Madame Renoir, you must not agitate your-

self. After all, you understand that these people are sick and need care."

"My house is no hospital."

"You are mistaken, Madame. At present your house *is* a hospital."

"My house," she spluttered. "I give the orders here, no one else."

Dr. Kapra controlled his temper with difficulty.

"I must point out to you that your house is at present under military control, and has been requisitioned for a hospital."

"There is no such thing!" Madame Renoir seethed. "After all, I have a license. The mayor will tell you. Mayor Gospoda . . ." But Albi was nowhere to be seen. "That skulking coward" she fumed. "Brings all this rabble into my house and then skips out. I'll teach him. I'll stand in the market place and tell everybody what a fine mayor we have." She gasped for breath. "But I can do without him." Again she hurled herself at Dr. Kapra. "Why don't you take your patients to the city hospital? Why keep them in my house?"

"I am afraid you will have to accept the army's decisions without question, Madame Renoir."

"Army," she sneered. "A hell of an army." She caught sight of the stretcher my men were carrying. "I suppose you want to put her in one of my beds, on my down pillows! No, you won't; I won't hear of it as long as I'm still alive!"

Violetta came down the stairs, carrying her things, and paused for a moment beside the stretcher.

"Haven't you any sense of decency, *Miss* Violetta?" Madame reprimanded her. "Are you going to have anything to do with a common whore!"

Two other "misses" walked past the stretcher with upturned noses.

The doctor wanted to avoid complications if possible. But heart attack or not, his patience was at an end. "If you don't

get out of the way," he snapped at Madame, "I shall be compelled to have you removed by force." He beckoned to two officers. Madame Renoir had no choice but to abandon the field.

"Why did they ever come to my house?" she wailed as she moved off. "They've brought me nothing but ill luck. Why couldn't this have happened in Madame Tscherka's house? There's no justice."

We carried the girl upstairs, and I set out again. I had barely reached the garden gate when a sergeant came up to me and reported that a similar case had been found in the house next door.

As soon as I entered the room, I received a shock. The patient was Barnabas, my old hilarious chum from Hill 317. From the start I had always seen him laughing—laughing when we sought cover in muddy foxholes; laughing when the bullets whistled around our ears; laughing when we received rotting beets and polluted pond water at mess. All this came back vividly now. I saw him shaking with laughter when the first supplies arrived after our long famine, and enemy shells tore to bits chewing mouths and stuffed stomachs in the midst of our gluttonous feast. He would laugh in the face of suffering, horrors and death, as though the whole war could be overcome by laughter. No terror was too terrible and no grandeur too grand to be ridiculed. Only this morning, when the mayor had solemnly welcomed our victorious army, Barnabas had burst into raucous laughter.

Nature herself had inscribed deep folds upon his face, the birthmarks of unquenchable merriment. His body had been shaped upon the last of laughter. What a pity it was to see this man, this hero of gaiety, felled by paroxysms, lying there with pain-contorted face. He seemed to be still fully conscious, recognized me at once, and in spite of his pain tried as usual to greet me with a broad grin. His chest rose

in short, jerky gasps, but nevertheless he called out to me, "Ha-ha, Fatso!" When I asked where the pain was, he raised his long, apelike arms and pointed to his abdomen. "Hear it rumbling in there: clunk-clunk." And then indicating the cramped calves of his legs: "Snap-snap-ouch-ouch!" This was immediately followed by: "Ha-ha, hee-hee." He was wrathfully laughing at his own agony.

I had seen enough wretchedness in the field, but never had I been so shaken by human misery as here where a creature made for laughter contended with torments. Now the pain would seize him in its grip, would force him to hunch his head between his shoulders; the corners of his mouth would twist downward, his lips compress, his eyes freeze with horror—and then suddenly the laughter would dislodge his head, throw it back, curl his lips, widen his mouth, and the humor in his eyes would dispel the stoniness. His body, which a moment before had been writhing convulsively, would now shake so with laughter that he would have to hold his sides. Now the groans laughed, now the laughter groaned.

I stood paralyzed, finding it more difficult than Barnabas to see the funny side of this illness.

The door opened. The madam, lean as an old alley cat, came creeping in, apparently to see about collecting the money Barnabas owed to one of her girls. For a second she crouched, back bent, like an animal about to spring. Then she reached Barnabas' bed in one leap. "Cheat!" she hissed. And infuriated by Barnabas' hollow laughter, she fumbled in his pocket for his wallet.

The sergeant tried to restrain her. "Keep away," he called. "Don't touch him."

The old woman paid no attention. She already had her claws in Barnabas' coat pocket.

"Get away, it's contagious," the sergeant warned her.

Her scrabbling ceased. Frightened, she shrank back. "Con-

tagious," she whimpered, and with a catlike leap she was out of the room.

We looked at each other in dismay. A single careless word, and all our plans to keep the danger secret were thwarted. Now there would be no stopping it. Already the careless word was running down the corridor with the old woman, racing into the room, down the steps, into the tavern. From all the walls, from every corner, the house throbbed with: "Contagious, contagious!"

As yet it was only a word, as yet the disease had no name. But this very namelessness had evoked the dark and ancient fear of the unknown.

When we carried Barnabas out, this fear peered inquisitively through the cracks in all the doors. And as we walked down the gantlet of horror, Barnabas' laughter suddenly rose like a wave, washing over his torment. He sat up, arms clasped around his knees, rocking back and forth on his buttocks, and laughed so loudly, so wildly, that the whole abyss of terror resounded with his mirth.

Once outside the house we sealed the door and posted a double guard in front of it, as though we actually hoped to contain the careless word behind bolts and bars. As we sped down the street with our stretcher, all the windows in the houses on both sides flew open as if at a signal. Horror-stricken faces leaned over the sills, calling to one another: "Contagious, contagious!" At first the word sounded muted, from choked voices, but it rapidly climbed to a shrill crescendo. A piercing shriek flashed down the street: "Contagious!"

"Get back there! Close those windows!" the patrol called. But no command could drive that cry back into the houses.

And then, before the patrol could act, the doors flew open. Girls, madams and servants charged past the guards into the street. In a few seconds the narrow alley was peopled by outlandish phantoms, girls in tricots, girls in evening

dress, girls in lace-trimmed panties. A grotesque carnival procession of trembling bodies and fear-twisted masks pressed toward the exits of the Mashinka in the glow of the red lanterns. "Let us out, let us out!" they screamed.

We could not make any progress through this crowd with Barnabas' stretcher and took refuge in a doorway. When Barnabas, gripped by pain, began to roar, I ordered him taken to one of the rooms on the second floor. Just then I saw two of my men in front of the door. Here was my chance to send a message to Dr. Kapra, who must be wondering where I was. "I'll be right back," I shouted to Barnabas, and stepped out. Instantly I was carried away by a human torrent which irresistibly swept me along.

In the midst of the tumult I suddenly caught sight of Ludmilla's face. Near her were Violetta and other girls from the Silver Hall. All of Madame Renoir's misses, the aristocracy of the gutter, were now pressing forward together with the "common whores" toward the exit of the Mashinka.

As more and more bands poured out of the side streets, faces and figures of the swelling mob formed one indistinguishable mass. Abruptly the pressing and trembling, the cries of fear, were no longer the expression of horror by this one or that one—a multishaped mob-monster rolled in the red glow of the lanterns down the street, its head one gigantic throat from which there rose, like a roar, one and the same cry of terror.

The scene was beginning to whirl feverishly before my eyes. Houses and women merged with one another like phantoms. It seemed to me that everything all about would be seized by the insane fear of the mob, would begin to tremble and scream—doors, lanterns, buildings, all the panic-stricken vice of the Mashinka, even the cloudy sky, the air, the night—everything striving to escape the contagion.

An officer released me from the spell. "Don't just stand there, do something," he called, and gripped my hand, and

immediately I became a link in a chain of soldiers who were trying to contain the rabid mob. I was seized by uneasiness about Barnabas; I could visualize him plainly, and what troubled me was not so much his suffering, but his laughter. I should not have abandoned him, but now I was caught in this chain and could no longer return to the house where I had left him.

At this point the troops we had rounded up earlier came marching down the street under the leadership of the senior commander.

"Clear the street; drive them back into the houses," the commander shouted, and the soldiers began pressing the girls back. Their timely intervention seemed on the point of quelling the riot. But then the crowd abruptly hardened and resolutely faced the troops.

"Move along there!" the soldiers cried. But the crowd stood its ground. In the center I made out Ludmilla's towering figure. She whispered something to the girl beside her, who passed it on to the next; we could see the words leaping down the rows. And before we knew what was happening, the band of women had become transformed into a militant battalion. For a moment the cordon of soldiers and the battalion of women stood facing each other, motionless. Then Mannsteufel's voice rang out: "Get back or . . ." But before he could finish his threat, Ludmilla, with the lordly gesture of an Amazon chieftain, gave the signal to attack. With a furious cry the band of women fell upon us. They struck out with their fists, dug their fingernails into our flesh, flashed hatpins and hairpins like daggers, kicked with the sharp points of their shoes.

"Give it to them!" Ludmilla exhorted her Amazons.

Surprised by the sudden assault, our soldiers were at first at a loss to defend themselves. Most of them were battle-tried veterans who would have held their ground in the worst of enemy fire, but they were no match for these fe-

male furies. Even the senior commander was for a moment taken aback.

Presently he recovered. "Forward! Over the top!" he shouted as if we were in the trenches, his voice quivering with rage and excitement.

Then we closed.

We were on leave and without arms, had only our fists to rely on. But after all, these were men's fists, soldiers' hands that had tackled more than one enemy at the front. We struck hard at the women—male fists against maenads' claws, blows against scratches. Even so it was not easy to overpower them. Their determination to flee the district gave them a tenacity which our toughest fighters could not break down.

As soon as Mannsteufel had recognized the gravity of the situation, he had sent an orderly to telephone the garrison for armed reinforcements. The sky was already beginning to show light; the troops ought to arrive shortly. Meanwhile, the battle continued bitterly.

"Hold out!" the senior commander cried.

"Break through!" Ludmilla spurred on the girls.

Orders crossed through the air.

Now and then the girls slipped into houses and returned armed with kitchen utensils, bottles and ash trays. We had to duck and seek cover in order to dodge the well-aimed missiles. Close to me one of our men suffered a direct hit. A bottle landed squarely on his head. He fell to the ground, streaming blood. I rushed to his aid, but before I reached him one of the maenads jumped upon my back and dragged me down. Immediately other women pitched in and began kicking me around.

I was no fighter, only a medical aide and gravedigger. But now that they started stomping on my chest and belly, I saw red. I bit and pinched their calves, pulled them over, used every trick to free myself and get to my feet again. Yet

:ven now, as I defended myself against fingernails, needles ınd high-heeled shoes, and was in danger of being trampled :o death, Barnabas' pain-distorted, laughing face hung con-:inually before my eyes.

I had just succeeded in struggling to my feet when one of the girls dealt me such a well-aimed blow on the septum that everything turned black. Barnabas' face, too, vanished; only his peal of laughter remained. Divorced from his image, detached, nothing but a sound, his pure laughter shrieked in my ears, drowning out the howls and screams of the battle. Then I no longer knew whether I screamed at one of the furies, "Stop or I'll kill you!" or whether I screamed this at the laughter and lashed out with all my strength at it.

Time passed. The expected reinforcements had not yet arrived and the battle grew more furious on both sides. After a while, however, we gained the upper hand. We formed ranks once more and marched forward, striking blows to right and left. Already the women were beginning to retreat.

Then Ludmilla resorted to her last weapon. She stepped forward one, two paces, planted herself with legs spread wide in front of our advancing rows, and with one swift movement ripped the clothes from her body. Stark-naked, she stood there. "Come on!" she urged her band. A moment later we were facing a battalion of women in the armor of nakedness.

I saw Ludmilla advancing toward me, her flesh quaking as she came. "Come, baby," she cooed, and my face sank between her huge breasts. I felt her massive thigh between mine. Involuntarily, my hands slid from those of the men on either side of me and ringed Ludmilla's waist.

The fierce craving I had felt for her before the screams of Black Narcissus had torn her from my arms swept me once more. I felt the blood rising to my head, flooding hotly through my whole body.

"Ludmilla!" I moaned.

"Don't give way! Resist!" the order rang out.

Resist? To hell with resistance; when at last I could press her to me, feel her ripe mouth, her breasts, her thighs, her loins. After all, ever since this damnable war had begun I hadn't had a woman.

I could still hear solitary shouts of command. Then the only words that reached me were, "Come, baby, come." And now it was not merely Ludmilla, it was the body of Woman that pressed against me, the eternal womb from which all comes, into which all goes. And I was no longer Adam Ember, medical aide and gravedigger, but the first Adam, impelled by a fierce primordial desire which was stronger than duty, obedience, war and country. Dating back to the Garden of Eden, it preceded all wars and all countries, and invited disobedience.

I drowned in a voluptuousness intense to the point of pain. The passion that gripped me transcended the body and spread throughout infinity.

And then suddenly Barnabas' blasted laughter blared in my ears. I pressed Ludmilla closer, buried my head deeper into her flesh, so as not to hear it. But it laughed even more wildly, as if someone were actually laughing above me. Madness! I had myself left Barnabas at the house and ordered him to be taken to a room. Damn it all.

Linked to Ludmilla, I was in the midst of my pleasure, and still this laughter tormented me. It shrilled like an alarm clock in my ear. No hallucination could sound so loud, so powerful, so real. I had to find out. And there, as I looked up, I saw Barnabas leaning out of a window, looking down at the street and roaring with laughter.

The man must be raving mad. I wanted to wave my fist at him, give him hell, silence him. Then suddenly I realized that this was not Barnabas' laughter, this was no longer human laughter haw-hawing, but arose from the dark pri-

mordial throat; it was the mockery of damnation, the mirth of Hell which derides man and his Fall. And as I looked around, I saw all the other men plunged in lust, coupling with the naked girls.

A few officers were still manfully trying to fend off the naked bodies. "Hold out, force them back!" they called. But their cries grew feebler and feebler, until one command after the other faded into lewd blubberings at some girl's lips. Already the first line of soldiers had been overwhelmed by the naked bodies. The Naked Battalion was advancing victoriously, breaching the line in place after place. The military cordon consisted of nothing but gaps; the battle had degenerated into a self-forgetful orgy. Only the senior commander still stood at his post, sternly thrusting the naked girls aside. Apparently a man had to be a senior commander to resist such temptations. But finally he too began to waver. Even our printed handbook of military regulations would have succumbed to such arts.

The last command stuttered to a stop, the last row disintegrated. The Amazons had overpowered our battalion.

"Up, let's go!" Ludmilla commanded. Instantly, breasts tugged free from eager lips, hips from our hands, thighs from our thighs. And while lust held us stunned, the naked women ran as fast as their feet would carry them toward the exit from the Mashinka. The way into the town was open, and the nameless contagion raced with the girls toward Drohitz.

Suddenly, from the direction of the warehouses, came the clattering of treads. Out of a cloud of dust, rows of tanks came rolling up. The reinforcements at last!

The tanks barred the way, and the first warning salvo from their guns sent all the runaways fleeing back into the Mashinka.

The appearance of new troops brought us back to our senses and restored discipline. We set about vigorously herd-

ing the retreating girls into the houses. In a few minutes the main street of the quarter and all the side alleys were swept clear. The Mashinka was quiet again.

The reinforcements took up positions at a distance. The tanks were placed athwart the streets, blocking them completely, and drawn bayonets flashed threateningly. The Mashinka resembled a besieged fortress. No one could enter or leave it now. All of us, girls and soldiers, were caught in the whores' quarters, fellow captives, prisoners of the nameless disease.

Dawn broke.

V

Room Zero

Inside, in the Silver Hall, all was wild confusion after the defeat of the Amazons—confusion multiplied a thousandfold by the reflections in the mirrors. Ringed by guards and continually being forced back, flushed, naked women rummaged frantically through heaps of dresses and undergarments, seeking their own things. The soldiers and girls who had been picked up in the streets and brought to the Silver Hall for observation were now jammed in with the rest.

"Lay off pinching my ass, soldier boy."

"Those are my panties; give them here, you crook!"

"If only I hadn't listened to that fatheaded Ludmilla! Am I a sight now."

"Stop pushing. . . . Who ya shoving?"

"One more step and I'll have you put in chains, you sluts!"

So it went, the babble, wails and curses of the now powerless but still enraged women blending with the rough snarls of the guards.

In the vestibule stood a number of newly delivered stretcher cases who had to be moved into the rooms. In Madame's office orderlies came and went, commands rang

out, and the telephone shrilled. "Military headquarters? Senior Commander Mannsteufel? Here. I'm listening."

The upper story rang with the wails, shrieks and whimpering of the sick. The regimental doctor and the medical aides rushed from one room to the next.

"Ember, the senior commander wants to see you at once."

"Ember, the doctor needs you upstairs."

"Ember, make tracks to the vestibule. They don't know where to put the new stretchers."

"Ember, hurry over to the Mirror Room. One of your men is monkeying with the girls. . . . The suspects are trying to break out."

"Ember, Commander Konrad is worse. He's been asking for you."

Summoned here, ordered there, needed here, wanted there, downstairs, upstairs, back and forth. From the babble and cursing of the Mirror Room to the snarling and ringing of the office, from the anonymous wails of the upper floors to the groaning pleas of Konrad: "Dummox, stay here, don't go!"

"Can't you see I'm coming?"

"Haven't you any sense of decency?"

"No, no one is permitted to leave the room."

"I'll be right back, Commander Konrad."

"Rooms fourteen and seventeen are still free."

"Very well, sir, I'll see that it's attended to, Commander Mannsteufel."

"Corporal Barnabas? Tell him I'll be along as soon as I'm finished here."

On days of breathless confusion like that, when you have to be seventeen places at once, time itself jumps out of its watchcase, ceases its measured pace and rushes out of sight hour after hour.

It was already eight.

"Ember, damn it all, where's your head? Didn't I order

you to wake the mayor early so that he could inform the town officials? Fetch him at once."

I went to the pantry.

"Where is the mayor?" I asked the waiter.

"I haven't seen him. I suppose he's still sleeping."

Goodness, what these civilians are capable of! I don't care how drunk a man was, or how much of a shock he'd had—simply to sleep though this frightful night certainly took the constitution of a town official.

"Where have you put him?" I asked the waiter.

"In my room. Room zero."

"What do you mean, room zero?"

"Only the women's rooms have numbers in our house. Numbers one to twenty-nine are the girls, number thirty is Madame. A man doesn't count in a house like this." Karl added with a grin, "He's a nothing, zero."

We had reached the room, and I dismissed him. I knocked on the door several times. "Time to get up, Albi," I called. No answer. My, but he slept soundly. I opened the door and went in.

For a man with my professional experience, one look was enough to convince me that Albi's leaden sleep was everlasting. Purely for form's sake I felt his pulse, raised his eyelids and took the waiter's shaving mirror from the night table, holding it in front of Albi's mouth. The mirror remained unclouded, the eye was fixed, the pulse zero.

This was the second time since my encounter with Barnabas that I was really shaken. Yet I was used to such things if anyone was. What with the countless corpses that had passed through my hands on the hill, nothing should have surprised me. Only two days ago, during the retreat to Drohitz, I had picked the stiffs up from the ground like so many dropped apples. And yet, standing before the lifeless mayor, it was something altogether different. I could not take my eyes off him, and weird ideas kept crowding into my head.

This, for example: All the men I had disposed of in the field were corpses who had been marked out for that destiny from the beginning of their military careers. Way back in the barracks when they first put on their uniforms, they were donning their winding sheets. They had marched off into the field to the end that they might some day quit the service as corpses. From the first order, from the first act of obedience, with every "Forward, march!" they had drilled for the day of their death. So it had been with every mess call, with every act. From the first moment on, day by day and hour by hour, more and more had been subtracted from that sum which is called life: first the meat subtracted from the turnips, then the number of turnips, then half the water, then three quarters. At the same time there began a reducing of flesh, a waning of color, an evaporation of warmth and of mobility. So it went, subtraction, always more subtraction, until in the end only a tiny, half-rotten turnip and a few drops of foul water remained, only sunken cheeks and cold-numbed limbs were left. When death came, it was only a matter of drawing a line under the example and writing zero for the remainder. The only question was: What day, what hour? Today, tomorrow, next week, a year hence? For this great war went on and on, and even if there were an end to it, the next war would draw the line.

But the situation was quite otherwise for a civilian, especially for a mayor like Albi who was the very embodiment of civilian life. I could not help recalling how he had shone as town father on the parade ground, how we had cheered him at the banquet in the casino, how mightily he had drunk and slapped his thighs with laughter, and how merrily he had hopped around on the table top.

No, here wartime Death had played one of his pertest tricks. Robust body, dignity, praise, carefree hopping, blissful drunkenness—this was the sum of a life of pleasure. And then to have it wiped out, just like that. . . . Also that he

should be the first, when Konrad and all the others who were stricken were still alive. That he should be the one to lead off the danse macabre! Perhaps he too had suffered, groaned and shrieked, without anyone's hearing him amidst the tumult of this past night. One thought alone consoled me. At least he had been spared the painful task of issuing orders for the town of Drohitz from the bordello.

What would the senior commander say? "Impossible. Most regrettable. Something must be done at once." And those were actually his words when I brought him the news.

"And without a moment's delay," he added. "But what, and how?"

"Yes, that is the question," Dr. Kapra, who happened to be in the office, agreed.

"It will be impossible to keep Albi's death a secret. We'll have to inform the Drohitz town council."

"Quite right," the doctor nodded. "But that means a post-mortem and making out a death certificate with all the data: cause of death, place, time. In other words, it means calling the disease by name, and that is what we want to avoid at any cost. You know what the consequences would be."

"Of course: panic," the senior commander groaned. "Not to speak of the disastrous effect upon our army. Albi was a man with years of administrative experience; he would have known how to put a thing like this across to the townspeople. He was head of the town, after all. And now there is no head. I fancy we agree that the senior alderman isn't the man for a crisis. We've all seen what a namby-pamby he is. Didn't even dare come into the Mashinka with us."

"If only we'd all been namby-pambies, then we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Granted," the senior commander blurted out. "But that's beside the point. A man who skips out, no matter what the situation, is to my mind no man. Besides which

Mardi is an idiot who'd be likely to spoil everything for us."

"And yet I'm afraid we have no choice," Dr. Kapra replied.

"What a hell of a business," the commander said. "Devil only knows what we can do." For a moment he sat with a look of utter perplexity. His saber nose seemed to be slipping back into its sheath. Meanwhile the doctor's glasses had dropped to the rug, and with blind helplessness his naked greenish eyes were searching for them on the floor.

"Begging your pardon, sir, Commander Mannsteufel," I ventured, "a solution certainly will be found."

He threw a reprimanding look at me. But almost instantaneously the same words trickled like an echo from his own lips: "A solution will certainly be found." Abruptly he sprang to his feet and began pacing the office in marching tempo, hands clasped behind his back. "I have it!" he exclaimed victoriously. "It's all very simple."

Dr. Kapra had found his glasses; he donned them and listened eagerly as the commander continued: "The town of Drohitz will be placed under military administration. We will declare martial law, which means no questions asked, no explanations given. Orders will be issued and orders obeyed. That is all, gentlemen," he concluded, and with an imperious gesture, signaled that our presence was no longer desired.

I followed the doctor out of the room. He was going upstairs to look after his patients.

"If Madame finds out that her house is harboring a corpse, on top of everything else, what a fuss she'll make," I said.

"Don't worry, I gave her a double sedative; she'll stay under for quite a while," he replied.

"And what is to be done with the body?"

"You'll have to ask the senior commander about that."

I turned and went back to the office. The commander was talking on the telephone with the town council. I waited until the conversation was over.

"Well, what do you want now?" he asked me irritably. I had no sooner put my question about the dead man than he yelled, "Don't bother me with such trivialities. I have more important things to do now." He shoved me toward the door.

The word "trivialities" aroused my ire. Only a man with a face like a planned offensive and a saber for a nose could muster such inhuman coarseness. At the banquet he had outdone himself to toast and compliment Albi, but now that the mayor was dead he had more important things on his mind. Surely, the declaration of martial law would avert many unpleasant complications, but there remained an equally essential question: What was to be done about the immediate cause of these complications, the dead mayor, Albi himself? We could not let him rot in the waiter's bed. Aside from all feelings of humanity, the dead man was after all the head of a town which had received us hospitably. A man like Albi could at least expect his guests and fellow revelers to give him a decent funeral.

I decided to return to the office and bring up this "triviality" once more, and not to be sent packing until the matter had been settled one way or another.

Naturally the senior commander was even more put out at seeing me. "Get out of here!" he roared.

"No!" I said impudently, and did not stir.

My boldness so stunned him that for a moment he stood gaping. I took advantage of his astonishment, and said, "We simply can't let Albi lie here like a dead dog. What is to be done with him?"

"I don't know. Do what you like. I hereby place you in charge of all matters concerning the dead, with full powers to issue orders and requisition whatever you need."

"Very well, sir," I snapped. "Would you permit me, sir, in my new capacity, to call headquarters and order a coffin with all necessary appurtenances?"

"All right, but keep the call short; I have a hundred and one urgent matters to take care of."

I put through my call.

"Provisional headquarters of Senior Commander Mannsteufel speaking. We need coffins, etc., etc., urgently."

At the word "coffins" the commander shot me an uneasy look. I realized that I had committed a slip of the tongue. Probably my experience on the hill, that when dying started it never remained singular, had led me willy-nilly to use the plural. In any case, it would do no harm for us to have a few coffins on hand.

"All right, bury him, but don't attract attention," the commander dismissed me.

I left the office with mixed feelings, partly glad that I was exempted from medical aide work and was, so to speak, my own master; partly sad because my new assignment was the same one I had performed on the hill. I had come from the theater of war into a peaceful town, from the realm of the dead to the realm of the living, or so I had thought. For a few hours it had looked as though my life was going to be something different from misery and shoveling graves—for instance, eating, drinking, strolling, dancing and paying visits to bordellos. And now what was I in for? The old business: taking care of corpses. That seemed to be my fate, all right.

I entered on my new duties.

"Ember, hurry. A bad case. I don't know where to put the stretcher. Every room is full already." An aide stopped me.

"Sorry, I've been given another assignment. Speak to the doctor about it."

It is not possible to serve two masters at once, the dead and the living.

Before I reached room zero, another aide stopped me. "Ember——"

"Sorry, I've——" I began.

"You must come at once," he interrupted. "Corporal Barnabas is asking for you."

In all the commotion I had not had a chance to look in on him. "How is he?" I asked.

"We don't know what to do with him. We can't hold him down."

This was another matter, of course. I would have to see to this.

As I started up the stairs, the aide told me that Barnabas, after his fit of laughter by the window, had collapsed from exhaustion. But by and by he had revived and had insisted that he wanted to get up and go out.

"He's gone stark, raving mad," I said. "Oh, well, I'll calm him down."

As we reached the corridor upstairs, I thought I heard Barnabas' rumbling laughter. I stopped. I was deeply concerned about him, but at the moment I felt that I could not endure his idiotic laugh. Because of the dead man. Granted, there had been dead men enough out there on the hill, and when Barnabas had laughed about that, I had not cared a hoot; at times I had even laughed along with him. Apparently these civilian surroundings were making me suddenly aware of the majesty of death. I suppose one does feel more sensitive about death behind the lines. In any case, I knew that at the moment laughter was something that I could not face.

"I just remembered I have something else—most imperative," I blurted out. "Tell him I'll be along soon." With that, I left the surprised aide and hurried to room zero.

* * *

The problems awaiting me there kept my head whirling. Competent as I had been in my job at the front, I found myself facing decisions here which had simply not existed on the hill. For example, there was the question of terrain. On the hill that had been no fuss at all; everything, the whole military landscape, had been one great cemetery. But here it was different, all the more so since the Mashinka, as a result of the quarantine, was completely cut off from the town. To transfer the body to the Drohitz town cemetery was out of the question because of the danger of contagion. Where in the world was I to bury Albi in a quarter where the houses stood jammed right up against one another, these houses existing solely to purvey pleasure and serve vice? And then I had to do it without attracting attention. What a joker this one was!

Embarrassing though it would be, I was already considering whether I should not apply again to the senior commander, when the solution suddenly came to me. I had happened to notice the window of room zero; it gave on the back yard.

"Of course, in the yard, splendid!" I exclaimed delightedly, quite forgetting that it is unseemly to rejoice loudly in the presence of the dead.

The back yard seemed made for the burial. It was fairly large, extending all the way down to the river. Moreover the window was big enough for the coffin to be squeezed through. This would obviate the need to carry the body through the corridor. The whole funeral could be taken care of quietly and unobtrusively.

In order to make certain, I estimated with professional acuity the probable dimensions of the coffin, and then measured the window. Virtually cut to size for the dead man, I decided contentedly. Then I climbed out through the window into the yard, to choose a suitable spot. The back yard was simply ideal for my purposes. There were high walls to

the right and left, and the river on the far end. The interment could proceed without anyone's noticing.

I had no sooner climbed back in through the window than an orderly knocked on the door and told me to report at once to the senior commander's office.

"A call has just come from town headquarters that the coffins and all accessories will be delivered at the warehouse, just outside the cordon, at four o'clock," the senior commander informed me.

Four o'clock—I felt a sudden stab. I had made a rendezvous with Eve to meet her at the pastry shop, where she was going to introduce me to her friends. And while she waited there for me at four, I would be fetching coffins.

I selected a few medical aides to help me with the loading. We were on the spot at four sharp. According to the medical staff's orders, the coffins had to be taken over in such a manner that the soldiers from the city side did not come into contact with our men. I had just finished arranging with the officer in charge of the quarantine troops a kind of no-man's-land buffer strip when along came the truck with the coffins, shovels and ropes. While the other crew were unloading it, I observed a young man in a cassock who jumped down from the cab of the truck. I had forgotten to ask for a priest. The army coarsens, but the Church does not forget the salvation of her dead sons.

After the others had unloaded their stuff and returned to the town side of the buffer strip, we went to collect the coffins. The young priest approached us.

"I am telling you, Father," I heard the officer in charge call, "anyone who enters this area cannot return."

"I go and remain where the Lord wills," the priest replied.

He helped us carry the coffins. The strength of three men was concealed under that cassock, and the skill with which he juggled the coffins was so professional that even I, hardbitten as I was in such matters, was impressed.

There were four coffins. After they had been shifted to our side of the line, he turned to me. "Father Jacopo," he introduced himself. "I have been sent to bless the remains of the deceased and to give him a proper funeral." He made the sign of the cross above us. His fearlessness and the mildness of his voice affected us powerfully. We stood in silence for a moment with bowed heads.

"Well, now let us go about our work," he said.

"I am just wondering how we are going to carry these in without attracting attention. I don't know my way about here very well."

"There is a small path along the river, which leads to Loglosov. Not many people ever use it," he suggested.

One of the coffins, which contained all sorts of paraphernalia, was heavier than the others. Father Jacopo insisted on shouldering this particular one. There was nothing for me to do but offer to carry one end.

On the way to the river I struggled with myself for quite a while. Awkward as the subject was, it had to be broached, and so I asked whether he knew our destination. He nodded, and forged on without a word.

It was clumsy and time-consuming, carrying those long boxes over the uneven slope and down the overgrown path by the river.

Madame Renoir's house could not be missed. It stood a little apart from the row of houses of the Mashinka, and I remembered the riverside façade from my tour of the back yard. "Here we are," I said.

It was a steep climb from the river up to the house. We had to set the coffin down several times, in order to catch our breath. When we finally made it, we left the shovels in the yard. Then there was still the matter of lugging the coffins through the windows of room zero. Finally we were done with our task.

After Father Jacopo had paused for a moment before the

dead man's bed, spoken a few words of prayer and made the sign of the cross, he opened the lid of the heavy coffin and took from it a crucifix, a bottle of holy water, candles, a shroud—in short, everything necessary for the ritual of burial. He even produced a funeral garment, which had been provided by the town council, and all of the mayor's decorations. With a small sponge dipped in holy water, he once more made a cross over Albi's brow, chest, hands and feet. Then he knelt beside the bed in silent prayer.

I signed to my men to follow me and leave him alone. One after the other, we climbed out through the window into the yard, and I led them to the spot I had selected for the grave. With a spade I marked out the exact outlines of the grave, and told them the proper depth. The soil was soft, and the digging went easily. Before I went, I said to them, "You might as well dig a second one while you're about it."

"Do you think this stiff will need a spare?" Kalabas grumbled.

I pretended not to have heard his unseemly remark and went to the senior commander in order to consult with him on the time for the funeral.

He decided on nine o'clock that night. Only the senior commander, Dr. Kapra and a few officers who had attended the banquet in the casino were to be present.

There remained now the preparation of the body. When I re-entered room zero. Father Jacopo rose from his devotions. He felt that I had something to do in the room. I asked him to wait outside for a few minutes until I had laid out the body. He straightway offered to help me.

"Thank you, no," I declined. In purely professional matters I did not care for the assistance of amateurs.

Enough corpses had passed through my hands, and I knew to my fingertips how to handle them. But when I now set about the work, I felt like a raw beginner. Out in the field I had taken the dead as I found them and dumped them into

a hole without much fuss. With the mayor, however, it was not going to be so simple, of course. Ceremony was essential and this was something omitted from my education at the front. Here a civil, which was to say a dignified, laying-out was called for, and that meant washing the body, dressing it, and so on. Every single detail presented itself as a problem. I had to think out a regular plan of work, in order not to overlook anything. I came close to calling Father Jacopo back. But my professional pride restrained me.

It took some time before I had stripped the crushed, wine-stained clothes from Albi's body, and put him into clean garments. I had just finished pinning the medals and ribbons to his chest when the diggers, having finished their work, climbed in the window. They helped me lift the body, whose weight seemed to have been increased by death, from the bed to the coffin. We placed the two candles beside the coffin and lit them.

After we had washed our hands in carbolic, I told my men to go and wait until I called them. I wanted to have a few minutes alone, so as to say my personal goodbye. But then I again found myself in a curious predicament. Out at the front one forgets the simple vocabulary of the heart, and so I did not know what farewell wishes to express to someone setting out on a journey with no return. The difficulty was all the greater because my intimacy with Albi was confined to the events of the previous night, to his hopping and dancing in the casino and his behavior in the Silver Hall.

"Albi, I'd like, I mean I want to tell you . . ." I began several times, unable to find suitable words of farewell. I was on the point of giving up when a sudden inspiration came to my aid. Softly, I started humming the song about Eve's daughter, which had given him such a kick over at the casino. I had just reached the third line when there was a knock on the door. "One moment," I called, and hastily, almost inaudibly, I finished up the song. "There," I said, whis-

pering, "and now so long, Albi."

I called, "Come in!" and Father Jacopo entered.

Naturally, I had faced the coffin in the wrong direction, and the candles, too, did not stand where they belonged. After Father Jacopo had arranged everything properly, he folded the dead man's hands and placed the crucifix on his chest. Then he knelt at the foot of the coffin, and began the psalm: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord, listen to my voice . . ." His fervor increasing from word to word, he continued: "In loving kindness, O God, have mercy on the soul of Thy servant, rid him from every fetter of his sins, so that he may become worthy to pass from death to eternal life through our Lord."

It is unbelievable, what transfiguring power lies in the prayer of a man who truly knows how to pray. It was as if the house of ill fame in which I stood, the disease, the war, the misery and confusion of this miserable world had all vanished, as if I had escaped somehow from my own sinfulness and was transported to purer regions. Before I knew what was happening, I too was kneeling, and was praying with all the intensity with which I used to pray beside my mother in childhood.

I was lost in prayer still when the door opened. An aide beckoned to me to join him in the corridor. There he whispered to me that the girl we had found in front of the mirror was dead, and that I must remove her at once, since the room was urgently needed for new patients. I had no choice but to follow him at once.

As we climbed the stairs, I felt a little disturbed at the thought of having to pass by Barnabas' room. Luckily for me, he was asleep.

I had realized at once that the dead girl would have to be moved as unobtrusively as possible to room zero, in order to avert a panic. Of course the mayor was laid out there. But what did that matter? Had we not, up on the hill, bur-

ied colonels and privates side by side, ignoring differences of rank? The same principle would have to apply to civilians. Whore or mayor—in death was true equality.

"Help me move her down to room zero," I ordered the aide.

Father Jacopo's response assured me that I had acted properly in deciding to let the girl share the room with the mayor. As soon as we set down the stretcher, he came to her, made the sign of the cross, and launched on his prayers.

I knew how to lay hands on living women, but I was totally unskilled at handling them dead. Father Jacopo noticed my clumsiness. "Let me do it," he said.

I stood by, watching him with admiration. Only someone who disregards the difference between the sexes, and is concerned only for the salvation of souls, could have performed his task with such supernal ease. Tenderly as one would lift a child, he took the girl's lifeless body in his arms to bed her down in the coffin for her eternal rest. I wondered where to put the coffin so that it would not be in the way during the mayor's funeral ceremony. Father Jacopo's spontaneous action saved me the necessity for decision. He pushed the coffin alongside the mayor's, and placed one of the candles beside the girl's body.

"Do you know her name?" he asked me.

I had found her lying unconscious in front of a mirror during our inspection tour; beyond that, I didn't know a thing about her.

"Then I will call her the Unknown," he said, and kneeling by her coffin he prayed with the same earnestness I had seen him display for the mayor, prayed that her sins might be washed away and her soul received in Paradise. I also knelt and prayed with him.

The senior commander and the other funeral guests, who had been waiting for me, could not understand what had been holding things up. Grown impatient, they now ap-

peared in the room and started at the sight of the two coffins. From the commander's aghast expression, I could guess his question: "Ember, what is the meaning of this?" But there was no chance for him to say this.

Such was the compelling power of Father Jacopo's praying that even that martinet Mannsteufel, not to speak of the others, were moved to drop to their knees. With equal respect, they crossed themselves as Father Jacopo called out the names "Albert Johannes Gospoda" and "the Unknown."

Although the funeral which followed had some unusual features, the coffins being tipped one to the right and the other to the left in order to be maneuvered through the window into the yard, the solemnity of it all surpassed that of any state funeral. The holiness that radiated from Father Jacopo was that of a man whose eyes view the things of this earth in the transfiguring light of eternity, and to whom even this window funeral was but a final stage of the departed souls' journey to God.

The same elevated mood prevailed in the garden during the burial. Albi had been among us little more than twenty-four hours, and the girl was an anonymous prostitute; and yet we felt choked and moved, as though we were burying a close relative.

When the priest had blessed the ground and pronounced the last words, many of us were in tears. Dr. Kapra's greenish eyes were tinged with red. Even the diggers sobbed aloud as they lowered the coffins into the graves, returning the mortal remains of man and woman to the maternal earth. Only the senior commander preserved his composure.

Finally we climbed back through the window to prepare ourselves for the day to come.

VI

Aftermath

The senior commander and his officers went back to work. Dr. Kapra lingered for a while. With the perishing of the mayor and the girl, Death had, as it were, made his debut in the Mashinka. No one could say what his next step would be, and this uncertainty created a kind of comradeship among the doctor, the priest and myself. There were so many details to consider and discuss.

After a while, however, the conversation began to drag. Dr. Kapra could barely manage to hold himself upright. His nose, to begin with, refused to serve as a perch for his pince-nez. He removed the glasses, only to have his small green eyes go on strike. They almost fell shut. After all, the doctor was no youngster.

The most contagious of diseases is no more contagious than yawning, and the doctor had barely finished one yawn when he started on another. Weariness had overcome me also, and I was greatly relieved when Dr. Kapra said, "I believe it is time to knock off now and have a bit of rest." The only question was, where?

"You need not worry about me; I don't mind at all staying up for a night," the priest said.

"I suppose I shall be able to find a corner somewhere,"

the doctor mused. "And what about you?" he asked me as he started toward the door.

"I'll manage somehow," I assured him.

Naturally there was an unoccupied bed right here in room zero. But dead-tired as I was, I could not bring myself to use it. Of course I was exposed to the disease in spite of all the carbolic, and it would be a matter of pure luck if I came out of this mess safe and sound. But to stretch right out in a bed where someone had died a short while ago—no, thank you. After all, even at the front I hadn't made a practice of standing up as a target for the enemy guns.

I decided to sleep on the floor. But as I was pushing the two remaining coffins aside to make room, an idea occurred to me. Why sleep on the hard, dusty floor when here were clean coffins standing vacant? Why not, after all? If I died here in rear echelon, a coffin would be my resting place anyhow.

"I have found a bed for myself," I said to Father Jacopo, pointing to the coffin. I could see from his expression that he thought it frivolous of me to misuse the coffin, intended for eternal rest, for a brief night's sleep. But he seemed to sympathize with my exhaustion, and did not demur.

I removed my boots and jacket, opened my collar and lay down. I was not too comfortable, of course. The coffin had been built for rigid bodies, and did not leave much room for movement. But a man as tired as I was could overlook such trivialities. The chief thing was that I could stretch out full length.

In spite of my leaden limbs, however, my mind would not settle down to rest at once. As soon as my eyes fell shut, the fantasies of half-slumber began. A host of broken images of the day's events flitted in wild confusion past my closed eyelids. They condensed into a cluster that whirled faster and faster in a circle, until at last I could scarcely distinguish among them. When the maelstrom stopped at last, the im-

ages lay scattered about, transformed into opened packages and bags. To my astonishment I saw in one of the bags the porcelain Chinese for whom I had searched in vain in my room at the castle. So this was where he had gone! As soon as he realized I had caught him, he sprang in a single leap to the foot of my coffin and began waggling his head for all he was worth.

At first I was amused at the way he went on waggling so conscientiously, but after a while I began feeling bored. My stiff position hindered my turning my own head away. And so, in spite of my weariness, I forced my eyes open, to dismiss the image of the porcelain Chinese. I caught sight of Father Jacopo, bent over his prayerbook, murmuring softly to himself. Goodness, a man of God had things easy; seated or standing, he could take his night's rest in prayer. Again my eyes fell shut, and immediately the porcelain Chinese was back at the foot of the coffin, rocking his head back and forth.

I decided to get up, sit down beside Father Jacopo, and keep vigil and pray with him, to cling like a child to his cassock, so that he could spread his peace over me. The spirit was willing, but the damned flesh . . ! My body resisted like an obstinate mule. In the end even my eyelids refused to open again, and there I lay, utterly at the mercy of that porcelain Chinese.

What a torment! It is sheer hell, I thought to myself, and in that moment hell opened before me, as though I had summoned it up by my thoughts. Instead of the one porcelain Chinese, hundreds, a whole army of them, with heads waggling reproachfully, stood at the foot of my coffin. I realized at once that they were devils from hell, disguised as porcelain Chinese.

Then suddenly the rocking heads turned into sound. At first it was like porcelain jingling, but it swiftly revealed itself as laughter, that same infernal laughter that had pealed

from Barnabas as he leaned out of the window above the street during the battle of the Amazons.

So this was what the torments of hell were like. Head-waggling porcelain Chinese were the devils; roaring laughter was the damnation. My body lay leaden and cramped, and because it could not shiver externally, it shivered internally, and my teeth, too, chattered like mad, inwardly.

If only there had been nothing more than that. But there was! A few steps away from Hell that gaped at the foot of the coffin Heaven and all its angels surrounded the table where Father Jacopo was praying. Although Heaven was within arm's length of me, I could not reach it. I heard the priest intone a song, and the angels joined him in chorus. As though pitted against each other, the angels sang and the porcelain devils whinnied. Angelic cantata and diabolic laughter clashed. And the greatest torment of all, the torment of torments, was that Father Jacopo's Heaven was within reach of my Hell.

Father Jacopo could not, would not leave me here in my damnation. I cried imploringly to him. I begged and clamored, but my pleas remained soundless and did not reach him. My throat and lips were shut, sealed.

I began to blame the priest for my predicament. If he had known that it was a sacrilege to lie down in the coffin, why had he not kept me from it? Out of consideration for my exhaustion? Was that supposed to be Christian charity? I even suspected that he was letting me sample these torments of hell on purpose, as a kind of penance for my sins. But then what exactly were those sins of mine? Was it so sinful that I had visited this house of ill fame, when I hadn't had a girl since the start of the war? And when you came right down to it, what sins had I committed here? Mental sins at best, and was that so bad that a fellow had to endure the torments of hell? I felt close to rebelling against so cruel a divine order. But then I started in alarm at these ideas.

Perhaps this was the very sin that would consign me to the porcelain hell forever. My indignation swerved abruptly into penitential submission, and I promised to lead a virtuous life if the porcelain devils would ever relcase me again.

As though my vow had been heard, the diabolic laughter ceased, the waggling heads of the porcelain Chinese vanished. Only the angelic choir was audible now, and sang me into a restful sleep.

I awoke with a shrill "Get up, get up, it's urgent" ringing in my ears. Luckily, it wasn't me the insistent voice was rousing, but the doctor, who had apparently found no place upstairs and had followed my lead, choosing the other empty coffin as a bed for the night.

The medical aide who had come for him was trying in vain to wake him. I knew that Dr. Kapra was a heavy sleeper, and so I pulled myself up, lurched out of the coffin, and did as I had seen Madame Renoir do: I rocked and shook the doctor and pulled the shroud away from him until at last he had to rouse himself and followed the man upstairs.

As soon as they were gone, Father Jacopo returned to his vigil, and I lay down in the coffin again. I was going to catch up on my sleep.

Dawn was already breaking when I awoke. Sitting up, I looked out through the window and saw Father Jacopo in the back yard, walking up and down between the two graves, praying. Everything was so peaceful that I lay back once more to enjoy the stillness. The rays of the rising sun fell upon my stomach, and immediately it surged into a wild agitation. Up on the hill it had accepted emptiness, but not here in this civilian environment. The inordinate hunger that suddenly assailed me brought me swiftly to my feet. I decided to go to the pantry and see what I could do about a warm breakfast.

The morning appetite of the wearied inmates of the Silver

Hall had apparently matched mine, for veritable orgies had been celebrated in that pantry. There was scarcely anything left for a late-comer like myself. I was about to resign myself when I discovered some left-over porridge in a pot that had been pushed aside. The stuff was cold and already hardened into lumps, but I knew from experience that anything tastes like a delicacy to a hungry man. I was just scraping the last bits of porridge out of the pot when I heard footsteps and voices. I thought I recognized Madame's voice. Good Lord, if she caught me here, what a storm would burst. Oh well, no matter, it was already too late to escape: I had barely time to establish innocence by ridding myself of the pot. Then the door opened, and there stood Madame Renoir, accompanied by the waiter.

She looked totally changed. Her hair was unkempt. She was wearing a loose dressing gown and worn high-heeled mules. She looked absently around, as though she had not noticed my presence.

"Not until Mother's asleep, Adolar . . . through the back garden gate," she whispered mysteriously. "But take care not to make any noise, or you'll wake her." She smiled roguishly, like a young girl.

The waiter signed to me to remain still. He addressed her in a cajoling tone of voice. "You must be a good girl, Rosalind darling, and wait patiently," he said reassuringly. He sat her down on a bench. Then he came over to me and whispered, "It has all been too much for the poor soul. You understand . . ." He made a motion with his finger to indicate that she had lost her wits.

"Who is this Adolar?" I asked.

"He must have been her first lover, back in Constantinople, where she comes from," the waiter explained. "She recognizes nobody, doesn't know where she is, and imagines she is a girl. On the whole, it's lucky she doesn't see what has happened to her house." He glanced around, and I re-

alized at once that he was looking for the porridge. "I put it aside for her specially—where the devil . . ." he murmured. Then he noticed the empty pot. He fixed his eyes upon me, half questioning, half reproachful. I felt utterly humiliated. "See that she doesn't leave here while I fetch fresh porridge from the storeroom," he said, and left me alone with Madame Renoir.

I felt rather queer. This was my first encounter with a madwoman. As soon as the waiter had left, she tried to get up. I rushed over to her to keep her seated.

"No, no, Adolar," she fended me off. "Don't come so close, something might happen. Mother . . ." And then, abruptly. "Oh, Adolar, I can't stand it any longer." And she threw her arms around me and pressed me to her.

I was greatly relieved when the waiter returned and I was able to clear out.

I decided to look in on my two protégés, Barnabas and Konrad. I had promised them last night that I would be back soon. But as I passed the Mirror Room I heard a din as if the world were flying apart. I had at least to peep in to see what was going on.

I had entered only out of curiosity. But things were in such a state that no one, not even I—though officially the living did not concern me—could have played the part of the indifferent spectator. Say what you will about me, no one can deny that I'm always ready to help in an emergency. Within a few minutes I was right in the midst of the bustle. Naturally Lieutenant Waldo, who was in charge of the room, took advantage of my helpful spirit. "Ember here, Ember there, Ember this, Ember that"—the usual refrain rang in my ears.

I was just issuing instructions to some newly arrived medical aides when the door was flung open. I caught my breath. In each of the mirrors I saw Madame Renoir, wrapped in her loose dressing gown, smiling abstractedly to herself as she

tripped straight into the crowd. Suddenly she saw herself in the mirror and started back as if she had met a terrifying stranger. She looked to the right and to the left, and finding herself surrounded by the same mirror image she screeched, "That woman wants to kill me," and collapsed in a heap on the floor. There she lay motionless, curled up with her head buried in her lap. Everyone shrank away from her. The lieutenant ran forward to pick her up. But she lay in an obstinate embryonic position and refused to stir. While Waldo was trying to revive her, the door was again flung open and the waiter came rushing in, panting.

"A fine business," the lieutenant growled at him. "I gave you strict orders to prevent her from coming into this room."

"Had a call of nature, sir; I'm only human, you know," the waiter stammered.

"Orders are orders," the lieutenant cut him off.

The waiter knelt on the floor beside Madame Renoir. "Be nice and come along with Adolar," he urged her. She rose obediently, took his arm and left the room, smiling vaguely.

"Our poor Madame!" the girls wailed.

"It's you who have done this to her, you beasts," Ludmilla burst out, and since I was right in back of her she turned and gave me a stinging slap in the face. Two aides who were standing beside me pushed her aside. She kicked and struggled. I made use of the tumult to slip away, and went upstairs.

The doctor had quieted Barnabas with a strong sedative. He was sleeping, and the aide on duty told me that his condition had shown no particular change.

"When he wakes up, tell him I was here and will come back later," I said.

Konrad was in a sad state, but I could see that for the present I need not worry about his coming under my professional ministrations. Of course he started to complain

as soon as he caught sight of me. "Dummox, don't go, stay!" he pleaded, seizing my hand. I couldn't simply leave him lying there, and so I decided to spend a few minutes with him. But almost immediately an aide appeared to summon me to the doctor.

"It seems to be starting in earnest," Dr. Kapra declared. "You'll soon have work to do." He drew a slip of paper from his pocket. "Six on the critical list. Four of them army men. I think you should order a few more coffins, so that you won't run short."

As we were talking, an orderly came along with a request for the doctor to report to the commander's office. We went down together.

In Mannsteufel's office several of the officers were already assembled, and others followed us in. The senior commander stood behind a table, his right fist propped on the table top, and waited until everyone had arrived. Then he spoke in brisk tones. "Well, things are starting to look more organized, gentlemen. A little more perseverance and discipline, and we'll have this thing licked. At any rate we'll be able to confine this business right here in the Mashinka. Let us confer on the next steps to be taken. You, Lieutenent Waldo, see that——" The telephone rang. He lifted the receiver.

"Listening . . . what's that . . . what are you saying?" he exclaimed into the mouthpiece. "Incredible. . . . A fine mess. Why does it have to take place today? Couldn't they wait a few days? I don't understand. . . . What do you mean, custom? Nonsense, in a state of emergency, customs don't exist. Well, I've always said that the Church only makes trouble for the nation. . . . But that is absolutely out of the question, understand! Sheer madness! Tell them I said so."

With each passing minute the senior commander grew

more agitated. The whole topography of his face quaked. "What does that mean, the populace demands it?" he bellowed into the telephone. "In a state of emergency the populace has no say at all, not to speak of demanding. . . . Damn it all, hasn't the administration any authority? I tell you, it's hell to have anything to do with civilians. . . . Those bastards don't know the word 'discipline.'" He took a breath. "All right, let them come. I'll see to it that the aldermen are straightened out, let me tell you. Three o'clock then, outside the cordon. . . . Idiotic bastards," he snorted again, slammed down the receiver, and tramped furiously back and forth in the room.

Naturally we were on tenterhooks to know what was up. But it took a while before he simmered down enough to speak at all, and even then we had to piece together a string of incoherent phrases before we understood what had made him blow his top.

That morning a requiem mass for the mayor had been scheduled at the cathedral. Although it had only been planned for close relations and friends, half the town had shown up. The cathedral was jampacked, and throngs of Drohitzers had even gathered outside in the square. During the mass the mayor's sister had broken down in bitter sobbing, and that had started the ball rolling.

"Where is our mayor?" someone had shouted from a back row, and soon the whole church was resounding with the cry: "He ought to be buried here in town." The priests succeeded in quieting the tumult and completing the requiem, but as soon as they stepped away from the altar the storm broke again, louder than ever. "We want to give our mayor a decent burial!" the crowd shouted. Cathedral and square roared with the cry; and in a moment the crowd was surging toward the town hall.

The senior alderman stepped out on the balcony and promised the overwrought citizenry that a deputation from

the town fathers would be sent to the cordoned area to demand, in the name of Drohitz, surrender of the body and transfer of it to the Gospoda family vault.

"And that's how the matter stands," the senior commander concluded. "At three o'clock I shall have the pleasure of receiving the officials of the town near the storehouses. But if they think they are going to be taking the mayor back, they're in for a mighty surprise. My job is to maintain the quarantine without a break. Without a break, I say. I don't give a hang what the Drohitzers demand. They're all worked up about its being a disgrace for the town to have their mayor buried in the Mashinka. Ridiculous! If it was good enough for a national hero like Lieutenant Colonel Natonek to have a few lumps of mud thrown over him on a filthy field, then it's good enough for the mayor of Drohitz to be buried in the back yard of the Silver Hall. What difference does it make? The earth is the same earth everywhere. All we need now is to have the disease carried into the town, eh, Doctor?" He appealed to Dr. Kapra. When the doctor hesitated, he went on, "Whatever they say, it's no and no again. No transfer, not even in a hermetically sealed coffin. He stays where he is, and that is all there is to it. Well, we'll resume our conference later, gentlemen."

While the others were filing out, I stayed and asked permission to telephone town for more coffins.

Delivery of the coffins was set for one o'clock. I appeared punctually with my men at the cordon around the warehouse, but the truck was slow in coming. An hour and a half passed, and still it had not arrived.

Once the civil order starts breaking down, sense of duty, promises and agreements cease to mean anything. Maybe the coffin makers were up in arms along with all the other citizens of Drohitz; maybe the coffin dealer, amid all the tur-

moil, had forgotten to put the order through. At any rate, we seemed to be waiting in vain.

I had just about made up my mind to give up and leave when I saw the truck approaching from the town. As the men started unloading the coffins the voice of the quarantine officer rang out: "One side, clear the way."

The deputation from town hove in sight, and almost at the same moment the senior commander, flanked by two officers, came striding down the main street of the bordello district. I would have to wait until after the meeting, before I could take over my coffins. As it turned out, that unforgettable scene was worth waiting for.

Behind the representatives of the town, who marched forward in black frock coats and bowlers, thronged deputies from the Drohitz retail merchants' council, the innkeepers, the craft guilds and labor unions, the charitable and cultural organizations and the glee clubs. There were committee ladies wearing veils and troops of school children led by their teachers. Among the schoolgirls I caught sight of my orchard, my Eve, draped in black mourning. The whole crew from the parade ground had appeared, it seemed, and a sea of black frock coats, veils, bands of crepe and black draperies surged toward us from beyond the cordon.

Just as the Drohitzers in honor of our arrival had dressed up in all their colorful finery, so they now appeared to have dug out every inch of black cloth in their shops or cupboards, and brought it along to the quarantine cordon.

Our senior commander had, of course, not reckoned on what Mayor Gospoda had meant to his people of Drohitz. This business was not going to be as simple as the commander had imagined. I was burning with curiosity to see how the commander would adhere to his policy in the face of such a tremendous display of sorrow.

After a formal bow, Mardi, the senior alderman, stepped forward and in a quivering voice read the text of a petition

of all the people of Drohitz, demanding transfer of the mayor's body from the Mashinka to his family vault.

Then the bishop spoke and asked in the name of Christian charity that the beloved father of their city be buried in the hallowed soil of Drohitz cemetery. Whereupon the entire administration, all the clubs and organizations and all the black-draped delegations, broke into violent sobs.

One would have to be inhuman, I thought, to refuse the plea of the grief-stricken people of Drohitz. But the senior commander was not human; he was a martinet from top to toe. That, and nothing else. The whole universe might wail, but his job was to do what was best for the army. Like a statue he stood upright and untouched through it all. And then, in a steely voice that brooked no contradiction, he said: "The deceased will remain where he is, in the interests of the army command and of our country."

"In the interest of our country!" the chief of protocol bawled, to everyone's embarrassment.

With a supreme disdain for the mourning crowd, the senior commander about-faced and, flanked by his adjutants, strode back into the Mashinka.

VII

The Mayor's Creatures

Naturally things had been fairly hectic since we had returned from the cordon with our load of new coffins. But whatever the to-do on the premises, whether the delivery of fresh cases, brawls in the Silver Hall, the sudden, uncanny appearance of Madame, or death agonies in the sickrooms—all this seemed of little moment by comparison with the disturbing news that kept reaching us from the town.

It began with a report of the sudden death of the chief of protocol. That, in itself, the army could have borne without a tremor. One patriotic parrot more or less really did not signify. But the circumstances of his death had various consequences which our commander could not possibly ignore.

It all started with an utterly senseless story bruited about by a night watchman—an ignorant peasant he was. During his rounds, he declared, he had noticed that a light was still burning at an unusually late hour in Magados' office. When he entered to see whether there was any trouble, he found the chief of protocol lying doubled up with pain across his desk. The watchman carried him home, and was holding up his lantern, trying to locate the light switch, when to his horror what should he see in the darkness but the mayor, ac-

companied by a painted girl. The mayor even spoke, addressing these words to the protocol chief: "I need you. Follow me." When the watchman at last collected himself sufficiently to find and switch on the light, the protocol chief was stretched out stiffly on the floor. The doctor who came to the watchman's summons could do nothing but confirm that he was dead.

This fantastic tale rapidly circulated through the town, and in the case of a good many Drohitzers was swallowed hook, line and sinker.

"What utter, hair-raising nonsense. Impossible to understand how anyone can take such stuff seriously," the senior commander grumbled. "There we have it again—you see how backward our provinces are. Walking dead! What will we have next?"

But when a few of the officers gave vent to dutiful chuckles, he stopped them with an angry glance. "There's nothing funny about this, gentlemen. It's a serious matter, and we shall have to deal with it at once."

Mannsteufel's infallible instinct for anything that might spell trouble for the army warned him immediately of the ground swell of dissatisfaction that had given rise to these rumors.

"The whole affair is nothing but a malicious fiction cooked up in order to force us to transfer the mayor's body to town," he reasoned. "But if that's what they're counting on, they've run into the wrong man."

He ordered Dr. Zitrom by telephone to determine immediately the natural cause of Magados' death, and to publish the results of his investigation, to dispel this idiotic superstition.

Idiotic superstition, of course—walking dead, what nonsense, I said to myself. Nevertheless I was startled about the mayor's having been accompanied by a painted girl, although neither the night watchman nor anyone else in the

town could possibly know that we had buried the little whore from the Mashinka beside the mayor. Naturally I refrained from mentioning this to anyone; I wouldn't want people to think I was as backward and superstitious as the populace of Drohitz.

Dr. Zitrom's investigation did not lead to the hoped-for result. The chief of protocol had no friends or relatives who could make a statement. Documents had been his only near and dear ones. The solitary witness of his death was the night watchman, and this man reiterated his wild story.

"These civilians," the senior commander ranted. "Why did the good Lord ever create them?" Everyone was still pondering this question when a new civilian rumor started circulating.

The night watchman's wife, we were informed over the telephone, had been in her kitchen preparing supper for her husband before he started on his evening round. Suddenly she heard her husband's voice from the parlor raised in a peculiar wail. Running in, she saw the mayor accompanied by the painted girl and the dead chief of protocol. If she was to be believed, the mayor had told her husband to follow him, and had stood by, as if waiting, until Alois lay lifeless on the floor.

"That's the limit!" the senior commander exclaimed. "Something radical has to be done before this superstition spreads any further. I'll show this town who I am!"

He instantly phoned Mardi, the senior alderman, and instructed him in the army's name to use the whole weight of municipal authority to scotch these and any similar rumors. Apparently Mardi made some remonstrance at his end of the line, for the commander blasted off: "Damn it to hell, any fool can squash such balderdash. I'll expect a report from you this evening."

After the senior commander had set down the receiver, Dr. Kapra cleared his throat. With some timorousness, he

said, "What I suspect is far more serious than any silly rumors. I hardly dare to put it in words, and yet the conclusion is perfctly obvious."

"Well, out with it." the commander exclaimed impatiently. "What is so obvious?"

"That it is no mere matter of chance that the night watchman should follow the chief of protocol. At least in this case it would seem to be contagion."

"You don't mean to say that it's the same disease!" the commander exploded.

"That is precisely what I fear. And of course it's far more urgent, you'll grant, to determine the fact of the matter than to go after this rumor business."

The senior commander almost fell from his chair. "That would be hellish," he stammered.

When Dr. Kapra telephoned Dr. Zitrom to inform him of his suspicion, Zitrom replied that the possibility had already occurred to him. He was taking the necessary steps, and would report as soon as he had finished the post-mortem.

We were in the midst of a keen discussion of the possible consequences if Dr. Zitrom did confirm the presence of the disease in town when an aide came to call the doctor, who beckoned to me to follow him.

Black Narcissus was in the throes of death. I waited until it was over, and then set to work, aiming to finish up as quickly as possible so that I could return to the office and be present when Dr. Zitrom's call came. But there were all sorts of obstacles. Things I ordinarily did as a matter of routine I now attacked so clumsily that I had to repeat my work two and three times over. We also had no graves in reserve; I had two more dug at once just in case. The fellows worked at a snail's pace, of course. And it seemed to me that Father Jacopo's pious ritual was dragging. Despite my respect for him and his office, I stood on pins and needles during the prayers. I couldn't very well urge him to hurry, but he had

no sooner said the last word than I barked at the fellows to lower the coffin into the grave, cover it with earth and get the burial over with.

Then I rushed back to the office, feeling sure that Dr. Zitrom must long since have called. As I approached the door, it opened and an aide came forward to meet me. "I was just looking for you in there, Ember. You must come at once. Commander Konrad has kicked off."

"Konrad?" That really gave me a shock. "Impossible. When? How?" I hurried upstairs. How strange, it flashed through my mind: Black Narcissus and now Konrad—the two whose embrace had started this whole mess. And in such quick succession, first she and then he, as though they had arranged a rendezvous to go on sleeping together in death.

When I entered the room and saw the commander, his fever-crusted mouth gaping, lying there lifeless, I was smitten by pangs of conscience for not having devoted enough time to him lately. We two were really the only men from the hill who actually belonged together—except for Barnabas, anyway. And yet I had callously abandoned him in his hour of trial. Good God, how hard it is being human. I despised myself. Never would I live this down, never regain my self-respect.

My previous impatience had utterly vanished. My curiosity, my interest in Dr. Zitrom's report, in what would be happening next, indeed in everything that was or would be, evaporated completely. At this moment all of reality consisted solely of this dead man before me, and of the painful regret that I had allowed the commander of our hill to depart without solace, without a word of farewell.

The aide had gone out for a stretcher, and I was left alone with the dead man. "Commander, Commander," I sobbed, taking his hand and placing it on mine, as he had done in the past few days when he wished to prevent my leaving.

"Here I am, Commander, Dummox, reporting for duty, sir, Dummox."

The aide reappeared with the stretcher. Tenderly we laid Konrad on it and carried him, at a solemn and deliberate pace, down the stairs. When we turned into the hall toward room zero my legs—obeying the earlier impulse to hurry—suddenly increased the tempo, and I almost began to run. But my mourning spirit proved stronger, and we continued on to room zero at the same measured pace.

Although it was already evening and Dr. Zitrom had certainly telephoned in the meanwhile, I paid my last respects to the commander. I had rid myself of all worldly considerations; with all my soul I had surrendered to the power of grief. Even at the end, I stood by the grave lost in meditation for quite a while, before I returned to the office.

In spite of all the unforeseen contingencies, I was still in time.

The suspense with which all the officers had waited for Dr. Zitrom's call had become an unbearable strain by the time the telephone rang at last. Dr. Kapra quickly lifted the receiver, and everyone in the room held his breath. "Town office," he said in disappointment, and handed the receiver to the commander. The commander's first impulse was to wave it away, but then he recalled that he had ordered the senior alderman to report to him. "That must be Mardi," he muttered.

Instead of Mardi, it was the second councilman with the stunning news that Mardi had suddenly sickened, and died with equal suddenness. But what really stunned us was the revival of that superstitious drivel about the walking mayor. Mardi's wife and the maid, the councilman declared, had sworn by all the saints that the dead mayor, the painted girl, the chief of protocol and the night watchman had appeared

at Mardi's bedside to fetch him. When they vanished, Mardi lay dead.

"That is absolutely the limit!" Mannsteufel roared. "To think that a goose like that is an alderman's wife. Are we still in the Dark Ages here?"

The senior commander was still raging against the whole damned town of Drohitz when the telephone rang once more. This time it was Dr. Zitrom at last—to communicate the shattering result of the post-mortem examination. There could be no doubt about it: the cause of both deaths was identical.

Even a man of Mannsteufel's caliber needed a moment to regain his composure after this shock. For if this were the case, all his measures to isolate the disease in the Mashinka had been ineffectual. He simply could not see it. Here he'd set up the cordon, enclosing the Mashinka in an iron ring. Not a single human soul had been able to break through it. After all, it was to eliminate the slightest possibility of spreading the disease that he had forbidden transfer of the mayor's coffin into the city. A commander could not have practiced any greater circumspection, have taken any more precautions. Then how was it possible, in spite of all these radical measures, that the disease had swept on into the town? If it had started among any of the soldiers stationed in town, or among the sick men at the Castle Hospital, the spoiled turnips and filthy puddle water they had consumed at the front might be responsible—as in the cases of Konrad and Barnabas. But that the disease should break out among civilians, and right in the center of town—there was simply no logical explanation for that.

"Somewhere there must be a leak in the quarantine," Dr. Kapra observed. "Perhaps there are secret paths by which someone has stolen into the town and so smuggled the infection in."

"But what paths, where could they be?"

"At the moment I don't know. Our first task must be to ferret this out, and prevent any further spread."

Dr. Zitrom, who had been instructed to conduct investigations inside the town, had no easy task of it. Everywhere, he ran head on into the same fantastic story, and what little objective information he received proved to be negligible. The night watchman had come into contact with the chief of protocol, and so might have caught the disease from him. But what about Mardi? The senior alderman and the night watchman had lived in two different worlds; there were fewer points of contact between them than between noon and midnight. Before their sudden deaths, both had followed their usual routines. There seemed to be only one point where their paths had crossed: both had visited Humperdinger's pastry shop.

The night watchman had been a sweet-toothed fellow who brought éclairs home from the pastry shop three times a week. And after office hours the senior alderman was in the habit of dropping in at the pastry shop with a few cronies for cake and coffee.

There seemed nothing unusual in their both visiting the pastry shop. And the pastry shop had no more connection with the Mashinka than the town hall or the rest of Drohitz. Nevertheless, in his perplexity, Dr. Zitrom thought it might be worth while taking a look at the pastry shop. And sure enough, the investigation paid off.

No sooner had Dr. Zitrom and his two aides sat down at table and ordered their coffee and cake than he noticed a lady at the next table trying to drive away a fly that was dancing around on her rum baba. At the same moment he saw in his mind's eye old Karsinov, his professor of bacteriology, demonstrating in class Nuttat's fly experiment, and he heard the professor's sonorous voice stating: "Flies are often the carriers of epidemics."

"It's the flies!" Dr. Zitrom burst out, to the amazement of

the patrons of the shop. Instantly he leaped to his feet and roared in an imperious voice: "In the name of the army, no one may leave this shop for the present!" One of his aides blocked the door, while the other was sent for reinforcements. In a few minutes the guards appeared and placed the pastry shop and its guests under lock and key.

"So it is *Musca domestica*," Dr. Kapra murmured after laying down the telephone. "I should have thought of that myself!"

"*Musca domestica*?" The senior commander and the officers stared questioningly at him. I wanted to show off my school Latin, and translated: "The housefly."

As soon as the word was spoken, we saw nothing but flies wherever we looked. Of course they had been everywhere all along. But we were so accustomed to them that we had ceased to notice them.

"It's no wonder the contagion spread into the town in spite of all our precautions," Dr. Kapra said. "Those insects don't give a damn about orders. No cordon in the world can stop them. They simply fly over it. All the pathogenic matter they pick up here in sickbeds, on utensils, from toilets and garbage, they carry into the town and, with their hairy legs, deposit on the pastries in the shop."

He rocked his head pensively back and forth. "Now that it's settled that the infection started from its new focus in the pastry shop," he continued, "Dr. Zitrom's prompt order to lock up the place and intern the patrons is certainly a good prophylactic measure. The question is whether isolating the pastry shop will be sufficient."

All of us looked at him in dismay. "Let me explain the situation," he went on. "There is no reason to assume that the flies, in their flights about town, patronize Humperdinger's pastry shop exclusively or feast only on pastry.

There is not a soup pot, not a sugar cube, not a sausage in Drohitz that is safe from them. Naturally we have ways and means of fighting them. Disinfection and insecticides, carbolsan and Triple L, X-332, and so on. But if only one pair of flies escapes, there will be descendants running into the millions."

"We are the army, Doctor," the commander interrupted, somewhat vexed at these fatalistic statements. "Do not forget that the army knows only one answer to every question: advance, act! I trust you agree that we cannot sit with folded hands and watch the disease spread through the entire town until all our troops are infected and our last chance for a victorious counteroffensive is ruined. You speak of the difficult task we face. But there is no task so difficult that it can faze a true soldier. If we have to fight the flies of an entire town, that to me means nothing but a new type of counteroffensive. And if a single surviving pair of flies can produce millions of descendants in no time, there is only one answer: The entire breed of flies must be exterminated to the last insect. The fact that our headquarters happens to be under quarantine at the moment is insignificant. I commanded the victorious Grievitz campaign from a haystack. The site does not matter, but the man in command. And I assure you, gentlemen, I know what I must do. And I will lead to victory this time as well! Heads up, gentlemen; let's have a display of soldierly courage!"

When Mannsteufel pronounced the words "heads up" and "soldierly courage," with his own brow beetling and his nose thrusting sharply forward, the words not only braced and encouraged men; they exerted a spellbinding force which annihilated in his subordinates any ability to think for themselves, and transformed them into brainless robots. I could scarcely believe my eyes and ears when I saw the doctor, a skeptical and scientific-minded man, spring to his feet like a murderous berserker and cry at the top of his

voice: "To the last insect, to the last fly's egg. Let's go and drown every one of the vermin in carbolsan!"

Mannsteufel dismissed us. "Now I must ask you, gentlemen, to leave me until I have worked out the necessary orders."

He was a quick worker, and half an hour later we were called back to hear his directives. He had devised an offensive true to all the rules of military strategy and tactics. The terrain of operations was divided into two fronts (the fly front inside and outside the cordon). In one bold glance he had taken in the whole complex without overlooking the smallest details.

Article I contained directives for Front M regarding battle order in the area immediately within our concern: recruitment of all able soldiers and girls for formation of a flycatching brigade which was subdivided into skirmish detachments with specific designations. For each detachment a group leader was appointed; Father Jacopo, for example, was assigned the post of flycatching leader in room zero. I was the recipient of two designations: leader of the flycatchers of the burial squad, and official in charge of the interment of fallen flies.

Article II assigned the battle order for Front D: immediate levying and mobilization of the entire population of Drohitz for the purpose of organizing flycatcher battalions; military requisition of all fly-swatters, obligatory suspension of flypaper in all dwellings, dispatch of disinfection patrols to all quarters of the town, establishment of border controls at all points of ingress to inspect animals, fruit, vegetables and general merchandise in order to prevent the unwitting importation of new flies.

"That ought to do it, eh, gentlemen?" Mannsteufel said at the end, rather puffed with pride.

Article II was immediately transmitted by telephone to Dr. Zitrom, who was entrusted with the command of Front D.

On our front, too, everyone prepared to set out on his various tasks.

Matters did not go quite as the commander with his "that ought to do it" had fancied. What the doctor had said before he fell under the spell of the commander—that it is by no means simple to cope with flies—proved to be quite right. I might have brought up a few things bearing out the doctor's thesis if I had dared to speak up honestly. For example, that there must have been good reason for the Jews of Ekron in the Old Testament—as we may read in the Second Book of Kings—to have named Beelzebub, prince of all troublemaking devils, the Lord of Flies. And I might have cited the fact that King Menelaus, when he marched to battle against the noble Hector, asked the goddess Athene to confer upon him the courage of that most impertinent of all creatures, the fly.

Of course, even if I had dared adduce such items, Mannsteufel probably would not have understood them. What did a military commander care about the Old Testament or the ancient Greeks; what did he know aside from the stuff that had been hammered into his head in the military academy?

As it turned out there was no clearly defined battlefield, no strong points, no terrain, ramparts, trenches, no orderly fronts whose distances could be measured by surveying techniques. There was no way reconnaissance could determine the enemy's positions and his numerical strength.

As long as we were dealing with men, we had the choice of refusing battle, remaining on the defensive and concealing our own positions, or of seizing a favorable moment to force a decisive battle, ring the enemy's positions, cut off his reserves, creep into the enemy camp and take prisoners or hostages. Above all, in any such ordinary battle there was a commanding position on a height, figuratively or literally, from which the military developments could be surveyed. In a struggle against human beings anything was possible—

even, as Mannsteufel asserted, a victory directed from a haystack.

But war against the flies of Drohitz was quite another matter, if only because the operational terrain was no terrain at all in the usual military sense. Positions, battlefield, flanks were constantly shifting. One moment it was a wall or a hand, then the edge of a glass of milk, then a windowpane, a bald head, the tablecloth, the ceiling. Moreover, the enemy combatants moved along quite unpredictable lines, now right, now left, now up and down; straight ahead for a short stretch, then a sharp turn, followed by a bold arc through the air. In this campaign there was no possibility of reconnoitering the exact enemy positions, of scouting the enemy's numbers, of creeping into the enemy camp, not to speak of taking prisoners and hostages. And above all, there was no commanding position from which the battlefield could be surveyed. The enemy was installed in our own headquarters, sometimes on the commander's very nose while he was directing the offensive.

Madame Renoir's establishment had not been the most peaceful of sanctuaries up to now. But the turmoil that followed upon the inmates' being converted into an army of flycatchers went beyond anything I had ever experienced. People were in a frenzy to catch one fly after another, to pile trophy upon trophy, to lie incessantly in wait and then, with one great flowing swing, to slam down upon a fly with the swatter. Moreover the place was positively dripping with flypaper. And you had to be constantly on your guard against running into one of the dangling ribbons and being caught fast like the enemy.

Now and then a quarrel broke out when someone, with the best of intentions, attempted to waft a fly away from a fellow soldier's face and in so doing hit his comrade in the eye. And more than once these warriors in the anti-fly army flew into such a passion that they confused each other with

their winged opponents and came close to finishing each other off. Even in Madame Renoir's office, our temporary military headquarters, such scenes were not unknown—except that there, among the officers, they took place with a "begging your permission, sir" or an outraged "I should think."

All friendly sociability, all normal human intercourse, came to an end. People scarcely took time for the normal duties of the day. Everything was turned topsy-turvy; all order broke down into fearful anarchy. Even the sick, weak and whimpering in their beds, were not spared this heat of battle; they too, according to their strength, were mobilized. Every one of them who was capable of holding a fly-swatter in his feverish hand was impressed for killing flies.

The Silver Hall, where the mirrors multiplied a thousandfold the dangling flypapers, the swatters and the frenzied hunt, presented the wildest battle scene of all. When I stepped into it for a moment, I felt as if I were witnessing the final struggle between the human race and the fly species.

For me, this battle of the flies was the first in this great war in which I took part as an active combatant. And at the beginning it really gave me pleasure to unleash my own aggressive impulses, to run about with drawn fly-swatter, lashing wildly about me, demolishing foes—even if they were only flies. At times, also, it so happened that I could get in a blow at someone with whom I had a score to settle—a smart swat on the behind, the hand or right in the face.

Along with this, of course, I had my regular duties and was required to clear the battlefield of corpses, just as I had done in human war. This was neither pleasant nor easy work. As soon as I had gathered the battered corpses and the flypapers covered with casualties into a pail and buried them on the slope leading down to the river, I would return to the Silver Hall only to find every surface littered with dead flies once more. And this same process went on and on, endlessly.

No matter how many corpses I took off to the burial pits, there were always fresh pailfuls. Gradually I awoke to the fearful numbers, the inexhaustible reserves our enemy possessed.

And yet Madame Renoir's establishment was merely one small sector of this two-front war. What must be going on in the other sectors of Front M, and especially in the main battlefields of Front D, in the butchers' and greengrocers' shops, in the municipal offices, at family tables and in the Castle Hospital! What mountains of fly cadavers my colleagues on Front D must be picking up; how many pails of flies they must be dumping in the fly cemetery!

It was a mystery to me that Mannsteufel, who after all had eyes and could see what was going on, could still believe his strategy would succeed. There was no accounting for this adamant conviction in terms of ordinary human reason. Evidently a commander of Mannsteufel's breed must have a textbook on strategy rather than a brain inside his head, to have such faith in his army's invincibility and in his own genius as a general. How else could he unwaveringly continue this hopeless stuggle?

There was nothing for me to do but to accept the whole idiocy of it, as I had always done in this war, and to comfort myself with the thought that this, like everything else, would pass sooner or later—if in no other way, then by my own passing. And thinking this, I was helped by Father Jacopo's words of promise, that all who suffer here on earth will reap salvation in the afterlife.

Unpleasant bulletins from the town came thick as flies; as soon as we thought we had finished with one problem, another was on its way.

Dr. Zitrom's order to isolate the suspect disease carriers in the pastry shop for purposes of observation proved untenable, even as a temporary measure. It was no small matter to deal

with the outraged customers themselves, who had innocently assembled for a cup of coffee and a friendly chat, and were now forcibly held in protective custody. The situation worsened, moreover, when members of their families, troubled by their long absence, arrived at Humperdinger's and learned what had happened. A storm of indignation burst. Dr. Zitrom patiently explained that the patrons were detained as a preventive measure, necessary in the interests of the town, the army and the fatherland. His word fell on deaf ears. Nothing could calm the angry crowd; more and more menacingly, they demanded the release of the prisoners in the pastry shop. The guard had the greatest difficulty controlling the citizenry, whose mood grew uglier by the minute.

From Zitrom's telephoned account of these developments, it was obvious that something had to be done at once. And where decisions were wanted, Mannsteufel was the right man. In no time he came up with the solution. The detainees in the pastry shop must be brought into the Mashinka without more ado, he declared. There were many reasons in favor of such a step. Once those people crossed to our side of the cordon, there would be no further difficulty in keeping them secure. Moreover, here at the locus of contagion the doctor was familiar with the symptoms and had some experience in treating the disease. And if there were to be additional cases of disease in town, the Mashinka seemed the logical place to concentrate them for reasons of space also. The Mashinka, after all, had plenty of beds. If the need arose, other houses could be requisitioned in the Mashinka, so that the commander could personally check developments and issue the proper orders.

The more Mannsteufel considered, the more it appeared to him that centralization in the Mashinka was the only logical course from the military point of view, and therefore, the only course.

Informed by telephone of this decision, Dr. Zitrom protested that so radical a step would only further raise the indignation of the townspeople, and that the transfer was bound to meet with stubborn resistance. Mannsteufel, of course, waved aside all such objections. What was this about resistance? What kind of resistance could a few civilians put up? At worst they would wail and scream. Well, let them wail and scream. Their noise would not deter the army. Besides, what was so terrible about shipping the pack of lousy civilians into the Mashinka? There were women and young ladies among them? At the moment the whole lot of them were nothing but potential carriers of disease who had to be watched.

Subduing flies might be a tougher task than he had bargained for. But as for dealing with human beings—Mannsteufel felt that he could do that with a flip of his fingers.

As soon as the order was issued to Dr. Zitrom, preparations were begun in the Silver Hall. In order to make enough room, two adjacent houses were requisitioned, and the girls from these distributed among other houses. The Silver Hall itself would remain the reception and observation center, while the pantry was designated an examining room.

As Dr. Zitrom had anticipated, the transfer of the detainees involved a good deal of unpleasantness, From his description of the tumultous scenes that had taken place outside the pastry shop, we were prepared for real trouble when the shipment of suspects arrived at the Mashinka.

"What a damned nuisance," the commander muttered. "I've always said so: whether they're whores, ladies or gentlemen, it's always the same civilian rabble."

He decided to conduct the group from the cordon to the Silver Hall in person, and picked a detachment of reliable officers and soldiers for the job. Lieutenant Waldo was in-

cluded in this group, and since he knew that I must stay behind because of the patients on the critical list, he asked me to assume command of the Silver Hall until his return. Judging by my recent experiences, this was not the most tempting of assignments. Still, I had no choice but to consent.

The news that honorable citizens of Drohitz were going to be quartered in the Silver Hall stirred up considerable excitement among the girls, who felt a mischievous satisfaction that respectable townspeople were about to share their lot.

It was no more than fifteen minutes' walk from the cordon to the Silver Hall. The group ought to be arriving at any moment. When they did not show up, I sent one of the guards to find out what was happening. He returned with the news that the group had just passed the cordon, and that our soldiers were having a time of it compelling the civilians to take so much as a single step.

"The whores were a different proposition," he commented. "They raised a rumpus, but once they saw that the jig was up, they went back of their own accord. These ladies and gentlemen are like a pack of mules. They've made up their minds that they're not going to move ahead. They stand like logs, and every one has to be pushed and shoved. If it goes on at that pace, it will be a while before they get here."

A scornful babble rose up among the girls.

"Snooty, ain't they!"

"Who do they think they are?"

"It'll be a good lesson to them."

"It's what I call justice."

"At least they'll see how we live here."

"And they can learn a thing or two about handling men."

"They've come, they're already in the front yard," the guard reported at last. But even the short stretch from yard to door took quite a while. Every step of the way was a pain-

ful struggle. At last, from the hall, the commander's voice rang out: "Forward, march! Get on there now!" There followed sounds of pushing and panting.

Abruptly the chattering in the Silver Hall ceased. "Shh, shh!" the girls admonished one another. The hall was in dead silence now as everyone stared at the door, necks thrust forward, eyes wide.

Then the door opened. Two matrons, rigid as statues, and a middle-aged gentleman in frock coat were propelled roughly into the room by several soldiers. Then followed a man with a goatee, a young woman, a plump girl and a bald man with glasses. All of them had to be pushed or dragged across the threshold; but as soon as they were inside the Silver Hall the mirrors accomplished what all the shouting and shoving had been unable to do. The brilliant illumination, the numbers of girls and soldiers, the sight of their own mirror images multiplied a hundredfold, broke down all reserve, and the civilians flitted back and forth like wound-up mechanical dolls. Their heads craned right and left, their limbs and faces twitched and quivered; they stared in perplexity at one another, gasped for breath, floundered like fish out of water.

This sudden change would have roused the dead to laughter. I had all I could do to maintain order in the room, but even so I found it hard to keep my face straight.

"Adam!" a treble voice suddenly caroled, and whom should I see but Eve detaching herself from a group of new arrivals and running from one mirror image to the next, not knowing where I was actually standing.

I was supposed to be on duty here, but when I saw Eve looking for me in all the mirrors, I was seized by a kind of frenzy. I forgot my orders, forgot everything. "Here, Eve, here I am," I shouted, running toward her through the crowd.

"Adam, my Adam," she exclaimed joyously, when I

reached her. But all at once her pleasure at this unexpected encounter was clouded by reproach: "Say, why did you stand me up? And . . . and . . ." Growing indignation overwhelmed her rejoicing. "What are you doing here?" she went on, looking around the room. And then, angrily: "To think of meeting you again in such a place! I never expected anything like that from you. You make me wait in vain for hours at the pastry shop while you're . . . you're . . . hanging out in this . . . this house of ill fame! To think I longed for you and thought of you as a hero. You've destroyed my faith in heroes forever, my faith in men. I wish I'd never met you, I wish you'd fallen on the field of honor!"

I could explain everything, I was sure. "I . . . I . . ." I began in embarrassment.

She would not hear. "Save your breath. I'm through with you. It's all over. I'm through with you for good." She turned her back on me.

"Eve, Eve," I cried, running after her, "listen to me, please."

"Don't you even recognize me?" One of the ladies of the new contingent suddenly blocked my way. I look questiongly at her. The faces of so many females had been impressed so forcibly upon my mind in the past few days that I really could not remember hers. "A fine cavalier you are," she said, half reproachfully, half teasingly. "Why did you run out without a word to me?" Then I realized that she was the blue-eyed girl I had followed into the jeweler's shop.

"I . . . I . . ." I tried to explain again.

But then Eve caught sight of us and was on the spot immediately. "What have you to say to my Adam?" she demanded. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, trying to sneak my hero away?"

"I'm trying to sneak him away from you? He ran after me. You'd better do your homework, you little hussy, and keep away from soldiers. I'll tell your mother on you."

"And I'll write to your husband so he'll know what his Angela is doing behind his back while he fights for his country."

"Shut up, or . . ."

"Shut up, or . . ."

They seemed on the point of scratching each other's eyes out.

"Why, you're not going to start scrapping over him, are you?" Violetta interposed. She and several other girls, attracted by the raised voices, had clustered round. "That's just the kind of guy he is. He did the same thing to me, stood me up. Sheer waste of time. I could have had another customer in the meanwhile."

"Another customer?" They did not immediately grasp this, but they understood at once that here was another woman I had stood up, that I was that kind of fellow.

"You can have him, I'll give him to you," Eve said.

"No, thanks, I don't need him; you said he belongs to you," Angela replied.

I stood rooted to the spot in utter helplessness.

"Well, well, baby, what have you done this time?" Ludmilla slipped her great bulk into the group. "I assure you"—she turned to the others—"you haven't missed anything. I ought to know; I've had this pig in bed."

They were worlds apart, but a shared disappointment placed them in league against me. Was this real, or was I dreaming? All my unconsummated soldier's love life in rear echelon, my love-at-first-sight of the parade ground, my first flirtation at the Corso, my first excitement in the Silver Hall, my encounter with Ludmilla—all these experiences after months of deprivation returned now, distorted into a ghastly caricature, and stood before me, accusing and contemptuous.

"Ugh," I heard Eve say, and Angela, Violetta and Ludmilla made the same derisive sounds. Dimly, I observed

the last of the prisoners from the pastry shop being hustled across the threshold. Then the Mirror Room with its hundreds of reflected crystal chandeliers seemed to vanish into darkness.

"Well, I'll be damned; Ember, what's the matter with you?" I heard the commander rumbling out of the darkness. His voice seemed to rise from a vast abyss, and at the same time he and the abyss sounded as if they were right beside me. "What's the matter with you? Don't you hear me?" the abyss roared into my ear.

"The porcelain Chinese, the porcelain Chinese . . ." A half-choked cry burst out of my throat.

"Nothing serious, just an attack of giddiness," I heard Dr. Kapra's voice.

I was lying on the floor in room zero, with the doctor and Father Jacopo standing over me.

"You gave us a good scare," the doctor said. "We were beginning to think that you too . . . But it doesn't seem to be anything much; all you need is a good rest."

After a while I was back at my post. The steady flow of bad news from town, and the resultant rearrangements in the Silver Hall, left me little time to worry about my private troubles. I threw myself into my work and tried to be everywhere at once, in order to drive that painful confrontation from my thoughts.

As Dr. Zitrom had predicted, transfer of the pastry-shop patrons to the Mashinka had aroused widespread indignation in Drohitz. Forcible removal of ladies and girls of the best families of Drohitz to the bordello quarter! Who had ever heard of anything like it! It was inexcusable. If isolation of the "suspects" was actually necessary, they should be sent to the municipal hospital. Wasn't it disgraceful enough that the army officers had taken advantage of the mayor's hospitality by luring him into the Mashinka, and then buried

him there like a dog? Now they were forcing the respectable citizens of Drohitz to follow their mayor into the halls of vice!

And who was responsible for all these indignities? The army, of course. The selfsame army that Drohitz had received with open arms, for which Drohitz had prepared a hero's welcome. And this was the army's thanks for Drohitz' cordiality! Not even the enemy could have humiliated, could have insulted the town worse than its own army did.

The fly squadrons invading private homes were felt to be deliberate vexations, and the increasing shipments of suspects to the Mashinka were viewed as outright spite. All this naturally fed the resentment of the townsfolk. "If this goes on," people were saying, "all Drohitz will end up in the bordellos. Of course the army—brutes—doesn't give a damn what it means to peaceful citizens to be torn away from their homes. Individuals don't count to the army."

The bitterness of the citizenry soon assumed the form of passive resistance. The proclamations of the army, posted on street corners and billboards, were flatly ignored. The fly squadrons found themselves, more and more frequently, confronted by locked doors which they had to break open by force. Day after day it became more difficult to properly carry out the sanitation measures ordered by the military command.

Then came that juvenile prank on the part of several townspeople which just about blew the lid. One morning all the army's announcements were pasted over with posters bearing the following outrageous text:

PROCLAMATION OF GHQ, UNITED FLY COMMAND

Drohitzers, awake! Hear the truth! Do not permit the soldiery to mislead you, nor cast all blame upon our wings. For generations we have lived with you, sharing your rooms,

your kitchens, your stores and stands. And although we have had our domestic quarrels, we have on the whole coexisted very well with you. We buzzed about here while Drohitz developed from a small village to a flourishing commercial town. Ever since the first red lanterns winked on in the Mashinka, we have flown back and forth, but never before have we been accused of bringing evil from the Mashinka into the town.

If anyone is responsible for the importation of this disease, it is not us, but the army. The army has attempted to shift its own responsibility to us. We carry back and forth only what we are given to carry.

People of Drohitz, let us in this urgent hour bury our domestic quarrels. Let us fraternize and proceed with united forces against the common enemy, the accursed, infected army.

We extend our wings to you in fraternal greeting.

(*Signed*) UNITED FLY COMMAND OF DROHITZ

Army Intelligence located the printer at once, but in spite of interrogation that verged on the third degree, it proved impossible to discover who was responsible for this shameful piece of mockery. And although town headquarters saw to it that the posters were covered over at once, the contents could not be wiped out. Every Drohitzer knew the words of the proclamation by heart as well as he did the national anthem.

The tension between the town and the army reached such a critical point that the second councilman, who was at the time conducting the town's affairs, dropped in at the casino one evening in order to discuss the ticklish business with some of the town fathers over a bottle of wine.

One of the councilors argued that in spite of all provocations they must not lose their heads, and that they ought to

urge the population to obey the sanitary regulations. After all, it must not be forgotten, he pointed out, that Drohitz had been spared occupation by the enemy during all the years of the war, and that this mercy was due solely to the brave stand the army had made. He was in the midst of these arguments when the second councilman was called to the telephone. He returned shortly, his face flaming with indignation.

"The devil with Mannsteufel," he shouted. "Too much is too much." He turned to the councilor. "And what's this about our owing gratitude to the army? It's time we looked the facts in the face. Brave stand? Defenders of the country? Saviors of Drohitz? Rubbish, absolutely rubbish! They're a beaten horde who've abandoned the greater part of the country to the enemy; they ran away like cowards and came to Drohitz for safety. Do you remember how they arrived here, scattered stragglers, filthy, ragged, half famished? They came to Drohitz to prepare a victorious new offensive—so they say. But where did their preparations begin? In the bordellos! Heroes—rot! They're a pack of whorehounds, that's all."

This outburst on the part of the second councilman took place in a circle of intimate friends, and all those present swore to keep mum about it. But when outrage has reached such proportions, no secret is sacred. By the following morning every word of it was being repeated joyously by the citizens of Drohitz.

All of us in Madame Renoir's establishment had seen Commander Mannsteufel blow his top on a number of occasions. But his explosion this time, when Intelligence telephoned a report on the events in the casino, exceeded anything we had imagined possible. It was as if all the rage that God has distributed among such elemental forces as volcanoes, rivers in spate and hurricanes had assembled for a brief rendezvous inside Mannsteufel. He swore, he thun-

dered, he raged, he raved. Any moment, it seemed this excess of fury would burst the limited human vessel that contained it.

Who knows how it would have ended if at that moment a fly had not settled on Mannsteufel's nose. He tried to brush it away. It obstinately flitted back until at last an adjutant sprang to his feet and crushed it on Mannsteufel's nose. For a moment this comical interlude brought the trace of a smile even to Mannsteufel's face, and with that his rage returned to its human limits.

"Arrest him, court-martial him, shoot him!" he bellowed. But that was easier to order inside the Silver Hall than to carry out in Drohitz, for the town was ranged against the Mashinka like an enemy camp.

Before the commander's punitive campaign against the rebellious townsfolk could come to a head, it was over. Oddly enough, it terminated without unconditional surrender on the part of the townspeople, and without the commander's yielding an inch. An unforeseen event caused this change in the situation. A wholly new front suddenly opened up, a front which on the one hand demanded the commander's entire attention and resolution, and on the other hand compelled the town rebels to shelve their grudge for a while.

The immediate cause of this new situation was the amazing case of Trombolin. Ever since Sodom and Gomorrah there have been, in every doomed city, a few persons who co-operate with the authorities. One such person was the venerable grocer Trombolin, who was the moving spirit of the co-operative movement for which the town councilor had pleaded during that memorable conference at the casino. As scion of the oldest commercial dynasty in Drohitz, Trombolin threw his entire prestige into the cause of convincing the citizens that in spite of their justified rancor

against the army, self-preservation demanded that they support the sanitary measures of the military authorities and help combat the plague of flies.

Dr. Zitrom, who had appointed Trombolin chairman of the voluntary civilian defense organization, found him a pillar of strength in the battle against the flies. Not only Trombolin himself, but his whole family also took an active part in this struggle—and the Trombolins formed a sizable clan. Mrs. Trombolin was president of the Anti-Fly League of Patriotic Housewives, and the Trombolin children organized volunteer flyfighter squads in the schools. In Trombolin's warehouse and home not a single fly was to be found. And then this champion of the anti-fly campaign caught the disease, and died.

To make matters worse, a magistrate, a watchmaker and a few other customers of Trombolin's fell ill. Of course the townsfolk immediately revived their stories about the mayor's ghost; but for an enlightened man like Dr. Zitrom there was never any doubt that every infectious disease had its natural cause.

After Trombolin's body had been removed from the house, and the room in which he had breathed his last thoroughly disinfected, Dr. Zitrom made a routine inspection of the warehouse. Just as he was turning to go, something scurried across his foot. A rat.

Could it be . . . How frightful! he thought in alarm—and immediately found confirmation of his fears. For as he looked around the warehouse and pushed boxes and crates aside, he discovered, behind a gnawed sack of rice, a dead rat swollen to the size of a suckling pig. He groaned at the thought that he had been so blinded by his obsession with flies. Why had he not considered this possible mode of disease transmission from the start?

There could be no doubt that, along with the flies, these stub-nosed, short-tailed, brown rodents were also responsible

for the spread of the infection. Of course they too disregarded cordons; the flies flew over the cordon, the rats slipped through it. And naturally these greediest of animals had promptly found the way to Trombolin's foodstuffs, and with the disease in their own bodies and the fleas in their pelts, carried the germs of the disease everywhere. Who could say how many other warehouses, sheds, cellars, attics and stables they scurried through?

Flies, rats and fleas in an alliance against us! What a situation!

The commander, however, remained composed. After Dr. Kapra had given him a briefing on available rat poisons, he withdrew, and shortly afterward returned with plans for another offensive. Everything was once again worked out down to the smallest detail—appointment of a rat intelligence staff, organization of rat-catching squads who would wear fleaproof smocks, issue of rat traps and sulfur-dioxide packets, and all the rest of it. The monomaniac boldness and verve with which he now assumed the extermination of two more prolific species was somewhat frightening.

However, the rat war had barely begun when another front had to be opened. This resulted from the diligence with which Dr. Zitrom, his wits sharpened by the case of the rats, now sought for other, hitherto overlooked, avenues for the dissemination of the disease. In the poor quarter of the town a washerwoman and her clients fell ill. Dr. Zitrom examined the water of the Strij River and discovered that the sewage from the Mashinka flowed into the Strij. Thus, in addition to all the other carriers, the river Strij was pouring infection into the town. Nature herself was playing tricks on the senior commander. He promptly ordered the evacuation of all houses along the Strij; no one was allowed to go down to the bank of the river; and the laundry washed in Strij water was confiscated.

The struggle against a hostile army possessing such in-

exhaustible reserves as the vermin and as a river which incessantly poured tons of infected water into the town, and at the same time the effort to combat an invisible government of the dead under the leadership of a dead mayor—in the end such a struggle slowly but surely wore down even so stalwart a character as our Mannsteufel. And still the bitter cup had not yet been drained to the dregs. But we had not long to wait.

In the course of an investigation about a washerwomen's death, it turned out that the last person to have been in contact with the deceased was an old maid, Vera Gambos, a midwife of the poor.

When Zitrom's men appeared at Vera's address, intending to take her to the Mashinka for observation, she meekly asked permission to change her dress before going with the soldiers. After waiting for some while the soldiers lost patience, broke into her bedroom, and found it empty. They searched the house from cellar to attic—in vain. Vera had escaped them. They asked the neighbors; but although Vera must have left the house only a short time before, no one would admit having seen her. The old maid seemed to have vanished.

The military police finally succeeded in locating the midwife at the other end of town, in the home of a textile merchant. But it was already too late. Not only was Vera herself dead; there was already another casualty in the house.

The textile merchant was the sole survivor and witness. His testimony was as follows: His sister-in-law Vera had sought refuge in his warehouse in order to escape the shame of being confined in the Mashinka. There, due to the stale air and her agitation, she had felt nauseated. She had ventured into the yard for a breath of fresh air. When some time passed and she did not return, his wife went out to look for her.

At this point the factual part of the story ended, to be fol-

lowed by the usual absurdities about the mayor's ghost.

The textile merchant heard a sharp cry, ran out and found his wife lying on the ground in a dead faint. After he had carried her into the house, she slowly came to. Trembling in every limb, she said that when she asked her sister to return to the house, Vera had replied, "I can't. Don't you see His Honor the Mayor and all the others? I must go with them."

"You're seeing ghosts," his wife had replied, and gone up to Vera, who lay in a twisted position on the ground. But as she was about to lift Vera to her feet, someone behind her seized her arm and pulled her aside. She turned around. There stood the mayor, surrounded by his band.

"Come along," she heard him summon Vera. "We cannot wait any longer."

She did not know what happened after that, because she fainted.

"Bring Vera in, hurry, hurry," she implored her husband. But when he went into the yard, Vera was dead.

The next day his wife fell ill. And he himself saw the mayor, coming with his band to fetch her.

What drove Dr. Zitrom almost to despair was that it became more and more difficult to check the swelling tide of superstition. Whenever anyone caught the disease and died, the mayor and his retinue were sure to have appeared. And every man who joined his band was as loyal to the dead mayor as he had been to the living mayor.

Dead storekeepers directed the mayor to the houses of their best customers. Dead husbands opened the doors to their wives' bedrooms for him. And each time the mayor picked his candidates by his own standards. For reasons beyond the knowledge of the living he would choose one and reject another.

Regardless of all the logical arguments put forward by the

military government there was simply no way of fighting the insane superstition of the townspeople. It would obviously end by defeating all efforts of the officials and of Dr. Zitrom's heroic sanitary measures. Effective as flypaper, fumigation, flea powder, rat poison and traps might be in disposing of vermin, carefully as the Strij water might be boiled and distilled to destroy germs—no fumigant could smoke out the dead mayor, no trap could catch him, no poison eliminate him, no distillation evaporate him.

On top of everything else, there now came alarming reports from the Castle Hospital. One of the voluntary nurses had come down with the disease. Then two of the invalid soldiers in her care caught it. It was inconceivable how this could happen in that citadel of disinfection, where all hygienic measures had been strictly observed.

Since I was the only man at the Mashinka headquarters who had been to the Castle Hospital, Dr. Kapra assigned me to liaison duties. I was to take all calls from the hospital, and so I was right at the source when Head Nurse Jadwiga telephoned.

"Adam Ember speaking. I'm sure you remember me, Nurse Jadwiga. I am the medical aide who——" I started off in friendly, chatty fashion.

"Yes," she interrupted me, "but we have no time now. Listen to me. Something frightful has happened here during the night."

"Something frightful?" I repeated in alarm. Hearing the words, the commander, the doctor and the other officers in the room besieged me with questions. Covering the mouthpiece with my hand, I said to the commander, "Beg pardon, sir, just one second. I haven't yet heard what it is." I removed my hand. "Yes, please, Nurse Jadwiga, what has happened?"

Her news could not have been worse. Some days ago the

baroness had fallen ill. Dr. Zitrom stayed with her most of the nights, looking after her, while Head Nurse Jadwiga attended to other patients. Around four o'clock this morning Dr. Zitrom had suddenly come rushing into the main ward, screaming, "Nurse, Nurse, come quickly. I'm going out of my mind. The mayor and his band have come into the baroness' room. I know it cannot be true, and yet I've seen it with my own eyes." Whereupon he broke into hysterical weeping.

His noise aroused the sleeping patients in the ward. "They're here, bar the door!" they shouted wildly. Some sprang from their beds; others hid under their blankets. Nurse Jadwiga had her hands full stemming the panic.

With Nurse Melanie's assistance, she got Dr. Zitrom into bed; he had collapsed, unconscious, in the midst of his hysteria. Then she hurried to the baroness' private wing. She found the mistress of the castle lifeless in her bed.

"What's up now, in the name of God!" the senior commander snapped as soon as I laid down the receiver. For a moment I stared wildly into space. All the details of that memorable evening of our arrival revived in my mind. I saw the baroness, bronze-skinned and thoroughbred, standing in the doorway to the boudoir; I saw Dr. Zitrom's face, red with lechery and embarrassment, as he sent me out to the banquet so that he could spend the night with the baroness.

"Well, come on! Don't sit staring like an idiot!" the commander roared, shaking my shoulders roughly.

When at last I managed to bring out the story, the commander turned pale. All the others stood stunned. At last Dr. Kapra broke the silence: "A military physician, an enlightened man. No, it's beyond understanding. I really did not expect that of Zitrom. We'll have to write Zitrom off. The question is now who can take his place."

"His first assistant?"

"We don't know a thing about the man."

"I know him; a blockhead who served in my squad," I remarked.

"There we have it."

While they were still mulling over the matter, I blurted out, "If Dr. Zitrom's story gets around among our soldiers in Drohitz, they'll be sure to meet the roaming mayor and his band."

"Shut up, you idiot!" the commander roared. "Out of this room. And you too, gentlemen, if you please," he said to the officers. "I must collect myself."

I slunk off to room zero. But I felt so conscience-stricken that I decided to return to the office to apologize to the commander. Cautiously, I opened the door a crack and caught sight of the commander—whom I had never seen in any but a military posture—kneeling on the floor. Hands clasped in prayer, he was murmuring despairingly: "Lord have mercy upon us!"

Stunned by this unexpected sight, I closed the door before he should notice me.

Toward evening of that same day Dr. Zitrom passed on. Dr. Kapra listed him as one more victim of the disease. But privately I thought that Dr. Zitrom had abjured his faith in natural causes for good and all, and had followed his baroness to join the mayor's retinue of the dead.

VIII

Family Life in the Bordello

The epidemic which spread so rapidly in Drohitz also had its effects on the Mashinka. The senior commander and his staff were now completely taken up with the organization of additional annexes, and I seldom saw the commander himself in the Silver Hall. Dr. Kapra came there only for his morning round, and for a brief checkup during the afternoon. In his absence Kalabas officiated part time in the pantry, distributing drugs and taking care of other medical functions. A corporal sat in the office to receive telephoned reports, and supervision of the Silver Hall was left entirely to Lieutenant Waldo and a handful of guards.

The mood in the Mirror Room was uglier than ever. The new arrivals were much exercised at the disgrace of being locked up in the same room with prostitutes. The girls, on the other hand, maddened by the snobbery of the respectable citizens, retaliated by making fun of them, which of course only fanned the rage of the citizenry. The tiniest incident served as a pretext for a scene. One violent outburst followed the next, until one day the tension rose to a point where it simply could no longer be borne. As in nature the

wildest hurricane eventually reaches a saturation point, so the tempests in the Silver Hall suddenly subsided overnight, perhaps from sheer exhaustion.

Anyone who had seen the Mirror Room the day before would scarcely have believed this was the same place. The moral indignation of the townsfolk had evaporated like the perfume from a poorly corked bottle. One after the other they dropped their reserve and mingled, as Eve and Angela had already done, with the "girls" who belonged there.

At first there was only a hesitant sniffing and snuffing at each other, then the beginnings of conversation, then closer acquaintance, and finally the formation of friendships. Whereupon the girls stopped their gibing and the guards could actually make themselves heard below a bellow. They began to act quite civilly—until in the end nothing but the uniforms remained of their rough military character.

Even the hostility of my four Furies, Eve, Angela, Violetta and Ludmilla, seemed to have eased somewhat, although they continued to regard me as something less than a man. The Silver Hall turned into a kind of sanctuary, and I would hurry to finish my daily rounds in order to get back there. When I did, I was sure to find the respectable citizenry deep in intimate conversation with the whores of the Mashinka.

The citizens who had been so rudely torn from their accustomed ways and were now incarcerated here, cut off from their homes, families and occupations, felt a strong urge to vent their bitterness. A stocky, almost neckless man, whose head seemed set right on his shoulders and whose body resembled an undifferentiated block, began, just as I came in one afternoon, recounting how it had all happened. His clumsy speech was as shapeless as his body. He faltered after every few sentences, began anew and repeated everything he had already said.

"I was just, just about to put our famous Humperdinger

rum baba into the oven. Into the oven it was going when they came rushing in and grabbed the cake from my hands. For forty years I've baked the cake that bears my name, and now it's over, all over." He was seized by a fit of asthma and snorted like an overheated engine toiling up a mountain.

"Pray let me tell the story, Mr. Humperdinger," intervened a mercurial gentleman. He was, as I learned later, the banker Rappaport, who also acted as director of the Drohitz amateur theater. In a well-modulated voice, with vivid gestures, he began describing all that had happened that memorable afternoon in the pastry shop.

"I am sure you will recall, my dear Madam President and my dear Mrs. Moffet," he said, turning to two of the ladies —one of them a robust person in a close-fitting black taffeta dress that threatened to burst any moment, the other a bit faded, but fairly attractive, dressed in a flowered print with white ruching at the neck, her profuse blond hair curled over her forehead—"that you were sitting at the round table in the pastry shop. Mrs. Moffet, would you be so kind as to move your seat over to Madam President's?" he prompted. "You ladies, if I remember rightly, were discussing an important committee affair when I joined you." Like a stage director he took his chair and moved over to them, in order to bring the scene to life. "To our right sat Malva." He now turned to a pale, plump girl with dreamy, almond-shaped eyes, and asked her to move her chair to the proper position. "That was exactly how it was," he murmured approvingly, and continued: "When we noticed each other, we nodded in greeting. Malva was on the point of dunking her croissant into the coffee when suddenly this dreadful army doctor who was sitting at the next table with two of his henchmen jumped to his feet——" Whereupon Mr. Rappaport, to make it as vivid as possible, jumped up, stationed himself at the table beside Miss Malva, and began to

shout like a madman, "It's the flies! The flies!"

So cunningly did he imitate Dr. Zitrom's voice that I thought for a moment I was hearing Dr. Zitrom himself.

Caught up in the spell of this graphic performance, the citizens felt themselves transported back to the pastry shop. As they once more lived through the traumatic scene, they stared at the shouting man in sheer horror. Even those who had not been present, the whores and the guards, were under the illusion that they were actually experiencing the scene at the pastry shop.

Mr. Rappaport went on imitating Dr. Zitrom. He snapped into military posture, planted himself squarely before the guests, and ordered his imaginary adjutants: "Let no one out of here!"

His realistic portrayal threw the townsfolk into such a state of fright that they leaped to their feet and started rushing wildly toward the door. Engaged in a frantic hand-to-hand struggle with the imaginary adjutants, they struck out with their fists at phantom faces and hurled their shoulders against phantom bodies in order to break through. But the two imaginary soldiers were made of steel; they did not yield an inch.

"Let me out, have pity!" Madam President begged, falling to her knees and embracing the imaginary legs of the two immovable soldiers. "Think of my poor Bertram with his diabetes. I can't leave him all alone with no one to prepare his diet!" she wailed.

Whereupon, as if part of a chain reaction, a plainly dressed matron lamented, "My poor little Timmy and Linda —what will become of them? I must get back home. Who else will look after them? I must go to them, do you hear! You have children too; where are your hearts!" She pleaded so imploringly that even the hearts of imaginary soldiers should have been softened. But imaginary soldiers have no hearts.

To cap it all, the girl Malva began screeching, "Philip, Philip, my only love! Never again . . ." and fainted dead away on the floor.

I don't know how we would have coped with this situation if one of the ladies had not come to our aid. Her snow-white hair and unwrinkled face, as rosy as a baby's, had struck me as familiar from the moment I first saw her. But I had been unable to recall where we had met. Now, however, as she began rallying the mother of Timmy and Linda—whom she addressed as Mrs. Dolbin—I suddenly remembered that she was one of the gray ladies I had seen at the Castle Hospital. Now she soothed successively Mrs. Dolbin, Malva and Madam President.

With these three quieted, the others settled down once more, with the exception of one man whose strange behavior had intrigued me all along. He kept hopping from one place to the next, his head all the while darting to right and left like a feeding sparrow's. His hard mouth, pursed like a beak, and his rounded paunch, jutting from a long-tailed brown frock coat—in short, his whole appearance—had the quality of a sparrow. What most irritated me about this *rara avis* was the monotonous cry he repeated from time to time: "Everything must come to an end."

The girls of the house had served tea. For a while all sat together in silence, but their bitterness was still seething. A gaunt man with sallow cheeks, hollowed eyes, a bilious expression and a nicotine-stained goatee finally broke the spell.

"Where I come into it, I don't know to this day," he began. As he spoke he nervously lit a cigarette, carefully pinched it out after only a few puffs, obviously in order to conserve his meager supply, but then relit it almost immediately. "I was at work revising the town budget when two uniformed men entered my office and demanded, 'Did you see the chief of protocol yesterday?' 'Of course, I have

official business with him,' I replied. 'Then follow us!' And before I knew what was going on they dragged me away, jammed me into a limousine and dumped me at the pastry shop."

"That is exactly what happened to me," exclaimed a dandified young man whose hair was slicked back with pomade and whose eyes kept snapping open and shut. " 'Rogemund, hurry with these medicines to Notary Boshavan,' my boss ordered me. On my way a soldier took hold of me and marched me off to the pastry shop."

"I knew from the start it would turn out this way," muttered a moon-faced man who looked around so blackly that the gloom of his eyes seemed to hang like a cloud above his rotund body. "Even on our way back from the reception at the parade grounds I said to my wife, Katerina, 'I can't explain it, but I have a feeling that all this will turn out badly.' "

"Everything must come to an end," the twittering bird man put in.

" 'Why, you're out of your mind, Hugo!' she snapped at me," the corpulent man continued. " 'Call me crazy, but I have a kind of intuition,' I told her. 'Then kindly keep it to yourself,' she replied. 'If any of the officials heard us, God forbid, they'd cancel the whole lard order. And then our dog Fatty and the two of us could go right ahead and fry in our own lard.' I remained mum, because I didn't want the order canceled, but I thought what I thought."

"No, I never would have believed it," Madam President put in passionately. "To think that they would do this to me, to me who have sacrificed two sons to our country. I ask you, is this gratitude? To think that our own army on our own soil should treat people with such inhuman callousness —this is something unprecedented in all history."

"Well, certain inhumanities are inevitable in warfare," a bald-headed man with black horn-rimmed glasses and a

wispy mustache spoke up. "As we know, there have been acts of inhumanity in all wars—for example, in the Franco-Prussian War, in Napoleon's campaigns, in the Thirty Years' War—I could adduce hundreds of examples, back as far as . . ."

Madam President was every inch a lady of breeding. Yet when the bald-headed historian reached Caesar and started to review the Punic Wars, her patience gave out.

"Professor Drish," she said, "you know that as president of the Cultural League I welcome your mission in Drohitz. But with all due respect I must tell you that I consider it poor taste indeed that while I am speaking of the two sons I have lost, you choose to show off your erudition about the Punic and God-knows-what-other wars. . . . I am well aware that you are a noted historian commissioned to collect data for the war archives. But don't you see that you are dealing with human beings here, and not with documents, with people who are being humiliated and mistreated in the most inhuman fashion imaginable . . . ? I really must say, this is simply beyond me. . . ."

"I am only glad my poor dear daddy did not have to live to see this," Eve blurted out. "A general with his high ideals could not have stomached such baseness on the part of our army."

The professor looked baffled. "But I only meant, looking at it from the historical point of view . . ." he apologized. No one listened; the whole company fell upon him at once.

"And I suppose what the army did to the mayor means nothing to you?"

"And the beastly way they treated our deputation!"

"And ruining our whole business—I suppose that's patriotic behavior!" Ludmilla protested.

"Professor What's-your-name, Mr. Historian, Mr. Document-collector or whatever you are, don't you understand that girls like us have to live too?" Violetta squalled at him.

"Why, in wartime girls like us are . . . are historically important to the soldiers," Myra seconded her.

"Only an out-of-towner could think like that, never a born Drohitzer," Mrs. Moffet commented.

"I'll tell you something, Professor," Mr. Humperdinger snorted. "I am not an educated man—I just managed to finish grammar school—and I don't know nothing about the Caesars or the Punics. But I can tell you one thing, no army could have acted worse than ours, and if that isn't so my name isn't Humperdinger and I'll never bake a Humperdinger rum baba again."

A neatly dressed elderly gentleman, the insurance agent Ginzele, tried to restore peace. "My dear Professor," he said, "I happen to have attended the university and am well informed on historical events. Naturally history is replete with atrocities. Nevertheless you will have to grant that the humiliating situation in which we find ourselves here cannot be regarded from a historical point of view. What has been done to us and to our city in an unequivocal—— But it is better, perhaps, that I say no more."

"Why not, Mr. Ginzele, why not call a spade a spade?" a pug-nosed little blonde put in.

Lieutenant Waldo decided that it was time to sneak away. "Ember," he whispered to me, "would you be so kind as to take my place for a few minutes? I have a call of nature."

No sooner was he out of the door than the pug-nosed blonde burst out: "Scandalous, that's what it is, an outrage. They're pigs and prigs, the whole army, the whole officers' corps. God knows I speak from experience. First acting nicey-nicey, paying us compliments, settling down comfy in our best beds, and afterward behaving like barbarians."

The tone in which she said "our best beds" instantly called to mind the associated phrase, "spring mattresses." Of course, this was the pretty blonde who had boasted of her

beds with spring mattresses when our officers were being quartered.

"Yes, downright barbarians," everyone cried out in chorus.

"Quite right, barbarians, vandals, Huns!" Professor Drish now agreed, to everyone's surprise.

"Bravo, bravo!" they all cheered him, and immediately took up the slogan: "Barbarians, vandals, Huns!" The words rang through the room.

I was debating whether to curb them or not, but decided to do nothing at all for the present. After all, it was Waldo's duty to defend the honor of the officers' corps, and what did I care about the damned army command? If the honor of dead members of the army had been impugned, that would have been a different matter!

A sudden sob put an end to the uproar. Malva was weeping inconsolably.

"Why, Malva," the gray lady addressed her, "what is the matter? You must keep your courage up, like the rest of us."

"Mama finally gave her consent for Philip and me to marry as soon as he gets home on furlough. But if he ever finds out that I've been here in this—this place, he may never want to marry me. Oh, what a wonderful life we would have had, without a care in the world, with his salary as a railroad engineer."

"Railroad engineer!" Ludmilla suddenly screeched so passionately all heads turned toward her. "My intended, my Julius, was a railroad engineer too. We could have been so happy together. If only that scheming boarder, that double-crossing Viennese, hadn't come between us. If only I hadn't fallen for his line. Afterward it was all over with Julius. He treated me like dirt. And my dad, he gave me the boot. After that I didn't care a damn what happened."

Forgetting her own grief, Malva spontaneously ran and threw her arms around Ludmilla. "We must both be brave!" she cried.

"Yes, we must all be brave in these difficult times," Madam President agreed. She took Ludmilla and Malva by the arm and withdrew with them to a corner of the room.

Things quieted down and when Lieutenant Waldo reappeared at last, I could set out on my already overdue rounds.

Nothing in the world can break down the barriers of class and manners and unite people from all walks of life as quickly as anger and resentment against common injustice. In a case like this strangers a world apart draw close in no time, and mutual bitterness and grief form a united front.

When I returned to the Silver Hall, I found whores and solid citizens deep in talk with one another, exchanging accounts of the life they had led before the army disrupted Drohitz. I joined them, and soon Lieutenant Waldo and the guards moved closer to the group. For a while they lapped up the conversation, though from a certain distance, like eavesdroppers, but finally they moved chairs up to the circle and joined it. We were all sitting together like one big happy family. That act broke down the last barriers between the prisoners in the Silver Hall and their guards.

The townsfolk were eagerly telling stories of their peaceful pursuit of happiness in their sheltered family circles. The girls of the Silver Hall listened spellbound. Lolo, Mitzi and Tamara sat well-nigh frozen, their expressions reverent, their eyes wide open, like prim young misses in their pews during Sunday sermon. Others kept their eyes closed, in reveries. Many of the girls seemed touched to the quick, recalling happy days which they had spent with their families before a love of adventure had caused them to break away. Seized by belated repentance or envy, one or the other girl would sigh deeply and shift uneasily back and forth in her chair. Ludmilla and Griselda were barely choking back their rising sobs.

The soldiers, who had so long been parted from their

loved ones back home, were likewise gripped by nostalgia. Daydreaming my way back to the happy times of peace, I suddenly saw my mother, the way she had wept when I bade her goodbye. "Mama," I sobbed, and I had to produce my handkerchief to dry my tears. Lieutenant Waldo, who had left wife and children behind, turned away to conceal his emotion. Even so coarse-grained a fellow as Kalabas brushed the sleeve of his tunic over his eyes. After all, under every uniform there was a son, a brother, a husband, a father.

Then it was the girls' turn to tell about their lives, about their experiences with clients, about the wild orgies which had been the order of the day—or rather of the night—about the tricks of their trade; and now the Drohitzers listened spellbound. An unknown world opened up for them, a world of sensual delights which convention had barred from them.

What fun to sit, watch and listen. The gray lady was flushed to the roots of her snow-white hair. Malva, undone with embarrassment, sat with downcast eyes riveted to her lap. Mr. Humperdinger puffed and gasped. Mrs. Moffet removed her collar and fingered nervously at the neck of her dress. The lard dealer's gloomy moon-face had changed to a noonday sun, and cast searing rays all about. Rogemund's blinking eyes flitted around restlessly like lustful butterflies, settling now on this, now on another of the girls. The professor removed his horn-rimmed glasses and shut his eyes, in order to visualize more vividly the subject matter of these far-from-ancient histories. Madam President struggled to preserve her decorum. But her majestic bosom began heaving up and down, straining at the bonds of her tight taffeta dress like young foals determined to escape the corral and gallop away.

For some of the Drohitzers, the girls' frank tales struck direct to the heart of the matter. A lustful glee spotted their

faces like a rash, and their nostrils quivered like those of animals in rut. The pug-nosed blonde slipped farther and farther off her seat, and soon lay half melting on the floor. Refined Mr. Ginzele slid obscenely about on his chair, and quite unexpectedly uttered a whinnying sound.

Eve and Angela, as if by mutual agreement, were bombarding me with sensual glances that burned my skin right through the uniform. I reached the boiling point, and disregarding all military regulations I opened my collar button and loosened my belt. The other soldiers listened with rapt attention. After all, there were men inside those uniforms!

The mounting heat in the room reached its peak when Ludmilla told of a certain cavalry captain who had hustled her up to her room and fallen upon her with the ferocity of a starved bear, his big paws pulling at her breasts so that they were still sore. "But that," she said, "was only the beginning."

Just at this thrilling moment, the idiotic birdman ruined the mood for everyone with his twittering: "Everything must come to an end."

I was infuriated, jumped to my feet, ready to slap his silly beak, when he piped, "What's going on? It's already two. Feeding time, isn't it?"

Violetta sprang up in alarm. "Good Lord, the pea soup will be burned," she exclaimed and rushed out into the kitchen.

The previous mood could not be recaptured. Ludmilla, suddenly conscious of her growling stomach, lost interest in the description of her cavalry captain's eccentricities. Soon afterward we sat down to eat.

Seldom, however, had a meal been polished off so quickly, a table cleared so rapidly. As soon as the dishes were done, everyone huddled together once more.

The girls of the Silver Hall desired to learn how a respectable woman caught herself a husband, and how on earth

she managed to go on sleeping with one and the same man year in and out.

The ladies in their turn questioned the girls about the finer points of their trade, whether they really enjoyed doing it with a different man each time and even with several strangers the very same night.

They also exchanged stories about Mayor Gospoda, who had played a significant part in everyone's life, having been a kind of father to all the Drohitzers. Several of the citizens expressed concern as to what would become of the town without his wise guidance. The girls worried about the future of the Silver Hall, now that poor Madame Renoir, who had been a mother to all of them, had suffered a collapse.

The soldiers too were concerned over the way the war would go now that the infection had given everything so unexpected a turn.

I would gladly have contributed to the general conversation and I tried several times to relate my wartime experiences, but somehow I could not get a word in edgewise. One time Mrs. Dolbin broke in to quote us some of Timmy's and Linda's precocious remarks. Then Eve had to mention several inspiring pronouncements on the noble mission of the army by her father, the general, while Mr. Rappaport entertained us greatly by mimicking certain comical incidents in Drohitz society. The lard dealer talked about his well-trained pug, Fatty. Finally Mr. Humperdinger told the story of how, as a young baker's apprentice, he had hit upon the idea of creating the Humperdinger rum baba which had since made his name a byword throughout the country.

"Ah, yes, the Humperdinger rum baba," Madam President exclaimed, and she recollected the mammoth cake Mr. Humperdinger had baked for the baptism of her eldest son, who had died fighting for his country. By such easy stages she was led to think of the difficult confinement she had had when this son was born.

Then Malva had to tell us how her mother had at first opposed her marriage to Philip. Myra, the redhead, told of the decline of her family when her father, a factory worker, lost his leg in an industrial accident. Griselda narrated how one of her father's friends, a lewd art dealer, had lured her to his flat on the pretext of showing her some rare etchings. Mrs. Moffet, whose husband had been reported missing in action, and who was living with her mother-in-law, complained of all she had to put up with from the querulous old lady.

So it continued for hours. Household habits, the peculiarities and whims of husbands, the peculiarities and whims of regular patrons and passing strangers in the Silver Hall, questions of dress, secrets of beauty culture, treasured recipes for cakes and soups, the tricks of half a dozen trades—the day was not long enough for these intimate exchanges.

At first, it had been simple curiosity on the part of the moral and the immoral inhabitants of Drohitz that had brought them together. But now they became genuinely concerned with one another. Whenever Mrs. Dolbin returned to her pet topic of Timmy and Linda, the girls of the Silver Hall glowed with maternal pride. When the lard dealer told of Fatty's fabulous tricks, everyone expressed great surprise. When Malva described the sweet shiver that had gone all over her her when Philip pressed the first kiss upon her cheek, all the girls of the Silver Hall shared the virginal thrill of this kiss. And when Madam President spoke of the firemen's ball in Drohitz (a good twenty years ago, that was) when she, newly married, started off the first waltz on her Bertram's arm, dressed in a taffeta gown ordered specially from Vienna—then the listening girls seemed to feel the rustling flounces brushing their own legs, and they began swaying back and forth as though they themselves were waltzing with Bertram over the waxed parquet.

It was the same vice versa. When Ludmilla called to mind that fateful night when the accursed boarder had

stolen into her room and taken her by surprise, and when she described her feelings when her fiancé, the railroad engineer, had thrown her over—the good ladies shared in her feelings to the point of total identification as though they themselves had been pounced on in the night, shamefully diddled in the afternoon, and as though the subsequent disillusionment and despair had been their own lot.

Ladies of breeding and ladies of pleasure had merged into a single body, a single soul, and the hearts of virgins, wives and mothers began to beat in the breasts of whores, while the mauled and tattered hearts of the whores pounded in the bosoms of the townswomen. Civilians and soldiers, too, merged into a single throbbing heart. The townsmen suffered with the soldiers all the privations and terrors the latter had endured in foxholes and under fire, shared their rejoicing over the order for strategic withdrawal, and waxed anxious over the probable outcome of the war. And as though the soldiers themselves were native Drohitzers, they in their turn felt outraged by the shameful treatment of the mayor and the town deputation and wondered how Drohitz would manage henceforth, now that good Mayor Gospoda was no longer with them. And civilians and soldiers alike deplored Madame Renoir's heart attack as much as the girls, and feared for the future of the Silver Hall without her experienced guidance.

From my earliest youth a good share of adventure had come my way. Impelled by curiosity and a desire to get the most out of life, I had plunged head over heels into living, had gone a-galloping on all sorts of mounts, suffered all manner of dogs to yap at my heel, had tasted victory and defeats, was at home in many countries and cities, had lolled in many soft beds, dwelt in miry holes in the ground, rejoiced and regretted, regaled myself and repented. And yet I had never confronted life as fully as in this defunct bordello, listening to the palaver of a motley group of soldiers,

townsfolk and whores. At times it seemed to me that I was watching the mysterious loom of life weaving the manifold destinies of man into a single fabric, a weird and wonderful pattern.

IX

Charades

One afternoon as I entered the Silver Hall a mood of anxiety seemed to have gripped the townspeople.

"I wonder what will happen to all of us in the end?" asked Mrs. Dolbin in a strangely subdued voice.

Others took up the theme. "Yes, really, what is going to become of us?"

"I can tell you!" exclaimed Tamara to everyone's surprise.

"Yes, Tamara, go ahead," her friend Griselda urged her.

"All right, then I'll bring my cards," Tamara said, and off she went.

In her absence, Griselda extolled Tamara's gifts as a fortuneteller. She told the story of Barbara, a girl who had put in quite a few years in the Silver Hall and was no longer in the bloom of youth. Tamara's cards had predicted that within a year Barbara would have a rich bridegroom. Sure enough, the year was not yet over when one night a traveling fur dealer named Shushak had come to the Silver Hall and made Barbara's acquaintance. He returned the following two nights, and a month later, when he was again in Drohitz on business, he paid Madame Renoir off for Barbara, took her with him, and now she was wealthy Mrs. Shushak, one of the first ladies of Podol.

"And do you remember," volunteered Myra, "how Tamara saw in the cards that I would be given an expensive ring? Pretty soon, that reserve lieutenant up to his ears in debt came along; he'd made up his mind to shoot himself, but he was spending his last night in the Silver Hall, and he gave me this ring in return for a happy ending." She stripped an amethyst ring from her finger. And as the ring passed from hand to hand and was properly admired, I saw Tamara entering the room, her long, black hair reflected in all the mirrors.

She sat down at one of the tables and began shuffling the cards like a regular gypsy. Everyone gathered around her; only the birdman abstained.

"Don't you want to have your fortune told, Mr. Dingda?" Mr. Rappaport inquired.

"Don't need it," the birdman chirped.

"You're not afraid of finding out your future?" Rogemund chaffed him.

"Me afraid? Fiddlesticks! I just don't have any need for such nonsense," Dingda twittered, and hopped away.

Mrs. Moffet had first turn. Tamara held out the cards for her to cut, and then dealt them out in three rows of nine. Everyone craned his neck.

Tamara studied the cards attentively. "A nice how-do-you-do," she murmured, pointing to the jack of hearts, which had turned up alongside the nine of spades. She whispered something into Mrs. Moffet's ear.

"Why, that's just wonderful!" Mrs. Moffet exclaimed, beaming.

"No secrets, please," the others insisted. "We all want to know."

Mrs. Moffet gave her consent, and Tamara announced that a near relation of Mrs. Moffet's would soon pass away.

"And who do you think it is? None other than my nagging mother-in-law," Mrs. Moffet exulted. "You all know

what I have to take from that woman."

"Congratulations, congratulations!" the others cried.

On the whole the cards were favorable. For Mrs. Dolbin the five of diamonds was ninth card from the center, which suggested that she would soon be seeing Timmy and Linda again. From the excellent position of the ace of clubs Madam President could count on finding her Bertram well and happy. The cards promised Mr. Ginzele an unexpected business coup. The two of hearts indicated that Humperdinger, a widower, would remarry. The pug-nosed blonde would find a handsome lover, Eve—three of clubs—a whole host of men. And so it went, one after the other. Happiness, love, money was the constant refrain, and at each prophecy the others cried in chorus: "Congratulations, congratulations!"

At last came Malva's turn—in her modesty she had waited until last. The cards were cut and laid out. Here the king, there the two of diamonds, the five of diamonds. Tamara looked at the cards as though she did not trust her eyes. "Why, but it's perfectly clear," she exclaimed at last, pointing at the five of diamonds which lay directly between the diamond king and diamond queen. "There simply is no doubt about it."

"Don't keep me on pins and needles," Malva said. "Is it good or bad?"

"The finest thing you could wish for," Tamara said. "Here, do you see," she went on, pointing to the queen, "this is you, and this"—she indicated the king—"is your Philip, and here"—she tapped the five of diamonds—"is the baby. You're going to have a baby, and very soon; two of diamonds, a boy; the jack of hearts is the ninth card."

"Shocking!" Madam President exclaimed. "What will your mother, Madame de Beaujoin, say to it? How could you?"

Malva turned fiery red and burst into tears.

Madam President at once changed her tune. "Silly child, there isn't any reason to cry," she said, trying to appease the sobbing girl, and took Malva into her arms.

"Such things happen in the best of families," Mr. Rappaport observed.

It was not easy to soothe Malva. "Oh, what am I going to do?" she wailed. "If Mama finds out . . ."

"Don't worry about it. I shall explain the situation to her," Madam President assured her.

"The disgrace! The scandal! No, I simply can't go through with it," Malva wailed.

"Nonsense, Malva, there's not a soul will blame you for it," Eve told her.

"Why, such a thing means nothing at all nowadays, in wartime," the pug-nosed blonde put in.

"You ought to be happy, Malva," Mrs. Moffet urged. "Whatever happens to us, *you* at least will have your little Philip."

"Then you will learn what true happiness is," Mrs. Dolbin added.

"How I envy you," Ludmilla exclaimed. "To be carrying a child. Ever since I was thirteen I've dreamed about having a kid inside of me. May I touch it, place my hand on it just for a moment?"

A shy smile dispelled the tears from Malva's eyes. She nodded her permission.

Ludmilla patted the girth of Malva's abdomen. "How nice it feels!"

And then the other Silver Hall girls thronged around the pregnant girl. "May I too?" Violetta asked. "Me too? Me too?" begged Griselda, Myra and Tamara, one after the other. Each went carefully up to Malva and put her hand respectfully upon her middle. "How nice it feels."

The crowding apparently became too much for Malva. She turned pale and began to sway.

"Good heavens, she's fainting."

"A chair, quick!"

"The sofa's better, so that she can stretch out."

They at once moved the sofa over and bedded Malva down on it.

"A few pillows would make her more comfortable."

Instantly several of the girls ran out of the room and returned with a heap of pillows and blankets. The gray lady arranged two pillows under Malva's head, and one under her feet, and was just about to tuck in the blankets when Mrs. Dolbin suggested that the girl's dress ought to be unbuttoned.

"Would the gentlemen have the kindness to turn around for a moment?" Madam President suggested.

"But they'll see in the mirrors," Violetta cried out. "Better if they close their eyes."

Like one man we all, townsfolk and soldiers alike, closed our eyes.

"There, now the gentlemen can look again," Violetta said a moment later.

There lay Malva, reflected on all sides, like a queen awaiting the birth of the crown prince, reposing on pillows, swaddled in blankets, surrounded by a band of attentive women.

After she had recovered somewhat, Malva wanted to get up.

"For Heaven's sake, no," the others cried out.

"A woman in your condition has to take care of herself. You need plenty of rest."

"Yes, you must take it easy."

"Would you like something to brace you? Hot bouillon, or a cup of tea?"

"No, thank you."

"But you must take something, for little Philip's sake. A nourishing soup or porridge."

"Good nourishment is the main thing when you're expecting," Mrs. Dolbin said.

"Let me take care of that," Violetta said, speeding off to the kitchen.

In their solicitude the ladies and the girls of the Silver Hall could not lavish enough care upon Malva; each tried to outdo the other. Some of the girls conferred in whispers on how they could get together the layette. "Not a baby in the world is going to have a nicer layette than our little Philip. We'll knit everything from bonnet to socks."

Mrs. Dolbin remembered that Linda's old cradle was still put away in the attic. As soon as she returned to town, she promised, she would have the cradle fixed up for little Philip.

The men, too, did not stand by idle. Mr. Rappaport took checkbook and fountain pen from his breast pocket and handed Malva a substantial check which was to be used for the future education of her little Philip. Mr. Ginzele promised that as soon as the quarantine was lifted he would make out a life insurance policy for little Philip, and of course his agency would take care of the premiums. Mr. Humperdinger came forth with an offer to bake the baptismal cake.

Here I saw an opportunity to make a contribution of my own. "Father Jacopo is a good friend of mine," I said, "and will certainly not refuse if I ask him to officiate at the baby's baptism. He is a broad-minded person; he is a true servant of God."

"Still, it would be better if the birth of the child were legalized by marriage," Lieutenant Waldo observed, and he promised to put in a word with the commander, who might arrange for an emergency furlough.

At first Malva could scarcely believe that all this fuss over her was actually happening. But gradually she began to accept it calmly as her due. She stretched out comfortably on the sofa and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Shh, shh, she's asleep," Mrs. Dolbin whispered.

All fell silent, lost in reverence, as though they were witnesses to a miracle taking place here in the Silver Hall. It was as if an angel were passing through the room, although

he was not reflected and multiplied in the mirrors. Eyes fixed in rapture upon the pregnant girl, everyone stood still in a transport of emotion. Even Dingda, the bird, was affected by the general atmosphere. To be sure, he could not entirely suppress his gloomy twitter. But whenever the time came for it, he hippity-hopped to the farthest corner of the room, held his hand over his beak, and piped his call discreetly into his cupped palm.

Gradually life in the Silver Hall assumed an everyday, commonplace character. The girls of the house generously lent the townswomen their whole whores' assortment of beauty preparations for their morning toilette—rouge, powder, perfume, lipstick, vanishing cream and scented soaps. Then, while the ladies were putting the Mirror Room to rights, the gentlemen would use the bathrooms.

Each morning Dr. Kapra made a brief medical checkup before he went on his rounds through the annexes. Afterward, all would assemble for breakfast together. The rest of the morning was spent on a variety of domestic chores. Some of the ladies cleaned, others helped Violetta in the kitchen, while others collected the laundry, washed, ironed, mended and sewed. Those who were adept at fine needlework gathered around Malva's sofa, knitting and embroidering the tiny garments for little Philip's layette.

Early in the afternoon the inmates of the Silver Hall took the air in Madame Renoir's garden. During this time the guards were moved from the front door to the garden gate.

Afternoons were usually spent in bright chatter around Malva's sofa, or in cards, party games and similar distractions. In their effort to entertain Malva and themselves, the townsfolk, girls and soldiers vied with one another in inventing all kinds of amusements. Thus Mr. Rappaport gave a gala performance in which he impersonated in turn each member of the group and finally, amid general cheers, broke

into the mewling of a newborn baby, completing the portrait by kicking his feet and tossing his arms. The guards, on a suggestion of mine, improvised a kind of war scene in puppet-theater style, in which one shot the other until in the end all lay on the floor dead as doornails. Ludmilla hit upon the idea of holding a fashion show along with Madam President, she dressing up as a lady and promenading about with genteel gestures while Madam President decked herself out as a whore and swaggered with swaying hips.

During the fashion show Eve kept throwing hot looks at me, until my blood was seething. I approached her, but the little minx, moody as she was, suddenly changed her mind and gave me the cold shoulder. Disappointed and somewhat dazed, I strolled over to a group of lotto players. On my way I bumped into Mr. Dingda and stepped on one of his restless toes. He did not take it amiss, and as clashes at times bring people closer together, we started talking and I learned that in real life he was the proprietor of the Drohitz funeral parlor. Having found out that we were, so to speak, professional cousins and shared many interests, Mr. Dingda became amazingly loquacious and discussed at great length the respective merits of handmade and factory-made coffins. I, for my part, told him about my burials with and without coffins up on the hill. In sprightly colloquy we both hopped up and down for a while, although I had some difficulty adjusting to his tempo.

While we were hopping the others played cards or lotto, gossiped, knitted, flirted, and when I looked for Eve I found that Violetta was busy doing her hair in Silver Hall style. Ludmilla was in the midst of explaining certain tricks of her trade to the pug-nosed blonde, illustrating her words with graphic motions. A number of townswomen were eavesdropping on this conversation with growing interest, and at last they all dropped their various games. Eve had jumped to her feet, her coiffure half done, and even the group around

Madam President suspended their needlework to attend Ludmilla's exciting seminar.

This idyllic routine in the Silver Hall did not, however, go on for long. It ended one fine day with that brutal brusqueness with which good things so often come to an end, suddenly, without warning. The day started out pleasantly enough. During my morning check of the sick lists I did not find a single critical case and I rubbed my hands in contentment. In the course of my rounds, I dropped in on Barnabas to deliver the happy message Dr. Kapra had given me for him.

"You will only have to stay in bed another day or two, Barnabas," I said. "Then you can come down into the Hall again." He received this with his usual roar of laughter, and out of old comradeliness I laughed along with him.

When I entered the Silver Hall a game of charades was in progress. The inmates stood divided into two groups, one consisting of the townsfolk, the other of the girls and the soldiers. Each group was alternately guessing proverbs.

"Ember, you're just in time, we need one more on our side," my fellows greeted me. "We've all had turns, so this one is yours. You know the rules?"

"I sure do."

I went up to the group of townsfolk, fished a slip out of the lard dealer's hat and deciphered the proverb scribbled on the paper. I'm not much of an actor anyhow, and to make matters worse I had bad luck on the drawing. If only I had picked a proverb that fell more or less into the line of my experience, such as: "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." But as hard luck would have it, I was supposed to do: "Pride goeth before a fall."

I signaled with my fingers that the proverb to be guessed had five words. Then I tried to represent the words in pantomime. The word "fall" gave me no trouble, and my team

guessed it right off. But when I had to act out "pride," I was sunk. After all, how could a person like me, a trainee in humiliation, act out "pride" in a convincing manner? Before I knew it, the three-minute interval allowed for guessing had slipped by. We had lost the round, and the score remained even.

Now it was Mr. Rappaport's turn on the townspeople's team. A born mime, he was in his element, of course. No sooner had he drawn his slip from Lieutenant Waldo's army cap than he set to enacting the proverb in a masterly manner. He crouched, made himself small as a child, moved his hands playfully about, wiggled his finger upward like a tongue of flame, and stroke by stroke his side guessed: child —play—fire. And when he capped his act with a grimace of pain and sharply drew his hand back in alarm, Eve cried out triumphantly: "The burnt child dreads the fire."

"One and one half minutes," the umpire announced.

"Fourteen to thirteen in our favor," the townsfolk rejoiced.

Now it was our group's turn again. But Mr. Rappaport seemed unwilling to quit the stage. Rather, in the typical manner of ham actors who become intoxicated with their own performances, he went on mimicking the reactions of the burnt child.

"All right, enough, Mr. Rappaport, you've had your turn," everyone objected. But he ignored these cries and persisted in his efforts to portray even more realistically the already-guessed proverb. He fell to the floor, doubled up and writhed about with astonishing skill.

Everyone watched his performance half in annoyance, half in amusement, but at last it became too much for everybody. Especially our group was on pins and needles, for we had to win the next round or lose the game.

"Now that's enough, Mr. Rappaport, other people want their turn," Lieutenant Waldo said, his voice taking on an edge.

But when Mr. Rappaport nevertheless continued his act, and worse still, began to groan and whimper, in violation of all the rules of pantomime, the Silver Hall girls lost patience.

"Okay, okay!" Ludmilla screamed in exasperation, and she, Violetta and Tamara pounced on him to put an end to his tomfoolery.

To my ear, sharpened as it was by my professional work to the intonations of moans and whimpers, the business was beginning to seem rather odd. Even the greatest actor could not have played this scene so convincingly, to say nothing of a provincial ham like Mr. Rappaport. I pushed away the girls and bent down beside him. "Mr. Rappaport, don't you feel well?" I asked.

He looked up at me out of veiled eyes. His face was chalky, while the blue veins of his temples protruded. Here's a pretty mess! I thought.

Chummy though I was with Mr. Dingda these days, I nearly jumped on him when he chose this very moment to chirp: "Everything must come to an end."

"Damn it all, will you keep your wisdom to yourself," I snarled, and struck him across the beak.

"Ouch!" he shrieked.

"Sorry," I murmured, somewhat ashamed of myself, and then turning to Rappaport, "Where does it hurt?"

Rappaport raised a trembling arm and pointed toward his belly. He tried to speak, but emitted only gurgling sounds. It was clear that this had ceased to be mere play-acting. A mightier director—reality—was in charge of this production.

"Quick, the stretcher," I ordered Kalabas.

Ludmilla and the girls clustered sympathetically around Mr. Rappaport. Some even bent down to lift him from the floor.

"For Heaven's sake, don't touch him! Everyone move away!" I exclaimed. "Don't you see that it's the infection."

The fatal word had passed my lips, and now it was too late to call it back. Whenever that terrible word was uttered, it provoked frantic terror. But to have it spoken here in the Silver Hall where everyone felt so snug and sheltered, and to make matters worse, in the midst of a jolly game, made its effect the more devastating.

For a moment all stood speechless with horror. Then their horror began to scream, to roar. And amazingly enough, the Silver Hall girls—although God knows they had been living with this danger for some time now—took the lead and went the farthest in despair. A frightful, insane clamor arose, comprised of piercing cries of alarm and curious oaths. The girls called down the blackest imprecations upon the heads of the soldiers, the Silver Hall, Creation, the seed that had engendered them, the day they were born. Louder, more and more piercingly, the fear and trembling cried out, the primordial fear and trembling of all ages, of all creature life.

Before the guards knew what was happening, the whole company, the girls at their head, surged like a storm-lashed wave toward the door, where they were stopped and rolled back into the room like surf breaking and ebbing back from rocky cliffs.

Lieutenant Waldo and the guard managed to contain them. I instructed Kalabas to take the girls who had come into contact with Mr. Rappaport to the pantry, where they were to be disinfected and given booster inoculations. Then Grimbam, one of the medical aides, helped me carry Rappaport out on the stretcher. We had barely started up the stairs when I observed our patient's lips assuming a violet hue; his pupils turned up, and his chin dropped upon his chest. Alarmed, I halted and took his pulse. I dropped his icy, putty-colored hand.

"There's no sense even carrying him up," I said to Grimbam.

We reversed our direction and started toward room zero.

Even before we reached it, Rappaport's sufferings had ended.

"I'm sorry we're too late, Father," I said as we entered, for I knew how punctilious Father Jacopo was about administering the last sacraments to the dying.

We laid the dead man carefully on the bed. Then I scurried back to the Mirror Room to see what had been going on there, leaving the lifeless body to the care of Father Jacopo.

X

The Mirror Hell

The idyllic life of the Silver Hall was never to be the same again. The panic caused by Rappaport's sudden collapse was no longer at the shouting and screaming stage by the time I returned, but it had assumed another and more haunting form.

The door to the pantry opened, and Ludmilla, Violetta and Tamara reappeared; they had been fumigated and given their preventive shots. Ludmilla went directly to Madam President to tell her all about it. To her amazement her bosom friend brusquely turned her back.

"What's the matter, Gertrude? Have I offended you?" Ludmilla asked in astonishment, and tried to take her hand. Snatching it free, Madam President retreated from her. "Let me be," she said sharply, and went quickly over to Malva's sofa just as Violetta and Tamara were approaching it. Like a fury, she pulled Malva to her feet, exclaiming, "For goodness' sake, Malva, be careful; you have two to worry about now. Don't you understand?" And she bustled off, dragging Malva after her.

"Be careful!" The words rang like a warning signal through the hall, and all at once everyone fled to the farthest corner of the Silver Hall, to avoid contact with the suspect

three. Like a bird startled by a hunter's shot, Dingda hopped after the others, piping, "Everything must come to an end," and joined the group in the corner.

Like lepers the three stood in the middle of the room, isolated from the others.

"What in the world has got into them? What do they have against us?" Violetta asked in utter dismay.

"What do they have against us? Didn't you hear them say, 'Be careful'?" Tamara replied. "They're scared because we touched Rappaport."

"But I don't understand; we've been disinfected and had preventive shots," Violetta spluttered. "Kalabas, Ember"—they turned to us—"tell them there's no danger."

We tried, but our lecture fell on deaf ears; we were treated with disdain. "None of that, we're not interested. And don't you come near us; you touched him too."

"If they're going to be so stupid, let them, and the hell with them," Ludmilla declared.

"You're right," Tamara agreed. "Let them stew in their own juice. Come, we'll sit down and have a game of Black Peter."

Was it only yesterday, I thought, that we had all been sitting together in peace like a big, happy family? And now the others huddled in a corner, consumed by terror, and the three sat all by themselves in the vastness of the room—two enemy camps.

Lieutenant Waldo took up a post near the door, where he could survey the field.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish," I said, strolling over to him. "What are we going to do?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Just let them be. They've had a good scare. After all, there's no army order that they have to act loving. As long as they don't violate the regulations, I see no reason to interfere."

"All I meant was that things were going along so nicely.

For the first time during this war we've had some kind of home life."

He threw me a mocking glance. "Who's getting sentimental! Look here, Ember, when are you going to grow up, not to say learn how to be a real soldier? You didn't join the army to play house in a bordello. It was nice for a while, sure. Be glad for that. Now it's over. War isn't a summer vacation. Sometimes things are the way you like them, sometimes not. Mostly not."

I paced gloomily back and forth. To me, to whom the idyllic atmosphere of the Silver Hall had meant so much just because of my grim duties, because it made me forget dying and death, it was not so easy to accept this changed situation.

"So you dopes are scared of us, are you!" Ludmilla bellowed belligerently across the room to the table where the cautious group had settled down. "Weren't all of you as much with Rappaport as we were? At least we've been fumigated and had our booster shots. Not you. You're more exposed than we are. We ought to be scared of you, not the reverse!"

The others pretended not to have heard her, but her words had hit home. The majority group grew restive, and could scarcely concentrate on the canasta game they had started. Madam President pettishly dropped her cards to the table.

"Now, now," Mr. Ginzele said, "we really mustn't let ourselves go this way. Let's start again. Rogemund, it's your deal."

Rogemund shuffled the cards, but all the while he was shifting uneasily about on his chair. He blinked and blinked, more nervously than ever before. "Excuse me for a moment," he said, laying down his hand. The next instant he had left the room.

"What's wrong with the boy?" Mrs. Dolbin asked, puzzled.

"I hope nothing ails him, God forbid," the budget director said.

"After our experience with Mr. Rappaport, I shouldn't be surprised," Mrs. Moffet observed.

"Yes, yes, it looks bad," the lard dealer murmured.

"And I had to be the one sitting next to him," Madam President exclaimed wildly.

"Me too," snorted Mr. Humperdinger, who had been sitting on Rogemund's left.

"My dear friends," Mr. Ginzele appealed in his most prudent tone, "Rogemund will be back in a moment. I'll deal for him meanwhile." He reached out for the cards.

"Mr. Ginzele, for Heaven's sake don't touch *these* cards," Madam President cried in terror, clutching the sleeve of his jacket. "No one will make me play with *these* cards."

"You mean to say you are starting to be afraid of playing cards too," Mr. Ginzele remonstrated. "My friends, we must keep a grip on ourselves."

"Spare us this kind of talk. Until I know what ails Rogemund *I* certainly shall not touch these cards."

"Nor I, nor I," the others cried out.

"If Mr. Ginzele is so keen on going on with the game, he can play with himself," the pug-nosed blonde said pertly.

"Not with us, at any rate," townsfolk and girls chorused.

"Notice how long he is staying out. I bet he's coming down with something," Mrs. Moffet said in a troubled voice.

"In all probability that's what it is. Folks, I think we had better adjourn before he comes back," Myra suggested.

"You're right; in such situations we cannot be careful enough," Madam President agreed. "Come, Malva, quick, before he turns up again."

"Aren't you coming too?" Eve nudged the history professor, who was sitting beside her.

"By all means," the professor answered, getting to his feet. "Caution is the mother of all wisdom, as even the Hittites knew."

"Friends, do be sensible. At least let us wait until he returns; then we'll see whether he is feeling well or not." Mr. Ginzele attempted to restrain them. "At any rate I am going to stay here."

"Stay, if you insist on catching it from him," Eve called over her shoulder as she drifted off.

One after the other, they left the table until Ginzele was sitting alone.

After a while Rogemund reappeared at the door.

"Look how pale he is and how sunken his eyes are," Griselda whispered.

"Yes, really, pale as death and hollow-eyed," the others whispered.

"Lucky we moved away in time."

Ginzele, who had doggedly kept his seat, grew visibly more nervous as Rogemund approached the table.

"What's happened?" Rogemund asked. "No more canasta?"

Without deigning to reply, Ginzele rose abruptly and joined the group of cautious souls.

"Mr. Ginzele," Rogemund exclaimed, running after him. "Professor, Eve, Malva"—he turned from one to the other —"tell me what is the matter."

"Mr. Rogemund," Madam President said, bristling, "will you kindly cease molesting us. Can't you see that none of us want to have anything more to do with you?"

"But why not? What have I done?" Rogemund asked, blinking pitifully.

"One thing you might do is not blink incessantly; you drive a person crazy with it," Madam President spluttered. "Look at yourself in the mirrors and watch yourself blinking back at you a hundredfold."

"What is there so special to see?" Rogemund asked, examining himself in one of the mirrors. "I look just as I always look. I'm pale and I blink by nature."

"If you are blind, that is your own affair," Madam Presi-

dent replied. "Everyone else sees it. And the way you rushed out just like that in the middle of dealing—I suppose that means nothing. Well? No, my friend, you cannot deceive us. You had better run along and have yourself examined. That is my advice."

"Oh, now I understand," Rogemund said. He could not repress a smile. "You mean because I had to . . . But my dear ladies and gentlemen, I merely had to answer a call of nature as we all do now and then."

"Will you kindly spare us your calls of nature! Have you no manners at all? I thought you a well-brought-up young man! Don't you think it highly improper in the presence of ladies . . ."

"Such boorishness—really insufferable!" Mrs. Moffet burst out.

"What can you expect of a pill-grinder like him?" Eve said contemptuously.

"Do you know what you all need? As a druggist I can tell you: a double dose of bromide. That's it, bromide," Rogemund snorted.

"How dare you, you shameless wretch!" Madam President screamed at him.

"Wretch, wretch!" they all echoed her.

"Oh, hell." Rogemund shrugged. He went back to the card table and began laying out a game of solitaire.

"Hey, Rogemund, don't you want to join us over here?" Ludmilla called in a reckless surge of solidarity.

"Have you gone mad?" Tamara snapped at her.

"You seem to be losing your grip, too," Rogemund called over to her. "A good dose of bromide would do you good, also."

The whole affair seemed to amuse Lieutenant Waldo. He was right, of course, for it was too idiotic to be taken seriously. But it nearly broke my heart when I heard Eve say in a trembling voice, "Something can happen at any moment."

"And what should we do if it does?"

"At any rate we must be prepared for anything."

"Lucky we kept them at a safe distance."

"The only question is whether it was not already too late."

"What a ghastly situation."

"The things a war can do to a person," Madam President sighed. "First my two sons, and now all of us, right in the midst of this epidemic where you never know when and if . . ."

"Yes, yes, that is the way war is," the history professor said. "That is the way it is and has always been. It was similar, I may almost say exactly the same in every detail, at the time of the cholera during the War of 1870 and during the plague in the Thirty Years' War."

At the words *cholera* and *plague* everyone jumped as though stung. An inarticulate fury rumbled up from the crater of Madam President's firmly corseted breast and finally burst forth like molten lava.

"Professor Drish, with all due respect for your scholarship, the manner in which you are behaving toward us here is beyond description. And to make matters worse, you choose a moment when our nerves are strained to the utmost. At such a moment you come along with your ridiculous 1870 and your Thirty Years' War—at a time like this and in spite of the fact that no one, not even the authorities, has the slightest idea what kind of infection this one is. You have the temerity, merely because you are a professor of history, to pretend to know what no one knows, as though you were the wisest man on earth!"

"My dear Madam President, you seem to have misunderstood me," the professor hastened to assure her. "I merely meant that a certain parallel exists here; I mentioned these other wars merely as examples . . ."

"We are not interested in your examples and you can put your parallels into your pipe and smoke them," Madam Pres-

ident interrupted. "To think that you dare to mention in our presence such disgusting . . . words! Do you realize what you have said, you—you puffed-up filing case, you textbook, you monster! It is not this contagion, but you yourself who are—" she forced herself to say it—"a plague!" Menacingly, she advanced toward him. "If I were not the president of the Drohitz Cultural Association, if I were not a lady and could permit myself to give way to my feelings, do you know what I would do?"

The moment had come when Lieutenant Waldo felt obliged to intervene. He planted himself in front of the professor and dressed him down in official tone: "Have I heard rightly? Have you been spreading irresponsible rumors? You, a civilian employee of the army? Rumors that not only lack all basis in fact, but that might endanger the entire nation, the whole army! We are dealing here with an infection, a mere infection, do you understand? This time I am only giving you a warning. But if you continue to circulate such evil rumors I shall be forced to report the matter to Commander Mannsteufel, and then you will have to answer before a military tribunal!"

The professor stood mute, utterly crushed.

"Quite right, Lieutenant, that's where he belongs, before a military tribunal," several of the townspeople and girls called out.

"Don't interfere with military affairs," Lieutenant Waldo told them, and returned to his seat.

"I at any rate do not intend to have anything more to do with such a pedantic monster," Madam President said, turning her back on the professor. Followed by several of the others, she sailed haughtily to the sofa.

"I knew from the start that it would end this way," the lard dealer stammered. "Why, as I was coming back from the parade ground with Fatty and Katerina, I said . . ."

"Nobody is interested in your preposterous second sight,"

Madam President snapped irritably.

"My dear friend"—Mr. Ginzele attempted to intervene—"do be calmer. After all, nothing has happened yet. What is the sense of viewing with alarm?"

"I should be obliged to you, Mr. Ginzele, if you would keep your bright suggestions to yourself," Madam President spat back at him. "I am as calm as I need to be. The things a person has to put up with here," she went on, turning to the others. "And he"—she made a contemptuous gesture in Mr. Ginzele's direction—"thinks he is a gentleman."

"No, it really is almost unendurable," Angela sighed. "We must do something or we'll go out of our minds."

"Yes, something, anything, needlework, cards," Eve proposed.

"No, lotto is better," the pug-nosed blonde said. "You have to watch your board every minute; that puts other things out of your mind."

Some of them sat around the table and distributed lotto cards. But others were too nervous to concentrate on anything and preferred discussing with one another what the future would bring.

The Silver Hall, which seemed so enormous because of the reflecting mirrors, was in reality only a rather large parlor, and so I could catch some of the more private talk, especially when I took over Waldo's observation post—the chap was restless and kept finding reasons for going out. His seat was only a few steps away from the table where the "cautious" group was playing lotto.

Myra had just brought tea and crackers from the kitchen. They all sipped and nibbled and seemed only too ready to interrupt their not very compelling game.

"Look over there," I heard Griselda say to Myra. She pointed to the budget director, who had withdrawn into a corner with Lolo. "Doesn't Lolo's face look rather flushed?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, it's perfectly plain. You don't think she may be coming down with something, too?"

"Heaven knows," Griselda replied. "But what other reason could there be?"

"Don't say it."

"What shouldn't she say?" Madam President asked.

"Oh, it's just about Lolo. You can't help noticing."

Everyone's gaze turned toward the two in the corner.

"Odd that the budget director hasn't noticed how fiery red she is. He isn't color-blind, after all."

"But a bureaucrat always wears blinkers."

"Someone ought to warn him," Mrs. Moffet said.

"We have no obligation to, and it wouldn't be nice to disturb them."

"What do you mean, wouldn't be nice?" Eve said. "It's only right to warn a person who is running such a risk. If you're too timid, I'll go over and tell him. It doesn't embarrass me."

"You might simply say that I wished to speak with him for a moment," Madam President suggested.

Eve was already on her way, and in a moment came back with the budget director.

"I hope you won't take it amiss, our disturbing you, but we are old friends, after all, and I must warn you to be careful about Lolo. You must have noticed yourself how unnaturally flushed her face is."

"Oh, I'm deeply grateful to you I must say, it did puzzle me, and now that you mention it—" warily, the budget director threw a glance at Lolo, his goatee quivering—"she really is red as a poppy."

"We simply cannot be too careful," Madam President remarked, and with trembling fingers brought her teacup to her lips. As she did so she was taken by a sudden, violent fit of choking. She had to set down the cup and fight for breath.

Myra had jumped up and was about to pat her on the back.

"You'd better not," Eve said, plucking Myra's sleeve. "Come away; you never know. I'm going, at any rate." She rose.

Myra nudged Mrs. Moffet, and she the history professor. One after the other, all stood up.

"Malva, for Heaven's sake, don't sit here like a log. You must take care for two!" Angela tugged her along.

"Where are you all going?" Madam President asked, still choking. "It simply went down the wrong way."

"As you remarked before, we cannot be too careful," Eve retorted.

"Nonsense, you can't think that I . . . I'm coming with you," she rose and attempted to join them.

"Keep your distance!" Mrs. Moffet fended her off. They all backed away from her.

"Now you have a dose of your own medicine," Rogemund called to her maliciously.

"Serves her right!" Ludmilla chortled.

"Look at the way she is shaking," Eve said, pointing to Madam President, who was in the throes of another choking fit.

"A lucky thing we took Malva safely away in time," Angela commented.

I felt sorry for Gertrude, seeing her standing all alone in the middle of the room, and I started toward her to comfort her.

"Don't you come near me, Ember," she screamed. "You touched Rappaport."

All right, if that was how she wanted it. I sat down again.

So it went, on and on. Sooner or later, everyone came under suspicion.

"Did you notice how strangely Lizzie sighed when she got up from table? If that doesn't mean something, my

name is Pumpernickel and not Humperdinger."

"There's something peculiar about the way Mr. Dingda is hopping about. I've never seen him quite that jumpy before."

"Look at the way Griselda is staring into space. Goggling, rather. It's really uncanny. As though her eyeballs were going to fall out."

"It gives me the shivers just to look at her."

"Did you say you are shivering?"

"No, it's nothing at all."

"Oh, well, I'd rather sit somewhere else."

"Just see how the budget director is sweating. It's running in torrents down his brow and the back of his neck."

"Positively abnormal."

"Did you notice the way Ginzele suddenly pinched his thigh and made a face? I have known him for thirty years—it's simply not like him. It would not surprise me if he were the next . . ."

"Malva isn't feeling well. Listen to her moaning. She seems to be having some kind of cramps. We must look to her." Angela started toward Malva.

"Don't be overhasty, wait a bit." The others restrained her.

"In her condition that isn't unusual," Angela protested.

"Not unusual? I have brought two children into the world; I know what pregnancy is. Moaning and doubling up like that—that isn't how a woman behaves, not even in labor. And she's a long way from that, after all. No, there must be another cause."

"Don't you see it?" "Doesn't it strike you?" "What is the matter with him . . . with her?" "Careful, careful! We cannot be too careful." Each cautioned and denounced the other, and the slightest deviation from normal in appearance or gesture was read as a sign of danger. Pallor and floridity, a lagging or a rapid gait, apathy or nervous excite-

ment, motion or stillness—everything seemed equally suspect. There was a constant beckoning, exchange of secret signs, whispering, moving away, warning, warning. After all, anyone here in the room might be a carrier of the disease; anyone might be the next victim.

The danger of infection sat wherever they sat, jumped up when they jumped up, gushed from their every movement and gesture, emanated from their clothes, remained clinging to their chairs, to the objects they touched. The disease lurked in every one of them, ready to leap, to fall upon anyone at any moment.

Instead of the kindly inquiries as to each other's welfare, there was now nothing but catch questions intended to trip up and expose. The affectionate looks they had been in the habit of exchanging had become suspicious, sidewise squinting. Instead of the former sociability there was now only startled retreating, turning away, avoidance, segregation. Frantic fear of one another was the only remaining bond between them. For could not mere proximity, the lightest touch, a single breath, transfer the dreaded disease?

Then, as though the cup of horror had not yet been filled to the brim, a shrill cry of alarm pierced the air. With the cry of a sparrow whom a hawk has caught in its talons and will tear to pieces, Mr. Dingda shrieked, "It's got me! Help! I don't want to, I don't want to die!" And his arms flailed the air like the wings of a desperate bird.

He began to sway, was about to fall, but I caught him in time and hauled him over to the sofa, from which Malva had sprung up in alarm.

I had already seen so many cases of the infection that I was only too familiar with the symptoms and could recognize at a glance whether or not it was the real thing. As Mr. Dingda lay there, I studied him closely, but the telltale signs were singularly absent.

"Mr. Dingda," I spoke quietly to him, "don't be afraid. I assure you there is nothing wrong with you. I give you my word. It's just your imagination. Get a grip on yourself and you'll soon feel better."

I meant well by the man, but I began to be annoyed when he disregarded my assurances and persisted with his senseless wail: "It's got me, I don't want to die," throwing the whole place into a panic. After all, here was an individual who by profession ought to have accepted the inevitable without making a fuss about it. He of all people ought to be ashamed to behave like this. It really was going too far. Finally I lost patience with him.

"Mr. Dingda," I roared, "will you pull yourself together and stop this hysterical nonsense! There's nothing wrong with you! Get to your feet at once! Lieutenant Waldo, help me out on this." I appealed to Waldo, who after all was in charge.

"Will you shut your beak at once!" Waldo commanded Dingda. "That is an order. Shut up, I say, or I'll have to take military action."

But that hypochondriac of an undertaker was all wound up now and would not unwind.

"Ember, Kalabas, I don't want that bird in the room another moment. Take him to the pantry and lock him in until Dr. Kapra comes. You'd better go for the doctor at once," Waldo went on, turning to Kalabas. "I don't want anything to do with these crazy civilians."

I took Dingda by the shoulders, Kalabas lifted his feet, and we carried him to the pantry.

Luckily the doctor was in one of the nearby houses, and was over in a shake. My diagnosis had been right, of course. Dr. Kapra took one look at the patient and stated, "A hypochondriac; mere hysteria." He drew me aside. "It's not altogether out of the question that the fellow's malingering; he's fed up with the Silver Hall and might have wanted a pretext

for getting out of it. Stuff two of these yellow pills down his gullet and leave him here until he sleeps it off." He sat down to study the sick list. "In the future you'd do best to ignore such frauds," he counseled me.

When I re-entered the Silver Hall I found everything in total upheaval. The disease itself could not have been more contagious than the hysteria Dingda's screams had unleashed.

"I'm about fed up with this," the lieutenant confided to me through the hubbub. "I tell you, this crazy stuff isn't in my line. I'm an infantry officer, after all. If you ask me, this is a setup for the medics."

He was surely right about that.

Mr. Humperdinger complained of ominous rumbles in his stomach, Professor Drish of intolerable pains in the back of his head, Mrs. Moffet of a chill that turned her backbone to ice, the lard dealer of rippling convulsions in the calves of his legs, Malva of giddiness and nausea, and Madam President of stomach cramps, chills, pains in the calves, nausea and giddiness all at once, and on top of all that of a choking sensation in the throat. "Help, help! It has me!" she screamed, and with a wild gesture ripped open her high-necked dress and gripped at her breasts as though she were about to tear them from her body. No sooner had Kalabas and I sped over to her when Malva, who had not dared to go back to the sofa on which Mr. Dingda had lain, sank down in the middle of the room, while Mrs. Dolbin simultaneously fainted away.

"Mrs. Dolbin—" I shook her until she opened her eyes—"you must pull yourself together. Think of Timmy and Linda!" Then I bent over Madam President and spoke urgently to her. "Now really, you cannot give way like this. Think of your Bertram. Who will take care of his diet?" And then to Malva: "Consider Philip, consider your baby. As a mother-to-be, you must be strong!"

It did not help worth a damn. Timmy, Linda, Bertram, big and little Philip—the names were nothing more to them than empty sounds. Their sole reaction, their only thought, was: "My stomach feels funny." "My calves." "I'm dizzy, nauseated." "I'm suffocating." "Help!" "Help!"

Madam President put on a demonstration of her symptoms befitting her high rank in a cultural association. She acted in grand style and so convincingly that I suddenly began to feel qualms. What if it were the real thing? What if she should die under my hands? I hustled her into the pantry.

Luckily Dr. Kapra was still there. He examined her conscientiously, then he asked Kalabas to hand him a jug of water. Whereupon he poured the entire contents of the jug over her face.

"Hey!" she shrieked, with full use of her respiratory apparatus.

"There's not a thing wrong with you," he said harshly. "And I advise you not to put on another such act. Kalabas, stuff three of those triangular yellow ones—you know the kind—down her gullet and put her beside Dingda to sleep it off. And you, you credulous ass," he went on, turning to me, "I thought you knew better than to fall for such phony stuff."

All right, all right, Doctor, I thought to myself, you fell for it too for a while. But I only bit my lips and said nothing.

"Don't bother me again with such trivia. I have more important things to do. Besides which I am an army doctor. I know how to deal with battle fatigue and shell shock, but hypochondriacal civilians and hysterical females are outside my sphere. You'll have to manage by yourself."

I must say I had had even less practice than he. But sometimes the amateur succeeds where the professional fails. Just because I was a total ignoramus in this field, a flash of inspiration told me what to do.

"No cause for concern," I called out as I entered the Silver Hall. "There is nothing wrong with Madam President."

"I suppose she's just sleeping it off in the pantry," Eve taunted. "She's done for, and you're trying to conceal it from us."

"Done for, done for," the whole room howled hysterically. And a moment later Ludmilla lay on the floor, eyes rolling, skirts over her head, stout legs thrashing, while from her lusty lungs issued the roar of an animal being dragged to the slaughterhouse.

At the sight of this whore behaving like a madwoman, there flashed to my mind a childhood memory: a morning when I did not want to go to school, pretended to be sick, and lay on the floor like Ludmilla, kicking violently until my father gave me a resounding whack that cured me in a trice.

Following the sudden inspiration, I did as my father had done, and Ludmilla was instantly silenced. It proved unnecessary for me to smack the rest of them, one after the other. That single example did the trick.

Naturally, the slap was no miracle cure. I had quelled their frightful noise, but the saving on the ears had to be paid for by the eyes. The terror choked back in their throats avenged itself by breaking forth with diabolic power upon their faces; it showed in their looks, their expressions, shaped all their gestures, was manifest in their every motion. Like a carnival of terror—faces contorted into grotesque masks, hands convulsively clenched into fists—they staggered about, trying to escape the clutches of the dreaded disease. At times they would suddenly halt, look desperately about for a hiding place, crawl under the furniture, roll up into a ball, hopeful that their diminished surface would prove too small a target for the stab of contagion. Now they would freeze into rigidity, now leap up and run again, more and more

madly, faster and faster, about the room. Even their clothes, as though sharing their fright, followed their every movement, sagged when they crouched, flew up when they leaped, crushed together when they huddled.

To have such insane fear not only inside their bodies, plucking at their skins, but also to see it constantly reflected, the dread-distorted faces, the terror-stricken glances, the constant milling about of all the others and of themselves—to see this multiplied a thousand times in all the mirrors, to be inhabited by horror and at the same time to be compelled to observe its phantom prowling in the very walls—it was more than flesh and blood could bear.

"Ember," Lieutenant Waldo said softly, "as you know, I've had three years of service in combat areas. There isn't much I'm not hardened to. But not in the bloodiest battle have I ever seen anything so horrible as these civilians. I simply can't take this much longer."

I nodded, for I felt much the same. My duties having been what they were, I was familiar enough with horrors, God knows. And yet I had to admit that on no battlefield which I had scoured for the miserable remains of fighting men had I ever seen anything so gruesome as this.

By and by I noticed one after the other lower his head and gaze at the floor. Several of them covered their eyes with their hands, others squeezed their eyes shut, in order to escape the reflections in the mirrors. At times an involuntary twitch passed across their faces, or a reflex movement jerked through their limbs, until gradually even these feeble signs of life ceased.

"Ember, I'm sick to my stomach," Waldo remarked. "Take charge for a while. When I'm back, you can leave to take a breather."

I was just as nauseated as he. But as a subordinate there was nothing for me to do but say, "Certainly, sir." Battlefield or bordello—the army is the army, which means that

the underling has to swallow whatever his superior cannot chew.

Lieutenant Waldo rose, swayed on his feet, and dropped back into his chair. His eyes closed, and almost instantly he began to snore.

Meanwhile, I guarded the hall. Unmoving, they all sat or leaned against furniture, heads low; the rest of their bodies were in a stupor, more immobile than the dead who rotted all day long on the field of honor and gave no sign of ever having been alive.

Fate must have had it in for me. How else explain the malice of its ways? In good times, when things were so jolly in the Silver Hall and I wanted nothing more than to be able to stay there undisturbed, when I would be winning in a card game, or listening to a fascinating conversation, or just about to hear the punch line of a joke—at just such junctures a medical aide was sure to come rushing into the room to fetch me to one of the annexes where one or two corpses were awaiting my ministrations. But now, when the Silver Hall had been converted into an inferno and my only desire was to escape it, not a single one of the victims of the disease in the annexes took the notion to say farewell to life and give me a respite from the Silver Hall.

After a while even a peasant lout like Kalabas, who had nerves of steel, could no longer endure it in the damnable place. "You know, Ember, I'm responsible for those two in the pantry," he said. "Don't you think it's high time I looked in on them? I mean, you know, if they should wake up and start fooling around with the medical stores, Dr. Kapra would give me the dickens. If you need me, just call."

Grimbam, the other medical aide, also found a pretext for clearing out. It suddenly occurred to him that he ought to clean up the sickrooms so that everything would be in order when Dr. Kapra came around for inspection.

"Go on, go ahead," I said wearily. As soon as the door

closed behind them I undid my shirt collar, took off my shoes and loosened my belt.

Even though I was physically more comfortable, I began feeling uneasy after a while. I became aware of a hypnotic spell emanating from the endlessly reflected motionless bodies and closed eyes. It began to overpower me. Since I was assigned to guard the hall as Waldo's deputy, I did not dare succumb. But the hypnotic spell was a mighty one, and my strength of mind was not what it had once been. Suddenly I noticed the distance between myself and the effigies in the room shrinking before my eyes, obliterating all distinctions between Me and Them. The numbed figures were now sitting and standing right up close to me, along with the chairs, tables, whatnot ornaments, corners, and walls of mirrors. The whole hall was closing in on me, threatening to crush me. My desperate efforts to fend it off were in vain. I could no longer stir. An invincible force held me down, as though the weight of all those rigid bodies, of the furniture, the mirrors, the weight of the entire room, was trained upon me. When I forced my drooping eyelids open again and looked around me, the dividing line between spatial reality and mirrored reflections had vanished. The people and objects in the room had left their fixed spot in space; the reflections had stepped out of the mirrors; the realities and appearances had merged. The physical Humperdinger had become one with the thousand Humperdingers in the mirrors, Eve and the professor with the mirrored Eves and mirrored professors; each of them and all the things in the room were identical with their mirror images, so that it was utterly impossible to tell which was alive and solid, and which was mere reflection.

Almost at the same moment I realized with alarm that all firm outlines were dissolving, and I could no longer distinguish one thing or one person from another. Everything seemed to pass through and into something else. The lard

dealer's moonlike face was one with Ludmilla's backside, Tamara's loose black hair with Humperdinger's neckless head, the professor's scholarly face with the table-top. And this ghastly mishmash began to boil and churn in a circle, faster and faster, until at last it stopped abruptly, transformed into a gigantic eye fixed squarely upon me. It was the weird eye of a monstrously swollen dead rat. What happened after that I could no longer perceive, for time itself came to a standstill in that motionless rat's eye.

Perhaps I would have remained in this timeless trance until Judgment Day if I had not been wrenched back to reality by a sudden whimpering, a whimpering that for all its muffled character was as imperative as reveille in the training camp at Arak, and as rousing as the trumpets of Doomsday calling saints and sinners to the judgment seat. I opened my eyes, and my heart skipped a beat as I saw Lieutenant Waldo, sitting beside me, shaken by convulsions.

I knew at a glance that Waldo was really in a bad way. A man like him, infantry lieutenant from head to toe, possessor of a bronze medal for heroism, was not given to self-pity or hypochondriacal funks. I snapped out of my daze immediately, jumped to my feet and called Kalabas and Grimbam. I ordered them to bring a stretcher so that we could carry Waldo up to the emergency room.

Perhaps it takes a soldier, and in particular a private, to grasp the thoughts that shot through my mind while I waited for the stretcher. There was, for example, the question: If the infection had the temerity to attack the commander of the Silver Hall, it might equally well leap upon Mannsteufel, the commander in chief of the Eastern Sector, and in the end fall upon all the authorities, right up to the chief of the General Staff. Why not, after all? And if that were to be the case, what was the sense of the whole war?

Waldo's groans had startled others besides myself out of

their numbed state. In fact, eyes had promptly popped open. Yet they remained frozen in their postures, so that their terror over Waldo's breakdown flashed and raged only in their goggling eyes. That the infection should have struck the commander of the Silver Hall, who had stood outside the circumference of their fear, and whom in their most hysterical mood they had not even dreamed of suspecting—this intensified their terror beyond all measure. Any moment the frenzy could find violent expression. I preferred not to think of what might happen then.

But I had little time for such conjectures. Above all I had to get Waldo to the emergency room so long as there was a spark of hope for him.

"Hurry, hurry," I urged Kalabas and Grimbam when they returned with the stretcher. But even such dolts as those two were so panic-stricken by the sight of their commander writhing on the floor that they stood dazed until I barked at them: "Damn it all, behave like soldiers. We haven't any time to lose." They finally acquiesced and lifted Waldo onto the stretcher.

"Come, help me carry the lieutenant upstairs," I ordered Grimbam, and instructed Kalabas to take over as guard of the Silver Hall during my absence.

"Yes, sir; very well, sir," he snapped with military precision—but his goggle-eyed look betrayed that his wits were wandering.

With Grimbam's help I lifted the stretcher and off we tramped. As soon as we reached the emergency room, I dispatched Grimbam to fetch Dr. Kapra and report the matter to Commander Mannsteufel.

Although Waldo was badly off, I was at first relieved, after the inferno in the Mirror Room, to be dealing with a single and unreflected individual.

I summoned up all my knowledge as a trained medical aide, shifted him from his right to his left side, applied al-

ternate hot and cold compresses to his abdomen, neck and chest, and gently massaged his forehead and limbs. At last I thought I had him quieted and lulled to sleep. But almost immediately afterward the convulsions began again, worse than before.

His fever rose so high that he threw off the blanket and all his clothes; a moment later he was shaken by such chills that the entire bedstead trembled. He rolled himself up in a cocoon of sheets and blankets, buried his head in the pillows, then suddenly reared up, leaped out of bed and staggered toward the door, dragging the blanket after him like a train. I had to exert all my strength to get him back into bed. And still Dr. Kapra did not come. Even that idiot Grimbam, whom I had sent out for the doctor, had not yet returned.

I recalled that Dr. Kapra kept a supply of syringes and drugs in the closet in the emergency room. Since my training course in Arak I had not handled a syringe. But since all else was failing and Waldo's pangs were assuming more and more violent forms, there was nothing for me to do but try. My hand trembled. I had to apply the needle two, three times, before it punctured the skin and penetrated into the flesh of his arm. I waited for the sedative to take effect. But I must have done something wrong, for his pain seemed as furious as ever. And still I could not and would not give up.

The more desperate and hopeless all my efforts were, the more stubbornly I continued to wrestle with the pain, struggled to keep Waldo alive at least until Dr. Kapra appeared. I worked with a furious obstinacy. As though the pain that racked Waldo were a demon and I a medicine man who had to exorcise it, I began pleading with it, exhorting it and conjuring. And when the demon still would not give up his prey, I resorted to wrathful threats to drive it from the sick man's defenseless body. I was engaged in hand-to-hand

combat with the demon. But the demon proved stronger than I. Waldo groaned once more; then his voice failed, his breath came in shorter and feebler gasps from his bluish lips, and his glazed eyes no longer knew me.

It was of course my Christian duty to call Father Jacopo at once, but I felt faint and had to sit down to catch my breath. At once a leaden weariness overcame me. I was on the point of dozing off when I heard a strange din, compounded of phonograph music, yowls and thumps, like the noise during our first night at the Silver Hall. At first I thought it must all be a hallucination due to my strained nerves. But when the racket continued undiminished, I rose, opened the door a crack and listened down the corridor. No, there was no doubt about it, the thumping and shouting came from the Silver Hall. What the devil was going on there now? I rushed down the stairs three at a time.

*

XI

The Silver Bacchanal

When I opened the door of the Silver Hall, the sight took my breath away. The inmates whom I had left a short while before in a state of frozen dread, the ladies, gentlemen and whores, even Madam President and Dingda from the pantry, as well as the guards from the front door, were reeling about the room in drunken revelry, guzzling straight from uncorked bottles and roaring in unison with the phonograph: "Augustin, Augustin, everything's gone!"

In vain I looked around for Kalabas, to whom I had assigned the supervision of the hall. In vain I shouted at the top of my voice: "Kalabas! Kalabas!" My shouts went unheard in the tumult. Then the door of the pantry opened and I saw Kalabas, assisted by Grimbam whom I had sent for the doctor, carrying out a fresh case of champagne.

"Hurray!" The others rushed to snatch themselves a bottle.

I saw the whole story in a flash. They had taken advantage of my absence to break into the wine cellar, plunder Madame Renoir's stores, and were now drowning in champagne the terror inspired by Waldo's collapse.

Shaking with indignation, I elbowed my way through the throng and reached Kalabas. "Have you gone mad?" I

roared at him. "And you, you miserable scoundrel!" I snarled at Grimbam. "You wait, you'll pay for this. Kalabas, I order you to . . ."

Instead of replying, Kalabas aimed the champagne bottle he had just uncorked in my direction and let the bubbling champagne spray right into my face. As I was wiping the stuff out of my eyes with my coat sleeve, he addressed me with cheerful impudence: "Don't be a drip, Ember. Join us! We live only once, after all." At the same time I saw him motion to several of the girls standing near. At once they fell upon me, grasped my arms, pinned them behind my back and tipped my head back. Two strong hands forced my mouth open, and then Eve was bending over me, holding a full bottle in her hand. She poured the champagne down my gullet. Then, before I knew what was happening, she kissed me passionately on the mouth.

"Oh, I'm crazy about you," she murmured thickly. "No matter who comes between us, you are mine and I am yours."

"Say, leave a little of him for me, selfish!" Angela interposed, stepping between us.

"All right, but hurry up," Eve giggled drunkenly.

"Today he won't run out on me," Angela panted, hugging me.

"And what about me? I want some of him too." Violetta pushed her aside, threw her arms around me and whispered into my ear: "This time we'll go all the way."

"Enough of that, you slut; after all I have priority," Ludmilla cried out, and pushing Violetta aside she thrust her stout thigh between my legs and pressed her bountiful bosom against my lips. "Remember how we were interrupted, baby? Just at the moment . . . Oh, my only sweetheart!" she whispered into my ear.

"It isn't fair to get me worked up and then not give me a chance," the snub-nosed blonde protested. "I want some

of him too!" She threw herself upon me from behind.

"And what about our poor Malva," Tamara intervened. "Just look at her. Do you want to let her pine away? Don't you have a heart? Even a woman who's expecting has her physical desires." Whereupon she thrust Malva, who blushed to the tips of her ears and hung back a little, into my arms. "Go on, don't be a prude," Tamara urged her. "You can't lose your innocence again. Just close your eyes and imagine that he's Philip."

I drew away to show proper respect for a pregnant woman. But Malva thrust herself lasciviously at me. Shudders mingled with lust ran down my spine, and when she kissed me and bit my tongue, the devil himself took hold of me.

When the others' turns came, I no longer knew which one was squeezing me; they thrust themselves upon me alternately, kissed me one, two, three at a time, all at once.

"Father in Heaven, how can you abandon yourself this way," the still, small voice whispered to me, sounding above the crazy din. "Think of Waldo . . . poor man in his last gasps . . . his salvation . . . Extreme Unction. Fetch Father Jacopo!"

I tried to free myself, but there were too many of them; they had me in their clutches. They pulled and tugged fiercely at me, and finally pushed me over to the sofa where Madam President was lying, stony drunk.

"Gertrude, make room, do you hear?" Ludmilla shouted, trying to push her off the sofa.

"Oh, let her have a bit of him, too," Eve said magnanimously. "She can stay in the corner and cuddle his feet."

They pressed me down on the sofa and fell upon me. "Hurray, now he can't escape us," they cheered.

"Now, kids, let's share him like sisters," Eve proposed. "Agreed? First me, then you, then you. He belongs to all of us."

It was quite beyond me why they were so set on me.

Neither my mug nor my physique was anything special. There was Kalabas, that bounder, who was a whole lot brawnier than I was. But who can account for women's tastes? Maybe I wasn't so bad after all. And if they wanted it that way, why should I object! Might as well enjoy it. After all, what could I do when the whole pack of them was squirming all over me, and the lustful twitching of their bodies began to twitch in my own limbs, the hot blood racing through their veins began to pulse in my own—voluptuous sensations that did not come the way of a gravedigger every day in the year.

I wonder how I eventually summoned enough strength to free myself from that serpents' nest of lustful bodies. Man is unpredictable, that's all there is to it, and it remains a mystery how a born coward suddenly turns into a hero. I writhed my way through them, leaped to my feet and resolutely made for the door; they took after me, caught up with me, clung to me and tried to pull me back. Vigorously, I pushed them away and cried out in a steely voice not normally my own: "If you do not desist at once, I will fetch Commander Mannsteufel. He will restore order here!"

When they realized that I was in earnest, they flew into a rage. "You just dare, you'll regret it!" they threatened.

I ignored them; undeterred, I pushed on toward the door.

"Pansy, pansy!" Eve called out contemptuously, and at once the others took up the cry. "Pansy, pansy!" they shouted in a scornful chorus.

I already had my hand on the doorknob when I heard a deafening BOOM, followed by a tinkling cascade of sound. Turning, I froze into a pillar of salt. To my speechless horror I beheld a tremendous hole in the right-hand mirror-wall, and on the floor in front of it a heap of shards and splinters of glass. Before I could even begin to look for the culprit, Eve's drunken voice rang out: "Good aim! Go on,

go on!" Whereupon a second and a third bottle, then a whole barrage of empties flew one after the other across the room and smashed into the wall of mirrors.

Their unleashed concupiscence, suddenly transformed into senseless lust for destruction, turned all its violence upon the wall of mirrors. A veritable bombardment of bottles began, as though the men and women in the hall regarded their mirror images as an enemy army which they would exterminate to the last man in one decisive battle, together with everything surrounding them in the mirror. They were determined to smash the whole mirror camp to bits, level it to the ground. Their fighting rage increased with every new bottle pitched, became a furor which I stood powerless to check.

Boom-boom-boom, the bottles crashed here and there, striking the right side and the left side, the top and the bottom tiers of the mirrors, here smashing a mirrored face, there cutting off a head, converting bosoms into craters, shattering loins, tearing limb from limb, splitting bodies into two unequal halves, leaving only the arm of the sofa, only the top of the table, only the legs of the easy chairs.

Fragmented, beheaded, bisected, drawn and quartered pieces of whores, townsfolk and soldiers scurried like phantoms among morsels of furniture in the mirrors. And while Eve—her face a blank patch in a mirror—uttering fierce cries like a maenad, spurred the rest of the party to further feats of destruction, Rogemund's arm, severed from its body, wound up for another throw; Madam President, juggling a bottle, reeled without legs through the mirrored wastland; headless Humperdinger pushed a thousand-splintered Ginzele to one side in order to pinch a breastless Ludmilla crudely in her reflected behind. Alongside them the gray lady's armless hand compassionately upheld the cracked body of a swaying Mrs. Dolbin; the upper half of undertaker Dingda hopped merrily toward a bellyless Malva who,

dead-drunk, closing one eye, was about to cast a neckless bottle against the wall of mirrors. Dingda snatched the bottle from her and hurled it with excellent aim against a mirror, striking the history professor's forehead and smashing his mirrored pate into a thousand pencils of glass. At the same moment portions of the budget director fell with savage lust upon the shattered reflection of Lolo, obscenely rooting about in the fragments of her anatomy, while the lard dealer's shining countenance, liberated from his body, hung grinning above them like a full moon afloat in the sky. I caught a glimpse of myself like the shaft of a broken pillar, nose and belt spanned only by a jagged notch of mirror. *Bang*—a bottle struck Ludmilla's mirrored buttocks, simultaneously demolishing Humperdinger's fingers which were buried in them. Whereupon all the bodies in the hall broke into roars of laughter.

Meanwhile Kalabas and Grimbam had brought up fresh ammunition, in the shape of a new case of champagne bottles. Roaring "Hurray," Ludmilla, followed by a yowling mob, bore down upon them. They seized the bottles, drained them dry, and resumed the bombardment with renewed verve. Lust and destruction, destruction and lust, alternately spurred each other on to a more and more savage frenzy, until nothing at all was left of the mirror wall on the right.

Now they turned to the other mirrors, and on all sides the glass crashed and tinkled to the floor. When at length the last remnants of the enemy army in the mirrors had been annihilated, they raised a cry of victory such as could scarcely have had its like in all the history professor's annals of war.

The next phase unfolded with fantastic swiftness. Within a few seconds the sofa, tables and chairs had been pushed to the sides, and in the middle of the hall, surrounded by shards of glass, the victorious party fell into one another's

arms in mindless ecstasy, mingled, kissed, broke up into couples and began dancing to the blare of "One Enchanted Evening" from the phonograph. The dance became more and more passionate; swaying, stamping bodies pressed together; lips, breasts, thighs merged into one bacchantic madness of the flesh, until the couples fell down and, uttering lewd cries, rolled and writhed about on the floor.

Humperdinger and Ludmilla, the lard dealer, the professor, Madam President, Kalabas, Grimbam and Angela, the budget director, Dingda, the snub-nosed blonde, Rogemund, Mr. Ginzele, Lolo, Myra, Tamara, Violetta, the girls and the guards and—O woe and shame, shame and woe for the honor of motherhood, maidenhood, womanhood—Mrs. Dolbin, Malva and the gray lady were among them, in drunken abandonment, enlaced in a tangle of shamelessly entwined bodies, a knot of sheer eroticism, rolling about on the parquet floor.

I am not a prude, not by a long shot; nevertheless I became dizzy and nauseated at the sight. I did not want to go on living; I wished the infection would take hold of me on the spot. "Lord, take me, take me!" I prayed. "Spare me the sight of these last days of mankind, this Fall of man, this final damnation, this hideous Last Judgment here on earth!"

The fear and shame which had gripped me at my first intimations of the dark mystery of sex—the fear and shame rose in me, stinging hot; a boyish sob burst from my throat, and with the helpless gesture of a small boy who could not bear to look, I buried my face in my hands.

It was clear that this could not go on, and that I must do something. But what? What could I, Adam Ember, one sober man in the midst of this sex-crazed mob, do by my lone self?

What I ought to have done, of course, was to inform Commander Mannsteufel at once, but I could not leave the

hall unsupervised, especially since I had not the slightest idea in which of the newly annexed houses the commander might be found. To be truthful I was also scared to report to Mannsteufel. For of course he would blame me for everything and vent all his rage against me.

I debated back and forth: go, no, not go; stay, no, not stay. The phonograph was blaring "Onward, Christian Soldiers." The devil only knows what such a record was doing in a bordello. I wanted at least to shut the raucous thing off, but did not have the strength to go over to the machine. I had no strength left for anything. As limp as a jellyfish, I stood with my back leaning against the door. Suddenly someone outside began wrenching wildly at the knob and hammering on the panels. I turned and tried to open it, but could not. Now someone outside seemed to be lunging a shoulder against it. Here was something to do, and my energy returned. I pulled with all my might against the door until it flew open.

Madame Renoir, unkempt and in her nightgown, evidently having just tumbled out of bed, was wrestling with the waiter, who was trying to prevent her from entering. I sprang to his aid, blocked her way and attempted to force her back. But she kicked her high-heeled mule so savagely against my shin that I staggered aside, leaving the way clear to her.

Madame Renoir, who in the normal course of events would present you with a bill for a broken goblet, now stood utterly mute on the threshold. Overwhelmed by the ruin which met her eyes and the spectacle of her girls ignoring all the time-honored rules of the establishment and shamelessly carrying on with the townsmen and the soldiers, she emerged from her world of delusion.

"My mirrors, my fixtures, my nice little business! Twenty-five years of hard work—destroyed, gone," she stated in an oddly matter-of-fact tone. "Yes, Karl, gone," she said, turn-

ing to the faithful waiter, who could no longer master himself and broke into sobs.

"Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think!" the phonograph blared.

"Karl," she ordered the waiter, "go and turn that off. I can't stand the racket."

"I'll do it," I offered. But there was no time. For as I started forward I saw her beginning to sway; she gasped for breath, clutched convulsively at her heart, and before I could catch her, keeled over into a heap of splintered glass. With the waiter's aid I lifted her up again. Her face was lacerated and streaming with blood. We carried her, just as she was, I at her head and the waiter at her feet, into the corridor, intending to take her to room zero.

In the corridor whom should we meet but Barnabas. "You're still a private-room case," I snarled at him. "Back to your bed at once."

"Gee, what's going on down here? Say, what's it all about?" He was the same good-natured, simple-minded goof as ever, and he paid me no mind.

I had neither the time nor the energy to enforce my order. We simply left him and hurried on to room zero.

"Father Jacopo will take care of her," I said to the waiter. "You run off and find Commander Mannsteufel and Dr. Kapra as fast as possible. Tell them what is going on here and explain that we urgently need medical and military reinforcements." I knew that Karl could be depended on.

After he had left, I hurried back to the Silver Hall so that I would be at my post when the commander arrived, ready to make the requisite report.

As soon as I entered the room, Barnabas plucked at my sleeve. He was doubled over with laughter. "What do you say to this business?" he chortled. "They're having themselves a ball, eh?" And then he pointed a finger at the bare walls. "Like plucked chickens, eh? Ha-ha-ha."

"You damned fool, if you don't shut up I'll ram your teeth down your throat."

"You never did have a sense of humor," Barnabas replied, and went on laughing uproariously.

It was hopeless; what could one do with a fellow like this, when not even the infection with all its pain and convulsions could teach him gravity?

A faint tap-tapping sounded from the corridor. Louder and louder, the heavy tramp of soldiers' boots approached the door. I sighed with relief: "At last!"

The door was flung open. Commander Mannsteufel, accompanied by Dr. Kapra, entered. His stiffly erect figure seemed to tower up through the ceiling into the atmosphere, into the universe. The bold aquiline nose stood drawn like a gigantic saber against the horizon, against the whole of Creation.

He took one look at the shambles which had been the Silver Hall and at the tumbling couples on the floor. Then, even before he issued an order to his troops, he came down upon me like a thunderstorm: "You slacker, you scoundrel, you despicable war criminal, you traitor to your country! I'll court-martial you, I'll have you hanged, you . . . you . . ."

"For he's a jolly good fellow," the tireless phonograph bleated.

"Devil take it, turn off that damnable machine!" Mannsteufel stormed. "Forward, attack!" he ordered his soldiers.

First of all the honor of our uniform had to be redeemed, and the soldiers wallowing on the floor had to be got back on their feet.

"Give it to them! No mercy!" Mannsteufel urged his men on. "What do you think the Lord gave you fists for? What are you wearing boots for if you don't know how to use them? You can whip a handful of drunks into shape, can't you? Damn it all, go at them!"

Soldiers could scarcely have carried out an order more obediently. Nevertheless, it was not easy to separate the uniforms and skirts entangled in their bacchantic orgy. Impatiently, Mannsteufel himself plunged into the melee and gave one of the Silver Hall guards a vigorous kick. "That's the way to do it."

In high dudgeon, Mannsteufel turned to the doctor. "Now here you have something new under the sun. Unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable! Soldiers who flop themselves on the floor without having been shot. Under my command! They'll pay for it, I can tell you that!" And as though all the punishments stipulated by courts-martial were not enough, he added his own list of possible penalties, arranged in an ascending order of sadism: "I'll have them put up against the wall, hanged, racked, drawn and quartered; I'll cut their balls off." Suddenly he was seized by a shiver. "Brr, there's a draft," he interrupted himself. He pointed to the still-open door and barked at me: "Shut that!"

I hurried to obey. As I reached the door, I found Barnabas, a grin spread across his whole face, hidden behind it.

The commander had already caught sight of him—and Mannsteufel's expression was something to see! His mouth gaped, his eyes strained from their sockets. "How dare you grin in my presence!" he roared. "Will you stop it at once, you . . ." He strode threateningly toward Barnabas, his clenched fists raised.

Dr. Kapra caught his arm. "No, Mannsteufel." He tried to placate the commander. "This is one of the patients from upstairs—he's had it. The man's a bit off his head."

"What do you mean, a bit off his head?" The commander's fist lunged at Barnabas' face. I had never dreamed I would see the smile wiped off Barnabas' grinning mug, but Mannsteufel accomplished it.

"Don't stand around like an idiot, you shirker," Mannsteufel snarled at him. "Pitch in!"

Barnabas was like a changed man. With an absolutely deadly earnestness he began kicking Grimbam to such good purpose that he brought the fellow to his feet in a moment.

"When will you get around to your report, you irresponsible nitwit!" Mannsteufel abruptly blasted me, as though I had been withholding my report of my own accord throughout this little contretemps. "How could you ever let this stinking mess get started?"

When I reached the point in my report of mentioning that Lieutenant Waldo had come down with the disease, Dr. Kapra exclaimed, "For Heaven's sake, why didn't you send for me at once?" I was not given the chance to explain. "I must look to him right away," he said, and made for the door. In his haste he collided with a soldier. His glasses fell from his nose. I stooped to pick them up, but already a heavy military boot had come down upon the lenses, crushing them to powder. His naked, greenish eyes peering myopically about, the doctor stood helpless in the doorway. It was only natural for me to extend my hand to him, so that I could guide him to Waldo. But to Mannsteufel there was nothing natural about the most natural act in the world.

"You stay here, Ember," he snapped. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, hightailing it away from the mess you've created? That civilian there can guide him; he's standing around doing nothing anyhow." He jerked a blunt thumb at the waiter who was patiently waiting to take the doctor to Madame Renoir.

I could see the waiter falter. "Go along, Karl," I urged him. "The doctor is in a hurry."

The waiter drew me aside. "What about Madame?" he whispered anxiously to me. "Have you forgotten her?"

"Later. You realize, the lieutenant must come first," I put him off.

"Well, waiter, how long will I have to wait?" Mannsteufel barked angrily. These words, so familiar to a waiter's ears,

brought Karl back to a dutiful state of mind. With the impeccable good form and alacrity of his profession, he gave the doctor his hand and started away with him.

I set about helping the others. At last we succeeded in restoring the honor of the uniform—that is, in getting all the soldiers back on their feet.

"Now see to it that you clear the room of these filthy civilians and the broken glass," Mannsteufel ordered.

But before the clean-up could begin, the doctor returned, still led by the waiter.

"How is he?" the commander asked.

"Finished," the doctor reported.

"Impossible—the lieutenant dead?" the commander exclaimed. Whereupon, ignoring place and circumstances, but faithful to the army manual, he clicked his heels, stood to attention, raised his right hand to his temple, and called upon the soldiers present to pay their respects to the dead. All the men in uniform at once snapped to salute, prepared to show final honors to the dead lieutenant with a solemn minute of silence. Unfortunately, Grimbam, after a fierce struggle with himself, was forced to hiccup. The commander glared furiously at him. Grimbam tried to hold his breath, but he failed, and once more hiccuped loudly.

"You swine, will you stop that!" Mannsteufel shouted.

"Beg pardon, sir, can't help it," Grimbam stammered, each word punctuated by hiccups.

"Can't help it! I'll show you how!" the commander cried, and he lunged his fist into the pit of Grimbam's stomach. But even Mannsteufel's fist was helpless against the power of nature. Hiccuping loudly, Grimbam stumbled from the room.

While, thanks to Mannsteufel's firm action, the honor of the uniform had been restored comparatively quickly, and the derelict soldiers converted back into obedient subordinates, it was quite another matter to rehabilitate the good

citizens of Drohitz. Even if their shameless behavior in the Silver Hall should never reach the ears of their fellow citizens, there would remain the torments of their own consciences. But there was no time now for consideration of conscience. Mannsteufel acted too quickly.

Regardless of the way they had behaved, now, without regard for status or sex, to belabor them with kicks and blows as though they were drunken soldiers—that was something only a brute like our commander could conceive of doing. If I had not been wearing a uniform, and if, moreover, I had not been a coward at heart, I would have rushed upon Mannsteufel and spat straight at the three stars on his collar. But in my position as a subordinate I had to obey his orders just as the other soldiers did; I had to do my share in it all. At any rate, whenever I felt he was not looking, I simply went through the motions of punishing the civilians, delivering mock blows like an actor on the stage.

When I had to attend to Eve, and pull her out of her daze, this business of shamming almost turned out badly. "Kiss me, otherwise I'll never live it down," she whispered, trying to snuggle up to me. To be perfectly honest, I found it would be too hard not to do her that little favor. Luckily, amid all the tumult no one noticed us. After that, however, I thought it wiser to turn her over to one of the sergeants of Mannsteufel's detachment.

This same sergeant then set to work on Malva, and pushed the poor girl about so roughly that she started to hemorrhage. "Brute," I cried, punching the sergeant in the ribs. "Don't you realize what you've done? Mistreating a pregnant woman that way! Dr. Kapra, hemorrhage," I shouted to the doctor. The word appealed to his physician's conscience so keenly that the nearsighted man was suddenly able to see without his glasses, and came directly over to Malva.

I would not have thought it possible that anyone could

summon up the courage to oppose the commander as vigorously as Dr. Kapra did—for Mannsteufel would stand for no exceptions and barked, "What's this! What the devil? Pull her to her feet." But the doctor, blind as a bat though he was, stood his ground and roared right back at Mannsteufel. And miracle of miracles, Mannsteufel stood there like the most subordinate of subordinates, stood there open-mouthed and took his dressing down. Then, as though all orders did not stem from the commander, the doctor called imperatively: "Ember, Kalabas, lift her carefully and carry her into the examining room. But take it easy, understand?"

Although no one could see it, I knew at that moment with absolute certainty that the same angel who had once before passed through the room on Malva's account had now returned and was watching over her again. We carried Malva across the shards of glass into the pantry, where Kalabas remained to assist the doctor.

When I returned to the hall, most of the ladies, whores and gentlemen were standing, still slightly dazed, with wild hair and rumpled clothes, but at least on their feet. It was pitiable to see them in their wretchedness, with the hangover just beginning.

Where were the inmates of the Silver Hall to be taken and what should be done about the shambles of the room? But before Mannsteufel could issue an order, a messenger came rushing in from one of the annexes with a dispatch for the commander. Evidently something dreadful must have happened. For, as though the whole Silver Hall problem no longer existed, Mannsteufel dictated in his brusquest tone: "Go to Dr. Kapra at once and tell him that I expect him immediately at our fourth annex, Lantern Street 3." From the doorway he called over his shoulder: "You finish up here. And woe to you if . . ." And he was out of sight and hearing.

Off I went with the message to the doctor, but before I

reached the pantry the waiter seized my arm. "Ember, Madame Renoir!" he besought me. "Hurry, or it will be too late!"

I sympathized with the poor devil, but I had to refuse him. "Orders are orders," I said, and pulled away.

Dr. Kapra was still busy with Malva. "It's tough on a doctor in times like these," he sighed when I informed him of the commander's order.

No sooner were we out in the corridor than the waiter blocked our way. He knew that this was his last chance to get hold of the doctor. All the lamentations, pleas and persuasions that a man can summon up at such moments, the faithful servant produced in his concern for his mistress. "Doctor, you promised me upstairs that you'd come, and so did Ember. And now you're going off and leaving her to die. Please come and look in on her just for a moment. Have mercy!" He went on pleading in a shaking voice, and it seemed as if all of humanity was beseeching us through him.

Although the commander was expecting him, Dr. Kapra was unable to refuse the waiter's plea. After all, underneath his uniform he was a man and a doctor who could not bring himself to go his way when he knew that a few steps away someone needed his professional help. "All right," he said.

The medical examination in room zero did not detain him long. I saw at once, from the way Father Jacopo's face was raised toward Heaven, that there was little to be done. All that remained for Dr. Kapra was to feel for Madame Renoir's pulse, lay his ear against her chest, and ask for a mirror. The waiter hurriedly brought his shaving mirror. Dr. Kapra held it in front of Madame Renoir's mouth. "If those damned glasses hadn't . . ." he murmured, bringing the mirror right up to his myopic eyes. There was not the slightest mist upon it.

"Coronary, not a doubt about it," he commented matter-of-factly.

Madame Renoir was the first person to die a natural death since the epidemic had descended upon Drohitz. The waiter stood with eyes streaming tears. Father Jacopo knelt and began to pray for the salvation of the dead woman's soul. There was nothing for me to do but let things take their course while I myself guided the nearsighted doctor to the annex.

XII

Promotion

I had intended to conduct Dr. Kapra to his destination and return to the Silver Hall without delay. But when we arrived a whole flock of newly delivered cases was already waiting to be examined and classified by the doctor, before being sent to the various annexes. Naturally there was work for me, too. Before I could return to the Silver Hall I had to sort out the hopeless cases and arrange for their disposal.

This took longer than I had expected—the main reason being Dr. Kapra's lack of glasses. The doctor was a man of the old school and insisted on examining every patient carefully to ascertain whether there was even a spark of hope, the faintest chance of keeping the moribund alive.

"Can I put this one aside yet?" I would ask.

"Wait a moment, let me have a close look at him first," he would answer every time.

Perhaps a family doctor in peacetime can afford to be so finicky, but for a near-sighted regimental physician without glasses amid the hordes of victims of a wartime epidemic, his conduct was sheer luxury. We had scarcely finished with half the patients we found waiting for us when the arrival of more shipments of the sick was announced.

Something had to be done to speed things up. Suddenly I had an inspiration.

Among the deceased there were quite a few who wore glasses. Under normal circumstances it would never have occurred to me to snatch the glasses off a dead man's nose, but what did it matter? The near-sighted would have no use for their glasses in the beyond, would they? I collected a few pairs of glasses and had the doctor try them. Now the lenses were too strong, now too weak, now the nosepiece did not fit; but at last we found a pair that did the trick. Wearing these borrowed glasses, Dr. Kapra began making his examinations with much greater dispatch.

I was still up to my ears in work, separating the dead from the living and those who had undoubtedly breathed their last from those who still needed Dr. Kapra's OK, when Grimbam came running up to me.

"You must come at once," he panted. "We can't handle that crew in the Silver Hall."

"Idiot, can't you see that I have my own hands full right here?" I snarled at him.

"Kalabas says he can't control them by himself. They're breaking out and running away."

"So what? What the devil does it matter whether a handful of civilians and whores run off when we're swamped with the sick and the dead? Who cares about the whole Silver Hall? You'd better go and tell Kalabas and the others to quit wasting their time in that rubble heap and come over here to help carry off the dead. We need every man."

One after the other, virtually without a pause, the shipments of the disease-stricken were coming in from the town. Heaven only knows what had boosted the epidemic to this degree. Was it fresh broods of flies and rats, or more visitations by the dead mayor and his band, or did the contagion no longer need any special agent—could it manage of its own accord now?

With typical foresight Commander Mannsteufel had already had a whole row of additional houses along Lantern Street evacuated to make room for the sick. But with the ever-rising tide of new patients, even these measures proved insufficient. Dr. Kapra, forced by sheer necessity, ordered the patients doubled up in the available beds and eventually had them bedded on rags spread out on the floor.

The number of dead also rose, of course. I was constantly called from one house to another. When all the running back and forth became too much for me, I organized regular corpse rounds at stated intervals. Only then did I realize fully the predatory greed with which Death gathers up his prey once he has been emboldened by war to don his plague dress. Many of the beds were like nests of corpses; in others the dead and moribund lay scrambled together, so that at times we had only to wait a little in order to be able to carry them all out together.

It was not long before most of the back yards and gardens of the Mashinka were overcrowded and we had to start searching the whole terrain to break new ground.

With each succeeding day the situation grew worse.

At midnight on the fourth day after the smashing of the Silver Hall, Kalabas, Grimbam and I finished up our last collection and had the corpses readied for removal. But by then the incoming cases had so blocked sidewalks and roadway with stretchers and patients that it was a sheer impossibility for us to push through. There was nothing to be done but to dump our load temporarily in the doorways until we found some burial place we could reach without crossing the main street of the Mashinka.

"Leave it to me," I said to Kalabas and Grimbam. "I'll find some vacant spot in one of the yards or gardens, or on the slope. But I'll need some kind of light to find my way about in the darkness." Most of the heavy sham-baroque lamps from the bordello parlors had been converted back

to kerosene because of the wartime shortage of electricity, but they weighed a ton. However Grimbam had a saving idea. "What about the lantern hanging over the door," he suggested. "Of course it is red," he added hesitantly.

"Well, what of it?" I replied. Red light was light, after all, and if it was good enough to guide visitors on their way to the bordellos, it would help me find my way to some suitable burial ground. I lifted the lantern off its hook. "Wait here, I'll be right back," I said, and set out.

But nowhere could I find a spot that was not already overcrowded with corpses. I was about to turn back when the glow of my lantern picked out a small clear strip near the cordon. It did seem somewhat too narrow to hold the fifty-odd corpses we had collected, but it was the best I had seen.

The cordon was solid as an iron curtain, of course. Even so, what harm could be done if I begged the sergeant on duty to move the cordon back just a few yards? After all, even a sergeant has human emotions on occasion. At any rate, he could do no more than say no.

My red lantern swaying back and forth had attracted the sergeant's attention, and he came over to me to ask my name and my business. I came to the point right away, and the sergeant of the cordon proved to be one of those rare sergeants with a heart and soul.

"I fully understand," he said, after I had explained the situation. And he ordered his men to draw the cordon back a little.

Delighted with the success of my mission I paused for a moment to gloat over the ground I had gained, and then turned to go back to Kalabas and Grimbam and fetch the corpses. But just as I started off one of the soldiers from the cordon came running up to me. "The sergeant wants to speak to you for a moment."

I started in alarm, fearing that he had changed his mind. But that was not the case. He had called me back because a

truck from the town had arrived with a load for the graves section. The Mashinka could not receive a single additional truck, and since I happened to be at hand he wanted me to handle the matter. After he had been so considerate toward me, I could not very well refuse.

I went up to the truck and flashed my red lantern over it. What a mass of bodies! If they were unloaded here there would be no room for my own corpses.

"Can you wait a few minutes?" I said to the driver. "I must go back for reinforcements." Meanwhile, of course, I was planning to bring up my own corpses and place them here before the ground was taken away from me.

"Sorry, we have orders to unload and return to town immediately. Every vehicle is urgently needed," the driver snapped. "Come on," he called to his helpers, and they began unloading without more ado. And how brutally they went about it. They tossed the corpses down off the truck like sacks of fertilizer, as though they had not, only a short while ago, been living beings. I was shaking with indignation, but there was nothing I could do.

"Now it's up to you to take care of them," the driver said; he jumped back to the wheel and drove off.

Professional gravedigger that I was, I had lost a good deal of the respect that is due to the dead. Nevertheless, I could not possibly leave the corpses lying about in such utter chaos as this—bodies of officers, soldiers, townsmen and women flung down in one crazy heap. I had to sort them and lay them out properly before I went. Besides, since my reserved space was already gone, there was no particular need for me to hurry back. In fact, I decided that as soon as I finished this work I would take a well-earned rest. I had been sweating it out all day long, and by now I was so tired I could hardly stand.

I was just laying out the last corpse when I heard a roar and rattle. I paused and peered into the blackness. There ahead, out of the pitch-darkness, glaring headlights ap-

proached and stopped near me. The compact mass of a truck rose before me. Two shadowy figures floated down from the cab and moved like gigantic ghosts toward my red lantern. I realized at once that this was still another load of corpses. Lucky we had no more room available.

When the driver barked out his order, I retorted, not without a touch of malice, "Sorry, but it's simply impossible. Everything is already overcrowded."

"What do you mean, overcrowded?" he replied. "There's room enough."

My profession had given me a practiced eye for terrain, and I could calculate precisely the capacity of a given bit of ground. I wasn't going to let any idiot of a driver tell me how many dead could be laid in an area thirty feet wide.

"Don't you see how many are piled up here?" I said sharply, and flashed my lantern over the bodies of the first load.

"And what about the empty space back there?" he answered.

"The cordon is back there," I replied.

"Nonsense, I'll show you," the driver said.

"Go right ahead."

I went along with him. "There, you see," he said. "You're just trying to shirk work."

I was stunned. If I knew anything, I knew that thirty feet were thirty feet. There was no doubt about that. And yet the fellow was right—there was room.

"Come on," he called to his helpers, and they started unloading their cargo. As they were about to drive off a third truck came roaring up, and the driver of the second called to the driver of the third, "There's room over there, plenty of room." He had already backed his truck and turned around, and as I followed the direction of his headlights I saw to my utter amazement an enormous free area stretching out in front of his truck for hundreds of feet.

It was unimaginable that thirty feet could extend to a

hundred. Was something supernatural going on here? Space is space, after all; it is fixed and definite and cannot stretch on and on without an end. That sort of thing happens only in fairy tales, when the most impossible things are possible.

To settle the matter at once, I started running toward the cordon. But although I had talked with the sergeant right there a short while before, and knew exactly where the line ran, I could not find the cordon anywhere. It seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth. No matter how far I went, empty space yawned in front of me and to all sides. I must have gone at least half a mile, and when the emptiness seemed to extend into infinity, I was gripped by a premonition that if I took another step ahead I would fall out of space and would be lost forever. Fear of voracious beasts, powerful foes, earthquakes and avalanches is nothing compared to the terror that a vacuum inspires.

Abruptly, I turned on my heel and ran frantically back to the place from which I had started. I sighed with relief when I beheld the spread-out corpses; I felt like a lost child that has found its way home, returned to the safety and shelter of the family. And now, seeing those corpses stretched out so peacefully, I was gripped by an almost envious craving to imitate them.

True, Kalabas and Grimbam were waiting for me, and our corpses were blocking the doorways; but what did I care? My sole desire was to stretch myself out for once as comfortably as the dead. I threw myself down among the dead, so that I would not have to face the menace of an inch of empty space. My last thought before I closed my eyes was of how the dead must relish spending a whole eternity motionless and undisturbed, not having to get up again until Judgment Day. I might well have followed their lead if familiar voices had not suddenly forced me to wake up and listen.

"Are my eyes deceiving me? Kalabas, come, look here.

That's Ember, isn't it—of course it's he," I heard Grimbam saying.

"So that's why no one could find him. Dead. Just as I predicted in the Silver Hall. Now his turn has come."

"Nothing to cry over. One bastard the less."

"What a brute you are. Haven't you any feelings at all for a dead buddy? He wasn't a bad fellow at heart. I'm sorry about him."

"Don't give me that stuff. Come on, be honest. You're glad you'll get a promotion and take his place. Why the fake mourning?"

"I owe it to my religion."

"Hypocrite!"

"We'd better notify Dr. Kapra at once, so that he calls off the search for him. Hey, Private, skip over to the doctor and tell him we've found Ember dead. Well, come on, Grimbam, we've lost enough time. Look at the pile we have to remove here. Help me carry Ember so that he'll go with the first load." And the two of them started to lift me.

This was getting a little too close for comfort. It was high time for me to give a sign of life. I began wriggling.

"He's moving—God help us, he's still alive," Kalabas cried out in fright. "Ember do you hear me?"

I opened my eyes. Day was already breaking. "Yes, of course," I said. "I just passed out. Couldn't keep awake any longer."

"And here we went and notified Dr. Kapra that you're dead," Kalabas blurted out. "Couldn't you have spoken up sooner, instead of letting us go out on a limb like that? We'll have to recall the report right away. Hey, you there," he shouted to another medical aide who was busy with the corpses, "run to Dr. Kapra and report to him that Ember is still alive." Then he turned back to us. "But now let's get to work. You too, Ember. Since you aren't dead you might as well lend us a hand. We've got no time; we have to ship all

the stuff lying around here to the sugar refinery before twelve."

"To the sugar refinery?" I asked in amazement. "That's on the other side of the cordon."

"What do you mean, other side of the cordon? There hasn't been any cordon since midnight."

"What's that? What happened to it?" I stammered.

"Commander canceled it. By now it was only a crazy idea anyhow. What's the difference between the Mashinka and the rest of the town when half of Drohitz is hit and every house is filled with the sick? All the cordon was doing was blocking traffic."

"Wonderful!" I shouted jubilantly.

"What's so wonderful about it?"

I could not explain the matter to him, but I threw my arms around his neck in an excess of relief.

"You see, Grimbam, I always told you he was a good guy underneath it all," Kalabas murmured, slightly embarrassed.

"A good guy? If he isn't a fool I've never met one," Grimbam mumbled.

"Come on, let's get to work. We've got to get rid of these, and it's quite a ways to the sugar refinery."

"Why the sugar refinery instead of the warehouse, which is a lot closer?" I asked.

"Because the yard of the warehouse is already chock-full of corpses. You seem to have slept through everything that went on here during the night. Wait till you see the place. Half the city is a hospital, and every yard, every clear spot of ground is a cemetery."

We had reached the sugar refinery and were starting to unload our corpses when a messenger arrived.

"Is Gravedigger Ember here? Dr. Kapra has ordered him to be brought in at once, dead or alive."

"Here I am," I said.

"Then follow me to the orphanage."

Dr. Kapra was hard at work. Apparently the evacuated orphanage had been turned into a temporary epidemic hospital. "Wait a moment," he called to me. "I'll soon be through. I've got good news for you." He issued a few instructions and turned to me again. "You've been promoted to Commissioner of Deceased Persons of the whole Drohitz Sector!"

What a surprise! Naturally I had cherished ambitions, like everyone else, to make something of myself in the army. But now that this dream of promotion was so unexpectedly fulfilled, I somehow could not respond as joyfully as I should—devil knows why. Only after Dr. Kapra threw a puzzled look at me did I catch myself up and come to attention with a snappy salute.

He instructed me to issue the necessary orders in the sugar refinery, so that Kalabas and Grimbam could carry on alone, and then trot over to the Town Hall to be briefed for my new post. "And now, good luck," he said, dismissing me.

It is hard to believe what a promotion will do for a man. As long as I stood there receiving orders from the doctor I was the same old subordinate gravedigger I had been, but the moment I left him I became a new man.

To issue orders instead of obeying them—good Lord, what an enormous difference that made! Everything around me, the gravediggers, the stretchers, the corpses, the sugar refinery which had become a new depot, even the sky above it and the whole rest of the world seemed utterly different from what they had been when I regarded them as a mere subaltern. And I myself stood differently; and whereas formerly I had habitually wiped my nose on my coat sleeve, I now instinctively took out my handkerchief for that purpose.

But it was not only that I seemed so utterly changed to myself. There was no doubt that the others noticed it and behaved accordingly. Kalabas and Grimbam, who had al-

ways treated me as their equal and been as impertinent as they liked, now behaved with the utmost respect toward me. They stood at attention before me, waiting obediently for my commands, just as I had been accustomed to do before officers. And the same conduct was observable in everyone else I had anything to do with. Although I was still wearing the same uniform and as yet had neither stars nor stripes to show my new rank, they recognized the commissioner in me, just as though it were written on my face, and they paid me the deference that was my due.

Moreover, the soundness of the old proverb—that whom God gives power he gives the brains to go with it—was proved in my case. A person who had been born to leadership and had done nothing else but issue orders all his life could not have snapped out commands more crisply and judiciously than I did now. Then I went straight to the Town Hall to take over my new post.

XIII

Drohitz Revisited

The city was changed beyond recognition. I had last seen it in festive garb on the day of our arrival, the streets beflagged and filled with gaily surging crowds. Now it lay deserted and empty, doors and windows locked, blinds down, walls pasted over with a barrage of official notices. In my haste to reach the Town Hall I merely glanced at these posters as I strode by. "Suspects and members of their families required to report immediately." "Drinking of unboiled water prohibited under penalty of the law." "Unauthorized persons are forbidden to enter houses chalked with a cross." Who was supposed to read all this stuff, I thought to myself, when there was not a single pedestrian on the streets?

I did not know my way about Drohitz and had no idea which direction to take in order to reach the Town Hall. So I knocked on a door and kept pounding away until at last the blinds were drawn up over a window and an inquisitive face peered out. At the sight of me the face started back as though I were a messenger of evil, and in a moment the blinds were lowered again. I tried my luck at several other houses—blinds up, alarmed face, blinds down—one house after the other, as though a conspiracy were afoot against me.

I turned into an avenue branching off to the left, which appeared to lead to the center of town. Suddenly I saw a car swing sharply around the corner. It roared past me. Five men wearing gas masks sat in it. Then, to my astonishment, the car braked some distance from me, rolled backward and stopped beside me. One of the gas masks jumped out.

"Second Lieutenant Gritz of the flying disinfection patrol," he introduced himself. "Can I help you, sir?"

Astonishing, I thought, that this lieutenant, in spite of the furious speed, should have noticed behind his gas mask that I was a person of consequence.

"Adam Ember, Commissioner of Deceased Persons," I snapped out. "I am looking for the Town Hall."

"Be glad to take you there, sir, except that we have orders to smoke out Crescent Street 5, down in the lower town. But we can give you directions. Go straight ahead to the third intersection, turn left into Matthew Street, then straight on to the traffic light, turn right, and then left again at the second crossing. You can't miss it. Sorry, but we have to . . ." He jumped aboard the car and they roared off again.

I followed his instructions and turned left into Matthew Street.

"Don't you see the arrow! Closed to pedestrians." A sentinel intercepted me. Then suddenly, as though thinking better of it, he inquired whether I had authority to pass down Matthew Street.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "I'm the Commissioner of Deceased Persons and must get to the Town Hall."

"When you come to the next arrow, sir, just give the password 'Vabra.' Then you will not be stopped, sir."

I went down Matthew Street. Almost every door was chalked with a white cross, and underneath in large block letters stood the word: CONTAGION! As I proceeded through "Vabra" streets I wondered whether there was any unchalked

quarter left in the town of Drohitz. At last I reached the Town Hall.

I entered the building. The lobby resembled a hospital. It was swarming with people in white smocks carrying stretchers laden with groaning patients in and out of the corridors, up and down the stairs. "Room thirty-two," they called to one another. "Room seventeen, Section M, Section Z." Would I find anyone left at his post who could give me the necessary information? The men in smocks were tearing around so busily that I could not even ask where the Public Health office was located. Then I caught sight of one stationary smock standing beside a stretcher at the foot of a stairway and calling, "Rippel, Rippel, I can't carry him up by myself, you know."

I went over to him, but before I could put my question he said, "I don't know where the devil that fellow Rippel is. Could you help me carry the patient to Section M, sir?" The man on the stretcher was writhing in convulsions. What else could I do but take up one end of the stretcher and follow the smock to Section M?

When we entered we were greeted by wailing and groaning. An elderly doctor was going from one patient to another, administering morphine injections.

"Another one, always another one. They haven't stopped coming in since early morning," he lamented as we entered.

He was obviously on the point of collapse, so I offered to lend him a hand.

"Lucky you came along," the doctor said. "I really don't know how I could have handled it."

The door opened again and three more stretchers were brought in. "There simply is no end to it," he sighed. "Thank God you are here, at any rate."

"I'd like to go on helping you," I said, "but I must get to the Public Health office. You see, I am the newly appointed Commissioner of Deceased Persons."

"Why, that's wonderful," the doctor exclaimed. "You can't imagine how eagerly we have been awaiting you. The dead are piling up from hour to hour. We have already turned three rooms of our hospital into morgues——"

"Your hospital?" I interrupted him. "Why, then I'm in the wrong place. Isn't this the Town Hall?"

"Used to be. They have converted it into a hospital, like all the other municipal buildings."

"Can you at least tell me where the town offices are located now?" I asked, rather discouraged.

"In the rear wing of the building, the former police headquarters."

I thanked him and started toward the door.

He intercepted me. "But what about our dead?" he said.

"As soon as I receive my directions I'll arrange for them to be carried away at once," I promised him.

I went around the building, entered the back door and found myself in a long room with about eighteen desks, each complete with officials and filing cabinets. I stopped at the first desk, at which a man was riffling through a pile of documents.

"I am Adam Ember, newly appointed Commissioner of Deceased Persons," I introduced myself.

"So," he said in the dusty, papery voice of an indolent official. He did not even look up.

"Regimental Doctor Kapra has sent me to find out the number of deceased in Drohitz and to establish temporary depots for them."

"Then you've come to the wrong office. This is the Department of Sanitation. The head of the Public Health Department is in charge of the dead."

"I beg your pardon, where is the Public Health Department?" I asked.

"Where else would it be, if not in this room? Do you think we're still in the old Town Hall with separate offices

for each department? Just walk straight on down toward the end of the room—you can't miss it."

I squeezed my way between the desks, past God knows how many departments—Traffic, Registry of Property, Welfare, Registry of Marriages—until I finally reached Public Health. There I made my request.

"Would be glad to help you, but my department covers only the municipal hospitals and their supplies. Deceases come under the Census Department, two desks down."

I went on to the Census Department. "I'll look it up at once," said a bald-headed official. He went over to the filing case and began to rummage. "No, not that; no, not that," he mumbled nervously, dropping one folder after the next on the floor. "Sorry," he said. "My predecessor was taken yesterday noon, right at his desk. I'm new here. Seems I can't lay my hands on these death lists right now. Better you drop in again tomorrow morning; by then I'll surely have the information you want."

My patience gave out. "What do you mean, tomorrow? Have you lost your mind? I need those documents at once. If you don't know what's what, you have no right to be head of this department. This isn't an office, it's a muck-heap," I shouted.

A tall, shriveled fellow stepped to the desk and patted me on the shoulder. "Department Head Mackadu," he introduced himself. "I quite understand that you urgently need the statistics of the dead. But you must consider that with the rapid spread of the epidemic the municipal offices have suffered also, and nothing goes as smoothly as usual. After all, we are facing an emergency."

"That's why it is so urgent to remove the dead."

"I see that you are thinking only of the dead and forgetting that there are still living officials who cannot do more than is humanly possible."

"I have no time to indulge in philosophical discussions,"

I snapped. "Either you see that I get those documents at once, or I'll complain at military headquarters," I threatened.

"Go right ahead, I'm not stopping you," he replied.

I opened a door. "That's the wrong one, the exit is to the right," someone called after me. But I had already entered a room no bigger than a spacious closet. Hunched behind a desk sat an official buried in a heap of papers. I was about to turn around when I caught sight of his goatee. Am I seeing aright? I wondered. He certainly looked familiar. But no, it could not be. And yet, a goatee so stained by nicotine was certainly not to be met with every day in the week.

I stepped closer. He looked up. Of course, I had guessed right. It was the budget director.

"Why, how in the world have you . . ." I exclaimed.

Simultaneously he cried out: "Adam Ember, what brings you here?"

"Well, what a surprise," we exclaimed in unison. "Who ever would have thought it?"

This time I managed to speak first. "But tell me how come you are here."

"As you see, I've returned to my old post. Perfectly natural, after all—just as soon as I got out of the Silver Hall I made straight for the Town Hall. Incidentally, it was high time I got here, because the epidemic has promoted most of the old guard under the ground. And besides, nobody knows as much about the municipal finances as I do. Just consider the vast unforeseen expenses an epidemic like this imposes on a town. The income has dropped to zero, and the subsidy from the army is just a pittance, of course. Now just suppose the town didn't keep its wits about it and let the budget run on unbalanced! A few Drohitzers might survive the epidemic, but the town would find itself bankrupt. And then what good would it do the survivors to have survived? I tell you, come what may, the municipal budget must be in order!"

There was no stopping him now. "Look at this." He held a sheet of paper under my nose. It was covered with neatly penned debit and credit columns. "Looks pretty good, doesn't it?"

I nodded approvingly. The Lord must have been in a jocular mood when He created bureaucrats.

"So you see I'm doing my best," he concluded. "But now you must tell me what brings you into town, and to our office, no less."

I told him of my appointment, my assignment, and finally of my fruitless argument with the census officer and the department head. "I'm sorry I let my temper carry me away," I said half apologetically. "I was rather rude to them."

The budget director displayed intense interest. "What did you say to them?"

"Oh, that if a man didn't know how to handle his job he didn't belong in it, and that they were not running an office but a muck-heap."

"Muck-heap!" he exclaimed joyfully. "Bravo, bravo, Ember." He rubbed his hands maliciously. "It's about time someone threw the truth into their faces."

"Couldn't *you* help me somehow and get those documents for me?" I asked him. "I really don't like the idea of complaining to the senior commander."

"I'm afraid you're not familiar with our regulations, my friend. Every chief clerk has his own sphere and won't tolerate interference from any other department. I myself cannot give you sufficient information. The cost of coffins and funeral figures in the budget are, of course, at my finger tips. But that would scarcely help you. Say, wait a moment," he interrupted himself. "I have an idea. You know who could give you all the information you need? Our Professor Drish. He's assembling all the data he can lay hands on for the War Archives."

"Wonderful. Then I must go to see him right away," I

exclaimed, delighted. "Where can I find him?"

"His office is in the former pastry shop. Oh yes, there was something else I ought to tell you about that . . . But better not, you'll see for yourself. You're in for a surprise! I'm sorry I'm tied up here, because I'd like to go along with you and see your face when you . . ." He trailed off meaningfully.

"How do I reach the pastry shop?"

"I'll send my assistant along to guide you. Pafka," he called, "take Commisioner Ember to the military archives office."

"You have to pound rather heavily on the door," Pafka said as he left me at the pastry shop.

I knocked and knocked. At last the door opened. "Mr. Humperdinger," I exclaimed. "I'd never dreamt we'd meet again!" As always, Humperdinger was clumsy-tongued. He stood there in his baker's apron, arms sticky with dough to the elbows, trousers dusty with flour, snorting like a locomotive, and finally succeeded in puffing out: "Yes, it's me. Back at my old stand. Come along."

He drew me inside. It was as though I had taken a coffee break in this pastry shop every afternoon of my life—it seemed so familiar to me. Everything was exactly as our late friend Rappaport had described it in the Silver Hall. I paused a second and looked around.

"Not a single fly! They've got wind of the extermination measures," Humperdinger assured me. "But now come and meet the wife. She'll sure be glad to see you."

His wife? I wondered. In the Silver Hall he had passed himself off as a widower.

We went through the shop toward the back room, where the great surprise was in store for me.

"Baby!" Ludmilla threw her arms around my neck. She

was munching something and swallowed it down quickly before she continued. "We certainly never imagined this, did we, baby?" She turned promptly to Humperdinger. "Don't mind my calling him 'baby.' It's just a habit."

"Of course not," Humperdinger stammered morosely.

The room smelled deliciously of freshly baked bread. I sniffed greedily. "Now won't you two tell me"—I purposely used the plural so that Humperdinger would not feel left out—"how you ever got things started up again here, in such a short time?"

"Well, I thought," Humperdinger began haltingly, "after we . . . we . . ."

"Let me tell it," Ludmilla interrupted. "You see, as soon as we got away from the Silver Hall and reached town, Humperdinger said, 'We can't just sit around and wait till the epidemic knocks off the whole town.' He wanted to do something useful, and the most natural thing was to bake bread, of course. After all, Humperdinger started out as a baker's boy, and bread is something that's always needed. So he went to the Town Hall and asked for the concession as municipal baker. They gave it to him right away."

"It's only . . . the . . ." Humperdinger stammered.

She took his words up at once. "He means it's only the beginning. If everything goes well he expects to open up his shop again soon."

"And bake my famous rum baba again," Humperdinger added, pinching Ludmilla's backside as he used to do in the Silver Hall.

"But now it's your turn, baby," Ludmilla said. "Tell us what brought you here. Aren't you in charge of the Silver Hall any more?"

"Of course not. Don't you notice any change in me?"

She examined me from head to foot. "Your mug still looks the same to me."

"Well, I'll have you know that I've been promoted to

Commissioner of Deceased Persons of all Drohitz!"

"You've certainly come a long way, baby! The Silver Hall can really be proud of you."

"As a matter of fact, it's because of my new position that I'm here," I went on.

Ludmilla looked at me wide-eyed: "You haven't come to buy bread for the dead, have you?"

"Not quite," I parried. "I've come to speak with Professor Drish about some official matters. I need certain data and the budget chief has told me . . ."

"Oh, then you've seen old Nicotine Beard already," Ludmilla interrupted.

"He told me that the professor had set up his military archives in the pastry shop."

"Right," Humperdinger said. "We've turned the spare room over to him."

Ludmilla opened a door and pointed to a table heaped with documents. "He's out just now, gathering material, but he'll be back soon. But won't you have something to eat first? You look starved." She didn't wait for my answer, but left the room and quickly returned with a pot of piping-hot coffee and a basket piled high with fresh-smelling rolls. "They're hot from the oven," she said. "Dig in, take whichever you prefer, hard ones or soft ones, they're all delicious."

She didn't have to urge me. The mere sight of fresh rolls made my head spin. "To think of having a choice even in times like these," I said appreciatively between mouthfuls.

"You've got Hump to thank for that."

"Here's to the baker of Drohitz," I exclaimed, lifting my coffee cup. "But tell me, Ludmilla, what has become of the rest of our gang?"

"Well, soon after you left the Silver Hall we all broke away and escaped into town. The cordon was still in force that day. But Ginzele helped us out. He proved himself a true gentleman. He's rich, you know, and always carries

a few banknotes in his wallet. I needn't tell you that none of the sentries could resist it. He paid the passage for all of us, so that we were the first to leave the Mashinka."

"What is Ginzele doing now?"

"His insurance business is sunk, of course. Who would be buying insurance in times like these? People need every cent for the black market. Luckily, Ginzele didn't have to start right out in some new venture. He's helping to finance the disinfection of houses and has even placed one of his own houses at the town's disposal, for use as a hospital. There's an honest man for you."

"And what about the rest?"

"Whom do you want to hear about first? I suppose with your new job it's Dingda."

"Yes, what has become of him?"

"You and he are the only people who have really made a career of this mess. He's on top of the heap, the richest man in town. Can you think of anything that sells better than coffins today?" She told me that Dingda's son had died while his old man was locked up in the Silver Hall, but his daughter, Rebecca, had kept the business going.

"And how about the others?"

"Gertrude and Mrs. Moffet are busy organizing a Ladies' Aid Committee. The lard dealer has become manage of the Consumer Co-operative. Rogemund has taken over the pharmacy, and the gray lady is head nurse at the Castle Hospital."

Humperdinger excused himself for a moment. He had to load the bakery truck.

"And what happened to the girls?" I asked as we remained alone.

"I'll tell you, but you must promise to keep it quiet. The girls have decided to carry on with their business. After all, there are old customers to think about. People have to have some fun in times like these. The girls have rented a house, and everything is going along beautifully. Of course, it's all

being kept a secret—we wouldn't want Military Headquarters ever to get wind of this. The house is underground, sort of. I've arranged the whole thing for them. You know, they're like sisters to me. I see to it that they have bread, food, cosmetics and everything else they may need. Hump looks the other way, for my sake. He's such a good soul. Really, I couldn't have wished for a better husband."

Heaven knows what was riding me, but now that my stomach was filled a different kind of hunger assailed me. I no longer craved Ludmilla's soft rolls but her soft white breasts. I jumped up, grabbed her around the middle and tore open her blouse.

"Baby," she panted with professional ardor. But then she recollected herself and pushed me away. "We'd better not. Hump will be back any moment, and he's jealous as a cock."

So once again nothing came of it.

"What about Eve?" I asked resignedly. "What is she doing?"

"Oh, the poor girl," Ludmilla exclaimed. "When she got back from the Mashinka she found herself an orphan. Now with her mother gone she doesn't have a soul in the world. Do you know what, Adam? You should marry her. What a swell little wife she'd make!"

"Well, well, Ludmilla, don't be marrying me off so fast!"

"Why not? What are you waiting for? You're young and strong, you've got a good job. It's about time you started raising a family. At any rate you ought to meet her again. Just leave it to me; I'll arrange it. She'll be tickled pink to see you again."

"Who'll be tickled pink?" asked Humperdinger, who had finished loading the truck.

Before Ludmilla could answer there was a knock on the door. "That must be the professor," Ludmilla exclaimed. "Hump, go and open but don't tell him that Adam is here."

The professor stood open-mouthed with amazement when he beheld me in the baking room. But he quickly recovered and showered me with a multilingual stream of surprised exclamations.

After I in turn had voiced my pleasure at seeing him again, I told him of my appointment and of my hope that he could supply the data about the dead which I needed to get on with my job.

He led me to his study and pointed to the table heaped with lists and documents. Swiftly, he combed through the sheaves of paper. He fished out a neatly written list on which the exact number of sick and dead, hospitals and cemeteries in Drohitz were arranged according to city districts. "And here are the latest additions. I can supply you with absolutely any information you need," he said, opening his brief case.

I extolled his thoroughness. "You have cause to be proud. Our Bureau of Military History can consider itself lucky to have a man of your caliber on its staff."

"To be sure, to be sure," he agreed. "But all this is nothing, Ember. What I really take credit for is the unique discovery I have made since my return from the Mashinka. This is going to prove of immense importance, and not only for our military archives but for the history of the war itself. Someone else might well have compiled the exact count of the sick and dead. But I doubt that anyone else could have turned up what I did. Has either of you told him how many of us are here?" he asked the Humperdingers, who stood at the door listening to our conversation.

"I've told him about most of them," Ludmilla said.

"Well, what do you say to that, Ember—that almost all of us from the Silver Hall are back in Drohitz again?"

"Why, that's just great," I said.

"Just great?" he asked, visibly disappointed. "You do not seem to grasp the whole significance of it all. Evidently, in

your concern with mortuary matters you have completely lost sight of the survivors."

This was the second reproach of that kind in a day. There must be something to it, I mused.

"Doesn't it mean anything to you," he went on, "that our budget director is again in charge of the municipal finances, that the Humperdingers are providing all of Drohitz with bread, that Madam President is head of the Ladies' Aid Committee, that Ginzele, Dingda and even Rogemund are heading up vital posts?"

I still did not see what he was getting at. "Naturally I'm happy to hear that they've all done so well for themselves," I agreed.

"You are still missing the point," he said. "I am not concerned with the personal point of view. I am interested solely in the historical significance of this phenomenon. You can search through all the wartime epidemics of history and you will find nothing that even approximates the vast purport of my discovery. Beginning with the Punic Wars . . ."

I knew from bygone days in the Silver Hall that once the professor got started on ancient wars there was no stopping him. And so I hastily interjected: "I'm dying to hear the details of your discovery."

"The fantastic fact is that all those who stayed in Drohitz, who enjoyed complete freedom of movement and occupied the highest positions, have died like flies and are already under the ground, whereas those who were quarantined in the Silver Hall were spared and are now holding positions of crucial importance in our town."

"Yes, it certainly is an epoch-making discovery," I quickly interrupted him. "We really must discuss the matter in detail some time. Right now, unfortunately, I have to attend to my official duties. Would you go through the lists with me?"

He was agreeable, and placed all his material at my dis-

posal. With professorial pedantry he explained where, in which districts, in which hospitals and in which morgues the victims of the epidemic were located, and which official I must apply to in each case.

I decided to go first to the Castle Hospital, since according to the professor's lists a particularly large contingent of dead had accumulated there. Moreover, I was somewhat familiar with the place, and the gray lady would undoubtedly give me a hand. The professor placed his small car and driver at my disposal, so that I would be able to get to my destination faster.

I thanked him heartily and bade them all goodbye, promising to return as soon as I had a little time to spare.

"But where are you going to sleep?" Ludmilla asked.

"Military headquarters will find some billet," I replied.

"Don't be silly; God knows where they'll put you up. We'll arrange something for you, so that you can have a decent, comfortable bed on your first night in town. I'm certain Madam President will be only too glad to have you. Humperdinger will fix it up for you."

Nothing so strikingly impressed me with the changes that the epidemic had wrought in Drohitz as my visit to the Castle Hospital. This was the very place where I had reported to Dr. Zitrom upon our arrival in Drohitz. The amazing contrast between the hospital as I remembered it and what I now saw provided me with a measure of the devastation the epidemic had wrought.

On my previous visit an excess of voluntary nurses had competed with one another to minister to our soldier lads. Often three of them would have been hovering about a single patient, and in addition there had been a gray lady by every bed, to while away the time for the pampered soldiers. Now the big reception hall of the castle was a place of horrors. The ward was jammed, bed lined up against bed and

even the floor covered with patients, with only a few nurses who proved utterly unable to cope with the hordes of screaming patients.

"Where is the head nurse?" I inquired.

"She must have gone across to the women's section."

"Where is that?"

"In the next room."

There I found the same lamentable scene with the only difference that here women instead of men were writhing in convulsions and crying for help.

Then I caught sight of the gray lady. She was conducting herself as usual with infinite patience and gentleness. She seemed literally to be multiplying herself and to be giving succor at several beds at the same time. For a moment I hesitated to disturb her in her Samaritan's work. Then I gave myself a little push and threaded my way among the pallets on the floor toward her.

"Adam Ember!" she exclaimed when I addressed her, but she was by no means as overjoyed with my visit as Ludmilla had been. On the contrary, she seemed rather upset. And while I explained the reason for my coming, she avoided looking at me, averting her face. Was my presence unwelcome because of the recent scenes in the Silver Hall, where even this angel of mercy had lost her head and forgotten herself? Or was it that I reminded her of death, while at the moment she was preoccupied with saving lives?

"The morgues are in charge of Mrs. Hallowa. They are located in the baroness' former private apartment."

I went to the former private rooms of the baroness and knocked on the door which the baroness herself had once opened when I came there in search of Dr. Zitrom. Now it was opened by Mrs. Hallowa. As I explained my mission to her, I saw through the doorway, at the spot where Dr. Zitrom had sat in a love seat—leaning back on the cushions and regaling himself with cognac and coffee—a coffin. I en-

tered. The whole room was full of coffins.

"It is high time that someone took this matter seriously in hand. We no longer know what to do with them. Just look at this!" She opened the door to the adjoining room. It was crammed full with coffins. I made a quick count.

"Are these all your dead?" I asked.

"For the moment. I must ask the supervisor of the Critical Cases Department how many new ones have accumulated there in the meantime."

"Where are the critical cases?"

"In the former guest rooms in the other wing. I'll have someone conduct you."

"Thank you, thank you, no need; I know the way."

A few minutes later I stood before the room which I had once occupied. I opened the door and stood stunned. There on his knees beside the bed of a moribund patient was Father Jacopo with all his sacramental utensils, fervently absorbed in prayer. I tiptoed forward and decided to wait until he had completed his ministrations to the patient, intending to speak with him afterward.

His prayers had always exerted a hypnotic power over me, and so they did now. I did not know who the dying man was beside whose bed he was kneeling, but as though obeying an inner compulsion I went down on my knees and prayed with him for the unknown's salvation. There were three beds with moribund patients in the room. When he had completed his sacred office with the first, he turned to the next bed and again became absorbed in prayer. I joined him as though this were my appointed task. Not for a moment was I molested during the prayers by my military conscience, not for a moment reminded of my duties. Rather, I felt the firmest conviction that in spite of all the urgent business my sole real task consisted in kneeling here in quiet prayer.

Before we turned to the third dying man, however, I

jumped to my feet and fled from the room. Once outside, I felt as though I had escaped the clutches of hell. For the devil—I swear it was he—had assailed me in the midst of prayer with the vision of the confounded Chinese whom I had bought at the bazaar on my first day in Drohitz. It was a preposterous thought that I might still retrieve him. Yet I had to keep looking around the room trying to guess where he might possibly be hidden. I had feared that unless I left the room at once, I would be unable to resist the temptation, and in spite of the solemn rites for the dying, would begin rummaging through beds, wardrobes, chests and corners for my piece of bric-a-brac.

Outside, I waited impatiently for Father Jacopo, hoping that his appearance would expel the demon. As he emerged from the room he looked at me searchingly and at once perceived the chasm in my soul.

"Don't despair, Ember," he said. "The Lord knows that man has the hardest struggle with himself. In His infinite mercy He understands and forgives." He made the sign of the cross and hurried off down the hallway.

I left the Critical Cases Department. It really did not matter whether a few more or less had to be removed, I reflected—and I quickly put the Castle Hospital behind me.

The professor's chauffeur took me back to town. He drove from one Vabra avenue to the other, across a Vabra square and down a Vabra boulevard, until finally he dropped me off at Madam President's house. It was already nine o'clock in the evening.

I rang the doorbell. Her husband opened the door. After all of Gertrude's lamentations in the Silver Hall over her poor, ailing Bertram, I was startled to find a man bursting with health and radiating vitality.

"No need for explanations, Adam," he greeted me. "Gertrude has told me all about you, and I've heard from

Humperdinger that you're here in Drohitz to collect the dead. But it will be a while before you get me into your clutches, I can tell you that," he jested.

"I need only look at you to give up hope." I played along with him.

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse Gertrude for a while. She was called away to an urgent meeting of the Ladies' Aid Committee. Conditions in the slum districts are something dreadful, they tell me. At any rate, she has your supper all ready and waiting. But how about a drop of cognac for a pick-me-up?" He filled two snifters. "I'm not supposed to drink, but I know you won't tell on me. To your health!" He downed his glass in one swallow, and immediately proceeded to wash it carefully and replace it in the cupboard.

He himself served the supper, and as I packed away this hearty meal I told Bertram how his loving wife had been worrying about him during her stay in the Mashinka.

"Too much so, my dear fellow, too much so," he exclaimed.

At last Madam President herself returned. She greeted me warmly, and then described with deep perturbation the dreadful conditions to be found in the slums. An uprising by the embittered populace, she said, might be feared at any moment. But she quickly checked herself, and observing how tired I was, proposed to make my bed.

"Bertram," she said, rising from her chair and turning to her husband, "I think you should give our guest your bedroom tonight. He will be most comfortable there."

"Of course," Bertram agreed. "I'll carry my bedding to the other room and make up the bed for him."

"No, keep Adam company, I'll take care of it," she said, and started toward the door. Bertram leaped up and quickly blocked the door.

"Will you have the kindness to let me pass? I should think I have the right to enter my husband's bedroom," my hostess

snapped. "Or are you trying to hide something from me?" She fixed a stern gaze upon Bertram, at which he shrank to one side.

As soon as she was out of the room Bertram's jovial face contorted in a grimace of anxiety. "Now I'm in for it," he stammered. "She's caught me."

In a moment she was back in the room, her bosom heaving against the tight-laced bodice of her dress. "So that was why you didn't want to let me in!" she burst out. "*That* is what you are doing while I wear myself out on an all-day survey of slum conditions."

A pretty mess I've walked into, I thought. She's found out he's deceiving her. To think that poor dear Bertram was an adulterer!

She was holding something in her clenched fist. "So you wanted to conceal it from me, did you? This time you're not getting away with it."

Apparently some lady had left an intimate garment in the room, I surmised.

But I was wrong. She opened her hand, and to my utter confusion I saw a praline in a little brown wrapper.

"Stuffing himself with chocolates behind my back and in days like these!" she raged.

"Please calm down, Gertrude; consider our guest," Bertram pleaded.

"How can I calm down," she went on vehemently. "Have you forgotten what the doctor in Podol told you? You'll kill yourself with your sweet tooth one of these days."

"Now, now, Gertrude," he placated. "What with the epidemic going on, nobody can count on being alive tomorrow. I'd just as soon die a sweet death, anyway."

"You know I cannot abide your silly jokes. Don't try my patience to the limit," she retorted. "You can bless your stars we have a guest here or I'd really give you a piece of my mind."

At this Bertram finally lost control. "If only you had

stayed in the bordello," he stormed. "All you're good for is to make my life miserable. As long as you were in the Mashinka I felt on top of the world; I could eat, drink and make merry. Now life is pure hell again, of course."

"Pure hell!" his wife shrilled. "You have the nerve to speak of hell: you, who were able to sit peacefully and comfortably under your own roof while I truly went through hell in the Silver Hall. And now you even stoop to rubbing it in that I stayed in the Mashinka."

She rushed at him. I stepped between them. "My dear Madam President," I admonished her.

"Now, if that isn't mental cruelty," she exclaimed, turning to me with righteous indignation. But as she looked into my face, she blushed to the roots of her hair and quickly changed her tune. "It's only that I want you to keep well, Bertram," she said in a honeyed voice. "Well, well, what's done is done, only for safety's sake go and give yourself a little injection now. Your insulin. Please. For my sake."

As soon as Bertram had lumbered off she whispered to me, "Ember, I can depend on your being a gentleman, can't I? You won't say a word to him about the fashion show with Ludmilla, and what happened at the end there—— You know what I mean. You won't betray me?"

"Of course not," I assured her. "Word of honor."

When Bertram returned, she received him with maternal leniency. "Promise me never to do it again, darling."

He nodded meekly.

"When would you like your breakfast?" Gertrude inquired before I went to bed.

But I had had enough of hospitality for the present. "Please don't trouble yourself about that," I said. "I must report to headquarters first thing in the morning. Thank you ever so much for your kindness in putting me up."

As I dozed off in Bertram's bed my last thought was that I should have let headquarters find a billet for me.

* * *

The next morning I reported for duty. A conversation with Mannsteufel's adjutant revealed to me the incredible state of confusion throughout the city.

As long as I had been a subordinate I had tended to blame my superiors for almost everything that went wrong. But now, since I had risen in rank, I could afford a less biased point of view. There was no doubt in my mind that the commander had done his best to cope with a desperate situation.

It was natural, of course, that Mannsteufel, in so far as he attended to the dead, had concerned himself primarily with those who had succumbed to the epidemic while serving their country. Nevertheless, no one could charge him with having disregarded the plague-stricken civilians. He and his subordinates had done all that an army administration could do for a city under military occupation. Thus, for example, he had requisitioned all public and many private buildings as emergency hospitals. He had expropriated private lands and turned them into special cemeteries. He had forcibly recruited civilians of both sexes into an emergency sanitation corps, had issued Draconic ordinances, set aside the civil courts and imposed martial law.

Now it was high time I proved my mettle. I outlined a bold plan, which so impressed the adjutant that he offered me every possible assistance and promised to round up some helpers and vehicles for me by afternoon.

As I left headquarters I decided to call on Dingda first to check his stock. His place was only a few blocks away, so it did not take me long to get there.

Although I had expected, from Humperdinger's story, to find a flourishing business, I was nevertheless taken aback by the scale of Dingda's establishment. God knows, in the course of my career I had seen coffins a-plenty, but what I

found here—a whole warehouse crammed full with first-, second- and third-class coffins—overwhelmed me.

Dingda had already heard of my presence in Drohitz. He congratulated me on my promotion, and assured me how much he appreciated the privilege of co-operating with me in business dealings. He offered his help and advice and I thanked him profusely.

"Think nothing of it, my dear Commissioner, or shall I call you dear colleague . . ."

"Plain Adam is good enough," I said.

"All right, Adam, come along now and I'll show you my stock. You may be sure I shall do my best to satisfy you. I hope, of course, that you will also put in a good word for me with the proper authorities in regard to calculation of expenses."

I nodded. "Well, you certainly must be doing a good business," I said as we hopped through his warehouse.

"Oh, yes, everything is galloping toward the end now. The only problem is how to keep up with the demand. Now look at this section here." He pointed to a stockpile of coffins. "Those have been ordered by Army Headquarters. And"—he turned to another pile—"what you see here is already bought and paid for by the church. These here"—he pointed to a smaller section—"are still available. I'll put them aside for you at once. How many will you need for today?"

"I won't be able to tell you until this afternoon. But from what I saw yesterday, I don't think this will be nearly enough."

"Unfortunately they are all I have in stock at the moment. But Uncle Zucki from Podol, my cousin Pushtock and my nephew in Zanock have promised me a large shipment for tomorrow."

He realized from the astonishment on my face that I had not quite understood. "Apparently you don't know," he ex-

plained, "that occupational intermarriage is a tradition in our trade. This comes in handy in times of emergencies."

"A brilliant business arrangement," I remarked appreciatively.

"Besides this," he went on, "the army has placed a number of recruits at my disposal. They are working day and night, some of them lumbering in the woods around town, some of them milling the lumber, and some knocking out new coffins. Here, you can see the carpenters at work yourself." He opened a door, and I looked in on a furiously busy workshop.

We reached a section which bore a sign: RESERVED.

"For Morgue Central."

"For unidentified bodies?" I asked wonderingly.

"Of course not," he replied. "Morgue Central is really the casino where high officials and the society dead are laid out —the elite of Drohitz, so to speak, who can afford coffins like these. If you will just compare the rough, unplaned pine boxes over there with these gold-bound, ebony-stained, luxury affairs, you'll grant that the difference is enormous. And this here"—he opened another door which led to a small chamber—"is my iron reserve stockpile. These are only for super-special clients. If, for instance, such personages as Mr. Ginzele or our Madam President were to be stricken down . . . Or if, God forbid, you, my dear friend and colleague . . . Well, I'll put one aside, just in case."

"Most obliged, Mr. Dingda," I acknowledged his *esprit de corps.*

"Listen, Adam." He placed his hands on my shoulders. "I've just had an idea. What would you think of entering my firm as a junior partner? You wouldn't need any capital; I would regard your experience and your connections with the high command as sufficient contribution. I know, of course, that as long as you remain in uniform you could be active only as a silent partner. But after all, it's a fine busi-

ness, not only now, but in the future, too. As I'm used to saying: Everything must come to an end, and for that reason there'll always be a demand for coffins. In any case give it some thought," he concluded.

I nodded. "But now I'm afraid I have to get along," I said.

"Wait just a minute." He held me back. "I want you to meet my daughter, Rebecca. She has taken care of the business while I was away. You should have much in common with her."

He went to fetch her and soon returned with a comely girl of about twenty-eight who greeted me with a mixture of curiosity and embarrassment.

"I'll get you a map of Drohitz so that you will find your way around," Dingda proposed and left us alone.

"I understand we are working in the same field, so to speak," Rebecca addressed me. To overcome the awkwardness of the situation she had obviously decided on talking shop. As it turned out she knew all the fine points of the undertaking business and I found it not hard to warm up to her.

When Dingda entered and found us in such rapport he gloated like a bird that has just spied a fat worm. "Didn't I tell you, Rebecca, he'd make the best partner anyone could be looking for?" he cried. The mere thought of it delighted him so that he proposed inviting our Silver Hall gang to a party at his house. "I promise you a meal like peacetime. There isn't a delicacy or a drink that Dingda can't lay hold of. And you'll see how Rebecca can cook. She's a real jewel, that girl, I am telling you! How about Thursday?"

"That's fine with me," I agreed. "But now I have to get on."

I took leave of Rebecca, and Dingda led me to the door. "Think it over," he whispered and pressed my hand. I promised to do so and thought over my prospects as I was tak-

ing the shortest way to the school, which Dingda had marked in red pencil on the map.

Suddenly I found myself at the Corso where on that glorious day of our triumphant arrival I had been swept along by the pulse of life as I strolled in the midst of carefree civilians. As I looked around now I wished that I had been spared seeing the Corso in its present state. The once lively street with its well-stocked stores was deserted. For instead of the throngs of flirtatious girls and women all I saw now was a horde of mangy dogs who were scrambling and scrapping among themselves.

I quickened my pace to put the Corso behind me. As I turned into the market square I passed the cathedral. This being my first active day in office I decided to step in for a short prayer and Father Jacopo's blessing. I was in for a surprise. In the nave, in the side aisles, all the way down to the altar, I saw a host of coffins, draped with black palls, flanked by wax candles, and at the foot of each coffin knelt a praying nun in the habit of the silent order.

An elderly priest had just finished the ritual at the altar and now stepped over to the epistle side. A tinkling funeral bell rang three times. The priest turned to the coffins, crossed himself and began to read the collects prescribed in times of pestilence for all the faithful departed.

The funeral service somewhat distracted me from my prayer and I felt that as Commissioner of the Deceased I should offer my assistance in removing the coffins. There were so many, however, that I realized I could not possibly wait for the end of the funeral mass. So I tiptoed to the sacristy to discuss the matter. Since I was not sure whether it was proper to knock on the sacristy door I opened it cautiously a crack. Seeing the sacristy also filled with coffins, and a young priest engaged in preparations for a funeral mass, I quickly closed the door again. Turning around I found myself face to face with a deacon, who inquired

whether I was looking for a relative.

"No, thank you," I replied, introducing myself, "but maybe you can tell me where to find Father Jacopo. He is an old friend of mine and I'd like to offer him my assistance."

"Father Jacopo is otherwise engaged," he told me. "I am sure he'll appreciate your solicitude, although you need not concern yourself about our dead. The Mother Church prefers to return to earth the remains of her children who have fallen asleep in God. The brethren and sisters of our orders take charge of the burials in consecrated ground."

I felt somewhat deflated and was about to leave when I heard footsteps in an adjoining corridor. Perhaps this was someone I could ask about Father Jacopo's whereabouts. I turned into the corridor and saw one of the nuns in the habit of the silent order. No luck, I thought, when, much to my surprise, she addressed me: "Is there anything you wish?" Seeing my astonishment she explained, "Father Jacopo has rescinded our vow of silence for the duration of the epidemic. He says that in times of tribulation it is more pleasing to God that we speak words of comfort to those in need. So please tell me whether I can be of any assistance to you." The words bubbled from her lips clear as spring water, as though the voice had been purified by long years of silence.

"He is moving about," she said. "Since the cathedral has been given over to funeral masses Father Jacopo has established a flying church. He is preaching at street corners, hears confession in courtyards or squares and administers the Last Sacrament wherever it is needed. It is hard to say where he is to be found at any given time."

Just like him, I thought, leaving the cathedral and pursuing my way to the school. Judging from the map I must be rather close to my destination. As I turned into a Vabra street a guard rushed off, shouting joyfully: "The Commis-

sioner of the Deceased! He's coming, he's coming." Further guards passed the word on to each other until it reached the guard in front of the school.

In the schoolyard I was greeted by a deputation of men and women. A haggard wreck with hollow cheeks, his suit hanging limply on his body, swayed forward and introduced himself with a half-extinguished voice: "Assistant Principal Ringwing. Professor Drish," he went on, "informed us that you would be coming some time this morning. We have been waiting for you ever since, for we are simply at our wits' end. Would you kindly follow me to see for yourself."

He led me into the building. The entrance hall was an indiscriminate tangle of corpses which defied all description. I stood numb with horror as he explained: "It seems all the bodies for which they cannot find room otherwise are simply deposited here at the school as if it were a town dump. And there is no one we can turn to," he went on. "If we appeal to the town authorities, they send us to military headquarters. If we appeal to headquarters, they tell us that the army dead must be taken care of first. It is left to us to worry about the disposal."

"But in the meantime couldn't they be placed at least . . . I mean . . . a little apart . . ."

My consternation must have been written on my face, for he hastened to say, "Don't think it has been this bad all along. It's only since this morning, when Principal Kadosh collapsed, that things have got completely out of hand. He was carrying the body of the math teacher into the science lab when his feet gave way. We didn't dare move him. He's still lying in a coma in the utility room."

"Did you have a doctor take a look at him?"

He shrugged his shoulders: "*You* try to get a doctor these days."

On the way to the utility room we crossed the science lab.

It was crowded with corpses, while round about on tables and shelves stood all kinds of scientific gadgets, stuffed animals, cages of white mice and jars with various animal organs preserved in alcohol. "Good Lord, couldn't you at least remove this miserable junk? Have you lost every ounce of respect for the dead?" Carried away by my emotions, I went up to the shelves, intending to clear the trivia away myself.

"For Heaven's sake, Commissioner, don't upset the science lab," the assistant principal exclaimed, clutching my arm. "If our principal should come to again and find any of his science projects gone, he would suffer a stroke on the spot. Then we'd really be sunk for good."

I must have looked rather dumfounded, for he hastened to explain: "You see, the principal is our science instructor. He has built up this department himself. It means everything to him. He just swears by science . . ."

"Never mind," I shrugged. "Let's take a look at him now."

We entered the utility room. The principal lay stretched out on the floor. I gave him the old field treatment—pounding him vigorously on the back, pumping his arms for artificial respiration, and he came to like a shot.

The assistant principal pressed my hand. "Surely God sent you," he sighed with relief.

As the principal regained his strength we conferred on the most urgent steps that had to be taken. I promised that in view of the situation I would give removal of their corpses top priority. While we were talking someone came rushing in. "Another sixteen," he announced. "We've no room inside and it's starting to rain. We cannot let them rot in the yard. So what are we going to do?"

"Leave it to me," I said. "I'll take care of them." With these words of assurance I hurried to the door.

"Who is this Commissioner?" I heard the principal asking.

"A miracle worker," the assistant whispered.

* * *

Outside I jumped up onto the seat beside the driver of a school bus which had been converted into a hearse. "To Morgue Central," I ordered.

A short time later we stopped at the casino. I bade the driver and his men wait for me and stepped in.

Although the lobby, hung with black crepe and funeral garlands, as well as the icy silence which prevailed, gave the impression of a genuine morgue, I could not help thinking back to my first visit to the casino.

"Your name." A man in a long-tailed black frock coat, black tie and gloves startled me out of my thoughts. As I looked at his narrow-margined forehead with the mouth and nose doodled in beneath it, I could have sworn he was Chief of Protocol Magados, although I knew full well that Magados had been the first victim of the epidemic in Drohitz proper. What a resemblance, I mused; it seems as though Magados' ghost had risen from the grave to check on the visitors to the casino.

"Adam Ember, Commissioner of Deceased Persons," I identified myself.

"Have you some kinfolk here?" the ghost inquired.

"Nothing of the sort," I replied. "I've come on official business, Magados."

"My name is Salvadini," he corrected me dryly.

"Suits me fine," I said. "But now let's get down to business. I have a load outside which will have to be stored here temporarily."

"*Here?*" he exclaimed, drawing himself up to his full gaunt height. "Out of the question. You'll have to try elsewhere. Our morgue is reserved for members of the casino and their closest relations."

"Reserved for members of the casino. Ridiculous!" I snorted. "Every corpse has a right to a roof over his head, especially in rain like this."

"I regret that it is raining," he replied. "But the town has an agreement with headquarters that not even members of

the officer corps are to be laid out here, only members of the casino and their families."

"If headquarters ever made such an agreement, I, as Commissioner of Deceased Persons, hereby rescind it. The bodies are being placed here, and that's all there is to it."

"Look here, sir, you may be the Commissioner of the Deceased, you may be Death in person for all I know, but I warn you—this building belongs to the charter members of the casino. It is out of bounds for you. Unless you leave at once I shall be forced to call the police."

I turned and opened the door, but not to beat a retreat. "Unload and bring them in," I called to the driver in the yard.

When he and his helpers brought in the first bodies, Salvadini flew into a tantrum. "You don't actually intend to put these disreputable naked corpses into the same room where our casino members are laid out!" he stormed.

"What do you mean, naked bodies?" I roared at him, not realizing right away that he referred to the fact that they were not encased. "Coffins or not," I went on, "one corpse is as good as another. Go on," I urged the driver and his men, "bring them all in and then carry them upstairs."

Salvadini remonstrated: "You will find out yourself that there is simply no room upstairs," he protested.

"We shall see," I replied.

The sixteen bodies had been deposited in the lobby and the men were about to carry them upstairs when Salvadini took his last desperate stand. He planted himself with outstretched arms in front of the stair and cried, "Only over my dead body."

"All right, if that's the way you want it," I said, and shoved him aside. He screeched after the men who were climbing the stairs: "Under protest, under protest!"

I went upstairs and he followed me closely, muttering curses under his breath.

The banquet hall, where on the evening of our arrival

the town officials and officers had fraternized so warmly, had been converted into a morgue. But what a morgue! No crowded sordidness here, as in other morgues. The whole atmosphere was one of refinement. The place looked more like a reception hall in an expensive rest home, with ample space around every coffin. And how solid, elegant and costly everything was. The silver candelabra, the damask covers and so on. There had been no pinching of pennies here; everything was first-class.

I was just pondering how lavishly the rich were treating their dead when I heard Salvadini's voice: "Now you'll admit yourself that there's no room to spare."

"On the contrary. There is plenty of room," I retorted. "We need only to move the coffins a little closer together and we'll be able to squeeze in another truckload if necessary."

"It's an outrage," protested Salvadini. "These gentlemen have generously supported the casino to their last breath. They have earned the right to enjoy their accustomed privacy."

"Privacy for dead men in coffins," I scoffed, and directed the truck men to get done with their job.

From the casino I went to headquarters and took over the men, trucks and stretchers which the army placed at my disposal. I thanked Mannsteufel's adjutant for supplying me with what I needed and, as a man of character, I also put in a few casual words on the excellent quality of Dingda's wares.

After having made a brief rallying speech to my crew to arouse a true *esprit de corpse* we stopped by at Dingda's to pick up the coffins and then went on to the school to clean up the mess. By the time it grew dark we had done a full day's work and had earned a night's rest.

When I went to bed in the room headquarters had as-

signed me I fell asleep immediately. Toward morning I awoke in a cold sweat, startled by an eerie laughter which I had heard in my dream. I remembered having seen Bertram who had greeted me with his jovial laughter, but suddenly his conviviality changed into Barnabas' wild hilarity as he bent over my bed shaking me vigorously.

I jumped up and decided to find out what had happened to my old pal Barnabas, the only buddy from way back on the hill who was still around. Before starting on my rounds I inquired at headquarters and was shocked to learn that Barnabas had been transferred to the insane asylum. I pleaded his case with Mannsteufel's adjutant but was brushed aside. As it turned out they could not release him even if they wanted to. The prestige of the army was at stake. In defiance of the commander's express wishes, Barnabas had dug up the mayor in the Mashinka and was about to transfer his body into town. When he was apprehended and called to account he had answered with a hysterical salvo of laughter. I had to give up on him for the time being.

We labored all morning long carting off corpses from the Town Hall and the Castle Hospital. We had barely a moment to choke down a bite at noon when we were summoned to remove the dead from the Old Age Home and the Brewery Hospital.

The epidemic raced through town like a conflagration that has got out of hand. It no longer contented itself with covering greater and greater stretches of town territory from one day to the next. It took enormous leaps from hour to hour. Since all the emergency hospitals were filled to the rafters, an increasing number of people were left to die in their own homes. That meant that we also had to rush back and forth to private houses scattered here and there throughout the city.

A member of the flying disinfection patrol had coined the expression, "It's burning," in reference to houses and

districts which were ablaze with infection. From dawn to dusk the words rang in our ears: "It's burning here, it's burning there, in the second house on Ulitz Street, on the north side of Tar Square, all of Heaven's Gate Lane." Day in, day out, we were busy removing the "ashes," as the disease victims were being called.

Luckily Dingda did not fail me. Although the demand was staggering he supplied me with all the coffins I needed. Uncle Zucki and the other members of his clan had come through with their shipments. During one of the pickups at his warchouse I congratulated Dingda on having a business based on family solidarity. He winked at me, muttering under his breath: "Glad you see the point. Remember, Adam, my offer still stands. Don't forget Thursday night for the gala reunion."

He need not have reminded me, for with the gruesome job on my hands, I was really looking forward to some divertisement.

XIV

Reunion

I've come a few minutes early so that we can discuss some urgent business," I explained to Dingda upon arrival.

"Oh no, not today, my friend!" Dingda replied. "This evening we want to forget all these business troubles and just enjoy ourselves as though we hadn't a care in the world. It's a unique occasion, after all, really like a blessing from on high, that along with our reunion, we are going to have a wedding."

"What's this you say? Whose wedding?" I asked in astonishment.

"Why, don't you know about it? Didn't the Humperdingers tell you?"

"No. I haven't seen them since day before yesterday. Who is getting married?"

"Our Malva, of course."

"Why, how wonderful. Did Philip get a furlough after all?"

"No, not exactly that. But Humperdinger and the professor managed to wheedle permission for a proxy wedding. And you know, everything has been turning out so well in all respects these past few days that the official permission

from the army reached us yesterday, just in time."

"Who is going to play the part of the bridegroom?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to tell you that. We've agreed with the Humperdingers that it's to be a surprise for everybody. Come along and see what we've done here," he added, leading me into the living room.

The room was brilliantly illuminated, the walls and chandeliers decorated with crepe-paper streamers, garlands and waxen flowers—roses, tulips and carnations. "Well, how do you like it?" Dingda said proudly.

"A regular florist's shop," I exclaimed in admiration.

"Isn't it, though? It was a wonderful idea of Rebecca's to snip the wax flowers from the funeral wreaths we still have in stock and use them for decorations."

"And how effectively she has arranged everything," I said.

"Yes, everything my Rebecca does, she does well," Dingda agreed. He glanced at his watch. "I only hope the Humperdingers will be along soon to give us a hand. We'll need at least another half-hour to get everything ready. After all, it's no cinch to arrange a party like this, especially in times when everything is coming to an—— Damn it all," he interrupted himself, "I promised Rebecca that I wouldn't say that tonight. Rotten habit."

The doorbell rang. "That must be the Humperdingers now," Dingda exclaimed, rushing to the door. Ludmilla and Humperdinger and Professor Drish, their arms laden with packages, entered.

"Sorry we're late," Ludmilla apologized. "We had to wait till Hump's baking was done."

"Why, where have you been, Adam?" the professor asked me. "I looked everywhere for you, at the morgue and at the cemeteries, but I couldn't locate you anywhere."

"How do you like the decorations—aren't they gorgeous?" Ludmilla said to me. She handed Dingda a number of pack-

ages. "This one is for the kitchen," she said, "and these are the wedding presents." She put them down on a large damask-covered table which stood against the wall. "Why the long face, Adam?"

"I feel awkward because I didn't bring anything—I didn't know about the wedding."

"Don't worry about that—no one expects a soldier to be giving wedding presents," Ludmilla reassured me, beginning to arrange the packages on the table. "If it really bothers you, Hump will let you have one of our packages so you can feel at ease."

"Which one?" Humperdinger asked.

"It doesn't matter. Any one of them."

"Here, write your name on it." Humperdinger pushed one of the packages across the table to me.

"I'm sorry to rush you, but we won't be done in time unless we hurry," Dingda said. The bell rang once more. "There, you see, people are starting to come. Adam, would you be so kind as to receive the guests and entertain them for a little, while we attend to the preparations?"

The lard dealer and his wife Katerina entered. He was carrying an enormous parcel; she had a pug dog tucked under her arm. It was amusing to see how the long years of marriage had made husband and wife resemble each other. Both had the same well-stuffed figures, and Katerina's face seemed cut out of the same pattern as Hugo's round, moon-like countenance—the sole difference being that his moon was clouded over, while hers gleamed forth as on a brilliant night.

"It is such a pleasure to meet you at last, after all Hugo has told us about you," I said in greeting. "I suppose this is your famous Fatty." I nodded at the dog.

"Right you are," the lard dealer declared. "Dingda thought we should bring her along. There'll be room for her somewhere, I imagine. Anyhow, Katerina wouldn't have

a moment's peace if she were to keep thinking of her alone at home all evening. We won't make a nuisance of ourselves, will we, Fatty?"

"She's the best dog in the world," Katerina said fondly. "Her temperament is just like my Hugo's."

The next person to arrive was Mrs. Moffet, followed by a frail lady of advanced years. I bowed.

"I would like to introduce you to my mother-in-law," Mrs. Moffet said.

"Is this the army gentleman, the commissioner you've told me about?" the old lady quavered.

"Of course, who else?" Mrs. Moffet snapped impatiently. She turned away and struck up a conversation with Katerina. "We've run into each other at the grocery, haven't we?" she said. "And this other little guest as well. How nice to meet you and Fatty socially."

I had scarcely exchanged a few words with Mrs. Moffet senior before I realized how little trust one can place in the judgments of daughters-in-law on their mothers-in-law. Certainly you did not meet such a refined and charming person every day in the week.

"My, what a beautiful sight," Katerina exclaimed as we entered the living room. "They look exactly like real flowers."

"Oh, come, it's easy to see they're made of wax," Hugo protested.

"Will you ever learn to take a less critical view?" Katerina reproved him. "If a person is really enjoying himself, wax flowers look just like real ones. Am I right, Adam?"

"Absolutely."

They put down their packages. "Who of us would have thought we'd ever be meeting for Malva's wedding, while we were locked up in the Silver Hall," the lard dealer said to Mrs. Moffet.

"I couldn't believe my ears when Ludmilla telephoned me this morning," Mrs. Moffet replied. "Has any of you the

slightest idea how these proxy marriages are handled? And who is going to represent the bridegroom?"

The bell rang again, and I went to open the door. Madam President appeared with her Bertram.

"How good to see you here," Katerina trilled. "Wasn't it nice of Mr. Dingda to invite us all to this reunion?"

"We were just wondering who the proxy bridegroom is going to be," Mrs. Moffet said. "Gertrude, have you any idea?"

"No, I wasn't able to worm it out of Ludmilla," Madam President replied.

Meanwhile the gray lady and Angela arrived, and promptly joined in the guessing game. But no one could deduce who the bridegroom was to be.

Angela looked sharply at me. "Maybe it's going to be you," she teased.

"What a wild idea, Angela," Madam President blurted out. "Of course I don't want to say anything against Adam, he's a good-looking young man, but it would be out of the question for someone in charge of the dead to represent the bridegroom."

"What's that, in charge of the dead?" Angela exclaimed in astonishment. "Is he working for Dingda?"

"No, he's still in the army. But didn't you know Adam has been promoted? He's Commissioner of Deceased Persons now."

"No, I didn't know, and I had no idea the dead needed a commissioner, not to speak of a live one. Anyway, congratulations," she said, shaking hands with me.

"I can scarcely wait to see Linda and Timmy," Madam President said. "Ludmilla tells me the two children will be flower girl and page at the wedding."

"Perhaps they're here now," I said as the bell rang again. I hastened to the door. It was Mr. Ginzele, accompanied by a servant carrying a case of wine.

"Always large-handed, our Mr. Ginzele," Mrs. Moffet

remarked as the servant staggered off with his load into the kitchen. "I imagine things will be rather gay tonight."

"What a pity my poor son Albert cannot be with us," old Mrs. Moffet sighed.

"Oh, Mother, don't start that again," Mrs. Moffet rebuked her. "I've told you a hundred times over that I don't want to be reminded of him day and night."

"Of course, my child, forgive me," old Mrs. Moffet murmured timidly.

"Where can Mrs. Dolbin and the children be?" Madam President broke the constrained silence.

"Gertrude, this is going too far. You can't take Mrs. Dolbin's children under your wing too," Bertram remonstrated. "Sometimes I really do not understand you."

"Of course you don't understand me. You just don't know what those children meant to us when we were all in the Silver Hall."

The next arrival was the snub-nosed blonde, and immediately after her came Mrs. Dolbin and the children.

"Linda, Timmy!" everyone cried. "You certainly were not exaggerating, Mrs. Dolbin. What perfectly lovely children! You have every right to be proud of them."

"Our flower girl looks like a little princess."

"And what an enchanting dress."

"I'm sure your mama made it herself."

"No doubt about it."

"And that sailor suit—oh, I could eat him up."

"How old are you, Timmy?"

"Answer Madam President, children," Mrs. Dolbin said. "The boy is seven, and Linda six."

The children, intimidated by all the fuss, hid their faces in their mother's skirt. Neither coaxing nor urging could them out.

Suddenly Timmy caught sight of the dog. He nudged Linda, and both children made a dash for Katerina.

"What's the dog's name?" Timmy asked.

"Fatty."

"Boy or girl?"

"A little girl."

"Can I hold her?" Linda demanded.

"First say how do you do to all the ladies and gentlemen," the children's mother admonished.

Madam President held out her hand to Linda. "Linda," Mrs. Dolbin prompted, "shake hands like a good girl and show us a nice curtsey."

Linda pretended not to hear. "Does she bite?"

"No, Fatty is a well-brought-up little dog."

"Timmy, Linda," their mother implored, "what is everybody going to think of you?"

"Come, Mrs. Dolbin, don't let it bother you," Madam President placated her. "To children dogs are more important than people. My boys were just the same."

"Wow-wow . . ." Timmy barked to strike up a friendship with Fatty. When the dog did not react, he asked, "Can't Fatty bark?"

"Oh, certainly. But Fatty is a good dog and knows how to behave when she's visiting," Katerina simpered.

"Tell her to bark, I want to hear her bark."

"Bark, Fatty." The dog barked. "Stop!" Fatty fell silent. The children smiled blissfully at each other.

"Can Fatty do other tricks?" Linda wanted to know.

"I should think so!" the lard dealer replied with proprietary pride. He set the dog down on the floor. "Fatty, sit! Fatty, beg! Fatty, roll over! Fatty, gimme your paw. Now give a paw to Madam President." Fatty obediently gave her paw to everyone in turn, whereupon Timmy and Linda likewise shook hands all around.

"That's fine. Now say hello to everyone," their mother prompted.

"Fatty didn't say hello," Timmy retorted.

"What a precious little darling," Madam President exclaimed. She bent down to take Timmy into her arms.

"Let me go!"

"Not until you give me a kiss."

"Do you want a fight?" Timmy challenged, driving a small fist into her breast.

"Ouch!" Gertrude exclaimed in surprise. "What a little savage!"

Mrs. Dolbin was beside herself. "I can't imagine what has got into these children today," she wailed. "Timmy, you apologize to Madam President at once."

Timmy stood in sulky silence.

"If you don't obey at once and don't show better manners, I'll send you both home," their mother threatened them. Whereupon Timmy and Linda began to bawl, and the dog joined his yapping to their yammering.

"Fatty, stop that!" the lard dealer commanded. Fatty hung her head in shame, and fell silent. The children instantly stopped crying.

"Now show that you are well brought up too, and say how do you do to everybody," their mother pleaded.

The children obeyed. Their heads turned toward Fatty, their eyes fixed upon the dog, they went the rounds: "How do you do, Madam President. How do you do, Mr. Ginzele. How do you do, Miss Angela. . . . Why is Fatty tilting her head?" Linda interrupted herself, turning to Katerina.

"Come here, I'll tell you." Katerina whispered something into Linda's ear.

"I have to go too," Linda cried, and at once Timmy chimed in: "Me, too."

"Leave it to me, I'll walk Fatty," I said to Katerina.

"We want to go along," the children shouted.

"No, first . . ."

"Mama, I've got to hurry," Linda wailed, wriggling.

"Oh, how darling children are," Madam President chirruped.

"Do let them go," everyone urged Mrs. Dolbin.

"I'll bring them back to you all in one piece," I assured her.

"All right," she consented at last. "But promise to be good."

"Yes, yes," the children screamed, clinging to me. "I like you," Timmy said as we started out. "Honest."

"You're the nicest soldier I know," Linda flattered me. She pressed close to me. "When I'm grown up, I want to marry a soldier like you."

After Fatty had done her business, I found it not so easy to lead the children back into the house. Timmy wanted to play war. He lifted Fatty and called out to me, "You and Linda are the enemy. Bang, bang!"

"Now now," I fended him off. "We promised your mother to go right back. Some other time."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

No sooner were we back in the undertaker's house than the bell rang again. Eve, accompanied by Violetta, stood on the threshold. As soon as we caught sight of one another, we exclaimed simultaneously, "Adam!" "Eve!" I held out my arms to her, but Linda ran between us. "Did you bring the snake?" she asked.

Laughing, Eve shook her head. "I haven't any snake."

"Oh, yes you have. It's in there. I can hear it rattling." Linda pointed to the box in Eve's hand. "Won't you show it to us?" And the two children began scrambling all over Eve, trying to snatch the box from her hand. To fend them off, Eve ran to the back of the store, followed by the children, with Fatty joining in the chase. Suddenly Eve vanished behind the coffins. The children looked around in perplexity until Fatty, smelling out Eve's hiding place, began to bark. The children ran in the direction the dog was pointing, but by then Eve had escaped again and was hidden behind another rack of coffins.

"Catch her, catch her, Fatty," they shrieked, racing behind the dog.

The shouts and laughter drew the guests from the living room into the coffin showroom. Even Mr. Dingda came.

"Timmy, Linda, stop that at once," Mrs. Dolbin called.

"Eve, enough, enough," Violetta cried.

"Fatty, down!" the lard dealer commanded.

Only Fatty obeyed.

"No, really, this is going too far," Mrs. Moffet remarked.

"Why, let them have their fun," Angela said. "I'm sure you don't mind, do you, Mr. Dingda?" she asked the host.

Although Dingda was plainly nervous, he forced himself to reply politely, "Of course not."

Meanwhile Eve had hidden the box.

"Where is it?" the children asked.

"Find it."

They ran here and there, while Eve called out: "Hot! Cold! Warm!"

"What a child Eve is after all," Violetta remarked.

Yes, she surely is a child—the only girl for me, I thought.

Bertram came up to me. "May I ask you to introduce me to the pretty young lady?" he said.

"Miss Violetta—Mr. Bertram."

"Delighted to meet you," Bertram said, bowing gallantly. "Are you a Drohitzer?"

"Of course," Violetta said.

"How is it that I have never seen you before?" Bertram wondered.

Madam President drew him aside. "Don't ask such stupid and tactless questions," she whispered.

Then the girls from the Silver Hall arrived in their finery. However, they had draped chiffon scarves and lace shawls so skillfully over the plunging necklines of their bordello dresses that their breasts and arms were decently concealed.

"Time out," Eve called when she caught sight of the

girls. "Linda, Timmy, come, I want to introduce you to my friends."

The children followed her obediently. "This is Aunt Tamara, Aunt Lolo, Aunt Mizzi, Aunt Griselda . . ."

"Mama," Linda appealed to her mother, "do other kids have so many aunts, too?"

"I imagined them as being altogether different," I heard old Mrs. Moffet whispering to Katerina behind me.

"I really don't know how to act toward such persons," Katerina whispered back.

"My friends, may I ask you to come in now." Mr. Dingda invited the guests to follow him.

"What about Fatty?" Katerina asked.

"Adam will fix up a place for her to sleep," Dingda said.

"Mama, please let us stay and see where Fatty is going to sleep," begged the children.

Mrs. Dolbin nodded her consent, and I signed to Eve to stay behind. "Come, I'll show you where Fatty is going to take her nap," I said to the children, and led them into the room where Dingda had stored the luxury coffins for his special customers. There I deposited Fatty. "Now, let's go."

"Uncle Adam." Timmy clutched my sleeve. "Won't Fatty be scared here?"

"Why should she be?"

"Suppose a ghost comes out of a coffin all of a sudden?"

"Yes, Uncle Adam," Linda seconded her brother. "I'd be scared, too."

"But there aren't any dead people in the coffins. These coffins are empty," I said.

"I don't believe it."

"I wouldn't tell you anything that wasn't so."

"Then open one up and show us that nobody is inside."

I lifted a lid. "Now, quite empty. And this one too. That's how they all are. But now hurry back. We promised your mama."

"Aren't children simply adorable? You know, Adam, it's my dearest wish to have lots of children," Eve said, throwing me a love-stricken look. "How do you feel about it, Adam?"

"I've never really given it a thought. But now come and tell me about yourself. Poor girl, how much you must have gone through! Your poor mother's death. . . . And what are you doing nowadays?"

"Let's go to the back room where we'll be undisturbed," she suggested.

"Now tell me everything," I urged her, but she closed my mouth with a kiss which lasted longer and longer and might never have ended if Timmy had not crept into the room and suddenly jumped up like a jack-in-the-box from behind one of the coffins, chanting: "Peek-a-boo, I see you!"

"You little devil, how dare you!" Eve gasped, laughing.

"I wanted to see what you were going to do with the snake," Timmy said.

"Timmy, Timmy!" Mrs. Dolbin rushed in and led him back into the living room.

But I had no chance to speak to Eve, for the next moment Malva appeared, the train of her bridal dress looped over her arm, accompanied by an elderly lady of aristocratic air, with a wasplike waist and sharply angular features, who looked around disapprovingly.

"Malva, dearest, I'm so inexpressibly happy for you," Eve greeted her.

"Yes, I wish you all the happiness in the world," I said.

"I know that, Adam," she replied, letting her train drop and throwing her arms around me. Then she turned to the lady with her. "Eve, you already know *Maman*, and this is Adam Ember from the Silver Hall. My mother, Madame de Beaujoin."

"Adam, the guard?" her mother inquired.

"Yes, the guard," Malva smiled. "But a true friend and a fine fellow. There's not another guard like him in the world."

"*Enchantée,*" *Maman* nodded coolly. The tone makes the music—the way she said it sounded more like: "To hell with you."

It was simply incredible that this supercilious, Frenchified wasp could be the mother of warm-hearted, affectionate Malva. Perhaps Malva was her adopted daughter, I thought.

Malva tried to evoke a little warmth from her mother. "You have no idea, *Maman,*" she said, "what would have become of all of us in the Silver Hall if we hadn't had Adam. Right, Eve? And how are the two of you getting along? I've been hoping that you too would soon . . ."

"*Écoute, chérie,*" the wasp interrupted. "I think we had better go in now."

"Do you think that some day we too . . . ?" Eve whispered to me as we followed them.

"Would you like that?" I whispered back.

"Would you?"

We squeezed hands by way of answer.

The rest of the party gave the bride a veritable ovation. Everyone thronged around Malva, showering congratulations upon her. In vain Ludmilla reminded them: "Hey, folks, take it easy, have some consideration for her in her condition."

"Yes, let her be," Dingda protested. "Let her be, or there'll be nothing left of her for the wedding."

At last Timmy, who had forced his way through to Malva, called out, "Make room, I've got to hold her train." This caused considerable laughter, and the greetings began to subside—to be immediately followed by a barrage of questions.

"Malva, where is the bridegroom? Who is he?" everyone began asking at once. And the curiosity mounted to a pitch when Dingda announced, "Now let us begin." He instructed the company to form a semicircle. With Humperdinger's assistance he pushed a table to the center of the room. The professor placed a pen and inkwell on the table. Ludmilla

handed Malva a bridal bouquet of violets and brier roses, and placed a basket of lilies of the valley in Linda's hand. In a few minutes everything was ready for the ceremony.

"Only the bridegroom is missing," Angela said. "Ludmilla, don't torture us. Who is he?"

"Just be patient a little longer. You'll be seeing him in a minute."

The budget director had stepped up to the table and spread his papers out on it. "There. And now, Mr. Dingda, will you kindly bring the gentleman in."

Dingda vanished, and returned in a moment. "Here he is," he announced. And then the grand surprise appeared. In stepped Rogemund, dressed in a cutaway and starched shirt, with a white carnation in his buttonhole.

"Impossible!" the others exclaimed. Our surprise was all the greater because no one had thought of Rogemund, although he was so obvious a choice.

"We should have realized that he was the only one of the gang who was absent."

"Well, not exactly the only one. Kalabas and Grimbam are missing, too. But of course we might have thought of him."

While such whispering was going on, Rogemund took his place beside Malva.

Dingda hopped up to the table. "My friends, may I have your attention for a moment?" he began, and while everyone listened in suspense, he continued to chirrup away: "First of all I believe I speak in the name of all of us here when I express my thanks to our dear friends, the Humperdingers and Professor Drish, for their indefatigable efforts in obtaining permission for this wedding. We are also greatly obligated to our budget director, who as senior official of the municipal government has assumed the functions of a justice of the peace and will see to the legal formalities. Because of my peculiar professional background, I

unfortunately lack the gift to find appropriate words for such joyful occasions as this one. I shall therefore confine myself to a few practical remarks to explain why we had to wait until this morning, until virtually the last minute, before passing on the glad news which has made this a double celebration.

"Once it was plain that we were not going to obtain a leave for Philip," Dingda continued, "we set our sights on at least a proxy marriage, for which of course Philip's written signature would be necessary. That was by no means easy to secure, what with the present precarious communications between the lines and home front. To our delight, that signature finally arrived last night. I trust that you will agree that we could have chosen no better representative for Philip than our esteemed friend Rogemund. Mr. Ginzele has had the kindness to be best man. My Rebecca is the bridesmaid, and as you already know, Linda is the flower girl and Timmy the page. May I now request the contractual parties to step forward, so that Mr. Budget Director can begin the civil ceremony."

All of us who had been quarantined in the Silver Hall had long ago made Malva's problems our own. The ladies in particular felt them as intimately as though they themselves were facing the disgrace of bringing an illegitimate child into the world. For all of us, therefore, the legalization of Malva's affair evoked the strongest emotion. The ladies had their handkerchiefs ready in their hands to dry their tears of joy. But they did not seem likely to use them, for curiosity was stronger than sentiment. The married women especially, who at their weddings had stood opposite their proper grooms, with whom they were afterward to spend the wedding night, watched with bated breath this ceremony whose wedding night had already taken place. Moreover, Rogemund identified so well with his role that he beamed infatuated looks at Malva and pronounced his "I

do" with a quiver in his voice, as though he were the actual bridegroom. Even Malva seemed to find difficulty in distinguishing between the proxy and the real thing.

The handkerchiefs nervously gripped in clenched hands might have remained altogether unused had not the Silver Hall girls, for whom a wedding represented an unfulfilled dream, begun to sob. And since weeping is as contagious as laughter, all the ladies of Drohitz except Madame de Beaujoin promptly began pouring forth streams of tears.

As soon as the ceremony was over, everyone clustered around Malva to congratulate her. The Silver Hall girls bombarded her with questions about how it felt to be married, so that we others had to stand in line waiting our turn. "Looks like our co-operative store ten minutes before opening time," the lard dealer remarked.

"Well, you are a fine one," Angela said to Mr. Ginzele while we were waiting to offer our felicitations. "I wouldn't have thought you could be so sly. You knew all about it from the start, and listened to the rest of us guessing without saying a word. What a hypocrite he is, isn't he, Adam?"

"Why hypocrite? Just a gentleman who knows how to keep a secret."

"Just notice the haughty way Madame de Beaujoin is acting. '*Merci, merci.*' She hasn't said a cordial word to anyone," the women behind me whispered.

"Thinks she's somebody special."

"What has she to be so stuck-up about, I'd like to know?"

"Her title, I suppose."

"*De, de,* nothing in front and nothing behind—it's just ridiculous! If it weren't for Malva, I'd tell her so to her face."

"Ludmilla," the snub-nosed girl called, "can't you speed them up a little? We've been waiting forever to do our congratulating."

"Listen, kids, give the others a chance," Ludmilla placated the girls. "You'll have Malva all evening, after all. But be

quick about it," she said to the townsfolk. "We want her to get to unpacking her presents."

"Oh, how you are spoiling me—what heaps of wedding presents!" Malva exclaimed, going up to the table piled high with packages. "I don't know which to open first."

"The bridegroom's, of course," Ludmilla said, pointing to Rogemund's huge parcel.

Malva took her time opening it. Baby oil, talcum, absorbent cotton, a teething ring, six bottles and a dozen nipples emerged from the wrappings. "How kind and thoughtful, Rogemund," Malva cooed.

"I wanted to bring you something you could really use," Rogemund replied.

"I must give you a kiss for it," Malva said.

The other presents were no less practical and thoughtful. The package from the lard dealer and Katerina contained baby food: puréed meat, vegetables and apple sauce, evaporated milk and an assortment of cereals. "And a sheaf of ration stamps besides," Malva exclaimed. "You're so very generous!"

"Your little Philip will certainly be well provided for," Madam President remarked.

"Why, look at these wonderful things," Malva cried as she opened package after package from the Silver Hall girls and held up booties, jackets, caps and bibs. "Tell me, how could you possibly make all these things in such a short time?" she asked. "Do you have goblins working for you?"

"No mystery to it," Griselda answered. "Ever since Tamara predicted from the cards that you'd be having little Philip, we've spent all our free time working on baby things."

While Malva started unwrapping Rebecca's package, Dingda and Humperdinger pushed the "ceremonial table" out of the room. Mrs. Dolbin rushed toward Dingda as he

returned. "I can't find my present anywhere. The man delivered it, didn't he?"

"Don't get excited, Mrs. Dolbin, there was just no room for it. We're bringing it in this very moment. . . . Here it is now," he said, as two of his pallbearers came in carrying a heavy box between them.

"What in the world can that be?" several persons exclaimed.

While Dingda's men were untying the cord and stripping off the heavy wrapping paper, Malva held up Rebecca's presents so that everyone could admire them: a silver spoon and silver cup. "How precious, how elegant!" the ladies chirruped.

I was standing near Madam President and overheard a conversation between Mrs. Moffet and Katerina behind me.

"How do you like Rebecca?"

"I had no idea Dingda had such a pretty daughter."

"Pretty, and a real jewel. It will be a lucky man who marries her."

"And think of the dowry—Dingda's business is a pretty good thing these days."

"Rogemund wouldn't be the worst husband for her. Did you notice how well he carried off his part as bridegroom? Made for marriage, I'd say. And a good-looking young fellow besides. What do you think, Gertrude?" Mrs. Moffet turned to Madam President.

"Oh, certainly, if only he wouldn't blink his eyes in that irritating way," Madam President replied. "It positively nauseates me at times. I can think of someone better for Rebecca—him." She nodded in my direction. "And besides, he's in the same business, so to speak. How would that suit you, Adam?"

I smiled constrainedly. Fortunately a head poked through the door and saved me from the necessity of answering. "Is it time yet, Mr. Dingda?" the head asked.

Heaven help me, wasn't that the waiter, Karl? "One moment, please," I excused myself, and sped after him into the kitchen.

"What are you doing here, Karl?"

"I'm working for Mr. Ginzele now. I came here just to help out for today."

"It's great to see you again," I said. "At any rate, this is a happier occasion than our last meeting with Father Jacopo and poor Madame Renoir."

"I'll never forget that," he said in a choked voice. "But I'd better scoot along now."

"We must have a talk later on."

"Yes," he nodded.

I returned to the room just as the pallbearers were lifting Mrs. Dolbin's gift from its carton. A cradle! "Just as I promised in the Silver Hall," Mrs. Dolbin explained modestly.

Deeply moved, Malva embraced her. She was still admiring the cradle, with its frills of light-blue gauze, when Mr. Ginzele took an envelope from the table and handed it to her. "And here is what I promised," he said. It was the life insurance policy for little Philip.

"What a baby shower!" Dingda twittered softly. "From the cradle to the grave."

The Humperdingers' packages of baby utensils were lavish to the point of extravagance. "This one here," said Ludmilla, pointing to another package, "is from Adam."

"You too, Adam?" Malva turned to me. "What can it possibly be?"

I was just as curious as everyone else.

Malva opened the wrappings. Diapers! "Well, imagine. Who would ever have expected Adam to think of that?"

"I never would have," the snub-nosed girl remarked. "You ought to change jobs, Adam, and have a lot of kids instead of fooling around with the dead."

Everyone extolled my thoughtfulness, so much so that I

was on the point of confessing that the present was Ludmilla's. But she signaled me to keep that to myself. And after all, what did it matter?

"And that one is from me, Malva," Madam President said as Malva began opening a box tied with white ribbon.

"Aunt Malva." Linda plucked at the bride's sleeve. "I have to whisper something into your ear."

"Just a moment, darling; first let me see what Madam President has brought."

"It can't wait any longer. You have to hurry."

"Do you want to go again?" Mrs. Dolbin asked.

"No," Linda protested. "I can't tell anybody but Aunt Malva."

Malva stooped, and Linda whispered something into her ear.

"She wants me to open Eve's box first," Malva said. Eve and I burst into laughter. "Where is it?" Malva looked over the table, now covered with wrapping paper.

"Here," Timmy piped, handing the box to her.

"Careful of the snake," Eve called playfully to the children.

Timmy and Linda jumped back. The box rattled ominously as Malva shook it. To everyone's delight, a baby's rattle appeared.

"There, and now I want to see what your package holds," Malva said to Madam President.

"How lovely," everyone murmured as Malva held up a hand-embroidered christening dress.

"It's only a trifle, but it's the most precious thing I have. It was my poor boys' christening dress."

"And you're giving it to me?"

"Yes, for your little Philip."

Malva set about opening the few remaining presents. "*Maman* is always last, of course," Madame de Beaujoin said stiffly, coming over to her.

"But, *Maman*, how could I know which of all the presents is yours?" Malva apologized.

"The poor child really could not have told," Madam President said, trying to soothe Madame de Beaujoin.

"Oh no, it's always the same. It was no different with the baby—I was the last to be told," *Maman* snapped.

Malva opened the package with trembling hands. A punch bowl!

"Oh, what a lovely potty," Linda broke the rather strained silence.

"Silly," Timmy corrected her. "It's a baby bath."

Luckily Karl had uncorked the iced champagne and now started making the rounds with his tray of filled glasses. Everyone drank to Malva's health, to the absent and the expected Philips, and finally to the generous donor of the champagne, Mr. Ginzele.

The guests stood around in small groups, sipping champagne and chatting. Katerina and old Mrs. Moffet took complete possession of the "bridal couple," and the page and flower girl. I stood talking with the budget director and some of the other men; to our right was a group of ladies who eagerly eavesdropped on our conversation.

"Since according to our civil law a marriage is just another type of contract," the budget director said, explaining the legal aspects of a proxy marriage to us, "the parties have the right to be represented by an agent, provided that a formal authorization of the absent contracting parties is presented."

"What I wonder is how it was possible to obtain army approval in the present situation," Bertram said.

"For that you need friends like the Humperdingers who are well thought of at headquarters."

"Quite right," Mr. Ginzele chimed in. "With fresh rolls you could wind the angel Gabriel around your finger these days."

Mr. Dingda, who was being the attentive host and hop-

ping from group to group, came over to us, a champagne glass in hand, trilling in a slightly tipsy voice, "Tiri-li-li-li."

"Just wanted to make sure you were having a good time," he twittered.

"And how!"

"To think that we're having such a jolly wedding celebration here, while outside everything . . ." the lard dealer began.

"Sh!" Dingda checked him, laying a finger on his lips. "Strictly forbidden tonight. Let us drink!" We raised our glasses. "One moment," Mr. Dingda called, noticing that Bertram's glass was empty. "Karl, fill Mr. Bertram's glass."

Bertram threw an interrogative look at his wife. Madam President shook her head vigorously. "You know, Bertram, you must be careful on account of your diabetes."

"Come now, my dear Madam President, on a night like this we can make an exception," Dingda invervened. "Just a drop," he ordered the waiter.

"Cheers!" Everyone touched glasses with Dingda. Trilling, he hopped on to the next group.

If he isn't a transformed bird, I don't know what he is, I thought.

As soon as Madam President had turned back to her group of ladies, Bertram seized his opportunity. Holding his glass covertly behind his back, he had Karl fill it to the brim, and turning aside, swiftly tossed it down.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to be here," Madam President said. "I feel just as if I were celebrating for my own child and grandchild."

"Exactly how I feel," Mrs. Moffet said.

"So do I—all of us, don't we, Angela?"

"All except her real mother. Look how she sits there on the side lines with that sour face of hers."

"I'd like to know what is eating her. Can you figure it out?"

"No. I suppose you have to be a '*de*' something or other to understand such as attitude."

"Gertrude, you know her better than the rest of us. Why don't you ask her what is wrong?"

"Very well, if you think so," Madam President said. She went over to Madame de Beaujoin. "Bianca, isn't it wonderful to see how everyone adores your Malva? Look at that table—I don't think there is another bride in Drohitz who was so heaped with wedding presents. Aren't you pleased?"

"Pleased, indeed!" Madame de Beaujoin replied. "Am I supposed to be pleased when my daughter has a baby shower for her wedding?"

"It's just a matter of adjusting to special circumstances," Madam President snapped. "You certainly are hard to satisfy." She turned ostentatiously away to the group of Silver Hall girls who were standing around Eve. We also joined them.

"We were just saying how Tamara's cards were right in Malva's case," Violetta said.

"I wanted to tell you before, Tamara, that the cards were right about me, too," Angela said. "I have a boarder, girls! A man—I tell you—a real passionate type. If I were to tell you . . ."

At this point Bertram pushed in between Eve and Violetta, clasping his arms lightly around both girls. "May I hear too?"

"Move on," Madam President said commandingly. "This is something just for us who were in the Silver Hall. What a way to behave toward the girls!"

Bertram slunk shamefacedly away.

"Yes," Mrs. Moffet resumed the conversation, "the cards have been right about all of you. How is it, Tamara, that they've failed only in my case?" She gestured toward her mother-in-law.

"The time will come; the cards don't lie," Tamara placated her.

Recalling the prediction for Eve, that she would have many men, I whispered to her, "I hope they're wrong in your case too!"

The door to the dining room opened. "Dinner is served," Karl announced. Rebecca, that jewel of a girl, had arranged everything perfectly; even the seating plan was carefully graded by rank and position. A name card lay beside each setting, and the guests moved around the table finding their places. An extra table had been set for Timmy and Linda in the adjoining room. Lured by the promise that all sorts of surprises awaited them there, they were quickly got out of the way of the grownups.

We sat down. What a spread that was! It was truly a match for the mayor's banquet at the casino. Only a man with as profitable a business as Dingda's could have afforded such an outlay for damask, silver, porcelain and crystal. At the upper end of the table sat the host, with the bride and groom on his left, Madame de Beaujoin on his right. At the lower end of the table Rebecca presided. She had assigned me to the place beside her. Opposite me sat Eve and Bertram.

We had already unfolded our napkins when Karl went up to Mr. Dingda and whispered something to him.

"Why, of course, show him in," Dingda said.

"A late wedding guest?" Violetta inquired. "I wonder who it can be?"

The door opened and the unexpected guest entered. It was Father Jacopo. If it had not been that Karl, in all his waiter's solidity, had ushered him in, I would have thought him a phantom.

His effect upon me was exactly the same as it had been in those strange situations in room zero during the service for

the unknown whore and during the burial through the window. From the first moment a power of consecration emanated from him that transformed our festive table into a church. Everyone rose.

"The Lord has sent me to bring His blessing," he said simply. Producing a crucifix and a prayer book, he laid them on the table, which seemed instantaneously transformed into an altar. No regular church wedding could have been performed more solemnly than this one with a dining table as a provisional altar.

Malva knelt down before Father Jacopo. Rogemund stood for a moment in uncertainty, not knowing whether as a mere proxy bridegroom he had the right to receive the blessing. With the naturalness of a man to whose eye all temporal and earthly imperfections, including this proxy wedding, appeared transfigured in the timeless light of perfection, Father Jacopo beckoned to Rogemund, ordered him to hold out his hand to Malva, spoke a prayer, and blessed the covenant; with the same naturalness he also blessed the fruit of Malva's womb. He laid his hand upon Malva's and Rogemund's heads, and held out the crucifix for them to kiss. Then all the others, with the exception of Dingda, stepped forward to receive the blessing.

"Papa, do go," Rebecca urged her father.

"You know I don't . . ." he objected.

"Then do it for my sake. . . ."

Finally, Dingda, too, received Father Jacopo's blessing. "I hope you will give us the pleasure of staying to dinner," he said, and signed to Karl to set another place for the priest.

Father Jacopo excused himself. He had only come to bless the couple; he must go back at once to the sick and dying who needed comforting.

"Then at least have a glass of champagne," the host urged him.

"No, thank you," Father Jacopo courteously declined.

And like a phantom he vanished again as abruptly as he had come.

"You feel like another person after something like that," the gray lady remarked.

Everyone agreed.

The transforming power of Father Jacopo's presence was even evidenced by Malva's *maman,* who sat relaxed and smiling for the first time all evening.

"You feel easier at heart now, don't you," Madam President said to her.

"*Naturellement,*" Madame de Beaujoin replied. "At least it is now a proper marriage."

"Say what you will about religion, it is a force that gives people a lift," the budget director opined.

"Wasn't it wonderful of Father Jacopo, overburdened as he is, to have even thought about the wedding, and to have taken the time to come," Mrs. Moffet said.

"How did he know about the wedding, anyhow?" Mr. Ginzele asked the Humperdingers. "Did you tell him?"

"Not us."

"Then who did?"

"Perhaps the Blessed Lord himself."

"There is a real man of God for you. Don't you agree, Mr. Dingda?"

"Absolutely! But God forbid that I have another experience like that, or I'd have to start believing in things that I, as a freethinker, have doubted all my life."

"Remember our gay champagne party in the Silver Hall?" Ludmilla said, trying to gloss over the impression Dingda's remark had made on some of the company.

As soon as the Silver Hall was mentioned, Madame de Beaujoin's features stiffened again, and she looked as stony and aloof as ever.

Meanwhile the vichyssoise was served. I found myself in a rather difficult situation. From across the table Eve was

casting affectionate glances at me. As a well-bred young man I felt it my duty to devote myself to the lady at my side, and I could not reply to these looks as warmly as I might have wished. Vexed, Eve began to flirt with Bertram. And Bertram, the champagne and Eve's advances both going to his head, entered into the game only too eagerly.

Until that moment I had not known myself capable of raging jealousy. When Eve, to provoke me, carried on worse and worse, and Bertram kept moving his chair closer to hers, I could hardly sit still. Moreover, Rebecca, consciously or unconsciously, was winding me in the toils of a conversation that grew increasingly more animated.

I was at my wits' end when, fortunately, Madam President noticed how Bertram was carrying on and called to him warningly, "Finish up your soup, Bertram. You're delaying the waiter. And besides, remember, no sweets! You know your diet!"

Bertram understood the implication, and hung his head as meekly as Fatty.

Eve promptly changed her strategy, and called across the table to me, "Remember, Adam, how we first met on the parade ground?"

Now Rebecca gave the dagger a little twist: "I'm so terribly glad to hear from Papa that you intend to enter our firm as a partner."

I was caught in a neat dilemma. At the same time I suddenly felt someone kicking my ankle. "Ouch!" I cried, looking under the table.

"Beg pardon," Bertram said, blushing.

It was not hard to guess that his foot had collided with my shin only by accident. I was familiar with *that* technique, for I had tried it myself with Violetta that first evening in the Silver Hall. A sly rascal, Bertram, I thought to myself. The sweets that are denied him on the table, he tries to attain surreptitiously.

I smiled at the thought. Both Eve and Rebecca thought the smile was directed to them. This contest for my person, and Bertram's pedal flirtation with Violetta, continued while the trout and cucumber salad were served and the roast venison brought in.

In the hierarchy of the animal world Grivan steer may be reckoned superior to venison, but in quality Dingda's roast was not a whit inferior to the mayor's.

"What a huge roast! I'm sure you shot the deer yourself," Katerina said.

"I didn't know you were a hunter," Mr. Ginzele remarked.

"Hunting is a passion with me," Dingda declared. "In my profession it is a relief to see an *animal* dead for a change."

As Commissioner of Deceased Persons, I could sympathize with the sincerity of this remark.

The appearance of the roast venison was the cue for the dinner speeches. The first to rise was the host. He tapped his glass three times with his fork and proposed a toast to all present. For a moment the old Dingda threatened to break out. "Since everything comes to an end," he began, but immediately corrected himself: "I mean, since the epidemic is coming to an end . . ." and painted a hopeful picture of the future that awaited all of us.

Then Rogemund rose and drank the health of the husband whom he had had the honor to represent this evening. Ginzele, ever the gentleman, emptied his glass to the well-being of Madame de Beaujoin, who thanked him with a somewhat chary nod.

Speeches in honor of the living aroused in me, as on another memorable occasion, the urge to toast the dead. And this time, too, my oratory was not without effect.

"Let us empty this glass," I began, "to our friends of the Silver Hall for whom, alas, events took a less happy turn, and who, therefore, could not join us upon this festive oc-

casion. To our unforgettable friend Rappaport, to Lieutenant Waldo, and to our former hostess, Madame Renoir!" Karl broke into sobs and let a tray full of dishes fall to the floor. However, he regained control of himself almost immediately, and began clearing away the shards.

The following speeches took a turn which quickly made us forget the incident. The professor began to speak of his latest discovery, a fact unique in history, he declared: that while all the dignitaries and officials who had remained in Drohitz were dead and buried, we who had been quarantined in the Mashinka as disease suspects had mostly been spared, and were now charged with the historic task of guiding the affairs of the city.

His words impressed everyone, for there is nothing more glorious for ordinary mortals than to learn that their existence has historic significance. Everyone sat erect and solemn-faced, as if posing for a group photograph for posterity. Probably we would all have held this pose indefinitely if Madam President, with her characteristic good sense, had not pointed out the practical consequences of the professor's observation.

"That is all quite right," she said. "But words alone are not enough. If we are really conscious of our historic task, then we must learn above all to live up to it. And that means taking action! I sincerely believe that no one is more obligated to do so than we with our experience. For although the Mashinka was a hard school for us, we learned a good many things in the Silver Hall. We have personally experienced this wartime epidemic, a turning point in the history of our town. Life in Drohitz can no longer continue in the same old rut; it must be radically reformed, must meet the demands of our times!"

There was a burst of applause, and a general outcry of assent and suggestions. "Radical reorganization of the municipal government!" the budget director called out. "Re-

form of the public health organization," the gray lady urged. "Extension of consumer co-operatives," the lard dealer contributed.

"One moment, please," Madam President remonstrated, tapping her fork on the table. "No, my friends, we will get nowhere with everyone talking at once. We must first form an action committee and proceed in an orderly fashion."

Hitherto we had called her Madam President as a matter of courtesy. Now, however, it was more than a title; she had proved herself truly a president.

In a trice the wedding banquet was transformed, under her chairmanship, into a regular committee meeting bristling with all the established rules and procedures. Mrs. Moffet, Jr., was elected vice-president, the budget director treasurer. He looked around questioningly, whereupon Mr. Ginzele promptly drew out his checkbook. The professor was charged with taking the minutes and began circulating a sheet of paper so that the others could pledge contributions. As the paper passed from hand to hand, the members of the action committee received their specific assignments in the reorganization of Drohitz.

"And what about you, Adam?" Madam President asked me.

"I shall do all in my power, with Dingda's help, to clear the city of the dead weight of—of the dead," I offered. "Of course I am only here temporarily, but until the army withdraws . . ."

"Nonsense, nonsense," several of the others protested. "You belong to us. When the war is over you must settle down in our new Drohitz!"

"You will, won't you, Adam?" Rebecca and Eve asked simultaneously.

I nodded, so that both could take my reply as consent to each of them.

"And now for the agenda," Madam President said. "To my mind, the most important prerequisite for successful achievement of reforms is understanding on the part of the population that Drohitz is entering a new age. As president of the Ladies' Aid, an organization which comes into contact with all levels of the population, I can assure you that there is a great deal to do. It is unbelievable, how medieval and reactionary many of our citizens are. Would you think it possible, for example," she went on emphatically, "that even today a large part of the population of Drohitz blames the high mortality in the city not on the nature of the epidemic, but on the dead mayor's unlaid ghost?"

"It seems to me that army headquarters is responsible," old Mrs. Moffet said, "for insisting on burying the mayor in the yard of a house of ill fame, instead of in his family vault."

"That was merely a matter of expediency," her daughter-in-law retorted.

"Since it was done that way," Madam President said, "I really don't see what was so terrible about it. If it did us no harm to live in a brothel for a while, why should it have mattered to our mayor to be buried in such a place? We ladies might perhaps have been guilty of such old-fashioned prejudices before the epidemic, but not after all we have seen and experienced since."

At this point Ludmilla asked for the floor. "Madam President is perfectly right about that, but as she said, words alone are not enough. And so I'd like—" She interrupted herself. "But before I make my motion, I want to make my personal point of view clear. You will all believe that I, a happily married woman, no longer take any personal interest in Mashinka affairs. Of course I have maintained my loyalty for my former colleagues. But the main object of my proposal is to help establish an enlightened and progressive Drohitz. And so I want to ask all of you here whether it is not a crying injustice that girls from the Silver Hall are ostracized like plague vic-

tims by the rest of the citizens and must spend the greater part of their lives behind the ghetto walls of the Mashinka. Why? What is so awful about their occupation? As the professor recently explained to me, it is the oldest of all civilized professions."

The professor nodded affirmatively.

"Think of what would happen to all the unmarried men otherwise," Ludmilla continued. "After all, they need it; everyone needs it. It's essential to health, to orderly government. Since this is so, I cannot see why people look down upon those who render such valuable services, and refuse them the respect accorded to other working people. In short, what I propose is: Down with segregation; equal rights for all women!"

Ludmilla's speech was hailed enthusiastically not only by the girls, but also by all the women who had been temporarily quartered in the Silver Hall.

"Bravo, bravo!" Eve cried, clapping wildly. "Down with segregation. Equality for all woman. Let's unionize! Let's organize!"

Although I consider myself an enlightened young man, and wholeheartedly approved of Ludmilla's motion, I was rather disconcerted to see a girl like Eve, the daughter of a general, taking such an eager interest in this particular subject. She had really gone a bit too far.

At that moment Karl, amid cries of "What a sight, bravo, bravo," brought in a rum baba à la mode, garnished with whipped cream. Two huge portions were dispatched to the children in the adjoining rooms. The guests could not find enough to say in praise of the cake. "Ah, what a flavor. There's nothing in the world that beats a real Humperdinger rum baba!" Everyone smacked his lips, and shoveled in one helping after the other, so absorbed in the pleasure of eating that the plans for a new and reformed Drohitz would have been forgotten if Madam President had not reminded us that the meeting was not yet adjourned.

Mr. Ginzele was appointed chairman of a subcommittee charged with working out a detailed plan for reform of the municipal government. The budget director promised, in his capacity of ranking city official, to see that the committee's decisions were speedily implemented. It was arranged that the members of the action committee would meet every Wednesday at Madam President's house and report on the progress of the program.

"If we succeed in carrying out our program, it will mean far more than merely changing the face of Drohitz; our town will become a model of progress for all the other cities in the nation," Madam President said.

"Yes, indeed, we are on the verge of a great new era," the professor commented.

"And even if it should not be granted us to enjoy the fruits of this new era," Mr. Dingda expatiated, "our children and children's children will."

"Let us drink a glass to the future of Drohitz," Rebecca proposed, blushing.

"Karl, the champagne," the host called.

"Bottoms up!" Everybody drank. Loud barking interrupted the babble of voices.

"What's the matter? Fatty never barks at night," the lard dealer said, listening anxiously.

"Oh, something terrible must have happened to her." Katerina had turned white. "Come, Hugo, quick." She hurried out of the room, followed by the whole action committee, the whole wedding company.

We found Timmy and Linda astride one of the coffins, happily consuming their rum baba and ice cream. Fatty's barking came from the closed coffin. Mrs. Dolbin furiously dragged her little darlings off the coffin; Hugo raised the lid and placed the liberated dog in its mistress' arms. "There she is, Katerina, safe and sound." Katerina snuggled Fatty to her, smiling blissfully.

All of us began to laugh, now that all had turned out well.

But Mrs. Dolbin could not be calmed. The usually gentle and affectionate mother, transformed into a fury, rained merciless slaps upon Timmy and Linda.

"Just you wait," she raged. "Disgracing me like this. I'll never take you anywhere again. And now off you go, right straight home!"

The word "home" sounded a signal to all of us.

"High time we were leaving too."

"I had no idea it was so late."

"The evening has just flown by like a dream."

"Come, do have one more little glass." Dingda attempted to hold his guests.

"Thanks, but we really must be getting along home now."

"Adam, wait just a moment," Rebecca and Eve separately and unitedly urged me.

"Sorry, I can't possibly, I'm on duty. We'll see each other soon," I promised, leaving it unclear which one I was addressing.

"Come again, all the luck in the world, Malva."

"And thanks for a lovely evening, Mr. Dingda."

"A wonderful evening. Really out of this world."

Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!

"Until Wednesday—we'll see each other at the next committee meeting," Madam President called as she left. "Good night, all."

One after the other we set out for home. Each into his own night, into the black night of Drohitz's plague-stricken reality.

XV

Farewell

I hardly expected that the reunion at Dingda's would turn out to be truly a farewell, not only in terms of our intimate circle, but also to the few remnants of joy still left in town.

When I returned the next day to pick up the new consignment from Podol I told Dingda that the number of coffins wasn't nearly enough. I would need more boxes and in a hurry.

He assured me that work in the carpentry shop was coming along at top speed and that by the end of the week his relatives would dig up enough coffins to fill my demands. "You see, Adam," he added, "I am an optimist where my relatives are concerned. On Zucki I can rely as I do on death."

"God grant you are right," I remarked.

"No need to discommode God, Adam. My folks in Podol won't let me down. I'll send word to headquarters as soon as the shipment arrives."

Unfortunately I could not wait that long. In its blind rage the epidemic disregarded all boundaries between military and civilians. It forced its way even into headquarters and raced through the building, mowing down officers as though they were buck privates.

Mannsteufel's adjutant summoned me urgently and commanded that all remaining coffins be requisitioned and transferred immediately to military headquarters. "We can't have any dead people lying around here, understand?" he dismissed me.

I drummed up my men and we drove to Dingda. As he came to greet me I could scarcely believe my eyes: the twittering bird was a broken man.

"I am sorry to disappoint you," he muttered dejectedly. "The shipment from Podol has not yet arrived. In fact I've had no word from Zucki at all. And the shop isn't operating. I've lost three of my best men."

"Sorry to hear it," I said, and then I explained that I had been directed to fetch whatever was left.

"But not the iron reserve I am holding for our personal friends," he exclaimed, paling visibly.

"I am reluctant, of course, to rob our friends of their coffins," I remarked, "But I have to take everything. Orders are orders."

"Yes, I know," he stammered.

As my men removed the last coffin Dinga looked on with tear-brimming eyes. "Who would have thought it?" he sighed sadly, viewing the empty warehouse. Remember how well-stocked we were when you came first to this place? A lifetime of hard work and now—nothing. My poor Rebecca," he sobbed.

Seeing him crushed like this I tried to comfort him: "Come, come, Dingda, don't despair!" and employing his own argument, I added, "Your relatives won't leave you in the ditch. You can rely upon them."

"I hope so," he said rather doubtfully.

"Well, I'll be waiting to hear from you," I remarked as I climbed on the truck. But I realized that the outlook was dim. While we drove back to headquarters I decided that drastic measures had to be taken. I could not risk leaving the

mounting number of corpses without burying them. Much as I dreaded it, I would have to bury the dead uncoffined in mass graves. I tried to convince myself that there was really nothing to get upset about; after all, that was the way I had buried our dead heroes on the hill. Yet somehow I felt this was different. It pained me to dump the people of Drohitz beneath their own home ground.

Since there was no alternative to this plan, I set out alone in search for the right spot. Then I started back to headquarters to sumon my men.

On the way I grew weak from hunger. I had not eaten all day and had visions of a round loaf of rye which grew larger and larger until it blocked my path. I found myself in front of Humperdinger's. As soon as I entered, the delicious fragrance of oven-fresh rye bread struck my nostrils.

"I am glad you have come," Ludmilla greeted me. "Sit down, have a bite." As I was munching away she continued: "Eve wants to see you urgently. She has something to tell you. There was no chance at the reunion. Can you drop in for breakfast, day after tomorrow? I'll arrange it so that the two of you can be by yourselves."

"I am terribly busy right now, but I'll surely make time for Eve. But tell me, what is it all about?" I asked, my curiosity aroused.

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Give me a hint at least," I pleaded.

"Baby, don't pester me. She'll have to tell you herself. We'll expect you Sunday at nine."

"You may count on it."

The mass burials were a trying task. We spent hours and hours, digging and dumping. Still there was always more work to be done. We were in the thick of it when the professor came roaring up in his little car.

"Listen, Ember, you've got to help me out. Things are

moving too fast. I have somehow lost track. Can you give me the exact number of burials? It's for my chapter on the epidemic on the Eastern Front."

I had not the slightest idea how many bodies we had dumped during these last days. So I simply called out "Four hundred and eighty-six"—the first number that came into my head.

Next morning when we were just about to set out again, a messenger brought me the news that an urgent call had come through from Dingda's. I should hurry over immediately. I had scarcely hoped the long-delayed shipment would arrive, and now we tore off to fetch the coffins. I was happy indeed!

The place was hung with swags of black crepe and the floor covered with a broad black runner. Rebecca, her face streaked with tears, came to meet me. She caught my hand and led me to the end of the black runner. There, Dingda, the coffin king of Drohitz, was laid out on a crude wooden platform that served as a bier. A sad sight indeed, like a dead bird that has dropped from a branch onto a plank.

"I can't bear it," Rebecca sobbed. "To think that there isn't a single coffin left for Father."

I felt somehow responsible, although it was not really my fault. In my embarrassment I offered to fetch a priest. But Rebecca declined: "It wouldn't be right," she said. "Father firmly believed that the end here on earth is the end of everything. He did not believe in a hereafter."

"Then let me take care of his burial, at least," I suggested.

"No, I am sorry, but I've promised the pallbearers. They've been associated with Father for many years now. It's a privilege to them. You understand, don't you?"

I nodded silently, not knowing what to say.

"Adam," she whispered, "in remembrance of Father, will you promise to remain my friend?"

"Of course I shall," I said, pressing her hand.

Then I rushed off with my men. I worked furiously to for-

get the whole incident, but I couldn't help thinking that without Dingda, death in Drohitz would never be the same.

No Dingda, no coffins, and soon even the land gave out. I did not know where to bury my dead. All the empty lots were filled to the brim.

I went to Mannsteufel's adjutant to discuss the possibility of having more land appropriated for my purposes. The adjutant, obliging as always, immediately checked with the administrator of requisitioned property. It turned out, however, that there simply was no more land available. My disappointment must have been written large on my face, for the adjutant felt impelled to give me a little pep talk: "We here at headquarters are absolutely confident that in view of all your previous accomplishments you will surely find a solution to this tricky situation."

The trust headquarters placed in me had an electrifying effect. Like a giant searchlight that reaches out into the darkest night and illuminates everything in and out of sight, I suddenly saw the solution laid out before me.

"How about the parade ground where we were received when we entered Drohitz?" I proposed.

The adjutant slapped my shoulder: "Ember," he cried, "you are fabulous. What a glorious idea! Columbus' egg! If anyone deserves the Medal for Meritorious Service, you do."

My chest swelled proudly as though the medal were already adorning it. I arrived on the parade ground in high spirits and inspected the terrain with professional care. I was delighted to find that it met all my expectations—just right for mass graves!

However, my moment of glory was short. No sooner had I discovered this wonderful new graveyard than the epidemic began to deprive me of the hands that shovel the soil, lift the corpses and drop them into the pits. With infamous guile the epidemic set upon my gravediggers and mowed them down,

one after the other, until at last I had only four men left. It was impossible to do the job with such a shortage in manpower. But when I applied for additional helpers at headquarters I was turned down for the irrefutable reason that the epidemic had cut down many of the military men, and those who remained were indispensable for the maintenance of order and discipline.

This confronted me with a situation in which not even a miracle worker could help becoming pessimistic. I already pictured myself some day all alone on the parade ground, with no helpers whatsoever, surrounded by piles of unburied corpses. I was about to leave headquarters in deepest dejection when I ran into Dr. Kapra, who came down the corridor.

"What's the matter, Ember?" he asked, noticing at a glance that something was troubling me. Two officers passed us, and Kapra signaled me to follow him to one of the offices.

I was certainly glad at the chance of having a heart-to-heart talk with the man to whom I owed my promotion.

"*You* are complaining?" he said after I had told him all my predicaments. "What shall *I* say? You are at least dealing with mute, motionless corpses. I am handling patients who wail and writhe day and night, and I am lacking both help and medicine to alleviate their pain. That's the worst for a doctor—to have to stand by helplessly and watch them dying under one's hands."

He cleared his throat and went on: "When I applied for active service, although I am past the draft age, I thought it my God-given duty to aid the victims of war with all my abilities. But I'll be damned if I understand why God lets me continue in the service at a time when all my medical knowledge is worthless." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, as they say, His ways are inscrutable. And yet I wonder why He continues to spare Mannsteufel. To see the innocent perish on all sides while the commander struts around roaring his orders: 'Hold out! Our country's survival is at stake! We

must preserve the core of a new Eastern Army.' It's beyond me."

I nodded agreement. Then we parted and returned to our sad duties; he to his desperate patients, I to my uncoffined corpses.

Eager as I was to meet Eve for breakfast at the Humperdingers'—especially after Ludmilla's mysterious hints—I could not keep my appointment. Everything happened so suddenly that I was not even able to send word to Ludmilla, and my conscience plagued me for having stood them up once again. However, I had no choice in the matter. The fact was that Dr. Kapra had prevailed on Mannsteufel to call an emergency meeting of all military department heads. It was called on short notice, the very morning I was due at Ludmilla's.

When I entered the conference room at headquarters, I found Dr. Kapra, the head of the flying disinfection patrols, the head of military provisions and supplies, and the budget director, who had come as a representative of the municipal government. Mannsteufel himself arrived shortly to listen to our reports on the situation.

Dr. Kapra told of the disastrous conditions in the hospitals, the lack of qualified nurses, the shortage of serum, morphine, needles and syringes; the chief of the disinfection patrols was almost out of disinfectants; and the budget director warned that the last reserves in the municipal treasury had already been exhausted. My report on the shortage in coffins fitted in with the rest.

Mannsteufel took it all in, pacing the floor vigorously, then he stopped in front of us abruptly and bellowed: "We are soldiers and must hold out." That was his sole reaction to our reports.

Dr. Kapra was the only one of us who had the courage to tell the commander bluntly that something more specific had

to be done. "I am afraid," he said, "that if these widespread shortages are permitted to continue, our situation here will become untenable."

"Not another word, please," the commander exclaimed. "We cannot afford defeatism. The Eastern Front, the very nation is at stake. We simply have to hold out!"

There followed a short moment of silence, in which the funeral bells from the cathedral could plainly by heard. Irritated by this intrusion, Mannsteufel beckoned to his adjutant and barked: "See to it that these damned bells are shut up at once! Well, what you you waiting for?" he roared when the adjutant stood somewhat hesitant.

"May I most respectfully call your attention to the fact, sir, that the tolling of funeral bells is an age-old custom of the Church?"

"What do I care about age-old customs! When I give orders the Church has to obey," Mannsteufel stormed.

"Beg your pardon, sir; it is not alone a question of the Church," the adjutant stammered, "but . . . the sensitivity of the populace."

"Rot! Don't give me such nonsense. The populace, indeed!"

"I should like to point out that since yesterday's emergency directive, the people of Drohitz are in a dangerous ferment. Only this morning our men had to be sent out to prevent an open uprising in the Old Town. A new edict of this sort might arouse them even further."

"We'll deal with that rabble. Orders are orders."

The adjutant clicked his heels and left. And then, as though his order to silence the knelling of the death bells had solved the general problem of dying, Mannsteufel dismissed us.

"Well, there you have it. Now you have seen for yourself," Kapra remarked.

* * *

No sooner had Mannsteufel ordered the funeral bells to be silenced than Death retaliated. Incensed by the presumptuous denial of an age-old tribute to its power, Death asserted its might by extending its domain. The epidemic gripped peasants on nearby farms, assailed hired hands in the fields and shepherds in the pastures. Whole villages were stricken and the victims poured into Drohitz. The military government was baffled that in spite of all the precautionary measures to isolate the town from the rest of the operational terrain, the epidemic had managed to spread to the countryside.

The first hint as to what was up came from the disinfection patrol which, in the course of its duties, used to burn clothing, bedding and other personal belongings of the deceased. The head of the flying disinfection patrol reported that, of late, his men could find hardly anything worth burning when they entered the stricken quarters. This applied not only to the dwellings of the poor but also to the houses of the rich. It almost seemed as though the inhabitants of Drohitz owned only what they wore on their bodies.

A few days later I was able to supply an additional clue. During the burial of some countryfolk I noticed a man in peasant boots who was wearing a white silk shirt with the initials *L.B.* Investigations showed that the shirt belonged to a retired businessman who had died two days ago. As it turned out, this was not an isolated incident. We came upon peasant women with nylon stockings and the other city fineries. It was obvious that the articles that the disinfection patrol failed to discover in the town houses had found their way to the countryside. There seemed to be a ring at work that seized the belongings of the sick and the dying before the patrol's arrival and sold the contaminated goods to unsuspecting countryfolk, thus spreading the epidemic to the surrounding villages. To stem the tide it was essential to catch the thieves and to apprehend the ringleader who directed these shady operations.

Mannsteufel ordered a thorough investigation. A number of suspects were arrested and questioned. But in spite of third-degree grilling, no confession was forthcoming, and the search for the depot of stolen goods proved fruitless.

I scarcely believed my ears when the next morning the adjutant greeted me with the news: "We've finally found the master mind. By the way, he happened to be a friend of yours."

"Imposible," I exclaimed when he told me that the culprit was the head of the Consumer's Co-operative. The moon-faced Hugo!

"Unfortunately, the scoundrel has escaped his well-deserved punishment," the adjutant remarked. "He hanged himself."

I was suppose to gather corpses in the old part of town, but I decided to make a detour and pick up Hugo first. The Consumer's Co-operative had been sealed and the square in front of it was roped off.

"Vabra," I called to one of the guards, who let me pass and directed me to a shed in back of the store.

As I entered I was greeted with wild howls and barking. Only a dog can mourn his departed master with such woeful abandon. I found Hugo, the cut rope still around his neck, lying on top of a heap of old clothes. His round face shone for the first time with unclouded glee, as though the moon was actually smiling. His widow knelt at his side, dissolved in tears.

"Katerina," I called softly, but she seemed too submerged in grief to take notice. I repeated her name a little louder and she lifted her tear-stained face to me.

"I am so sorry," I stammered. "Believe me, I feel with you. A terrible loss . . . but, in view of the circumstances, we should not begrudge him his rest. Much has been spared him."

She kept on sobbing. "Katerina, please calm yourself," I pleaded.

"How can I calm myself!" she sobbed. "Just look at the poor darling"—she pointed at Fatty—"God knows whether she'll survive the shock."

"Maybe it's best if I remove the body," I proposed, somewhat taken aback by her remark.

"Wait, wait," she shrieked, and pressing Fatty to her she quickly snatched up one of the stolen garments and draped it over Fatty's head to shield her eyes from the gruesome sight of having her master removed.

As I was about to leave with the body, Fatty managed to jump from Katerina's arms. She pursued me to the door and bit me viciously in the calf.

The next morning early, before dawn, I was startled out of sleep by the cry: "It's burning in the Glaci." I went to wake my four men and we roared off toward the Glaci. As we passed headquarters I was amazed to notice that some of the rooms were still brightly illuminated.

On the way through the slums I saw Father Jacopo, standing in front of a one-story house administering the sacraments to a dying man through the window. We wound our way through a tangle of narrow streets, and finally reached the outskirts of Drohitz. There were only a few scattered huts and deserted barracks here. The cobblestone pavement came abruptly to an end; then we were on a dirt road which lost itself in underbrush.

We seemed to have missed our way, and I was on the point of turning back when two headlights glared at us from the underbrush. Behind a group of birches a hospital truck emerged slowly and stopped beside us. A young man in a white smock called out, "Are you looking for the Glaci?"

"Yes," I said. "We got lost somehow."

"No, you didn't," he replied. "It's the first fork on your left."

"Are you just coming from there?" I asked. When he

nodded. I inquired, "How do things stand? Much work?"

"Not for us, just a few burns. But we've left plenty of ashes for you, especially in one house. I don't envy you that."

I thanked him. We turned at the fork and reached the Glaci, which consisted of six houses, most of them run-down cottages. We investigated them carefully but found only a scattering of bodies. This couldn't be all. We branched out in different directions, lighting our ways with flashlights.

"Commissioner"—one of my men came running back after a while—"I think I've found it." He led me to a building at the foot of the wooded slope so concealed behind hedges of evergreens that we had not noticed it as we drove past. Unlike the other houses, this was a well-kept, ample, two-story structure. The beam of my flashlight scurried over the entrance door and illuminated a name plate: "A. B. *Ginzele.*"

"Stop, wait a moment," I called to my helper who was trying to push open the door. I rang the bell as if I were making a courtesy call, and only when nobody answered did we proceed to enter a vestibule with tapestries and hunting trophies. "Hello," I shouted *pro forma,* but there was no reply, and we set directly to work.

I sent my helper to the upper story to search the rooms there. I myself attended to the ground floor. I went down a hallway, opened the first door on my right and switched on the light. I found myself in an elegantly furnished bedroom which was a sight. The unmade bed was a tangle of blankets, sheets and pillows. On the night table I saw lipsticks, powders and jars of cosmetics. Various intimate garments were scattered all over the floor. The former occupant of this room must have been taken on the hospital truck, for there was no one in sight.

It was almost impossible to open the next door. Somthing was blocking it from inside. When I finally succeeded in forcing it open, so that I could squeeze in, I stumbled in the darkness and fell over something soft. I jumped up, groped

for the light switch, and found that I had tripped over a body. I caught my breath; the dead man at my feet was the budget director. Half-dressed in the bed by the wall lay the lifeless form of Lolo.

Ginzele's house! Not a living soul in it. An abandoned bedroom in utter disorder. The budget director and Lolo—their rendezvous cut short by death. How did it all fit together? It was not until I searched the adjoining rooms and discovered the bodies of Tamara and Griselda, who shared a double bed with the two dead gentlemen, that the truth gradually dawned on me. Ginzele's well-hidden hunting lodge was obviously the underground brothel that Ludmilla had mentioned.

When I opened the next door I shrank back with horror. On the couch, Eve, my one and only orchard, was lying—dead. I stood motionless, utterly crushed by grief and remorse, cursing myself for not having taken care of her. I had been unable to keep our date, and now fate had arranged a ghastly meeting!

My tear-blurred eyes examined the room and suddenly my grief gave way to bitter indignation. Good Lord, I thought, what on earth is she doing *here*? Then I knew in a flash why she had insisted on meeting me at all cost. She must have wanted to confess her shame. That's what it was. And Ludmilla hadn't even dared to give me a hint. And to think that this was the girl I had contemplated marrying, this the girl who had had the brazenness to suggest at the reunion that we should raise a flock of children together!

I stood numb, with my thoughts in a whirl, too upset to know where to turn. Sure, I thought, I'd seen her in a brothel before. But the Silver Hall had been a different matter. This must have been a voluntary decision. It was too much to bear.

I heard my helper calling from upstairs. I had to hide Eve somewhere. I didn't want her to be seen here. I noticed a door which apparently led to the dressing room and decided

to stow her away there for the time being. But when I opened the door I saw in one corner of this room the slumped form of a dead man, dressed in overcoat and bowler. The hat had fallen forward, concealing the upper part of his face. I raised his chin and gasped. It was Bertram! "Poor, good, dear Bertram," as Madam President used to say! If he had not been dead already I would have murdered him. To vent my rage I threw his dignified bowler on the floor and trampled it underfoot.

Bertram and Eve—it was simply incomprehensible! Or was it? Hadn't I noticed their shameless flirtation during the dinner at Dingda's? What else could one expect of a girl like that? But it was desperately hard to swallow. I thought of our first meeting at the parade ground, how she had asked my name and how significant it had seemed that mine was Adam, while she called herself Eve. When we'd looked deeply into each other's eyes, it had been like a vow; it was as though we stood in the Garden of Eden. But my Eve's fall was much worse than that of the first Eve. It's not the same to reach for an apple and to succumb to the seductions of a sweet-toothed serpent like Bertram.

But I had to act. Fortunately the room where I had discovered Bertram was a connecting room with doors on two sides. I decided to push Bertram into the adjoining room so as to make space for Eve. As I entered the second room, I discovered Violetta's body. This gave me a sort of relief.

Could I have misjudged Eve? Perhaps Bertram had spent the night with Violetta, and Eve was merely an innocent visitor. After all, poor orphan that she was, where did I expect her to spend the night? Why not close to her best friend Violetta! It was certainly possible, even most probable, wasn't it?

I suddenly saw the reunion table in a different light. True, Eve had been flirting a bit with Bertram, but merely out of jealousy, because I paid too much attention to Rebecca. As

soon as I had disengaged myself from our hostess, Eve had had eyes and ears for me alone, and Bertram had started playing footsie with Violetta.

I returned to Eve's room, and as I looked once again at her innocent face and her childlike body with the pointed ripening plums of her breasts, the last traces of my ugly suspicion vanished. Without a doubt Bertram had come to see Violetta, not Eve. Eve was and remained my one and only true love in this damned war. Come what might, I would see to it that she was not thrown into a mass grave. I would give a decent burial to this slender, childish body that I had never possessed.

While I was hiding her in the dressing room, I heard my helper's voice in the corridor: "Commissioner, Commissioner!" Damn the insolent importunity on the part of subordinates! I heard him pulling open one door after another in his search for me. To forestall his barging in here I hurried out to meet him.

"Well, what's the situation upstairs?" I inquired.

"This joint must have been a fancy house, Commissioner," he said. "It's full of janes and men."

"Many?" I asked.

"Quite a few. How about downstairs?"

"Quite a few, too," I said. "Fetch the others so that we get done with the job quickly."

When my men turned up, I ordered them to assemble the ashes from both floors in the lobby before carrying them outside. I gave them a hand and placed Bertram with the rest, feeling that I was doing Madam President a good turn. With Bertram headed for a mass grave she would never learn where he had spent his last hours and he would live in her memory as "poor, good, dear Bertram." But how miserable I felt about my fine and trusted friends from the Silver Hall!

We loaded the bodies onto the truck and drove to the parade ground, where I instructed my unit to take care of the

burials. While they were busy with the job, I drove back to the hunting lodge to give Eve my personal attention. There was little enough I could do for her, but I decided that she should have a decent funeral. For a moment I had the wild idea of slipping into the cellar at headquarters and stealing one of the military coffins. But I discarded it as too risky. A simple stretcher would have to do for a coffin. I draped it with a clean white sheet and took a few pillows from the house to prop up her head. Then I arranged her clothes and her hair, kissed her two hands and carried her out tenderly. In the measured tempo of a funeral procession, I drove my Eve to her last resting place.

On the way I worried whether I would be able to bury her privately without being noticed by my men. But there was no need for concern. When I reached the parade ground, I found my squad of four stretched out on the ground, sound asleep after all their exertions.

There was no doubt in my mind as to the one and only place worthy of her memory. I chose the spot where she had come running toward me after the mayor's speech, the place where our love had begun, where with looks and a handclasp we had sealed our Adam-and-Eve pact.

I took pick and shovel and set to work. Although of late I had been leaving shoveling to my subordinates, I was still in good trim. Before long the grave was ready and I lowered my orchard into the earth. "Eve," I sobbed, and recalling her fondness for everything military, I placed my soldier's cap upon her breast. Then I closed the grave, wrote Eve's name in the sandy soil with my finger, broke off a few sprigs from a nearby pine tree, and strewed them over the earth. For a while I sat beside the bare mound and stared into the lifting dusk of dawn; my eyes misted with tears, I watched as the day rose out of night like life being resurrected from death.

* * *

I do not know how long I remained there, oblivious to space and time, unknowing whether I sat on the parade ground of Drohitz, or on the verge of an eternal void. Then suddenly I heard a voice: "Senior Commander Mannsteufel is approaching!" Whereupon the void, apprehensive of meeting up with top brass, retreated and left the field to the parade ground.

I sprang to my feet. A detachment of soldiers was forming up on the parade ground; more troops were lined up, according to their branches of the service. I saw the officers pacing off their decimated companies as though for inspection, carefully checking posture, uniform, buttons and caps, so that everything would be in order according to regulations when the commander arrived.

Having just returned from the brink of eternity, I found it rather difficult to take hold of reality. Besides, I had no idea what these early-morning exercises on the parade ground were all about.

While I stood gaping vacantly, the professor came rushing into view. "Commissioner Ember," he called, "I hope I can rely on you to give me the final total after the announcement."

"Of course," I said; "but could you tell me what announcement you are referring to?"

"Senior Commander Mannsteufel's historic announcement, my friend," he called over his shoulder as he raced away.

Meanwhile the whole supply train had driven up. The trucks stood in a neat line all around the edges of the parade ground. Then Kapra appeared with his shrunken entourage. When I caught sight of him I ran over to ask what was up. But before I could open my mouth, he exclaimed, "Where have you left your men? Go and get them quickly. He'll be here in a moment."

I hastily collected my squad and we joined the medical

group. Now the whole Drohitz army stood in readiness. And almost at once the cry rang out: "Attention! *Salute.*"

The senior commander appeared on the parade ground. He held himself as erect as ever, stared into the distance with the air of a field marshal and marched with supreme callousness across a row of mass graves.

Confounded disrespect! I thought, and then I saw him marching straight toward Eve's grave. "Oh, no, you don't," I muttered under my breath, leaped out of line and blocked his way.

"Begging your pardon, Commander—please go no farther, sir."

"How dare you?" he snarled at me, and pushed me aside.

I grasped his sleeve in spite of its stripes and stars, and held him back.

"Let go of me at once, you, you——" he roared.

But I was not to be bullied. As Commissioner of Deceased Persons I alone was in command of all the graves in Drohitz, and I was not inclined to brook interference from anyone. "To this point and no farther," I exclaimed.

"We'll see about that!" he bellowed. He wrenched away from my grasp and with his heavy military boots proceeded across the newly upturned ground beneath which lay my Eve.

I pulled him back and shouted into his face: "Don't you see you're stepping on a grave?"

He halted, murmured something inaudible, then made a snappy left wheel, and leaving the grave to his right marched straight toward the middle of the parade ground. I stooped, indited Eve's name in the sand once again, rearranged the pine sprigs and returned to my place in the ranks.

It was not until I saw Mannsteufel standing there in the middle of the parade ground with beetling brow and that unsheathed saber of a nose that I understood the professor's remark. When I began to feel almost physically, deep within

my bones, the excitement and tension of the troops, of the dawning day, of the trees, the rising sun, I grasped the decisive importance of this historic moment—whatever it was.

"Officers, soldiers, warriors of the victorious Army of the East," Mannsteufel began, each word carefully articulated. "Since the day of our entry into Drohitz when we first assembled here on the parade ground, the supreme, the glorious goal of the Army of the East under my command has been and remains the ultimate annihilation of the enemy, the triumphant termination of this great war, and thus the assurance of a glorious future for our country. Faithful unto death to this noble goal, the council of war, held under my direction last night, has decided in the interest of strategy and for the purpose of regrouping the Army of the East, to transfer our operational terrain to Solopot. Thus there begins a new phase in our heroic offensive. All of you who are assembled here form the core from which there will rise, out of the soil of Solopot, a new Army of the East, whose destiny it is to win the final victory."

When he referred to the core I could not help thinking: Sure enough, but who left the fruit to rot, so that only the core remains?

"The Supreme Command, and indeed the whole nation," the senior commander continued, "is fully confident that in Solopot, as in Drohitz, you will all, to the last man, continue to conduct yourselves as soldiers beyond reproach."

I rubbed my eyes, not to wipe away tears of emotion, but because I could not believe what I saw. For here was Barnabas, of all people, strolling leisurely across the parade ground. How in the world had he managed to break out of the insane asylum, and what devil had led him to turn up here at this worst of all possible moments? God forbid that he notices me, I thought, and tried to hide behind one of my men. But of course he had already spotted me and, sauntering casually on, came straight to me.

"The epidemic which has so viciously assailed the Army of the East in Drohitz," Mannsteufel continued, "has regrettably somewhat delayed our planned offensive. Now, however, the time has come for us to hail the epidemic as our most important ally in this war, an ally that will help us to win a swift and final victory."

With alarm I observed the corners of Barnabas' mouth begin to twitch. I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow and threw him a warning frown. At once his brows contracted; he looked down at the ground and tried to keep control of himself. But as Mannsteufel continued to expatiate on the alliance between the epidemic and the Army of the East, Barnabas' hold on himself grew weaker and weaker.

"In clear recognition of this invaluable assistance, the Supreme Command decided last night to evacuate Drohitz and to leave the disease-stricken city behind as a death trap for the approaching enemy. When the enemy marches into Drohitz, we shall have won our first important victory, which will lead inevitably to our final supremacy. Thus the hour of Drohitz' true greatness has struck at last, the hour for whose coming this patriotic city has yearned, the hour which in the future will cause the name of the city of Drohitz to be inscribed in golden letters in the annals of this great war."

At this point Barnabas could no longer restrain himself. His whole body shaking, he broke into peals of laughter. The senior commander glared in the direction of the disturbance and motioned to have the troublemaker removed. Two medical aides seized Barnabas and led him away. He made no resistance, for he was too weak from laughter.

Somewhat dazedly I listened while the commander announced his plans for the heroic soldiers in the hospitals. As it turned out, these sick heroes would not be left behind, but would be taken aboard a sealed hospital train, which the War Ministry had promised to supply shortly. They would be transported to the hinterland, nursed back to

health and reactivated for further service to their country. My unit was to be attached to Dr. Kapra's medical section, to speed the removal of the sick.

"And now, Drohitz, farewell!" the commander cried into the perfect silence of the troops. Rigid as a granite column, a monument of patriotic resolution, he stood at attention, and might have frozen in his heroic pose forever had it not been for a signal from his adjutant, which induced the core of the Eastern Army to cheer: "Hurrah for victory! Hurrah for our country!" One of the officers intoned the national anthem, and the core became a chorus.

To the strains of the anthem, the troops, led by the commander, marched off the parade ground, on toward Solopot and ever new and more glorious victories. As they marched off a voice called out clearly: "Good riddance!"

"Doesn't that sound like Mayor Gospoda's voice?" Dr. Kapra remarked.

"Yes, it was he," I stated.

"All I said was that it *sounded* like his voice," the doctor corrected me. "You don't expect an enlightened man like myself to believe that he's still around."

"Of course not," I said. "Maybe he's dead and gone, but his voice is still alive."

The doctor removed his borrowed glasses and looked searchingly at me out of his greenish, nearsighted eyes. A faint smile played around the corners of his mouth.

René Fülöp-Miller

Born in 1891 in Caransebes, Hungary—now Romania— René Fülöp-Miller *now lives in Westport, Connecticut. He has lived in eleven countries, studied philosophy, literature, history and the natural sciences at several European universities, worked in psychiatry with Forel, Babinsky and Freud, received a degree in chemistry and pharmacology and awards for his work in these fields, taught—at various universities—Russian civilization, sociology and Renaissance and sevententh-century literature. He now teaches sociology and cultural history at Hunter College in New York. He has been active in practically every field of writing, has written sixteen books published in this country, and many others published in German and French and translated into nineteen languages. His article, "Dostoyevsky's Sacred Disease," was the basis both of Freud's essay "Dostoyevsky and Parricide" and of his introduction to "The Unknown Brothers Karamazov," which Mr. Fülöp-Miller edited as one volume of the posthumous Dostoyevsky editions.*