# COMPULSION

**Stefan Zweig**

*To Pierre J Jouve in fraternal friendship*

THE WOMAN WAS STILL fast asleep, her breath coming full and strong. Her mouth, slightly open, seemed to be on the verge of smiling or speaking, and her curved young breasts rose softly under the covers. The first glimmer of dawn showed at the windows, but the light was poor this winter morning. Somewhere between darkness and day, it hovered uncertainly over sleeping things, veiling their forms.

Ferdinand had risen and dressed quietly, he himself did not know why. It often happened these days that, in the middle of working, he would suddenly pick up his hat and hurry out of the house, into the fields, striding faster and faster until he had walked to the point of exhaustion, and all at once found himself somewhere far away, in a place he did not know, his knees shaking and the pulse throbbing at his temples. Or he would suddenly freeze in the middle of an animated conversation and lose track of the words, failing to hear questions, and he would have to force himself back into awareness. Then again, he might forget what he was doing when he undressed in the evening, and would sit perfectly still on the edge of the bed, holding the shoe he had just taken off, until a word from his wife startled him out of his reverie or the shoe fell to the floor with a bang.

As he now left the slightly close atmosphere of the bedroom and stepped out on to the balcony, he shivered. Instinctively he drew his elbows in, closer to the warmth of his body. The landscape deep below him was still enveloped in mist. Dense, milky vapours hovered over the Lake of Zürich, which from his little house, perched high up here, usually looked as smooth as a mirror, reflecting every white cloud that hurried past in the sky. Wherever his eyes looked, whatever his hands felt, it was all damp, dark, slippery and grey. Water dripped from the trees, moisture trickled from the rafters of the house. The world rising from the mists was like a man who has just emerged from a river with water streaming off him. The murmur of human voices came through the misty night, but muted and disjointed like the stertorous breathing of a drunk. Sometimes he also heard hammer blows and the distant chime of the bell from the church tower, but its usually clear tone sounded damp and rusty. Dank darkness stood between him and his world.

He shivered. Yet he stayed there, his hands thrust deeper into his pockets, waiting for the view to clear. The mist began slowly rolling up from below, like a sheet of grey paper, and he longed to see the beloved landscape that, he knew, lay down there in its usual orderly fashion, with its clear lines that normally brought clarity and order to his own life, although now it was hidden by these morning mists. He had so often gone to the window here in a mood of inner turmoil to find reassurance in the peaceful view: the houses over on the opposite bank of the lake, turning to each other as if in friendship, a steamer dividing the blue water with delicate precision, gulls flocking cheerfully over the banks, smoke rising in silver coils from red chimneys as the noonday chimes rang out. Peace! Peace! was the message it conveyed for all to see. At such moments, in the face of his own knowledge and despite the madness of the world, he believed in the beautiful signal it gave him, and for hours could forget his own homeland as he looked at this new one that he had chosen. Months ago, in flight from the present times and from other human beings, coming away from a country at war and arriving in Switzerland, he had felt his soul, crumpled, furrowed and ploughed into disorder as it was by horror and dismay, smoothing out here and growing scar tissue as the landscape softly welcomed him in, and its pure lines and colours called on his art to set to work. As a result he always felt alienated from himself, an exile once again, when the sight was obscured, as it was by the mist hiding everything from him at this time of the morning. He felt infinite pity for everyone shut up down in the dark, and for the people in the world of his old home, far away now—infinite pity, and a longing to be linked to them and their fate.

Somewhere out in the mist, the bell in the church tower gave four strokes and then, telling itself the time of day, chimed eight in clearer tones that pealed out into the March morning. He felt as if he were on top of a tower himself, indescribably isolated, with the world before him and his wife behind him in the darkness of her slumbers. His innermost will strained to tear that soft wall of mist apart and to sense, somewhere, the message of awakening, the certainty of life. And as he sent his eyes out into the mist, so to speak, he thought he did see something, either a man or an animal, moving slowly down there in the grey penumbra where the village ended and the winding path climbed up the hill to this house. Small, softly veiled in mist, it was coming towards him. He felt first pleasure to see something awake besides himself, then curiosity too, an avid and unhealthy curiosity. The grey figure of a man was making its way to a crossroads, with tracks leading to the next village in one direction and up here in the other. For a moment the stranger seemed to hesitate and draw breath at the crossroads. Then, slowly, he began climbing the bridle path.

Ferdinand felt uneasy. Who is this man, he wondered, what compulsion drives him out of the warmth of his dark bedroom and into the morning as mine has driven me? Is he coming up to see me, and if so what does he want? Then, through the mist which was thinner at close quarters now, he recognized the postman. He climbed up here every morning on the stroke of eight, and Ferdinand knew and pictured the man’s rough-hewn face, his red seaman’s beard turning grey at the ends, and his blue-framed glasses. His name was Nussbaum, meaning ‘nut tree’, and to himself Ferdinand called him Nutcracker because of his stiff movements and the ceremony with which he always swung his big, black leather bag over to the right before delivering the post with an air of self-importance. Ferdinand could not help smiling as he saw him trudging up, step by step, bag at the moment slung over his left shoulder, careful to impart great dignity to his short-legged gait.

But suddenly he felt weak at the knees. His hand, which had been shielding his eyes, dropped as if suddenly numb. His uneasiness today, yesterday, all these last weeks was back. He thought he sensed that the man was coming step by step inexorably towards him, coming to him alone. Without knowing just what he was about, he opened the bedroom door, stole past his sleeping wife, and hurried downstairs to intercept the postman on his way up the fenced path. They met at the garden gate.

“Do you have… do you have…”—he had to try again three times—“do you have any post for me?”

The postman pushed up his wet glasses to look at him. “Let’s have a look.” He hauled the black bag round to his right, and his fingers—they were like large worms, damp and red with the frosty mist—rummaged among the letters. Ferdinand was shivering. In the end the postman took one letter out. It was in a large brown envelope, with the word ‘Official’ stamped in large letters on it, and his name underneath. “To be signed for,” said the postman, moistening his indelible pencil and holding out the book to Ferdinand, who signed his name with a flourish. In his agitation the signature was illegible.

Then he took the letter that the sturdy red hand was offering him. But his fingers were so awkward that it slipped out of them, and fell to the ground to lie on the wet soil and damp leaves. And as he bent to pick it up, a bitter smell of decomposition and decay rose to his nostrils.

This, he now knew for certain, was what had been lurking under the surface for weeks, destroying his peace: the thought of this letter, which he had expected and was reluctant to receive, sent to him from far away, from a pointless, formless distance. Its rigid, typewritten words were groping for him, his warm life and his freedom. He had felt it approaching from somewhere or other, like a mounted man on patrol who senses the cold steel tube invisibly aimed at him from green forest undergrowth, and the little piece of lead in it that wants to penetrate the darkness beneath his skin. So resistance had been useless, and so had the little tricks he had practised to occupy his mind for nights on end. They had caught up with him. Barely eight months ago he had been standing naked, shivering with cold and revulsion, in front of an army doctor who felt the muscles in his arms like a horse-dealer. The humiliation of it illustrated the human indignity of the times and the slavery into which Europe had declined. He bore life in the stifling atmosphere of the patriotic phase of the war for two months, but after a while he found the air too difficult to breathe, and when the people around him opened their lips to speak he thought he saw their lies lying yellow on their tongues. The sight of the women, shivering with cold, who sat on the marketplace steps with their empty potato sacks in the first light of dawn broke his heart; he went around with his fists clenched, he felt that he was turning mean-minded and spiteful, he hated himself in his powerless rage. At last, thanks to a good word that someone put in for him, he succeeded in moving to Switzerland with his wife, and when he crossed the border the blood suddenly returned to his cheeks. He was swaying so much that he had to hold on to a post for support, but he felt like a human being again at last, full of life, will, strength, and capable of action. His lungs opened to breathe the air of freedom. All his fatherland meant to him now was prison and compulsion. His home in the world was outside his country, Europe was humanity.

But that light-hearted happiness did not last long. The fear came back. He felt that somehow or other his name had hooked him from behind to haul him back into that bloodstained thicket, that something he didn’t know, although it knew him, was not about to let him go. He retreated inside himself, read no newspapers in order to avoid anything about men being called up, moved house to blur his trail, had letters sent to his wife poste restante, and avoided company so as to be asked no questions. He never went into town, he sent his wife to buy canvas and paints. He hid away in anonymity in this little village on the Lake of Zürich, where he had rented a small house from a farming family. But still he knew that in a drawer somewhere, among hundreds of thousands of other sheets of paper, there was one with his name on it. And one day, somewhere, some time, they would be bound to open that drawer—he could hear it being pulled out, he imagined the staccato hammer of his name being typed, and he knew that the letter would be sent on its travels until at last it found him.

Now here it was, crackling and cold, physically present in his fingers. Ferdinand made an effort to keep calm. What does this letter matter to me? he asked himself. Why should I take out the sheet of paper inside the envelope and read what it says overleaf? Tomorrow and the day after tomorrow the bushes will bear a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand leaves, and this is no more to me than any of them. What does that word ‘Official’ mean? Does that say I have to read it? I hold no office anywhere, and no one holds office over me. What’s my name there for—is that really me? Who can compel me to say it means me, who can force me to read what’s written on the paper? If I just tear it up unread, the scraps will flutter down to the lake, I won’t know anything about it and nor will the world; it will be gone as fast as a drop of water falling from a tree to the ground, as fast as every breath that passes my lips! Why should this piece of paper make me uneasy? I won’t know anything about it unless I want to. And I don’t want to. All I want is my freedom.

His fingers tensed, ready to tear the stout envelope into small scraps. But oddly enough, his muscles would not do it. Something or other had taken over his own hands against his own will, for they did not obey him. And as he wished with all his heart that they would tear up the envelope, they very carefully opened it and, trembling, unfolded the white sheet of paper. It said what he already knew.

‘No 34.729F. On the orders of District Headquarters at M, your honour is hereby requested hereby to present yourself in Room Number 8, District Headquarters at M, by 22nd March at the latest for a further medical examination with a view to establishing your fitness for service in the army. You will be issued with the military papers by the Consulate in Zürich, where you are to go for that purpose.’

When he went back indoors an hour later his wife came to meet him, smiling, a bunch of spring flowers loosely held in her hand. She was radiant with carefree delight. “Look,” she said, “look what I’ve found! They’re already flowering in the meadow behind the house, even though the snow still lies in the shade among the trees.” He took the flowers to please her, bent over them so as not to catch his beloved wife’s untroubled gaze, and was quick to take refuge in the little attic room that he had made into a studio.

But his work did not go well. No sooner did he face his blank canvas than the typewritten words of the letter suddenly stood there as if hammered out on it. The colours on his palette seemed to him like mud and blood. He kept thinking of pus and wounds. His self-portrait, painted in half-shade, showed him a military collar under his chin. “Madness! Madness!” he said out loud, stamping his foot to dispel these deranged images. But his hands trembled and the floor shook beneath his feet. He had to sit down, and he went on sitting there on his small stool, overwhelmed by his thoughts, until his wife called him to luncheon.

Every morsel choked him. Something bitter was stuck high up in his throat, it had to be swallowed with every mouthful, and it always came up again. Hunched there in silence, he realized that his wife was watching him. Suddenly he felt her hand softly placed on his own.

“What’s the matter, Ferdinand?” He did not reply. “Have you had bad news?”

He just nodded, and gulped.

“From the army?”

He nodded again. She said no more, and nor did he. The looming, oppressive idea of it was suddenly there in the room, pushing everything else aside. It weighed down, broad and sticky, on the food they had begun to eat. It crawled, a damp slug, over the backs of their necks and made them shudder. They dared not look at each other, but just sat there in silence with their shoulders bent, and the intolerable burden of that thought pressing down on them.

There was a faltering note in her voice when at last she asked, “Have they told you to go to the Consulate?”

“Yes.”

“And will you go?”

He was trembling. “I don’t know. But I have to.”

“Why do you have to? They can’t order you about here in Switzerland. You’re a free man here.”

“Free!” he said savagely, through gritted teeth. “Who’s still free today?”

“Anyone who wants to be. You most of all. What is this?” Contemptuously, she snatched away the sheet of paper that he had placed in front of him. “What power does this scrap of paper have over you, scribbled by some wretched clerk in an office—what power does it have over you? You’re a free, living man! What can it do to you?”

“In itself it can’t do anything, but the people who sent it can.”

“So who sent it? What human being does it come from? It’s from no one but a machine, a vast, murderous machine. But it can’t touch you.”

“It’s touched millions, so why not me?”

“Because you don’t want to go?”

“Nor did all the others.”

“But they weren’t free. They were caught between the guns, that’s why they went. Not of their own free will, not one of them. No one would willingly have left Switzerland to go back to that hell.”

But when she saw how he was tormenting himself, she checked her wildness. Pity welled up in her, as if for a child. “Ferdinand,” she said, leaning against him, “try to think perfectly clearly now. You’re afraid, and I understand how distressing it is to have this evil beast suddenly pouncing on you. But remember, we were expecting this letter. We’ve discussed what to do in this event hundreds of times, and I was proud of you because I knew you’d just tear it to pieces, you wouldn’t give yourself up to go and murder people. Don’t you remember?”

“I know, Paula, I know, but…”

“Don’t say any more now,” she urged him. “Somehow or other, this thing has got its teeth into you. But think of our conversations, of the statement you drew up—it’s there in the left-hand drawer of the desk—saying that you would never carry arms. You had firmly decided…”

He reacted to that. “No, I hadn’t firmly decided! I was never sure! All that was lies. I was hiding from my own fear. I intoxicated myself with those words. But it was all true only as long as I was free, and I always knew that if I was summoned I’d be weak. Do you think I trembled before them? They’re nothing as long as their ideas aren’t really in my heart, otherwise they’re just air, words, nothing. But I trembled before myself, because I always knew that as soon as they called me up I’d go.”

“Ferdinand, do you want to go?”

“No, no, no,” he cried, stamping his foot, “I don’t want to, I don’t, nothing in me wants to. But I shall go, against my own will. That’s the terrible part of these people’s power, you serve them against your will, against your own convictions. If you still had a will of your own—but the moment you have a letter like that in your hands, your free will is gone. You obey. You’re a schoolboy, the teacher’s calling to you, you stand up and tremble.”

“But Ferdinand, who’s calling you? The Fatherland? Some clerk in an office! Some bored bureaucrat! And what’s more, even the state has no right to force a man to commit murder, no right…”

“I know, I know. Why not quote Tolstoy too? I know all the arguments: don’t you understand, I myself don’t believe they have any right to call me up, I don’t believe it’s my duty to obey them. I acknowledge only one kind of duty: to act as a human being and to work. I have no Fatherland beyond mankind in general, no ambition to kill other people, I know all that, Paula, I see it as clearly as you do—except that they’ve caught me already, they’re summoning me and I know, in spite of everything, I shall go.”

“But why? Why? I ask you, why?”

He groaned. “I don’t know why. Perhaps because madness is stronger than reason in the world these days. Perhaps it’s just because I’m no hero and I daren’t run away… there’s no explaining it. It’s a kind of compulsion; I can’t break the chain that is throttling twenty million people. I can’t do it.”

He hid his face in his hands. The clock above them ticked on and on, a guard on duty outside the sentry-box of time. She was trembling slightly. “It’s calling to you, yes, I can understand that, although… well, I don’t really understand it. But can’t you hear anything here calling to you as well? Is there nothing to keep you here?”

He flared up. “My pictures? My work? No! I can’t paint any more. I realized that today. I’m already living over there, not here any more. It’s a crime to work for your own pleasure now while the world falls into ruin. You can’t feel and live for yourself alone!”

She stood up and turned away. “I never thought you lived for yourself alone. I thought… I thought I was part of your world too.” She couldn’t go on; her tears were forcing their way out along with her words. He tried to soothe her. But there was anger behind her tears, and he shrank from that. “Go, then,” she said, “you’d better go! What do I mean to you? Less than a scrap of paper. So go if you want to.”

“I don’t want to!” He struck the table with his fists in helpless rage. “I don’t want to. But they want me to. They are strong and I’m weak. They’ve forged their iron will over thousands of years, they’re well-organized and subtle, they’ve made preparations and now it breaks over us like a thunderstorm. Their will is strong and my nerves are weak. It’s an unequal battle. You can’t fight back against a machine. You could resist men, yes, but this is a machine, a slaughtering machine, a soulless tool without a heart or mind. There’s nothing you can do to oppose it.”

“Yes, you can if you must.” She was shouting like a madwoman now. “I can do it if you can’t. If you’re weak I’m not, I don’t knuckle under to a piece of paper, I don’t give up any living creature for a word. You won’t go as long as I have any power over you. You’re sick, I can swear it. You’re highly strung. If a plate so much as clinks you jump nervously. Any doctor must see that. Get yourself examined here, I’ll go with you, I’ll tell the doctor everything. He’s sure to say you’re unfit. You just have to defend yourself, take the bit between your teeth—the bit of your own will. Remember your friend Jeannot in Paris, who had himself put under observation in the psychiatric hospital for three months—and how they tormented him with their investigations, but he held out until they discharged him. You just have to show that you’re not going along with them. You can’t give up. This means everything; don’t forget, they want your life, your liberty, everything. You have to fight back.”

“Fight back! How can I fight back? They’re stronger than anyone, they’re stronger than anything in the whole world.”

“That’s not true! They’re only strong as long as the world allows it. The individual is always stronger than any idea, he just has to be true to himself and his own will. He just has to know that he’s a human being and wants to stay human, and then those words they use to anaesthetize people these days—the Fatherland, duty, heroism—then they’re simply phrases stinking of blood, warm, living human blood. Be honest, is your Fatherland as important to you as your life? Is a province that will switch overnight from one Serene Highness to another as dear to you as the hand you paint with? Do you believe in some kind of justice beyond the invisible knowledge of what’s just and right that we build into ourselves with our thoughts, our blood? No, I know you don’t, no! You’re lying to yourself if you say you want to go…”

“I don’t want to.”

“But you don’t feel that strongly enough! You don’t want to stay any more. You’re letting yourself want to do this thing, that’s your crime. You’re giving yourself up to something you hate and staking your life on it. Why not on something you really believe in? Shedding blood for your own ideas is one thing, but why do it for someone else’s? Ferdinand, don’t forget, if you really want strongly enough to stay free, what are those people over the border but wicked fools? If you don’t want it enough, and they get hold of you, then you’re the fool. You always said…”

“Yes, I said, I said it all, I talked and talked just to give myself courage. I was boasting, the way children sing in a dark wood because they’re afraid of their own fears. It was all a lie, that’s cruelly clear to me now. Because I always knew that if they sent for me I’d go…”

“You’re really going? Oh, Ferdinand, Ferdinand!”

“Not me! Not me! It’s something else in me that’s going—has gone already. Something or other stands up in me like the schoolboy obediently standing up for the teacher, I told you so. It trembles and obeys! Yet at the same time I hear all you say, and I know it’s right and true and human and necessary—it’s the one thing I ought to do, I must do—I know that, I know it, that’s why it’s so despicable of me to go. But I am going, something compels me. Despise me! I despise myself. But there’s nothing else I can do, nothing!”

He hammered on the table with both fists. There was a dull, animal, captive expression in his eyes. She couldn’t bear to look at him. In her love, she was afraid that she might indeed despise him. The table was still laid, the meat standing on it was cold now and looked like carrion, the bread was black and crumbling; it might have been slag. The heavy smell of food filled the room. Nausea rose to her throat in her disgust at all this. She pushed the window open to let in some fresh air. Her shoulders were shaking slightly, and above them rose the blue March sky, with its white clouds caressing her hair.

“Look,” she said more quietly, “look out there! Just once, I beg you. Perhaps all I’m saying isn’t entirely true. Words always miss the mark. But what I can see is true all the same. That doesn’t lie. There’s a farmer down there following the plough. He’s young and strong. Why doesn’t he go off to be murdered? Because his country isn’t at war, because his fields lie a little way beyond the border, so the law doesn’t apply to him. And now that you’re in this country it doesn’t apply to you either. Can an invisible law that’s in force only as far as a few milestones and then not beyond them be true? Don’t you feel how senseless it is when you look at the peace here? Look, Ferdinand, look, see how clear the sky is above the lake, see how the colours wait for us to enjoy them, come here to the window and then tell me just once more that you want to go…”

“I don’t want to go! I don’t want to! You know I don’t! Why should I look out at this scene? I know all about it, everything, everything! You’re just tormenting me! Every word you say hurts. And nothing, nothing, nothing can help me!”

She felt weak in the face of his pain. Pity broke her strength. She quietly turned around.

“So when… oh, Ferdinand… when do you have to go to the Consulate?”

“Tomorrow. Well, it ought to have been yesterday, but the letter didn’t reach me in time. They didn’t track me down until today. So I’ll have to go tomorrow.”

“But suppose you don’t go tomorrow? Keep them waiting. They can’t do anything to you here. And there’s no hurry. Let them wait a week. I’ll write and tell them you were ill, you were in bed. My brother did that and gained two weeks’ grace. At the worst they won’t believe you and they’ll send the doctor from the Consulate up here. Perhaps we could talk to him. People are still human beings if they don’t wear a uniform. Maybe he’ll look at your pictures and see that someone like you is right out of place at the front. And even if that doesn’t work we’ll have gained a week.”

He said nothing, and she felt that his silence was opposing her.

“Ferdinand, promise me not to go tomorrow! Let them wait. You need to be well prepared in your mind. At the moment you’re upset, and they’re doing what they like with you. They’d be stronger than you tomorrow, but in a week’s time you’ll be stronger than them. Think of the happy days we’ll enjoy then. Oh, Ferdinand, Ferdinand, are you listening to me?”

She shook him. He looked at her, empty-eyed. That apathetic, lost gaze showed no response to her words, only horror and fear from a depth that she could not plumb. He pulled himself together only slowly.

“You’re right,” he said at last. “You’re right, there’s no hurry. What can they do to me? Has the letter necessarily reached me? Couldn’t I have gone away for a little while? Or I could have been ill. No—I signed a receipt for the postman. But that makes no difference. We have to think things over. You’re right, you’re right.”

He had risen to his feet and began pacing up and down the room. “You’re right, you’re right,” he mechanically repeated, but there was no conviction in his voice. “You’re right, you’re right”—it sounded abstracted, he was repeating the words vacantly. She felt that his thoughts were somewhere else, far away, still with the people over the border, still heading for disaster. She couldn’t bear to hear his constant “You’re right, you’re right” any more. Quietly, she went out of the room, and then heard him walking up and down it for hours on end, like a prisoner in his dungeon.

He did not touch dinner that evening either. There was something far away and frozen in him. It was only that night that she felt her living husband’s fear as he lay beside her, clasping her soft, warm body as if taking refuge in it, embracing her passionately, convulsively. But this, she knew, was not love but escape. It was a spasmodic reaction, and under his kisses she sensed bitter, salty tears. Then he lay in silence again. Sometimes she heard him groan. Then she held her hand out to him, and he took it as if he could cling to it. They did not talk. Only once, when she heard him sob, did she try to comfort him. “You still have a week. Don’t think about it.” But then she was ashamed of herself for advising him to think of something else, for she felt from the chill of his hand, the pulsing of his heart, that this one idea possessed and commanded him. And there was no miracle to release him from it.

Never before had silence and the dark weighed so heavily in this house. The horror of the whole world stood there within its walls, cold and chilly. Only the clock, undeterred, ticked on, an iron sentry marching up, marching down, and she knew that with every marching step of that clock the living man at her side, the man she loved, was moving further away from her. She couldn’t bear it any more; she jumped out of bed and stopped the pendulum. Now there was no time any more, only terror and silence. And they both lay mute and wakeful, side by side, until the new day dawned, with the idea of what was to come marching up and down in their hearts.

It was still wintry twilight. Hoarfrost was hovering over the lake in heavy drifts of mist when he got up, quickly threw on his clothes, hurried hesitantly and uncertainly from room to room and back again, until he suddenly took his hat and coat and quietly opened the front door. Later, he often remembered how his hand had trembled when it touched the bolt, which was cold with frost, and he turned furtively to see if anyone was watching him. Sure enough, the dog rushed at him as if he were a thief stealing in, but on recognizing him got down, responded affectionately to his patting, and then raced around wagging his tail, eager to go for a walk with him. However, he shooed the dog away with his hand—he dared not speak. Then, not sure himself why he was in such haste, he suddenly hurried down the bridle path. Sometimes he stopped and looked back at his house as it slowly disappeared from sight in the mist, but then the urge to go on came over him once more and he ran downhill to the station, stumbling over stones as if someone were after him. Only when he arrived did he stop, warm vapour rising from his moist clothes, sweat on his forehead.

A few farmers and other folk who knew him were standing there. They wished him good morning, and one or two seemed inclined to strike up a conversation with him, but he turned away from them. He felt a bashful fear of having to talk to other people at this moment, and yet waiting idly beside the wet rails was painful. Without attending to what he was doing he stood on the scales, put a coin in the slot, stared into his pale, sweating face in the little mirror above the dial that showed his weight, and only when he got off and his coin clinked down inside the machine did he notice that he had failed to register what the pointers said. “I’m going out of my mind, right out of my mind,” he murmured quietly, and felt a chill of horror at himself. He sat down on a bench and tried to force himself to think everything over clearly. But then the signal bell rang, very close to him, a harsh, jangling sound, and he jumped, startled. The locomotive was already whistling in the distance. The train raced in, and he sat down in a compartment. A dirty newspaper lay on the floor. He picked the newspaper up and stared at it without taking in what he was reading, seeing only his own hands holding it and shaking more and more all the time.

The train stopped. Zürich. He staggered out. He knew where he was going, and sensed his own reluctance to go there, but it was growing weaker all the time. Now and then he set himself small trials of strength. He stopped in front of a poster and, to prove that he was in command of himself, forced himself to read it from top to bottom. “There’s no hurry,” he told himself in an undertone, but even as his lips murmured the words he was overcome by haste again. His frantic, thrusting impatience was like an engine driving him on. Helplessly, he looked around for a cab. His legs were trembling. A taxi drove by and he hailed it, flinging himself into it like a suicide plunging into the river. He gave a name; the street where the Consulate stood.

The car engine hummed. He leaned back with his eyes closed. He felt as if he were racing into an abyss, and even took some slight pleasure in the speed of the cab carrying him to his doom. It felt good to observe himself passively. But the car was already stopping. He got out, paid the driver, and entered the lift of the building where the Consulate had its offices. In an odd way he again felt a sense of pleasure at being mechanically raised up and carried onwards. As if it were not himself doing all this, but the unknown, unimaginable power of his compulsion forcing him to go on his way.

The door of the Consulate was locked. He rang the bell. No answer. A thought flashed urgently through his mind: go back, get away from here quickly, go down the stairs and out! But he rang the bell again. Steps came slowly dragging along inside. A servant in his shirt-sleeves, duster in hand, made a great business of opening the door. Obviously he was tidying the offices. “Yes, what do you want?” he growled.

“I—I was told to come to the Consulate,’ he managed to say, retreating, and ashamed of stammering in front of this servant.

The man turned, sounding peevish and annoyed. “Can’t you read what it says on the plate? Office hours ten to twelve. There’s nobody here yet.” And without waiting for any answer he closed the door.

Ferdinand stood there, flinching, as a sense of boundless shame struck him to the heart. He looked at his watch. It was ten-past seven. “This is mad! I’m out of my mind!” he stammered, and went down the steps trembling like an old man.

Two-and-a-half hours—this dead, empty time was terrible to him, for he felt that with every minute of waiting some of his strength slipped away. Just now he had been braced and prepared, he had worked out what he would say in advance, every word was ready, the whole scene was constructed in his mind, and now this iron curtain of two hours had fallen between him and the strength he had screwed to the sticking-point. Afraid, he sensed all the warmth in him dissipating, obliterating word after word from his memory as they tumbled over one another and nervously took to flight.

He had worked it out like this: he would go to the Consulate and have himself announced there at once to the military attaché, whom he knew slightly. They had once met and made casual conversation at the house of mutual friends. So he would at least know the man he faced: an aristocrat, elegant, worldly, proud of his joviality, a man who liked to appear generous-minded and did not want to be thought a mere bureaucrat. They all had that ambition, they wanted to figure as diplomats, men of importance, and he planned to work on that: he would have himself announced, speak of general things at first in a civil, sociable tone, ask after the health of the attaché’s wife. The attaché would be sure to ask him to sit down, offer him a cigarette, and finally, as silence fell, would say politely, “Well, how can I help you?” The other man must ask him first, that was very important, that was not to be forgotten. In answer he would say, very cool and casual, “I’ve had a letter asking me to go to M for a medical examination. There must be some mistake; I’ve already been expressly declared unfit for military service.” He must say that very calmly, it must be immediately obvious that he regarded the whole thing as a mere trifle.

At this point the attaché—he remembered the man’s casual manner—would take the piece of paper and explain that this was to be a new examination; surely, he would say, he must have seen in the newspapers, some time ago, that even those previously exempted must now report again.

To this, still very coolly, he would say, “Ah, I see! The fact is I don’t read the papers, I just don’t have time for it. I have work to do.” He wanted the other man to see at once how indifferent he was to the whole war, how much he felt himself a free agent.

Of course the attaché would then explain that Ferdinand must comply with this call-up order, he himself was sorry, but the military authorities… and so on and so forth. That would be his moment to speak more forcefully. “Yes, I understand that,” he must say, “but the fact is, it’s quite impossible for me to interrupt my work just now. I’ve agreed to have an exhibition of my paintings held, and I can’t let the curator down. I’ve given my word.” And then he would suggest to the attaché that he should either be given a longer deadline, or have himself re-examined here by the Consulate doctor.

So far he was sure he knew how it would go. Only after this point were there a number of possibilities. The attaché might agree at once, and then at least he would have gained time. But if the attaché said politely—with cold, evasive civility, suddenly sounding official—that such decisions were inadmissible and outside his jurisdiction, then he had to be resolute. First he must stand up, go over to the desk and say firmly, very, very firmly, his manner conveying an inner sense of inflexible determination, “I understand that, but I would like to put it on record that my economic obligations prevent me from complying with this call-up immediately. I will take it upon myself to postpone matters for three weeks, until I have satisfied my moral liabilities. Naturally I have no intention of failing in my duty to the Fatherland.” He was particularly proud of these remarks, which he had planned with care. “I would like to put it on record”, “economic obligations”—it all sounded so objective and official. If the attaché then pointed out that there might be legal consequences, that would be the time to make his tone a little sharper and reply coldly, “I know the law, I am well aware of the consequences. But once I have given my word, I regard keeping it the highest law of all, and I must accept any difficulty in order to do so.” Then he must be quick to bow, thus cutting the conversation short, and go to the door. He’d show them that he was no workman or apprentice to wait for dismissal, but a man who decided for himself when a conversation was over.

He acted out this scene in his mind three times, pacing up and down. He liked the whole structure, the entire tone of it, he was waiting impatiently for the moment to come like an actor waiting for his cue. There was just one passage that still didn’t seem quite right to him. “I have no intention of failing in my duty to the Fatherland.” There absolutely had to be some kind of sop to patriotic values in the conversation, it was necessary to show that he was not being purposely obstructive, but he wasn’t ready to go either. He would acknowledge the necessity of showing patriotism, for their ears only, of course, not for himself. However, that “duty to the Fatherland”—the phrase was too literary, it came too pat. He thought it over again. Perhaps: “I know that the Fatherland needs me.” No, that was even more ridiculous. Or better: “I have no intention of shirking my responsibility to answer the call of the Fatherland.” Yes, that was an improvement. But he still didn’t like this part of the scene; it was too servile. He was bowing just a little too low. He thought yet again. He had better keep it perfectly simple. “I know my duty”—yes, that was it, you could turn the phrase this way and that, understand or misunderstand it. And it sounded clear and brief. You could say it in a masterful tone—“I know my duty”—almost like a threat. Now it was all perfect. Yet he glanced nervously at his watch again. Time refused to go forward. It was only eight o’clock.

People jostled him in the street, he didn’t know which way to turn. He went into a café and tried to read the papers. But he felt the words disturbing him; they were all about duty and the Fatherland here too, and the phrases left him confused. He drank a cognac and then another, to get rid of the bitter taste in his throat. Frantically, he wondered how he could get the better of time, and kept reassembling the pieces of his imaginary conversation in his head. Suddenly he put a hand to his cheek—“Unshaved! I haven’t shaved!” He hurried to a barber’s, where he also had his hair cut and washed. That disposed of half-an-hour of waiting. And then, it occurred to him, he ought to look elegant. That was important in such offices. They took an arrogant tone only with the riffraff, they’d snap at people like that, but if you appeared looking elegant, a man of the world, at ease, they’d soon change their tune. The idea went to his head. He had his coat brushed and went to buy a pair of gloves, taking a long time over his choice. Yellow gloves somehow seemed too striking, something a gigolo might wear; a discreet pearl-grey pair would be better. Then he went up and down the street again, looked at himself in a tailor’s mirror, adjusted his tie. His hand felt too empty—a walking-stick, it occurred to him, a walking-stick would impart a sense of occasion, a touch of worldliness to his visit. He quickly went into the shop and bought one. When he came out again the clock in the tower was striking quarter-to-ten. He recited his lines to himself once more. The new version, with the words, “I know my duty,” was now the strongest part of it. Very sure of himself, very firmly he strode out and ran up the stairs to the Consulate, as light on his feet as a boy.

A minute later, as soon as the servant opened the door, a sudden presentiment that his calculations might be all wrong descended on him. And indeed, nothing went as he had expected. When he asked to see the attaché he was told that His Honour the Secretary was with a visitor, and he must wait. A not particularly civil gesture showed him to a chair in the middle of a row where three men of downcast appearance were already sitting. Reluctantly, he sat down, feeling with annoyance that his was just an ordinary affair here, he was a case, something to be dealt with. The men beside him were exchanging their own little stories; one of them was saying, in plaintive and depressed tones, that he had been interned in France for two years and now the people here wouldn’t give him the money for his fare home; another complained that no one would help him to find a job, even though he had three children. Privately, Ferdinand was quivering with fury; they had left him on a bench with common petitioners, yet he noticed that somehow he was also irritated by the petty, fault-finding tone of these ordinary people. He wanted to rehearse his conversation once more, but their fatuous remarks put him off his stroke. He felt like shouting at them, “Be quiet, you fools!” or bringing money out of his pocket and sending them home, but his will was crippled and he just sat there with them, hat in hand like his companions. The constant coming and going of people opening and closing doors also confused him; all the time he was afraid that someone he knew might see him here with the petitioners, and yet whenever a door opened he was ready to leap up, only to sit back again disappointed. Once he pulled himself together and told the servant, who was standing beside them like a sentry on duty, “I can always come back tomorrow, you know.” But the man reassured him—“His Honour the Secretary will be able to see you soon”—and his knees gave way again. He was trapped here; there was nothing he could do about it.

At last a lady came out, skirts rustling, smiling and preening, passed the waiting petitioners with an air of superiority, and the servant called, “His Honour the Secretary can see you now.”

Ferdinand stood up. Only when it was too late did he realize that he had left his walking-stick and gloves on the window-sill, but he couldn’t go back for them now, the door was already open. Half looking back, confused by these random thoughts, he went in. The attaché sat at his desk reading. Now he looked up, nodded to Ferdinand, and gave him a courteous but cold smile, without asking him to sit down. “Ah, our magister artium. Just a minute.” He rose and called to someone in the next room. “The Ferdinand R file, please, you remember, the one that came the day before yesterday, his call-up papers were sent on here.” Sitting down again, he said, “So you’re another one who’s leaving us again! Well, I hope you’ve enjoyed your stay here in Switzerland. You’re looking very well,” and then he was leafing through the file that a clerk brought him. “Report to M… yes… yes, that’s right… all in order. I’ve had the papers made out… I don’t suppose you want to claim travel expenses, do you?”

Ferdinand stood up and heard his own voice stammering, “No… no.”

The attaché signed the call-up order and handed it to him. “You’re really supposed to leave tomorrow, but I don’t suppose it’s all that urgent. Let the paint dry on your latest masterpiece. If you need another day or so to put your affairs in order, I’ll take the responsibility for that. A couple of days won’t matter to the Fatherland.”

Ferdinand sensed that this was a joke, and he ought to smile. To his private horror, he actually did feel his lips stretching in a polite grimace. Say something, he told himself, I must say something now, not just stand around like a dolt. And at last he managed to get out, “Is the call-up letter enough… I don’t need anything else… some kind of special pass?”

“No, no,” smiled the attaché. “They won’t make any trouble for you at the border. They’ll be expecting you anyway. Well, bon voyage.” And he offered his hand.

Ferdinand felt that he had been dismissed. Everything went dark before his eyes as he quickly made his way to the door. Nausea rose in his throat.

“The door on the right, please, the one on the right,” said the voice behind him. He had tried the wrong door, and now—with a slight smile, as he thought he saw in the dim light of his bewildered senses—the attaché was holding the correct door open for him.

“Thank you, thank you, please don’t trouble yourself,” he stammered, furious with himself for this unnecessary civility. And no sooner was he out of the room, with the servant handing him his stick and gloves, than he remembered all he had planned to say. “Economic obligations… put it on the record.” He felt more ashamed than ever before in his life, and he had even thanked the man, thanked him politely! But his emotional capacity would no longer suffice even for rage. Pale-faced, he went down the stairs, feeling only that this man walking along couldn’t be himself, and that he had been defeated by force, a strange and pitiless force treading a whole world underfoot.

It was not until late in the afternoon that he arrived home. The soles of his feet were sore; he had been walking aimlessly around for hours, and had turned back from his own door three times. Finally he tried stealing up to it from the back, along hidden paths through the vineyards. However, the faithful dog had detected him. Barking wildly, he jumped up at him, tail wagging passionately. His wife stood at the door, and he saw at first glance that she knew everything. He followed her without a word, shame weighing heavily on the back of his neck.

But she was not harsh. She did not look at him, she was visibly avoiding anything that would upset him. She placed some cold meat on the table, and when he obediently sat down she went to his side. “Ferdinand,” she said, and her voice was shaking badly, “you’re not well. This is not the time for me to talk to you. I won’t blame you, you’re not acting of your own free will, and I feel how much you’re suffering. But promise me one thing: don’t do anything else in this business without discussing it first with me.”

He said nothing. Her voice became more agitated.

“I’ve never interfered in your personal affairs, I always aimed to leave you the freedom to make your own decisions absolutely. But now you’re playing not just with your life, you’re playing with mine too. It took us years to find our happiness, and I’m not giving it up as easily as you. Not to the state, not to murder, not to your vanity and weakness. Not to anyone, do you hear? Not to anyone! If you are weak when you face them, I’m not. I know what this is all about, and I’m not giving up.”

He still remained silent, and his servile, guilty silence began to make her bitter. “I’m not letting this scrap of paper take something away from me, I don’t acknowledge any law that ends in murder. I’m not bowing to any bureaucracy. You men are all ruined by ideologies now, you think in terms of politics and ethics, we women still have straightforward feelings. I know what the word Fatherland means too, but I know what our Fatherland means today: murder and enslavement. You can feel a sense of belonging to your own nation, but that doesn’t mean that when the nations have run mad you have to join them. You may be just a number to them, a tool, cannon-fodder, but to me you’re still a living man and I won’t let them have you. I’m not giving you up. I’ve never ventured to decide anything for you, but now it’s my duty to protect you. You’ve always been a clear-minded, responsible human being who knew what he wanted; now you’re a broken, disturbed, dutiful mechanism without any will of your own—it’s dead, like those millions of victims out there. They’ve worked on you through your nerves, but they forgot me. I was never stronger than I am now.”

He still remained silent, lost in gloomy thought. There was no ability in him to resist either his adversary or her.

She stood up very straight, like someone arming for battle. Her voice was hard, tense, braced.

“What did they say to you at the Consulate? I want to know.” It was an order. Wearily, he took out the paper and handed it to her. She read it, frowning. Then she tossed it scornfully on to the table.

“What a hurry those good gentlemen are in! Tomorrow! And I expect you even thanked them, clicked your heels, obedient already. ‘Ordered to make yourself available at once.’ Available! They should have said make yourself a slave. We haven’t fallen so low yet, that point hasn’t come, not by a long way!”

Ferdinand stood up. He was pale, and his hand clutched the chair convulsively. “Paula, let’s not deceive ourselves. That point has come. We can’t escape it. I tried to defend myself, and it was no use. I’m—I am this piece of paper. Even if I tear it up, I still am. Don’t make it difficult for me. There’d be no freedom here. Every hour I’d feel something out there calling, groping for me, pulling and tugging at me. It will be easier for me there. There’s freedom to be found in the dungeon itself. It’s only while I still feel I’m a fugitive, evading them, that I’m not free. And anyway, why jump to the worst conclusions? They rejected me once, why not this time too? Or perhaps they won’t give me a weapon, in fact I feel sure they won’t, I’ll be employed on some lighter kind of service. Why think the worst now? It may not be so dangerous, perhaps I’ll be lucky.”

She did not relent. “That’s not the point any more, Ferdinand. It makes no difference whether they give you light or heavy work to do. It’s a case of whether you have to go into service under what you hate, whether you’re willing to lend yourself to the greatest crime in the world against your own convictions. Because everyone who isn’t against them is with them. And you can reject them, you can do it, so you must.”

“I can do it? I can’t do anything! Not any more. Everything that once made me strong—my abhorrence of this absurdity, my hatred for it, my indignation—all that is such a burden on me now. Don’t torment me, please, don’t torment me, don’t tell me that.”

“I’m not. You have to tell yourself: they have no rights over a living man.”

“Rights! Rights! Where are there any rights in the world? We’ve murdered rights. Every individual person has his rights, but they have power, and nothing else matters any more.”

“And why do they have power? Because the rest of you hand it to them. And they’ll have it only while you’re still cowards. What humanity now calls monstrous consists of ten men with strong wills in the countries concerned, and ten men can destroy the monstrosity again. A man, a single living man can destroy their power by saying no to them. But while you and those like you cower, thinking perhaps you’ll muddle through, while you dodge and duck and hope to slip through their fingers instead of striking them to the heart, you’ll be their servants and you’ll deserve no better. A man ought not to crawl away, he ought to say no, that’s the only duty there is today, there’s no duty to go and get yourself killed.”

“But Paula… what do you think… what should I…”

“You should say no if something says no inside you. You know I love life, I love your freedom, I love your work. And if you tell me today: I have to go there, I have to lay down the law with a gun, and if I know you truly believe you must, then I’ll say: Go! But if you go for the sake of a lie that you don’t believe yourself, out of weakness and lack of nerve and just hoping you can muddle through, then I despise you, yes, I despise you! If you want to go as a man standing for humanity, for what you believe in, then I won’t try to stop you. But if you go to be a beast among beasts, a slave among slaves, I shall stand up to you. It’s all right for people to sacrifice themselves for their own ideas, not for the madness of others. Let those who believe in the Fatherland die for it.”

“Paula!” Instinctively, he rose to his feet.

“Oh, am I speaking too freely for you? Do you feel the corporal’s stick behind you already? Never fear! We’re still in Switzerland. You’d like me to keep quiet, or tell you you’ll be all right, nothing will happen to you. But this is no time for sentimentality. Everything is at stake now. You and I are at stake.”

“Paula!” he said, trying to interrupt again.

“No, I have no more sympathy with you. I chose you and lived with you as a free human being. And I despise weaklings and those who lie to themselves. Why should I sympathize with you? What do I mean to you? A sergeant hands you a few words on a piece of paper, and you cast me aside and run after him. But I’m not to be cast aside and then picked up again: you must decide now. Decide between them and me! Despise them or despise me. I know there are hard times ahead for us if you stay; I’ll never see my parents and family again, we shall never be allowed to go back, but I can face that if you are with me. If you tear us apart now, though, then it’s for ever.”

He merely groaned, but she was blazing with angry strength.

“Choose them or me! There’s no third choice. Ferdinand, think better of it while there’s still time. I’ve often felt sorry we have no child. Now, for the first time, I’m glad of it. I don’t want a weakling’s child, and I don’t want to bring up a war orphan. I’ve never stood by you more than I do now that I’m making it hard for you. But I tell you: this is not a trial separation, this is goodbye for ever. If you leave me to join the army and follow those uniformed murderers, there’s no coming back. I don’t share my life with criminals, I don’t share a man with that vampire the state. It or me—you must choose now.”

He still stood there shivering as she went to the door and slammed it behind her. The loud slam brought him to his knees. He had to sit down, and collapsed there, sombre, at a loss. And at last he broke down and cried like a small child.

She did not come back into the room all afternoon, but he felt that her strong will stood outside it, hostile and armed. And at the same time he knew about that other will, with a steel driving-wheel set cold under its breast, forcing him on. Sometimes he tried to think about this or that, but his thoughts slipped away, and as he sat there still, apparently thoughtful, the last of his peace flowed away into a state of burning nervous agitation. He felt the two ends of his life taken and tugged both ways by superhuman powers, and wished only that it would split like a rope in the middle.

To occupy himself he went through the desk drawers, tore up some letters, stared at others without taking in a word, stumbled round the room, sat down again, forced up by restlessness and down again by exhaustion. And suddenly he saw his hands putting together necessities for the journey, bringing out his rucksack from under the sofa. He stared at his own hands doing all this deliberately and against his own will. When the rucksack was packed he began to tremble, and suddenly there it was on the table. His shoulders felt weighed down, as if it were already resting on them, and with it the whole weight of these times.

The door opened, and his wife came in with a paraffin lamp. When she placed it on the table, the circle of light it cast fell on the packed rucksack. His secret ignominy, thus brightly lit, emerged starkly from the darkness. He stammered, “It’s only in case… I still have time… I…” But a glance, fixed, stony, mask-like, met his words and crushed them. She stared at him for several minutes, her lips tightly pressed over her teeth. She stood motionless at first, then swayed slightly as if she might faint, while her eyes bored into him. The tension of her lips relaxed, but she turned, a shudder ran over her shoulders, and she left him without looking back.

A few minutes later the maid came in, bringing supper for him alone. The usual place at his side was empty, and when, full of incoherent emotion, he looked at it, he saw the cruel symbol of the rucksack placed there. He felt as if he had left already, was already dead to this house; its walls were dark, the circle of light from the lamp did not reach all the way to them, and outside, beyond the lights in other houses, night and the föhn wind pressed down. All was still in the distance, and the height of the sky, its vast expanse spanning the depths below, only increased his sense of isolation. He felt everything around him gradually dying, dropping away from him: the house, the landscape, his work, his wife, as the broad sea of his life suddenly dried up, compressing his beating heart. A great need for love overcame him, for warm and kindly words. He felt ready to agree to anything, if he could only somehow get back to the past. Melancholy prevailed over his nervous restlessness, and the strong emotions of his imminent farewell were lost in childish longing for a little tenderness.

He went to the bedroom door and softly tried the handle. It did not move; it was locked. He knocked, hesitantly. No answer. He knocked again. His heart beat in time with his knocking. Still silence. Now he knew it was all over and he had lost; the chilly knowledge came home to him. He put out the lamp, lay down on the sofa in his clothes and wrapped himself in a rug. Everything in him now longed to fall into sleep and oblivion. Once more he listened, and thought he had heard something close. He strained his ears, looking at the door, but it was solid wood. Nothing. His head fell back again.

Then something low down touched him. He started up in alarm, but it soon changed to emotion. The dog, who had slipped in with the maid and hidden under the sofa, came up to him and licked his hand with a warm tongue. And the animal’s instinctive love touched him deeply because it came from the world now dead to him, and was all of his past life that still was his. He bent down and hugged the dog like a human being. Something on this earth still loves me and does not despise me, he felt, to him I am not a machine yet, not just a tool of murder, not a willing weakling, only a creature linked to him by love. Again and again, his hand tenderly stroked the soft coat. The dog moved closer to him, as if he knew his master was lonely, and both of them, breathing softly, began to fall asleep.

When he woke up he felt fresher, and the morning was bright and clear outside the shining window. The föhn wind had blown away the darkness, and the white silhouette of the distant mountain chain gleamed above the lake. Ferdinand got up, still a little unsteady from the hours he had slept away, and when he was fully awake his eyes fell on the fastened rucksack. Suddenly he remembered it all, but now, in bright daylight, it did not weigh so heavily on his mind.

Why did I pack it? he asked himself. Why? I have no intention of going away. The spring is just beginning. I want to paint. There’s no great hurry. He told me himself I could take a couple of days. Even animals don’t run to the slaughter. My wife is right: it’s a crime against her, against myself, against everyone. Nothing can happen to me, after all. A few weeks under arrest, maybe, if I report for duty late, but isn’t military service a prison in itself? I have no ambition to cut a fine figure in society, in fact I’d feel it an honour to have disobeyed at this time of slavery. I’ve no idea of setting out now. I’ll stay here. I want to paint the landscape first, so that some day I’ll remember where I was happy. And I won’t go until the picture is in its frame. They can’t herd me like a cow. I’m in no hurry.

He took the rucksack, swung it up in the air and tossed it into a corner. He enjoyed trying his own strength as he did so. And his new mood made him feel a need for a quick test of his will power. He took the call-up order from his wallet to tear it into pieces, and unfolded it.

But strangely, the military jargon cast its spell over him again. He began to read. “You are under orders to…”. The words struck him to the heart. This was an order that would not be denied. Somehow he felt himself wavering; that unknown sensation was back. His hands began to shake. His strength faded. Cold came from somewhere, like a draught of wind blowing around him, uneasiness returned, inside him the steel clockwork of the alien will began to stir, tensing all his nerves and making its way to his joints. Instinctively he looked at his watch. “Plenty of time,” he murmured, but he no longer knew what he himself meant: time to catch the morning train to the border, or did he mean the extended deadline he had granted himself? And now it came back, that mysterious internal compulsion, the ebb tide carrying him away, stronger than ever because it faced both his last resistance and his fear, his surely hopeless fear of succumbing. He knew that if no one held fast to him now he would be lost.

He made his way to the door of his wife’s room and listened intently. Nothing moved. Hesitantly, he knocked with his knuckles. Silence. He knocked again. Still silence. He cautiously tried the handle. The door was not locked, and opened, but the room was empty, the bed empty too and unmade. He felt alarmed. Softly, he called her name, and when there was no reply repeated, more uneasily, “Paula!” Then, like a man under attack, he shouted at the top of his voice, “Paula! Paula! Paula!” Nothing moved. He tried the kitchen, which was empty. The terrible sense of abandonment asserted its rights over him, and he trembled. He groped his way up to the studio, not knowing what he wanted to do: say goodbye or be prevented from leaving. But here again there was no one. There wasn’t even any trace of the faithful dog. Everything was deserting him, loneliness washed around him and broke the last of his strength.

He went back through the empty house and picked up the rucksack. In giving way to the compulsion he somehow felt relieved of the burden of himself. It’s her fault, he told himself, her fault. Why has she gone? She ought to have kept me here, it was her duty. She could have saved me from myself, but she didn’t want to. She despises me. She doesn’t love me any more. She’s let me down, so I’ll let myself down too. My blood will be on her conscience! It’s her fault, not mine, all her fault.

Outside the house, he turned once more. Would no call come from somewhere, no word of love? Would nothing raise its fists against that steely mechanism of obedience inside him and smash it? But nothing spoke. Nothing called. Nothing showed itself. Everything was deserting him, and already he felt himself falling into an abyss. And the thought came to him: might it not be better to take another ten steps towards the lake, let himself fall from the bridge and find peace?

The clock in the church tower struck, a ponderous, heavy sound. Its severe call out of the clear sky he had once loved so much goaded him on like a whiplash. Ten more minutes: then the train would come in, then it would all be over, finally, hopelessly over. Ten more minutes: but he no longer felt they were minutes of freedom. Like a hunted man he raced forward, staggered, hesitated, ran on, gasped in frantic fear of being late, went faster and faster until suddenly, just before reaching the platform, he almost collided with someone standing at the barrier.

He started in alarm. The rucksack fell from his trembling hand. It was his wife standing there, pale, as if she hadn’t slept, her grave, sad eyes turned on him again.

“I knew you’d come. For the last three days I’ve known you would do it. But I’m not leaving you. I’ve been waiting here since early in the morning, since the first trains came in, and I’ll wait until the last have left. As long as I breathe they won’t lay hands on you, Ferdinand, remember that. You said yourself there was plenty of time. Why are you in such a hurry?”

He looked at her uncertainly.

“It’s just that… my name’s been sent in… they’re expecting me…”

“Who are expecting you? Slavery and death, maybe, no one else! Wake up, Ferdinand, realize that you’re free, entirely free, no one has power over you, no one can give you orders—listen, you’re free, free, free! I’ll tell you so a thousand times, ten thousand times, every hour, every minute, until you feel it yourself! You’re free. Free! Free!”

“Please,” he said quietly, as two farmers turned curiously to glance at them in passing. “Please, not so loud. People are looking…”

“People! People!” she cried in a rage. “What do I care about people? How will they help me when you’re shot dead, or limping home, a broken man? What do I care for people, their pity, their love, their gratitude? I want you as a human being, a free, living human being. I want you free, free, as a man should be, not cannon-fodder.”

“Paula!” He tried to calm her fury. She pushed him away.

“Let me alone, you and your stupid, cowardly fear! I’m in a free country here, I can say what I like, I’m not a servant and I won’t give you up to servitude! Ferdinand, if you go I’ll throw myself in front of the locomotive.”

“Paula!” He took hold of her again, but her face was suddenly bitter.

“But no,” she said, “I won’t lie. I may be too cowardly to do it. Millions of women have been too cowardly when their husbands and children were dragged away—not one of them did what she ought to have done. Your cowardice poisons us. What will I do if you go away? Weep and wail, go to church and ask God to let you off with some light kind of service. And then perhaps I’ll mock men who didn’t go. Anything’s possible these days.”

“Paula.” He held her hands. “Why are you making it so hard for me, when you know it must be done?”

“Am I to make it easy for you? It ought to be hard for you, very, very hard, as hard as I can make it. Here I am, you’ll have to push me away by force, use your fists, you’ll have to kick me when I’m down. I’m not giving you up.”

The signals clattered. He straightened up, pale and agitated, and reached for his rucksack. But she had already snatched it and was standing foursquare in front of him.

“Give me that!” he groaned.

“Never! Never!” she gasped, wrestling with him. The farmers gathered around, laughing out loud. There was shouting as the bystanders egged them on, encouraging one or the other, children ran from their games to look. But the pair were struggling for possession of the rucksack with the strength of bitter despair, as if fighting for their lives.

At that moment the locomotive was heard as the train steamed in. Suddenly he let go of the rucksack and ran, without turning back. He hurried on, stumbling over the rails to reach a carriage and fling himself into it. Loud laughter broke out as the farmers roared with glee, pursuing him with shouts of, “You’ll have to jump out again, mister, the missus has got it!” Their raucous laughter lashed at his shame. And now the train was moving out.

She stood there holding the rucksack, with the laughter of the crowd all around her, and stared at the train vanishing faster and faster into the distance. He did not wave from the window, he gave her no sign. Sudden tears veiled her eyes, and she saw no more.

He sat hunched in the corner of the carriage, and did not venture to look out of the window as the train gathered speed. Outside, torn to a thousand pieces by the speed of the train, everything he owned passed by: the little house on the hill with his pictures, his table and chair and bed, his wife, the dog, many days of happiness. And the wide landscape at which he had often gazed, his eyes shining, was gone as if hurled away, like his freedom and his whole life. He seemed to feel his life’s blood streaming out of all his veins; he was nothing now but the white call-up order crackling in his pocket, and he was driven on with it by the ill will of Fate.

In dull bewilderment, he merely registered events as they happened. The conductor asked for his ticket; he had none, but in the voice of a sleepwalker named the town on the border as his destination, and passively changed to another train. The mechanism inside him did everything, and it had stopped hurting. At the Swiss customs office they asked to see his papers. He showed them what he had: only that one sheet of paper. Now and then some lost remnant of himself made a slight effort to think, murmuring as if in a dream, “Turn back! You’re still free! You don’t have to go.” But the mechanism in his blood that did not speak, and yet made his nerves and limbs move by force, thrust him implacably on with its invisible command, “You must.”

He was standing on the platform of the transit station where he had to change trains again for his native land. Over there, clearly visible in the dull light, a bridge crossed the river which was the border. His weary mind tried to understand the meaning of the word; on this side of the border you could still live, breathe, and speak freely, act as you liked, do work that mattered. Eight hundred paces further on, once over that bridge, your will would be removed from your body like an animal’s entrails being gutted, you would have to obey strangers and stab other strangers to death. And the little bridge there, a structure of just ten dozen wooden posts and two crossbeams meant all those things. That was why two men, each in a different, colourful and pointless uniform, stood one at each end with guns to guard the bridge. A sombre sensation tormented him, he knew he couldn’t think clearly any more, but his thoughts rolled on. What exactly were they guarding in the form of that wooden structure? They were preventing anyone passing from one country to the other, making sure no one got out of the country where men’s wills were gutted, and went to the country on the other side of the border. And was he himself going to cross the bridge? Yes, but the other way, out of freedom into…

He stood still, musing, hypnotized by the idea of the border. Now that he saw its intrinsic nature, a physical object guarded by two bored citizens in military uniforms, there was something in himself that he could no longer entirely understand. He tried to stand back and think: there was a war going on. But only in the country over there—the war was going on a kilometre away, or rather a kilometre minus two hundred metres away. Or perhaps, it occurred to him, it was ten metres closer than that, say a kilometre minus eight hundred metres minus ten metres away. He felt some kind of odd urge to find out whether there was still a war in progress on those last ten metres or not. The comical aspect of the idea amused him. There ought to be a line drawn somewhere, the dividing line. Suppose when you reached the border you had one foot on the bridge and one on the ground, what were you then—were you still free, or already a soldier? You’d have to be wearing a civilian boot on one foot and a military boot on the other. His confused thoughts became more and more childish. Suppose you were standing on the bridge, you were already over it, and then you ran back, were you a deserter? And the water under the bridge—was it warlike or peaceful? And was there a line drawn somewhere in the national colours? What about the fish, were they allowed to swim across into the war zone? What about the animals? He thought of his dog. If the dog had come along too, they’d probably have called him up as well, he’d have had to fire machine guns or go tracking down wounded men under a hail of bullets. Thank God the dog had stayed at home.

Thank God! The thought gave him a shock, and he shook himself. He sensed that since he had seen the border in physical form, a bridge between life and death, something in him that was not the mechanism was beginning to work, understanding and resistance were coming back to life in him. The train that had brought him in still stood on the opposite track, except that the locomotive had been moved and its gigantic glass eyes were now looking the other way, ready to pull the carriages back into Switzerland. It was a reminder that there was still time. He felt painful life return to the numbed nerve of his longing for his lost home, and the man he had once been began to revive. Over there, on the far side of bridge, he saw a soldier strapped into a strange uniform, he saw him marching pointlessly up and down with his gun over his shoulder, and he saw himself reflected in this stranger. Only now was his destiny clear to him, and now that he understood it he saw that it meant death and destruction. And life cried out in his soul.

Then the signals clattered, and the harsh sound shattered his still tentative feelings. Now, he knew, all was lost—if he got into the train just coming in and spent three minutes in it, travelling to the bridge and over it. And he knew that he would. Another quarter-of-an-hour and he would have been saved. He stood there feeling dizzy.

But the train did not come in from the distance into which he looked as he stood there trembling; it rumbled slowly over the bridge from the other side. And suddenly the station concourse was full of movement, people were streaming out of the waiting rooms, women crowded forward, crying out, pushing, Swiss soldiers quickly lined up. And all at once music began to play—he listened, amazed, he couldn’t believe it. But there it was, blaring out, unmistakeable: the Marseillaise. The enemy’s national anthem, sung on a train coming out of German territory!

The train thundered up, puffing, and stopped. And now everything was fast and frantic: carriage doors were flung open, pale-faced men stumbled out, delight in their glowing eyes—Frenchmen in uniform, wounded Frenchmen, enemies, enemies! In his dreamlike state, it was some seconds before he realized that this was a train with wounded prisoners being exchanged, freed from captivity over there, saved from the madness of the war. And they knew it, they all felt it; how they waved and shouted and laughed, although even laughter still hurt many of them! One man, staggering and hesitant, stumbled out on a wooden leg, clung to a post and shouted, “La Suisse! La Suisse! Dieu soit béni!” Sobbing women hurried from window to window until they found the beloved faces they were looking for, voices called out in confusion, sobbing, shouting, but all of them rising high in the golden moment of rejoicing. The music died away, and for some time nothing could be heard but great waves of emotion breaking over these people as they shouted and cried out.

Then they gradually calmed down. Groups formed, happily united in quiet joy and rapid talk. A few women were still wandering around, calling out names. Nurses brought refreshment and presents. The very sick were carried out on their stretchers, pale in white bandages, tenderly surrounded by care and comfort. The whole debris of suffering could be seen concentrated in those forms: maimed men with empty sleeves, the emaciated and half-burnt, the lingering remnants of youth gone to seed and growing old. But all eyes gleamed happily as they looked up at the sky; they all sensed that they were near the end of their pilgrimage.

Ferdinand stood as if paralysed amidst this unexpected throng of new arrivals; his heart was suddenly beating strongly again under the sheet of paper in his breast pocket. Standing alone and apart from the others, with no one expecting him, he saw a stretcher come to a halt. Slowly, with unsteady steps, he went over to the wounded man, who seemed to have been forgotten in the joy of all these strangers. The man’s face was white as a sheet, his beard straggled wildly, a limp, injured arm dangled from the stretcher. His eyes were closed, his lips pale. Ferdinand shivered. Gently, he raised the dangling arm and placed it carefully on the sick man’s breast. Then the stranger opened his eyes, looked at Ferdinand, and out of distant regions of unknown torment the man formed a grateful smile of greeting.

It came to Ferdinand like a flash as he stood, still trembling: was he to do such things himself? Injure people like this, look his fellow men in the eye with no emotion but hatred, take part in this terrible crime of his own free will? The truth of what he felt revived strongly again, breaking the mechanism inside him. Freedom rose up, great and blessed freedom, destroying obedience. Never, never! something in him cried in a primal, mighty, unknown voice. It struck him down. Sobbing, he collapsed beside the stretcher.

People hurried to him, thinking he must have had an epileptic fit; the doctor came along. But he was already getting slowly to his feet and refused help. His face was calm and cheerful. He found his wallet, took out his last banknote and placed it on the wounded man’s stretcher; then he took the call-up order and read it once more, slowly and deliberately. After that he tore it in two and scattered the scraps on the platform. People stared at him as if he were mad. But he was not ashamed any more. I am well again, he felt, and that was all. The music began once more. And his own heart drowned out all the musical notes with its resonant song.

Late that evening, he came home to his house. It was dark and closed, like a coffin. He knocked. Footsteps slowly made their way to the door; his wife opened it. When she saw him, she gave a start of surprise. But he gently took her arm and led her back to the doorway. They said nothing, just stood there, both of them trembling with happiness. He went into the living-room and saw his pictures in it. She had brought them all down from the studio so that she could be close to him through his work. He felt infinite love for her at this sign of her own for him, and realized how much he had just saved. In silence, he pressed her hand. The dog came racing out of the kitchen and jumped up at him; everything had been waiting for him, it seemed as if his real self had never left this place, and yet he felt like a man coming back from the dead.

Still they said nothing. But she took his hand gently and led him to the window. Outside, untouched by the self-inflicted torment of humanity run mad, lay the everlasting world, with endless stars shining for him under an endless sky. He looked up and saw, in a devout and solemn mood, that there was no law on earth for mankind except the law of humanity itself, that nothing unites men more truly than their own union. His wife’s breath close to his lips was sweet and blessed, and sometimes their two bodies trembled slightly in the pleasure of holding each other close. But still they said nothing. Their hearts soared freely in the eternal freedom of things, released from the confusion of words and man-made laws.