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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 in each box, and did his weighing once a week. Part of the problem was that he had more worries than work. All through the dark months while feeding his winter bees (a tricky technique), he would decide that should the colonies look weak when spring came, he would combine two boxes into one, and, if necessary buy more bees, undertake more expense, more of Der Alte, who would be smelling up 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.

So, his fears were enough to harangue his family on what might or might not occur in summer. So much depended on what he read each night on how to keep a winter hive.

He did build one new hive box which he did not need as yet, but was proud of the skill demanded. He also had to admit that his box was not the equal of the Langstroths.

Yet the work eased his worries. 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." Still, it was not such a very good remark. Why not speak instead of Austrian blood?

That question came to bother him. Did certain blood possess special virtues? Why, indeed, 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 under one Hapsburg empire. Germans couldn't do that. Germans were always squabbling. 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? "Because," he said to himself, "I know what it means."

Yet what did it mean to decide you knew something when you didn't, not quite. Although in some way you most certainly did. A nice enigma. Alois decided that he was now thinking like a philosopher. Not 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. For that reason, he had chosen to stay away for a few days, and hang some netting near the hives to keep birds 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 now saw him as an expert on apiculture. Every bit of advice Der Alte had offered, plus whatever nuggets he had picked up of late in his reading, were 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 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. 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 before his retirement. "The trick," he told his visitor, "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 next winter.

My agents kept providing me with these petty episodes, but I was growing testy. They were missing the depth of Alois' 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. She was soon wide awake and unhappy.

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

She knew immediately what was coming next. 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, because the possibility was still there that he would do business with Der Alte. So, she had taken pleasure in the thought that maybe it would yet be Herr Rostenmeier, and in that case she could be the person in-between, and bring a little money back to the house from the local sales. Her fingers tingled each time she thought of such a 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 are still ready to 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, could it be? 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. She would have been up half the night explaining those few words, "A person like you."

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No surprise. Alois went back to Der Alte after all. 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 told me this.)

Alois paid his visit on the next Sunday and, once again, took Adi with him. This time the boy paid 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 path. All the while, he was filled with uneasy excitement. A woe as large as a loaf of bread had settled in his stomach, but perched above such heaviness, his heart felt most alive. 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 too many spirits in the woods then."

For Adi, the second meeting between Der Alte and his father turned out even better than the first. If, at the start, they spoke about the marketing of honey and Adi could hardly follow that, it all became interesting once business was done. That was when 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. These little devils come to us from the Good Lord's divine and curious aesthetic—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 encourage them to praise God. In the highest. Always.

For that matter, he went on for so long that Alois was, once more, repelled. Too much time had elapsed without 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. 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, "but you must be prepared. It is winter. Bees are sluggish during these months."

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. At one end 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, and flying 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 making. 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 had been placed. There he remained for a considerable time, growing colder by the minute. 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 might have come into 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, eight 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 special power he possessed 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 ability 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, I was bold enough to tell him that I did not like our chances of disrupting the Coronation itself. Too much would be arrayed against us. Whereas once the Coronation had taken place, it should not be difficult to create a powerful disorder a few days after the event.

I had dared to speak my mind, but then, the Maestro does not look kindly upon a lack of opinion among his close subordinates. "Allow me to muse upon the perceptions that some of you are able to offer. That is signally more useful to me than silence. I do not wish the fear of being wrong to leave you mentally inactive."

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 go for naught. He had been counting on a powerhouse of a son to sweeten his old age, yes, offer an improvement over the three boys he could

not, at present, boast about, the wild one, the mamma's boy, and a crybaby snot. So, Alois was unready to celebrate the new birth, 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 infant spew. There were now six human beings in his home. Come the end of spring, when Junior returned from Spital, he would be one of seven. The louder the tumult of voices in the bar, the more he was ready to compare it to the noise there would be at home.

My agent gained nothing from his visit to the tavern. 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 nearby forces.

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 splendid as a fine 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 to go outdoors.

But now he was awake, and painfully aware of all the excrement that had been accumulating in his colonies all these months. How could the little buggers hold it in?

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. It smelled like ripe bananas, and the snow was 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 these yellow spots 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 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. 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 close by me. I will tell you. I keep it in the kitchen."

"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. Because now that I have selected her, she must live alone in a small queen box I use for her even if she is not a queen."

"My father says that bees 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 live in a hive. They 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 did want to see what would happen if I were to 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 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 a 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 the sweetness of relief. That can come only when 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."

Is Der Alte entering his senility? No! 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. The oddest experiments reveal much to us. Freaks can be a fount of information.

I will say one outcome became clear. Our 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 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 hive began 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 seemed to be all they 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 was 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. 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 is 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 in the dream. There had been at least forty rows of one hundred bees, all laid out on an immaculate white cloth. 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 his dream. There had been many more mounds of dead bees to count.

Here, I would warn the reader not to make too much of the gassing nor the body count. It is not to be understood as the unique cause of all that came later. For a dream-etching, no matter how artful, leaves but a dot upon your psyche, a footprint to anticipate a future sequence of developments that may or may not come to pass some decades later. Most dream-etchings are not unlike 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 capped by with wax by the worker bees only when the water content in the honey had been reduced to less than 20%. To blow off such surface water, the hive had to fan their wings for hours every day. 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 in the area. 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 in the other Langstroth box.

Der Alte even gave him a lesson on how to spot the present Queen. It was not too difficult 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 now be partially filled, and that was also to the good. Each colony could now build wax cells for their new brood and 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. 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 each hive where guard bees stayed on post. 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 had already 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, and the foragers were flying missions from morning to dark. Each forager would return with its load every few minutes, and then was out again. Alois had read that it took forty thousand such voyages to accumulate 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 were battered relics with frayed wings, worn-out from over-use. The hair was gone from their bodies. Still ready 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 whichever bodies had fallen to the ground floor of the box and sweep them from 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 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.

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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. This scout—or whoever she was—kept making figure-eights in the air.

"She is signaling to the others," Alois said to himself. "She is trying to show them something."

He was right in this observation, he knew it, because a good number of other bees had joined the first, and off they flew 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 had always wanted from life even more than a new woman, it was to be the discoverer of a new concept, something so startling and so valuable that his name might even be honored across time.

The desire still resided in him. It gave him considerable happiness to think that he had just discovered a new concept here, and now, 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 already an established concept among apicultural cognescenti, or, to the contrary, if brand new, might not Der Alte know better than himself just where to publish the observation?

Alois did permit himself to entertain the hope that Alois-Junior might yet use his intelligence to work well for his father's ideas. Yes, let the son

become as worthy as the father! How much Franz Josef had wanted that. Sorrow came to Alois at the thought of the Emperor's pain in the hour he learned that Rudolph, his own Crown Prince, had died at Mayerling after perpetrating a 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 her son Rudolph.

These sad thoughts had a curious effect. They left Alois feeling so full of enterprise that he decided to visit Der Alte and ingest a little instruction on how to locate the Queen bees.

Der Alte was certainly skillful—it had to be said. He opened one of his 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, sometimes, resting in her court.

"Once located, it is 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 with a flat concave dome at one end. "This is what you lay over the queen," he said, "and then you slip a little queen-cage"—he held up just such a small flat container, two inches long—"underneath and blow the queen right into the cage, punkt! Now she is safe. She can stay in the cage until the honey has been removed."

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 flat dome-like end of the tube most carefully over one or another, and then blowing her right into the little queen-cage.

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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 for all his gains to be 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.

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 were a reflection of how he felt 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.

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 man of pride (such as himself) could do as he chose.

Now, he was feeling panic of a new sort. 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. I would offer an impersonation of a guardian angel. I did not even have to be present. It might be 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 too fixed in their nature to warrant much molding, whereas flexibility is what we look for in exciting new clients. Their aims must be redirected with ours.

On those special occasions when we do choose a man or woman over fifty, we look for a serviceable warp in them that we can employ for a specific purpose. 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. 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 for me.

Klara, in contrast, knew how to make better use of spring in Hafeld. She was not always counting how many of the brood nests were 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 some of the knots that had coagulated in her limbs that winter. "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. They were doing a dance, the tiniest dance. "Yes, Paula," she said, "these flowers love you and love me because we like them so much. Is it not so, you little dears?" She was ready to vouch for this (although to whom?—certainly not Alois) 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 had been born, now felt sweet with the beginnings of true

repair. She told herself that it was Spring, and nature herself was enjoying a party. How could it be otherwise? Each breath was full of balm. God was near and He was in the air, her Good God, full of radiance. Yet, the air was at peace. Could it be that God was resting on His laurels? And 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. 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, 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. Indeed, 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 who would think? He had glared back at her—the prince of princes, so strong a look that she had to use all the strength of her eyes to stare him down.

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.

BOOK VIII

THE CORONATION OF NICHOLAS II

-1-

If I am now ready to disrupt the narrative by my move to Russia, I would also remind the reader that I, too, am a protagonist. Moreover, I will remain Adolf Hitler's guide for decades to come, and so his future development will, to a great degree, be dependent on mine. Since the eight months in Russia from late 1895 to the early summer of 1896 was an education, I was considerably more ready afterward to foresee the outcome of large events—which is an instinct that only the highest devils are able to develop. Needless to add that by the 1930s, Hitler had developed similar talents. What I learned about Russian Grand Dukes over my eight months in

Russia later proved convertible to my understanding of German tycoons.

While such gentlemen are usually more powerful in essence than royal figures, they prove equally vain, and Adolf's developed gifts were able, when necessary to play to a man's vanity.

I also learned how to manipulate the will of the people. I speak of the blind will of the people. When properly incited, they are eager to enter the ranks of the mad. It need not be debated whether this was of use to Adolf.

I also learned a good deal about God's strengths and His increasing weakness. In 1942, a decision had to be made whether to activate the gas chambers in the concentration camps—a daunting move even for Nazis, but Adolf was ready. God would not be equipped to punish him. Certainly not at once!

If there are readers who still will say, "I don't care for this. I want to go on with what is happening in Hafeld," I do have a reply. "That is your right," I can tell them. It is now your book. You are holding it in your hands. So, feel free, if you must, to ignore Russia. Just turn to page _____. Adolf Hitler's story will pick up again right there. It is just that you will learn less about devils and a good bit less about me."

-2-

The beauty of the spring day when Klara felt so happy holding Paula, happened to coincide (even to the hour) with the Coronation of Nicholas the Second. Indeed, the same early summer warmth was in the Moscow air. Even after I came back to Hafeld in June, this fine period continued across much of Europe, and these long sunny days were compatible with my recollections of the Coronation and the days that followed.

As I have stated, I was the one to suggest to the Maestro that any direct attack we mounted on the crowning event was not likely to succeed. We could, of course, initiate many an episode. Nowhere in Europe could we field as many agents and clients as in Russia. A number were of high rank. We possessed more than one Grand Duke and Duchess among the several

branches of the royal family. We infested the Okhrana. We had more agents among these secret police than did the Cudgels. We also had government ministers who were as loyal to us as hounds slavering over kibble. We were well-installed among all the royal families of Europe, not to mention the nobility and/or the generals. Nouveau riches lay before us like an open whore. Tycoons were among our most valued and protected clients. We also had our share of anarchists, nihilists, and terrorists. When it came, therefore, to calling upon such actors, we knew that if we were ready to accept the cost, we could bring off a major disruption on Coronation Day.

Nonetheless, I was opposed to such ventures. Our losses, as I saw it, could be immense, and sympathy could be created for the new Tsar. It was his hour, after all, that would be ruined. So, I dared to propose to the Maestro that we postpone our attack until the Peasants' Festival which would take place four days later. When the Maestro accepted my proposal, my delight was, however, mixed with woe. What if I was wrong? Did I begin to comprehend the monumentality of Russia? Not only could we muster our hordes of devils, but Moscow and St. Petersburg now held a large assembly of angels. Never had I felt the D.K.'s presence so directly. In Russia, His Presence was evident.

It was obvious—God wanted this Coronation to succeed! I knew we would pay heavily for any direct offensive. This lay upon my judgment with all the weight of a hard fact—a stone too heavy to lift. Moreover, a large source of my dread remained. Would even the Maestro be able to explain God's immense commitment to this Coronation?

In recent years, He had invested in a variety of Russian people and Russian causes. Attention had been paid to Monarchists and to Republicans, to the most established aristocrats and to revolutionaries who were ready to die for the honor of overthrowing these overlords. Nor for that matter, did He ignore the Pope and the Vatican (but then, neither did we!) He was open to the calls of liberty and to the injunctions of autocracy. As the Maestro once remarked, "It is not difficult to hear the workings of His Mind. 'I may make My mistakes,' He says, 'but I do pay attention to who wins. That is the best way to discover what works.' "Why, after all," added the Maestro, "did He give liberty to men and women? Obviously, the Dummkopf wanted to obtain some notion of what He had actually put together."

The Maestro might be enjoying his irony, but what if God had decided that His best immediate continuation now rested on the need for a Tsar who

could enjoy a close alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church? So, He was looking to have a monumental ceremony that would fortify Crown and Cross. Guided by Him, the new young Tsar might even be able to obtain some purchase on the vast if inchoate energies of the Russian people.

If true, this was an amazing decision. To depend on Russia—so invested with corruption. So teeming with injustice! It was what we looked to find. We searched for injustice. It was a yeast to inspire hatred, envy, and the loss of love. If we had an all-purpose rule of thumb, it was to encourage injustice wherever we could. For rare was the man or woman who did not possess an intense sense of the injustice done to them each day. It was our taproot to every adult. It was a fury in every child. Our work would fall apart if humans ever came to brood as intensely upon the injustice others might be suffering.

I concluded, therefore, that an answer might be found in the young man who would soon be crowned. Was there something angelic about him? I made a request to the Maestro: Could I devote my efforts to learning as much about Nicholas as was possible? "Do what you can," was the reply. I could hardly decide whether I was being promoted, or abandoned.

As I soon learned, it would not be routine to approach this Nicky—which is how everyone in his large family referred to him. Nicky had a beautiful Danish mother, Empress Marie, the widow of his recently dead father, Tsar Alexander the Third, and four Grand Dukes for uncles, as well as brothers, sisters, cousins and in-laws. So far as one could discern, these relatives seemed surprisingly fond of him.

But I could not, as I say, come near. I had never encountered a human being so well guarded by squadrons of angels. Usually, I can call upon keen senses that enable me to take in the spiritual heft of a human being. And I see with precision. From the far end of a large room, I can perceive flaws of character in the corner of a nostril or the ridges of an ear. Yet, I do not look to muster these fine senses for all occasions. Satanic existence would be enervating if we were always obliged to operate at the highest level of readiness. Instead, we only call upon these gifts when the need is present to learn a good deal quickly about a particular man or woman.

I was not able to approach Nicky, however—so too many Cudgels. Once again, I had to rely on the materials that our Russian devils had picked up from royal valets working in the palaces of St. Petersburg or serving in the

churches and offices of the Kremlin. They were able to provide copies of numerous letters and diaries. It seemed as if everyone in every royal family of Europe was writing letters to parents, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, and intimates. In addition, they kept diaries. The Tsarevitch, soon to be Nicholas the Second, had made an entry in his embossed little book every day from boyhood on. By the time of the Coronation he felt so close to Alix (his soon-to-be Tsarina Alexandra) that she was always by his side. Literally. His diary was not only open to her perusal, but to her entries additions which she added to many of his pages.

I was fascinated. These two young people were related to the highest monarchs in Europe. Alix might be only a princess from Hesse, but her mother, Alice, had been one of Queen Victoria's three daughters, and when Alice died, Alix was only seven years old. Queen Victoria then paid loving attention to the child and brought her to England on frequent visits.

There was also Wilhelm the Second, who would yet become the much-reviled Kaiser Wilhelm of World War I. He happened to be married to Queen Victoria's oldest daughter. So, he was Alix's uncle. She called him Uncle Willy. The English prince who would yet become King George the Fifth of

England was Nicky's cousin. In time, King George's oldest son would become Edward the Eighth until he abdicated the throne in order to marry Wallis Simpson. Surrounded by our devils, that couple would live on for decades as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. (The D.K. did not even bother to assign an angel to them.)

If I list such family ties, it is to emphasize how much of European royalty knew Nicky and Alix. All seemed to agree that they were very much in love, a rare and bona-fide love.

The Maestro, however, had his doubts. To me, he remarked, "The Dummkopf presents Himself as the Almighty Avatar of Love. He is Love, and those who Love Him are full of Love, and Love itself will solve all human problems. With this noxious pomade, He not only gulls a good three-quarters of his humans, but deludes Himself. No one believes in Love so much as the Dummkopf."

Could this account for the number of Cudgels here? Had God retreated to His medieval assumption that monarchy would provide the best foundation for society? Did He actually suppose that if a handsome young king and attractive young queen remained magnificently in love with each other, and

were wholly devoted to belief in His Goodness, why, then, He, God, was ready to underwrite a bold experiment? Might it turn out better than some of His other ventures? Most previous monarchies had, after all, been notably void of love between the principals.

I was relieved. I now had a premise. The D.K. was no longer in full possession of His Faculties. Was that true or false?

-3-

All the same, such debate was disturbing. How could the Lord be senile? When, on occasion, I find myself near the sea, it is difficult to believe that He is suffering any loss of His powers. For that matter, similar uneasiness can be aroused in me by a fine field, a rocky crag, a peerless sunset or the retort of the heavens when lightning is followed by thunder. One can even cite the dazzlements of grass when dew is on the ground.

Of course, He could have fashioned all this eons ago, back at the peak of Creative Powers. In that case, did He now brood on the possibility that humankind had become His least successful Creation? Were we now awash in the dithering of an old divinity? This Nicky and Alix—they seemed so naïve,

so unfitted for any vast project. While I had not been able to get near to their living presence, I had certainly absorbed the tone of their love, their piety, their innocence. I had read hundreds of their communications back and forth. If I now choose to present a few of those missives, it is to provide a sense of how young they were.

In June of 1894, when their engagement was just two months old, Nicky wrote to her in English, a language they shared:

**I love you too deeply and too strongly for me to show it:
it is such a sacred feeling, I don't want to let it out in
words that seem meek and poor and vain! But now I will
try to break the habit of hiding my feelings, because I
think it wrong and selfish in some occasions. Darling
primrosy-mine, I love you my darling!!!!**

Be it said, I took pains to count the exclamation marks. Is that not, after all, a point of kinship between us? The observant reader may have noticed that I am fond on occasion of such emphasis at the end of a parenthesis. (Interruptions of attention should pretend, at least, to be vital!)

Four months later, Nicky's father is grievously ill. Alix, always ready to add her sentiments to Nicky's diary, offers this:

Tell me everything, dushka, you can fully trust me, look upon me as a bit of yourself. Let your joys and sorrows be mine, so that we may be ever drawn nearer together. My sweet One, how I love you, darling treasure, my very own One.

Only yours, quite your very own little spitzbub, Pussy mine!"

Nicky's diary, 20 October, Livadia:

My God, my God, what a day! The Lord has called unto Him our adored, dearly beloved Papa.

My head is going round, I cannot believe it—it seems inconceivable, a terrible reality.

It was the death of a Saint! Lord, help us in these terrible days!

Later, I learned that Nicky was thinking of the hour in his childhood when a nihilist had managed to plant a small bomb in the railroad car where the royal family was traveling. When the explosion went off, the blast blew the roof upward. As a result, no one was injured, but almost immediately the roof began to come down on them. Alexander III, a giant of a man, used the holy and unholy strength of his arms to support the collapsing structure long

enough for his wife and children to be rescued. Only a saint was capable of such strength, declared Empress Marie, a small and beautiful woman.

Nicky, being short like his mother, also revered Alexander's powerful torso. Through his adolescence, Nicky had worked, therefore, at body-building. He also excelled at horsemanship and at hunting—a point of honor to him. He also grew a fine brown mustache and beard, yet he never became large enough to look like a Romanov.

Nicky, Diary, 21 October, Livadia:

After luncheon we held Prayers for the Dead and again at 9 o'clock in the evening. The expression on Papa's face was wonderful, smiling as if he were about to laugh!

22 October.

Last night we had to carry Papa's body downstairs, as unfortunately, it has rapidly begun to decompose.

Indeed, they soon had to cover the Emperor with an imperial cloth. His hands and face were turning black.

The marriage to Alix came just a few days after the funeral—It would not do for the Tsar to remain an unmarried man. Nonetheless, it was an immense event and had taken place a full year before I arrived in Russia. I was, however, offered enough accounts by our resident devils to inspire the confidence that I had been there standing in the Winter Palace with 10,000 of the gentry. Mind you, they were without chairs. The Russians seem to believe that devotional services should exact a penance on the body. The mighty had to remain on their feet for three hours while liturgies were recited. All the while, choral music continued, sad, but in its way, majestic, due to the length of the occasion. It is as though the deepest groans of Jesus Christ had to be heard again and then again before the Bride might be proclaimed Empress. All were quick to comment on her dignity, her beauty, and on the manner in which her head bowed whenever she greeted anyone. Our devils, being not in the least generous about such matters, remarked that this bobbing of her head was reminiscent of a pigeon.

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Staying by themselves in Tsarskoe Selo, Nicky wrote in his diary:

**Such a dear place for us both; for the first time since
our wedding we have been able to live alone and live
truly soul-to-soul.**

Alix added:

*Never did I believe there could be such utter happiness
in this world, such a feeling of unity between two mortal
beings. I love you—those three words have my life in
them.*

On the next day she wrote:

*At last united, bound for life, and when this life is ended,
we meet again in the other world to remain together for
all eternity.*

I was intrigued by her confidence that they carried a joint passport to the Eternal. Rarely had I encountered newly-weds who seemed as infatuated. Yet Nicky was twenty-six, and no neophyte in these matters. Since Alix had been a virgin, I was disposed to look upon her entries as much too concerned with the absolute necessity to show Nicky's diary how much she was in love.

Of course, I could not be certain. Whenever Nicky passed by a fine forest, he would be able to remind himself that this loveliness was his land. He was one of the rare chosen of God. Yet, he certainly felt unready. How, then, could he fail to make all he could of Love? For him, Love was a vertiginous ascent and you could maintain your balance only by climbing upward, always upward.

Still, the damnable question remained. Was it not conceivable that in His Desire to nourish their marriage, God was enriching them with physical

ecstasies? How could I know? I had only the language of their letters, and the reasonable assumption that if God was going to choose a Tsar, He would be ready to support him with Wisdom and Strength—against, of course, the no small skills of the Maestro.

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On the other hand, one could also ask how God had prepared this young man to be the Tsar. It is certain that the court had not. Everyone had supposed that Alexander the Third would rule for at least another generation.

Nicky, Diary, 17 January 1895, St. Petersburg:

An exhausting day. I was in a terrible state about having to go to the Nikolayevsky Hall and deliver a speech to the representatives of the nobility, and the town committees.

He had been closeted with the Grand Dukes before he gave the speech. They had assured him that he must follow in his father's footsteps. "Nicky, you must be absolute!" His grandfather, Alexander II, had been assassinated. His father had had his close call. Absolute allegiance to autocracy—that must be proclaimed again and again.

From Nicky's speech:

17 January 1895, St. Petersburg:

I am aware that recently in some *zemstvos* there have arisen the voices of people carried away by senseless dreams of taking part in the business of government.

Let everyone know that I will retain the principles of autocracy as firmly and unbendingly as my unforgettable late father.

Despite such promises, his official duties oppressed him. He kept lamenting that he could not spend enough time alone with Alix.

As the first winter of their marriage came to an end, she began to develop symptoms. We counted on that. Symptoms were our stock-in-trade. (Victorian women were never easy to invest, but we could always send a

shiver into their corseted defense of personal virtue by tainting their dreams with one or another smelly thought.)

Nicky's diary, 9 April, 1885, St. Petersburg:

Unfortunately, dear Alix's headache continued all day. She did not go to church nor to luncheon.

Nicky's Diary, 10 April 1895, St. Petersburg:

Dear Alix still has an unbearable pain in the temples and she was obliged to remain in bed, on my advice.

An ongoing headache! When intense enough to be characterized as migraine, these headaches speak of a clear desire to commit murder. I did not believe Alix had such sentiments toward her husband, but it had to be another matter with her mother-in-law. The Empress Marie had adored her huge husband for the best of reasons and one of them was that she had been the Empress. Between the two women, animosities were developing.

By June, Alix was free, however, of her worst headaches. She was also pregnant. I suspect that her mother-in-law was, in consequence, able to exercise less pressure upon her temples. In an entry to Nicky's diary on June 10, Alix wrote:

My sweet old darling manykins, Wify loves you so deeply and strongly, you are my one and my angels, what intense happiness. . .ours. . .our very own. . .what happiness could be greater; only Wify must try and be as good and kind as possible lest another little person suffer for it. A big kiss.

This is June, but the baby will not be born until November. Is Alix suggesting that they have no contact down below until the baby arrives?

My comprehension was not advancing. None of us was ready to admit as much to ourselves (and never, certainly, to the Maestro) but the presence of real love often blurred the clarity of our analysis. We could penetrate every aspect of false love, and be demonic at converting the sensitivities of love to the imperatives of lust. Of course, there are special occasions when God decides that lust will be beneficial for one of His chosen, yes, there is Godly lust as well, and so the issue can offer ambiguity.

It is a curious contest. The angels have powerful sweets to offer, but, in turn, I would say we possess more improvisational skills than the Cudgels. We also lack a quality I do not wish to confess, although I must, or what I offer will make no sense. It is that I know everything about love but Love

itself. I do not like to make this confession. Yet, it is true. I recall nothing of my existence as a human, nor even whether I was, to the contrary, always a spirit. This, however, I can say—I have never known Love. I can expatiate upon its properties and tendencies, its dilemmas, its dissipations, I can delineate most of the reasons for its presence or disappearance, I can inspire jealousy, doubt, even periods of revulsion toward the beloved, I can tell you everything about Love except that I cannot distinguish true love from its artistic substitutes.

Witness, then, my confusion concerning Alix. I could comprehend Nicky more easily. He needed love the way others require drink. But Alix? I could not say. Could it be that her amorous hysteria was her way of believing that she felt heights of passion, pleasure, and devotion?

Given, however, that curious line in her letter, "Wify must try and be as good and kind as possible lest another little person suffer for it," I came to a conclusion. She was declaring a temporary moratorium on sex. On many a milk-run, I had watched any number of pregnant women enjoying the act in the eighth or even the ninth month. Of course, Alix was preparing for the next Tsar, and one wouldn't dare to bruise the development of that royal head, but

still!—was there to be no sex on the schedule until November? After all, she was writing this in June. I now leaned to the hypothesis that Alix had strained mightily to rise to the passionate heights she deemed necessary for this first period of their marriage, but that accomplished—at least in part—and the heir-to-be now in place, she was ready to take a rest. Yes, we must not do it "lest another little person suffer."

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Alix was more than pregnant. Her belly was huge. They were all full of anxiety awaiting the birth of an heir—the young bouncing male baby who would soon be Tsarevitch to Nicholas II.

It is the mark, however, of Romanov breeding that no disappointment was mouthed when a strapping ten-pound female has came forth.

It did not matter that much to Nicky—Alix, at least, was safe!

Nicky's Diary 3 November 1895 Tsarskoe Selo

A day I will remember forever. At exactly 9 o'clock P.M. a baby was delivered and we all breathed a sigh of relief. With a prayer we named the daughter from

Almighty God "Olga!"

Two days later, Nicky is fascinated by some unexpected aspects of infant nutrition.

Nicky, Diary 5 November 1895 Tsarskoe Selo

The first attempt at breastfeeding took place and ended up with Alix successfully feeding the son of the wet-nurse while the latter gave milk to Olga. Very funny!

6 November 1895

Thank God, all is well, but the baby does not want to take her breast so we had to call the wet-nurse again.

I was not surprised. A few of us have developed the power to discern the sentiments of an embryo during the final months. By the last trimester, they are able to declare themselves through their mothers' dreams. So we knew that most infants come into the light of the birthing room feeling affection or antipathy toward the benevolent caretaker (or the surly warden) who so recently constituted the walls of their womb. That is exactly why women feel desolate when their milk is refused by their babe.

Nonetheless, these two, the wet-nurse and the young Empress, were doing their best to avoid such a recognition. So was Nicky. I expect he was ready to tell himself that huge little Olga has the sturdy instinct to wish to smell and taste the paps of a strong Russian woman. And I, from my funds of cynicism, think that the two women, so profoundly different, were ready to enjoy this open (if still surreptitious) connection of the flesh.

In any event, less than half a year later, Alix has certainly resumed relations with Nicky.

29 March St. Petersburg

*sweet precious Nicky mine, no words can express
how deeply I love you--more and more, day by day,
deeper--truer. Lovy sweet do you believe it, do you
feel hearty throb so quickly, and only for you, my
husband.*

Nicky had been so good about the birth of a princess rather than a prince, that Alix to her sweet surprise had a "hearty throb" on the moment he entered her, a novel event, or, at least, I assume it was novel. Besides, determination can shift. Olga, for example, has come to accept the given.

Now, she feeds at her mother's breast even as Alix is taking morning coffee with the Emperor.

Our closest attention, however, was on the Coronation of Nicholas II. It was approaching. It is safe to add that there could have hardly been a devil present who was not experiencing his share of elation and dread. There is never a time when the presence of crowds can feel as demonic to us as at a great occasion with a massive ceremony.

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Festivities for the Coronation would take place in Moscow on May 14th and everywhere one saw two large letters, "N" for Nicky, and "A" for Alix. Countless numbers of platforms had to be erected for the spectators, as well as false fronts to hide the ugliest buildings on the route. Moscow was awash in officers speaking many a tongue, and came from many a nation. Those who lived on the route of the Coronation parade were renting their abodes to spectators. A window on the street could be leased from dawn to sunset for 200 rubles on any one of the days from the entrance parade on May 9th to the coronation itself on May 14th. Carriages accompanied by coachmen cost 1200 rubles for the month. Useless to argue that one only wanted the coach for the

week, or that one could buy ten good horses for such an amount. 1200 rubles! Even to acquire a limited view in a narrow space on a flimsily-built platform came to 10 or 15 rubles—woe to the obese. To afford a balcony you had to spend 500.

Those wealthy enough to rent apartments overlooking the parade on May 9th, might expect to pay up to 2500 rubles. Nor were hotel rooms easily available. The government had taken over whole floors this week for foreign princes and princesses, diplomatic representatives, noblemen, honored artists, nabobs, moguls, and tycoons. The French, being determined for reasons of state to leave an imprint on the occasion, proceeded to spend 200,000 rubles. Were they not, after all, the great and good ally of the Tsar? Since that had once been a role for Germany, those diplomats responded by moving out of Moscow to a palace in the woods costing only 7000 rubles, a modest gem, but then the Germans did not even give a ball, just a musicale. They may also have been gambling on bad weather. If so, they lost. The procession on May 9th offered beautiful skies.

The parade had to be comparable to the most splendid royal occasions of the past. Nicky and Alix would make their entrance into the Spassky Gate

of the Kremlin from a temporary residence in Petrovsky Park, situated on the northern outskirts of Moscow and so six miles away. Since it was no secret that this event looked to equal the majestic entry of Louis XIV into Reims in 1654, a procession stepped out then in full panoply on the morning of May 9th to exhibit for the world the exceptional resources of the Russian Empire. First came the Cossacks with their scarlet tunics, their silver epaulettes, their blue trousers and black boots; on came Asian princes from unpronounceable regions, wearing costumes never seen before in Europe, representatives of far-off barbarian lands which the Russians had conquered over several centuries, and they were followed by the endless ranks of their courtiers and huntsmen. Next came the Arch Grand Master of the Coronation Ceremonies and his associates, twelve Chamberlains and twenty-five Gentlemen of the Chamber, followed by Marshalls of the Court, and the members of the Council of Empire, to be succeeded by the regiments of the Royal Army, then came Nicky himself, born, as all too many were whispering, on the sixth of May. Thousands of Russians were passing such information to each other, for May 6 was the Orthodox Feast Day of St. Job the Sufferer, one of the most sinister dates on the calendar. No one would ever wish to repeat the sufferings of Job.

Nicky was most aware of this. In the first weeks of their betrothal, he had felt it was his duty to warn Alix. He could do no less. And she replied that it would now be her duty to stand beside him. In union with each other, they would overcome such an omen. This had to be a test given to them by God. So she saw it. God wanted them to love each other so well that they would not have to suffer like Job, not if they were ready to love God even more than had St. Job.

Just so much did I learn on the day they entered the Kremlin. I had been able at last to enter Nicky's mind, and never in my experience were so many angels surrounding a human being. Yet, on this day, as he paraded his pale English mare along the six miles from Petrovsky Park to the Spassky Gates of the Kremlin, I was able to approach his thoughts. Be certain, it was a small entry, but the approaches to his mind were not wholly barricaded. Hosannas to the Maestro! Ten years ago when the Tsarevitch was an eighteen-year-old cadet, he had had a short but agreeably lustful set of encounters with one of our devils. She had appeared in the form of a gypsy prostitute, a tsvigane. Since the affair occurred years before the Cudgels had begun to devote their

massive efforts to protect him, the Maestro had succeeded in mining a most narrow ingress into Nicky's mind.

Now, he had chosen me to post myself in this hard-won passage for the length of the march up Tverskaya Street to the Kremlin. Thereby, I would be able to pick up many of the thoughts that passed through his royal head.

There were a few surprises. He felt close, on this ride, to what he once he had been, a young Colonel in the Life Guards, and he did recognize—for one moment, no more—how much happier his days might have been if they could have been spent in that rank. I supposed that such thoughts were aroused by the enthusiasm of the troops. Their great roar of joy at the sight of him left a pang. In five days, he would receive the Crown and have to give a full farewell to these memories. He would be overwhelmed with duties.

Nicky's recollections now turned libidinous. That devil of a whore who had been installed into his young experience was still calling to him. Each great cheer from the troops stirred a tumult in his groin. The English mare, so elegant, so pale, must also have been alert to such arousal, for she now began to offer new steps. How she pranced!

After no more than another minute, however, these fine spirits shared by horse and rider sank back to gloom. Born on the Feast Day of St. Job the Sufferer. What, indeed, had God intended?

Just as quickly, however, did his good mood return. I did my best to follow. Nicky's thoughts came pell-mell, full of clatter and echo, but then, even a dark mood could not prevail for long in the face of this promenade. So many decorations had been hung upon the facades of the homes on Tverskaya Street. Moscow, on this morning, had the radiance of an old lady who had never been as beautiful before, and the glory of the light occasioned Nicky to think of his best hunting days. Even Alexander III had seen fit to compliment his son's prowess. Nicky blushed on receiving so rare a compliment from his parent, and proceeded immediately to give the credit to his hunting dogs. Whereupon, Tsar Alexander the Third had said, "One can measure a man by his dogs."

Yes, let the Almighty see him as the most loyal of His dogs. He knew animals, he knew them. Almost always, when drinking the blood of a stag just hunted down, the echo of the last shot still alive in the forest, he would feel close to God. The stag, so immaculate in form, had just lost its existence.

Why? For whom? To Nicky, the answer was simple but profound. The death of this beautiful beast would bring a closer understanding between God and man. For it was God who had given human beings the right to take the lives of these exquisite creatures. Now, Nicky remembered a blasphemy that once had burned in his throat. It came as he drank his first cup of stag's blood. He had thought: "This blood must be like Christ's blood? How else can it taste so pure?" Remembrance of such a blasphemy made him wince. It also made him think of obligations yet to come. He might feel close to God, he could certainly feel close to beautiful animals, but now there were always ministers around, eager to see him, looking to use him. The loyalty of those ministers was to the aggrandizement of their office. Deceit was at their fingertips. Self-interest was in their skin.

He could withstand them. So, he told himself. He had a supreme trinity with which to protect himself. It had been his father's guide—Honor, Tradition, Service. Yet, to remain faithful to three such principles would demand unyielding strength. Otherwise, Honor could fall into dishonor, Tradition stiffen, and Service wear one out. He was not the man to deal with endless intrigues. To keep up with such ministers was like falling through a

stairwell. Whereas to kill an animal, yet know compassion for the beast—marrow for the soul!

At this moment, his mare reared up. Had she just had an image of the stag's blood? A cry of fear rose from the spectators for the mare stood on her hind legs. But then the crowd applauded. On the streets, at the windows, upon the balconies, from the roofs of Tverskaya Street—out of the tens of thousands who witnessed this moment rose a great wave of applause. Nicky, most gracefully, had kept his seat and calmed his horse. The sound of the crowd's elation traveled all the distance up to the Spassky gate of the Kremlin. Other tens of thousands of spectators still ahead on the line of march did not see this episode and so did not know why they had heard such applause, but they too began to applaud. And Nicky was flushed with pleasure.

Not for long—his future duty was still before him. He was doomed to work with his ministers and they were one treacherous construction perched upon another. Nor would they ever respect him. They were accustomed to the force of his father.

Their opinions were usually able to override his own. They knew more. So, he had not planned this procession. They had. They had told him that this

long entrance to the Kremlin would be his triumphant introduction to the world. That was why it must be so long and elegant a parade. It was crucial that he be seen close to the front of these many miles of procession. Yet to keep expectations alive for the onlookers, his mother and Alix would only be seen in their two golden coaches at the conclusion. This arrangement, the ministers insisted, was the most dramatic way to demonstrate the great and near-to-endless extent of Russian power.

Alix had wanted, however, to be closer to him. Nicky tried to explain the intentions of the ministers. She was silent, but unhappiness remained in her eyes. It was one matter for Nicky to feel like a dog before God, but quite another to suffer such a sentiment with one's wife. Nothing is worse for an animal who would be brave than to be told by the eye of his beloved that he is no more than a timid and conceivably ignoble creature.

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Over the five days from May 9 to May 13th which would precede the Coronation on the fourteenth, Nicky and Alix were engaged in ceremonial receptions that required them to offer a good welcome to each high official as he came forward. This ability to remain affable while not shifting one's feet, nor indicating strain, was a measure of royal competence. As he complained afterward to Alix and to his mother (with a smile), his cheeks were sore from being kissed by plenipotentiaries with stiff mustaches.

On May 13th, when sacred ornaments were transported to the throne hall of the Kremlin Palace, a host of anxieties rose into his mood. The ceremonies were, by now, familiar, but he felt as if hell itself was waiting. He wanted

nothing to go wrong. For he saw the 14th of May as deliverance. By its end, he would no longer be acting Tsar, but consecrated as the Tsar.

I suspect he knew that something malign was in the offing. But he had no instinct for when it would happen. Each day from the tenth to the thirteenth seemed as dangerous to him as the next.

For that matter, he was not alone in these anticipations. Given the firm Russian expectation that nothing good can prevail for long, many were certain all this good weather would disappear by the morning of the Coronation. Instead, on the 14th of May, Moscow was alive with early morning sunshine. Morose predictions had to be postponed. Any number of women who had been quick to predict floods of downpour were still convinced something would yet go bad. Since Alix had converted to Russian Orthodoxy immediately after the demise of Alexander III, these women now said, "She comes to us behind a coffin." Given the beauty of this exceptional day, however, a counter-sentiment soon arose. Many were now saying, "We are close to the end of the century. Maybe the new one, this Twentieth Century, will be different. Let miracles of beauty and comfort come to us."

-9-

Soon enough, I will be able to speak with some detail of our contribution scheduled to occur four days after the Coronation, but I am not able to offer much concerning that ceremony. The Maestro did not include me among those devils who were going to work upon a few aspects of the event. I did not protest. The most dependable route to his favor was to accept the position you had been assigned. Besides, he even told me, as if by now I might be developing into one of his intimates, "Across the grand scheme of things, the Coronation will yet be seen as a petty event. You will miss nothing."

I was not present, therefore, in any of the cathedrals, not the Assumption, the Archangel, nor the Annunciation, but I was told over and again of the unspoken scandal of the event at the Cathedral of the Assumption.

Soon after the Tsar and Tsarina had mounted their thrones, the Chain of the Order of St. Andrew broke. Even as the Tsar was bending his head to receive it, the chain broke! Given the number of Cudgels surrounding this ceremony, was it possible that we had accomplished this? Or was it a gift of chance?

It is not routine to be precise about these matters—there is a labyrinth of relations, after all, between the Maestro and the Dummkopf. I could list an endless register of compromises, brutalities, games, and deceptions on both sides. So, there is much to contemplate about these Russian ceremonial procedures, fortified as they are with their relics, their icons, such instruments of Monarchical ascension as the Chain, the Cross, the Crown, the Sceptre and the Orb. Then, there is the Throne itself, resonant with blessings and curses, that same Throne upon which Tsar Michael Fyodorovitch sat in the year 1613. Of course, some of the faithful believe that the ceremony itself emits an indispensable Godly power which enters the pores, the flesh, and the heart of

the Tsar. But I would suspect that this magic did not emanate entirely from the Dummkopf. The Maestro took pride in smuggling his wares into God's gifts.

We were not wholly unsympathetic, therefore, to the intensity with which Nicky believed in the Lord Almighty. The Maestro would look to turn that to our advantage. I knew that many of us would be present when the procession set out from the Palace at half past ten, each step buried in the peals of a thousand church bells, some as light as the rustle of leaves, others as heavy as the groans that issue from the heart of the metal. The priests inside Assumption Cathedral came out to the paradon to welcome the Monarchs and give them the Holy Cross to kiss. The Trinity was invoked—three times were prayers repeated, three times were the holy icons embraced. Nicky and Alix then ascended the steps of the dais in the center of the cathedral. We had had much to do with its construction. We were present when Michael Fyodorovitch, the first Tsar of the Romanov dynasty, had ascended to this same Throne, so I will not elaborate on how the Imperial Regalia were placed, nor repeat the address of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg as he importuned Nicholas II to make his public confession. And Nicky did indeed make such a public confession, but in a voice spoken so low and with such brevity that no

one could hear. After which, the Tsar read the prayer for the day, and the Metropolitan said, "The blessing of the Holy Spirit be with thee. Amen."

I can say that we are always ready to feel the approach of the Holy Spirit. (On many an occasion, His Blessing is infiltrated with our spirit.) Indeed, it was at this point that the Chain of the Order of Saint Andrew broke. Of course, the priests ignored this startling event. It is a rule of order never to indicate that some element in a sacred service has gone awry. Without pause, therefore, the Metropolitan, made the sign of the cross, laid his hands on the Tsar's head, and said two prayers, after which Nicholas the Second was able to take up the Crown, place it upon his own head, and proceed to hold the Sceptre to his right hand and the Orb in his left. He then placed his royal hindquarters again on the seat of the throne of Tsar Michael Fyodorovitch. Whether or not he felt any such ancient residual resonance from contact, he rose but a few moments later, handed over the Regalia to his attendants, and beckoned to Alix, who knelt before him on a crimson cushion, its border of golden lace. Again cannon sounded from one hundred and one guns.

The ritual continued. Orthodox service on such occasions is never brief. Many, who had felt some inner illumination at the commencement, now settled

into the weariness of their limbs. Boredom entered the Divine Liturgy. I have to wonder if that is not part of the genius of Russian worship. For the length of the service captured many in the congregation who were without real interest at the start. Ergo, there is no need to enumerate every step taken by the Tsar and the Tsarina once they descended from the dais. A measured three paces here, three there, the Trinity to be commemorated again and once again. Indeed, the Maestro always spoke well of the Trinity as if he knew something others did not. I have seen the best man at a wedding who, unknown to all but the bride, has had carnal knowledge of the lady, and there is a subtlety in the posture of such a fellow that I do not find dissimilar to the nuance of appreciation our Maestro is always offering to the Holy Ghost. That is always the point of his attack. Since the Holy Ghost is the embodiment of the love of the Father for the Son, and the Son for the Father, so is it always a point of attack chosen by the Maestro in order to weaken that quintessential integrity.

So, I believe it was the Maestro's act that broke the link in the chain of the Order of Saint Andreza.

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The Tsar and his retinue would move from Assumption Cathedral to Archangel Cathedral where, with a few variations, the service would be repeated before going on to the Annunciation Cathedral.

I was told that the Tsar and Tsarina were in need of rest, but were facing a ceremonial meal in the Hall of Facets. In his diary, he would write that night, "All that happened in the Assumption Cathedral, though it seems but a dream, is not to be forgotten for life." To that he added, "We went to bed early." Whether this was from fatigue, or a resurgence of lust from the good and happy sense that it was done, and they would never have to do it again, I cannot say. I would certainly have liked to have been in their room. At the least, I would have learned how much the corrupted sanctity—I use precisely those two words—the corrupted sanctity of these holy Metropolitans had to do

with Nicky and Alix's raptures. Had these endless ceremonies served some sweet bubble of concupiscence? I suffered all the pains of exclusion.

If it seems strange that I am always hungry to learn more, let me dispel the common assumption that God and the devil have all the knowledge they need. I would suggest that the easiest approach to comprehending my powers, is to assume that I am as much advanced beyond an accomplished scholar as he is in turn more knowledgeable than a clod from a poorly endowed school. Since I hardly command every answer to questions that bedevil humankind. I, too, can be unmanned by all I do not know.

That night, occupied with my own preparations for the Peasants' Festival to take place four days later, I also missed the banquet in the Palace of Facets. It was the event of the season for Moscow and for Russia—one of those social occasions which can offer great advancement to one's future if one has been invited—an orgy of putative achievement, therefore, to the richest of the nouveau riche.

Of course, there was also much curdling of expectation among many of these ambitious souls. They were not always happy with where they had been seated. Studying other placements in the room gave them too much measure

of their present status in the world. Had it been lowered recently? Indeed, only the most elevated of the guests were in the same room as the Tsar and Tsarina. The cream of the diplomatic corps was there, and the Holy Synod, as well as the Grand Marshal and the Grand Master of Ceremonies, the highest ministers and some of the exceptionally wealthy. The remainder had been assigned to the Hall of Saint Vladimir.

A blunting of ambition is, however, the last punishment a monarch would care to arouse among his dinner guests—nor does it require the wisdom of Machievelli to know this. So Nicholas, in company with Alexandra, made a point of visiting every table in both rooms, followed by the Dowager Empress Marie, the Queen and Prince of Naples, the Duchess of Edinburgh, the Crown Prince of Sweden, Duchess Elisabeth and Grand Duke Alexei, all of them proceeding to table after table through the Hall of Saint Vladimir, and were in turn greeted at each seating with the kind of ovation that issues from the parched throats of people who had been all too ready to assume that no matter what trials they had suffered to obtain an invitation, they might still be ignored. What applause, then, to see the Tsar and Tsarina approaching.