

HITLER'S PHANTOM

a novel

NORMAN MAILER

BOOKS

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In those months, Klara visited her more often than Alois, and the wound they had left in each other all-but-healed. On the first visit, Klara had fallen on her knees before the bed where Fanni rested, and said, "You were right. I do not know if I would have been true to my vow." In turn, Fanni wept. "You would have been true," she said. "Now I tell you to give up your vow. He is through with me."

"No," said Klara, "my promise must remain! It has to be stronger than ever." She had a moment when she thought she might at last have a

true understanding of sacrifice. This left her feeling exalted. She had been taught to search for just such a pure state of the soul. Those teachings had come from her father, that is to say, her father-in-name, old Johann Poelzl, who was sour on all matters but Devotion. “Devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ is all of my life in each and every day,” he would tell her—he was indeed more pious than any woman in Spital. At many a meal, after saying grace, he would tell Klara (especially once she passed the age of twelve) that to give up what one truly desired was the nearest you could come to the moment of knowing the glory of Christ. But to attain that hour, one must be ready to sacrifice one’s dreams. After all, had God not sacrificed His Son?

Klara was soon trying to relinquish her desire for Uncle Alois. That fever had not gone away during the four years she worked for Anna Glassl. Then there had been another four years in Vienna serving an old lady who alternated between doting on Klara and then counting the silverware. The old lady had the real heat of suspicion—it irritated her when the silver count was correct (as it always was) because paranoia which cannot be confirmed is more difficult to bear than outright theft. The old lady was secretly

proud of the perfection with which this young servant kept house for her—it spoke of respect for her mistress—yet the honesty made her irritable.

Years earlier, in payment for her one cardinal sin with Alois, Johanna had turned into a very good housekeeper, and Klara had responded to their house duties more than any of Johanna's remaining children. It was as if the mother and daughter believed that what was left of the family—given the ghosts of all those dead children—depended on offering ceaseless attention to the daily skirmish against mud, dust, ashes, slops, and all crusted plates, cups, pots, and cutlery.

By now, Klara was never lax. Each household task required respect for the labor even when one knew how to do it well. Sacrifice, however, was different from such work. Sacrifice was an ache she felt next to her heart. If she wanted Alois, if she dreamed of Alois, she was still obliged to find a way (once Fanni's two children had been put to sleep) to keep him at arm's length. There was not a night in the inn, the best inn of Braunau, the Pommer Inn (to which they had moved) when Alois was not staring at her open-faced and slightly drunk from the three steins of beer he took into himself each evening after work with one or another of the Customs

Officers before returning to the Pommer for the meal Klara had cooked in the kitchen of the hotel and brought up to their lodgings. He would eat that meal with full gusto saying not a word, just nods to demonstrate his enjoyment. Then he would stare at her in the privacy of their sitting room, his eyes open as if to share his thoughts. It seemed as if all that was valuable in the recesses of her body was being fingered by his imagination. Her thighs burned, her cheeks burned, her breath wanted to inhale his breath. If one of the children cried out in sleep, she would jump up. The sound was equal to a cry from Fanni come to her all the way from Laughter-in-the-Woods. Afterward, however, a cramp of disappointment would be sure to follow.

Alois was often on the point of describing to his drinking associates how he loved her eyes. They were so deep, so clear, so full of the desperation to have him.

Why not? Alois kept to his view that he was one exceptional fellow. Who did he know besides himself who was as ready to claim his indifference to religious fear? That was its own kind of bravery. He often made a point of declaring that he never went to church. Nor would he

confess to a priest. How could a run-of-the-mill priest be equal to him? He had his allegiance to the Crown and he needed no more than that. Would God be about to punish those who served the State well? Hardly!

Just the week before, a cousin had inquired whether his son, now of age, would be happy working on the Finance-Watch. Alois had written back, "Don't let your boy think it is a kind of game because he will be quickly disillusioned. He has to show absolute obedience to his superiors at all levels. Second, there is a good deal to learn in this occupation, all the more so if he has had little previous education. Heavy drinkers, men who get into debt, and gamblers and those who lead immoral lives cannot last. Finally, one has to go out in all weather, day or night."

Naturally, he felt equal to the sentiments in the letter, nor did he have to think about "those who lead immoral lives." Immorality, Alois knew, was not to be confused with the details of your private life. Immorality might be taking a bribe from a smuggler, but private life was too complicated for judgment. He did not know to a certainty that Klara was his daughter—after all, he did not have to trust Johanna Hiedler Poelzl's word.

What, after all, was the point of being a woman if you could not lie with skill? Sie ist hier! True, or not true?

All the same, she might be his daughter.

Alois knew why he didn't have to go to church, or to confession, he knew why he was brave. He was ready to take the same forbidden road that drunken peasants and adolescents blundered into while sharing a bed. But he, unlike them, would not look back in fear and penitence. He would just do it. Yes, he would fuck his daughter. Yes.

Which he finally did at the end of a short evening that had been much like all the other dinners when he had looked at her with no deceit in his expression and no activity but to stand up now and again with his pants in full profile thrust forward, his proud bulge always ready to speak for itself. Then, he would poke the fire and sit down and look at her again. On this one night, however, he did not say goodnight as she put her hand on the door to the children's room where she slept, but instead, he strode forward, caught that hand, kissed her on the mouth, and brought her to his bedroom and his bed, even as she begged him in a low uncertain voice to do no more, "please, no more," whereupon he proceeded to lay a track with his hand, so

veteran at insinuating his fingers through the defenses of inner garments, all the way to the nest of hair she had so long concealed. And there it was, much like feathers—downy—much as he had expected. Half her body was on fire, but half was locked in ice, the bottom half. If not for the Hound, he might have stalled at the approach to such a frozen threshold, but then her mouth was part of the fire and she kissed him as if her heart was also in her lips, so rich, so fresh, so wanton a mouth (and all despite herself) that he exploded, exploded even as he entered her, ripped her hymen altogether, and was in, deep, and in, and it was over even as she began to sob with woe and fright and worse—in shame for the one throb of exaltation that shivered through her at a bound. She knew that this had been the opposite of sacrifice. Nor could she stop kissing him. She went on and on like a child raining kisses on the face of the great adult beloved, and then there were other kisses, softer, deeper. He was the first man she had ever kissed as a man rather than as a relative of the family, yes, the wrong kind of exaltation. She could not stop weeping. Nor could she stop smiling.

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So, Klara was now his lover, his cleaning woman, and the nursemaid to Alois-Junior, and to Angela. On many a night she was also his cook—unless (having hired one of the hotel maids to sit with the children for an hour) they went downstairs to the dining room of the Pommer Inn, there in full display as uncle and niece, the middle-aged customs officer in uniform and his demure young mistress. No one in Braunau was fooled, no matter how often she might call him Uncle. It was enough to stir a boil of outrage in the onlookers that he could sit there as if he were Franz-Josef himself, ready to claim, “In company with the Emperor, I, too, have a lovely mistress.” On any night that he took her downstairs to dine, it never

failed—he would make love as soon as they came back, his voice so hoarse he could hardly speak. “I am your bad uncle,” he would say in the thick of the embrace, “your very bad uncle.”

“Yes, yes, my bad uncle,” and she would cling to him, hardly able to distinguish pain from what was seeking to become pleasure—a most unholy pleasure—“Oh,” she would cry out, “we will be punished.”

“Who the hell cares?” he would growl, and that brought her closer to the unholy pleasure.

She would always weep when it was over. It was all she could command not to scream at him. Inside her was all the over-squeezed congestion of all that had not quite come to pass. Besides, she was so guilty.

Now, it was Klara’s turn not to go to Mass. She was working for the Devil (so she knew!) She felt as if her finest impulses were now bringing her nearer to the Evil One, yes, even the loving care she gave to Alois-Junior, and to Angela. The more she adored them, the worse it must be. Her tainted presence could pollute their spirit. By her presence itself! And

when she thought of her dead brothers and sisters, she had to fear what she might now be doing to them—wherever they were!

Then, there was Fanni. Klara had not told her and knew she must. Because if Fanni did not know now, she would certainly find out so soon as her life ended and she was on the other side. Fanni would be left with the intolerable thought that Klara never cared enough to tell her.

Yet, in the last week of Fanni's illness when Klara did confess, the answer was brief: "This is my punishment for sending you away four years ago. That is fair."

"I will take care of the boy and girl as if they were mine."

"You will take better care than I would," said Fanni, and turned her face away. "It is all right," she said, "but you must not come to see me any more."

Then Klara knew once again that she lived in the grip of the Evil One. Because if at first she was hurt, she soon felt furious that Fanni could send her away this time as well, and the anger was still present on the day that Fanni was interred, a very long day, since Alois did not bury Fanni in Braunau. He had chosen Ranshofen ("On-the-Brink-of-Hope") where they

had been married. This was not from sentiment but annoyance. The word in Braunau was that he had bought Fanni's coffin months before she died. No less! The townspeople were saying that he had found a true bargain in advance (a mahogany job confiscated from a smuggler at the Customs gate.) In truth, he had only bought the damned crate ten days before her death. He had not sat on it for months but for days. So, he could not forgive the gossip. Besides, the tragedy of death was overrated. So many times, it was like saying goodbye to a friend who has outworn every welcome. In truth, he did not plan to visit the cemetery too often. His eyes were on Klara for tonight. By evening, after the funeral, he could not stop looking at her. Those blue eyes! So much like the diamond in the museum!

For Klara, a night followed unlike any until now. In bed on that hot August night, her life received another life. She felt it travel directly to her soul, or so she felt. For her soul seemed to reside right there beneath her heart, and she came close to falling into darkness from the pleasure. But the pleasure went on and on. Now, it did not stop. She belonged to the Devil. Completely! He had dug into her loins with the most evil enjoyment she had ever known. Her guilt in the morning was as heavy as a water-logged

tree. She had a dreadful moment for realizing that her delight had come because Fanni was gone. Yes. All the love she had felt for the long-sick friend had vanished into this unholy glee, this long-withheld and so nasty joy that she could release at last because the woman who banished her for four years was dead. Now, she could be the wife.

She became pregnant. No surprise.

She never indicated that she wanted him to marry her, but he knew. "A man can be a fool," Alois liked to say, "yet even a fool must be able to learn from experience. Only by this, should he be judged." So Alois knew that he must be responsive to this new duty.

Besides, he wanted to get married. The displeasure of the good people of Braunau had begun to itch. Literally. An intolerable itching skin had begun to bother him (even on duty!) and sometimes would last for as long as an hour. It had to be the thoughts of the townspeople, there in full discharge against him. For the first time, he considered the possibility that all these anonymous letters they were writing to the Finance-Watch were not going to be thrown away by desk officials, no! Inquiries could well ensue. Such matters moved slowly, but now that Klara was pregnant, it

could prove an offensive sight if, in four or five months, she could not step into the street due to the size of her unmarried belly. That would put no honey into the letters sent to the Finance-Watch.

He could also say to himself that for the first time he did have some liking for the woman he would marry. Anna Glassl had satisfied his sense of rank—no question there!—but he did not enjoy the pale smell of her perfume. That could remind him in advance of the coffin waiting for her. And Fanni, to say the least of the worst, was like a wild woman in her shifts of mood. Klara, however, was calm and knew where she came from. He had to like how she took care of his children, and if she gave him a big family, well, nothing too terrible about that. It would shut the mouths of the townspeople.

In any event, what with children dying all the time, a large family was insurance against tragedy. Lose a few, and you still had others.

On the other hand, technically, they were cousins. When Alois made his first inquiries at the Braunau parish house, he discovered that he would have to file an application.

Now, Alois had to worry about the lie that had been certified near to nine years ago on the day when he had travelled to Strones with Johann Nepomuk and the three witnesses. Could that day stand in the way of a quick marriage? On official paper he was Johann Georg Hiedler's son, and therefore, Klara's cousin, one-step-removed. By Church ordinance, that might be too close. If he would now claim that Johann Georg was in no way his father, he would have to go back to being Alois Schicklgruber again. Not to be contemplated! So, he and Klara would have to take the long step of asking for an ecclesiastical decision.

In Braunau, the incumbent of the parish church, Father Koestler, proceeded to study the problem. After a month, came a discouraging response: The power to grant dispensations in cases such as Herr Hitler's did not reside in him. Klara and Alois would have to apply to the Bishop of Linz. Father Koestler would help him to write the letter.

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Most Reverend Episcopate:

Those who with most humble devotion have appended their signatures below have decided upon marriage. But according to the enclosed family tree they are prevented by the canonical impediment of collateral affinity. They therefore make the humble request that the Most Reverend Episcopate will graciously secure for them a dispensation on the following grounds:

The bridegroom has been a widower since August 10th of this year, and he is the father of two minors, a boy of two and a half years (Alois) and a girl of one year and two months (Angela), and they both need the services of a nurse, all the more because he is a customs official away from home all day and often at night, and therefore in no position to supervise the education and upbringing of his children. The bride has been caring for these children ever since their mother's death, and they are very fond of her. Thus it may be justifiably assumed that they will be well brought up and the marriage will be a happy one. Moreover, the bride is without means, and it is unlikely that she will ever have another opportunity to make a good marriage.

For these reasons, the undersigned repeat their humble petition for a gracious procurement of dispensation from the impediment of affinity.

Braunau am Inn, 27 October, 1884

Alois Hitler, Bridegroom

Klara Poelzl, Bride

Alois had become friends with Father Koestler's housekeeper, a plump middle-aged woman with a light in her eye.

Given the matching light in his eye, he showed her the letter and said, "There is no mention of a very important reason for our marriage. The bride is pregnant."

"Oh, we know that," she said, "but it is not a good idea to leave a stone in the envelope."

After a digestive pause, Alois said, "That is fine advice. It is well-seated," and he put his hand on her behind as if to test the center of her wisdom. She gave him a crack across the face.

"How could you do that?" he asked.

"Herr Hitler, don't you get slapped a lot?"

“Yes, but I also get some surprises. From fine women who are not as high and mighty as you.”

She laughed. She could not help herself. The cheeks of her face must be as red as the place where he had left his compliment. “Good luck with the Bishop of Linz,” she said, “he is a timid fellow.”

Word did not come back from Linz until a full month had passed. The Bishop of Linz would not grant the dispensation.

If Alois had had little liking for the Church, he could now despise it. “Churchmen wear black cassocks,” he said to himself, “to cover their lily-white asses.”

To Father Koestler, he asked respectfully, “What, then, Father, is the next step?”

“The letter containing your plea must now be translated into Latin by the diocesan scholars in Linz. That would allow us to send it to Rome. I think the papal court will be more receptive. They usually are.”

Yes, thought Alois, they will be far enough away not to worry about an Austrian man and woman. To the priest he said, “I thank you for your wisdom. I learn much from you, Father. I think in Rome they will see that

the act of providing a decent mother for my two children will constitute good Catholic virtue. That is a virtue I seek to acquire.”

His hints were not small. He was one sinner who might be ready to return to the mother fold.

Father Koestler was sufficiently pleased to offer good economic advice. Since the translation into Latin could prove expensive, it might be wise to sign a Testimonium Pauperatis.

“That is, a declaration of poverty?” Alois had certainly picked up enough Latin to translate that for himself.

“It will remove the obligation, Herr Hitler, to pay for the translation.”

Herr Hitler restrained himself from remarking that as an officer of the Crown, he considered himself well-to-do, thank you. Instead, he accepted the advice. He was not so removed from the wisdom of the earth as to wish to pay a tithe that he could avoid.

Three weeks later, close on Christmas, 1884, Rome granted the dispensation. But Alois and Klara still had to wait. No marriages could be solemnized until two weeks after the anniversary of the Holy Birth. This

further delay proved unhappy for Klara; her belly would be up to four visible months by then.

“It’s a big fellow we have here,” said Alois.

“I hope that is so,” she said. What could come out of a mother who had been so far away from Devotion on such a crucial night? Or, if the child did live, might it be marked? The thought would haunt her wedding.

Like many of the nuptials of Customs officials, the day was divided into two parts. As Klara would say later: “We were standing by the altar before six in the morning, but by seven Uncle Alois was out there on duty at his post. It was still dark when I came back to our rooms.”

That night they had a reception at the Pommer Inn and Johann Nepomuk, now a widower, came all the way from Spital to Braunau in company with Klara’s sister, Johanna, named after her mother, Johanna Poelzl. “Little Johanna” was a hunchback. This occasioned some corner-of-the-mouth humor between two of the Customs officials. “Yes,” said one, “the question is whether Alois will think it is good luck to rub her hump.”

“Don’t talk so loud,” said the other. “I hear this hunchback has a terrible temper.”

There was music. An accordion was played, and Alois and Klara did their best to dance, but Alois was stiff-legged. To stand in one place for hours on a cold day did not make you an artist on the dance floor.

Others followed. Customs officials and their wives. One of them had a son old enough to dance a vigorous polka with the recently-hired maid for the newlyweds, a girl with crimson cheeks and merry eyes named Rosalie, and this Rosalie had also prepared a roast leg of veal and a roast suckling pig to place in the center of the wedding feast.

She had also thrown too many logs on the fire. The rest of the dancers soon gave up. They had to. The room had become much too hot. Half in annoyance but half in exuberance, Alois kept teasing Rosalie, "Oh, you are the one who is in a hurry to burn up a man's goods, are you not?" and Rosalie would cover her cheeks with her hands and giggle.

Rosalie's eyes would open wide when she was teased. It was no small matter that her breasts were undeniably full, and were heaving in the aftermath of the polka. It did not need even that much to convince Klara. Alois was ready for his next diversion. She would remember this night for all the years to come, those years of sorrow when the child Gustav she was

carrying on this night and the two who were to follow, Ida and Otto, were all to die in the same year, Gustav at two, Ida at one, and Otto only a few weeks old.

Johann Nepomuk also noticed the warmth of the room and the look in Rosalie's eye. "Get rid of that maid," he whispered to Klara, but she did no more than shrug. "The next one could be worse," she whispered back.

Nepomuk had a terrible nightmare after the wedding party. His heart felt ready to burst. He could have died that night in his bed but instead he lived for three more years. There is no hide more resistant to rupture than the heart of a tough old peasant. Nonetheless, he never felt the same, a cruel punishment for an old widower who is trying to hold on to what is left for him. Death, when it arrived at the age of eighty-one, was by the same epidemic that took away the children—diphtheria.

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Diphtheria came into their family like the Black Death.

Mucus welled up from the throat of the two-year-old and the one-year-old, an endless up-pouring of green phlegm, thicker, heavier, than the mud of Strones. Noises rasped forth from the boy and girl, sounds uttered with the tortured authority of an old man and an old woman working their lungs like galley-slaves to clear a straw's width of passage. Gustav died first, Gustav, always sickly, a two-and-a-half-year-old who looked like the ghost of Klara's lost brothers and lost sisters, then Ida went, Ida, fifteen months old, certainly the blue-eyed image of Klara, going three weeks after Gustav. Both deaths came back upon the mother in the blow that soon

followed of Otto's death—Otto, just three weeks old!—lost to a galloping colic that gutted him inside-out. The stench of a baby born to die in its first weeks of life settled upon Klara's memory.

She had no doubt whose fault it was. Alois had been close to the Evil One—that, for certain!—before she had even been born. But such a matter she could understand. A boy in Vienna all alone and he always wanted so much. Of course! But for herself, there was no excuse! She had desired a family where children did not die but grew to their full age, and yet she had been unfaithful to the Lord God Almighty on the night Gustav was conceived, yes, and that secret pleasure she still looked to find on nights when Alois chose to make love as a change in his diet from the present affair with the new cook, Rosalie, at the Pommer Inn.

She hated him for such acts. But then, she also learned that this kind of hatred was treacherous. It seemed to increase her desire. Whereas on those nights when she felt a moment of love for Alois, all such good life turned to ice below. Alois would grumble when the act was done even as she was kissing him in a fever to set things right.

“Your mouth gives promises you do not keep,” he would tell her.

It did not feel as if she were married. Anna Glaszl and Fanni were always in her mind. If she had begun as a maid, and then became a nurse to Fanni's children, and then a stepmother, now her own children were dead. Alois-Junior, and Angela had been sent to Spital when diphtheria assaulted the younger children, and the older ones escaped infection. They were back with her now, even if the Hitler family rooms at the Pommer Inn were still reeking of the fumigation that followed each death. The odor lived on in her clothes through the three separate days of the three services at the cemetery. She knew how small a coffin could be—she had learned as much from the losses in the Poelzl family—but the miniature coffins of her own children proved equal to three slashes upon her heart. It aroused the love she had not dared to feel when her children were alive. She had been too terrified of the evil she could bring to these newborn souls, so unprotected. It was only after the death of Gustav that she realized she had loved him.

Alois, in his turn, had decided not to forgive God. To his friends at the tavern near the Customs House, and to the men he would drink with after duty, especially the newcomers, young Customs officials, he would speak with the authority of his three decades in the Finance-Watch. "It is

the Emperor who has the power to guide us,” he remarked one hot summer night. “Real power is there. God does nothing but kill us off.”

“Alois,” said his oldest friend, “you speak as if you are not afraid of going upstairs.”

“Upstairs or downstairs, the only importance for me is Franz Josef. He should mean more to us than God, yes!”

“And the Devil?”

“Forget the Devil. Who builds the ships? Who makes the railroads? Not God, not the Devil. Men make these things!”

“You go too far,” said his oldest friend.

By the time he reached home, Alois was usually in no good mood. The beer wore off in a sour cloud. He would scold Alois-Junior, he would upbraid Angela, he would not say a word to Klara. Now, no more often than once a week (and he was furious at how much these three deaths had taken from his vitality) he would look at Klara again as he had on their first night, and he would try to conceive of how to introduce her to specialites de maison. He did not speak French but he knew all he needed to know about those three words. One of the Customs Officers, a man hardly to be relied

on for telling the truth about his personal life, would brag that he had been to Paris in his youth. There, in a brothel, he claimed, he had learned more in two nights than from all the rest of his life.

Alois refused to be impressed. Some of the details were not foreign to him. Fanni, for one, liked to put her mouth everywhere, and Anna Glassl was no lady when you got down to it. And once in a while with one of the maids or the cooks, they would give him a nice wet surprise.

Now, he had this frightened bird whose torso could scorch him even if her thighs were as cold as a snow bank. She made love, yes, when he could actually get all the way into her—not often—she was as strong as the Hound, yes, so much like bitches he had seen snarling and snapping at a male dog's genitals. Klara did not snarl or snap, she just jumped up on the altar, alone, always alone, she was so private that he wanted to put his mouth where she was most private, and then he would slip the Hound into her mouth. He would show her where the real Devotion was located.

Yet, on this hot summer night when he tried to open her closed legs, pushing harder than ever with the force of his arms, there came a moment when his breath overtook him. A startling pang! For one instant, he felt as

if he had been felled by thunder. Was that his heart? Was he the next to die?

“Are you all right?” she cried out as he lay beside her seeking to breathe again, his wind going in and out with a rasp that sounded as terrible as the last winds of their lost children.

“All right. Yes. No,” he said, and then she was on him. She did not know if this would resuscitate him or end him, but the same spite, sharp as a needle, that had come to her after Fanni’s death was in her again. Fanni had told her once what to do. So Klara turned head to foot, and put her most unmentionable part down on his hard-breathing nose and mouth, and took in his old battering ram to her lips. Uncle was now as soft down there as a coil of excrement. Even as she said this to herself, she had plopped him into her mouth with an avidity that could come only from the Evil One himself—that she knew. She knew from where the impulse had come. So, now they both had their heads at the wrong end, and she knew—the Evil One was also with them. She knew. He had never come closer.

And now, the Hound began to come to life. Right in her mouth. It surprised her. Alois had been limp, so limp. But now it was happening.

She was giving life to her man. She felt such power. Alois was stronger, and before long, he was revived, yes, fully revived, a man again! And now, his mouth lathered with sap and juice from her unmentionable other parts still on his lips, he turned around and embraced her face with all the passion of own lips and face, ready at last to give it to her with the Hound, grind it into her piety, yes, damn all piety, thought Alois—damned churchmouse wife, damned church!—he was back from the dead, some kind of miracle had rescued him, yes, he was all there, his pride and honor like a sword, and never before a night like this, better than a storm at sea! And then it went on beyond such moments, for she—the most angelic woman in Braunau—was giving herself over with a prime lust to accept the Devil, yes, she knew he was there with Alois and herself, all three were now drowning in the spurts that came out of him and then out of her, and I certainly knew for I was the third presence, I rode with them into the caterwauling falls of this coming together, Alois and myself filling the womb of Klara Poelzl Hitler, yes, I knew the moment when a new creation was conceived, was seized, for I, too, was there, I was representing the Evil One. Yes, I was present at this conception, even as the Angel Gabriel was the servant of Jehovah on

that momentous night in Nazareth. So did I appear on this July night nine months and ten days before Adolf Hitler would be born on April 20, 1889. Yes, I was there as a high officer in the finest intelligence service that has ever existed.

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Titles in our domain are changeable. Given the needs of the occasion, I am known as the Mandarin, the Prince, the Impersonator, the Aide, or, (since I will not be present in visible form through the events to come) I will term myself a phantom. The particular role does not matter. I remain an instrument of the Devil.

That will not be comfortable for many readers. What with the pronounced dominance of the technological world in the Twenty-First Century, an unspoken agreement seems to exist among many of the most well-educated that there is no such entity as the Devil. Among American and European intelligentsia, there is no readiness to postulate a conflict

between Satan and the Lord. Rather, the New Technological World is fiercely in need of a universe subject to reason. While the existence of God is acceptable to some scientists, numerous high officials, and a horde of church-goers who see Him as All-good, All-powerful, the notion that there is another entity equal or nearly equal to God is not to be posited. Not in the Twenty-First Century. There can be one Mystery, but not two!

Sophisticated men and women do not often give credence to the supposition that God and the devil are still very much in existence and very much at war.

There need be no surprise, then, that the general understanding of Adolf Hitler's personality is blurred. He is, after all, a third mystery, the most mysterious human of the century, a man, when all is said, who was all-too-human, if, it will be agreed, the average man or woman does possess large funds of the petty and the inhumane. Nonetheless, over the years, as I will yet do my best to explain, I did grow able to comprehend his psyche. How can I not take pride in this? As a specimen of humanity, he was close to unmeasurable. He developed into the wild beast of the century, this all-too-modest-looking client with his gargoyle of a mustache, who, in the

beginning, even I belittled as “little Adolf,” yes, I knew him when we still referred to the young man who grew out of the boy as “little Adolf with the big ideas.”

I can state that as a newborn he was a most typical Klara Poelzl product. That is, he was close to desperately unhealthy. Indeed, he terrified Klara every time a drop of snot oozed out of his nose or a bubble of sputum popped up from his infant lips.

It is probably true that she was ready to die if he did not live. Devils are sound at anticipating motive (the more sordid, the better), but our predictive attempts fade at the borders of mortality. We are obliged to recognize that God does have a final power to decide where and when a human being will die. Take the extreme example of an airplane that has just crashed. Let us say we are responsible for the malfunction. Nonetheless, we do not have the power to destroy everyone on board. Our Adversary (God) determines the result. In most such cases, He will have to accept what we have succeeded in bringing off. It is too costly for God to countermand us. Do not assume that it requires no exceptional effort for Him to save a few people trapped on that edge of extinction—airplane

crashes involve so many factors! Indeed, He could not even save His Son, (as we are never tired of reminding our clients!) but there are occasions when a death we looked to create does not occur. From time to time, even in extreme difficulties, God still disposes.

Be it understood, then, that even such mortal questions come down to the measure of expenditure. A most useful rule of thumb—for human endeavor as well—is that all wars are ultimately determined by who can bear the cost. Sometimes, it is prodigiously expensive for God to war with us. To keep this understanding alive—that He is not All-Powerful—our Maestro demands that we try not to speak of the Lord as God, but as the D.K. (What D.K. means, will be explained before long.)

For now, however, allow me to take up Klara and her condition as she became a mother for the fourth time.

The attention she gave to Adolf's early days would have been seen as hysteria in any woman who had less cause for concern, but then, Klara was living at the edge of the abyss. Recollections of her first illicit joining with Alois were pervaded by the penetratingly corrupt smell of the sickroom as Gustav, Ida, and Otto were lost one by one in the same few months of the

same year. She had prayed devoutly to God to save them. He had chosen to ignore her. As she saw it, that rebuke could only confirm the wretched evil of her condition. So she looked to go back to her feelings on the day she first met Alois. His visit in Spital came when she was sixteen, and she had never seen a man who disturbed her so directly, so physically—she fell back a full step on their meeting at the door. She might as well have received a blow to the stomach.

Yet she had also admired Alois, immensely, and at once. Her mother had an expression on her face Klara had not seen before. For one instant, there in full pride and longing, Johanna did look beautiful. In the next instant, Klara felt a closeness to her mother that was more than their family sense of sharing the same bed-rags of existence, no, it was as if she inhabited her mother's heart for the blink of an eye, and then felt the full force of the pang that followed. She was able to feel all of her mother's old desire at the exact moment they both saw Alois. If one may speak of a pang of joy, she felt indeed just such a bolt.

We need not, however, journey again along the back and forth of Klara's passion for Alois, nor return to the depths of her piety. By the time

Adolf was born, she had formed the habit of washing her mouth every morning with laundry soap (Alois was now full of a predilection—especially in late pregnancy—to put her head onto the Hound and keep it there, one big hand on her neck until the discharge of his needs was complete.)

No surprise then if her love was for the baby. So soon as Adolf gave some real indication of living—after two weeks he would smile with delight at the approach of her face—she began to believe that God might be kind to her this time, that He could even be ready to forgive. Would He be ready to spare this child? Was His Wrath lessened? Had He even given her an angel? Such is the nature of pious hope! Next, she had a dream where an angel told her to have nothing to do with her husband. Not in bed! Such is the nature of pious obligation.

Alois soon had to face the possibility that a will of iron, when forged by prayer, can be quite as powerful in a woman as a highly-developed biceps on a man. At first, Alois could not believe that her refusal to let him touch her was not more than a whim, nor a new species of drawn-out enticement. “You women go back and forth like a kitten chasing its tail,” he

told her. Then, deciding that rebellion such as this was to be mercilessly crushed, he seized her buttocks with one hand and a breast with the other.

She bit him on the wrist hard enough to draw blood. Whereupon he cuffed her, leaving Klara with a bruised eye. Gott im Himmel! He was obliged next morning to beg her not to go out until her eye was no longer discolored. For a week, his hand bandaged, he did the shopping after work—no tavern for those nights. After which, the bruise gone, he still had to give up what he considered to be his irrevocable rights, and Alois slept in a huddle on his side of the bed.

Since this state was to be maintained for close to three years, it will certainly be worth returning to the solutions he found to raise such a matrimonial siege. But, for now, we stay close to Klara. An intensity of emotion is always attractive to demons and devils, even as farmers dream of black soil for future crops.

It need hardly be underlined that the death of Otto, Gustav, and Ida proved useful to us even if we had not been the ones to effect it. Obviously, it intensified Klara's adoration of Adolf past any usual measure of large maternal love. When he began to scream every time she kissed his lips, she

came to understand that it was the odor of lye on her mouth. But since Alois had now been driven to his side of the bed, there was no longer a need to wash with it in the morning. Therefore, she could kiss Adolf even as he gurgled obligingly.

It hardly required special insight for us to know that this could prove useful. Excessive mother-love is almost as promising to us as the void of mother-love. We were keyed to look for excess of every kind, good or bad, loving or hateful, too much or too little of anything. Every exaggeration of honest sentiment contributes to our aims.

When it comes to turning a child into a client, we follow a reliable rule of thumb. An incestuous procreation followed by swarms of mother-love will offer rich possibilities. When the event has been fortified by the presence of the E.O. at conception, there is every reason to expect that the child can develop exceptional possibilities. If it lives. We lose so many. All too often, the D.K. is aware of our choice and, heartlessly—I will say this about Him!—yes, God removes them heartlessly! This can happen no matter the cost to Himself. The cost to Himself? A curious calculation is present. The D.K. is not insensitive to the hopes of those who surround the

child. The early death of an exceptional child can demoralize a family. Even when the D.K. knows, therefore, that a given individual belongs in good part to us, He hesitates. Sometimes, He does not wish to take on the collateral damage to the family. Besides, His Cudgels can always look to steal the boy or girl back from us.

So the D.K. is respectful of mother-love when it is all-embracing. It will come as no surprise then that many artists, ogres, geniuses, killers, and an occasional savior live to maturity because God chose not to dispose of them. The first element of mutual recognition in the struggle between the D.K. and the E.O. is probably the understanding that no single splendid human quality can ever prevail by itself, unaltered by either. Even the noblest, most self-sacrificing and generous mother can produce a monster provided we are there. All the same, this is not a game where one can count on the end result. That is why investing in the newborn is often an unbalanced gamble for both the Maestro and the Lord.

But I can see by now that further explanation of the conditions, limitations, and ineffable powers of the separate world that I inhabit, is necessary or too little will be understood.

-2-

The Lord, as the Maestro never fails to remind us, is not Infinite. The unholy secret of the local heavens is that God and the Devil exist within parameters. Call them paradoxes if you must, but even divine powers suffer constraint. I will add that many primitive tribes, as well as the Egyptians and the Greeks, were more closely attuned than modern men and women to the vagaries and boundaries of divine power. It was the theologians of the Jews, the Christians, and the Moslems who ascribed infinite amplitude to God, and we have profited from their error ever since.

So, yes, the war proceeds, and we devils are still confronted daily by a formidable army of angels. (We choose to call them Cudgels!)

These warring forces ought to be familiar to anyone who has read "Paradise Lost." I would note that devils are often well-versed in literary classics. I cannot speak for the angels, but our Maestro sees literary insight as a complement to our work with humans. John Milton is high, then, in our arcana of poets and novelists who are not unforgivably second-rate because of sentimental inexactitudes. John Milton did provide some outline, after all, of the contest between the Two Kingdoms. No matter how inaccurate his details, he offered a suggestion of the manner in which our armies confronted each other at the commencement of the divine estrangement when hordes of early angels first separated into opposed camps.

One can offer respect, then, to that great blind man even if his suppositions are seriously out of date. No longer do angels and devils wage war in phalanx. Rather, we are artfully installed now in every corner of human behavior. To present a closer notion of the sinuosities, salients, neuterings, and recesses of our war, I would start therefore with the three central elements of present-day strife—the divine, the satanic, and the human. God and His angelic cohort strive to bring men, women, and children under His Guidance. Our Maestro, with the aid of his

representatives, look to direct these same humans in opposed directions. Until the Middle Ages, human beings brought no vital role to this contest. They were pawns. Hence the original concept: Two Kingdoms. By now, however, we have to take each individual man or woman into account. We are obliged to. Many, if not most, humans now do their best to be beholden neither to God nor to the Maestro. They seek to be free. They often remark (if most sentimentiously) "I want to discover who I am!" Humans have become so vain (through technology) that more than a number expect by now to become independent of both of us, God and Devil alike.

This, it can be repeated, is but a first approach to the contradictions embedded in existence, a sketch of the complexity of apparently simple events. This much explained, I would add that I most certainly do plan to draw a portrait of the early life of this Adolf Hitler. I would add that I have a skilled devil's ability to enter many a human mind.

-3-

I can recover, if necessary, the concealed, even long-buried memories of a client. Such power, however, consumes Time. (Time is a word I capitalize since for us, as well as for the angels, it is a resource comparable to how Money serves as a matrix for humans.) We are always calculating the Time we can afford to give each of our clients, and such costs increase when we choose to inhabit people's dreams. My need to acquire more insight always has to be balanced, then, against the increased investment required when working our will upon a person. For this reason, the average human is not often of interest to us. Their powers of insight, memory, and ill intent are limited. Rather, we look to find men and women

who are ready to transgress divine or social laws in the course of carrying off a major endeavor for us.

Such men and women are rare. More often we have to be content with mediocrities whom we look to make more successful. In our Company, provided we are sufficiently patient, that can produce promotions for oneself. Over many an era, I have had clients whom I was able to develop to the point where they could serve directly in one or another of the Maestro's larger projects. The majority, however, caught in the push-and-pull, the back and forth between their guardian angel and a directing devil like myself, end by producing little that is useful to either Kingdom, and I can certainly recall a few unhappy situations where the guardian angel who was my opposite number came away with the spoils.

At one period in the past, as a result of several such losses, my position suffered. For a time, I was assigned clients of petty origin or modest achievement. I encouraged common soldiers, for instance, to injure the morale of their company by desertion, I served workers and peasants who looked to stir up revolutions, but turned corrupt. I knew a few priests in small towns who got into trouble with little boys, or estate managers who

pilfered funds. I indulged petty barons and counts as they gambled away the last of old holdings, and I might as well list petty suicides, petty thieves, drunken louts, and unfaithful wives (of the worst sort—matched by their male counterparts). I had a horde of clients, but only a few could stimulate my developed instincts. For the most part, I had to serve as proctor for clients born with little who soon proceeded to less. It could have been cause for despair. I did miss the brio that a social summit offers. While I could rarely know whether the Maestro was safeguarding my talents for some future purpose or merely marinating me in various backwaters, I did take hope when on one occasion he chose to remark that I might yet be given a post comparable to some of the epic encounters of our Company during the first three centuries of the Church in Rome. Yes, all of that might be there for me once more, provided I was ready to pay unremitting attention now to my present wretches, thugs, and drunks. I did, and eventually, was selected to oversee the work of a number of minor demons who were keeping watch on a young Austrian family whose developed potentialities might yet prove astounding. Insignificant at present was this embryo as was his family, but he had ancestral fault-lines full of the

intoxicating stink of our old friend, blood-scandal. So I was to observe him more closely after his birth.

I did not dare to ask, but of course I could not, in those years, hide my curiosity, and at this point, the Maestro did choose to speak directly to my thoughts. He said: “Why have I been so interested in this creature not yet born? Can it be that he will yet possess the largest ambition one could possibly encounter? I may propose that you yet take him on full-time. But, remain at ease! It is still no more than a project. It could certainly fail. I know he will need endless instruction. His future terrors must be allayed by the most reassuring experiences you can arrange for him. And you must guard him from receiving any crushing defeats to his ego in his early years. In time, if he develops the greater part of his potential promise, he could, as I say, become your only client. Must I say more? Do pay attention. We may be looking at a major project.”

All this was uttered by the E.O. with characteristic irony. We never knew how serious The Master was when he spoke to our mind's ear.

In any case, I dared not ask: What if I fail? Many of our projects do. Particularly, major ones, and this new venture had to remain an outrageous

gamble. I felt as if I knew too much. I had been there, after all, when he was conceived.

Now, some readers may have noticed that I have described that event in two modes. Once, I speak as if I was there in that connubial bed. Then again, I have indicated that I was not. Not literally. Nonetheless, in referring to my participation, I am telling the truth just as completely as if I were purveying a lie. For even as we now assume to our scientific confusion that light is both a particle and a wave, so do we devils live in both the lie and the truth, side by side.

The explanation—provided one is ready to follow!—is considerably less difficult than, let us say, Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity.

-4-

Spirits like myself keep what I would call a retroactive relation to Time. Our ability to ingest the experience of lower demons enables higher phantoms like myself to inhabit two moments of Time at once. A devil of rank, I did not have to be present on the night Adolf was conceived. I was able to ingest the exact experience as it took place in Time by calling upon the devil (of lower rank) who had been present in Alois' bed on the original occasion. This devil had certainly plunged into the act directly. I must say that that is always an option for us. We enter into many a cohabitation. On rare occasions, and this was one, a minor devil can even implore the E.O to be present as well. And he was. The occasion demanded it! Afterward,

following my assignment to Klara, Alois, and young Adolf Hitler, the moment of impregnation was repeated for me by the devil who had actually been present that night. It entered my senses with a completeness of odor and carnal detail that can be termed absolute. So, it also happened to me. For practical purposes, I was there. That particular Time became my own. Yes, among us, to be given an exact recollection is equal to being present. So, I also knew from the incomparable intensity of the occasion that this was the rarest event. The E.O. had actually joined with the attendant devil for one instant (even as Jehovah had offered His immanence to Gabriel during another exceptional event.)

While I would not be attached exclusively to Adolf Hitler for many years, the Maestro did place him in my Overview. His life and modest deeds as a boy were conveyed to me over all the years of his childhood. For this reason, I am ready to write about that early life with a confidence no responsible biographer would feel ready to attempt.

-1-

By the time he was a year old, Klara called the boy Adi. It was never Adolf or Dolfi. (Dolfi was much too close to Teufel.) “Look,” she would say to her stepchildren, “look, Alois, look, Angela, isn’t he an angel, a little god?” Since the baby had a round face, big round eyes as blue as hers, and a small mouth, and therefore looked to them like any other baby, they nodded with easy obedience. She was a good stepmother and that was all right with Alois-Junior, and also with Angela, especially since they had heard from Alois-Senior that their own mother, Fanni, had been crazy.

Klara did not plan to speak with such open enthusiasm to her stepchildren about their new half-brother, but she could not help herself. The beatitude was in her eyes. Adoration welled forth with every indication Adi gave that, yes, he would still be there tomorrow, he would live.

She was certain she would keep him alive. Breast-feeding gave her the most virtuous sense of certainty. She was putting her own strength into him. Her nipple was never far from his mouth. Minor devils, flying over Braunau at night, would report that her prayers were more heartfelt than any of the other young mothers there. Devils, obviously, have minimal attachment to the sentimental, let alone the heartfelt, but one or two were bothered by Klara, yes, even haunted a bit. Her prayer was so pure: “Oh, Lord, take my life if it will help to save his.” Other women, being more practical, complained to the D.K. about what was missing in their days. The most greedy and stupid were always looking to own a better house, more money, or a surprisingly good lover, “yes, if you permit it, Lord,”—there was rarely a sweet for which they did not pine. Klara, by contrast, looked to

give nourishment and long life to the child. Her breast, count on it, was always in his mouth.

While the Maestro was in general not sympathetic to breast-feeding since its absence often stimulated energy ugly enough for us to employ, he was invariably tolerant concerning cases of first-degree incest. In such situations, he did want the mother to be close to the child. All the better for us! (A monster is most effective when it can call on stores of love with which to charm new acquaintances.)

We obtain other advantages through excretory dramas. A dirty butt on a baby, if found daily, always sends us a signal—the mother is, yes, a potential client for us. The opposite, however, can also be of use. Klara is a fine example here. She always kept a clean house. Her rooms at the Pommer Inn were now as spotless as any home tended to by several good maids. The furnishings gleamed. So, too, did Adi's pip-squeak of an anus have its glow. It was kept as immaculate as an opal, small and glistening, and of that, too, did the E.O. approve—an incestuary must always be kept aware of the importance of his or her excrement, even if it comes down to a little asshole that is forever being polished.

-2-

Not long after Adolf was born, Alois decided to leave the Pommer Inn. This move amounted to his twelfth change of address in Braunau over fourteen years. But, Alois had good words for the Pommer: "It has elegance. I don't know that I would use such a word for anything else in this little city." He had a dozen such remarks to enliven a hundred situations of small talk. "Women are like geese," he liked to say. "You can recognize them from behind." Heavy tavern laughter would follow even if none of them could explain what was so particular about the rear end of a goose. Or, when speaking to fellow professionals: "To pick out a smuggler is easy. Either they look like the wretches they are or they are too good to be true.

They dress too well, they speak too well, and the amateurs always work very hard at looking you in the eye.”

When asked, however, why he had moved from the Pommer Inn after a residence that had lasted for four years, he would shrug. “I like to move,” he would say. The truth was that he had used up the waitresses, chambermaids and cooks at the Pommer who were not too old or too ugly, and he could have added (and did to one or two friends), “when a woman goes dry on you, change your house. That can put a little oil in her juice.” He could even have given the real reason—no matter where he lived, a restlessness came upon him sooner or later.

On the day when the Hitler family left the Pommer Inn, he had, however, a most uncharacteristic thought. It was that fate could yet choose him for high position. I will remark that his idea of high position was to become Chief Customs Official for the provincial capital of Linz. Indeed, fate would yet give him exactly that post. Never superstitious (except when he was) Alois decided that the shift from the Pommer Inn to a rented house on Linzerstrasse was a good move. He and Klara both agreed that they needed more room, and now they had it. Of course, there were no females

in the attic, but he could manage with that. He had nosed out a woman who lived on his route home from the tavern. He had to pay for the privilege by giving her a gift time to time, but then the rent on Linzerstrasse was low. It was a dreary house.

All the while, he fought against falling in love with his wife. She infuriated him. If ants were like bees and had a Queen for whom they labored, then Klara was Queen of the ants, for she commanded his skin to crawl, his crotch to itch, and his heart to toll in his chest—all of this coming from no more than the presence of Klara on her half of the divided bed. He would keep thinking of how she had looked on the night of her wedding. She had worn a dark silk dress, rose-colored with a white collar—that much white she allowed herself as a bride—and on her white forehead, she had teased some charming curls. At her breast was pinned the one piece of jewelry she possessed, a small green cluster of glass grapes looking real enough to mislead a man into reaching for one. And then there were her eyes—no mistake! He had to fight against falling in love with a woman who kept the cleanest house in Braunau just for him and for three kids—two of them not even her own!—a woman always as polite to him in public as to an

emperor, a woman who never complained about what she had and didn't have nor nagged him about finances, a woman who still had only one good dress, the one worn at her wedding party, and yet if he laid a finger on her, she would have bitten it off. He wondered if the difference in their age was what it was about. Better than marrying her, he should have put her in a convent. Yet his skin itched at the thought of how she would not let him near.

Drinking at the tavern, he would look to regain some pride. His dislike of the Church had by now become a conversational grist. Yes, he could say a few things. He would occasionally page through an anti-clerical volume he had found in an antique bookshop in Braunau; indeed, the store owner, Hans Lycidias Leipziger, would meet him on many an evening for beer. While the bookseller kept himself at a scholarly level above more mundane discussions by offering no more than a nod of his head from time to time, his wise presence, his shaven chin and shaven upper lip, his full mutton chops, his peephole spectacles, his half-bald head of burgeoning white hair, offered a slight but legitimizing resemblance to Arthur Schopenhauer and this gave support to Herr Leipziger's smallest assent, just

enough to carry the other Customs Officers around the more bruising turns of Alois' argument. While they were hardly to be counted as church-goers, "No good man wants to be neutered," most were ready to admit, still they were officials. So, they could hardly feel at ease when a prestigious institution was mocked, let alone the Holy Roman Church.

Not Alois. He felt no fear in declaring that he had no fear. "If there is a Providence larger than Franz Josef's power to provide for us, I have not encountered it."

"Alois, not everything comes up to a man with a printed sign," said the officer closest to him in rank.

"Yes, it is all a mystery. Mystery, mystery, mystery, and the Church keeps the keys, they are the caretakers, yah?"

The others laughed uneasily. But Alois was thinking of Klara and how her piety left a hot rock in his stomach. He would grind this rock to powder. "In the Middle Ages," he said, "do you know? The whores, they were more respectable than the nuns. They even had a Guild. For themselves alone! I have read about a convent in Franconia so stinking bad the Pope had to investigate. Why? Because the Franconia Whores' Guild

complained about the illegal competition they were receiving from the Franconia nuns.”

“Come now,” said two drinkers at once.

“True. It is true. Absolutely true. Hans Leipziger here can show you the text.” Leipziger nodded slowly, reflectively. He was a little too drunk to be certain on which side his authority should fall. “Yes,” said Alois, “the Pope says, ‘Send a monsignor to look into it.’ What does this good monsignor report? Yah? Half the nuns are pregnant. This is the sober fact history must live with. So, the Pope takes a real look at the monasteries. Orgies. Orgies of homosexuals.” He said it with such force that he had time to take a long swallow from his tankard.

“That, of course,” said Alois, once fresh breath had also been ingested, “need not surprise us. To this day, half of the priesthood are mamma’s boys. We know that.”

“No, we don’t,” muttered one of the younger officers. “My brother is a priest.”

“In that case, I tip my hat to him,” said Alois, “if he is your brother, he is different. But that was then. And I assure you: The priests who were

real men did worse. You ever hear this saying of the Pope? From the same Pope. He said, 'No priest needs to marry so long as the peasant has a wife.'"

The unspoken demand of his voice was that they be ready to applaud with laughter. So, they laughed. "It was exactly like that," he said. "The poor merchant has one wife, the priest has ten, and the Bishop cannot enter heaven—too many wives to bring along."

"Which Bishop?"

"The Bishop of Linz, don't you know?"

Alois had not forgotten the Bishop of Linz who, six years ago, had refused his application to marry Klara. In order to defray the expenses of translating his letter into Latin, Alois had been forced to declare that he was a pauper. Six years ago. It still rankled.

On the walk home, his mood was foul. He had decided that the days of enjoying open tirades against the Church might be coming to a close. He was fifty-four years old, and for many years, had never worried about his position in life. He had known he could and would rise in the ranks open to him, but no higher.

Now, however, his stomach was unsettled. From a friend in the Finance Watch, he had been told that in Vienna there was talk of a promotion for Alois Hitler up to Chief Customs Officer at Passau. Given his lack of respectable education, this would be a true rise in rank, a most innovative promotion. "However, you have to watch yourself, Alois," the friend had said. "This is still a year away. Keep a good name if you want to be moved to Passau."

He had always seen himself as exceptional, afraid of no one (except for certain superiors in uniform), possessed of a genuine magnetism for women (how many men could say that much for themselves?) and up from the ranks. Moreover, he had never been timid about public opinion. Nobody he knew could say as much. He was no coward in that department.

But now this respected friend who had a confidant in the upper councils of the Finance-Watch was saying, "Watch out for the townspeople in Braunau."

This worry travelled right into him. Because Alois could not decide whether to trust his friend. The man was a practical joker. In fact, he was the same one who had once told him: "The townspeople of Braunau are

nothing. You can put your thumb to your nose at them.” Alois had indeed put together a good many habits around that remark, but the truth was he had said too much tonight, if there was any ground to the rumor concerning Passau. Most unsettling! He was learning how much ambition he had, a real ambition which he had never admitted to himself. He couldn't. It would have been like a river breaking through a levee. But now he could recognize that a flood-water was waiting. If he wanted to stay afloat, he had to stop pissing on the Church.

Yes, in this sense, his wife, a cold tit to him and a jug of warm milk to the baby—what a guzzler! never off the tit, but, get by all that!—she was a useful wife. Good for the children, good cook, very good with the Church.

Now, he, personally, was not going to be caught at a High Mass except for State occasions, holidays. He did not wish to live with a new itching attack, no, he did not see the confessional box for himself. His skin prickled. A serious official of the Crown like himself should not have to bare his soul (and some of the private stuff below the belt!) no, not to one more priest. Let them find nourishment elsewhere for their masturbation.

Women, however, should be seen in church. It was time to accept that fact. The people in Braunau must be able to say that his wife never missed a Mass.

-3-

Within the Company, we look upon human ambition as a force at our disposal. While we accept the likelihood that many human emotions originate in God, even as He gave necessary instincts to the animals, nonetheless, we are always ready to convert an interesting passion. Of no two states is this more true than ambition and its weak sister, avarice. Avarice is simple to deal with—it is, after all, nothing but greed. Ambition, however, can be related to the Originating Vision. That may be why the D.K. is so often ready to encourage ambition. I would suppose His goal is for every living human to possess the potential to fulfill some part of His Vision. For to that degree, God would also prosper. The Maestro is

forever hinting to us that there are other gods in the cosmos. We can assume they have their separate hegemony among the stars with their own notions of the purpose of existence. At that level, the D.K. is no more than one entrepreneur among many!

The Maestro was speaking, of course, of cosmic ambition. Let me address myself, however, to the human variety. As he is never loathe to tell us, a human who suffers from too much ambition is paying for the Creator's own lack of anticipation. The D.K., wishing His Vision to be effective, had encouraged the human will to be free of Him. In doing so, He enabled us to take in a horde of clients whose free will brought them racing to us. God, once again, had miscalculated. Ambition is not only the most powerful of the emotions but the most unstable. So, defeat pulls a man or woman toward us. (So many of the most ambitious are ready to blame God for a run of bad luck.)

Personal ambition, therefore, awakens our interest. The D.K., a prodigious optimist, had not foreseen that the men and women who could promulgate His Vision by the intensity of their ambition had better be saints. Of course, few human beings have any desire to develop to that

point. I will be blunt. His miscalculations proved grievous for Him. He overrated the amount of good feeling in human nature even if He had been creative enough to originate it in the first place. Whereas the Maestro has always been alert to the lodes of perversity to be found in every vein of human nature.

Consider the case with Alois. Many people guard their ambition as the most secret part of their emotions (guarded even from their own awareness). For so soon as ambition begins to burn too brightly in the mind, it is ready, if necessary, to shred a good many long-held convictions about the inviolability of one's honor. All too often ambition can become as blind a cutting tool as a laser.

No surprise then if Alois was not the only one in the Hitler family to suffer this disruption. Ambition being a true germ, is highly infectious. If Klara now had a child who was actually giving a few signs of staying alive, this was due, as we have remarked, to her belief in the life of her milk. Her breasts were suffused with joy, the most generous joy she had ever known. So, Klara now wanted everything for Adi. And to such a degree, that she

was even ready to contemplate forgiving her husband a bit—enough maybe to allow him to cross the middle of the bed.

Their second courtship began. She was still breast-feeding Adolf. So, there was no question of a pregnancy. What inspired the return of some little carnal interest was her growing appreciation of Alois. He had built strong foundations, after all, for the good future of Adolf. Even as her husband had risen from the mud of Strones and Spital to the honor of a high uniform in the service of Franz Josef, she, in turn, might begin to measure the heights to which little Adolf could ascend should his ability to go beyond his origins prove equal to the vigor and upward progress of his father.

For that, however, he would need this father to love him. Once, in her gentlest voice, she had said to Alois, “Sometimes I wonder why you never hold Adi.”

“It will just make the other two jealous,” he answered. “Jealous kids are not to be trusted with babies.”

“Alois and Angela hold him all the time,” she said. “They are not jealous. They like him.”

“Let us keep it that way. Maybe they are happy I do not hold him.”

“Sometimes I am afraid he is not very important to you,” she dared to say.

She had gone one step beyond where she had thought to go. Bad enough for him that he had only half a bed, but now she was looking to scold him? “Important to me?” he said. “That I can answer. He is not important to me. Not yet. I want to see if he will live.”

She did not weep often, but here she burst into tears. The worst had happened, and she felt weak before him again. She was not free of loving him.

At that moment, the dog began to bark. Alois had bought a mongrel boxer for a few gulden from a farmer he knew. Since they were living in a house, rather than at an inn, the purchase could be considered protection worth the cost. But the dog, whom he named Luther, proved disappointing. While Luther worshipped Alois and quivered before his master at every shift of tone, he did not seem otherwise alert. Moreover, he had nervous habits. Even as Alois shouted at him to stop howling, poor Luther would urinate on the floor.

Afterward, Alois might have his regrets. The dog, after all, did adore him. First, however, he whipped him. Even as Luther tried to crawl away, the poor bottom of the beast became soaked in his own outpourings. All the while, he was yelping in full terror. The uproar woke the children. Alois-Junior came out first, then Angela, and Adi at the last, not yet two years old, but agile enough to get out of his low bed and totter into the midst of this. Klara leaped up to seize him. She was ready for the worst, she hardly knew what—that the child would step into the urine, that he would weep for her breast, that Alois might strike them both—she had seen the look in her husband's eye when Adi became too greedy on her tit. None of this happened, however. To the contrary, the child looked with solemn interest at the whimpering dog, then at the flailing hand of the father, and his blue eyes had a gleam she had seen before, a look of remarkable intensity for one so small. She had seen it on his face when suckling him. He would stare at her with an expression equal to the one on Alois' face at rare times, the tender expression of a lover overwhelmed for a moment by the implicit equality of flesh to flesh, soul upon soul. Deep is the communion of being

able to speak without a sound being uttered. At such instants, she felt as if this child was closer to her and knew more about her than anyone.

Now, as Adolf stared at the wet dog and then at the over-flushed face of the father, there was no tenderness in this look, but much comprehension.

Klara felt an odd panic as if she must now startle the little boy into weeping so that she could give him her breast and thereby remove him from the room. And, she succeeded. Adi burst into a rage as she took him up, bore him away, and force-fed him. Indeed, armed with his first tooth, he nipped her enough for Klara to cry out, whereupon he stopped bawling long enough to give a deep and hearty chuckle.

From the room she had just quit, she could hear Alois bellowing.

“That dog can’t even shit right,” he cried out of his own pain at the awful turn the evening had taken. Luther was bleeding at the mouth from blows he had received full-face on his muzzle, but in turn, Alois’ palm had a small but ugly laceration from raking one fierce slap across a broken incisor in the middle of Luther’s sad front teeth.

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It will be noted that I write about my people much like any reasonably good novelist. By turns, I am ready to observe them sardonically, objectively, ironically, sympathetically, judgmentally, even compassionately. Nor am I often sinister. This should not come as a surprise. Why should I descend to the level of a casual reader's notion of how a devil is supposed to behave?

From the onset of our service, the Maestro has instructed us to make humankind our ongoing study. He even encourages us to feel close to what is godly in people as well as to the spoils that may be there later. To comprehend the nobler facets of humankind, precisely those that can prove

inimical to us, is important. If we had religious Orders in the Company, I might be a Jesuit. Indeed, I share a fundamental understanding with them. I am always ready to acquire a sympathetic comprehension of whoever is our adversary—I see it as my duty to be ready, indeed, to know more about godly sentiments than all but the most gifted of the angels.

That may be why the Maestro encourages us to speak of God as the D.K. (At least those of us who work in German-speaking lands. In America, it is the D.A.—dumb ass! In England, the B.F.—bloody fool! For France, A.S.—L'Ame Simple. In Italian, G.C.—gran cornutto! For Spanish—G.P.—grande payaso.) So D.K. stands for Dummkopf. It is not that we look upon God as stupid—never so! Moreover, we know from experience (and lost battles) that the Cudgels can, on occasion, be as bright and incisive as ourselves. The root to employing Dummkopf comes, I think, from the Maestro's desire to wean us from our greatest weakness—the unwilling admiration we feel for the Almighty. As he never allows us to forget, God may be powerful, but He is not All Mighty. Hardly so! We, after all, are also here! If the D.K. is the Creator, we are His most profound and successful critics.

All the same, we have to recognize that the Angels have succeeded in getting most men and women to believe that our leader is the Evil One. We have no real opportunity to protest this canard. So, our best recourse, as the Maestro suggests, is to take pride in these initials. Or, try to. Which we do. When I write E.O., or speak of the Evil One, it is with full knowledge of the richness of the concept. He has given us so much, our subtle master who enjoys the use of his various names—the E.O., the O.O., (the Omniscient Observer!), the Source, and the Maestro. “Leave excessive reverence to the God-worshippers who are always on their knees,” he tells us. “We have work to do, and it is tricky. I recommend that you keep thinking of Him as the Dummkopf. For, indeed, given what He could have been, that is what He is. We are brighter by far. And, of late, we are more creative. Remember: It is our universe to gain. It is His to lose. Keep calling Him the Dummkopf.”

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The outpouring of the urine, the shit, and the blood of Luther became the first in a series of episodes remarkable for their powers of transmogrification—that is to say, dramatic and thoroughgoing metamorphosis.

So, for example, Adolf's bowel movements now began to dominate the pitch of life in the house on Linzerstrasse. Before the episode with Luther took place, Klara had certainly been alert, no matter how often Adi soiled his wrapping cloths, to keep the child clean, indeed, the act, as I have remarked, became a dalliance between mother and boy. She wiped him so carefully that his eyes gleamed with transmogrificational delight. He

discovered that Heaven was in his anus right next to the gas and the cramps. All the while, his mother subtly, tenderly, delicately (and with unwitting demonic finesse) expunged the soil, wet or dry, from his rosebud, (which was, of course, Klara's secret name for her dear baby's incomparably dear little hole—die Rosenknospe.) She was so proud of its pink sheen that she could not even suppress her joy when her step-children were watching. Indeed, unlike other good mothers in Braunau, she barely bothered to teach Angela how to substitute for her. She was, after all, wholly superior to the unhappy elements in the procedure. His stool, (which could on occasion be as rank as any other colicky child) did not occasion her disgust. It was disturbing if the outpouring was rank in smell, or what was worse—gave a hint of the empty cavern that lurks in the odor of grave illness, but her breath stayed calm even when the stink was rich enough to overpower anyone else. She even wanted this stench to be strong. The stronger, the better. A sign of health! Such was her love for Adi.

Yes, love sparkled between them. His eyes danced as she dredged his cheeks with feather-smooth wipes of the rag, and her eyes—whether she knew it or not—were full of admiration that his little penis stood so erect.

She, in turn, would giggle and coax it back (most properly) as they both laughed. For, of course, it jumped up again. Whereupon she kissed the tip, (once), and then blushed. Be assured! She did not allow her mind to suggest that the act might be subject to Confession. No, not with such innocent joy.

All this changed after the episode with Luther.

She lived again in high fear of Alois. Now, she was always in fear that Adi's swaddling cloths might suddenly bag open. What if Alois should come upon a full plop on the floor? Once, stepping out of the parlor to start a dish in the kitchen, she returned in the next minute to see the child playing with his spoil—he had already plastered his upper lip and chin. She shuddered at the thought of Alois coming through the door.

So, training began. It was like trying to teach a bright but willful dog. In the beginning, Adi might even tug at her skirt, or take her to the closet that held the chamberpot and cry out for her to remove his cloth. After which, complimenting him for his prowess, they would go, two spirits in one, through the wiping. For such intelligence, she offered full praise. His eyes would glow.

Now, she became ambitious. She wanted Adi to learn how to unsnap the safety pins that held his cloth. Indeed, he was able to. Day by day, success followed success, until one morning, he pricked his finger. After that, he would not go near the pins again. She lost patience. He had come so near and now he refused to continue. Finally, she scolded him, and that was certainly the first time he had heard such a tone from his mother. He rebelled. Knowing how important he was to her, his response was keen—he felt the same kind of clarity with which he had watched Alois beat Luther. At that moment, Adi had been illumined by new knowledge. He did not measure the difference between a dog and a man, not yet, for Luther was as much a person to him as his father, but he could see the instant result: the dog might have collapsed into abject terror but still loved his master.

So would Klara love him, he decided, even when he would not obey her. Taken out of his cloth and allowed to run naked from the waist down, he began (never when his father was at home) to shit on the floor. Sometimes he would do it right next to the chamber pot, which brought Klara so close to screaming that Adi could hear every sound she did not

make, and felt in consequence masterful. He had no fear of Klara even when she came close to striking him.

He went too far. One day when she was in the midst of waxing her kitchen floor, he spread excrement on the upholstered arm of the parlor couch, studied it, knew by a new tumult in his chest—so curious in sensation—that this was different. Risk was present. All the same, he would show it to her. He did.

This time she stood stock-still. She sensed that he had done it on purpose, and so did not say a word, merely cleaned the sofa by which time he had an attack of diarrhea and the floor was dirty again. He began to laugh and to bawl, but she did no more than sigh and clean him soundlessly in a listless loveless fashion. This made such an impression on him that he awoke in the middle of the night and went to her bedroom. Alois had been called to Passau for preliminary interviews and the house had not seen him for a week, but just before midnight he had come home. Since the boy enjoyed going to his mother's bed whenever she was alone, he was surprised, even as he cracked the door, to hear a little gasping, and wheezing, and then the bull-roar of Alois' voice. It came in spasms.

Beneath it and above it were his mother's cries, soft, and full of the oddest torture. Those cries spoke of joy soon to come, so soon to come, yes, just beyond reach, yes, now, almost! No, not yet! Through the half-open door (kept open particularly for her to hear him should he cry) he saw a sight his mind would not take in, not at once. Something looked like eight arms and legs and two people, yes, two, but one of them was upside down. He could make out Alois' bald head and side-whiskers pressed between his mother's legs. Then, without a word his father had turned around and was sitting on her face.

Adolf walked away as silently as he had entered, but he knew. There was no doubt. His mother had betrayed him. Just then he heard a final set of cries, and he turned back and peered into the room, seeing what he could by the moonlight entering the window, and his father was belaboring Klara with all of his body, his big belly slapping on her. And she was grunting like a dog. So full of contentment! "You beast, you are an ugly man, you are an animal, you!" and then again, "You, yes, you, yah, yah, yah." There was no question. She was happy. Ja!

He would never forgive her. That much the two-year-old knew. All her love had been for him. Now, his father was on top of her back.

This time Adolf went all the way back to his room. He could, however, still hear them. In the bed next to him, Alois-Junior. and Angela were giggling. "Goosey, goosey," they kept saying.

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He began to bawl for his milk not thirty minutes after Klara had sunk into the best sleep she had known for years.

Must one suppose that because a child's deepest feelings have a half-life of thirty minutes, they are not profound? Because of that betrayal, he might never love his mother as much again. Yet, his feelings were heightened. There was pain in his love now, and an anger that revealed itself by nipping at her breast with his new tooth. Indeed, for a few days, he felt close to Luther, and when drowsy, would sleep beside the dog through an afternoon. Truth, he saw the hound as a sibling, and this brotherly affair went on until Adolf began to take too much advantage of the beast,

punching him in the belly, trying to poke his eyes, and sometimes, when standing, loosing a kick to the ribs. When the dog began at last to growl at his approach, Adolf would whine and run to Klara. There was a period when this all made her so distraught that delight in breast-feeding was gone. The tooth had done it. The days of weaning were at hand.

In those private councils of her mind that would never be available to her child, her stepchildren, her husband, nor even to the confessional box, she had come to the conclusion that she must have another child. If this came in part from the old fear, even now, that Adolf might not live, she also feared that she would never love him as much again, no, not as once she had, and so maybe there should be another child. Besides, she was entering a new time in her marriage. She looked forward to Alois approaching their bed when he was in a most friendly mood. For on such evenings—after all these years!—desire came alive again, desire was there!—down in the marrow, yes, deep!

We may remember that the last time we had been as close to Alois as his own skin, he had been burying his nose and lips in Klara's vulva, his tongue as long and demonic as a devil's phallus. (Be it said: we are not

without our contributions to these copulatory arts!) Alois was certainly full of us for that little while. Never before had he given himself so completely to this little exercise, and yet he had become good at it, and so quickly, that no explanation is possible unless we are given credit as well. (We do have the power to pass transient but intense gifts to men and women even when we are not looking to turn them into full-service clients.)

In the morning, Alois could not believe he had done it. All that! To lower himself to such an extent! In bald fact, and to make her pay for such bottoming on his part, he had, we must recall, clumped his buttocks once more over her nose and mouth—precisely the frightful sight that drove Adolf back to his bed and caused him to bawl for milk not a half-hour later.

Yet Alois in a most unexpected manner, also felt tender towards Klara in the morning. This unexpected gentleness in concert with the astonishing pleasure he had given her by way of his tongue, a joy whose unexpected preciosities had conducted her up to, yes, occult regions, had also left her ready enough to forgive the rotten part. (Indeed, his heavy behind actually smelled better than Adi's.)

As a devil, I am obliged to live intimately with excrement in all its forms, physical and mental. I know the emotional waste of ugly and disappointing events, the sour indwelling poison of unjust punishment, the corrosion of impotent thoughts, and, of course, the literal aspects of caca itself. It is true. Since as devils, we live in shit and work with it, we find it natural to comprehend a marriage through the eye of the cloaca—and I will add—that is not the worst way. For parenthood is not only the crown but the outhouse of marriage. As St. Odon of Cluny stated so unforgettably (in a remark worthy of the best of devils: inter faeces et urinam nascimur—between shit and piss are we born), so the proper study of marriage resides not only in partnership, congeniality, boredom, predictable habit, daily annoyance, verbal scuffles, and daily despair, but in the guts and smear of it all—the comradely knowledge of all the forbidden tastes, smells, bodily places. Indeed, if all that were absent, the sacrament would have less foundation. On caca, is marriage based. So I would assert. You are free to reject my opinion because of my spiritual empowerment. I am a devil, after all, and we look for the lowest common denominator in any and all truth. Small wonder if the condign properties of waste are part of our province.

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Alois' promotion came through. The Finance-Watch named him to the post of Chief Customs Officer at Passau, and Klara was without further doubt that she was married to a man of achievement.

On the other hand, they could hardly rent their house at such quick notice. Yet Alois now had to work at his new post in Passau. That was a full day's travel from Braunau. So, there were weeks at a time when Alois lived away from the family. In consequence, Adolf could loll in the big bed next to his mother.

If it was also grievous that Klara had to put him aside whenever Alois come home, so did he also learn that such happiness could be regained after a day or two when Alois would be off again to Passau.

This lasted for a year. Even when the family made the move to Passau, Alois had to oversee other border towns and was, therefore, absent as much as he was home, which permitted Adolf to sleep right up against the nocturnal warmth of his mother for many a night.

While the new position gratified Alois' vanity, it soon proved to be a burden to his confidence. In Braunau, a less important station, trade with Germany had been more limited, and for the most part, the smugglers they rounded up were petty individuals. The roads that crossed the frontier at that point were of secondary importance, and incoming tourists were rarely well-to-do. Most of the product to be examined was agricultural; weighings were tedious. While Braunau was nicely situated on the river Inn, its architecture was humdrum.

Passau, in contrast, had more presence. It was also a German city. By mutual agreement, Austrian customs operated on the German side of the Danube, and the buildings there offered their historical legends. Passau had

once been ruled by a Prince-Bishop, and so could boast of medieval towers on its castles. Some of its churches dated back to the onset of the Middle Ages; others were High Renaissance. Passau's walls reflected the grandeur of dedicated duty, ancient crimes, torture chambers, dark secrets, by-gone glory, and—much to the point for Alois—criminal smugglers with imagination enough to be something of a match for him.

But he also felt a subtle discomfort in the new position. If he had always considered his uniformed presence to be a full warning to would-be malefactors, a conclusion he could fortify before every mirror, he also knew that this depended upon the rigor of his professional manner. So he took professional pains to present a personality of near to monumental official calm, and this weighty approach all but announced that he had set an incorruptible seal on himself. Let travellers know that he was not the fellow with whom to play games. He had studied many an upper-class customs officer—those with university learning, some with livid, invaluable dueling scars. They were the ones to model oneself after.

Taking up his command in Passau left him feeling, however, less inside his own good skin. His tone, in consequence, became a little too

harsh. One's inferiors learned correct procedure best under the sting of an order well-applied. Occasionally, however, some trifle would provoke him unduly. Once he went into a tirade because an underling addressed him as "Herr Official" rather than "Herr Senior Official Hitler." He could sense that his new Passau contingent of subordinates were better educated than the younger officers at Braunau. They might be growing critical of him. Now and again, looking down from his post at the rush of the Danube below the Customs' bridge, his eyes would sparkle with tears. He would find himself thinking of Braunau, and of the two women buried in the region, dear carnal-spirited Franzeska, yes, and for an instant he would also mourn Anna Glassl. No beauty, but she had known what to do under the sheets.

He smoked all the time. His nickname, not known to him, was The Chimney. (The German is good enough to offer here: Der Rauchfund!) "And what is the mood of our Chimney today?" one young officer might ask another as he came on duty. Alois knew these juniors were resentful because he did not allow them to smoke on their shifts—nonetheless, he knew that the very injustice of it would enforce his authority. A good officer must be fair for the most part, yet still exercise certain specific

inequalities. Done judiciously, that proved effective. One's inferiors were reduced one necessary notch.

Now that Klara and the children had joined him in Passau, he also became more severe with his offspring. Alois-Junior and Angela soon learned not to speak to him unless they were asked a direct question. If Alois-Junior was outside, the father would put two fingers to his lips and whistle. It was identical to the call he used to summon Luther. In turn, Alois-Junior, fresh-cheeked, strong, stocky, and with a face like his father's, had driven Klara and Angela into hysterics one afternoon by picking up a monumental turd that Adi had chosen to deposit on the parlor rug. When stepmother and sister began to scream at the sight of it in his hand, dark, doughty, and forbidding as a club, young Alois chose to run after them, his eyes wild. What a mischief! Klara and Angela were crying out in terror at the monstrosity of the act. Then, Adi joined in their chorus. He screamed with the rest even as he also galloped right behind Alois-Junior, until his big brother, tiring of the sport, tore off an inch of the stuff, whirled around and planted it on the tip of Adolf's nose.

That evening Klara told Alois-Senior. The beating that ensued was comparable to the attack on Luther. Alois-Junior could just about crawl off to school next day. Profound, after that, was the discipline in the house. When Alois came home from his duties, the children dared at most to whisper. Klara, unwilling to upset him, was also quiet. Supper was eaten in silence. The smell of Alois' breath, rich with meat and sour from beer, mingled with the aroma of red cabbage.

He would take, then, to the armchair, select one of his long-stem pipes, tamp his tobacco into the bowl with all the authority that could reside in the thumb of a man of official importance, and proceed to overpower the air with his own smoke. Alois-Junior and Angela went to their room once permission was given. But, Adi was called forward.

His father would cup the three-year-old's head in his hand, and then, with a divided grin—fifty percent affection, fifty percent pure meanness of spirit—would blow smoke into Adolf's face. The boy would cough. The father would chuckle.

As soon as Alois let go of his head, Adolf would smile and run off to the water closet. There, he would throw up. Sometimes, head bent over the

pail, the three-year-old would remember the sounds of Alois making love to Klara, and their groans and sobs accompanied with him through the lurches of his esophagus. He kept asking himself why his mother never complained about the smoke.

She did not dare. She sensed that the greatest provocation to her husband would be to comment on his pipe.

Moreover, Adolf had given her new cause for fear. Cleaning his bottom one day (and she did not make this large discovery until he was three—such were her curious proprieties) she came to notice that he had only one testicle.

A town doctor reassured her that this medical phenomenon was not fearsome. Such boys often grew up to be men with large families—“The good God, dear lady, gave more than enough for one testicle, before He doubled it.”

“So he will not be different from others when he goes to school?”

“Boys of that condition are sometimes active. Highly active. That is all.”

These kind words could hardly soothe Klara. The missing testicle left one more stain on the Poelzl family. Her sister Johanna was not only a hunchback but, according to Alois, half-mad. And then there was a first cousin—a true imbecile. Not to speak of all of Klara's dead brothers, her dead sisters, her own dead children. There was not enough, she decided, of Alois' strong constitution in Adolf, no, none of the strength Alois had so obviously passed on to Alois-Junior. This was also her fault. She had loved her husband on the night that Adolf had been conceived, but only on that night, and in a way—was it unholy?—such a night!

But now—could it be too late?—she would say that she loved her husband again. She came to this conclusion slowly, step by step, over many months, but on one fine night in June, a year and a half after his transfer to Passau, she felt a new rush of respect for him. For just that afternoon—he had learned that in another six months, he would be transferred to Linz, the capital of the province, there to serve as Chief Customs Officer. It was the most important assignment you could find in all the Service between Salzburg and Vienna.

On that night, they conceived. Perhaps there was never an hour when she loved Alois more simply, or realized she wanted a second son so much. Little Adi with his one testicle, had put a small but year-long horror into her heart. She did not dare to think any longer that Adi might live a long life. On the contrary, they needed another child. The new one, she decided, must belong to Alois as much as to herself.

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Edmund was born on March 24, 1894, a few weeks before Adolf would be five. Klara had told him that he would soon have a brother or—if God so desired—a sister, and Adolf was ready either way. He looked forward to playing with the baby on arrival. He expected to meet a child half his age, at least as measured by size, a living creature ready to speak, but in any event, certainly able to listen. On the approach to Klara's bed, when he saw no more than a cloth bundle on her breast with a face inside it as wizened as an old apple, he was aghast.

Having been sent the night before to a neighbor's house where he went through the discomfort of sleeping on a small bed between Angela and

Alois-Junior (who kept pinching each other over his intervening body) he knew that changes were coming. This perception turned into his first large sorrow when, next day, as he rushed to his mother's bed, the midwife put out a hand as large as his face and said, "Stay back. Don't hurt the baby."

Klara made it worse. She put a hand on his head which was so passing in its touch that he could feel no love. Tears came to his eyes.

"Ah, the poor little one," said the midwife and led him out of the room. "In a few days," she said, "you can get nearer to the baby."

"Will he talk to me?"

"Oh, you will be the first to understand him." With that, she laughed and returned to the bed where his mother lay.

He rarely got near enough to talk to Klara. Yet just a few weeks ago, no more, he used to enjoy the same conversation each morning with her.

"Mommie," Adi would ask, "are you the most beautiful woman in the world?"

She would tease his hair. "What do you think?"

"I think you are the most beautiful."

She would hug him to her breast. The love her breasts held for him was not what it used to be, but she would pretend that it was. Not a year had passed since she had stopped feeding him. Now, he would gorge on the cream puffs she often prepared for dessert, indeed, he would wolf them down at such a rate that Alois-Junior would complain audibly if Klara was present, or, in her absence, would crack a knuckle across his head. Klara, prey to new uneasiness at how little attention she gave to Adi these days, would defend his right to the cream puffs. "He is so little," she would say, "he needs them more than you."

Now, following the birth, Klara was often too fatigued to cook. The temporary servant made cream puffs that tasted like sour milk. Klara, in her turn, was breast-feeding Edmund all the time. So it seemed to Adolf. He experienced a new sorrow which blended with the sad undertone of the church bells in Passau, so many bells, so frequent. In his ears, it sounded as if she was forever feeding Edmund.

Now, when he tried to ask if she was the most beautiful woman in the world, she would laugh unhappily. "Oh, I am a worn-out woman," she would say, "I am not beautiful, Dolfchen. But your sister Angela will be."

Adi did not agree. Angela was undependable. Angela was always ready to pinch him. She was nice, at times, but treacherous. "No, you are more beautiful than Angela," he would say, and his mother would shake her head.

Meanwhile, much of the time, his father was in Linz. One week after Edmund's birth, Alois took up new and full-time duties there. Since Linz was fifty miles east of Passau, Alois did not return to his household more than twice a month. The weight of his strong voice was not there now to quiver through the boy's body. During the day, when Angela and Alois-Junior were away at school, Adi would be alone with his mother and the infant, yet Klara still did not have a lot of time for him. And at night, he no longer could be certain where he would sleep. Alois-Junior would often take over his cot, and Adi would have to move to Angela's bed. She would tickle him too much. Sometimes she would tell him that he did not smell good. "So, Adi, your breath is rotten," she would say. Often, he would put a blanket on the floor to escape her.

He was also afraid to go outside. There were boys his age and older playing in the field back of the house, and their yells were fearsome. He

spent his time looking at the illustrations in a book his father had bought about the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. He decided he would like to be a brave soldier. Could he be? He was so afraid!

One afternoon, after school and much at Klara's bidding, Alois-Junior pulled Adolf out of the house, and led him to the field behind the house. Yes, he had known it would be so. A dozen small boys were playing at war.

Alois-Junior studied the group, then selected the leader of one army, a stout five-year-old. "This is my brother," Alois told him, "and if you let anyone on the other side hit Adolf, you will hear from me." He punched the boy on the arm just hard enough to certify his words, and departed.

When Adolf came home that evening, Alois-Junior told him, "From now on, I eat the cream puffs first. As many as I want. If you cry to your mother, mamma's boy, I will not protect you on the field."

"I won't cry," said Adi, holding his breath as tightly as if he were clinging to a rope.

Next day, he went to the game by himself. He was more afraid of Alois-Junior's derision than of any blows he might take in the battle.

Actually, there had been little enough punishment on the first day. The fat boy was quick to use his own body to shield Adi from every attack. Besides, it did not take long to grasp the basic principle. The game was simple. Divided into two teams, the boys took turns chasing each other. It was really not a war. Once caught, you were dead. So, it was more like tag. Besides, each melee lasted but a few minutes. After which, the boys, close to breathless, would count the losses, take a breath, and start up again. On the first charge across the field, somebody would always get knocked down. Once, when the boy that Alois-Junior had chosen to protect him was waylaid by two kids from the other team, it even happened to Adolf. A rude shove on the shoulder and he was slammed to the ground. Earth drove up his nose.

He did not cry. It took a considerable effort of his will. In the following minute, he had to negotiate with himself in order to keep from weeping. He was hurt that no one had applauded his new-found stoicism. His feelings were as bruised as the scrape on his cheek. His nose burned from the outrage to his stuffed-up nostrils, but he managed not to cry. One's

will could be as strong as a wall if one was ready to command it. So he told himself. He was nothing if not precocious.

He also managed to get through the rest of the battles that day without another collision. He was quick enough to dart away whenever an enemy soldier came near. To his delight, he even tagged one boy.

On the next day, his face was in the dirt again. Action was everywhere. It was hard to dodge the rush. He was knocked down again.

The fat boy was rueful about it and begged him not to tell his brother. Adi had the pleasure of patting him on the back. No cause for alarm, he announced, not a word would he say.

That night he could hardly sleep. He felt that not only did he know more already than they did, but in time to come, the fat boy, Klaus, would be his lieutenant, while he, himself, as captain, would make the rules.

To accomplish such an aim, he came up with a new set of moves. War, he reasoned, should be trickery. War was not two armies charging at each other all the time—war was maneuver! He did not know the word as yet, but he had certainly acquired the concept.

To his new mates he now proposed that they move from the flat field to a hill in the next meadow. Each army was on opposite slopes, and so would not be visible until one team or the other crossed the summit.

Once he had convinced the boys of this change, he brought in an amendment. The captain on each side, he insisted, must not be captured. The leader must not even be touched. "The highest officer," he argued, "must always be respected."

To gain his point, it did not hurt that stout, sturdy Klaus was always by his side. All the same, he was a little amazed at how well he could deal with these matters. So was I. For a boy of five, his eloquence was preternatural.

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Following young Adolf's first war games, I was instructed to take a more direct interest in his development.

Be it understood that further investiture is never routine. Each case is unique. The average man or woman, paralyzed by his ignorance, assumes one can lose one's soul to the devil on an instant, and permanently. The premise is false but is reinvigorated every Sunday by the most dedicated and mediocre ministers. It is no more than brainwashing! The real situation is that we do not appropriate people by way of a lightning flash. Nor does Satanic entrapment brand a man or woman forever as our vassals. Rather, it is a contest. So soon as we seek to invest our powers in a client, the

Cudgels invariably appear. Quick possession rarely occurs. Not all that often do either of us realize a significant victory. Indeed, after a series of such battles, the odd soul actually captured in toto by us or by the Cudgels can bear more resemblance to a throwaway than to a prize. (Insane people are often the victims of such sustained contests.)

Moreover, entrapment is not free of paradox. The clients that we find most difficult to approach are those with the greatest potential. Conversely, individuals who are easy for us to pick up usually prove of no great service. It does not take much to traduce a drunk or an addict. We polish what is left of their charm, which helps to consume a little more of the compassion of their families, especially if the mother, father, or any of the siblings are obsessed with not losing the last of their charity. In effect, we injure their God-loving hearts! But that is simple work. Such gains are small. Ultimate ends are not served. Our final aim, after all, is to draw human nature away from the Vision of the D.K.

There is, however, another factor in every contest—an economic factor. It concerns the separate resources of Divine energy and of Satanic energy. They differ.

I can allow that even in the higher cadres of devils and angels, we hardly know who has more Time to give to a contest once we are contesting possession of one man or woman. Of course, when it comes to larger matters, we are not in contention. For example, the D.K. disburses whole bonanzas of divine substance on His sunsets (which—it must be admitted) can and do bolster human morale. There, He is certainly a spendthrift, whereas we devils have to give our attention to head-on budgetary demands. We have to estimate closely the expenditures of Time involved in securing a new client. To spend years on a promising fellow who eventually resists us is a budgetary blemish on one's individual record. So, when choosing targets, we try to exhibit more acumen than the Cudgels. We certainly take cognizance of any fornication that can get us off to a good start.

Our targets are obvious. Rarely do we fail to attend the joinings of rich and powerful people (so full of infidelity!). As has been noted, we do not ignore the occasional wretched couple whose rites include incest. Other copulations, however, particularly those illumined by angels, present a more demanding task—it is not routine to slip through their blockade! It seems—

I speak here for myself—as if the E.O. has never been able to accept his failure to be present in the hour when Jesus Christ was conceived.

Fortunately for us, Jesus proved to be a typical Son. (The record we are furnished informs us that He was at odds with His Father.) Jehovah, indeed, was often incensed by the rebelliousness of this good son.

But I stray from the point. The prevailing fact of our existence as devils and demons is that we are obliged to live within a limited budget, and so our projects are chosen with discretion.

For that reason, except in special instances, we do not take large interest in the early development of children. Sometimes we keep no more than a short record of those families who interest us. “Over the first few years,” our Maestro will remark, “a child is caught between the need for love and the development of the will. Those inclinations are so naturally at odds with each other that we can still count on making approaches when the children involved are older.”

Except for the most unusual cases, therefore, we exercise no intervention until the age of seven. (Until well into the nineteenth century,

an extraordinary child was always in danger of being carried off abruptly by one grievous disease or another.)

Once a child has turned seven, it becomes a little easier to decide, but even then, the Maestro considers the next five or six years as the Age of Clods. "They are now encountering the world in its basic form—the school years. Nearly all of them rush toward habit, routine, and stupidity as the most immediate forms of protective insulation. These are the years when the average human ego takes shape in all of its readiness to lie, misremember, distort and forget—all in order to keep the young ego in some readiness to support the ongoing project, oneself."

Our hunt commences more often with adolescence. Here, we are at a first stage of intervention. Often the best energies of the D.K. are there for us to subvert since He is invariably ready to invest resources in very young men and women who hardly know what to do with a sudden inrush of increased will and appetite. Dramatic distortions of His Intention are now open to us.

I have mentioned these delayed processes of selection because I wish to emphasize how uncommon was the special attention given to this one

particular five-year-old. That his name was Adolf Hitler was, after all, of no importance then.

All the same, I had lived (by proxy) in the demonic instant of his conception, and had then been assigned to review the work of the devils who would oversee his family's activities. It was light surveillance. Our jargon for this kind of action was milk-runs, an expression we employed long before it was adopted by U.S. Air Force pilots in the Second World War. Any one of our devils could pass by a house in the hours before dawn, and by way of the small and large family storms, inertias, and joys that had transpired since the last visit, could ingest new information. It required no exceptional expenditure unless the abode was being guarded by angels. In a more normal condition, one could sweep by the house and then relay the findings. While humans slept, we did our work. (As did the angels. Yes, those forces of Light also worked in the night!)

I had been able to keep up then with a close history of the Hitler family for all the years since Adolf had been born. (Be it understood that my devils also kept track of numerous other projects in that region of Austria.) If what my agents had offered up to now was modest, it had,

nonetheless, sufficed. Reviewing Adolf's early years, I confess that I saw no vast promise in the boy. He was outrageously in need of love and damnably vulnerable. The odds were that he would perish early, or creep through life with a mutilated ego. At least, so I would have judged if the Evil One had not been present at his conception. That event, however, determined our judgment. Even on the busiest nights, the Hitler family was included on every milk-run.

This routine of careful but passive observation was overturned altogether for me on the day that Alois-Junior dragged Adi off to the boys' game of war. The E.O. intervened. I received a direct message: "Take closer care of him now. Stiffen his spine. We will lose many of his future potentialities if we don't take steps."

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As is true of all reasonably disciplined armies, there is no room for rebellion when given a direct order. I did what I was told. I stiffened the boy's spine. Indeed, I will make the claim that I accomplished this with some finesse. For I did not inject any special funds into his courage or his will; rather, I gave him just enough wit to carry out the job himself. He had been the one, after all, who chose not to weep when his face was in the dirt, and afterward, he displayed his own cunning in finding ways to avoid physical punishment. It had been enough that I was (so to speak) at his side. We, too, can serve in effect as guardian angels. (For prime clients, only!)

I was aware again of the superior insight of the E.O. Adi showed a few signs that he might be worth the work. The child had powerful instincts, and was as much superior to an average five-year-old as a young race-horse to a run-of-the-mill mule. I enjoyed working with him, and that was just as well since the order had come during a period when I could not afford new inroads on my budget. Improving a child's courage usually demands the use of precious stores, precisely those funds of love and force we have managed to steal from the Cudgels. Of necessity, we have become skilled at impersonating angels. Even an adult, feeling our infusion of love, tends to believe it is bona-fide, that he or she is the recipient of Grace. (I suspect Kierkegaard had just that in mind when he suggested people might well be wary of feeling too saintly, since they could then be working for Satan.)

I speak of this because we devils are human to this degree—a fine return on our investment puts us in the best of moods. So I came to enjoy being in company with Adi as he looked to improve the little game of war that was being played by these five-year-olds in Passau in the spring and summer of 1894. Indeed, the change in my sentiments was as rapid for me

as for the child. (Secretly, we do cherish our power to bestow gifts upon a putative client.) We must. Often the only way to capture a child so young, as I have indicated, is to spend some of our limited stores of love to seal the conquest. A risky business. All too often, a child's shifting inclinations can waste our efforts. Our youngest clients can alter themselves on their own, or resist us, or, worse, the Cudgels move in.

To forestall this, I was there night after night to instruct Adi while he slept. Indeed, he delighted me (the rarest of pleasures for a devil!) by the development of his activities during the day. To repeat—he was no ordinary five-year-old, no, he had an exceptional capacity to improve their game of war. Rarely did he fail to tinker with it.

He soon saw, and I believe this came as much from his perception as mine, that outposts were necessary. It was wrong to send soldiers over the hill without fore-knowledge of what opposite force they might encounter. So, a scout from each army had to attempt to work his way up close enough to the summit to obtain a covert look at the dispositions of the other side. Following in logical sequence came another change in the rules—an advancing army had to be free to move its forces from flank to flank, even

as it climbed the hill. Ditto for the defenders. The defense could also shift their outposts. Of course, this called for larger forces on each side, but Adi was soon able to convince his regulars that more boys should be invited in from nearby streets and fields. Of course, they, the originals, having been here first, were entitled to take promotion in rank. Let me offer one of his speeches to his troops.

“Why do we love our game?” he would ask. “Is it because we need to know more about war? Yes. Because, my friends, when we are big men, we will want to be heroes. Is that not true? Klaus, do you want to be a hero?”

“That is what I want.”

“Of course. It is what we want. All of us. But to do this we must learn more. So, we need more soldiers. On both sides. How are we to accomplish this?

“I will tell you. It is by bringing in all who are willing to join us. Then, we who are here can be given high rank. We who command must be very high in rank. Not just a captain, or a major, but a general.

“Klaus here, will be my colonel.”

Those words are close to what he said. While I have certainly endowed him with an eloquence no five-year-old could muster on his own, I have to admit that some of the good turns of speech that came out of him were, indeed, not mine.

Before long, he and his troops were engaged in hour-long contests. There were endless alterations of the rules. The numbers increased to fifteen and twenty a side.

Word came from the E.O. "Enough for now. Let us see how much of this endures after the move."

That was not uncharacteristic of our Maestro. We had to be ready to accept quick changes of direction. In this case, the situation of the family altered. Alois had decided to move Klara, Angela, Alois Junior, Adi, and the baby Edmund, up from Passau to dwell nearer to him in Linz.

I am obliged, therefore to apologize to the reader for bringing so abrupt a termination to Adi's young war games. Moreover, sympathy may have been aroused for the boy. Good readers are the most unprotected of humans—their allegiance moves in advance of their judgment. Some may have felt uneasy, therefore, to discover that they were enjoying these first

successes of the child Adolf Hitler. Be assured. To read about the skills or triumphs of any protagonist is bound to elicit happiness in just about all who follow the story, especially if there is a suggestion of the sentimental, or even better, the magical—useful tools for any author who wishes to arouse quick emotions in the reader. That is why so many popular writers come looking for us. We love them. They are dupes. Popular writers usually think they are working for God as well as for their own prosperous selves. We do not disabuse them. We want them to steep their readers in baths of misperception. The profit comes to us. Misperception of reality which, at the least, wastes Time, serves as one more form of compound interest in our most special economy.

BOOK VI
THE FARM

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This time, Alois had a serious reason for moving. He was going to retire and he would buy a farm. In the last year of his Customs work, he had begun to look about and by February of 1895, he bought what he deemed might be the right property in a town called Hafeld, thirty miles from Linz. In April, Klara and the children moved from Passau to this newly-chosen abode. It was, indeed, a rural retreat. The closest school was in the nearest hamlet, Fischlham, a mile away, and there, after the summer, Adi would enter the first grade. Meanwhile, over the next few months Klara could live on the farm with their four offspring while Alois completed his service in Linz.

Of course, the oncoming retirement could not come without opening a few cracks in what had been a most impressive edifice. I speak of Alois' ego. It was its own kind of monument. When we consider the meager materials out of which he had had to construct it, he may even have been entitled to feel the meditative nectar with which he would review his life.

If only he had enjoyed working at his final post in Linz, his last title, Chief Customs Officer, could have left a marrow of real satisfaction, but the problems with personnel that he had encountered at Passau were now magnified. Linz was a major center of attention for the Finance-Watch. The capital of a most important province, Upper-Austria, Customs was stocked, therefore, with even more ambitious junior officers and they kept together and seemed never at a loss to show their subtle contempt for the failings of senior officials. Most of these young men could take for granted their future attainment of high office. Having come from well-to-do families, their confidence had to leave Alois out of joint. He was getting on. For the first time in all the years that he had been wearing a uniform, he did not always strike the passing eye as an immaculate official. (That now demanded so many pains!) Nor was he as punctual as once he had been.

Sometimes, at the point of issuing disciplinary reprimands, he would hesitate long enough to contemplate the possible repercussions. Worse. There were one or two occasions when he forgot what he was about to say next.

For just such a reason, he eased up on smoking restrictions. He no longer enjoyed confronting the inheld wrath of younger officers. But, in consequence, he enjoyed his own tobacco less. He also began to feel as if all his associates, young and old, were looking for him to retire. He had put in, after all, near to forty years of service. He was eligible. While he could continue for another twelve-month and even another, he did not deem it wise. Small, steady inroads on his vanity kept lowering him into a smaller dream. What if he chose to become a gentleman farmer? That would not be so bad, no, not out there in the autumn sun of his last good years. What the hell! Born a peasant, he could end as a well-to-do fellow who had gone back to the earth.

He had money enough. He could buy a decent farm outright. He would have his pension, and his savings—he and Klara had certainly exhibited thrift. Besides, he had in hand the sum and interest of a large part

of three wives' dowries. It could be said that the first two had brought real money to the union. If Anna Glassl had succeeded in recovering, through law, half of her large dowry due to their separation, still, the half remaining was not small. Franzceska, while hardly up to that measure, was nonetheless the child of a prosperous farmer. Even old Johann Poelzl, Klara's father, had come up with some florin when they married.

On the other hand, Alois understood money only too well. He knew not all coin was equal. Deep in one's conscience, one had to pay a tithe to money that was not earned properly. Money gave back its reflection of how it had been gained. Sometimes, he felt a passing chill. A good part of his prosperity could be seen as the flower that had sprouted from the coffin-soil of dead wives' dowries.

During this last year of service, while Klara took care of the children in Passau and he was free in Linz, he had begun to feel too old for other women. That was when he told himself to go back to the earth. It was what he had always heard from Johann Nepomuk—"the real woman is in the fields." The old man had only to take one drink, and he would repeat it over

and over. "The real woman—look for the real woman in the fields. Respect her."

It was an adage Alois could enjoy although his present plans did not include heavy duty with the soil. His aim, rather, was apiculture. He was interested in developing beehives. He would market the honey. That would be his crop. All the same, owning a little land might be equal to acquiring another limb, a fifth appendage so to speak, as important to a man with peasant roots as a trunk to an elephant.

He had indeed bought a farm five years ago about the time Adolf was born. In many a way that purchase had been more exciting to him than the birth. Land, at least, was not going to die like the first three of Klara's babies.

The reverse had occurred. The land did not perish, but his ownership did not go well. The holding had been near Spital, about a hundred miles from where he was then working in Braunau, yet he had had some far-off notion of retiring there later. In the interim, it might be a good way to take care of his sister-in-law, Johanna Poelzl, in preference to having her dwell

with them as a maid. He had long decided that he did not want Johanna in the parlor every night, especially not with that dome on her back.

All the same, he did feel some admiration for his sister-in-law. Johanna was not in the least afraid of God. She would put no trust in Him. "God," she would declare, "did not have to kill off so many of us in the Poelzl family." Alois could tip his hat to that. "She's not like my wife," he was fond of telling the tavern. "Klara is ready to kiss every cross she meets."

All the same, Johanna did not run the farm very well. Each peasant who worked for her was, sooner or later, antagonized by the hunchback's sharp tongue. Finally, she decided to give it up and go back to live with her father and her mother—also named Johanna. If we recall, this Johanna was the one who had been Alois' mistress on an unforgettable occasion. ("Sie ist hier!")

Alois was able, however, to sell that first farm at a modest profit and so was not ill-disposed to taking on the property in Hafeld these several years later. Here was a farm he would work himself. It was called the Rauscher Gut (which can be translated as the Windy Estate) and it offered

nine acres of pasture plus a wooden house under a thatched roof with good views of the mountains of the Salzkammergut. In addition, there were fruit and oak and walnut trees. A hayloft was in the stable and stalls for two horses and a cow, plus one prize sow.

It was perfect. All ways but one. After the purchase, (and only after the purchase) neighboring farmers were ready to hint to the new arrival that the land might be beautiful, but it was not necessarily going to be famous for its crops.

He looked upon these comments as exactly the kind of hazing that resident farmers would visit on a newcomer. Oh, he assured them, it did not matter. The land would be given a rest. He was there to raise bees. That was his element. Good honey could become the most prosperous crop of them all.

Indeed, in the last days before his retirement ceremony (which was acceptably eulogistic to Alois and most impressive, even thrilling, to Klara) he did have a series of drinking nights as a closer way of saying farewell to his staff and to the decades of his work. Since he had no desire ever to be seen as a man who would moon over the past, he dwelt on his future, he

bullied his junior associates, plus a couple of old cronies, and a few respected town officials to drink more than one stein with him on the merits and mysteries of bee-keeping. Indeed, he belabored each table on each night with so much concerning "the "mysterious psychology of these fabulous little creatures," that the junior officers would warn each other, "Tonight, let's try to keep The Chimney from smoking us out with his bees."

In truth, he did see himself as something of a philosopher concerning this subject. What an achievement for an untutored peasant from the Waldviertel to be able to give a lecture equal to a university savant!

So, yes, in these last weeks before retirement, in the same Linz tavern he had frequented each night after his customs house shift, Alois spoke more and more often of the higher concepts of apiculture. Honey bees formed an amazing world, he kept informing his drinking cohort. "With rare exceptions, these tiny creatures offer up their lives to one purpose: It is to build a future for the generations who will follow. The honey they convert from nectar and pollen is not only for their consumption, but, gentlemen, it is also to feed their larvae." He nodded. "These larvae are installed in the tiniest hexagonal cells, a wonder to behold, because they are

constructed symmetrically out of the very beeswax these insect workers make from pollen, which process, gentlemen, is so mysterious that it is not yet wholly understood even by the most modern chemists."

His company nodded, their spirits glum. This was not lively beer talk. But Alois, on these last nights, had become the kind of lecturer who is always ready to exhibit an incorruptible lack of sensitivity to his audience. "Some bees," he now remarked, "the heftier ones, become guards to watch over the entrances to the hive. Do you know? They are ready to go into battle at the cost of their lives. They will even fight off such powerful raiders as wasps or spiders or termites. Yes, all the insect world, you see, is looking for a free meal in the honey. But that is only one of the obstacles to a peaceful life for the bee. All through the summer, many of the worker bees, as one example, are constantly engaged in keeping the interior of the hive cool. How? By means of tireless activity. They never stop fanning their wings. A good many even wear out their wings. After which, they are ready to die. They give up their lives in this hard labor of creating a draft to cool the hive. Why? Because the larvae cannot survive in too much heat. Think of it. Thousands of wings all fanning away, even as others go out to

forage and bring back more supplies from the fields of flowers. They collect the pollen in pods on their legs and then, flying back to the hive, they manage to stay aloft under the weight of loads of pollen and nectar that weigh more than their own bodies. Flying work-horses the size of bees. I tell you, they create a society that is not unlike ours. But maybe more rational. It is certainly more hard-working."

None of the junior officers were ready to argue. (If they did, he might go on for another hour.) It took one of the older town officials to reply. Taking several portentous sips of smoke from his pipe, he said, "Come, Alois, they are only insects."

"No, good sir! With all due respect, you are mistaken. There is much more to them than one would think. Some, I believe, live to finer purpose than the average human dolt. Let me say, they are one of the wonders of our universe."

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I was not prepared for Alois' interest in these matters. Here was not the man I knew. While I could see his practical purpose, since the product was eminently salable, apiculture also had its risks, including the peril of receiving a serious number of bee stings. While it might be reasonable to engage in such efforts rather than endangering his long-used heart by plowing a field, I had, all the same, an uneasy suspicion. Alois was too sincere in this enthusiasm, and not sufficiently concerned with profit. That surprised me. The desire for money is the tap-root that usually drives men like Alois into new activity. The relative absence of this desire did concern me, therefore. (I have to feel like a sorry devil whenever I cannot come

close to the real motive.) Yet here was Alois ready to undertake such a venture because it satisfied something that I had not yet located in him.

I did recall that he had tinkered with keeping bees in one small town near Braunau, dabbled, and soon gave it up. In these last few months, however, he had written a short article for a bee-keepers' journal. To my surprise, the piece was literate. Alois' experience might be limited, but he had acquired a degree of book knowledge on the subject, and was now fascinated by new modes of cultivation. It looked as if bee hives made of straw would soon be done away with. Skeps they were called, squat-ribbed domed objects about the size and shape of big-bellied human torsos, and these old skeps had their drawbacks. To harvest the honey, bee-keepers had to keep the population of the hive stunned by enough smoke to put them into a near-comatose condition. It was an imprecise process, and the skep often had to be ripped open to collect the product. Despite the smoke, some honeybees awoke long enough to sting the collector.

A new and much-discussed innovation was, however, being developed in England and in America. Even in Austria, some bee-keepers were ready to do away with the old structure. If the skep had been for its

time an improvement over the more barbaric practice—common through antiquity and the Middle Ages—of chasing the bees out from their hole in a tree, advanced bee-keepers around Linz were now speaking of hives that could become the equivalent of a metropolis for bees. This new housing, no greater in size than a small wooden cabinet, was filled with wax trays installed vertically. The worker bees seemed content to build their miniscule wax cells on both sides of each tray. Since this cabinet could hold a good number of trays, which each had room for thousands of cells in a grid of files and rows, some keepers calculated that each hive could be seen as comparable to a giant apartment building of the future in Berlin or New York.

To explain this venture to Klara, Alois did emphasize the pecuniary promise. Good money would come back from clean work, and Alois Jr. and Angela would help, he told her. And Adi as well! He convinced her that the new project was eminently practical.

I was more than bothered. Klara might believe him but I did not. I had decided that Alois was looking to find a way to come nearer to the Dummkopf. That was not a matter I could afford to ignore.

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I was now debating whether to pass this concern on to the Maestro. I was supposed to be on the alert for unexpected turns. On the other hand, Alois had never been one of our clients. We had never felt the need. He was by our measure an average man, which is to say, sufficiently corrupt to be available for our use whenever we might decide to invest a little in him. The assumption was that he would be open to us. The Cudgels would hardly be guarding the fellow. To what end? He was so self-centered. What could there be for them to protect? Whereas, when it came to someone like Klara, we did not choose to go near. Not for too little. It would have proved punishing and again—to what end? We did not need

her directly. Some of our most exceptional clients are the offspring of good mothers. Indeed, as I have attempted to show, evil children can issue from the most loving mothers. Average men and women find it hard to accept this realization. It shakes their faith in the Dummkopf. How could God allow it? A standard lament.

We had felt no need to go near Klara, therefore, except for that incomparably special night—one lightning raid!—when Adolf had been conceived.

After that, she was more useful to us as herself, there, innocent, nurtured by the attentions of the Cudgels. This is, however, a complex matter. To give but an indication, let me say that Klara, being gifted with depths of love, would not only adore her Adi, but would become enchanted by the new one, Edmund, and that was certain to agitate many of Adolf's feelings.

To watch over a child through the early years is, as I have indicated, too chance-filled a procedure. We usually wait. Whereas Alois, in himself, on the hoof, that is to say, Alois, his faults and virtues all more or less predictable, had been serving as the keel to our ongoing comprehension of

the Hitler family. He was so dependable in his strengths and habits, his productive contributions, his built-in cruelties (not to mention his crudities) that one could, if necessary, intensify or reduce the heat of Adolf's hatred for his father in such a way as to mold the boy. Depend on it! We depended on Alois. He was predictable.

Now, his outsize love for bees was turning matters askew. For me, at least! There are a few atheists like Alois who can go all the way to the grave without being challenged in their heart on one or another occasion by the fear or, worse, the intimation, that God does exist. In this sense, they are comparable to pious virgins who suffer the temptation of sudden and unholy heats. Like many such ladies, they cannot accept sex (or, in the case of atheists—religion!) as a force to be met on sensible terms. No, like the good virgin, the confounded atheist, has to take it, so to speak, through the back door. Atheists fall in love with God by way of paganism, service to others, technology—usually seen by them as the best possible solution to humankind's problems—or occasionally through exceptional allegiance to some phenomenon of nature. In Alois' case, it happened to be the

recognition that a collaboration was possible between the mighty and the miniscule.

Since our good fellow was hardly ready to pray for the greater glory of the Lord, he approached this newly opened sense (of Mystery!) by way of his old allegiance to Franz Josef. I learned as much by a quick Sunday morning raid on his mind while Klara was in church and he was asleep, an activity that depended on the likelihood no Cudgels would be in the offing during my excursion. Indeed, they were not.

So, I penetrated quickly, and soon was out. I gathered what I needed. Now, I knew more about Alois' new preoccupation, and confirmed my unhappy sense of what might be in his mind. He saw bees as having a life with parallels to his own. This is why natural phenomena are so often the first perception by humans of the conceivable nearness of God. They discover, for example, that a puppy is a warm cuddly bit of existence not wholly unlike themselves in the need for affection and so can serve as the gateway to larger suppositions. For Alois, bees in search of new fields of flowers were creatures he could understand.

On any warm day, such foragers know the heat of the sun and the intimate yearning that the sun can arouse in flower petals. Alois was not about to throw open any bolted door to the mystical side of himself—he was no different from most people in that regard—but I had found a soft spot in the underbelly of his psyche. He would actually, in the innermost recess of his thoughts, muse on the art that must be present in any scheme of creation that has chosen to draw the honeybee into the perfumed caverns of the flower. It stirred him to think of two wholly separated existences, more and more entranced with each other through the burgeoning heat of the sun. The flower would surrender its nectar to the bee's tongue, while the hairs of the honeybee covered themselves with the pollen of the stamens. In another moment, the bee would separate from one passionate lust to look for another, whichever fine flower of the same species was beckoning in the breeze, ready to gather more nectar for the hive even as it left some of the pollen of the first stamen on this second infatuation.

Such images gave life to Alois. It was the balance between hard work and satisfied desire. He could feel close to that bee who would stagger back in flight with its pollen bags heavy, and its stomach full of nectar. Had not

Alois, in his turn, given much to women and yet brought back much for himself, so much accumulated wisdom on how to deal with the world, or, at least, his customs-house corner, where by the end of his career, he invariably knew what was true and what was false in declarations offered by strangers, particularly women who might wish to deceive him, yet could not, because he was wiser than they were. He possessed the true honey—wisdom. That was the knowledge of what others were up to, all those secrets held by passing travelers and commercial people, secrets as sweet as honey, all those little goods travellers looked to steal and keep for themselves. But he had been there to capture their secrets. He could work as hard and long as any honeybee on the hottest and most productive day of summer when the flowers were most open, working hard for a future beyond themselves, even as he, Alois, had labored on many an occasion to protect the glory, centuries old, of the Hapsburgs and their exceptional Empire, so devoted to the future. Not all the Hapsburgs had been great he would admit, not all were even very good people, but it was true for the best of them, those who were like Franz Josef. They were good, very good. Alois could hope to find a resemblance to Franz Josef in his own features—the same

sideburns, the same dignity. It was said of the Emperor Franz Josef that he could work for endless hours at his necessary and near-to-endless duties. When necessary, he, Alois, was also ready. And yet they knew enough, both of them—the Emperor and himself—to comprehend that it was not enough to amass the honey, but that one must keep a taste for oneself.

Some people in Linz he knew, fools for the most part, had been shocked when gossip spread about the actress, Fraulein Katharina Schratt, whom Franz Josef had taken for a mistress when he had a wife so beautiful as Empress Elizabeth! Such news had spread like a spill of oil that has no boundaries. It had been a blow to some. Not to Alois. He understood. Both the best of men and the worst had to keep some share of the honey for themselves. As he entered retirement, this thought actually brought a taste of peace.

Let me not be altogether captivated, however, by the voluptuous turn Alois has just brought to his meditations. After all, he had his fear of bees as well. Once, in previous years, he had been stung so ferociously and apocalyptically (if I may put it so) that he never forgot the attack of vertigo it caused. Such power to create pain! That it could exist in creatures so

small! It did not come from the honeybee alone, he decided, but must derive from congress with the sun! Such pain might even express the rage of the sun. With that, Alois was familiar. He had worked through many an August afternoon, stuffed into his uniform. Of course he knew the rage of the sun.

These were thoughts too large for Alois to accept openly. He would not encourage meditations of this ilk to come all the way forward into words, but this much he knew: Honeybees were agents of the sun even as he was an agent of the Hapsburgs, and both were close to the greatness of ultimate power.

Could these swollen epiphanies be the product of full retirement even before Alois was ready to retire? I looked forward with my own trepidation to how he would deal with his four children now that Edmund had been born. For that matter, how would it be to live on a farm with Klara? I could expect unforeseen rages. Like clouds not yet on the horizon was my disturbance. So, I was prepared, but not well enough, for the trouble that Alois-Junior, would bring in the next year when he turned fourteen.

-4-

On the very night in April when they slept for the first time in the house at Hafeld, Klara became pregnant again. Until then, Klara had kept the family in Passau. Edmund was ailing, and it was winter. Moreover, Alois would not be able to join them permanently until his retirement at the end of June. By April, however, Klara decided to brave the difficulties and, right after Easter, accompanied by Angela, Adolf, Edmund, and the sum of their possessions, she accomplished the move to Linz. It was made even more difficult since she was without Alois-Junior to help her with the luggage—he had had to stay behind and board with a neighbor until the end of his school year. Nonetheless, whatever the difficulties, she embarked

by train from Passau early in the day and her husband met them at the station in Linz with a large wagon and two work horses to carry their trunks, valises, packing crates and packages over the last thirty miles to Hafeld.

This portion of the trip lasted from noon to dark, but the day had been warm, and Alois, to everyone's surprise, entertained the children with one song after another—his voice was rich, and Klara, who had a clear if delicate soprano, would join him when she knew the words. Alois was in a rare mood, and proud of his skill with the horses and wagon. It was some years since he had gotten up on a buckboard, and he had almost hired a driver, but given his oncoming responsibilities as a farmer, he took on the project himself.

The previous owner had—as was local custom—stocked each fireplace with logs and kindling, and so the rooms, before long, were warm. What with bread and sausage, plus a carefully packed jar of split pea soup, they had enough to eat and went to bed more happily than not. Alois was going to spend the next day with them before driving his rented wagon back to Linz.

That first night, however, Alois was also ready to establish some special investiture of the premises. By the light of the gas lamp in their bedroom, he could see that Klara looked in fine color, not pale at all, and when he said as much, she laughed in true merriment.

"You, too, Uncle," she said. "Your nose is very red from the sun."

"Ah," he said, "you are still calling me Uncle. Soon, it's ten years that we are married and still, what am I to you? Uncle Alois? Do you mean Old Uncle Alois? That is a disgrace."

"No," she said, "we are very proud of you. Today, so much. The horses and the wagon. You did it all. And so well. Something you never did before."

"Well, I can do a lot of things you do not know. I am never so simple as you think."

"I do not think you are simple," she said, "no, that I do not think."

"Yes, you can tell me. What do you think, my little Niece?"

It was not often that she was ready to speak to him so directly, but on this night, an exceptional night after all, she said, "I wonder why you never tell me that you love me."

"Maybe," he replied, "it is because you still call me 'Uncle.'"

To his astonishment, her answer was the nearest she had ever come to speaking in a manner that most certainly belonged to other kinds of women. "Maybe I call you Uncle," she said, "because you are such a big, healthy fellow of an Uncle."

This was not about to pass him by. Instantly, the Hound was straining at the leash. Alois' voice was heavy. "How would you know what is the size of a healthy fellow?" he asked.

"I do not know. But I am free to guess. You are a very big Uncle."

That was all it took to make her pregnant. He was excited enough to take her by the side of the bed, both of them standing, half-dressed, and then he took her again in bed. He was full of love—for himself, first, and his prowess—such a fine power at his age—and then he felt a degree of love for her—plus a good deal of love for the farm. It was a beautiful piece of land. He even took pleasure in the thought of coming a little closer to his children, which is to say, he had an image of kids working along with him in the fields, doing what, he hardly could say, he was about to fall asleep and thought instead of summer bees searching the meadows. He was unusually

delighted with how much power had been in his loins on this night. To have it all there, just when he had begun to wonder.

He even held Klara in his arms, which was hardly his habit, and when he woke up to honor the alarms of his bladder, he almost kicked over the chamber pot. In the dark, what with his unfamiliarity with a new bedroom, he was stumbling around, and Klara was giggling. Then, she wrapped her arms around him as he came back to bed. "I am happy," she said. "I think this will be the place for us."

"Silence!" he growled. "Don't be a goose! One does not make silly predictions!" Yes, he could feel the earth of the farm, all those nine acres to the rear and the front of them, and felt just as superstitious as any of the peasants of his childhood. A person should not be as ready as Klara to speak out with good feelings to empty night air. Not aloud! Was it so empty after all? Who knew what might be there to listen to you with evil ears?

In the morning, she could sense his impatience to be done with the unpacking. It was obvious. He wanted to go out and walk his grounds. So, she took over the larger part of the immediate tasks while he gave the

children a tour of the barn, all three huddled close to him before the animal immanence of the two horses, the cow, and the prize sow that had been part of the purchase price. Those animals were huge, and the sow was close to overpowering them with her odor.

Now, Alois told them to go back to the house and help their mother. In the afternoon, he would, he promised, teach them how to milk the cow, feed the pig, and curry the horse, not to mention the hen house and the eggs, but for now it was their good mother who needed them.

He wanted to walk his lands alone. He had to make more than a few decisions. So, once again, he studied the condition of the fruit and walnut trees. When he had seen it last, there was more than a little snow on the ground, but he had been able to determine that the trees looked healthy, and the bare branches appeared to have integrity, strong, reasonably straight, and not too many tortured shapes to suggest the aftermath of crazy storms when the trees were young.

In truth, he realized now, he had hardly studied the place before. Enough that the price was not high, and the house and the view were the

best he had found. He had had to be in a hurry—he could not keep spending full days in travel back and forth from Linz.

All the same, he was not so much at ease with his purchase as he had anticipated. Walking the meadows and mounting the one small hill of his new domain, the land was less extensive than he remembered, no larger, really, than what it was, nine acres, a good-sized parade-field. On the other hand, it was small enough to encourage him to do a little more farming than he had anticipated. Three or four of those acres would make a decent but manageable potato field. Should he give another acre to beets? Could he plant this year? That would be the question. He could not get going until the end of June, the beginning of July, but Alois-Junior would be back here then from Passau, his school year finished, and, yes, maybe they could take on some late plowing.

All this while, his true disappointment came back to him. He must recognize—once again—that he could not cultivate his bees, not this summer. The brunt of the project would have to wait. Honey-gathering began in April and hardly lasted into September. One had to be there at the beginning. So, he must wait. All right, he would have nine months now to

prepare, counting at least from the time when he would be back here again, permanently, in June, late June, and an unexpected and most unpleasant shiver of anticipation came to him at this thought. Did he know what he was doing? Such a bad thought! He forced it back. He had been in control of his feelings since he was ten years old, and he was not preparing to let go now.

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By July, life was certainly different for Alois. Klara, for example, was pregnant. In seven months, assuming the baby would be born without incident, there would be a total of eight kids who had come into existence because of him, eight, if you include the three who now were gone. Of course, if he so desired, he could add some Kinder not exactly accounted for—quite a number of cooks and chambermaids who had managed to conceive with what might be called mixed male parentage, much mixed. Yes, whenever one of them said she was pregnant, he had agreed that it was possible and he could be the true father, but then, hadn't she also been with Hans and Gerhardt and Hermann and Wolf? With rare exceptions (like

Fanni) those women were not in a position to argue who was who when it came to the true father. It was enough to give them a decent gift.

Here in Hafeld, he was face to face with the other side of such achievements. Through the heat of July, in this farm-house up on the hill, he had to look at five faces every meal, from Klara all the way down to Edmund, sixteen months old and trying to talk. By January, there would be another child. He was used to living with peoples' faces in front of him, more new faces than most people had to meet up with every day, but now, it was the same mugs every day. He was not used to dwelling with such questions as whether Edmund, for example, had come up with a new phrase or was just gurgling out his usual globs of sound.

Managing the farm was another matter. He could take pleasure in Angela's work. For a twelve-year-old who had been putting cold cream on her hands ever since she was eight—a little city girl, ready to be spoiled!—she was now, to his surprise, decent help. She was always currying the two horses, and washing down the cow even when that hefty lady didn't need another bath. She would also get Adolf and Edmund to laugh at the hearty contentment to be heard in the full-gutted sound of the sow every time they

approached with food. Rosig (Pinky) was large for a pig, large even for a prize pig, and seemed happy in her smelly wallow with its pink rosette tacked above the stall, an old prize rosette from the summer before they bought the farm. By next summer, when all the new work wouldn't be weighing on them, and there might be time, Angela wanted to prepare Rosig again for local competition. Yes, his girl, Alois decided, was a prize herself. Angela even took the pains to keep the manure of the farm animals separate. She made a point of carrying each collection to a different pile. Why? Because she declared to Klara, "My father would want it that way. Nice and neat." She even succeeded in getting Adi to take up a part of the slack. While he could be counted on to throw a tantrum, Angela would ride it out. Then the boy would follow her, his nose up to heaven in horror, but nonetheless carrying a second manure pail.

His school year over in Passau, Alois-Junior came to the farm at the beginning of July. For a short period, no one could surpass him at work. Right off, he was splendid with the horses, particularly Ulan, a stallion five years old. Alois was proud of how quickly Junior took to the saddle. The youth was also ready for the joy of a quick canter bareback up the hill and

down, accompanied by full screams of excitement from Angela and Adi. Yet, he also seemed content to work the plow for hours in the sun with the dray horse, Graubart. Before too long, they had turned up three acres of hard soil pasture for the potatoes, the same sprouting potatoes Klara had bought and stored in the root cellar a week after her arrival. Alois-Junior worked harder for two weeks than his father would have believed. Then, of a sudden, this splendid flurry of hard labor fell off. Bad news arrived in a letter from Alois' school in Passau. He had failed half of his courses this last semester. He would have to take those studies over again.

"I won't go back," he told his father. "The teachers are so stupid that we laugh at them."

Yes, the boy must have been brooding for these two weeks over the bad school news but had not said a word, just kept working hard in his father's field. In that time, they had tilled ten inches deep into the three acres chosen, a stubborn, resistant soil, then laid the seed potatoes in shallow trenches and covered them lightly, each of the sprouters a foot apart, each row of furrow less than a yard away from the next, but that had been only the beginning. Now, came the labor that went into weeding and

fertilizing. Bad memories from fifty years ago came back to Alois. He now encountered white grubs and wire worms, and had to watch as the earliest potato leaves were nibbled into green lace by aphids and flea beetles. Every day one had to go back for more weeding. Soon enough, watering became an ongoing problem. One could only dig down a few inches for the irrigation canals. Go deeper and potato roots would be slashed by the shovel. But these shallow trenches soon filled with silt. Hours had to be spent carrying pail after pail of well water up the slope to the meadow. On one of those afternoons, Junior disappeared. He was out riding Ulan. Alois put Angela to work in his stead, and for the rest of the working day, she carried the water, heavy duty for a girl her size.

That night, Alois gave his son a tongue-lashing right in front of the others. "You are," he said, "very much like your crazy mother. Only with you, worse. You have no excuse. Your mother, by the end, was out of her mind, yes, but at least she had always been hard-working. You are lazy. You are full of filthy, foul laziness!" If the episode had happened even a year earlier, Alois would have given him a beating, exactly the apocalyptic variety that leaves a scar on the heart, but now the boy was big, and wild

enough in the occasional expression of his eyes to offer Alois pause. So, he did not strike him. Which, he came to decide in the days that followed, was a mistake. That stuck-up head should have been ringing from one hell of a wallop. Now, Junior might be able to think that his father might be a little afraid of him, maybe a little, yes. It was a fact that the boy kept reducing the total of his hours. He was no longer comporting himself like a farmer's son—more like a lad from the city doing summer labor. Often, more than an hour short of sundown, he would ask Alois to let him take Ulan for a ride over the hill.

The trouble, Alois told himself, was that as a father, he was not hard enough. Under all the bite, he had a soft heart. The truth was that he adored Alois-Junior. The boy was so attractive. Restless, yes, and like his mother, victim to terrible moods. He was much too prideful, and in full flight from getting a decent education. Yet, he could be as charming as Fanni when he chose to be. He reminded Alois of how well she used to move. He even felt pride at how quickly his son had gotten on good terms with the stallion. Alois himself hesitated to ride him. It was truly a long way to the ground for a heavy man! But Alois-Junior could saddle up with all the eclat of a

prize cadet—the sort who used to promenade along the best streets of Vienna wearing the boots that Alois had made for them in those years, all the way back when he had so admired such well-turned-out young men. Memories returned of those officers strutting on the Ringstrasse with their handsome ladies, even as he, the apprentice, had dreamed of finding an elegant and lovely young milliner for himself whom he might persuade to start a shop offering the finest hand-made hats and most exceptional boots, a stupid dream, but now his own Junior reminded him of those cadets. Such a striking young man. He was not at all like little Adolf, full of hysterical temper, or tiny Edmund, full of snots.

So, Alois could not bring himself to refuse when Alois-Junior would ask for an hour off. Ulan, after all, had to be exercised. And the horse did love his young rider. But not the father! Whenever Alois approached, the beast would paw the straw of his stall, showing teeth in an unmistakably evil grin.

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On one warm evening in August, Alois-Junior, took another unpleasant liberty. This time, Klara was infuriated. The youth was at table ready for their evening supper, but Angela was not. She was in the barn currying Ulan's wet hide after her brother had put the charger into a gallop on the way back from the woods and then provided too brief a walk-down to allow the animal to cool. Klara could not believe such selfish behavior. It was one of the few times in their marriage when she spoke sharply to her husband. After six pregnancies, he was no uncle to her now, not at this moment. "You allowed your son to leave such work to Angela? That is certainly not right."

"Angela likes wiping Ulan down," said Alois-Junior. "I can do without it."

"I may not know horses so much," said Klara, "but I am still ready to say that he who rides a horse has his duty afterward. The horse sees the difference. Even if you don't."

"You know nothing about the subject," said her step-son. "When it comes to horses, you are ten degrees less than zero."

"Silence!" shouted Alois. "And keep your mouth shut for the rest of the meal. Not one word."

Coming into the fray these several steps behind Klara, he had to be masterful. "Yes, silence," he repeated. "I call for it."

"Jawohl!" shouted Alois-Junior.

Now, Alois had to ask himself whether he was being mocked or obeyed? "I will repeat," said Alois. "You are to be silent for the rest of the meal. Not one word. Not even 'Jawohl!'"

Alois-Junior stood up and left the table.

"Come back," said Alois, "come back, sit down, and be silent."

There was a pause, and then he did come back, but in the pause was all the suggestion of what might be yet to come.

They finished the meal in silence. Angela came in, flushed from currying, started to speak, and then did not. She sat down, her face still moist from the quick wash she had taken with the dipper, and put her face to the food. Sitting next to her, Adi was so full of excitement and foreboding that he was stiff with fear he might soil himself. And Klara? She ate slowly, pausing often, her spoon in the air. She was filled with an unruly desire to upbraid her step-son again, and then—no small impulse—upbraid her own Alois as well. She said nothing, however. She did not dare. To interfere with two men who were in such a rage was no territory to enter. Edmund, pale, pasty-faced, lip-dribbling Edmund, began to cry.

That offered a solution. Klara picked him up and left the table. Then Alois rose and quit the room. Angela and Adi gathered the plates for washing, and Alois-Junior, continued to sit at the table, poised within his own silence, gravely poised, as if he had converted his father's order into a species of silent reverence addressed to himself.

That night, Alois-Senior could not sleep and by the end of the next afternoon, he quit his labors early. For the first time in quite a while, he went to the only tavern in the area, a full mile away at Fischlham.

He had hesitated whether to go. The company was certainly less to his taste than the old beer cronies in Linz. Besides, he knew enough about farmers to anticipate the nature of his reception. He could hear certain thoughts in advance. "The peasant who tries to act like a millionaire," they would say behind his back. Or, as easily, the opposite—"this rich idiot who wants to play at being a peasant."

He had visited a couple of neighbors in January when he first looked at the house he was to buy, and had asked a few questions. They had not trusted him much. He expected that. They were not about to talk too openly to a stranger who could also choose not to buy the farm, yet might repeat enough of what he had heard to leave the owner altogether offended by their gossip. So Alois was only told the good news, land good, just a few animals, but excellent livestock, prize sow, good orchard—yes, walnuts, all by themselves, were easy money once a year.

Alois had not bothered to believe them. Nor to disbelieve them. He had wanted the farm. He had assumed it could not be as good as it looked, and, of course, it wasn't. Already the big cow who had been giving fine milk every day had come down with udder trouble.

He did bring this matter up at the tavern in Flischlham. He needed to. He was looking for a few opinions on the respective merits of the veterinarians in the district, and used it as a calculated opening to stimulate the farmers drinking with him to say a few other things as well. He had decided to be mild in manner. One didn't want to be perceived as a retired fool throwing some weight around. So, he listened to their guarded opinions about the local veterinarians and learned nothing he could count on. Next, he talked about his land.

When he told them that he had planted potatoes, they looked uneasy. In the most indirect manner, it did come out that he might have been wiser to consider beets.

"I planned to put one acre in like that, but not this first year. Too much at once."

They nodded. Farming and work. Yes. The oldest marriage. One must never do too much at once if one could help it.

They were more slow-spoken than most of the voices he had heard since he first went to Vienna forty-five years ago. It took an hour of staring at the unadorned wooden walls of the tavern, fretting all the while over the one spike of a splinter in his behind (a gift of the dried-up wood of the tavern bench) before one of them would come forward with the muffled hint that this land on which he had planted potatoes should have been given to beets. That was because last year's crop had been wheat. Now, they spoke of a variety of wheat whose genus was unfamiliar to him, but that was what the previous owner had been planting these last three years. Who knew? The soil could have been depleted. They did not say as much; they just drew on their pipes and drank their beer and looked sad. Worst of all, as he could tell, the sadness was hardly for him, no, it was offered to the outrage done to the earth now owned by another rich man, an interloper trying to be a peasant.

The smell of the tavern became unpleasant. He could not locate the odor that mingled with the beer, but it was impure—sour milk? Old

manure? A compost pile outside the door that had gone wrong? What he resented most about this quiet dun-brown wooden den was that there was not even a hint of schnapps in the air, no, not even one good town drunkard.

The evening proved, however, not to be altogether a loss. He learned the name of an apiculturist who lived in Hafeld. Then, for further consolation, the walk home was agreeable. The late summer moon was out, a harvest-orange moon, and he finally felt the pleasure that beer usually offered quickly. Tonight, however, those pints had merely been stored in his stomach, ready only now to dispense their goodness. He had a long splendid urination by the side of the road.

Next morning he was back in his gathering gloom. He had to live with the disappointment of his three acres of potatoes. He would probably end with half a marketable crop. His drinking companions of last night (who in memory now smelled as dank as the Fischlham tavern) were right. He knew that whenever he dug up one or another early potato. And now he felt a few twinges in his gut. Was his heart acting up? Sometimes he even felt as if this long-trusted organ—such a hearty companion—was forcing itself right up into his brain. Yes, headaches.

Given the work yet to be done of digging up the potatoes and carting them to market in Fischlham, he ended by hiring a day laborer for the week, a stupid fellow, yet, on balance, the man probably served up as much useful service as Junior. How was that boy going to end? Would he yet be a criminal? Alois could certainly conceive of him in something like the French Foreign Legion. Dark thoughts, but they had their appeal to Alois. When he was young, he would have made a good soldier of that variety, ready for anything. Or was that nonsense? There was something in the boy that was wilder than himself. Was that why, these days, they always had to speak to each other as if they were in ballet shoes? Up on tiptoe!

The day laborer was stupid, but he was not so incapable of thinking when it came to putting a number of those potatoes aside for himself, and Alois could not even be certain there had been a theft. Feeling not too well one afternoon, he had let the laborer take the produce to market, and the man returned with less Kronen than Alois had estimated. Just a little less. More fingering at the edges.

Then there was a miserable end to the prize sow. It died. Angela was disconsolate. Alois was amazed at how long and how hard a twelve-year-old female could cry.

It started with that big, pretty pig being a little grumpy. Then, day to day, it got worse. Angela was so upset that Alois broke into his own reservoirs of pride and actually turned to his three nearest neighbors for advice. It was then he had to recognize that he had forgotten one of the laws of his childhood received from Johann Nepomuk before he was even ten years old. When it came to farming, there were no laws you could count on, no, not if you had the bad luck to meet an unexpected problem. Even your wisest friends could disagree on the solution. Of course! Every farmer, he now learned, had his own idea of how to cure a sick pig. Of course!

The three neighbors suggested, in turn, an emetic, a binder, and a diarrhetic. All were wrong. The sow stopped breathing and was gone. All three had assumed the trouble could only be in the stomach or the bowels. Where else in a pig? Who had ever heard of consumption in such a heavy

porker? Perhaps it was something else. Even the veterinarian he called in after the demise was unsure. Probably the lungs, but he couldn't say.

Nothing could have aggravated Alois more. To pay good money after the animal had died! Why? Because he had to know the cause. What an idiocy! He wasn't going to raise any more pigs, not now! but still he had to know. And then he found out that the specialist—if you could call him that—was no more sure of the cause than his neighbors. It would take, he told Alois, the further expense of lab tests in Linz. To hell with that! Such an expenditure would be obscene. On top of it, he had to bury the animal whole. He was tempted, but he did not dare to carve away any good part of it for the family. Left to himself, Alois would have looked for some choice cuts—how much did the hams have to do, after all, with the lungs? But, no, the vet was definite. "Do not take a chance, Herr Hitler, on any part of this animal."

Yes, that is what the vet told him, but only after he had been paid! And there was Angela going on and on with her hiccups and her sobs, "Ach, ach, ach!" Not to mention his own labor of digging a big goddamn hole for the carcass.

Yes, these were losses to calculate. What kind of profits could he point to from his mediocre potato crop? When he added the cost of the seed potatoes, the compost he had bought for the three acres, and then subtracted the wages of the hired hand, the loss of the sow, and the fee of the vet as well, how could he claim to have made any respectable sum? If not for the walnuts, which had, as promised, been easy money, money for you right off the ground, he would have had no profit at all.

He had to reassure himself. It wasn't that he was in real financial trouble. Never yet! His pension alone was six times the income of any day laborer like the poor fellow he had hired, who, dumb or not, was also able to cheat him. But, all right! In the old days, in the best years of his earning power at Passau and Linz, he had been situated in what you could call the well-salaried layers of the middle class.

All the same, that hardly extracted the real thorn from his gut. One of his strengths with these younger officers who came from good families had always been that he, being real peasant stock, could know at least when people were cheating him. And now he had discovered that the land he bought was nothing to brag about. Once upon a time, he might have been a

peasant. Now, he could just as well call himself another town idiot, fooled on a deal involving land! Could he feel any worse if Klara took up with a farm boy? That was impossible, but then, how had it been so possible for himself, Alois Hitler, to be gulled on this deal?

By October, he was settled in gloom. Even the Hound was one sick puppy. How was he to look at himself—a man in his late middle age who dangled a sad pup between his legs?

Klara, seven and a half months pregnant, tried to explain it to him. Now that the potato crop was in, and so much hard work was finished, it was not unnatural to feel a little unhappy. Women, she could tell him, were that way after a child was born. So much had gone into the womb, so much hope and effort, but now one was empty again. The baby might be there and beautiful, but for a time the woman had to feel empty. For a little while. It was natural.

She had never waxed so philosophical before, not to him, but he almost took her head off. "What am I, a woman?" he wanted to shout.

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Changes occurred, however. Alois' depression lessened. Junior was no longer around. Klara had taken it upon herself to suggest that he should be sent to Spital where he could work with her father, Johann Poelzl, who by now had certainly become old enough to need a family hand. It developed that Alois-Junior was also in favor of the move. His father's depression, with all its muted threat of more despotism to come, lived in the midst of the son's rage like a fist jammed in his face.

So, it was arranged. Alois' cart, driven by the hired man, would take the fourteen-year-old to Linz. Then he would travel by train to Weitra,

where he could get on a jitney that passed through Spital. The boy was gone, and a cloud of dark presentiment could lift.

In September, Adi and Angela began school in Fischlham, Angela in the fourth and most advanced grade for twelve-year-olds, Adi, at six, going to first grade.

His first school days proceeded through a bright and mellow September. The green was still on the fields. It was a fine walk hand in hand with his sister over hills and meadows. There was only one peril—a full-grown bull grazing in a fenced-in pasture. Depending on the bull's mood, they could choose to go around, or dare to cross the field. On most days, they did not dare.

Soon enough, Adi learned that it was unwise to shame Angela when she was afraid. She knew how to pay him back. She could always inform him that he smelled awful! Sometimes, it was his breath, as often, his body odor.

Probably, she did not know to what depth down into his quick-beating chest these accusations entered, but deep they went, and for good cause. They were true. He did have an odor—a touch of sulphur and an

unmistakable hint of something rotten—of that I may soon choose to speak. Such off-odor is one of the constant problems of our clients. It besets us. The Cudgels are quick to pick up such a clue.

From Angela's point of view, it was simple. If Adi was trying to make her cry, then of course she would look for ways to start tears up in his eyes as well. Besides, bad smells did not bother her much. She was accustomed to sour milk and horse manure. A passing wind reeking of pig wallow from a neighboring farm even brought a real sorrow to her heart—poor dead Rosig!

"What are you crying about now?" asked Adi. "You tell me how I am bad-smelling and I am the one who should cry."

"Oh, shut up. It's not you I cry for."

That meant she was thinking of Rosig and he did feel sad for her. This was not because he had liked the sow so much (in fact, he had been jealous of Angela's affection for the beast) but because he did like his older sister. She was good most of the time. Besides, she was the brightest girl inside the four walls of the one-room schoolhouse, just as he was the smartest boy.

Depending on weather and the immediate needs of the neighboring farms for additional labor, there were sometimes less than forty boys and girls, sometimes it was down to thirty, even twenty-five, but the school-room contained seating divisions for these four grades; and each child, First to Fourth, six to twelve in age, was able to listen to all that took place in every other class, a routine matter since there was only one teacher, a middle-aged lady, Fraulein Werner, who had a long nose and wore spectacles.

Adi was soon able to follow the lessons for all four classes. His introduction to German History came by way of the senior grade, the Fourth, where Angela and the others were studying the exceptional deeds of Charlemagne. An hour later, in First, Adi would be asked in company with the other beginners to decide which pictures of animals should be connected to printed words on a big card that Fraulein Werner would hold up. In the beginning, it was wondrous—all those awesome letters that made a word. At first, the drawing vibrated in his eyes, but before long, it turned into no more than a puzzle. By the time he had reduced it to a solvable problem, he took care not to make the same mistake twice. Indeed, he soon

grew bored waiting for others in his class to catch up. Then, he could barely wait for the lessons of the Third who were studying the geography of the Hapsburg empire, the Great Hapsburg Empire, as Fraulein Werner would always say. If permitted, he would have been ready to speak out to those students who were simpletons, and could not find any of the places on the map that he had already noticed, Braunau and Linz being the first to catch his eye. Plus Passau, just across the Danube on the map.

So, by the age of six, he was absorbing the lessons of the eight and ten and twelve-year-olds, and it pleased him that Angela was the brightest in her class. He could see the approval in Fraulein Werner's eyes each time they entered the room, but then, they were also the neatest brother and sister. That was Klara's doing, and that helped to put them up high in Fraulein Werner's favor. All the same, such neat dress obliged him to stay apart from other boys during recess, and soon enough he had to deal with one bully a year older who kept daring him to wrestle.

"Are you crazy?" he would answer. "I am in my good clothes. My mother will kill me if I get them dirty." The daily wars of Passau had enriched his voice with just enough assurance to deter the other. But then

that boy was nothing. If Adi could manage to live with Alois-Junior, how much had he to fear from a fool like this, also named Klaus, same as his lieutenant in Passau? It was big sister who bothered him with all this teasing.

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Angela was concerned these days by having come into her first period. Here, Klara had done her best to allay the girl's horror. She could see that it was all connected in Angela's mind with Rosig who hemorrhaged blood all over her hams before she died.

To bring some calm to such outraged feelings, Klara spoke for the first time of intimate matters. She adored her step-daughter. The twelve-year-old was by now her substitute for a woman who could become a close friend, and so she spoke not only of this new condition, but went on at good length about odor in general, and its peculiar subtleties in nature. Odor was part of nature. Casting about for happy examples, she passed on a piece of

information Alois had provided her in passing. Once, Klara had asked how he could be sure his own bees (once he did start his hives) would know how to find their way back to home. As she understood it, he planned to acquire a couple of hive-boxes, each a full colony in itself. There they would be, sitting side by side in the shade of the big oak near the house. "How will these thousands of bees know to which box they belong?" she asked.

He was sufficiently pleased by her curiosity to explain that he would paint each of his boxes a different color, green for one, sky-blue for another, even pink, possibly, for a third. Bees, he explained, liked to return to dwellings that could be close to the color of the flowers whose nectar they brought back.

"But you tell me that each day these little creatures go to a different kind of flower. They are faithful only for this one day at a time to each variety of flower. Is that not so?"

"Yes." He wasn't certain he liked the conversation. Would he be able to answer all her questions without slipping and sliding into other matters?

"So it could be a flower of one color on one day, and another color is what they like tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"How do these bees not get mixed up?"

Yes, he was reluctant to tell her. It was not something to talk about. Not necessarily. Still, he chose to proceed. For Klara to be interested in apiculture might, on balance, be better for him than if she showed indifference. "Each queen bee has her own odor," he informed Klara. "Since she will fertilize every cell in every comb and so puts tens of thousands of eggs, yes, larvae, into separate wax cells for their beginning in life, so she is certain to pass her own odor into each of her thousands of children."

"That is remarkable," said Klara. "How do you know this, Alois? So much you know."

"I have read about these discoveries in books," he said grudgingly.

"You have never smelled it yourself?"

"Do I look so stupid as to put my head into a hive in order to give a dozen bees the opportunity to fly up my nose?"

She began to laugh. In certain ways, she knew him well. He might read his books on the subject, but, at bottom, he did not like to admit that he

had not learned the subject by way of his hands, his feet, his strength, his own patience and his five good peasant senses.

Indeed, Alois had told her a little too much. Now, she had to know more.

Before the conversation was over for this night, she actually prodded him to explain how the queen was fertilized. She was, after all, curious about any queen who could give birth to so many thousands of children and still remain a queen! She could see it! There was such admiration in Alois' eye when he spoke of this. Everything depended on The Queen—the absolute success of the hive, you could say.

So Alois did choose to lead Klara through a few descriptive steps. Given her evident excitement, he could sense it would be to his advantage on this night. She was clearly full of ardor at the thought of so female a creature, so tiny, so noble. So extraordinary.

He explained then that the young queen, very much a virgin, not twenty days out of her own wax cell, (which was no larger in width and depth than the eraser tip on the end of a new pencil) would be fed so soon as she emerged from that cell, by bee nurses and bee attendants. Yet, just three

weeks from that day, she would be ready nonetheless to take her virgin flight out of the hive, and this usually took place on the first warm day in May. Up she would lift into the heavens on this first sortie, higher than all but for a few male bees who would dare to follow.

"The ones who are called drones?" asked Klara.

"Yes, fat, spoiled fellows. They jam their corner of the hive. They live to eat, and on a good day they fly around like fools. For the fun of it. They do not even bother to bring back honey. It is only when the virgin queen comes out for her first flight that they are able to justify their existence. On this day, they have been flying around waiting for her. They know she is coming. This Queen who flies so high, who is so beautiful compared to all her sisters, those thousands of worker bees, yes, work-horse female bees always looking for more nectar to bring back—those poor girls do not have full ovaries so they go out and forage, except when they are attached to necessary duties for the hive. Clean-up duties. Chores. But this Queen, she is different, still a virgin, she is not yet really a queen, more, I would say, a princess. And then, I would also say, very much like a princess, she flies so high that only a few of these drones can follow. It

comes down to two drones, to one, but, oh, this last strong one, he reaches her, he puts what he has, yes, you know what I mean, his very own organ which he has kept inside himself until now but suddenly it comes out, springs up, you could say, into, yes, yes, springs into—call it her vagina—why not? It is so, and she takes it all in even as they are up in the air so high, just the two of them."

"It is a wonder," said Klara. Her eyes had begun to shine. She almost said, "A miracle of love."

"No, not exactly," said Alois. At this moment, he did not know how to continue. If he said too much, he could spoil what he was looking for on this night. Still, his shrewd side was ready to speak, and he knew, yes, the best was most likely to come from telling it all.

"This drone," he said, "this one good brave drone, sticks it in so far, which is exactly what nature demands, we must suppose, that then he cannot get it back."

"What?"

"No! Donnerwetter, he can't pull out! The queen has hooks, or something of the kind, very sharp hooks for certain to keep him there. She

likes him there. He is stuck. When he does insist, when he has to pull away, you won't believe it, his good organ is ripped right out of him. He is obliged to leave it behind. His manhood! Gone. All gone."

"And him? What happens then? To him?"

"Oh, he dies. He is gone. Of course! He falls to earth."

"The poor creature," she said. But she could not help it. Against her will, Klara's mouth pulled into a smirk, then slipped over to a smile. Once begun, she had to laugh. Then, she could not stop. Never before had Alois heard her laugh so long.

"What a life," she finally said, and Alois had been right to tell her. She was over six months into her pregnancy, but they made love that night. Alois had known more than one woman who could even give you a good piece of the real business in that very last week before she would pop out someone else's baby. But that had hardly been the case with Klara. On this night, however, she was different. It was equal to her best.

Of course, he certainly did not go on to tell her of two other things. The first was that the queen was perfectly capable of having other lovers after that first fabulous flight. Over the next few weeks and into June, she

could have five or six more lovers. That would store more semen in her ovaries, enough to lay thousands, then tens of thousands of eggs, one each to every cell among those thousands of cells, and continue to do so until cold weather came. Then this cycle could be repeated each Spring for as much as the next three years to come. (All that wealth of impregnation derived from no more than five or six copulations!) This meant that for the rest of her life, the Queen would have no more to do with drones, but would be feeding honey and pollen to the pupae she had created while her court, her own worker females, followed her with devotion, capping the cells of larvae yet to emerge with a mysterious wax substance they were able to make from the pollen of the May flowers, a wax that no chemist could duplicate in the laboratory. No, he did not describe how devotedly the Queen would have to work for the rest of her life, and he certainly did not tell Klara that when mating season was done, these female worker-bees would evict the drones from the hive, and when it came to dealing with the laziest bums who would not stir, they would sting them to death. (Nor did the worker bees lose their sting. The belly of a drone was that much softer than human skin.) Then, after the slaughter, the worker bees would sweep

the carcasses out of the hive. He did not speak of more worrisome complications. There was always a tendency, once warm weather began and the empty cells of the hive had been filled near to capacity with new brood, for as much as half of the colony to be ready to swarm, that is, to fly away, to desert the hive. You could lose most of your future profit in a hurry. Nor could he conceive of telling her of new queens being born, five or six perhaps, fed for that purpose on royal jelly, who were often extinguished by the high court of bees who surrounded the Queen Bee. He left such details alone. It was better that Klara should remain sympathetic to what would be his oncoming enterprise.

Klara had not only been engrossed by what he told her that night, but now, (much like an older sister), decided to use it to divert Angela from her woes. Klara, remembering her own early flow, could certainly respect the depth of vulnerability it could leave. She had actually felt herself to be an open wound. So, now she did decide to describe to Angela the poor wrenching end of the brave drone who succeeded in reaching the Queen. This time, Klara had company in her laughter. They carried on as if they were girls of the same age or just about, and as Klara divulged more and

more of what she had learned from Alois, the topic turned not only to odor, but to the exceptional power of the Queen Bee. There she was, this creature, hardly larger than her own nursing bees and certainly smaller than any drone. Nonetheless, she had the power to impregnate the air of the hive and the thousands who dwelt within it. All of them would know their own hive since they all smelled the same. "It is," said Klara, full of a new set of giggles, "as if all Russian men and women have one kind of awful aroma, and those Polish oafs another. Maybe there is a good decent smell of tea for the English, and we Austrians, we have to be something special, we are warm like strudel." Again, she had Angela in laughter. "And the French, yes, a shameless ugly scent. So harsh! Worse than rotten onions and old gravy. Italians—nothing but garlic." They were hugging each other by now. "Maybe the very worst, the Bohemians. I shouldn't describe them. Stinking old cabbage."

"Why not the Hungarians? They could also be just as terrible!"

They wiped their eyes. Adi, hearing their laughter, came to join them. He was annoyed when they explained nothing, merely kept laughing at the sound of each country.

All this talk of good and bad smells gave a special tingle to Angela's nose. In school, she was now most aware of Fraulein Werner with all her talcum powder, and then there was her own little Adi. He had this absolutely smelly stink when he ran up and down too many hills. She was always coaxing him to use more soap, or on those nights once a week when Klara boiled enough water for each of them to bathe in the big farm house wash-tub, Angela would insist on lathering his back and his armpits before returning the bar of soap to him. Then, with a wholly mischievous grin—"You have the soap now, so put it where it can do some work, you careless boy."

Adi would scream with anger at such rudeness, loud enough for Klara to come running in, but he would not tell his mother. He was in a turmoil of indecision. Either he smelled as bad as Angela kept saying, or she was crazy. Who could know? He could barely sniff a thing on himself.

Angela, however, would begin to brood again on the death of Rosig. The prize sow had indeed been full of a strong odor, not unlike Adi at his worst, or was it Rosig at her worst?—enough! Angela began to cry for both, the boy and the pig together. Full of remorse for teasing him, she

tried to make amends by telling him a few of the wonderful secrets Klara had told her, all of this new knowledge about bees, and on many a morning as the two walked to school, she would take up the topic again—her head was so full of what she had been told that Adi's imagination was soon inflamed by the mysteries of the Queen Bee.

Ever since they had come to the farm in April, he had been most aware of the nearness of bees. In May and June, there had been hours in full daylight when the sky was full of tiny lights, pellets of light whipping about, flying in so many directions. His mother was always warning him that he must not try to touch any such tiny creature, not if he saw one on a flower. Worse, he must never dare to kill one. That same bee could give him something to remember! Then one fine morning in July, Edmund got stung and didn't stop screaming for an hour. So Adolf, in his turn, had been most respectful of the perils of their presence.

Now, however, to hear that the Queen Bee shared her odor with every bee in the hive (and he could count by now to a thousand) yes, that did excite his thoughts.

So when he heard that his father might be going to talk to a neighbor about purchasing what Alois called "the first materials"—an announcement he made on a Saturday evening at dinner, Adi had a vivid dream that night. He saw an army of bees flying in circles above the farm. Standing near their house was an old man who was dressed differently from anyone Adi had ever seen. His shirt remained outside his pants and came to his knees, and he wore an old hat over his white hair, as long as a stocking. It hung half down his back. He was not short, but he still looked like a dwarf because he was so bent over. In this dream, Adi knew his name. The man was called Der Alte, and the boy woke up on Sunday morning to learn that his father was actually going to visit a bee-keeper named Der Alte.

How could he not ask his father if he could go along? Alois was surprised, then pleased. Every Sunday until now, Klara was picked up by another farm couple in their wagon to go to Sunday Mass in Fischlham's small chapel. She would travel with the three children, even as Alois stayed at the farm. "In truth, in good conscience, I cannot go," he would tell her, and he would be left alone to walk his fields. This morning, therefore, he was all the more pleased that Adi asked to join him.

I can say that I was directly instrumental in shaping the boy's dream. It had been the first active participation I had taken with the family since the night I entered Alois' mind just after his beer-soaked sermon in Linz about the beauties and wonders of apiculture.

Now, I feel (with some unease) that I must address the reader again on an unappetizing matter. It does concern Adi's bad smell.

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It is curious, yet, after all, not so curious that few matters concerning men and women are so difficult to discuss as odor. To make matters less agreeable, it is also true that spirits who labor for the Maestro can hardly avoid the libel that they too are offensive on occasion.

Enough! Stinks do not make for a good subject. At this time, approaching the end of the Nineteenth Century, our problems in managing clients could often be traced to one phenomenon. Many human beings in whom we invested, found it necessary to be exceptionally fastidious in their personal habits. Otherwise, they would at varying times smell rank enough to arouse distrust.

How this condition began, I do not know. I have served the E.O. for countless ages—no need to count—but my recollection of earlier eras is no more grounded in the far past than a human might have of previous incarnations. It is probably not to the Maestro's interest to have us know any more than we need to know. Rather, we are asked to deal as effectively as possible with the problem before us. We do not have to call, after all, upon Judas or Bluebeard or Attila the Hun to encourage a drunken client to slug down one more tot of booze. In consequence, we have almost no idea of the real beginning of the war between the Dummkopf and the Evil One. Whether they were both gods or, as Milton proposed, the contest was between God and an angel as important as Lucifer—is entirely beyond my province. I do not know that we will ever know. Nor can we dismiss the possibility that the Dummkopf (in whole command of this earth and this solar system) was obliged nonetheless to address Himself to even higher powers out somewhere in the galaxies. Was He in immediate need of an assistant? It is possible that our O.O. (to use for a moment his highest self-assigned title—the Other Omniscience) was dispatched here by those greater powers. Why? Why not? They may have been dissatisfied with the

progress of the D.K. Evolution had already enmeshed itself in cul-de-sacs. But for these matters, there are only questions.

Yet, if I must offer my conjecture as to what might have taken place during the interminable eons consumed by that same evolution, I would posit that the D.K. is undeniably the Creator of the world of weather, flora, fauna, and primates that we inhabit, all of us, all separate souls, bodies and spirits—divine, satanic, and human. So, yes, if He is the Creator, then evolution was certainly His immense laboratory, and the signs of His Folly as well as of His Genius are to be found over all those elaborations of endless experiments as He proceeded to develop His creatures over the near to measureless time it took before He could induce some of His living inventions to fly. Add to this the breadth and bulk of His earth-bound or marine species, His godly hopes that went, for example, into the brontosaurus (only to discover that that particular over-enlarged construction of animal life happened to be simply too large to survive—that is one failure.) I could name a myriad. The Creator had His relative successes and His abysmal failures. While it must be admitted that He never gave up, even if He was not always in firm control of the earth He had

fashioned, it is also incontestable that earthquakes and ice ages brought many an interruption to His experiments and savaged many of His pursuits. Why? Because He had incorrectly designed this globe of earth in the first place.

Of one matter I am relatively certain. By the time His most ambitious concept, men and women, had entered the D.K.'s expectations, there came a shift in the importance of odor.

I would also suppose that in the long-gone era of primitive man, odor had been one of the Creator's assets. How could He not have used its signals to aid the development of all His species? In large part, animals and humans were often drawn or repelled by one another directly through the messages that entered through the nose. So simple and elegant a solution! Presumably their smells (as developed by the qualities that the D.K. had put into them) were ready to reveal the depth of each animal's courage, perseverance, fear, treachery, shame, loyalty, and their determination to propagate—no end to the list. It was all useful to the D.K. It enabled Him to encourage creative steps forward in evolution without having to oversee each and every mating.

I think by the time our E.O. contested His progress, the D.K. could no longer entertain His old idea of Himself as All-Good and All-Powerful. The presence of a colleague (possibly unwanted in the first place) had to reduce His sense of stature. So He began to search for a method whereby His Cudgels could determine which men, women, and children had separated themselves from Him. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the D.K. could have marked each of our clients with a touch of condign odor, a process chosen for its simplicity and relative lack of cost. From the Middle Ages on, therefore, our Maestro had combated this obstacle to his intentions by encouraging many of his alchemists to develop perfumes whose subtleties became a means whereby rotten odors could be topped with sweeter, earthier, more untraceable, and finally more appealing fragrances, even exotic in their hint of a bit of reek beneath the bouquet. (It is, for example, impossible to reconstruct the history of court life in France during the reign of Louis XIV without pondering these royal redolences, these carnal aromas so full of camouflage. They proved a boon to all of our clients who were rich enough to afford good perfumes.)

By the end of the Enlightenment, matters had altered once more. Soaps, developed by us, were able to add their powers of obliteration to mephetic aromas. Again, the Dummkopf was confounded. At this time of Adi's boyhood, and indeed, throughout the decades to come, a pervasive erasure of human odor became part of our immense progress across this sector of the war between the Kingdoms. Soaps, bath-tubs, cleansing oils and the development of plumbing all came into being, and were due in large part to the energies of those entrepreneurs in whom we had made successful investment. (A history has even been published of the common crapper.)

By the middle of the Twentieth Century, the D.K.'s dependence on bad personal odor as a means of warning His Cudgels that the Evil One's clients were near, had been rendered obsolete. Deodorants dominated the day. By now, in the Twenty-First Century, hardly anyone ever possesses a sense of the odor of their closest partner. (This is certainly true in the more developed nations!) The loss of such cognitive power has lessened the dominance of the D.K. and given great impetus to us.

Back, however, toward the end of the Nineteenth Century, this was not so, not yet, and the meeting between Alois, Adi, and Der Alte was

characterized by a curious but immediate intimacy between the boy and the old man. In part, indeed, it was aromatic.

I must not ignore, however, the walk to Der Alte's farm for on the way, Alois had a real conversation with his son.

BOOK VII

DER ALTE AND THE BEES

-1-

I must, however, speak first of the dream I installed in Adi's sleep on the Saturday night that came before Alois' Sunday meeting with the beekeeper. This dream was put together by me in response to a direct order from the Maestro. I will add that creating a dream which is not connected to the dreamer's previous experiences, is never routine. While we can, on special occasions, insert whole scenarios into our client's sleep, it is also true that dream-works produced ex nihilo make serious inroads on our budget. Moreover, when the client is young, there is risk involved. Cudgels who might be involved with the client can be more than

troublesome if they become aware of what we are attempting. A set of delicate manipulations calculated to alter no more than one small element in a subject's psyche should not be undertaken under battlefield conditions. Few people prosper from a nightmare.

It has been my experience that the installation of highly selected nocturnal visions (dreams!) can deliver many desired effects, but success is best obtained when one is able to work deliberately with the protégé, nimbly, subtly, proceeding in small steps over many a night in order not to arouse the Cudgels. Count on it, His angels react with fury to any dream that we initiate. The D.K. wishes to be the only one to command dreams. This has been true from the commencement of human existence. Looking to control those primates He was inspiring to become humans, the impetus offered by His structured hallucinations proved essential to Him.

Much later, during what the E.O. calls The Jehovah Period (that is, from 1000 B.C. to the advent of Jesus Christ) the D.K. not only disbursed a host of awards and punishments, occasionally by way of miracles, but more often directly through dreams, yes. He could arouse visions in prophets

and plebians alike, He could drive His wards in many a direction, often, I suspect, on not much more than His imperious whim.

Our entrance, however, into the developing life of humankind was able to reduce our many of His powers. No longer could Jehovah employ dreams to control His chattels at will. Indeed, given our work through the centuries, dreams are no longer seen by now as visions. Rather, they usually present themselves as jagged, broken-backed narratives—incomprehensible intrusions.

The D.K.'s once imperious use of dreams is, therefore, at present, all but inactive. Rarely now can commands be delivered from Above. Instead, the modern nocturnal episode serves to give the sleeper no more than a whiff of the buried disturbances in his or her life. If a trusted friend is bound to prove treacherous down the road, the dream is now there to alert one to just such a possibility. If, on the other hand, it is the subject who is ready to betray a close friend, the consequences of such an act can be played out through the imaginary scenario. The D.K., no matter His shortcomings, has found a kind of means to guide some of His human beings. Indeed, for those lucky or worthy few who have been guarded by the strongest angels

and so can rarely be approached by us, the D.K.'s new methods did prove efficacious. When we devils and demons cannot be present to alter the content, a dreamer might actually obtain some useful insights into his or her vulnerabilities. The mock situations created by the dream are intense enough to test the subject's ability to withstand anxiety. When successfully interpreted, the subject could become aware of how he or she possessed less courage, less loyalty, less devotion, less love, or less health than previously assumed. The dream could now serve as a protective system to warn a man or woman away from situations they cannot dominate.

To the degree, however, that we can interfere, we look to warp the D.K.'s intent. Our entrance produces chaos. The average dream becomes a whirligig, a stew left by the melee between the Cudgels and ourselves.

So, the task of creating a whole dream for a child appeared, on the face of it, to require special attention. As I have remarked, the Maestro did not, for the most part, encourage costly ongoing ventures with children. It will be recalled that when the Hitler family made their move from Passau, I was instructed to cease paying attention to little Adolf. He and his family would now be monitored through routine milk-runs by my assistants.

Except for the sole occasion when I had slipped into Alois' brain long enough to delve into his fascination with beekeeping, I had been working through that region of Austria with other clients. The information provided by my assistants about the Hitlers of Hafeld proved adequate.

Now, a direct communication from the Maestro had arrived—I was formally instructed to implant a dream into the head of our six-year-old. Indeed, the order proposed considerably more than the passing insertion of a concept. Etch was the verb employed by the Maestro. "I want you," he said, "to etch Adi's brain with a permanent notion. We have been quiescent in that direction long enough to expect no interference from the Cudgels. You can probably gain open entrance."

That was not a short speech for the E.O. His regard for each of us could usually be measured by the length of his communication. All too often, reading our minds, we would hear no more than "Yes," or "Don't!"

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The act itself took no more than a few minutes, but the preparation had not been simple. Etch, I will repeat, was the operative word. A fixed notion, once successfully installed, can attach the client more closely to us. But etching is not there for any devil to practice. It must be done with incisive strokes. Misapplied, it can unbalance the recipient.

I will go so far as to say that on this occasion, I was deft. Given the knowledge absorbed from the milk runs, I knew that Alois would soon be visiting this neighboring beekeeper, Der Alte, also known as Der Alte Zauberer—the Old Sorcerer. Or such was the name given him by neighboring peasants.

The term was an exaggeration. This old man was a hermit and highly eccentric. He could also be as mean as a winter wind, but on special occasions he might seem agreeable like any other purportedly warm old fellow. The peasants in Hafeld, having known him for decades, knew better. Nonetheless, he was the only apiculturist in the area, and he knew more about beekeeping than anyone within a day's walk in any direction.

What was most comfortable about Der Alte was that he had belonged to us for decades. In effect, he was an old pensioner. Moreover, he and Adi would be kin in odor, and so were likely to be unoffended by each other. The magnetic thrust of the dream soon suggested itself. Before they met, I would etch the boy's mind with a clear image of Der Alte.

As a matter of style, when it comes to dream-work, I have always been inclined to avoid baroque virtuositities. Modest scenarios are usually more effective. In this case, I satisfied myself by producing as close a presentation of Der Alte's face and voice as I could manage and then placed him into Adi's dream. For the setting, I used an image of one of the two rooms of the old man's hut, and made the yard visible through the window. The action of the dream could not have been more direct. As Der Alte led

them inside his quarters, he fed Adi a spoonful of honey. I made certain the taste was exquisite on the boy's tongue. Adi awakened with wet pajamas from navel to knee and a whole sense of happiness. Stripping his wet night-clothing, a not unusual event, he went back into slumber, replaying the dream with his own small variations, looking to taste the honey again. In his mind, he was certain that he would soon meet Der Alte, and this emboldened him to ask his father to take him along next morning. Alois, as I have remarked, was pleased.

 Their conversation on the walk to the Sorcerer's house is yet to be recounted but I will choose to jump ahead long enough to say a little more about the Maestro's concept of etching for it has a good deal of relevance to our work. For example, we now knew that when Adi met Der Alte on this Sunday, he would feel a new sense of importance in the heart of his thoughts for he would now believe he had the power to peer into the future. Indeed, we had balanced both sides of this new relation. For in his sleep, Der Alte had also been instructed to give the boy a taste of his finest honey, and do it directly on meeting him.

Be it said once more, this man, Magnus Rudiger, spoken of as Der Alte Zauberer, was in fact not much of an old sorcerer. His curses were neither remarkable nor effective. Whenever a sense of dread came to him from forces he could not name (usually from one or another branch of the Cudgels) he thought it was sufficient to lay a circle of salt around the table where he sat by himself in the kitchen. That, for all its picayune effect, was more effective at nudging us away than the Cudgels. Such minor clients can become an annoyance when they grow old. Still, no neighbor was in a hurry to attack his self-esteem. Indeed, by way of his dress, his odor, his resonant, even reverberating, voice, and his compendious knowledge of bees, he did suggest that he was a magician. In this manner, he was able to safeguard his pride. To his favor, I can also add that he rarely resisted our occasional employments of him.

No surprise then that Adi, etched by the dream, was marked by the visit. His future belief that he could, on necessary occasions, be able to picture in advance (and most accurately) people he had not yet met, would become an asset for us.

We would exercise this device often during Adolf Hitler's service as an Army courier over the two years and more when he had to carry messages up to the trenches, then work his way back to Regimental Headquarters. We were there for him on many a day and night during the First World War. Since his duties incurred real danger, his belief that he could anticipate the future, proved of no small assistance to his courage. Too soon to speak of that, however. His experiences as a soldier—a most complex amalgam of our magic, and his desperation and dedication—remain eighteen years away. For now, I will leave this discussion of dream-etching until it is necessary to discuss the practice again.

Rather, I will follow the unspoken thoughts and the ensuing conversation he had with his father on the walk to see Der Alte Zauberer. Alois, of course, did most of the talking, and was anticipating his meeting with no great confidence. It was never routine for Alois to encounter a man who knew more about a subject than himself.

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Once the father and son began to talk, Alois proceeded to supply Adi's head with so many new names and thoughts—all the while continuing to stride along at a good pace—that before long the boy was twice breathless. He did not dare to lag behind by a step nor a word. In turn, Alois, so rarely in the habit of spending time or thought on this little Adolf, was a hint short of breath himself. Over the years, he had packed enough rheumatism into his knees and enough constriction upon his lungs (via tobacco) to move as a rule with more deliberation. But now, discovering that he could actually engage in a conversation with the boy, offered stimulus to his legs. It was not Alois' habit to harbor many sentiments

toward his younger children, indeed, he never found fatherhood a subject of personal interest until Alois-Junior and Angela worked with him on the farm. Now, most unexpectedly, he felt a sense of mystery coming to him from the presence of this little one. He actually wished to enlist the admiration of the small creature trotting along so breathlessly beside him.

Adi, in his turn, was more than excited. To be in the company of his father! He had barely learned to spell but Alois stood before his eyes as MEIN VATER! Just so large was his recognition of the size, and—no other word will do—the immanence of the heavy man beside him. Alois now aroused in him the same kind of awe that rose in the expression of his mother when she would speak of der Gute Gott.

How the boy wanted to please Alois! At the start of the walk, their mutual silence had been formidable, and it remained so until Adi found the words. "Have there always been bees?" he asked at last. It was a simple question but fortuitous. It came just before they were about to remain mute for the rest of the trip.

"Yes. Always. Bees," Alois amended, "have been on our fine earth for a long time."

"They go very far back, Father?"

Alois gave him an encouraging pat on the nape of his neck. The boy's obvious desire to keep the conversation in flow now served to activate Alois' funds of exposition. "Yes, I would say, the answer is: Way back! Maybe for a longer time than us. And there has never been a day when we didn't look to steal their honey." He laughed at the extent of his own insight. "I have read that back in the time of the Bronze Age, already we were eating honey, yes, and I can say for certain that I have seen some old drawings in glass cases right there in the old Linz museum, going back into the Middle Ages, that show how beekeeping was already a serious activity. Although wild, very wild then."

Despite his touch of rheumatism, Alois was indeed walking fast. Adi's breath was now seizing his lungs in a unique mixture of happy fervor at the fact of the conversation itself, and the desperation that he might not be able to keep walking (half-running) at his father's pace. So many unfamiliar words were coming into his mind at once. This past August, standing under the walnut tree nearest to their farmhouse, a gale of wind came by like the crack of a whip, whereupon three walnuts, hard as stone, had pelted his head

with such authority that he did not even dare to cry—it was as if the walnuts told him to be silent. Now, he was buffeted by the Bronze Age, and next, the Middle Ages—maybe he had heard Middle Ages before. He felt as if he might know it. Charlemagne, maybe. No question of stopping to ask—he strode along as fast as he could, the air burning in his lungs.

"They had," said Alois, "no hives in the Middle Ages. Bee-keepers already, yes, honey, yes, but they had to go out hunting to where they could find a swarm of bees gathered together. Where? Where else? In hollow trees. Locate such a tree, and then grab what you can of the honey before all the bees rush out to sting your head off. That was how good men must have done it then. Only, that was not enough. They also had to look for the wax. This beeswax was just as important. With beeswax, you could have light for your hut. Every night. Candles! But, oh, they had to pay. So many bites. Then along would come their Duke or their Baron. If he heard about your honey, you had to pay up. A good share he took. Imagine. What do you think he gave you back?—a bow, a nice strong cross-bow. Why? Because the bears in the forest were also looking for honey. Think how crazy those bees must have got when a bear stuck his nose right in to

lap up their hive. It is one thing to sting a man, but how do you stop a bear? A bear with his thick skin! They had to go for the eyes. It didn't matter. The bear would still come looking. So, a man needed a cross-bow—to kill the bear. Not so easy to go near honey if the bear got there first, but you could have compensation. Sometimes you had bear meat. Once in a while, you had bear meat and honey."

Adi's breath was by now on fire. Their path was passing through a small wood, and he was on the lookout for a bear. One more fear to pile on top of the tumult in his lungs.

"Sometimes," said Alois, "on a cold day this time of year a man would find a tree ready to fall, a dead tree with a big hollow in it, and a swarm of bees clustered right there in the hollow, trying to stay warm against the cold. Well, an enterprising fellow might dare to take the tree down. He would have to do it carefully. Don't stir up too much! He would have to do it in the evening when bees are more quiet, especially when it is cold, and then he and his son, or maybe his brother, would carry the tree back near their hut, where they could manage to extract the rest of the honey."

"What about the bears? Would they come?"

"Yes. The kind of man we're talking about had to be ready to kill the first bear and hang him up near the bees. That kept other bears away. This is exactly how it began. But now, what is it? What has it become? A hobby! A little risky, maybe, but profitable."

"Hobby," the boy repeated—another new word.

"Soon," said Alois, "it will be a business."

They walked in silence. Der Steckenpferd was how Alois had put it—a horse-on-a-stick, a plaything, a hobby. Soon it would be a business, he had said. The boy was confused. The continued pace at which they were walking was now pinching his breath past the point where he could ask even one more question.

Abruptly, Alois stopped. He had become aware at last of his son's discomfort. "Come," he said, "you sit down." He pointed to an available rock, then sat next to him on another rock. Only then did he feel the pain in his own knees and legs.

"You must understand," he said, "this bee-keeping will not be fairy-tales for us. Honey is sweet, but bees are not always so sweet. Sometimes they are cruel to each other. Very cruel. Do you know why?"

"No," said Adi. His eyes were, however, alight. "Please, you must tell me why, Father."

"Because they obey one law. It sits on top of everything. It is so clear to them. This law says: Our colony must survive. Nobody can dare to be lazy. Not there! Not inside this hive of bees." He paused. "Nobody, except for the drones. They are there to serve their one good purpose. But then it's all over for them. They are gone. Goodbye."

"Are they killed?" The boy knew the answer.

"Killed. Of course. All of them. Once a year, right about now—just after summer they are gotten rid of. No charity." He began to laugh again.

"In the home of the bees, there are no good Christians. No charity whatsoever. You will not find one bee in any hive who is too weak to work. That is because they get rid of cripples early."

As they rested, however, Alois' thoughts receded back into silence. He was feeling some dread. It was not intense, yet it had come to him on

this Sunday morning. It could have been a cloud holding more than one shape. He could not even name every one of his fears. He knew he was directly afraid of being cheated by Der Alte. Alois had understood what the neighboring peasants were not ready to say. They had praised Der Alte, they had echoed each other while speaking of his vast knowledge on this subject of apiculture. Yet Alois could hear no great allegiance to the man himself.

This was but one hint of his fear. If the fine and attractive location of his own farm had been the good reason for its purchase, he could not say the same for the land. He did not wish to be cheated again. Indeed, given the trouble with Alois-Junior, he had kept putting off the decision to go into this beekeeping. Now, all of August was lost. It might even be too late to start the winter colony. He did not feel competent about this aspect of apiculture, but he knew—he had delayed too long. His choices had become restricted. He must buy and buy soon. He might even have to pay an unnatural price for the stock and materials. Yes, he could be held up, wherever he went. He certainly did not enjoy the thought of these peasants laughing at him. Yet that was not his prime uneasiness. He could not quite admit it to

himself, but the last time he had been in this bee business, going at it as a horse-on-a-stick, just one hive, one skep, kept in a little town at walking distance from Braunau, a place he could go to in the evening to get a rest from the tavern and his fellow officers, or be able to visit on a Sunday in order not to have to watch everyone going to church—a diversion, he had thought. But then he had had a near disaster. On a given Sunday for no mistake he could point to, he had been stung so quickly and repeatedly by so many infuriated bees that he decided afterward he must have been poking about in the Queen Bee's quarters. Who could tell with a skep? Straw has so little shape! He realized his ignorance of the real stuff. He had been so open to ambush in the course of working with that straw hive.

Now, he could say he knew more. He had been reading on the subject. At length. Given his lack of education, no one could claim to be a quicker student than himself. He retained what he read. How many were able to say that? Where, then, was his fear?

But he knew. He could tell. By the way he was preparing in advance to recount to this man, Der Alte, that he had taken many stings on his hands and his knees and that that had actually proved beneficial for the stiffness in

his joints, yes. For certain, he felt ready to impress Der Alte with his knowledge of bee venom. He would speak of the degree to which diseases in ancient Egypt and Greece had even been treated in that manner. He would speak of Pliny and Galen. Romans, but great doctors. They knew how to make ointments from bee venom and bee honey. Charlemagne and Ivan the Terrible could also be cited. He would speak of these monarchs' afflictions of the joints and how they had had such pain eliminated, or so it was reputed, by bee stings.

But was he really prepared to enter this kind of conversation with Der Alte? Alois felt trapped. To the degree that he had spoken at such length to Klara on the subject, he could hardly allow her to become aware now of the fear which had bloomed in his heart that this might not be, no—not when you got down to it completely—that this might not be the next step he really wanted to take.

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As I have indicated, Der Alte is one of ours. I have called him a pensioner and that is also accurate. In recent years, we have not used him often, and any benefits he has received from us have not been large. From time to time, we offer a new insight to one of his old perceptions, (a species of gift-giving practiced by angels and demons alike) and we look to revive faded loyalties with a lagniappe, a Trinkgeld, a bonus, (as is stated so baldly in English.) In turn, our pensioners do work a little harder for us when we require recompense. Certainly, the old doctor obeyed with dispatch the instruction to put a spoonful of exquisite honey on Adi's tongue even as he and Alois came through the door. (Even I refer to him as doctor.)

Nonetheless, it is one of his more unseemly vanities. He will insist that he is an honored and learned university graduate. I have heard him refer on separate occasions to his years at Heidelberg, Leipzig, Gottingen, Vienna, Salzberg, and Berlin, none of whose eminent schools he attended. Indeed, only Heidelberg and Gottingen ever saw him at all, and that was for a brief visit. Our old and learned doctor is a fraud, a half-Jewish Pole, of no certified higher education who, nonetheless, much through his own efforts, has acquired some of the verbal skills and superior manner of a tried-and-true Doctor of Philosophy. If he has chosen in his old age to look like a confirmed drunk, an odd choice (since in fact he does not drink) he is attracted all the same to many of the slovenly habits of old sots. His clothes are filthy. Even his long woolen cap manages to be full of soup stains (for he wipes his mouth with the tail of it) and his white beard is discolored with nicotine. He not only smells of these unhappy scents we look to reduce in our clients, but to put no pretty word on it, he is incontinent. Even his furnishings, let alone his garments, have the harsh persona of old urine.

Nonetheless, he is striking. That long stocking cap which he even wears indoors in summer does serve his devoted image of himself as some

species of throwback, can it be, to a court jester? So does he sit in his hut swathed in an old cape full of faded bright colors, a fool's motley. One could hardly expect him to be impressive in appearance, yet he is. Undeniably, he is. His eyes are extraordinary, as blue as the coldest skies of the north, yet full of merry lights that offer a clue to many a trick he has learned.

Alois, who for forty years had encountered hundreds of people a day, was hardly to be surprised by an unorthodox appearance. For that matter, he had developed the ability to capture the first moment, so to speak, in just about every passing exchange. Travellers were not prepared for the phenomenon of meeting a Customs official who possessed such a degree of authority. Yet there he was at his post, or, later in career, at his desk, exhibiting the strength of his peasant roots, while offering his physical resemblance to Franz Josef. The first moment, therefore, invariably belonged to Alois. Few were prepared for the intelligence that stood out in his immediate glance. "Try to fool me—you will fail!" was the unmistakable sentiment in his eyes.

This was one of the reasons for my specific direction to Der Alte that he must meet the father and son at the door with a spoonful of honey, and insert it without leave into the boy's mouth. Whatever Alois had been preparing for, it could hardly have been this. So rude. So gracious! Both at once! And nothing offered to Alois but a superior smile from Der Alte as if his piss-soaked den, worse than an abode of fifteen cats relentless in their leavings, was nonetheless Der Alte's realm and he was happy in it, and, I may as well add, diabolically unembarrassed.

Moreover, Der Alte won the boy on the instant. It took no more than this one move placed on top of my dream-etching from the night before! Alois now perceived a look of admiration for this extraordinary old man on the boy's face. Adi's eyes were alive with the same intensity of admiration that Alois had been receiving from his son for all the length of their walk together. Now, Alois felt as if Der Alte had stolen affection which, by every right, belonged exclusively to him.

They sat down. The old man fussed a little (albeit most skillfully) at preparing tea. To Alois' further discomfort, the procedure was courtly. A very old gentleman, or even a very old lady, might have been showing the

adult visitor how little he knew—after all these years!—of the putative elegance of a tea ceremony, particularly between absolute strangers.

All the same, I do not approve of Der Alte. For all his gifts, he has never accomplished much for us, not as much as I had anticipated. For a time I had expected he would become one of my prize clients. He certainly did not have to end as a bizarre, impossibly smelly hermit with an immense reputation for dealing with hordes of bees in a pretty little corner of Austria, a country filled already with pretty little corners. I had lost standing with the Maestro by remarking decades ago, that I saw extraordinary promise in this young half-Polish, half-Jewish Magnus. Of course, he was at that time a pagan with the ladies. As far as I was concerned, this client had settled for much too little.

Once they had taken their tea, Der Alte in little sips, and Alois in three scalding gulps which enabled his host to pour him another cup almost instantly (as a most subtle form of reproof) they began at last to talk about the reason for the visit.

Alois, much habituated by now to dominating the onset of a conversation with any man or woman newly met, had developed an unhappy

habit out of this very confidence. He would, by now, take the first step even when he sensed that he might be overmatched. In effect, he was buckled to his habit.

So he began by citing Pliny and Galen, Charlemagne, and Ivan the Terrible, exactly as planned. He spoke, or so he believed, in a most moving manner of the afflictions of the two great monarchs and the dedication of Pliny and Galen—two medical geniuses—who had known how to deal with ailments so grievous that others could find no cure. It was not, he would vouchsafe, that he, personally, had suffered inhumanly from gout or from rheumatism, merely, you could say, that he had received a few intimations that there could be future miseries. He had, however, learned a great deal on one particular occasion when he had been prey to an unprecedented attack, "just the one time, but with many bites to the knees which subsequently provided considerable protection against the expected commencement of my rheumatism. I admit that I would have given much to be a medical scientist for then I could have begun research on just this subject. I am even sufficiently confident of myself to believe I would probably have made significant discoveries."

"Just so," said Der Alte, "you might, you might very well have done so. Because indeed, dear sir, what you then believed was there to be discovered has indeed been detected by no less a figure than Dr. Likomsky back in 1864, thirty-one years ago when you were still a young man, and I might also mention Doctor Terc who put the crowning cap on what could have been your thesis. Yes! Herr Doctor Terc came forth with serious chemical studies on the nature of bee venom and its as-yet-undeveloped potential for precisely these valuable cures. Rheumatism and gout might both be seen by now as ailments of the past if not for the innumerable obstacles which present themselves in the way of administering treatment. We are still looking for more precise positioning of the bee sting onto the affected body. It is rumored that the Chinese"—now with a melting look (designed most shamelessly to add to the mutual delight that existed already between him and the boy) he added, "the Chinese who live on the other side of the earth from us. Have you heard?" he asked of the boy.

Adi nodded solemnly. He had heard of the Chinese, heard of them in his one-room school house during the hour when Fraulein Werner instructed

the geography class on the specific placement of India and China on the great continent of Asia.

"Yes, in that far-off near-mythical land, esteemed Finance-Watch Chief Officer Herr Hitler, it is said that these Chinese employ the power to puncture possessed by sharp needles to alleviate gout, an excellent solution I would think, since the least attractive aspect of my beloved bees is their eagerness to sting, yes, we love them for their honey, but not necessarily for their so-often-martyred condition whenever they seek to defend themselves, and so succeed with their sting even as, unhappily, they surrender their lives."

Alois sensed that he would do well to leave this topic. The tea had left a penetrating aroma in his nostrils which, to his surprise, was compatible with the urine. Needless to say, he would have preferred a good swallow of beer to pump a few of his prepared remarks up into more forceful delivery, but as of now, this conversation did belong to Der Alte. At what length he went on!

"I cannot," he remarked, "begin to call you my good friend as yet. For I do not know you. Except, of course, by way of your fine reputation.

Word of your former most respected position precedes our meeting. Your father," he now said to Adi, "is well-regarded by all, but"—and he was now back, once more, to Alois—"I am still ready to call you my friend because I feel in myself an imperative to counsel you, for, oh, I must say, there is, dear sir, so much to learn about these bees and their good keeping." He sighed with a sound of woe as physically intimidating in its resonance as any of a number of less poetic sounds of expression with which the body will declare itself.

"Let me note that I would not wish in any manner to impose on your pride." He stopped. Since a man's pride was involved, he would proceed no further without a laisser-passer.

"No, tell me, good Doctor, you must tell me what you think," said Alois, his voice most normal (to the degree he could command it) but his nostrils were near to quivering. He hardly knew if he was at the onset of an intolerable sense of woe or whether a true burden was about to be lifted. What could be this imposition on his pride?

"Given your gracious permission, I would say that I must caution you about your honorable and honest desire to enter the endless vagaries of

apiculture. It is, you see, a vocation." He nodded. He turned again to Adi as if the boy was one more equal, yes, all three sitting there quite alike in implicit stature. "You, little fellow," Der Alte said, "you, who looks so smart, are you smart enough to know what a vocation might be?"

"No," said Adi, "but maybe I do. Yes. Almost."

"You do. You know it even before you are aware that you know it. That is the first sign of a truly intelligent person, not so?" Der Alte's voice vibrated into the tender pit of Adi's stomach.

"A vocation," said Der Alte, "is not something you do because others tell you that this is what you must do. Not so. With a vocation, there is no choice. You give all that you have to doing whatever has now become so important to you. 'Yes,' says the vocation, 'you must do it.'"

"I would not wish to dispute your learned words," said Alois, "no, I do not wish to commence a dispute, but surely one can keep a hive without building a monastery to enshrine it. I can foresee no more than a serious but modest investment for a retired man like myself."

"Dear sir, it cannot and will not ever be that way," said Der Alte.

"That much I can promise a strong person like yourself. Heartbreak or

happiness. Nothing between!" He nodded with all the profundity of the decades he had continued to present himself as a great and learned doctor.

"Herr Hitler, I cannot allow you to consider such a project until you are made fully aware of the risks that await you, the diseases and mortal enemies that surround our delicate sweet-seeking bees. After all, the honey they make is to the world of nature an exact equivalent of gold. So many of the creatures of nature, large and small, are jealous of the life of these remarkable little creatures who are not only able to make honey but dwell constantly amidst that golden and intoxicating presence. In consequence, honey-bees are hated. They are pursued and entrapped. I can inform you of one genus of spider who is evil, nothing less. Die Krabbe-Spinne, it is called. So soon as it finds a promising flower, this creature ensconces itself deep within the cavern, the small perfumed cavern of the bloom. There the crab-spider waits, fully at home. It activates the scent of this flower by stirring about within those blessed folds of the corolla; soon, its own spider odor is overcome by the intoxicating elixir of the petals. What then? It waits. When the forager-bee, our sweet hard-working female with its undeveloped ovaries—only the Queen, as we know, is completely in

possessio of that most mysterious avatar of female existence!—ach, these other females are there to work for the length of their short lives, to clean house, to serve the Queen's court, or to forage. So here, contemplate our poor little forager, our honey-bee. She smells the inimitable redolence of the flower's cavern. She enters to pick up her lustful store of nectar and pollen but, at once, she is done in. Cruelly! Most sadistically. For, the poor bee is not even dead, merely half-gone. So much worse! She has been paralyzed by a sting from the crab-spider. Whereupon, the bee sits there, numb, incapable of saving herself, while the spider, altogether without mercy, proceeds to sup on the vital liquids and subtle constituents of the bee's internal elements. When nothing is left to sip but the dry whisper of an empty hull, a husk, this crab spider goes to the actual labor of ejecting the remains from the flower, after which, I must suppose, it ensconces itself in all the bliss of sleep, yes, a successful destroyer's sleep. The crab-spider slumbers, all sated, in the corolla."

Adi would dream for weeks to come of the bee, the flower, and the evil bug. Yet, more fearful detail was to come. Der Alte began to talk about the bee-wolf, a wasp who would strike at the honeybee just as it was

alighting on a flower. The bee-wolf would always go for the throat.

"Always! The honeybee has a soft throat. So once again, our forager is paralyzed. The wasp is now in complete command of what she knows how to do. Exactly does she know how to do it. She proceeds to squash the belly of the honeybee in order to disgorge all the nectar that hard-working little being has already taken into herself. This nectar squeezed up from the belly overflows out of the bee's mouth into the maw of the bee-wolf. Is that enough? No. This female brute is now ready for the labor of flying off with her stricken victim. She transports her to a nest most specially prepared and lays her down next to as many as six or eight still-living but wholly-paralyzed other honey-bees who were caught earlier. Then she proceeds to deposit into this same crypt but one egg, one solitary wasp egg which will later feed on those unmoving bees who are still alive. And when the egg becomes a larva, it is ready to eat its way up into the full embodiment of coming forth as another bee-wolf. Every last one of those stricken but living bodies served as nutritional ordnance for her growth. In their misery, the victims cannot even die. They wait to be ingested, piece by piece, limb by limb. How can that be accomplished? How are they preserved? The

answer is simple. Our so-called good and wise system of nature can show nonetheless all the cunning of the cruelest maniac. It is the venom in the wasp's sting that preserves the flesh of these paralyzed bees, and thus keeps them alive for days while this one hungry little wasp-to-be becomes a bee-wolf itself.

"I have offered these two exceptional cases as lively examples of the perils to the life of any colony you may hope to protect. There are so many enemies. A skunk will fret his claws on the front wall of a hive until the guardian bees within must come forth to repel him. These soldier-guards are heroic, but futile. They are swallowed en masse. Toads wait beneath to pick up the droppings. Another variety of spider will wrap artful cocoons about each bee that flies right into a web. Ants are capable of invading your hive. I have seen a number of colonies, never my own, where the bees are actually obliged to tolerate the ants, and will even surrender a portion of their territory in order that these rude invaders do not attack the combs that contain the future brood. With mice, it is worse. In summer, they loot the combs directly for the honey. In winter, they move into the hive seeking warmth, then proceed to construct a mouse-nest in one or another corner.

When the most valiant of our home guard attack the intruder, they can on occasion succeed by the force of sheer numbers. So, yes, it is not impossible. They actually can sting to death the invading monster. A glorious victory. But what then can they do with the dead mouse? For them, it is larger than Leviathan. When the mouse-carcass begins to decompose, the hive becomes intolerable. So the bees proceed to cover this catastrophic rotting presence with disinfectant. Contemplate their fabulous skill. They have managed to manufacture this new and necessary substance from pollen plus a few chosen green buds. Have you heard of it? This propolis?"

"Certainly," said Alois. "They also know to use propolis for mending cracks in their walls." He was pleased with himself at not having been disconcerted.

"I see," said Der Alte, "that I may have failed to discourage you."

"I live by the law of averages," said Alois. "I prefer to think of the ongoing possibility of profit rather than of the occasional perils that surround all such activity."

"Does the bee-wasp frighten you?" asked the old man of the boy.

Adi nodded, but then was quick to say, "If my father is ready to do this, then so must I be."

"You have a splendid son," said Der Alte.

Alois was ready to agree for the first time that this might be a possibility. How nice it was to learn that his little Adolf was more than a bed-wetter. Might he even be the equal of Alois-Junior one of these days?

But thoughts of Alois-Junior invariably reminded him of all that was not yet in place. So now Alois wondered why Der Alte had been seeking to discourage him. It made no sense. Given the state of his hut, the old man could use the money. Doubtless! Why then scorn a potential customer's desire to invest?

For the first time, he felt as if he had a grasp on Der Alte. The hermit understood him better than others, decided Alois. "He knows that I am a man who looks to keep his pride intact. I do not give way to the first warning. So Der Alte must know that the more he discourages me, the more I will be ready to begin my colony. He will have his money after all!"

Alois now gave Der Alte what he considered his largest and most confident smile. "I respect your cautions," he said, "but we must move now

to the other side of the question. Can we speak of what you will do for me, and what I can do for you?"

"Not quite yet, said Der Alte. "If you wish to remain a man with a modest little hobby, I will, of course, be available for the necessary materials. But I see in you, Sir, if I may speak on a more personal level, the possibility of a true vocation. So, I would propose another consideration, a better approach. I, for example, to learn my metier, put in an apprenticeship that lasted for three years, but provided me with an advanced license. What I would propose to you is a more collegial relationship—may I put it so?—I am prepared over the next few years, for the most modest fees, to have you study with me as I work on my colonies. It could prove a most agreeable arrangement. You will learn much, and I will have the pleasure of an intelligent man's company. It is sad to say, but in all these verdant fields that surround our Hafeld, we are the only two individuals of outstanding intelligence."

Alois kept a smile on his face but his nostrils were paying their own tithe. "Work for years with you, you foul-smelling old goat?" was the

speech he did not utter. There was, after all, some real need to come to an arrangement with the old mountebank concerning the purchase of materials.

In turn, I was horrified. No professional has a greater desire for competence than a devil. I had been incompetent here. Der Alte might be a pensioner, but I had neglected him for too long. The loneliness revealed in these last remarks was like the chill in an old stone house that remained unoccupied for too many winters. How intense was the old man's yearning to see more of Adi! No bold move is ever free of unplanned consequences. Calculated mischief was our province, but such capers must not belong to a client. Not if we could prevent it. We look to direct the romantic habits of our fold, rather than correct them! Any future episode between the old man and the boy would not be to the Maestro's liking. Not so early! Too many indeterminables!

At this point, Alois said, "I am honored by your personal interest in me, but I must explain. In my family, we are blockheads. All of us, blockheads. The worst to be said is that we are proud of that. So, I must work alone. That is how I am. I look forward, therefore, to enjoying a mutually agreeable commercial relationship."

Der Alte nodded. He, too, had his pride. No matter the need, he would not repeat his suggestion.

"Yes," he said, "we will make arrangements. I will put together a couple of colonies for you and supply those tools and products you do not have in hand already." He turned to Adi. "Soon your father will be very busy. Are you able to count to one thousand?"

"Yes," said Adi. "They do that in the Upper Class at school, and so I know."

"Good. Because this spring your father will be master of many, many thousands of bees. Will you be afraid of them? Are you ready?"

"I am afraid," said Adolf, "but you know, I am also ready."

"A wonderful boy," said Der Alte, and his expression was full of love. Tears came into Adi's eyes. His mother would soon have another baby, and again it would be the same as when Edmund was born. He would not see the love he wanted to find in her eyes when she was looking at him. Not for a while.

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I must now inform the reader of an unexpected summons from the Maestro that removed me from Alois Hitler and his family for close to eight months. Indeed, it took me out of Austria altogether. I can add that this alert arrived on the same evening early in October of 1895 that Alois completed his apicultural negotiations. A colony of bees installed in each of two Langstroth boxes were purchased from Der Alte, as well as a variety of tools, together with enough sealed jars of pollen and honey to feed his newly-acquired inhabitants through the winter.

So soon as purchased, the goods were transported by Alois to the Hitler home. It was to prove an exciting trip for Adi who sat beside his

father in the dray and could not sleep that night in anticipation of morning when the hive-boxes would be set up on a bench under the shade of an oak tree some twenty paces from the house.

If there is some curiosity concerning how much these purchases cost, I have no very dependable way to carry a calculation forward from the kronen of Alois' era to the present American dollar—certain products are priced one hundred times higher today than a century ago; other increases are modest. I will offer one rough estimate: Alois' pension in 1895 may have been the equivalent of sixty or seventy thousand dollars a year in the present era, and so I can say that he found the new expenditures dear. What Der Alte charged him might be the equal today come today of a thousand dollars. Alois, fully anticipating that he would pay too much, was weary, nonetheless, of dealing with the old man and so did not press beyond the small satisfaction of acquiring a few extra tools at no cost.

It was at this point that I was ordered to leave Adi and the other members of the family (as well as my other clients in that area of Austria.) Three of my agents were deputized to remain and I left at once for St. Petersburg where we would embark on a massive oncoming project. We

would attend the Coronation of Tsar Nicholas the Second, scheduled for May of 1896 in Moscow, an event still seven months away.

Yes, off to St. Petersburg! Leave it that I was obliged immediately upon arrival to commence my study of the late Nineteenth Century Russian soul, all of it—belly, vices, beliefs, harmonies and inner disharmonies. Once in that Slavic realm, (which is so much nearer to God and to the Devil than any other land above the equator) I stayed for all of a winter in the capitol prior to coming down to Moscow on a cold April morning one month in advance of the Coronation that May.

During these seven months, I did receive news regularly of Alois, Adi, Klara, and Angela. There were even reports on the temperament of the dog, Luther, and the horses, Ulan and Graubart. In any event, none of that was of great interest to me, not at all, what with our oncoming venture in Russia. Perhaps I had become a little too full of the Hitler family's intimacies. (I had also been hoping to receive more of an active assignment.) Now, I had it. Our O.O. was obviously in the first stages of bringing off a major and mighty mischief.

Now, I will make one apology, although I will do my best not to repeat it. (Good readers do not purchase novels, after all, to put up with the author's regrets.) I have to say, however, that having read the best and worst of novels for many years, which is, to remind you, part of a good devil's education, I should know by now (and do!) that not even loyal readers stay true to an author who is ready to leave his narrative for what must seem an unrelated subject. So, I have spared the reader reference to other cases, particularly the month I spent in London back in May of '95 when I attended the trial of Oscar Wilde and was in the courtroom on the day of his conviction for "sodomy and gross indecency"—a matter in which I played a hand with the jury's deliberations. (My instructions were to do my best to get him convicted.) It is likely that the E.O. was looking to stimulate a rabid sense of martyrdom among many of Wilde's closer associates, particularly those who were of very good family. But to this I cannot attest. Only on rare occasions will the Maestro explain his strategies—we are there to fulfill his aims rather than to satisfy our curiosity.

Nonetheless, I was now harboring a conviction that this abrupt transfer of so many of our forces over to Russia had put the Dummkopf into a state of some disturbance.

For that, I can only offer my own set of explanations. While I cannot guarantee their dependability, I will say I have long suspected that our mighty antagonist, the D.K., is critically dissatisfied with the state of all the formal religions who claim to be serving exclusively in His name. (This, of course, must exclude reference to Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and any other sects or faiths not based on texts dictated—so goes the claim—by God.)

No, I would assume He is unhappy with the strictures of the Catholics, the Protestants, the Orthodox Jews, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites, most unhappy that He was unable to control the development of these forms of worship. Humans—many of the worst sort—are now the overlords in most halls of Godly worship. Given the tenacity of the priests, reverends, rabbis and imams who have attached themselves to these concentrations of power (and given their lust to control human behavior) these leaders of organized hysteria have succeeded over the centuries in installing

themselves into the mind of half of humankind. Thereby, they have succeeded in keeping God at a distance from His humans. I could only suppose that He resented it. But if so, why was He generating any special hopes for this Coronation?

For many centuries the Maestro has been an incisive critic of the D.K. We have certainly done our best to enlarge the sum of emotional dissatisfaction in men and women. Over the last two thousand years, one of our more effective methods had been to encourage the more humorless varieties of religiosity. Everywhere fine men and women are locked into a mosque, a synagogue, or a church, all clinging to what is virtually the same oxymoron. Despite every other difference, they are attached to the obtuse belief that God is not only All-Good but All-Powerful. This premise, so removed from all the existing evidence of history (which is to say that immaculate compendium of male and female perversity) offers no service to the human mind. The contradictions are so mind-boggling! All-Good and All-Powerful is a concept to stupefy the instincts God had installed for human development. By promoting exactly this concept—All-Good and All-Powerful—we have succeeded, century after century, in locking the best

minds of humankind onto a bed of Procrustes. All-Good and All-Powerful. Indeed! Yes, we looked to encourage every fundamentalist we could find, every Islamist, Born-Again, or unyielding nun—we didn't give a damn. "Come to us," became our creed, "come, all of you who are in need of rock-hard faith and anchored certainties! Be born again into total mental security, yes, we are here for that!" How ready they were to believe they were serving God even as they commenced to work for us in ways they could never imagine.

Now, whatever advantage we had obtained by 1895 was due in part to God's own inability to decide on which direction He would look to steer His human creatures. (Should He encourage their powers of Free Will to turn Left or Right?—God could not make up His Mind.) His strength (as the Maestro will be the first to acknowledge) is that He can beget a plenitude of fine forms throughout the natural world. God is an Artist, and some of His Forms are dazzling (the butterfly, the rose), some are so useful. Some are relatively successful. (The honey-bee might be one example.) And some were most improperly designed. (The dinosaur, the horse-fly, the mosquito—failures and excesses come to mind.)

But, by the time the Lord had raised primates to the level of humans, He had become much too proud of this creative achievement. (He saw this human animal as His finest work.) Indeed, He felt so expansive that He even provided men and women with memory, passion, and sufficient reason to exercise Free Will. He encouraged them to develop speech. In the beginning, He was prepared to allow this creation to be free even of Himself. (At least on most occasions!) Just so confident was His belief in His Powers of Anticipation. He had no fear that humans would burst the limits He had supposed would be enough for them.

This miscalculation proved calamitous. It was equal to raising a dog who turns on his master. Men and women soon gave every indication that, once left entirely to themselves, they would depose Him. (The first tendencies are even visible in Adam and Eve.) So He gave up the heartfelt notion of engaging in an open partnership with this highest form of His Creation. Instead, He now looked to frighten men and women back into obedience. He felt it necessary to return to earlier modes, to tyrannical judgments, to His Embodiment as Jehovah. He would terrify humans once more. "Obey Me and Fear Me. I am All-Good. I am All-Powerful." The

message that He had wished to transmit through His Son—"Love each other and you will share in My love" was converted by St. Paul and his crew of minions into "Fear Me, Respect Me, and on occasion, I will answer your prayers." (I suspect that the Lord could not recover from the blow to His Hopes occasioned by the Crucifixion.)

God's great retreat opened territories to the Maestro. Since our purpose is to lower the vitality of what is, admittedly, the most exceptional creature developed by the D.K., we look to activate forms of religiosity that are mindless. Warp the brains of men and women, and a corruption of human emotion will soon follow. (Yes, imbalance is the beginning of rot.) The Maestro is there to remind us that once we accomplish our job, we may be able to subsume His Creation into Our System.

This has been the ongoing intention of the Maestro through many an age, and our activities now look everywhere. We look to charm atheists, philosophers, entertainers, and any number of highly independent individuals who have been turning bitter at the edges. Through the Nineteenth Century, this did work reasonably well for us. Yet, by the approach of the 20th Century, the Maestro seemed to be contemplating a

major change in our procedures. Was he preparing to usurp the throne of the Prime Creator?

I could not conceive of what this shift might require of me. Perhaps I was too mired in our dependable Austrian tactics. So, this new adventure in Russia did arouse much uneasiness. For who could know more about the pestilence and slovenliness of human nature than those of us who have worked through the centuries to inflame all that has proved misbegotten in the calculations of God? We are there to sniff all the harsh residue of all the unfocused animal rage He left in His human beings, even as He kept investing more and more heedless if Godly enthusiasm into this most advanced form of His Creation! Given His Desire to provide a level of life that would be able to survive through unforeseeable conditions of heat, cold, flood and forest fire, the D.K. had had to endow man and woman with a sense of self-importance. He had decided that that would be crucial to their survival. But, once again, His creative balance was impaired. Human self-righteousness, so necessary to meeting the demands of survival ("I am important—I deserve to survive!") soon produced envy as its first by-product, and that worked dependably in our favor. The D.K.'s powers to

fashion new varieties of Creation might be encyclopedic, but His skills as an engineer were—by the measure of the Cosmos—riddled with fault. His design of the earth's tectonic plates proved open to earthquake. Even without our presence, His problems would have been many. Over the eons of evolution, His endless refashioning of His own works by way of trial and error, (and His endless re-designings of works-in-progress) even His readiness to live with His mistakes until such time as He could correct them, His outsize rages as a younger god!, His frenzies as Jehovah!, had compounded a multitude of slashes, scars, open wounds, and spiritual amputations in the body of human history. Now, I could wonder how the Maestro would begin to reshape such a boggled Creation. We would even have to deal with the disarray left by our work. I was worried. Yes.

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I will yet describe the disorder we would look to wreak in the wake of the Coronation of Tsar Nicholas the Second, but I would prefer at this point to stay with an account of the small events and minor adventures of the Hitler family in Hafeld during the period while I was away. Only then will I feel free to return to our activities in St. Petersburg and Moscow. I will say that the eight months from my departure in October of 1895 until my return to Austria in June of 1896 turned out to be of some future importance for Adolf Hitler, enough, certainly, to relate what took place during my absence.

Let me point, however, to a difficulty. During my absence, reports of the various experiences of Alois, Klara, and the children were passed on to me by second-rate agents—the three I had left behind to oversee my portion of the Province of Upper Austria. Given the import of our mission to Russia, I had, of course, taken my best assistants along. For my knowledge of what was taking place in Hafeld, I would suffer a loss. Lesser devils are comparable to lesser humans, particularly in their insensitivity to significant detail.

I can keep a good notion of what is transpiring among my clients when relying on what is given to me by mediocre agents, but the work does suffer from a loss of tone. What will save the account received, however, is that I was able to review a few determining events in Adi's development.

On the other hand, my narrative will not suffer critically. Even the least of my aides had been brought up to a reasonable level of perception, and I say this with pride. (They had had so little to offer when they first came to me!) I am, however, not eager to explain our means of recruitment. It would bring us immediately into a more sacrosanct question: How do devils come to be in the first place? Is the Evil One on the alert for superior

humans who might be ready to work for us, or, as is more usually the case, do they arrive as a brood of rejected humans? (How this arrangement was negotiated between the D.K. and the Maestro is beyond my knowledge.) While I cannot declare why or when it happened, I am familiar with the results. The Maestro, looking to make his way up onto a plane of equality with the D.K., had to be ready to accept God's exudate—all these spoiled human possibilities. Over the centuries, over—it well may be—the millennia, the Maestro had to disburse a large share of his resources in training the disturbed material we do receive. It is analogous in difficulty to working up a symphony orchestra from applicants who have yet to play an instrument.

I will not pursue these difficulties here. I will only say that the agents I had left in Hafeld did their best to report on Alois' ongoing efforts at bee-keeping, but since they did not always have a close enough sense of his difficulties, they did not always satisfy my understanding.

Forewarned, forearmed. I will now present my small improvement on the summary I received of what went on with Alois, his bees, his wife, and his children from the end of 1895 until the following summer.

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In late October, if I had permitted it, my agents would have overwhelmed me with detail. To my complete lack of surprise, Alois had any number of obsessions concerning his new venture.

I had no time to attend to this. Short of forcing a direct entrance into Alois' waking thoughts which, it may be remembered, is rarely done with men and women who are not our clients, my agents had to work by way of their milk runs. In what our Maestro chooses to call "the markets of sleep," most dreams of men and women are reasonably available, open to devils

and Cudgels alike, and so their daily thoughts can be picked up (at least in superficial degree) by no more than passing through the night chamber.

We also learn a good deal through the simple expedient of listening to a family's chatter. To be sure, a plethora of superficial information now arrived, more than enough to annoy me. It was a biased portrait. My agents perceived Alois as weak and much too worried, but they lacked insight for dealing with men or women who possess strength, yet are being studied at a time of anxiety. (It is easier to comprehend those who are weaker than ourselves than to anticipate the moves and true feelings of those more powerful.) A sense of nuance is demanded, precisely what my locals were lacking.

Being of no great stature themselves in their former lives, they tended to pick up all that was second-rate in Alois. I was left, therefore, with the burden of discounting improperly weighed materials. While I will give some adjustment to what I received, let me abjure the reader. We must not forget that the boy who later became Adolf Hitler emerged from a childhood with this father and mother. So, it has to be obvious that we would do well

to take measure of Klara and Alois' real strengths and, needless to say, their significant weaknesses.

Very well. Here then is my developed if second-hand account of Alois' woes now that he is becoming a bee-keeper.

His first concern (which I find comic—since he has spent his life in uniform) is that he has to remind himself constantly to put on light-colored gloves and a bee-keeper's large trapezoidal hat and veil, always of the whitest material. Since he must avoid dark coats or trousers, when that is his customary dress, he is always concerned in these first days to remember to change his garments before going out to the hive-boxes. Deep and somber colors, he knows all too well, do irritate bees. He knows that by experience. On the particular occasion some years ago when he had been gravely stung while working with the little colony he then kept near Braunau, he had made the mistake of inviting an attractive woman out with him one Sunday afternoon. As an element in his plan of seduction, he thought he would demonstrate not only his competence with the hive, but his elegance. Therefore, he was in full dress dark blue uniform. That twilight he was stung so fiercely that the recollection still rises in one quick

spurt from the pit of his stomach. Alois' hopes of fornication were obliged to remain unsatisfied that Sunday, indeed, the lady was stung as well, and on no less than the exposed flesh of her ample breast. Only a passing romance was lost, but a blow was given to his best opinion of himself. As we see, he continues to pay the price. Dressed in white, shoots of fear, bright as rockets, fire off nonetheless in his stomach as he approaches the hive boxes.

Nonetheless, Alois, in some part, remains a good peasant. He has not forgotten that after any small disaster, one must stay on the alert for whatever value can still be plucked from the misfortune. His interesting medical theses, for example, were stimulated by the alleviation of his rheumatism on the following day—bee stings did seem to be good for his knees. When their meeting occurred, Der Alte, we remember, was ready to agree.

This confirmation may have been part of Alois' decision to accept Der Alte's opinion that imported Italian bees were superior to the Austrian variety. While Alois had his suspicion that Der Alte might be selling exactly the stock that, for whatever reason, he wished to get rid of, still, the

telling point (to Alois' present shame) was that Italian stock was easier to handle. They were gentler, Der Alte assured him. And what with their glowing rich yellow tan, not unlike the mellow hue of the best shoe leather, they were incontestably more beautiful. Alois did admire the three golden segments of their bodies, each fold set off by the sharpest edging in black. So striking! Chic! Whereas the Austrian honey-bee was gray and hairy. No, she did not gleam like these gilded Italians. All the same, Alois felt as if he had been disloyal. He should have taken the "Franz Josefs," the gray-beards.

What added to his unease is that he kept wondering whether he would have done better to wait for spring? Now, he had to keep his colony warm enough not to perish in the cold.

All through these months, therefore, he would have to keep taking the temperature of the air within the hive. He had even been advised to start a diary for recording the daily and weekly data. Yet, he must not open any hive. "No matter your curiosity," Der Alte had confided (as if in full command of the new apiculturalist's temptations) "you must not allow yourself to peer in, or extract any of the movable frames in order to study

the combs. Why, the cold draft that could arise from raising the large lid of the box might so lower the temperature that your bees would need hours to warm the interior again. Such a chill could decimate your population. Take no chances, Herr Hitler. Up until now, from what you have told me, I expect that in the past, you have only lived with bees in June and July. Any tourist can do that. But to be the Skipper of your little people through the ice-cold air of all the winter months to come, that takes character, my friend." And then as if to enrich the assumption, he added, "My new friend."

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If Alois had stood in the dock before himself as judge, he would have found the defendant guilty. How could retirement prove so enfeebling to a strong man? He had bought the farm on impulse and now, to double such a bet, had purchased two bee-hives in their Langstroth boxes. Why, so suddenly, had he committed himself to apiculture over the winter? Hadn't that also been done on too quick an impulse? Der Alte had had the consummate nerve to say to him, even as Alois left, "You will soon see how much work I have saved you."

What Alois saved in work, he spent in worry. He was still under sixty, damn it, not yet sixty by a year and more, but he felt such a sense of

inner weariness before these new responsibilities. His two populated boxes were now set under the oak tree with tarpaper underneath for warmth, and more tarpaper above, all kept in place with stones. Two populations housed in two boxes. Each day he read the temperature of the heat within each box, and did his weighing once a week. Part of the real problem was that he did not have enough work, just worries. All through the dark months while feeding his winter bees (a most tricky technique in the beginning), he would console himself with the thought that if the colonies looked to be weak when spring came, he might combine two boxes into one, and, if necessary buy more bees at that time, undertake more expense, more of Der Alte, who would be farting in his pants, no doubt, from laughing so hard at the great esteemed High Customs Officer Herr Hitler with his ten thumbs all ready to be stung by what he didn't know about bees. Already, in November, Alois was lecturing Angela and Adi, even Klara, on the need in apiculture for immaculate hygiene once warm weather arrived. No matter how warm the day, they must certainly not leave the hives open. Above all, they must never spill honey outdoors. If they did, they must mop it up instantly, for the bees could be drawn to it and might begin to fight for free honey, easy

honey, as it lay in a pool on the ground. If the puddle were deep enough, they could drown en masse.

Such were his fears, enough to harangue his family for what might or might not occur in summer. And then he would go back to worrying about the putative weaknesses of a winter colony. So much depended on what he read each night on the subject of keeping a winter hive.

He engaged in a flurry of work and built one new hive box (which he did not need immediately, but was proud of the skill it demanded—yes, he could have been a decent cabinetmaker!) but also had to admit it was not the equal of his Langstroths. Then he proceeded to paint the three boxes. Three colors—blue, yellow, and ultra-violet.

He enjoyed working with his hands. Doing the carpentry, his worries eased. For a week, his chest even puffed up again with an old truism. "Good German blood understands," said Alois to his wife, "that blessings do not come from God, but from hard work. That idea is as safe as a sound house." Still, it was not such a very good remark. Why not speak instead of Austrian blood?

This concern stayed on like a minor sore. The question bothered him. Did certain blood possess special virtues? Why, then, praise German blood? Why not Austrian? He had an Emperor who could live with the huge (and often) idiotic problems of keeping Czechs, Hungarians, Italians, Poles, Jews, Serbs, plus gypsies, living in peace together under one Hapsburg empire. Germans couldn't do that. Germans were always squabbling with each other. Without Bismarck, they would be nothing. Petty principalities. Mad King Ludwig I is followed by Mad King Ludwig II, both crazy Bavarians. And Prussians were worse. Prussians had a ramrod up their ass. Why speak then of good German blood? Yet, he said to himself, "All the same, I know what it means." Yet what did it signify to declare to yourself that you knew something when you didn't, not quite. Except in some way you most certainly did. A nice enigma. He was now thinking like a philosopher? Not so bad for a boy who was once a peasant. He was tempted to bring up the question at the tavern in Fischlham, but didn't, after all. They were dolts. He resented the time he spent with them. By November, he had even found himself drinking there in the afternoons, a proof, if he needed it, that there was not enough work to do. For that

reason, he had chosen to stay away for a week, and do all the carpentry, paint the exterior of the hive boxes, even build a framework on which to hang some netting near the hives so that the birds would stay away in the spring. He even debated whether to visit Der Alte, but recollections of the smell put an end to that.

Before long, he was back in the tavern. There was one pleasure he did find there. The dolts had come to see Alois as an expert on apiculture. Every bit of advice Der Alte had offered, plus whatever he had picked up of late in his reading, was now presented as his own well-acquired lore. Alois would be the first to say that honesty and modesty were excellent virtues, and should be employed where possible when dealing with superiors. An inferior mind, however, wanted—especially when drinking—to feel it was in the company of a wise man. Since he was more available to the locals than Der Alte, he stood in as the resident expert on bees. A farmer even walked over one Sunday afternoon to seek his advice on how to get started. Alois proceeded to overwhelm him with the details of feeding a hive through the winter.

This discourse allowed him to feel like the fine fellow he had once been, yes, before his retirement. "The trick," he said, "is to master the technique of your special feeder. Because you not only put in the liquid nourishment, and cover the mouth of the jar, as I just told you, with the fine mesh, but you must have a small pump built into the bottle as well to create a vacuum since you will next be holding the vessel upside-down over the bung hole above the brood that is waiting to be fed. Do you follow?" Alois could see that he didn't. Before long, this Sunday visitor, thoroughly disheartened, said goodbye—he was not likely to be competition come June.

All the while that my agents were giving these conversations to me, I was growing testy. Such expositions were boring. They gave little new insight into Alois. They were missing the depth of his new anxieties. So soon as his visitor left, Alois felt so alone with his project that he began to wonder whether disease might strike the colonies.

He spent an evening reading his books but the anxieties remained. He had dreams of living in one of his boxes, himself a bee, no more than part of a cluster living in deepest and darkest obscurity. How could these bees guide themselves in that world, so stygian, so bereft of light?

By the end, Alois had raised this dream to the level of a nightmare. (Now I could feel more interest in what my agents were transmitting!) Alois' hive multiplied in the darkness, then escaped from the box and flew away, far away. They could not be found.

When spring came, would he lose his hive? In the dark, he felt for Klara, and his hand came across her belly. She was so big now, yet the new one wasn't due until January. Would he be a giant of a fellow?

She came awake with his hand on her, and would have nestled into the embrace of his arm, but in the middle of this darkness, he felt a need to discuss a worrisome matter. But he had only to say a few words, and she was wide awake and unhappy.

"I hope," Alois said, "that you haven't spoken to Herr Rostenmeier."

She knew immediately what he would next suggest. Herr Rostenmeier was the owner of the country store in Fischlham where once a week, on Saturday, she and Angela would buy a few foodstuffs they did not raise in their garden. Klara liked Mr. Rostenmeier, and had begun to talk to him about the future sale of their honey. Alois had told her not to make any deals, not yet. There was always the possibility, slight, of course, that he

would do business with Der Alte. She had taken pleasure in the thought that it would probably be Herr Rostenmeier, and she could be the in-between, and bring a little money back to the house and hand it over to Alois. Her fingers tingled each time she thought of such a direct transaction.

But now Alois would go to Der Alte. She knew it. "I thought," she said in the darkness, even as he patted her belly, "that you didn't like that man at all, yes, I remember you said you would have to smell him."

"He will be good to consult," Alois said shortly. The tendrils of the nightmare were still with him.

"Yes, yes," said Klara, "but you told me you don't trust Der Alte. Yes?" She was close to becoming hysterical. To be torn out of an agreeable sleep for this! "Yes, you say you don't trust him, and yet you choose this Der Alte over an honest man like Herr Rostenmeier?"

"Klara, this is all because you feel embarrassed," he told her. "Maybe you had a little too much conversation with Herr Rostenmeier already. Something you haven't mentioned, maybe. A real commitment. Without speaking to me first."

"No," she said, "not at all. I am not embarrassed. I made no commitment." She was tempted to add, "But this I will say, I must say, I will never understand the thinking that goes on in a person like you."

However, she knew better. She was silent. He would have ridiculed her for such a stupid remark. "A person like me?" She would have been up half the night explaining those few words.

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No surprise. Alois went back to Der Alte after all. His bees just gave him too many worries. He was a realist, he told himself, and so he was used to bad odors. After all, one had to deal now and again with the devil. (My devils snickered as they informed me of this.)

Alois paid his visit on the next Sunday and, once again, took Adi with him. This time the boy paid careful attention to the route. It was but a mile away and so he knew he would be able to find the hut again by remembering the forks of the road. All the while, he was filled with uneasy excitement. A woe as large as a loaf of bread had settled in his stomach. All the same, perched above such heaviness, his heart felt most alive in his

chest. He knew he would not tell his father that he planned to visit Der Alte on another day and very much on his own.

"Yes," he kept saying to himself, "I will not be afraid to walk there. In the night, maybe yes. There are many spirits in the woods then, and they listen to all that is said."

The second meeting between Der Alte and his father was, however, even better for Adi than the first. If, at the start, they spoke about the marketing of honey and Adi could hardly follow that, it all became much more interesting once business was done. For then the old man could not stop talking about the ongoing mysteries of bees. "Yes," said Der Alte in a most resonant voice, "I never weary of contemplating these tiny creatures with their immortal honey and their near to immortal sting. There are such subtleties to their keeping."

A rich discourse ensued. If Alois was hardly able to speak, he was nonetheless not too displeased for he would use it tomorrow night at Fischlham. A gift for the dolts! Adi, in turn, listened with care. The words he could not understand lived in his mind with their sounds.

"Can we," asked Der Alte, "ever pay enough attention to this work of Creation itself? It is so full of genius! Think of it! These little devils come to us from the Good Lord's divine and curious aesthetic, a Coronation of nature's wisdom expressing itself in this most bizarre form. We are given a hint of God's secret rites."

Der Alte went on. He could go on! References to God's ballet, God's gymnastics, God's investiture in wonder and awe. Der Alte was like many of our clients. We encouraged them to praise God. In the highest. Always.

For that matter, he went on for so long that Alois was, once more, repelled. Only so much time could elapse without some exercise of his own voice. Moreover, he did not like the look in his son's eye. Those blue eyes, so similar to Klara's, large and alive! But there was reverence in them now.

Alois managed finally to interject a word.

"Why don't you take us into the other room, and show the boy your viewing box? "

It was obvious that Der Alte would prefer not to—even as Alois had expected—but Adi spoke up. "Oh, please, sir," he cried out, "I have never

seen the inside of a bees' home. They have been with us back at the house for so long—" he tried to count quickly—"for seven, no, I think it is eight weeks, and I have not seen even one of them. Must I wait until summer? Please."

"Spring," said Der Alte. "It is necessary to wait until spring." But then he shrugged. "All right," he said, "only you must be prepared. It is winter. The bees are sluggish now."

Indeed, they were. In the kitchen, bare but for a small stove, a sink, a hand-pump above the sink, and a pail beneath for the run-off, was also a table. On one end of it had been placed a narrow glass box, perhaps two feet long and one foot high, its interior concealed on both sides by black curtains. Once drawn back, two glass walls, not three inches apart, held one vertical frame in the space between, and it was filled with a mosaic of small wax cells, an uncountable number of them.

Adi was disappointed. A cluster of pullulating things, no larger than dark pills in a bottle, kept climbing over each other, startled by the light, a poor gang, crammed, jam-packed, an assembly of what looked to be squashy little creatures about as ugly as roaches. (Their wings were folded.)

Adi had not been so disappointed since he had first seen Edmund's homuncular face squeezed up on Klara's breast.

Now, these bees could just as well have been beans bumping around in a heated pot, except, no, beans did not look so nervous. What an awful way to live! They miss the sun, the boy thought. Since last summer, he had been thinking of these bees as flashes of light in the garden. Now they were just shoved up against each other. He sighed in preference to bursting into tears. Could these bees breathe?

"At this moment," said Der Alte, "they are the poorest of the poor, no better than sodden creatures in a slime of their own exudate. Yet their lives will yet span the extremities of existence. Now, they do nothing, but in summer, you will see them dance in the air, as wonderful as drops of dew in early morning light. So fearless. How they will strut as they enter into the golden petals of the flower-blooms that are waiting for them."

"Hear, hear," said Alois. No matter the drear aspects, Der Alte did have a manner. Give that much to the stink-pot.

And Adi was thinking, "these bees can sting you and then you are dead." He shivered in the old man's kitchen before the incomprehensibility

of dying. Yet, right in the midst of this chill, he felt as close to the old man as to his father, for he could listen all day and all night to the wonderful words that came forth.

"Come and visit me," the old man managed to whisper before Alois gave the signal to leave.

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I do not know how powerful an influence this last murmured message could have had on Adi, but I will say that at no moment up to this point did I feel more regret at being obliged to rely on my Hafeld agents. Not long after (on Christmas Eve, no less!) when the rest of the house was asleep, Adi got up from bed, bundled himself into his warmest clothing, and went out to sit on the bench under the oak tree where the two Langstroth boxes were placed. There he remained for a considerable time, growing more and more chilled as the minutes elapsed. Yet, he stayed, and having placed himself between these two boxes, he kept embracing the back of each. He was praying for the continued life of the bees.

This was of signal interest to me. I queried my agents more than once about what they could glean from the boy's thoughts, and some of it seemed of value. That night, Adi had heard his father complain that the screen protecting the hive entrance had been torn. The entrance was small, but all the same, a mouse could have entered the hive. Alois soon decided that this was unlikely—the hole was simply not large enough—but Adi was not convinced. Since his father had repaired the screen that afternoon, Adi no longer knew as he sat between the boxes which one might be occupied by the mouse. Ergo, he set a hand on each.

What with it being Christmas Eve, the boy was full of his mother's spirit of celebration. "On this night, one thousand, nine hundred and ninety-five years ago," said Klara, "the Son of God was born, and he was the nicest human being ever to walk on earth. The loveliest, the sweetest. If you love Him, He will love you."

Adi was certain. This was one night when you could feel free to breathe the night air, no matter how cold. For the Son of God was present. Would He grant the power Adi needed to kill the mouse by the force of his thoughts?

To kill the mouse by the force of his thoughts? I knew the limitations of my agents. They could not have conceived of such a notion. This had come from Adi. It was his. His alone. If I had been present, I would have increased the stakes. I might have gotten the boy ready to believe that he could save certain lives by exercising the power to destroy others. That is one of the most useful suppositions we can implant in clients, but it does call for a sequence of dream-etchings.

Since I was not present, I did my best not to brood over the lost opportunity. There was more than enough to occupy me in St. Petersburg. In company with my assistants, I was facing considerable opposition to my activities. I had never encountered a group of Cudgels as determined as this Russian crew. Nor as brutal. Over the last few centuries, these Russian angels had developed a powerful capability to contest the many demons we had installed within Russian Orthodox churches and monasteries. In consequence, these Cudgels—fully as rough as the meanest Russian monks—were in command of considerable zeal. During these months, they were wholly ready to defend the Coronation of the young Tsar-to-be, Nicholas the Second.

When the Maestro consulted me—as would occur now and again in Russia—I did present a notion that he would adopt. I was bold enough to tell him that by my estimate, our chances of disrupting the Coronation itself were going to be minimal. Too much would be arrayed against us. Creating a powerful disorder in the days after the event, however, could accomplish many of our ends.

I had dared to speak my mind, but then, the Maestro will not accept a lack of opinion among his subordinates. "Musing upon the distorted perceptions that most of you are bound to offer, is nonetheless more useful to me than silence. The fear of being wrong will leave you inert."

Enough. It is easy to see that these Russian matters were temporarily, at least, of more concern to me than the small events of Hafeld.

All the same, whether I was interested or not, Klara gave birth on January 21 to the new infant. For Alois, minimal joy. The much-anticipated strongman of the future had not arrived. A little girl was in the maternal bed. Now, all the ruckus of baby-feeding at night and baby yowling in the day, would be for naught. He had been counting on a powerhouse of a son for his old age as an improvement over the three boys

he could not, at present, boast about, a wild one, a mamma's boy, and a crybaby snot, yes, Alois was unready to celebrate, but he did—at the tavern in Fischlham night after night for quite a few nights (although the beer began to smell as sour as his infant's throwback). There were now six human beings in his home. Come the end of spring, when Junior returned from Spital, and he could count on seven. Yes, the louder the tumult of voices in the bar, the more he was ready to complain of the noise at home. In truth, however, the bar was noisier.

Let men drink in a crowded room and solidarity rises among them. They soar on zephyrs of grain spirit, a brotherly defiance against the inroads of angels and demons, a certainty that as men, they are at this moment equal to all else.

These are not good conditions for our work. Openings, however, do present themselves, particularly when the drinkers are staggering home. We are ready then. Sometimes, disgusted at the hours lost, we even slam them to the ground. They usually take it personally, their lament most characteristic. "Somebody shoved me," they often cry out. Nobody

believes them, but they know better. Wrath had struck between the shoulder blades, and it was not their own rage, not at all.

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On his return, Alois may have been staggering now and again, but he was also feeling too alive to enter his house. Instead, he sat by the hive-boxes and fished out a rubber tube he had been keeping in his pocket. Next, he placed one end of it against a wall of the Langstroth and thereby was able to listen to the thrumming of the tenement dwellers in his little city. A fine sound was there for his ears, almost a tune, rich with little swells of contentment. But then, why should they not be content? Come morning, hundreds, then thousands of his bees, would be in a cluster awaiting their turn to suck on the mesh cloth of the wide-mouthed jar for their honey-and-water. So, in this dark and nicely drunken hour, separate thoughts passed

through Alois like horses on file, one large thought at a time. He tried to count how many bees might be inhabiting the box. No matter how drunk, he could still make an intelligent guess. Call it 20,000. That was bound to be the answer. Despite himself, knowing he should not really disturb the hive, he knocked on the side anyway. Because then, through the tube, he could listen to the shift in sound. Were they issuing alerts? The calls had gone up in pitch. Like the strings of a crazy violin. Then, quiet again. Soft. Like cats who sheathe their claws. Purring while asleep.

He roused himself long enough to go into the house and get his shirt off and his pants. Then he fell into bed. But he was still hearing the chorus. Strange sounds. His breath lifted over a small hesitation and down he went into slumber. He had one final thought as immanent as one more splendid horse on parade—it was that he certainly enjoyed these hymns of the bees a good deal more than the caterwauling of an infant.

His dreams, however, were not good. He had entered a large and cavernous interior where, to his lack of surprise, he found himself among his bees. It was not agreeable. They were defecating, and there he was, one of many, suffering just like his brother-creatures—no, sister-creatures—

wasting away in the contractions of a severe bowel disease, all of them defecating into the narrow aisles of the Langstroth box—what a filthy vision.

He looked to rouse himself. Because this was a dream. Healthy bees did not defecate in their own habitat (except perhaps for the worst and laziest of the drones) no, he had listened to the bees in one hive, and their sound was honorable. They would wait until the weather was warm enough for them to go outdoors and only then would they do their duty. (Concerning the other box, he was not so sure the sound was good.)

Now he was awake, agitated by the dream. It had certainly been too cold for bees to dare to fly out into this February air. The thought made Alois painfully aware of all the excrement that had been accumulating in his colonies over all these months. How could such little buggers hold it in? And once again he tried to recall the sounds of the hive. Had he really heard contentment rising from their midst? These were bees. Could he detect the difference between happiness and panic, calm and near-madness? Yes, he told himself, he did know—he was sure they were content. One hive-box anyway.

It was warm next morning, the first warm morning of a February thaw, and as Alois came out of the house, his horde was everywhere above, hundreds of them, thousands—who could count? They were leaving their droppings all over the place, fifty and then more than a hundred feet away, such a curious caca! It smelled like ripe bananas, and was so visible on the snow, a field of white dotted with yellow spots. Innumerable yellow spots out there in a big circle around the hive bench. Buttercups in the snow! Hanging on a clothesline, Klara's laundry had also become polka-dotted. Paula's diapers were spotted. An immense shower of defecation. Alois stepped it off. Yes, you could even find yellow spots in the snow one hundred paces away from the hive boxes.

Klara was as furious as she dared to be. "You never told me to be careful," she said to her husband.

"It is too bad," he said, "that you will have all this laundry to do again. But how can one apologize? It is, after all, an act we have received from that good God you are so sure is yours."

She walked away. A half hour later, water churning in two huge pots, she took the soiled garments off the line and set out to boil them again.

Alois was not about to tell himself that he felt sorry. Rather, he was happy for the bees. What delight they had shown while they flew about. Since it was a Saturday, Adi was nearby in the meadows and Alois, on impulse, decided to call him over. Let him hear some real talk.

"Everybody shits," he told the boy. "Everything shits, all things living. That is as it should be. What you keep in mind is that you learn how to get rid of shit or it will shit on you. Understand? You keep yourself clean, do you hear? Look at these bees. They are wonderful. They hold it in all winter. They are determined not to dirty the hive. We can do the same. We are good people. Where we live is where we keep everything spotless."

"But, my father," said little Adolf, "what about Edmund?"

"What about him?"

"He still does it in his pants."

"That is your mother's concern, not yours."

Later in the day, Adi remembered the time when Alois-Junior, had stuck a dab of excrement right onto his nose, and even the recollection of it now brought forth the oddest cry from Adi's throat, so humiliated, so full of

glee. Nor could Adi get over his excitement at the cleansing flight. Those bees had been so happy. They were dancing in the wind. That was because there had been so much caca in them, and now they were light. They were free. He couldn't help it. He couldn't stop his giggles. It had all made his mother so angry.

Now he remembered what Angela had whispered to him one morning. "Your mother has a saying," she said. 'Kinder, Kuche, Kirche.'" He nodded. He had heard it already. He yawned in her face.

"Oh, you think you know it all already," Angela said, "but you don't. There is a secret word as well. I was told the word."

"By who? By my mother?"

"I can't say. I have to keep this secret. It is a secret word."

"Who told you?"

She could see he was ready to burst into a tantrum. "All right. I will let you know," she said. "I heard it, yes, from your mother, your dear mother who loves me even if I am not hers."

"Tell me or I will yell and she will hear."

"That is you. That is just as mean as you." She held him by the ear.

"Remember," she said, "she told me in secret that the real saying is, 'Kinder, Kucher, Kirche und. . .'" she started to giggle. "und Kacke!"

Now, he was giggling as well. Oh, those bees, worse than babies. He had a crazy picture of every bee with a diaper, the tiniest diaper. He was laughing so hard that he felt like urinating, and that made him think of Der Alte who came into his thoughts so often, especially when he had to urinate.

Now, Adi realized that he would like to visit Der Alte, yes, he wanted to, so much.

Next day, Sunday, was warm again, and once more the bees were out. After Klara left for church and Alois dozed, Adi started to run up and down the meadow, as if to use up the impulse to visit the old man, but in his mind he kept seeing each fork in the forest road, and so he knew he could find the hut. This was so much more than an impulse. The desire to make such a trip by himself was as sure as if a rope had begun to tug on him.

He went. And Der Alte, prepared for the visit (by the same message, for certain, that Adi had received) was there once again at the door, but the tablespoon of honey was not yet in his hand, no, for that, Adi now had to sit

on his lap. "Yes, you are such a good boy," Der Alte said, "I can love you like a grandson, and you will never need to be afraid of me. Yes, you are so nice and strong." Der Alte laid a hand upon the boy's thigh, but with only the lightest touch, even as he fed Adi the honey.

The boy was not afraid, or, yet, perhaps a little. In school, they had fairy tales to read, and sometimes there were ogres in the forest and evil spirits could change little children into birds or mice, or pigs or goats. However, it did not feel so risky sitting on the legs of Der Alte. It was better than his father's lap. He never knew when his father would blow pipe smoke into his face. Then, when he coughed, his father would laugh. No, Der Alte was a nicer man.

And indeed, they sat there long after Adi had tasted all of the spoonful of honey and felt happy with Der Alte's old hand resting on his knee.

After a considerable part of an hour has passed, he began, however, to feel less comfortable. Would his father begin to wonder where he was? Yet, when he stirred, Der Alte said a few words which aroused the same

sense of surprise as turning a page in a book and right there before you is a nice picture.

"Do not tell this to anyone," said Der Alte, "but I am trying to make one little bee very happy. I have asked this bee to live by itself, but near to me."

"Does it try to talk?"

"It can make sounds. For certain!" Der Alte smiled. "But no, dear boy, I do not try to encourage this little bee to speak our language. That is certainly too much to ask. I just try to make her happy. Which is not so easy now. Because now that I have selected her, she must live alone in a small queen box I use just for her even if she is not a queen."

"My father says that bees can live only for other bees. They are—" he searched to remember the expression—"they are dedicated to the community."

"Your father is correct. Yes. Bees who live in a hive do not seek to live alone."

"Even if they are fed good things all the time?"

"You are the smartest boy I know. You are full of understanding. I want to see what will happen if I select one bee and keep her warm and most well-fed, and think about her all the time with all the good feeling that is in my heart. So, when I go into the other room, I take care to speak to her. That is twenty times a day. She cannot comprehend what I am saying. But I want her to know that I am thinking of her. Sometimes I even take her out of the Queen box."

"Doesn't she fly away?"

"Oh, no. I look to prevent such a possibility." He touched the boy's head tenderly. "When I remove it from its little box, it jumps around, it is so merry, but it knows it must not try to fly."

"Does it have no wings?"

There was a pause. "No longer does it have wings."

Adi knew. No need to ask. Such a mix of good feelings and bad. His happiest feelings were trying to lift themselves above the bad ones. He asked now to look at the bee in the little box.

It was so little and so frisky and it jumped about in excitement when Der Alte let it out of the box. Indeed, it hopped onto the tip of the old man's finger which had been dipped into honey.

"I do not know how much more will happen," said Der Alte. "What I am attempting is difficult. I see little chance for success. But how wonderful if I can brighten the feelings of this little creature. After all, before my intervention, she was insignificant. Can I lift her now to that level her sisters cannot attain? I feel for her. She is so lonely. She misses the horde. She is loneliness itself. But I am ready to try to bring a certain sweetness of relief of a sort that can come only when one's terrible loneliness is replaced by well-being. Yes," he said, nodding his head most profoundly.

"Oh," said Adi, "I hope you are able to do that. It is so sad to be lonely. Sometimes I, too, am lonely. So, I know. But I feel afraid for this bee. Will it die?"

"Sooner or later, it must. It will. But I would like to see if I can make her happy for a little while."

"Yes," said Adi, "I understand. You love this one."

"Maybe," said Der Alte. He sighed. "Next time you visit, we will see if I have made progress."

Let us recognize that what has just been recounted is likely to leave many a reader uneasy. For some, interest in Der Alte might now be affected by the suspicion that he is a touch uncontrollable in his senility. Let me explain then that this outlandish pursuit of "well-being" for one isolated bee, an obviously stupid procedure (particularly after it has lost its wings!) is not without purpose. For the Maestro, that is. We have to test the immutability, if you will, of the instincts that the Dummkopf has placed in his vast consortium of creatures. The oddest experiments do reveal much to us.

I will say one outcome was clear. This minute and wingless embodiment of loneliness died before Adi saw her again. What is also to the point: Der Alte and Adi had tears in their eyes on the boy's next visit and were closer than ever. Count on it. Der Alte had decorated a small matchbox to serve as a coffin for the bee, and the old man and the boy then laid it into the earth under a spoonful of excavated dirt.

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Early in March, a week arrived that brought the sun to Hafeld every day. The hives began to stir, and the hardiest of the winter bees came out to forage. It was likely that the queen was now laying eggs out of her well-kept store of old fornications consummated high in the air last summer. Now, one of the hives came to weigh more each morning. That worried Alois. The other should be doing as well.

He decided to open the top of each Langstroth box and look in. Whereupon, he discovered exactly what he had been fearing. The two colonies might have sat on the same bench through the winter, but that was the only condition they seem to have shared. One was thriving, the other

could not be termed healthy. While a few dead bees lay on the lowest platform of the good box, a tumble of miniscule carcasses were on the floor of the other!

Of late, just before the warm spell, Alois, by way of the rubber tube, had heard a great deal of restless humming in this second colony. It worried him. Now, open to examination, fecal droppings were visible near the hive entrance, and many of the brood combs were empty. Had the queen died? He did not really know how to locate the lady—she was, after all, only a bit larger than her own worker-bees, smaller, indeed, than the drones.

He would have been dispirited, but his acumen had also been confirmed. He had not worried for too little. There had been real troubles in that second box. It looked like one or another killer disease.

So Alois decided that the remaining bees of this colony had to be gassed. He was ready to call on Der Alte for assistance but decided that he would not. His winter-long worries had engendered their own kind of fortitude.

He chose a Saturday. Adi and Angela, home from school, were his assistants, and the process was not difficult. He took a small cake of

sulphur (part of the equipment he had purchased five months ago), lit it, and left it to smoke on the floor of the bad hive. The entrance was plugged, the hive lid at the top was laid on again, and the gas did the job, and quickly enough. When Angela began to weep over the death of the poor bees, Alois sent her inside. But Adi watched, sitting beside Alois on an adjoining bench, his eyes alive in response to his father's lecture. "In nature," said Alois, "there is no mercy for the weak. Your big sister was silly. To become so upset!"

"I am not bothered," said Adi.

"Good," said Alois. "Now, let us go and empty this box and clean the combs."

Adi found himself thinking of Der Alte's one lonesome bee, now dead, and that did bring tears to his eyes.

But, of course, there was no comparison. He blinked back those tears. It was clear to Adi: Der Alte had loved one little bee, but the sick ones here in this bad hive dirtied the place where they ate and where they slept. No comparison.

That night, by way of a suggestion from the Maestro, I prepared a small dream-etching, simple enough to be installed by the best of my local Hafeld agents. It was a repetitive dream in which his father asked Adi to count each and every one of the dead bees. To make sure of the number, Adi was told to lay them out in rows, one hundred to each row—a tedious dream to be certain, and in the morning, he was almost late in leaving for school, since it took many minutes to awake. All the same, he was proud of the high number he had managed to count. There had been at least forty rows of one hundred bees, and each one of them was lying there on the white cloth he had laid out for them. He had not realized until now that he could count to four thousand. No one else in his class would come near. His only regret was that he had not finished. There had been many more mounds of dead bees to count.

Here, I would warn the reader not to make too much of this gassing nor of the body count. It is certainly not to be understood as the unique cause of all that came later. For one dream-etching, no matter how complete, leaves but a dot upon your psyche, a footprint to anticipate a future sequence of developments that may or may not come to pass decades

later. Most dream-etchings are akin to the abandoned foundations one can see on the outskirts of Third World cities. Left to molder for lack of further funds, they lie there, excavations on a scraggly field.

It would be a gross mistake, then, to assume that this dream-etching determined all that was to follow. I assure you we would be the first to applaud if matters were that simple.

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The good hive was another matter. It was thriving. The weight of the colony increased each week, and the honey comb began to fill up. From his books, Alois had learned that each of these miniscule cells was not capped by the worker bees with wax until the water content in the honey had been reduced to less than 20%. To blow off such surface water, half the hive had to be occupied all day fanning their wings. Alois felt intoxicated all over again by the dedication of his newborn creatures to such never-ceasing chores. To sweeten his mood, the first honey was also ready, and now his bees were capping the cells—just as they were supposed to!

Out in his white garments with the big box-like white veil over his head, protected by his gloves, Alois began to feel as if he was acquiring a bit of real technique. It was, after all, not so simple to pull combs out for examination, then slide them back again. He certainly didn't want to be such a lummoX as to squash his Queen if she happened to be moving around there. Indeed, the confidence he gained from these results took him over to Der Alte's hut long enough to purchase a new Queen to replace the lady who had been gassed.

Der Alte even gave him a lesson on how to spot the lady. It was not too difficult an observation when she was laying her eggs into empty cells, for she would be followed by a retinue who hovered over each deposited egg long enough to discharge their own enzymes onto the larva. "Magical fortifiers," Der Alte was quick to say.

Alois had to submit to the lecture but he returned with not one but two new queens, (both impregnated in the past year). One would establish a colony for the box that had been fumigated, and the other was to be installed in the one Alois had built himself last Fall. Some of his combs of new brood together with combs of new honey would now be transferred to

the two empty boxes. All three would be only partially filled, and that was also to the good. Each of his new three colonies would now build wax cells for their new brood as well as storage cells for their new honey. If he had lost one colony to gassing, he would soon be able to consider himself the master of three, all flourishing—could that be? Of course, he had had to lay out good money to be able to speak of such success.

All the same, he began to feel a cautious optimism. This spring might yet prove good to him, and beautiful for the family. April had come. Flowers were sprouting, the walnut trees, the oaks, the plum trees, the beeches and cherry trees, the maples and apple trees were in bloom. There would be a host of flowers in the meadow.

He liked to sit by his hive boxes with Adi beside him, the boy carefully covered and veiled in an outfit Klara had put together. Father and son now delighted in keeping watch at the entrance to the busiest hive where guard bees stayed on post at the foot of the box. Every last bee who came back with pollen and honey was carefully sniffed by one of the guards before she could enter. On occasion, Adi would begin to hoot because the

guard would drive a visitor away, especially if it carried no honey. "Look, Father," he would say, "she doesn't smell right."

Yet, with all these incoming riches, Alois still kept serving food to the colonies. "Now we feed them honey," Alois told the boy, "so they will make even more honey." Five trays were now filled with combs in each of the three hives. And three queens were working in three separate hive boxes to deposit their eggs in cells. Yes, endless numbers of Queen's eggs to be fertilized by long-contained sperm from the dead drones of those monumental fornications up in the long-gone sky of summer past. His colonies were flying missions from morning to dark. Each evening Alois would check the weight of the hives. It took so many trips to increase the weight. Each forager would be back with its load in a few minutes, then out again. Alois had read that it took forty thousand such voyages to-and-fro to make two pounds of honey.

Sometimes he would look at the old bees who had lived through the winter in the good box. They were easy to notice. They certainly were old now, battered and dying off, relics with worn-out wings, frayed from over-use. The hair was gone from their bodies. They had been out to forage at

the beginning of this season, but now, undeniably, they were expiring. Each morning a team of new-born worker bees would collect those bodies which had fallen to the ground floor of the box and sweep them out of the guards' entrance, then off the ramp. Alois could hardly mourn their passing. Young stock was taking their place. He felt as if he had finally begun his real venture into apiculture. The new bees would be his, not Der Alte's. He did not dwell on the fact that all three of his queens had been fertilized a year ago, and so, in that sense, were Der Alte's children. Such thoughts could put a spot on one's self-esteem.

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Given a splendid morning in May, with a host from each of the three colonies in the air, Alois began to notice a pattern in the movement of one bee. Just overhead, this scout—or whoever she was—kept making turns in a pattern she kept duplicating, wigwagging her belly as she flew around an oval, and then turned to fly back through a reverse oval. One figure eight after another!

"She is signaling to the others," Alois said to himself. "She is showing them something."

And he was right in this observation, he knew it, because in another few minutes, a good number of other bees had joined the first, and off they

flew in company toward the head of the meadow. On the other side of that rise, as Alois soon discovered on his walk, wildflowers had sprouted overnight. The bee he had observed was indeed a scout.

An old lust came back then. If there was one thing Alois wanted out of life even more than a new woman, it was for him to be the proud, happy, and honored discoverer of a new concept, something so startling and so valuable to human culture that his name might even be honored across time.

The desire still resided in his belly, and it gave him considerable happiness to think that he had just discovered a new concept right here, right now, and by his eyes alone! He had seen what he would call a signal-dance. One bee was looking to bring others to a place where flowers full of nectar were waiting. Bridesmaids, you could say, all lined up to be deflowered by the wedding ushers. But these hard-working foragers could not be called ushers. They were girlies, making love to flower-girlies. A joke, but his own joke, and he enjoyed it. In none of the books he had read so far had he seen any mention of this little dance, this wig-wag in the sky. He was twice afraid to mention it to Der Alte, once—because for all he knew—it might be an established concept already among apicultural

cognescenti, or, to the contrary, if brand new, might not Der Alte know better than himself just where to publish the observations?

Alois did permit himself to entertain the hope that Alois-Junior might, just for once, use his intelligence to work well for his father's ideas. Yes, let the son become equally famous. How much Franz Josef had wanted that. Sorrow came to Alois at the thought of the Emperor's pain in the hour after he learned that Rudolph, his own Crown Prince, had died at Mayerling in that awful situation so many years ago, that murder and suicide, or double suicide—whatever it had been!—with his young mistress. What a blow for the good man, the Emperor-father. And tragedy for Sisi, the beautiful Empress. How she must have loved Rudolph!

Feeling these sad thoughts in the midst of his new vocational pride allowed Alois to have an hour mellow enough to surrender his vanity—after all, he did not feel inferior to Der Alte any more. So, he decided, on the spur of this invigorating impulse, to visit the piss-bum and ingest a little instruction on how to treat the Queen bees (and, incidentally, locate them.)

Der Alte experienced no difficulties with that. He was certainly skillful—it had to be said. He opened one of his leaf-hives, scanned the

racks, located the Queen, reached in with a bare hand, and grasped her wings carefully and most delicately between thumb and forefinger. "In a few years," he said, "you, too, will be employing this approach to capture, but for now, I will show you a safer method." Of course, he proceeded then to discourse on all the methods and modes of discerning just where the queen might be, whether depositing eggs, or fertilizing them one after another in their new cells, or resting occasionally in her court.

"Once located, it is so simple," said Der Alte, "to capture our Lady."

"This, as I understand," said Alois, "will be most necessary when I look to collect my honey."

"Exactly," said Der Alte. "That is a time when you are moving many frames, and scraping the wax covering away from the honey cells. A careless move can crush the queen. So,"—to Alois' annoyance, Der Alte wagged a finger at him—"so," he repeated, "we do not go first for the honey, no, we locate the Queen like the good fellows we are, and then we use this queen-catcher, this glass." He took up a glass tube which offered a larger opening at one end. "The blunt part here is what you lay over the queen, and then you slip a little queen-cage"—he held up just such a small

flat container, two inches long—"under the glass tube, after which you blow the queen right into the cage, punkt! Now she is safe. You don't have to put her back until the honey has been taken from the comb."

We can be certain that Alois practiced catching the queen. Indeed, he spent an afternoon apprehending and releasing each of his three beauties, finding them, putting the bulging end of the tube most carefully over them, and then blowing them right into the little queen-cage prior to returning them to the colony.

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Alois' fine spirits waned with the loss of warm weather. A cold spell arrived, cruel to the expectation aroused by early spring. Alois now girded himself to be ready if all his gains were lost by this out-of-season chill upon the earth.

An old axiom returned to him. Johann Nepomuk used to say, "Spring is the season that will betray you most!"

So there were days when he came close to exhausting himself through the to-and-fro of removing tar-paper from the top of each hive, only to put it back again if the light at high noon might go dim in the sky, so abrupt was the movement of the clouds. Soon after, he had to run back to strip the

tarpaper away for the sun was out again and the day had returned to warmth. Back and forth, anxiety driving him inside and out.

During one near-freezing cold spell, he caught a cold. That offered a collateral worry. Was it impossible that one of his Queens might also catch a cold? In sympathy with the overlord? He scolded himself. Such nonsense!

Then it occurred to Alois that this return of his fears might not be so silly. What if it was a reflection of how he felt (in secret even from himself) about the condition of his true health? Was he coming nearer to his end? It was the worst thought to have. His imagination now entered a matter he had never allowed himself to approach. All through the years, so far as he could remember, death had not seemed threatening to him. A dull end to a good life, maybe, but nothing to do with hell. Such drivel was not for him. A reasonable state of peace in the ground, wet at times, but so what? Once dead, you would not feel clammy any more.

Now, however, one damn question was following another. What if death was not as he had assumed? He had been certain that religion was there for a very good practical reason. It couldn't be simpler—you had to

keep the weak and unruly in order. But a strong man (such as himself) could do as he chose to do.

Now, he was feeling a panic of a new sort. What if there was actually such a condition as guilt? His heart took a leap at the thought, one fearful leap as if his chest had been pummeled. Could guilt be real?

Poor Alois. He was now there for the taking. No Cudgel would bother to protect him. I could have the tried-and-true pleasure of appearing to him in a dream with my own—I will make such a claim—my own most adept impersonation of a guardian angel. He would soon be ours—as bound to us as Der Alte. I did not even have to be present. It was easy enough for the best of my three agents to bring it off.

But to what end? Would Alois be worth the maintenance?

The sober fact, which we do well not to ignore, is that people of Alois' age are rarely a prize. Their utility is limited. They are already too shaped to warrant much molding of their nature, and flexibility is exactly what we look for in new clients. So often, their aims must be redirected with ours.

On those special occasions when we do choose a man or woman well over fifty, we look for a serviceable warp in their nature, a particular distortion that we can employ for a particular purpose (usually outlandish). Repetitive irritations are one example. A mean old lady who keeps asking everyone whether they want something to eat when she knows that they don't, can unhinge a good family. They grow uneasy at their increasing desire to smother her with the nearest pillow.

Alois, however, was too average a human product. So there was little need to pick him up now. Milk runs would be enough. Let my agents hover just above his dreams.

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Early in May, the weather turned warm again, and many of Alois' woes eased. In part he had already recovered some of his good spirits by cleaning and oiling the tools he had bought in the fall from Der Alte, and this chore he performed in much the manner of a good soldier who takes his rifle apart in order to oil it and put it back together again.

My Hafeld agents, having little to report, filled their latest communications with lists of his tools and did this so assiduously that I grew irked at their enumerations of pollen feeders, hatching cages, bee-smokers, a water sprayer, a mating box (whatever that was!) a hive-tool, even a honey-stirrer made by Alois himself out of beech-wood. And then

there was a spur-wheel embedder for preparing the foundation of the insertable frames, as well as a capping fork, a slew of details which provided no interest and left me ready to wish I had taken him as a client, after all—a hands-on approach to his thinking might have been more stimulating than all this determinedly second-rate trivia.

Klara, in contrast, knew how to make much better use of spring in Hafeld. She was not always counting how many of the brood nests were already filled with new pupae, nor was she worrying about the temperature within the hives. Now that it had turned warm on a second wave of sun and undulant air, she was ready to loosen the knots that had coagulated all winter in her limbs. "God, too, is taking His rest," she said to herself even as she drew in a breath of air through the open window of her kitchen, and then, on impulse, with much left to do in the house, she picked up Paula, four months old, and went out into the meadow. The loveliest of silences prevailed, wholly without sound, no, rather it was a silence that took in the lightest caress of air, and she could even hear the swaying of the grass in the field, and all but hear the curtsies of the flowers. It was as if the sum of these tender sensations was there to contain the silence of these hills.

"Listen to how quiet it is," she said to Paula, "listen, little angel, and you will hear the flowers whisper." And, indeed, it seemed to her as if the nearest ones had heard what she said, for indeed they began to incline toward her, the most cheerful little daisies she had ever seen.

The breeze had not been enough to cause a stirring in these wildflowers. She knelt in the grass, the infant in her arms, and spoke to the daisies, "You are beautiful, all of you," she said, and, yes, there was no mistaking, these flowers were moving for her in the tiniest dance, yet with more of a move than the all-but-silent turn of the air. "Yes, Paula," she said, "these flowers love you and love me because we like them so much. Is is not so, you little dears?" She was ready to swear to this (although to whom?—certainly not Alois), to vouch that they had heard her, and indeed, they bowed delicately as if she had been waiting on them. "Yes, they are little princesses," she said to Paula, and had to laugh at herself for feeling—was this pure madness itself?—for feeling that the daisies were not only dear to her, but that she was dear to the daisies. "Oh, I am one big silly," she said aloud. But she could not help herself. She still believed that these white petals were listening. The balm of the air was like love, yes, exactly

like the love she felt for the four-month-old in her arms. Klara's body was returning to her, or so it felt. The old poked-out, wounded, bruised and stupid body of all the winter months since Paula was born, now felt sweet with the true beginnings of repair, yes, it was Spring, and nature herself was enjoying a party. Each breath was full of balm. How could it be otherwise? God was near and He was in the air, her Good God, yes, full of radiance. Yet, the air was at peace. It was as if the Good God was resting on His laurels, yes, for so He deserved. He deserved so much. She wanted to pray to Him then, but did not know how since she did not wish to ask for anything at this moment, merely to praise Him for being so good, and that was better done in church. There, everyone else would be doing the same so it could be understood as humble, not vain, whereas here she was all alone with Paula and the flowers, and full of such happiness. She was enraptured, yes. For she was thinking of all the young boys and girls of her childhood and of those rare occasions when they would romp and play just like these sweet crazy bees flying around the house now and so happy to be out in the sun after living in a dungeon all through winter, yes, crazy now with the joy that they could turn somersaults in the air, free of all duties, free

of their tasks for a little while, oh, yes, like Paula they were new to sunshine.

And Klara thought of the years to come when Paula would be ready to play, and that left her full of love for little Edmund who was so kind to the baby, the only one of the children who was. Angela couldn't really care (although she was dutiful enough) and Adi was a worry—once she had seen him pinch Paula's cheek hard enough to make her cry. Klara had spanked him for that, one sharp slap across his little seat, but she wouldn't do it again in any kind of hurry. For he had glared back at her—the prince of princes, you would think!—so strong a look that she had had to take all the strength of her eyes to stare him down. And he was only six years old!

It was too beautiful a day to think of that moment of misery—so intense it had been—no, she would rather thank God for having given her so sweet a baby, a daughter who would yet grow up, so she knew, to be her own good sweet best friend. And she even said as much aloud to Paula. "May the angels hear me," she whispered to her child before she turned back to the house and her duties.