

The Golem

By

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SLEEP

The moonlight is shining on the foot of my bed, lying there like a large, bright, flat stone.

Whenever the disc of the full moon begins to shrink and its right-hand side starts to wither—like a face approaching old age, in which one cheek becomes hollow and wrinkled first—that is the time when at night I am seized by a dark and agonising restlessness. I am not asleep, nor am I awake, and in my reverie things I have seen mingle with things I have read or heard, like rivers of different colour or clarity meeting.

I had been reading about the life of the Buddha before I went to bed, and one passage kept on running through my mind in a thousand variations, going back to the beginning again and again:

"A crow flew to a stone which looked like a lump of fat, thinking perhaps it had found something good to eat. But when the crow found that it was not good to eat, it flew off. Like the crow that went to the stone, so do we—we, the tempters—leave Gautama, the ascetic, because we have lost our pleasure in him."

And the image of the stone that looked like a lump of fat grew in my mind to enormous dimensions:

I am walking along a dried-up river-bed, picking up smooth pebbles, bluish-grey ones with specks of glittering dust. I rack my brains, but I still have no idea what to do with them. Then I find black ones with patches of sulphurous yellow, like the petrified attempts of a child to form crude, blotched salamanders.

I want to throw them away, these pebbles, far away from me, but they keep just falling out of my hand, and I cannot banish them from my sight.

All the stones that ever played a role in my life push up out of the earth around me. Some are struggling clumsily to work their way up through the sand to the light, like huge, slate-coloured crabs when the tide comes in, as if they were doing their utmost to catch my eye, in order to tell me things of infinite importance. Others, exhausted, fall back weakly into their holes and abandon all hope of ever being able to deliver their message.

At times I emerge with a start from the half-light of this reverie and see again for a moment the moonlight lying on the humped cover at the bottom of the bed like a large, bright, flat stone, only to grope my way blindly once more after my departing consciousness, restlessly searching for the stone which is

tormenting me, the one which must lie hidden somewhere in the debris of my memory and which looks like a lump of fat.

The end of a rainwater pipe must once have reached the ground beside it, I imagine, bent at an obtuse angle, its rim eaten away by rust, and I furiously try to force such an image into my mind in order to beguile my startled thoughts and lull them back to sleep.

I do not succeed.

Again and again, again and again, with idiotic persistence, tireless as a shutter blown by the wind against the wall at regular intervals, an obstinate voice inside me keeps insisting, 'That is something else, something quite different, that is not the stone that looks like a lump of fat.'

There is no escape from the voice.

A hundred times I object that that is all beside the point, but, although it goes silent for a little while, it starts up again, imperceptibly at first, with its stubborn 'Yes, yes, you may be right, but it's still not the stone that looks like a lump of fat'.

I am slowly filled with an unbearable sense of my own powerlessness.

I do not know what happened after that. Did I voluntarily give up all resistance, or did my thoughts overpower me and bind me?

All I know is that my body is lying asleep in bed and my senses are detached and no longer tied to it.

'Who is this T, now?', is the question that suddenly occurs to me; but then I remember that I no longer possess an organ with which I can ask questions; and I am afraid that the voice will start up again with its endless interrogation about the stone and the lump of fat.

So I turn away.

DAY

I suddenly found myself standing in a gloomy courtyard and through the reddish arch of a gateway opposite, across the narrow, filthy street, I could see a Jewish junk-dealer leaning against a shop-front which had bits of old iron, broken tools, rusty stirrups and skates, and all kinds of other dead things hanging round the open doorway.

And this image had about it that tormenting monotony which characterises all impressions which, like pedlars, cross the threshold of our perception with

a certain regularity, day in, day out, and did not arouse either curiosity or surprise within me.

I became aware that I had been living in this neighbourhood for a long time now.

In spite of its contrast with what I had perceived only shortly beforehand, and with the manner in which I had come here, this awareness did not make any deep impression on me either.

As I made my way up the worn steps to my room, musing in passing on the greasy appearance of the stone treads, I was suddenly visited by the notion that at some time I must have heard or read of a strange comparison between a stone and a lump of fat.

Then I heard footsteps going up the higher flights ahead of me, and when I reached my door I saw that it was Rosina, the fourteen-year-old red-head belonging to the junk-shop owner, Aaron Wassertrum. I had to squeeze past her, and she stood with her back against the banisters, arching her body lasciviously. She had her grubby hands curled round the iron rail for support and I could see the pale gleam of her bare arms in the murky half-light.

I avoided her glances.

Her teasing smile and waxy, rocking-horse face disgust me. I feel she must have white, bloated flesh, like the axolotl I saw just now in the tank of salamanders in the pet-shop. I find the eyelashes of people with red hair as repulsive as those of rabbits.

I unlocked my door and quickly slammed it behind me.

From my window I could see the junk-dealer, Aaron Wassertrum, standing outside his shop. He was leaning against the wall of the arched opening, nipping at his fingernails with a pair of pliers.

Was the red-haired Rosina his daughter or his niece? He did not resemble her at all.

Among the Jewish faces that appear day by day in Hahnpassgasse I can clearly recognise different tribes, whose distinguishing features can no more be blurred by the close relationship of particular individuals than oil and water can be mixed. You cannot say, 'Those two are brothers, or father and son.' This man belongs to one tribe and that to another; that is the most that can be read from these features.

Even if Rosina did look like the junk-dealer, what would that prove?

These tribes harbour a secret loathing and revulsion for each other, which can even burst through the barriers of close blood-ties; but they know how to

conceal it from the outside world, as one would guard a dangerous secret. Not one of them gives the slightest hint of it, and in this accord they resemble blind people filled with hatred who are clinging to a rope dripping with slime: some grasp it tight with both fists, others keep a reluctant hold with one finger, but all are possessed by the superstitious fear that they would be doomed to perdition the moment they abandoned their communal security and separated themselves from the rest.

Rosina is one of that red-haired tribe which is even more repulsive in its physical characteristics than the others; the men are pigeon-chested and have long, skinny necks with protuberant Adam's apples. Everything about them is freckled, and their whole life through they suffer the torments of lust, these men, and fight an unending, losing battle against their desires, on the rack of a constant, loathsome fear for their health.

It was not at all clear to me how I had come to assume Rosina and the junk-dealer, Aaron Wassertrum, were in any way related. I have never seen her anywhere near the old man, nor ever noticed them calling out to each other.

But she was almost always in our courtyard or hanging around the dark corners and passages of our house.

I am sure that all the other inhabitants of the building think she is a close relative or some kind of ward of the old junk-dealer, but I am convinced that not one of them would be able to give a reason for this supposition.

I wanted to drag my thoughts away from Rosina, so I looked out of the open window of my room, down into Hahnpassgasse. As if he had felt my eye light on him, Aaron Wassertrum suddenly turned his face up towards me, a horrible, expressionless face, with its round, fish's eyes and gaping hare-lip. He seemed to me like a human spider that can sense the slightest touch on its web, however unconcerned it pretends to be.

And whatever did he live on? What were his thoughts, his plans? I had no idea. The same dead, worthless objects hang down from the rim of the arched entrance to his shop, day after day, year in, year out. I could have drawn them with my eyes shut: the buckled tin trumpet without any keys, the picture painted on yellowing paper with that strange arrangement of soldiers; and in front, piled up close to each other on the ground so that no one can cross the threshold of his shop, a row of round, iron hotplates from kitchen stoves.

These objects never increase or decrease in number, and whenever the occasional passer-by stops and asks the price of this or that, the junk-dealer falls prey to a violent agitation. It is horrible to see then how the two parts of his hare-lip curl up as he spews out a torrent of incomprehensible words in an irritated, gurgling, stuttering bass, so that the potential buyer loses all desire to

pursue the matter further, shrinks back and hurries off.

Quick as a flash Wassertrum's gaze had slipped away from my eye to rest with studied interest on the bare walls of the neighbouring house just beyond my window. What could he find to look at there? The house turns its back on Hahnpassgasse and its windows look down into the courtyard! There is only one that gives onto the street.

By chance, someone seemed to have entered the rooms next door—I think they form part of some rambling studio—that are on the same storey as mine; through the wall I can hear a male and a female voice talking to each other.

But it would have been impossible for the junk-dealer to have heard that from down below!

Someone moved outside my door, and I guessed it must be Rosina, still standing out there, hot with expectation that I might yet call her in after all.

And below, on the half-landing, Loisa, the pockmarked adolescent, would be waiting with bated breath to see if I would open my door; even here in my room I could feel the air quiver with his hatred and seething jealousy. He is afraid to come any closer because Rosina might see him. He knows he is dependent on her, as a hungry wolf is dependent on its keeper, yet most of all he would like to leap up and abandon himself to a frenzy of rage.

I sat down at my table and took out my tweezers and gravers, but no creative work would come out right, and my hand was not steady enough to clear out the fine lines of the Japanese engraving.

There is a bleak, gloomy atmosphere hanging round this house that quietens my soul, and old images keep surfacing within me.

Loisa and his twin brother Jaromir cannot be much more than a year older than Rosina. I could scarcely remember their father, a baker who specialised in communion wafers, and now, I believe, they are looked after by an old woman, though I have no idea which one it is of the many who live in the house, like so many toads hiding under their stones. She looks after the two boys, that is, she provides them with lodgings; for that they have to hand over to her whatever they manage to beg or steal. Does she feed them as well? I shouldn't imagine so, the old woman conies home very late at night.

They say her job is laying out corpses.

I often used to see Loisa, Jaromir and Rosina playing together innocently in the yard when they were children.

Those times are long since past.

Loisa spends the whole day chasing after the red-haired Jew girl.

Sometimes his search is fruitless, and if he can't find her anywhere he creeps up to my door and waits, a grimace on his face, for her to make her surreptitious way up here. At such times, as I sit at my work, I can see

him in my mind's eye, lurking outside in the crooked corridor, listening with his head bent forward on his gaunt neck.

Sometimes the silence is broken by a furious outburst of noise: Jaromir, who is deaf and dumb, and whose head is permanently filled with a crazed lust for Rosina, roams the house like a wild animal, and the unarticulated howling he emits, half out of his mind with jealousy and suspicion, is so eerie that it freezes the blood in your veins.

He is looking for the pair of them. He always assumes they are together somewhere, hiding in one of the thousand filthy nooks and crannies, and he rushes about in a blind frenzy, goaded on by the idea that he must be at his brother's heels, to make sure there is nothing going on with Rosina that he doesn't know about.

And it is precisely this unceasing torment of the deaf-mute which, I suspect, keeps provoking Rosina into carrying on with his brother. Whenever her ardour or her willingness abate, Loisa always thinks up some new piece of nastiness to arouse her lust once more. For example, they let Jaromir catch them in the act, apparently or really, and then, when he is beside himself with fury, slyly lure him into dark corridors where they have set up vicious traps—rusty barrel-hoops that shoot up when he treads on them and iron rakes with the points sticking up—which he trips over, bloodying his hands and knees.

From time to time, just to tighten the screw, Rosina will think up some devilish trick of her own.

All at once she will change her behaviour towards Jaromir, acting as if she has suddenly taken a liking to him. With the smile that is permanently fixed on her face, she hurriedly tells the poor deaf-mute things that drive him almost insane with arousal; to communicate with him she has invented a mysterious, only half-comprehensible sign-language which never fails to entangle him in a net of uncertainty and hope that drains all the strength from him.

Once I saw him standing in front of her in the courtyard, and she was talking to him so insistently, and with such vigorous gestures and lip movements that I thought he would collapse with nervous strain at any moment. The sweat was pouring down his face with the superhuman effort it required of him to grasp the meaning of a message which was deliberately hurried, deliberately unclear.

He spent the whole of the following day in a fever of expectation on the steps of a half-ruined house farther along the narrow, filthy Hahnpassgasse,

until it was too late for him to beg for his few kreutzer on the street corners. And when he arrived home in the evening, half dead from hunger and agitation, his foster-mother had long since locked the door.

A cheerful woman's laugh came through the wall from the studio next to my room. A laugh—a cheerful laugh!—in these houses? There is no one living anywhere in the Ghetto capable of laughing cheerfully.

Then it came back to me that a few days ago Zwakh, the old puppeteer, had told me that some young gentleman had taken the room from him, at a high rent, clearly in order to be able to meet his lady-love undisturbed. And now the new tenant's expensive furniture had to be secretly

carried up, gradually, so that no one in the house would notice, piece by piece every night. The kind-hearted old man had rubbed his hands with glee as he told me about it, childishly pleased at the clever way he had gone about it so that none of the other tenants would have any idea of the presence of the romantic couple. There were, he confided, entrances to the studio from three different buildings. It even had access through a trapdoor! And if you unlatched the iron door to the loft, which was very easy from the other side, you could get along the corridor past my room to the stairs in our house and use those as a way out.

Once more the cheerful laughter rang out, releasing within me the vague memory of an aristocratic family and their luxurious apartment, to which I was often called to carry out minor repairs to costly objets d'art.

Suddenly I heard a piercing scream from the room next door. Startled, I listened to what was going on. The iron door to the loft was rattled violently and the next moment a lady rushed into my room, her hair undone, her face as white as a sheet, and with a length of gold brocade flung round her bare shoulders.

"Herr Pernath, hide me, for Christ's sake hide me! Ask no questions, but just let me hide here!"

Before I could answer, my door was torn open once again and then immediately slammed to. For just a second the face of Aaron Wassertrum was visible, grinning like some horrible mask.

A round patch of gleaming light appears before me, and by the light of the moon I once more recognise the foot of my bed.

Sleep is still spread over me like a heavy, woollen coat, and the name of Pernath stands in golden letters before my memory. Now where have I read that name? Athanasius Pernath?

I think . . . I think that once, a long, long time ago, I took the wrong hat

somewhere, and even then I was surprised that it fitted me so well, since my head has a very individual shape. And I looked into this hat that belonged to someone else . . . all those years ago, and . . . yes . . . there it was in letters of gold on the white silk lining:

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Then suddenly the voice, the voice I have forgotten, the voice which kept asking me where the stone was that looked like a lump of fat, flies towards me like an arrow.

Quickly, I imagine Rosina's sharp profile with its sickly-sweet grin and thus manage to avoid the arrow, which immediately disappears into the

darkness.

Ah, Rosina's face! It is stronger than that voice and its mindless prattling. And now that I'll soon be back, safe and sound, in my room in Hahnpassgasse, I've nothing to worry about.

J

Unless I the feeling I have is mistaken, someone is following me up the stairs, always staying the same distance behind me, in order to visit me, and he must be just about on the last landing now.

And now he must be coming round the corner where Hillel, the archivist at the Jewish Town Hall, lives, up the worn stone stairs and out onto the top-storey landing, with its floor of red brick.

Now he is feeling his way along the wall, and now, right now, he must be reading my name on the door-plate, laboriously deciphering each letter in the dark.

I positioned myself in the middle of the room, looking towards the entrance.

The door opened, and he came in.

He took only a few steps towards me, neither removing his hat nor saying a word of greeting.

That is the way he behaves when he feels at home, I sensed, and I found it quite natural that he acted as he did and not otherwise.

He put his hand into his pocket and took out a book.

He spent a long time leafing through its pages.

The cover of the book was of metal, with indentations in the form of rosettes and sigils filled with enamel and small stones.

Finally he found the place he was looking for and pointed to it.

I could make out the title of the chapter: Ibbur—'The Impregnation of Souls'.

I automatically ran my eye over the page. Half of it was taken up with the large initial \$ in red and gold which was damaged at one edge.

I was to repair it.

The initial was not stuck onto the page, as I had previously seen in old books; rather, it seemed to consist of two thin pieces of gold leaf welded

together in the middle and with their ends wrapped round the edge of the parchment.

So there must be a hole cut in the page where the letter was? If that was the case, then the J must be visible in reverse on the next page?

I turned the page and found that my assumption was correct. Without thinking, I read that page as well, and the one opposite.

And I read on and on.

The book was speaking to me, just as dreams can speak, only more clearly and much more distinctly. It was like a question that touched me to the heart.

Words streamed out from an invisible mouth, took on life and came towards me. They twisted and turned before me, changing their shapes like slave-girls in their dresses of many colours, then they sank into the ground or turned into an iridescent haze in the air and vanished, making room for the next. For a little while each hoped I would choose it and not bother to look at the next.

Some there were among them which strutted around like peacocks in shimmering garments, and their steps were slow and measured.

Others were like queens, but aged and worn out, their eyelids painted, their wrinkles covered with an ugly layer of rouge, and with a lascivious twist to their lips.

I looked past them to those that were still approaching, and my glance skimmed over long rows of grey figures with faces that were so ordinary, so devoid of expression, that it seemed impossible they could impress themselves on one's memory.

Then they dragged along a woman who was stark naked and as gigantic as a brazen colossus.

For a second the woman stopped before me and bent down to me.

Her eyelashes were as long as my whole body and she was pointing mutely to the pulse in her left wrist. Its throb was like an earthquake, and I sensed within her the life of a whole world.

From the distance a wild, bacchic procession was charging towards us. Among them were a man and a woman with their arms clasped around each other; I could see them coming when they were still far off, and nearer and nearer came the din of the procession.

Now I could hear the singing of the ecstatic dancers echoing all round me, and my eyes sought the entwined couple. But they had been transformed into a single figure, a hermaphrodite, half male, half female, sitting on a throne of

mother-of-pearl.

And the hermaphrodite wore a crown of red wood with a square piece at the front into which the worm of destruction had eaten mysterious runes.

Trotting along one behind the other in a cloud of dust came a herd of small, blind sheep, animals the gigantic hermaphrodite kept to feed its bacchic horde.

At times there were among the figures that came streaming from the invisible mouth some arisen from graves, with shrouds over their faces. And they halted before me, suddenly letting their winding sheets fall to the ground, staring greedily at my heart with predatory eyes and sending an icy shock through my brain that dammed up my blood like a river into which huge boulders have suddenly fallen from the sky, blocking its course.

A woman floated past. I could not see her face, it was turned away and she was wearing a cloak of flowing teardrops.

Strings of people in fancy dress danced past, laughing, ignoring me. Only a pierrot turned and gave me a thoughtful look, then came back to plant himself in front of me and look me in the face as if it were a mirror. There was an eerie force in the bizarre faces he pulled and the movements of his arms, now hesitant, now lightning fast, that filled me with an irresistible urge to imitate him, to wink as he did, to shrug my shoulders and turn down the corners of my mouth.

Then he was shouldered aside by the figures behind, impatient to push their way to the front and all wanting to show themselves to me.

But none of these beings has any permanence.

They are strings of pearls slipping along a silk thread, single notes of a melody pouring from the invisible mouth.

It was no longer a book speaking to me now, it was a voice. A voice that wanted something from me which I could not understand, however hard I tried. A voice that tormented me with burning, incomprehensible questions.

But the voice that spoke these visible words was dead and without echo. Every sound that appears in the here and now has many echoes, just as every object has one large shadow and many small shadows. But this voice no longer had any echoes, they must have long since died away and disappeared.

I had read the book right to the end and was still holding it in my hands, and yet I felt as if I had been searching through my brain and not leafing through a book!

Everything the voice had said to me I had carried within myself all my life, only it had been obscured and forgotten, had kept itself hidden from my

thoughts until this day.

I looked up.

Where was the man who had brought me the book?

Gone!?

Will he return when it's ready? Or am I to take it to him?

But I could not remember him saying where he lived.

I tried to recall his appearance, but failed.

What had he been wearing? Was he old, was he young? And what had been the colour of his hair, his beard?

Nothing, I could see nothing with my mind's eye. Every picture I tried to conjure up disintegrated inexorably, even before it was properly fixed in my mind. I closed my eyes and pressed my hand against my lids in an attempt to catch just one tiny scrap of his portrait.

Nothing, nothing.

I stood in the middle of the room, looking at the door, just as I had been doing before, when he arrived, and pictured the scene: now he's coming round the corner, now he's crossing the red brick landing, now he's reading the nameplate—Athanasius Pernath—on my door, and now he's coming in. All to no avail. Not the faintest trace of a memory of what he looked like stirred within me.

I looked at the book lying on the table and tried to summon up in my mind the hand that went with it, that had taken it out of the pocket and handed it to me. I could not even remember whether it had a glove on or was bare, whether it was young or wrinkled, had rings on its fingers or not.

Then I had a curious idea. It was like an irresistible inspiration.

I put on my coat and hat and went out into the corridor and down the stairs, then walked slowly back to my room, slowly, very slowly, just as he had done when he came. And when I opened the door, I saw that my chamber was shrouded in dusk. Had it not been broad daylight when I went out a few seconds ago?

How long must I have stood down there, lost in thought, oblivious of the time?!

I was trying to imitate the gait and expression of the unknown man when I could not even remember them. How could I expect to imitate him if I had no clue at all as to what he looked like!

But what happened was different, completely different from what I imagined. My skin, my muscles, my body suddenly remembered, without revealing the secret to my brain. They made movements that I had not willed, had not intended.

As if my limbs no longer belonged to me!

All at once, when I took a few steps into the room, I found myself walking with a strange, faltering gait. That is the way someone walks who is constantly in fear of falling forward on to his face, I said to myself.

Yes, yes, yes! That was the way he walked!

I knew quite clearly: that is the way he is.

I was wearing an alien face, clean-shaven, with prominent cheek-bones; I was looking at my room out of slanting eyes. I could sense it, even though I could not see myself.

I wanted to scream out loud that that was not my face, wanted to feel it with my hand, but my hand would not obey me; it went into my pocket and brought out a book, just as he had done earlier.

Then, suddenly, I was sitting down again at the table, without my hat and coat, and was myself, I—I, Athanasius Pernath.

I was shaking with terror, my heart was pounding fit to burst and I knew that ghostly fingers had been poking round the crevices of my brain. They had left me a moment ago, but I could still feel the chill of their touch at the back of my head.

Now I knew what the stranger was like, and I could have felt him inside me, whenever I wanted—if I had wanted. But to picture him, to see him before me, eye to eye, that I still could not do, nor will I ever be able to.

I realised that he is like a negative, an invisible mould, the lines of which I cannot grasp, but into which I must let myself slip if I want to become aware of its shape and expression.

In the drawer of the desk I kept an iron box. I decided to lock the book away in it and only take it out again when this strange mental derangement had left me. Only then would I set about repairing the broken capital 3.

So I picked up the book from the table: it felt as if I had not touched it at all.

I took the box in my hand—the same feeling. It was as if my sense of touch had to pass through a long tunnel of deepest darkness before it surfaced in my consciousness, as if the objects were separated from me by a seam of time a year wide and were part of a past which had long since left me.

The voice, which is circling round in the darkness, searching for me to torment me with the stone or the lump of fat, has passed me by without seeing me. I know that it comes from the realm of sleep. But everything that I have just experienced was real life, and I sense that is why it could not see me, why its search for me was vain.

PRAGUE

Standing beside me was Charousek, the collar of his thin, threadbare coat turned up; I could hear his teeth chattering. The poor student will catch his death of cold in this icy, draughty archway, I said to myself, and invited him to come over to my room with me, but he declined. "Thank you, Herr Pernath", he murmured, shivering, "but unfortunately I have not much time left. I have to get to the city as quickly as possible. Anyway, we'd be soaked to the skin after a couple of steps if we went out into the street now. This downpour just won't let up!"

Showers of water swept across the roof-tops, streaming down the faces of the houses like floods of tears.

If I turned my head a little I could see my window on the fourth floor across the street; with the rain trickling down, the panes looked like isinglass, opaque and lumpy, as if the glass were soggy. A filthy yellow stream was coursing down the street, and the archway was filling up with passers-by, who had all decided to wait for the storm to die down.

Suddenly Charousek said, "There goes a bridal bouquet", pointing to a spray of withered myrtle floating past in the dirty water. Someone behind us gave a loud laugh at this remark. When I turned round I saw that it was an elegantly dressed, white-haired old gentleman with a puffy, frog-like face. Charousek also looked round briefly and muttered something to himself.

There was something unpleasant about the old man, and I turned my attention away from him to the discoloured houses squatting side by side before me in the rain like a row of morose animals.

How eerie and run-down they all looked! Plumped down without thought, they stood there like weeds that had shot up from the ground. They had been propped against a low, yellow, stone wall—the only surviving remains of an earlier, extensive building—two or three hundred years ago, anyhow, taking no account of the other buildings. There was a half house, crooked, with a receding forehead, and beside it was one that stuck out like a tusk. Beneath the dreary sky, they looked as if they were asleep, and you could feel none of the malevolent, hostile life that sometimes emanates from them when the mist fills

the street on an autumn evening, partly concealing the changing expressions that flit across their faces.

I have lived here for a generation and in that time I have formed the impression, which I cannot shake off, that there are certain hours of the night, or in the first light of dawn, when they confer together, in mysterious, noiseless agitation. And sometimes a faint, inexplicable quiver goes through their walls, noises scurry across the roof and drop into the gutter, and with our dulled senses we accept them heedlessly, without looking for what causes them.

Often I dreamt I had eavesdropped on these houses in their spectral communion and discovered to my horrified surprise that in secret they are the true masters of the street, that they can divest themselves of their vital force, and suck it back in again at will, lending it to the inhabitants during the day to demand it back at extortionate interest as night returns.

And when I review in my mind all the strange people who live in them, like phantoms, like people not born of woman who, in all their being and doing, seem to have been put together

haphazardly, out of odds and ends, then I am more than ever inclined to believe that such dreams carry within them dark truths which, when I am awake, glimmer faintly in the depths of my soul like the afterimages of brightly coloured fairy-tales.

Then it is that a ghostly legend wakes to new life in the hidden recesses of my mind, the legend of the Golem, that man-made being that long ago a rabbi versed in the lore of the Cabbala formed from elemental matter and invested with mindless, automatic life by placing a magic formula behind its teeth. And just as the Golem returned to inert clay immediately the arcane formula was removed from its mouth, so, I imagine, must all these people fall lifeless to the ground the very second a minuscule something is erased in their brains—in some the glimmer of an idea, a trivial ambition, a pointless habit perhaps, in others merely a dull expectation of something vague and indefinite.

And the constant furtive look in their eyes! You never see them work, these creatures, and yet they are up early, at the first flicker of dawn, waiting with bated breath, as if for a victim that never comes. If it ever happens that someone enters their territory, someone defenceless they can fleece, then they are immediately paralysed by a fear which sends them scuttling back into their holes, trembling, discarding all their skulking designs. There seems to be no one so weak that they have the courage to seize him.

"Degenerate, toothless predators, who've lost their strength and their claws", said Charousek, hesitantly, looking at me.

How could he know what I was thinking? I had the feeling that sometimes you can fan the flame of your thoughts so vigorously that they give off a spray of sparks that fly to the brain of the person standing next to you.

"What on earth can they live on?" I said, after a while.

"Live? What on? Why, there are millionaires among them!"

I stared at Charousek. What could he mean by that? But the student was silent and looked up at the clouds. For a moment the murmur of voices in the archway had stopped and all one could hear was the spatter of the rain.

What ever could he mean by, 'there are millionaires among them'?

Again it was as if Charousek had guessed my thoughts. He pointed to the junk shop next door, where the water was washing off the rust from the old ironware into brownish-red puddles.

"Aaron Wassertrum, for example! He's a millionaire, owns almost a third of the Jewish quarter.

Didn't you know that, Herr Pernath?"

It literally took my breath away. "Aaron Wassertrum?! Aaron Wassertrum from the junk shop a millionaire?!"

"Oh, I know him well", Charousek went on, determined to tell me the story; it was as if he had just been waiting for me to ask. "I knew his son as well, Dr. Wassory. Have you never heard of him? Dr. Wassory, the eye-specialist? He was famous. Only a year ago the whole city was raving about him, about that great 'scientist'. No one knew then that he'd changed his name, that he was called Wassertrum before. He used to like to play the unworldly man of science, and if ever the conversation came round to origins, he would modestly intimate, with a few deeply felt but vague words, that his father came from the Ghetto; had to work his way up from the very bottom, you could have no idea of the cares and worries! That kind of thing. Of course! Cares and worries! But whose cares and whose worries, and by what means, that he didn't say! But I know what the connection with the Ghetto is!"

Charousek grabbed my arm and shook it violently. "Herr Pernath, I'm so poor it's beyond belief.

I have to go about half-naked, like a tramp,—look—and yet I'm a medical student, I'm an educated man!"

At that he tore open his coat, and to my horror I could see that he was wearing neither jacket nor shirt; he had nothing but his bare skin under his coat.

"And I was already as poor as this when I caused the downfall of that

monster, the eminent, all-powerful Dr. Wassory, and even today no one knows it was me behind it. In the city people think it was a doctor called Savioli who brought his shady practices to light and drove him to suicide.

Savioli was merely my instrument, I tell you! I alone it was who thought up the plan, gathered the material, supplied the evidence; I alone it was who loosened the edifice Dr. Wassory had erected, quietly, imperceptibly, stone by stone, until it only needed the slightest nudge to send it tumbling down—and no money on earth, none of your Ghetto tricks could avert the disaster.

You know, like . . . like playing chess. Yes, just like playing chess.

And no one knows it was me!

I think there must be nights when Aaron Wassertrum can't sleep because he is haunted by the thought that there must be someone else—someone he does not know about, someone who is always close by but whom he can't catch, someone besides Dr. Savioli—who had a hand in the matter. Wassertrum is one of those men with eyes that can see through walls, but he still cannot conceive that there are minds which are capable of working out how to insert long, invisible, poison-tipped needles through such walls, between the masonry, past gold and precious stones, to pierce the hidden vital artery."

Charousek slapped his hand against his forehead and gave a wild laugh. "Aaron Wassertrum will soon find out! On the day he thinks he has Savioli at his mercy! On that very day! That's another chess game I've worked out, right down to the last move. This time it'll be the king's bishop's gambit. There's no move I can't counter with a crushing reply, right to the bitter end. Anyone who accepts my king's bishop's gambit will end up dangling in the air, I tell you, helpless as a puppet on a string, and I'll be pulling the strings, do you hear, I'll be pulling them and then it'll be goodbye to free will for him!"

Charousek was talking feverishly. I looked at him in horror. "What have old Wassertrum and his son done to you to fill you so full of hate?"

Charousek waved my question away. "Forget that! Ask instead what it was that broke Dr.

Wassory's neck. Or would you like to discuss it another time? The rain's stopping, perhaps you want to get home?" He had lowered his voice, like someone who has suddenly come to his senses. I shook my head.

"Have you heard how they cure glaucoma nowadays? No? I'll have to explain it to you if you're to understand everything, Herr Pernath. Glaucoma is a malignant disease of the eyeball that leads to blindness and there is only one means of stopping its progress, an operation called an iridectomy in which a wedge-shaped sliver of the iris is snipped out. There is an unavoidable side-

effect: the patient suffers from glare for the rest of his life. Usually, however, he is saved from total blindness.

But there is one odd fact about the diagnosis of glaucoma: there are times, especially in the initial stages of the disease, when the symptoms, although they have previously been most clearly evident, seem to disappear completely. In such cases it is impossible for a doctor, even though he cannot detect the slightest trace of the disease, to say for certain that his colleague who examined the patient and diagnosed glaucoma must have been wrong.

But once the iridectomy, which can, of course, be carried out on a healthy eye as well as on a diseased one, has been performed, it is impossible to determine whether glaucoma had been present or not.

It was on this and other factors that Dr. Wassory based his fiendish plan. Time after time he diagnosed glaucoma—especially in women—when the patient was suffering from some relatively harmless complaint, just so that he could perform an operation which was simple for him, but which brought in a lot of money.

You see, Herr Pernath, the people he had in his power were completely defenceless; fleecing them demanded no courage at all. The degenerate predator had found a territory where it could devour its prey without needing strength or claws. Without taking any chances! Do you understand?! Without risking anything!

By getting a large number of spurious articles published in the scientific journals Wassory had acquired the reputation of an outstanding specialist; he had even managed to pull the wool over the eyes of his colleagues, who were far too decent and naive to see through him. The logical result was a stream of patients looking for help. Whenever someone went to him with a minor impairment of their vision, he immediately set about his devilish plan. First of all, he questioned the patient in the usual manner, but to cover himself for all eventualities he was careful only to note down those answers which were compatible with glaucoma. He also carried out a thorough check as to whether the patient had already been examined by another doctor. In the course of his conversation with the patient, he would casually let drop that he had been urgently called abroad on professional business and would have to leave the following day.

His next step was to examine the patient, and when, in the course of this, he shone the light into the patient's eyes, he deliberately caused as much pain as possible. All part of his plan! All part of his plan!

When the examination was over and the patient had asked the natural question, 'Was there anything to fear', Wassory played the opening move of his

gambit. He would sit down facing his patient, wait for a good minute and then pronounce, in measured, sonorous tones, "Blindness in both eyes is inevitable in the near future."

Not surprisingly, the scene that followed was harrowing. Often the people would faint, cry or scream and throw themselves to the ground in desperation.

To lose one's sight is to lose everything.

Then, when the moment came, as it invariably did, when the poor victim was clasping Wassory's knees and begging him for the love of God to help them, the fiend made his second move and transformed himself into a god in the patient's eyes by offering him a chance of saving his sight.

Everything in the world is like a game of chess, Pernath, everything.

"If we operated immediately", Wassory would muse, almost as if he were debating with himself,

"there might just be a chance; anyway, it's the only hope." Then his vanity would take over and he would launch into a bombastic tirade consisting of long-winded descriptions of various cases, all of which were supposed to bear an uncommon similarity to the present one, and a list of the countless patients whom he had saved from blindness. He basked in the feeling that he was some kind of higher being, charged with the welfare of his fellow-men.

All the while his hapless victim, the cold sweat of terror on his—or, more often, her—forehead, would sit there, not daring to interrupt the torrent of words for fear of angering the one person that could help him.

Unfortunately—thus Wassory would conclude his harangue—he would not be able to perform the operation until after he had returned from his journey abroad, in a few months time. It was to be hoped—hope sprang eternal—that it would not be too late by then.

Naturally the patients would leap up in horror, insisting that they were under no circumstances prepared to wait one day longer, and plead with him to advise them as to which of the other eye-specialists in the city he might recommend to carry out the operation. Now the moment had come when Wassory could deliver the decisive blow. He would pace up and down, with furrowed brow, deep in thought, until finally he would explain, in a hesitant, concerned voice, that an operation by a different doctor would, unfortunately, require another examination of the eye, which would involve shining the torch into it again and which, because of the dazzling light,—the patient himself would remember how painful it was—could well have disastrous consequences. So another doctor—quite apart from the fact that iridectomy was one area where many of them lacked the necessary expertise—would not

be able to operate for some time, not until the optic nerves had recovered from this first examination."

Charousek clenched his fists. "That is what in chess we call zugzwang, my dear Pernath, a forced move, which leads to further forced moves.

Almost out of his mind with desperation, the patient would now beg Dr. Wassory to have pity on him and put off his departure for just one day so that he could perform the operation himself. His was, the poor victim would say, a fate worse than death; death might come quickly, but the cruel torment of the constant fear of going blind was the most wretched state imaginable.

And the more the monster refused and protested that delaying his departure might cause immeasurable damage to his reputation, the higher were the sums the patients offered him. When Wassory finally decided the sum was high enough, he gave way and on the very same day, to avoid any chance occurrence that might reveal his plan, inflicted irreversible damage on the healthy eyes of his poor victims. His treatment left them with the constant feeling of being dazzled which made their lives a torment, but which destroyed the evidence of his villainy once and for all.

Such operations on healthy eyes not only increased Wassory's fame as an incomparable doctor who had never yet failed to avert the danger of blindness, they also satisfied his lust for money and flattered his vanity. What could be more pleasing than to see those whom he had robbed of their health and their money look up to him as a good Samaritan, to hear them praise him as their saviour?

Only a man whose roots were in the Ghetto and whose every fibre was soaked in Ghetto lore, a man who had learnt from his earliest childhood to lie in wait for his prey like a spider, could have gone on perpetrating such atrocities for years without being caught. To do that, it took a man who knew everyone in the city, who knew such intimate details of their affairs and their finances that he almost seemed to have psychic powers. And if it hadn't been for me, he would still be up to his tricks, would have carried on until he retired to spend his declining years as a venerable patriarch, surrounded by his loved ones, a shining example to future generations until at last he, too, went the way of all flesh.

But I also grew up in the Ghetto, my blood is tainted with its fiendish cunning as well. I was the author of his downfall, striking him unawares, like a bolt from the blue. Dr. Savioli, a young German doctor, is generally given the credit for unmasking him, but he was merely the tool in my hand. I it was who piled up the evidence and supplied the proof, until the day came when the long arm of the law was reaching out for Dr. Wassory.

That was when the fiend committed suicide, the Lord be praised! It was as if my double had been beside him, guiding his hand! He took his life with the very phial of amyl nitrate that I had deliberately left in his surgery when I went there myself to trick him into falsely diagnosing glaucoma in me as well. When I left it I breathed a fervent prayer that it would be this phial of amyl nitrate that would deliver the coup de grace.

Word went round the city that he had died from a stroke—the effect of amyl nitrate when it is inhaled resembles a stroke. It was not long, however, before the truth was known."

Charousek stared into space, lost in thought, as if immersed in some deep problem; then he shrugged a shoulder in the direction of Aaron Wassertrum's junk shop. "Now he's alone", he muttered, "all alone with his greed and—and —and with his wax doll."

My heart began to thump. I stared at Charousek in horror. Was the man mad? It must be the wanderings of a fevered mind. Of course! Of course! He must have invented it all, dreamt it up.

That tale about the eye-specialist can't be true. He's consumptive, it's the fever of death spinning round and round in his brain. I decided to make some jocular remark to calm him down, to set his thoughts moving in a more cheerful direction, but before anything suitable occurred to me, a memory struck me like a bolt of lightning: the door to my room being torn open and the face of Aaron Wassertrum with its hare-lip and round, fish's eyes staring in.

Savioli? Dr. Savioli?! Now wasn't that the name that Zwakh, the old puppeteer, had whispered to me as the name of the young gentleman who had rented his studio? Dr. Savioli! It was as if someone were screaming the name inside my head. A stream of twitching, nebulous figures danced through my mind, jostling with sudden inklings that were racing towards me.

Filled with fear, I was about to question Charousek, to tell him everything I had seen and heard from the room next to mine, when he was suddenly racked with a violent fit of coughing that almost sent him tumbling to the ground. He nodded a brief farewell, and I saw him grope his way along the wall and out into the rain. His story, I now felt, was not the figment of a fevered imagination. He was right; crime did stalk these streets, day and night, like a disembodied spirit in search of a physical form through which to manifest itself. It is in the air, but we do not see it.

Suddenly, it precipitates in a human soul, but we are not aware of it and by the time we sense it, it has long since dissolved back into thin air. All that we hear are dark rumours of some hideous deed.

All at once I understood the innermost nature of the mysterious creatures

that live around me: they drift through life with no will of their own, animated by an invisible, magnetic current, just like the bridal bouquet floating past in the filthy water of the gutter. I felt as if the houses were staring down at me with malicious expressions full of nameless spite: the doors were black, gaping mouths in which the tongues had rotted away, throats which might at any moment give out a piercing cry, so piercing and full of hate that it would strike fear to the very roots of our soul.

What was the last thing the medical student had said about Wassertrum? I whispered his words to myself, "Aaron Wassertrum is alone now with his greed and—his wax doll."

What in heaven's name can he have meant by the wax doll?

I told myself to calm down, he must have meant it metaphorically. It must have been one of those deranged metaphors he uses to take you by surprise; you don't understand them at first, only later they unexpectedly take shape and give you a profound shock, like a harsh light suddenly striking some unusual object.

I gave the people who were sheltering in the archway with me a closer scrutiny. Now the fat old man was standing beside me, the same one who had given that horrible laugh earlier. He was wearing gloves and a black frock coat, and his protuberant eyes were fixed on the entrance of the house opposite. His coarse-featured face was clean shaven and was twitching with excitement.

Automatically, I followed the direction of his gaze and realised that he was staring spellbound at Rosina, who was standing on the other side of the street, her permanent smile playing round her lips. The old man was trying to make signs to her, and I could tell that she was well aware of them, but was behaving as if she had no idea what he meant.

Finally the old man could stand it no longer, and waded across the street on tiptoe, bobbing up and down in a ridiculous manner, like a huge, black rubber ball bouncing over the puddles.

He seemed to be well-known, to go by all the innuendoes I could hear around me. Someone behind me—a lout with a red knitted scarf round his neck, a blue soldier's cap on his head and a half-smoked cigar behind his ear—started making leering insinuations which I did not understand. All I could make out was that in the Ghetto they called the old man the 'Freemason'

and that in their jargon this was a name for a man who has sexual relations with schoolgirls but whose connections with the police render him immune to the legal consequences.

Across the street Rosina and the old man disappeared in the darkness of the entrance hall.

PUNCH

We had opened the window to get rid of the tobacco smoke from my tiny room. The cold night wind blew in and set the shaggy coats hanging on the door gently swinging to and fro.

"Prokop's noble specimen of the hatter's art is tempted to fly away", said Zwakh, pointing to the musician's huge floppy hat, the broad brim of which was beginning to flap like a pair of black wings.

Joshua Prokop gave a cheery wink. "It probably wants to—"

"—go to Loisitchek's, to listen to the dance band", interrupted Vrieslander.

Prokop laughed and beat time to the music that was borne across the roofs on the thin winter air.

Then he picked up my old, battered guitar that was leaning against the wall, pretended to pluck its broken strings and sang a strange song in a squawking falsetto, exaggerating the pronunciation of its canting jargon:

A dusty hen

With gelt to cough;

A zaftik naffka

For your kife;

Jack-a-dandy,

Snout and scoff:

Nothing but fressing—

That's the life.

"Shows a natural aptitude for thieves' slang, doesn't he?" laughed Vrieslander, joining in a reprise with his rumbling bass:

Jack-a-dandy,

Snout and scoff:

Nothing but fressing—

That's the life.

Zwakh explained. "It's a peculiar song that Nephtali Schaffranek—the

meshuggenah with the green eyeshade—croaks out every night at Loitschek's; there's a dolled-up woman plays the accordion and joins in the words. It's an interesting dive, you should come along with us some time, Pernath. Perhaps later on, when we've run out of punch. What do you think? As a birthday treat for you?"

"Yes, you should come along with us", said Prokop, closing the window, "it really is worth seeing."

Then we went back to our hot punch, each one occupied with his own thoughts. Vrieslander was carving away at a puppet.

Zwakh broke the silence. "You literally cut us off from the outside world, Joshua, when you closed that window. Since then, no one's said a word."

"I was just thinking about the way those coats started napping earlier on", Prokop answered quickly, as if to excuse his silence. "Isn't it strange the way the wind makes inanimate objects move? Doesn't it look odd when things which usually just lie there lifeless suddenly start fluttering. Don't you agree? I remember once looking out onto an empty square, watching huge scraps of paper whirling angrily round and round, chasing one another as if each had sworn to kill the others; and I couldn't feel the wind at all since I was standing in the lee of a house. A moment later they seemed to have calmed down, but then they were seized once more with an insane fury and raced all over the square in a mindless rage, crowding into a corner then scattering again as some new madness came over them, until finally they disappeared round a corner.

There was just one thick newspaper that couldn't keep up with the rest. It lay there on the cobbles, full of spite and flapping spasmodically, as if it were out of breath and gasping for air.

As I watched, I was filled with an ominous foreboding. What if, after all, we living beings were nothing more than such scraps of paper? Could there not be a similar unseeable, unfathomable 'wind' blowing us from place to place and determining our actions, whilst we, in our simplicity, believe we are driven by our own free will? What if the life within us were nothing other than some mysterious whirlwind? The wind of which it says in the Bible, 'Thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth'? Do we not sometimes dream we have plunged our hands into deep water and caught silvery fish, when all that has happened is that our hands have been in a cold draught?"

"Prokop, you're talking like Pernath. What's wrong with you?" asked Zwakh, giving the musician a suspicious look.

"It's the story about the Book of Ibbur that we heard earlier—pity you

came too late to hear it—that's given him such strange ideas", said Vrieslander.

"A story about a book?"

"Actually about the odd appearance of a man who brought a book. Pernath doesn't know what he's called, where he lives or what he wanted, and although he says his appearance was very striking, he can't describe it."

Immediately Zwakh pricked up his ears. "That's remarkable", he said after a pause. "Did this stranger happen to be smooth-faced, without any growth of beard? Did he have slanting eyes?"

"I think so", I said. "That is, I . . . I'm quite certain of it. Do you know him?"

The puppeteer shook his head. "It's just that it reminded me of the Golem."

Vrieslander put down his knife. "Golem? I've heard so many people talk about that. Do you know anything about the Golem, Zwakh?"

"Who can claim to know anything about the Golem?" replied Zwakh with a shrug of the shoulders. "Everyone says it's a myth until one day there's something happens in the streets that brings it back to life. Then for a while everybody talks about it, and the rumours grow and grow until they're so blown up, so exaggerated they become completely implausible and everyone dismisses them. The origin of the story is supposed to go back to the sixteenth century. A rabbi, following instructions in a lost book of the Cabbala, is said to have created an artificial man, the so-called Golem, as a servant to help him ring the synagogue bells and do other menial tasks."

But it had never become a true human being, Zwakh went on. It led a kind of semi-conscious, vegetable existence, and that only by day, so it is said, through the power of a scrap of paper with a magic formula that was placed behind its teeth, attracting free stellar energy from the cosmos.

And when, one evening before prayers, the rabbi forgot to take this seal out of the Golem's mouth, it went raging through the streets in the dark, crushing everything that happened to be in its way. Finally the rabbi managed to block the creature in its path and destroy the scrap of paper.

At that, the Golem sank lifeless to the ground. Nothing was left of it but the dwarf clay figure which can be seen over there in the Old-New Synagogue even today.

"That same rabbi is supposed to have been summoned to the Emperor in the castle on the Hradschin, where he called up the spirits of the dead in visible form", added Prokop. "Modern scientists claim he must have used a magic lantern."

"A magic lantern! People will believe anything nowadays", Zwakh rejoindered, unperturbed. "As if Emperor Rudolf, who had devoted his whole life to such matters, would not have seen through a crude trick like that right away.

It is true that I don't know where the legend of the Golem originated, but of this I am sure: there is something abroad in the Jewish quarter, something connected with it that never dies. My ancestors have lived here for many generations and I think I can say that there is no one who has more evidence, ancestral and personal, of the periodic appearance of the Golem than I have."

Zwakh suddenly stopped talking and we, too, could feel how his thoughts had wandered off into the past. Seeing him sitting there at the table, his head propped in his hand, the light emphasising

the strange contrast between the youthful redness of his cheeks and the whiteness of his hair, I could not help comparing his features with the mask-like faces of his puppets which he had shown me so often.

Strange how like them the old man was! The same profile, the same expression!

There are, I felt, some things on earth which cannot keep apart. As I contemplated Zwakh's simple life, it suddenly seemed monstrous, even uncanny, that someone like him, even though he had had a better education than his forebears and been intended for the acting profession, should have suddenly returned to the shabby puppet booths and fairgrounds of his ancestors, putting the same puppets with which they had made their meagre living through the same clumsy movements and acting out the same threadbare plots. I realised that he was unable to abandon them. They were part of his life, and when he was far away from them, they changed into thoughts which lodged in his mind and made him unsettled and restless until he returned home.

That is why he looked after them so lovingly and proudly dressed them up in their tawdry finery.

"Aren't you going to tell us more, Zwakh?" asked Prokop, with a questioning look at Vrieslander and myself, to see whether we agreed.

The old puppeteer began hesitantly. "I don't know where to begin", he said, "the story of the Golem is so difficult to pin down. It's just like Pernath said, he knows exactly what the stranger looked like, but he can't describe him. Roughly every thirty-three years something happens in these streets which is not especially exciting in itself and yet which creates a sense of horror for which there is no justification nor any satisfactory explanation: at these intervals a completely unknown person, smooth-faced, with a yellow

complexion and mongoloid features, dressed in faded, old-fashioned clothes and with a regular but oddly stumbling gait, as if he were going to fall down on his face at any moment, is seen going through the Ghetto from the direction of Altschulgasse until . . . the figure suddenly vanishes.

Usually it turns a corner and disappears.

Once, so it is said, it walked in a circle and returned to the point from which it started out, an ancient house close to the Synagogue.

On the other hand, you come across agitated people who maintain they saw it coming round a corner towards them. Although it was quite clearly walking towards them, it gradually grew smaller and smaller, like the figure of someone disappearing into the distance, until it finally disappeared.

Sixty-six years ago it must have made a particularly profound impression; I can still remember—

I was just a little boy at the time—how they searched the house in Altschulgasse from top to bottom. All that they discovered was that there really was a room in the house with a barred window to which there was no access. They hung washing from all the windows, so as to check the rooms from the street, and that's how they found out about it. As there was no other way in, a man had himself let down by a rope from the roof in order to look in. Scarcely had he reached the window, however, than the rope broke and the unfortunate man smashed his skull on the pavement. And when they decided to try and repeat the experiment some time later, they could not agree on which was the right window and gave up the whole idea.

It was about thirty-three years ago that I encountered the Golem myself for the first time in my life. It was coming towards me in a passageway and we almost knocked against each other. Even today I still can't work out precisely what was going on inside me. You don't go around, day in, day out, expecting to meet the Golem, for God's sake, and yet I'm certain, absolutely certain, that in the instant before I saw it something inside me screamed 'The Golem!' And at that very moment something came stumbling out of the darkness of a doorway and an unknown figure passed me. A second later a stream of pale, agitated faces was coming towards me, bombarding me with questions. Had I seen it?! Had I seen it?!

When I answered them, it felt as if my tongue were suddenly free, although before I had not been aware of being unable to speak. I felt astonished that I could move my limbs, and I realised that I must have suffered from a kind of paralysis, even if only for a fraction of a second.

I have thought about this long and often, and I think that the closest approach to the truth is something like this: once in every generation a

spiritual epidemic spreads like lightning through the Ghetto, attacking the souls of the living for some purpose which is hidden from us, and causing a kind of mirage in the shape of some being characteristic of the place that, perhaps, lived here hundreds of years ago and still yearns for physical form.

Perhaps it is right here among us, every hour of the day, only we cannot perceive it. You can't hear the note from a vibrating tuning fork until it touches wood and sets it resonating. Perhaps it is simply a spiritual growth without any inherent consciousness, a structure that develops like a crystal out of formless chaos according to a constant law.

Who can say?

Just as on sultry days the static electricity builds up to unbearable tension until it discharges itself in lightning, could it not be that the steady build-up of those never-changing thoughts that poison the air in the Ghetto lead to a sudden, spasmodic discharge? A spiritual explosion blasting our unconscious dreams out into the light of day and creating, as the electricity does the lightning, a phantom that in expression, gait and behaviour, in every last detail, would reveal the symbol of the soul of the masses, if only we were able to interpret the secret language of forms?

And just as there are natural phenomena which suggest that lightning is about to strike, so there are certain eerie portents which presage the irruption of that spectre into the physical world. The plaster flaking off a wall will resemble a person striding along the street; the frost patterns on windows will form into the lines of staring faces; the dust drifting down from the roofs will seem to fall in a different way from usual, suggesting to the observant that it is being scattered by some invisible intelligence lurking hidden in the eaves in a secret attempt to create all sorts of strange patterns. Whether the eye rests on a uniform sameness of texture or focuses on irregularities of the skin, we fall prey to our unwelcome talent for discerning everywhere significant, ominous shapes which grow to gigantic proportions in our dreams. And always, behind the spectral attempts of these gathering swarms of thoughts to gnaw through the walls surrounding our everyday existence, we can sense with tormenting certainty that our own inmost substance is, deliberately and against our will, being sucked dry so that the phantom may take on physical form.

When I heard Pernath tell us just now that he had encountered a man with a beardless face and slanting eyes, the Golem immediately appeared before my inward eye, just as I had seen it all those years ago. It just seemed to materialise from nowhere, as if by magic. For a moment I was seized with a vague fear that once again something inexplicable was about to happen. It was the same fear I had felt as a child when the first eerie portents foreshadowed the appearance of the Golem.

That must have been sixty-six years ago now. It happened one evening when my sister's fiancé was visiting us and the date of their wedding was decided upon. For amusement, they decided to tell their fortunes by dropping molten lead into water. I looked on open-mouthed, not really understanding what they were doing. In my confused, childish imagination I connected it with the Golem I had often heard of in my grandfather's tales. I could almost visualise the door opening and the strange figure entering the room.

My sister poured the spoonful of molten metal into the tub of water and, when she saw me looking on all agog, gave me a merry laugh. With wrinkled, trembling hands, my grandfather picked the glittering lump of lead out of the water and held it up to the light. Immediately the grown-ups became excited and all started talking at once. I tried to push my way to the front, but they held me back. Later on, when I was older, my father told me that the molten metal had solidified into the distinct shape of a small head, smooth and round, as if it had been poured into a mould. Its resemblance to the Golem was so uncanny that they all felt a shiver of horror.

I have often discussed it with Shemaiah Hillel, the archivist at the Jewish Town Hall and Warden of the Old-New Synagogue who also looks after that clay model from Emperor Rudolf's time that I told you about. He has studied the Cabbala and thinks the lump of clay shaped into human form is a portent from the old days, just like the lead that shaped itself into a human head in my youth. He believes the unknown figure that haunts the district must be the phantasm that the rabbi in the Middle Ages had first "to create in his mind, before he could clothe it in physical form. It reappears at regular intervals, when the stars are in the same conjunction under which it was created, tormented by its urge to take on physical existence.

Hillel's late wife also saw the Golem face to face and had the same sensation as I did of being paralysed as long as the mysterious being was in the vicinity. She used to say she was firmly convinced that it could only have been her own soul which had left her body for a moment and confronted her for a brief second with the features of an alien creature. In spite of the terrible dread with which she was seized, she said she was never in the slightest doubt that the other could only be part of her inmost self."

"Incredible", muttered Prokop, lost in thought. Vrieslander also seemed engrossed in his ruminations.

Then there was a knock on the door and, without a word, the old woman who brings me water and anything else I need in the evening came in, put the earthenware jug on the floor and went out. We all looked up, staring round the room as if we had just woken, but for a long time no one spoke. It was as if some new influence had slipped in through the door behind the old woman

and we needed time to get used to it.

"Yes!" said Zwakh suddenly, apropos of nothing, "that Rosina with the red hair, she has one of those faces that you can't get out your mind, that keep on popping up all over the place. That frozen, grinning smile has accompanied me throughout my life; first her grandmother, then her mother! Always the same face, not the slightest change. The same name, Rosina, each was the resurrection of the previous one."

"Isn't Rosina the daughter of Wassertrum, the junk-dealer?" I asked.

"So people say", replied Zwakh. "But Aaron Wassertrum has any number of sons and daughters people don't know about. As for Rosina's mother, no one knows who her father was either, nor what became of her; she had a child when she was fifteen and no one's seen her since. As far as I can remember, her disappearance was connected with a murder, of which she was the cause and which took place in this house.

Just like Rosina today, her image used to haunt the minds of all the young men. One of them's still alive; I see him quite often, but I've forgotten his name. The others did not live long. In fact, all I can remember from those days are brief episodes that drift through my memory like faded pictures. For example, there was a simple-minded man who used to go from bar to bar at night, cutting out silhouettes of the customers from black paper for a few kreutzer. And whenever they managed to get him drunk, he would become unutterably sad, and sob and weep as he snipped away at a girl's pert profile, always the same one, until his stock of paper was all used up. I have long since forgotten the details, but I think it was suggested that, while still not much more than a child, he had fallen so deeply in love with a certain Rosina—presumably the grandmother of the current one—that he had gone out of his mind. Yes, when I count back over the years, it can have been none other than the grandmother of the current Rosina."

Zwakh stopped talking and leant back in his chair.

In this house, destiny seems to run round and round in circles, always returning to the same point. As this thought came to mind, it was accompanied by a horrible image: a cat with one half of its brain damaged staggering round and round in a circle . . .

I was suddenly aware of Vrieslander's high voice saying, "And now for the head", and he took a round piece of wood from his pocket and began carving it. My eyes grew heavy with tiredness and I pushed my chair back out of the light. The water for the punch was bubbling in the kettle, and Joshua Prokop refilled our glasses. Softly, very softly the sound of the dance music could be heard through the window; sometimes it would fade away and then return,

depending on whether the wind dropped it on the way or carried it up to us.

After a while I heard Prokop ask me whether I wasn't at least going to say cheers, but I gave no answer. I had so completely lost the will-power to make my limbs move, that it did not even occur to me to open my mouth. I thought I was asleep, so rock-like was the calm that had taken possession of me. I had to look across at the glitter of Vrieslander's shining knife as it restlessly sliced tiny shavings off the wood to convince myself that I was awake.

Far away, I could hear Zwakh's rumbling voice telling all kinds of strange stories about marionettes and recounting the elaborate fairytales he thought up for his puppet-plays. He came round to talking about Dr. Savioli again and the fine lady, the wife of some aristocrat, who secretly visited Savioli in his hide-out in the studio.

And once again in my mind's eye I saw the mocking, triumphant expression on Wassertrum's face.

I wondered whether I shouldn't tell Zwakh what I had seen, then I decided it was of such trifling importance it wasn't worth the effort. Anyway, I realised that at the moment my will-power would not be strong enough to enable me to speak.

Suddenly the three of them round the table gave me a sharp look and Prokop said quite loud,

"He's fallen asleep", so loud, indeed, that it almost sounded as if it were meant as a question.

Then they went on talking in subdued voices, and I realised they were talking about me.

Vrieslander's knife went on dancing up and down; it caught the light from the lamp and the reflection burnt into my eyes. Someone said something like "be mad", and I listened to what they were saying to each other.

"Topics such as the Golem shouldn't be mentioned when Pernath's around", said Prokop reproachfully. "When he told us earlier on about the Book of Ibbur, we just sat still and asked no questions. I wouldn't mind betting he dreamed it all up."

Zwakh nodded. "You're quite right. It's like taking a naked light into a dusty chamber, where the walls and ceiling are lined with mouldy cloth and the floor is ankle-deep in the withered debris of the past: one little touch and the whole lot would burst into flames."

"Did Pernath spend a long time in the lunatic asylum?" asked Vrieslander. "It's a pity about him, he can't be any more than forty."

"I don't know, nor have I any idea where he might come from or what work he did before. With his slim figure and pointed beard he looks like some ancient French nobleman. A long, long time ago an old doctor I was friendly with asked me to take him under my wing and find him a room somewhere round here, where no one would notice him or bother him with questions about old times." Again Zwakh gave me a concerned look. "Since then he's lived here repairing antiques and engraving gems, and he's managed to make a decent living out of it. The fortunate thing is that he seems to have forgotten everything to do with his madness. I beg of you, never ask him about things that might call the past back to mind for him. How often the old doctor used to emphasise that. 'You know, Zwakh', he would always say, 'we have our method for dealing with this; with great effort, we've managed to wall up his illness, if I can put it like that, just as you might build a wall round the site of some tragedy, because of the unhappy memories associated with it.'"

Zwakh's words had grasped me like a slaughterer grasping a defenceless animal and were squeezing my heart with rough, cruel hands. There had always been a vague torment gnawing at my soul, a feeling as if something had been taken from me and as if I had passed through long periods of my life like a sleepwalker going along the edge of a precipice, but I had never been able to find the cause. Now the secret was out, and it stung unbearably like an open wound.

My morbid dislike of any indulgence in reminiscences of the past; this strange dream that keeps on returning from time to time of being locked in a house with room after room that I can't get into; the frightening failure of my memory in things concerning my youth—suddenly there was a terrible explanation for it all: I had been mad and they had used hypnosis to treat me, they had closed off the 'room' that gave access to those chambers of my brain, rendering me homeless in the midst of the life around me.

And without any hope of ever recovering the lost memories!

I realised that the mainspring of all my thoughts and actions lay hidden in another, forgotten existence, and that I would never be able to uncover it. I am a cutting that has been grafted onto another stem, a branch sprouting from an alien stock. Even if I were to succeed in forcing my way into that locked 'room', would that not just mean I would once again fall prey to the ghosts that have been locked away in it?

The story of the Golem that Zwakh told us an hour ago went through my mind and suddenly I saw that there was a gigantic, secret link between the legendary chamber without an entrance in which the unknown being was said to live, and my ominous dream. Yes! And if I were to try to look in through the barred window in my psyche, my 'rope' would break too!

The strange connection became clearer and clearer to me and began to take on an aspect of indescribable horror. I could sense that there are things, incomprehensible things, which are yoked together and race along side by side like blind horses, not knowing where their course is taking them.

And in the Ghetto: a chamber, a room to which no one can find the entrance, and a shadowy being that lives there, occasionally feeling its way through the streets to sow terror and panic among men.

Vrieslander was still carving away at the puppet-head, I could hear the rasp of the blade against the wood. The sound of it was almost painful, and I looked over to see if it was soon going to be finished. The way the head moved to and fro in the painter's hand made it look as if it were alive and were peering into every corner of the room. Then the eyes stayed fixed on me for a long time, satisfied that they had finally found me. I could not turn my eyes away and stared, as if hypnotised, at the wooden face. For a while Vrieslander's knife seemed to hesitate, unsure of itself, then it scored a firm, decisive line and the wooden features suddenly took on a frightening life of their own.

I recognised the yellow face of the stranger who had brought me the book.

Then everything went blurred. The vision had only lasted for a second, but I could feel my heart stop beating and then start fluttering nervously. And yet, just as when it had brought the book, I still retained awareness of its face.

I had turned into it and was lying on Vrieslander's lap, peering round. My gaze wandered round the room, someone else's hand moving my head. All at once I saw an expression of dismay etch itself on Zwakh's features, and heard him exclaim, "Good God! That's the Golem!"

There was a brief struggle as they tried to prise the carving from Vrieslander's grasp, but he pushed them off, laughing, "What do you mean? It's just a botched job." He tore himself away from them, opened the window and threw the head down into the street.

Consciousness left me and I plunged into a profound darkness with shimmering gold threads running through it. It seemed to me that it was only after a long, long time that I came to, and it was only then that I heard the clatter of the wooden head on the cobblestones outside.

"You were so sound asleep that you didn't even notice we were shaking you", said Prokop. "The punch is all finished, there's not even a glass left for you."

A burning pain at the things I had overheard swept through me, and I wanted to scream at them that I had not dreamt up the story of the man with

the Book of Ibbur, I could take it out of the iron box and show it to them. But these thoughts could not find words to express themselves and they were drowned in the atmosphere of general bustle that had overtaken my guests as they prepared to leave.

Zwakh insisted on putting my coat round my shoulders, shouting, "Come along to Loitschek's with us, Pernath, it'll revive your spirits."

NIGHT

Unresisting, I let Zwakh lead me down the stairs. The smell of the fog, which penetrated the house from the street, grew stronger and stronger. Prokop and Vrieslander had gone on a little way ahead, and we could hear them talking outside the entrance.

"It must have fallen right through the grating into the sewers, Devil take it." We came out into the street and I could see Prokop bending down, looking for the puppet-head.

"I'm glad you can't find the stupid thing", growled Vrieslander. He was leaning against the wall and at regular intervals his face shone brightly and then faded again as he sucked the hissing flame of a match into his short pipe.

Prokop waved his arm for silence and bent down even lower. He was almost kneeling on the cobbles. "Do be quiet! Can't you hear anything?"

We went over to where he was squatting. He pointed silently at the grating over the sewer and put his hand by his ear. We stood there for a while, listening for sounds from the drain.

Nothing.

"What was it you heard?" It was the old puppeteer who finally asked the question, but Prokop immediately grabbed him by the wrist.

For a brief moment, scarcely more than the length of a heartbeat, it had seemed to me as if somewhere down below a hand were knocking, almost inaudibly, on a sheet of iron. The next second, when I thought about it, it had disappeared, but in my breast there was an echo, like a memory of the sound, that gradually dissolved into a vague sense of terror. Steps coming down the street dispelled the feeling.

"Let's go. What are we hanging around for?" Vrieslander demanded.

We continued down the street, Prokop following reluctantly. "I'm willing to wager my last breath there was someone down there screaming for dear life."

None of us responded, but I felt it was an almost imperceptible fear rising within us that tied our tongues.

Soon we were looking at the red-curtained window of a tavern. A piece of cardboard announced: SALON LOISITCHEK

Grande Conserte Tonight

The edges were decorated with faded photographs of women.

Before Zwakh could grasp the knob, the door opened inward and we were greeted with much bowing and scraping by a big burly fellow with black, brilliantined hair and no collar, but a green silk tie round his bare neck and the waistcoat of his dress suit adorned with a bunch of pig's teeth.

"Well, well, well, what fine gentlemen", he said, and hurriedly twisted his head round to shout across the crowded tavern, "Quick, Pane Schaffranek, a fanfare." The response was a tinkling sound from the piano, as if a rat were running along the keys.

"Well, well well, what fine gentlemen, what fine gentlemen. Isn't that nice", the burly man kept muttering to himself as he helped us off with our coats. "Yes, we have the whole of the aristocracy of the land gathered here tonight", he said proudly, in response to Vrieslander's astonished expression at the appearance of a few elegant young men in evening dress on a kind of raised dais at the back of the tavern that was separated from the front part by a balustrade and a couple of steps.

Clouds of pungent tobacco smoke hung in drifts above the tables. Against the walls behind them, the benches were full of figures in rags and tatters: whores from the old ramparts, unkempt, grubby, barefoot, their firm breasts scarcely concealed beneath their discoloured shawls, beside them pimps with their blue soldiers' caps and cigarettes behind their ears; cattle-dealers with hairy hands and clumsy fingers whose every gesture was a mute statement of infamy; out-of-work waiters with insolent looks and pock-marked clerks in check trousers.

We heard the oily voice of the burly man say, "I'll bring you a screen so you won't be disturbed", and a wheeled partition with little pictures of dancing Chinamen all over it slowly rolled into position alongside the corner table where we had seated ourselves.

The babble of voices died down as the grating tones of a harp made themselves heard. At a brief rest in the tune there was deathly silence, as if everyone were holding their breath, and it was with a sudden shock we became aware of the hissing of the flat, heart-shaped flames from the iron gas-pipes; then, almost immediately, the music swelled up and swamped the noise.

As if they had simply materialised before my eyes, two strange figures appeared out of the clouds of tobacco smoke. One was an old man with the long, white beard of an Old Testament prophet, and a black silk skull-cap such as Jewish patriarchs wear on his bald head. He was blind, and his glassy, milky-blue eyes were fixed on the ceiling as his skinny, claw-like fingers tore at the strings of the harp, his lips moving in silent song. Beside him, the picture of hypocritical bourgeois respectability in her greasy black taffeta dress with a jet cross round her neck and jet bracelets on her arms, was a bloated female with a concertina on her lap.

A wild jumble of notes came lurching out of the instrument which then, exhausted, confined itself to a feeble accompaniment. The old man snapped at the air a few times, then opened his mouth wide so that we could see the blackened stumps of his teeth. Slowly, amid all sorts of strange Hebrew gutterals, a wild bass voice forced its way up from his chest:

"Sta-haars both re-hed and bluuue—" "Trallala", screeched the female, immediately snapping her spittle-flecked lips shut, as if she had said too much. "Sta-ars both red and blue, Crescent mo-hoons too."

—"Trallala."

—"Redbeard, Greenbeard,

All kinds of sta-hars,"

—"Trallala, trallala."

Couples stepped onto the floor and the dancing began.

"It's the song of the chomezig borchu, the blessing of the leavened bread", the old puppeteer explained with a smile as he softly beat out the rhythm on the table with the tin spoon that, oddly enough, was fixed to the table by a chain. "It must have been a hundred years ago or more that two bakers, Redbeard and Greenbeard, put poison into the bread rolls—they were star-shaped and crescent-shaped—on the eve of the first Sabbath in Passover, Shabbes Hagodel, to cause the wholesale murder of Jews in the Ghetto. But the beadle—the meshores— was warned in time by a divine revelation and managed to catch the two would-be murderers and hand them over to the authorities. To commemorate this miraculous deliverance from death, the learned scholars, the landomin and the bocherlech, composed this strange song which you can hear now being played as dance music in a brothel."

"Trallala-trallala."

"Sta-hars both re-hed and bluuue," the old man's bawling was gradually turning into a hollow-sounding, fanatical howl.

Suddenly the tune became muddled and gradually adapted itself to the

rhythm of the Bohemian Slapak, a shuffling pas de deux in which the partners danced closely entwined, cheek to sweaty cheek.

"That's the way. Bravo. Here you are. Catch. Giddy-up!" a slim young swell on the raised dais with a monocle in his eye called out to the harpist, putting his hand in his pocket and throwing a silver coin in the musician's direction. It didn't reach him. I saw it glitter as it flew over the crowded dance floor, then it suddenly disappeared. Some ruffian—I seemed to know his face, I think it must have been the same one who was standing next to Charousek when we were sheltering from the rain recently—had slipped his hand out of his partner's blouse, where it had been pretty firmly ensconced until then, and in one movement, slick as a monkey, without for a moment getting out of step with the music, had snatched the coin out of the air. The rogue's face remained as impassive as ever, only two or three couples dancing near him grinned slyly.

"Must be one of the 'Regiment', to judge by the quickness of the hand", said Zwakh with a laugh.

"I'm sure Pernath has never heard about the 'Regiment'", Vrieslander quickly interrupted, with a surreptitious wink to the old puppeteer that I was not supposed to see. I well understood what they were about; it was the same as earlier on in my room. They thought I was ill and wanted to cheer me up. The idea was that Zwakh should tell me some story, any old story. The look of pity the old man gave me pierced me to the heart and sent a hot flush spreading over my face. If only he knew how his pity wounded me.

I missed the old puppeteer's introduction to his story, I just felt as if I were slowly bleeding to death. I felt myself growing colder and colder, more and more rigid, just as when I had seen the wooden face lying on Vrieslander's lap. Then I suddenly found myself right in the middle of the story; I felt somehow alienated from it, as if it were a lifeless piece from a school anthology.

Zwakh began:

"The story of the learned Dr. Hulbert and his Regiment Well, how shall I start? His face was all covered in warts and his legs were as bandy as a dachshund's. Even as a boy all his time was spent at his studies, dry-as-dust studies that frayed his nerves. He made a meagre pittance by giving private lessons, and from that he had to support his sick mother. I think he probably only knew what green meadows looked like, or hedges and hills covered with flowers and trees, from books. You know yourself how little sunshine reaches Prague's dark streets and alleys.

He was awarded his doctorate with distinction, as was expected, and in time became a celebrated lawyer. He was so famous that everybody, even

judges and old attorneys, would come to him if there was anything they didn't know. And all the time he still lived in a wretched little attic looking out over the courtyard behind the Tyn Church where the Old Toll House Tavern is where we usually go for our drink.

The years passed, and Dr. Hulbert's reputation as a leading light of the legal profession spread throughout the country. No one would have thought that a man such as he, whom no one could remember ever having heard talk of anything other than law, would be susceptible to the tender passion, especially as his hair was already beginning to turn white. But it is in such people who keep their hearts locked tight that the fires of yearning burn brightest.

On the day when Dr. Hulbert achieved the goal which must have been his highest ambition since his student days, on the day, that is, when His Majesty the Emperor in Vienna appointed him Chancellor of our University, the news flew from mouth to mouth that he had become engaged to a beautiful young lady from a noble, though impoverished family.

It really seemed that happiness had come to stay for Dr. Hulbert. Even though the marriage remained childless, he doted on his young wife and his greatest pleasure was to fulfil her every wish before she could express it.

Amidst all this happiness he did not forget those less fortunate than himself. 'God has satisfied my longing', he is supposed to have said. 'He has allowed the vision that has been like a guiding

star to me from my earliest childhood to become reality; He has given me the dearest creature the earth affords for my very own. And I want to see to it that, as far as it is in my power, a reflection of my happiness will fall on others.'

And so it came about that he took in a poor student as his own son. Presumably he was motivated by the memory of how much his own wretched youth would have been helped by such a kindness. But the earth we live on is such that many deeds that appear fine and noble have consequences one would expect from a despicable act, because we are unable to predict whether they bear harmful or wholesome seeds within them. Dr. Hulbert's act of charity was to be the source of the most bitter suffering for him.

His young wife was soon inflamed with secret passion for the young student, and fate at its most cruel decreed that it should be at the very moment when Dr. Hulbert, as a token of his love, came home unexpectedly with a bouquet of roses as a surprise birthday present, that he found her in the arms of the man on whom he had heaped kindness after kindness.

It is said that the blue spring gentian will lose its colour for good if the pale, sulphurous gleam of the lightning that announces a hailstorm should

suddenly shine on it; what is certain is that old Dr. Hulbert's soul lost all its radiance from the day his happiness was shattered. That very same evening he, who until then had never known the meaning of intemperance, was still here at Loisitchek's at daybreak, dead-drunk on cheap brandy. And Loisitchek's became home to him for what was left of his ruined life. In the summer he would sleep among the rubble of some building site or other, in the winter here on the wooden benches.

By silent agreement, they did not take away his title of Professor and Doctor of Laws. No one had the heart to accuse him of conduct unbecoming a scholar and gentleman.

Gradually there gathered round him all the shifty riffraff that haunted the Ghetto, until finally there was formed that strange community that even today is still known as the 'Regiment'. Dr.

Hulbert's comprehensive knowledge of the law was deployed to shield those in whom the police took too close an interest. If there was a recently released jailbird close to starvation, Dr. Hulbert would send him out into the Old Town Square stark naked so that the Council was compelled to provide him with a suit. A homeless prostitute who was about to be drummed out of town would be quickly married off to some rogue who was registered in one of the city wards, thus giving her right of residence. Dr. Hulbert knew hundreds of such ploys that reduced the police to impotence.

For their part, these outcasts, the dregs of human society, faithfully contributed everything they 'earned', right down to the very last kreutzer, to the common purse, from which they supported themselves. In this regard, not one of them was guilty of the slightest dishonesty. Perhaps it was this iron discipline that led to them being called the 'Regiment'.

Every year on the first of December, the anniversary of the day of Dr. Hulbert's misfortune, a strange nocturnal celebration was held here at Loisitchek's. They would all be here, packed shoulder to shoulder: beggars and vagrants, pimps and whores, drunks and ragmen; and they would be as quiet as if it were a church service. Then Dr. Hulbert would stand in that corner there—where those two musicians are sitting, right under the coronation portrait of His Majesty the Emperor—and tell them the story of his life: how he had worked his way up by the sweat of his brow, had become Doctor of Laws and finally Chancellor of the University. And every time he reached the point where he entered his wife's room with a bunch of roses in his hand, to celebrate her birthday and at the same time in commemoration of the day when he had come to ask for her hand in marriage, the day when she had agreed to be his bride, at that point his voice would give way and he would collapse, sobbing, onto the table. And often it would happen that some brazen

harlot would go up to him, shyly and in secret, so that no one would see, and place a half-withered flower in his hand.

For a long time not one of his audience would move. These types are too tough for tears, but they would stare at their boots and tug self-consciously at their fingers.

One morning old Dr. Hulbert was found dead on a bench down by the Moldau. I imagine he must have frozen to death. His funeral was something I'll never forget, the 'Regiment' almost bled itself white to make sure everything went off with as much pomp as possible. At the head of the procession came the University Beadle in full regalia, bearing on his hands outstretched before him the purple cushion with the gold chain on it, then, behind the hearse, the interminable file of the 'Regiment', barefoot, filthy, ragged and torn. One of them had sold his every last possession and trudged past with his body, legs and arms wrapped in layers of old newspaper.

Thus they paid him their last respects.

On his grave in the cemetery is a white stone with three figures carved on it: the Saviour on the cross between the two robbers. No one knows who had it put there. There is a rumour that it was Dr. Hulbert's wife who paid for it.

His will, however, contained a legacy that provides a free bowl of soup every day for each member of the 'Regiment' at Loisitchek's. That's why there are these spoons hanging from the chains, and the depressions hollowed out of the table-top are the soup-bowls. At midday the waitress comes along with a huge metal pump and squirts them full of gruel; and if there's anyone who can't prove they belong to the 'Regiment', she sucks the soup back into the pump.

From this table, the story of this peculiar custom has gone all round the world."

It was the awareness of some disturbance in the tavern that roused me from my lethargy.

Zwakh's last sentences were drifting away over the surface of my consciousness; I saw him moving his hands to demonstrate the piston of a large pump going in and out, then the scenes that were unfolding all around us suddenly started to flick past my vision as quickly as if they were part of a clockwork peep-show, and yet with spectral clarity, so that for a while I completely lost awareness of myself and felt like a cogwheel in a living mechanism.

The room had become one seething mass of people. The raised platform was crowded with gentlemen in black tails, white cuffs and glittering rings, a

dragoon's uniform with captain's epaulettes and, at the rear, a lady's hat with salmon-pink ostrich feathers.

Loisa was glowering up through the bars of the railings, so full of hatred that he was unsteady on his feet. Jaromir was there too, staring up fixedly and with his back tight, very tight, against the side wall, as if an invisible hand were pressing him against it.

The figures suddenly stopped dancing, the landlord must have shouted out something that had startled them. The music was still playing, but softly; it was unsure of itself, it was trembling, you could feel it distinctly. And yet the landlord was making no attempt to conceal the gloating expression on his face.

A police inspector in uniform suddenly appeared in the doorway. He spread his arms out so that no one could leave. Behind him was a detective constable.

"So, we're dancing are we? In spite of the ban? I'm closing the place down. Mine host, you're coming along with me, and all the rest of you, off to the Station."

He barked out the words, like a military command.

The hulk of a landlord said nothing, but the gloating grin did not disappear from his face.

It merely froze.

The concertina spluttered and died away in a whistle.

The harp changed its tune.

Suddenly all the faces were seen in profile, staring expectantly up at the platform.

And an elegant figure in black made its nonchalant way down the few steps and walked slowly up to the inspector.

The inspector's eyes were spellbound, fixed on the black patent-leather shoes strolling towards him.

The swell stopped one step in front of the policeman and his bored gaze travelled slowly from his helmet down to his boots and back again.

The other young aristocrats up on the platform were bent over the railing, stifling their laughter with grey silk handkerchiefs. The Captain of Dragoons stuck a gold coin in his eye like a monocle and spat his cigarette-end out into the hair of a girl leaning on a chair below.

The inspector went pale and in his embarrassment kept staring at the pearl in the aristocrat's shirt-front. The flat, indifferent gaze from the unmoving,

clean-shaven face with the Roman nose was too much for him. It made him uneasy. Crushed him.

He was stretched on the rack of the deathly hush in the tavern.

"Just like those effigies of knights lying with their hands crossed on stone coffins in Gothic cathedrals", whispered the painter, Vrieslander, as he looked at the aristocrat.

Finally the young swell broke the silence. "Errr . . . Hmmm", he went, imitating the landlord's voice, "Well, well, well, what fine gentlemen; isn't that nice." The pub exploded in a howling gale that made the glasses rattle. The toughs fell about laughing. A bottle hit the wall and smashed to pieces. The hulking landlord brayed obsequiously as he let us in on the joke, "His Highness Prince Ferri Athenstadt."

The Prince handed the inspector his visiting-card. The poor policeman took it and saluted several times, clicking his heels.

Silence returned. The crowd listened breathlessly for what would come next.

Prince Athenstadt spoke again:

"The ladies and gentlemen whom you see gathered here are . . . er . . . are all guests of mine."

With a nonchalant gesture His Highness indicated the down-and-outs. "Perhaps, inspector, you would like me to . . . er . . . introduce you?"

The inspector shook his head with a forced smile, muttered a few embarrassed words about 'only doing his duty' and finally managed to come out with, "I can see that this is an orderly establishment."

That put life back into the Captain of Dragoons: he rushed over to the lady's hat with the ostrich feathers at the rear of the dais and, to the cheers of the young aristocrats, dragged Rosina down onto the dance-floor.

She was so drunk she staggered round with her eyes shut. The large, expensive hat was all askew and she was wearing nothing over her naked body but long pink stockings and a tail-coat.

A signal, and the wild music started up again—"Trallala, trallala"—sweeping away the gurgling cry the deaf-and-dumb Jaromir emitted when he saw Rosina.

We decided to leave. Zwakh called the waitress, his words swallowed up in the general noise.

The scenes I saw were as fantastic as any opium hallucination: The

Captain has his arms round the half-naked Rosina as they slowly revolve to the music, the deferential crowd making room for them.

Then a murmur starts up round the benches, "Loisitchek, Loisitchek", and people crane their necks as an even stranger couple joins the other on the dance-floor. An effeminate-looking young lad in pink leotard and tights, with long blond hair down to his shoulders, his cheeks and lips made up like a whore's and his eyes cast down in provocative modesty, is clinging, lovesick, to the chest of Prince Athenstadt.

The harp is oozing a sickly waltz.

A sharp disgust with life rose in my throat. I took a quick, fearful glance at the door: the inspector was standing there with his back to the dance-floor, making sure he did not have to see anything, in hasty, whispered conversation with the detective constable, who was putting something back in his pocket. There was a clink of handcuffs.

Then the pair of them squinted over at the pock-marked face of Loisa, who at first tried to hide and then stood as if paralysed, his face chalk-white and twisted in terror.

A picture flashed before my mind's eye and immediately faded: the picture of Prokop, as I had seen him only an hour ago, leaning over the bars of the drain cover listening, and a piercing cry of mortal anguish coming from below the ground.

I try to shout out, but can't.

Cold fingers have been thrust into my mouth, forcing my tongue up against my front teeth, filling my mouth like a lump that makes it impossible for me to bring out a single word.

I can't see the fingers, I know they are invisible, and yet I can feel them as if they were a physical presence.

It is perfectly clear to me that they belong to the spectral hands that brought the Book of Ibbur to me in my room in Hahnpassgasse.

"Water! Water!" shouts Zwakh, who is sitting beside me. They are holding my head and shining a candle into my eyes.

There is a whispered conference, "Take him to his flat—fetch the doctor—Hillel, the archivist, knows about this kind of thing—take him there."

Then I am lying on a stretcher, stiff as a corpse, and Prokop and Vrieslander are carrying me out.

AWAKE

Zwakh had run on ahead up the stairs, and I heard the anxious questions of Miriam, Hillel's daughter, and his attempts to reassure her.

I made no effort to follow what they were saying to each other, and I guessed more than heard that Zwakh was telling her that I had had an accident; they had come to ask for help to bring me round and give me first aid.

Still I could not move a muscle, still the invisible fingers held my tongue fast; but my mind was sure and firm, and the feeling of terror had left me. I knew exactly where I was and what was happening to me and I did not even find it strange when they carried me, like a corpse, stretcher and all, up to Shemaiah Hillel's study, set me down and left me alone there.

I was filled with a calm and natural contentment, such as you feel when coming home after a long journey.

It was dark in the room and the blurred lines of the cross shapes in the window-frames stood out against the dull, hazy gleam coming up from the street. Everything seemed quite natural, and I was not in the least surprised when Hillel entered carrying a seven-flamed Menorah, nor that he calmly wished me 'Good evening' as if he were expecting me.

As he went about the room, adjusting a few objects here and there on the sideboard, then using the candelabra to light another seven-armed one, I was suddenly struck by something about him which until that moment I had not registered as special, in spite of the fact that we would meet on the stairs two or three times a week: the elegant proportions of his body and limbs, and the slim, delicate lines of his face with its high forehead. And, as I could now see in the light from the candles, he could not be any older than I was, forty-five at the most.

"You arrived a few minutes earlier than I had assumed", he began after a while, "otherwise I would have had the candles ready lit." He pointed to the two candelabra and came up to the stretcher looking, so it seemed, with his dark, deep-set eyes at someone who was standing or kneeling by my head whom I, however, could not see. At the same time his lips moved, speaking soundless words.

Immediately the invisible fingers let my tongue go and the paralysis left me. I sat up and looked behind me: there was no one in the room apart from Shemaiah Hillel and myself. The person who had come a few minutes earlier than he had been expecting must be me, then?

What I found much more bewildering than the mere fact, was that I was incapable of feeling the least surprise at it.

Hillel obviously guessed my thoughts, for he gave me a friendly smile and helped me up from the stretcher, pointed to a chair and said, "There is nothing mysterious about it at all. It is only magic and sorcery— kishuf— that frighten men; life itches and burns like a hairshirt, but the rays from the sun of the spiritual world are mild and warming."

I said nothing, since nothing occurred to me that I could say in reply, and he did not seem to expect any, but sat down opposite me and calmly continued, "A silver mirror, if it had feeling, would only suffer pain while it was being polished. Once it was smooth and shining, it would reflect all the images that struck it without suffering or emotion."

Happy the man", he went on softly, "who can say of himself, 'I have been polished'." For a moment he was wrapped in thought and I heard him murmur a few words in Hebrew,

"Lishu'oskho kivisi Adoshem." Then his voice was clearly to be heard again:

"Thou earnest to me in a deep sleep and I have woken thee. In the Psalm of David it says, 'Then spake I with myself, now shall I begin. It is the right hand of the Lord that hath wrought this change.'

When men arise from their beds, they think they have shaken off sleep and they know not that they have fallen victim to their senses and are in the grip of a much deeper sleep than the one they have just left.

There is only one true state of wakefulness, and that is the one you are now approaching. If you should speak to others of it, they will say you are sick and they cannot understand you. For that reason it is pointless and cruel to speak to them of it.

Lord, Thou earnest them away as with a flood;

They are as a sleep:

They are as grass which groweth up:

In the evening it is cut down and withereth."

I wanted to ask, 'Who was the stranger who came to me in my room and gave me the Book of Ibbur? Was I awake or dreaming when I saw him?' but Hillel answered before even I could put the thought into words.

"Assume that the man who came to you and whom you call the Golem signifies the awakening of the dead through your innermost spiritual life. Each thing on earth is nothing but an eternal symbol clothed in dust.

How is it possible to think with your eyes? Each shape that you see is a thought in your eye.

Everything that takes on shape was a ghost before."

I felt ideas, which until then had been firmly anchored in my mind, tear themselves loose and drift like rudderless ships on a boundless ocean.

Placidly Hillel went on,

"Anyone who has been wakened can no longer die; sleep and death are the same."

". . . can no longer die?" A dull ache gripped me.

"Two paths run beside each other: the Path of Life and the Path of Death. You have taken the Book of Ibbur and read in it. Your soul has been made pregnant by the Spirit of Life", I heard him say.

"Hillel, Hillel, let me take the path that all men take, the Path of Death!" everything within me screamed out loud. Hillel's countenance froze in an expression of deep earnestness:

"Men do not take any path, neither that of life nor that of death. They drift like chaff in the wind.

In the Talmud it is written, 'Before God created the world he showed the souls a mirror, wherein they could see the spiritual sufferings of existence and the joys that followed. Some accepted the suffering. But the others refused and God struck them out of the Book of the Living.' But you are taking a path and you have set out on it of your own free will, even if you are no longer aware of it. Do not grieve; as knowledge comes gradually, so does memory. Knowledge and memory are the same thing."

The friendly, almost kindly tone in which Hillel concluded this speech restored my calm, and I felt safe and sound, like a sick child that knows its father is close by.

I looked up and saw that the room was suddenly peopled with figures standing in a circle round us. Some had white shrouds such as the rabbis of old used to wear, others had three-cornered hats and silver buckles on their shoes. But then Hillel passed his hand over my eyes and the room was empty once more.

Then he accompanied me out onto the stairs and gave me a burning candle for me to light my way up to my room.

I went to bed and tried to sleep, but sleep would not come and instead I found myself in a strange state that was neither dreaming, nor waking, nor sleeping.

I had snuffed the candle, but in spite of that everything in the room was so clear that I could distinguish each individual shape. At the same time I felt

completely comfortable and free from that agonising restlessness which usually torments you when you find it impossible to get to sleep.

Never before in my life had I been capable of such sharp and precise thought as now. The rhythm of health flowed through my every nerve, arranging my thoughts in orderly rows, like an army awaiting my command.

I only needed to call on them, and they stepped up and did what I wanted.

During the last few weeks I had been trying, without making any progress whatsoever, to carve a cameo out of sunstone; I never managed to make all the flecks in the stone fit in with the face I had in mind. Now I remembered the piece, and in a flash I could see the solution and knew precisely what line to take with the graver to do justice to the texture of the gem.

Formerly I had been the slave of a horde of fantastic impressions and visions, and often I could not say whether they were feelings or ideas. Now I suddenly found I was lord and master in my own kingdom. Calculations, which previously I had only been able to do with much groaning on paper, now seemed to work themselves out in my head as if by magic.

All this was the result of my new-found ability to perceive and retain those things—and only those things—that I needed: numbers, shapes, objects or colours. And if it was a matter of questions which could not be answered by means of such tools—philosophical problems and the like—then my inner vision was replaced by hearing, and the voice I heard was that of Shemaiah Hillel.

I was granted the strangest insights.

I suddenly saw things, which a thousand times previously I had allowed to slip past my ear as mere words, now clear before me, and soaked with significance in every pore; things I had learnt 'off by heart', I now 'grasped' at one stroke so that I 'owned' them. Mysteries hidden in the forms of words that I had never even suspected were now revealed to me.

The 'high' ideals of humanity, which until now, chests puffed out and besplattered with decorations, had looked down their respectable aldermanic noses at me, removed the masks from their features and apologised: they themselves were really only poor souls, but still they were used to prop up an even more insolent fraud.

Might I perhaps not have been dreaming after all? Could it be that I had not talked to Hillel?

But no, there was the candle Shemaiah had given me. Happy as a little boy who has slipped out of bed on Christmas Eve to make sure the marvellous jumping-jack really is there, I snuggled back down into the pillows.

Like a tracker dog I penetrated further into the jungle of spiritual puzzles surrounding me.

First of all I tried to go to the point farthest back in my life that memory could reach. From there it must be possible, or so I believed, for me to see that part of my life which a quirk of fate had hidden in darkness.

But however hard I tried, I still could get no farther than seeing myself in the gloomy courtyard of this house with a view through the arched gateway to Aaron Wassertrum's junk-shop; it was as if I had spent a hundred years as an engraver of gems in this house without ever having been a child.

I had almost decided that any further groping around in the wells of the past was hopeless, when I suddenly realised with dazzling clarity that, although in my memory the broad highway of events ended at that arched gateway, that was not the case with a whole host of narrow footpaths which had presumably always accompanied the main road, but which I had ignored. 'Then where'—it was like a voice screaming in my ear—'did you learn the skills by which you earn

your living? Who taught you to engrave gems, and everything that goes with it? To read, to write, to speak? To eat and walk, breathe, think and feel?'

Immediately I began to follow the advice that came from within me. Systematically I retraced my life.

I forced myself to follow an uninterrupted but inverted chain of thought: What had just happened? What had led to it? What came before that? And so on, back into the past.

I was back at that arched gateway again. Now! Now! Only a little jump into empty space and surely I would have crossed the abyss separating me from my forgotten past? Then I saw something which I had missed on my way back through my thoughts. It was Shemaiah Hillel passing his hand over my eyes, just as he had done before in his study.

And everything was erased. Even my desire to delve into the past.

There was only one thing left that I had gained from it, and that was the realisation that the sequence of events in one's life is a road leading to a dead end, however broad and easy it might appear. It is the narrow, hidden tracks that lead back to our lost homeland; what contains the solution to the last mysteries is not the ugly scar that life's rasp leaves on us, but the fine, almost invisible writing that is engraved in our body.

Just as I could find my way back to the days of my childhood, if I went through my alphabet book from back to front, from Z to A, to reach the point where I had started reading it at school, so too, I realised, I ought to be able to

journey to that other distant home which is beyond all thought.

I carried a world of work on my shoulders. Hercules, I remembered, had also borne the weight of the vault of heaven on his head, and I saw the gleam of hidden significance in the old legend.

And just as Hercules had managed to escape from it through his cunning in asking Atlas, 'Just let me tie a layer of rope round my head so that the awful burden does not crush my brain', so perhaps, I sensed, there was a dark path leading away from this precipice.

A deep distrust of blindly following my thoughts any farther in this direction suddenly crept over me. I stretched out straight in bed and covered my eyes and ears with my hands so as not to be distracted by my senses; so as to kill off every thought.

But my determination was smashed by an iron law: one thought could only be driven away by another thought, and if that one should die there would already be the next feasting on its flesh. I sought refuge in the roaring torrent of my blood, but my thoughts were ever at my heels; I hid in the pounding forge of my heart, but after a short while they had discovered me there.

Once more Hillel's kindly voice came to my rescue, saying, "Keep to your path and do not falter.

The key to the art of forgetting belongs to our brothers who follow the Path of Death; but you have been made pregnant by the Spirit of Life."

The Book of Ibbur appeared before me with two letters engraved in flame upon it: the one representing the bronze woman was throbbing, powerful as an earthquake; the other was infinitely far away: the hermaphrodite on the mother-of-pearl throne with the crown of red wood on its head.

Then Shemaiah Hillel passed his hand over my eyes for the third time and I fell asleep.

SNOW

Dear, dear Herr Pernath,

I am writing this letter to you in great haste and fear. Please destroy it as soon as you have read it—or, even better, bring it to me together with the envelope. Only that will put my mind at rest.

But do not tell a soul I have written to you! Not even at the place where you will go today!

Recently (from this brief reference to an event that you witnessed, you will guess who is the author of this letter; I am too afraid to put my name at the end of it) your good, honest face filled me with a great feeling of trust; also, your dear late father taught me as a child: all this gives me the courage to turn to you, perhaps you are the only person who can help me!

I beseech you: be in the Cathedral on the Hradschin at five o'clock this evening.

A lady known to you.

I must have sat there for a quarter of an hour with the letter in my hand. The strange atmosphere of reverent solemnity, in which I had been enveloped since last night, was dissipated in a trice, blown away by the fresh breeze of a new day with its earthly tasks. A new-born destiny, wreathed in auspicious smiles, a veritable child of spring, was coming towards me. A human soul had turned to me for help! To me! What a change it brought about in my room! The worm-eaten cupboard suddenly had a smile on its carved features and the four chairs looked like four old folk sitting round the table, chuckling happily over a game of cards.

Now there was something to give meaning to my days, something rich and radiant. Was the rotten tree to bear fruit after all?

I could feel a current of vital energy coursing through my veins. It had long slept within me, concealed in the depths of my soul, buried beneath the debris of daily routine, but now it poured forth, like a spring gushing from the ice when the grip of winter is broken. And I knew, just as certainly as I knew I was holding her letter in my hand, that I would be able to help, whatever the danger that threatened her. It was the rejoicing in my heart that gave me that certitude.

Again and again I read the line, ". . . also, your dear late father taught me as a child . . ." It took my breath away. Did it not sound like the promise, "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise"?

The hand that she was stretching towards me for help also held out a gift: the memory that would lead me back to the past I longed to reach; it would reveal to me the secret, help to lift the veil that had closed off my past.

"Your dear late father", how alien the words sounded when I repeated them over to myself!

Father! For a brief moment I saw the tired face of an old man with white hair appear in the armchair beside the chest: a stranger, a complete stranger, and yet so eerily familiar! Then normal vision reasserted itself and the hammerstrokes of my heart beat out the actual hour of the clock.

I started in horror. How long had I been dreaming? Had I missed the appointed time? I looked at the clock: the Lord be praised, it was only half past four.

I went into my bedroom for my hat and coat and set off down the stairs. Today I was impervious to the mutterings of the dark corners, the petty, spiteful, sour misgivings that emanated from them: "We're not letting you go—you belong to us—we don't want you to be happy—happiness in this house, the very idea!" Usually in these passages and alcoves there is a fine, poisonous dust that grabs me by the throat and chokes me, but today it retreated before the vital breath streaming from my mouth. I paused for a moment outside Hillel's door. Should I go in? Some hidden awe kept me from knocking. I felt so different today, as if it would be wrong for me to go in to him.

Already the hand of life was pushing me on, down the steps.

The street was white with snow.

I think many people wished me good afternoon; whether I replied or not, I can't remember. I kept touching my breast pocket to make sure I still had the letter. The place where it lay felt warm.

I made my way through the massive stone arcades of the Old Town Square, past the bronze fountain, its baroque railings covered in icicles, and across the stone bridge with its statues of saints and its monument to St. John Nepomuk.

Down below, the river foamed as it pounded the piers of the bridge with waves of loathing.

Half dreaming, my eye caught the monument to St. Luitgard: on the hollowed-out sandstone the

'Torments of the Damned' were carved in high relief and the snow was lying thick on the lids of the souls in purgatory and on their manacled hands raised in supplication.

Arches swallowed me up and released me, palaces with arrogant carved portals on which lions' heads bit into bronze rings slowly passed me by.

Here too was snow, snow everywhere. Soft and white as the fur of a gigantic polar bear. Tall, proud windows, their ledges glittering with ice, stared coldly up at the sky. I was astonished to see the air so full of migrating birds. As I climbed the countless granite steps to the Hradschin, each one the width of four bodies laid head to foot, the city with its roofs and gables sank, step by step, from my conscious mind.

Already the twilight was creeping along the rows of houses as I stepped out into the empty square in the middle of which the Cathedral towers up to

the heavenly throne. Footsteps, the edges encrusted with ice, led to the side door.

From somewhere in a distant house the soft, musing tones of a harmonium crept out into the stillness of the evening. They were like melancholy tears trickling down into the deserted square.

The well-padded door swung to with a sigh behind me as I entered the Cathedral and stood in the darkness of the side aisle. The nave was filled with the green and blue shimmer of the dying light slanting down through the stained-glass windows onto the pews; at the far end, the altar gleamed at me in a frozen cascade of gold. Showers of sparks came from the bowls of the red glass lamps.

The air was musty with the smell of wax and incense.

I leant back in one of the pews. My heart grew strangely calm in this realm where everything stood still. The whole expanse of the Cathedral was filled with a presence that had no heartbeat, with a secret, patient expectation.

Eternal sleep lay over the silver reliquaries.

There! From a long, long way away the sound of horses' hooves reached my ear, muffled, scarcely audible; they seemed to approach and then fell silent.

A dull thud, like the closing of a carriage door.

The rustle of a silk dress came through the church and a slim, delicate lady's hand touched my arm. "Please, please can we go to that pillar over there. Out here among the pews I cannot bring myself to speak of the things I must tell you."

The holy images all around came into sharp focus. I was suddenly wide-awake and alert.

"I don't know how to thank you, Herr Pernath, that you have come all the way up here in this terrible weather for my sake."

I stammered a few banal phrases.

"But I could think of no other place where I would be safer from spies and danger than here. I'm sure no one has followed us to the Cathedral."

I took out the letter and handed it to her. She was almost completely enveloped in a luxurious fur, but I had recognised her as the terrified woman who had sought refuge from Wassertrum in my room in Hahnpassgasse. It did not surprise me at all; I had not expected it to be anyone else.

My eyes did not leave her face, which presumably seemed paler in the

twilit alcove than it was in reality. Her beauty took my breath away and I stood there, spellbound. It was all I could do not to fall down on my knees and kiss her feet because she was the one I was to help, because she had chosen me for the task.

"Please, I beg you from the bottom of my heart to forget—at least for as long as we are in here—the situation in which you saw me when we last met", she went on urgently. "I don't know how you feel about such things

All I could think of to say was, "I am an old man, but never in my life have I been so arrogant as to feel called upon to sit in judgment on my fellow men."

"I thank you, Herr Pernath", was her warm but simple reply. "But now I must ask you to listen patiently, to see if you can help me in my desperate situation, or at least advise me." I could feel

she was in the grip of some terrible fear, her voice trembled. "That night, in the studio, that was when, to my horror, I suddenly realised that hideous monster was deliberately spying on me. For months already I had noticed that wherever I went—whether alone, or with my husband or . . . with . . . with Dr. Savioli—the villainous face of that junk-dealer would always appear somewhere in the vicinity. Awake or asleep, those squinting eyes haunted me. There is still no sign of what his intentions are, but that only increases the fear that torments me at night: when is he going to slip the noose round my neck?

At first Dr. Savioli tried to reassure me. What could a poor wretch like this Aaron Wassertrum do? At worst it would be some petty blackmail or something of the kind. But his lips went white, every time the name of Wassertrum was mentioned, and I began to suspect that, to reassure me, Dr. Savioli was concealing something from me, something dreadful that might cost him his life—or me mine!

And then I learnt what it was that he was carefully trying to conceal from me: this Wassertrum has been to see him several times, at night, in his apartment! I know something is going on, I can sense with every fibre of my body that something is gradually tightening round us like a snake crushing its prey. What does that murderer think he's doing? Why can't Dr. Savioli shake him off? No, no, I won't put up with it any longer, I must do something—anything—before it drives me mad."

I tried to put in a few words of comfort, but she interrupted me. "And in the last few days the nightmare that is threatening to choke me has taken on more and more tangible form. Dr. Savioli has suddenly fallen ill; I cannot contact him, cannot visit him without the constant fear of my love for him being discovered. He is delirious, and all that I could find out is that in his fever he imagines he is being pursued by some monster with a hare-lip: Aaron

Wassertrum!

I know how brave Dr. Savioli is, so you can imagine how much it terrifies me to know that he has collapsed, paralysed by a fear which to me just seems like the dark presence of the Angel of Death.

You will say that I am a coward. If my love for him is so great, why do I not openly admit it, why do I not give up everything for him, wealth, honour, reputation and so on? But"—she screamed out the words so that they echoed round the galleries—"I cannot! I have my child, my dear little girl! I can't give up my girl! Do you think my husband would let me keep her? Here, Herr Pernath, take this"—frantically she tore open a bag that was stuffed full of strings of pearls and jewels—"and give it to this Wassertrum. I know how rapacious he is, he can have everything I possess, but he must leave me my child. That will keep him quiet, won't it? Please say something, please, for the love of God, even if it's only one word! Say you will help me!"

She was almost beside herself, but with great difficulty I managed to calm her sufficiently to get her to sit down in one of the pews. I said whatever came into my head, a tangle of disjointed phrases. All the while thoughts were whizzing round my brain, fantastic bubbles that burst scarcely had they seen the light of day, so that I hardly knew myself what my lips were saying.

Unconsciously, my gaze was fixed on the painted statue of a monk standing in a niche in the wall. As I talked and talked, the statue gradually became transformed, the monk's habit turning into a threadbare overcoat with a turned-up collar out of which appeared a youthful face with emaciated cheeks and unhealthy red blotches. Before I could comprehend my vision, the monk had returned. The throb of blood in my veins was too loud.

The unfortunate woman was bent over my hand, sobbing gently. I gave her some of the energy which had come to me when I had read her letter and which I could feel again now, coursing powerfully through my limbs. Slowly she seemed to recover.

After a long silence she started to speak softly, "I will tell you why it is you I have turned to, Herr Pernath. It is because of a few words you once said to me, and which I have never forgotten, even though it was all those years ago."

All those years ago? My blood froze.

"You were saying goodbye to me—I can't remember why, I was still a child—and you said in a friendly, but oh, so sad voice, 'I presume it will never happen, but if there should come a time in your life when you don't know where to turn, then remember me. Perhaps the good Lord will allow me to be the one to help you.' I turned away quickly and dropped my ball into the fountain so that you would not see my tears. What I would really have liked to

do would have been to give you the heart of red coral that I wore on a silk ribbon round my neck, but I was too embarrassed, it would have seemed so silly."

Memory

The invisible, choking fingers were feeling their way towards my tongue again. Without warning an image appeared before my mind's eye, like the pale reflected shimmer of a long-lost, yearned-for land: a little girl in a white dress, and all around her the parkland of a country estate surrounded by old elm-trees. I could see it quite clearly.

I must have changed colour, I could tell by the hurried way she went on. "I know that what you said then was just prompted by the mood of farewell, but they have often been a comfort to me, and . . . and I thank you for that."

I clenched my teeth and called up all my strength to bury the raging pain deep in my breast which was threatening to tear me apart.

I realised that the hand which had bolted the door to my memories had performed an act of mercy. That brief shimmer from the old days had etched its message on my mind: for years a love that was too strong for my heart had gnawed at my mind until insanity had spread the soothing balm of oblivion over my wounded spirit.

Gradually insensibility spread its peace over me, cooling the tears behind my eyelids. Solemnly, proudly, the bells echoed through the Cathedral, and I could look with a joyful smile into the eyes of the one who had come to seek help from me.

Once more I heard the dull thud of the carriage door and the clatter of the horses' hooves.

Trudging through the glittering, midnight-blue snow, I made my way back down into the town.

The street-lamps blinked at me in astonishment, and the piles of Christmas trees stacked up high whispered of tinsel and silver-painted nuts and the coming celebrations. Beside the column bearing the statue of the Mother of God, the old beggarwomen with their grey scarves over their heads were muttering a rosary of the Virgin by candlelight. The stalls of the Christmas market were crouched around the dark entrance to the old Ghetto. Right in the middle of them, covered with red canvas, illuminated by the harsh light of smoky torches, was the open stage of a puppet theatre. Zwakh's Punchinello, dressed in crimson and magenta, his whip with a skull dangling from it in his hand, clattered across the boards on a wooden stallion.

Crowded together in rows and with their fur caps pulled tight down over

their ears, the children were staring up open-mouthed and listening spellbound to the verses of the Prague poet, Oskar Wiener, that my friend Zwakh was declaiming from inside the booth: What have we here? A jumping jack! As skinny as a rhyming hack; All dressed in rags of red and blue—Watch the tricks that he gets up to.

I turned down the dark, twisting street that led to the square. A packed, silent crowd was standing shoulder to shoulder in the darkness in front of a notice. One man had struck a match and I managed to read odd words here and there which registered dully in my consciousness: Missing Person

1,000 CROWNS REWARD

.....in his mid-sixties.

.....black frock-coat.

.....face: plump and clean shaven.

.....

.....hair: white.

.....to the Police.

Room no.:

Void of interest in my surroundings, void of all desire, I slowly went on into the darkness between the rows of unlit houses, a living corpse. A handful of tiny stars glittered in the narrow strip of sky above the gables.

At peace now, my thoughts went back to the Cathedral, and the calm that encompassed my soul became more blissful, more profound. All at once, from the square came the voice of the puppeteer, crystal clear on the wintry air, as if it were close to my ear: Where is the heart of coral red? It hung upon a silken thread, Gleaming in the blood-red dawn.

GHOSTS

Until deep into the night I paced restlessly up and down my room, tormenting my brain to find some way of helping 'her'. Often I was on the point of going down to Shemaiah Hillel, to tell him everything that had been confided to me and to ask him for advice, but each time I rejected the idea.

I saw him towering so high above me in the spirit, that it seemed a desecration to bother him with practical matters. Then again, there were moments when I was racked with doubt as to whether I really had been through all those happenings which, although only a brief span of time

separated them from the present, now seemed so strangely faded compared to the throbbing vitality of my experiences of the last few hours.

Was it not all a dream? How could I, a man who had suffered the outrageous misfortune of forgetting his past, accept as fact, even for a moment, something for which my memory was the only witness on which I could call? My glance fell on Hillel's candle, which was still on the chair. Thank God! I had been in personal contact with him; that at least was one thing I could be sure of. Should I not abandon all this introspection and rush straight down to him, clasp his knees and pour out the excruciating anguish that was eating away at my heart?

I already had my hand on the latch, but then I let go of it. I could see what would happen: Hillel would gently pass his hand over my eyes and—no, no, not that! I had no right to ask for relief.

'She' had put her trust in me and in my help and if, at the moment, the danger she feared appeared small and insignificant to me, it certainly seemed enormous to her.

Tomorrow would be time enough to ask Hillel for advice. I forced myself to look at the matter coolly and objectively. Should I go and disturb him now, in the middle of the night? Impossible!

It would be the act of a madman.

I was going to light the lamp, but then I let it be. The reflection of the moonlight from the roofs opposite shone into my room, making it brighter than I needed. I was afraid the night would pass even more slowly if I lit the lamp. There was a sense of hopelessness about lighting the lamp just to await the morning; a vague fear whispered that that would make the dawn recede until I should never see it.

I went over to the window. The rows of ornate gables were like a ghostly cemetery floating in the air, weatherworn tombstones with eroded dates erected above the dark vaults of decay, those 'dwelling-places' where the swarms of the living had gnawed out caverns and passageways.

For a long time I stood there, staring out into the night, until I gradually became aware of a feeling of surprise nibbling gently at my consciousness: why was I not trembling with fear when I could clearly hear the sound of cautious steps from the other side of the wall?

I listened. There was no doubt about it, someone was out there again. The brief groans from the boards betrayed each hesitant, creeping step. At once I was fully alert again. Every fibre in my body was so concentrated in my determination to hear that I literally grew smaller. All my sense of time was

focused on the present.

A brief rustling that broke off short, as if startled at itself, then deadly silence, that agonising, watchful hush, fraught with its own betrayal, that stretched each minute to an excruciating eternity. I stood there, stock-still, my ear pressed against the wall, with the ominous certainty rising in my throat that someone else was standing on the other side, doing just the same.

I strained my ear—nothing.

The studio next door seemed utterly deserted.

Silently, on tiptoe, I stole over to the chair by my bed, picked up Hillel's candle and lit it. Then I stood there, working out what I was going to do. The handle of the iron door in the corridor that led to Savioli's studio was on the other side. I picked up the first suitable implement that came to hand, a wire hook that I found on the table among my engraving tools. That kind of lock was easy to open, all it needed was one touch on the spring.

And then what would happen?

I decided that it could only be Aaron Wassertrum next door, prying around, perhaps rummaging through cupboards and drawers to find more evidence, more weapons in his fight against Savioli.

What good would my interrupting him at it do?

I did not waste much time in thought. Action, not reflection, was what was needed! Anything to put an end to this terrible wait for morning to come!

The next moment I was standing by the iron door. I pushed at it, then carefully inserted the hook into the lock, listening all the time. Yes! From inside the studio came the scraping sound of someone pulling out a drawer.

The next moment the bolt shot back.

Although it was dark and my candle only dazzled me, I had a view of the whole room. A man in a long black coat started up in panic from a desk, hesitated for a second, uncertain what to do, took one step forward, as if he were going to hurl himself at me, then snatched his hat from his head and swiftly covered his face with it. I was about to demand what he was doing here, but he forestalled me. "Pernath? Is it you?! For God's sake, get rid of that light!" I seemed to recognise the voice; it certainly wasn't Wassertrum's.

Automatically I blew out the candle.

The room lay in semi-darkness, dimly lit, like my own, by the shimmering haze from the window, and I had to strain my eyes to the utmost before I could recognise in the emaciated face with the unhealthy red blotches that suddenly appeared above the coat, the features of the medical student, Charousek.

"The monk!" were the words that came to my lips, and all at once I comprehended the vision I had had yesterday evening in the Cathedral. Charousek! That was the man I should turn to! And I heard once again the words he had spoken while we were sheltering from the rain in the house entrance, "Aaron Wassertrum will soon find out that there are those who can pierce the vital artery with poisoned needles through solid walls. Soon, on the very day he thinks he has Dr.

Savioli at his mercy!"

Had I an ally in Charousek? Did he know what had happened as well? The fact that I had found him here, and at such an odd hour, suggested as much, but I was loth to ask him straight out. He had rushed over to the window and was peering through the curtains down into the street. I guessed that he was afraid Wassertrum might have seen the light of my candle.

After a long silence he said, in an unsteady voice, "You probably think I'm a thief, Pernath, finding me here, at night, in someone else's apartment, but I swear to you—"

I interrupted immediately to reassure him. To show that I did not distrust him at all but saw him, on the contrary, as an ally, I told him everything—with the few reservations I thought necessary—about the studio and that I was afraid that a lady who was a close friend of mine was in danger of falling victim, in some way or other, to blackmailing demands from the rapacious Wassertrum. From the polite way he heard me out, without putting any questions, I deduced that he already knew most of it, even if not the precise details.

"So it's true", he muttered to himself when I had finished. "I was right after all. The fellow intends to ruin Savioli, but hasn't enough evidence yet. Why else would he spend all his time snooping round here? You see," he explained, when he saw my puzzled expression, "yesterday I was walking—let's say 'by chance'—along Hahnpassgasse when I happened to notice Wassertrum strolling up and down, with feigned nonchalance, outside the entrance to this house; the moment he thought no one was looking, he quickly slipped into the building. I immediately followed and pretended to be visiting you; that is, I knocked at your door, and as I did so I caught him trying a key on the iron door to the roof space. Of course, he stopped the moment he saw me and used the same pretence of knocking at your door. You don't seem to have been in.

Cautious enquiries in the Ghetto revealed that someone—and from the descriptions it could only be Dr. Savioli—had a secret love-nest here. As Savioli is seriously ill, I could work out the rest for myself. See, I've taken these from the drawer, to thwart Wassertrum", he said, pointing to a packet of letters on the desk. "They're the only papers I could find, let's hope I haven't

missed any. At least I've had a good look through all the chests and cupboards, as far as it's possible in this darkness."

As he was speaking, my eyes searched the room and were caught by the sight of a trapdoor in the floor. I vaguely remembered Zwakh telling me some time or other that there was a secret entrance to the study from below. It was square and had a ring as a handle.

"Where shall we keep the letters?" asked Charousek. "I should imagine you and I, Herr Pernath, are probably the only people Wassertrum thinks are harmless, me because . . . well . . . there are . . . particular reasons for that" (his features were twisted in an expression of violent hatred as he spat out those last words) "and you he considers . . ." Charousek choked back the word 'mad' with a hurried and obviously feigned fit of coughing, but I guessed what he had been going to say. I was not hurt by it. I felt so happy at the idea of being able to help 'her' that my sensitivity to such suggestions had completely vanished. We decided to hide the packet in my room and went back there through the iron door.

Charousek had left a long time ago but I still could not make up my mind to go to bed. A sense of unease was gnawing at me, making rest impossible. I felt there was still something I had to do, but what was it? What? Make a plan of our next moves for Charousek? No, that alone wasn't enough. He wouldn't let the junk-dealer out of his sight for one second anyway, of that there was no doubt. I shuddered at the memory of the hatred emanating from his every word. What on earth could it be Wassertrum had done to him?

This strange sense of unease inside me was growing, driving me to distraction. There was something invisible calling me, something from the other side, and I could not understand it. I felt like a horse being broken in: it can feel the tug on the reins, but doesn't know which movement it's supposed to perform, cannot tell what is in its master's mind.

Go down to Shemaiah Hillel?

Every fibre in my body resisted the idea.

The vision I had had in the Cathedral, when Charousek's head had appeared on the monk's body in answer to my mute appeal for help, was indication enough that I should not reject vague feelings out of hand. For some time now hidden powers had been germinating within me, of that I was certain; the sense was so overpowering that I did not even try to deny it. To feel letters, not just read them with my eyes in books, to set up an interpreter within me to translate the things instinct whispers without the aid of words: that must be the key, I realised, that must be the way to establish a clear language of communication with my own inner being.

'They have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear and hear not'; the passage from the Bible came to me like an explanation.

"Key . . . key . . . key . . ." As my mind was teasing me with these strange ideas, I suddenly noticed that my lips were mechanically repeating that one word. "Key . . . key . . .?" My eye fell on the wire hook which I had used to open the door to the loft, and immediately I was inflamed with the desire to see where the square trapdoor in the studio led. Without pause for thought, I went back into Savioli's studio and pulled the ring on the trapdoor until I had managed to raise it.

At first, nothing but darkness.

Then I saw steep, narrow steps descending into the blackness. I set off down them, but they seemed never-ending. I groped my way past alcoves damp with mould and mildew, round twists, turns and sharp corners, across passageways leading off ahead, to the left or the right, past the remains of an old wooden door, taking this fork or that, at random; and always the steps, steps and more steps, leading up and down, up and down, and over it all the heavy, stifling smell of soil and fungoid growth.

And still not a glimmer of light. If only I had brought Hillel's candle with me!

At last the ground became level. From the dull crunching sound of my footsteps I guessed I was walking on dry sand. It could only be one of those countless passages that run, without rhyme or reason, from the Ghetto down to the river. I was not in the least surprised; half the town had been built over this network of tunnels and since time immemorial the inhabitants of Prague had had good reason to shun the light of day.

Even though I seemed to have been walking for an eternity, the complete lack of sound from above my head told me that I must still be within the confines of the Ghetto, where a tomb-like silence reigns at night. Had I been below even moderately busy streets or squares, the clatter of carriages would have reached me.

For a second fear grabbed me by the throat: what if I was merely going round in circles? What if I should fall down some hole and injure myself, break a leg and be stuck down here?! What would happen to her letters then? They lay in my room, and Wassertrum was sure to get his hands on them.

Unbidden, the comforting presence of Shemaiah Hillel, whom I vaguely associated with the idea of help and guidance, flooded through my mind. To be on the safe side, however, I went more slowly, checking my foothold at each step and holding one arm above me so as not to knock my head against the roof if the passage should suddenly get lower. Occasionally, and then with

increasing frequency, my hand hit the rock above me until eventually it was so low that I had to bend down to continue.

Suddenly there was empty space above my upraised arm. I stood still and stared up. Eventually I seemed to make out a scarcely perceptible shimmer of light coming from the ceiling. Could it be the opening of some shaft, perhaps from a cellar? I stretched up and felt around with both hands above head height. The opening was rectangular and lined with stone. Gradually I began to make out the shadowy outlines of a horizontal cross at the top of the opening and finally I managed to grasp the bars that formed it and pull myself up and through the gap between them.

Standing on the cross, I tried to get my bearings. If my fingers were not deceiving me, that must be the remains of an iron spiral staircase? I had to spend a long, long time groping in the darkness until I found the second step, then I started climbing. There were eight steps in all, each one at almost head height above the last.

Strange! At the top, the staircase came up against a kind of horizontal panelling which let through, in regular lines, the shimmer of light that I had seen from below. I bent down as far as I could to see if, from the extra distance, I could make out the pattern of the lines. To my astonishment I realised that they formed the precise shape of a six-pointed star, such as is found on synagogues.

What on earth could it be?

Suddenly it dawned on me: this, too, was a trapdoor, with the light seeping round the edges. A wooden trapdoor in the shape of a star. I put my shoulder against it and heaved; one second later I was standing in a room flooded with bright moonlight. It was fairly small and completely empty apart from a pile of rubbish in one corner. There was only one window, and that had strong iron bars. I checked the walls several times, but however carefully I searched I could find no door or other kind of entrance, apart from the one I had just used. The bars over the window were too close for me to put my head through, but from what I could see of the street outside, the room must have been roughly on a level with the third floor, as the houses opposite had only two storeys and were considerably lower.

The pavement on the other side of the street was just in view, but the dazzling moonlight that was shining full in my face formed deep shadows, rendering it impossible for me to make out any details. The street must be part of the Jewish Ghetto, for all the windows of the building opposite were bricked up and merely indicated by ledges projecting from the wall; nowhere else in the city do the houses turn their backs on each other in this odd fashion.

In vain I racked my brains to try to work out what this singular building in which I found myself might be. Could it perhaps be one of the abandoned side-towers of the Greek Church? Or did it somehow form part of the Old-New Synagogue?

The situation was all wrong for that.

Again I looked round the room: not the slightest clue. The walls and ceiling were bare, the whitewash and plaster had long since flaked off and there were neither nails nor holes to suggest the room had ever even been inhabited. The floor was ankle-deep in dust, as if no living being had been here for decades.

I shuddered at the idea of examining the rubbish in the corner. It was in deepest darkness and I could not make out what it consisted of. At first glance it appeared to be rags tied up in a bundle.

Or was it a couple of old, black suitcases? I prodded it with my foot and managed to use my heel to drag part of it towards the ray of light the moon cast across the room. It looked like a broad, dark strip of material that was slowly unrolling.

What was that spot, glittering like an eye? A metal button perhaps?

It gradually resolved itself into the arm of some curiously old-fashioned coat hanging out of the bundle. And beneath it was a little white box, or something like that; under the pressure of my foot it gave way and crumbled into a mottled, layered heap. I gave it another poke with my foot and a piece of paper fluttered into the light.

A picture?

I bent down: a Juggler, the lowest trump in the game of Tarock. What I had taken for a white box was a pack of cards.

I picked it up. How grotesque, a pack of cards in this eerie place! The strange thing was, I had to force myself to smile as a faint shudder of horror crept up my spine. I tried to think of a simple explanation of how they came to be here, mechanically counting the pack as I did so. Seventy-eight cards, it was complete. Even as I was counting them I was struck by the fact that the cards felt like slivers of ice. They gave off a glacial cold, and I found that my fingers were so stiff that it was almost impossible to release the cards from their grip. Once more I looked for a rational explanation. My thin suit and the long walk without coat or hat through the underground passages, the bitter cold of the winter's night, the stone walls, the severe frost that seemed to flow in through the window with the moonlight—if there was anything odd it was that I had only started to feel the cold now. The fever of excitement I was in

must have made me insensible to it.

Fits of shivering rippled across my skin, penetrating deeper and deeper into my body. My skeleton seemed to be turning to ice and I was aware of each individual bone in my body as if it were a cold metal rod onto which my flesh was freezing fast. Walking round the room, stamping my feet on the ground, beating my arms against my sides—nothing helped. I clenched my teeth to stop them chattering.

It must be Death, I said to myself, laying his chill hand on my skull. And I fought like a madman against the numbing sleep in which the freezing cold was enveloping me like a stifling, soft woollen cloak.

The letters in my room, her letters! The words exploded in my brain like a howl of despair. They will be found if I die here! And she is relying on me, she is looking to me to save her! Help!—

Help!—Help!

And I screamed out through the bars of the window, sending my cry echoing through the deserted street, "Help! Help! Help!" I threw myself to the ground and immediately jumped up again. I mustn't die, I mustn't! For her sake, for her sake alone! I had to find warmth, even if it meant striking a spark from my own bones. Then I caught sight of the rags in the corner, and I rushed across to them and pulled them on over my own clothes with shaking hands. It was a threadbare suit of some thick, dark material in an ancient, curious style.

It gave off a smell of decay.

Then I huddled down in the opposite corner and felt my skin slowly, very slowly begin to grow warmer. But the gruesome awareness of the icy skeleton inside my body refused to leave. I sat there motionless, my eyes wandering round the room. The playing card I had noticed first—the Juggler—was still in the ray of light that ran across the middle of the room.

I stared at it, I could not tear my eyes away.

As far as I could tell from that distance, it seemed to be a crude picture, painted in watercolours by a child's hand, representing the Hebrew character Aleph in the form of a man in quaint, old-fashioned dress, with a short, pointed beard, and one hand raised whilst the other pointed downwards. I could feel a disturbing thought seeping its way into my mind: did the man's face not bear a strange resemblance to my own? That beard, it wasn't right for a Juggler. I crawled over to where the card lay and threw it into the corner with the rest of the jumble, just to rid myself of the tormenting sight.

There it was now, lying there and gleaming across at me through the gloom, a blurred, greyish-white smudge.

I forced myself to think about what I could do to get back to my room. Wait for morning, then call out from the window to passers-by to find a ladder and bring me some candles or a lantern!

Without a light I would never manage to find my way back through the maze of tunnels, that was certain, horrifyingly certain. Or, if the window should be too high, perhaps someone could climb onto the roof and use a rope . . .? My God! It struck me like a bolt of lightning. Now I knew where I was! A room without an entrance, with only a barred window, the ancient house in Altschulgasse that everyone avoided! Many years ago someone had let himself down by a rope to look in through the window and the rope had broken and . . . Yes! I was in the house where the ghostly figure of the Golem disappeared each time!

I was overwhelmed with horror. I tried to resist, but in vain; even the memory of the letters was powerless against it. My mind was paralysed and my heart started to contract convulsively.

Hastily I told myself it was only the icy draught blowing from the corner over there. Lips numb with fear, I repeated it over to myself, faster and faster, my breath whistling, but it was no use: that smudge of white over there, the card, it was swelling into blistered lumps, feeling its way forward to the edge of the ray of moonlight and then creeping back into the darkness. The silence in the room was punctuated by dripping sounds, half imagined, half real. . . outside me, all around me, and yet somewhere else at the same time . . . deep within my heart and then out in the room once more; it was the sound a pair of compasses makes when it falls and the point sticks into a piece of wood.

And again and again, that smudge of white . . . that smudge of white! "It's a card, a miserable, stupid little playing card!" I sent the scream echoing round my skull, but in vain . . . now it was . . . was taking on human form . . . the Juggler . . . and was squatting in the corner and staring at me with vacant eyes out of my own face!

For hour after hour I sat there without moving, huddled up in my corner, a frozen skeleton in mouldy clothes that belonged to another. And across the room he sat, he . . . I . . . myself.

Mute and motionless, we stared into each other's eyes, the one a hideous mirror-image of the other. Can he see the moonbeam too, as it sucks its way across the floor as sluggishly as a snail, and crawls up the infinite spaces of the wall like the hand of some invisible clock, growing paler and paler as it rises?

I fixed him with my gaze, and it was no use his trying to dissolve in the half-light of morning which was coming in through the window to help him. I held him fast.

Step by step I wrestled with him for my life, for the life that is mine because it no longer belongs to me. He grew smaller and smaller, and as the day broke he crept back into the playing card. I stood up, walked across the room and put the Juggler in my pocket.

The street below was still completely deserted.

I rummaged through the things in the corner that were now revealed in the dull morning light: some broken pottery, there a rusty pan, here scraps of mouldy material, the neck of a bottle.

Inanimate objects, and yet so remarkably familiar. And the walls too, how clear the lines and cracks were becoming! Now where had I seen them before?

I picked up the pack of cards and it began to dawn on me. Had I not painted them myself? As a child? A long, long time ago? It was an ancient set of tarot cards. With Hebrew signs. Number twelve must be the Hanged Man, I seemed to remember, hanging head downwards with his arms behind his back? I flicked through the pack. There! There he was!

Then another image, half dream, half certainty, appeared before my inner eye: a blackened schoolhouse, crooked, hunch-backed, a sullen witches' cottage, its left shoulder too high, the other merging into a neighbouring house. There are several of us, adolescent boys . . . somewhere there is an abandoned cellar . . .

Then I looked down at my body and was thrown into confusion once more. I did not recognise the old-fashioned suit at all. . .

I started at the clatter of a cart on the cobbles, but when I looked down from the window there was not a soul to be seen, just a mastiff standing pensively by the corner of a house.

There! At last! Voices! Human voices! Two old women were trotting slowly down the street. I forced my head part-way through the bars and called out to them. Open-mouthed, they stared up, asking each other what it might be. But when they saw me they let out a piercing cry and fled. I realised they had taken me for the Golem.

I expected a crowd to gather so I would be able to explain my situation to them, but a good hour passed during which, now and then, a pale face would arrive below, peer up warily at me and immediately start back in mortal fear. Should I wait—perhaps for hours, perhaps even until tomorrow—for the police to arrive, those state-licensed crooks, as Zwakh calls them?

No, I would rather try to investigate the underground passages, to follow them a little way to see where they led. Perhaps now it was day a glimmer of light might come through cracks in the rock?

I clambered back down the spiral stairs and continued on the way I had been following yesterday, over whole mounds of broken bricks, through subterranean cellars, then up a ruined staircase—to find myself suddenly in the hallway of the black schoolhouse I had seen in my dream.

Immediately I was engulfed in a tidal wave of memories: desks bespattered from top to bottom with ink, arithmetic jotters, songs bawled out at full voice, a boy setting a cockchafer loose in the class, readers with sandwiches squashed between the pages and smelling of orange peel. But I wasted no time in reflection and hurried home.

The first person I met—it was in Salnitergasse—was a misshapen old Jew with white side-locks.

Scarcely had he caught sight of me than he covered his face with his hands and started to reel off Hebrew prayers in a loud howl. At the noise, many people must have rushed out of their hovels, for an incredible clamour broke out behind me. I turned round and saw a teeming throng of pale, terror-struck faces surging down the alley behind me. I stood dumbfounded until I looked down at myself: I was still wearing the strange, medieval clothes from the night before over my suit; the people must think they were seeing the Golem. Quickly I hurried round the corner and hid in an entrance, tearing off the mouldy clothes.

A second later the crowd was pouring past me, waving sticks in the air and shouting abuse.

LIGHT

Several times during the course of the day I had knocked at Hillel's door. I felt I could not rest until I had asked him what all the strange events I had been through could mean, but each time I was told he was not at home. His daughter said she would let me know as soon as he came home from the Jewish Town Hall.

What a strange girl she is, that Miriam. A type of girl I have never come across before. A beautiful girl, but with a beauty so foreign that at first you can't comprehend it, a beauty that strikes you dumb when you look at her and, in some inexplicable way, makes you feel disheartened. As I mused on this, the only explanation I could come up with was that her face must be formed according to laws of proportion that have been lost for thousands of years. I wondered what precious stone I would have to choose to capture it in a cameo while still engraving it according to the rules of my art. The attempt failed at the very first hurdle: the blue-black sheen of her hair and eyes were beyond

any stone I could think of. How then could I even contemplate trying to capture the vision, the spirit of the unearthly slimness of that face in a cameo? All that would emerge would be the tedious similitude of an academic portrait. I came to see that only a mosaic would do, but what materials would I use? It would take a lifetime just to assemble a suitable supply of them.

Where on earth was Hillel? I found myself longing for him as for a dear, old friend. It was remarkable how attached to him I had grown in the last few days. After all, to be precise, I had only spoken to him once in my whole life.

Of course! The letters—her letters. I was going to find a better hiding place for them. For my own peace of mind, in case I should have to be away from home for any length of time again. I took them out of the chest; they would be safer kept in the iron box.

A photograph slipped out from among the letters. I tried not to look, but it was too late. 'She' was looking me straight in the eyes, a brocade gown round her shoulders, just as I had seen her the first time, when she had fled from Savioli's studio and taken refuge in my room.

A stabbing pain almost drove me to distraction. I read the dedication underneath without taking in the words; then came the name:

Your Angelina.

Angelina!!

As I spoke the name, the veil that had shut off my youth from me was rent from top to bottom.

I felt I was going to collapse under the weight of misery. I clawed the air and bit my hand, I whimpered: O dear God, only let me be blind once more, let me continue that life-in-death I have lived until now!

The agony welled up inside me, rose to my lips and poured forth. It tasted strangely sweet, like blood . . .

Angelina!!

The name throbbed through my veins; it was an unbearable, ghostly caress.

With a violent shudder I pulled myself together and forced myself, my clenched teeth grinding together, to stare at the photograph until I slowly mastered it.

Mastered

it!

As I had mastered the playing card during the night.

Steps at last! A man's tread.

He was here!

Joyfully I rushed to the door and threw it open.

Outside stood Shemaiah Hillel and behind him—I reproached myself for the feeling of disappointment it caused me—with his red cheeks and round, child's eyes, was old Zwakh the puppeteer.

"It gives me great pleasure, Herr Pernath, to see you in such good health", said Hillel.

Such a cold tone?

Ice. Suddenly the room was full of ice, searing, numbing ice.

In a daze, I only half listened to what Zwakh, breathless with excitement, was prattling on to me about.

"Have you heard? The Golem is haunting the Ghetto again! We were talking about it not that long ago. You remember, don't you, Pernath? The whole of the Ghetto is in uproar. Vrieslander saw it with his own eyes. And this time again it started with a murder!" I looked up in astonishment: a murder?

Zwakh shook me. "Yes. Don't you ever hear anything, Pernath? There's a huge police notice appealing for witnesses at every corner: fat old Zottmann, the 'Freemason'—I mean Zottmann the managing director of the Life Assurance Company—has been murdered, so they say. Loisa—the one who lives in this house—has already been arrested. And Rosina has disappeared without trace. The Golem . . . the Golem . . . it's enough to make your hair stand on end."

I made no answer, but searched Hillel's eyes. Why was he staring at me so fixedly? All at once the corners of his mouth twitched with a suppressed smile. I realised it was meant for me.

I was so beside myself with joy I could have flung my arms around his neck. In my ecstasy I rushed aimlessly round the room. What should I bring first? Glasses? A bottle of burgundy? (I only had the one.) Cigarettes? Finally I managed to speak. "But why don't you sit down?"

Quickly I pushed chairs across for my friends.

Zwakh was beginning to get irritated. "Why do you keep smiling like that, Hillel? Perhaps you don't believe the Golem is haunting the Ghetto? It seems to me you don't believe in the Golem at all."

"I would not believe in it even if I were to see it standing before me in this

very room", Hillel calmly answered, with a glance at me. I understood the double meaning his words contained.

In astonishment, Zwakh took his glass from his lips without drinking. "And the evidence of hundreds of people counts for nothing to you, Hillel? But just you wait and mark my words: now there will be murder after murder in the Jewish quarter. I know about these things. The Golem brings some macabre things in its wake."

"There is nothing miraculous about a proliferation of similar events", replied Hillel. He stood up as he spoke, went over to the window and looked down at the junk shop. "When the thaw comes, the roots begin to stir, the poisonous ones as well as the wholesome ones."

Zwakh gave me a merry wink, jerking his head in Hillel's direction. "If the Rabbi wanted, he could tell us things that would make your hair stand on end", he said in a half-whisper. Shemaiah turned round.

"I am not a Rabbi, even if I have the right to use that title. I am just a poor archivist at the Jewish Town Hall and keep the register of the living and the dead."

I felt there was some hidden significance in his words. The old puppeteer seemed unconsciously aware of it as well. He fell quiet, and for a long time none of us spoke.

It was Zwakh who broke the silence, and his voice sounded unusually grave. "By the way, Rabbi—I'm sorry, I mean Herr Hillel, there's something I have been meaning to ask you for a long time. You don't have to answer if you'd rather not, or if you're not allowed to . . ."

Shemaiah came over to the table and idly fingered the wine-glass. He did not drink, perhaps there were Jewish rituals forbidding it.

"Ask away, Herr Zwakh."

"You know something of the Jewish esoteric doctrine called the Cabbala, Hillel?"

"Only a little."

"I have heard there is supposed to be a collection of mystical writings from which one can learn the Cabbala: the Sohar . . ."

"Yes, the Sohar, the Book of Splendour."

"There you are, you see!" Zwakh said angrily. "Isn't it scandalous that a book that is supposed to contain the keys to the understanding of the Bible and to eternal bliss—"

Hillel interrupted him. "Only some keys."

"All right! But some keys at least! And isn't it scandalous that this work, because of its great value and extreme rarity, is only available to the rich? In fact I believe I'm right in saying there is only one copy, and that in the British Museum in London and written, what's more, in Chaldaean, Aramaic, Hebrew or whatever. Have I, for example, in my whole life ever had the opportunity to learn those languages or to go to London?"

"Are all your desires set so passionately on that goal", asked Hillel, gently mocking.

"Well, to be honest.. . no", Zwakh admitted, somewhat deflated.

"Then you can have no cause for complaint", Hillel said drily. "Unless you cry out for the spirit with every atom in your body, as a man who is suffocating gasps for air, you cannot see the mysteries of God."

'Despite that, there is said to be a book which contains all the keys to the puzzles of the other world, not just some.' As the thought flashed through my mind, my hand automatically fingered the Juggler, which I still had in my pocket, but before I could formulate the question, Zwakh had spoken it out loud.

Once again Hillel smiled his sphinx-like smile. "Every question that can be asked by man is answered the moment it is asked in the spirit."

Zwakh turned to me, "Have you any idea what he means by that?" But I gave no answer, I was holding my breath so as not to miss a single word of what Hillel was saying.

Shemaiah went on, "The whole of life consists of nothing but questions which have taken on physical form and which bear the seed of their answer within them, and of answers which are pregnant with questions. A man who sees anything else in it is a fool."

Zwakh thumped the table. "Yes: questions that are different every time and answers that mean different things to different people."

"That is the whole point", said Hillel amicably. "It is, I believe, solely the doctor's privilege to have 'one pill for every ill". Each questioner is given the answer best suited to his needs; otherwise humanity would not follow the path of their longings. Do you think there is no rhyme or reason why our Jewish books are written in consonants alone? Each reader has to find for himself the secret vowels that go with them and which reveal a meaning that is for him alone; the living word should not wither into dead dogma."

The old puppeteer disagreed violently. "That's nothing but words, Rabbi, words! Call me a fairground juggler if I can make head or tail of it!"

A fairground juggler! Like a bolt from the blue, Zwakh's words immediately brought back to mind the Juggler I had found during the night. I almost fell off my chair in horrified surprise.

Hillel avoided my eye. I heard his voice as from a great distance. "A juggler? Perhaps that is what you are. One should never be too sure of oneself. By the way Herr Zwakh, talking of jugglers, do you play Tarock?"

"Tarock? Of course. Since I was a boy."

"Then I'm astonished you can ask me about a book which contains the whole of the Cabbala when you must have held it in your hand thousands of times."

"Me? In my hand? My own hand?" Zwakh scratched his head in bewilderment.

"Yes, you! Has it never struck you that the Tarock pack has twenty-two trumps—precisely the same number as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet? And, what is more, do not our Bohemian cards have pictures which are obviously symbols? The Fool, Death, the Devil, the Last Judgment? How loud, my friend, do you want life to shout its answers to you? It's not necessary, of course, for you to know that Tarock, or Tarot, is the same as the Jewish word Tora, 'the Law', or the old Egyptian tarut, which means 'One who is asked', and the ancient Zend word tarisk, which means 'I demand the answer'. But scholars should know these facts before they assert that the Tarock pack originated during the time of Charles the Sixth. And just as the Juggler, the lowest trump, is the first card in the pack, so man is the first figure in his own picture book, his own double: the Hebrew character Aleph, which is formed after the shape of a man, with one hand pointing up at the sky and the other downwards, saying, therefore, 'As it is above, so it is below; as it is below, so it is above.' That is why I said before, who knows whether you are really Zwakh the puppeteer and not the 'Juggler'? Do not tempt fate."

As he spoke, Hillel fixed his gaze on me, and I gradually felt greater and greater depths of new meaning open up at his words. "Do not tempt fate, Herr Zwakh. If you do, you can find yourself straying into dark passages from which no one has ever returned unless he bore a talisman with him. There is a legend that once three men descended into the realm of darkness; one went mad, the other blind, and only the third, Rabbi ben Akiba, returned safely home and said he had met himself. You may object that there are a number of people—Goethe, for example,—who have met themselves, usually on a bridge or some other footway leading from one bank of a river to the other, have looked themselves in the eye and not gone mad. But that was just a reflection of their own consciousness and not a true double, not what is called Habal Garmin, 'the breath of the bones', of which it is said, 'As it went down into the

grave, in bone incorruptible, so will it rise up on the day of the Last Judgment'." Hillel's gaze pierced deeper and deeper into mine.

"Our grandmothers say of him, 'He lives high above the ground in a room without a door, with

only one window, from which it is impossible to communicate with mankind. Anyone who manages to bind him and to refine him, will be reconciled with himself . . . to get back M to Tarock, however, you know as well as I do that each person is dealt a different hand, but it is the one who knows how to use the trumps aright who wins the game. But come along now, Herr Zwakh, it's time to go, otherwise you'll drink all of Herr Pernath's wine and there'll be none left for him."

CARE

A snow-battle was raging outside my window. One snow-flake regiment after the other, tiny soldiers in shaggy, white coats, rushed across the window-panes for minutes on end, always in the same direction, as if they were all fleeing from some particularly vicious enemy. Then all of a sudden they would tire of running away, seemed, for some inexplicable reason, to be consumed with anger and dashed back again until they were ambushed from above and below by new hostile armies and everything dissolved into a chaotic, swirling mass.

I felt as though months had elapsed since the strange experiences which I had been through such a short while ago. Had it not been for the fact that several times a day new and ever more grotesque rumours of the Golem would reach my ears and refresh my memory of that night, I think there would have been moments when I suspected I had been the victim of a hallucination.

The thing that stood out most vividly from the fantastic pattern the events had woven round me was what Zwakh had told me about the murder of the so-called 'Freemason', which was still unsolved. I really could not see pockmarked Loisa as the murderer, although I was not without my own, dark suspicions. Almost immediately after Prokop claimed to have heard a weird noise from the sewers, we had seen the lad at Loischek's. On the other hand, there was no reason to believe the shout from underground was a cry for help, even assuming it was not simply a figment of the imagination.

The flurries of snow were dazzling my eyes and I was beginning to see everything as a jumble of dancing stripes. I turned my attention back to the cameo I was working on. I had made a wax model of Miriam's face and I felt that the moonstone, with its bluish sheen, ought to be perfect for it. I was very

pleased; it was a happy chance that I had found something so suitable among my stock of stones. The deep-black hornblende setting gave it just the right light, and its shape fitted so well it was as if nature had created it especially to be transformed into a lasting likeness of Miriam's delicate profile.

Initially it had been my intention to cut a cameo from it representing the Egyptian god Osiris. I had been inspired by the vision of the hermaphrodite from the Book of Ibbur which I could recall to mind at will with remarkable clarity but, after I had made the first incisions, I gradually came to see such a close resemblance to the daughter of Shemaiah Hillel, that I altered my plan.

The Book of Ibbur!

The memory affected me so strongly that I laid aside my burin. It was incredible, all the things that had come into my life in such a short stretch of time! All at once, like someone who suddenly finds himself transported into the middle of an interminable sandy desert, I became conscious of the immense, profound loneliness separating me from my fellow men. Had I a single friend, apart from Hillel, with whom I could talk about my experiences?

It was true that in the still small hours of recent nights the memory had returned of how, throughout my youth, going back even to my earliest childhood, I had been tormented by an indescribable, agonising thirst for the miraculous, for anything that lay beyond mortality. But the

fulfilment of my yearning had come like a violent hurricane, crushing the joy even as it welled up in my soul. I was trembling with fear at the thought of the inevitable moment when I would wake to my past, when those forgotten events would come alive in their full, soul-searing immediacy.

But not yet, not yet! Let me first savour the pleasure of watching this unutterable radiance come towards me!

It was in my power! I only had to go into my bedroom and unlock the box in which lay the Book of Ibbur, the gift of the invisible ones.

How long ago it was since my hand last touched it when I locked up Angelina's letters with it!

From time to time, when the wind sends the snow piled up on the roofs cascading down to the ground, there is a dull rumbling from outside. Otherwise all is hushed silence, as the carpet of snow over the cobble-stones absorbs every noise.

I was about to go back to my engraving when suddenly, along the street below, came the sound of horses' hooves, the clash of steel on stone so sharp I could almost see the flash of sparks. It was impossible to open the window to look down, it was bound to the masonry with icy sinews and the lower half

was white with drifting snow. All I could see was Charousek, who was standing and talking, apparently quite amicably, to Wassertrum. I saw the words die on their lips and amazement spread across both their faces as they stared, presumably at the carriage, which was invisible from where I was.

It must be Angelina's husband, was the thought that flashed through my mind. It couldn't be Angelina herself, it would be sheer madness for her to drive up in her carriage outside my house in Hahnpassgasse for everyone to see! But what should I tell her husband if that is who it is and he asks me straight out?

Deny it, of course, deny everything!

Quickly I tried to work out what might have happened. It can only be her husband; he'll have received an anonymous letter—from Wassertrum most likely—telling him she's meeting her lover here; she'll have thought up some excuse, probably that she's commissioned a cameo or something of the kind from me. There! A furious knocking at my door and—Angelina was standing before me.

She was incapable of speech, but the expression on her face told me everything: there was no point in hiding any more, the game was up.

And yet there was something inside me that rejected this interpretation. I just could not bring myself to think that the feeling that I could help her had been a delusion. I led her to the armchair and silently stroked her hair as she, like a weary child, pressed her face to my breast. We could hear the crackling of the logs in the stove and see the red glow of the flames fluttering across the floorboards, flaring up and dying away—flaring up and dying away—flaring up and dying away . . . I seemed to hear a voice inside me singing, 'Where is the heart of coral red?' I started up. Where am I? How long has she been sitting here?

I questioned her, cautiously, gently, oh! so gently, so as not to alarm her, taking care that my probing should not touch the painful wound. Piece by piece, I learnt all I needed to know, putting it together like a mosaic.

"Your husband knows. . .?"

"No, not yet; he's away."

So Charousek had guessed correctly: it was Dr. Savioli whose life was in danger. And it was because it was Savioli's life that was being threatened and not hers any more, that she was here. I realised she no longer had any thought of concealment.

Wassertrum had been to see Savioli again; had forced his way to his sick-bed by means of threats and force.

Go on! Go on! What did he want from him?

What he wanted? Half Savioli had told her, half she had guessed: Wassertrum wanted . . . wanted

. . . Savioli . . . to . . . to take his own life. Now she knew the reason for Wassertrum's wild, unbridled hatred: it was Savioli who had driven his son, Wassory the eye specialist, to his death.

The first thought that flashed through my mind was to dash down and reveal everything to Wassertrum, to tell him that it was Charousek who had struck the blow, Savioli had only been his instrument . . . 'Traitor! Traitor!' screamed a voice inside my brain, 'You would hand over Charousek to the vengeance of that vindictive rogue, a penniless, consumptive student who tried to help you and her!' I felt as though I were being torn into two bleeding halves. Then a calm, ice-cold voice gave me the solution. 'You fool! The answer is in your own hand. All you have to do is pick up that file on the table over there, run down the stairs and stick it into that junk-dealer's throat until the point comes out through the back of his neck!'

My heart sent up a jubilant cry of thanksgiving to God.

I continued my questioning. "And Dr. Savioli?"

He would kill himself, there was no doubt about it, unless she managed to save him. The nurses were not letting him out of their sight; they had drugged him with morphine, but perhaps he would suddenly wake up, perhaps he was . . . even now . . . and . . . and . . . No! No! She had to leave, she mustn't waste another second; she would write to her husband, confess everything; let him take the child from her, as long as Savioli was saved; if she told her husband, that would rob Wassertrum of the only weapon he possessed against them.

She must reveal their secret herself before he could betray it.

"No, Angelina, that you will not do", I cried, thinking of the file, and my voice cracked with jubilant delight at the thought of the power I held in my hand.

Angelina tried to tear herself away; I held her tight.

"Just answer me one thing: will your husband take Wassertrum's word for it?"

"But he has evidence, he obviously has my letters, perhaps a picture of me, all the things that were hidden in the desk next door."

Letters? A picture? The desk? I could control myself no longer. I drew Angelina to my breast and kissed her. Her hair fell in a golden veil over my face. Then I grasped her slim hands, and told her, the words coming tumbling

out of my mouth, that Wassertrum's mortal enemy, a penniless Czech student, had taken the letters and everything for safe keeping; they were now in my possession, securely locked away.

She flung her arms around my neck, laughing and crying at the same time. She kissed me, then ran to the door, turned back and kissed me again. Then she was gone.

I stood there in a daze. I could still feel her breath on my cheek.

I heard the thunder of her carriage over the cobbles, the furious gallop of the horses' hooves. A minute later everything was silent. Silent as the grave.

The silence filled my heart, too.

Suddenly the door creaked softly behind me and Charousek appeared in the room.

"Excuse me, Herr Pernath, but I knocked for a long time; you didn't seem to hear."

I just nodded.

"I hope you don't assume I've made my peace with Wassertrum, because you saw me talking to him just now?" Charousek's mocking grin told me it was just one of his bitter jokes. "I must say, fortune seems to be on my side. That vermin down there is beginning to take a liking to me, Herr Pernath. It's a strange thing, the call of the blood", he added softly, almost as though speaking to himself. I had no idea what he was talking about, and assumed I had missed part of what he had said. I was still trembling from the after-effects of all the excitement.

"He wanted to give me a coat", Charousek went on in his normal voice. "I thanked him but said no, of course. My skin is hot enough as it is. And then he forced some money on me."

I was about to exclaim, 'You didn't accept it?' but just managed to keep my tongue. Round red blotches appeared on Charousek's cheeks. "Naturally I accepted the money."

My head was going round and round. "Ac. . . cepted it?" I stammered.

"I would never have thought such pure, unalloyed joy was possible here on earth." He paused for a moment and twisted his face into a grotesque expression. "Is it not elevating, dear brethren, to contemplate ever new proofs of the wisdom and prudence with which Providence's thrifty hand orders Mother Nature's domestic economy?"

He was declaiming like a preacher, at the same time jingling the coins in his pocket. "Verily, I shall regard it as my sacred duty to devote this charitable

gift to the worthiest of ends, right down to the very last kreutzer."

Was he drunk? Or mad?

Charousek suddenly changed his tone. "The fact that it is Wassertrum himself who is paying for his . . . medicine, is not without a certain diabolical humour, don't you think?"

The hidden meaning behind Charousek's words gradually began to dawn on me; I felt a shiver of horror at the feverish look in his eyes.

"But that's enough about that, Herr Pernath. First let us deal with more immediate matters. That lady just now, that was her, wasn't it? What did she think she was doing, driving up here so openly?"

I told Charousek what had happened.

"Wassertrum certainly has no evidence", he interrupted triumphantly, "otherwise he wouldn't have searched the studio again this morning. Odd you didn't hear him? He spent a good hour there."

I was puzzled how he came by all this precise knowledge, and told him so.

"May I?" In order to illustrate his explanation, he took a cigarette from the table, lit it and began,

"You see, if you open the door now, the draught coming in from the stairwell will blow the cigarette smoke in the other direction. It is perhaps the only law of nature with which Herr Wassertrum is well acquainted and with that in mind he had a small, concealed aperture inserted in the wall of the studio overlooking the street—the house belongs to him, as you know. It is a kind of ventilation shaft, and in it he has hung a little scrap of red cloth, so that when anyone goes into or out of the room—that is, opens the door—Wassertrum can tell from below by the fluttering of the red rag. However, I know that too." Charousek added drily, "and, if necessary, I can see it perfectly from the basement opposite, which a merciful Providence has graciously assigned to me for my abode. The neat little trick with the ventilation shaft is that worthy patriarch's very own, but I've known about it for years."

"Your hatred for him must be beyond all human bounds, for you to follow his every step like that. And you've been doing it for years, you tell me!?"

"Hatred?" Charousek gave a twisted smile. "Hatred? Hatred's not the word for it. The word to express my feelings for him has yet to be invented. To be precise, it's not him I hate, it's his blood. Can you understand that? Like a wild animal, I can scent if someone has a single drop of his blood in their veins and"—he clenched his teeth—"that happens now and then here in the Ghetto." He had worked himself up into such a fury, that he was incapable of going on. He went over to the window and stared out. I could hear his heavy

suppressed breathing. For a while neither of us spoke.

"Here, what's this?" He suddenly started up and waved me over. "Quick, quick! Haven't you any opera glasses or something like that?"

We peered down cautiously from behind the curtains. Jaromir, the deaf-mute, was standing outside the entrance to Wassertrum's junk-shop and, as far as we could tell from his sign-language, was offering to sell him a small, glittering object he was holding, half concealed, in his hand. Wassertrum pounced on it like a vulture then darted back into his shop. The next moment he rushed back out again, deathly pale, and grabbed Jaromir. A violent struggle ensued, but then suddenly Wassertrum let go and seemed to be considering his next move as he gnawed furiously at his hare-lip. Casting a suspicious glance in our direction, he took Jaromir amicably by the arm and led him into his shop.

We must have waited a good quarter of an hour, they seemed to be taking a long time to come to terms. Eventually Jaromir emerged with a satisfied smile on his face and went on his way.

"What do you think that was about?" I asked. "It can't have been of any great importance. The poor chap was probably just turning some object he'd managed to beg into ready cash."

Charousek did not reply, but went back to the table and silently sat down. He obviously thought the episode of no importance for, after a short silence, he continued where he had left off.

"Yes. As I said, I hate his blood. By the way, you must interrupt me, Pernath, if I get too worked up again. I want to remain cool; I mustn't waste my best feelings like that. When I do, I have a kind of hang-over afterwards. A man with any sense of decency should speak calmly, not with flowery affectation like some whore or poet. Since the world began it would never have occurred to anyone to 'wring their hands in grief had not ham actors thought up that particularly visual gesture."

I realised he was deliberately just rambling on in an attempt to restore his inner calm. Not that he was having great success at the moment. He walked up and down the room in an agitated manner, picking up all sorts of objects and then putting them down again with a preoccupied air.

Then he suddenly pulled himself together and returned to the subject.

"I can recognise his blood in the slightest unconscious movement a person makes. I know children who look like him and are supposed to be his, but do not belong to the same tribe, it is impossible for me to be deceived. For years no one told me that Dr. Wassory was his son, but I—

how shall I put it?—I could scent it.

Even as a small boy, before I had any idea of what Wassertrum's connection with me was"—for a moment he gave me a searching glance—"I possessed this gift. They kicked me and beat me—

there is probably no part of my body that has not experienced acute pain—they starved me until I was half crazy with hunger and thirst and happy to eat rotting scraps, but I was incapable of feeling hatred towards those that tormented me. It was simply impossible. There was no room for hatred within me. Do you understand? In spite of the fact that my whole being was soaked in hatred.

Wassertrum has never caused me the least harm. By that I mean that he never beat me, nor threw things at me, nor even swore at me when I was a ragged street-urchin running round the Ghetto. I am perfectly aware of that, and yet all the hatred, all the rancour boiling up inside me was directed at him, at him alone!

One remarkable fact is that as a child I never once played a trick on him. If the other children did, I immediately went my own way. But I could spend hours standing in a doorway, hidden behind the door, staring at his face through the crack until everything went black, so intense was this inexplicable feeling of hatred.

It must have been then, I think, that I laid the foundations of the second sight that awakes within me the moment I come into contact with people, or even with things, that have some connection with him. As a child I must have unconsciously absorbed his every movement—the way he wears his coat, the way he picks things up, or drinks, or coughs and all that kind of thing—and learnt them off by heart until they had etched themselves on my soul, so that anywhere I can unfailingly recognise the merest traces in others as his legacy. Later on it started to become an obsession. I would throw away the most inoffensive objects, merely because I was tormented by the thought that his hand might have touched them. Others, however, were dear to me because I felt they were like friends who wished him ill."

Charousek was silent for a moment. I saw him gazing abstractedly into space. Mechanically, his fingers stroked the file on the table.

"Then when a few teachers took pity on me and collected enough to allow me to study philosophy and medicine—and to learn to think for myself, by the by—I gradually came to understand what hatred is. We can only hate something as deeply as I do, if it is part of ourselves.

And when I found out . . . learnt everything, bit by bit . . . what my mother was . . . and still must be, if . . . if she is still alive . . . and that my own body"—

he turned away so that I should not see his face—"is filled with his foul blood . . . then it was clear to me where the root of it lay. At times I feel there is even some mysterious connection in the fact that I am consumptive and spit blood: my body fights against everything that conies from him, and spews it up in disgust.

Often my hatred of him follows me into my sleep and tries to console me with visions of all possible kinds of torture which, in my dreams, I inflict on him; but I have always rejected them because they leave me feeling dissatisfied.

Whenever I think about myself, I am filled with surprise that I find it impossible to hate, even to feel a mild antipathy towards anyone or anything in the world apart from him and his tribe. At such times a nauseating feeling begins to creep over me: I could be what people call a 'good man'. Fortunately that is not the case. As I told you, there is no room for that left inside me.

You mustn't go thinking that I have been embittered by misfortune (it was only later on that I learnt what he had done to my mother). I have had one day of joy that eclipses anything granted to ordinary mortals. I don't know if you have ever had a truly intense, burning religious experience? I never had, until the day Wassory put an end to himself. I was standing outside the shop down there and I saw him receive the news. Anyone unacquainted with the true theatre of life would have called his reaction 'impassive', but when I saw him stand there for a full hour, listless, his blood-red hare-lip just drawn up a fraction of an inch higher than normal over his teeth, and a peculiar look in his eye, as if it were turned inwards on itself—when I saw him like that, I caught a whiff of incense from the wings of the Archangel passing overhead. Do you know the statue of the Black Madonna in the Tyn Church? I flung myself to the ground before it, and my soul was enveloped in the darkness of paradise."

As I looked at Charousek standing there, his big, dreamy eyes full of tears, I remembered what Hillel had said about how incomprehensible the dark path that the Brothers of Death follow appears to us.

Charousek went on, "You are probably not the least bit interested in the material circumstances which 'justify' my hatred, or at least render it comprehensible to the paid servants of the law.

Facts give the appearance of milestones but are, in reality, only empty eggshells; they are the insistent popping of champagne corks at the tables of the rich, which only a simpleton would take for the banquet itself. Wassertrum used all the fiendish means which people like him have at their disposal to persuade my mother—if it wasn't worse then that—to let him have his way with her. And then . . . then he sold her off to . . . to a brothel; that kind of thing isn't difficult if you count the Police Commissioner among your business

associates. But he didn't do it because he was tired of her. Oh no! I know every nook and cranny of that heart of his. The day he sold her off was the awful day he realised just how passionately in love with her he was. Someone like him may appear to behave without rhyme or reason, but deep down he's always consistent. The squirrel inside him gives a screech of horror the moment anyone comes and buys something from his junk-shop. No matter how much they pay for it, all that he feels is that he is being forced to hand something over. His favourite verb is 'to have', and if he were capable of thinking in abstract terms, 'possession' would be the concept that expressed his ideal.

During the affair with my mother, fear grew and grew within him until it was a gigantic mountain, the fear of no longer being in control of himself; the fear not of giving love, but of being compelled to give love; the fear of finding some invisible presence inside him that would fetter his will, or what he would like to think of as his will. That was how it began, the rest followed automatically, just as a pike automatically pounces, whether it wants to or not, when something that glitters floats past at the right moment.

The logical consequence for Wassertrum was to sell my mother into slavery. It gratified those other characteristics sleeping within his soul, his greed for money and the perverse pleasure he finds in tormenting himself.

You must forgive me, Herr Pernath", Charousek's voice suddenly took on such a harsh, sober tone that I started in surprise, "forgive me for all this clever talk, but when you're studying at the University you come across masses of idiotic books and you automatically adopt their fatuous jargon."

I forced myself to smile to try and cheer him up; secretly I knew he was fighting back the tears.

'I must find some way of helping him', I thought; 'at least do whatever I can to relieve his immediate need.' Without his noticing, I took the hundred-crown note I kept at home out of the sideboard drawer and slipped it into my pocket.

"When, later on, you set up as a doctor and live in a better district, you'll feel at peace with yourself, Herr Charousek", I said, in order to give the conversation a conciliatory turn. "Will you soon be qualified?"

"In a short time. I owe it to the people who have been kind enough to support me. Otherwise there's no point; my days are numbered."

I made the usual objection that he was taking too pessimistic a view of things, but he waved it away with a smile. "It's better like that. It would be no pleasure to act the part of the great physician, perhaps even to end up with a title after a career as a licensed poisoner. However", he added with his caustic humour, "I'm afraid this earthly ghetto is soon going to be deprived of the

benefit of any further medical miracle-working from me." He picked up his hat. "But I won't take up any more of your time. Or is there something else we need to discuss in the Savioli case? I think not. But you will let me know directly you hear anything new, won't you? The best thing would be to hang a mirror up in the window as a sign that I should come to see you. One thing, though—you must never come to my cellar, Wassertrum would jump to the conclusion that we are in this together straight away. I'm very curious to know what he'll do, now that he has seen the lady come to see you. You must simply tell him she brought you a piece of jewelry to repair and if he tries to press you, just pretend to go berserk."

No suitable opportunity arose to press the bank-note on Charousek, so I picked up my modelling clay from the window-sill. "Let's go then; I'll accompany you downstairs as far as Hillel's. He's expecting me", I lied.

He stopped in surprise. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"In a way. Do you know him? Or do you suspect him as well?" I had to smile at the very idea.

"God forbid!"

"What makes you say it like that?"

Charousek hesitated, pondering before he answered. "I've no idea why. It must be some subconscious impulse. Whenever I meet him in the street I want to step off the pavement and go down on my knees before him, as if he were a priest carrying the host. You see, Pernath, in Hillel you have a person who is the opposite of Wassertrum in every atom of his being. For example, among the Christians in the district, who, in this case are as wrongly informed as always, he has the reputation of being a miser and a secret millionaire; in fact, he's incredibly poor."

I stopped, appalled at the thought. "Poor?"

"Yes, even poorer than I am, if that's possible. I think he only knows the verb 'to receive' from books. When he leaves the Jewish Town Hall on the first of the month, the beggars run away from him because they know he would press his meagre salary on the first one he came across and end up starving—together with his daughter—a few days later. There's an old Talmudic legend that says that of the twelve tribes of Israel, ten are cursed and two holy. If that's true, then he represents the two holy ones and Wassertrum all the ten others put together. Have you never noticed the way Wassertrum goes all colours of the rainbow whenever Hillel passes him in the street? Interesting fact, that. I tell you, blood like that could never mix, the children would all be stillborn; that is, assuming the mothers hadn't died of horror first. And another thing: Hillel's the only person Wassertrum steers clear of, he avoids him like

the plague. Probably because Hillel represents something completely incomprehensible to him, something he just cannot work out.

Perhaps he senses the cabbalist in him, as well."

We were already on our way down the stairs.

"Do you believe there are still cabbalists around today? Do you believe there is anything at all in the Cabbala?" I asked, curious as to what he would answer, but he seemed not to have been listening. I repeated my question.

He seemed flustered by it and diverted my attention to a door giving onto the stair-well that was made from the lids of packing-cases nailed together. "You've got some new neighbours there", he said. "It's a Jewish family, but poor: that meshugge musician, Nephtali Schaffranek, with his daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. When it gets dark and he's left alone with the girls, he goes into one of his crazy moods and ties their thumbs together so they won't run away. Then he squeezes them into an old chicken-coop and gives them 'singing-lessons', as he calls it, so that they'll be able to earn a living when they grow up; that is, he teaches them the weirdest songs, fragments, German words that he's picked up somewhere and, in his deranged mind, takes for—

Prussian battle-hymns, or I don't know what."

And, true enough, strange music could just be heard wafting out onto the landing. The vague contours of a music-hall song were being scraped out on one and the same excruciatingly high note of a fiddle, whilst two squeaky children's voices sang: Frau Pick,

Frau Hock,

Frau Kle—pe—tarsch

Always gossiping together

Never mind the wind or weather—

It was crazy and comic at the same time, and I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Schaffranek's son-in-law—his daughter sells the juice from pickled gherkins by the glass to schoolchildren at the egg market—spends the whole day running round from office to office", Charousek went on in his bitter manner, "begging for old postage stamps. He sorts through them, and whenever he finds some that happen to have been franked on one half only, he puts one on top of the other, cuts them in two, then sticks the unfranked halves together and sells them as new. At first business boomed and sometimes he even made the grand sum of a crown a day, but eventually the Jewish

businessmen of Prague cottoned on, and now they do it themselves. They cream off most of the profit."

"Would you try to help the poor and needy, Charousek, if you had more money than you knew what to do with?" I asked him quickly. We were at Hillel's door now, and I knocked.

"Can you think me such a wretch that I wouldn't?" he asked in astonishment.

Miriam's footsteps were approaching. I waited until she had her hand on the latch, then I quickly stuffed the banknote into his pocket. "No, Charousek, I don't think that of you, but then you ought to think me a wretch if I didn't."

Before he had a chance to reply, I shook his hand and closed the door behind me. While Miriam was greeting me I listened to find out what he would do. He stood still for a while, then gave a sob and made his way down the stairs, slowly, feeling for each step, as if he had to hold on to the banister.

It was the first time I had gone to Hillel's apartment. It was as bare as a prison cell. The floor was spotlessly clean and sprinkled with white sand. There was no furniture apart from two chairs, a table and a sideboard; standing against either wall to the right and left were two wooden stands.

Miriam was sitting opposite me at the window, and I was kneading away at my modelling clay.

"Does an artist have to have a face in front of him in order to catch the likeness?" she asked shyly, and only to break the silence. Bashfully our eyes avoided each other. She was so tormented by embarrassment at the wretched room that she didn't know where to look, and my cheeks were burning with self-reproach at not having taken the trouble sooner to find out how she and her father lived.

All the same, I had to find some answer.

"It's not so much in order to catch the likeness as to make sure that one's inner vision is right."

Even as I spoke, I could feel how false, how completely false everything I was saying was. For

years I had parroted the mistaken dictum of the painters that to create a work of art one had to study nature. It was only since that night when Hillel had woken me that my inner eye had opened, that sight behind closed lids which vanishes the moment you open your eyes, a gift that everyone believes they possess, but that is given to less than one among millions.

How could I talk of even thinking of checking the infallible guidance of

spiritual vision against the crude measure of appearances. Miriam seemed to be thinking similar thoughts, to go by the look of astonishment on her face.

"You mustn't take it literally", I said in excuse.

Attentively she watched me as I deepened the lines of the model with the graver. "It must be immensely difficult to transfer all that precisely onto the gemstone?"

"That's only mechanical work; more or less, anyway."

A pause.

"May I see it when it's finished?"

"But it's meant for you, Miriam."

"No, no; that's impossible . . . it . . . it . . ." I could see her hands start twisting nervously.

"You won't accept even a little thing like this from me?" I quickly broke in. "I wish I could do more for you."

Hastily she turned away.

What had I said!? I must have wounded her deeply. It sounded as if I were referring to her poverty. Should I try to explain what I really meant? Would that only make matters worse? I decided to try. "Listen to what I have to say, Miriam. Do please listen. I am so much in your father's debt, you've no idea how much . . ."

She looked at me, unsure of herself; clearly she did not understand.

". . . how very much I owe him. More than my life."

"Because he did what he could for you after you had fainted? Anyone would have done that."

I could sense that she had no idea what the bond was that tied me to her father. Cautiously I probed to see how far I could go without giving away things he had concealed from her. "I would say there is intangible aid that is more highly to be valued than mere physical succour. I mean the spiritual influence that can radiate from one person to another. Do you understand what I mean, Miriam? It is possible to heal someone spiritually and not just physically, Miriam."

"And my—"

"Yes, that's what your father did for me!" I took her hand. "Surely, then, you can understand how deeply I feel the desire to do something that will give pleasure, if not to him, then to someone close to him? Won't you trust me just

a little? Is there nothing at all that I could do for you?"

She shook her head. "You think I must be unhappy here?"

"Of course not. But perhaps you sometimes have worries I could take care of? It's your duty—

your duty, do you hear—to let me share them. Why would you both live here, in this dark, depressing alley, if you didn't have to? You're still so young Miriam and—"

"But you live here yourself, Herr Pernath", she interrupted with a smile, "what binds you to this house?"

Her question stopped me in my tracks. She was right. Why did I live here? I couldn't explain why. What binds you to this house? I repeated to myself absent-mindedly. I could not find an explanation, and for the moment I completely forgot where I was. Then, suddenly, I found myself carried away somewhere high up . . . in a garden . . . the enchanting fragrance of lilac . . .

far below me the city . . .

"Have I touched an old wound? Have I hurt you?" Miriam's voice came to me from far, far away.

She was bending over me, scanning my face with an anxious expression. I must have been sitting there in a trance for a long time for her to be so concerned.

For a while waves of feeling surged and sank inside me, until suddenly they burst the dam and overwhelmed me, and I was pouring out my whole heart to Miriam. As if I were talking to a dear friend I had spent all my life with and from whom I had no secrets, I told her the truth about myself, how I had learnt from Zwakh's story that at some time, years ago, I had been mad and robbed of all memory of my past; I told her how images had recently awoken within me that must have their roots in those days, and how I was trembling at the thought of the moment when everything would be revealed and would tear me apart once more.

The only things that I kept back from her were those which would involve mentioning her father, my experiences in the underground passages and all that.

She had moved her chair close to mine, and was listening with deep, breathless sympathy, which comforted me more than I could say. At last I had found someone in whom I could confide when my spiritual loneliness became too heavy to bear. Of course, there was always Hillel, but for me he was like a being from beyond the clouds, like a ray of light which came and went, so that I could not see it just whenever I happened to feel a longing for it.

I told her that, and she understood. She, too, saw him in the same way, even though he was her father. He was filled with an immense love for her, and she for him, "and yet", she confided, "I am separated from him as if there were a glass wall between us which I cannot break through. It has been like that for as long as I can remember. Whenever as a child I dreamed I saw him

standing by my bed, he was always wearing the robes of the high priest, with the golden breastplate of Moses with the twelve stones in it over his breast, and blue rays of light shone out from his temples. I believe his is the kind of love that reaches beyond the grave, and is too great for us to comprehend. That was what my mother always said when we used to talk about him secretly."

She suddenly gave a shudder and her whole body quivered. I was about to jump up from my chair, but she put her hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry, it's nothing. Just a memory. When my mother died—I alone know how much he loved her, although I was only a little girl at the time—

I thought I was going to suffocate with the pain, and I ran to him and clung to his robe and wanted to scream but couldn't because my whole being seemed paralysed; then . . . and then—it sends shivers down my spine whenever I think of it, even now—then he looked at me with a smile, kissed me on the forehead and passed his hand over my eyes, and from that moment on it was as if all my grief at losing my mother had been washed away. I could not cry one single tear when she was buried; I saw the sun in the sky as the radiant hand of God and wondered why people were crying. My father was walking beside me behind the coffin, and every time I looked up he gave a gentle smile, and I could feel the tremor of horror that passed through the crowd when they saw it."

"And are you happy, Miriam? Really happy? Isn't there also something terrifying in the idea of having as a father a being who has grown so far beyond humanity?" I asked gently.

Miriam gave a joyful shake of the head. "My life seems to pass like a blissful dream. When you asked me just now whether I had any worries and why we lived here, Herr Pernath, it almost made me laugh. Is nature beautiful? The trees are green and the sky is blue, of course, but it is all much, much more beautiful when I close my eyes and see it in my imagination. Do I have to be sitting in a meadow to see it? And as for the bit of poverty and . . . and . . . and hunger, hope and expectation make up for that a thousandfold."

"Expectation?" I asked in astonishment.

"Expecting a miracle. Don't you know what it is to do that? No? You poor man, I pity you. So few people know what it is to expect a miracle! That's the

reason, you see, why I have no friends and never go out. I used to have a few friends—Jewish girls, of course, like myself—but we always seemed to be talking at cross-purposes. They didn't understand me, nor I them. When I talked about miracles they thought at first I meant it as a joke, and when they realised that I was serious, and that when I talked of miracles I didn't mean what the Germans, with their spectacles on their noses, mean when they use the word—the way the grass keeps growing, and things like that—but the opposite, if anything, then their first impulse was to call me mad. But since that was obviously not the case—I am pretty quick-witted, have learnt Hebrew and Aramaic, can read the Targumim and Midrashim, and have other such trifling skills—they had to find another word for it, and finally settled on one that is completely meaningless: they called me 'highly strung'.

When I tried to get them to see that for me the important—the essential—thing about the Bible and other holy writings was the miraculous element and that alone, and not moral or ethical commandments, which can only be hidden ways of approaching the miraculous, then all they

could do was to throw platitudes at me. They were afraid to admit openly that the only parts of the sacred writings they believed in were those which could just as well be in the Civil Code.

They were uncomfortable at the very mention of the word 'miracle'. It felt as if the ground were opening up at their feet, they said.

As if there could be anything more marvellous than to have the ground open up at your feet!

The world exists for us to think it to tatters', I once heard my father say. 'Then, and only then, does life begin.' I don't know what he meant by 'life', but sometimes I do feel that one day I will do what I can best describe as 'wake up', even if I have no idea what kind of world I will wake up in. And I'm sure that miracles will precede it.

'Have you already witnessed a miracle, that you are constantly expecting another?' my friends often used to ask me, and when I said I hadn't, they immediately started gloating. Tell me, Herr Pernath, can you understand the workings of hearts like that? That miracles have happened to me, even if only little ones, tiny little ones", Miriam's eyes were shining, "was something I wouldn't reveal to them"—I could hear the tears of joy in her voice—"but you will understand.

Often, for weeks, for months even", she was speaking very softly now, "we have lived from miracles alone. When there was no more bread in the house, not a single mouthful, then I knew the hour had come! And I would sit here and wait and wait until my heart was pounding so that I could hardly breathe.

And . . . and then I would feel drawn outside and I would run downstairs and this way and that through the streets, as fast as I could so that I would be back in time before my father came home. And . . . and every time I found money. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but always enough for me to be able to buy the bare necessities. Often there would be a crown coin lying in the middle of the street. I would see it glittering from far off, and people would tread on it or slip on it, but none of them noticed it. Sometimes I was so full of confidence, that I didn't even bother to go out, but searched the floor in the kitchen over there to see whether some money or bread had not fallen from heaven."

An idea flashed through my mind, and I smiled with pleasure at it.

She noticed my smile. "Don't laugh, Herr Pernath", she begged. "Believe me, I know that these miracles will grow, and that one day—"

I reassured her. "But I'm not laughing, Miriam. Whatever gave you that idea? I'm eternally happy that you're not like all the rest, looking for the usual cause behind every effect, and taking exception when, for once—in cases where we shout, 'Thank God!'—things turn out differently."

She stretched out her hand to me. "And you won't ever say again that you want to help me—or us—, will you, Herr Pernath? Now that you know it would deny me the chance of a miracle happening if you were to?"

I promised, but in my heart I made a reservation.

The door opened and Hillel came in. Miriam embraced him, and he greeted me in a warm, friendly manner, but once more using the formal mode of address. Also there seemed to be a

slight tiredness or uncertainty about him. Or was I imagining it? Perhaps it was just the result of the twilight that filled the room.

"You must have come", he said, when Miriam had left us alone together, "to ask for my advice in the case concerning the lady—"

I was so astonished, I was about to interrupt, but he forestalled me. "It was Charousek who told me. He looked so remarkably changed that I spoke to him in the street. His heart was full to overflowing, and he told me all about it. He also told me you gave him some money." He gave me a penetrating look, emphasising each word in a most curious manner, but I could not understand what he meant by it. "It is true that it means a few more drops of happiness have fallen from heaven . . . and . . . and in this . . . case I think there's no harm done, but . . ." he thought for a while, "but sometimes one only causes sorrow to oneself and to others with such deeds. Helping people is not as easy as you think, my friend. If it were, then redeeming the world would be a very, very simple matter indeed. Or don't you agree?"

"But don't you give money to the poor as well, Hillel? Often everything you possess?" I asked.

He shook his head and smiled. "It seems to me you have turned into a Talmudist overnight, answering a question with another question. That makes it difficult to have a proper argument."

He paused, as if he expected me to answer, but once again I could not understand what he was waiting for.

"Well, to get back to the subject", he went on in a different tone of voice, "I don't think your protegee—I mean the lady—is in any danger just at the moment. Cross your bridges when you come to them. People do also say, 'A stitch in time saves nine', but I think it is wiser to let things take their course and be ready for anything. There may be the possibility of a meeting between Aaron Wassertrum and myself, but the initiative has to come from him; I can take no steps to bring it about, it is he who must cross the street. Whether he comes to see you or me does not matter, I will speak to him. It will still be his decision whether he follows my advice or not. I'll wash my hands of the matter."

Apprehensively, I tried to read his face. I had never before heard him speak in such a cold and menacing manner. But behind those dark and deep-set eyes lay a slumbering abyss. Miriam's words, 'as if there were a glass wall between us', came to mind. All I could do was to shake his hand and depart without saying a word.

He accompanied me out into the passage, and when I turned round on the stairs and looked back, I saw that he was still standing there, giving me a friendly wave, but with the expression of someone who would like to say more, yet cannot.

FEAR

It had been my plan just to collect my coat and walking-stick from my apartment and then go out for a meal at the Old Toll House Tavern, where Zwakh, Prokop and Vrieslander would be sitting, as they did every night, telling each other crazy stories until the early hours, but scarcely had I entered my room than my intention vanished, just as if a hand had whipped away a scarf or something similar I had been wearing.

There was a tension in the air which I could not explain, but which was almost tangible and which, within a few seconds of my entering, took such violent hold of me that I hardly knew what to do first: light the lamp, close the door behind me, sit down or walk up and down.

Had someone crept in while I was out and hidden themselves in the room? Was it someone's fear of being seen that I had caught? Was perhaps Wassertrum here? I pulled the curtains aside, opened the wardrobe, glanced into the other room: no one.

The iron box had not been moved from where I had left it.

Would the best thing be to burn the letters right away and remove that worry once and for all?

My fingers were already feeling for the key in my waistcoat pocket but did it have to be now?

There was time enough before the morning.

Light the lamp first of all!

I could not find the matches.

Was the door locked? I took a few steps back towards it then stopped again. Why this sudden fear?

I tried to tell myself I was behaving like a coward, but the thought came to a halt, right in the middle of the sentence.

I was suddenly seized by the insane idea that I should quickly climb up onto the table and take a chair with me to hit 'the thing' on the head that was crawling round on the floor, if. .. if it should come that close.

"But there's no one here", I said to myself out loud, in some irritation; "have you ever been afraid in your life?"

It made no difference. The air I was breathing had turned thin and sharp, like ether.

If only I had been able to see something, anything, however awful, my fear would have vanished in a trice.

Nothing came.

My eyes searched every corner: nothing.

Everywhere I looked, nothing but familiar things: furniture, chests, the lamp, the picture, the wall clock, faithful old friends all of them, and lifeless.

I hoped they would change their shape as I looked at them, allowing me to assume some optical delusion had been the cause of the fear that was paralysing me.

No, that was not it, either. They stood there, rigid, remaining true to their shapes. Much too rigid, given the murkiness of the light in the room, for it to be natural.

They are under the same spell as you are', I told myself. 'They don't dare make even the slightest movement.'

Why wasn't the wall clock ticking?

The lurking presence all around devoured every noise.

I shook the table and was surprised that I could hear the sound.

If at least the wind were whistling round the house. Not even that! Or if the wood in the stove would crackle. The fire had gone out.

And all the time the same awful lurking presence filling the air incessantly, like the constant sound of running water! All my senses permanently ready to pounce, but with nothing to clutch at! I doubted whether I would ever survive it, the room full of eyes I could not see, full of aimlessly wandering hands I could not grasp.

This, I realised, was terror giving birth to itself, the paralysing dread at an inexplicable, shapeless nothing that eats away the boundaries of our thought.

Stiffening every sinew, I stood and waited.

I must have waited a quarter of an hour. Perhaps 'it' could be tricked into trying to creep up on me from behind, and I could catch it.

I swung round: still nothing. The same nothing that did not exist, and yet filled the room with its ghastly life and chilled me to the marrow.

If I were to run out? What was there stopping me?

But I knew with absolute certainty that 'it' would go with me. I also realised that it would not help if I lit the candle, and yet I still searched for the matches until at length I found them.

But the wick refused to burn, for a long time it was nothing more than a faint glimmer. The little flame could neither live nor die, and when it finally won the battle for survival it gave off a consumptive glow, as dull as a dirty yellow piece of tin. No, darkness was better. I put it out again and threw myself fully clothed onto my bed. I counted my heartbeats, one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . up to a thousand and then again and again from the beginning, for hours, days, weeks, as it seemed, until my lips were dry and my hair was standing on end. No relief, not even for a second.

I started saying words out loud, any words that came into my head: "prince", "tree", "child", "book", and repeating them mechanically until they suddenly stood before me, naked, stripped of sense, fearful sounds from a distant, barbaric past, and I had to cudgel my brains to rediscover their meaning: p-r-i-n-c-e? b-o-o-k?

Had I gone mad? Or was I dead? I pinched myself to see.

"Stand up", I commanded. "Sit down in that chair."

I collapsed into the armchair.

If only death would come! If only I could escape from the sense of this intangible, lurking presence! "I won't!" I screamed. "I WON'T!—Can't you hear me?!"

Drained of all strength, I slumped back into the chair; incapable of thought, incapable of action, I stared dully into space.

'Why does he keep insisting on offering me the seeds?' The thought washed over me, receded and then returned. Receded. Returned.

I slowly realised there was a strange being standing there—perhaps had been standing before me since I had sat down in the chair—holding out his hand towards me. It was a grey, broad-shouldered creature, about the size of a sturdily built human, leaning on a knotted, corkscrew stick of white wood. Where the head should have been I could see nothing but a sphere of pale mist. The apparition gave off a dismal odour of sandalwood and damp slate.

I was in the grip of a feeling of utter helplessness, which almost robbed me of my senses. All the torment, which for weeks had been gnawing at my nerves, had condensed into mortal fear and taken shape in this abortion. My instinct for self-preservation told me—warned me, screamed in my ear—that I would go mad with terror if I could see the face of the phantom, and yet it drew me like a magnet, so that I found it impossible to avert my gaze from the pale, misty sphere and kept scrutinising it for eyes, a nose, a mouth. Despite all my efforts, however, I could not discern the slightest movement in the misty sphere. I could visualise all kinds of heads on the body, but I knew that each and every one was a product of my own imagination. And they always dissolved, almost at the very moment I had created them.

The one that retained its shape longest was an Egyptian ibis head.

In the darkness the phantom was outlined in a spectral haze. The only perceptible movement was a slight contraction of the silhouette, which then dilated again, as if the whole of its body were pulsating with deep, slow breaths. Instead of feet, it was standing on bony stumps, from which the grey, bloodless flesh was pushed up for a few inches in bulging rolls.

Immobile, it held out its hand towards me. In it were little seeds the size of beans, red with black spots round the edges.

What on earth was I supposed to do with them?

I had a vague, nagging feeling that an enormous responsibility lay upon

me, a responsibility that went far beyond the confines of this world, were I to make the wrong decision. Somewhere in the realm of prime causes, I sensed, there was a balance with the weight of half the world in each scale, and the one into which I cast my handful of dust was the one that would sink to the ground.

That, I realised, was the cause of this awful, lurking presence all around me. 'Do not move a muscle', reason advised, 'even if death should never come to release you from your torment.'

'But that', another voice whispered, 'would still be making a choice; that would be to reject the seeds. There is no way round it; you must decide.'

I looked round for help, for some sign to tell me what I should do. Nothing. I probed the recesses of my mind: not a spark of an idea, everything lifeless, dead.

I recognised that in this terrible moment the lives of myriads of men and women weighed as light as a feather.

It must already have been deep into the night, for I could no longer distinguish the walls of my room. From the studio next door came the sound of steps. I could hear someone moving wardrobes, pulling out drawers and letting them crash to the floor; I thought I recognised Wassertrum's rasping bass cursing and swearing. I ignored the sounds. They meant as little to me as the rustling of a mouse.

I closed my eyes. Long lines of human faces passed me in endless procession, rigid death masks with the eyelids firmly closed: my own kin, my own ancestors. They rose from their graves, and all had the same shape of skull, however much individuals appeared to vary, with hair brushed smooth and parted, curled or cut short, with full-bottomed wigs or pigtails fastened with a ring; down the centuries they came, their features growing more and more familiar until they merged into one last face: the face of the Golem, with which the chain of my ancestors broke off.

Then the darkness dissolved the room into an infinite, empty space, the centre of which was myself sitting in my chair with the grey shadow still in front of me, its arm outstretched. And when I opened my eyes, I could see strange beings standing round us in two circles, intersecting so that they formed a figure of eight.

Those in the one circle were swathed in robes of shimmering violet, the others reddish black.

They were people of an alien race, tall and unnaturally slight in stature, their faces hidden behind shining cloths.

From the quivering of my heart I could tell that the moment of decision had come. My fingers itched to take the seeds; at that I saw a tremor go through the figures in the reddish circle.

Should I reject the seeds? The trembling passed to those in the bluish circle. I examined the headless man closely; he was still standing in the same posture, as motionless as ever.

Even the breathing had stopped.

I raised my arm, still with no idea what I should do, and—struck the outstretched hand of the phantom, so that the seeds rolled away over the floor.

For one moment, with the sudden violence of an electric shock, I lost consciousness and felt I was plunging down through bottomless depths; then I found my feet firmly on the ground.

The grey apparition had disappeared. Likewise the figures from the reddish circle.

The bluish figures on the other hand had formed a circle round me. On their breasts they bore an inscription in golden hieroglyphs and silently—it looked as if they were taking an oath—they raised their hands, each holding between index finger and thumb one of the red seeds I had knocked out of the headless phantom's hand.

I heard a shower of hail rattle against the window outside, and a peal of thunder rent the air. A winter storm in all its blind fury was raging over the town. The howling of the storm was interrupted at regular intervals by the sound of dull detonations from the direction of the river, announcing the break-up of the ice which covered the Moldau. My room blazed with the flashes of lightning following one another in uninterrupted procession. I suddenly felt so weak that my knees trembled and I had to sit down again.

"Do not fear", said a clear voice beside me, "do not fear, it is Lelshimurim, the Night of Protection."

Gradually the storm died down and the deafening noise turned into the monotonous drumming of the hailstones on the roofs. The lassitude I felt in every limb had reached such proportions that I was only dully aware of the things going on around me, which took on a kind of dreamlike quality.

One of the figures in the circle spoke. "The one ye seek, he is not here."

The others replied, but their words were in a foreign tongue.

At that, the first spoke a sentence in which the name 'Enoch' occurred, but I could not understand the rest, too loud were the groans of the ice-floes breaking up in the river.

Then one left the circle and stood before me, pointed to the hieroglyphs on his breast—they were the same characters as those the others bore—and asked me whether I could read them. And when, almost incoherent in my exhaustion, I replied that I could not, he stretched out the palm of his hand towards me, and the shining characters appeared on my breast, at first in Latin script: CHABRAT ZEREH AUR BOCHER

before gradually changing back into the ones I could not read.

And I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep such as I had not known since the night when Hillel loosened my tongue.

URGE

The last few days had flown by. I scarcely even seemed to have time for meals. From dawn to dusk an irresistible urge towards physical activity shackled me to my workbench.

I finished the cameo; Miriam received it with a childlike delight.

I have also repaired the letter J in the Book of Ibbur.

I leant back in my chair, relaxing by reviewing all the little events of these days in my mind.

On the morning after the great storm, the old woman who looks after me came rushing into the room with the news that during the night the stone bridge had collapsed. Collapsed .. strange!

Perhaps at the very moment when I had knocked the seeds . . . no, no, I must not entertain the thought. It might give the events of that night a veneer of rationality, and I had decided to bury them deep in my breast until they awoke of their own accord. Leave well alone!

How long ago was it that I had crossed the bridge and looked at the stone statues? And now, after standing for centuries, it was in ruins. I felt almost sad at the idea that I would never set foot on it again. Even if they rebuilt it, it would still not be the old mysterious stone bridge. For hours while I worked on the cameo I had found my thoughts turning to it, and it had all come back into my mind, as naturally as if I had never forgotten: how often I had crossed it as a child, looking up at the statues of Saint Luitgard and all the others who were now buried beneath the raging waters.

In my mind I had once more seen all those tiny little things which, as a child, I had called my own. I remembered, too, my father and mother and all my schoolfriends. Only the house where I had lived was lost to memory. But I

knew that one day, when I was least expecting it, it would suddenly reappear in my mind, and I looked forward to that day.

It was so comfortable to feel that, all at once, my life was running on a simple, natural course.

When I took *The Book of Ibbur* out of the iron box the day before yesterday, I found that there was nothing remarkable about it at all; it looked like any old parchment book with decorative initials, it looked quite ordinary to me. I could not understand how it could ever have affected me as supernatural. It was written in Hebrew and therefore completely incomprehensible to me.

When would the unknown man come to collect it?

The joy of living, which had quietly returned while I was working on the cameo, awoke again in all its invigorating freshness, repelling the night thoughts which were still trying to ambush me.

Quickly I picked up the photograph of Angelina—I had cut off the dedication at the bottom—

and kissed it. It was all so foolish and unreasonable, but why for once not think of happiness, why not grasp the present and enjoy it, as one might enjoy the sight of a glistening soap-bubble.

Was it not perhaps just possible that these images which the yearning in my heart conjured up for me could turn into reality? Was it so absolutely beyond the bounds of possibility that I might become famous over night? Her equal, through reputation if not by birth? At least the equal of Dr. Savioli? I thought of Miriam's cameo. If I should manage to create others as fine? There was no doubt that even the foremost artists of the past had not produced anything better.

And then, assuming one chance event: supposing Angelina's husband should suddenly die?

I felt hot and cold all over. One tiny chance event and my desire, my most audacious desire, could turn into reality. Happiness hung by a thin thread which could break at any moment, letting it fall into my lap like a ripe fruit. Had not things happened to me which were a thousand times more miraculous? Things whose very existence humanity did not even suspect?

Was it not a miracle that, in a few short weeks, creative powers had awoken within me which lifted my work to a far higher level, far above the commonplace?

And this was only the beginning!

Had I no right to happiness?

Must mysticism mean a complete lack of personal desire?

I drowned the 'Yes' within me. Could I not dream for a minute, for a second, for the brief span of human existence?

And I was dreaming with my eyes open. The gemstones on the table grew and grew, surrounding me on all sides with multicoloured cascades. There were trees of opal standing together in groves, scattering the light-waves from the sky, which was an iridescent blue, like the wing of some gigantic tropical butterfly, in a sparkling shower over boundless meadows redolent with summer heat. I was thirsty, and cooled my limbs in the icy spray of the streams dashing down over rocks of shimmering mother-of-pearl. The air hung heavy over blossom-strewn banks, intoxicating me with the odour of jasmine, hyacinth, narcissus, daphne. . .

It was too much! Too much! I erased the vision.

I was thirsty.

Such were the torments of paradise.

I flung open the window and let the warm breeze play on my brow. There was a scent of the coming spring.

Miriam!

The image of Miriam forced its way into my mind. The way she had had to lean against the wall so as not to fall over with excitement when she came to tell me that a miracle had happened, a

real miracle: she had found a coin in the loaf of bread that the baker had put through the bars onto the kitchen window-ledge.

I grabbed my purse. With any luck it would not be too late and I would still have time today to magic another ducat into her hand.

She had visited me daily, 'to keep me company', as she called it, though she had been so full of the 'miracle' that she had hardly spoken a word. The experience had stirred her to the very depths of her soul, and when I recalled how sometimes—without any obvious cause, purely from the memory—she would go deathly pale, even to her lips, then my head swam at the mere thought that in my blindness I might have done something with incalculable consequences.

And when I reminded myself of Hillel's last, dark words and related them to what I was doing, an ice-cold shiver ran down my spine. The fact that my motives were pure was no excuse. The end does not justify the means, of that I was well aware.

And what if my desire to help was merely an ostensible motive? Could there not be an insidious lie hidden behind it? Perhaps the unconscious wish to preen myself in the role of benefactor?

I was beginning to doubt my own self.

What was clear was that I had been much too superficial in my assessment of Miriam. The simple fact that she was Hillel's daughter must mean that she was different from other girls. How could I have been so foolish as to interfere with the workings of a soul that was perhaps infinitely superior to my own?

Her very profile, which was much closer to the sixth Egyptian dynasty—though much too spiritual, even for that—than to our own age with its rationalistic types, should have been a warning to me. 'Only fools distrust outward appearances.' I had read that somewhere. How true it was! How true!

By now Miriam and I were close friends. Should I confess to her that it was I who had been slipping the ducats into the loaves every day? The blow would be too sudden. It would only bewilder her. I dare not risk it, I would have to proceed more cautiously.

Perhaps I should try to tone down the 'miracle'? Instead of putting the coins into the bread, leave them on the stairs where she would find them when she opened the door, and then, and then? I comforted myself with the thought that I would surely be able to think of something new, of some less abrupt way of gradually leading her from the realm of miracles back into the everyday world?

Yes! That was the way to do it!

Or should I cut through the knot with one blow by telling her father and asking his advice? I blushed at the very thought. Time enough for that if all else failed.

But there was no time to lose, I must set about it right away.

I had a sudden inspiration. I had to persuade Miriam to do something unfamiliar, to drag her for a few hours out of her normal surroundings, to open her mind to other thoughts.

We could hire a carriage and go for a ride! Who would recognise us if we avoided the Jewish quarter? Perhaps it would interest her to see the bridge that had collapsed?

Or she could go with old Zwakh or one of her friends from school if the idea of going with me was too outrageous.

I was determined not to take no for an answer.

As I left my room I almost knocked a man over.

Wassertrum!

He must have been spying through the keyhole, as he was bending down when I collided with him.

"Were you looking for me?" I asked brusquely.

He stammered a few words of excuse in his impossible dialect, then agreed that he had been.

I asked him to come in and sit down, but he stood by the table, convulsively twisting the brim of his hat. However much he tried to conceal it from me, his face and his every movement betrayed a profound hostility. Until now I had never seen the man this close to. It wasn't his dreadful ugliness which was so repulsive (that, rather, aroused my compassion; he looked like a creature whom nature herself had given a furious, disgusted kick in the face at birth), but something else, some indefinable aura he gave off. The influence of his 'blood' as Charousek had so aptly formulated it.

Involuntarily, I wiped the hand that had shaken his when he came in. I tried to do it unobtrusively, but he must have noticed; he had to force himself to suppress the flash of hatred which threatened to suffuse his features.

"Nice place you've got 'ere", he said hesitantly, when he realised I was not going to do him the favour of opening the conversation. He rather contradicted what he was saying by closing his eyes, perhaps to avoid having to meet mine. Or did he think it would give his face a harmless expression? You could hear the conscious effort he was making to speak standard German.

I did not feel obliged to reply to this, and waited to see what he would say next.

In his embarrassment he put his hand out towards the file which, God knows why, had been left lying on the table since Charousek's visit, but immediately drew back involuntarily, as if he had been bitten by a snake. I felt a rush of astonishment at such subconscious psychical sensitivity.

He finally roused himself to speech. "Of course, it's part of the business, to 'ave an elegant establishment like this when you get such . . . fine visitors." He opened his eyes, to see what impression his words had had on me, but evidently decided it was premature and quickly closed them again.

I tried to force him into a corner, "You mean the lady who came here in her carriage recently?"

Why don't you say what you mean?"

He hesitated for a moment, then grasped me fiercely by the wrist and dragged me to the window.

The strange, abrupt way he did it reminded me of the way he had pulled the deaf-mute, Jaromir, into his den a few days ago. He held out a glittering object to me in his crooked fingers. "What do you think, Herr Pernath, can anything be done with it?"

It was a gold watch, the covers of which were so bent that it almost looked as if someone had damaged them deliberately. I took my magnifying glass. The hinges were half torn off and inside . . . wasn't there something engraved on it? It was scarcely legible anyway, but for good measure someone had covered it with a lot of fresh scratches. Slowly I deciphered it: Ka. . .rl Zott. . .mann Zottmann? Zottmann? Now where had I seen that name? I couldn't remember. Zottmann Wassertrum almost knocked the magnifying glass out of my hand. "The mechanism's all right, I've 'ad a look meself. But the cases's bugged."

"Just needs hammering out again, perhaps a couple of welds. Any goldsmith could do that for you, Herr Wassertrum."

"But I'd like it done proper, artistic as you might say", he put in hastily, almost anxiously.

"Very well then, if it's that important to you . . ."

"Important!" His voice cracked with eagerness. "Important? I'm goin' to wear it meself, that watch. And whenever I show it to anyone I want to be able to say, 'Look, that's Herr Pernath's workmanship, that is.'"

The fellow was nauseating, smearing me with his slimy flattery.

"If you come back in an hour it'll be ready for you."

Wassertrum squirmed until he almost tied himself in knots. "No, no . . . I don't want you . . . to put yourself out. . . Three days, four days. . . next week's soon enough. I'd never forgive myself, if I thought I was imposing on you."

What was he after, getting into such a state? I stepped into the next room and locked the watch in my iron box. On top was Angelina's picture. I quickly closed the lid in case Wassertrum should be watching.

*

When I went back I noticed that he had changed colour. I gave him a close look, but immediately abandoned my suspicion. He couldn't have seen anything.

"That's settled then; some time next week perhaps", I said, in order to bring his visit to a close.

Suddenly, however, he seemed in no hurry at all. He pulled up a chair and sat down. Contrary to his earlier behaviour, he now kept his fish's eyes wide

open and fixed on the top button of my waistcoat.

"I bet that baggage told you to say you know nothing, if it all came out, didn't she, ey?" Without warning, he suddenly started ranting on at me, thumping the table with his fist. There was something frightening in the abrupt way he could shift from one tone to the other, switching like lightning from flattery to a brutal verbal assault. I imagined it was quite likely that most people, especially women, would be in his power in no time at all, if there was the least thing he could use against them.

My first thought was to grab him by the throat and throw him out, but on reflection I decided it would be wiser first of all to find out what he knew.

"I have really no idea what you mean, Herr Wassertrum", I said, looking as blank as possible.

"Baggage? What, some kind of luggage?"

"I'll be teachin' you your own language next", he snorted. "You'll have to swear on the Bible in court, you will, when it comes down to it. I'm tellin' you, d'you understand?" He started to shout,

"You can't look me in the face and tell me that her from over there", he jerked his thumb in the direction of the studio, "didn't come runnin' in 'ere, with nothin' on but a bit of carpet?"

I saw red, grabbed the rogue by the chest and shook him. "One more word in that tone of voice and I'll break every bone in your body, do you understand?"

Ashen grey, he sank down into the chair and stammered, "What? What's the matter? What d'you want? I was only saying."

I strode up and down the room a few times to recover my composure, not listening to the continuous dribble of excuses slobbering from his lips. Then I sat down facing him, knee to knee, determined to clear up the matter, so far as it concerned Angelina, once and for all. If a peaceful solution was not possible, I hoped to force him finally to open hostilities and perhaps waste some of the arrows in his quiver in a premature volley.

Without paying the least attention to his interruptions, I told him in no uncertain terms that blackmail of any kind was doomed to failure, since there was no accusation he could back up with hard facts, and I (in the extremely unlikely event of it ever coming to court) would definitely avoid giving evidence. Angelina, I emphasised, was much too close a friend for me to leave her in the lurch when she was in danger. I was prepared to pay any price to save her, even perjury!

Every muscle in his face was twitching, his hare-lip turned up until it

touched his nose and he bared his teeth, gobbling all the time like a turkey-cock in his attempts to interrupt. "Did I ever say I wanted anythin' from the baggage? Will you just listen." I refused to let myself be put off my stride, and that sent him beside himself with impatience. Suddenly he erupted in a roar, "It's that Savioli I want, the goddamned swine . . . the . . . the . . ." He was gasping for air. I stopped immediately; now I had him where I wanted him. But the next moment he had himself under control again and was staring at my waistcoat.

"Listen, Pernath"—he forced himself to adopt the cool, calculating tone of a businessman—"you keep on talking about that bag—. . . the lady. Fine! She's married. Fine! She's taken up with that young . . . rascal. What has it to do with me?" He was waving his hands to and fro in front of my face, the tips of his fingers and thumbs pressed together, as if he were holding a pinch of salt in them. "That's between 'er and 'er conscience, the little baggage. I'm a man of the world and you're a man of the world. We both know what's what. All I want is to get my money back. Now d'you understand, Pernath?"

I started in astonishment. "Money? What money? Is Dr. Savioli in your debt?"

Wassertrum evaded the point. "I've things to settle with 'im. It all boils down to the same thing."

"You mean to murder him", I shouted.

He leapt up, staggered, and swallowed hard several times.

"Yes! Murder him! How long did you think you could keep up this act?" I pointed to the door.

"Out you go."

Slowly he picked up his hat, put it on and turned to leave. Then he stopped and said, with a calm I would never have thought him capable of, "Right. If that's how you want it. I wanted to leave you out of it. Why not? But if you don't, then that's all right by me. It's the tender-'earted sawbones what makes the worst cuts. I've 'ad it up to about 'ere. If you'd shown a bit more sense .

. . Savioli's only in your way, isn't 'e? Now—I'm—going—to—make—mincemeat of (to make his meaning absolutely clear, he drew his hand across his throat) all three of you."

There was an expression of such fiendish cruelty on his face, and he seemed so sure of himself, that the blood froze in my veins. Obviously he must have something he could use against us, something I had no idea of, the existence of which even Charousek did not suspect. I felt the ground sway under my feet.

"The file! The file!"

It was a whisper running through my brain. I gauged the distance: one step to the table, two steps to reach Wassertrum. I was about to spring when there in the doorway, as if by magic, stood Hillel.

The room was swimming before my eyes. I saw, as if through a mist, that Hillel remained motionless, while Wassertrum shrank back, step by step, until he came up against the wall.

Then I heard Hillel say, "You know the rule, Aaron, that all Jews must vouch for each other? Do not make it too difficult for us." He added a few words in Hebrew which I could not understand.

"Why d'you 'ave to go snoopin' at doors?" the old junk-dealer spat out venomously, lips quivering.

"Whether I was listening or not is none of your business." Again Hillel added a sentence in Hebrew which, this time, sounded like a threat. I expected it would lead to an argument, but Wassertrum answered not a word; he just thought for a moment and then went out, with a defiant look on his face.

I looked at Hillel expectantly. He signalled me to stay silent. Clearly he was waiting for something, for he was listening for what was happening out in the corridor. I was about to go and close the door, but he waved me back impatiently.

A good minute passed, then we heard Wassertrum's shuffling steps coming back up the stairs.

Without a word, Hillel left and made way for him.

Wassertrum waited until Hillel was out of hearing, then he snarled at me,

"Gimme my watch back."

EVE

Where on earth was Charousek? Almost twenty-four hours had passed and still he had not appeared. Could he have forgotten the signal we had agreed on? Or had he perhaps not seen it?

I went to the window and adjusted the mirror so that the ray of sunlight falling on it was reflected onto the tiny barred window of his basement.

Hillel's intervention yesterday had reassured me somewhat. I felt sure he would have warned me if there were danger in the offing. And anyway, Wassertrum had taken no steps of any significance since then. Immediately

after he left me he had returned to his shop. I glanced quickly down at it, yes, there he was, slumped motionless behind his cast-iron hotplates just as he had been when I had seen him first thing this morning.

Unbearable, this eternal waiting!

The mild spring air pouring in through the open window in the next room was making me sick with yearning. The drip of melting ice from the roofs! All those delicate filaments of water gleaming in the sun! It was as if invisible threads were drawing me outside. Impatiently I paced up and down the room; threw myself into a chair; stood up again.

My breast was filled with the sprouting shoots of a feeling of being in love which had no precise object. I could not rid myself of it; the whole night through it had tormented me. At first it had been Angelina's body nestling against mine, then I was in the middle of an ostensibly innocent conversation with Miriam; hardly had I torn up that image, than Angelina returned and kissed me; I could smell the scent of her hair, and the soft sable she was wearing tickled the skin of my neck, slipped from her bare shoulders and—she turned into Rosina, dancing with drunken, half-closed eyes, wearing a tail-coat, but otherwise naked. I seemed to be half asleep, yet at the same time it was as if I were awake. Awake in a sweetly sapping twilight state.

Towards morning my double appeared at my bedside, the spectral Habal Garmin, the 'Breath of the Bones' of which Hillel had spoken. I could tell by the look in its eyes that it was in my power, that it would be compelled to answer any question I might put to it, on any matter concerning this world or the world beyond. I knew that it was just waiting for me to ask, but my thirst for knowledge of the mysteries was no match for the lascivious throbbing of my blood, and dried up in the arid soil of reason. I dismissed the phantom, commanding it to turn into the image of Angelina. It shrank to the letter 'Aleph' and then grew again until it was the naked woman, gigantic as a brazen colossus and with a pulse like an earthquake, that I had seen in the Book of Ibbur. She bent over me, and I inhaled the overpowering smell of her hot flesh.

Was Charousek never going to come? The bells were singing out from the church towers. I would wait another fifteen minutes, but then I would go out, out into the busy streets thronged with people in their Sunday best. I would mingle with the crowds in the wealthy districts, see the beautiful women, their coquettish faces, their slender hands and legs.

I excused myself with the thought that I might chance to meet Charousek.

To while away the time, I took the old-fashioned pack of Tarock cards down from the shelf.

Perhaps one of the picture cards would give me an idea for a cameo? I looked for the Juggler.

Nowhere to be found. Where could it have got to? I shuffled through the pack again, immersed in reflections on their hidden meaning, especially the Hanged Man. What on earth could it signify?

It showed a man hanging by a rope, head downward, between heaven and earth; his arms were tied behind his back and his right leg was bent over the left, forming a cross above an inverted triangle.

An incomprehensible symbol.

There! At last Charousek was coming. Or perhaps not?

A joyful surprise: it was Miriam.

"Do you know, Miriam, I was just going to go down and ask you to come out for a drive with me." It was not the whole truth, but that didn't worry me. "You won't refuse me, will you? My heart is so full of happiness today, and you, Miriam, you alone, are the one to crown it."

"For a drive?" she repeated, in such a bewildered voice that I had to laugh out loud.

"Is the suggestion so absurd, then?"

"No, no, but . . .", she was at a loss for words, "extremely odd. To go for a drive!"

"Not odd at all when you think that hundreds of thousands do it, do nothing else, in fact, all their lives."

"Ah yes, other people", she agreed, still under the influence of the surprise. I took both her hands in mine. "I would like you, Miriam, to enjoy the pleasures other people have, only to a much fuller extent."

She suddenly turned deathly pale. I could tell what her thoughts were from the dull, fixed expression in her eyes, and I was cut to the quick.

"You mustn't let this . . . this miracle prey on your mind, Miriam", I told her. "Will you promise me that, out of. . . friendship for me."

She could hear the anxiety in my words and looked at me in astonishment.

"I could be happy for you, if it wasn't such a strain on you, but as things are . . .? I'm very concerned about you, Miriam, do you know that? Concerned for . . . for . . . how shall I put it? . . . for your peace of mind. Don't take it too literally, but . . . I wish the miracles had never happened."

I expected her to contradict me, but she just nodded, wrapped in thought.

"It's wearing you down. Am I not right, Miriam?"

She roused herself. "Sometimes I almost wish they had never happened, either."

To me it seemed a ray of hope.

She spoke slowly, as if lost in a dream, "Whenever I think that a time might come when I had to live without such miracles—"

"But you might become rich overnight, and then you wouldn't need . . ." I interrupted her, without thinking, only to break off the moment I saw the horror spread over her face, "I mean, your worries might be solved in a perfectly ordinary way, and then your miracles would be more inward, spiritual experiences."

She shook her head and said adamantly, "Inward experiences are not miracles. What is surprising is that there seem to be people who have no such experiences at all. Ever since my childhood, day by day, night by night, I have —" (she broke off abruptly, and I guessed that there was something else deep within her, something she had never told me about, perhaps a web of invisible events, such as I was entangled in) "but that's beside the point. Even if someone should appear and heal the sick by the laying on of hands, I wouldn't call it a miracle. Only when lifeless matter—earth—is animated by the spirit, and the laws of nature are broken, only then will the miracle have occurred that I have been longing for since I can remember. My father once told me that there were two sides to the Cabbala, a magic side and an abstract side, which can never be brought together. That is to say, the magic side can draw the abstract to it, but the converse is impossible. The magic side is a gift, the abstract can be mastered, even if only with the help of a guide." This took her back to the thread of her earlier thoughts. "It is the gift that I thirst after; I care nothing for what I can master, it means no more to me than a speck of dust. As I said before, whenever I think that a time might come when I had to live without such miracles . . ."—seeing her fingers clench convulsively, I was tormented with guilt and remorse—"I feel the very idea is killing me already."

"Is that the reason why you wished the miracles had never happened?" I asked.

"Only partly. There's something else as well. I . . . I", she thought for a while, "I wasn't ready yet for a miracle of that kind. That's it. How can I explain it to you? Suppose, just for the sake of example, that every night for years I have been having one and the same dream, which keeps on developing, and in which someone—let's say an inhabitant of another world—is giving me instruction, not only by showing me through a mirror-image of myself and the gradual changes in it how far I am from the maturity in the magic sphere

needed to experience a 'miracle', but also by supplying the solution to intellectual problems I happen to be concerned with, solutions I can verify during my waking hours. I'm sure you will understand what I mean when I tell you that such a being makes up for the loss of any earthly 'happiness'. He is a bridge connecting me with the 'other side', a ladder, such as Jacob dreamt of, by which I can climb from the darkness into the light; he is both guide and friend to me, and the confidence I feel that, whatever dark paths my soul might tread, I will never stray into the black abyss of madness, comes from 'him' who has never deceived me. And then, contrary to everything he has told me, a miracle appears in my life!?! What should I believe now? Was that being, in whom for many years I found fulfilment, a mere delusion? If I were forced to give up my faith in him, I would plunge head first into a bottomless pit. And yet a miracle did occur! I would dance for joy, if-

"If?" I interrupted, breathless. Perhaps she herself would say the word I was waiting for, and I could confess everything.

"If I were to learn that I was wrong, that it wasn't a miracle at all. But I know, just as well as I know that I'm sitting here, that it would destroy me." At this my heart stood still. "To be dragged down, to have to leave heaven and come back to earth. Do you think anyone could bear that?"

"Why don't you ask your father to help you?" I said, helpless with fear.

"Ask my father? To help me?" She gave me a blank look. "When there are only two possible paths for me, how could he find a third? Do you know what the only way out of it is? If the same thing should happen to me as happened to you. If at this very moment I could forget everything that lies behind me, my whole life up to today. Isn't it strange: what is a misfortune to you would be the greatest happiness to me!"

For a long time neither of us said anything. Then she suddenly took my hand and smiled, almost a happy smile.

"I don't want you to be sad for my sake." (She was comforting me, me!) Before, you were so full of joy at the spring outside, and now you're the incarnation of gloom. I shouldn't have spoken at all. Dismiss it from your mind and return to your previous thoughts. I'm so happy—"

"You are happy, Miriam?" I interrupted in bitter tones.

She gave me a resolute smile. "Yes! Happy! Really! When I came up here to see you, I felt so incredibly anxious. I don't know why, but I just couldn't get over the feeling that you were in some great danger"—I was all ears—"and now, instead of being pleased to find you safe and sound, I've been burdening you with my troubles and-

I forced myself to be cheerful, "—and can only make up for it by coming out for a drive with me." I made every effort to sound as light-hearted as possible. "Just for once, Miriam, I'd like to try and see if I can blow away your gloomy thoughts. You can say what you like, you're still far from being an Egyptian mage; for the moment you're just a young girl who'll have to be on her guard against the tricks the spring breezes can play."

She suddenly became quite high-spirited. "What's got into you today, Herr Pernath? I've never seen you like this before! And talking of the 'spring breezes', it is a well-known fact that for Jewish girls it is the parents who direct the 'spring breezes', we have only to obey. And we do, it's in our blood. Not mine, though," she added in a rather more serious tone, "my mother flatly refused to marry that awful Aaron Wassertrum."

"What? Your mother? Marry the old junk-dealer from across the road?"

Miriam nodded. "Thank God nothing ever came of it; though it was a devastating blow for the poor man."

"Poor man, you call him?" I exclaimed. "The fellow's a criminal!"

She shook her head from side to side reflectively. "It's true he's a criminal. But anyone with his handicaps would have to become either a criminal or a prophet."

Intrigued, I pulled my chair closer. "What precisely do you know about him? I'd be interested to hear, for a quite particular—"

"If you had ever seen his shop from inside, Herr Pernath, you would understand the workings of his mind straight away. I say that because I was often in there as a child. Why the astonished look? Is that so strange? He was always kind and friendly to me. I remember once he even gave me a large, sparkling stone which had particularly caught my fancy among the things in his shop.

My mother said it was a diamond and, of course, I had to take it back there and then.

At first he refused to take it back, but then he grabbed it out of my hand and threw it away in fury. But I saw the tears pouring down his face, and even at that age I knew enough Hebrew to understand what he was murmuring. 'Everything my hand touches, is cursed.' It was the last time I was allowed to go and visit him, and since then he has never invited me in. And I know why. If I had not tried to comfort him, everything would have stayed as it was, but because I felt so awfully sorry for him and told him so, he never wanted to see me again. You can't understand that, Herr Pernath? But it's simple. He is obsessed. The moment someone touches his heart, he is filled with distrust, a

distrust it is impossible to dislodge. He believes he is much uglier than he really is, if that is possible, and that is the basis for everything he thinks and does. People say his wife loved him; perhaps it was more pity than love, but a lot of people believed she loved him.

The only one who was convinced of the opposite, was Wassertrum himself. Everywhere he smells hatred and betrayal.

The only exception was his son. Who could say what the reason was? Perhaps because he had watched his son's development from a tiny baby and had thus seen every characteristic from the moment of germination, so to speak, there was never anything to trigger off his distrust. Or perhaps it was the Jewish blood in him which led him to lavish all the love he was capable of on his offspring; our race has an instinctive fear of dying out and not being able to fulfil its mission, which we have forgotten anyway, but which lives on in some obscure corner of our being.

He guided his son's upbringing with a shrewdness which bordered on wisdom and was nothing short of miraculous in such a completely uneducated man. In order to spare his child mental torment later in life, he showed the insight of a psychologist in shielding him from any experience that might have contributed to the development of a conscience.

As his tutor he employed an outstanding scientist, who held that animals were insensitive to pain and that expressions of distress were mere mechanical reflexes. The fundamental principle underlying this far-sighted educational system was to squeeze as much pleasure and enjoyment as possible out of any creature and then throw away the shell as useless.

As you can well imagine, Herr Pernath, money, as the key to and symbol of 'power', played a leading role in all this. And just as he is careful to keep his own wealth secret, in order to cloak the extent of his influence in obscurity, so he thought up a way of making that possible for his son, whilst at the same time sparing him the discomfort of a life of apparent poverty: he imbued him with the pernicious cult of 'beauty', taught him an aesthete's responses and gestures, brought him up to appear outwardly like one of the lilies of the field, whilst inside he was a vulture.

Of course, this whole business of 'beauty' can hardly have been his own idea; it was probably his 'improvement' of a suggestion from some more cultured person.

He never resented the fact that, later on, his son disowned him at every opportunity. On the contrary, it was he who obliged him to behave in that way. It was a selfless love, and one that, as I have already said of my father's, reaches beyond the grave."

Miriam was silent for a while, but I could tell from the look on her face, and from the change in her tone of voice when she continued, that she was following the thread of her thoughts. "Strange fruits grow on the tree of Jewry."

"Tell me, Miriam", I asked, "have you never heard the rumour that Wassertrum keeps a wax doll in his shop? I can't remember who told me, perhaps it was only a dream . . ."

"No, no, Herr Pernath, it's quite true. There's a life-size wax doll in the corner where he sleeps on his straw mattress surrounded by piles of grotesque jumble. They say he took it in payment of a debt from the owner of a waxworks, years ago, simply because it resembled a Christian . . . a woman who is supposed to have been his lover once."

'Charousek's mother!' was the thought that immediately came to mind. "You don't know her name, Miriam?"

Miriam shook her head. "If it's important, would you like me to try and find out?"

"Good Lord, no, Miriam, it's no matter at all." (I could see from the brightness of her eyes how worked up she was. I resolved not to let her relapse into her old state.) "What I'm more interested in is something you touched on earlier. I mean what you said about the 'spring breezes'. I'm sure your father wouldn't dream of dictating to you whom you should marry?"

She gave a merry laugh. "My father? What on earth are you thinking!"

"Well, that makes me very happy."

"Why?" she asked, unsuspecting.

"Because it means I still have a chance."

It was only meant as a joke, and that's how she took it, but she still jumped up and ran to the window so that I shouldn't see her blush.

To help her over her embarrassment, I said, "As an old friend, there's one thing I must ask of you. When the time comes, you must let me in on the secret. Or are you thinking of staying an old maid?"

"No! No! No!" Her denial was so emphatic I couldn't repress a smile. "I'll have to get married some time."

"Of course! Naturally!"

She became as flustered as a schoolgirl. "Can't you be serious for a single minute, Herr Pernath?"

I obediently put on my schoolmaster's face, and she sat down again.

"When I say I'll have to get married some time, I mean that, although up to now I have not given the when or the whom any thought, it would go against what I see as the meaning of life if I were to assume that I, as a woman, had come into the world to remain childless."

For the first time I saw the woman behind the girl.

"It is a dream of mine", she went on softly, "to imagine that it is one of the goals of life for two beings to fuse into one, into—have you ever heard of the Egyptian cult of Osiris?—something of which the 'hermaphrodite' is a symbol."

The word caught my attention. "The hermaphrodite . . .?"

"By that I mean the magic union of the male and female principles in the human race to create a demi-god. As a final goal! No, not as a final goal, as the beginning of a new course, which will be eternal, which will have no final end."

I was deeply moved. "And you hope that some time you will find the one you seek? Could it not be that he lives in some far-off land, is perhaps not even here on earth?"

"I know nothing about that", she replied simply. "All I can do is wait. If he is separated from me by time or space—which I cannot believe, why then would I be bound to the Ghetto here?—or if we do not recognise each other, and I do not find him, then my life will have been without purpose, just the mindless whim of some idiotic demon. But please, please, let's not talk about that any more", she pleaded. "Whenever a thought is put into words, it gets an ugly, earthly taste, and I wouldn't want—." She suddenly broke off..

"What wouldn't you want, Miriam?"

She raised her hand and quickly stood up, saying, "You have a visitor, Herr Pernath."

There was a rustle of silk out in the corridor, an impetuous knock and then: Angelina!

Miriam was going to leave, but I held her back. "Allow me to introduce you. The daughter of an old friend—Countess——"

"One can't even drive up to the house any more, the ! roads have been dug up everywhere. When are you going to move to an area that's fit for human habitation, Pernath? Outside the snow is melting, the sky is enough to make your heart burst with joy, and here you are stuck in your dank, dark cavern like an old frog. By the way, do you know I went to see my jeweller yesterday and he said you're the finest gem-cutter, the greatest engraver living today, if not one of the greatest who ever lived?" Angelina chattered on like a river in

spate, and I sat spellbound. I was mesmerised by her radiant blue eyes, her little feet in their tiny patent-leather boots, her coquettish face beaming out of a mountain of furs, and her little rosy ear-lobes.

She hardly gave herself time to draw breath. "My carriage is waiting at the corner. I was afraid I might not find you at home. I hope you haven't had lunch yet? First of all we'll drive to—now, where shall we drive first? We'll head for—just a minute—yes! To the Arboretum, perhaps—or, well—anywhere out in the country, anywhere one can really feel all the sap rising and the buds budding. Come on, come on, where's your hat? Then I'll take you back to my house for lunch and we can chat until evening. There's your hat, what are you waiting for? I've got a lovely, soft, warm rug down in the carriage. We can wrap ourselves up to the ears in it and snuggle up together till we're boiling hot."

What could I say? 'I've just arranged to go out for a ride with the daughter of my old friend here'?

Miriam had quickly taken her leave of Angelina before I could get the words out. I saw her to the door, even though she made it clear, with a friendly smile, that it wasn't necessary.

"Listen, Miriam, out here on the stairs I can't really tell you how fond I am of you, and that I would much rather go with—"

"You mustn't keep the lady waiting, Herr Pernath", she insisted. "Goodbye, and enjoy your drive."

She said it with unfeigned warmth, but I could see that the brightness had gone from her eyes.

She hurried down the stairs and my heart was too full for words. I felt I had lost a whole world.

Intoxicated, I sat at Angelina's side as we drove at a furious gallop through the crowded streets.

Life was surging all around so that, dazed as I was, I only registered tiny glints of the scenes slipping past me: sparkling jewels in an earring or a muff-chain, a shiny top hat, a lady's white gloves, a poodle with a pink bow round its neck that ran along yapping at the carriage wheels, black horses in silver harnesses and covered in foam racing towards us, a shop window with gleaming bowls full of pearl necklaces and glittering jewelry, the sheen of silk round slim, girlish hips.

The chill wind cutting into our faces made the sensuous warmth of Angelina's body seem even more beguiling.

The policemen at the crossings jumped respectfully to one side as we flew

past them.

Then we were going down the Embankment, which was one long line of carriages, at a walk, and past the ruins of the stone bridge with its throng of gawping sightseers. I scarcely gave it a glance. The slightest word from Angelina, her eyelashes, the rapid twitching of her lips, it was all much more important to me than watching the blocks of stone down in the river heave the tumbling ice-floes up into the air.

An avenue through the park; then the give of soil trampled flat, the rustle of dead leaves under the wheels; damp air; huge bare trees full of crows' nests; pallid green fields with grubby white islands of melting snow, it all flashed past me as if in a dream.

Angelina mentioned Dr. Savioli, but only in a few, almost indifferent words. "Now the danger is past", she said, with her delightful, childlike lack of inhibition, "and I know that his health has improved, everything I have been through seems so terribly boring. And I want to enjoy myself again, close my eyes and plunge into life's glittering bubbles. I think all women are like that, only they won't admit it. Or are they so stupid that they don't realise it? Don't you think so too?"

She ignored my answer. "Anyway, I think women are completely uninteresting. You mustn't think I'm just trying to flatter you, but I know that I far prefer the mere presence of a man I like to the most stimulating conversation with a woman, however intelligent. When it comes down to it, it's all chitter-chatter about some silly nonsense. At best they'll talk about clothes, and fashions don't change that often, do they?" She suddenly gave me a coquettish look and said, "I'm dreadfully frivolous, aren't I?" I was so beguiled by her charm that it was all I could do not to take her head in my hands and plant a kiss on the nape of her pretty little neck. "Tell me I'm frivolous." She snuggled up closer to me and took my arm.

We were leaving the main avenue now, driving past clumps of ornamental shrubs, still wrapped in their protective winter coats of straw, so that they looked like the trunks of monsters that had had their heads and limbs chopped off. People sitting in the sunshine on the benches watched us drive by and immediately their tongues started wagging.

We were silent for a while, each immersed in our own thoughts. How completely different Angelina was from the Angelina who existed in my imagination! To me it seemed as if today she had entered the real world of the present for the first time. Was this really the same woman I had comforted that evening in the Cathedral? I could not take my eyes off her half-open lips.

Still she did not say anything; she seemed to be seeing some image in her

mind's eye.

The carriage was rolling over a damp meadow. It smelt of the awakening earth.

"Do you know, Countess—"

She interrupted softly, "Call me Angelina."

"Do you know, Angelina, yesterday I . . . I spent the whole night dreaming of you?" I almost had to force the words out.

She made a slight movement, as if to withdraw her arm from mine, and looked at me wide-eyed.

"Incredible! And I dreamt of you! And just now I was thinking exactly the same!"

Again our conversation juddered to a halt and we both guessed that we had had the same dream.

I could feel it by the throbbing of her blood. Her arm was quivering ever so slightly against my breast and she was looking fixedly away from me, out of the carriage.

Slowly I drew her hand to my lips, pulled back the soft, scented glove and, as her breathing grew more agitated, pressed my teeth, mad with love, into the ball of her thumb.

Hours later I was staggering like a drunken man down through the evening mist to the town. I followed any street that took my fancy, and it was a long time before I realised I was walking round in a circle.

Then I found myself leaning over the iron railings by the river, staring down into the roaring waves. I could still feel Angelina's arms around my neck, and I could see the stone basin of the fountain, where once before, years ago, we had taken leave of one another; it was full of rotting elm-leaves, and once again she was walking with me, as she had only a few hours ago, silent, her head on my shoulder, through the twilit park of the castle where she lived.

I sat on a bench and pulled my hat down over my face to help me dream.

The waters were thundering over the weir, drowning the last grumblings of the city as it went to sleep. From time to time I looked up as I pulled my coat tighter round me, and the shadow on the river grew deeper and deeper until, under the heavy pressure of night, it was a mere grey-black flow, with the foam of the weir a strip of dazzling white running diagonally across to the other bank.

I shuddered at the thought of having to go back to my dreary lodgings. The

glory of one short afternoon had made me for ever a stranger in my own home. A few weeks, a few days perhaps, and my bliss would surely be over, leaving me with nothing but a beautiful, painful memory.

And then?

Then I would not belong anywhere, neither here nor on the other side, neither on this bank nor across river.

I stood up. Before I returned to the darkness of the Ghetto, I wanted to have one more look through the park railings at the castle and the windows of the room where she was sleeping. I set off in the direction from which I had come, feeling my way through the thick fog along rows of houses and across slumbering squares, past black monuments that suddenly reared up menacingly before me, past lonely sentry boxes and the scrollerly of baroque facades. In the thick mist, the dull glow of the street-lamps grew into fantastic, gigantic rings coloured like faded rainbows, turned into piercing, pale-yellow eyes, then dissolved in the mist behind me.

My foot felt a broad stone step strewn with gravel. Where was I? It was a steeply rising, sunken lane. To the left and right were smooth garden walls with the bare branches of a tree trailing down over them. They seemed to come down from the sky, the trunk was hidden behind the wall of fog. A few thin, rotten twigs snapped off with a loud crack as my hat brushed against them, and tumbled down my coat into the misty abyss concealing my feet.

Then a point of light shone out, a single, lonely point of light somewhere in the distance, mysteriously suspended between heaven and earth.

I must have taken a wrong turning, it could only be the Old Castle Steps that ran across the slope of the Furstenberg Gardens.

Long stretches of clayey soil, then a paved path.

A bulky shadow towered up above me, the top ending in a stiff black pointed hat: the Dalibor Tower, the dungeon where many subjects had died of hunger whilst their kings hunted game in the Stag Moat below.

A narrow twisting alley with crenelations, a spiral staircase scarcely wide enough for my shoulders, then I was standing opposite a row of houses none of which was taller than myself; if I stretched out my arm I could touch their roofs.

I was in 'Goldmakers Alley' where, in the Middle Ages, the adepts of alchemy heated the philosophers' stone and poisoned the moonbeams. There was no other way out than the one by which I had come, but I could not find the gap in the wall. Instead I bumped into a wooden gate.

'It's no use', I thought to myself, Til have to wake someone up to show me

the way out.'

Strange, there is a house blocking the end of the street, larger than the others and apparently lived in. I can't remember ever having seen it before. It is shining so brightly out of the mist, it must be whitewashed.

I go through the gate, across the narrow strip of garden and press my face against the window-panes. Everything is dark. I knock on the window. Inside, an ancient man, as old as Methuselah, comes tottering in through the door, stops in the middle of the room, slowly turns his head towards the dusty alchemical flasks and retorts on the shelves, gives the huge spiders' webs in the corners a reflective stare and then turns his gaze directly towards me.

The shadow of his cheek-bones falls across his eyes sockets, so that it looks as if they were empty as those of a mummy.

He obviously cannot see me.

I knock on the glass.

He can't hear it. As silently as a sleepwalker, he goes out of the room.

I wait in vain. I knock on the door of the house. No one opens.

There was nothing left for it but to go on looking until I found the way out of the street.

It would be best, I decided, to go and mix with people. To go to the Old Toll House, where my friends, Zwakh, Prokop and Vrieslander would surely be, in order to drown my desperate longing for Angelina's embraces for at least a few hours. I quickly set off for the inn.

They were sitting round the worm-eaten old table like a trio of dead men, all three with white, thin-stemmed clay pipes clenched between their teeth. The whole room was full of smoke. The dark-brown walls so swallowed up the meagre light from the old-fashioned hanging lamp that it was almost impossible to tell which was which.

In the corner sat the taciturn waitress, flat-chested and weatherworn, with her blank gaze and yellow duck's-bill of a nose, eternally knitting away at a sock. Dull-red blankets had been hung over the closed doors, so that the voices from the next room sounded like the soft hum of a swarm of bees.

Vrieslander, with his straight-brimmed conical hat on his head, his pointed beard, leaden complexion and scar under his eye, looked like some drowned Dutchman from a bygone century.

Joshua Prokop had stuck a fork through his musician's locks and was keeping up a constant drumming with his uncannily long, bony fingers whilst admiring Zwakh's efforts to clothe a pot-bellied bottle of arrack in a purple

cloak from one of his puppets.

"It's going to be Babinski", explained Vrieslander with the utmost gravity. "You don't know who Babinski was? Zwakh, tell Pernath who Babinski was."

"Babinski", explained Zwakh at once, without interrupting his work for a moment, "was a celebrated robber and murderer who used to live in Prague. For many years he went about his deplorable business without anyone noticing. Gradually, however, it began to strike people in the better families that this or that member had been missing at dinner and never reappeared. Though at first nothing was said—the matter did, after all, have its good side in that it meant less cooking—they could not ignore the fact that people might start to talk and the family's social prestige would suffer. Especially when it was daughters of marriageable age who disappeared without trace. Anyway, family pride demanded that they publicly demonstrate the high regard in which they held family values.

Those sections of the personal columns in the local newspapers headed 'Come Back, All Is Forgiven' grew out of all proportion—a fact which Babinski, with that thoughtlessness which is characteristic of professional murderers, had not taken into account—and finally aroused general attention.

At heart Babinski was a man of simple tastes, and his untiring industry had enabled him to establish a cosy home in the idyllic little village of Krtsch just outside Prague. It was the tiniest of cottages, but sparkling clean and had a garden at the front full of geraniums.

Since, on his income, he could not afford to acquire more land, he found it necessary, in order to dispose of his victims unobtrusively, to do without the extra flower-bed he had set his heart on and establish in its stead a simple, yet practical grassy mound which could easily be enlarged whenever business or the season demanded.

It was on this blessed spot that every evening Babinski, after all the trials and tribulations of the day, would sit enjoying the last rays of the setting sun and playing all sorts of melancholy tunes on his flute."

"Just a moment", interrupted Joshua Prokop and, taking his house-key out of his pocket, held it to his lips like a clarinet and played on it, "Toorali toorali-addy."

"Were you there, then", asked Vrieslander in astonishment, "since you know just which tune it was he played."

Prokop threw him a furious glance. "No. Babinski lived too long ago for that. But, as a composer, I ought to know what Babinski played if anyone does. It's not for you to judge, you've no ear for music. Toorali toorali toorali-

ay."

Deeply moved, Zwakh listened until Prokop put away his house-key, then went on, "The constant increase in the size of the mound gradually aroused his neighbours' suspicions, but the credit for finally putting an end to the fiend's selfish activities goes to a policeman from the suburb of Zizkov, who happened to observe, from a safe distance, Babinski strangling a highly respectable old lady. He was arrested at his country retreat.

Taking his otherwise exemplary character into account as a mitigating circumstance, the court condemned him to death by hanging, at the same time commissioning the firm of Leipen Bros., Wholesale and Retail Rope Merchants, to supply the authorities with the requisite cordage at a reasonable price and with invoices in triplicate.

In spite of all such precautions, however, it happened that the rope broke and Babinski's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

Twenty years the murderer spent behind the walls of Saint Pancras Prison without a single word of complaint ever crossing his lips; even today the staff of the institution still sing the praises of his model behaviour, he was even granted permission to play his flute on the official birthday of our most noble sovereign—"

Prokop immediately felt for his house-key, but Zwakh stopped him with a wave of the hand.

"On the occasion of a general amnesty, the rest of his sentence was remitted and he was given the position of gatekeeper at the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy. Thanks to his proficiency with the spade, which he had acquired in his previous walk of life, the light gardening, which was part of his duties, took up so little of his time that he had leisure enough to purify his heart and mind through the study of carefully selected works of improving literature.

The results were pleasing in the extreme. Whenever the Mother Superior sent him to the local inn on a Saturday evening, to raise his spirits a little, he would always return punctually before nightfall, remarking that he found the general decline in moral standards depressing; there were so many shady characters making the roads unsafe that the sensible course for any right-thinking person was to see that he set off for home in good time.

At that time in Prague the candle-makers had developed the unfortunate tradition of selling little figures with red cloaks representing the murderer Babinski. There was not one among the bereaved families who did not have such a figure. Usually, however, they were to be seen in the shops under a glass cover, and there was nothing calculated to infuriate Babinski so much as

the sight of one of these.

'It is extremely degrading and betokens an unparalleled coarseness of spirit to keep on confronting a person with his youthful peccadilloes', Babinski would say on such occasions, adding, 'and it is deeply regrettable that the authorities have taken no steps to deal with such an outrage.'

Even on his deathbed he was still expressing similar sentiments, and not in vain, for soon afterwards the government banned the trade in the offensive Babinski statuettes."

Zwakh took a deep draught from his hot toddy, and all three grinned a fiendish grin. Then he stole a cautious glance at the pallid waitress, and I saw her wipe a tear from her eye.

"Well, esteemed colleague and gem-cutter, have you nothing for us?" asked Vrieslander after a considerable pause for general reflection, "Apart, that is, from footing the bill out of gratitude for such a delightful narrative?"

I told them about my wandering in the fog. When I came to the place where I had seen the white house, all three took their pipes out of their mouths with excitement, and when I had finished, Prokop banged the table with his fist and shouted, "That's the absolute limit! This Pernath experiences every legend personally. By the way, talking of your Golem, the matter's been cleared up, did you know that?"

"What do you mean: cleared up?" I asked, completely dumbfounded.

"You know that mad Jewish beggar, Hashile? No? Well, Hashile was the Golem."

"A beggar was the Golem?"

"Yes. Hashile was the Golem. This afternoon the ghost was seen walking without a care in the world in its notorious seventeenth-century costume along Salnitergasse, and the man from the knacker's yard managed to trap it with a dog-catcher's noose."

"What on earth are you talking about? I don't understand a word of it."

"But I'm telling you, it was Hashile. I heard he found the clothes some time back in a house entrance. But, to get back to the white house on the Kleinseite, your story is terribly interesting.

There is an old legend that up there in the Street of the Alchemists is a house which is only visible in fog, and that to a 'Sunday's child' alone. It is called the 'Wall by the Last Lamp'. If you go up by day all you will see is a large, grey rock; beyond it there's a sheer drop down into the Stag's Moat. You were lucky, Pernath, that you didn't take another step, you would have tumbled

down and broken every bone in your body.

Beneath the rock, according to the legend, there's a huge treasure buried. The stone itself is said to have been laid by the 'Order of Asiatic Brethren', whom some people claim founded Prague, as the foundation stone for a house which will not be inhabited until the end of time, by a person—or, rather, by a hermaphrodite, a being composed of man and woman. And this being will have a hare on its coat of arms. By the way, the hare was the symbol of Osiris, so that's probably where all the business with the Easter bunny originated.

Until the time is come, Methuselah himself, so the legend goes, will keep watch at the place to stop Satan flying down and treading the stone, thus begetting a son with it, the so-called Armilos.

Have you never heard of this Armilos? They even know—that is, the old Rabbis know—what he would look like if he appeared on earth: golden hair tied at the back, with two partings, then sickle-shaped eyes and arms that reach down to his feet."

"Such a divine popinjay should be recorded", muttered Vrieslander, looking for a pencil.

"Well, Pernath, if you should ever have the good fortune to turn into a hermaphrodite and stumble on the buried treasure", Prokop concluded, "then don't forget I was your best friend."

I didn't feel like joking; my heart ached. Zwakh could probably tell by my look, and even if he didn't know the reason, he quickly came to my aid.

"However that may be, it's remarkable, almost uncanny, that Pernath should have a vision at the precise spot that is so closely linked to an old legend. There are connections that some people cannot escape from if their soul has the ability to see shapes that are not accessible to our sense of touch. I'm afraid I can't help it, I think there's nothing more fascinating than the supernatural!

What do the rest of you think?"

Vrieslander and Prokop were serious now, and none of us thought an answer necessary.

"And what do you think, Eulalia?" asked Zwakh, turning round.

The old waitress scratched her head with a knitting needle, sighed, blushed and said, "Oh, get away with you! The things you do say, sir!"

After we had stopped laughing, Vrieslander said, "There's been something in the air the whole day. I haven't been able to do a single stroke. I've not been able to get Rosina out of my mind, the way she danced in that tail-coat."

"Has she reappeared yet?" I asked.

" 'Appeared' is good. The Vice Squad booked her for a special appearance! Perhaps the inspector took a fancy to her when he saw her at Loitschek's that night? Anyway, now she's in a fever of activity and doing her bit to increase commerce in the Jewish quarter. And a strapping wench she's turned into in such a short time!"

"It's astonishing when you think what one of these daughters of Eve can do to a man, simply by making him fall in love with her", Zwakh commented. "In order to make enough money to be able to sleep with her, that poor fellow, Jaromir, has turned into an artist overnight. He goes round the taverns cutting silhouettes for the customers who want that kind of portrait."

Prokop, who had not been listening to Zwakh, smacked his lips and said, "Really? Is she that pretty now? Have you had a little nibble yet, Vrieslander?"

The waitress immediately jumped up indignantly and flounced out of the room.

"There goes that broiling fowl again!" muttered Prokop in exasperation at her departing form.

"Virtue outraged! That's the last thing she needs! Huh!"

Zwakh calmed him down. "Don't bother with her. Anyway, she made her exit on the wrong cue!

But she'd just finished the sock."

The landlord brought a new supply of hot toddy and the conversation took a decidedly lascivious turn; too lascivious not to set the blood throbbing in my veins, given my already feverish state. I fought against it, but the more I tried to shut myself off from it and concentrate my thoughts on Angelina, the more insistent became the ringing in my ears. Rather abruptly, I got up and left.

The fog had lifted slightly and sprinkled fine needles of ice all over me, but it was still so thick that I could not read the street names, and missed my way going home. I was in the wrong street and was about to turn round when I heard someone call my name. "Herr Pernath! Herr Pernath!"

I looked around, up, down: no one.

Beside me a door with a small, discreet red light over it yawned wide revealing, or so it seemed, the luminescent outlines of a figure at the back of the hallway.

Again the voice, "Herr Pernath! Herr Pernath!"

Surprised, I went into the vestibule, and two warm, female arms wrapped

themselves round my neck. A door slowly opened a little, and in the light I could see that it was Rosina who was pressing her hot body against mine.

RUSE

A dull, grey day.

I had slept late into the morning, a lifeless, dreamless sleep, for all the world as if I were dead.

The old woman who did my housework had either not turned up or had forgotten to light the stove. It was full of cold ashes. The furniture was covered in dust, the floor unswept.

Shivering, I walked up and down. The room was full of the stale smell of cheap liquor. My coat, my clothes stank of cold tobacco smoke.

I threw open the window and then shut it again; the filthy, icy air from the street was unbearable.

Outside, the sparrows were perched motionless in the gutters, their feathers soaked. Wherever I looked, there was nothing but drab despair around me, and I had a soul to match, all mangled and torn.

The seat of that armchair, how threadbare it was! The horsehair was coming out at the edges. I should take it to the upholsterer, but why bother, just one more, joyless lifetime to last through, and it would be fit for the rubbish heap with everything else.

And those net curtains on the windows, how tasteless, how pointless! Why didn't I twist them into a rope and hang myself by them? Then at least I wouldn't have to look at the misbegotten things any more, and the whole dreary, tiresome business would be over, once and for all!

Yes, that was the sensible thing to do. Make an end of it. Today. Now. This morning. Not even bother with breakfast. A revolting thought, to do away with yourself on a full stomach! To lie in the wet, cold earth with undigested food decaying inside you!

If only the sun had shone for the last time, so that its sparkling rays would no longer fill your heart with the brazen lie that life is full of joy!

No, I was not going to fall for that again! Never again be at the mercy of this clumsy, pointless destiny that raised me up, then dropped me in the mud, merely in order to make me realise how transient all earthly things were—which I knew already, anyway, which every child, every dog in the street knows.

Poor, poor Miriam. If only I could help her at least.

It was time to make a decision, one final, irrevocable decision, before that confounded vital urge woke up again and started dangling more fancies before my all-too-credulous inward eye.

What use had they been to me, all these messages from the incorruptible realm?

None, none whatsoever.

All they had done had been to send me staggering round in circles until this earth seemed an impossible torment.

There was just one thing I could do.

I worked out in my head how much money I had left in the bank. Yes. That was the only way. Of all my worthless deeds in this life, that was the only, tiny one that might have any value at all.

I must tie up everything I possessed, including the few gems in the drawer, in a little parcel and send it to Miriam. That would free her from material cares for a few years at least. And write a letter to Hillel, telling him the truth about her and her 'miracles'.

He alone could help her. I knew that he would find a way.

I gathered together all the stones and wrapped them up. If I went to the bank now I could have everything arranged within the hour.

And then a bunch of red roses for Angelina. My every nerve screamed with sorrow and longing: just one more day, let me live for just one more day!

In order to go through this agony of despair again?

No, I must not wait one single minute longer. I felt satisfaction at not having given way.

I looked round. Was there anything else left to do? Of course, the file. I put it in my pocket to throw it away somewhere in the street, as I had intended to do recently.

I hated that file! How close it had come to making me a murderer!

Who was that coming to disturb me now?

The junk-dealer.

"Only a moment of your time, Herr von Pernath", he asked, immediately ennobling me when I told him I had no time. "Just a moment for a few words."

The sweat was pouring down his face and he was trembling with

excitement.

"Can we 'ave a few words, in private this time, Herr von Pernath? I don't want that—that Hillel to come burstin' in again. Could you lock the door, or perhaps we should go into the next room?"

He dragged me along behind him in his usual rough manner. Then he looked round furtively a few times and said in a hoarse whisper, "I've changed my mind, you see, in that little matter we was discussin' the other day. It's better that way. Wouldn't 'ave done me no good, anyway. So that's it. Water under the bridge now."

I tried to read his eyes, but he returned my gaze, though the effort it cost him could be seen in the way his hand clenched the back of the chair.

"I'm glad to hear it, Herr Wassertrum", I said in as friendly a tone as I could manage. "Life is dreary enough, without mutual hatred making it a misery for each other,"

"Talks just like a book", he grunted, relieved. He rummaged around in his trouser pocket and took out the gold watch with the broken spring lids. "Just to show you I really mean it, I've brought you a little present. Go on, take it. I insist."

"What are you thinking of?" I objected. "You don't imagine—" Then I remembered what Miriam had said about him and I stretched out my hand for the watch, so as not to hurt his feelings. But he ignored it and turned deathly pale as he listened, gurgling, "There! Listen! I knew it would

'appen! It's that Hillel again. He's knockin' at the door!"

I listened as well. Then I went back into the other room, pulling the door to behind me so as reassure him. It wasn't Hillel this time. Charousek came in, put his finger to his lips as a sign that he knew who was in the next room and then, without waiting to hear what I might say, showered me with a torrent of words.

"Ah, Herr Pernath, my dear friend, how can I tell you how much pleasure it gives me to find you alone, and in such good health, too." He was talking like a ham actor, and his pompous, unnatural language was in such stark contrast to his contorted face that I shuddered with horror.

"Never, Herr Pernath, would I have presumed to visit you in your home in the tattered attire in which you have, I am sure, frequently seen me in the street. But what am I saying? Seen me!?"

You were often gracious enough to give me your hand! Today you see me with a clean white collar and a spotless suit. And do you know whom I have to thank for that? One of the noblest and, I regret I have to say, most

misunderstood men in the city. I am overcome with tears whenever I think of him.

Although he enjoys but a modest income, he is ever ready to help the poor and needy. Whenever I used to see him standing so sadly outside his shop, I was moved by a heartfelt urge to go up to him and, without a word, shake him by the hand. A few days ago he called to me as I was passing and gave me some money, enabling me to put down the deposit for a suit.

And do you know, Herr Pernath, who my benefactor is? It is with pride that I tell you, for I have long been the only person to suspect that beneath that modest exterior beats a heart of gold. It is Herr Anton Wassertrum!"

I realised, of course, that Charousek was acting out this comedy for the benefit of the junk-dealer listening in the next room, but I had no idea what he hoped to achieve by it. I was not at all convinced that the rather crude flattery would fool the suspicious Wassertrum. Charousek obviously deduced my thoughts from the anxious expression on my face, for he grinned and shook his head. His next words were presumably designed to tell me that he knew his man, and knew precisely how far he could go.

"Yes, Herr—Anton—Wassertrum! It makes my heart bleed not to be able to tell him myself how eternally grateful I am, and I must beg you, Herr Pernath, never to reveal to him that I was here and told you all this. I know that the selfishness of his fellow citizens has embittered him and filled him with a deep, ineradicable and, unfortunately, all too justified distrust.

I have trained as a psychologist, but it is my instinct that tells me that it would be best if Herr Wassertrum never heard, not even from my own lips, in what high esteem I hold him. That would be to sow the seeds of doubt in his unhappy soul, and far be it from me to do that. Better that he should think me ungrateful.

Herr Pernath, I myself have known, from my earliest childhood, what it is to be unhappy, to stand alone and abandoned in the world. I do not even know my father's name, nor have I ever seen my dear mother's face. She must have died very early on." At this point Charousek's voice took on a strangely mysterious, urgent tone. "But I am convinced she must have been one of those profoundly sensitive characters who can never express their innermost feelings—just like Herr Wassertrum.

I possess one page torn out of my mother's diary—I keep it always close to my breast—and in it she wrote that she loved my father, although he is supposed to have been ugly, more than any mortal woman has ever loved a man. And yet she seems never to have told him. Perhaps for the same reason why I, for example, could not tell Herr Wassertrum, even if it should break my

heart, how grateful I feel towards him.

But there is one more thing that page from her diary tells me, even if I had the greatest difficulty deciphering it since the words have been rendered almost illegible by tears: My father—may his memory be erased in heaven and on earth—must have maltreated my mother most dreadfully!"

Charousek suddenly fell on his knees with a resounding crash, and screamed in such spine-chilling tones that I could not tell whether he was still play-acting or had actually gone mad, "O thou almighty being, whose name man should not speak, I kneel before thee and beg thee: cursed, thrice cursed, be my father for all eternity!"

His teeth snapped shut, literally biting the last word in two, and he listened for a while, eyes wide open. Then he grinned a fiendish grin. I thought I could hear a faint groan from Wassertrum in the next room.

"You must forgive me, Herr Pernath", Charousek went on, after a pause, in a histrionically strangled voice, "for letting myself go like that, but I pray morning, noon and night that the Almighty will grant that my father, whoever he may be, should die the most gruesome death imaginable."

I was about to make some automatic reply, but Charousek quickly interrupted me. "But now, Herr Pernath, I come to the request I have to make of you. Herr Wassertrum had a protege to whom he was inordinately attached, probably a nephew of his. People even say it was his son, but I can't believe that, since in that case he would have borne the same name. In fact he was called Wassory, Dr. Theodore Wassory.

Whenever I see him in my mind's eye I can't hold back my tears. I was devoted to him, heart and soul, as if we were bound by some direct tie of love and kinship." Charousek sobbed, as if he was so moved he could hardly speak. "Oh, that such a noble spirit had to depart this life. For some reason that I have never discovered, he killed himself. And I was one of those called to his assistance, but too late, too late, oh, too, too late! And then, as I stood alone at his deathbed, covering his cold, pale hand with kisses, I—why should I not confess it, Herr Pernath? It could not be called theft—I took a rose lying on the breast of the corpse and slipped into my pocket the phial with the contents of which the poor unfortunate had put an end to a life so full of promise and achievement."

Charousek took out a small medicine bottle and went on with quivering voice, "I'm going to put these mementoes of my late friend, the withered rose and the phial, on the table here. How many times during those desolate hours when, lonely at heart and consumed with longing for my mother, I wished for death, have I played with that phial. It was comforting to know that I only

needed to pour the liquid onto a cloth and breathe in the fumes to float painlessly to the realm where dear Theodore is resting from the tribulations of this vale of tears.

And now I beg you, Pernath, for the sake of the high esteem in which I hold you, to take them and give them to Herr Wassertrum. Tell him you had them from someone who was close to Dr.

Wassory, but whose name you have sworn never to reveal, perhaps a lady's. He will believe you, and they will be a reminder of his son, just as they reminded me of a dear friend.

That will be my way of thanking him without his knowing. I am a poor man, and it is all I have, but I will be content to know that both will now belong to him, and yet he will never suspect that they came from me. Merely to think of it is balm to my soul.

And now, goodbye, and a thousand thanks for your help in this matter. I know I can rely on you."

He grasped my hand, gave me a meaningful wink, and then, when I did not understand, mouthed some silent words at me.

"Just a moment, Herr Charousek, and I'll see you down the stairs", I said, mechanically repeating the words I read from his lips, and followed him out. We stopped on the dark first-floor landing.

Before taking my leave of Charousek, I told him to his face, "I can imagine what the purpose of your little charade was. You . . . you want Wassertrum to poison himself with the phial!"

"Of course", Charousek admitted cheerfully.

"And you imagine I'll be a party to that?!"

"Not at all necessary."

"But up there you said I was to take the bottle to Wassertrum!"

Charousek shook his head. "When you go back up to your room you will see that he has already pocketed both."

"How can you assume that?" I asked in astonishment. "Someone like Wassertrum will never kill himself, he's much too much of a coward, and he never acts on impulse."

"Then you know nothing about the insidious poison of suggestion", Charousek countered earnestly. "Had I spoken in normal tones, you would perhaps be correct in your assessment, but I had worked out beforehand how I was going to speak, right down to the slightest emphasis.

Swine like that only react to the most nauseatingly turgid rhetoric. Believe me! I could have described his expression at every sentence I spoke. There is no Kitsch too crass to draw tears from such rabble, rotten to the core though they be. Don't you think that, if it were not for that, all the theatres would have long since been razed to the ground? You can recognise scum by their sentimentality. Thousands of poor devils can starve to death without a single tear being shed, but dress up any greasepaint bitch as a country bumpkin and let her roll her eyes at them from the stage and they'll blubber like abandoned lap-dogs. Even if by tomorrow old Papa Wassertrum has forgotten the scene that has just cut him to his dung-heap of a heart, when the time comes when he feels sorry for himself, every single one of my words will reawaken within him. At such moments of spiritual diarrhoea all it needs is a gentle shove—and I shall make sure he gets one—and even the most cowardly cur will reach for the poison. It just has to be close at hand! Friend Theo would probably not have gone through with it if I hadn't made it easy for him."

"But Charousek, that's dreadful!" I exclaimed, horrified. "Don't you feel any—"

He quickly put his hand over my mouth and pushed me into an alcove. "Quiet! Here he comes!"

Wassertrum came stumbling down the stairs, supporting himself against the wall, and lurched past us. Charousek quickly shook my hand and crept after him.

When I returned to my room, I saw that the rose and the phial had disappeared. In their place on the table lay Wassertrum's battered gold watch.

At the bank they told me I would have to wait eight days until I could get my money; that was the usual notice.

I told them to fetch the manager. I was going to leave town within the hour and was in a great hurry, I lied.

He was in conference, they said, but anyway, he would not be able to alter the bank's standard practices. At that a man with a glass eye, who was waiting at the counter behind me, snorted with laughter.

So I would have to wait eight days, eight dreadful, dreary days, for death. They seemed to stretch out endlessly before me.

I was so depressed that I walked up and down, up and down, outside a coffee house without any idea of how long I had been doing so. Finally I went in, simply to get rid of the awful fellow with the glass eye who had followed me from the bank. He was hovering nearby, and whenever I looked at him he immediately started searching around on the ground, as if he had lost

something. He was wearing a bright check jacket that was much too tight and baggy black trousers with shiny patches that hung down like sacks round his legs. His left boot had a raised, egg-shaped leather patch sewn on, so that it looked as if he wore a signet ring on his toe.

Scarcely had I found a seat than he came in and sat down at the next table. I thought he was going to try to cadge a loan from me and I was already getting my purse out when I caught the flash of a diamond on his fat, butcher's fingers.

Hour after hour I sat in the coffee house, feeling I was about to go mad from the strain on my nerves, but where else could I go? Home? Wander round the city? The one seemed worse than the other.

The stale air, the incessant, inane clatter of the billiard balls, the perpetual hacking cough of a half-blind journalist opposite me, the spindle-shanked infantry officer, alternately picking his nose or combing his moustache with nicotine-stained fingers in front of a small pocket-mirror, the seething clump of vile, sweaty, gabbling Italians round the card table in the corner, now rapping their knuckles and squawking as they played their trumps, now hawking up a lump of phlegm and spewing it onto the floor: all that was bad enough, but to see it reflected two, three times over in the mirrors on the walls! It slowly sucked the blood out of my veins.

It gradually began to grow dark, and a flat-footed, weak-kneed waiter poked at the gas lamps with a long pole until, with a shake of the head, he resigned himself to the fact that they were not going to light.

Whenever I turned my head I met the wolfish squint of the man with the glass eye, who then quickly hid behind a newspaper or dipped his grubby moustache into the cup of coffee which he had long since finished. He had pulled his hard, round hat well down over his face so that his ears stuck out almost horizontally, but he showed no signs of wanting to leave.

It was unbearable.

I paid and left.

As I was closing the door behind me, someone took the handle out of my hand. I turned round: that fellow again! I turned left for the Jewish quarter, but he came up close beside me and stopped me. "That's the absolute limit!" I shouted at him.

"To the right", he said curtly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He gave me an insolent stare. "You're Pernath!"

"I assume you mean Hen Pernath?"

He just gave a scornful snigger. "That's enough fooling around. You're coming with me."

"Are you mad? Who are you, anyway?"

In reply he silently opened his jacket, revealing a worn, tin double-headed eagle pinned to the lining. I understood at once: the rogue was a secret policeman and he was arresting me.

"But for God's sake, tell me what I'm supposed to have done."

"You'll find out soon enough. At the station", he said rudely. "Off we go now. Quick march."

I told him I would prefer to take a cab.

"Nothing doing."

We walked to the police station.

A policeman led me to a door. The name on it read:

ALOIS OTSCHIN

Superintendent of Police

"In you go", said the policeman.

Two grubby desks with three-foot high panels hiding the occupants stood facing each other; between them were a couple of rickety chairs; a portrait of the Emperor on the wall looked down on a goldfish tank on the window-ledge.

Otherwise the room was empty.

Sticking out from under the left-hand desk were a club-foot and, beside it, a huge felt slipper, both surmounted by frayed grey trouser-legs. I heard a rustle of papers. Someone murmured a few words in Czech, and immediately afterwards the Superintendent appeared from behind the right-hand desk and came up to me. He was a short man with a grey, pointed beard and the peculiar habit of baring his teeth every time he was about to speak, like someone staring into bright sunlight. Then he would screw up his eyes behind his glasses, which gave him a frighteningly malicious expression.

"Your name is Athanasius Pernath and you are—" he looked at a sheet of paper with nothing written on it,—"a gem engraver."

Immediately the club-foot under the other desk came to life; it rubbed against the leg of the chair, and I could hear the scratch of pen on paper.

I concurred. "Pernath. Gem engraver."

"Well, we're both agreed on that, Herr . . . Pernath . . . Pernath, yes, Pernath. Yes, yes." Suddenly the Superintendent was full of warmth, as if he had just heard the most gratifying news. He stretched out both hands towards me and made grotesque attempts to sound harmless. "Tell me, Herr Pernath, what do you do all day?"

"I think that is no business of yours, Herr Otschin", I answered coolly.

He screwed up his eyes for a moment then suddenly shot out a lightning-quick question, "Since when has the Countess been having this affair with Savioli?" but I had been expecting something of the kind and did not bat an eyelid.

He interrogated me cunningly, darting from one topic to another in his attempt to get me to contradict myself, but although my heart was in my mouth with fright, I said nothing to give myself away and kept insisting that I had never heard the name of Savioli, was acquainted with Angelina from my father's time and that she had frequently commissioned cameos from me.

In spite of that, I had the feeling the Superintendent could tell whenever I was lying and was inwardly fuming that he had not managed to get anything out of me. He thought for a moment, then pulled me towards him by the lapel, gave a warning jerk of the thumb towards the left-hand desk and whispered in my ear, "Athanasius, your late father was my best friend. I want to save you, Athanasius. But you'll have to tell me everything about the Countess. Everything, do you hear?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. "What do you mean, you want to save me?" I asked him out loud.

The club-foot stamped irritably on the floor. The Superintendent's face went ashen-grey with hatred. His lip curled. He waited. I knew that he would pounce again (his shock tactics reminded me of Wassertrum), so I waited, too. A goat-like face, obviously belonging to the owner of the club-foot, appeared above the desk-panels, then suddenly the Superintendent yelled at me in an ear-splitting voice:

"Murderer!"

I was speechless with astonishment.

With a sour look on his goat's face, club-foot withdrew behind his desk.

The Superintendent also seemed rather taken aback by my calm, but cleverly disguised his surprise by drawing up a chair and offering me a seat.

"So you refuse to make the statement I have requested about the Countess, Herr Pernath?"

"I have no statement to make, Superintendent, at least not the statement you expect. In the first place, I know nobody by the name of Savioli, and secondly I am firmly convinced that the suggestion that she is deceiving her husband is a vile calumny."

"Are you prepared to repeat that under oath?"

My heart missed a beat. "Yes. Any time you like."

"Good. Hmm."

There was quite a long pause, during which the Superintendent appeared to be racking his brains.

When he looked at me again, there was a rather obviously assumed expression of pain on his face. As he spoke, his voice vibrant with tears, I was immediately reminded of Charousek. "But Athanasius, you can tell me—me, your father's old friend—me, who carried you in his arms when you were a little baby—" I could hardly stop myself from laughing: the man was at most ten years older than I, "tell me, Athanasius, it was self-defence, wasn't it?"

The goat's face reappeared.

"What was self-defence?" I asked, completely mystified.

"The affair with . . . ZOTTMANN!" The Superintendent suddenly yelled the name at me, and it struck me like a blow from a dagger. Zottmann! Zottmann! The watch! Zottmann was the name engraved on the watch. The blood throbbed in my veins. That fiend Wassertrum had given me the watch to throw suspicion of the murder onto me.

Immediately the Superintendent threw off his mask, bared his teeth and screwed up his eyes. "So you admit the murder, Pernath?"

"But it's all a mistake, a dreadful mistake. For the love of God, listen to me. I can explain everything, Superintendent!" I cried.

"Now will you tell me everything about the Countess?" he quickly broke in. "I must point out that it will be counted in your favour."

"I can't say any more than I have already. The Countess is innocent."

He clenched his teeth and turned to goat-face. "Take this down: Pernath confesses to the murder of Karl Zottmann, insurance agent—"

I was seized by a blind fury. "You swine! How dare you?!" I roared at him and looked round for a heavy object.

The next moment two policemen had grabbed me and handcuffed me. At that the Superintendent strutted before me like a cock on the dung-heap. "And this watch?"—he suddenly had the battered watch in his hand—"Was poor

Zottmann still alive when you stole it from him or not?"

I had calmed down now and simply stated: "The junk-dealer, Anton Wassertrum, gave me that watch this morning."

There was a snort of laughter, and I saw the club-foot and the felt slipper perform a dance of joy under the desk.

RACK

My hands tied behind my back and followed by a policeman with his bayonet fixed, I had to walk through the lamplit streets. Scores of street urchins ran alongside, bawling and yelling, women flung open windows, waved their wooden spoons and shouted insults at me. In the distance appeared the massive stone cube of the Law Courts, with the inscription over the entrance:

Avenging Justice

Protects the Law-abiding Citizen

Then I was passing through a huge gateway, along a corridor and into a room that reeked of kitchen smells. A man with a bushy beard and wearing a sabre, uniform jacket and cap, his bare feet protruding from long Johns tied at the ankles, stood up, put the coffee mill he had been holding between his knees on one side, and ordered me to take all my clothes off. He looked through my pockets, taking out everything he found in them, and asked me if I was infested with any vermin.

When I said no, he took the rings off my fingers and said that was all, now I could get dressed again. Then I was taken up several flights of stairs and along corridors with large, grey lockable chests standing in the window embrasures. The other side of the corridor was an unbroken row of iron doors with massive bolts and small, barred windows; above each burnt a gas jet.

A giant of a gaoler with a military bearing—the first honest face I had seen for hours—opened one of the doors, pushed me into a dark, closet-like cavity with a pestilential stench, and locked the door behind me. I was in complete darkness, and found my bearings by feeling my way round. My knee bumped against a galvanised iron bucket. Finally—the room was so narrow I could hardly turn round—I managed to find the door-handle to hold on to. I was in a cell: double bunk-beds with straw mattresses ran along the walls on either side, the gap between them scarcely one pace wide. A barred window three feet square high above the back wall let in the dull light of the night sky. The heat was unbearable, the cell filled with the smell of unwashed clothes.

When my eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, I saw that one bunk was empty, but the other three were occupied by men in grey prisoners' uniforms sitting with their elbows on their knees and their faces in their hands.

Not one spoke a word.

I sat on the empty bunk and waited. Waited. Waited.

One hour.

Two hours, three hours.

Whenever I thought I heard a step outside, I sat up. Now, I thought, now they're coming to fetch me to see the examining magistrate.

Each time my hopes were dashed. The sound of the steps faded down the corridor.

I tore open my collar, I felt I was going to suffocate. One by one, I heard the groans of the other prisoners as they stretched out on their mattresses.

"Can't we open the window up there?" I put my despairing question to the general darkness around, almost starting at the sound of my own voice.

"No", was the sour response from one of the straw mattresses.

Nevertheless, I felt along the mildewed wall . . . a shelf at chest height . . . two jugs of water . . . a few stale crusts of bread. With difficulty I managed to clamber onto it, grasped the bars and pressed my face to the gap, so that at least I could breathe some fresh air. And there I stood, until my knees started to tremble, staring out into a monotony of dark-grey fog. The cold iron bars seemed to sweat.

It must soon be midnight.

Behind me I heard snoring. There was only one of them who seemed unable to sleep. He tossed and turned on the straw, sometimes moaning softly to himself.

Would morning never come? There! A clock was chiming! And again.

I counted with trembling lips. One—two—three!—Thank God, only a few more hours until it would begin to get light. The chiming continued. Four? Five? The sweat started pouring down my face. Six!—Seven!! . . . It was eleven o'clock! Only one hour had passed since I had last heard the clock strike.

Bit by bit I started to work out what must have happened. Wassertrum had tricked me into accepting Zottmann's watch so that I would be suspected of murder. He must be the murderer himself, or how else could he have come into possession of the watch? If he had come across the corpse somewhere and

then stolen the watch, he would certainly have claimed the thousand crowns reward which had been offered for information leading to the discovery , of the missing man. But that could not be the case: the posters were still up in the streets, as I had clearly seen as I made my way to the prison.

What was obvious was that the junk-dealer had informed against me; also that, as far as Angelina was concerned, he was in league with the Superintendent. Why else the interrogation about Savioli? On the other hand, that showed that Wassertrum had not yet managed to get hold of Angelina's letters.

I thought hard.

Suddenly the whole plot was revealed to me with awful clarity, as if I had been there myself.

Yes, that's what must have happened: Wassertrum had searched my room with his police accomplice and must have secretly taken my strong box, suspecting it contained compromising material. He wouldn't have been able to open it right away, since I had the key with me . . . perhaps he was in his lair, trying to break it open at this very moment.

In a frenzy of desperation I shook the bars. In my mind I could see Wassertrum rifling through Angelina's letters. If only I could tell Charousek what had happened, so that he could at least warn Savioli in time!

For a moment I clung to the hope that the news of my arrest would have spread through the Jewish quarter like wildfire. I trusted Charousek as I would trust my guardian angel. Wassertrum could not match his fiendish cunning. "I will have him by the throat the very moment he thinks he has Dr. Savioli at his mercy", Charousek had said.

The next moment I rejected the whole idea and was seized with panic. What if Charousek came too late?

Then Angelina was lost.

I bit my lips till the blood came, and tore my breast with remorse at not having burnt the letters straight away. I swore a solemn oath that I would kill Wassertrum the moment I was free again.

What did it matter to me whether I died by my own hand or on the gallows?!

Not for a single moment did I doubt that the examining magistrate would believe me if I told him the story of the watch and of Wassertrum's threats. I was sure to be free by the morrow, and at the very least the court would order Wassertrum's arrest on suspicion of murder. I counted the hours, praying for them to pass more quickly. All the while I stared out into the black murk

outside.

After an interminable time it began to get lighter and, first as a dark patch, then clearer and clearer, a huge copper disc appeared out of the mist: the face of an old clock on a tower. But—

yet another torment—the hands were missing.

Then five o'clock struck.

I heard the other prisoners waking up and starting a conversation in Czech. One voice seemed familiar. I turned round and clambered down from the shelf. There was the pock-marked Loisa sitting on the bunk opposite mine and staring at me in amazement. The other two were hard-faced rogues who scrutinised me contemptuously. "Embezzler, don't you think?" the one asked his mate in an undertone, giving him a dig in the ribs at the same time.

The other muttered some disparaging remark, rummaged around in his mattress, pulled out a black piece of paper and lay it on the floor. Then he splashed a little water from the jug onto it,

knelt down and used it as a mirror as he combed his hair into a kiss-curl with his fingers. Then he dried the paper with solicitous care and hid it in his mattress again.

"Pan Pernath, Pan Pernath." Loisa kept muttering my name to himself, staring at me wide-eyed, as if he had seen a ghost.

"You gentlemen appear to be acquainted, if you'll allow the remark", said the prisoner with uncombed hair in the slightly stilted manner characteristic of Viennese Czechs, sketching a mocking bow in my direction. "Permit me to introduce myself: Vossatka's the name, Black Vossatka. Arson", he added an octave lower, his voice throbbing with pride.

The man with the kiss-curl spat through his teeth, stared at me contemptuously for a few seconds, then said laconically, pointing to his own chest, "Breaking and entering."

I remained silent.

"Well, and what's brought you here, Count?" the Viennese Czech asked after a short pause.

I thought for a moment and then said calmly, "Murder in the course of robbery."

The two started in surprise, the scornful expression on their faces giving way to a look of utmost respect as, with one voice, they exclaimed, "An 'onour to share a cell with you."

When they saw that I took no notice of them, they withdrew to a corner where they held a whispered conversation. Then the one with the kiss-curl stood up and came over to me, silently felt my biceps and returned to his companion, shaking his head.

In a low voice, so the other two would not hear, I asked Loisa, "I suppose you're being kept on suspicion of having murdered Zottmann as well?"

He nodded. "Yes, a long time now."

More hours passed. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. Suddenly I heard Loisa calling softly, "Herr Pernath, Herr Pernath!"

"Yes?" I pretended to wake up.

"Please—excuse me, Herr Pernath, but—please—do you know what Rosina's doing? Is she at home?" the poor lad stammered. I felt extremely sorry for him as he stood there staring at me with his bloodshot eyes, convulsively wringing his hands with worry.

"She doing well. She's . . . she's a . . . waitress at . . . the Old Toll House Tavern", I lied. I could hear his sigh of relief.

Two convicts brought in a tray with enamel bowls containing the liquid left over from boiling sausages and, without a word, left three in the cell. After a few more hours the bolts rattled and the gaoler took me to the examining magistrate. My knees trembled with suspense as we went up and down stairs.

"Do you think it's possible I might be let out today?" I asked the gaoler anxiously.

I saw him repress his smile, out of pity for me. "Hm? Today? Hmm? God, everything's possible."

A chill ran down my spine.

Again I was looking at a door with a name on an enamel sign: Karl, Freiherr von Leisetreter

Examining Magistrate

Another bare room and another two desks with three-foot high panels. In front of one stood a tall, old man with a white bushy beard neatly parted down in the middle, a black frock coat, thick red lips and creaky boots.

"You are Herr Pernath?"

"Yes."

"Gem engraver?"

"Yes."

"Cell 70?"

"Yes."

"Held on suspicion of the murder of Karl Zottmann?"

"Baron Leisetreter, may I first—"

"Held on suspicion of the murder of Karl Zottmann? "

"Probably. At least, that's what I imagine. But—"

"Have you made a confession?"

"What is there to confess, Baron Leisetreter, I'm innocent?"

"Have you made a confession?"

"

"No."

"Remanded in custody. Gaoler, take the man out."

"Please listen to me, your Honour. It is imperative that I get home today. I have important things to do—"

Behind the second desk someone cackled.

Baron Leisetreter grinned.

"Gaoler, take this man out."

The days crept by, week followed sluggish week, and still I was sitting in my cell. At twelve o'clock every day we were allowed out into the prison courtyard with the other convicts and prisoners on remand to trudge round on the damp earth for twenty minutes.

Talking to each other was forbidden.

In the middle of the yard was a bare, half-dead tree; an oval picture of the Virgin Mary painted on glass had grown into the bark. Along the walls ran a scraggy privet hedge, its leaves almost black from soot; all around were the barred windows of our cells from which, occasionally, we could see a putty-coloured face with anaemic lips looking down at us.

After the twenty minutes it was back up to our living tombs and bread, water and sausage broth; on Sundays we had putrid lentils.

In all that time I had had only one further interrogation. Did I have any witnesses that 'Herr'

Wassertrum had given me the watch?

"Yes. Herr Shemaiah Hillel . . . that is . . . no" (I remembered that he had

not been there) "but Herr Charousek . . . no, he wasn't there, either."

"In brief: no one else was present?" "No, no one else was there, Baron Leisetreter." Again the cackle from behind the other desk followed by: "Gaoler, take this man out."

My anxiety about Angelina had turned into a dull feeling of resignation. There was no longer any point in worrying about her, I told myself; either Wassertrum had succeeded in carrying out his revenge or Charousek had stepped in.

Now it was my concern for Miriam that was almost driving me mad. I imagined her waiting hourly for the 'miracle' to happen again, running out to meet the baker every morning and examining the bread with trembling hands; perhaps she was worrying herself sick with fears for my safety.

Often during the night these anxieties would hound me from my sleep, and I would clamber up onto the shelf and stare out at the copper face of the clock in the tower, consumed with the desire that my thoughts might reach Hillel, might scream out to him to help Miriam and liberate her from the torment of waiting for a miracle.

Then sometimes I would throw myself onto the straw mattress and hold my breath until I almost burst, trying to force the image of my double to appear so that I could send it to comfort her.

Once it did even appear beside my bunk with the words *Chabrat Zereh Aur Bocher* in mirror writing on its breast. I was about to shout out loud with joy that everything would be all right now, but it disappeared into the ground before I could order it to go to Miriam.

And why no news from my friends? I asked my cellmates whether letters were forbidden. They did not know. They had never received any, but then they had no one who could write to them, they said. The gaoler promised to make enquiries when the opportunity arose.

My nails were all torn because I had to bite them to keep them short, and my hair was a tangled mass, for we were not allowed scissors, a comb or brush. Nor was there any water for washing.

Most of the time I was fighting against nausea because they used soda instead of salt in the sausage broth, a prison regulation 'to combat the sexual urge'.

Time passed in awful, grey monotony; I was stretched out on the rack of the hours and minutes.

There were moments—all of us at some time fell prey to them—when one or another would jump off his bunk ; and pace up and down for hour after hour

like a wild animal, finally to collapse back onto his mattress and lie there listlessly waiting—waiting—waiting.

When evening came the bugs appeared in droves, crisscrossing the walls like ants. It made me wonder why the fellow with the sabre and long Johns had even bothered to ask me whether I was carrying any vermin. Perhaps the court was worried about cross-breeding producing new species of insects?

Usually on Wednesday mornings a man with flapping trouser-legs and a slouch-hat over his piggy eyes and fat snout would appear—Dr. Rosenblatt, the prison doctor—to assure himself that we were all in the best of health. If ; any of us claimed to be ill, he would prescribe zinc ointment for rubbing on the chest, whatever the complaint.

Once the president of the district court—a tall, perfumed scoundrel from so-called 'good' society who had the crudest vices written all over his face—even accompanied him, to see that everything was in order or, as my cell-mate with the kiss-curl put it, "whether any of us 'as topped 'isself."

I went over to put a request to him, at which he immediately jumped behind the gaoler, pointed a revolver at me and screamed, "What do you want?"

I asked politely whether there were any letters for me. For answer Dr. Rosenblatt gave me a push in the chest and then quickly made his escape. The president of the court also left, jeering at me from the safety of the doorway that I would do better to confess to the murder. Only then would I receive any letters this side of the tomb.

I had long since become accustomed to the heat and bad air. I was shivering with cold all the time, even when the sun was shining. The occupants of two of the bunks had changed several times, but I ignored the newcomers. One week it would be a pickpocket and a footpad, the next a counterfeiter and a fence.

Everything happened one day, was forgotten the next. Nothing could touch me apart from my gnawing concern for Miriam. There was only one thing that had made an impression on me, sometimes a distorted version even haunted my dreams:

I had been standing on the shelf to stare up at the sky when I suddenly felt a sharp object sticking into my thigh. When I looked I discovered it was the file which had made a hole in my pocket and found its way into the lining of my jacket.. It must have been there for a long time, otherwise the man who checked my clothes would have found it. I took it out and tossed it onto my straw mattress. When I climbed down from the shelf, it had disappeared, and I had no doubt that it could only have been Loisa who had taken it. A few days

later they took him out to transfer him to a cell on the next floor down. It was quite wrong, said the gaoler, for two remand prisoners such as Loisa and myself, who were accused of the same crime, to be kept in the same cell.

With all my heart I hoped the poor lad might manage to escape with the help of the file.

MAY

When I asked him what the date was—the sunshine was as hot as in the middle of summer and the tired tree in the courtyard had put out a few buds—the gaoler was silent for a moment, but then he whispered to me that it was the fifteenth of May. Actually he shouldn't be telling me, he added, it was forbidden to talk to the prisoners at all, and especially those who had not confessed were supposed to be kept in the dark about the passage of time.

Three whole months I had been in prison, and still no news from outside!

In the evening, the soft sound of a piano came through the barred window that was now left open on warm days. One of the convicts told me that it was the daughter of the warder who lived below playing.

Day and night I dreamt of Miriam. I wondered how she was. At times I had a comforting feeling, as if my thoughts had reached her, were standing by her bedside while she slept and had placed a cool hand on her brow.

At other times, when my cell-mates were taken to be interrogated one after the other, all except me, I had moments of despair in which a shadowy fear that she was long dead took me by the throat.

Then I would try to question destiny as to whether she was alive or dead, sick or well. I would take a handful of straws out of my mattress and read the answer from the number. And almost every time it was the 'wrong' answer, and I searched through my mind for a glimpse into the future. I tried to trick my soul, which was concealing the secret from me, by asking what appeared on the surface to be a different question: Would the day ever come when I would be happy and once more able to laugh? In such cases the oracle always answered yes, and then for an hour I rejoiced and was glad.

Just as a plant sprouts and grows in secret, so had a deep, unfathomable love for Miriam gradually awoken within me, and I could not understand how I had been able to sit and talk with her all those times without being aware of it.

At such moments my trembling hope that she, too, might be thinking of me with similar feelings would often harden to a certainty, and if I heard a step in

the corridor outside, I was almost afraid that they might come and release me, and my dream would be torn to shreds by the harshness of reality outside.

Over the long months of my imprisonment my hearing had become so sharp that I heard even the quietest sounds. Every day at nightfall I heard a carriage in the distance and racked my brains to think who might be in it. There was something strange in the idea that there were people outside who could do whatever they liked, who could move around and go here or there and yet not feel intoxicated by it. That I should ever be in that happy position again, able to walk through the streets in the sunshine, I was no longer capable of imagining. The day when Angelina had held me in her arms seemed to be part of an existence that belonged to the distant past. When I looked back on it, it was with the kind of mild sadness that creeps over you when you open a book and find between the pages a withered flower once worn by the beloved of your youth.

Would old Zwakh still be sitting in the Old Toll House every evening with Prokop and Vrieslander, embarrassing Eulalia to the roots of her old maid's soul? No, it was May, the time when he went with his puppet theatre touring the provincial backwaters and playing Bluebeard on a green meadow outside the town gates.

I was alone in my cell. Vossatka, the arsonist and my sole companion for the last week, had been taken to the examining magistrate several hours ago.

His interrogation was lasting a remarkably long time.

There. The iron bar on the door clanked and, beaming with delight, Vossatka rushed in, threw a bundle of clothes onto his bunk and began to change with lightning speed. He threw his prison uniform onto the floor, accompanying each item with an oath.

"Not been able to prove a thing, not a sausage, the bunglers. Arson! I ask you!" He pulled down his lower lid with his index finger. "You have to be up early to catch Black Vossatka. Was the wind, I said. And never budged from that. Sir Blowhard Wind, you can lock him up, if you can catch him. Just wait for this evening. Loitschek's'll really be humming." He threw out his arms and danced a few steps of a polka. "The springtime of lo-ove will soon fade away", he sang.

With a smack he slapped a hard hat sporting a blue-spotted jay's feather onto his head. "Oh, yes, you'll be interested to hear this, Count. D'you know the latest? Your friend, that Loisa's escaped!

I heard it when I was up there with the bunglers. Towards the end of last month it was. By now he'll be over the hills and—poof!" he snapped his fingers, "far away."

'Aha! The file', I thought, with a smile.

"And now, Count", said the arsonist, giving my hand the friendly shake of a fellow criminal, "see that you get out as soon as possible. And if you're ever short of ready cash, just ask for Black Vossatka at Loitschek's, all the girls there know me. That's it then. Goodbye, Count.

Pleased to have met you."

He paused in the doorway, but the gaoler was already shoving a new inmate into the cell. As soon as I saw him, I recognised the lout in the soldier's cap who had once stood next to me in the rain under an archway in Hahnpassgasse. What a pleasant surprise! Perhaps he might have some news of Hillel, Zwakh and all the others?

I wanted to start asking him questions right away, but to my astonishment he put a finger to his lips with a conspiratorial look on his face, indicating that I should say nothing. Only when the door had been locked from outside and the warder's steps died away down the corridor did he come to life.

My heart was thumping with excitement. What could it mean? Did he know who I was? What did he want?

The first thing the lout did was to sit down and take off his left boot. Then he gripped a plug in the heel with his teeth and pulled it out. From the cavity he took a small, bent piece of sheet-iron and ripped off the sole, which was obviously only loosely attached, and then proudly handed both to me.

All this he did in less than no time and without paying the least attention to my excited questions.

"There! Greetings from Herr Charousek."

I was so taken aback that I could think of nothing to say.

"All you do is take the iron and prise open the sole during the night. Or any time when no one's looking. 'Ollow inside, you see", the lout went on with a superior look on his face. "You'll find a letter from Herr Charousek in there."

I was so overcome with delight that I threw my arms round his neck, the tears streaming down my cheeks. He gently pushed me away and said reproachfully, "You've got to pull yourself together, Herr von Pernath. We 'aven't got no time to lose. Any moment they might find out I'm in the wrong cell. Franzl and me swopped numbers down in the gatehouse."

I must have looked completely nonplussed, for he went on, "It don't matter if you don't understand. The important thing is, I'm here."

"But tell me, Herr . . .?"

"Wenzel, they call me, Pretty Boy Wenzel."

"Well tell me, Wenzel, how is Hillel, the archivist at the Jewish Town Hall, and his daughter?"

"No time for all that now", the self-styled Pretty Boy interrupted impatiently. "I might be chucked out any moment now. The reason I'm 'ere is I confessed special to robbery with violence——"

"What! You committed robbery with violence just to get in here to help me, Wenzel!?" I asked, aghast.

The lout shook his head contemptuously. "If I really 'ad done a robbery, I wouldn't be confessing to it, would I. What do you take me for!?"

The penny slowly dropped. The fellow had worked a trick to smuggle Charousek's letter in to me.

"Right then. First of all", he took on an air of supreme importance, "I've to learn you about epplepsy."

"About what?"

"Epplepsy. Just watch me and see 'ow it's done. First you fill your gob with spittle", he blew out his cheeks and moved them from side to side, like someone rinsing his mouth out, "then you foam at the mouth, like so." This he proceeded to do, with the most revolting realism. "Then you grab your thumbs, go all cross-eyed", he squinted horribly, "and then, this's the 'ard bit, you 'ave to give little grunts, like this, 'Berr, berr, berr', and fall over at the same time." He collapsed onto the floor, making the walls tremble. When he got up, he said, "That's your natural epplepsy, just like what Dr. 'Ulbert taught us in the Regiment."

"Yes, yes, very convincing", I agreed. "But what's the point of it all?"

"Because first of all you 'ave to get out of this place!" Wenzel explained. "That Dr. Rosenblatt's an obstinate old bastard. Your 'ead could drop off and 'e'd still pass you fit as a fiddle. There's only one thing puts the fear of God into him, epplepsy. If you can throw a good fit, you'll be in the prison 'ospital in no time at all, and it's child's play to break out of there." His voice took on a confidential tone. "The bars on the window over there 'ave been sawn through, you see, and just stuck together with a bit of mud. That's one of the Regiment's little secrets! You just need to keep a sharp look-out for a few nights till you see a noose on the end of a rope let down from the roof.

Then you take out the bars, all quiet like so you don't disturb no one, put your arms through the noose and we'll pull you up onto the roof and down to the street on the other side, and that's it."

"But why should I break out of prison?" I objected timidly, "I'm innocent."

"But that ain't no reason not to escape!" Pretty Boy Wenzel objected, his eyes wide with astonishment.

It took all my persuasion to talk him out of this harebrained scheme which, he assured me, was the result of a 'Regimental council'. He just couldn't believe I had rejected such a God-given opportunity and preferred to wait until I was released.

"Nevertheless, I would like to thank you and your comrades from the bottom of my heart", I said, shaking him warmly by the hand. "When my trials are over, the first thing I'll do will be to give you all a token of my gratitude."

"No need for that", said Wenzel amiably. "We wouldn't say no to a couple of glasses of Pilsener, but that's all. Pan Charousek, him what's treasurer of the Regiment now, 'as told us all about the good you do on the quiet. Any message for 'im when I get out in a few days time?"

"Yes, please", I said quickly. "Ask him to go and see Hillel and tell him I've been very concerned about the health of his daughter Miriam. Herr Hillel should not let her out of his sight. You'll remember the name, won't you: Hillel."

"Hirrel?" "No: Hillel." "Hiller?" "No: Hill-el."

Wenzel found it almost impossible to get his tongue round such a completely un-Czech-sounding name, but finally managed it, grimacing madly.

"Just one more thing. Please ask Herr Charousek if he would be kind enough, as far as it is in his power, to help a certain lady; he'll know whom I mean."

"You probably mean that aristocratic tart what was 'aving a bit on the side with that Nyemetz, that German, what's 'e called, Dr. Sapioli? No need to worry about 'er, she's got 'er divorce and 'as cleared off with 'er kid and Sapioli."

"Do you know that for certain?" I could feel the quiver in my voice. However glad I was for Angelina's sake, it still pierced me like a knife to the heart. All the anxiety I had suffered for her and now I was forgotten. Perhaps she thought I really was a murderer. There was a bitter taste at the back of my throat.

The lout, with a delicacy which, strangely enough, even the most degraded wretches show in matters of love, seemed to have guessed how I felt, for he looked away and did not answer.

"Do you perhaps know how Herr Hillel's daughter, Fraulein Miriam, is? Do you know her?" I asked, hardly able to get the words out.

"Miriam? Miriam?" Wenzel screwed up his face in a reflective frown. "Miriam? Does she often go down to Loitschek's of an evening?"

I couldn't help but smile. "No. Certainly not."

"Then I won't know her", replied Wenzel laconically.

We said nothing for a while.

There might, of course, be something about her in Charousek's note.

"I suppose you've 'card", he suddenly went on, "that old Wassertrum's kicked the bucket?"

I started in horror.

"Yes", Wenzel pointed to his throat. "Someone done 'im in. 'Orrible it was, I can tell you. When they broke into 'is shop because 'e 'adn't been seen for a few days, I was the first in, wasn't I. And there 'e was, old Wassertrum, sitting in a filthy armchair, blood all down his chest and the eyes popping out of 'is 'ead. You know, I'm a pretty tough customer, but it made my 'ead spin, I can tell you, I thought I was going to keel over myself. I 'ad to keep telling myself, 'Wenzel', I said,

'no need to get worked up, it's only a dead Jew.' There was a file sticking into 'is gullet and the shop was a right mess. 'E must 'ave come across the burglar, who done 'im in."

The file! The file! I could feel my breath go cold with horror. The file! So it had found its target after all!

"And I know who it was, too", Wenzel went on after a pause. "It was that pock-marked Loisa, I tell you, that's who it was. I found 'is pocket-knife on the ground in the shop and I slipped it into my pocket so the police wouldn't find it. 'E got into the shop by an underground passage—" He suddenly broke off and listened for a few seconds, then threw himself onto a bunk and began to snore for all he was worth. Immediately there was the clank of the padlock being removed and the gaoler came in and gave me a suspicious stare. I looked completely blank. Wenzel was almost impossible to wake. It took several blows before he sat up, yawned and staggered out sleepily, followed by the gaoler.

Feverish with suspense, I unfolded Charousek's letter:

12th May

My dear friend and benefactor,

Week after week I have waited for you to be released, but always in vain. I have tried everything I can think of to collect evidence to prove your innocence, but I could not find any. I begged the examining magistrate to expedite the proceedings, but every time the reply was that there was nothing he could do, that was the responsibility of the prosecution service and not his.

Bureaucrats passing the buck!

But just now, only an hour ago, I came across something which looks very promising: I learnt that Jaromir sold Wassertrum a gold watch which he found in his brother's bed after he was arrested. Now there is a rumour going round at Loisitchek's, where, as you know, the detectives do their drinking, that poor Zottmann's watch—they still haven't found the body, by the way—

was found in your rooms. I worked out the rest myself: Wassertrum and all his works!

I immediately found Jaromir and gave him a thousand crowns—

The letter sank to the bed, and my eyes were filled with tears of joy. Only Angelina could have given Charousek such a sum; neither Zwakh, nor Prokop, nor Vrieslander had that much money.

She hadn't forgotten me after all! I read on:

—a thousand crowns and promised him a further two thousand if he would agree to go to the police with me right away, and admit to having stolen the watch from his brother and sold it.

But we can only do that after I've sent off this letter to you. Time is short, but you can rest assured that it will be done. And today, I give you my word on that.

I have no doubt at all that Loisa committed the murder and that the watch is Zottmann's. If, by any chance, it should not be, Jaromir knows what he has to do. Whatever the case, he will identify it as the one found in your rooms.

So bear up and do not despair. The day of your release may be quite close now.

And will the day come when we will meet again? I do not know. I am inclined to say not, for I have not long to go now and I must be on my guard so that my last hour does not catch me by surprise. But there is one belief you must hold firm: we will see each other again. If not in this life, nor in another life after death, then on the day when Time is shattered, the day when, as it says in the Bible, the Lord will spew those that are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, out of His mouth.

Do not be surprised to hear me talk like this. I have never spoken to you

about such matters, and the one time you mentioned the word 'Cabbala', I evaded the issue, but I know what I know.

Perhaps you understand what I am talking about, but if not, then I beg you, please erase what I have just said from your mind. Once, in a delirium, I thought I saw a sign on your breast.

Perhaps I was dreaming with my eyes open?

If you really cannot understand all this, then just assume that there is a certain inner knowledge, which I have had almost from my earliest childhood and which has led me on my strange path.

This inner knowledge does not coincide with what medical science teaches; it is knowledge which, thank God, is closed to medicine and, I hope, will always remain so. I have not let myself be stultified by science, whose highest goal is to furnish a 'waiting room', which it would be best to tear down.

But enough of that. I must tell you what has been happening while you have been in prison.

By the end of April Wassertrum had reached the point where my suggestion was beginning to have its effect. I could tell by the way he kept on talking to himself in the street and waving his arms about. That kind of thing is a sign that a person's thoughts are gathering for the attack and will soon fall upon their master.

Then he bought a little book and started making notes.

He was writing! Writing! The very idea! Wassertrum writing!

And then he went to a lawyer. Waiting outside in the street I knew what he was doing up in the lawyer's chambers: he was making his will. However, the one thing I didn't foresee was that he would make me his heir. The joy would probably have given me St. Vitus' dance, if I had suspected it.

He made me his heir because he imagined I was the only person on earth to whom he could make amends. It was his conscience that tricked him. Perhaps it was also the hope that when, after his death, I suddenly found myself a millionaire by his favour, I would bless him, thus cancelling out the curse he heard me pronounce in your rooms.

Thus my use of suggestion had a triple effect.

The joke is that he secretly did believe in atonement in the world beyond after all, while he had spent most of his life trying to convince himself there was nothing in it. But that's the way it is

with all these people who are too clever for their own good, you can recognise it by the insane fury they get into when you tell them the facts to

their face. They feel they've been caught out.

From the moment Wassertrum went to see his lawyer, I never let him out of my sight. At night I kept my ear pressed to the boards across the entrance to his shop, any moment could be the decisive one. I think I would have heard the pop of the cork coming out of the bottle of ; poison through any wall, however thick. There was perhaps only one more hour to go to the completion of my life's work, when an outsider intervened and murdered him. With a file.

Wenzel will give you the details, it is too bitter for me even to write it down. Call it superstition if you will, but when I saw that blood had been shed—it was all over the things in the shop—I felt as if his soul had escaped me. There is something inside me, some acute, infallible instinct, which tells me that it is not all the same if a man dies by his own hand or another's. My mission would only have been completed if Wassertrum had had to take his blood with him into the earth. Now that it has all turned out differently, I feel rejected, an instrument that was not found worthy of the hand of the Angel of Death.

But I will not rail against fate. My hatred is a hatred that goes beyond the grave, and I still have my own blood, that I can shed in whatever way I like, so that it will pursue his wherever it may go in the realm of shades.

Every day since they buried his bones I have been sitting beside his grave, listening for a voice within my breast that will tell me what to do. I think I already know, but I intend to wait a while until the inner word becomes as clear as a bubbling spring. We humans are an impure race, and often it takes weeks of fasting and waking until we can understand the whisperings of our soul.

Last week I was officially informed by the court that Wassertrum had made me his sole heir. I presume I do not need to assure you, Herr Pernath, that I will not touch one copper of it. I will take care not to give 'him' a hold on me 'on the other side'. The houses he owned will be auctioned, the objects he touched will be burnt, and after my death one third of the money realised will go to you. In my mind's eye I can already see you jumping up and protesting, but I can reassure you. Everything you will receive is yours by right, with interest. I have known for a long time that years ago Wassertrum cheated your father and his family out of everything they owned; it is only now that I have the documents to prove it.

Another third will be distributed among the twelve members of the Regiment who knew Dr.

Hulbert personally. I want each one to be rich enough to be able to enter 'good' society in Prague.

The final third will be distributed equally among the next seven to commit a murder in the course of robbery, but who are released because there is insufficient evidence against them. I owe that to public morality.

I think that is everything. Farewell my dear, dear friend; I hope you will sometimes think of me.

With sincere gratitude,

Innocence Charousek.

Deeply moved, I put the letter down. I could feel no joy at the prospect of imminent release.

Charousek! Poor fellow! Looking after me like a brother simply because I once gave him a hundred crowns. If only I could at least shake him by the hand! But I sensed that he was right; that day would never come. I could see him standing before me, his restless eyes, consumptive's shoulders and high, noble forehead. Perhaps this blighted existence would have turned out differently if a helping hand had been held out to him early enough.

I read through his letter once more.

How much method there was in Charousek's madness!

Was he mad at all? I was ashamed that I had entertained that idea, even for a moment. Did not the hints he dropped tell me enough? He was a person like Hillel, like Miriam, ! like myself, a person over whom his own soul had taken control, guiding him upwards through the wild gorges and gulfs of this life to the snow-capped peaks of an untrodden land beyond. Was not he, who had spent his whole life plotting murder, much purer than any of those who look down their noses at the rest of humanity as they pretend to follow the skin-deep commandments of some unknown, mythical prophet?

He kept the commandment dictated to him by an all-powerful urge, without thought of a 'reward', either here or in the world beyond. Was this nothing other than the most religious devotion to duty in the most profound, most arcane sense of the word?

'Cowardly, cunning, bloodthirsty, sick, disturbed: a criminal personality', I could hear what the judgment of the multitude would be, if they were to come and light their way through the passages of his soul with their dim stable lamps, that envious multitude that will never comprehend that the poisonous autumn crocus is a thousand times more beautiful and noble than the useful chive.

Again the bolts were drawn back outside, and I heard someone being pushed into the cell, but I didn't even turn round, so completely were my thoughts absorbed by the contents of the letter.

Not a word about Angelina, nothing about Hillel.

Of course, Charousek must have written it in great haste, I could tell by the writing. Would he send me another secret letter? My hopes were fixed on the morrow and the exercise with the other prisoners in the yard. That was when it would be easiest for one of the Regiment to pass something to me.

I was startled out of my reflections by a quiet voice. "Would you permit me to introduce myself, sir? My name is Laponder, Amadeus Laponder."

I turned round. A short, slightly built and still fairly young man in elegant clothes, only without a hat like all remand prisoners, was giving me a polite bow.

He was as closely shaved as an actor, and there was something strange about his large, shining, light-green, almond-shaped eyes: however directly they were looking at me, they did not seem to register me; there was something absent-minded about them.

I muttered my name and returned his bow, intending to turn away again immediately, but for a long time I could not take my eyes off him, so alien he seemed with the permanent mandarin-like smile which the upturned corners of his curved mouth seemed to give his face. With his smooth, transparent skin, his narrow, girlish nose and delicate nostrils, he looked almost like a Chinese statue of the Buddha sculpted in rose quartz. 'Amadeus Laponder, Amadeus Laponder', I kept repeating to myself. 'What crime can he have committed?'

MOON

"Have you already been interrogated?" I asked after a while.

"That's where I've just come from. I hope I won't have to impose on you for too long", Laponder replied politely.

'The poor devil', I thought to myself, 'he's no idea how they treat remand prisoners here.' I decided to prepare him for it gradually.

"You eventually get used to sitting doing nothing, once the first days are past; they're the worst."

An expression of gratitude appeared on his face.

Another pause.

"Did the interrogation last long, Herr Laponder?"

"No. They simply asked me if I confessed and then I had to sign my statement."

"You signed a confession!" I exclaimed.

"Naturally."

He said it as if it were a matter of course.

It can't be a serious crime, I decided, he doesn't show any sign of nerves at all. Probably challenging someone to a duel, or something of the kind.

"Unfortunately I've been in here so long it seems like a whole lifetime", I gave an involuntary sigh and his face immediately took on a sympathetic expression. "I sincerely hope you won't have to go through that, Herr Laponder. By all appearances, you'll soon be out of here."

"Depends how you look at it", he said calmly, but it sounded as if there was a double meaning hidden in his words.

"You don't believe you will?" I asked with a smile. He shook his head.

"What do you mean? What awful crime have you committed? Please excuse the question, Herr Laponder, but I am genuinely interested, I'm not asking simply out of curiosity."

He hesitated for a moment, then he said, without batting an eyelid, "Murder with rape."

I felt as if he had hit me over the head with a club. I could not utter a word for horror and disgust.

He seemed to notice and discreetly looked to one side, but there was not the slightest slackening of his automaton smile to suggest he had been hurt by my sudden change in behaviour.

Our conversation ended there, and we silently avoided each other's gaze.

When it became dark and I went to bed, he immediately followed my example, undressed, carefully hung his clothes on the nail in the wall, lay down and appeared, from his deep, regular breathing, to have fallen fast asleep straight away.

I, on the other hand, could not get to sleep all night. The idea that I was sharing a tiny cell with such a monster, even breathing the same air as he, was so horribly disturbing that it drove all the other events of the day, even Charousek's letter, completely from my mind. I had lain down in such a position that I had the murderer constantly in view; I could not have borne having him behind me. The cell was dimly lit by a shimmer of moonlight, and I could see Laponder lying there motionless, almost rigid. There was something corpse-like about his features, and his half-open mouth only intensified the impression.

For many hours he lay there, not changing his position once; not, that is, until a long time after midnight when a moonbeam fell on his face and he became slightly restless, moving his lips silently, like someone talking in his sleep. It seemed to be always the same words, perhaps a sentence of two syllables, something like, "Let me. Let me. Let me."

For the next few days I took no notice of him, nor did he break the silence at all. His manner remained as friendly as ever. He seemed to be able to tell if I wanted to walk up and down, and would immediately draw back his feet, if he was sitting on his bunk, so as not to be in my way. I began to reproach myself for my brusqueness, but with the best will in the world, I could not overcome my repugnance for him. However much I hoped I might become accustomed to his presence, it did not happen. It even kept me awake at night. I scarcely managed to get more than a quarter of an hour's sleep at a time.

Every evening the same ritual would be repeated, down to the very last detail: he would wait respectfully until I was lying down, then he would undress, fold his clothes meticulously, hang them up, and so on, and so on.

One night, it must have been around two, I was standing on the shelf again, drowsy from lack of sleep, staring at the full moon, whose beams were reflected like a film of glittering oil on the copper dial of the clock, full of melancholy thoughts of Miriam.

Suddenly I heard the soft sound of her voice behind me.

At once I was awake, wide-awake. I turned round and listened. I could not understand the words exactly, but it sounded like, "Ask me. Ask me."

It was definitely Miriam's voice.

Trembling with excitement, I climbed down, as quietly as I could, and went over to Laponder's bed. The moonlight was shining full on his face, and I could see clearly that his lids were open, but only the whites of his eyes were visible. From the rigidity of his cheek muscles I could tell he was in a deep sleep.

Only his lips were moving, as they had a few days ago, and gradually the words coming through his clenched teeth became distinctly audible, "Ask me. Ask me."

The voice sounded just like Miriam's.

"Miriam? Miriam?" I cried out involuntarily, immediately lowering my voice so as not to wake the sleeping Laponder. I waited until his face had returned to its former rigid state, then repeated softly, "Miriam? Miriam?"

His lips formed one word, scarcely audible but yet distinct, "Yes."

I put my ear close to his mouth. After a while I could hear Miriam's voice whispering to me; so unmistakable was the voice, that an icy shiver rippled over my skin. I drank in her words so greedily that I only took in the gist. She spoke of her love for me, of her unutterable happiness that we had finally found one another, would never part. She spoke without pausing for breath, like someone who is afraid of being interrupted and wants to make use of every second.

Then the voice faltered, went completely silent for a while.

"Miriam?" I asked, holding my breath and trembling with fear, "Miriam, are you dead?"

For a long time there was no answer, then, almost inaudibly, "No—I am alive—I am sleeping."

That was all. I listened and listened. In vain. There was nothing more.

Trembling with the nervous strain, I had to support myself on the edge of the bunk so as not to collapse on top of Laponder. The illusion was so complete, that for a brief moment I thought it was Miriam lying before me and it took all my power of self-control not to place a kiss on the murderer's lips.

"Enoch! Enoch!" I suddenly heard him say, at first almost incoherently, then in clearer and more articulated tones, "Enoch! Enoch!"

Immediately I recognised Hillel's voice. "Is that you, Hillel?" No answer.

I remembered having read somewhere that to get sleepers to talk one should not direct the questions at their ears, but at the network of nerves in the solar plexus This I did. "Hillel?"

"Yes. I hear you."

"Is Miriam well? You know everything?" I asked quickly.

"Yes. I know everything. Have known for a long time. Do not worry, Enoch, and do not fear."

"Can you forgive me, Hillel?"

"I told you, do not worry."

"Will we see each other soon?" I was afraid I would not be able to understand the answer; even the previous one had been little more than a faint breath.

"I hope so. I will wait . . . for you . . . if I can . . . then I must. . . land . . ."

"Where? To which land?" I almost grabbed Laponder. "To which land? To which land?"

"Land . . . of Gad . . . southern . . . Palestine . . ."

The voice faded away.

In my confusion a hundred questions shot through my head. Why did he call me Enoch? What about Zwakh? Jaromir? The watch? Vrieslander? Angelina? Charousek?

"Farewell, I hope you will sometimes think of me" came, suddenly loud and clear, from the lips of the murderer. This time the words were in Charousek's tone, but as if I had spoken them myself.

Then I remembered: they were the very words with which he had ended his letter.

Laponder's face was in darkness now, the moonlight falling on the end of his mattress. In a quarter of an hour it would have disappeared from the cell.

I put question after question, but received no more answers. Laponder lay there, motionless as a corpse, his lids closed. I reproached myself that all this time I had only seen Laponder as a murderer, not as a man. From what I had just heard, he was obviously a somnambulist, someone who was susceptible to the influence of the full moon. Perhaps he had committed the rape and murder in a kind of trance.

It was certain even.

Now, as morning began to break, the rigidity in his features gave way to a beatific smile. A man who has a murder on his conscience cannot sleep as peacefully as that, I told myself. I could hardly wait for the moment when he would wake up.

Would he know what had happened?

Finally he opened his eyes, met my gaze and looked aside. I immediately went over to him and took his hand. "You must excuse me, Herr Laponder, for my unfriendly behaviour, but I'm not accustomed—"

"Oh please, my dear sir, you may rest assured that I understand completely", he interrupted. "It must be an awful feeling to have to be shut up with a murderer and rapist."

"Say no more about it", I begged him. "Last night I turned the whole matter over in my mind, and I can't help thinking that perhaps you . . ."

He spoke the thought that was in my mind, "You think I am ill."

I agreed. "There were certain signs that led me to that conclusion. I . . . I . . . may I ask you a rather direct question, Herr Laponder?"

"Please do."

"It may sound rather strange, but . . . would you tell me what dreams you had last night?"

With a smile he shook his head. "I never dream."

"But you were talking in your sleep."

He looked up in surprise, thought for a while and then said firmly, "That could only be if you had asked me a question." I admitted I had. He paused, then repeated, "As I said, I never dream", adding, almost under his breath, "I . . . I roam."

"You roam? What exactly does that mean?"

He seemed somewhat unwilling to speak, so I decided it would be best to tell him what had led me to question him, and I gave him a summary of what had happened during the night.

When I had finished, he said solemnly, "The one thing you can be sure of is that everything I said in my sleep is based on truth. When I said just now that I did not dream, but 'roamed', I meant that my dream-life was different from that of, shall we say, normal people. If you like, you can call it leaving the body behind. Last night, for example. I was in the strangest room which you entered from below, through a trapdoor."

"What did it look like?" I interpolated quickly. "Was there no one there? Was it empty?"

"No, there was furniture in it, though not much. And a bed in which a young girl was asleep—or in some state of suspended animation—and a man was sitting beside her with his hand over her forehead." Laponder described their faces. There was no doubt about it, it was Hillel and Miriam.

I could hardly breathe with suspense.

"Please go on. Was there anyone else in the room?"

"Anyone else? Just a moment . . . no, there was no one else in the room. There was a seven-branched candelabra on the table . . . Then I went down a spiral staircase."

"It was broken?" I broke in.

"Broken? No, no, it was in good repair. There was a room leading off on one side, and in it there was a man sitting with silver buckles on his shoes. He looked very foreign, a type that I have never seen before, with a yellow complexion and slanting eyes. He was leaning forward and seemed to be waiting for something. For instructions, perhaps."

"A book, a big, old book? You didn't see anything like that anywhere?" I

asked.

He rubbed his forehead. "A book, you say? Yes, that's right. There was a book on the floor. It was made of parchment. It was open and the page began with a large letter 'A' painted in gold."

"Don't you mean with an T?"

"No, with an 'A'."

"Are you sure of that? Wasn't it an T?"

"No, it was definitely an 'A'."

I shook my head and began to have my doubts. It was clear that in his trance Laponder had read what was in my mind, but had confused everything: Hillel, Miriam, the Golem, the Book of Ibbur and the subterranean passage.

"Have you had this gift of being able to 'roam', as you call it, for long?" I asked.

"Since I was twenty-one—" he broke off and seemed unwilling to talk about it. Then an expression of utter astonishment spread across his face and he stared at my chest as if he could see something there. Ignoring my puzzlement, he hastily grasped my hand and begged me, almost pleading, "For heaven's sake, tell me everything. Today is the last day I can spend with you. They'll be coming to fetch me soon, within the hour perhaps, to hear the death sentence read—"

Appalled, I interrupted him. "Then you must take me with you as a witness! I will testify that you are ill. You are a somnambulist, a sleep-walker. They mustn't be allowed to execute you without a psychiatrist's report. You must see that?!"

In some agitation he waved away my objections. "That's all so irrelevant. Please, tell me everything."

"But what is there to tell you? Let's talk about you instead and—"

"I realise now that you must have had certain strange experiences that concern me closely, more closely than you can ever imagine; please, I beg you, tell me everything!" he pleaded.

I could not understand why my life should interest him more than his own affairs which, at the moment were, in all truth, urgent enough, but to calm him down I told him all the incomprehensible things that had happened to me. After each incident, he nodded with a satisfied air, like a person who has seen to the bottom of some matter.

When I came to the part where the headless apparition had stood, holding

out the red beans with black spots towards me, he could hardly wait for me to finish.

"So you knocked them out of his hand", he muttered reflectively. "I never thought there could be a third 'path'."

"That wasn't a third path", I said. "It was the same as if I had rejected the seeds."

He smiled.

"You don't think so, Herr Laponder?"

"If you had rejected them, you would presumably also have followed the 'Path of Life', but the seeds, which represent magic powers, would not have remained behind. As it is, they rolled onto the ground, you said. That means that they have remained here and will be guarded by your ancestors until the time of germination comes. Then the powers, which at the moment slumber within them, will come to life."

I didn't follow. "The seeds will be guarded by my ancestors?"

"To a certain extent you have to understand your experiences symbolically", explained Laponder. "The circle of blue luminous beings around you was the chain of inherited 'selves' which all those born of woman carry with them. The soul is not a single unity; that is what it is destined to become, and that is what we call 'immortality'. Your soul is still composed of many

'selves', just as a colony of ants is composed of many single ants. You bear within you the spiritual remains of many thousand ancestors, the heads of your line. It is the same with all creatures. How could a chicken that is artificially hatched in an incubator immediately look for the right food, if the experience of millions of years were not stored inside it? The existence of 'instinct' indicates the presence of our ancestors in our bodies and in our souls. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you."

I finished my account. I told him everything, even the things Miriam had said about the

'hermaphrodite'. When I stopped and looked up, I noticed that Laponder had turned as white as a sheet and that the tears were running down his face. Quickly I stood up and pretended I hadn't noticed, walking up and down in the cell until he was calm again. Then I sat down opposite him and summoned up all my persuasive powers to try and convince him how important it was to inform his judges of his psychological condition.

"If only you hadn't confessed to the murder!" were my final words.

"But I had to! They asked me on my honour", he said naively.

Somewhat puzzled, I asked, "Do you think a lie is worse than . . . than rape and murder?"

"As a general principle probably not, but in my case yes, definitely. You see, when the examining magistrate asked me if I admitted the crime, I had the strength to tell the truth. That is, it was in my power to lie or not to lie. When I committed the rape and the murder I had no choice. Even though I was fully aware of what I was doing, I still had no choice. There was something inside me, the presence of which I had until then never suspected, that woke up and was stronger than I. Do you imagine I would have murdered someone if I had had the choice? I have never killed anything, not even the smallest animal; now I would be absolutely incapable of doing so.

Just assume for the moment it was the law that you had to murder people, and not to do so would incur the death penalty, as is the case in wartime; at this very moment I would deserve to be condemned to death. I just could not commit a murder. When I committed my crime, it was the other way round."

"But all the more, now that you feel you are a different person, you should do everything in your power to avoid the sentence", I objected, but Laponder waved my argument away. "That is where you are wrong! From their point of view the judges' decision was quite correct. Should they let someone like me to go around free? To commit another crime tomorrow or the day after?"

"No. But they should intern you in a hospital for the mentally ill, that's what I am saying!"

"If I were mad, then you would be right", replied Laponder, unconcerned. "But I'm not mad. I am something quite different, something that might look very much like madness, but is, in fact, the opposite. Listen to me, please, and you will understand at once. You remember you told me about the apparition of the headless phantom—which is, of course, a symbol, you can easily find the key if you think about it. Well, it appeared to me as well. Only I took the seeds! That means I am following the 'Path of Death'. For me, the most sacred thing imaginable is to allow my steps to be guided by the spirit within me, blindly, wholly trusting in it wherever the path may lead, to poverty or riches, to the gallows or a throne. I have never hesitated when the choice was mine.

That is why I did not lie, when the choice was mine.

Do you know the words of the Prophet Micah, 'He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what the Lord doth require of thee'?

If I had lied, I would have created an ultimate cause, because I had the choice. When I committed the murder, I did not create a cause. It was merely

the effect of a cause that had long been slumbering within me, and over which I had no control, that was released.

That is why my hands are clean.

By making me into a murderer, the spirit within me has carried out an execution on me; by stringing me up on the gallows, men will detach my fate from theirs: I will reach freedom."

This man is a saint, I thought to myself, and my hair stood on end as I shuddered at my own insignificance.

"You told me that a doctor used hypnotism to treat you, with the result that for a long time you lost the memory of your childhood and youth", he continued. "That is the characteristic—the stigma—of all those who have been 'bitten by the snake of the spiritual realm'. It seems almost as if, inside us, one life has to be grafted onto another, as a scion is grafted onto a wild tree, before the miracle of awakening can occur. The separation that usually comes with death is in our case achieved by erasing the memory, sometimes just by a sudden spiritual about-turn.

In my case, there was no obvious external cause. I just woke up one morning in my twenty-first year a different person. All at once I was completely indifferent to everything that I had cared for until then. Life seemed nothing more than a silly story of cowboys and indians and lost its reality; dreams became absolute certainty—and I mean true and demonstrable certainty—and everyday life became a dream.

Everyone could do that if they had the key. And that key lies solely in becoming aware, while asleep, of the 'form' of one's 'self—of one's skin, so to speak—and finding the narrow slit through which our consciousness slips between wakefulness and deep sleep. That is why I said 'I roam', and not 'I dream'.

The struggle for immortality is a battle for the sceptre against the ghosts and sounds within us, and waiting for our own self to be crowned king is waiting for the Messiah.

The spectral Habal Gamin which you saw, the 'Breath of the Bones' of the Cabbala, that was the king. At the moment when he is crowned, the thread, by which you are bound to the world through your physical senses and your reason, will tear apart.

You will ask how it could happen that I, in spite of my detachment from the world, could turn into a rapist and murderer over night? Human beings are like glass tubes with coloured balls running along them. In most cases there is only one ball during a whole lifetime: if the ball is red, then the person is 'bad';

if it is yellow, the person is 'good'. If there are two, one red and one yellow, then 'one' has an 'unstable character'. We who have been 'bitten by the snake' go through as much in one lifetime as the whole of mankind goes through in an epoch. The red and yellow balls shoot along the glass tube one after the other, and when they are finished, then we will have become prophets, will be the mirrors of God."

Laponder was silent. For a long time I found it impossible to say a word. I was dazed from what he had told me.

"Why were you so concerned to ask me about my experiences, when you are so far above me?" I asked eventually.

"You are wrong", said Laponder. "I am far below you. I asked you because I felt you were in possession of the one key I still lacked."

"Me? In possession of a key? Good God!"

"Yes, you. And you gave it to me. I don't think there can be a happier man on earth than I am today."

Outside there was the noise of the bars being pulled back; Laponder paid no attention to it.

"What you said about the hermaphrodite, that was the key. Now I possess certainty. That is why I am glad that they are coming for me, for soon I will reach my goal."

I could not see Laponder's face for tears, but I could hear the smile in his voice. "And now, farewell, Herr Pernath, and remember: what they will hang tomorrow is only my outer garments.

It is you who have revealed to me the ultimate beauty; now the mystical marriage can take place." He stood up and followed the gaoler. "It is connected with the rape and murder", were the last words I heard, though I could only dimly understand them.

Every night after that when the full moon was in the sky, I kept imagining I could see Laponder's sleeping face on the grey linen of the bed. In the days after he had been taken away I had heard the sound of thunderous hammering and sawing from the execution yard, sometimes continuing through the night until the dawn. I knew what it meant and sat for hours with my hands over my ears in despair.

Month after month passed. I could see how the summer was trickling away in the sickly appearance of the sparse foliage in the exercise yard; I could smell it in the mouldy air from the walls. Every time I noticed the dying tree with the glass picture of the Virgin in its bark, I automatically saw it as an image of the way Laponder's face had lodged within me. It was always with

me, his Buddha's face with its smooth skin and strange, constant smile.

Only once, in September, had the examining magistrate sent for me and asked me suspiciously what reason I could give for saying at the bank that I had to leave the town on urgent business, and why in the hours before my arrest I had been in such an uneasy mood, and why I had all my precious stones on me?

When I replied that I had had the intention of committing suicide, there again came the scornful cackle from behind the other desk.

Until then I had been alone in the cell and could immerse myself in my thoughts, in my grief for Charousek, whom I felt must be dead by now, and Laponder, and in my yearning for Miriam.

Then new prisoners came: thieving, dissipated-looking office workers, pot-bellied bank clerks,

'orphans' as Black Vossatka would have called them, ruining the air and my mood. One day one of them told us full of indignation about a sex murder that had taken place in the city some time ago. Fortunately, he went on, they had caught the murderer straight away and soon made short work of him.

"Laponder was 'is name, the evil-minded bastard!" shouted out another, a ruffian with predatory features who had been given the heavy sentence of fourteen days in prison for child abuse. "They caught 'im in the act, they did. A lamp fell over while they was fighting and the room burnt down. The girl's corpse was so charred they still haven't been able to find out who she was. She had black hair and a narrow face, and that's all what's known. And that Laponder refused point blank to come out with 'er name. If I'd 've 'ad my way, I'd Ve skinned 'im alive and sprayed pepper all over 'im, but then that's your upper classes for you, innit? Murderers the 'ole lot of 'em.

As if there wasn't plenty of other ways, if you want to get rid of a tart", he added with a cynical grin.

I was seething with rage; for two pins I'd have knocked the fellow to the ground. Every night he snored in the bed where Laponder had lain. I breathed a sigh of relief when he was finally released.

But even then I wasn't free of him. What he had said stuck in me, like a barbed arrow.

Constantly, especially during the dark, the awful suspicion gnawed at me that Laponder's victim might have been Miriam. The more I fought against the notion, the tighter it wrapped its tendrils round me, until it threatened to become an obsession.

Sometimes though, especially when the moon shone brightly through the

bars, things were better. I could relive the hours I had spent with Laponder, and the feeling he aroused in me dispelled the torment. But all too often those terrible moments would return in which I would see Miriam's charred corpse, and feel that I was about to go mad with anxiety. At such moments the vague suspicions on which my fear was based would harden into the firm conviction revealed in a vivid picture full of indescribably horrific detail.

One November evening towards ten o'clock—it was already pitch-dark and my despair had reached such a point of intensity that, like an animal dying of thirst, I had to bite my straw mattress to stop myself from crying out loud—the gaoler suddenly opened the door and ordered me to follow him to the examining magistrate. I felt so weak that I staggered rather than walked.

Any hope I had of ever leaving this awful place had long since died within me.

I prepared myself for the usual icy question followed by the usual cackling from behind the desk, before I was sent back into the darkness. Baron Leisetreter had already gone home and there was no one in the room but an old, hunchbacked, spider-fingered clerk. I just stood there, dully waiting to see what would come next. Then I noticed that the gaoler had stayed in the room and was giving me encouraging winks, but I was much too downhearted to ask myself what they might mean.

"The investigation into the case of Karl Zottmann has led to the conclusion —", the clerk began, cackled, clambered onto a chair and rummaged around in the papers on the shelf before he found the one he wanted, then continued, "—the conclusion that prior to his death the aforementioned Zottmann, in the course of a secret assignation with the former prostitute Rosina Metzels, spinster, generally known at the time as Rosie the Redhead, later procured for an undisclosed sum from Kautsky's Wine Bar by the deaf-mute, Jaromir Kwassnitschka, silhouette artist, now detained at His Imperial Majesty's pleasure, and since April of this year living in a common-law marriage—Rosie the Redhead, that is—with His Highness Prince Ferri Athenstadt, was enticed—the aforementioned Zottmann, that is—into a disused cellar of the house, cadastral number 21,873, stroke Roman III, commonly referred to as Hahnpassgasse no. 7, where he was incarcerated against his will and left to starve or freeze to death." The clerk peered at me over his spectacles and leafed through several pages of the document before continuing.

"The investigation led to the further conclusion that subsequent to his decease the aforementioned Karl Zottmann was, in all probability, robbed of all the possessions he carried on his person, in particular of the double-cased pocket-watch"—the clerk held up the watch by its chain—"enclosed under section capital P, stroke b. The testimony of Jaromir Kwassnitschka, silhouette

artist, orphan of the late manufacturer of communion wafers of the same name, in which he claimed to have found the above-mentioned watch in the bed of his brother, Loisa, who has since absconded, and disposed of it to Aaron Wassertrum, dealer in second-hand goods and owner of several properties subsequently deceased, for an agreed sum, was rejected due to the unreliable character of the deponent.

The investigation also established that the corpse of the aforementioned Karl Zottmann contained, at the time of its discovery, a notebook in its rear trousers pocket in which it had made, presumably some time before its demise, several entries relevant to the case and which assisted the Imperial and Royal authorities in identifying the criminal. The testimony of the entries in the deceased's notebook casts strong suspicion on Loisa Kwassnitschka, at present a fugitive from justice, to whom the Imperial and Royal state prosecution service has accordingly turned its attention. In consideration of the new material evidence detailed above, the detention order against Athanasius Pernath, gem engraver with no previous convictions at present, is therefore to be revoked and the proceedings against him withdrawn.

The ground seemed to give way under my feet, and for a few minutes I lost consciousness. When I came to, I was sitting on a chair and the gaoler was giving me a friendly pat on the shoulder.

The clerk remained utterly impassive, sniffed, blew his nose and then said, "Notification of the decision could not take place before today due to the fact that your name begins with a 'P' and must therefore naturally come towards the end of the alphabetical order." Then he continued reading:

"In addition, Athanasius Pernath, gem engraver, is to be apprised of the fact that, by the terms of the last will and testament of Innocence Charousek, medical student of this city, who died in May of this year, he, Athanasius Pernath, is declared heir to one third of the total estate of the said Innocence Charousek, and is hereby required to append his signature below in acknowledgement of this notification of the court's decision."

As he read the last word, the clerk dipped his pen in the ink-well and began scrawling across the paper. I expected his usual cackle, but he refrained from it.

"Innocence Charousek", I murmured, lost in thought. The gaoler leant over and whispered to me:

"He came to visit me, did Herr Dr. Charousek. It was just before he died and he was asking after you. 'Give him my very, very best wishes', he said. Of course I couldn't tell you then. Strictly against the rules. He came to a terrible end, did that poor Dr. Charousek. Did away with himself, he did. They found

him lying on his front on the grave of that Anton Wassertrum. He'd dug two deep holes in the ground, cut open the arteries in his wrists and stuck his arms down the holes.

He must have bled to death. Mad he probably was, that poor Dr. Char-

The clerk pushed his chair back noisily and handed me the pen to sign. Then he stood up, full of self-importance, and said, in exactly the tones of his aristocratic superior, "Gaoler, take this man out."

Once again—after how many, many months?—the man with the sabre and long Johns in the room in the gatehouse had put aside the coffee-mill he was holding between his knees, only this time he did not examine me, but returned my precious stones, my purse with the ten crowns in it, my coat and all my other things.

Then I was out in the street.

"Miriam, Miriam! Soon at last we shall see each other again!" It was all I could do to suppress a wild shout of joy. It must have been midnight. Like a dull brass plate, the full moon was floating wanly behind a veil of cloud. The cobbles were covered with a layer of sticky mud. In the mist the cab looked like a prehistoric monster; I was so unused to walking that my legs almost gave way, and I staggered towards it, the soles of my feet completely numb, as if I were suffering from inflammation of the spinal chord.

"Hahnpassgasse, Cabbie, as quick as you can, number seven. D'you hear? Hahnpassgasse No. 7."

FREE

We had only driven a few yards when the cab stopped.

"Hahnpassgasse, your Honour?"

"Yes, yes, on you go!"

The cab set off again, and again it stopped.

"For God's sake, what's the matter now?!"

"You did say Hahnpassgasse, your Honour?"

"Yes, yes. Of course I did!"

"But I can't take you to Hahnpassgasse."

"Why ever not?"

"Cos they've dug up the roads everywhere. They're pulling the whole of

the Jewish quarter down."

"Take me as far as you can, then, but be quick about it!"

His nag took one leap forward and then subsided into its habitual amble. I let down the rattling windows and greedily sucked in the cool night air. Everything had become so strange, so bewilderingly new, the houses, the streets, the closed shutters. A white dog trotted past, alone and morose, along the damp pavement. How strange! A dog! I had completely forgotten the existence of such animals. Full of a childish delight, I shouted after it, "Come on now, how can you look so glum?"

What would Hillel say? And Miriam?

Only a few more minutes and I would be there. I would not stop hammering on their door until I had roused them from their beds. Now everything was going to be all right, all the trials and tribulations of this year over at last. What a splendid Christmas it would be! And this time I wouldn't sleep through it like last year!

For a moment my old fear returned to paralyse me as I remembered the words of the ruffian with the predatory features. The charred face—rape—murder. No! No! I forced myself to shake off the horrifying images. No, no, it could not be true. Miriam was alive! Had I not heard her voice from Laponder's lips?

Just one more minute—thirty seconds—and then—

The cab stopped beside a mountain of rubble. Everywhere the road was barricaded by heaps of cobblestones with red lamps on top of them. An army of navvies was working by the light of blazing torches.

The way was blocked by piles of debris and broken masonry. I clambered over it, sinking in up to my knees.

There, that must be Hahnpassgasse, mustn't it? I had the greatest difficulty orienting myself, nothing but ruins all around. Wasn't that the house where I had lived? The facade had been ripped off.

I climbed to the top of a mound of earth; far below, what had been the street had become a narrow passageway between black walls. I looked up. The lattice of exposed rooms rose up into the air like the cells of a gigantic honeycomb, lit half by the torchlight, half by the dull moon.

That one up there, that must have been my room. I could recognise it by the paint on the walls, although there was only a small patch left to see. And next to it the studio, Savioli's studio. I suddenly had an empty feeling in my heart. How strange! The studio! Angelina! That was all so far, so immeasurably far behind me now.

I turned round. Of the house in which Wassertrum had lived there was not one stone left standing on another. Everything had been razed to the ground, the junk-shop, Charousek's basement, everything, everything.

A phrase I had read somewhere came to mind, 'Our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.'

I asked one of the workmen whether he knew where the people who had left these houses lived now. Did he know Shemaiah Hillel, the archivist at the Jewish Town Hall?

"Nix daitsch", was the curt answer, but when I offered him a crown, he immediately found he could understand German; however he still could not help me. None of his workmates either.

Perhaps I would find out more if I asked at Loisitchek's?—Loisitchek's was closed, they said, the house was being renovated.

Well, then, I could wake up someone in the area, anyone. Wouldn't that be possible?—There was no one living in the area, no one at all, not even a stray cat. Forbidden by the authorities. Because of typhoid.

"But the Old Toll House Tavern? The Old Toll House must be open?"

"Closed."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure."

I tried a few names, the first that came into my head, of people who had run small shops or stalls in the neighbourhood; then Zwakh, Vrieslander, Prokop . . .?

At every name the man shook his head.

"Perhaps you know Jaromir Kwassnitschka?"

The worker looked up. "Jaromir? Deaf and dumb?"

Thank God! Someone I knew at last. "Yes, he's a deaf-mute. Where is he living?"

"Does he cut out those little pictures? Out of black paper?"

"Yes, that's him. Where can I find him?"

With many digressions, corrections and repetitions, the workman told me the way to an all-night cafe in the centre of town and went back to his digging.

For over an hour I fought my way through the maze of rubble, balancing over planks and ducking under beams that barred the way. The whole Jewish

quarter was a waste of brick and stone, as if the Ghetto had been destroyed by an earthquake. Breathless with agitation, covered in dust and my shoes all torn, I eventually made my way out of the labyrinth and found the sleazy tavern only a few blocks away. Cafe Chaos said the sign over the door. It consisted of one tiny, almost deserted room which scarcely had space for the tables placed against the walls. In the middle was a three-legged billiard table on which the waiter was snoring. A market-woman, with her basket of vegetables on the floor beside her, was sitting dozing in a corner, a glass of tea in front of her.

Finally the waiter deigned to wake up and ask me what I wanted. The insolent look with which he scanned me from head to toe made me realise how tattered and torn I must look. I glanced in the mirror and was horrified to see an unfamiliar face staring at me, pale and anaemic, wrinkled, grey as putty, with a scrubby beard and long, tangled hair.

As I ordered a black coffee, I asked the waiter whether he had seen Jaromir, the silhouette cutter.

"No idea where he can have got to", he yawned, then lay down on the billiard table and went back to sleep.

I took the Prager Tagblatt down from its hook on the wall, but the letters seemed to be scuttling about like ants all over the page, so that I did not take in one word of what I was reading.

Hours passed, and through the window-panes appeared that dubious dark-blue colour that signals the arrival of dawn for a gas-lit cafe. Now and then a few policemen would peer in, the feathers on their helmets a shimmering green, and depart again with their slow, heavy tread.

Three bleary-eyed soldiers came in.

A street-sweeper had a glass of schnapps.

At long, long last, Jaromir.

He was so changed, that at first I did not recognise him. His eyes were dull, he had lost his front teeth, his hair was thinning and there were deep hollows behind his ears.

I was so overjoyed to see a familiar face after all this time, that I jumped up, went over to him and wrung his hand. He appeared extraordinarily apprehensive and kept glancing towards the door. I used every sign I could think of to show him that I was glad to see him, but for a long time he did not seem to believe me, and whatever questions I asked, they all received the same helpless gesture of incomprehension.

How could I make him understand? Ah, an idea!

I borrowed a pencil and drew the faces of Zwakh, Vrieslander and Prokop.

"What? None of them in Prague any more?"

He waved his arms around in the air, made a gesture indicating money being counted out, marched his fingers across the table and slapped himself on the back of the hand. I guessed that all three had probably been given money by Charousek with which they had made a going concern of the puppet theatre company and were now on tour.

"And Hillel? Where is he living now?" I drew his face and a house followed by a question mark.

The question mark Jaromir did not understand since he could not read, but he realised what I wanted to know; he took a match, apparently threw it up in the air, but actually made it disappear like a conjuror.

What did that mean? Hillel was also away on a journey?

I drew the Jewish Town Hall. Jaromir shook his head vigorously.

"Hillel is not there any more?" A violent shake of the head.

"Then where is he?" Again the trick with the match.

"He's just saying the gentleman has gone away, but no one don't know where", explained the street-sweeper, who had been watching us with interest the whole time.

Fear struck at my heart; Hillel had gone! Now I was completely alone in the world. The objects in the room began to dance before my eyes.

"And Miriam?" My hand was trembling so much that for a long time I could not achieve the likeness.

"Has Miriam disappeared too?" Miriam had disappeared too, disappeared without trace.

I groaned out loud and paced up and down the room, making the three soldiers give each other puzzled looks. Jaromir tried to calm me down and made great efforts to tell me something else he had heard. He lay his head on his arm, like someone sleeping.

I grasped the table to steady myself. "For God's sake, you don't mean Miriam is dead?" A shake of the head. Jaromir repeated his mime of someone sleeping.

"Has she been ill?" I drew a bottle of medicine. A shake of the head. Again Jaromir laid his head on his arm. By now it was daylight and the gaslamps were turned off one after the other, but still I could not fathom what the gesture was intended to convey.

I gave up and sat thinking. The only thing left to do was to go to the Jewish Town Hall as soon as it opened and ask there if they had any idea where Hillel and Miriam might have gone. I had to look for him.

I sat next to Jaromir in silence, as deaf and dumb as he was. When, after a long time, I looked up, I saw that he was snipping away at a silhouette. I recognised Rosina's profile. He handed me the scrap of paper, put his hand over his eyes and softly began to cry. Then he suddenly leapt to his feet and staggered out of the door without another word.

At the Jewish Town Hall all they could tell me was that one day their archivist, Shemaiah Hillel, had been absent without explanation and had not reappeared since. He must have taken his daughter with him, for since that day she had not been seen either.

No clue as to where they might have gone.

At the bank they told me my account was still blocked by a court order, but any day now they expected it to be released. Charousek's legacy would have to go through official channels as well, of course, just when I was impatient to get my hands on the money so that I could do everything to trace Hillel and Miriam.

I sold the precious stones I had on me and rented two small furnished rooms in the attic of a house in Altschul-gasse, the only street that had been excluded from the demolition of the old Ghetto. By a strange coincidence it was the very house into which, according to legend, the Golem disappeared.

I asked the inhabitants of the house, mostly small tradesmen and artisans, what was the truth about the room without an entrance, and they laughed in my face. How could anyone believe that kind of nonsense!

My own experiences connected with it had, during my time in prison, taken on the pale cast of a dream that had long since faded, and I now looked on them as empty symbols lacking the pulse of real life, and struck them out of the book of memory. It was the words of Laponder, which sometimes I could hear as clearly as if he were still sitting opposite me in our cell, which encouraged me in the belief that it must have been purely an inner vision, even though at the time it had seemed like tangible reality.

How many things that I once possessed had vanished for good? The Book of Ibbur, the fantastic pack of Tarock cards, Angelina, even my old friends, Zwakh, Vrieslander and Prokop.

It was Christmas Eve and I had brought home a little Christmas tree with red candles. I wanted to relive my youth with the glitter of lights and the fragrance of pine needles and burning wax around me. Before the end of the

year I might well already be on my way, searching for the two of them in villages and towns, or anywhere else I felt I might find them. I had gradually lost all my impatience at having to wait, and all my fear that Miriam might have been murdered. I knew in my heart that I would find them both.

All the time I was inwardly smiling with happiness, and whenever I put my hand on some object it felt as if it gave off healing power. In some inexplicable way, I was filled with the content of a person who, after many years of wandering, sees from a distance the towers and spires of his native town gleaming in the sunlight.

Once I went to the tiny cafe to invite Jaromir to spend Christmas Eve with me, but I was told he had not been back since I was last there. Disappointed, I was about to leave, when an old pedlar came in with worthless bric-a-brac on his tray. I was rummaging around among all the fobs, small crucifixes, hairpins and brooches when I happened upon a heart carved of some red stone on a faded silk ribbon. To my astonishment, I realised it was the memento that Angelina had wanted to give me, when she was still a little girl, at the fountain in the castle where she lived.

All at once the days of my youth flashed past my inward eye, as if I were watching a peep-show drawn by a child. I was so moved I just stood there for a long time, staring at the tiny red heart in my hand.

I was sitting in my attic listening to the crackle of the pine-needles whenever a twig that was above one of the candles began to glow.

'Perhaps, somewhere or other, at this very moment old Zwakh is putting on his Puppets'

Christmas', I imagined, 'and is declaiming that verse by his favourite writer, Oskar Wiener, in cryptic tones,

Where is the heart of coral red? It hangs upon a silken thread. Give, oh give it not away, For I was true; I loved it dear And laboured seven years and a day To win this heart I loved so dear.

All of a sudden I was filled with a strangely solemn feeling. The candles had burnt down. Just one was still flickering. The smoke was gathering in drifts around the room. As if there were a hand tugging me, I suddenly turned round:

There on the threshold was my likeness, my double, dressed in a white cloak, a crown on its head.

Just for a second it stood there, then flames burst through the wooden door and a suffocating cloud of hot smoke poured into the room.

Fire! The house was on fire! Fire!

I tore open the window and climbed onto the roof. Already I could hear the piercing siren of the fire-engine approaching.

Gleaming helmets and brusque commands, then the ghostly, flapping rhythm of the pumps breathing in and out as the water demons gathered their strength to pounce on their mortal enemy: fire. The tinkle of glass; red tongues of fire shooting out of all the windows; mattresses thrown down into the street, people jumping down, injuring themselves, being carried off.

I do not know why, but I felt a wild, jubilant ecstasy coursing through my veins. My hair was standing on end.

I ran to the chimney so as not to get burnt, the flames were clutching at me. A chimney-sweep's rope was wrapped round it. I uncoiled it. One twist round wrist and leg, as we had been taught at gym in school, and I calmly began to let myself down the front of the house.

Past a window: inside the light is dazzling.

And I see . . . I see . . .

My whole body becomes one great, echoing shout of joy:

"HUM! Miriam! HUM!"

I make a jump for the bars. Miss. Lose my grip on the rope.

For a moment I am hanging between heaven and earth, head downwards, legs forming a cross.

The rope twangs as it takes my weight. The fibres stretch and creak.

I am falling.

Consciousness is fading.

As I fall I grab the window-ledge, but my hand slips off. No grip. The stone is smooth.

Smooth, like a lump of fat.

END

". . . like a lump of fat!"

That is the stone that looks like a lump of fat.

The words are still ringing in my ears. Then I sit up and try to remember where I am.

I am in bed. In my hotel.

And I'm not called Pernath.

Was it all a dream? No, dreams are not like that. I look at the clock; I have hardly been asleep for an hour. It's half past two. And there on the hook is someone else's hat that I took by mistake in the Cathedral today, while I was sitting in a pew during high mass.

Is there a name in it?

I take down the hat; in gold letters on the white silk lining is the unknown and yet so strangely familiar name:

ATHANASIUS PERNATH

Now it won't leave me in peace any more. I dress quickly and hurry down the stairs.

"Porter! Open the door! I'm going out for a walk for an hour or so."

"Where to, if I might ask, sir?"

"To the Jewish quarter. To Hahnpassgasse. There is a street of that name, isn't there?"

"Certainly there is, certainly." The porter gave a suggestive grin. "But there's not much going on in the Jewish quarter nowadays, if you catch my meaning. It's all been rebuilt."

"That doesn't matter. Where is Hahnpassgasse?"

The porter pointed to the map with a fat finger, "There, sir."

"And Loisitchek's bar?"

"Here, sir."

"Give me a large sheet of paper."

"Here you are, sir."

I wrapped up Pernath's hat in it. The odd thing about it was that it was almost new, spotlessly clean, and yet as brittle as if it were ancient.

As I made my way, my mind ran over these strange events. In my dream I experienced everything this Athanasius Pernath experienced; in the course of one night I saw, heard, felt everything as if I was Pernath. But then why did I not know what he saw through the barred window at the moment when the rope broke and he called out, "Hillel, Hillel!"?

That, I realised, was the moment at which he separated from me.

I decided I must find this Athanasius Pernath, even if it meant running round this city for three days and three nights.

So that's Hahnpassgasse? Not the least like it looked in my dream. Nothing but new houses.

A minute later I was sitting in Cafe Loisitchek, a characterless but fairly clean place. It did, though, have a raised dais with a wooden balustrade at the back; a certain resemblance to the old Loisitchek's of my dream was undeniable.

"What can I get you, sir?" asked the waitress, a buxom girl who was literally bursting out of a red velvet tail-coat.

"Brandy, please.—Ah, thank you.—Oh, Fraulein?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Whom does the cafe belong to?"

"Herr Loisitchek. He owns the whole building. A very distinguished member of the business community."

Aha, the fellow with the pig's teeth on his watch chain! I remember.

A good question to help me get my bearings occurred to me.

"Fraulein!"

"Yes, sir?"

"When did the stone bridge collapse?"

"Thirty-three years ago."

"Hmm. Thirty-three years ago." I calculated. Pernath, the gem engraver, must be getting on for ninety by now.

"Fraulein!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Is there no one among your customers here who can remember what the old Jewish Ghetto used to look like? I'm a writer, that's why I'm interested in it."

The waitress thought for a moment. "Among the customers? No. But just a minute. Do you see the marker over there who's playing billiards with that student? The old man with the Roman nose? He's lived here all his life, he'll be able to tell you everything about it. Shall I tell him to come when he's finished?"

I looked over to where she indicated. A slim, white-haired old man was leaning against the mirror chalking his cue. A debauched, but oddly aristocratic face. Now whom did he remind me of?

"Fraulein, what is the billiard marker called?"

The waitress leant her elbows on the table, licked her pencil and at lightning speed wrote her first name countless times on the marble top, quickly erasing it each time with a wet finger-tip. As she did so, her smouldering eyes kept giving me more or less suggestive glances, depending on how well she thought they were received. An essential accompaniment was the raising of the eyebrows to give her a wide-eyed, appealing look.

"Fraulein", I repeated, "what is the billiard marker called?" I could tell that she would have preferred another question, 'Fraulein, why are you wearing nothing but a tail-coat?' or words to that effect, but I didn't ask it, I was too preoccupied with my dream.

"What do you think he's called?" she pouted. "His name's Ferri, Ferri Athenstadt."

Aha! Ferri Athenstadt! Another old acquaintance! "You must tell me everything you know about him, Fraulein", I wheedled, though it meant I had to fortify myself with another brandy, "I do so love listening to your lovely voice." (I found myself so nauseous it turned my stomach.) She leant towards me with a conspiratorial air, so close that her hair tickled my cheek, and whispered, "Old Ferri, he was a sly one, he was. People say he had a title that went back hundreds of years; nothing but silly gossip, of course, just because he always goes round so beautifully clean-shaven. The story is that he had pots of money and a red-haired little Jewess, that had been on the game since she was a girl (she quickly scribbled her name a few more times on the table-top), stripped him bare—of money I mean, of course. Then when he had no money left she ran off and married this toff, she whispered a name I could not understand in my ear.

"The toff had to give up all his grand titles of course, had to go round calling himself Sir Simple Simon. Serve him right. And the fact that she used to be on the game still showed, right to the end. I always say—

"Fritzi! The bill", someone shouted from the dais.

I was glancing round the room when I suddenly heard a faint, metallic chirping, like a grasshopper, from behind

When I turned round I could not believe my eyes. There, sitting hunched up in the corner, face to the wall, and turning the handle of a little music-box the size of a cigarette packet with his skeletal fingers, was blind Nephtali Schaffranek, as old as Methuselah.

I went over to him. In a whispering voice he was singing a muddled song to himself: Frau Pick,

Frau Hock,

Stars both red and blue

All gossiping together

"Do you know what the man is called", I asked a waiter as he hurried past.

"No, sir, no one knows him or his name. He's even forgotten it himself. He's all alone in the world. He's a hundred and ten years old, they say. He comes in every night and gets a free coffee for old times' sake."

I leant down over the old man and shouted in his ear, "Schaffranek!"

He twitched, as if he had had an electric shock. He mumbled something and rubbed his forehead in thought.

"Can you understand me, Herr Schaffranek?"

He nodded.

"Listen carefully. I want to ask you some questions about the old days. If you answer properly, you can have this crown on the table here."

"Crown", repeated the old man, and immediately began twirling the handle of his tinny music box like mad.

I put my hand on his. "Just try to remember. Did you know, about thirty-three years ago, a gem cutter by the name of Pernath?"

"Pain in the arse! Tailor and cutter!" he babbled asthmatically, laughing uncontrollably, as if he had just heard a capital joke.

"No, not 'pain in the arse', Pernath!"

"Pereles!?" he said, jubilantly.

"No, not Pereles, either. Per—nath!"

"Pascheles?" he crowed.

My hopes dashed, I gave up the attempt.

"You wanted to speak to me, sir?" Ferri Athenstadt, the billiard marker, introduced himself with a faint bow.

"Yes, I do. I thought we might have a game while we talked."

"Do you play for money, sir? I'll give you ninety start."

"Right then. For a crown. Would you like to cue off?"

His Highness took his cue, aimed, miscued, grimaced. I knew perfectly well what he was up to.

He would let me reach ninety-nine and then finish in one break. The odd feeling I had was growing stronger by the minute, and I decided not to waste time beating about the bush.

"Tell me, Herr Athenstadt, do you remember—it was many years ago, around the time when the stone bridge fell down—a certain Athanasius Pernath who lived in the old Jewish quarter?"

A man with a squint wearing a red-and-white striped linen jacket and tiny gold earrings, who was sitting on the bench along the wall reading the newspaper, looked up and stared at me, crossing himself.

"Pernath? Pernath?" repeated the aristocratic marker, racking his brains, "Pernath? Wasn't he tall and slim? Brown hair, short pointed beard flecked with grey?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Roughly forty years old at the time? He looked like . . .", His Highness suddenly stared at me in surprise, "Are you a relation, sir?"

The man with the squint crossed himself.

"Me? A relation? What an odd idea! No, I'm interested in him, that's all. Do you know more about him?" I asked calmly, although I could feel my heart turning to ice.

Ferri Athenstadt racked his brains once more. "If I'm not mistaken, people thought he was mad.

Once he claimed he was called . . . just a minute . . . yes, he claimed he was called Laponder.

And another time he tried to pass himself off as a certain . . . Charousek."

"All a pack of lies!" interrupted the man with the squint. "That Charousek really existed. My father had several thousand crowns from him."

"Who is this man?" I asked Athenstadt in a low voice.

"A ferryman, he's called Tschamrda. As far as Pernath is concerned, all I can remember, at least I believe I'm right in this, is that in later years he married a beautiful, dark-skinned Jewess."

'Miriam!' I said to myself. I was so excited that my hands were trembling and I couldn't go on playing.

The ferryman crossed himself.

"What ever's the matter with you today, Herr Tschamrda?" asked Athenstadt in astonishment.

"That Pernath never lived!" he exclaimed. "I don't believe it!"

I immediately bought the man a brandy to loosen his tongue.

"There are people who do say Pernath is still alive", the ferryman declared at length. "He's a comb-cutter, so I've heard tell, and lives up on the Hradschin."

"Where on the Hradschin?"

The ferryman crossed himself. "That's just it. He lives in a place where no living person can live: at the wall by the last lamp."

"Do you know the house, Herr Tscham . . . Tschamer . . . Tschamrda?"

"I wouldn't go up there, not for all the money in the world!" he protested. "Jesus, Joseph and Mary, what do you take me for!?"

"But you could show me the way, from a distance, couldn't you, Herr Tschamrda?"

"That I could do", muttered the ferryman, "if you can wait until six in the morning. That's when I go down to the Moldau. But I warn you not to! You'll fall into the Stag's Moat and break your neck, Mother of God have mercy on us!"

We went down together through the morning air; a fresh breeze was blowing from the river. I was so tense with expectation I could scarcely feel the ground under my feet. Suddenly I saw the house in Altschulgasse before me; I recognised every window, the curving gutter, the bars, the window-ledge like glistening lumps of fat, everything, everything!

"When did this house burn down?" I asked my companion with the squint. I was so tense the blood was pounding in my ears.

"Burn down? Why, never." "But it did! I'm sure of it." "No."

"But I'm sure. Would you like to bet on it?" "How much?" "One crown."

"Done!" Tschamrda fetched the porter. "Has this house ever been burnt down?"

"Burnt down? What ever for?" The man laughed. I just could not believe it.

"I've been living here for seventy years", the porter assured us, "so I should know." Strange . . . strange!

On a zig-zag course that kept darting sideways into the current, the ferryman rowed me across the Moldau. His boat consisted of little more than eight unplanned planks, and the yellow waters foamed against the wood of the bows. The roofs on the Hradschin were a glittering red in the morning sun.

I was in the grip of a solemn feeling that was beyond words, like the gradual dawning of a muted emotion from a former existence, as if the world around me were enchanted. I saw everything as if in a dream, as if I had at times lived in several different places at once.

I got out. "How much do I owe you, ferryman?" "One kreutzer. If you'd helped me row, it would have been two."

Once again I am making my way up the lonely Castle Steps that I ascended the previous night in my sleep. My heart is beating fast. I know that next comes the bare tree whose branches reach over the wall.

No. It is covered with white blossom. The air is full of the sweet scent of lilac. At my feet lies the city in the first light of the morning, like a vision of the promised land.

Not a sound, just fragrance and light.

I could find my way up to the bizarre little Street of the Alchemists with my eyes closed, so familiar every step suddenly seems. But in the place where last night there was a wooden gate in front of the shining white house, the street now ends in a magnificent set of elegantly bowed gilt railings. The gate in the wall running along behind the railings is flanked by two yew-trees that tower up above the blossoming shrubs.

Standing on tiptoe to see over the bushes I am dazzled by fresh splendour: the garden wall is covered with mosaics of turquoise set with strange, golden shellwork frescoes depicting the cult of the Egyptian god Osiris.

On the double gate is the image of the god, a hermaphrodite with one half on each side, the right-hand one female, the left-hand male. Done in half-relief, the figure is seated on a sumptuous, low throne of mother-of-pearl. Its golden head is that of a hare with the ears pricked and close together, so that they look like the two pages of an open book.

There is a scent of dew, and the fragrance of hyacinths drifts over the wall.

For a long time I just stand there like a stone statue, marvelling at it all. I feel as if an alien world is appearing before me. Then an old gardener or servant with silver buckles on his shoes, a lace jabot and a strangely cut coat appears behind the railings from the left and asks me what I want.

Without a word I hand Athanasius Pernath's hat in its paper wrapping over the railing to him.

He takes it and goes in through the double gate.

When it opens, I see beyond it a marble building like a temple, and on its steps stands ATHANASIUS PERNATH and leaning against him is

MIRIAM,

both of them gazing down on the city.

For a moment Miriam turns round, sees me, smiles and whispers something to Athanasius Pernath.

I am spellbound by her beauty. She is still as young as in my dream last night.

Athanasius Pernath turns slowly towards me, and my heart stands still: His face is so like mine, that it is as if I were looking into a mirror.

Then the gates close and all I can see is the shimmering hermaphrodite. The old servant gives me my own hat and says, in a voice that sounds as if it came from the depths of the earth,

"Hear Athanasius Pernath's compliments. He thanks you most kindly and begs you not to interpret the fact that he has not invited you into the garden as a lack of hospitality; it is a strict house rule from time immemorial.

He has not, I am to tell you, put your hat on; he noticed the mistake immediately.

He hopes that he has not given you a headache."

THE END.