It passes, but it does not pass away

AN EMERGENCY
Introduction

SINCE THE PASSENGER TRAIN CONNECTING THE icebound estates of the southern lowlands, which extend from the banks of the Tisza almost as far as the foot of the Carpathians, had, despite the garbled explanations of a haplessly stumbling guard and the promises of the stationmaster rushing nervously on and off the platform, failed to arrive ('Well, squire, it seems to have disappeared into thin air again …' the guard shrugged, pulling a sour face), the only two serviceable old wooden-seated coaches maintained for just such an 'emergency' were coupled to an obsolete and unreliable 424, used only as a last resort, and put to work, albeit a good hour and a half late, according to a timetable to which they were not bound and which was only an approximation anyway, so that the locals who were waiting in vain for the eastbound service, and had accepted its delay with what appeared to be a combination of indifference and helpless resignation, might eventually arrive at their destination some fifty kilometres further along the branch line. To tell the truth, none of this really surprised anyone any more since rail travel, like everything else, was subject to the prevailing conditions: all normal expectations went by the board and one's daily habits were disrupted by a sense of ever-spreading all-consuming chaos which rendered the future unpredictable, the past unrecallable and ordinary life so haphazard that people simply assumed that whatever could be imagined might come to pass, that if there were only one door in a building it would no longer open, that wheat would grow head downwards into the earth not out of it, and that, since one could only note the symptoms of disintegration, the reasons for it remaining unfathomable and inconceivable, there was nothing anyone could do except to get a tenacious grip on anything that was still tangible; which is precisely what people at the village station continued to do when, in hope of taking possession of the essentially limited seating to which they were entitled, they stormed the carriage doors, which being frozen up proved very difficult to open. Mrs Plauf, who happened to be on her way home from one of her customary winter visits to relatives, took full part in the pointless struggle (pointless since, as they soon discovered, no one actually remained standing), and by the time she had shoved aside those who stood in her way and used her tiny frame to hold up the crowd pressing behind her in order to assure herself of a rear-facing window seat, she could no longer distinguish between her sense of indignation at the intolerable jostling she had just endured and a different feeling, oscillating between

fury and anguish, occasioned by the awareness that she, with her first-class ticket, which was quite worthless in this stench of garlic sausage blended with the aroma of mixed-fruit brandy and cheap pungent tobacco, surrounded as she was by an almost menacing ring of loud-mouthed, belching ‘common peasants’, would be faced by the acute uncertainty faced by all those engaged in what was in any case the risky business of travelling nowadays, in other words not knowing whether she would arrive home at all. Her sisters, who had lived in complete isolation ever since age had rendered them immobile, would never have forgiven her if she had neglected to pay them her regular early-winter visit and it was only on their account that she refused to abandon this dangerous enterprise even though she was as certain as everyone else that something around her had changed so radically that the wisest course under the circumstances would have been to take no risks at all. To be wise, however, soberly to anticipate what might lie in store, was truly no easy task, for it was as if some vital yet undetectable modification had taken place in the eternally stable composition of the air, in the very remoteness of that hitherto faultless mechanism or unnamed principle—which, it is often remarked, makes the world go round and of which the most imposing evidence is the sheer phenomenon of the world’s existence—which had suddenly lost some of its power, and it was because of this that the troubling knowledge of the probability of danger was in fact less unbearable than the common sense of foreboding that soon anything at all might happen and that this ‘anything’—the law governing its likelihood becoming apparent in the process of disintegration—was leading to greater anxiety than the thought of any personal misfortune, thereby increasingly depriving people of the possibility of coolly appraising the facts. To establish one’s bearings among the ever more frightening events of the past months had become impossible, not only because there was little coherence in the mixture of news, gossip, rumour and personal experience (examples of which might include the sharp and much too early cold snap at the beginning of November, the mysterious family disasters, the rapid succession of railway accidents and those terrifying rumours of gangs of criminal children defacing public monuments in the distant capital, between any of which it was hard to find any rational connection), but also because not one of these items of news meant anything in itself, all seeming to be merely omens of what was referred to by a growing number of people as ‘the coming catastrophe’. Mrs

Plauf had even heard that some people had started to talk of peculiar changes in the behaviour of animals, and while this—for the time being at least, though who knows what might happen later—could be dismissed as irresponsible and harmful gossip, one thing was certain, that unlike those to whom this signified a state of utter chaos, Mrs Plauf was convinced that, on the contrary, it was perfectly appropriate in its timing since a respectable person hardly dared set foot outside her house any more, and in a place where a train can disappear 'just like that' there was, or so her thoughts ran on, 'no sense left in anything'. And this was how she prepared herself mentally for the ride home, which was bound to be far less smooth than the outward journey, cushioned as she had then been by her nominal status as a first-class passenger, since, as she pondered nervously, 'anything might happen on these dreadful branch-lines' and it was best to steel oneself for the worst; so she sat like one who would happily make herself invisible, straight-backed, her knees schoolgirlishly clamped together, wearing a chilly, somewhat contemptuous expression, among the slowly diminishing huddle of people still tussling for seats, and while she kept a suspicious eye on the terrifying gallery of undefined faces reflected in the window, her feelings swung between anxiety and yearning, thinking now of the ominous distances ahead and now of the warmth of the house she had had to leave behind; those pleasant afternoons with Mrs Mádai and Mrs Nuszbeck, those old Sunday walks along the tree-lined avenue of Friars' Walk, and finally the soft carpets and delicate furniture of home, that radiantly calm order of carefully tended flowers and all her little possessions, which, as she well knew, was not only an island in a wholly unpredictable world where afternoons and Sundays had become merely a memory but the one refuge and consolation of a lonely woman the orderliness of whose life was calculated to produce peace and calm. Uncomprehendingly, and with a certain degree of envious contempt, she realized that her noisy fellow travellers—most likely coarse peasants from the darkest nooks and corners of distant villages—were quickly adapting themselves even to such straitened circumstances: to them it was as if nothing unusual had happened, everywhere there was the rustling of greaseproof paper being unwrapped and food being doled out, corks were popping, beer-can lids were dropping to the greasy floor, and here and there she could already hear that noise 'so calculated to offend all one's finer feelings' but, in her opinion, 'perfectly common among common people' of munching and

crunching; and what was more, the party of four directly opposite her, who were among the loudest, had already started dealing a deck of cards—till only she was left, solitary, sitting even more stiffly among the increasingly loud human hubbub, silent, her head determinedly turned to the window, her fur coat protected from the seat by a sheet of newspaper, clutching her clipped handbag to her with such terrified and resolute suspicion that she hardly noticed the engine up ahead, its two red lights probing the frozen darkness, drawing uncertainly out into the winter evening. A discreet sigh was her only contribution to the noises of general relief (grunts of satisfaction, whoops of joy) that after such a long and chilly period of waiting something at last was happening; though this did not last long, since, having travelled barely a hundred metres from the now silent village platform and after a few clumsy jerks—as if the order permitting them to start had been unexpectedly revoked—the train came judderingly to a stop; and though the cries of frustration soon gave way to puzzled and angry laughter, once people realized that this state of affairs was likely to continue and were forced to admit that their journey—possibly because of the extended chaos owing to the employment of an off-timetable train—was sadly destined to vacillate between lurching forward and lurching to a halt, they all relapsed into a jokey indifference, the dull insensibility that ensues when one has been forced to accept certain facts, which simply goes to show how people behave when, having failed, infuriatingly, to understand something, they try to suppress the fear caused by genuine shock to a system which seems to have been overtaken by chaos, the nerve-rackingly repeated instances of which may be met with nothing but withering sarcasm. Although their crude incessant joking (‘I should take so much care when I’m in bed with the missus …!’) naturally outraged her delicate sensibilities, the stream of ever ruder cracks with which each hoped to trump the one before—jokes, in any case, now dying away—had a relaxing effect, even on Mrs Plauf, and, every so often, on hearing one of the better ones—and there was no real escape from the coarse laughter that followed in each case—she herself couldn’t entirely suppress a shy little smile. Slyly and carefully, she even ventured a few momentary glances, not at her immediate neighbours but at those who were sitting further off, and in the peculiar atmosphere of daft good humour—since, while the occupants of the carriage (those men slapping their thighs, those women of nondescript age cackling with their mouths full) remained rather fearsome, they seemed

less threatening than they had been—she tried to keep her anxious imagination in check and tell herself that she might not actually have to face the lurking terrors of the ugly and unfriendly mob by which, her instincts told her, she was surrounded, and that it might only be because of her keen susceptibility to omens of ill-fortune and her exaggerated sense of isolation in such a cold and alien environment, that she might arrive home, unharmed it may be, but exhausted by her state of constant vigilance. To tell the truth, there was very little real basis for hope of such a happy resolution but Mrs Plauf simply couldn't resist the false enticements of optimism: though the train was once again stalled nowhere, waiting minutes on end for a signal, she calmly concluded that they were making 'some kind of progress', and she controlled the nervous impatience occasioned by the regular—alas too frequent—squealing of brakes and periods of unavoidable immobility, since the pleasant warmth that had resulted from the heating being switched on when the engine started had encouraged her to divest herself of her coat, so she no longer had to fear that she might catch a cold on stepping out into the icy wind on arrival home. She adjusted the creases in the stole behind her, spread the fake-fur wrap over her legs, locked her fingers round the handbag swollen by the woollen scarf she had stuffed inside it, and, with an unchangingly straight back, was just looking out again through the window when there, in the filthy glass, she suddenly found herself face to face with a 'peculiarly silent' unshaven man, swigging from a bottle of stinking brandy, who, now that she was clad only in a blouse and the little jacket of her suit, was staring ('Lustfully!!') at her perhaps too prominent, powerful breasts. 'I knew it!'—quick as lightning, despite a hot flush running right through her, she turned her head away, pretending she hadn't noticed. For several minutes she didn't move a muscle, but stared blindly into the darkness outside, and tried, vainly, to recall the man's appearance (conjuring up only the unshaven face, the 'somehow so dirty' broadcloth coat and the uncouth, sly yet shameless gaze which she was to find so disturbing …), then, very slowly, trusting that she ran no risk in doing so, she allowed her eyes to slide across the glass, withdrawing immediately when she discovered not only that 'the creature in question' was persisting in his 'impudence', but that their eyes had met. Her shoulders, neck and nape were all aching because of the rigid posture of her head, but by now she couldn't have torn her eyes away even if she had wanted to, because she felt that whichever way she turned beyond the narrow darkness of the

window, his terrifyingly steady gaze would easily commandeer every nook of the carriage and ‘snap her up’. ‘How long has he been looking at me?’—the question cut Mrs Plauf like a knife, and the possibility that the man’s dirty raking eye had been ‘on her’ from the very start of the journey made the gaze, whose meaning she had understood in a flash in the very second of contact, appear even more terrifying than before. These two eyes, after all, spoke of sickeningly ‘foul desires’—‘worse still!’ she trembled—it was as if some sort of dry contempt burned within them. While she couldn’t think of herself as an old woman, not precisely, she knew she was past the age when this kind of attention—not uncommon when paid to others—was still natural, and so, as well as regarding the man with a certain horror (what kind of person is it, after all, who is capable of lusting after elderly women?), she was frightened to realize that this fellow stinking of cheap brandy wanted nothing more perhaps than to make her ridiculous, to mock and humiliate her, then laughingly toss her aside ‘like an old rag’. After a few violent jolts the train now began to pick up speed, wheels clattered furiously on rails, and a long-forgotten feeling of confusion and acute embarrassment took hold of her as her full, heavy breasts started to throb and burn under the man’s fixed, uncontrollable and threatening gaze. Her arms, with which she could at least have covered them, simply refused to obey her: it was as if she had been specially selected, helpless to cover the shame of her exposure, and as a consequence she felt ever more vulnerable, ever more naked, ever more conscious of the fact that the more she yearned to conceal her thrusting womanhood the more it drew attention to itself. The card players ended another round with an outburst of crude bickering which broke across the hostile and paralysing hum—cutting, as it were, the bands that tightly bound her and prevented her escaping—and she would almost certainly have succeeded in overcoming her unfortunate torpor had not something even worse suddenly happened, the sole purpose of which, she realized in despair, was to crown her suffering. Driven as she was by her instinctive embarrassment and in an act of unconscious defiance, she was just trying to hide her breasts by tactfully inclining her head, when her back bent awkwardly, her shoulders slumped forward and she realized in a moment of terror that her bra—perhaps due to her unusual physical exertion—had come unclipped behind her. She looked up aghast, and was not at all surprised to see the two male eyes still fixed steadily on her, eyes that winked at her with an air of complicity, as if aware of her ridiculous ill-

fortune. Mrs Plauf knew all too well what would happen next, but this almost fatal accident so disturbed her that she only sat stiffer than ever in the accelerating train, helpless once more, her cheeks burning with embarrassment, having to suffer the malicious look of glee in those contemptuously self-confident eyes which were now glued to her breasts, breasts which, freed from the encumbrance of the bra, jogged merrily up and down with the jolting of the carriage. She didn't dare look up again in order to check this, but she was sure it was the case: it was no longer just the man but all those 'loathsome peasants' staring at her discomfort; she could practically see their ugly, greedy, grinning faces encircling her, and this humiliating torture might have gone on for ever had not the conductor —an adolescent lout with a bad case of acne—entered the carriage from the rear compartment; his harsh, recently broken voice (Tickets please!') finally freed her from the grip of shame, she snatched her ticket from the handbag and folded her arms below her breasts. The train stopped again, this time where it was supposed to, and—even if only to avoid having to contemplate the genuinely frightening expressions about her—she mechanically read the name of the village on the faintly illuminated signboard above the platform, and could have cried out with relief at recognizing it from the familiar because exhaustively perused timetables she endlessly consulted before any journey, knowing that only a few minutes from now they would be arriving at the county town where ('He'll get off! He must get off!') she would almost certainly be free of her pursuer. Tense with excitement, she watched the slow approach of the conductor through the derisive clamouring of those who wished to know why the train was so late, and though she had intended to ask for help as soon as he came to her, his baby-face wore an expression of such helplessness in the surrounding racket, an expression so unlikely to offer her the assurance of official protection, that by the time he was standing next to her she felt so rattled it was all she could do to ask him where the washroom was. 'Where else should it be?' the boy answered nervously as he punched her ticket. 'Where it's always been. One at the front, one at the back.' 'Ah yes, of course,' mumbled Mrs Plauf with an apologetic gesture and leapt from her seat clutching her handbag to her, scuttling back down the carriage, swaying now left now right as the train lurched off again, and it was only once she had reached the place of desolation masquerading as a WC and leaned gasping against the locked door that she realized she had left her fur coat hanging on the hook by the

window. She knew she had to move as fast as possible and yet it took her a full minute before—surrendering all thought of dashing back for her expensive fur—she could pull herself together and, rocked to and fro by the juddering of the train, divest herself of her jacket, quickly pull the blouse over her head and, holding coat, blouse and handbag under her arm, tug her pink slip right up to her shoulders. Her hands trembling with nervous haste, she brought her bra round and, seeing ('Thank heaven!') that the clip was not broken, sighed in relief; she had just begun clumsily to dress when she heard behind her the tentative but clearly audible sound of someone outside knocking at the door. There was about this knocking some peculiar quality of intimacy which, naturally enough in the light of all that had happened so far, succeeded in scaring her, but then, on reflecting that the fear was probably no more than a monstrous product of her own imagination, she grew indignant at being hurried like this; and so she continued her half-finished movement, taking a perfunctory glance in the mirror, and was just about to reach for the handle when there came another burst of impatient knocking, quickly succeeded by a voice announcing: 'It's me.' She drew her hand back aghast, and by the time she had formed an idea of who it was, she was overtaken less by a sense of entrapment than by desperate incomprehension as to why this croaky strangled male voice should bear no trace of aggression or low threat but sound vaguely bored and anxious that she, Mrs Plauf, should at last open the door. For a few moments neither stirred a muscle, each waiting for some word of explanation from the other, and Mrs Plauf only grasped the monstrous misunderstanding of which she had become the victim when her pursuer lost patience and tugged furiously at the handle, bellowing at her, 'Well! What is it to be?! All tease, no nookie?!' She stared at the door, terrified. Not wanting to believe it, she bitterly shook her head and felt a constriction at her throat, startled, like all those attacked from an unexpected quarter, to find that she had 'fallen into some infernal snare'. Reeling at the thought of the sheer unfairness, the naked obscenity of her situation, it took her some time to comprehend that —however incredible, since as a matter of fact she had always resisted the idea—the unshaven man had from the very start believed that it was she who was propositioning *him,* and it became clear to her how, step by step, the 'degenerate monster' had interpreted her every action—her taking off her fur … the unfortunate accident … and her enquiring after the washroom —as an invitation, as solid proof of her compliance, in a word as the cheap

blush-worthy stages of a low transaction, to the extent that she now had to cope with not only a disgraceful attack on her virtue and respectability but the fact that this filthy repulsive man, stinking of brandy, should address her as if she were some ‘woman of the streets’. The wounded fury which seized her proved even more painful to her than her sense of defencelessness, and —since, apart from anything else, she could no longer bear the entrapment —driven by desperation, in a voice choking with tension, she shouted to him: ‘Go away! Or I shall cry for help!’ On hearing this, after a short silence, the man struck the door with his fist and, in a voice so cold with contempt that shivers ran down Mrs Plauf’s back, he hissed at her: ‘Go screw yourself, you old whore. You’re not worth breaking down the door for. I wouldn’t even bother to drown you in the slop-pail.’ The lights of the county town pulsed through the window of the cabin, the train was clattering over points, and she had to stop herself falling over by grasping at the handrail. She heard the departing footsteps, the sharp slamming of the door from corridor to compartment, and, because she understood by this that the man had finally released her with the same colossal impudence as he had accosted her, her whole body trembled with emotion and she collapsed in tears. And while it was really only a matter of moments, it seemed to last an eternity, that in her hysterical sobbing and sense of desolation she saw, in a brief blinding instant, from a height, in the enormous dense darkness of night, through the lit window of the stalled train, as if in a matchbox, a little face, her face, lost, distorted, out of luck, looking out. For though she was sure that she had nothing more to fear from those dirty, ugly, bitter words, that she would be subject to no new insults, the thought of her escape filled her with as much anxiety as the thought of assault, since she had absolutely no idea—the effect of each of her actions so far being precisely the reverse of that calculated—what it was she owed her unexpected freedom to. She couldn’t bring herself to believe it was her choking desperate cry that frightened him off, since having felt a miserable victim of the man’s merciless desires throughout, she, by the same token, considered herself an innocent and unsuspecting victim of the entire hostile universe, against whose absolute chill—the thought flashed across her mind —there is no valid defence. It was as if the unshaven man had actually raped her. She swayed in the airless, urine-smelling booth, broken, tortured by the suspicion that she knew all there was to know, and under the spell of the formless, inconceivable, ever-shifting terror of having to seek some

protection against this universal threat, she was aware only of an emerging sense of agonizing bitterness: for while she felt it was deeply unfair that she should be cast as an innocent victim rather than an untroubled survivor, she who ‘all her life had longed for peace, and never harmed a soul’, she was forced to concede that this was of little consequence: there was no authority to which she could appeal, no one to whom she might protest, and she could hardly hope that the forces of anarchy having once been loosed could afterwards be restrained. After so much gossip, so much terrifying rumour-mongering, she could now see for herself that ‘it was all going down the drain’, for she understood that while her own particular immediate danger was over, in ‘a world where such things happen’ the collapse into anarchy would inevitably follow. Outside she could already hear the impatient grumbling of passengers preparing to get off and the train was noticeably slowing down; realizing, panic-stricken, that she had left her fur coat wholly unguarded, she hastily unbolted the door, stepped out into the press of people (who, ignoring the fact that there was no point in it, engaged in the same storming of doors on the way out as they had on the way in) and, stumbling across suitcases and shopping bags, struggled back to her seat. The coat was still there but she didn’t immediately see the fake-fur wrap and while conducting a furious search and trying desperately to remember whether she had taken it with her into the washroom it suddenly dawned on her that in all that nervous excitement her assailant was nowhere to be seen: obviously, she thought, much assured, he must have been one of the first to leave the carriage. At this moment the train actually stopped but the briefly less stuffy, partially vacated, carriage was almost immediately overrun by an even larger, and, if possible, more frightening mass of bodies, more frightening because silent, and while it was easy to see that this dark huddle would give rise to equal anxiety over the remaining twenty kilometres, there was a still greater shock in store for her: if she had hoped to be rid of the unshaven man she was to be bitterly disappointed. Having gathered up her coat and finally located her wrap under the worn and shining seat, she gathered it about her shoulders and had, just for safety’s sake, set out to find another carriage in which to continue her journey, when—she could hardly believe her eyes—there was the very same broadcloth coat (‘As if he had left it there expressly for me to see!’) thrown carelessly across the back of a distant seat. She stoppped dead in her tracks, then hurried on, through the back door into the next carriage where she pushed her way through another

silent mass of people to find another central rear-facing seat which, in desperation, she immediately occupied. For some time she kept her eyes fixed on the door, ready to leap up, though she no longer knew of whom she was most frightened, nor from what direction the danger was most likely to threaten, then, nothing untoward having happened (what with the train still standing in the station), she tried to gather her remaining strength so that should some awful adventure befall her she would at least be ready. Suddenly she felt infinitely tired, but though her weak legs were practically burning in the lining of her boots and her aching shoulders felt 'ready to collapse' she was unable to relax even a little, or only to the extent of slowly turning her head about to relieve the pain in her neck and reaching for her compact to cool her tearful flushed face. 'It's over, over, there's nothing to be scared of now,' she kept muttering to herself without believing it: for not only did she lack any such confidence, but she was unable even to lean back in her seat for greater comfort without increasing, as she thought, the risk of leaving herself unprepared. For the carriage was being occupied by a crowd 'every bit as ugly as the first lot' and not a whit less frightening than that at the start of her journey, so she could only hope that the three empty seats around her—the last empty seats—might act as some kind of defence and remain unoccupied. There was indeed some chance of that, at least for a while, because, for practically a whole minute (the train whistle blew twice in the interval), not a single new passenger entered the carriage; but suddenly, at the head of a new wave, loudly puffing and panting and carrying an enormous backpack and basket, balanced by a few well-filled shopping bags, a fat headscarved peasant woman appeared in the doorway, and turning her head this way and that way ('Like a hen …' it occurred to Mrs Plauf), took a decisive step towards her and, grunting and croaking with an aggression that brooked no argument, proceeded to colonize all three seats with her endless baggage which formed a barricade for her as well as Mrs Plauf from the throng of contemptible (or so her expression suggested) travellers behind her. It would have been useless of course for Mrs Plauf herself to have muttered a word of complaint and, suppressing her fury, she came round to thinking how it might even have been a stroke of good luck that, having lost the comforting cushion of space around her, she was at least preserved from the encroachments of the silent mob, but this feeling of consolation was short-lived, for her unwelcome fellow traveller (all she wanted was to be left in

peace) loosened the knot binding her headscarf under her chin and, without a moment's hesitation, launched into conversation. 'At least the place is heated, eh?' The sound of that raven-like croaking and the sight of two piercing malicious eyes that seemed to leap at her from beneath the headscarf decided her immediately that, since she could neither repel nor escape her, the only course of action was to ignore her entirely and she turned her head away to look out of the window in protest. But the woman, having cast a few more contemptuous looks down the carriage, was not bothered in the slightest. 'You don't mind me talking to you? There's just the two of us so we might as well have a good natter, eh? Going far? Right to the end of the line, me. Visiting my lad.' Mrs Plauf glanced at her reluctantly, but seeing that the more she ignored her the worse things would get, nodded in acknowledgement. 'Because,' the woman perked up at the encouragement, 'it's the grandson's birthday. He said to me, at Easter, he did, sweet little bairn, 'cause I was there then: You're coming, mam, aren't you? That's what he calls me, mam, that's his name for me, the little lad. So that's where I'm off to now.' Mrs Plauf felt constrained to smile here but immediately regretted it because this opened the floodgates: there was no stopping the woman now. 'If that little bairn only knew what a hard life it is for us old folk nowadays …! Spend the whole day standing about in the market on your poor feet, and what with the varicose veins and all, no wonder a body gets tired by the end of the day. Because, you know, to tell you the truth, we do have a little garden, but the pension hardly stretches. I don't know where all those shiny Mercedes come from, all that money people seem to have, I honestly don't. But you listen here, I'll tell you something. It's thieving is what it is, thieving and cheating! It's a Godless crooked world, God has no say in it any more. And this awful weather, eh? You tell me what it's all coming to. It's all round you, isn't it? Radio says it'll be seventeen degrees or whatever—below freezing, that is! And we're only at the end of November. You want to know what'll happen? I'll tell you. We'll freeze till spring. That's right. 'Cause there's no coal. I wish I knew why we had all those no-good miners up in the hills. Do you know? There, you see.' Mrs Plauf's head was swimming in the verbal downpour but however hard it was to bear she found it impossible to interrupt her, to make her shut up, and eventually, realizing the woman wasn't really expecting her to listen and that she could get away with nodding every so often, she spent more and more time looking out of the window at lights

slowly drifting by, attempting to bring some order to her troubled thoughts while the train drew away from the county capital, though hard as she tried she couldn't banish the memory of the carelessly discarded coat which bothered her even more than did the frightening ill-omened crowd of silent faces that confronted her. 'Was he disturbed?' she fretted. 'Did drink get the better of him? Or has he deliberately …' She made up her mind not to torture herself with vain surmise, but, however risky the enterprise appeared, to ascertain whether the coat was still there, so, wholly ignoring the lumpen woman, she joined those loitering at the end of the carriage, crossed over the coupling and peered as carefully as she could through the gap of the door which had been left partly open. Her intuition that it would be better to investigate the unshaven man's unexpected disappearance was immediately rewarded, for there, to her horror, he was, sitting with his back to her, his head just tipped back to swig at the bottle of brandy. Lest he, or anyone else among that dumb crew, should notice her (for in that event God himself could hardly absolve her of bringing her troubles on herself), still holding her breath, Mrs Plauf returned to the rear carriage, and was dumbfounded to see that a fur-hatted figure had taken advantage of her brief absence to occupy her seat practically unopposed, so that she, the only lady present, would have to travel standing, pressed against the side of the carriage, and she realized she had been rather stupid in deluding herself that, simply because she hadn't seen him for a few minutes, she had been freed of the man in the broadcloth coat. Whether he had gone to the lavatory or popped out to the platform ('Surely not without his coat?!') to get himself another bottle of stinking spirits was completely immaterial now as she was not really worried that he would try to get at her again here on the train, since the crowd—provided it didn't turn against her ('A fur coat, a boa or my handbag might be enough for these people …!')—and the difficulty of making one's way across it, did, after all, offer some kind of defence; at the same time her mistake forced her to admit, since she might as well face the worst that could befall her, that in the case of some beastly mishap ('… some incomprehensible, mysterious act of fate') she would be firmly trapped and that this time there would be no escape. Next to her helplessness this was what most terrified her, since with the passing of immediate danger, the greatest threat, on reflection, was not so much that he would want to rape her (though 'just to pronounce the word is awful …') but that he looked to be the sort of creature who 'knew neither God nor

man', who, in other words, had no fear of hellfire, and was therefore capable of anything ('Anything!'). Once more she could see before her those ice-cold eyes, that bestial unshaven face, once again she saw his sinister and intimate wink, once more heard that flat, mocking voice saying: 'It's me', and she was sure that she was not dealing with a simple sex maniac but had in fact escaped some vast murderous fury whose nature it was to crush under its heel whatever remained whole, for the very concepts of order, peace or the future were to such a monster inimical. 'On the other hand,' she could hear the hoarse voice of the old baggage who was now directing her never-ending stream of conversation at her new neighbour, 'you look in a pretty bad way if you don't mind me saying so. I got nothing to complain of, you see. Just the usual troubles of old age. And the teeth. Look,' and shoving her head forward she opened her mouth wide for her fur-capped neighbour's examination, drawing her cracked lips apart with her forefinger, 'time's ravages, all gone. But I don't let them mess about in there! The doctor can waffle on as much as he likes! This lot'll get me to the cemetery, eh? They're not going to get rich on me, all these scoundrels, may their innards drop out, the lot of them! 'Cause you look here,' and from one of her shopping bags she drew forth a little plastic soldier; 'what do you think this cost me, this little bit of rubbish! Believe it or not they wanted thirty-one forints for it! For this piece of trash! And what's it got for that price? A gun and this red star. They have a real cheek asking thirty-one forints for that! Ah, but,' she stuffed it back into her bag, 'that's all children want nowadays. So what can an old girl like me do? Buy it. You grind your teeth but you buy it! That's right, eh?' Mrs Plauf turned her head away with loathing and took a quick look out of the window, and then, hearing a dull thump, her glance darted back at them and she found herself unable to look away or stir an inch. She didn't know whether it was a bare knuckle that had done the damage, since the unchanging silence failed to reveal what had happened or why, all she saw in that quick involuntary movement of her eye was the woman falling backwards … her head slipping to one side … her body, supported by her luggage, remaining more or less where it was, while the fur-capped man opposite ('the usurper of her seat') moved from his forward-leaning position, his face expressionless, and slowly sat back. Even when it is only some annoying fly being swatted you expect some general murmur, but no one stirred in response to this, not a word was spoken, everyone continued standing or sitting in perfect indifference. 'Is it

silent approval? Or am I imagining things again?'—Mrs Plauf stared in front of her, but she immediately rejected the possibility she had been dreaming, because judging by all she had seen and heard, she couldn't but believe that the man had hit the woman. He must have had enough of her nattering and simply, without a word, struck her a blow in the face, and no, her heart thumped, no, it can't have been otherwise, and in the meantime all this of course was so shocking that she could only stand rooted to the spot, her brow breaking out in perspiration at the fear of it. That woman is slumped there unconscious, the sweat poured down her brow, the man in the fur cap is motionless, and so she stood helplessly, seeing only the window before her, the window-frame and her own reflection in the dirty glass, then the train, which had been forced to stall for a few more minutes, started up again and, exhausted by the furious succession of images, her mind buzzing, she watched the dark empty landscape swimming by outside under the heavy sky in which, even in the moonlight, the masses of cloud were barely distinguishable. But neither the sky nor the landscape meant anything to her and she only realized she had practically arrived when the train clattered over the level-crossing over the main road leading into town, and she stepped out into the corridor, stood before the door and, bending to the shadow cast by her hand, saw the local industrial warehouses and the clumsy water-tower looming above them. Ever since her childhood, such things—level-crossings on highways, long flat buildings steaming in unbearable heat—were the first assuring reminders that she had arrived home still in one piece, and although this time she had particular cause for relief, since they would bring to an end circumstances of no ordinary hardship, and could almost feel the wild drumming in her heart that used to start up whenever she returned from her infrequent visits to relatives, or from the county capital where, once or twice a year, she attended the performance of some favourite operetta together with some members of her dispersed family, when the friendly warmth of the town served as a natural bastion protecting her home, now, and indeed for the last two or three months, but particularly now, after the shameful revelation that the world was full of people with unshaven faces and broadcloth overcoats, nothing of that sense of intimacy remained but a cold maze of empty streets where not only the faces behind the windows but the windows themselves stared blindly out at her and the silence was 'broken only by the sharp yelp of bickering dogs'. She watched the approaching lights of town and once the

train had passed the industrial estate with its car park and was making its way along the row of poplars lining the track which was only just discernible in the darkness, she anxiously scanned the as-yet-pale and distant glow of streetlamps and illuminated houses to locate the three-storey block containing her apartment—anxiously, for the feeling of acute relief on realizing that she was home at last was immediately succeeded by terror, because she knew all too well that the train being now almost two hours late she couldn't count on the usual evening bus service, and so would have to walk ('And, what is more, alone …') all the way home from the station—and, even before confronting that issue, there still remained the problem of actually getting off the train. Small allotments with kitchen gardens and locked sheds sped by beneath the window, followed by the bridge over the frozen canal and the old mill behind it; but they conveyed no sense of release, suggesting rather further, fearful stations of her cross, because Mrs Plauf was almost crushed by the knowledge that while she was only a few steps from freedom, suddenly there, behind her back, at any moment, some wholly incomprehensible something might leap out and attack her. Her whole body was covered in sweat. Hopelessly she observed the extended yard of the sawmill with its piles of logs, the tumbledown railwayman's hut, the old steam engine slumbering in the sidings and the weak light percolating through the barred glass walls of the repair sheds. There was still no movement behind her, she was still standing by herself in the corridor. She gripped the ice-cold handle of the door but couldn't decide: if she opened it too early someone might push her out, if too late then 'that inhuman band of murderers' might catch up with her. The train slowed alongside an infinitely long row of stationary wagons, and squealed to a halt. As the door opened, she practically leapt off, saw the sharp stones between the sleepers, heard her pursuers behind her, and quickly found herself outside in the station forecourt. No one attacked her but by some ill-chance which coincided with her arrival the lights in the vicinity suddenly went out, as did, so it soon transpired, every other light in town. Looking neither left nor right but keeping her eyes firmly at her feet so she shouldn't stumble in the dark, she hurried over to the bus-stop hoping against hope that the bus might have waited for the train to come in, or that she might still catch the night-service, should there be one. But there was not a single vehicle waiting, nor could she count on the 'night-service' since, according to the timetable hanging beside the main entrance to the station, the last bus

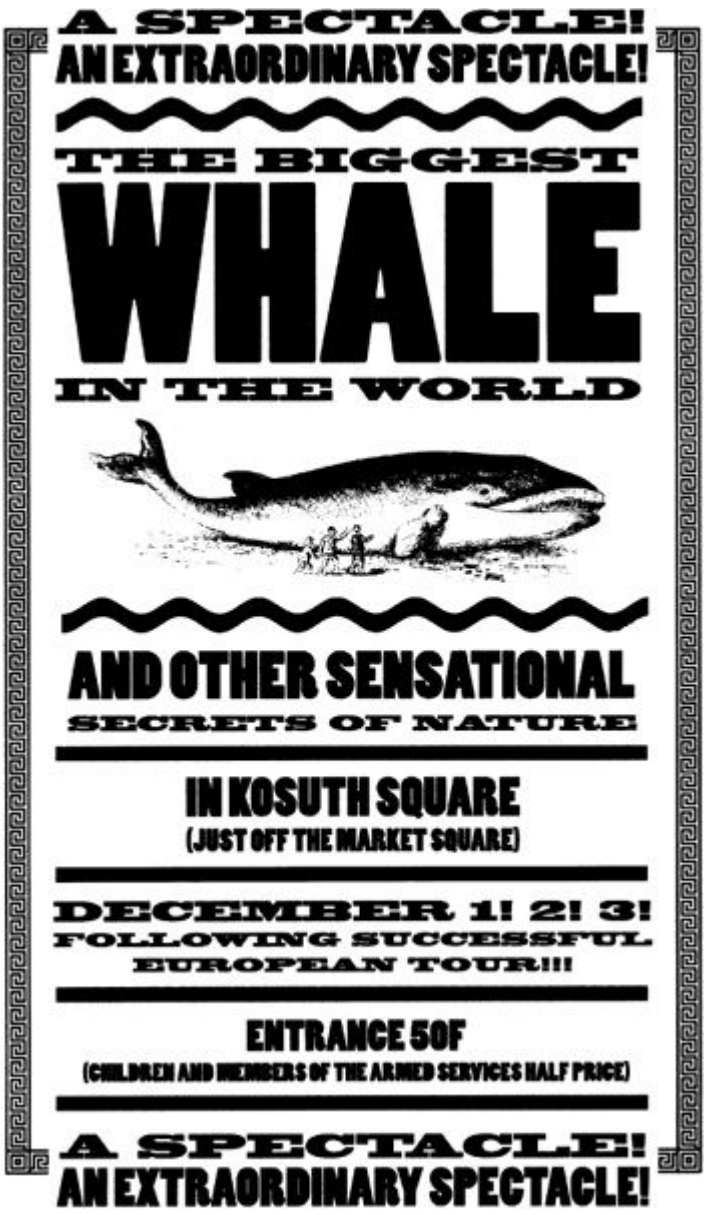
was precisely the one that would have left soon after the scheduled arrival of the train, and in any case the whole sheet was ruled through with two thick lines. Her attempts to forestall the others were all in vain, for while she stood perusing the timetable, the forecourt had become a dense forest of fur caps, greasy peasant hats and ear-flaps, and, as she was gathering courage to set out on her own, she was assailed by the terrible question of what all these people were doing here anyway; and the feeling she had almost forgotten, the awful memory of which had been practically washed away by other feelings in the rear of the compartment, now stabbed at her again as she saw, among the crowd loitering to the left of her, on the far side, the man in the broadcloth coat; it was as if he were searching about, looking for something, then he turned on his heels and was gone. This all happened so quickly, and he was so far away from her (to say nothing of the fact that it was dark and it had become almost impossible to distinguish the genuine from monsters of the imagination), that she couldn't be absolutely certain it was really him, but the mere possibility so scared her that she cut through the idle ominous mass of bodies and, almost at a run, set off down the wide main road leading home. As it happened she wasn't altogether surprised, for however unreal this seemed (hadn't her whole journey been utterly unreal?!) even on the train, when to her great disappointment she spotted him a second time, something inside her had whispered that her involvement with the unshaven man—and the terrifying ordeal of the attempted rape—was far from over, and that now, when she had not only the fear of 'bandits attacking her from behind' to drive her forward but the prospect of him ('If it really was him, and the whole thing wasn't just imagination') leaping out at her from some doorway, her feet stumbled on as if unable to decide whether it was more advisable in such a tight spot to retreat or run ahead. She had long left behind the enigmatic square of the station forecourt, had passed the junction with Zöldág Road which led to the pediatric hospital, but not a soul did she encounter (meeting someone she knew might be her salvation) below the bare wild chestnut trees of the unswervingly straight avenue, and beside the sound of her own breath, the light squeak of her footsteps and the humming of the wind in her face she heard nothing, only the steady quiet puffing of what might have been some distant, unrecognizable machine whose sound vaguely reminded her of an ancient sawmill. Although she continued to resist the force of circumstances which seemed to have been created expressly to challenge such resolution,

in the complete absence of streetlight and the still oppressive silence she began to feel ever more like a victim cast to her fate, for wherever she looked, seeking the filtered lights of apartments, the place assumed the look of all cities under siege, where, regarding all further effort as pointless and superfluous, the inhabitants have surrendered even the last traces of endangered human presence in the belief that while the streets and squares have been lost, the thick walls of buildings behind which they cower afford shelter from any serious harm. She trod the uneven surface of rubbish frozen to the pavements and had just passed the minimal display of the ortopéd shop, a once popular showroom of the local shoe-manufacturing cooperative, when, before crossing over the next junction, more out of habit than anything else (owing to the petrol shortage there hadn't been much traffic even when she'd set out to visit her relatives), she took a glance down the darkness of Erdélyi Sándor Road which, because the closed precincts of the law courts and the jail with their high, barbed-wire-topped walls running the length of it, was known by the locals simply as 'Judgement Street'. Down in its depths, around the artesian well, she glimpsed a clotted mass of shadows, a dumb group, who, it suddenly seemed to her, were silently beating someone. In her fright she immediately took to her heels, every now and then casting a look behind her, and only slackened her pace once she knew that the law courts were far behind and that no one had emerged to pursue her. No one had emerged and no one was following her, nothing disturbed the deathly calm of the necropolis, except the increasingly loud puffing, and in the terrifying ripeness of that silence, to which the unbroken quiet round the artesian well, where some crime, for what else could it be, was being committed, raised an echo (not a single cry for help, not the single smack of a blow), it no longer seemed strange that there should be so few stragglers about, though despite the almost quarantine-like isolation of individuals in ordinary circumstances, she should by now have met one or two nighthawks like herself in a thoroughfare as broad and long as Baron Béla Wenckheim Avenue, especially so close to the city centre. Driven by her sense of foreboding, she hurried on, feeling ever more convinced that she was crossing some nightmare terrain permeated by evil, then, as she got ever closer to the source of that now clearly audible puffing, and through the bars of the wild chestnut trees could see the heap of machinery which produced it, she felt quite certain that, exhausted as she was by her struggles against the powers

of terror, she was imagining, simply imagining everything, for what she saw in that first glance seemed not only stupefying but downright impossible. Not far from her, a spectral contraption was moving at melancholy pace through the winter night down the middle of the road—that is if this satanic conveyance, whose desperately slow crawl reminded her of a steamroller struggling to gain each centimetre of ground, could be said to be moving at all: it wasn't even a matter of overcoming strong wind resistance on the normal road surface, but of ploughing through a tract of dense, refractory clay. Sheathed in blue corrugated iron and sealed on every side, the lorry, which reminded her of an enormous wagon, was covered with bright yellow writing (an indecipherable dark-brown shape hovered at the centre of the inscriptions) and was much higher and longer—she noted incredulously—than those vast Turkish trucks that used to pass through town, and the whole shapeless hulk, which smelled vaguely of fish, was being drawn by a smoking, oily and wholly antediluvian wreck of a tractor which was making fearful exertions in the process. Once she caught up with it though, her curiosity overcame her fear and she paced along beside the vehicle for a while, peering at the clumsy foreign letters—obviously the work of an inexpert hand—but even up close their meaning remained inscrutable (could it be Slavic … or Turkish? …), and it was impossible to say what purpose the thing served, or indeed what it was doing here at all in the very heart of this frosty, windswept and deserted town—or even how it had managed to get here since, if this was its normal speed, it would have taken years for it to have made it from the nearest village, and it was hard to imagine (though there seemed no alternative) that it would have been brought in by rail. She lengthened her stride again and it was only once she had left the awesome juggernaut behind and glanced back that she spotted a heavily built and bewhiskered man with an indifferent expression on his face, wearing only a vest on top, with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, who—once he noticed her on the pavement—pulled a face and slowly raised his right hand from the wheel as if to greet the gaping figure outside. All this was highly unusual (to crown it all, it must have been rather overheated in the cabin for the mountain of flesh behind the wheel to feel so warm), and the more she kept glancing back at the vehicle as she moved away, the more exotic a monster did it seem, encapsulating in its appearance all that life had so recently thrown at her: the past, it seemed to say, was no longer what it had been but was crawling remorselessly ahead

below the windows of unsuspecting people. From this moment she was convinced she was in the grip of a terrible nightmare, only there was no waking from this one: no, she was quite certain that it was reality, only more so; furthermore she realized that the chilling events in which she had been participant or to which she had been witness (the appearance of the phantasmagorical vehicle, the violence in Erdélyi Sándor Road, the lights going off with all the precision of an explosive device, the inhuman rabble in the station forecourt, and above all this, dominating everything, the cold unremitting stare of the figure in the broadcloth coat) were not merely the oppressive creations of her ever-troubled imagination, but part of a scheme so co-ordinated, so precise, that there could be no doubt of their purpose. At the same time she was constrained to make every effort to reject such an extraordinary fantasy, and she kept hoping that there might be some clear, however depressing, explanation for the mob, the weird truck, the outbreak of fighting, or, if for nothing else, for the extraordinary power cut that affected everything; all this she hoped because she couldn't quite allow herself to lapse into a wholesale acceptance of a state of affairs so irrational as to permit the general security of the town to go down the drain together with every other sign of order. Sadly she had to forgo even this slim hope: for while the issue of the blacked-out streetlamps remained unresolved, the destination of the truck with its terrible load, and the nature of that load, were not to remain a mystery for long. She had passed the house of the local celebrity, György Eszter, had left behind the night noises of the park surrounding the old Wooden Theatre and had reached the tiny Evangelical Church when her glance happened to light on a round advertising pillar: she stopped dead in her tracks, stepped closer, then simply stood, and, in case she had made a mistake, read and reread the text which looked like the kind of thing a tramp from some outlying estate might scrawl, though a single perusal should have been enough since the poster, which had obviously been freshly pasted over all the others and still showed traces of fresh paste at the edges, offered an explanation of sorts. She thought that if she could finally isolate one distinct element of the chaos, she would find it easier to orientate herself and so ('God forbid it should be necessary …!' of course) defend herself 'in case of a total collapse', though the feeble light shed on this by the text only increased her anxiety, the problem all along having been that nothing seemed to provide the faintest shadow of an explanation for the whole cycle of events she had been forced to witness as victim or

bystander, till now—as if that ‘feeble light’ (‘The Biggest Whale in the World, and other sensational secrets of nature’) were all too much at once—when she was driven to speculate whether there might not be some firm, yet incomprehensible reason at work in this. Because, well, a circus? Here?! When the end of the world was all too imminent? Fancy allowing such a nightmare menagerie, to say nothing of that evil-smelling beast, into the town! When the place is threatening enough as it is! Who has time for entertainments now, when we’re in a state of anarchy? What an idiotic joke! What a ridiculous, cruel idea! … Or could it be … could it mean precisely that … that it was all over and it didn’t matter any more? That someone was ‘fiddling while Rome burned’?! She hurried away from the pillar and crossed the road. There was a row of two-storey houses on that side, some with a faint light sifting through their windows. She gripped her handbag firmly and leaned into the wind. Reaching the last doorway, she took a



quick last look round, opened the door and locked it behind her. The banisters were icy cold. The palm tree which had been the one jealously guarded splash of colour in the house—and which had been plainly beyond rescue even before her departure—was now most certainly past resuscitation, having frozen to death in the winter. There was a suffocating silence around her. She had arrived. A slip of paper with a message on it had been stuck behind the handle of the door. She took the briefest glance at it, pulled a face then entered, turning the keys in both locks and immediately engaging the safety chain. She leaned against the door and closed her eyes. ‘Thank heaven! I’m home.’ The flat was, as people say, the well-deserved fruit of several years of careful work. When her second husband of blessed memory died

suddenly and tragically some five years ago as the result of a stroke and she had had to bury him too, and then, not much later, when her relationship with her son from the first marriage, a boy ‘always in flight, always on the move; with never any improvement in prospect’—resembling in this his father, from whom he clearly inherited the heavy burden of his tendency to depravity—also became untenable and he moved into a sublet, not only did she find she could reconcile herself to the unavoidable, she even felt a little easier in her mind, for however depressed she was by the consciousness of her loss (she had, after all, lost two husbands and—since he no longer existed for her—a son as well), she could clearly see that there was no longer any reason why, at the age of fifty-eight, having always been ‘one or other man’s fool’, she should not at last live entirely for herself. She therefore exchanged—at a notably handsome profit—the family house, which was now too big for her, for a ‘darling’ little flat in the city centre (with intercom in the gateway), and, for the first time in her life, while her acquaintances accorded her unusual respect on account of her loss of two husbands and only tactfully mentioned the son who was generally known to be no good, she, who had up till then owned no more than some bedlinen and the clothes she stood up in, set about the full enjoyment of her own property. She purchased soft imitation-Persian rugs for her floors, tulle curtains and ‘gaily coloured’ blinds for her windows, then, getting rid of the old cumbersome wall unit, installed a new one; heeding the smart advice of the locally highly popular magazine *Interiors,* she refurbished her kitchen on modern lines, had the walls newly painted, chucked out her clumsy old gas convector, and completely refitted the bathroom. She knew no fatigue, she was, as her neighbour, Mrs Virág, acknowledged, bursting with energy; but she only began to feel really in her element once the major work was over and she could start prettifying her ‘little nest’. She was full of ideas: her imagination knew no bounds and she would return from shopping expeditions with, now, a hall mirror in a wrought-iron frame, now, a ‘so-practical’ onion-slicer and now, some eye-catching clothes-brush with, wondrous to behold, an inlaid panorama of the town on the handle. Despite this, some two years after the sad memory of her son’s departure—he had left in tears, she could hardly get him out of the door, and (‘for whole days!’) she was unable to shake off a fog of depression—and despite the fact that, thanks to two years of feverish activity there was hardly a square inch of unoccupied space remaining in the flat, she still felt strangely

disorientated by a sense that there was something missing from her life. She bought the last of a set of sweet little china figurines to complete the collection in her cabinet, but realized all too soon that it was not going to fill the void; she racked her brains, reviewed matters, even asked her neighbour for advice, then, one afternoon (when she happened to be working on the latest piece of 'Irma' embroidery in the comfy armchair), while her eyes were resting on the china swans and gypsy girls with guitars and had moved along the rank of tearful little boys to the recumbent young girls, so conducive to daydreaming and feelings of happiness, it suddenly occurred to her what 'important thing' was missing. Flowers. She did possess two rubber plants and a sickly asparagus that she had brought over from the house, but these fell some way short of providing a satisfactory object for what she referred to as her newly resurrected 'maternal instincts'. And since, among her acquaintances, there were many who 'liked pretty things', she soon acquired a range of beautiful cuttings and buds and bulbs, so much so that within a few years spent in the company of green-fingered friends such as Dr Provaznyik, Mrs Mádai and, of course, Mrs Mahó, not only were her window-sills densely populated by carefully tended miniature palms, philodendra and mother-in-law's tongue, but she had to order, first one, then three more flower-stands all at once, from a locksmith's shop in the Romanian quarter, because eventually there was nowhere else to put the numerous fuchsias, aluminium plants and armies of cacti, in what her feelings told her had become a 'heart-warmingly homely' little flat. And could it be that all this—the soft rugs, the gaily coloured curtains, the comfortable furniture, the mirror, the onion-slicer, the clothes-brush, the much-praised flowers, and the sense of calm, security, happiness and content they provided—was really all as wood to the fire, finished and done with?! She felt utterly exhausted. The slip of paper in her left hand slid from her fingers and fell to the floor. She opened her eyes, looked at the clock on the wall above the kitchen door, watched the frisky second hand skip from digit to digit, and though it seemed impossible that any further danger should threaten her, however she yearned for peace her feelings of insecurity persisted; her mind was racing furiously, now this or the other experience assumed major significance, and so—having taken off her coat, pulled off her boots, massaged her heavily swollen feet and tucked them into her warm comfy slippers—she first cast a careful eye up and down the deserted main street from her window (but there was 'not a soul to be seen,

no one prowling in the shadows … only the enormous circus wagon … and that unbearable puffing sound …'), then, to check that everything was there, she went through all her cupboards and wardrobes, and finally interrupted a thorough handwashing, thinking that she had better check all the locks just once more in case she had forgotten the most important one. By this time she had calmed down a little, picked up, read and furiously discarded the note into the kitchen litter-bin (four lines, one under the other, saying 'Hello, Mama, I called,' three of them crossed through), then went back into the living room, turned up the heating and, to put an end to all her anxiety, examined each of her plants in turn, for, she reasoned, if she found nothing wrong with them, everything else would fall into place. She had no reason to be disappointed in her obliging neighbour, who, as well as giving the place a daily airing, had been urged to keep a careful eye on her jealously tended flowers: the earth in the pots was nicely damp, and her 'slightly simple and outspoken but essentially good-hearted and conscientious friend' had even thought to dust down the leaves of some of the most sensitive palms. 'Dear Rózsi, so utterly priceless!' sighed Mrs Plauf, in an excess of sentiment, and now that she could see in her mind's eye—however briefly—that ample figure forever bustling about, and could settle back into one of her apple-green armchairs to survey once more her undamaged possessions, everything appeared in perfect 'ship-shape order': the floor, the ceiling, the walls with their floral patterns, all surrounding her with such an air of unshakeable security that her previous sufferings seemed merely a bad dream, the ugly product of strained nerves and a sick imagination. Yes, it might all have been a dream, since she, who for years had lived out a routine of spring-cleaning in the spring and jam- and preserve-making in the autumn, of crochet work in the afternoons, and a daily round comprising the usual cares and joys of passionate indoor gardening, had got used to observing the crazy whirlpool, the mad comings and goings of the outside world, from the decent distance and kindly shelter of her inner one, knowing that whatever fell outside its scope was cloudy, formless and uncertain, and now—when she could sit in peace behind the never-yet-disturbed security of her closed doors it was as if she had turned a lock on the whole world—the unfortunate experience of her journey began to seem less real, and a translucent veil seemed to descend between it and her, so she could only just make out the raucous passengers on the branch-line, the petrifying look of the man in the broadcloth coat, the fat woman

tipping over to one side, the darkness in which some poor unfortunate was being silently beaten by the crowd of shadows about him; only indistinctly discern the peculiar circus, the thick cross drawn through the yellowed paper of the timetable; and, even more faintly, herself, like a lost soul, trying desperately now this way now that to make her way home. The outlines of her immediate surroundings grew progressively more distinct as her sufferings of the past few hours lost their reality, though the terrible images of the urine-smelling privy, the filthy gravel between the rails and the circus employee waving to her from his cabin still swirled rapidly and unbearably around her mind. Here, surrounded by her flowers and furniture, in the deepening consciousness of her invulnerability, she no longer feared an assault and felt the tension due to her constant vigilance slowly dissolve, though this did not alleviate her permanent state of anxiety, which had settled like gruel in the stomach and permeated her whole being. Besides, she felt more exhausted than she had ever felt before, and therefore decided to go immediately to bed. It took her only a few minutes to shower and wash out her underwear, then, drawing a warm dressing gown over her thick nightdress, she looked into the pantry, so that while ‘she couldn’t really settle down to a proper supper’ she might at least pick at a bit of preserve before sleep. Considering the times, the pantry, which served as the hub of the whole flat, contained a surprisingly rich store of food: joints of ham with strings of paprika hung like necklaces about them, spicy sausages and smoked bacon suspended from high hooks and, in their shadow on the floor, a low barricade comprised of bags of sugar, flour, salt and rice; neatly ranged on either side of the cupboard were further bags, of coffee beans, poppy seeds and walnuts, not to mention spices, potatoes and onions, a complete bastion of provisions whose copiousness bore ample witness—much as the beautiful forest of dazzling plants outside did—to its creator’s foresight, the whole crowned by ranks of benevolent-looking jars of preserves arranged with military precision along the shelves lining the middle wall. Here was everything she had had time to bottle since the beginning of summer, from fruit in syrup and various savouries, through tomato juice to walnuts preserved in honey, and she ran her eye over the glittering glassware in her usual way, not quite knowing which to choose, finally returning to her room with a jar of boiled cherries in rum; then, before settling back into the apple-green armchair, more out of habit than genuine curiosity, she turned on the television. She leaned back and

stretched out, resting her tired feet on a little pouffe, and, refreshed as she was by her shower, in the by-now-pleasant warmth, she was delighted to see that it was operetta time on TV again: perhaps there was hope after all, perhaps the old sense of peace and calm was returning. For she knew very well that while the world remained as infinitely beyond her reach—in her star-struck son's idiotic phrase, the one he loved to repeat *ad nauseam*—'as light exceeds vision', and realized perfectly clearly, that while those, including herself, who snuggled down in quiet little nests, in tiny oases of decency and consideration, continued to go in fear and trembling of events outside, the furious hordes of the anarchic unshaven would instinctively assume command: it was simply that she never rebelled against the ways of the world but accepted its incomprehensible laws, was grateful for its little joys, and therefore felt justified in believing that she could proceed on the assumption, she consoled herself, that fate would spare her and her mode of life. It would spare her and protect the miniature island of her existence; it would not tolerate the possibility that she—and here Mrs Plauf searched for the right words—she who had never desired anything but peace for herself and her fellow human beings, should fall prey to them. The charming delicate strains of the light operetta *(Countess Maritsa* …! she recognized with an immediate thrill of pleasure) swept through the room like a gentle spring breeze, and once she was away, rocking on 'sweet waves of song', the startling images of the emergency train with its freight of vulgar folk which had risen anew to terrify her no longer did so, for what she felt for them now was not so much fear as contempt—in fact, precisely what she had felt at the outset of her journey, when she had first glimpsed them in that filthy compartment. The two distinct elements of that unsavoury crowd ('crude gregarious types scoffing salami' / 'silent murderers') had become so confused in her mind that she felt free at last to look down at them from her eminence, to rise, as it were, above her sorry circumstances, just as the music that flooded from her set rose and covered the earth and all its terrors. It might well be, she speculated thus emboldened, splitting another sweet cherry between her teeth in front of the television, that for now the scum gathered out there in the darkness of night had the run of the place, but, in due course and proper manner, once the racket they made had finally become quite unbearable, they would scurry back where they came from, because, thought Mrs Plauf, that is where they belong, beyond the pale of our fair and ordered world, excluded from it for ever without remission.

Until that day arrived, and proper justice was meted out, she went on ever more certain of her own opinions in the matter, let all hell break loose, she would ignore it: she had *absolutely nothing* to do with this mess, this inhuman tyranny, these people who were nothing but jailbait and, while things were as they were, the streets being occupied by such, she would not so much as put her foot outside the house, would refuse to have herself involved in any manner, would not hear another word about it until this disgraceful state of affairs came to an end, until the skies brightened and mutual understanding and sober restraint were once again the order of the day. Lulled and fortified by these thoughts, she watched the triumph of Count Tasilo and the Countess Maritsa as, after many trials and tribulations, they found each other at last, and was about to melt weepy-eyed in the overwhelming happiness of the introduction to the finale when, unexpectedly, she heard the buzzing of the intercom in the gateway. She clutched at her heart, shaking with terror ('He has found me! He has followed me!') then, assuming a mask of outrage ('Really! How dare he!'), she glanced up at the clock on the wall and hastened to the gate. It couldn't be either a neighbour or a friend, since, originally as a matter of breeding, and nowadays for lack of courage in tackling the town after seven o'clock at night, people did not call on each other, and so, having dismissed from her mind the likelihood that it might be the nightmarish figure in the broadcloth coat, she had little doubt who it actually would be. Ever since she had moved into this sublet of the Harrers, it had, unfortunately, become the practice of her son to turn up at least every third night, often in a wine-sodden state, either to plague her for hours with his mad obsessive talk about stars and planets, or, more frequently on recent occasions, tearfully, bearing flowers his disillusioned mother was convinced he had stolen 'to recompense her for all the pain he had caused her by his disobedience'. If she had told him once, she had told him a thousand times, in fact every time she finally managed to get rid of him: he was not to come, he was not to bother her, he should leave her in peace, she didn't want to see him, he shouldn't so much as set a foot inside her flat, and yes, she really meant it, really didn't want to see him, that twenty-seven miserable years spent in his company was quite enough, that not a day, not a minute, went by but she blushed in shame at having such a son. As she confessed to her sympathetic cronies, she had tried everything she could think of, and later announced that just because her son was incapable of becoming a decent human being

she did not see why she should suffer for his behaviour. She had suffered with Valuska senior, her first husband, who had been completely ruined by alcohol, and she had suffered more than enough with her son—she stressed this time and again to all her acquaintances. They advised her—and she often followed their advice—that 'until this mad son of hers gave up his bad habits she should, quite simply, refuse to let him in', but not only was this hard 'for a mother's tender heart to bear', she also had to admit that it was no real solution. After all, it was useless laying down the law while the will that might have enabled him to adopt a normal lifestyle was clearly weak or absent; it was pointless him calling, pointless for Valuska junior—still playing the vagrant—to look in on the third day and proclaim with a radiant expression on his face that 'his will was now resolved', not once but again and again. Resigning herself to the hopeless struggle, to the knowledge that nowadays, in his incurable simplicity, he wouldn't even understand what his mother wanted of him, she invariably sent him packing and that is what she intended to do right now, though when the answer came over the phone, instead of the usual stuttering plea ('It's … it's only me … mama …'), she heard the confidential murmur of a woman's voice. 'Who?' asked Mrs Plauf again in her surprise, and for a second she held the receiver away from her ear. 'Only me, Piri love! Mrs Eszter!' 'Mrs Eszter?! Here?! At this time?!'—she exclaimed, and started to fidget irresolutely with her gown. This woman was one of those people whom Mrs Plauf—and as far as she knew, everyone in town—'kept at arm's length', indeed it was as if they were practically strangers, for apart from giving her the unavoidable but naturally cool nod in the street when they met, she had hardly exchanged a dozen words with her about the weather in the course of the whole year—in the circumstances, therefore, her visit was more than surprising. It wasn't just Mrs Eszter's 'scandalous past, loose morals and currently confused family situation' that made her the perennial topic of her friends' conversation, but also the fact that in her colossal arrogance she refused to acknowledge either that, on the one hand, her rude, bumptious and pushy manner and 'gaudy clothes, so befitting her tub-of-lard figure' offended the more respectable families in the neighbourhood, or, on the other, that her impudent attempts to curry favour through displays of hypocrisy—'enough to put a chameleon to shame'—excited both distaste and opposition. As if this were not enough, ever since a few months ago she had taken advantage of the lack of vigilance occasioned by the recent disorder and atmosphere of

anxiety to get herself appointed—through the influence of her lover, the chief of police—as president of the women's committee, she had become even more stuck up than before, her jowls wobbling with pride and triumphant glee, or, as a neighbour so neatly put it, 'glowing with a nauseating smirk of what she considers charm'. On the pretext of a courtesy visit she had managed to worm her way into even those households that until recently were barred to her. It was plain enough that Mrs Eszter was about some such mischief right now, so she padded down towards the gate with the firm intention of giving her a severe lecture on her lack of manners ('The creature clearly lacks even the most minimal awareness of when it is proper to call on people!'), and to express her general tendency to reticence the most direct way, by sending her packing. However, this wasn't how things turned out.

It wasn't how things turned out, nor could it have been, since Mrs Eszter knew very well whom she was dealing with and thought it natural that she, who—as her friend, the chief of police, daily whispered in her ear—was, 'in terms of height and body-weight, positively gigantic … not to mention the other things', should, with her inborn sense of superiority and notorious intolerance of opposition, flatten the resistance of stubborn Mrs Plauf. After sugaring her up with a few crooned 'my dears', she adopted a ringing manly tone and proclaimed that while she herself was in absolutely no doubt about the time of night, it was of vital importance that she should speak to her then and there on 'a private matter that could not be deferred', and thereupon taking advantage of the brief and predictable paralysis suffered by the shocked Mrs Plauf, she simply bundled her through the gate, stormed up the stairs and, bobbing her head out of habit ('I wouldn't want to give it a painful crack'), passed straight through the open door into the hall where, to divert attention from the urgency of her visit, she engaged in little formalities about the 'excellent situation' of the flat, the 'ingenious pattern' of the hallway carpet and the general 'enviably refined good taste'—a taste of whose 'common vulgarity' she was convinced by the time she had darted a few glances about as she hung up her coat. It would be hard to state with any certainty whether the 'diverting her attention' ploy truly represented the precise nature of her intentions, since the fact was that her aim—having regard, that is, to the urgency of her need to spend a quarter of an hour or so with Valuska's mother before the day was over, so that, if they chanced to meet the following day, she could refer to the visit—

might have been achieved in any number of ways; however, despite this, she did not after all choose the solution closest to hand (which was, in fact, immediately to sit down in one of those repulsive armchairs and steer the conversation round to ‘that desire for renovation and rejuvenation so evident in the country at large and, in this context, the now-in-every-way-more-energetic work of the keenly enthusiastic local women’s committee’), for though she had made allowance for it, the cosy comfiness, the stolid air of inactivity, the treacly prettiness of this ‘filthy little viper’s nest’ had such a strong effect on her that, suppressing her repulsion with a great effort born out of tactfulness, she was constrained to examine every item in her hostess’s armoury with the gre-a-test of care. Accompanied by Mrs Plauf, who in her fury and confusion hardly dared to breathe a word, but ran along behind her, red-faced, treading on her heels and readjusting each disturbed item, she ran her eyes carefully over each nook and cranny of the flat, stifling under its load of bric-à-brac, and, with feigned appreciation (since ‘it wasn’t yet time to lay one’s cards on the table’), she deployed her booming alto voice to declare, ‘Yes, undoubtedly, women lend meaning to the lifeless objects around them; it is women, and only women, who can provide what we call that individual charm,’ while struggling desperately with the ever more intense temptation to crush one of those little knick-knacks in her enormous palm, to snap it as one would the neck of a chicken, since, damn it all, these comb racks and lace doilies, that swan’s-neck ashtray, the velveteen ‘Persian’ carpet, the ridiculously wispy tulle curtains and, behind the glass of the showcase, those straggling sentimental novels with their hot, sticky, airless contents, most graphically demonstrated to her where the world had got to with its petty unbridled indulgence in ‘idle pleasures and feeble desires’. She saw and made a mental note of everything, nothing escaped her attention, and taking it all in, having summoned all her self-control, she tortured herself further by taking a bitter delight in breathing in the scent-polluted air of the flat, which reminded her so precisely of ‘the sickeningly dainty pong of doll’s-houses’ and which, even a mile away, eloquently proclaimed the pitiable condition of its inhabitant, it was a stink from which she shrank, especially as, even on the threshold, it induced in her—or so she was wont to remark with withering sarcasm to the chief of police whenever she returned from one of her informal visits following her election—an earnest desire to vomit. Whether it was just her tendency to mockery or a genuine case of nausea, her friend

could be quite certain that she was being subjected to no ordinary trials and tribulations, for ever since ‘the spirit of communal will had finally been recovered’ sufficiently to elevate her from the position of leader of the local male-voice choir (a post which occasioned her some humiliation and one whose demands were relieved only by that so-called ‘exclusive repertoire’ of marches, work songs and odes to spring) to president of the women’s committee, a figurehead of iron will, she had had to fritter her days away (‘hours at a time’) in such flats, if only to demonstrate to herself, again and again, that what she had suspected all along was in fact true beyond the shadow of a doubt. For clearly as she saw that it was precisely in such debilitating circumstances—among over-sweetened preserves and fluffy eiderdowns, among rugs with their fringes combed straight and armchairs protected by tightly knotted covers—that every powerful urge came to grief; that it was in this fatal slough—populated by those who considered themselves to be the cream of local society, who in their ridiculous house slippers devoured equally ridiculous operettas and treated simple healthier folk with contempt—that each decent impulse sank to oblivion; she understood the phenomenon all too well, and saw that despite, for example, the months of work following the presidential launch of the epoch-making campaign for renewal, the movement had unfortunately been frustrated. To be honest it was no more than she had expected so she wasn’t really surprised when this fine society of parasites, saturated by their own sense of self-worth, coolly rejected her carefully considered arguments, since behind the eternal excuses (such as, for example, ‘A clean-up in December? Perhaps later when it’s time for proper spring-cleaning …’), Mrs Eszter saw straight to the heart of their opposition, understanding that their impotence and craven servility sprang from an unreasonable, though, to them, justified, fear of all enterprise that aimed at general renewal, a renewal which, to them, might look like general decay, for in all passionate espousals of the new, people were liable to detect traces of an equally passionate drift towards chaos, and—quite rightly—suspect that the powers unleashed, instead of protecting that which was irrecoverably dead and buried, would smash it to pieces in the good cause of replacing the featureless boredom of their selfish lives with ‘the elevating passion of communal action’. One couldn’t deny that in this evaluation of the unusual and anarchic events of the immediate past—her confidant, the captain, and one or two right-minded people excepted—she probably stood alone in the

town, but this gave her no cause for concern, nor did she think it necessary to reconsider her position, because something whispered to her that ‘the victory that justified all’ would not be long delayed. As to the question of what this victory would consist of, she could not have answered it in one or two simple sentences, but her faith was so firm that however resistant or numerous ‘these refined coteries of slippered old pantaloons’ might be she would not be cowed, for not only had she really nothing to fear from them, but she knew full well that the true enemy—and this was why this battle for hearts and minds had become such a personal struggle for her—was György Eszter himself, a man generally regarded as an eccentric hermit living in absolute isolation, but in fact merely sickly and lazy, Eszter, her semi-respectable husband-in-name, who, unlike her, ‘had no record whatsoever of involvement in civic affairs’—who had attained an ambiguous celebrity in town by spending years lying in bed so that (‘let us say’) once a week he could take a peek out of his window … Could he be the true enemy? He was more than that: for Mrs Eszter he was both ‘the hopeless and insurmountable walls of hell’, and, at the same time, her only hope of maintaining her well-earned place among the most influential citizens, in other words a snare, the perfect, faultless trap whose effectiveness it was vain to doubt, one she could neither escape nor wreck. Because, now, as always, Eszter continued to be the key to the operation, the decisive link in the chain of the fulfilment of her high ambition, the very man who, years ago, when, owing to what he called his ‘back problems’, gave up the directorship of the local school of music, told her quite simply and with boundless cynicism that he ‘no longer required her household services’, and she had had to dig deep into their savings to rent herself a flat by the marketplace, the very man who, to compound his deed—as an act of revenge, for what else could it be?—abandoned such few commitments as they had shared, and resigned his post as director of the town’s orchestra, because, apparently, as she was to hear from others, he was no longer interested in anything but music and did not wish to take up his time with other things although Mrs Eszter, if anyone, could have told the world what ear-splittingly false notes he jangled out on that del-i-ber-at-ely out-of-tune piano, only, of course, if and when he could bring himself to rouse that body of his, enfeebled as it was by his habit of lounging about, and extricate himself from his monstrous piles of soft cushions and travelling rugs. When she thought back on all those years of endless humiliation, she would

happily have given anything to have taken a handy axe and chopped her insufferable husband into tiny pieces there where he lay, but she knew very well that this was the one expedient not even remotely open to her since she had to admit that without Eszter the town would remain closed to her, and that whatever she set her mind on she would continually be running up against him. Explaining their separation by reference to her husband's need for solitude and quiet working conditions, she was forced to maintain the appearance of marriage, and to suppress even the thought of a fiercely desired divorce; worse still she had to resign herself to the fact that with the assistance of Eszter's disciple and favourite, the terminally lunatic Valuska, Mrs Plauf's degenerate son from her first marriage, her husband—at first secretly but later quite openly so the whole town knew about it—had taken to doing all the washing, including the 'filthy underclothes'. The situation looked undeniably grave but Mrs Eszter was not to be defeated: though she didn't know whether personal revenge or 'the struggle for the common good' was the more appropriate, or whether it was more important to pay back Eszter ('for everything!') or to render her own rather unstable 'position' impregnable, of one thing she was certain, that this unfortunate state of affairs could not last for ever, and that one day, perhaps even in the not-too-distant future, once she had achieved a fully deserved power and attained high enough rank, she could finally settle the hash of this pathetic scoundrel who was 'determined' to make a laughing stock of her and make her life a misery. And she had sound enough reasons for thinking that things might turn out like this, because (for it wasn't simply a case of, 'It must be so, therefore it will be so') the office of president not only presented the opportunity of 'a free hand and the unfettered exercise of power', but was also an encouraging sign of her growing independence from him—not to mention the fact that since she had discovered how to gain the support of the obstinate bourgeoisie for the drastic measures envisaged by the committee and, at the same time, re-established her useful connection with Eszter, her self-confidence, which had been sadly lacking, was now boundless and she was fully convinced that she was on the right road and that no one could stop her marching directly towards her goal … The plan was foolproof after all, and, naturally, like all 'strokes of genius', simple as pie, it was just that, as is usually the case, it was hard work achieving that unique and peculiarly appropriate resolution; of course she had clearly seen, right from the beginning when the movement was first advertised, that

indifference and opposition to it could be overcome only by bringing Eszter ‘into play’; if only he could be forced into taking part, persuaded into the figurehead role, the programme represented by the empty slogan of A TIDY YARD, AN ORDERLY HOUSE, which had been up till then a contemptible failure, might form the basis of a wide-ranging, genuine and powerful initiative. Yes, but how? That was the question. It took her weeks, nay months before, having discarded a whole range of impractical methods from simple persuasion to force of arms, she stumbled on the one sure way of putting him on the spot, but ever since then, once she had realized that her scheme depended on no more than ‘that soft creature, Valuska’ and his mother, Mrs Plauf, who was commonly known to be estranged from and therefore all the more passionately adored by him, such an utter sense of calm had descended on her that nothing or no one could shake her out of it; furthermore, now that she was sitting among the spongy carpets and overpolished furniture of this tiny (‘… yet so very buxom’) woman, she was vaguely amused to see how, every time she dropped and scattered ash from her cigarette, or when she approvingly tasted the cherry preserve remaining on the table, Mrs Plauf’s cheeks ‘absolutely blazed’. She was delighted to observe that the helpless fury of her hostess (‘She’s frightened of me!’ she decided with some satisfaction) was slowly overcoming her earlier indignation, and so, glancing round the room stuffed with plants which made her feel she was in some meadow or yard full of loose clods of grass, she switched back to her low murmur—for no other reason now than to amuse herself—to remark by way of acknowledgement: ‘Well, that’s how it is. It’s every townee’s desire to bring nature indoors. We all feel like that, Piri, love.’ But Mrs Plauf did not answer, she did the least she was constrained to do and simply gave a little nod of her head, which was a signal clear enough for Mrs Eszter to comprehend that she should get on to her business. Of course, whether Mrs Plauf did or did not agree to play her part in the matter—since she couldn’t have guessed that she had already said ‘yes’ by failing to prevent the invasion of her flat, the sheer presence of her visitor being the whole point—her willingness or otherwise was of little importance; nevertheless, having painstakingly described the situation for her (in the manner of ‘don’t for a moment think, my dear, it is I who want him, no, it’s the town that wants Eszter, but to persuade a man as busy as everyone knows he is to act is so hard only your nice gentle son can do it …’), and having addressed her in the friendliest manner possible while

looking directly into her eyes, she was undeniably and unpleasantly surprised by the immediate rejection, because she could see perfectly well it wasn't that relations between Valuska and Mrs Plauf 'had totally broken down some years ago', and that it was Mrs Plauf's 'parental duty to distance herself from anything to do with Valuska, though one could well imagine what pain and bitterness one suffered having to say this of one's own son who did not lack a heart but was distinctly ungrateful and useless', but that all her suppressed fury at her feeble helplessness had been concentrated into this 'no' which would serve to pay Mrs Eszter back for the indignity of the last few minutes, for the fact she was small and weak while Mrs Eszter was large and powerful, that, however she would have liked to deny it, she had been forced to admit that it was her son who was 'a lodger at Hagelmayer's', her son who was a village idiot whose abilities barely qualified him to be newsboy for the local post office—and that she had to own up to all this before a stranger disapproved of by all her friends. There was enough evidence for her to have grasped this anyway, and seeing that Mrs Plauf, 'this midget', was quite impotent before her, as if only by way of recompense for the fact she had been forced to sit for almost twenty minutes and endure 'that infuriating smile' and those mock-pious looks of hers, she leapt from the deep apple-green armchair with a contemptuous aside to the effect that she must be going, cut her way through the thick foliage, accidentally brushing a tiny sampler from the wall with her shoulder, and, without another word, stubbed her cigarette out in a never-before-used ashtray and snatched down her enormous black fake-fur coat. For while she was perfectly capable of coolly appraising a situation, knowing she could no longer be surprised by anything, once anyone dared say no to her, as Mrs Plauf did just now, her gorge immediately rose and she practically burst with gall, for she had no clear idea what to do in the circumstances. The fury simmered in her, the anger consumed her, so much so that when the neurotically hand-wringing Mrs Plauf addressed a question to her just as she was snapping the last steel clip of her coat into place (her eyes flashing, her lips tight, neck craned back, staring at the ceiling), something to the effect that she was 'terribly anxious' ('… This evening … when I got back from my sisters' house … and … I hardly recognized the town … Has anybody explained why the streetlamps are no longer lit? … This sort of thing never used to happen before'), she practically screamed at the terrified housewife: 'You have every cause for anxiety. We are on the

threshold of a more searching, more honest, more open society. There are new times just around the corner, my dear Piri.' At these significant words, and more particularly because Mrs Eszter emphasized the last sentence by jabbing an admonitory finger in the air, the colour quite drained from Mrs Plauf's face; but none of this rendered her any kind of satisfaction, because, however pleasant it was to see this and to know that the little 'bag of tits' would persist in hoping for one word, for one reassuring answer from her unintentionally provoked visitor all the way down the stairs, right until she had closed the gate behind her, and however clearly she realized that she should have accepted this as recompense, the wound to her self-esteem administered by Mrs Plauf, this 'no', like a poisoned arrow stuck in a tree, continued to quiver for an unaccountable length of time and she was forced shamefully to admit that what should have been merely an unpleasant sting (for she had after all convincingly accomplished her goal and this tiny setback was of little importance) was slowly intensifying to an ever more acute pain. If Mrs Plauf had agreed enthusiastically, as one had every right to expect she would, she would have remained an easily manipulated tool, unaware of the clash of events above her, events which, in any case, were of no account to her, and her insignificant role in them would, quite properly, have come to an end, but no ('But no!'), with this rejection her superfluous being was now elevated to the role of what amounted to anonymous partner; this dwarfish nonentity (dwarfish, that is to say, compared with Mrs Eszter's unquestionably intenser reality) had, so to speak, dragged her down to her own safely ignorable level, so that she might revenge herself on her visitor's radiant air of superiority, which she could neither tolerate nor resist. And while of course this helpless sense of injury could not last for ever, it wouldn't have been proper to claim, after all this, that she was quite simply over 'the business', nor did she claim it when later—at home by that time—she recounted the meeting to her friend, though she did perhaps skate over certain details, and remarked only on how 'the wonderful, breathtakingly fresh air', which revived her immediately she set foot outside Mrs Plauf's stifling stairwell, had had 'the most beneficial effect' on her judgement, so that by the time she had reached Nadabán's butcher's shop, she had recovered her earlier equanimity, was once again decisive, invulnerable, absolutely calm and full of confidence. And this—the decisive effect of sixteen degrees of frost on her frayed nerves—was certainly no exaggeration, for Mrs Eszter genuinely belonged to that class of people who

‘sicken with spring and collapse in summer’, for whom enervating warmth, incapacitating heat and the sun blazing in the sky were a source of terror, confining her to bed with the most shocking migraine and a strong tendency to bleed; one of that class, in other words, for whom cold, not the glowing fireplace, is the natural medium that offers protection from unremitting Evil, those who seem practically resurrected once terminal frost sets in and polar winds sweep round corners, for it is only winter that can clear their vision, cool their ungovernable passions and reorganize that mass of loose thought dissolved in summer sweats; and so it was along Baron Béla Wenckheim Avenue, leaning into the icy wind that frightens weaker ordinary people with its hard early frosts, that she felt cured and properly prepared to assess her new burden so that she could rise above Mrs Plauf’s hurtful attitude. Because there was much to rise above and aspire to and much to look at: so, while the cold penetrated and refreshed every atom of her body, she propelled the vast weight of her importance along the unremittingly straight pavement with ever greater abandon, as if she were as light as a sparrow, and decided to her satisfaction that the irreversible process of ruin, schism and disintegration would continue according to its own infrangible rules, and that, day by day, the range of ‘whatever things’ were still capable of functioning or showing vigour was growing narrower; the way she saw it the very houses were dying by imperceptible degrees of neglect, obedient to the fate that was certain to overtake them: the bond between lodger and lodging was broken; stucco was dropping in great chunks, rotten window-frames had separated from walls and, on either side of the street, roof after roof showed signs of sagging, as if deliberately to demonstrate that something in the constitution of beams and rafters—and not just beams and rafters but stones, bones and earth itself—was in the process of losing cohesion; along the pavements the rubbish that no one felt like collecting and no one did collect was spreading ever more luxuriantly across the whole town, and the cats that haunted loose mounds of it, cats whose numbers seemed to have increased at an impossible rate and who more or less took over the streets at night, had grown so confident that when Mrs Eszter wanted to cut through a thick forest of them they hardly deigned to move out of even her way, and when they did it was slowly, insolently, at the last possible moment. She saw all this as she saw the rusty shutters on shops not opened for weeks, the drooping arms of unlit ornamental lampposts, the cars and buses abandoned on the street for lack

of fuel … and suddenly a delightful tickling sensation ran all down her spine because this slow decay had, for her, long ceased to signify some terminal disillusion but was instead a harbinger of what would soon replace a world as ripe for ruin as this; not an end then but a beginning, something that would be founded ‘not on sickly lies but on the harsh merciless truth’, something that would place supreme emphasis on ‘fitness of body and a powerful and beautiful desire for the intoxicating realm of action’. Mistress of the future, she already had courage enough to look the town full in the eye, perfectly convinced that she was standing on the threshold of ‘sweeping changes leading to something new, something of infinite promise’, and it wasn’t only the usual every-day signs of collapse that confirmed her view, but a good many ordinary yet strange and, in their own way, not altogether unwelcome occurrences which hastened to prove that the unavoidable resurrection, despite the lack of ‘normal human resolve to enter the fray’, had been ordained by the mysterious and overwhelming forces of heaven itself. The day before yesterday the enormous water-tower at the back of the Göndölcs Gardens had begun—and continued for some minutes—to sway dangerously above the tiny houses surrounding it, a phenomenon which, in the opinion of the physics and math master of the local grammar school, a trustworthy member of the astronomical observation group whose telescope was positioned on top of the tower and who had interrupted many hours of solitary chess to run down breathless with excitement to proclaim the news, was ‘quite inexplicable’. Yesterday, the clock of the Catholic church in the main square, immobile for decades, startled everyone by beginning to strike (a sound which shot like electricity through Mrs Eszter!), a fact all the more extraordinary when you considered that of the four rusted parts of the mechanism, three, from which even the hands had been removed, leapt into simultaneous action, and continued, with ever shorter intervals between their dull ticking, to beat out passing time. It was no wonder then that, having ever since nightfall expected to come upon some other ‘ominous sign’, she was not surprised at what she saw when, arriving by the Hotel Komló at the corner of Hétvezér Square, she glanced up at the gigantic poplar which used to stand there. This colossus, over sixty feet high, a constant reminder of the great floods of the nearby River Körös, a wonderful shelter for hordes of sparrows and a monument which for generations had been the marvel of the town, was lying, lifeless, against the hotel’s Hétvezér Square façade, straddled across

the entire extent of the square, prevented from collapsing into the alley between only by thick branches entangled in the half-collapsed guttering; it wasn't that the trunk had been snapped in two by some violent gust, nor that it had been eaten away by worms and years of acid rain: the whole thing, roots and all, had split the hard concrete of the road. It was only to be expected that one day this ancient of days should eventually collapse, but that it should happen *now,* that the roots should release their hold *at this precise moment,* held a peculiar significance for Mrs Eszter. She stared at the ghastly apparition, at the tree lying diagonally across the dark square, then, with the knowing smile of one initiated into such things, remarked: 'Of course. How could it be otherwise?' and with this secret smile playing about her lips continued on her way in the secret knowledge that the sequence of 'miracles' and 'omens' was far from over. And she was not wrong. A mere few steps later, her eye, hungry now for more strange phenomena, lit on a small group of people silently loitering down Liget Street, whose presence here at this hour—for it was an act of courage to venture out of doors after dark in a town currently bereft of streetlighting—was wholly inexplicable. As to who they might be and what they wanted here at this time, she couldn't begin to imagine, and truth to tell she wasn't particularly bothered to try, for she immediately read this, along with the water-tower, the church clock and the state of the poplar tree, as simply another harbinger of the resurrection from ruins that was sure to follow; however, when, at the end of the boulevard, she entered the arena of Kossuth Square's bare acacias and discovered group upon group of silently waiting people, a hot flush ran straight through her, since it suddenly occurred to her that it was not wholly impossible that after many long months ('Years! Years! …'), after all her enduring and certain faith ('Perhaps! …), the decisive moment when preparation would give way to action might actually have come and 'the prophecy be fulfilled'. As far as she could see from this side of the square, roughly fifty to sixty men in twos or threes stood on the icy flat-trodden grass of the market-place: their feet shod in waterproof boots or heavy brogues, wearing caps with ear-flaps or greasy peasant hats on their heads and, here and there, hands clutching cigarettes that glowed into sudden life. Even under these conditions, in the darkness, it wasn't hard to see that they were all outsiders, and the fact that fifty or sixty strangers should stand about in numbing cold at such a late hour of the evening was in itself more than surprising. Their dumb

immobility seemed all the more peculiar and more spellbinding to Mrs Eszter, for it was like glimpsing the angels of the apocalypse in mufti at the end of the street. Though she should have crossed the square diagonally, cutting through by the most direct route to her flat in Honvéd Passage, just off the square, she felt a twinge—only a twinge, mind—of fear, and skirted their irregular ranks by pursuing an L shape round them, holding her breath and flitting like a shadow, till she reached the far side. Having arrived at the corner of Honvéd Passage and glancing back one last time, she was, if not exactly flabbergasted, certainly deeply disappointed to discover the enormous form of the circus vehicle, a circus whose arrival had been well advertised (though without a fixed date), for it was clear to her in a moment that the crowd behind her were not so much 'the disguised heralds of the new age' as, in all likelihood, 'ragged ticket touts for the circus', who, in their boundless avarice, were capable of suffering the whole night in the cold so that they could make a bit of money by buying up all the tickets in the morning once the booking office was open. Her disappointment was all the more bitter because, quite apart from the rude awakening it provided from her feverish reverie, it diminished the proud pleasure she had personally taken in the hiring and arrival of the by-now notorious company: the result of her first significant public victory a week ago when—with the decisive support of the police chief—she managed to crush the resistance of the more cowardly members of the town's executive committee who, by referring to the fact that all reports from outlying villages and hamlets, not to mention unsubstantiated gossip, suggested that the weird troupe caused alarm and unrest wherever it appeared, and that, furthermore, there had been one or two ugly incidents, had wished to ban it altogether from the town's precincts. Yes: it had been her first significant triumph (there were many who said that her speech about 'the inalienable rights of common curiosity' could easily have been printed in the papers), yet, despite this, she could not enjoy the fruits of victory, since it was precisely because of the circus that she discovered, too late, the laughably false nature of her misapprehension concerning the true identity of these loiterers about her. Since she felt the mordancy of ridicule more keenly than she did the attraction and mystery of the enormous wagon, she didn't even bother to investigate it in order to satisfy her own 'inalienable rights of common curiosity' about a vehicle so exotic it fully lived up to its publicity, but with a withering glance of contempt turned her back on both 'the stinking

juggernaut and those impudent rogues', and strode with clanging steps down the narrow pavement home. This fit of temper, needless to say—just like the one which followed her encounter with Mrs Plauf—consisted, as the idiom has it, more of smoke than of fire, and by the time she had reached the end of Honvéd Passage and slammed the frail gate of the garden behind her, she had succeeded in getting over her disappointment, for she had only to remind herself that by the end of the next day she would no longer be subject to her fate but the genuine master of it, and immediately she could breathe more easily and begin to feel the full import of her self once again, a self that chose decisively to dismiss any thought of premature daydreaming, since 'it desired victory and was resolute in the pursuit of it'. The landlady, an old wine merchant, occupied the front block; she inhabited the rear building of the ramshackle peasant dwelling, and while the place could have done with some repair she was not dissatisfied with it; for though the low ceiling prevented her standing up as straight as she might have wished and undoubtedly made movement difficult, and while the tiny ill-fitting windows and the walls crumbling with damp left scope for improvement, Mrs Eszter was so far a disciple of the so-called simple life that she hardly noticed these insignificant details, since, according to her convictions, if there was a bed, a wardrobe, a lamp and a basin, and if the roof didn't leak in 'the living unit', all possible human needs were satisfied. And so, apart from a vast sprung iron bedstead, a single wardrobe, a stool with basin and jug, and a crested chandelier (she tolerated neither carpet, nor mirror, nor curtains), there was only an unvarnished table and a chair that had lost its back to serve for meals, a fold-away music-stand for the increasing amounts of official paper-work she had to bring home, and a coat-stand for guests (should there be any) to hang their coats on. As concerned the latter of course, ever since she had met the chief of police, she received no one except him, and he came every evening, for, from the day when the leather belt and shoulder strap, the polished boots and the revolver hanging at his side had swept her off her feet, she regarded him not only as a close friend, a man fit to support a solitary woman, but as an intimate confederate to whom she could trust her deepest most dangerous secrets, and pour out her heart in moments of weakness. At the same time—apart from all the basic conditions—it was not a trouble-free relationship, for the police chief, who was in any case prone to morose silences punctuated by the odd sudden fit of temper, was

preoccupied by his ‘tragic family circumstances’—a wife who died in the flower of her youth and two little boys left to cope without a mother’s affections—and was a slave to drink, and, on being repeatedly questioned about it, would often admit that the only true remedy for his bitterness lay in the feminine warmth exuded by Mrs Eszter, which, to this day, was a burden she could never escape from. To this very day indeed, for Mrs Eszter—who had expected him to have arrived well before her—feared that the chief was at this very moment sitting in one of those suburban bars in his customary state of tortured gloom, so when she heard footsteps outside she went straight to the kitchen table, immediately reaching for the vinegar and box of bicarbonate, knowing from previous experience that the only cure for his condition was that (unfortunately) highly popular local mixture known as ‘goose-spritzer’, which, in the face of general opinion, she believed to be the only efficacious—if emetic—treatment, not only for indigestion the day after, but for drunkenness on the day. To her surprise the visitor turned out to be not the chief but Harrer, Valuska’s landlord, a stonemason who, probably because of his pockmarked face, was known to locals as ‘the vulture’; there he lay, flat out on the ground, because, as one could see at a glance, his legs, which were incapable of indefinitely supporting his constantly collapsing body, had given way just before his helplessly dangling hands could grasp the handle of the door. ‘What are you doing lying there?’ she barked at him, but Harrer didn’t move. He was a small, puny homunculus of a man; lying crumpled on the ground, his feeble legs folded under him, he would have fitted perfectly into one of those large dough-baskets stored out in the garden—furthermore he stank so intensely of cheap brandy that within a few minutes the fearful smell had filled the entire yard and penetrated every nook and cranny of the house, rousing even the old woman from her bed, who, as she drew the curtain of her courtyard window aside, could only wonder why ‘decent people can’t be content with drinking wine’. But by that time, Harrer, who seemed to have changed his mind, recovered consciousness and leapt from the doorway with such agility that Mrs Eszter almost thought the whole thing a joke. Nevertheless, it was immediately clear that it wasn’t, for waving his brandy bottle with one hand, the mason suddenly produced a tiny bouquet of flowers with the other, and, swaying in the most dangerous fashion, squinted at her in a manner so intensely beyond fooling, so utterly unreciprocated by Mrs Eszter—especially once she could make sense of his

gulping and gasping to the effect that all he wanted was for Mrs Eszter to hug him as she once used to (for ‘you, your ladyship, and only you, can provide consolation for this poor sad heart of mine …!’)—that, grabbing him by the shoulder-pads of his coat, she raised him into the air and, sans quips or jokes, heaved him in the direction of the garden gate. The heavy coat landed like a half-empty sack some few yards off (for the sake of accuracy, right in front of the window of the old woman, who was still staring and wagging her head), and Harrer, while not quite certain whether this new fall was in any significant sense different from his earlier one, began to suspect he was not wanted and made to scamper away; leaving Mrs Eszter to return to her room, turn the key in the lock and try to put the affront out of her mind by switching on the pocket radio next to her bed. The pleasantly rousing tunes—‘jolly traditional airs’ as it happens—had, as always, a good effect on her, and little by little succeeded in calming her seething temper, which was just as well, for while she should have been used to such irruptions, it not having been the first time that feckless characters had disturbed her at night, she flew into a fury every time one of her old acquaintances, such as Harrer (to whom she had no real objection for she could happily while away the time with him—‘Now and then, of course, just now and then’), ‘showed a total disregard of her new social position’ in which she could no longer allow herself to relax, for whoever Mrs Eszter perceived as the enemy would be waiting ‘for precisely such an opportunity’. Yes, she needed her peace and quiet, for she knew that tomorrow the fate of an entire movement would be decided; rest was what she needed without a shadow of doubt; and that is why, on hearing the unmistakable sound of the police chief’s footsteps out in the yard, her first wish was that he would simply turn round with all his accoutrements of belt, strap, boots and gun and go home. But when she opened the door and saw the short and scrawny figure who hardly came up to her shoulders and was probably drunk again, a quite different desire suddenly took hold of her, for not only was he quite steady on his feet, he didn’t look as though he was about to start bawling at her either. He stood rather like ‘a panther about to spring’, with a pugnacious look which, she immediately understood, called less for bicarbonate of soda than abandoned passion; for her friend, companion and comrade—far surpassing her hopes of the evening—came to her as a hungry warrior, whom, she felt, it was impossible to resist. She couldn’t deny, for she never did lack masculine

resolution, that ‘she was capable of properly appreciating the rubber-booted man who urged her on to rarely achieved heights of orgasm’, nor could she sneeze at the opportunity when someone of otherwise modest ability—like him—so clearly promised her personal advancement. So she said nothing, asked for no explanations, did not dismiss him, but, without any more ado, responded to his ever more passionate expression (which each second promised greater and greater delight), by languorously stepping out of her dress, dropping her underclothes in a heap on the floor, then slipping into the specially reserved flame-coloured baby-doll nightie he was so fond of and, as if obedient to command, arranging herself with a shy smile on all fours on the bed. By that time ‘her friend, companion and comrade’ had likewise divested himself of his gear, switched off the light and, wearing his heavy boots, with his customary shout of ‘To arms!’ threw himself on her. And Mrs Eszter was not disappointed: within a few minutes she had managed to rid the chief of all his troublesome memories of the evening, and after they had collapsed on the bed, breathless from their wild coupling, and he, gradually sobering, had received her acknowledgement of satisfaction delivered in an appropriately military manner, she rendered him a slightly edited version of her encounters with Mrs Plauf and the rabble in the market square, after which she felt so wonderfully confident and calm, her whole body suffused by such an extraordinarily sweet sense of peace, that she was certain that not only would the next day crown her with glory, but that there was no one who could possibly deprive her of the final fruits of victory. She wiped herself with a towel, had a glass of water, then lay back on the bed and only half-listened to the chief’s rambling account of his doings, because there was nothing more important now than this ‘confidence and calm’ and that ‘sweet sense of peace’, these messages of happiness that now rose from every nook and cranny of her body and rippled merrily through her. What did it matter that the ‘fat circus manager’ kept nagging him so long for ‘the customary local licence’, what did she care that the chief recognized ‘a gentleman from top to toe’ in the elegant though slightly fishy-smelling figure of the director of the world-famous company, and holding ‘an unopened bottle of Szeguin’ in his hand, extended his attention, as befitting a guardian of law and order, to suggest the assurance of some modest police presence (and that the request for such be tendered in writing) so that the three-day visiting performance be conducted without any let or hindrance, when she was just beginning truly

to feel that everything was bound to lose significance once ‘the body began to speak’, and that there was nothing more delightful and elevating than the moment when thigh, tail, breast and groin desire nothing but to drift gently and smoothly into sleep? So satisfied did she feel that she confessed to him that she no longer needed him, and so, after he had several times ventured beyond the warmth of her eiderdown and shrank back in again, she sent the chief on his way with a few words of sound maternal advice regarding ‘the orphans’, watching him pass through the door into the freezing cold and thinking of him, if not precisely with love—for she had always dissociated herself from such romantic literary nonsense—then at least with a certain pride, then, having exchanged her seductive baby-doll for the warmer flannel nightgown, she slipped back into bed at last to enjoy ‘her well-earned sleep’. Using her elbow, she smoothed out the sheet where it had rucked up under her, dragged the eiderdown back over her with her feet, then, turning first on her left side then her right, found the most comfortable position to lie in, pressed her face into the soft warmth of her arm and closed her eyes. She was a sound sleeper, so after a few minutes she quietly nodded off, and the occasional jerking of her feet, the rolling of her eyeballs under their thin lids and the ever more regular rising and falling of the eiderdown were accurate indicators that she was no longer properly aware of the world about her, that she was drifting further and further from the present enjoyment of naked power which was rapidly diminishing but would be hers again tomorrow, and which in her hours of consciousness whispered that she was mistress of her poor cold possessions and that their fate depended on her. The washbasin no longer existed, neither did the untouched glass of bicarbonate; the wardrobe, the clothes-rack and the stained towel thrown into a corner, all disappeared; floor, walls and ceiling had no more meaning for her; she herself was nothing but an object among objects, one of millions of defenceless sleepers, a body, like others, returning each night to those melancholy gates of being which may be entered but once and then with no prospect of return. She scratched her neck—but she was no longer aware of doing so; for a moment her face contorted into a grimace—but it was no longer aimed at anyone in particular; like a child crying itself to sleep she gave a brief sob—but it no longer carried meaning because it was only her breath seeking a regular pattern; her muscles relaxed, and her jaws—like those of the dying—slowly fell open, and by the time the chief had negotiated the severe frost, got

home and thrown himself fully clothed beside the sleeping forms of his two sons, she had already penetrated to the dense core of her dream … In the thick darkness of her room it seemed nothing stirred: the dirty water in the enamel basin was preternaturally still, on the three hooks of the clothes-rack, like great sides of beef above a butcher's counter, hung her sweater, her raincoat and a substantial quilted jacket, the bunch of keys hanging from the lock had stopped swinging, having finally absorbed her earlier momentum. And, as if they had been waiting for just this moment, as if this utter immobility and complete calm had been some sort of signal, in the great silence (or perhaps out of it), three young rats ventured out from under Mrs Eszter's bed. Carefully the first slithered past, shortly followed by the other two, their little heads raised and attent, ready to freeze before leaping; then, silently, still bound by their instinctive timidity, they proceeded, hesitating and freezing every few steps, to a tour of the room. Like intrepid scouts for an invading army apprising themselves of enemy positions before an onslaught, noting what lay where, what looked safe or dangerous, they examined the skirting boards, the crumbling nooks and corners and the wide cracks in the floorboards, as if mapping out the precise distances between the bolthole under the bed, the door, the table, the cupboard, the slightly teetering stool and the window-ledge—then, without touching anything, in the blinking of an eye, they shot off under the bed in the corner again, to the hole that led through the wall to freedom. It was no more than a minute before the cause of their unexpected retreat became apparent, for their intuition had warned them something was about to happen and this faultless, naked and instinctive fear of the unpredictable was enough to drive them to the option of immediate flight. By the time Mrs Eszter moved and disturbed the up-till-then-unbroken silence, the three rats were cowering in perfect safety at the foot of the outside wall at the back of the house; so she rose from the very ocean bed of sleep, drifting for a few minutes up into the shallows through which consciousness might faintly glimmer, and kicked off the eiderdown, stretching her limbs as if about to wake. There was of course no prospect of that yet and, after a few heavy sighs, she settled and began her descent into the depths from which she had only just risen. Her body—perhaps simply because it was no longer covered—seemed to grow even bigger than it already was, too big for the bed and indeed for the entire room: she was an enormous dinosaur in a tiny museum, so large no one knew how she had got there since both doors and

windows were far too small to admit her. She lay on the bed, legs spread wide, and her round belly—very much an elderly man's beer-gut—rose and fell like a sluggish pump; her nightgown gathered itself about her waist, and since it was no longer capable of keeping her warm, her thick thighs and stomach broke out in goosepimples. For now only the skin registered the change; the sleeper remained undisturbed, and since the noise had died away and there was nothing else to alarm them, the three rats once more ventured into the room, a little more at home this time but still maintaining utmost vigilance, prepared to flee at the slightest provocation, retracing their previous routes across the floor. They were so fast, so silent, their existence barely crossed the sensible threshold of reality; never once contradicting their blurry shadowy essence, they continually balanced the extent of their excursions against the peril of their sphere of activity, so that no one should discover them: those slightly darker patches in the darkness of the room were not hallucinations born of fatigue, not merely shadows cast by the immaterial birds of night, but three obsessively careful animals, tireless in their search for food. For that is why they had come as soon as the sleeper had fallen quiet, and why they returned, and if they hadn't yet run up the table leg to pinch the heel of bread lying among the crumbs it was only because they had to be certain nothing unexpected would happen. They started with the crust, but little by little, and with ever greater abandon, they stuck their sharp little noses into the loaf itself and nibbled at it, though there was no sign of impatience in the rapid movement of their jaws, and the bread, tugged this way and that in three directions, was almost consumed by the time it rolled off the table and under the stool. Of course they froze when it hit the ground and once more stuck their snouts into the air, prepared to make a dash for it, but all was quiet on the Eszter front, there was nothing but slow even breathing, so, after a good minute of suspense, they quickly slipped to the floor and under the stool. And, as they were to find, it was in fact better for them here, for apart from the dense darkness providing greater protection, they could cut down the risks of exposure in retreating to the cover of the bed and thence to freedom when their extraordinary instinct finally told them to abandon the now barely recognizable piece of loaf. The night, in any case, was slowly coming to an end, a hoarse cockerel was furiously crowing, an equally angry dog had begun to bark and thousands and thousands of sleepers, Mrs Eszter among them, sensed the coming of dawn and entered the last dream. The three rats,

together with their numerous confrères, were scuttling and squeaking in the neighbour's tumbledown shed among frozen cobs of well-gnawed corn, when, like someone recoiling from a scene of horror, she gave a disconsolate snort, trembled, turned her head rapidly from left to right a few times, beating it on the pillow, then, staring-eyed, suddenly sat up in the bed. She struggled for breath and looked wildly this way and that in the still twilit room before she recognized where she was and understood that everything she had just abandoned had ceased to exist, then rubbed her burning eyes, massaged her goosepimpled limbs, drew the discarded covers over her and slid down again with a relieved sigh. But there was no question of going back to sleep because as soon as the awful nightmare vanished from her consciousness it was replaced by the awareness of the day ahead and what she was to accomplish, and such a thrill of pleasurable excitement ran through her she couldn't drop off again. She felt refreshed and ready for action, and decided there and then to get up, for she was convinced that deed should immediately and without hesitation follow on design, so she threw off the eiderdown and stood a little uncertainly on the freezing floor, then donned her quilted jacket, grabbed the empty kettle and went out into the yard to bring in some water for washing. She took a deep lungful of chilling air, glanced at the dome of funereal cloud above her and asked herself if there could be anything more bracing than these merciless, masculine winter dawns, when cowards hide their heads and those 'called to life venture bravely forth'. If there was anything she loved it was this, the earth clapped under ice, the razor-sharp air, and the unyielding solidarity of cloud which firmly repulsed the weak or dreamy gaze so the eye should not be confused by the potential ambiguities of the clear deep sky. She let the wind bite viciously into her flesh as the flaps of her jacket flew apart, and though the cold was practically burning her feet under the worn wooden soles of her slippers, it never entered her mind to hurry about her task. She was already thinking of the water that would wash away the remaining warmth of the bed, but she was to be disappointed in this, for though she was particularly looking forward to crowning the whole experience of dawn in this manner, the pump wouldn't work: the rags and newsprint they had tried to insulate it with had proved no defence against the withering cold, so she was forced to wipe away the scum on top of the water left in the basin from last night and, abandoning any idea of a thorough wash, to dab at her face and tiny breasts, and, likewise with her hairy lower torso, she had to be

content with giving herself a military-style dry wipe, for ‘a person can’t be expected to squat over a basin as usual when the water’s so dirty’. Of course it upset her to have to forgo such arctic delights, but a little thing like this wouldn’t ruin her day (‘not this of all days …’), so once she’d finished wiping herself and imagined Eszter’s look of astonishment as, a few hours from now, he bent over the open suitcase, she dismissed the painful likelihood that she would ‘suffer from BO’ the rest of the day and busied herself mechanically fiddling with this and that. Her fingers fairly flew and by the time it was clear daylight she had not only dressed, swept up and made the bed but, having discovered the evidence of last night’s crimes (not that she minded them too much, for apart from having got accustomed to such things, she had developed something of an affection for these brave little revellers), she sprinkled the well-chewed remnant with a ‘trusty rat poison’, so ‘her sweet little bastards’ could feast themselves to kingdom come should they dare return to the room. And since there was nothing more to tidy, organize, pick up or adjust, with a superior smile on her lips she ceremoniously lifted the battered old suitcase off the top of the wardrobe, opened the lid, then knelt down beside it on the floor and ran her eyes over the blouses and towels, stockings and knickers stacked in orderly piles on the wardrobe shelves, and in a few minutes had transferred them all into the yawning depths of the suitcase. The clicking shut of the rusty locks, the pulling on of her coat and, after all the waiting, all the frustration, the setting out with only this lightest of burdens for company, of action in other words—this was precisely what she had longed for, the intoxicating fact of which went some way to explaining the degree to which she overestimated the significance and effect of her highly (perhaps too highly) planned *coup.* For it was undoubtedly the case—as she herself admitted later—that all this meticulous planning, fine calculation and boundless circumspection was quite unnecessary, for no more was required than that instead of the laundered knickers, socks, vests and shirts something entirely unexpected should be discovered there, in historical terms ‘the first and final notice of a victim in full realization of her rights’, and that if this day marked the beginning of something new it was simply a tactical switch from covert warfare—against Eszter and for ‘a better future’—to forthright attack. But here, proceeding along the narrow, icy pavements of Honvéd Passage, it seemed to her that if she were to step from the suffocating atmosphere of action-deferred into the dizzyingly fresh breeze of action-direct, it was

impossible to be too circumspect, and so, while steaming full speed ahead towards the market square, she went over and over the minutiae of the words she might use, the words that would form the sentences which, once she located Valuska, would render him wholly impotent. She had no doubts, feared no unexpected turn of events, she was as certain in her own mind as anyone could be, yet every nerve and sinew in her body was concentrated on the impending encounter, to the extent that having reached Kossuth Square and glimpsed the group of ‘filthy touts’ who since the previous night had grown into a veritable mob, her reactions were less of shock than of angry frustration that she might not, she thought, get through to the other side without engaging in close hand-to-hand combat, though ‘any loss of time—in the present situation—was quite impermissible!’ However, since there was no alternative but to struggle through the multitude, for the immovable (and, because they held her up, in her eyes no longer supernatural) loiterers filled not only the square but the entrances of the neighbouring streets, she was forced to use the suitcase as an offensive weapon, while being careful occasionally to raise it above her head while weaving her way through to Híd Road and suffering the stares of slyly gleaming pairs of eyes and the fumblings now and then of impertinent hands. The great majority of those present were foreign, clearly peasants, attracted here, thought Mrs Eszter, by news of the whale, but there was an unsettling alien quality about the local faces too, faces she vaguely recognized as belonging to small farmers at the outskirts of town who brought their wares to the busy weekly market. As far as she could judge from the distance between them and from the thickness of the crowd, the circus management had not given very much indication that they would soon commence their undoubtedly unique performance, and having attributed the icy tension evident in eyes which caught hers to this, she no longer permitted that annoying impatience to preoccupy her, but on the contrary allowed herself, for one clear minute, since she had had no opportunity yesterday, to enjoy the proud self-satisfaction of the thought that this great mass of people were ignorant of the fact that everything, but everything, was only there thanks to her, for without her memorable intervention there would have been ‘no circus, no whale, no production of any kind’. Only for a minute, one brief minute, for once having left them behind and finally found her route past the older houses of Híd Road towards Count Vilmos Ápor Square, she had forcefully to remind herself

that her concentration must be focused entirely elsewhere. She clutched the creaking handles of the suitcase with even greater fury, and slammed her heels down on the pavement with an even heavier military stride, and so soon managed to re-establish the train of thought which had been so annoyingly interrupted and lose herself in the labyrinth of words intended for Valuska's ears, so much so that when she practically bumped into two policeman—probably on their way to the market—who greeted her with proper marks of respect, she quite neglected to return their salutations, and by the time she realized what had happened and waved after them in a somewhat preoccupied fashion they were already a long way down the road. By the time she reached the junction of Híd Road and ápor Square, however, there was no time left to contemplate anything, and in any case her train of thought had drawn up at the station; she felt that every word, every useful turn of phrase was now securely under her command, and, happen what may, nothing now could take her by surprise: dozens and dozens of times she had run the scene through in her imagination, how she would begin, what the other would say, and, since she knew the other as well as she did herself, she could add the finishing touches and stand before the breathtaking tower of her most effective sentences not only in the likelihood but in the certainty that forthcoming events would be resolved wholly to her advantage. It was enough to conjure up the pitiful figure, the sunken chest, the crooked back, the thin scrawny neck and those 'warm liquid eyes' overtopping all; it was sufficient to recall his eternal hobbling as he carried that enormous post-bag, lurched by the wall and stopped intermittently and hung his head; like someone who at every step stops to check that she actually sees what no one else sees, if only in order that she should have no further doubts about its existence, so she kept reminding herself that Valuska would do what was expected of him. 'And if he shouldn't,' she smiled coldly, transferring the suitcase to the other hand, 'I'll give his stunted balls a little squeeze. The runt. The nobody. I eat his kind.' She stood below the steeply pitched roof of Harrer's house, took a quick look at the glass-topped wall before it and opened the gate in a manner sufficient to attract the immediate attention of the 'eagle-eyed' Harrer, who was in any case watching from one of the windows, so he should be in no doubt that this was no time for idle chatter, and that she would 'simply and without warning step on any common or garden weed that got in her way'. And, as if to underline the point, she gave her suitcase

a swing, though Harrer—labouring under the false impression that this gesture indicated she was on her way to meet him—was beyond being deterred by anything, and so it happened that when she was just about to turn right, bypassing the house, and make her way across the garden to the old kitchen-laundry which served as Valuska's home, Harrer suddenly leapt out from behind the door, threw himself in front of her and—silently, desperately—raised his haunted face to her with a look of entreaty. Mrs Eszter—seeing at once that her guest of last night, incapable of comprehension, was waiting for a forgiving word—showed no mercy; without so much as opening her mouth she sized him up in a glance and shoved him aside with her suitcase as lightly as she would some bent twig in her way, wholly ignoring his existence, as if all the guilt and shame—since Harrer now remembered last night all too well—which racked him counted for nothing. After all, no point in denying it, it genuinely did count for nothing, as did Mrs Plauf and the fallen poplar; nor did the circus, the crowd, not even the memories of times spent with the police chief, however sweet, mean anything now; so, when Harrer, with all the ingenuity of people hardened to bitter disappointment, and scarlet with 'guilt and shame', came full tilt round the other side of the house and stood silently before her, once more blocking the path to Valuska's shack, she merely spat, 'No forgiveness!' at him and pushed on, for there were only two things that occupied her mind in its present state of fevered activity: the vision of Eszter leaning over the suitcase and understanding how truly trapped he was, and of Valuska, no doubt still lying fully clothed on his bed in that filthy hole of his, stinking of stale tobacco and staring with his brilliant eyes up at the ceiling without realizing that it wasn't the twinkling night sky above him but a sheet of cracked and badly sagging plaster. And right enough, when after two sharp knocks she pushed the decrepit door open, she found precisely what she expected to find: under a ceiling of badly sagging plaster, in the stink of stale tobacco, the untidy bed; only those 'brilliant eyes' were nowhere to be seen … nor for that matter was the twinkling sky above.

THE WERCKMEISTER HARMONIES

Negotiations

SINCE MR HAGELMAYER, THE PROPRIETOR OF Pfeffer and Co., Licensed Victuallers of Híd Road, or as it was more popularly known, the Peafeffer, was usually longing for bed by this time and had begun to consult his watch with an ever sterner look on his face (‘Eight o’clock, closing time, gentlemen!’), which meant that his rasping, already angry voice took on an even heavier emphasis and that he would shortly turn down the steadily purring oil-heater in the corner, switch off the light and, opening the door, usher his reluctant customers out into the unwelcoming icy wind beyond—it was no surprise to the happily grinning Valuska, squeezed in, as he was, among donkey jackets and quilted coats which had long been unbuttoned or thrown about the shoulders, to be called upon, indeed encouraged, to explain this business of ‘the erf and the mune’, for this is what they had asked for last night, the night before and goodness only knows how many nights before that, if only to distract the stubborn attention of the loud if sleepy landlord and allow for one last all-important spritzer. After such endless repetitions the explanation, which, as a piece of entertainment, had been polished as smooth as possible and simply served to occupy the time, had long ceased to be of interest to anyone. Certainly not to Hagelmayer, who valued the pleasures of sleep above all, and who, to keep things orderly, would call time half an hour early so that they should understand he was ‘not to be taken in by this worthless old trick’; not even to the indifferent gaggle of drivers, painters, bakers and warehousemen who patronized the place and had grown as familiar with the set speech as with the coarse taste of the penny riesling in their scratch-marked glasses and would not hesitate to stifle Valuska if, in his enthusiasm, he attempted to steer ‘his dear friends’ on to the subject of ‘the mind-bending vastness of the universe’, which meant digressing to the Milky Way, because they were as certain as could be that new wine, new glasses and new entertainments were all doomed to be ‘worse than the old’, and were not at all interested in any dubious innovation, the common, unspoken assumption based on years of experience being that any change or alteration, any adjustment of any kind—and this was generally agreed—spelled decay. And if events had taken one turn so far they were all the keener that that was the way they should continue, especially now when a great many more events, particularly the extraordinary cold—fifteen to twenty degrees below freezing since the beginning of December—went worryingly unexplained,

and not a single snowflake in all that time but a frost which broke on them and had remained, nailed, as it were, quite unnaturally to the ground, contrary to normal expectations at the onset of a season, so much so that they were inclined to suspect that something ('In the sky? On erf?') had changed in the most radical fashion. For weeks now they had lived in a state between confusion and unease bordering on nervous melancholy, and having, furthermore, taken note of the posters that had appeared this very evening confirming rumours from nearby suburbs that the enormous, almost inevitably ill-omened whale was certain to arrive on the morrow (after all, 'Who knows what this means? What it will lead to …?'), they were more than a little drunk by the time Valuska had arrived at this particular station of his rounds. As for him, though he too, of course, adopted a puzzled expression and shook his overburdened head whenever he was stopped and questioned on the subject ('I don't understand, János, I just don't understand these days of judgement …'), and listened open-mouthed to everything that passed in the Peafeffer about the vague and, in some fashion, incomprehensibly mysterious air of danger surrounding the circus and its local prospects, he was unable to attribute any special significance to it all, and so, in the face of the general indifference, he, and only he, never got bored with it, nor ceased to enthuse about it; on the contrary, the very thought of sharing his thoughts with the others and so living through 'this sacred turning point in nature', filled him with a feverish excitement. What did he care now about the discomforts of the ice-bound city? Why should it interest him when people said, 'I wonder when we'll get some bloody snow at last', provided that the feverish excitement, that passionate tense feeling deep inside him experienced in the few dramatic seconds of silence once his wholly unvaried performance was officially over, swept over him with its unsurpassable sweetness and purity —so much so that even the alien taste of his customary reward, a glass of wine watered down with soda, something that, along with cheap brandy and beer, he had never learned to like but couldn't reject (for should he refuse this regular, and presumably presently forthcoming, token of his 'dear friends' affection, and betray his hatred of it by ordering some sweet liqueur, thereby finally confessing that he had always preferred sugary fizzy drinks, he knew that Mr Haglemayer would no longer tolerate his presence in the Peafeffer), seemed less unpleasant than usual. In any case there was no point in risking the less than complete confidence of both landlord and

regular customers for the sake of such a trifle, especially seeing that by about six in the evening the business with his passionately admired and well-known patron was finished (as this warm and demonstrative friendship was something neither Valuska nor the local citizenry fully understood, he was all the more anxious to show his gratefulness), so after arranging all Mr Eszter's affairs and having to leave him, he had, since time immemorial, made the inn behind the water-tower one of the chief havens on his eternal wanderings, the security and intimacy of its walls and the company of the 'men of goodwill' found therein holding peculiar attraction for someone of his stern integrity, and since—as he had often confessed to the stony-faced Mr Hagelmayer—he regarded the establishment as practically his second home, he was naturally unwilling to risk all this for the sake of the odd glass of liqueur, or indeed wine. And when he called for 'another', he might as well have been calling for the first, for it was precisely the immediacy and warmth of human company, that relaxed and liberating sense of well-being that he experienced on leaving the perpetual twilight of his very carefully tended elderly friend's curtained room with its air of respectful embarrassment and timidity, which he most missed, isolated as he was in Harrer's back garden in that one-time kitchen which now served as his room, which he found here and only here, in the Peafeffer, where, he felt, he was accepted, where he had only to repeat when requested his by now almost faultless performance of 'an extraordinary moment in the regular movement of heavenly bodies' to conform. In other words he had found acceptance and even if he had occasionally to produce an exceptionally passionate performance in order to convince his audience that their trust in him was well founded, it was undeniable that the crude banter directed exclusively at his innocent ever-willing self and his peculiar 'mug' did not preclude him feeling part of the undifferentiated mass of Hagelmayer regulars. Moreover, the continuing acceptance of his presence among them —and naturally enough he cultivated this, for alone and sober he would scarcely have been capable of sustaining the blazing fire of his stuttering rhetoric, having only the 'theme' itself to drive him on—among these drivers, warehousemen, painters and bakers, with what he perceived to be their comradely sense of solidarity, meant he could avail himself of the unceasing and regular opportunity of glancing into 'the monumental simplicity of the cosmos'. Once given the word, the paraphernalia of the sensible universe—of which he had only a somewhat foggy perception in

any case—immediately dropped away, he ceased to have any awareness of where he was or whom he was with, a single wave of the magician's wand admitted him to the magical terrain; he lost sight of earthly things, whatever had weight, colour or shape simply dissolved in an all-pervasive lightness, it was as if the Peafeffer itself had gone up in a cloud of steam, and he was left alone with the brethren under God's own sky, his gaze absorbed by 'the marvels' of which he spoke. Pointless to deny, of course, that there was absolutely no question of this last illusion coming true, since this peculiar gathering showed a certain obstinacy in dawdling within the four walls of the Peafeffer, the last thing on its mind being any kind of venture into the great unknown, indeed it had given little sign of paying particular attention to the lone cry ('Will you listen now! János is about to talk about them stars again!') directing the audience to him. Some of them, those stuck in the corner nearest the fireplace, or under the coat-rack, or laid out across the bar, were suddenly smitten with the desire for a sleep so deep that not even a volley of cannon would have woken them, nor could he look for comprehension among those who, having lost the thread of conversation about the monster due to arrive on the morrow, remained standing but glassy-eyed, though, doubtless, having regard to the miserable innkeeper staring pointedly at his watch, both the horizontal and vertical among them would have agreed upon a common course of action, even if only one of their company, a purple-faced baker's apprentice, was capable of giving it form by means of a sharp nod of the head. Naturally Valuska construed the onset of silence as an undoubted sign of the attention about to be concentrated on him, and, with the help of the house-painter who had invited his intervention in the first place—a fellow covered from head to foot in lime—employed what remained of his sense of direction to clear a space in the middle of the smoky bar: they pushed back the two chest-high drink stands that were anyhow in the way, and when the forceful if vain entreaties of his erstwhile assistant ('G'won, squeeze up to th'wall a bit, willya!') met the unsteady resistance of those clinging vaguely to their glasses and showing a few faint signs of life, they were constrained to employ the same methods on them so that after the minor kerfuffle caused by all that shuffling and involuntary backward-stepping, a space did in fact open, and Valuska, hungry by now for the limelight, stepped into it, and picked for his immediate audience those standing closest to him, who happened to be a lanky driver with a pronounced squint, and a great lump of

a warehouseman, referred to for now simply as ‘Sergei’. There could be little doubt about the surprisingly alert house-painter—his willingness to help just now was evidence of that—but one couldn’t be quite so certain of the attention of the latter pair, since apart from the fact that they plainly had not the faintest clue what was going on or why they were being jostled this way and that, having been deprived of the physical support provided by the close mass of bodies, they stared blankly, in a vaguely dissatisfied manner, into the space before them, and instead of attending to Valuska’s usual introductory remarks and being affected by the strenuous rapture occasioned by his in any case incomprehensible words, they were busy struggling with tired eyelids that kept drooping, for the night that was closing in on them, in however momentary a fashion, carried the clear symptoms of a dizziness so acute that the spinning of the planets in their mad vortex acquired a somewhat inadequate but wholly personal dimension. But to Valuska, who was just concluding his gabbled prologue about ‘the lowly place of man in the great order of the universe’, and was about to take a significant step towards his swaying companions, this was of no particular account, since he himself could barely see the three of them; on the contrary, for unlike his ‘dear friends’ whose dormant imagination was scarcely to be awakened (if it could be woken at all) without the agency of their three selected representatives, he himself had practically no need of a launching pad in order to leap from this enervatingly dry and sparsely populated patch of earth into the ‘immeasurable ocean of the heavens’, since in the world of his reason and fancy, which was never in fact divided into two such distinct regions, he had spent over thirty-five years cleaving the silent spume of that starry firmament. He had no possessions to speak of—beyond his postman’s cloak and the leather-strapped bag, and cap and boots that went with it, he owned nothing—so it was natural for him to measure his lot by the dizzying distances of the infinite dome above him, and while that enormous, inexhaustible yet familiar playground allowed him complete freedom of movement, being a prisoner of that same freedom, he could find no place in the utterly different ‘enervating dryness’ below, and would often feast his eyes, as he did now, on what he considered to be the friendly, if sometimes dim and uncomprehending, faces opposite him, so that he could allot them their usual parts, beginning, in this case, with the gangling driver. ‘You are the Sun,’ he whispered in his ear, and it never occurred to him that this was not

at all to the liking of the aforesaid, for it is annoying for a man to be mistaken for someone else, an insult in fact, especially when his eyelids insist on drooping and night creeps insiduously on so he is unable to raise even the mildest protest. ‘You are the Moon.’ ‘Valuska turned to the muscle-bound warehouseman, who shrugged his shoulder indifferently to indicate that it was ‘all the same to him’, and was immediately driven to the desperate expedient of waving his arms about in order to regain the balance lost through one careless movement. ‘An’ I’m the Erf, if I’m not mistook,’ nodded the house-painter in anticipation, and grabbing the wildly flailing Sergei, stood him at the centre of the circle, turning him to face the driver, who had grown morose from the continuous erosions of twilight, then, as befits one who knows his business, took an enthusiastic step behind them. And while Mr Hagelmayer, who had been fully eclipsed by this configuration of the four of them, yawned in protest, clattered the glasses and slammed lids to draw the attention of all those with their backs to him to the irredeemable passage of time, Valuska was promising to deliver an exposition so clear that everyone could understand it, that would provide, as he said, a chink through which ‘plain people such as we are might glimpse something of the nature of eternity’, the only assistance he required being that they should step with him into unbounded space where ‘the void which offered peace, permanence and freedom of movement was sole lord’ and imagine the impenetrable darkness which extended throughout that realm of incomprehensible, infinite, ringing silence. As far as the denizens of the Peafeffer were concerned, the ridiculously high-flown tenor of this well-known and by now tedious discourse, which would at least have sent them into a delirium of coarse laughter in the past, tended to leave them utterly cold; however, it took no great effort to play along with it, since complete and ‘impenetrable’ darkness was more or less precisely what they saw around them; and there was entertainment to be had, for despite their lamentable condition they couldn’t resist a throaty chuckle of delight when Valuska gave them to know that in this ‘infinite night’, the utterly paralytic squint-eyed driver ‘was the source of all warmth, in other words, life-giving light’. It is probably unnecessary to say that, compared to the inconceivable vastness of space, the room afforded by the inn was relatively small, so when it was time to set the planets in motion Valuska was resigned to an imperfect representation of the scale involved and did not even attempt to set the helpless and despondent driver, who stood in the centre with his

head sunk on his chest, spinning about his axis but, in his customary fashion, addressed his instructions only to Sergei and the increasingly enthusiastic house-painter. Though even this did not go without the odd hiccup, for while the roguishly grinning figure of Earth confronted his slowly sobering audience and completed the complex manoeuvre of two orbits round the lanky Sun with embarrassing and acrobatic ease, the Moon keeled over as if poleaxed by news of some terrible misfortune as soon as Valuska touched him, and despite every well-intentioned precaution all attempts to set him on his feet again proved sad failures, so that even he, in the midst of his enthusiastic running about and inspired if constantly stuttering monologue, had to admit it might be better to replace the heavily indisposed warehouseman with some more useful assistant. At this moment, however, just when the delight of the audience was reaching its peak, the Moon pulled himself together and, as if he had discovered a potent remedy for his acute dizziness, altered the disposition of his squat legs and, turning at an acute angle, launched himself—albeit in the wrong direction—into orbit and, beginning to spin, got so carried away with the process that his movements—which resembled nothing so much as the steps of the familiar *csárdás*—suggested he was capable of carrying on for some time in this manner, and, what was more, he had even recovered ('… thereyougo … ooplah … sodit … whoopsa …') his powers of speech to some degree. Eventually everything was ready, and Valuska, having stood aside for half a minute or so to wipe his sweating brow—for he didn't want to run the risk of even momentarily preventing anyone enjoying the glorious spectacle of the heavenly harmony of Earth, Moon and Sun in such carefully planned conjunction—got down to the business in hand; briefly raising his cap, he smoothed his hair back out of his eyes, swept his arms dramatically before him to recall, what he sincerely felt to be, everyone's rapt attention and, animated by the intense flame within him, lifted his flushed face heavenward. 'At first, so to speak … we hardly realize the extraordinary events to which we are witness …' he began, rather quietly, and hearing his whisper, everyone immediately stopped speaking, in anticipation of the storms of laughter to come. 'The brilliant light of the Sun,' his broad gesture took in the driver, who ground his teeth, struggling against the sea of troubles besetting him, and extended to the hypnotically circling figure of the house-painter, 'floods Earth with warmth … and light … the side of Earth facing it, that is.' He gently steadied the lewdly grinning

representation of Earth and turned him to face the Sun, then stepped behind him, leaning on him, almost embracing him, craning over his shoulder, the intense look on his face suggesting he was merely the medium for the others, and blinked at what he termed the 'blinding radiance' of the unsteady driver. 'We are standing in this … resplendence. Then, suddenly, we see only that the round disc of the Moon …' here he grabbed Sergei and propelled him from his orbit round the house-painter to an intermediary position between the Sun and the Earth, 'that the round disc of the Moon … creates an indentation … a dark indentation on the flaming body of the Sun … and this indentation keeps growing … You see? …' Again, he emerged from behind the house-painter, and gave a gentle shove to the almost terminally furious but helpless warehouseman. 'You see … and soon enough, as the Moon's cover extends … we see nothing but this brilliant sickle of sunlight in the sky. And the next moment,' whispered Valuska in a voice choking with excitement, running his eyes to and fro in a straight line between driver, warehouseman and house painter, 'let us say it's one p.m… . we shall witness a most dramatic turn of events … Because … unexpectedly … within a few minutes … the air about us cools … Can you feel it? … The sky darkens … and then … grows perfectly black! Guard dogs howl! The frightened rabbit flattens itself against the grass! Herds of deer are startled into a mad stampede! And in this terrible and incomprehensible twilight … even the birds ('The birds!' cried Valuska, in rapture, throwing his arms up to the sky, his ample postman's cloak flapping open like bat's wings) … 'the very birds are confused and settle on their nests! And then … silence … And every living thing is still … and we too, for whole minutes, are incapable of speech … Are the hills on the march? Will heaven fall in on us? Will earth open under our feet and swallow us? We cannot tell. It is a total eclipse of the sun.' He spoke these last sentences, as he had the first, in the same prophetic trance and in the same order as he had done for years, with not the minutest variation in his delivery (consequently there was nothing surprising in his speech), so these peculiarly powerful words, and the way they drained him, leaving him exhausted, adjusting the strap of his postman's bag which kept sliding off his shoulder while he smiled delightedly at his audience, did nevertheless have the residual effect of unsettling them and for a full half-minute there was not a sound to be heard in the crowded pub, and the customers gathered there, despite having recovered once, now experienced a new wave of

confusion and stared blankly at Valuska and could do nothing to satisfy their inclination to throw some cheery remarks his way, as if there were something disturbing about the knowledge that the reason old ‘Half-wit János’ found it hard to return to the unbearable ‘enervating dryness’ was that he never actually left ‘the great ocean of the stars’, while they, like so many fish out of water speckled by light refracted through the dimples in their glasses, had never actually moved out of the desert.

Had the inn shrunk for a moment?
Or was the world too vast?
Had they heard these words so many times
in vain,
‘the darkening sky’
and ‘the earth opening underfoot’
and ‘birds settling on their nests’,
their wild clangour
alleviating something in them once more,
but only once,
some burning itch
of which, as yet, they had no knowledge?

Hardly: they had simply, as they say, ‘left the door open’ a fraction of a second, or merely—having waited specifically for this—succeeded somehow in forgetting the ending; in any case, once the silence in the Peafeffer had stretched as far as it would go, they quickly found their tongues and, like someone who has become so absorbed in observing the lazy arc of a bird in flight that he is forced to wake suddenly from some dream of flying and sharply re-establish contact with terra firma, they found that indecisive, hazy, formless and ephemeral feeling being swept away by the startling consciousness of drifting cigarette smoke, the tin chandelier hanging above them, the empty glasses gripped tightly in their hands and the figure of Hagelmayer behind the bar, swiftly and remorselessly buttoning his overcoat. In the ensuing storm of ironic applause, they pressed flesh and administered numerous slaps on the back, congratulating the radiantly proud house-painter and the two other, by now wholly insensate, heavenly bodies and within a few seconds, Valuska, having received his glass of wine, found himself alone. Awkwardly, he withdrew from the forest

of donkey jackets and quilted coats into a corner of the bar offering more air, and since he could no longer count on the others' attention, he being once more the loner, the one truly inspired and faithful witness of the confluence of the three planets and their subsequent history, still dizzy after the presentation of the spectacle and the joy of the hubbub he assumed to be cheering he followed in splendid isolation the progress of the Moon as it swam beyond the glowing further surface of the Sun … Why? Because he wanted to see, and did in fact see, the light returning to the Earth; he wanted to feel, and did in reality feel, the fresh flood of warmth; he wanted to experience, and genuinely did experience, the deeply stirring sense of freedom that understanding brings to a man who has laboured in the terrifying, icy, judgemental shadow of fear. But there was no one to whom he could explain this or even speak about it, for the general public, as was its wont, tended not to listen to what it considered to be 'idle chatter', and now, with the passing of the ghostly eclipse, it regarded the performance as finished and stormed the bar in hope of a last spritzer. The return of light? The gentle flood of warmth? Profundity and liberation? At this point, Hagelmayer, who seemed to have followed Valuska's line of thought to a T, couldn't help but intervene: half-asleep by now, not having felt any great depth of emotion himself, he doled out the 'last orders', switched off the light, opened the door and sent them on their way, bellowing, 'Out of here, you great vats of booze, out with you!' There was nothing to be done about it, they had to resign themselves to the fact that the evening was truly over: they'd been kicked out and were forced to go their several ways. So they filed out in silence, and while the majority showed no particular desire for further entertainment, there was a couple here and there who, when Valuska bade them a warm good night at the door (it wasn't possible to bid farewell to everyone, for some, particularly those who had been woken too suddenly and shoved out into the icy cold, were too busy throwing up against the outside wall), gazed after him as they had done the previous night and who knows how many nights before, watching as he, still under the spell of his vision, proceeded on his way with that characteristically cramped gait of his, leaning forward, head bowed, pattering on tiny feet, almost breaking into a run ('as if he had something important to do') down the deserted street, and they sniggered behind their hands, and then, as he turned off by the water-tower, burst into loud and healthy laughter, for there wasn't much else to laugh about—particularly these days, when driver, warehouseman,

house-painter and baker all felt as if ‘time had somehow stopped’—except Valuska, who, as they used to say, provided ‘free ‘ntertainment’, not only with his act, but with his whole appearance, with those mild fawnlike eyes ever shining, that nose, so like a carrot in both colour and length, that postbag which never left his side, and that impossibly baggy coat thrown over that skinny body of his—all this was, in some strange fashion, invariably amusing and proved an eternal fount of rare good spirits. Nor was the crowd gathered before the Peafeffer entirely wrong in its surmise, for Valuska really had ‘something important to do’. As he attempted rather shyly to explain when they shouted after him and teased him about it, he had ‘to run the full distance before bedtime’, which was to say he had to run the gamut of darkened lampposts, which, since they no longer served any useful purpose, had for the last few days been turned off at eight o’clock, so he could inspect the silent, frozen city from St Joseph’s Cemetery to Holy Trinity Cemetery, from Bárdos Ditch, across the empty squares, to the railway station, accomplishing, along the way, a complete tour of the general hospital, the law courts (incorporating the prison), and, of course, the castle and Almássy Palace (unrestorable, therefore restuccoed once every ten years). What all this was in aid of, what the point of it was, no one knew for certain, and the mystery grew no clearer when, in reply to the insistent questioning of one or other local, he suddenly reddened and proclaimed that he was ‘driven, alas, by a constant inner compulsion’; though this meant nothing more than that he was neither capable of distinguishing nor willing to distinguish between his home in what used to be the kitchen in Harrer’s backyard and the homes of everyone else, between the press office and the Peafeffer or between the railway points and the streets and tiny parks, that he couldn’t, in other words, discern any vital organic difference between his life and the lives of others, considering literally the whole town from Nagyvárad Avenue to the powdered-milk factory as his abode, and, since a landlord was bound to make his rounds on a regular, daily basis, he—trusting everyone, protected by his half-wit reputation and accustomed through the excesses of his imagination to ‘the free highways of the universe,’ in comparison with which the town appeared no more than a tiny rumpled nest—would roam the streets as blindly, as blindly and tirelessly, as he had done for the past thirty-five years. And, since his whole life was an endless tour of the inner landscape of his nights and days, his claim that he ‘had to run the full distance before

bedtime' was something of a simplification, firstly because he slept only a couple of hours before dawn (and even then fully clothed and practically awake, so it was hard to regard this as 'bedtime' in any conventional sense) and secondly because, as concerns this peculiar 'run' of his, for the last twenty years he had simply dashed about town in a harum-scarum fashion so neither Mr Eszter's curtained room, nor the bureau, the junction, the hop, not even the pub behind the water-tower, could be properly considered stations on his eternal flight. At the same time, this ceaseless pounding of his, which by its very nature was enough to cause others to regard him less as one of their own and more as a bit of local colour to put it mildly, did not add up to some permanent, close or jealous keeping of the watch, still less as a crazy kind of alertness, though for the sake of simplicity, or by reason of a deeply implanted instinctive reaction, certain people, when invited to express their opinion, chose to regard it as such. For Valuska, disappointed in his desire to have the dizzying vaults of heaven constantly in view, had got used to staring at nothing but the ground beneath him, and consequently didn't actually 'see' the town at all. In his worn-down boots, his heavy service coat, his official cap with its insignia and the strapped bag like an organic growth on his side, he made his infinite, characteristically waddling, crook-backed rounds past the decaying buildings of his birthplace, but as to seeing—he saw only the ground, the pavements, the asphalt, the cobbles and the straggling weeds that sprouted between them on roads the frozen rubbish made almost impassable, straight roads, curved roads, gradients rising or falling away, no one knew the cracks and missing paving stones better than he (he could tell precisely where he was with his eyes closed by feeling the surface through his soles), but as for the walls that aged along with him, the fences, the gates and the minute details of eaves, he remained oblivious to these for the simple reason that he could not have borne the slightest contrast between their present appearance and the picture his imagination retained of them, and so, in effect, he acknowledged only their essential reality (that they were there in other words), in much the same way as he did the country, the decades that seemed to melt into each other as they passed, and people generally. Even in his earliest memories—dating roughly from the time his father was buried—he seemed to be walking these same streets (only in essence once again, for all he really knew was the small area round Maróthy Square which, as a six-year-old child, he ventured to explore), and, truth to tell,

there was hardly a chasm, nay, not even any perceptible demarcation line, between the person he had then been and the person he now was, since, even in that dim past (perhaps dating from the walk home from the cemetery?) when he was first capable of observing and comprehending, it was the same starry sky with its tiny flickering lights in the extraordinary vastnesses of space that held him captive. He gained height, grew thin, the hair on his temples had begun to grey, but, now as then, he had none of that useful sense of proportion, nor could he ever develop anything of the sort, which might have helped him distinguish between the continuous flux of the universe of which he constituted a part (though a necessarily fleeting part) and the passage of time, the perception of which might have led to an intuitive and wise acceptance of fate. Despite vain efforts to understand and experience what precisely his 'dear friends' wanted from each other, he confronted the slow tide of human affairs with a sad incomprehension, dispassionately and without any sense of personal involvement, for the greater part of his consciousness, the part entirely given over to wonder, had left no room for more mundane matters, and (to his mother's inordinate shame and the extreme amusement of the locals) had ever since then trapped him in a bubble of time, in one eternal, impenetrable and transparent moment. He walked, he trudged, he flitted—as his great friend once said, not entirely without point—'blindly and tirelessly … with the incurable beauty of his personal cosmos' in his soul (for decades now he had gazed at the same sky above him, and trod much the same route of concrete and weeds beneath), and if his life had anything that might be called a history at all, it consisted of those thirty-five years of ever deepening orbits from the time he left the immediate precincts of Maróthy Square to when his tours encompassed the whole town, for the startling truth was that in every other respect he remained exactly what he had been in childhood and whatever has been said about his destiny the same, with equal justice, might be said about his mind, which underwent no significant change, for the sense of awe—even over twice thirty-five years—is ahistorical. It would, however, be a mistake to believe (as did, for example, the denizens of Peafeffer, albeit behind his back) that he took no notice of anything around him, that he had no idea that people regarded him as a halfwit, and, above all, that he was unaware of the malicious nudges and winks he attracted, which he accepted as his lot. He recognized these things perfectly clearly, and whenever a voice, in the inn or on the streets, in the

Komló or up the junction, broke in on his ethereal circuit with a loutish cry of, “Ere János, how’s things in the cosmos?’ he detected the simple goodwill beneath the mocking tones, and guiltily, like anyone caught with ‘his head in the clouds’, he blushed, averted his eyes and, in a faint falsetto voice, mumbled something by way of answer. For he himself acknowledged that, possessed as he was by a vision of which ‘the regal calm of the universe’ would be an inadequate description, the mere glimpse of which he barely deserved and on explanations of which he was constantly willing to launch forth in an attempt to share his slender knowledge (as he tried to share whatever he had) with the limited audience of the frequently depressive Mr Eszter and his cronies in the Peafeffer, he was occasionally quite properly reminded that he should attend as much to his sorry state and lamentable uselessness as to the hidden delights of the universe. Not only did he understand the irreversible verdict of the public, but—and this was no secret—he largely agreed with it, often proclaiming himself to be ‘a real fool’ who would not quarrel with the obvious and knew what enormous debt of gratitude he owed to the town who did not ‘lock him up where he belonged’, but tolerated the fact that despite all his expressions of regret he was incapable of withdrawing his eyes from that which ‘God had created for all eternity’. How contrite he actually felt, Valuska never said, but in any case he was genuinely incapable of directing the gaze of those much mocked ‘brilliant eyes’ anywhere but the sky: though one did not have to, nor could one, believe this in the literal sense, if for no other reason than that the immaculate work, ‘God’s eternal creation’, at least here in the sheltered valley of the Carpathian mountains, was shrouded in almost permanently thick mist, comprised now of damp fog, now of impenetrable cloud, so Valuska was compelled to rely on his memory of ever shorter summers, summers that year by year imperceptibly had become still more fleeting, and was, therefore, almost from the very beginning, forced, however cheerfully, to relive—in Mr Eszter’s characteristically adroit phrase—‘his brief glimpse of ever clarifying totality’ while studying the thick relief map of rubbish on uneven pavements in the annually gathering gloom. The sheer brilliance of his vision could crush him one moment and resurrect him the next, and although he could talk of nothing else (believing as he did that ‘the matter was in everyone’s interest’), his command of language was such that he could never begin, even vaguely, to explain what it was that he did see. When he declared that he knew nothing of the

universe, they neither believed nor understood him, but it was quite true: Valuska really did know nothing about the universe, for what he knew was not exactly knowledge. He had no sense of proportion and was entirely lacking the compulsive drive to reason; he was not hungry to measure himself, time and time again, against the pure and wonderful mechanism of 'that silent heavenly clockwork' for he took it for granted that his great concern for the universe was unlikely to be reciprocated by the universe for him. And, since this understanding of his extended to life on earth generally and the town in which he lived particularly—for it was his experience that each history, each incident, each movement and each act of the will was part of an endless repetitive cycle—his relationship to his fellow human beings was governed by the same unconscious assumption; being unable to detect mutability where there plainly wasn't any, he made like the raindrop relinquishing hold of the cloud which contained it, and simply surrendered to the ceaseless execution of his preappointed task. He passed beneath the water-tower and circumnavigated the enormous concrete ring lined by the sleepy oaks of the Göndölcs Gardens, but because he had done this in the afternoon, in the morning, yesterday and the day before, in fact on countless mornings, noons, afternoons and evenings before, now, when he turned back and started down Híd Road, the street parallel with the main trunk road, it made no sense for him to draw any distinction between this experience and any other, so he drew none. He cut across the junction with Erdélyi Sándor Road, waving in an amiable manner to a solemn and immobile group of people gathered round the artesian well (though they were mere blots and shadows to him), made his familiarly waddling way to the bottom of Híd Road and, skirting the station, dropped into the news-stall and drank a scalding cup of tea with the railwayman who, having being frightened by 'some enormous vehicle', complained about the 'awful weather' and the chaotic timetable—and this was more, we should say, than a formal repetition of what had happened the previous day or the day before that, it was identical, precisely the same steps proceeding in precisely the same direction, as if it possessed that complete and indivisible unity underlying all appearance of movement and direction, a unity which can concentrate any human event into one infinite moment … He heard the warning whistle of the sleeper from Vésztö (a chance arrival, off timetable, as usual), and when the rusty engine ground to a halt before the perplexed but saluting stationmaster, he took a quick look through the news-stall's

window at the unexpected apparition and the suddenly crowded platform, thanked the railwayman for the tea and, taking his leave of him, made his way through the huddled masses looking lost beside the heavily puffing engine, and crossed the station forecourt so as to continue past the stray cats of Béla Werckheim Avenue—not following just any old route down it but placing his feet in his own bootprints along the frosted and sparkling pavement. Adjusting the strap of his bag, which kept slipping off his shoulder, he twice circumnavigated the law courts and the attached prison, made a few tours of the castle and the Almássy Palace, ran along the banks of the Körös Canal under bare weeping willows, down to the bridge of the German Quarter, where he turned off towards the Wallachian cemetery—wholly ignoring the silent and immobile crowds who seemed to have taken possession of the whole town, crowds comprising precisely those people to whom—but he had no way of guessing this—his fate would be inextricably linked for the foreseeable future. He moved untroubled through that desolate landscape, among the crowds, among abandoned buses and cars, moving as he did through his own life, like a tiny planet unwilling to enquire what gravitational field he moves in, entirely consumed by the joyful knowledge that he may play his part, however humble, in a scheme of such monumental calm and precision. In Hétvezér Passage he ran into a fallen poplar, but his interest was roused not by the tree's bare crown lying in the gutter but by the slowly dawning sky above it, and it was the same later in the Komló Hotel, where he called in to warm himself up in the night porter's stuffy glass compartment, when the porter, still red after his exertions earlier in the evening, told him about the enormous circus truck he had seen ('… Yesterday, it must have been, about eight or nine o'clock …') rolling through the street ('You've never seen the like of it, János! It knocks your vast cosmos into a cocked hat, mate …!'), for it was the approaching dawn that held him in its spell, that 'promise kept each morning' that the earth, along with the town and his own person, would emerge from beneath the shadow of night, and that the delicate glimmer of dawn would yield to the bright light of day … The porter might have said anything at all, might have described the crowds apparently hypnotized by 'what everyone says is its uncanny attraction', might have suggested to him later, as they were standing before the hotel entrance, that they should set out there and then to see it for themselves ('This you just have to see, old chum'), but Valuska—pleading that he had to visit the depot first and pick up the papers—would

have taken no notice of him, for though he too, in his own fashion, was curious about the whale, he wanted to remain alone under the brightening sky and stare—as far as he could, for thick impenetrable clouds covered the sky—into ‘the well of heaven, whence proceeds that inexhaustible light until the advent of night’. The way was rather a struggle, for between the railway points and the station dense waves of people were pressing forward, and being used to scuttling along rather fast he found himself constantly having to apply the brakes if he wished to avoid collisions on the narrow pavement, though he was barely aware of struggling for there was something about drifting in this solemn flood of humanity in a state of cosmic awareness that made it seem the most natural of activities, and, hardly noticing the surprising multitude, he absorbed himself ever more deeply in what, for him, were moments of exaltation as an insignificant inhabitant of the planet earth which was even now turning its face towards the sun, an exaltation so intense that by the time he finally reached the market end of the boulevard again (his bag filled with some fifty copies of an old newspaper since, as he discovered at the depot, copies of the new ones had once again gone astray), he wanted to cry aloud that people should forget about the whale and gaze, each and every one of them, at the sky … Unfortunately the frozen and impatient crowd, which by now occupied almost the whole of Kossuth Square, instead of the sparkling expanse of heaven above saw only an inconsolably bleak, tin-coloured mass before them, and, judging by the tension—rather unusual, one would have said, for the appearance of a circus act, an almost ‘tangible’ tension—of the wait, it was obvious that nothing would have dragged their attention away from the purpose of their pilgrimage. What was hardest of all to understand was what they wanted here, what drew them so remorselessly on to what after all was only a circus bill, since the question of how they could tell how much of the doomy prognostications of ‘the fifty-metre truck-load’ was true or whether there was any basis at all to the absurd gossip regarding the ‘spellbound mob’ that was supposed to have grown by now into a kind of army that followed the whale from village to village and town to town was something that the individual locals who had ventured into Kossuth Square (the night porter being counted among such brave spirits) could easily answer, for the exhausted and impoverished-looking mass and the terrifying blue-painted tin colossus spoke eloquently for themselves. They spoke for themselves without betraying anything of importance, for while the sheer phenomenon

was enough to prove that those ‘sober-minded, common-sense people’ who only yesterday were declaring ‘the whole thing’ to be no mystery, simply the usual clever trick employed by travelling circuses to create interest, were wrong, and the apparently baseless gossip regarding it was true, the few local citizens who had wandered into the square were, understandably enough, still at a loss to explain either the constant flow of new arrivals or the spell of the advertised gigantic whale. According to townspeople this shadowy army was drawn from the surrounding district, and while the local origin of the by now at least three hundred people was not to be questioned (for where else could they have come from but nearby villages and hamlets, those bleak outer suburbs of Vésztö, Sarkad, Szentbenedek and Kötegyán), no one could really believe that thiry years after the Flowering of the Nation, with its high-sounding plans, there should still remain so large a rabble of frightening, villainous-looking, good-for-nothing, possibly threatening characters thirsting after the crudest and most vulgar of miracles. Putting aside the twenty or thirty figures who, for some reason or other, did not seem to fit (and these later turned out to be the most determined among them), the close on three hundred remaining were notably of a kind, and the very appearance of three hundred fur jackets, quilted waistcoats, coarse woollen overcoats and greasy peasant hats, to say nothing of three hundred pairs of iron-heeled boots, all of which suggested a deep affinity, was quite enough to transform an active curiosity, such as that felt by the night porter, who watched the mob from a respectful distance, into fraught concern. But there was something else: the silence, that stifled, unbroken, ill-omened silence in which not a single voice rang out, and hundreds of people waited, growing impatient, yet obstinately stoical and utterly silent, ready to stir once the acute suspense associated with such events gave way to the ecstatic roar of the ‘performance’, each individual isolated as if he had nothing to do with anyone else, as though it was of no concern to anyone why everyone else happened to be there, or, conversely, as if they were all part of an enormous chain-gang in which the ties that bound them negated all possibility of escape thereby rendering pointless any communication or conversation between them. The nightmarish silence was, however, only one reason for this state of ‘terminal anxiety’; the other undoubtedly lay hidden in that monstrous truck besieged by the multitude, as the porter and other similarly curious observers might immediately surmise, for there was neither handle nor grip nor any kind of

chink in that riveted tin box, nothing at all that might suggest a door, and therefore it seemed (however impossible it might be to apprehend) that here, before the eyes of several hundred spectators, stood a contraption without any opening whatsoever at front, rear or side, and that the throng confronting it was in effect attempting to pry it open through sheer dumb obstinacy. And the fact that this tension and anxiety in the lingering crowd was not to be relaxed by any means owed not a little to the common feeling that the relationship between whale and audience was, probably, entirely one way. In the circumstances it was apparent that what had brought them here was not so much the keen anticipation of attending an unusual spectacle, but, much more likely, a sense that they were witnesses to some curiously motivated, long-standing and, for all practical purposes, already decided contest, the most fearsome element of which, they had heard, was the superior contempt with which the two-man company—the owner being an apparently sickly and overweight figure calling himself 'The Director', the other, according to stray rumours, an enormous behemoth of a man who was once a boxer but had degenerated since into a general circus helper—treated their audiences, audiences who by any stretch of the imagination could not be accused of being fickle or indifferent. Despite what had obviously been hours of waiting there was nothing actually happening in the square, and since there was no sign that the performance would ever commence, numerous locals, including the porter, were beginning to suspect that there could be only one reason for this deliberate delay: the base pleasure taken by the whale's attendants in knowing they could command the patience of a crowd practically frozen in the dry cold while they themselves were having a gay old time somewhere else. And, having been obliged to follow this train of thought in order to find a rational explanation, it wasn't hard to continue along the same path and convince oneself that the ramshackle truck belonging to 'this bunch of con-men' contained either nothing at all, or, if anything, then a stinking corpse whose plain lack of interest they disguised by a factitious, if effective, piece of market publicity about some so-called 'secret' … In this and other similar sundry fashions they continued their lucubrations in the more sheltered and inconspicuous nooks of the square, while Valuska, taking absolutely no notice of the anxiety around him and still dreamy-eyed from watching the sunrise, quickly wormed his way to the front of the crowd and up to the wagon, cheerfully apologizing as he went. Nothing worried him, and he had

not the slightest notion of anything out of place; indeed, having arrived at the front and taken cognizance of the enormous conveyance resting on its eight double wheels, he stared at it as if it were something out of a fairy tale, something whose very size banished the thought of disappointment. Round-eyed, he scanned the nearside of the vehicle from front to rear, shaking his head in wonder and, like a child confronted with a gift wrapped in shiny paper or done up in a beribboned box, he pondered what he might find once the package was undone. It was the curious writing on the side of the van that chiefly fascinated him; he had never seen letters or signs like it, and, having attempted to read it from both bottom to top and from right to left and failed to make any sense of it, he lightly tapped the shoulder of the person nearest to him and asked, 'Excuse me—you wouldn't happen to know what it says there?' But the individual thus addressed failed to respond and having tried a second time, a little louder, and been rebuffed with a deep slow growl advising him, in effect, to shut his face, Valuska thought he too had better stand perfectly still, rooted to the spot like the others. But he couldn't keep it up for long. He blinked twice, adjusted the strap of his bag, cleared his throat and turned to the grim figure beside him, remarking in a friendly way that he had never seen anything like it in his life, that while the occasional travelling circus might come round from time to time, it was nothing like this, not half as riveting, though he had just arrived, of course, and he simply couldn't imagine what such an enormous creature might be stuffed with, though it was likely to be wood-shavings, and did he happen to know what the entrance fee might be since he had only some fifty or so forints and would be very sorry if he were to be refused entrance for lack of a few coins. The fellow beside him gave not the slightest sign of having heard any of this confused muttering but kept glaring at the rear of the truck with such awful intensity and seemed so oblivious to all the hubbub round him that even Valuska was rapidly forced to the conclusion that whatever the question, there was absolutely no chance of an answer from the man. At first Valuska was simply aware of a sudden tension in the crowd, then, following the direction of their gaze, he could see the corrugated tin of the truck's rear door descending, and two fat hands—probably the ones that had clipped it there in the first place from within—sliding it down, then abruptly letting it go halfway through its descent, so when the bottom of it hit the pavement and the side struck the rim there was a tremendous clatter. Valuska, who had been swept to the

front of the crowd as it pressed towards the opening, was not at all surprised to find that the whale's domicile could apparently be opened only from the inside, for, or so he reasoned to begin with, one would naturally expect a company so unusual—and this lot certainly seemed unusual—to come up with a curious solution to such a problem. Furthermore, above and beyond all this, his attention was drawn to a great mountain of flesh, well over six feet high, standing in the now clear 'entrance' of the circus, a figure whose role was apparent not only from the fact that despite the intense cold he wore nothing but a dirty vest over his bulging and hairy torso (a 'factotum' would in any case be expected to dislike the heat), but from his badly disfigured and generally squashed nose, the effect of which was not so much fierce as foolish, lending him an air of surprising innocence. He raised his arms high into the air, gave a loud grunt as if he had just woken from a long sleep, dropped lightly down among the crowd gathered about the opening, dragged the corrugated sheet reluctantly to one side and propped the battered object up against the truck, then, having lowered three wide wooden boards from the platform, he got out of the way, grabbed hold of a flat metal box and started selling tickets with an expression of such utter weariness and boredom it seemed that neither the line of customers shuffling up the rather shaky ramp nor the almost unbearably tense air of expectancy was of the slightest interest to him; heaven or hell, what's the difference, as people in those parts used to say. Valuska stood in the line quivering with excitement, clearly enjoying everything: audience, wagon, the iron box, the ticket collector. With a grateful glance at the indifferent behemoth before him he thanked the ticket collector as he took his ticket, relieved that his purse would bear the expense, tried once more to enter into conversation with his ever changing neighbours, then, when his turn finally came round, he too picked his way carefully across the creaking boards, and stepped into the half-lit enormous vacancy of the 'whale-house'. On a low platform of beams and girders, precisely as the hand-written sign hung on its side proclaimed, lay the terrifying hulk of a 'sensational blahval', though any attempt to read the rest of the tiny chalked inscription and thus enlighten oneself as to what exactly a 'blahval' might be was bound to result in failure since anyone wishing to hesitate before it was carried forward by the slow press of the crowd behind. The huge creature facing him needed neither pointing out nor rational explanation; Valuska muttered the mysterious name under his breath as he took in the far from common

sight, open-mouthed, gaping, with a mixture of fear and wonder. Seeing the whale did not mean he could grasp the full meaning of the sight, since to comprehend the enormous tail fin, the dried, cracked, steel-grey carapace and, halfway down the strangely bloated hulk, the top fin, which alone measured several metres, appeared a singularly hopeless task. It was just too big and too long: Valuska simply couldn't see it all at once, and failed even to get a proper look at its dead eyes. Having managed to insert himself into the continually shuffling line, he finally reached the creature's jaws, which were ingeniously displayed wide open, but whether he stared down its dark throat, or tore his gaze away to survey its exterior to discover the two tiny eyes sunk in deep sockets on either side of the body, and noted the two vents in the lower brow above them, he was aware of seeing these things in isolation: it was simply impossible to see the enormous head as an integral whole. It was hard to see properly in any case since the overhead lights had not been switched on, and to stop and enjoy the horror at one's leisure, to appreciate the mouth so terrifyingly displayed or the vast unmoving tongue inside it, was impossible, though it wasn't so much the mouth, nor the sheer incomprehensible size of the creature that most astonished him, but the full and certain general knowledge purveyed by the publicity that it had witnessed the wonders of an infinitely strange and infinitely distant world, that this gentle yet terrifying denizen of great seas and oceans was actually here, and one could even take the liberty of touching it. Despite all this, while Valuska stood surprisingly undisturbed in his happy stupor, the others—who continued trudging compliantly round the whale in the stinking gloom—not only showed no signs of being similarly affected but gave the decided impression that the highly visible object of the advertisements itself was of limited interest. True, they cast a few sheepish glances at the petrified giant stranded in the middle, glances which did not entirely lack the proper element of apprehensive respect, but their eyes were restless, skipping about with terror and desire, scanning the entire extent of the wagon, as if there were something else to be found, some hypothetical presence, the very prospect of which would surpass all their expectations. Not that there was anything in that hostile environment, made even less hospitable by whatever light entered it, to encourage such expectations. Just inside the door, on one side of the line, stood a few metal lockers, one of which was open, revealing eight or ten bottles of formalin containing a few wrinkled sad-looking tiny embryos of which no one, not

even Valuska, took any notice, and the other end of the wagon was curtained off, though there was one rather large chink through which one could see that there was nothing of any great interest there either, save a basin and a jug of water. Lastly, directly opposite the cavern of the creature's open mouth, there was a door in the corrugated partition dividing off the rear of the compartment (albeit another door without a handle), a door which might possibly lead to some sort of bedroom for the staff, and though it was here rather than anywhere else that the crowd showed the most obvious signs of excitement, Valuska, if he had noticed any of this at all, would not have understood the reasons for such peculiar behaviour. This was futile speculation in any case for, being completely mesmerized by the whale, Valuska saw nothing but the whale, and having surveyed the far side of the fabulous object and found himself in the open air once more, descending with comparative safety from the high platform, he even failed to register that those who had preceded him in the line and had already been through the experience once were even now returning to the place from which they had all but started, as if, despite having seen the whale, the many hours of waiting had somehow not quite achieved the purpose for which it was intended. It failed to register with him—maybe precisely because he himself had determined to return in the evening in order to solve before anyone else the haunting phenomenon of this strange company with its extraordinarily patient votaries—and so, unlike the night porter, whom he greeted with a cheery wave, he viewed the spectacle as something that far surpassed itself as a circus exhibition, and when the former addressed him in a hoarse whisper, asking, 'Here, tell me what's in there … People are talking about aristocracy of some sort …'he fitted the question to his own line of thought and answered him enthusiastically, saying, 'No, Mr Árgyelán, sir! It's a grander thing altogether, I assure you! This is regal, positively regal!' and, cheeks glowing, abruptly left the puzzled gentleman to his astonishment. Clutching his bag to his chest, he squeezed his way through the crowd, and now that he sensed that it was past twelve o'clock, it being a Wednesday, and Mrs Eszter waiting with the 'laundry bag', he decided to return home and deal with that, there being enough time to deliver the papers later in the afternoon. So he set out for Híd Road—not suspecting that he would have been better employed in making a dash for it out of town to some distant place of refuge—pacing quickly and stopping dead every so often to take a conspiratorial squint at the sky, soon

completing the short distance home and seeing again and again before him, unfocused yet somehow in its entirety, that innocent carcass vaster than imagination which even now filled up his mind, and left him thinking, ‘How enormous! … How extraordinary a creation! … What a deeply mysterious person the Creator must be to amuse Himself with such extraordinary creatures!’ so that, proceeding along this line of thought, it wasn’t long before he had recovered the high ground of his early-morning meditations and could begin to associate them with his experiences in the market square, and, without a word, listening only to the unbroken murmurous dialogue in the depths of his soul, arrive at some conception of the way in which the gentle yet final gestures of the almighty Creator in the act of judgement succeeded in carefully relating His own omnipotence to untold billions of His creatures, right down to the terrifying yet entertaining spectacle of the whale. Now with bowed head, now with head uplifted examining the sky in his characteristic way so that he might once more be wholly absorbed by the silent joy of realizing that everything that existed was linked in some fraternal manner, as part of a single thought, to everything else … he sped past the apparently unpeopled houses of Híd Road. He sped on, propelled across the melancholy silence of Vilmos Ápor Square, down Dürer Street, chilled to the marrow, or rather, somehow overtook himself or divided himself into two, one part speeding on below, the other flying away, gaining height, as if he knew that a crash-landing or sudden petrifying stillness was what awaited him, for when he turned into the gateway of Harrer’s house and ran down the path leading to the old laundry room to push open the door, he was astonished to find someone already there, someone who looked up at him and, presumably disapproving of his ‘radiant expression’, without any preliminaries, rounded on him, demanding: ‘Tell me, why must you go round with that idiotic look on your face? Wouldn’t it be better to lock your door properly? It’s an open invitation to a burglar!’ Since her usual practice was to leave the bag at Harrer’s or to give it to him without crossing the threshold, and not (definitely not!) to come and pass the time of day with him, the unexpected sight of Mrs Eszter, his awesome ‘accomplice’, here among his battered possessions—especially now when her face glowed beetroot red and was veritably swollen with fury on account of the fact—or so it transpired—that she had been waiting there since morning—was almost too much for Valuska, and he flew into such confusion that he genuinely had no idea

where he was or what he was doing. Dizzied by this unsought honour and by his own too rapid descent from the empyrean, he blushed from ear to ear with embarrassment (since, for lack of a chair, Mrs Eszter had been forced to install herself on his bed) and hastened to sweep the remnant breadcrust, the lard in its greaseproof wrapper, the empty tin and various onion skins off the stool and on to the floor, then—under the hostile glare of his guest, who was watching him ensconce himself on the freshly cleaned and only available resource for sitting on—tried to kick a few stray socks under the cupboard without her noticing and, with an idiotic grin, attempted to remove a filthy pair of underpants from the bed itself. Whatever he touched, however, far from improving the situation, only served to expose ever more clearly the irredeemable condition of the room, though he refused to give up his hopeless struggle with the mouldy apple core in the corner, the cigarette butts surrounding the oil-stove that were tell-tale signs of Mr Harrer's visits, and the wardrobe door that refused to close, until Mrs Eszter noticed that he wasn't paying 'the blindest bit of attention' to what she was saying, and angrily screeched at him, commanding him to 'stop that right now!' and sit down at last, since she had something extremely important to tell him. There were so many thoughts whirling round his head that for a few minutes he couldn't even begin to pick up what the well-known grating voice was saying; he kept nodding and blinking and clearing his throat, and while his guest ranted on, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, about 'the days to come' and 'the heavy judgement waiting on the world', getting quite carried away, he was incapable of responding except by staring at the stool with a fixed expression of ardent agreement on his face. Under the circumstances it didn't take long for Mrs Eszter suddenly to turn and focus her attention on him, though the little he had begun to comprehend by this time was in any case far from reassuring. For while he was genuinely pleased to learn that his mother and his guest had 'parted as good friends' the night before (since his hopes immediately rose that with some assistance from her he might succeed in pacifying Mrs Plauf), he was alarmed at her plan, according to which 'because of the increasing amount of paperwork and the publicity associated with her new position' Mrs Eszter was to move, 'this very day', from her currently necessary sub-tenancy back home again, and that he was to send her clothes ahead, 'thereby exposing the long-term shady arrangement obtaining between her husband and the laundry', for he was not in the slightest doubt that the delicate health of his elderly and even now

rather over-sensitive friend, who trembled at the very mention of his wife's name, would be severely jeopardized by the impending events. And since it was equally plain to see that all his hard work in attempting to nurse Mr Eszter back to full health as well as improve his conditions of work would come to nothing should his partner succeed in accomplishing her ends, and that it would be very hard indeed to prevent her doing so, it came as a great relief to him when—having mentioned, in passing so to speak, the establishment of a new political movement, and that local people wanted György Eszter and no one else to lead it—she added that since such a significant appointment would bring great honour with it, she would be the happiest and proudest of wives if he were to accept the position (an acceptance, she whispered, that would naturally entail postponement of her plans to move, for if her husband were to carry such a load of responsibility, a load far greater than hers, she wouldn't for a moment dream of disturbing him), the only problem being that she, Mrs Eszter, unlike Mrs Plauf, she added with a resigned gesture, who felt that the whole matter should be left immediately to Valuska, who was bound to ensure its success, '… that I,' she went on, 'knowing my husband's delicate state of health and retiring disposition, have serious doubts as to whether he would accept the arrangement'. Realizing at last what she was on about, Valuska didn't know what pleased him more—the fact that his mother had perfectly understandably of course, despite her misgivings, turned to him ('Immediately!') to resolve this complicated state of affairs, or that Mrs Eszter should reveal a quite unexpected side of her character through an act of such dazzling self-sacrifice. What was quite certain, however, was that he grew highly excited at the thought, leapt to his feet in an excess of enthusiasm and ran about the room attempting to convince his visitor that he 'would undertake the task' and do all he could 'to ensure its success', an outburst that provoked the generally solemn and severe-looking woman to brief but sincere laughter. This laughter did not signify immediate assent and the guest was persuaded to accept Valuska's offer only after considerable argument and exhortation, and even having apprised him in the vaguest, most impenetrable terms of all of 'the essential facts about the movement', and listed on a piece of paper the names of those 'whose work and agitprop skills the incoming president should begin to employ this very afternoon', she proved unbending in the matter of the suitcase and the message, to the extent that once they emerged from behind Harrer's front

door and were proceeding down Dürer Street in the frost which had not abated though it was almost noon, and Valuska was regaling her with an account of the ‘marvellous performance’ in Kossuth Square, she heard him through with total indifference and talked only about the suitcase and the details of her move—and even as they reached the corner of Jókai Street and were on the point of parting, she insisted on repeating that if Valuska did not arrive by four o’clock in the afternoon with word of her husband’s unequivocal agreement, she, Mrs Eszter, would do as she had originally intended, and ‘eat her supper at Béla Wenckheim Avenue’. So saying, she turned on her heels and was away on ‘urgent business’ as she put it, leaving Valuska, with a suitcase full of laundry in one hand and a note in the other, staring after her for almost a full minute, much moved by the certain knowledge that if his old friend had ever doubted ‘the true worth of this exemplary woman’, this act, which was a sure sign of her good-will and readiness to sacrifice her own interests to his, would be enough to convince him. For it was now as clear as day to him whom it was she respected in that apparently harsh and imperious soul of hers, clear from the moment she first sought him out to inform him that henceforth, if Valuska was willing to keep it a secret, she would like to wash her husband’s dirty laundry with ‘her own two hands’, explaining how, through all the preceding years, she had regarded the husband who had so coldly rejected her with such unconditional fidelity and respect that it saturated her entire being. And when he suddenly realized what his guest desired to achieve with this transparent ruse of ‘moving back home’, to wit that she was willing to trust him and persuade him to take part in a political movement, which for all he knew she might have organized with the express purpose of manifesting the wondrous ‘qualities’ of György Eszter before the entire populace, he felt more certain than ever that the lonely occupant of the house in Wenckheim Avenue would no longer be able to resist her extraordinary persistence and would be forced to admit his helplessness in the face of such consuming passion. There was something of a gale blowing up and when he set off he had to fight against the icy blast which wanted to take his breath away; the suitcase was heavy and growing heavier by the minute, the road was slippery and packs of impertinent stray cats lounged lazily before him, slow to clear a way for him, but nothing could disturb his good spirits: he was sure that he had never before set out for his master’s house with such a wealth of good tidings. Today, everything would turn out for the better,

because it had been for this that he had set out every day, ever since Mrs Eszter first left the house, since, as carrier of the daily dinner, he had got to know the residence and its solemn master, but, above all, ever since ‘the musicologist, the full extent of whose researches and general importance was as yet hidden from the town, and who endeavoured to hide these gifts through the strict isolation demanded by his sheer modesty, who, furthermore, was practically bed-bound through his physical suffering, this fabulous personage to whom exceptional respect was due’ had, to his utmost amazement, one day declared that he regarded him to be his *friend.* And though he was at a loss to understand how he had qualified himself for his friendship and why Mr Eszter did not elect some other person to be the recipient of this distinction (someone capable of accurately grasping and noting the motions of his mind, motions that, as he himself admitted, he understood only vaguely at best), from that day forth he felt it was his responsibility to rescue him from the deadly slough of bitterness and disillusion which threatened to engulf not only him but the entire town. Contrary to what anyone might think, it had not escaped Valuska’s notice, the evidence being so readily available, that everyone he met was preoccupied by the notion of ‘the collapse into anarchy’, a state that, in the general opinion, was no longer avoidable. Everyone was talking about ‘the unstoppable stampede into chaos’, the ‘unpredictability of daily life’ and ‘the approaching catastrophe’ without a clear notion of the full *weight* of these frightening words, since, he surmised, this epidemic of fear was not born out of some genuine, daily increasing certainty of disaster but of an infection of the imagination whose susceptibility to its own terrors might eventually lead to an actual catastrophe, in other words the false premonition that a man who had lost his bearings might succumb to once the inner structure of his life, the way his joints and bones were knit, had loosened and he carelessly transgressed the ancestral laws of his soul—if he simply lost control of his undemeaningly ordered world … It bothered him greatly that however he tried to persuade his friends of this they refused to listen to him, but it saddened him most when in tones of unrelieved gloom they proclaimed that the period they were living in was ‘an unfathomable hell between a treacherous future and an unmemorable past’, for such awful thoughts reminded him of the sentiments and unremittingly painful monologues he was used to hearing on a daily basis in the house on Béla Wenckheim Avenue, which was where he had just arrived. Even more

depressing than this was that, however he would have liked to, it was impossible to deny that Mr Eszter—blessed as he was with the most refined poetic sensibility, incomparable delicacy and indeed all the great gifts of the spirit—who, as a clear sign of friendship never failed to spend at least half an hour playing—to him, with his tin ear!—passages from the famous Bach—was the most disillusioned of all, and while he put much of this down to the general debility occasioned by his illness and the oppressive monotony of being bed-bound, he blamed himself entirely for the extended convalescence and could only hope that if he carried out his duties ever more carefully, ever more thoroughly, eventually there might be the prospect of a complete recovery, and his great friend might finally be free of the darkness occasioned by the 'apparently inoperable cataracts' of his soul. He never stopped believing that the moment might arrive, and now, as he entered the house and negotiated the long book-lined hall, and considered whether to begin his account with events associated with the dawn, the whale or Mrs Eszter, he felt the period of convalescence might be finally over, that that ardently wished-for moment of full recovery might actually be at hand. He stopped before the familiar door, transferred the heavy case to his other hand and thought of that uplifting all-forgiving light that—should that moment have arrived—was waiting to shine upon Mr Eszter. Because there would be something worth seeing then, something worth discovering—he knocked three times as was his custom—since he would then be granted a vision of that incorruptible order, under whose aegis a boundless and beautiful power comprehended in one harmonious whole the dry land and the sea, the walkers and the sailors, heaven and earth, water and air and all those who lived in mutual dependence, whose life was just opening out or already flying by; he would see that birth and death were only two tremendous moments in an eternal waking, and his face would glow with amazement as he understood this; he would feel—gently he grasped the copper handle of the door—the warmth of the mountains, woods, rivers and valleys, would discover the hidden depths of human existence, would finally understand that the unbreakable ties that bound him to the world were not imprisoning chains and condemnation but a kind of clinging to an indestructible sense that he had a home; and he would discover the enormous joys of mutuality which embraced and animated everything: rain, wind, sun and snow, the flight of a bird, the taste of fruit, the scent of grass; and he would suspect that his anxieties and bitterness

were merely cumbersome ballast required by the live roots of his past and the rising airship of his certain future, and, then—he started opening the door—he would finally know that our every moment is passed in a procession across dawns and day's-ends of the orbiting earth, across successive waves of winter and summer, threading the planets and the stars. Suitcase in hand, he stepped into the room and stood there blinking in the half-light.

He stopped in the half-light, smiling in confusion, and, since Eszter was all too well acquainted with his pathetic and overwrought emotional state on arrival, he calmed him, gesturing, as if by way of greeting, in a manner impossible to refuse, that he should take his customary place at the table used for smoking, thaw himself out after his frosty journey and wait for the fire of his enthusiasm to die down while his old friend amused him with a few well-chosen observations. ‘We won’t be having any more snow then,’ he began without preamble, delighted to continue his previous, solitary train of thought, thereby subsuming all the things that had preoccupied him since morning once the time allowed for washing and dressing had elapsed and Mrs Harrer had, to his greatest relief, departed, ‘as one might boldly state judging from the state of the world at this moment in time’. It would not have been his style to get up and check the validity of such an authoritative statement with his own eyes, to ask the excited visitor currently sitting in the armchair to draw the heavy curtains, stare at the melancholy empty street and observe sheets of newsprint running before swirling waves of icy wind and paper bags passionately swooping between tomb-like houses frozen into silence, in a word to look out on his behalf, for to look out through the enormous windows clearly intended for better days was, in his opinion—he being a master of resistance to redundant gesture—utterly pointless since an act in itself could never be worthwhile given that the question to which it appeared to provide an answer was probably the wrong question, therefore the only question of any importance on waking, to wit whether it was snowing outside or not, could be settled just as well from his present position on the bed facing away from the firmly curtained casement windows, for the peace associated with Christmas, the happy ringing of bells, the very snow itself was somehow forgotten in this eternal winter—if this harsh regime of penetrating cold, when the last, light passion of his own existence was to decide what was to face ruin first: the house or its inhabitant, could be called winter at all. As regards the former, it was still standing after a fashion, despite the fact that Mrs Harrer, who was hired to light the fire at dawn—and no more—came round once a week under the guise of cleaning and, armed with her broom and the rags she called her dusters, set about the house to such effect that she seemed to be trying to accomplish inside that which the frost was very effectively doing outside: she flapped about violently with the rag; lithe and ready for combat, time

and again, with inimitable ill-luck, she assailed the hall, the kitchen, the dining room and the rooms at the back; week after week, while little ornaments showered about her, she went about her scrubbing with generous lashings of water and shoved around sensitive pieces of furniture with cracked surfaces and highly unstable legs; in the name of cleaning she occasionally broke a piece or two of the delicate Viennese and Berliner dinner service, so he might reward her good intentions—much to the decided satisfaction of local antique dealers—with a silver spoon or a volume bound in leather; in other words she swept and wiped and washed and tidied everything so remorselessly that the poor building, attacked both inside and out and by now in a perilous state, offered only one place of refuge where things might remain as they used to be—the spacious drawing room, where this 'ham-fisted champion of domestic order' ('Disturb the director at his work? Certainly not!') never dared to enter. Of course it was impossible to tell her to stop and occupy herself solely with that for which she was paid, for apart from the implied rudeness this might involve—and Eszter always avoided having to give orders or indeed anything that smacked of decision—it was clear that the woman, even if she could not gain access to him or his immediate surroundings, driven as she was by some mysterious force of charity, felt obliged to enter the bitter lists of battle against whatever objects still remained unbroken and would continue even if she were expressly forbidden, a predicament that offered the owner no option but the safe harbour of his own drawing room, which was not altogether an imposition since here he could be understood to pursue the alleged musicological research which enhanced his reputation in the town, and since this misconception kept Mrs Harrer at bay he had no cause to fear for the delicate ornaments and furnishings immediately surrounding him, and, what was more, could be certain that owing to this fortunate misapprehension nothing would disturb him in his real mission, which he referred to as his 'strategic withdrawal in face of the pathetic stupidity of so-called human progress'. The stove with its graceful copper feet was 'merrily blazing' as they say, and as it happens, this was the only item in the room which did not immediately betray the fact that time had terminally ravaged it: for the once-splendid Persian rugs, the silk wallpaper, the useless chandelier dangling from the cracked ceiling rose, the two carved armchairs, the settee, the marble-covered smoking table, the etched mirror, the dull, precarious Steinway and the countless cushions, tapestries, pieces

of porcelain bric-à-brac, all these inherited memorials of the family drawing room, each and every one of them, had long ago given up the hopeless struggle and the only thing that prevented them from crumbling and disintegrating where they stood was, in all likelihood, the ten years' worth of dust that thickly insulated them and, perhaps, his own mild, permanent, practically stationary presence. Continued presence and involuntary vigilance, however, do not in themselves constitute a state of health nor a particularly powerful assertion of the life-force, since, after all, the most funereal of positions was undoubtedly taken by the faithful occupant of the once ornamental *chaise-longue* which had been dragged some time ago from one of the bedrooms, by that man lying on high plumped pillows whose practically skeletal body could only with the greatest of charity be described as gaunt, whose ruinous condition testified less to the understandable revolt of the organs than to the constant protest against the powers that attempted to slow the natural if violent process of deterioration and the spirit that had mercilessly condemned itself, for reasons of its own, to a life of ease. He lay on the bed, motionless, his hands resting exhausted on the moth-eaten blanket in a perfect image of his by-now-stable constitution, which was not in the grip of some slow progressive disorder of the bones such as Scheiermann's Disease, nor under the threat of a sudden, potentially fatal infection, but had suffered a complete collapse, the serious consequence of allowing the muscles, the skin and the appetite to degenerate through permanent self-confinement to bed. It was the body's protest against the soft entrapments of pillow and rug, though it would be equally true to say that this was all it was, for the wilful regime of rest which nowadays only Valuska's visits and the usual morning and night-time rituals managed to break, that final withdrawal from the world of action and sociability, had no effect upon his determination and steadfastness of soul. The carefully groomed grey hair, the clipped moustache, the severe harmonization of his well-matched daily garments, all betrayed as much: the hems of the trousers, the starched shirt, the meticulously knotted tie and the deep maroon dressing gown, but, above all, the still-bright pale-blue eyes set in that pale face, eyes still razor sharp which had only to sweep over his decaying circumstances and his own body to register his highly efficient personal preservation and detect the tiniest signs of deterioration beneath the vulnerable surface of his charming and graceful possessions, which, he could clearly see, were all woven of the same ephemeral fabric of

form as himself. And it was not only the common condition of self and domain that he perceived with such acuity, but the deep sense of kinship that undoubtedly existed between the deathly calm of the room and the lifeless cold of the world outside: the sky, like some remorseless mirror, always reflecting the same world, dully turning back the sadness that rose in billows beneath it, and in the twilight, which every day grew a little darker, showed the bare pollarded chestnut trees in the moment before their final uprooting, bent before the biting wind; the trunk-roads were deserted, the streets empty, 'as if only stray cats and rats and a few pigs living on scraps' remained, while beyond the town, the bleak deserted plains of the lowlands questioned even the steady gaze of reason that attempted to penetrate them —this sadness, this twilight, this barrenness and desolation, could all be said to have found an equivalent in Eszter's drawing room with its desert-places, in the all-consuming rays emitted by the fixed dogma which united nausea, disillusion and the bed-bound routine, rays that could penetrate the armour of both form and surface, to wreck the fabric and substance; the wood and cloth, the glass and steel, of everything from floor to ceiling. 'No, we shan't have any more snow,' he declared again, casting a placid, calming glance at the nervous visitor wriggling impatiently in his chair, and leaned forward to smooth ruffles in the blanket covering his feet. 'No more snow.' He sank back on his pillows. 'Snow production has come to an end, therefore not one solitary drop will ever fall again, and, as you well know, my friend,' he added, 'between ourselves, that is the least of it …' So saying, he waved his hand once in a single careless gesture, for he had already employed that same mild gesture countless times before to express the same thought: the fatal early frost that had descended on a dry autumn with its terrifying loss of precipitation ('Ah, happy years, when it came down in buckets!') could mean only one thing, sure as the toxin, the undeniable fact that nature herself had laid down her tools and finished her regular task, that the once-brotherly bond between heaven and earth was well and truly broken, and that the last act had assuredly begun wherein we were orbiting alone among the scattered detritus of our laws and 'would soon be left staring, as fate had decreed, idiotically, uncomprehendingly, watching and shivering as the light steadily withdrew from us'. Every morning, as she was leaving, Mrs Harrer would stop at the partly opened door and unfailingly regale him with increasingly improbable horror stories, now of the water-tower that was clearly wobbling, now of the cogwheels

that spontaneously began to turn in the belfry of the church in the main square (today, as it happened, she had chattered about ‘a gang of desperadoes’ and about some tree that had been uprooted in Hétvezér Passage), though he himself no longer considered these events at all improbable, and did not doubt for a moment that the tidings—despite the congenital stupidity of the messenger—were in every respect true, since for him these were absolute confirmation of that which he could not have helped guessing: the chain of cause and effect and hence the notion of predictability were both of them illusions, ‘therefore the clear light of reason was forever obscured’. ‘It’s all up with us,’ Eszter continued, his gaze slowly trawling round the room before focusing meditatively on the stove with its flying, quickly fading sparks. ‘We have failed in our thoughts, our actions and our imaginations, even in our pitiful attempts to understand why we have failed; we have lost our God, forfeited the socially restraining forms of respect owing to honour and rank, neglected to maintain our nobly misplaced belief in the eternal laws of proportion which enabled us to estimate our true worth by relating it to the degree of our failure to measure up to the ten commandments … in other words we have come a cropper, come a painful cropper in the universe which, it appears, has ever less to offer us. If one is to believe the babblings of Mrs Harrer,’ he smiled at Valuska, who was vacillating between utterance and rapt attention, ‘people are talking about apocalypse and the last judgement, because they do not know that there will be neither apocalypse nor last judgement … such things would serve no purpose since the world will quite happily fall apart by itself and go to wrack and ruin so that everything may begin again, and so proceed *ad infinitum,* and this is as perfectly clear,’ he raised his eyes to the ceiling, ‘as our helpless orbiting in space: once started it cannot be stopped.’ Eszter shut his eyes. ‘I’m feeling dizzy; I’m dizzy and, God forgive me, bored, like everyone else who has succeeded in ridding himself of the notion that there is any suggestion of rhyme or reason in making or breaking, in birth or death, in this constant and agonizing going round in circles, postulating some enormous wonderful plan rather than a cold, mechanical, blindingly simple movement … That once perhaps … in the remote past … there might have been some feeling to the contrary,’ he cast another glance at the wriggling figure of his guest, ‘is, of course, possible, but today, in this vale of tears come all too true, it might be better for us to keep silent on the subject, at least to leave the hazy memory of the being

that set all this in motion to fade away in peace. Better to keep silent,' he repeated in slightly more ringing tones, 'and not speculate about our late creator's no doubt exalted purposes, for as to guessing how we might best have directed them we have guessed quite enough, and clearly haven't got anywhere in the process. We have got nowhere in this nor in anything else, because, as it is appropriate at this juncture to point out, we have not been over-generously blessed with the desirable gift of clear sight; the all-consuming over-active curiosity with which we have time and again assailed the sensible world has, not to put too fine a point on it, been far from a resounding success, and when, on the odd occasion, we have discovered some piddling secret we have immediately had cause to regret it. If you will forgive a joke in poor taste,' he wiped his brow, 'picture the first man to throw a stone. I throw it up, it comes down again, how splendid, he might have thought. But what really happened? I throw it up, it comes down, it strikes me on the head. The lesson is: experiment, but with caution,' Eszter gently admonished his friend. 'Better to be satisfied with the meagre but at least harmless truth, the validity of which we all, excepting of course your own angelic self, may prove upon our pulses; the truth that, when it comes down to it, we are simply the miserable subjects of some insignificant failure, alone in this simply marvellous creation; that the whole of human history is no more, if I may make myself clear to you, than the histrionics of a stupid, bloody, miserable outcast in an obscure corner of a vast stage, a kind of tortured confession of error, a slow acknowledgement of the painful fact that this creation was not necessarily a brilliant success.' He reached for the glass on his bedside table, took a gulp of water, and glanced enquiringly at the armchair, establishing, not without a certain anxiety, that his faithful visitor, who had long outgrown the domestic role of selfless general help, was more than usually restless today. Clutching the suitcase full of clothes with one hand and a small slip of paper with the other, Valuska looked as if he were cowering in his own shadow or nestling between the spread petals of his never-to-be-removed postman's cloak as the mild and sober shower of Eszter's words fell upon him; and he was obviously more and more confused about what he should do. It seemed to Eszter that he was trying to decide whether to yield to his attentive and sympathetic nature and hear his elderly friend through without interrupting him or, rather, to follow his usual habit and, as if by way of relief, immediately give vent to the sense of wonder that overtook him as he

walked like an angel through the night- and dawn-silenced streets—and as it was clearly impossible to assent to both impulses at once, Eszter was no longer surprised to see the early signs of such confusion in him. He was used to Valuska's entrances, to see him swept through the door on a wave of agitation—it was an entrance hallowed by tradition—and accepted the fact that 'till Valuska could master his inexpressible joy at one or other cosmic phenomenon' it was up to Eszter to entertain his guest with his own brand of bitter and severely critical humour. This was how it had been between them for years: Eszter talked, Valuska listened, until the moment when the expression on his disciple's face softened and gave way to the first gentle smile, when the host would be delighted to hand over to his guest, since it was not the content, only the initially passionate manner of his young friend whose answers were full of such 'wonderful blindness and unsullied charm' that ever disturbed him. It was one long unbroken story related in the stuttering and excitable prose his visitor had regaled him with each noon and every late afternoon for the last eight years, an endless fantasia of the planets and the stars, the sunlight, the ever-turning shadows, and the silent mechanism of the heavenly bodies orbiting overhead, which provided 'silent proof of the existence of an ineffable intellect' and had enchanted him all his life as he stared into the eventually over-clouded firmament on his eternal wanderings. For his part, Eszter chose not to make any objective comment on such cosmic matters, though he often joked about the 'perpetual orbiting' as if by way of light relief ('No wonder,' he once winked exaggeratedly in the direction of the armchair, 'that after thousands of years of the earth spinning about its axis people should find themselves somewhat disorientated, since their whole attention is devoted to simply remaining on their feet …'), though later he desisted even from such interventions, regarding them as thoughtless, not only because he feared destroying Valuska's delicate and brittle vision of the universe, but because he believed it might be a mistake to attribute the sad condition of humanity past or to come to the 'otherwise genuinely unpleasant enough' necessity of mankind rambling aimlessly through the universe since time immemorial. In the ascending hierarchy of their conversations, the subject of the heavens therefore lay wholly in Valuska's territory, and this was, in every sense, fair enough: quite apart from the age-old impossibility of seeing the heavens at all through such dense clouds (so dense that even to refer to them would have been a little untactful), he was convinced that Valuska's cosmos had

no relation whatsoever to the real one; it was, he thought, an image, something remembered from childhood perhaps, only an image, of some once-glimpsed universal order, an order that had become a personal domain, clearly a luminous landscape that could never be lost, a pure religion which assumed that there was or might once have been a heavenly mechanism ‘driven by some hidden motor of enchantment and innocent dreaming’. While the local community ‘given its natural inclination’ regarded Valuska as no more than an idiot, he, for his part, was in no doubt (though he only became aware of this once Valuska took on the role of his personal meal-provider and general help) that this apparently crazy wanderer on the highways of his own transparent galaxy, with his incorruptibility and universal, if embarrassing, generosity of spirit, was indeed ‘proof that, despite the highly corrosive forces of decadence in the present age, angels nevertheless did exist’. One superfluous phenomenon, however, Eszter immediately added, did not indicate merely that people had ceased to note and were actively neglecting such beings, but that, in his own view, the refined sensibilities and spirit of observation that registered such generosity and incorruptibility as distinct virtues and ornaments did so in the certain knowledge that there was nothing, nor ever was anything, to which such virtue might refer or quality ornament, or, to put it another way, that it referred to or ornamented some singular, useless and undemonstrable form—like some kind of excess or overflow—for which ‘neither explanation, nor apology’ existed. He loved him as a lonely lepidopterist might love a rare butterfly; he loved the harmless ethereal nature of Valuska’s imagined cosmos, and he shared his own thoughts with him—about the earth naturally, which, too, in its way, passed all understanding—because beyond the guarantee of goodwill which the regular visits of his young friend represented, which guarded him ‘against the unavoidable dangers of madness resulting from complete isolation’, this one-man audience provided him with constant proof, which confirmed, beyond all doubt, the redundancy of the angelic—and absolved him of responsibility for the possibly corrupting effects of his own solemn and deeply rational views, since his painfully constructed and precise sentences bounced off the shield of Valuska’s faith as if they were the lightest of darts, or simply went straight through him without touching a nerve or causing the slightest injury. Of course, he couldn’t be absolutely sure of this, for while it was hard enough in the regular run of things to establish what Valuska’s

attention was focused on, it was clear that this time his own words had no calming effect and that the most obvious causes of his nervousness were the case and the torn sheet of note-paper in his hand. Who knows whether Eszter immediately comprehended the reasons for this continuous tension, or had any notion of the import of the piece of paper Valuska was nervously clutching and twisting between his fingers, but he suspected, even on the basis of such slender evidence, that his visitor had called on him in the office of messenger rather than friend, and, since he was horrified by the sheer idea of something addressed to him or anything that might amount to a communication, he quickly replaced his glass on the bedside table, and—if only to preserve the peace of his mind and prevent Valuska speaking—pursued his own broken train of thought with a gentle but unremitting insistence. 'While, on the one hand,' he said, 'our most prominent scientists, the inexhaustible heroes of this perennial confusion, have finally and somewhat unfortunately extricated themselves from the metaphor of godhead, they have immediately fallen into the trap of regarding this oppressive history as some kind of triumphant march, a supernatural progress following, what they call, the victory of "will and intellect", and though, as you know, I am no longer capable of being the least surprised by this, I must confess to you I still cannot understand why it should be the cause of such universal celebration for them that we have climbed out of the trees. Do they think it's good like this? I find nothing amusing in it. Furthermore it doesn't fit us properly: you only have to consider how long, even after thousands of years of practice, we can keep going on two legs. Half a day, my dear friend, and we shouldn't forget it. As for learning to stand upright, allow me to cite myself as example, specifically the natural history of my illness, the course of which, as you yourself know, is to deteriorate to a condition known as Bechterew's Disease (a process my doctor, the wise Dr Provaznyik, regards as unavoidable), and that I must therefore resign myself to the fact that I must spend the remainder of my life in one simple back position, that, in short, I should continue to live, should I live at all, in a cramped and, in the strict sense of the word, stooping posture thereby atoning for and sensibly suffering the serious consequences of our thoughtlessness in assuming an erect position sometime in the remote past … Straightening up and walking on two legs therefore, my dear friend, are the symbolic starting points for our ugly historical progress, and, to tell you the truth, I am not hopeful,' Eszter sadly

shook his head, ‘that we are capable of concluding in any nobler a manner, since we regularly waste any slight chance we might have of that, as, for example, in the case of the moon landings, which, in their time, might have pointed to a more stylish farewell, and which made a great impression on me, until, soon enough, Armstrong and the others having duly returned, I had to admit the whole thing was only a mirage and my expectations vain, since the beauty of every single—however breathtaking—attempt was in some way marred by the fact these pioneers of the cosmic adventure, for reasons wholly incomprehensible to me, having landed on the moon and realized that they were no longer on earth, failed to remain there. And I, you know, to tell you the truth … well, I’d go anywhere to be out of this.’ Eszter’s voice had dropped to a whisper and he shut his eyes as if he were imagining embarking on some ultimate cosmic flight. One could not state with any great certainty that the magical attraction of this journey through space, a longer sojourn in cavernous vastness, would have dulled his appetite, yet it never lasted for more than a few seconds at a time, and though he refused to dilute the acidity of his last remark he couldn’t leave it hanging there in all its over-hasty rawness. Not to mention the fact that the temptations of this symbolic voyage were already, at the very moment of their conception, turned upside down (‘I wouldn’t get too far in any case, and however far I had got, with my bad luck, the earth would be the first thing I saw,’ or so he figured) and that his discomfort at the slightest movement was rather greater than it appeared. He had no real desire to participate in dubious ventures, nor did the thought of casual experiments in some unfamiliar situation appeal to him, since—and he never passed up the chance to draw a sharp distinction between ‘the enchantment of illusion and the misery of its fruitless pursuit’—he knew well enough that, faced with the prospect of such a dizzying journey, all he could count on would be ‘the unique quality of his own immobility’. After fifty hard years of suffering, of trying and failing to cross the swamp that constituted the town of his birth with its marsh-like foulness and suffocating stupidity, he had found a refuge from it. That intoxicating—ah, how brief—moment of daydreaming had proved utterly ineffective against it and he could hardly deny that even a short walk through its mire was beyond his powers. Not that he did deny it, of course, that was why he hadn’t left his house in years, for he felt that even a chance meeting with another citizen, the passing of a few words at the street corner he had at last carelessly ventured out to, might cancel out

all the progress he had made in his retirement. Because he wanted to forget everything he had had to suffer during the decades of his so-called directorship of the academy of music: those grinding attacks of idiocy, the blank ignorant look in people's eyes, the utter lack of burgeoning intelligence in the young, the rotten smell of spiritual dullness and the oppressive power of pettiness, smugness and low expectation under the weight of which he himself had almost collapsed. He wanted to forget the urchins whose eyes unmistakably glittered with a desire to set about that hated piano with an axe; the Grand Symphony Orchestra he was obliged to assemble from the ranks of assorted drunken tutors and misty-eyed music lovers; the thunderous applause with which the unsuspecting but enthusiastic public, month after month, rewarded this scandalous, unimaginably awful band of incompetents whose slender talents were not fit to grace a village wedding; the endless struggle educating them to music and his vain plea that they should play more than one blessed piece all the time—all those 'continual trials' of his 'monumental patience'. There were many people he wanted to wipe from his memory: Wallner, the humpbacked tailor; Lehel, the headmaster of the grammar school, whose stupidity was unsurpassed; Nadabán, the local poet; Mahovenyecz, the obsessive chess-player, employee of the water-tower; Mrs Plauf and both her husbands; Dr Provaznyik, who, with his doctor's diploma, eventually succeeded in easing everyone's path into the grave; they all deserved it, from the constantly crocheting Mrs Nuszbeck to the hopelessly mad chief of police, from the chairman of the local council with his eye for prepubescent girls to the very last roadsweeper, in short 'the whole breeding ground of dark stupidity' was to be annihilated in one fell swoop and for ever. Of course, the person he most devoutly wished to remain ignorant of was Mrs Eszter, his wife, that dangerous prehistoric beast from whom he, 'by the grace of God', had separated years ago, who reminded him of nothing so much as one of those merciless medieval mercenaries, with whom he had tied that infernal comedy of a marriage thanks to an unforgivable moment of youthful carelessness, and who, in her uniquely dismal and alarming essence, summed up all that 'multifarious spectacle of disillusionment' the society of the town, in his view, somehow succeeded in representing. Even before the beginning when, glancing up from his score, the fact of his being a husband dawned on him and he examined his spouse rather more thoroughly, he was presented with the insoluble problem of

how to avoid calling his over-ripe fiancée by her astonishing Christian name (‘How can I call her Tünde, after a fairy in a poem,’ he had pondered, ‘when she looks like a sack of old potatoes!’) and though, after a while, this problem seemed relatively unimportant, he never dared utter his alternatives to it aloud. For ‘the deadly appearance’ of his marital partner, which chimed in so perfectly with the quality of the awful choir he was doomed to conduct, was as nothing to the revelation of his better half’s inner character which pointed unmistakably to something military and martinet-like, that recognized one beat and one beat only, that of the forced march, and only one melody, that of the call to arms. And since he was unable to keep step, the martial trumpet sound of her voice made him shudder, and turned his marriage into what was, in his view, a satanic cell, a trap from which it was not only impossible to escape but which made the mere thought of escape appear to lie beyond him. Instead of ‘the basic life-energy and the poor-man’s implacable need for moral certainty’ he had unconsciously expected, shamefully in retrospect, at the time of their engagement, he found himself facing something that, without exaggeration, amounted to an ‘imbecility’ that intensified from sickness to overweening ambition and a kind of ‘vulgar arithmetic’ shot through with the crude spirit of the barracks, a roughness, an insensitivity, an inferno of such deeply destructive hate and crass boorishness, that over the decades it utterly incapacitated him. He became incapacitated and defenceless because he could neither bear her nor rid himself of her (the merest mention of divorce would loose a merciless torrent of abuse on his head …), nevertheless he suffered life under a single roof with her for close on thirty years, until one day, after thirty nightmare years, his life had reached a low point ‘from which there was no descent’. He was sitting by the window of the director’s office in the converted chapel which was the music academy, pondering the significance of some unsettling comments made by Frachberger, the blind piano tuner, whom he had just let out through the door. He looked out at the pale sunset, noted people laden down with nylon bags making their way home down the dark cold streets, and the thought flashed by him that, slowly, he too should start home, when a wholly unexpected and utterly unfamiliar sense of choking seized him. He wanted to stand up, get a glass of water perhaps, but his limbs refused to move, and he understood at that moment that it was not a passing fit of airlessness but a permanent fatigue, the disgust, bitterness and immeasurable misery of over fifty years of ‘being exhausted by such

sunsets and such journeys home' that had him in its grip. By the time he arrived at the house in the avenue and shut the door behind him, he had realized he could stand it no longer and decided to lie down; he would lie down and never get up again so that he would never lose another minute, because he knew the moment he lay down in his bed that night 'the great burden of human decline into madness, imbecility, dullness, thick-headedness, gracelessness, tastelessness, crudity, infantilism, ignorance and general stupidity' was not something that could be slept off even in fifty more years. Throwing all his previous caution aside, he invited Mrs Eszter to leave the house at her earliest convenience and informed his office that owing to his state of physical decline he was relinquishing all his privileges and obligations forthwith; as a result of which, to his greatest astonishment, his wife disappeared just like that, as in any fairy tale, and the formal decision concerning his pension arrived a few weeks later by special post, wishing him well for his 'outstanding work in musical research', bearing an indecipherable scrawl for a signature, signifying that from that day forth, by the ineffable grace of fortune, he should remain undisturbed and live only for that which he now considered to have been his mission in the first place, that is to recline on his bed and banish boredom by composing, day and night, sentences like variations 'on the same bitter theme'. Who or what he should thank for the strikingly exceptional behaviour of the institution or of his wife he had no idea, especially once the first waves of relief had washed over him, though the general conviction that his unexpected retirement was due only to the fact that his many years of research into 'the world of sound' had reached a last and decisive turning point was clearly based on a misapprehension, a mistaken hypothesis that was not entirely unfounded, although—in his case—it was incorrect to speak of musical research but rather of a moment of anti-musical enlightenment, something that has been glossed over for centuries, a 'decisive revelation' that, for him, amounted to a particularly distressing scandal. On that fateful day he was doing his customary evening round of the buildings so as to check that no one remained inside before it was locked up, and finding himself in the main hall of the academy, he saw Frachberger—clearly forgotten by the others—and as so often before, when he had come upon the old man engaged on his monthly work of tuning the pianos, he couldn't help but hear him muttering to himself. On hearing that muttering Eszter would normally sneak out of the room without signalling his presence, a gesture born of sensitivity (or

possibly distaste), and get someone else to hurry the old man up, but that afternoon he found no one, not even a cleaner, in the building, so it was left to him personally to rouse him from his meditations. Tuning fork in hand, presumably so he should distinguish more clearly between those wavering As and Es, this master craftsman lay, as was his wont, athwart the instrument, incapable of making the slightest movement without an accompanying noise, merrily conducting a one-sided conversation. At first his utterances seemed nothing but idle chatter, and as far as Frachberger himself was concerned it was indeed no more than that, but when, having found an as yet untuned chord, he cried out a second time ('How did this sweet little fifth get here? Terribly sorry, my dear, but I shall have to take you down a peg or two …'), Eszter was all attention. Ever since he was young he had lived with the unshakeable conviction that music, which for him consisted of the omnipotent magic of harmony and echo, provided humanity's only sure stay against the filth and squalor of the surrounding world, music being as close an approximation to perfection as could be imagined, and the stench of cheap perfume in the stuffy hall together with Frachberger's senile croakings represented a crude violation of such transparent ideality. This Frachberger creature was the last straw that late afternoon: a fury seized Eszter and, while still in its first fit, quite against character, he frog-marched the confused ancient out of the hall, and rather than pressing the white stick into his hand, practically threw it after him. His words though were not so easily disposed of: like siren voices, they wailed inside him, torturing him, and, perhaps already suspecting where this innocent-sounding chatter would soon lead, he couldn't put them out of his mind. Naturally enough, he recalled a sentence from his own academic training, to the effect that 'European instruments of the last two or three hundred years have been tuned to what is known as "well-tempered" pitch', and though at that time he had seen no particular signficance in the fact, it having been no concern of his what precisely lay beneath this simple statement, the once cheery sound of Frachberger's solitary mumbling now suggested that it referred to some sort of mystery, a kind of vague burden that had to be shifted before it crushed his desperate belief in the perfection of musical utterance, and in the weeks following his retirement, as soon as he had survived the most dangerous vortices of his own fatigue, he set about the grinding labour of immersing himself in the subject that seemed to strike most viciously at his person. And it quickly became apparent that

his immersion in the subject entailed engagement in a painful struggle of liberation against the last stubborn fantasies of self-delusion, because, once having worked his way through the dusted shelves full of relevant books in the hall, he had also worked out of his system that last illusion concerning the nature of ‘musical resistance’ with which he had tried to shore up his beleaguered values, and just as Frachberger ‘took a pure fifth down a peg or two’, so he too toned down the heroic mirage of his ideas until only those terminally darkening skies were left. Peeling away the inessential, or rather evoking the essential underlying concepts, he attempted, above all, to differentiate between musical and non-musical sound, positing that the former was distinguished by certain symmetries arising from harmonics inherent in its basic physical nature, that its characteristic quality lay in the fact that single vibrations comprised a whole series of so-called periodic waves which could be expressed in terms of relations between whole numbers; then went on to examine the essential conditions under which two sounds existed in harmonious relationship with each other, and established that ‘pleasure’, or the musical equivalent of such a sensation, was occasioned when the two above-mentioned sounds or tones produced the maximum number of harmonics and when the fewest of these were within critical proximity of each other; all this so he should be able, without the least tinge of doubt, to identify the concept of musical order and the ever more lamentable stations of its history, whose decisive conclusion he had almost reached. Because of his indifferent state of mind, whenever he learned anything new he tended to forget specific details and was obliged to refresh his memory and enlarge upon it, so it wasn’t surprising that during those feverish weeks his room was buried under a vast mountain of note-paper listing such a great mass of functions, calculations, decimal points, fractions, frequencies and harmonic indices that you could hardly walk for them. He had to understand Pythagoras and his mathematical daemon, how the Greek master, surrounded by his admiring students, established a musical system that, in its own terms, was wholly mesmeric, all through calculations based on the length of a stopped string, and he absolutely had to admire the brilliant insight of Aristoxenus, who trusted to the genuine musicianship and instinctive inventiveness of the ancient player and relied entirely on the ear, and, because he clearly heard the universal relationship betwen pure tones, believed the best course he could take was to tune the harmonics of his instrument to the famous Olympian tetrachord; in other

words he had to acknowledge and marvel at the fact that ‘the philosopher most concerned with the underlying unity of the cosmos and harmonic expression’ had, from wholly distinct temperamental premises, arrived at surprisingly similar conclusions. At the same time he was forced to acknowledge that what followed, to wit the sad history of the so-called development of the science of music, demonstrated the limits of natural tuning, and to observe that the problematic process of pitching an instrument, which, owing to difficulties of modulation, firmly excluded the use of the higher registers, rendered it ever more insufferable, in other words he was forced to watch events taking their fatal course, as the essential question—the meaning and value of pitch—was gradually, step by step, forgotten. The way led through Master Salinas of Salamanca, the Chinese master Tsai-Yun, through Stevinen, Praetorius and Mersenne, to the organ-master of Halberstadt, and while this last managed to resolve this issue once and for all to his own satisfaction in his *Von musikalischen Temperatur* of 1691, the issue remained what it was, a complex problem of tuning, or how one might—after all—employ all seven tones of the European scale in as free a manner as possible while using instruments tuned to a fixed pitch. Reserving to himself the right to change his mind, Werckmeister cut the Gordian knot with a cavalier swish of his sword and, maintaining only the precise intervals between octaves, divided the universum of the twelve half-tones—what was the music of the spheres to him!—into twelve simple and equal parts, so that henceforth, after easily overcoming the feeble resistance of those with a vague hankering after pure tonalities and much to the understandable delight of composers, the position was established. He established this infuriating and shameful position, a position that Eszter historically associated with the most wonderful harmonies and most sublime mutual vibrations, a position in which every note of every masterpiece had, over several centuries, contrived to suggest some great platonic realm, and Eszter was shocked to find that he had been merely dallying in the noxious marshes of its simplicity, a simplicity that had in fact turned out to be ‘false to the core’. Experts flocked to praise Master Andreas’s extraordinary ingenuity though, truth to tell, he was not so much an innovator as an exploiter of predecessors, and they discussed the issue of equal tempering as if this cheat, this fraud, were the most obvious thing in the world; not only that but in their attempts to uncover the true significance of the phenomenon, those elected to enquire into the matter

proved even more ingenious than the late Werckmeister himself. Sometimes they discoursed on how, following the genesis and spread of the theory of tonal equidistance, composers unfortunate enough to have been thus far immured within a prison of nine usable tones could now boldly venture into as yet unknown and unexplored territories; at other times on the fact that what they now referred to, in ironic inverted commas, as ‘natural’ tuning, constituted a serious problem of tonality that must be confronted, at which point they usually digressed to the issue of sensibility, for who would willingly forgo the unsurpassable oeuvre of ‘a Beethoven, a Mozart or a Brahms’ simply because the performance of their works of genius entailed some teensy-weensy departure from absolute purity of pitch. ‘We must transcend petty detail,’ they all agreed, and while there were one or two uncertain ivory-tower dwellers who, in the name of appeasement, dared to talk of compromise, the great majority adopted a superior smile and slipped the term into inverted commas, nuzzling up to their readers and whispering to them in confidential tones that pure tuning was indeed a mirage and that there was no such thing as pure tone, and even if there were, what would be the point, since everything was going so swimmingly in any case … At this point Eszter gathered these evidences of human failings, these masterworks of acoustics together, and consigned them to the litter basket, thereby, unbeknown to him, causing great joy to Mrs Harrer, not to mention the nearby second-hand book dealer, and furthermore, so that this personal gesture should serve as the public declaration of the end of his painstaking studies, he felt it was time to draw the appropriate conclusions. He did not doubt for a moment that he was dealing not merely with technical matters but with issues of ‘serious philosophical import’, but it was only as he pondered more deeply that he realized that in progressing from ‘Frachberger’s tiny downward adjustment of the pure fifth’ through his passionate researches into tonality he had arrived at an unavoidable crisis of faith where he had to ask himself whether that system of harmony to which all works of genius with their clear and absolute authority referred and on which he, who could certainly not be accused of harbouring illusions, had based his hitherto unshaken convictions, existed at all. Later, once the first and undoubtedly most bitter waves of emotion had passed and his passions had cooled somewhat, he could confront whatever ‘lay in his capacity to understand’, and once he accepted this state of affairs he felt a certain lightness of spirit for having seen clearly and precisely what had happened.

The world, as Eszter established, consisted merely of ‘an indifferent power which offered disappointment at every turn’; its various concerns were incompatible and it was too full of the noises of banging, screeching and crowing, noises that were simply the discordant and refracted sounds of struggle, and that this was all there was to the world if we but realized it. But his ‘fellow human beings’, who also happened to find themselves in this draughty uninsulated barracks and could on no account bear their exclusion from some notion of a distant state of sweetness and light, were condemned to burn for ever in a fever of anticipation, waiting for something they couldn’t even begin to define, hoping for it despite the fact that all the available evidence, which every day continued to accumulate, pointed against its very existence, thereby demonstrating the utter pointlessness of their waiting. Faith, thought Eszter, recognizing his own stupidity, is not a matter of believing something, but believing that somehow things could be different; in the same way, music was not the articulation of some better part of ourselves, or a reference to some notion of a better world, but a disguising of the fact of our irredeemable selves and the sorry state of the world, but no, not merely a disguising but a complete, twisted denial of such facts: it was a cure that did not work, a barbiturate that functioned as an opiate. There were ages more fortunate than ours, or so he pondered at that time; one had only to think of the age of Pythagoras and Aristoxenus, when ‘our fellow human beings’ were not only untroubled by doubt but felt no urge to depart from the assurance of their innocent childlike ways because they knew that heavenly harmonies were the province of heaven and were content that the music they contrived on their purely tuned instruments should afford them a glimpse into the vastness of interstellar space. Later though, after the so-called liberation from ordered cosmology, all this counted for less than nothing, since the confused, supercilious band who had opted for sheer chaos wanted none of it, insisting instead on the complete realization of what was only a fragile dream, which of course crumbled the moment it was touched, leaving them to cobble together what they could, a task they entrusted to people such as Salinas and Werckmeister, who dedicated their days and nights to turning falsehood into truth and succeeded so brilliantly that a grateful public could only sit back, examine itself with satisfaction and wink: perfect, just the job. Just the job, Eszter said to himself, and his first thought was whether he should chop up his old piano or simply toss it out of the house, but he soon realized that this

was the least attractive way of relieving himself of the shameful memory of his credulousness, so, after briefly reconsidering the situation, he decided to leave the Steinway where it was and to seek instead some more appropriate mode of self-chastisement. Equipped with a tuning socket and a sensitive frequency meter (a hard thing to get in 'the current commercial climate'), he began to spend ever more time at his ramshackle instrument, and because he believed that readiness was all and did nothing else, by the time he finished his task he was convinced that what he would hear could not possibly surprise him. This was a period of revisionist tuning or what he chose to call his 'careful adjustments to the Werckmeister oeuvre', which were, in effect, adjustments in his own sensibility, and while the former project was an unqualified success the latter was a more complex matter and he didn't feel at all certain about it. Because, when the great day arrived that he could finally seat himself at the retuned piano and devote himself, as he had intended, to playing but one suite of music for the rest of his life (the most brilliant pearls of the higher catalogue numbers in the Wohltemperierte Klavier which were perfectly suited to his purpose), the very first piece he selected, the prelude in C Major, instead of supplying some expected 'tremulous rainbow' effect, fell upon his ears with such an unbearably grating din he was forced to admit that nothing could have prepared him for it. As to the famous Prelude in E-flat Minor, the sound it made on this divinely tuned instrument reminded him of nothing so much as the scene at a village wedding, where guests heaved and retched and slipped off their chairs growing ever more drunk, and the fat, squint-eyed, heavily powdered bride, more drunk than the rest, emerged from one of the back rooms dreaming of the future … To ease his suffering he attempted to play the Prelude in F-sharp Major, the one in the second book, that referred to elements of the French overture, but it sounded as dreadful as every other piece he started. Up till now he had devoted all his time to 'universal retuning'; the time thenceforth was to be one of long and painful adjustment, a process that involved drawing deeply on his inner resources, a straining of every nerve and sinew, and when, after months of effort, he succeeded, not so much in liking but in simply bearing the ear-splitting racket, he decided to reduce his twice-two-hours-per-day to a bare sixty minutes of torture. Nor did he neglect that hour, not even after Valuska became a regular visitor; indeed, as soon as his young friend had outgrown the role of meal-provider and become his general factotum and confidant,

he began to share the painful secret of his deep disillusion and daily self-punishment with him. He explained the mechanics of the scale, drawing Valuska's attention to the fact that there was nothing mechanical about it, since the seven, apparently fixed, consecutive notes were not merely equal sevenths of a unitary octave, but seven distinct qualities, like seven stars in a constellation; he enlightened him about the limits of 'insight', and how a melody—precisely because of the divergency of the seven qualities—could not be played beginning at any point of the scale, since a scale was 'not a regular series of temple steps we can run up and down on as we please, enjoying congress with the gods'; he introduced him to 'the sorry rank of brilliant experts', from the blind man of Burgos to the Flemish mathematician, and he lost no opportunity of treating him—by way of example, so he should know how that wonderful piece sounded when 'performed on this most celestial of instruments'—to performances of Johann Sebastian. Over several years, day after day, every afternoon, having pushed his dinner aside after a few uninviting spoonfuls, he had shared with Valuska these regular acts of penance for his earlier foolhardiness and, now, hoping to delay the moment when he'd have to discover the secret of the screwed-up note and the nervously clutched case, he trusted to this routine once more, firmly determined to continue it by playing, 'for his edification', something from Johann Sebastian; but his scheme was to be frustrated either because he had left too long a gap after his last memorable remark or because Valuska had drawn on extra reserves of courage; in any case, what matters is that his bright-eyed guest got the first word in, and, however hesitantly the subsequent words followed, beginning with Valuska's own role in the matter of the suitcase, Eszter immediately realized that his fears had not been entirely insubstantial. Not at all insubstantial—for though the message and the identity of the messenger caught him off guard … he had always known that, having left the house, his wife would not only not forgive him for booting her out but would devise some scheme to get back at him, that the cool way he told her to go called for revenge. It did not matter that the day of her departure appeared so distant as to be positively antediluvian, that many years had passed since then; not for a moment did he console himself with the thought that Mrs Eszter would never again disturb him, for though he had deliberately 'wiped out the memory' of the formal divorce proceedings and for all the fact that this insulated him to some degree, the theatrical business of the suitcase full of laundry forced

him to admit that ‘the slut had by no means given the matter up’. He had to endure this ridiculous comedy in which week after week his gargantuan spouse, while pretending that her husband knew nothing of this secret arrangement, had, ever since his retirement, continued to do his washing and sent it back via the gullible Valuska, who had to pretend it had come from the laundry. ‘That is about the only thing she is good for, dealing with dirty washing,’ was Eszter’s opinion at the time, but now he saw what a terrible price he had to pay for his earlier carelessness, for he quickly discovered her clothes at the bottom of the suitcases and knew it was her surprisingly crude way of announcing that she would be back in the house ‘this very afternoon’. There was nothing here to suggest that the time for revenge had actually come, but it was enough to leave Eszter in a state of confusion until Valuska (who, being terrified of her, never ceased praising her) stuttered something that made it plain: Mrs Eszter’s uniquely wicked ‘scheme’ concerned the near future rather than the present. She did not intend moving in immediately, it was simply a way of hinting that she could do so at any time, a form of blackmail; all she was asking, it appeared from the note, was that he should take his place at the head of some campaign for moral rearmament, which had, so to speak, ‘chosen him as leader’. She was sending a list, Valuska added enthusiastically, mumbling as usual, a list of all the local citizens’ names who should be won round to the cause, so he must start immediately—it was a race against time—doing the rounds of the houses, not tomorrow but today, immediately, now, for every minute was precious—and so that he should be in no doubt what was waiting for him if he failed to act, to end with she hinted at ‘an evening over supper together …’ Rather than say anything while his friend was still in full flow, he didn’t open his mouth even after Valuska—almost certainly cowed by the low, scheming hag—had ceased praising her ‘loyalty and unprecedented tenderness’, but lay silently among the soft cushions of the once ornamental *chaise-longue,* his eyes following the sparks as they leapt from the fireplace. Should he resist? Should he tear the slip of paper up? Should he attack her with an axe, much as sensitive freshmen might attack a piano at the unguarded academy, if she dared approach the house ‘sometime in the evening’? No, Eszter said to himself, there was nothing he could do in the face of such wile and power, so he pushed back the covers and sat with bent back on the edge of the bed before slowly divesting himself of his maroon dressing gown. He told his friend, who was inexpressibly relieved to hear it,

that he was obliged, however briefly, to suspend ‘the inestimable pleasures of soothing oblivion’ because *‘testes vis maior’* etc., a decision that was made quickly, not so much because he was frightened out of his wits, but because he immediately perceived that, being as unwilling as he was to engage in warfare and wishing to avoid the worst, it was the only position he could adopt; he had, in effect, to yield to blackmail without the least struggle and not to think about it any longer, though this did not apply to the thought of having to move out; indeed, after having entrusted Valuska with the task of ‘disinfecting’ the place by depositing the suitcase—temporarily—at the furthermost point of the house (‘The suitcase, at least, can be moved, if not the sense of her presence …’), he hesitated in front of the wardrobe in some confusion. It wasn’t that he doubted his judgement, he simply didn’t know where to begin and what to do next, and like someone who has for a minute forgotten one part of a sequence of movements, he stood there, staring at the wardrobe door, opening and shutting it again. He opened it and shut it, then returned to his bed so that he might set out for the wardrobe again, and since, at this point, the hopelessness of his situation dawned on him, he tried to concentrate on one thing at a time and decide whether he should choose his dull sky-grey suit or the black one, which was more fitted to such a funereal occasion. He vacillated between the two, choosing now this, now that, but failed to reach any decision about his shirt or tie or shoes or even his hat, and if Valuska hadn’t suddenly begun to rattle about with the lunch-box in the kitchen and startled him with the noise, he would probably have remained in this state of indecision well into the evening and not have realized it was neither the grey nor the black he wanted but a third option, something that might offer him protection out there, a suit of armour ideally. Ideally, he would have preferred to choose not between jackets, waistcoats and overcoats but between helmets, breastplates and greaves, for he was all too aware that the ridiculous humiliation entailed in what he was forced to do—Mrs Eszter turning him into the equivalent of a street cleaner—would be as nothing compared to the potentially fatal real difficulties he would soon encounter; after all, it was about two months since he had last attempted a short walk down to the nearest corner. These difficulties included the moment he first made contact with pavement and air, with all those distances impossible to judge, with the perils he might have to face once he entered on the symbolic dialogue between ‘roof ridges willing themselves to collapse and the suffocating

sweetness of starched net curtains', not to mention what one might call the usual 'chances one takes in the street' (complication upon complication!), such as meeting the first, the second, then all the other citizens who were bound to come his way. He had to stand there, steady as a rock, holding his peace, while they mercilessly gave vent to their joy at seeing him again; he had to hold firm while miscellaneous people indulged their legally sanctified lack of restraint and laid the full complement of their psychological problems at his feet, and, worst of all—and here he grew melancholy at the thought—he must remain deaf and blind to all their stifling imbecility in case he should be lured into the truly sickening trap of showing sympathy or commit himself to an act of participation that might prove irreversible, predicaments he had avoided by withdrawing from society and 'enjoying the well-earned blessings of angelic indifference'. Trusting that his friend-in-need would relieve him of some aspects of his task, he did not concern himself with the manner in which he might go about them: it was of no consequence to him whether he finished up organizing a sewing circle, winning a pot-plant competition or leading this clearly obsessed movement dedicated to sweeping changes, and since he devoted all his energy to resisting such grotesque visions, having finished dressing and taking a last look in the mirror at his impeccable outfit (grey, as it happened), he briefly entertained the faint likelihood of returning from the horrible prospect of his walk unscathed, when his aperçus about the sorry state of the world and his general thoughts, which were far harder to put into words, concerning as they did such subjects as the sparks emitted by the fire in the fireplace and the evanescence of their 'evil if enigmatic significance', might be continued precisely where—owing to Mrs Eszter's foreseeable yet surprising demands—they had so regrettably left off. This was a faint possibility, he thought, but it would call for tremendous exertions in the face of potentially fatal difficulties; and as he passed the ever thinner double row of books in the hall with Valuska in his wake (Valuska was cheerfully dangling the lunch-box by now), and crossed the twilit threshold of the building to reach the street outside, the air he breathed seemed sharp as poison and he grew so dizzy that instead of worrying about 'being overwhelmed by the tide of middle-class manners' what really concerned him was whether his legs would support him in the confused and fluid space, and whether it wouldn't be wiser to consider retreating there and then, 'before,' he added as if answering another

question, ‘the lungs, the heart, the sinews and muscles could answer for themselves with a resounding no’. It was tempting to go home, lock himself away in the drawing room and insulate himself with cushions and rugs in pleasant warmth, but he couldn’t seriously consider it, since he knew what to expect if he ‘disobeyed orders’: it was equally tempting to bash the monster’s head in. He sought support from his walking stick and his suddenly anxious friend leapt to his assistance (‘There’s nothing wrong, is there, Mr Eszter, sir?’), and eventually he regained his balance and dismissed all thought of resistance from his mind, and concentrated on accepting the dizzy state of the world that was spinning round him as a perfectly natural state of affairs, at which point he took a tight grip of Valuska’s arm and continued on his way. He continued on his way, having decided that Valuska, his guardian angel—either because he was scared of the woman or because he was overjoyed at being able to show him his old haunts—was prepared to haul him through the streets even in his half-dead state, and so, muttering something to allay his fears (‘No, it’s nothing … nothing really’), he kept the true details of his disorientating dizziness and progressive weakening to himself; and while the latter, satisfied that there was nothing to hinder their walk, embarked on an enthusiastic monologue about the dawn birth of that mush of icy mist rolling about them, under whose riveting spell he seemed to have fallen as if for the first time, Eszter, quite beyond the hopes of a few moments ago and truly deaf and blind by now, gave all his attention to keeping his balance, placing one foot in front of another, so that they might at least reach a resting place at the nearest corner. He felt as if he had developed cataracts on both his eyes and was swimming through some foggy void: his ears were ringing, his legs shaking and a hot flush ran through his entire body. ‘I might faint …’ he thought, and rather than fearing such a spectacular loss of consciousness, he actually desired it, for it dawned on him that if he were to collapse in the street, surrounded by a huddle of frightened bystanders, and be carried home on a stretcher, Mrs Eszter’s plan might be ruined and he could escape from the trap by the simplest means possible. Ten more steps, he calculated, might be enough for this fortunate turn of events to take place; to realize that no such turn might be expected took him no more than five. They were passing the higher numbers in Eighteen Forty-Eight Street when, instead of collapsing, he suddenly began to feel better: his legs no longer shook, the ringing in his ears ceased, and, to his greatest annoyance, even the sense of dizziness left

him; in other words he had no excuse left for cutting short his walk. He stopped to find he could hear and see once more, and once he saw he was forced to look around and take account of the fact that something had certainly changed since his last excursion into ‘this hopeless bog of a town’. He couldn’t pin down what precisely it was, not at any rate in those first few moments of flickering confusion, but though he couldn’t isolate the phenomenon he had nevertheless to acknowledge that Mrs Harrer’s chattering had not been entirely beside the point. Not entirely beside the point, that was true, but a voice inside him whispered that Mrs Harrer hadn’t quite got the essence of the thing, for, by the time they had taken a breather at the corner of the avenue and the main trunk road, and he had taken ‘proper stock of the matter’, it became apparent to him that, contrary to the opinion of his loyal cleaner, his ‘beloved birthplace’ did not have the look of a town just waiting for the end of the world but rather of one that had survived it. What surprised him was that instead of the usual look of aimless idiocy on the faces of passers-by—an expression of endless patience also adopted by those who peeked from windows in anxious expectation of some great event, in other words ‘the usual dungheap smell of spiritual lethargy’—Wenckheim Avenue and the surrounding streets wore a hitherto unrecognized air of desolation and a look of speechless and arid neglect had replaced the ‘monstrous vacancy’ he was used to. It was strange that while the generally deserted neighbourhood suggested the aftermath of some cataclysmic event, all the incidentals and accidentals of life—contrary to what you would expect in the case of imminent plague or radiation sickness, when everyone would flee in panic—were still in place, looking as permanent as ever. All this was strange and surprising, but what he found most shocking—once he realized it—was that the answer to this conundrum that even a blind man could not help but be aware of and which he himself instinctively and immediately recognized, an instinct which told him that he had entered a terrain that had undergone some scandalous transformation, lay out of his reach despite the fact that as each minute passed he grew ever more convinced that there was an answer, but it was in the form of some hidden clue which even if he could spot—and clearly it had to be visible—he would be unable to recognize: it was something in this gradually more focused image—the silence, the desolate mood, the soulless perfection of the deserted streets—a point of rest on which everything else stood. He leaned with half a shoulder against the wall of the gateway that served as

their resting place, gazing at the buildings opposite, taking in the enormity of their voids, their windows and lunettes and the patchwork effect they created as they melted into the spaces between joists, then, while Valuska chattered away, he held his hands against the stucco behind his back in case the crumbling condition of the substance between his fingers might tell him what had happened. His gaze took in the storm-lamps and the pillars covered in advertisements; he observed the bare tops of the chestnut trees and let his eyes run down both ends of the main road, seeking an explanation in terms of distance, size or discrepancy in proportions. But he found no answer there, so he tried to locate an axis that might impose some meaning on the town's ostensible disorder, looking ever further afield in his effort, until he was forced to admit that it was hopeless searching for a clear overview under a dark sky like this that made early afternoon look like dusk. This sky, Eszter decided, this incomprehensible mass, this complex weight that had settled across them, had not changed its character, not in the slightest detail, and since this suggested that to conceive of even the most minor modulation of its surface was an absolute waste of time he determined to abandon the search and stifle his curiosity, putting the failure of his 'first instinctive reaction' down to the erratic functioning of an overstretched nervous system. To hell with it, he decided, acknowledging that he could not count on a favourable resolution to the so-far-steady improvement in his generally lamentable condition, and, as if to underline this, had fixed his ostensibly wandering attention on what Valuska's ringing words declared to be 'that eternal herald of good tidings', the indifferent dome of the sky, when, suddenly, like the proverbial absent-minded professor who discovers his lost glasses at the end of his own nose, he realized that he should not be looking up but down at his feet, since what he was looking for was there, there to the extent that he was standing on it. He was standing on it, had been treading its surface all along, and was fated to proceed along it in the immediate future, and as he noted this, he put his belated recognition of it down to the fact that it was all too obvious, too close, and its unsuspected proximity was the problem; it was because he could touch it, indeed walk all over it, that he had ignored it, and he was furthermore convinced that when, in those first few moments, he had sensed that there was something 'apocalyptic' and 'shockingly revolutionary' about it, he was far from mistaken. It was not the bare fact that was so astonishing, since, by some tacit agreement, the town—its capacity for civic

enthusiasm being strictly limited—regarded every piece of common ground as a kind of no man's land, with the result that for several years now no one had bothered with the so-called 'issue' of road maintenance. It wasn't even the unusual quality of the tide of the stuff that startled him, but its quantity, which Eszter, unlike the twenty thousand or so pedestrians, including Mrs Harrer, who daily trod the pavements—and had she taken particular notice of it she would certainly not have failed to let him know—considered fantastic beyond his wildest dreams. His ostensible response was a simple, 'Well, well …' but he was horrified: it was impossible, you couldn't throw away, you couldn't drag here such an enormous volume of it, and, since what he saw far exceeded anything that might have been credibly explained to an individual of normal intelligence, he felt that, taking the scale of this extraordinary and 'monstrous work of havoc' into account, he might be justified in risking the opinion that 'the exclusively human capacity for mind-numbing levels of neglect and indifference was, beyond a doubt, truly limitless'. 'The amount of it! The sheer amount of it!' He shook his head and, dropping any pretence of listening to Valuska's interminable discourse, attempted to take in the extent of this monstrosity, this all-pervading deluge, able at last, for the first time, now, at roughly three o'clock in the afternoon, to give a name to that which had so strangely disorientated him. Rubbish. Everywhere he looked the roads and pavements were covered with a seamless, chinkless armour of detritus and this supernaturally glimmering river of waste, trodden into pulp and frozen into a solid mass by the piercing cold, wound away into the distant twilight greyness. Apple cores, bits of old boots, watch-straps, overcoat buttons, rusted keys, everything, he coolly noted, that man may leave his mark by, was here, though it wasn't so much this 'icy museum of pointless existence' that astonished him (for there was nothing remotely new about the particular range of exhibits), but the way this slippery mass snaking between the houses, like a pale reflection of the sky, illuminated everything with its unearthly, dull, silvery phosphorescence. The awareness of where he was exercised an increasingly sobering effect on him—he had by no means lost his capacity for calm appraisal—and as he continued to appraise, as if from a considerable eminence, the monstrous labyrinth of filth, he grew ever more certain that, since his 'fellow human beings' had utterly failed to notice this flawless and monumental embodiment of doom, it was pointless talking about a 'sense of community'. It was, after all, as if the earth had opened up beneath him,

revealing what lay underneath the town, or, and he tapped at the pavement with his stick, as if some terrible putrescent marsh had seeped through the thin layer of asphalt to cover everything. A marsh in a bog, thought Eszter, the essential *fundamentum* of the place, and standing there for a while in vacant contemplation he suddenly had a vision of the houses, trees, lampposts and advertisement hoardings sinking right through it. Could this, he wondered, be a form of the last judgement? No trumpets, no riders of the apocalypse but mankind swallowed without fuss or ceremony by its own rubbish? 'Not an altogether surprising end,' thought Eszter, adjusting his scarf, then, having come to this neat full stop and considering his own investigations at an end, prepared to move off. But, understandably enough, he felt rather uncertain about the sheer idea of stepping from the solid concrete of the gateway to the frozen marsh of the pavement for that solid, static, infernal layer of waste in aspic had the knack of appearing both thick and thin, both substantial and brittle at once: like a pond with one day's covering of ice, it might crack as soon as you put any weight on it. As a concept, it was thick and unbreakable, the top layer of an infinite mass: as substance though it looked wafer thin, a distinctly hazardous surface incapable of sustaining him; and while he stood there, vacillating between the prospects of moving or remaining, the spirit of loathing and resistance rose up in him once again and he decided that 'owing to unforeseen circumstances' he would simplify Mrs Eszter's prescribed modes of procedure and pass the list she had left him to whoever happened to come along: let them arrange the affairs under his name, affairs that, with the town in this condition, he was wholly unfitted to deal with, let them get on with what remained of organizational matters; as for him, he decided, he should make his way home as quickly as his sanity, the state of his health and the petrified lava of lunar rubbish allowed. Unfortunately there was precious little chance of meeting anyone, the only visible life-form along Béla Wenckheim Avenue being a hardier species of cat, great softly padding packs of them, guarding, in their indolent way, the frozen residue of objects which still held significance for them, but from which, as far as everyone else was concerned, the weight of meaning had been lifted like some unspecified burden. They were overweight creatures, grown visibly feral, born out of a long dream, who, in these favourable circumstances, were clearly reverting to their ancient predatory instincts, witnesses, tsars of a long-expected dark age that seemed as if it would go on for ever, the new

lords of a town where ‘as far as he saw, the signs of a progressive and general decadence were all too evident’. No one could doubt that these cats were afraid of nothing, and, right on cue, as if to prove it, an individual beast in one of the packs, one that, judging by the half-rat between its jaws, had clearly not gone hungry, having recognized potential prey in the figures of two members of the former master race in the gateway, was approaching them with an air of insolent audacity. Eszter did not accord any special significance to the cats, but, once he noticed them, made a shooing movement with his hand which was intended to frighten them off, a gesture wasted on the uninhibited rabble that had apparently stuffed itself to the point of nausea; and, since the deference once owing to his species was no longer forthcoming at a mere gesture, its only effect being a cautious minor retreat on the part of the pack, it seemed he would have to resign himself to their company; and so it proved, for, having resolved to move off (and thereby put an end to all that vacillation) and set out in the direction of the cinema and the Komló Hotel, they found that the cats, instead of leaving them alone, ‘as if recognizing, in their instinctive animal way, the change in their relative status’, continued to follow them a good part of the way, at least as far as the hotel where Valuska picked up Eszter’s dinner and stowed it in his lunch-box, at which point, like detectives grown tired of tailing a suspect, they simply gave up and dispersed to forage among the most recent-looking of the piles of rubbish, resorting to their keen primitive sense of smell as they searched for scraps of meat, chicken bones or, indeed, live rats. The whole place looked as if an unruly carnival had not long ago passed that way: dangerous piles of broken glass and shards of bottles of cheap spirits lay before the deserted hotel entrance while, on the other side of the street, a gutted and vandalized bus, which seemed to have collapsed in mid-genuflection about its broken axle, stood with its hood up against Schuster’s haberdashery shop as if someone had given it a vague shove in that direction. Soon enough Valuska rejoined Eszter and they reached the Chez Nous Café, from where, according to Mrs Harrer, the famous poplar tree ought to have been visible (the one which had apparently got so bored with gripping the soil it let go its hold and collapsed, like some harmless giant, across the narrow width of Hétvezér Passage). Eszter, who was undoubtedly still dazed by the general experience of being outside but was thinking only of the rubbish, drew his companion’s attention to it. ‘Tell me, my friend, do you see what I see?’ But it was pointless trying to share his

astonishment with him: that was plain the moment he opened his mouth, for, after a moment of confusion (in himself or in the other man?), the merest glance at Valuska's shining face revealed that, having concluded his account of his dawn reveries, his mind was altogether elsewhere, as indeed it would be, thought Eszter, in one who had spent an eternity wandering the city streets and still did not notice anything unusual in this nightmare landscape—and the beaming expression on the face of his escort on this mournful shuffling walk was perfect demonstration of the fact that he regarded it almost as a kind of negation of the filth underfoot; it was as if the whole occasion were in some way uplifting, and that it was only due to some hallucination, born out of his own weakness and astonishment, that Eszter, having realized his mistake far too late, had stumbled across a ghost town where the old town had been. Ever since they had left the house he had concentrated solely on observing and assessing the situation, had hardly heard what the other man said, and if he had been aware of his presence at all it was merely because their arms were linked; so it was strange that now, suddenly, in understanding everything too late, he saw that there was but one proper target for his attention, that being the figure beside him, the man wearing a cap and a coarse, enormous postman's cloak, that blissfully meandering conveyor of provisions, Valuska himself. Up to this point—having so far, mistakenly, assumed he was dealing with a doomed but still functioning society—it had not occurred to him that the strictly reliable system of regular lunch-time and early-afternoon 'angelic visitations', not to mention his own unalterable daily routine, had, in effect, been organized by Valuska, and that his friend's strange, yet by now seemingly natural, punctuality might be in some way vulnerable to external circumstances; but now, on this day, a day which might justifiably be regarded as special, here before the Chez Nous Café, for the first time in all their long acquaintanceship, Eszter suddenly became aware of the great risks his companion had been running, albeit unwittingly, and was seized with a terrible anxiety. He saw this ultimate version of the last human environment, and could, at the same moment, for the first time, understand and imagine Valuska's life, how, without knowing quite where he was or to what threat he might be vulnerable, this innocent, unsuspecting creature, blinded by the starlight of his own internal solar system ('Like a rare endangered butterfly lost in flight in a burning forest …'), had spent his days and nights roaming through this potentially lethal heap of rubbish, and,

having understood this, Eszter could draw but one conclusion, which was that he couldn't rely on himself alone but required the assistance of his faithful companion, which thought, in turn, led him to decide there and then that, if they ever succeeded in finding their way home again, he would never again let Valuska out of his sight. For decades he had acted in the belief that his intellect and sensibility led him to reject a world whose products were unbearable to either intellect or sensibility, but were always available for criticism by the same, but now, stepping from Hétvezér Passage into the funereal silence of Tanács Street, he was forced to concede that all his clear thinking and stubborn adherence to the principles of so-called 'sober ratiocination' counted for nothing, since as long as this town, which he took to be representative of the world, persisted in maintaining its lethal reality, that earthy muddy smell he found such a particularly terrible trial would persist in emanating from it. It was no use struggling; he had to understand that his customary Eszterian mode of wit was of no help to him here, for the phrases he thought of failed abysmally to establish his proud superiority over the world; the meanings of words had faded like the light in a run-down flashlight, the objects words might have referred to had crumbled under the weight of the fifty or so years that had passed and given way to the unlikely trappings of a Grand Guignol stage-set in the face of which every sober word and thought confusingly lost its meaning. With such a world, in which statements employing tropes such as 'as' and 'as if' had lost their cutting edge; in an empire that was prepared to sweep away, or so he believed, not ignorance or opposition but whatever did not fit there; with such a 'reality', as Eszter conceived it with a shudder of disgust and repulsion, he had nothing to do—though at this precise minute it would have been very difficult for him to deny that to enter this labyrinth and then make such mad grandiosely dignified declarations could hardly be regarded as anything but eccentric. However, this did not stop him making them and, on their next stop, at the newsagent's stall in Tanács Street, the friendly newsvendor misunderstood him and tried to explain, by way of reassurance, that he knew the reason for this 'strange depopulation', launching so enthusiastically forth on his explanation that it concentrated Eszter's mind solely on the task of getting home as soon as his mission had been accomplished, and, should he by good fortune have succeeded in accomplishing that, henceforth staying there. For he had lost all interest in what was happening out here, in what calamity would follow the tide of

rubbish, in fact he had lost interest in everything except how someone who had blundered into the arena might seek safer soil ‘before the performance was over’, how he might disappear like ‘a gentle melody in the midst of cacophony’ and be hidden away indoors, secreted where nobody could ever find him; and this thought kept nagging away like some faint persistent recollection that at least one figure representative of him—‘some strangled, orphaned, vaguely poetic sensibility’—had, once upon a time, really, quite physically existed. With half an ear he was listening to Valuska’s rapt account of his experiences of the morning, something about a whale in Kossuth Square that attracted not only the local townsfolk, but (an obvious if forgivable exaggeration) ‘positively hundreds of people from the surrounding countryside’, but, truth to tell, he could cope with only one thought at a time, that being the problem of how long they had to turn the house on the avenue into an impregnable fortress that could withstand whatever chance could throw at it. ‘That’s where everyone is,’ his companion announced, and as they made their way up the main street towards the corner where the Water Board stood (its name had attracted a certain sarcasm in the last few months), he entered ever more feverishly into speculation about how marvellous it would be if, as a fitting climax to their excursion, they could view this once-in-a-lifetime monster together, and indeed Valuska’s description of the circus-owner with his squashed nose and soiled vest, of the hours of waiting by the so-called masses who flooded the market square, the whale’s enormous proportions and all the other fabulous details of the extraordinary creature, far from moderating Eszter’s desire acted rather as coal to the fire, for the whole depressing excursion with its even more important ‘uncanny sense of preparation’ could (and indeed should) scarcely have led to any other climax than this spellbinding monstrosity. If, he thought, and the thought depressed him further, if this monster should actually be in the square, and the enormous crowd and the showman in the vest were not merely a sign of his companion’s desperate attempt to populate the deserted town with the products of his imagination, and the existence of this tremendous spectacle were underwritten by the poster stuck on the walls of the furrier’s shop, a poster on which someone had written with a brush, or rather with a finger dipped in ink, the words: CARNIVAL TONIGHT, then it seemed all the more poignant that the more he looked about him in the surrounding desolation the more everything pointed to the fact that apart from the stray cats they

seemed to be the only living creatures about—in so far as, Eszter bitterly observed, such a sweeping generalization as ‘living’ could be made to apply to their own miserable selves. For it was no use denying it, they did look a somewhat strange sight, hanging on to each other as they slowly made their way towards the Water Board offices on the corner in the grinding cold, each step a struggle against the icy wind; more like two blind visitors from an alien planet than like a respectable man with his faithful companion at his side setting out to enthuse the populace about, of all things, a movement for moral rearmament. They had to harmonize two ways of walking, two different speeds, and, indeed, two different kinds of incapacity, for while Eszter’s every step across the suspiciously glimmering surface was taken as if it were his last, each appearing to be a preparation for a gradual but ultimately total cessation of movement, Valuska’s acute desire to increase his own momentum was consistently frustrated, and since Eszter was clearly dependent on him, he was constrained to hide the fact that the body leaning on his left arm was endangering his sense of balance, for while his enthusiasm could in some sense support the spiritual weight of his beloved master, the same was not true of the physical equivalent. One could perhaps sum up the situation by saying that their roles consisted of Valuska pulling and tugging and Eszter acting as an effective brake, or that Valuska was practically running while Eszter was practically standing still, but it would be inappropriate to consider their progress severally, partly because the discrepancy between their strides seemed to be resolved in some combined lurch forward, an uncertain, painful-looking progress, and partly because their clumsy clinging interdependence precluded their being individually identified as Eszter on the one hand and Valuska on the other: in effect they appeared to form a single bizarre figure. And so they advanced in curious unitary fashion, or, as Eszter rather sourly thought of it, ‘like an exhausted gnome, something perfectly at home in this infernal nightmare’, a wandering shade, a demon that had lost its way, one side of whose body was condemned to supporting the other, the left leaning on a stick, the right merrily swinging a lunch-box, and, as they went on, passing the tiny lawn in front of the Water Board and the silent offices of the Employment Insurance Bureau, they encountered three other figures standing in the doorway of the stocking factory’s White Collar Club who had just glimpsed them and appeared to be rooted to the spot, waiting for the dreaded hand of fate, in the shape of this monstrous apparition slowly approaching them, to

reach them (the two groups could well have regarded each other as ghosts), until there came the moment of recognition. ‘Three of the bravest there,’ Eszter nudged Valuska, who was still wholly absorbed in the story of the whale, indicating the ash-grey huddle on the other side (sparing him the supplementary, ‘seeing there is no one else around’), then reminded himself of what Mrs Eszter wanted done apropos her ‘movement’ and set off across the road, steeling himself to the first disturbing waves of missionary endeavour, trying to formulate phrases that might infuse the three men facing him—however poorly they seemed to be equipped for the great reawakening—with appropriate fervour. ‘Something has to be done!’ he bellowed once the formal courtesies were done with, and when he had succeeded in freeing his hand from theirs, one of them, the hard-of-hearing Mr Mádai, whose habit it was to scream mercilessly into his victims’ ears to establish ‘an exchange of views’, kept agreeing with him, and while the other two also agreed, it seemed they strongly disagreed on the more thorny question of what precisely it was that had to be done. Blithely ignoring the issue of what it was they had to do something about and recognizing Eszter as the immediate master of the situation, Mr Nadabán, the fat butcher, whose position among the notable and influential burghers of the town was underwritten by the quality of his ‘gentle and refined poetry’, announced that he would like to call the assembly’s attention to the need for solidarity; but Mr Volent, the fanatical general engineer of the boot factory, shook his head and counselled common sense as the natural starting point, a point with which Mr Mádai disagreed, for, gesturing for silence, he leaned towards Eszter once again and, practically busting his vocal cords, proclaimed, ‘Vigilance, vigilance at all costs, is my advice!’ Not one of them, of course, left any doubt that the central concepts—‘vigilance’, ‘common sense’ and ‘solidarity’—were merely first steps along a logical course of reasoning and that they could hardly wait to sally forth on the mission implied by these noble values and Eszter—deeply relieved at having stumbled upon at least ‘three representative species of local idiot’ at the entrance of the stocking factory’s White Collar Club—had little difficulty in anticipating what would happen if the diversity between the views of three proponents so clearly quivering with excitement and raring to go ever became apparent, so, taking a calculated risk and wanting as soon as possible to yield place to the retreating figure of Valuska, he tried to bridle their rising passions by asking them what united them in their

opinion (‘As I assume from the bitter tone of your reply’) that the end of the world had genuinely arrived. The question evidently surprised them and for a single moment the three faces with their different agitated expressions were almost as one, not one of them having expected Gyorgy Eszter to understand the situation; for how, after all, should someone whose existence already seemed to be commemorated in some as yet unwritten epitaph like: ‘He illuminated our daily life by bringing his extraordinary musical gifts to bear upon it’; someone who was an idol of the educated public, the subject of a panegyric in verse which included the line ‘the alpha and omega of our dull lives’, composed by one of the present company, Mr Nadabán; someone who, by virtue of being a genius, was, like all geniuses, presumed to be absent-minded, and who, furthermore, had chosen to withdraw from the noise and haste of the world; how should he have known anything of the matter? Clearly there were many good reasons for him to be ignorant of the situation and the three of them fully appreciated their remarkable fortune in having been chosen—out of all the population of this great town—to inform him of the ominous changes in the neighbourhood. And they kept cutting across each other in their haste to do so: the shops were sometimes full, sometimes empty; education and bureaucracy had more or less broken down; there were terrible problems in heating one’s home because of the shortage of coal; chemists had run out of medicine; travelling by bus or car was impossible; and this very morning, they desperately complained, the telephones had gone dead. This more or less summed up the situation. And what’s more! Volent added bitterly; and not just that! Nadabán interjected; and to top it all! bawled Mr Mádai, and to top it all, here comes this circus to wreck our last faint hopes of restoring order, a circus featuring some dreadful vast whale we have allowed into town out of the goodness of our hearts, against which now nothing can be done. Especially since the really strange events of last night, Nadabán dropped his voice; something more sinister than anything so far, Mádai nodded; since this extraordinarily evil-looking company, Volent’s brow wrinkled, arrived in Kossuth Square. Completely ignoring Valuska, who stared at them with a mixture of sadness and confusion, they addressed themselves to Eszter, explaining that it was bound to be some criminal conspiracy, though it was hard to see what it meant, what it was aimed at, or even to establish the basic facts. ‘There are at least five hundred of them!’ they claimed, but went on to say that there were really only two people involved in the company; one moment it was

the star item itself that was the most frightening (they had seen it!), the next it seemed to be merely a diversion from the rise of some kind of mob that was only waiting for night to fall before attacking the peaceful populace; one moment the whale had nothing to do with it, the next it was the cause of all the trouble, and when, finally, they claimed that the 'shady band of brigands' was already engaged in looting and rapine and standing immobile in the square at the same time, Eszter decided he had had enough and raised his hand to signal that he wanted to speak. He was interrupted before he could start by Volent, who declared that people were frightened; we cannot stand by and twiddle our thumbs, Nadabán interjected; not while they are plotting our doom, Mádai added in his characteristic fashion. There are children here, Nadabán wiped away a tear; and weeping mothers, Mádai trumpeted; and the most precious thing of all, hearth and home, the family, Volent added, his voice trembling with emotion, all under a terrible threat … One could imagine where this chorus of lamentation might have led if the chorus were not interrupted; one could only imagine since no one would ever know, for they found themselves so weighed down by the air of general gloom they had temporarily run out of breath. Eszter seized the initiative and, bearing in mind the wretched state of their nerves and the tortured condition of their souls, announced that there was, he was pleased to say, a solution: the situation may yet be turned to advantage and secured by a powerful sense of commitment. Without further ado he presented them with the essential programme of the movement for A TIDY YARD, AN ORDERLY HOUSE, the central concern of which, he explained as he looked away somewhere in the distance above their heads, spoke for itself, and if his friends would allow him he would assume the role of 'ombudsman-in-chief for waste' and 'general inspector of refuse', adding only that he did not doubt for a second the success of their mutual collaboration nor the effective organizational powers of the three gentlemen before him. It was as much as he could do to wait while Valuska handed over the programme for action and explained it all in the most exhaustive detail, and once his companion had finished, he turned on his heels and, compressing the whole act of farewell into a single wave of the hand, left them to digest the information for themselves. He was certain that the seed of Mrs Eszter's generative words had fallen on fertile soil and that there was nothing more for him to do but to wipe the events of the last quarter of an hour from his mind as thoroughly as he could, so that when his audience of three

recovered from his abrupt departure and broke into a spontaneous ecstasy of passion, crying, ‘We shall overcome! Wonderful idea! Solidarity! Common sense! Vigilance!’ he would no longer hear it, and so, drawing strength from the slender comfort that, having exercised his powers of patience to absolute breaking point, he had at least finally rid himself of the burden of his task, he returned to his incomplete plans and tried to think as carefully as he could through possible courses of action. He was aware that news of ‘the successful completion of his assignment’ had to reach his wife unconditionally and in good time (‘And in a few minutes’ time it will be four o’clock already!’), otherwise her threats would certainly be carried out, so, putting an end to the efforts of Valuska, who, having been confused by the preceding gabble, was trying to prove to him the groundlessness of his fears about the circus, he announced that, ‘conscious of a job well done’, he was off home now, but—and here he gave Valuska a significant look, one, however, that did not reveal the full extent of his plans—he would first ask him that whenever he finished whatever remained to do in Honvéd Passage he should return immediately. Naturally, Valuska protested that he couldn’t leave him alone in such cold weather, not to mention abandoning ‘the idea of seeing the whale’, so Eszter was forced to go into a little more detail, interrupting himself only to reassure Valuska that everything was perfectly all right and that he’d manage (‘Look, my friend,’ he said, ‘I cannot say I like the inexorable grip of frost, nor, on the other hand, that my existence here represents the tragedy of a tropical temperament condemned to spend eternity in the empire of snow, since as you know there is no snow, nor shall there be ever again, so let’s not even discuss it. Have no doubt, however, that I am capable of making my way back home over the little distance that remains unaided, even in this cold weather. And another thing,’ he added, ‘don’t spend too much time in regretting the brief postponement of the climax of our memorable adventure. I would happily have made the acquaintance of the majestic being, but we must give it up for the time being. It is, I find,’ he smiled at Valuska, ‘always pleasant and entertaining to come upon a creature on one of the points of the evolutionary scale at which I, personally, would gladly have stopped, but this walk has exhausted me and my rendezvous with your whale will, I imagine, wait till tomorrow … ’ His voice no longer had the sharpness it once had and he was aware that the intention of being witty was far more evident than the wit itself, but since there was a latent commitment in what he said, Valuska, albeit

somewhat unhappily, accepted his proposition; so the rest of their way together Eszter remained undisturbed and free to plan the occasion of their next meeting. He came to the conclusion that thanks to Mrs Harrer's destructive passion for cleanliness, apart from the barricading of the gates and the boarding up of the windows, there was little else needed to make the house habitable, and relieved by this thought he fell to speculating as to what 'life à deux might be like'. With great care and precision he defined Valuska's place in the magnetic swamp of his house in the space beside the drawing room, as close to his own as possible, and imagined 'peaceful mornings spent together' and 'silent evenings full of harmony'. He could see them now, sitting together in deep tranquillity, brewing up coffee in the afternoons and preparing hot dinner at least twice a week; his friend would launch forth on his astronomical reveries and he would pass his usual deprecatory remarks, and in so doing they would forget the rubbish, the fading props of the world, the very world itself … He noticed (and the consciousness naturally somewhat embarrassed him) that having got so far with his plans he had begun to shed a few sentimental tears, so he quickly looked round again and, casting his mind back to his sufferings, concluded that in view of his weakened condition ('Being an old man, as indeed I am') such a show of emotion was, for once, quite forgivable. He took the ice-cold lunch-box from Valuska, made him swear that as soon as his business was finished he would come straight over, and, after a few other minor admonitions, somewhere in the region of Hétvezér Passage, watched him disappear from view.

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He lost him from view, yet did not lose him, because even though the houses came between them he could still see Eszter, his beloved master, whose one-hour-long excursion had, under Valuska's intense protection, left such a strong mark on the town that no mass of mere buildings could obscure him. Everything pointed to the fact that he had passed that way, and wherever Valuska looked, the knowledge that he was still near conjured the other's presence—so much so that after the actual parting he spent a few minutes in a kind of reverie as the effect of this extraordinary event began to fade, slowing the process down and enabling him mentally to escort his master back to the house in Wenckheim Avenue, when he could breathe again and be assured that the walk, Mr Eszter's unexpected and wonderful foray into the world, 'though not without its element of sadness', had nevertheless been conducted to good effect. To have stood beside him as he left the room, to have been present as he took his first few steps in the hall, to have followed him like a shadow knowing what a tremendous advance this was in the much-desired and long-hoped-for healing process, to have watched him proceed from lounge to outside gate was cause for joy and conferred great honour on him as the proud witness of all this activity; on the other hand, simply to regard the excursion as something 'not without its element of sadness' now was to fail to convey the full quality of the experience, since his belated recognition of the fact that his elderly friend found every step an ordeal had, even during the walk, rather clouded the delight of being a 'proud witness', leaving only a suffocating air of sadness. He had believed that the moment the invalid had risen for the first time and finally left his curtained room heralded a recovery, a resurrection of his appetite for life, but within a few steps he had had to confront the possibility that the afternoon would bring no amelioration but only reveal the true seriousness of his condition, and the frightening likelihood that his public reappearance in the cause of social renewal was not the way back into the world but, more probably, a last farewell and resignation from it, an act of ultimate rejection, and this—for the first time in all their acquaintance—filled Valuska with the deepest anxiety. Feeling ill at the first breath of fresh air was a bad sign, though, since Eszter had hardly ventured from the house for as long as he could remember and certainly not in the last two months, it was not altogether unexpected, but nothing had prepared him to accept the extent of Eszter's physical deterioration or the sad condition of the town itself, its nervous tension and exhaustion, and his own lack of

vigilance left him with a terrible sense of guilt. Guilt for his lack of awareness, for having blinded himself to the truth and vainly hoped-for improvement in the short term; guilt because if any harm had come to his companion on this most trying walk he would have felt entirely to blame; and more than guilt, shame, confusion and the keenest mental torture, that instead of exhibiting a dignified and brilliant intellect to the town he could produce only a feeble old man whose best option, that of going straight back home, had been made unavailable by virtue of the promise he had made to Mrs Eszter. So they had had to go, and, unable to disguise his dependency, Mr Eszter had, without a word, taken him by the arm, and since this was a sign that his dependency was a form of delegation, Valuska had felt that if this was how things stood there was nothing for him to do but to try and divert his friend's attention, and so he had begun to talk about the news he had been so happy to bring to his attention at two o'clock. He spoke about sunrise, he spoke about the town, about how each and every part of it had woken to a distinct and separate life as the light touched it at dawn, he had talked and kept talking but the words lacked conviction because he himself was hardly paying attention to them. He was forced to look on the world through his friend's eyes, constantly to follow Eszter's gaze and realize, ever more helplessly, that whatever his eyes lit on bore witness not to his own liberating convictions but to the latter's sombre outlook. In the first moments he had believed that, freed from the close confines of his room, it would be the most natural thing for his friend to recover his strength and desire for life, that he might be persuaded to direct his attention 'to the totality of things, not to specific details', but by the time they reached the Komló it had become obvious that, once Eszter had laid eyes on them, these details could not be subsumed under ever more hollow-sounding words, so he had decided to keep quiet, his most valuable contribution to the trials and tribulations of their journey being to give support through honest acceptance and dumb assent. But this resolution had come to nothing, and when he left the hotel the words seemed to rush from his lips with, if such a thing were possible, even greater desperation, for standing in the food line he had heard some terrifying news that had thrown him into utter confusion. To be precise, it was not so much the terrifying news conveyed by people in the kitchen to the effect that 'the crowd in the market square was in fact a criminal gang of vandals' which, shortly after twelve o'clock, had robbed and would, like hooligans, have wrecked the

entire drinks-dispensing facility of the Komló, for this he simply didn't believe, discounting it as 'fears produced by the imagination', one of the depressingly common signs of 'infectious terrors and anxieties'; what did, however, surprise him as he was carrying the filled lunch-box back to the waiting Eszter was something he had so far entirely failed to notice: the fact that the corridor and the forecourt and the pavement in front of the hotel were indeed covered in shards of broken flasks and bottles which people were forced to negotiate. He had felt confused and answered his companion's perfectly understandable questions with a momentary show of hesitancy, quickly going on to talk about the whale, and later—the business with Mr Mádai having been successfully concluded—attempting to allay fears associated with the whale, fears that, to tell the truth, he himself now was prey to, for while he was certain that one sober gesture towards the heavens would ensure a rational return to life as he knew it, he was unable to forget what he had heard in the kitchen (particularly the head cook's remark that, 'Anyone wandering about the streets at night is risking his life!'). It was clearly a mistake to think that the 'friendly obliging people' with whom he had spent hours waiting in front of the circus vehicle that morning were vandals or bandits, but it was the kind of mistake, Valuska reflected, which, if only because the frightening rumours had spread so far, might leave even a man like Mr Nadabán shaking in his boots; it was therefore up to him to clear up this matter immediately, once and for all, and so, as in his imagination he was escorting Mr Eszter home, and had progressed from Városház Street to the market square, his first instinct on arriving in the midst of the still immobile waiting crowd was to pick out an individual and discuss the matter with him, the memory of the head cook's irresponsible claim mingling and conflicting with his own more optimistic conviction (… one sober gesture … one cool intervention …). He informed the man what was being said about them, that people in town were wont to jump to conclusions; he told him about Mr Eszter's condition, and stated his conviction that everyone should be acquainted with that great scholar; he confessed his own fears for him, proclaimed that he knew perfectly well where his duty lay, and finally begged to be excused his slight inarticulacy, but, he quickly added, he was already certain, even after these few minutes, that he was talking to a friendly spirit and that he was absolutely sure that his new friend understood him perfectly. The man he addressed made no reply to any of this but simply gave him a long hard stare from head to toe,

then, perhaps noticing Valuska's startled expression, smiled, slapped him on the back, pulled a bottle of cheap spirits from his pocket and offered it to him in amiable fashion. Relieved to see the relaxed smile on the man's face after the stern silence of the preliminary inspection, Valuska felt he couldn't properly refuse the offer as a token of goodwill and, striving to put the seal on his new friendship, took the bottle in his stiff fingers, unscrewed the cap, and, in order to win the other man's confidence and convince him of 'the spirit of mutual sympathy' that existed between them, did not merely take a formal sip of the contents but indulged in one great gulp. He immediately paid for his lack of caution, for the poisonously potent liquid sent him into such a terrible fit of coughing he thought he would choke, and a full half-minute later, having recovered and trying with an apologetic smile to beg pardon for his weakness, he found his words drowned out time and again by yet another fit. He was deeply embarrassed and feared that he had ruined his chances of establishing friendly relations with his new acquaintance; indeed, so real and acute was his suffering that, at the height of his agony, he unconsciously gripped the man he was talking to, and this provided a source of mild amusement not only to the latter, but to those standing in the near vicinity. Recovering his breath in the somewhat more relaxed atmosphere, he explained how Mr Eszter, for all his denials, was busy with a great work, and how, if for no other reason than this, he felt it was incumbent on all of them to restore calm in the house in Wenckheim Avenue—then, turning to his new friend, he confessed that this talk had done him considerable good, thanked the man once more for the goodwill that had been extended to his own person and apologized for the fact that he had to go, promising that next time he would explain his reasons (which were 'interesting, believe me!'). He had to go, and attempted to take his leave, shaking the man's hand, but the other would not release it ('Tell me the reason now, I'd like to hear it'), so Valuska was forced to repeat what he had just said. He had to go—he tried to free his hand from the unexpected grip—but he trusted they would meet again soon, and if this was not the case he could be sought at the Peafeffer, at Mr Hagelmayer's, or—he stared about him uncomprehendingly, not a little frightened—ask anyone at all, since the name János Valuska was known to everybody. He couldn't imagine what the other man wanted from him or what this tug of war signified, nor why it suddenly ended when his friend abruptly let go of his hand and the assembled hundreds in the square all turned to face the truck

with looks of great anxiety. Seizing the opportunity, still shocked by the strange manner of his detaining, he quickly said goodbye and walked into the thick of the crowd, and only once that crowd had swallowed him after a few steps did he look back, when he was struck by the dreadful thought that he had been mistaken, quite stupid, that he had immediately and shamefully to admit to himself that the powerful force employed against him in such a harmless fashion was no cause for suspicion, that even to suspect such was an act of rudeness on his part. What bothered him most was that by unforgivably misinterpreting the well-meant gesture he had left it unreciprocated, the shame he felt on account of his boorish behaviour being mitigated to some degree only by the knowledge that he was capable of responding to it in more sober fashion very soon after. He really didn't understand what he had just done (the other man's patience and sympathy merited gratitude not an irrational panic) and so—his mission to Mrs Eszter not allowing him the time to clear the matter up immediately by seeking out the man in the crowd again—he firmly determined, though he took some time to arrive at a clear explanation for the universal attentiveness, that he would most certainly make amends for his error the next time they met. It was quite dark by this time, only the streetlamps were flickering and some light was filtering through the circus back door, and since the director was not there but at the front of the wagon, only his bare faint silhouette could be picked out. 'It's him!' Valuska stopped dead in his tracks; it was undoubtedly him, even in shadow form his unmistakable great girth gave him away, the often remarked extraordinary extent of him, and indeed the fact of him corresponded in every detail to the rumour. Forgetting his urgent mission for a moment, forgetting all that had just happened, Valuska wormed his way through the crowd, which had clearly grown more agitated since the director's appearance, in order to get a better look at him, then, once he was close enough, stood on tiptoe in his curiosity and held his breath so as not to miss a single word. The director was holding a cigar between his fingers and was wearing a full-length fur coat, and this, taken together with his gigantic belly, the unusually wide brim of his hat and the vast row of chins collapsing over his carefully tied silk scarf, immediately earned Valuska's deepest respect. At the same time it was obvious that the awe in which he was held in every part of the square was not due simply to his imposing size, but also to the fact—a fact that no one could forget, not even for a minute—that he was the proprietor of the centre of attention. The

otherworldly character of his exhibit lent a peculiar weight to his person, and Valuska gazed at him as if he himself were an extraordinary sight, a man who exercised calm control over that which others looked on in fear and wonder. With the cigar that he was now holding stiffly at some distance he was clearly in absolute command of all he surveyed, and, strange as it may sound, it was impossible to watch anything but that fat cigar in Kossuth Square, for it seemed to belong to someone who, wherever he went, would stand in the shadow of a whale that was the wonder of the world. He looked tired, exhausted even, but it was as if this were the specific thing that had exhausted him, not ordinary everyday matters but one single all-consuming care; it was obviously a fatigue born out of decades of vigilance, exhaustion owing to the knowledge that any moment he might be killed by that immeasurable weight of fat. He said nothing for some time, probably waiting for perfect silence, then, once you could have heard a pin drop, he glanced round him and relit the dead cigar. As he screwed up his face against the rising smoke, taking the whole crowd in through those narrow rodent eyes of his, his expression completely threw Valuska, for this face, that look, though there can have been no more than three or four yards between them, appeared to be situated at some enormous distance from him. ‘Well then,’ he pronounced at long last, but in a manner that suggested that he had already finished speaking, or that he was preparing them for the fact that he was not about to make a great speech. ‘The show is over for the day,’ his deep voice rang out. ‘Until the ticket office reopens tomorrow we wish everyone well and are sincerely grateful for your attention. Allow me to commend our company to you once again. You have been a marvellous audience, but we must now take our leave.’ Holding his cigar away from him as before, slowly, and with some difficulty, he retreated into the crowd that obediently made way for him, climbed up on to the wagon and disappeared from view. He had said only a few words but Valuska felt they were ample proof of the director’s rare eloquence and the uniqueness of the circus (… ‘that a director should take such a fond farewell from his audience … !’), furthermore, from the crescendo of murmuring that immediately followed he concluded—a little frightened perhaps—that he was not alone in appreciating such a marvel. Immediately, that is to say, because the rumble grew louder as it passed across the square, and as it did so he wished the director would return to offer a few commonplace explicatory remarks on the fantastic monster or

about the company itself so as to lighten the air of mystery that had gathered about them. He stood there in the dark, not comprehending what people around him were saying, nervously adjusting the strap of his bag on his shoulder, waiting for the commotion, because that was what it had become, to stop. He suddenly remembered the head cook's words and the conversation in front of the White Collar Club, and since the sounds of dissatisfaction had still not abated, he had a momentary intimation that the apparently needless fears of the local population might not be so needless after all. He couldn't, however, afford to wait until the rumblings of disappointment died away, nor for the reasons for it to become apparent; unfortunately he had to leave without properly understanding it. Even after having pushed his way through the crowd to the opening of Honvéd Square he couldn't quite understand it. And in any case … along the pavement on the way to Mrs Eszter's dwelling … walking down those empty streets … his mind grew a little confused, one or other of the day's events flashing before him, and he couldn't see the meaning of any of them. On the one hand, memories of the day's excursion with Mr Eszter filled him with sadness; thoughts of the town and the square, on the other, caused him to suffer acute pangs of guilt for having wasted his time: he alternated so rapidly between these two states of mind, both conditions so remote from his usual experience (being cast into other people's lives, as it were, rather than marooned in his own), that he was utterly disorientated by the dizzying succession of images to the extent that nothing remained in his mind except indecision and incomprehension and an ever more desperate desire to ignore both indecision and incomprehension. On top of that, opening the garden gate he felt an all-surpassing terror sweep over him as he realized that it was long past four o'clock and that Mrs Eszter, with her implacable nature, would certainly not forgive him. But forgive him she did—not only that but it looked as if the presence of guests had diminished the importance of his mission, since she seemed hardly to be listening to his account, simply nodding irritably, leaving Valuska standing at the threshold, preparing to give details of the successful commencement of their campaign then forestalling him by announcing that 'in view of the current serious circumstances, the whole matter had, for the moment, lost its importance', then pointing to a stool and indicating strictly that he should remain silent. It was only then that Valuska realized he had mistimed his arrival and that there was some possibly vital conference in progress, and as he didn't

understand his role in all this, nor why the woman—her business with him being over—did not simply send him away, he sat down and clutched his knees tightly, fearful of making the slightest sound. If this was really the case and he had in fact blundered into an important meeting the committee certainly presented a strange spectacle. The mayor was dashing about the room, shaking his head in the most grief-stricken manner, then, having taken two or three such turns about the room, cried out ('To have come to this, that a leading official should have to lurk in the bushes in people's gardens …!!') and, purple with rage, first tightened then loosened the knot of his tie. There was not much you could say about the chief of police since he was lying, red-faced, a damp handkerchief spread across his forehead, wearing his uniform overcoat, perfectly immobile and staring stiffly at the ceiling, on the bed, which exuded a strong stench of alcohol. But it was Mrs Ezter herself who was behaving the most strangely for she wasn't saying anything but was obviously lost in deep thought (she kept biting her lips), now glancing at her watch, now looking significantly in the direction of the door. Valuska was overawed and sat in his place, and though, if for no other reason than his obligation to Mr Eszter, he should certainly have gone, he did not dare move a muscle in case he disturbed the tense proceedings. However, nothing happened for a long time and the mayor must have covered a good furlong walking up and down, when Mrs Eszter stood up, cleared her throat and announced that, since there was no point in waiting any longer, she had a valuable suggestion to make. 'We should send him,' she said, pointing to Valuska, 'so that, while we are waiting for Harrer to arrive, we should have a clear view of the situation.' 'The difficult situation! The difficult situation, if you please!' the mayor cut in, stopping dead in his tracks, with a most bitter expression, then, shaking his head again, he said he doubted that 'this otherwise commendable young man' was up to the task. She, however ('I, however … !'), did not and gave him a brief, superior smile that did not invite dissent, then, turning to Valuska with the utmost solemnity, Mrs Eszter explained to him that all that was required of him was that he should go to Kossuth Square and, 'in the interest of us all', should carefully observe what was happening there and bring report of it back to 'this crisis committee, in the simplest possible terms'. 'Delighted to oblige!' Valuska rose from his stool, having immediately understood that 'the interest of us all' concerned his friend, and that was why the committee had met, then, uncertainly, not knowing whether he was doing the right

thing, stood to attention and announced that he was all the more prepared to offer his services since Kossuth Square was where he had just come from, and he felt obliged to clarify a point or two, specifically relating to the strange mood of the crowd. ‘Strange mood?!’ The chief of police sat up for a moment on hearing this, then collapsed back on to the bed. In a faint voice he asked Mrs Eszter to dampen the handkerchief on his brow again and to bring him paper and pencil so that he should be able to make proper notes, since he could see that this was a matter that bore heavily on his official duties as a policeman and that he should ‘assume command of the situation’. The woman looked at the mayor and he looked back at her in quiet agreement that—the invalid being supplied with another damp handkerchief in the meantime—it would be ‘best to preserve calm’, so they beckoned Valuska over and Mrs Eszter sat down beside the bed, paper and pencil in her hand. ‘So little time!’ the chief sighed in anguish, and when the woman retorted, ‘There’s enough,’ a wave of anger ran over him and, in a condescending manner, like a professional among amateurs, he asked methodically, ‘More-of-what?’ ‘Enough time, enough place. I’ve written it all down,’ Mrs Eszter responded, irritated. ‘I was asking him,’ the chief nodded bitterly in the direction of Valuska, ‘What time? What place? Where? When? Note down his answer, not mine.’ The woman turned her head away in fury, clearly in a state of extraordinary tension, unwilling to say a word for the moment, then, recovering a little, she gave the perpetually moving mayor a meaningful look then glanced over to Valuska and gestured that he should ‘simply get on with it’. Valuska shifted from foot to foot, not understanding what precisely he was being expected to do, and, afraid that the invalid’s anger might at any moment be turned against him, attempted to inform the company ‘in the simplest possible terms’ of what he had seen in the square, but after a few sentences, when he reached the part about his new acquaintance, he felt he had made a mistake, and indeed the others stopped him there. ‘Don’t go rattling on about about your impressions, what you thought or heard or imagined,’ the chief cast his melancholy red-eyes at him, ‘stick to objective facts! The colour of his eyes … ? How old he was … ? How tall … ? Outstanding characteristics … ? I won’t even bother,’ he waved in resignation, ‘to ask you for his mother’s name.’ Valuska was forced to confess that he was indeed rather uncertain about precise data of that kind, excusing himself with the plea that it was getting dark just at that time, and though he announced that he would gather

all his wits and concentrate harder in case he should remember anything else, however he tried even his friend's image seemed to consist of nothing but a hat and a grey overcoat. To general relief, but particularly his, the invalid was at that point overtaken by the healing powers of sleep, so the volley of ever more dissatisfied and ever more difficult questions came to a sudden end, and since the pedantic and impersonal level of enquiry to which he felt unequal was clearly no longer to be enforced, despite his anxiety he succeeded in concluding his account and clearing things up a little. He described the appearance of the director from the cigar through to the elegant fur coat and repeated his memorable words of farewell; he described the circumstances of the man's departure and how this was received by the crowd; and, since he was convinced that the committee before him would interpret the foregoing events in this light, he admitted that, owing to the conditions in the market square and the town generally, he was quite at a loss what to do as far as Mr Eszter was concerned. If this outstanding scholar were to recover his health and retain his powers of creation, he needed, above all, conditions of absolute calm, calm, repeated Valuska, and not that ever more intense, and to him wholly incomprehensible, sense of agitation he had unavoidably ('though I did everything I could to avoid it … !') encountered this afternoon on finally leaving his house. Everyone knew that for a man blessed with such a high degree of sensitivity even the most insignificant signs of disorder were likely to be harmful and depressing, and because of this, Valuska confessed, especially because he had seen how the universal anxiety had communicated itself to the crowd in the market square, his every thought was for Mr Eszter. He understood perfectly that his own role and significance in the business in hand, compared to that of Mrs Eszter and the committee, amounted to little short of nothing, nevertheless he begged them to place their trust in him, to be assured that they could rely on him to do whatever they demanded of him. He would have liked to add that for him personally Mr Eszter's good was of paramount importance, and, having got so far, to state how greatly he himself was reassured by the fact that the fate of the town (and therefore of his master) was in the hands of something as impressive as the committee he saw before him, but unfortunately he was unable to express either sentiment, for the woman silenced him with a single stern gesture, saying, 'Very good, indeed you are perfectly right, we can't sit round chattering, we must do something.' They made him repeat

what he was to do, and he, excitedly, like a child reciting his tables, went through all the salient points—which were to note ‘the size of the crowd … the atmosphere … and the appearance, should it appear, of a certain monster’; then, once they had given up the idea of explaining this last admonition and made him solemnly promise to be both thorough and quick, he promised to return in a matter of minutes and left the committee room on tiptoe lest he should wake the occupant of the bed, who, just at that moment, groaned in his sleep. Wholly immersing himself in the dignity of having been trusted by the committee, or rather in the sense of relief that an entire ‘crisis committee’ was supporting Mr Eszter through his trials and tribulations, he carried on tiptoeing through the courtyard and only remembered to assume his normal gait once he had reached the street and closed the rickety old gate behind him. He couldn’t positively state that the visit to Mrs Eszter was exactly reassuring but at least the woman’s decisiveness had exercised a healing power which drove away anxiety and uncertainty, and though he hadn’t received an answer to any of his questions, he felt that here, at last, was someone to whom he could safely entrust his affairs. Unlike the earlier situation, where he—the unworldly innocent—had to understand and decide things by himself, he was now entrusted with a single unambiguous task, to accomplish that which he had been asked to do, and this wouldn’t, after all, be so terribly difficult, he thought. He mentally ran through the various elements of that task—ten times at least—and, before long, felt lighter in his mind concerning the matter of the unspecified ‘monster’ (having worked out that he was supposed to be looking at the whale again); he felt lighter, and, remembering the calm gaze of the woman, felt the once-disturbing fog of confusion concerning his entire mission lifting at the same time, and so, when he practically collided with Mr Harrer at the entrance to the square, the latter having addressed him in passing (‘Everything will be all right now, but it would be much better if a young man like you were not hanging about in the street … !’), he simply smiled back and vanished into the multitude though he would have been all too happy to explain his presence (‘… no, you’re mistaken, Mr Harrer, this is precisely where I should be … !’). The square was now lit by hundreds of little fires, and here and there groups of twenty or thirty freezing bodies were warming themselves at the flames, which leapt higher and higher, and since this made it easier to pass through them and to see everything a little more clearly, it took Valuska

only a few unobstructed minutes to take stock of the scene before him. A few minutes without obstruction perhaps, but this ‘thorough examination’ brought no immediate enlightenment as to the sheer size of the crowd (what detail was he supposed to look out for if everything was as before?) and observing these apparently peaceful groups loitering about the fires, rubbing their hands, he felt there was nothing particularly threatening here, not even in ‘the atmosphere’. ‘No one is moving, the mood seems fine,’ he tried the words out, but they rang ever more false, and as they did so, the nature of his mission appeared ever more painful. Observing these people in secret, walking among them as if he were some enemy, suspecting them of unnamed felonies and murders, taking their most innocent gestures as evidence of an evil intent—Valuska immediately realized that he was incapable of carrying this programme through. If, in his previous state of fright, he had found the woman’s sobering power a source of strength, then a few minutes among these people gathered around the friendly warmth of bonfires—resulting in a curious and sudden sense of domesticity—relieved him of the minor but embarrassing burden of misunderstanding, a misunderstanding shared by the head cook, Nadabán and his friends and Mrs Eszter herself, implying that the cure for ‘anxiety induced by a need for a rational explanation’ (and indeed his anxiety concerning Mr Eszter too) might be found in the circus and its long-suffering audience. The undoubtedly mysterious circus and the mysteriously loyal audience, the entire mystery, Valuska admitted to himself as the vision grew clearer, might have a simple and perfectly obvious explanation. He joined a group by one of the fires but the silence of his companions as they hung their heads staring at the flames or occasionally stole a glance in the direction of the circus wagon no longer perturbed him because he clearly understood that the mystery consisted of nothing but the whale, the first sight of the whale that he himself had seen and experienced that very morning. Was it so strange, he thought as he gazed about him with a smile on his face—and he would happily have hugged every single one of them in his relief—that everyone here had been as captivated as he was by the extraordinary creature? Was it any wonder that, deep down inside themselves, they believed it might be worth waiting on some extraordinary event in its proximity? He was so delighted to feel ‘the scales falling from his eyes’, he wanted to share the experience, and therefore declared in conspiratorial tones to those around him that he found ‘the endless wealth of nature’

overwhelming, quite overwhelming, he said, adding that such a sign, on a day like this, pointed to ‘the apparently lost unity of things’—then, not waiting for a reply, he waved goodbye to the others and continued on his way among the crowd. His first impulse was to rush back with the news, but according to his instructions he was to survey the whale too (‘The monster … !’ he smiled at the fearful epithet), and so, in order that his account to the committee should be as full as possible, he determined to steal another quick glance at ‘the Emissary of the One’ if he could, and not to leave his companions in the lurch this evening, an evening that had begun so badly but now promised to end so well. The wagon was open and they hadn’t yet put the boards across, so he couldn’t resist the possibility of stepping in rather than simply having a ‘quick peek’. Now that he was alone in looking at it, the body of the whale, illuminated by only two flickering light bulbs and resting as it did between enormous tin walls in the freezing cold outside, appeared bigger and more terrifying than ever, but he was no longer scared of it, in fact, apart from a respectful fascination, he felt as if the intervening events between their first encounter and the present one had facilitated a strange, confidential, almost courteous relationship between the two of them, and he was about to give it a humorous ticking off as he was leaving (‘See how much trouble you’ve caused, even though you’ve long been unable to harm anyone …’) when he heard unexpected if indistinct voices somewhere deep in the wagon. He thought he recognized the voices, and, as it soon turned out, he was not mistaken, for having reached the door at the back which, as he had earlier surmised, led to the area reserved for accommodation, by putting his ear to the tin wall he could begin to pick out a few sentences (‘… I engaged him to show himself, not to spin stupid stories. I won’t let him out. Turn him round! …) that were most certainly spoken by the director. The sounds he heard after that—a low even grumbling followed by a kind of sharp and sudden chirrup—were perfectly incomprehensible at first and it took some time for him to realize that the director was not conducting a monologue with caged birds and bears but was expressly addressing someone, that the strange grumblings and chirrupings must in fact have been produced by human beings, the first of which was even now grumbling in rather broken Hungarian to the effect that, ‘That’s what he says, and no one can stop him whatever they do. And he doesn’t understand what you are saying, Mr Director, sir …’ Having got so far, it was clear to Valuska that he had found himself in the position of

uninvited witness (furthermore, one ever less capable of suppressing his curiosity) to a discussion or, more likely, argument, though what the subject of the argument was, or whom the director was addressing in that apparently tense atmosphere (Tell him,' he was just saying, 'I am not willing to risk the reputation of the company again. That last time was positively the last …'), was not quite clear, and even if he did succeed in distinguishing the new bout of grumbling from the concomitant chirruping, and interpreting the bit of vaguely Hungarian grumbling that followed ('He says he doesn't recognize a superior authority. And that the director couldn't seriously think he would …'), he still couldn't tell who was speaking or how many conspirators there were in that hidden room, at least not until the next snatch of conversation. 'Would you please get it through into that infant's thick skull,' the director exclaimed, losing his temper—and being able to smell his cigar Valuska could picture the smoke snaking from his lips—'that I will not let him out, and even if, God knows, I did let him out he couldn't say a word. And you would not act as his interpreter. You are to remain here. I will take him out. Otherwise he's fired. In fact you're both fired.' Recognizing the unmistakably threatening tone of that remark it suddenly dawned on Valuska not only that this grumbling and chirruping—which were once again succeeding each other in that order and which reminded him of nothing he had ever heard before—were linguistically related and that there must therefore be two other people in that, as he imagined, narrow if not altogether uncomfortable bedroom (the director's person had radiated a likely need for comfort) beside the man with the sonorous and commanding voice, but that one of the two, the grumbler, must be the ticket collector with the squashed nose he had seen that morning. The very name he seemed to be stuck with, the 'factotum', made this all the more likely, and once he had decided this, one actor in this increasingly terrifying though enlightening conversation—which was clearly of an intimate or, so to speak, business nature—one particular member of this, as all the circumstances appeared to suggest, two-person company (something told Valuska that he had stumbled on the place where all his questions would be answered once the subject of the conversation was revealed, as it soon would be) became practically visible, and he could imagine him as clearly as if he were standing there, watching that enormous body behind the tin door as it calmly mediated between the two passionately opposing parties, between a strange and apparently inarticulate

language and the language of the director. What that language was, who it was the factotum was acting as interpreter for—in other words, working out who the third person in that sealed domestic space was—lay, for now, beyond Valuska's capabilities to discover, since neither the response (which in the giant's grumbling translation came out as, 'He says he's wants me with him because he's afraid the director might drop him') nor the cigar smoker's sharp interjection ('Tell him I resent his impudence!') was of any great help. Not only did it not help but it further confused him, since the suggestion that this so far unseen member of the whale's entourage (not just unseen, but apparently, deliberately concealed) had to be carried (how, on one's lap?), and that he had been hired as an exhibit which was not going to be put on exhibition, made the problem a particularly hard one to solve in any convincing way; furthermore, the imperious reaction ('He says that is ridiculous, because it's common knowledge he has a following out there. His followers will not forget who he is. No ordinary force can hold him, he has a magnetic power') indicated ever more clearly that the awe-inspiring and apparently omnipotent director was in a very tight corner, faced as he was by a superior being. 'Sheer insolence!' the director cried, openly betraying his dependency and helplessness, and the ever more nervous witness behind the door felt a tremor pass through him, thinking that if nothing else then the terrifying power of this great booming voice must surely put an end to the argument. 'His magnetic power,' the voice rumbled mockingly, 'is a disfigurement! He is an aberration, I'll say it slowly so you can understand it, an ab-ber-ray-shun, who—and he knows this as well as I do—has no knowledge or power. The title of prince,' the voice rang with contempt, 'was one I bestowed on him as a business decision! Tell him that I invented him! And that out of the two of us, I alone have the faintest conception of the world about which he piles lie upon outrageous lie, whose mob he agitates!!' 'He says his public is out there waiting,' came the answer, 'and they are growing impatient. To them he is The Prince'. 'All right,' screamed the director, 'he is fired!!!' Though through this exchange, which—because of the mystery surrounding the actors and the subject of their argument—was frightening enough in itself, Valuska had all but turned to stone behind the tin partition, it was only now that terror really seized him. He felt that those imposing words from 'aberration' through to 'agitates', from 'magnetic power' through to 'mob', were sweeping him towards some ominous shore where everything he had failed to understand

these last few hours, in fact every apparently meaningless phenomenon of the last few months, would suddenly resolve itself into a single picture with one dreadful outline, putting an end to ignorant certainties (such as the belief that the broken glass on the floors of the Komló, the friendly hand that seemed to manacle him in its grip, the anxious conference in Honvéd Square, and the patient waiting of the crowd in the market square had, and could have, nothing to do with each other), and that because of these 'imposing words' the blurred image created in his mind by the sum of his confused impressions and experiences had, like a landscape from which the fog had started to lift, begun the irreversible process of clearing, thereby suggesting the possibility that all these phenomena were symptoms of, or pointed to, a single event that meant 'big trouble'. At this stage of hostilities it was too early to say what precisely that might be, but he suspected that even if he were to offer resistance, he would know soon enough; and he did resist it as though it were possible to place obstacles in its path, and defended himself as if this offered some hope of avoiding it, of suppressing the instinct which up till now had detected no obvious connection between the crowds that had arrived together with the circus and the local people's hysterical sense of foreboding. That hope, however, was growing fainter by the minute, for the director's furious outburst had drawn together the various strands of his experience so far, from the head cook's words to the depressing conviction of Nadabán and his friends, from the memorable unrest of the crowd stiff with cold to the possibilities suggested by the so-called 'monster', and this consonance suggested something terrifying, if only because he was forced to admit that when he had dismissed, and indeed smiled at, local people's apprehensions, apprehensions that seemed to have grown particularly acute in the last twenty-four hours, they were right and he was wrong. From the moment the thought had first occurred to him during the murmur of protest following the director's notable public address, Valuska had successfully avoided drawing the appropriate conclusions and had dismissed any possibility that all the available facts supported the dark forebodings of the locals; through the time in Honvéd Square when he recognized that somewhere at the back of his own anxieties about Mr Eszter there lurked the suspicion that the general apprehension 'had taken hold of him too on the way', down to the present moment when he had lost even the capacity to move away from the door, he was forced to recognize that the relaxation of tension that used to follow waves of fear

would not now occur, that the shadow of significance that underlay these phenomena ultimately was their true significance, that there would, in short, be no escape from the feeling of inevitability about what was happening here. ‘Fine, he says,’ so the battle beyond the door continued. ‘He’ll go freelance from now. He will part company from the director and take no further interest in the whale. And he’s taking me with him.’ ‘You?!’ ‘I’ll go,’ answered the factotum indifferently, ‘when he says so. He means money. The director is poor. To the director The Prince means money.’ ‘Don’t you give me that Prince stuff too!’ the director turned on the interpreter, then, after a moment, he added: ‘Tell him I don’t like arguing. I’ll let him out on one small condition. That he keeps his mouth shut. Not a word. He is to be as silent as the grave.’ The weary tone of that voice, the early thunder of which had been reduced to a groan of resignation, left him in no doubt that the director had suffered a defeat, and since Valuska knew the cause in which he had been defeated and understood that there was something about the maker of that chirruping sound that the out-manoeuvred master was wanting, at all costs, to frustrate, something that would now inevitably follow with an instant and blinding clarity, he felt very much like a cat stuck in the middle of the road, paralysed by the headlights of an onrushing vehicle: he couldn’t move a muscle but stared, numb and helpless, at the inner door of the freezing truck. ‘He says,’ the voice of the interpreter continued, ‘there will be no conditions. The director gets the money, The Prince gets his followers. Everything has a price. There’s no point in arguing.’ ‘If his rabble destroy the towns they pass through,’ the director argued, exhausted, ‘there will be nowhere left for him to go after a while. Translate that.’ ‘He says,’ came the immediate answer, ‘that he has no wish to go anywhere at any time. It is always the director who carries him. And, he says, he doesn’t understand what you mean “after a while”. There’s no time left even now. Unlike the director, he believes that everything has its own individual significance. The significance is in the elements not in the whole as the director imagines.’ ‘I don’t imagine anything,’ the director answered after a long silence. ‘What I do know is that if he rouses the crowd rather than calming it, they will tear this town to pieces.’ ‘A town built on lies will continue to be a town built on lies,’ the factotum spoke for the more agitated chirruping. ‘What they do and what they will do are both based on lies and false pride. What they think and what they will think are equally ridiculous. They think because they are frightened. Fear is

ignorance. He says he likes it when things fall to pieces. Ruin comprises every form of making: lies and false pride are like oxygen in the ice. Making is half: ruin is everything. The director is frightened and doesn't understand: his followers are not frightened and do understand.' 'Please inform him,' the director snapped back, 'that as far as I am concerned his prophecies are mere blather, he can sell them to the mob but not to me. And tell him, while you're at it, that I refuse to listen to him any longer, that I will have nothing more to do with him, will take no responsibility for his actions, and that from this moment, gentlemen, you are free to do as you please … If you ask me though,' he added, clearing his throat for emphasis, 'you would do better to tuck your princeling up in bed, give him a double dose of cream, then take your books out and learn to speak Hungarian properly.' 'The Prince is shouting,' the factotum remarked indifferently above the now continuous, almost hysterical chirruping, not even bothering to address his boss directly. 'He says, he is always free in himself. His position is between things. And in between things he sees that he is himself the sum of things. And what things add up to is ruin, nothing but ruin. To his followers he is "The Prince" but in his own view he is the prince of princes. Only he can see the whole, he says, because he can see there is no whole. And for The Prince this is how things must be … as they must always be … he must see with his own eyes. His followers will wreak havoc because they understand his vision perfectly. His followers understand that all things are false pride, but don't know why. The Prince knows: it is because the whole does not exist. The director cannot grasp this, the director is in his way. The Prince is bored with him; he is going out.' The passionate chirruping ceased along with the bear-like grumbling, nor did the director have anything more to say, but even if he had Valuska wouldn't have heard it, because ever since those last words died away he had been backing away, much as his ears were—metaphorically—backing away from the words, in fact he backed away so far that he bumped into the propped-up snout of the whale. Then somehow everything around him was in motion: the truck slipped from under him, people were running beside him, and this great sense of rushing stopped only when he realized, in the middle of the crowd, that his new friend—to whom he wanted to reveal that what they were going to be asked to undertake was dreadful and that the words they were waiting to hear, even if they were what they had been waiting for all this time, should under no circumstances be listened to—was

nowhere to be found. Was nowhere to be found because the immense burden of his discovery had suddenly descended on him, crushing and destroying in minutes every idea he had formed about the circus, the afternoon and everything else that had happened to him that day, because his head was spinning, his shoulders were aching and he was cold and could no longer see faces but merely the blurred shapes of bodies. He ran between the bonfires but, being racked with cramps, his words (‘deception’ … ‘evil’ … ‘shame’) came out in such a breathless and choking manner as to be practically incomprehensible; incapable of helping himself he persisted in trying to help others, a doomed enterprise, for while he was aware that the sum of his knowledge—after an initial period of ignorance and credulity—had suddenly equalled and exceeded theirs, he also knew that the mere existence of The Prince guaranteed that whatever he wanted to do, there was nothing to be done. ‘There’s something terrible going on,’ he wanted to say but couldn’t get the words out and was quite incapable of deciding where to go with this information. Mr Eszter was his first thought and he set off towards the avenue, but suddenly changed his mind and turned back, only to stop a few yards later as if realizing that his first course was, after all, the wisest. And though events had slowed down to this point, suddenly everything began rushing once more: the lights of the bonfires were spinning round him, people were running again, and even while trying to avoid them he noticed that a curious silence had descended on the square; he couldn’t hear anything except his own hectic breathing, which rose loudly and powerfully from inside him: it was like leaning close to a millwheel in motion. He found himself in Honvéd Square and the next moment he was knocking on the woman’s door, but however often he repeated it to himself before entering, however often he actually pronounced the words (‘There’s something terrible going on, Mrs Eszter! Mrs Eszter, there’s something terrible going on out there!’) he failed to attract the attention of either the hostess or her guests. They didn’t seem to understand him. ‘It was the so-called monster, wasn’t it? It frightened you, is that right?’ the woman asked him with a self-confident smile, and when he nodded back at her, wide-eyed with panic, she simply sighed, ‘Not surprising. Not surprising!’ her confident smile readily giving way to a more troubled look, and having led the vaguely protesting Valuska to the one unoccupied stool and pushed him forcefully on to it, she attempted to calm him by telling him how ‘even our little circle of friends here was not

exactly immune to anxiety until Mr Harrer finally appeared with his good news', and that meant that Valuska could relieve his mind somewhat for ('Thank God!') it was certain that the troublesome company would be leaving town within the hour, whale and prince and all. But Valuska shook his head vehemently, leapt from his seat and repeated the sentence that had been ringing in his head all this time, then attempted as best he could to explain 'as clearly as possible' how he had inadvertently been witness to an intense argument which proved without the shadow of a doubt that The Prince was not about to leave. 'Things had moved on,' said the woman, pushing the rather unwilling Valuska back on to his seat, and leaning on his shoulder with her left hand so as to improve his perception of matters—she understood why the mere presence of the criminal referred to as The Prince should have so discomposed him, it was because, 'If I am not mistaken,' she added softly with a superior smile, 'you have really only just grasped the core of the problem.' She understood perfectly, their indomitable hostess continued, raising her voice so everyone should hear her (Valuska was unable to move for the weight of her hand on his shoulder); she understood and, since she too had had the same experience, it was no mystery to her what a person might feel when confronted with the true nature of the masked circus freak for the first time. 'Only half an hour ago,' Mrs Eszter's roar rang through the small room, 'we were given every reason to believe that the plans of this creature, this renegade hireling of the circus management, or as the unimpeachable director himself put it, in Mr Harrer's report, this "viper in our bosom", would be realized and there was nothing anyone could do about it, and at that point we had every reason to think it was so, but now, equally, we have every reason to believe the opposite, for since then the management, newly aware of its responsibilities, has decided on a course of effective intervention and will shortly free us of this demonic presence. Thanks to Mr Harrer's good offices,' Mrs Eszter continued passionately, almost transfigured, her words not really aimed at the company, but at reinforcing the idea of her own unquestionable significance, 'we know what lurks behind the mystery of what we may boldly admit is the mortally frightening rag-bag horde that threatens us and the even more extraordinary company they follow, and since, for the most part, we no longer have anything to fear, our role now being simply to wait for news of the circus's imminent departure, I suggest we should stop exacerbating the sense of panic in the way that you,' she

smiled down on Valuska, ‘so pathetically are doing, and instead consider, all of us, our future course of action, for after what has happened here we cannot help but draw,’ and here she glared at the mayor hunched up in the corner, ‘the appropriate conclusions. I don’t by any means suggest that we are capable of resolving all the issues here and now,’ Mrs Eszter shook her head, ‘no, of course, it would be wrong to suggest that; nevertheless, events having fortunately sorted themselves out, we may at least conclude that the town, which in most regards seems to be suffering under some curse’ (‘The curse of indecision!’ Mrs Eszter’s old acquaintance, Harrer, cried out) ‘cannot be governed in the old way any more!’ This speech, which clearly had begun before Valuska arrived and whose proud rhetorical heights and sound sense were clearly appreciated by the powerful speaker herself, a speech that was formal yet exerted its own spell of sheer logic, had undoubtedly reached a climax, and since Mrs Eszter, her eyes full of triumph, was satisfied with its effect, it now came to end. The mayor, his eyes fixed on a spot in front of him with a bewildered expression, was vigorously nodding in support, but his whole mien showed he hadn’t stopped vacillating between the desired state of relief and all-consuming anxiety. The views of the chief of police could clearly be assumed, though for the moment he was not in a position to give them: his head back, his mouth wide open, he was still sleeping the sleep of the just on the bed, and this was the only thing that prevented him from granting his assent to the foregoing line of argument of which he undoubtedly approved. So the one person who remained capable of both speaking and doing, who wholeheartedly approved of the ‘stirring and cogent speech’ (if his heart and eyes could speak they would have approved even more loudly) and could in any case proclaim himself an unconditional and almost fanatical admirer of Mrs Eszter’s, was Harrer, the bringer of good news, who stood before them flushed and confused, his fat face blotchy with emotion as if he could still not adjust to being the centre of the attention, awarded to him on the strength of his role in events. He sat under the coat hanger, his knees firmly clamped together, with the sardine tin which served as an ashtray in one hand, the other continually flicking the tiny amounts of accumulated ash from his cigarette into it as if he were afraid that at any moment a grain or two of ash might fall on to the freshly swept floor; and so he puffed and flicked, puffed and flicked, and when he thought he could safely venture it without engaging her gaze, he glanced up at Mrs Eszter from under lowered

lids, then quickly looked away and flicked his cigarette once more. It was apparent though that while seeming to avoid it, eye-contact was precisely what he was seeking; that he desired the sooner-or-later-inevitable clash of eyes; that, like all guilty parties, he would give anything to be able to summon up the courage to look the judge straight in the face; indeed, he gave a most convincing impression of someone groaning under the weight of a hitherto un-revealed act of darkness he was desperately anxious to redeem, something that, for him, mattered a great deal more than the circumstances currently prevailing in the market square—a thing that led him 'wholeheartedly to approve' of anything Mrs Eszter might say. No wonder then that in the silence that followed her last statement, he who had fed so intensely on her words should now be left clearly hungering for more, nor that when the mayor attempted to muddy the clear picture drawn by Mrs Eszter with some fussy point of order, he should regard this not so much as a questioning of his own veracity but as a crude insult to the dignity of their hostess and leap to his feet, cigarette in hand, forgetting the difference in their rank in the moment of his outrage, and make an unambiguous gesture ordering the mayor to shut up. 'But,' the mayor was saying, nervously passing his hand from where it had been massaging his brow across his bald pate right down to the nape of his neck, 'what if this so-called "prince" should change his mind and stay here! He can say whatever he likes to Harrer but that doesn't necessarily bind him. Who knows what we're up against? Have we not acted too hastily? The only thing that bothers me is that we might—with all due respect—have sounded the retreat a little too early, too suddenly … !' 'The message,' Mrs Eszter replied with due severity—and since Valuska was trying once again to rise from the stool she leaned on him in a reassuringly maternal fashion as if putting a child's mind at rest—'the clear message that Mr Harrer conveyed *verbatim* to the director—or so one hopes—from the leading members of the community who are still present and have not so far retreated an inch, let me remind him once more, unambiguously indicated that his request for police support, whatever might have been promised him by the already ailing chief of police, was not in our power to grant.' The mere fact, the woman emphasized, that, however brave, the number of constables at our disposal amounts to no more than forty-two, means that ordering them out to control a possibly agitated crowd is not a step that should be taken lightly, so he should think carefully before doing anything. And since, 'as

we know from Mr Harrer', it did make him think carefully, she, Mrs Eszter, had firm faith in his decision to leave the town forthwith, and any doubt she might have had was dispelled by the knowledge that, according to rumour, he had been in such situations before, so would be aware what might happen if he failed to keep his word. 'I saw that man and you did not,' Harrer added, less in bad conscience, more in her defence, 'and he is a man of such strong will, he just has to wave his cigar at his company and they follow him like sheep!' The hostess responded by icily thanking him for his passionate support, requesting him at the same time to return to the subject in hand and search his memory for anything he might have forgotten that related to his meeting with the director. 'Well,' he answered quietly and leaned forward as if imparting a confidence, 'you know how people talk, but it seems he has three eyes and weighs no more than twenty pounds.' 'Thank you,' she barked at him, 'but let me put the question another way so you should understand it. Did the director say anything else to you beside that which you have told us already?' 'Well … no,' the messenger closed his eyes, alarmed at the turn of events, neurotically flicking ash into the open tin. 'In that case,' the woman stated after a moment's hesitation, 'this is what I recommend. You, Mr Harrer, should go out into the square and come back immediately to report to us if the circus has started moving. We, your worship, will naturally remain here. As for you, János, I have a personal request …' and at this point, after a good quarter of an hour, she let go of Valuska's shoulder only to grab his arm, since he, frightened by Harrer, the mayor, the chief of police and Mrs Eszter too, would immediately have made a dash for the door. If he thought—and she gave him an encouraging look and leaned close to him in intimate fashion—that he had got over his state of shock, there was something important he could do that she, Mrs Eszter, being unable to leave her post, could not, unfortunately, however much she desired to do so, attend to. The chief, said she, indicating the bed that reeked of alcohol, whose sad condition was not entirely due, as it might seem, 'to the quantity of drink he had consumed' but to exhaustion caused by the weight of responsibility on his shoulders, was, on this extraordinary day, prevented from carrying out 'his paternal duties'. What she was trying to say, Mrs Eszter elaborated, was that there was no one at home to look after his two children at this difficult time, and since someone had to feed them and, 'since it was almost seven o'clock, and they were probably frightened', reassure them and put them to bed, she,

Mrs Eszter, immediately thought of Valuska. It was only a little thing, she crooned gently in his ear, but, she added humorously, ‘we will not forget even such trifles’, and she would be extremely grateful if he would agree—seeing how busy she herself was—to take the task on. Valuska would certainly have agreed, if only because he wanted to get away from her, and no doubt he would have answered with a firm yes, but he had no opportunity to do so for just at that moment the window-pane was shaken by a noise that sounded very much like a powerful explosion, and since there was no doubt as to where it came from—for even before the sound had faded everyone in the room knew something had happened in the market square to make the crowd cry out like that, they all froze and waited in perfect silence for it to die away—or for it to be repeated. ‘They’re going!’ Harrer broke the silence that had set in after the boom, but remained stock still, precisely where he was. ‘They’re staying!’ the mayor sobbed, then having admitted that he deeply regretted leaving his home since he didn’t actually know how he would get back, the route through back gardens probably being out of the question now, he suddenly made for the bed, shook the sleeper’s legs and shouted at him, ‘Wake up! Wake up!’ The chief, who could hardly be said to have added to the atmosphere of tension in the committee’s negotiations through any over-excitement on his part, lost none of his exemplary calm despite this merciless tugging, but slowly sat up, propped his elbows on the cushion, peered round through the slits of his inflamed eyes, then—stressing his words in a somewhat peculiar manner—answered, all right, but he wouldn’t do a damned thing until reinforcements arrived from the county, then collapsed back into the bed so as to re-establish the lost thread of his dreams—a thread that had been incomprehensibly cut and for no good reason—which offered the only chance of recovery, as quickly as possible. Only Mrs Eszter remained silent. She fixed her stern gaze on the ceiling and waited. Then slowly, deliberately, she met each pair of eyes, a barely suppressed smile of excitement flickering round her thin lips, and spoke. ‘Gentlemen, this is the moment of truth. I believe we are about to resolve the situation!’ Once again Harrer hastened to agree, but the mayor appeared to harbour one or two doubts on the subject, fidgeting with his tie, his head rocking from side to side. Valuska alone seemed unaffected by the ceremoniousness of her announcement, for his hand was already on the doorknob and, when given the sign for leaving, with the heavily breathing Harrer about to follow

closely on his heels, he called back from the door in a broken voice (‘… But … Mr Eszter?’), and left with such a disappointed expression on his face you’d have thought the world had collapsed about him; indeed, his every movement suggested that he was going only because he could no longer bear to stay, it being pitifully plain that he had no idea where he was to go to. His world had indeed collapsed, since the hopes he had so painfully, so desperately reposed in Mrs Eszter and the committee had been deeply disappointed: had they not committed the tragic mistake of confusing the order of the two reports (Mrs Eszter’s initial sentence, ‘Well, that’s over,’ was still ringing in his head) and gone on to assume that Harrer’s came after his, and, placing no trust in him, simply failed to hear his words at all and, what was more, owing to his agitated state taken not the blindest bit of notice of him to the extent that Mrs Eszter had actually shut him up, and didn’t this mean that he had lost any chance of relying on them to help him!? Under the circumstances it hadn’t taken him long to realize—Mrs Eszter having wholly devoted herself to the task of calming the fully justified fears of the mayor—that it was pointless trying to influence the headlong thought-processes of his resolute hostess, he had to cope with the knowledge of the terrible sequence of events in the market square all by himself. All by himself, and since he understood that no one there had been interested in what might happen to his friend in Wenckheim Avenue, he also had to deal with Mr Eszter all by himself, and as if precisely because of this, a great silence had fallen on the room as it had on the square before; that is to say he saw that people were talking around him but as for hearing it, he had heard nothing, and would not have wanted to hear anything anyway: all he had wanted was the strong hand lifted from his shoulder at last, to be able to leave this place he had come to in vain, to feel the houses rushing past him so he could forget his sense of helplessness at knowing that he couldn’t simply yield to the irresistible force of the plan he had overheard at the circus door yet had no idea what to do about it. There was indeed nothing for it but to forget this sense of helplessness in ‘the feeling of houses rushing past him’, but he stopped for a moment at the gate to beg Mr Harrer not to go there (but Harrer, seeming to be deaf, answered by raptly repeating, ‘What a woman! What a woman!’ and was already running off in the direction of Kossuth Square), then adjusted the strap of his bag and, turning his back on the market square and his fast retreating landlord, set off in the opposite direction down the narrow

pavement. He set off and houses and garden fences began to lurch past him but he felt rather than saw their fevered rushing for his eyes were incapable of seeing anything, not even the square blocks of paving at his feet; trees swept by him, their trunks at a slant, their bare branches trembling with anticipation in the murderous cold, lampposts leapt out of his way: everything was galloping, everything was in flight wherever he went, but all in vain, since neither the houses, nor the pavement slabs, nor the lampposts, nor the trees with their admonitory branches wanted to come to a stop, far from it, the more he wanted to force them back behind him the more he felt that they kept appearing again and again and somehow managed to get in front of him so that really he hadn't passed a single one. First the hospital, then the skating rink, later the marble fountain on Erkel Square flashed before him, but in the chaos of images rattling past his inner eye he couldn't decide, however hard he tried, whether he was where he seemed to be or had utterly failed to escape the immediate precincts of Mrs Eszter's home, then, despite all this—as if accidentally realizing his desire to put a considerable distance between himself and The Prince's domain in Kossuth Square and to enter his own as quickly as possible—he found himself where Eighteen Forty-Eight Avenue crossed the main road out of town and woke from the numbing labyrinth he had been trying to escape to the hazy consciousness that he was standing at the entrance to Mrs Plauf's block, pressing the buzzer to her flat. 'Mama, it's only me …' he bellowed into the set once he had rung several times and understood from the crackling of the speaker that his call had been noted but answered with silence. 'Mama, it's me, and I only want to tell …' 'What are you doing on the streets at this time?!' the intercom barked at him, so loud and sudden he lost track of what he was saying. 'I said, what are you doing on the streets at this time!?' 'Terrible things are happening, Mama …' he tried to explain, leaning closer to the microphone—'… and I want to …' Terrible things?' the voice snapped back at him. 'And you admit you know about it?! And despite that you insist on wandering about the streets at night?! Tell me, immediately, what have you been up to this time?! Do you want to kill your mother?! Haven't you done enough to ruin me yet?!' 'Mama, Mama, just listen to me … for a moment …' Valuska stammered into the intercom; 'really … I mean you no harm … I would just like to have told you to … to … to lock your doors and … and let no one in, because …' 'You've been drinking!!!!' the voice bellowed back, quite beside itself. 'You've been drinking again,

despite promising me you would never touch another drop! You keep drinking, though you have your little flat, but that's not good enough for you, oh no, you must go roving round the streets! Very well, dear boy,' the set hissed, 'things will have to change round here! If you don't go home at once you will never set foot in here again! You understand?!' 'Yes, Mama …' 'Then listen, listen very hard! If I hear, do you understand, if I once hear that you are hanging about in the streets and getting into trouble I'll come down and find you and drag you by your hair if need be to the station … and I'll have you locked up … you know where! I won't put up with it, you understand, I won't be disgraced by you again!!' 'No, certainly not, Mama … I'm going… . 'And he was going, just as he told the intercom he would, but somehow he couldn't resign himself to having failed to convey the seriousness of the situation, so he stood there for a while lost in thought, resolving to turn round and try again, till it dawned on him that if he was incapable of recounting his experiences even to Mrs Eszter, there was practically no chance of his doing so to his mother. He couldn't explain because she wouldn't believe a word of what he said about The Prince and the factotum and she would only lose her temper with him again, not wholly unjustifiably, Valuska felt, for you couldn't say she was precisely irritable, and the truth was that unless he had heard all that he had heard with his own ears, he would have been the first to cast doubt on the story or on the existence of anything so unlikely. Nevertheless—Valuska meandered down the deserted street—The Prince did exist, and that made it impossible to take a rational view of anything, since he required neither the quack mysticism of announcing himself as a celestial messenger, nor the operation of some inhuman desire to work harm in order to alter the shape of the world around him: his mere existence was enough to force it to abandon its habit of judging things by its own standards and encourage it to believe that there were principles at work here that negated its desire to label him as an unequivocal fraud. At the same time, the phenomenon of his mere existence —Valuska continued meandering—included elements both of quack mysticism and inhuman desire, as well as fraud, fury and harm, elements he did not bother to mask in the course of his haughty encounter with the director; the elements did not, however, constitute the person, but were simply the likely consequences of his clearly extraordinary and terrifying being, the full hidden significance and scope of which—apart from what could be concluded from a single stray remark—naturally lay beyond

Valuska's comprehension. He stumbled down one street after another, the words of The Prince buzzing round his head, and while the director's characterization of The Prince's activities as a wicked imposition remained persuasive, he was quite certain that this undoubtedly most mysterious member of the troupe was not merely a confidence trickster intent on enjoying the power reposed in him by an all too gullible public. Unlike the director, he found something profoundly terrifying in The Prince's words, the pitiless and wholly alien clangour of them rendered all the more fearsome by the fact that they had been interpreted in piecemeal fashion by an intermediary whose grasp of Hungarian was less than perfect; he felt that this added to their profundity and, indeed, inevitability, or rather that the words implied a notion of something so utterly free and unfettered that any attempt to bind it into the disciplines of systematic thought would be vain. Vain, because The Prince seemed to emerge out of shadows of things where the conventions of the tangible world no longer applied, a place compounded of impossibility and incomprehensibility from which he radiated a magnetism so powerful that, even allowing for the regard in which he was held by those he considered 'his own', his status far exceeded that of a freak in any circus side-show. It was a pointless and hopeless task therefore—the houses, trees, paving slabs and lampposts began to slow down at this point—to attempt to understand something so extraordinary, but simply to give in—and he remembered the tense expressions on the faces in the market square—and allow the town to be sacked at a single word of dread command, when the sacking would include Mr Eszter's residence (it was he himself who had unwittingly drawn their attention to it!) while Mr Eszter remained unsuspecting and defenceless; to abandon oneself to this notion and stand idly by as it happened—as everything around him slowed and came to a stop—was, he felt, impossible. He seemed to hear the screeching bird-like noises in his head again and this brought on a fresh wave of fear, so he stood still in it, knowing he could do no more than talk to people and warn them: 'Lock your doors and stay put.' He would tell everyone, he decided, from Mr Eszter to the brotherhood of man at the Peafeffer, from the dispersing employees of the railway company to the night porter, everyone—even the chief of police's little brood should hear about it, he thought suddenly, and when on looking round he realized that he was but a block away from them, he made up his mind to start with the children who had in any case been entrusted to his

care, then his employer, and extend his warning to the rest once he had done that. The block where the chief lived wore an anonymous look, as if pretending to be unaware of its important lodger hidden away on the first floor: the stucco had practically disappeared off the walls, a good length of drainpipe was missing further up, and as for the gate, it seemed to have solved the issue of whether it should stay open or shut by dispensing with its handle. The building could be approached only by negotiating heaps of rubbish brought out by the residents, while the path leading to the entrance from the pavement was obstructed by a stretch of detached iron railing someone happened to have left precisely in front of the doorway. Nor did the state of affairs inside offer a vast improvement on the exterior, for as soon as Valuska entered the stairwell he was hit by such a tremendous draught that his peaked cap was blown clean off his head as if by way of alerting him to the fact that nature was lord and master here. He set off up the concrete steps but the draught, instead of moderating, turned even more unpredictable: one moment it seemed to drop almost completely, the next it would assault him with renewed violence and vigour, so much so that he had to remove his cap and grip it in his hand while concentrating on breathing through his nose, and when he finally reached the right floor and pressed the bell he awaited the opening of the door as anxiously as someone who had just weathered a real hurricane. Unfortunately no one did open the door and the clamour of the bell died away together with the sound of frightened footsteps drumming in response to it, so he pressed it again, and once more, and was about to leap to the conclusion that there was someone in difficulty inside when he heard the key turning in the lock, but then the sound of drumming footsteps began once more, followed, again, by silence … It was warm in the apartment, hot even, and the walls with their rolled floral patterns blossomed in damp patches rising above the skirting board; he negotiated the coats, newspapers and shoes that were strewn across the narrow hall in the manner of an obstacle race, glanced into the kitchen and, still seeking an explanation for the curious manner of his reception, arrived in the sitting room, whereupon his frozen body was gripped by such a dreadful shivering he was quite unable to speak. He pulled at the strap of his bag across his shoulder, unbuttoned his coat and tried to stop himself trembling by energetically rubbing his numb limbs together. Suddenly he had the acute feeling that someone was standing behind him. He turned round, frightened, and indeed, he was not mistaken: there in the doorway of

the sitting room stood the two children staring at him wordlessly, unmoving.' 'Oh,' cried Valuska, 'you quite frightened me!' 'We thought it was dad coming home… .' they replied and continued staring. 'And do you always hide when your dad comes home?' The boys made no answer but remained still, gazing solemnly at him. One looked about six, the other about eight years old; the younger boy was blond, the elder had brown hair, but both had inherited the chief's eyes. Their clothes on the other hand had probably been passed on to them by the neighbour's eldest, for both shirt and trousers, but chiefly the latter, looked as though they had seen all too many washing days and had so far faded that practically all the colour had gone out of them. 'I ought to tell you,' Valuska explained in a somewhat confused manner, feeling that they were not only looking at him but nervously weighing him up, 'that your dad will be back late and that he asked me to … to put you to bed … Actually I have to go straight away, but it's very important,' he shivered again, 'that you should lock the door after me, and whoever rings don't let them in … In other words,' he added in even greater confusion since the children made no attempt to move, 'you should go to bed now.' He began doing up his coat and cleared his throat awkwardly, not knowing what to do with them, and to stop them staring he tried smiling at them at which the younger relaxed a little, edged closer to him and asked him, 'What's in your bag?' The question came as such a surprise to Valuska that he opened the bag, peered into it, then got down on his haunches and showed it to the children. 'Newspapers, that's all … I deliver them.' 'He's a postman!' the elder brother announced from the threshold with the annoyance and disdain befitting his seniority. "Course he's not a postman!' the other retorted. 'Dad says he's an idiot.' He turned to the visitor once more and suspiciously took stock of him. 'Are you really … an idiot?' 'No, I'm not,' Valuska shook his head and stood up. 'I'm not an idiot as you can see by looking at me.' 'Pity,' the little one's lip curled in disappointment. 'I want to be an idiot and tell the king good and proper that his country is rubbish.' 'Don't be stupid!' The older one pulled a hideous face behind him and Valuska tried to gain his sympathy too by asking, 'Why? And what would you like to be?' 'Me? I want to be a good cop,' the boy answered with pride, but with some diffidence as if unwilling to reveal the full extent of his plans to a stranger. 'And put everyone in jail,' he folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the doorpost, 'all the drunkards and all the idiots.' 'The drunkards, yes,' 'the little one agreed,

then shouting, ‘Death to the drunkards!’ began jumping and cavorting round the room. Valuska felt he ought to say something now so that having gained their confidence they might obey him and go to bed, but nothing worthwhile occurred to him and he closed his bag, stepped over to the window and looked out on the dark street; then, suddenly remembering that he should be on his way to Mr Eszter, he lost patience. ‘I’m afraid,’ he raised his cap with trembling hands and ran his fingers through his hair, ‘I’ve got to go.’ ‘I’ve already got my uniform,’ announced the older boy by way of response and, seeing that Valuska was ready to depart and had set off in the direction of the hall, he added, ‘If you don’t believe me, I’ll show you!’ ‘Me too! Me too!’ The younger one jumped up and down and, making car noises, steered his way in hot pursuit of his brother. There was no escape since Valuska had taken only a step or two down the hall before a door opened and slammed behind him and there they stood, to attention, with enigmatic looks on their faces. Both were wearing genuine police tunics: the smaller one’s scraped along the ground, but the one on the older boy reached only down to his knee; even though they looked comical in them—you could have got three of them into either of the jackets—the jackets were so well made, the proportions were so exact, it was clear they had only to grow into them. ‘I say … really …’ Valuska muttered approvingly and would have made his way outside but the little one produced a box from behind his back, squinted up at him and simply said, ‘Here, look!’ So Valuska was forced to admire a sharpened stick which, he was informed, ‘was to poke the enemy’s eyes out’, after which he had to admit that the Swedish razor was probably best fitted ‘to cut the enemy’s throat’ and, lastly, conceded that the splinters of ground glass in the stoppered jar would certainly be effective enough ‘to dispose of anyone’ if smuggled into their drink. ‘That’s nothing … ! I gave him all those things, they’re for kids in infant school … !’ the older one commented disparagingly from the kitchen doorway. ‘But if you want to see something really interesting, look here!’ And so saying he drew a real revolver from his pocket. He laid it in his palm then slowly closed his fingers about it so that Valuska, retreating instinctively, could hardly get his words out. ‘But, well … how did you come by this … ?! “That’s not important now!’ The boy shrugged and tried to spin the gun on his index finger, without success, for the sheer momentum sent it clattering to the floor. ‘I’d really like you to give that to me… .’ Valuska said, making a frightened grab for it, but the

boy was faster, snatched the revolver up and pointed it directly at him. ‘That’s a very dangerous thing …’ Valuska explained, holding his hands out before him. ‘You shouldn’t play with it …’ and then, since the gun didn’t move and because both of them were staring at him exactly as they had when he first arrived in the sitting room, he began to back away mechanically until he reached the front door. ‘Fine,’ he said, pressing the handle behind him. ‘I am really scared. But … now …’the door opened, ‘do put it back where it belongs or your dad … will be cross with you … Go to bed now, quietly …’he slipped through, ‘be good and go to sleep’; at last he could carefully close the door on them and mutter, more to himself than anyone else, ‘… and lock up everything … don’t let anyone in …’ He heard the laughter inside, he heard the key turn in the door, then, clutching his official peaked cap, made his way down the stairs through the violent gusts that broke about him. Two pairs of staring eyes were fixed on him nor could he free himself from their piercing, penetrating rays; having trembled in the heat of that chaotic room, now that he had left the building he began to shake with cold. He shook with cold in the chill that penetrated him to the bone, but he was equally chilled by a thought he had hitherto believed unthinkable: the thought that two children and such ruthless icy passion could be part of the same thought. He transferred the bag from one shoulder to the other, buttoned his coat up and, feeling that he could not bear the thought otherwise, tried not to think of the tightly gripped pistol, the mocking laughter behind the closed door, but to concentrate on getting to the house in Wenckheim Avenue as quickly as possible. He tried not to think of it, but the two boys in their enormous police tunics seemed to be dancing before his eyes and he suddenly felt a tweak of conscience that he had left them there with a possibly loaded weapon and wondered if he should turn back, a temptation he abandoned, but abandoned absolutely only once he had turned from Árpád Street into the main boulevard and noticed that not too far away, somewhere in the direction of the city centre, just above the rooftops, a reddish glow was rising. A terrifying thought struck him: ‘They’ve started burning things’—and suddenly all his feelings of guilt and doubt disappeared, he clutched his bag, so it shouldn’t keep slapping at his side, and started running through the array of stray cats, towards Mr Eszter’s house. He ran and, having arrived, stood in the doorway, his arms outstretched, then—having realized in his one remaining moment of lucidity that he would succeed only in frightening his

unsuspecting master by breaking in on him—resolved on remaining there, determined to repel any likely intruders. How he would do this he had no idea, and for a good while he could explain his own fear of unexpected assault only in terms of the panic brought on by the mere possibility of incendiary attacks (for he had no way of being sure that that was what he had seen). Meanwhile the sky continued red and Valuska paced up and down before the gate, ready to spring into action, taking now four steps to the right, now four to the left, and no more than four because by the fifth he would have been aware that the other side had been left unguarded, lost in the thickening darkness. Things happened very quickly after that, in fact in a single moment. Suddenly he heard footsteps, the sound of a hundred boot-clad feet approaching, tired, exhausted feet scraping the ground. A group of men stood before him and slowly encircled him. He saw their hands, their stumpy fingers, and would have liked to say something. But a voice behind them croaked, ‘Wait!’ and, without seeing his face, he recognized the grey broadcloth overcoat and knew immediately that the figure walking up to him through the open ring of men couldn’t be anyone else but the new friend he had made in the market square. ‘Don’t be afraid. You’re coming with us,’ the man whispered in his ear and put his arm about his shoulders. And Valuska couldn’t say anything, but set off with them; nor did the other speak but leaned across him, using his free hand to push aside a grinning figure who tried to insinuate himself next to Valuska in the dark. He heard hundreds of exhausted feet scraping the ground behind him, he saw the stray cats at his own feet as they scattered in fear before the silently advancing mass of raised iron stakes, but he felt nothing except the weight of the hand on his shoulder steering him through the army of fur caps and heavy boots. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ the other man repeated. Valuska gave a quick nod and glanced up at the sky. He glanced up and suddenly had the sensation that the sky wasn’t where it was supposed to be; terrified, he looked up again and confirmed the fact that there was indeed nothing there, so he bowed his head and surrendered to the fur caps and boots, realizing that it was no use to search because what he sought was lost, swallowed up by this coming together of forces, of details, of this earth, this marching.

‘It all adds up. You have to get the details right. Focus on the details,’ Eszter determined without any particular feeling of anger, as if distancing himself from his own clumsiness when the hammer hit his hand for the twentieth time while he was putting the final touches to the complex barricade he was erecting at this decisive juncture of his life. Gripping his painfully throbbing finger, he surveyed the chaos of boards and planks that covered the windows and, since there was nothing he could do about his shortcomings regarding this sorry sight, resolved that even if he, through countless decades, had shamefully neglected the art of putting hammer to nail, now that he had practically reached the end of the task he would avoid all such painful experiences henceforth. Having personally collected firewood from the yard on his return home—after a few minutes breather, that is—and piled it up between the bookshelves, he now selected one that would more or less do and, carefully considering the possibility of minor adjustments—a consideration that sprang from the apparent senselessness of being here at all, which in turn was a natural concomitant of the line of thought he had pursued in the gateway some three hours ago, a line that caused him to revise and re-evaluate all his previous opinions on the subject and which he therefore considered to be of almost a ‘revolutionary’ nature —he fitted the plank to the space left at the bottom of the jumble of boards covering the last window, but having raised his hammer and bit his lip, determined to carry the matter through in the distant hope of striking the nail-head perfectly the first time round, he immediately lowered it, perceiving that sheer ferocity of will would not ensure both the proper direction and the power of the blow. ‘The arc to be controlled is the one that determines the relationship between the head of the instrument and the head of the nail …’ he decided, contemplating the problem for a few moments, and while his thoughts slowly returned to the matter of ‘minor adjustments’, using all the power of his injured left hand to thrust the plank up against the window-frame, he blindly swung the hammer with his right. This did not result in any greater damage than had already been inflicted and, what was more, the nail-head sank a little further into the wood, but as to the previously rational-sounding idea of channelling the remnants of his already wandering attention into the genuinely valuable effort of observing the so-called arc, he thought better of it. After all, the hammer in his hand felt increasingly unsteady and the results of such experimentation would become ever more unpredictable, so, after the third effort, he had to admit

that the fact that he hadn't missed the nail in three successive goes, far from being due to his level of concentration, was probably down to sheer luck, or, to employ his own formulation, to a certain 'benevolent grace' that offered him 'a moment of respite' before he 'systematically beat his fingers to a pulp'; indeed, it was obvious from his failure so far that concentrating on nothing but the desired path of the instrument was precisely the best way of ensuring that he would get it wrong, since, he added, to control the trajectory of the hammer meant that to embark upon the hitherto undervalued operation so drastically reassessed at that fateful turn in his thinking was, according to his own gift for the mot juste, 'like daydreaming oneself into a situation that does not yet exist or determining the course of something which has yet to come into being', thereby repeating the exemplary and patent error that sixty years of idiotic blundering had not prepared him for on the last few yards of his way home … And this was the moment when something whispered to him that he would certainly be doing better to bring greater powers to bear on this issue, greater powers (he said to himself) and never guessing that this distancing of himself from the minor dilemma that had absorbed his entire being was actually bringing him closer to it, the utter senselessness of his presence in this place at this time not having excluded the exercise of practical thought, his mind began to focus once more on what lay nearer to hand. It was now his view that even if he felt weak at the knees, he need not wholly abandon the notion of concentrating on the arc, since the reasons for his failure up till now were 'no doubt errors due to lack of method rather than of substance', and so his gaze passed from hammer to nail and back again as he examined first the one then the other, searching for some point on the notional arc on which he might focus all his attention and thereby direct the course that would result in the two points meeting; then, having quickly located two such possible points, nothing remained but to decide which of the two he should focus on. 'The nail in the plank is stationary while the position of the hammer is variable …' he meditated, looking up to heaven, and this meditation appeared to suggest that he should concentrate upon the latter, but on considering the question further with a clearer head, having observed the angle of the hammer as he tried to bring it down again, he was forced sourly to acknowledge that even should the hammer feel more secure in his grip his chances of hitting the nail on the head were no better than one in ten at best. 'What matters,' he corrected himself, 'is where I want the contact to

take place … Is … what it is I want to hammer in.' The idea was appealing. 'It is in fact the only thing that matters.' And like someone who instinctively knows that he has finally discovered the right answer he stared at the target, the intensity of his gaze almost boring a hole in it, and, full of confidence, raised his hand. The aim was perfect and what was more, he noted with satisfaction, it could not possibly be more perfect; and as if to confirm the certainty of his control over the direction of the blow, all the other related manoeuvres suddenly appeared clear to him: he realized that his grip on the instrument had been quite wrong, that holding the handle at the end was much more comfortable; he now knew how much effort was required in a single stroke and from what distance the stroke should be applied for the full effect; and this moment of clarity also revealed to him that if he supported the nail with his thumb from below he really need not throw his whole body weight behind the hammer … Controlling his grip and movement in this way it was no wonder that the last two planks were affixed at lightning speed, and when he made a tour of the house to survey his handiwork (a considerable achievement, he thought) he corrected a few far from minor errors and returned to the hall, which swam in the low lamplight, regretting the sad fact that having finished the job he was in no position really to savour the smell of success. He would have liked to carry on hammering; he was intoxicated with 'the smell of success', with the discovery that after hours of clumsy failure in the realm of hammer, nail and arc, he had, albeit at the last moment, resolved his difficulties; furthermore, somewhere near the end of his tour of inspection, he was given a sudden unexpected insight into how the technique, because and indeed despite of which he had entered the modest outer chambers of the mystery, had so uniquely and confusingly directed his progress and resolved the 'revolutionary thought' that had seized him on his return from that shocking excursion and turned him into 'an Eszter new-born, an utterly simplified Eszter'. It was indeed a sudden awakening, but, like all such awakenings, not wholly unheralded, for before he set out on his tour he had been aware only of the plainly laughable nature of his efforts, the chief of which was to prevent his left hand being battered to pieces, a piffling task to which he applied the whole might of his considerable intellect and only immediately after that realized that even if he employed his full visual powers it would still prove a vain enterprise, or at least, laughable as it was, indeed taking that laughability into account along with his earlier ignorance of tools and

their application, that there was a deeper, more complex issue at stake, the nature of which was to allow him to master the art of banging in nails. He recalled various stages in his frantic efforts and the fact that even then, in what was imposing itself as a general frame of mind, he had suspected that any eventual resolution would not be due entirely to taking rational thought in the matter, a suspicion that had in the meantime become a certainty, for in divorcing the heavy artillery of his intellect (so typical of him) as he was, metaphorically, edging forward, or, in his own words, divorcing 'the ostensible fire-power of a determined general' from 'the chain of practical action and reaction', he had achieved mastery not through the application of a logical experimental process but through constant, wholly involuntary adaptations to the moment-by-moment nature of necessity; a process that no doubt reflected his intellectual bent but took no cognition of it. To judge by appearances, he summarized, the clear lesson was that the serious issue underlying this apparently insignificant task had been resolved by a persistent assault embodying a flexible attitude to permutations, the passage from 'missing the point' to 'hitting the nail on the head' so to speak, owing nothing, absolutely nothing, to concentrated logic and everything to improvisation, to an ever new set of exploratory motions, or so he had thought as he set out on his tour of inspection of the house to check whether any loose boards needed more secure fixing; there was nothing to indicate that the body's command mechanism, that well-oiled part of the human organism focused on the reality principle (he entered the kitchen) had imposed itself between the legislating mind and the executive hand and remained so well hidden that it could only be discovered, as he put it, 'between, if such a thing were possible, the dazzling object of illusion and the eye that perceives that object, a position that entailed conscious recognition of the illusory nature of the object'. It seemed it was the very freedom of choice between the range of competing ideas that actually decided the angle, the height, and experimental path between the top of the arc and the point of the nail; on the other hand (he examined the two small windows of the servants' room next to the kitchen), it was the conduct of the experiment employing the range of options open to him, his mechanical ability to orientate himself among an infinitely precise set of possibilities, or, to put it crudely and simply, the process of experimentation itself, which resolved itself and decided on the correct course among 'the free choice of options', a choice that was neither free nor allowed for the act of choosing,

since apart from intervening in the order of events the only active option was the perceiving and evaluating of the upshot of the various experiments, the only conclusion to be drawn from which (‘To make a fine distinction… . ’Eszter considered, making a fine distinction in the process) is that the process had been instantaneously anthropomorphized, so that, as so often in the humblest of instances, as for example in the hammering in of a nail, one immediately put down one’s success in the search for a solution to some ‘wonderful’ idea or particulary ‘brilliant’ insight. But no (he continued his tour through Valuska’s room on the way to the drawing room) it was not we who controlled the process, it controlled us, this process that did nothing to disturb the appearance of our controlling it, not at least while our heads, our heads so full of ambitious ideas, fulfilled their modest obligations of perception and evaluation; as for the rest (he turned the handle of his door and smiled), the rest did not lie within the head’s scope (and thinking this he felt like a blind man suddenly able to see and therefore descry the true relationship between things, and remained rooted to the spot in the open doorway, his eyes closed, quite forgetting where he was). He was aware of millions of propositions, an eternally restless seething mass of events conducting an austere and eternal dialogue between themselves, every one of the million incidents, each of those million relationships, million but uniform and therefore in one single uniform relationship along with everything else, uniting in a single confluence of conflicting elements, between things that simply by existing resist and those which by virtue of being themselves strive to overcome that resistance. And he had a vision of himself as part of this saturated, living immensity, just as he had seen himself in the hall before the last window, and understood for the first time the power he had surrendered himself to, the kind of phenomenon he was being absorbed in. Because, at that moment, he comprehended the driving force behind all this: necessity providing the momentum for existence, momentum bringing forth preparation, preparation in turn paving the way for participation, a positive participation in the relationships thus prescribed, the point at which our very beings try to choose whatever is favourable through a set of predetermined exploratory reflexes, so that accomplishment should depend on them, and the question of whether such a relationship really existed naturally enough presented itself to him in passing, and it depended on patience, on the fine particulars and accidentals of the struggle, since the success of the enterprise, the achievement of a

depersonalized sense of mere presence, he now acknowledged, and indeed saw, had a decidedly hit-or-miss kind of significance. He surveyed this endless, sharp, clear prospect and it shook him with its supremely exclusive reality, shook him because it was so hard to see that this world produced by his anxiety, a world of infinitely capacious reality had—for humankind at least—to come to an end, an end despite the fact that there was no end, and by that token no centre either, and we simply *are,* one element in the beating pulse of a space containing a million other elements, with which we harmonized and interacted with all our guiding reflexes … But of course on examination none of these things lasted longer than an instant and as soon as the glimmering vision cohered it splintered in the blinking of an eye; it splintered, its significance reduced to that of a spark which perhaps did no more than alert us to the dying of the fire in the grate which glowed once then disintegrated, as if aware of the worthlessness of its existence, dying in a single flash of light if only so its brief intensity might illuminate everything he had regarded on the way home, in his fateful decision, in the moment of judgement by the gate, as a 'potentially fatal mistake'. He stepped over to the grate, examined the embers and did his best to bring them to life again, threw three logs on, then took a step towards the window, a pointless journey, since however hard he looked, instead of the boards and nails, all he saw was his own reflection. He saw himself in front of the Chez Nous Café, by the uprooted poplar, with the rubbish at his feet, for on this extraordinary day, this dramatic early afternoon, when he found himself chased, yes, that was the right word, chased from his house into the street, that was the point at which he faced defeat, the point at which he was forced to surrender and had to admit that however well primed his guns were, however coolly he appraised the situation, however he tried to apply whatever is normally referred to as 'sober judgement', whatever forces he brought to bear on the serried ranks of the opposition lined up against him were bound to fail. His first failure was the failure to *understand* and his incapacity to deal with the scale of decay, it was here he first acknowledged this ('like someone suffering from a hereditary form of blindness …!'): what he could not know, however, was that it was precisely what he then did that was the crowning glory of this intellectual incapacity, the true defeat. For having failed to notice how 'the predicted collapse of forms he had for decades considered dislocated' should not have proved surprising, especially for him, he had also avoided the admission—and in this matter

he was quite happy to concur with his earlier position—that the whole enterprise was not only doomed but had actually run aground, the avoidance having taken the following form: he had decided that whatever it was he had seen out in the street was not worth devoting the least attention to, and if the town itself, in its changed circumstances, chose so patently to ignore his own being, which was based on the values of ‘intelligence and good taste’, the only course open to him was to ignore it in turn. He had believed, and was indeed perfectly justified in believing, that this ‘endless preparation’ was aimed expressly at him, since it was set on utterly annihilating that which in him had always resisted whatever was vulgar and destructive; it would crush reason, that exercise of free clear thinking, in order to rob him of the one last refuge where he could remain free and clear. The thought of that last refuge drove him closer to Valuska, and in his anxious solicitude for him he decided to demolish the few rarely used rickety old bridges that still existed between him and the world, to apply the rules of his earlier self-distancing from an ever more lawless society with even greater rigour, to leave this fatal stew to rot by itself and withdraw completely with only his friend for company. He would move to the other side of the river, Eszter decided, just past the waterworks, and in contemplating methods of turning his house in Wenckheim Street into a genuine fortress he bent every intellectual sinew to the task of maintaining absolute security: to maintaining it, or rather, to winning back everything the nightmare-like filth, the deserted street and the uprooted poplar had cast into doubt, while somehow retaining the hope that all the processes that constituted him might continue undisturbed. But he regained the first only at the expense of the second, since the price of his absolute security was precisely that he should not continue just as he was, should not continue because he could not continue, because, on their way back from that tiresome experience outside the White Collar Club, he had experienced a most curious feeling about what their common future might be like, about ‘the simple joys of resignation’. It was as if a great weight had fallen from his shoulders: he felt lighter and lighter and, having parted from Valuska at the corner of Hétvezér Passage, he had felt that lightness guiding him step by step and, regretting nothing, allowed himself to be led by it, recognizing that his identity, his very sense of selfhood, was being remorselessly dissolved in the process. In order to dissolve, to sink and emerge no more, there was one last thing he had to do: he had to draw the ultimate

conclusion which was to decide that having arrived at the further shore in the land of blessed calm, he should ‘regard as a victory that which in actual fact was a bitter defeat’. He had to retreat to a point of inner security if only because the world outside had become a place of agonizing decay; he had to ignore the itch, the desire to intervene, for the purpose and significance of action were being corroded away by its thoroughgoing lack of significance; he had to distance himself because the only valid response of a sound mind to this process was to protest against it, or indeed to withdraw, to cut all contact with it and retain one’s distance (so Eszter had pondered as he made his way back home through the grinding cold), while at the same time continuing to pay attention to the increasingly meaningless state of things, to look long and hard at it, for to avert one’s eyes would be nothing short of cowardice, like substituting submissiveness for misapprehension, like running away from the truth that however he may have spoken up against ‘a world that was losing its grip on the law’ not for one moment had he ever lost touch with it. He had spoken up against it and had never ceased interrogating it, wanting to know why it was irrational; like a fly he kept buzzing in its ear and would not be waved away, but now the buzz was out of him, he had no desire left to keep buzzing because he understood that his tireless questioning and rebelling against the nature of things resulted not so much in the world becoming an adjunct to his intellect as in him becoming an adjunct to the world, the world’s prisoner if you like. He had been wrong, he decided a few steps from his house, wrong in assuming that steady decay was the essence of the situation, for that was in effect to say that some element of good persisted in it while there was no evidence of that whatsoever, and this walk had convinced him that there never could have been, not because it had been lost but because ‘the present state of the area’ never had the slightest shred of meaning in the first place. It was not meant to have a point; if it was meant for anything at all it was expressely for the purpose of having no point, Eszter had thought as he slowed and stopped before his entrance; it had neither decayed nor disintegrated under the pressure, since, in its own fashion, it was perfect and eternal, perfect without any hint of intention, as if the only order inherent in it was that which fitted it for chaos, and directing the heavy artillery of one’s intellect at it, peppering it day in, day out, desiring to take action against something that simply doesn’t exist nor ever will exist, to stare and stare at it until the eyeballs cracked, is not only exhausting (he fitted the key to the lock) but

quite pointless. ‘I abjure thought,’ he had thought as he took a last look behind him. ‘Henceforth I will abjure all independent and lucid thought as if it were the crassest stupidity. I will deny the function of the mind, and, from this moment on, rely only on the inexpressible joy of my renunciation, on that only,’ Eszter repeated to himself. ‘No more showing off. I will be quiet at last, perfectly quiet.’ And he had turned the handle and entered, locking the door behind him. It was like being freed of a great weight and before he had even passed the threshold a wonderful sense of release flooded through him: it was as if he had left his old self, and everything that implied, out in the street, and had recovered his strength and all his old self-confidence, never to lose it again, until, step by step, he had lost it in the boarding up of the windows only to recover it, albeit in a different form, by the drawing-room window, not as a superior spirit passing judgement on ‘the terrible defects of the view outside’ but as one who responded humbly, knowing why things were as they were as if by instinct and therefore completely. What did it mean to think of this as something revolutionary, as indeed he did while contemplating his progress in the matter of nailing things from little details through to final adjustments and the extraordinary realization that sprang from it? The only revolutionary feeling he was aware of, or so he considered while standing in the doorway, was pride, his own pride, a pride that did not allow him to understand that there was no qualitative difference between things, a presumptuous over-confidence which condemned him to ultimate disillusion, for to live according to the spirit of qualitative difference requires superhuman qualities. Yet there was no real cause (he gently stroked one of the boards) for disillusionment, or rather there was no more cause for disillusionment than, for example, for wonder: in other words there was none; the fact that the human intellect was, unbeknown to itself, banished from the realm of ‘adjustment to the real nature of relationships between things’ did not necessarily imply that the universal anxiety implicit in the real nature of these relationships lacked all sense; nor did the fact that the human subject was merely an acquiescent servant to eternal anxiety necessarily imply a stark choice between disillusionment and wonder. If some frozen magical realm disappeared in the moment following that flash of enlightenment, its after-shocks did not, and he simply stood in the living wake of the fled vision feeling it pulse through him; nor could what he then felt be described as either disillusionment or wonder, it was more like being the recipient of a bequest,

an acceptance of the fact that the nature of the vision far transcended him, a kind of patience, a kind of resignation to the will of the special grace which allowed him to comprehend only as much as he was capable of comprehending. And in that moment he understood that the apparently momentous decision he had taken while standing in the doorway was pure childish ignorance, that his opinions about the terrible gap in the intelligibility and rational development of things were based on gross error, the cumulative error of 'some sixty years', sixty years of living with a metaphorical cataract in one's eye which, naturally, prevented him seeing what he now saw so clearly; that mind (he meditated the complex lines of the grain in one of the boards) was not so much a painful lacuna in the world-order as an integral part of it, the world's shadow. It was the world's shadow because in its eternal agitated dialogue it moved in synchronicity with the instincts that governed our being and that was its task, to interpret this phenomenon in all its delicacy and complexity, not to tell us anything about the purpose of the dialogue, since the thing it shadowed would not inform us about anything but the nature of its own movement. To be more accurate, Eszter continued, it was only a shadow in the mirror, a mirror where the image and the mirror wholly coincided though the shadow nevertheless tried to separate them, to separate two things that had from eternity been the same and could not be separated or cut into two, thereby losing the weightless delight of being swept along within it, substituting, he thought as he stepped away from the drawing-room window, a solid eternity purchased with knowledge for the sweet song of participating in eternity, a song so airy it was lighter than a feather. He moved towards the door, his head bowed. That's how it will be, like a withdrawn invitation, the whole intellectual process 'finding itself precisely by discarding the role of the intellect, finding itself, or rather finding something else that persists in existing despite the odds, that self which by wandering through the labyrinth of its own nature leaves behind confused memorials which bear witness both to invitation and to withdrawal. And that's how it will be, contemplated Eszter as he ambled on: the intangible contents of the 'world' that arises out of this dialogue which is itself so resistant to interpretation and which raises the insoluble question of 'what, after all, is the point?', act as a warning to the insatiable, a net to catch infinity, a language to capture that which is brilliant, and that is how one becomes two, the thing itself and its significance. That significance, like a hand, would first trace then gather

up the apparently stray threads of this mysterious mixture, would hold them together like mortar in a brick wall, but—and here he smiled, feeling the radiant heat of the fire as he approached it—even if this hand, much like his own, were to release the strands, this dialogue of opposing forces would go on, nor would the wall collapse. It would not collapse, just as he himself would not collapse, but he had to let go of all he had once clung on to, for this was a vital part of the process of simple realization, the realization that knowledge led either to wholesale illusion or to irrational depression, and by the time he had returned from the drawing room into the hall he was not 'thinking' as such any more, which is not say he had 'given up' thinking or 'retracted' what he had thought up to this point but that he acknowledged the fact that he was liberated from the passion of self-referential questioning, and through this liberation—similar to the kind he had experienced on the afternoon when following his encounter with Frachberger he relinquished music, but this time perhaps, in a genuinely revolutionary fashion—he could bid farewell to the illusions that led to such terrible depressions. Farewell to those countless moments of consciousness when he was forever losing the status he had tried so stubbornly to maintain, farewell to the idiotic necessity of making decisions, for now, at last, he was capable of 'assessing' his own situation correctly; farewell to all that, it was over, thought Eszter, and, on this extraordinary evening, he could practically hear the loud rumble as his whole previous life collapsed around him, and if life had been one constant rushing about before this—a rush 'forward', a rush to 'achieve' something, a rush to 'escape' from something—and having finished his tour of inspection and arrived back at the very last board he had hammered in, he took it for granted that he had succeeded in halting the onward rush, had finally landed with his feet on the ground rather than bouncing off again, had, after all that preparation, finally arrived reassuringly 'somewhere'. He stood in the relative gloom with his arms by his sides, the hammer in his lowered hand, with the genuine 'smell of success' in his nostrils, gazing at one of those notable nails, or rather at a gay little pinpoint of light that might have been produced by the light trickling from the open door of the drawing room (he had neglected to shut it) or, perhaps, by the weak effulgence of the ceiling light above him; he gazed at it as if it were the full stop at the end of a sentence, since, here and now, it signalled the end not only of his circular tour but of his last train of thought, so that after his extended detour and eventual 'release from the

massive weight of thinking' he should find himself back where he started, returning home with a never-before-experienced sense of lightness. Having been granted a glimpse into the true nature of relationships, having just now experienced the adventure of comprehending and realizing, having recovered from the extraordinary effort of recognizing in a very unlikely manner the unlikely manner in which he had arrived at the decisive moment of resignation, the happy little glimmer on the head of the nail conjured nothing more or less than a mysterious, unforgettable sensation that had surprised him on his way home, that despite the apparently insufferable condition of the town, he was glad simply to be alive, glad that he was breathing, that Valuska would soon be here beside him, glad of the warm glow of the fire in the drawing room and of the house, which henceforth would be a real home, his home (Eszter looked about him) where the tiniest thing possessed some significance, and so he put the hammer down on the floor, divested himself of Mrs Harrer's apron and hung it on the hook in the kitchen and returned to the drawing room so he could rest a little before lighting a fire in Valuska's room. It was a mysterious sensation but one that was born of simplicity rather than complexity: everything about him regained its original significance in the most natural way, the window became a window you could look out of again, the fire became a fire which gave out heat, and the drawing room ceased to be a refuge from 'all-consuming devastation' in much the same way as the outside world was no longer the scene of 'insufferable torture'. It was through that outside world that Valuska was roaming, perhaps hurrying (if he was keeping his promise); so he lay down and slowly spread himself across the bed, reminding himself that the scene outside the window was no longer identical with the one he had seen that afternoon, and that therefore, maybe, or so something whispered to him, the nightmarish rubbish there, like the odours or poisons rising from some magical 'Slough whose name was Despond', was merely the vision of a sick mind, the vision of a sick mind that after a long sojourn in darkness found an object on which it might project its fantasies; for one could regard the accumulation of rubbish outside, just as one might regard the fears of the irrational and confused populace, as something that could eventually be tidied up. But this possibility of cleansing and regeneration was only a momentary thought, for the drawing room now occupied his entire attention: the furniture, the carpet, the mirror and the lamp, the cracks in the ceiling and the joyful

flames leaping in the fire. He couldn't explain, however he tried, the feeling that he was here for the first time, that this refuge from 'human stupidity' had suddenly become an invulnerable island of peace, reconciliation and grateful satiety. He had taken everything into account: old age, loneliness, the possible fear of death, the sense of yearning beyond some ultimate calm, the notion of being in the grip of choking panic at seeing his horrific predictions come true; the possibility that he had gone mad, that the sudden turnaround in his life represented a cowardly retreat from the genuine dangers of taking further thought, that it was the cumulative result of all the foregoing, but whichever way he looked at it none of these seemed sufficient reason for his current condition, indeed, he considered, nothing could be more sober, more balanced than the attitude with which he now surveyed the world. He adjusted his deep-claret-coloured smoking jacket, linked the fingers of his hands together behind his neck, and, as he noticed the feeble ticking of his watch, suddenly realized that he had been escaping all his life, that life had been a constant escape, escape from meaninglessness into music, from music to guilt, from guilt and self-punishment into pure ratiocination, and finally escape from that too, that it was retreat after retreat, as if his guardian angel had, in his own peculiar fashion, been steering him to the antithesis of retreat, to an almost simple-minded acceptance of things as they were, at which point he understood that there was nothing to be understood, that if there was reason in the world it far transcended his own, and that therefore it was enough to notice and observe that which he actually possessed. And he really had 'retreated into an almost simple-minded acceptance of things as they were', because now, as he closed his eyes for a few minutes, he was aware of nothing but the velvety parameters of his home: the protective embrace of the roof over his head, the security of the rooms between which he could freely pass, the permanent half-light of his book-lined hall which faithfully followed the right-angled plan of the building and seemed to convey the calm of the garden, which looked neglected right now, but would be flowering by the time spring came round; he seemed to hear anew the sound of footsteps—Mrs Harrer's buttoned slippers, Valuska's boots—sounds that had etched themselves deep into his memory; could taste the air outside and smell the dust within; was aware of the soft swelling of the floorboards and the practically edible haze around the individual light bulbs in the lamp; and he knew that all these, the tastes, scents, colours, sounds—the beneficial

sweetness of the wholly circumscribing shelter—differed from the delights conjured by a happy dream only in that there was no need to keep conjuring them up, because they had not passed away, because they existed and would, Eszter was certain, continue to exist. And so sleep overtook him and when he woke a few hours later it was to the warmth of the pillow under his head. He did not open his eyes straight away, and because he thought that he had been asleep only a few minutes as he had intended, the warmth of the pillow brought to mind the protective air of the house as it seemed just before he fell asleep and he thought he could pick up the grateful review of his worldly wealth precisely at the point that he had left it. He felt there was time to sink into the peaceful silence which hugged him as close as did the blanket his body, into the impregnable order of permanence where everything remained as it was, where furniture, carpet, mirror and lamp waited undisturbed to receive him, and where there would be time to take stock of the tiniest detail and discover every part of what now revealed itself to be his inexhaustible treasure trove, gauging, in his imagination, the distance between his current position and the hall, a distance that seemed to be constantly increasing, but one that would soon be entered by the one person who would give meaning to all of this: Valuska. Because every element of this 'beneficial sweetness' referred to him: Valuska was the cause and subject of every process, and though he had suspected it, he had not been so keenly aware that this decisive turn in his life was not the result of some intangible accident but the work of the only person who had visited him these many long years, the man who acted as the mysterious antidote to his own daily more refined sense of bitterness, the true lineaments of whose face and whose terrible vulnerability he had only just now, in his half-asleep half-awake state, perceived in all its striking essence, or rather, had discovered earlier today, on the way back home from the Chez Nous Café. On the way back from there, but first, properly, in Hétvezér Passage, shortly after glimpsing the café and the fallen tree, when, shaken by the sight and thinking himself quite alone, the thought flashed through his mind that he was not in fact alone; it was a moment, almost an insignificant micro-second of consciousness, but so unexpected, so deep, that it was immediately transformed into anxiety for his companion, a process that took place so quickly the thought disappeared into it; disappeared, absorbed into his anxiety, into his decision to withdraw when faced by the intolerable imbalance he saw in town which provided him with unquestionable proof of

the nameless elements of that realization, without any idea what he was surrendering to in escaping into plans of their future life together. Nor did this vague and cloudy sensation leave him, it hovered over him every step of the way home, in the full overview of the happenings of the afternoon and evening: it hid there like a secret explanation as to why he should feel so tearful at the moment of their separation; it was to this that 'the unprecedent lightness of heart he had experienced on his way home' testified; it was there in the decision he took in the gateway, in every detail of the steps he took to barricade the house and in the tour of inspection and readjustment afterwards; and, finally, it was there in the new wealth of meaning to be discovered in his own imperium: in every corner of the house, in the half-light of his waking dream, at the very axis of all the events of this extraordinary day, there stood Valuska, fully revealed now for the first time. He felt that he could see what it was that touched him, was convinced that he grasped it immediately, at the very beginning, the thing he now confronted like an image carved into stone, for it was only one image that actually nourished him, one image that resulted in him changing the course of his entire life. In fact, looking back at it, he thought, he couldn't help but recognize it, for then, back at the 'flash of intuition', it appeared with a tidal force, something ungovernable, silent, that drove you forward without you noticing. In that particular moment, leaving the Chez Nous Café behind, having passed the sadly fallen tree, somewhere between the coffee house and the fur-trader's, he, Eszter, had stopped, arrested by an overwhelming mixture of indignation and untold despair, and, putting out his arm, had stopped Valuska in his tracks too. He said something, pointed to the rubbish as if to ask his companion whether he too had noticed it, and, glancing at him, noticed merely that the look of shining attention—the 'glow', as he described it—which had only lately left Valuska's face had now returned. An instinct told him that something had happened the instant before to challenge and question that look, and he stared harder but found nothing to confirm the hunch, so continued on his way—already yielding to his unconscious thought—without suspecting anything: genuinely unsuspecting, but having solved everything, he thought as he woke from his half-dozing state into full consciousness, the whole incident with Valuska resolving into a tableau, a manifestation touching in its simplicity, and everything that had happened in the course of the afternoon and evening finally and forcefully coming into focus. What he then felt, he now saw: his

trusty protector standing there beside him, his shoulders sagging, his head bowed, with the houses of Hétvezér Passage all around him, as the other he, his old enfeebled friend Eszter, pointed at the rubbish; his shoulders sagging, his head bowed, not as the tell-tale sign of a sudden attack of melancholy, but, and the realization almost broke his heart, because he was resting; resting because he too had tired, having practically had to carry someone who could hardly stand on his own feet; resting, furtively, as if he were a little ashamed of having to rest, as if he could not imagine burdening his fellow with the confession of his own weakness while he looked on: he could see it now again just as it had been. He saw the sagging shoulders and the postman's cloak as it rucked up over the bent back, saw the bowed head as a few stray wisps of hair escaped from his cap to hang over his eye, saw the bag slung crosswise over his shoulder … and, lower down, the worn-out boots … and he felt he knew everything there was to know about this tragic image, that he understood perfectly everything that could possibly be understood about it. Then he had a vision of Valuska on a previous occasion, a long time ago—was it six, seven or even eight years ago? He couldn't remember exactly—when, following Mrs Harrer's advice ('What we need round here, I tell you, is a man, someone to get your meals in!') that very afternoon, he made his first appearance in the drawing room, closely trailing behind her; how he shyly explained what he was doing there, protesting that he'd rather not accept the money offered, and, furthermore, would happily undertake, 'free of charge', whatever errands Mr Eszter chose to entrust him with, such as going to the shops or posting a letter, or, from time to time, tidying the yard if there were the opportunity—how he added, rather apologetically, as if it were the owner of the house that was doing *him* a favour, that a person might of course be perfectly justified in finding such an offer somewhat strange, and then, making a self-deprecatory gesture with his hand, broke into a smile. And in this manner a kind of self-evident benevolence entered, not only his yard, but his life, so that he became utterly dependent on it; a self-sacrificing, invisible, unshakeable, ever industrious, caring kind of benevolence: as Mrs Harrer cared for the fabric of the house, so Valuska protected his employer from himself, while he looked on as his domain perished before his very eyes (was it six, seven or eight years ago? At least seven, he thought). And, to the best of his ability, Valuska preserved him by his sheer presence even when he was not actually there, for the knowledge that he was on his way

shielded Eszter from the most serious consequences of his mind's tendency to self-destruct, or, at least, brought some relief from that tendency, made its effects less painful, diverted disastrous trains of thought constantly aimed at 'the world' from fatally striking down the poor fugitive figure that conceived them; in other words, saved him, Eszter—who was a living demonstration of how the fixed ideas of the day, in their short-sighted vanity, wanted to redefine every human institution and were busily tearing apart the fabric of the town and indeed the whole country (which fully deserved its fate) and would have done so had Valuska 'the genius of the wide-eyed stare' not awakened him this morning—from paying the bitter price of the destruction wreaked upon life with its indefinable wealth, its organic mechanism based on 'valid relationships between elements of reality', by the town and indeed the country, or rather by all the fixed ideas, all those acts of short-sighted vanity, every judgemental train of thought that wanted to view 'the world' from its own limited viewpoint. But Valuska had indeed woken him this morning, or maybe it was just the feeling he had first experienced outside the Chez Nous Café which had lasted until this moment of drowsy consciousness, in either case, at that moment he was compelled to understand what it was that his friend's steadfastness and love protected him from; at that moment he had to recognize that his existence—hitherto based on the twin values of 'intelligence and good taste', on his so-called independent and clear thinking and on the ability of his spirit to soar, as he had always secretly believed, above the mundane—was not worth a fly's fart: it was the moment he had to admit that nothing interested him any more but the steadfast love of his friend. Whenever, in this period of about seven years, he had thought of his young friend it was always as 'the intangible embodiment of the airy angelic realm at the point where it overflows into the mundane', something wholly ethereal, wholly transformed into spirit and pure flight, not a creature of flesh and blood but an immaterial being worthy of scientific investigation who entered and left his dwelling almost as a good fairy might; but now he saw him differently: his peaked cap on his head, his postman's cloak down to his ankles, he enters the house about lunchtime, lightly knocking first, says hello, then, the job being finished, he proceeds down the hall with the food container clanking on his shoulder, on tiptoe in his clumsy boots so as not to disturb the tranquil air of the drawing room, moves further still and reaches the gateway, having lightened, at least

until his next visit, the atmosphere of the house which had been heavy with its master's obsessions, having healed him with his mysterious benevolence, tender care and highly complex 'simplicity'—and though that simplicity is perhaps a little ridiculous, it is its touching delicacy that surrounds him, that makes it the most natural thing in the world for him to attend to all his master's needs, that enables him to render service with such absolute and profound constancy. Eszter was wide awake by now but remained perfectly still on the bed, for in his imagination Valuska's face had suddenly appeared before him, Valuska's face with its great eyes and high brow, its long red nose like something from a folk tale and his mouth fixed in a gentle smile—and it seemed to him that just as he had discovered the true element of 'home' lurking behind the façade of his house, so now, for the first time, he could descry the lineaments of the true face behind the apparent face; that behind the detached 'celestial aspect' of Valuska's features, which in the course of his feverish wanderings would be distilled to an 'angelic' glow, he could discover the original earthiness. Which is to say that it was simply *there;* as far as he was concerned the process whereby the face resolved itself into a smile, or having emerged from a solemn mood brightened up again, simply revealed the fact there was nothing further to seek in it: the smile was enough, the solemnity and the brightening were sufficient; he understood that the celestial aspect was no longer of real interest to him, that it was the face and the face alone that mattered to him: it was the face of Valuska not Valuska's vision of the universe that counted. The sobriety of that face, which wore a perpetual expression of concern for the ordered well-being of the drawing room and its occupant, an order that occupant was forever disarranging, was, thought Eszter, a model of circumspection and conscientiousness, showing a readiness to attend to minor tasks and tiny details, a readiness he himself was now imbued with, having opened his eyes, sat up in bed, looked around and considered what else he should do in preparation for the return of his friend. His original plan was to follow the barricading of the windows and the heating of the rooms with the blocking of the gate and of the door that opened on to the yard, but since the significance of the barricades had radically changed, even in a moment, as had the way he viewed the sheer notion of barricading, the manner in which it had been executed so far and all the other stuffing and padding out of his home, the whole thing having turned into a sorry memorial to his own folly, he decided to devote his

entire attention to the question of a room for Valuska, that is to say he would light a fire, tidy up if necessary, prepare the bedding and wait for his enthusiastic helpmate (who was no doubt rambling about town, busily completing his ‘mission’), wait, that is, for the thought of returning to the house in Wenckheim Avenue, as he had promised, to occur to him. He took it for granted that Valuska was doing what he always did, walking the streets somewhere, or had found his way to the event advertised in Hétvezér Passage and got delayed in the crowd, and he became anxious only when he had glanced at the clock a few times and realized that rather than dozing off for a minute or two, he had been asleep for almost five hours; pretty close to five hours anyway, he realized with a shock, and leapt out of bed ready to run in two directions at once, the first to make the fire in the next room, the second—for lack of a window—to dash down to the gate and look out for Valuska. In fact he did neither because he noticed that the fire had gone out in the drawing room, so his first thought was to relight it, and he did so, piling up as much wood as possible with a few bits of newspaper underneath the lot. But the fire refused to start—he had to take the pile of logs apart and relight it twice before the flames leapt up and spread—and even so, this task was as nothing to the one that awaited him in the next room, where he spent an entire hour trying and failing to light a Calor-gas stove that had not been used in years. He tried to recall the method used by Mrs Harrer, but it was no use, the wood resolutely defied all attempts to light it: he piled it into a pyramid, he threw it on loosely, anyhow, he tried flapping the stove door, he blew as hard as he could, but nothing happened, everything remained as it was but for a plume of thick smoke; it was as if in its long period of enforced idleness the stove had forgotten its own function and could not remember what to do in this situation. But by this time Valuska’s intended nest had taken on the look of a battlefield, the floor strewn with sooty planks and boards, ash everywhere, he alone toiling through spots of smoke, escaping into the drawing room every couple of minutes in search of fresh air and glimpsing, in the course of one of these excursions, the state of his smoking jacket, which immediately recalled to his mind the apron Mrs Harrer had left in the kitchen, a thought that should have cheered him up but didn’t until he was on his way into the drawing room again when the soft roar of something catching fire struck his ears and he turned round, reassured that the struggle had not been altogether in vain, for now it was as if someone had unplugged the chimney: the Calor-gas

heater was working again. Because it had taken so long to get the fire going, he didn't think there would be time to remove the boards from the windows that here too gave on to the street, so leaving all the doors as wide as he could, he encouraged the smoke to disperse through the small servants' room via the kitchen and the hall, then tried to rub his smoking jacket clean of soot, but only succeeded in further begriming it; having wasted some minutes warming to the task, he gave up, donned Mrs Harrer's apron, and with cloth, broom and pan in one hand and a litter bin in the other hastened into Valuska's room to remove evidence of the mess he had created. If the vitrines full of porcelain, cutlery and sea-shells and the carved dining table and bed had hitherto, under the custodianship of Mrs Harrer, lent the place a museum-like air, that air was now somewhat singed and the museum looked like something the fire brigade had only just left, a little ruefully perhaps, in response to a call to greater heroism; everything was covered in soot and ash, and if it wasn't then it was as if he had been afflicted with the curse of Mrs Harrer—he himself besmirched it; though he knew quite well it wasn't so much the curse of Mrs Harrer but his own excitement and carelessness that were responsible, distracted as he was from his task by the necessity of continually listening out for the long-awaited knock on the drawing-room window which would accord with their agreed arrangement, knowing as they did that the janitor locked the gates in the early evening. Having given the bed a bit of a dust down and loaded up the Calor stove, he decided to abandon the pointless task, thinking they might continue it together in the morning, and returned to the drawing room, where he grabbed a chair and sat down by the fire. He kept glancing at the clock, one minute thinking, 'It's already half-past three,' the next, 'It's not a quarter to four yet'—the hour seeming too early or too late depending on his state of mind. At one moment it seemed certain his friend wasn't coming, either because he had forgotten his promise or because he had decided that not having been able to arrive in time he would under no circumstances disturb him in the middle of the night; at the next he felt sure Valuska was still sitting by the newspaper-collection point in the station, or with the hotel porter at the Komló, where he never failed to call in the course of his nocturnal roaming, and he began to calculate how long it would take him to arrive if it should occur to him to leave at that particular moment. Later there were intervals when he no longer thought in terms of, 'It's already a quarter to …' or 'It's not four yet …' when he seemed to hear

someone tapping at the window, and then he hurried to open the gate, looked out, and in the light emitted by the peculiar circus, the cinema and the high illumination of the Komló, which seemed to have gathered a large if aimless-looking crowd, established that no one had in fact knocked, and so withdrew, disappointed, to take up his place again. It also occurred to him that Valuska might have called while he was sleeping, that, no one having answered his knock, he might have decided not to pursue the matter and gone home, or—Eszter speculated—it might be, as had happened, if only rarely, that someone had plied him with drink, possibly at the circus, or more likely at Hagelmeyer's, where he did in fact call every day, and he was ashamed to appear before him in that state. He considered the now faint, now all too significant clues, lay down, got up, put more fuel on the two fires, then rubbed his eyes and, so as to keep awake, settled down in the armchair that Valuska used in the afternoons. But he couldn't keep it up: his hips began to ache and his damaged left hand felt as though it was burning; so he quickly decided not to wait any longer, only to reverse the decision a few minutes later, when he thought he'd wait until the big hand reached twelve, but then he woke to realize that the clock showed nine minutes past seven and it seemed as though someone was really rattling the window-pane. He stood up, held his breath and listened in the silence because this time he wanted to be sure he wasn't imagining it, that his frayed nerves weren't merely playing tricks on him, but a second bout of knocking resolved all his doubts and swept away any feeling of fatigue owing to his vigil, so by the time he left the drawing room, having drawn the key from his pocket, and was hurrying down the hall, he was fully alert and in keen spirits, and he reached the gate in such a state of freshness and joyous anticipation that despite the stultifying cold as he turned the key, the long, apparently endless hours of waiting seemed merely to form the substance of something he could recount to his visitor, who, unaware that he was no longer a visitor but a lodger, had after all arrived. But to his greatest disappointment it was not Valuska but Mrs Harrer standing before him, moreover Mrs Harrer in a clearly anxious state and behaving most oddly, for before he could take proper stock of her, without any explanation as to what she wanted at this hour, she had slid past him through the gate, run into the hall wringing her hands and made her way into the drawing room, where she did something she had never done before, sat down in one of the armchairs, unbuttoned her coat and looked at him with such a forlorn

expression she appeared to have lost her tongue and could only sit there, staring at him with an all too eloquent air of panic. She was wearing her usual outfit, the extra-thick skirt, the lemon-coloured cardigan and the brick-red overcoat, but this was all that brought to mind the Mrs Harrer of the previous morning when, in the secure knowledge that she had done a good job, she had exchanged her buttoned house-slippers for the lined boots she always wore outside, shuffled out and left the house, shouting, 'Back on Wednesday!' through the door. She had one hand on her heart while the other hung helplessly at her side, her red eyes had dark rings under them and for the first time Eszter noticed that her cardigan was badly buttoned up —altogether she gave the impression of someone who had been broken by some terrible tribulation that had shaken her to the core, to the extent that she didn't know where she was or quite what had happened to her and was bitterly waiting for an answer to these questions. 'I'm still frightened, professor, sir,' she gasped breathlessly and shook her head in despair. 'I still can't believe it's the end, though,' her voice broke, 'the army is already here!' Eszter stood by the fire, astonished, not having understood a word of this, and when he saw her dissolve in tears again he took a step forward to calm her, but feeling that if she wanted to cry there was nothing he could do, thought better of it and sat down on the edge of the bed. 'Believe me, professor, sir, I don't know if I'm dead or alive …' She sniffed and pulled a crumpled handkerchief from her coat pocket. 'I just came because my husband told me I should come, but really, I dunno if I'm dead …' she wiped her eyes '… or alive …' Eszter cleared his throat. 'But what happened!' Mrs Harrer gestured dismissively. 'I told them before it would happen. I told you, professor, sir, you will remember, when the tower shook in the Göndölcs Gardens. It was no secret.' Eszter was beginning to lose his patience. Clearly, her husband was drunk again and must have fallen down and struck his head on something. But what had the army to do with this? What does it mean? What does all this chaos add up to? He would have liked to lie down and sleep for just a few hours until Valuska turned up, and that would be about noon now, the usual time. 'Try starting at the beginning, Mrs Harrer.' The woman dabbed at her eyes again, then rested her hands in her lap. 'I don't properly know where to start. You can't just begin talking about it like that, because I saw neither hide nor hair of him all day yesterday from morning through to night, and I said to myself, all right, wait till he gets home, I'll sort him out, as I'm sure the professor will

understand, what with him going off just like that with every penny, while I, well I mean he's honest enough but I'm practically busting a gut with the amount of work I do, though of course it's what you expect from a drunkard, there's nothing to be done about it, and me waiting all day for him to come home so I can give him what for. I look at the clock, six o'clock, seven, half-past seven, then at eight, I say to myself, he'll be properly drunk by now, like a blessed newt, and it's only yesterday he was nearly dead with a hangover what with his heart, it's not strong, you know, but at least, I say to him, not on a day like this, not when the whole town is full of those dark-skinned hooligans and something's sure to happen to him as he staggers home, and on top of it there's that whale, or whatever they call the blasted thing, don't forget that, I say to myself. Of course, I might have guessed what would come of it! There I am watching the clock in the kitchen, the washing-up finished, I've gone round with the broom, turned the t.v. on and I'm looking at the operetta that was on before but they're showing it again by popular demand, then out into the kitchen once more to check the time and it's half-past nine. I'm really worried by then, as he never stays out so long, even when he is really swinish drunk he's home at that time. When he's drunk, I mean, he's no good at all, he's got to lie down and falls asleep but then he gets cold so he comes home. But no, I'm just sitting there, watching the t.v. without taking it in as I keep thinking about him, what could have happened to him, him being not a young man any more, so he should have more sense, I say to myself, than to wander round the streets at this hour of night, as there's a lot of them dark-skinned hooligans about making a racket, because I knew quite well what would happen, that things would turn out like this, I said it would be so, as the professor might recall, when the tower shook, but no …' Mrs Harrer continued, wringing her handkerchief, 'it's gone eleven and I'm still sitting in front of the t.v., the national anthem's come and gone and the set is making that hissing noise but he's still not back. Well, by that time I couldn't stand it any more, I went and called in on the neighbours in case they had any idea. I ring, I knock, I tap at the window, it's as if they hadn't heard me, there's not a stir although they're home, I mean where else would they be in this weather when the tip of your nose is liable to freeze solid in that deep frost? So I begin to call them, pretty loud, to make sure they know it's me so they can let me in, and at last they do but when I ask about my husband they don't know anything. Then, as an afterthought, my neighbour

says do I know what's happening in town tonight? How should I know? I tell them. Well there's a lot of unrest, a real rebellion. They're smashing things up all over the place, and I'm thinking my husband's out there, and believe me, professor, sir, I thought I was going to collapse there right in front of the neighbours, I could hardly stand and just about got home, but once I was in the kitchen I had to sit down on a chair, like a sack, with my head in my hands, like I felt it was going to burst. I thought of all kinds of things, best not even mention them, and the last thing was that maybe he'd come home and hid himself in the laundry room where Valuska lives, as he had often done that before and taken shelter with him until he'd sobered up a bit, Valuska looking after him, but if he'd known the upshot of it my husband never would have gone there, because even if he drinks and runs off with the housekeeping he's an honest man really, and I couldn't deny it. So I take a look, open the door and fair enough there's nobody there so I go back into the house, but I'm so tired by then, what with working all day not to mention the anxiety, I thought I'd faint with exhaustion, so I had another think and decided I would at least occupy myself and brew up some coffee, which would wake me up a bit. The professor knows me after all these years, I haven't been one to linger over work, but believe me, heaven knows it took me almost half an hour to put the wretched coffee on the gas stove and I hardly had strength enough to unscrew the lid of the jar, I had no power in my arms at all and on top of that I was clumsy as my attention was gone and I kept forgetting what I had gone to do, though eventually I managed to put the pot on and get the flame lit. I drink the coffee and wash the cup, take another look at the time and see it's midnight so I decide to do something, as anything's better than sitting in that kitchen and waiting, waiting all the time and him not coming, I'm sure the professor knows what it feels like watching the hands of the clock go round, as I've had plenty of opportunity to do, since as long as I can remember, for forty years or so I've done little else but work and look at the clock, wondering whether he is coming, Lord knows what I've done to deserve a husband like this, I could have done better for myself. Anyway, I made my mind up, threw some clothes on, those you see me in now, but I'd gone only a few steps when I see, pretty close to me, some fifty or so people at the nearest corner, I didn't need telling who or what they were, I just knew as soon as I heard a loud smash, I looked neither left nor right but got straight back in that house and locked the gate, and I said to myself I must turn the light off, and believe

me as I sat there in complete darkness my heart was beating fit to burst as the noise of smashing got nearer and nearer, nor could you mistake that sound. You can't imagine what I went through then, sir, as I was sitting there, I almost stopped breathing …' Mrs Harrer broke into fresh sobbing, 'all by myself with no one to help me in that empty house and I couldn't even run across to the neighbours now, I just had to sit there and wait to see what would happen. It was dark as death in there, but I shut my eyes too so I shouldn't see anything, as hearing it was enough as they smashed the two upstairs windows, and I could hear the glass splintering below, four big panes of glass there were, as we'd had the upstairs windows double-glazed, but I didn't give it a thought then how I'd worked a whole week so we could pay the price of them, I just sat there and prayed to God they'd be satisfied with that, as I was afraid they'd come into the yard and who knows what they'd have thought of doing then, perhaps they'd have demolished the house if it occurred to them. But then God heard my prayer and they went away and I stayed there with those two broken windows listening to my heart thumping as they were smashing the neighbour's windows by then, but I still didn't dare turn the light on, God help me, and I didn't stir for an hour after that, then felt my way about, went into the room, lay down on the bed just as I was, and lay there as if dead, listening carefully, minute by minute, in case they came back to smash the two ground-floor windows. I haven't the words, don't even have the time to tell you everything that went through my mind, the end of the world, the gates of hell being opened, all kinds of nonsense, the professor will know far better than me the things I thought of, I just lay there like a plank for hours on end but my eyes wouldn't stay closed, though the best thing would have been to go to sleep and not have those ridiculous ideas running through my head, because by the time my husband came home, seeing as he finally did get home about dawn, I was in no fit state to be cheerful about him being restored to me, as he wasn't even drunk but stood by the bed sober as a judge, sat down on the covers just as he was with all his clothes on, in his coat and all, and tried to put my mind at rest as he could see I was lying there hardly full of the joys of spring and practically dead to the world, and I said to myself, pull yourself together, it's all right, he's home now, we'll get by somehow. He brought me a glass of water from the kitchen and when I drank it I started slowly gathering my wits about me so we turned the light on in the room, as I wouldn't let him do that before, but my husband said it was time to calm

down and we should turn it on as it's on in the kitchen in any case so why should I give myself a headache on account of two broken windows, the council would pay for them. He saw them when he came in the house, as he would of course, the shattered bits lying there in the entrance, though I didn't even dare look at them, but as he said after he returned from taking the glass back out into the kitchen, the council would deal with it as he had influence there now. By that time I had recovered to the extent that I sat up in the bed and asked him what had happened, where he had been all night, and didn't he have a drop of humanity left in him? I went on the attack, leaving me alone in an empty house while he was out there, skulking about outside, though what I really wanted to say was heaven be praised, how good to have you back, what a miracle no harm has come to you, but you know how it is, professor, the fear and those dark-skinned hooligans, not to mention the double-glazing in those two windows being gone. But my husband he just sits and hears me out and keeps looking at me in this strange way, and I ask him, for God's sake, what's happened? what's going on? and I am about to tell him all about the windows on the upper floor, but my husband he says, what's happened has happened and he raises his finger and says from today you'll have to change your view of me, I'm on the town council or whatever they call it, and what's more, he says, I'm getting some sort of medal too. Well, professor, sir, you may gather I couldn't understand a word of this and just stared at him, his head nodding, then he says they spent the whole night in negotiations, no, not in the pub he says, but in the town hall, because he's involved in a special something or other, some kind of committee that has saved the town from the hooligans. That's all very well, I answer, but while you're in session I'm prey to all kinds of dangers here in this empty house, not even being able to turn a light on. To which he answers, stop this nonsense, I was awake the whole night all on account of you and everyone else's safety, then asks me if there's anything here to drink, but by that time I was so happy to have him home again, that he was all right, sitting there on the bed beside me, I told where he could find some and he went through to the pantry and fetched the bottle of brandy from behind the jars of preserves, since that's where I keep it as, sad to say, I have to hide it. I ask him who those people were, those in the street, and my husband replies, sinister forces, but we stopped them all right, they're being rounded up right now, he says, as the army has arrived and there's order now, and he takes a swig of the bottle, soldiers everywhere,

says he, imagine, they've even brought a tank with them, it's there in Friars' Walk in front of the church, and I let him take another swig but then said Enough! and put the bottle down beside me on the bed. How did the army get here, I ask him, as I couldn't imagine a tank there, and he says it was the circus, the circus was behind it all, if the circus hadn't been here they'd never have dared attack the town, but attack it they did, my husband says, and I can see the gooseflesh running over him too and his face really clouding over, they attacked it, and looted and set buildings on fire, and imagine, he says, poor Jutka Szabó and her friend at the telephone exchange, they were victims, the professor will remember Jutka Szabó'—Mrs Harrer's eyes filled with tears—'them too. But people have died, says my husband, and then again I didn't know if I myself was dead or alive, because apart from the post office this was the first I'd heard,' she explained, 'about the soldiers occupying the main buildings, and in the station, he said, they'd found a woman, imagine that, and yes, a child too, but then I couldn't bear to listen to any more and asked him, how could you say you were defending us with that committee when such things were happening? to which he answers that if the committee didn't exist, and especially the professor's wife, who, at least this is what my husband said, was brave as a lion taking up the struggle, I mean if she weren't there and she hadn't succeeded in persuading two policemen to try to get through with a car then there would have been no army, and then maybe there'd have been more than two broken windows, four panes I tell him, and even more wounded and dead. Because the police, and my husband was really bitter about this, were nowhere to be found, they had melted away, that's the way he put it, melted away and were nowhere to be found, except those two who then drove over to the county capital, and there was only one reason that all the police lost their heads, not exaggerating, lost their heads, my husband stressed with a significant look on his face. The chief of police, and here he drew out the long "ee" sound of "chief", he hates him so much, I don't know why, and has really hated him some two or three years, so much so that if his name comes up in conversation I hardly recognize him the hate is so strong in him, you wouldn't believe it, since most people say he's on good terms with him, though I don't know the truth of that except he always denies it, in other words that the chief of police, the head of the squad as he put it, is in fact, he explained, the very head that the police have lost, and he grew so red in the face at this point, you could see how

intensely he hated him. He was drunk, said my husband, he was so drunk he slept through the entire day, imagine that, the whole day, though they occasionally woke him but it was no use as he wasn't up to anything, then some time in the early dawn he left the committee and everybody, including the professor's wife apparently, thought he was off to do something, but no, the two policemen who brought the army back with them confessed they had seen the chief unconscious with drink, he must have got hold of some more drink, because as for the good of the public, as my husband put it, he couldn't give a flying fart for it. Of course he drinks too, said my husband, but he wouldn't do anything like that if it was a matter of the public good, he had enough self-discipline to see it through, as for the chief, and again he stretched the "ee" out, no, he gets drunk all over again, to say nothing of the fact that no one knows where to find him, as there were only those two policemen to say they had picked him up when he looked as though he was heading home. Me, I'm just lying down, listening to all these terrible things, but the worst was to come, all the destruction they carried out, all that laying waste, says my husband, and no one knows how many are injured and how many dead, and simply where people are, my husband shook his head he was so fed up with it, because, for example, once the army arrived and the tank was there in front of the church, once people ventured out into the streets again, then right here on the main road, professor, sir, right in front of Nadabán's butcher's shop, as he was coming home to reassure me, he met Mrs Virág, who looked just as devastated. She was looking for her neighbour, Mrs Virág told him, who had spent the whole night sitting at her window watching the terrible events, and who had asked her across, she being frightened all by herself, so then they sat at the window together, but, as Mrs Virág said, it would have been better for them not to be sitting there, because it was past midnight when another band of hooligans came down the main road, waving sticks and God knows what, beating to death the stray cats in their path, Mrs Virág told my husband. And apparently they suddenly saw, and my husband deliberately didn't mention his name, Mrs Virág's neighbour's son, as he put it to be precise, but I didn't suspect anything and that was exactly as my husband wanted it, for he didn't want me being suspicious, that's all he said and reached down beside the bed for the brandy bottle, but I told him, don't you touch that bottle now, and asked him if he was sure it was Mrs Virág. And he answers, yes, Mrs Virág. I'm thinking furiously, but nothing occurs to me, and they're looking out of the

window, my husband goes on, and they can't believe their eyes, because there is Mrs Virág's neighbour's son, there in the thick of the hooligans, you'll never believe it, he says, don't even try, you won't guess, we've been harbouring a viper in our bosoms. And I'm just staring at him, still not getting it, who he means, so I ask him and he says the woman, said Mrs Virág, got so wound up she'd never seen anything like it, and she started shouting how she'd had enough, enough of her son, she couldn't care less any more, he had done nothing but bring shame on her but no more, she could bear it no longer and she got her coat, said Mrs Virág, and there was nothing she could say to her' (Mrs Harrer briefly registered Eszter's dumb-founded expression) 'she was off. I'll drag him out of there by the hair if need be, she was screaming quite out of her mind, and Mrs Virág was really frightened, said my husband, as they stood in front of Nadabán's shop, and she followed them and it was well past midnight and she still hasn't returned, and heaven knows how many others have gone that way, sighed my husband. Then he left Mrs Virág and walked down the main road a little way, and the havoc, he said, sitting in a crumpled heap on the bed, as he turned down Jókai Street, which is where he bumped into the soldiers and naturally, he said, since it was us who invited the forces of order into town they didn't even bother to check my papers but simply showed me the list with its ringed names and descriptions, because by that time they had interrogated the witnesses at the town hall, people who'd seen what had happened overnight, and the soldiers, my husband explained, were now divided into squadrons to keep the peace and seek out troublemakers, but the list they showed him in Jokai Street, says my husband, had only one or two names on it and the rest were descriptions as there wasn't hardly anyone local on it, the rest were strangers and hooligans. And he's just staring at this list and doesn't want to believe the evidence of his eyes, like he didn't want to believe Mrs Virág neither, and when the soldiers ask him if he recognizes anyone on the list he's so scared he says he doesn't although he does. In the meantime I'm lying on the bed as I hear his name and I don't want to believe my ears, he's gone mad, I think, but then he says there's no time to waste as they're out looking for him and the reason he's come home was to put my mind at rest but that now I should get my clothes on and get over as fast as I can to the professor, since the two of them, him and the professor, owe him that much, but I keep looking at him wondering what he's up to. I tell myself, I knew it, I knew what would come of him, I

told them when he first appeared that we shouldn't take him on, it'll only mean trouble taking a fool on, but of course my husband wouldn't listen to me, what's the point, I thought, in taking on the local idiot, and for that money if you please, I'm not going anywhere, I'm not moving a step from here, I say to him, but at the same time I'm getting off the bed and pulling my coat on like an idiot myself. Then we're out of the house with all the glass in the entrance and my husband says he's off to look for him but he'll shortly have to go to the town hall because the professor's wife had made him promise to be there by seven at the latest, oh, I see, I say, by seven I'll have to be alone again, all by myself, but he goes on protesting that this is the way things have to be, after having distinguished himself he's got to keep his word and all, and he does have influence now and they made him promise to be there by seven. I beg him this and that and by this time we have reached the junction of Jókai Street and the main road, but I might as well be talking to the wall, and he says he'll go as far as the station then come back and I should go over to the professor in case there's something I can do for him, and it's pointless me telling myself this is no good, not one step further, I was confused and came here anyway, looking neither left nor right as if I'd been struck blind, so I forgot even to say hello at the gate so I don't know what the professor must think of me. I mean, to break in on someone just as dawn's breaking you'd think it wouldn't be too much to say hello, but I didn't even do that, but what's to be done, professor, a person's mind gets into muddle when everything is collapsing about them, what with the army being here,' Mrs Harrer dropped her voice, 'and that tank …' Eszter sat immobile on the edge of the bed, looking, the woman felt, straight through her. He was like a pillar of salt, that's how he seemed when she had finished, she told Harrer afterwards, when she got home about noon. Then all she could see was her employer leaping from the bed, rushing to the wardrobe, ripping his coat from its hanger, and it was like he was responsible for everything, he cast one persecuted, fugitive glance at her, then stormed out of the house without a word. For her part, she remained seated in the armchair, blinking with fear, and when she heard the gate slammed loudly and furiously behind him, gave a shudder, burst into tears again, then unfolded her handkerchief, blew her nose and looked round the drawing room. It was only then she noticed the boarded-up windows. She rose slowly, then, because she could in no way comprehend what the boards were doing there, she walked over to them, gazing at them

appraisingly, her face long and drawn. She ran a hand down one of the boards, then, having convinced herself that it was real, she gave all the others a little tap and with a slight pout, like any expert in the field, turned her back on the four panes of glass and concluded with a bitter sigh, mumbling, ‘Those nails should have been hammered in from the outside not from inside facing out!’ She shuffled back to the stove, had a look at the fire and threw a few more bits of wood on it, then, giving a shake of her head, turned off the light, took a last glance at the dark drawing room, and repeated, ‘Not in, but out …’

Not simply out of this ruined spot, to which their attention had clearly been called by the missing awnings beside the unusual sign, ortopéd, but back to ‘the innermost depths of hell from which you’ve emerged’, said the man in the corner, his eyes fixed in front of him, although the mouth swollen from beatings kept repeating the words, ‘Scram’ and ‘Out of here’ and ‘Hop to’, while they, as if it were precisely these bitter last words which signalled the end, paid not even the slightest attention to the petrified shoemaker, but stopped there in the wrecked workshop with precisely that sense of unspoken unity with which they had forced their way in, and simply abandoned their activities, left the upended cupboards full of leather, crossed the floor strewn with urine-soaked surgical shoes, slippers and boots, and were, every one of them, out in the street again. Though they were in no position to see it, they sensed from the memory of their mass dispersal, that the others—divided into groups of roughly similar size—were all there in the pitch darkness, not one of them missing, and, if anything, it was this knowledge that had instinctively prepared them for independent action that governed their progress on the march of destruction, for their cumulative fury dictated neither their targets nor their direction, merely that whatever act of wickedness they had committed they should trump it with an ever greater one—as now, when, having finished with the maker of surgical boots, their passions amenable to command yet unfettered by it, they set out to find the next appropriate target (not yet suspecting it would be their last), proceeding down the chestnut-tree-lined road into the town centre. The cinema was still on fire and in the scarlet light of the flames that occasionally shot up, three groups were seen hanging about the pavement, still as statues, watching the fire with a look of disgust, but, just as would happen later in the square when their companions met with a noticeably larger crowd by the now burning chapel, the way they came upon them enabled them to maintain their rate of progress during whatever remained of their terrifying unfinished expedition, ensuring that their otherwise slow but menacing pace should chime in with the even tempo of the march, which had been previously maintained from the cinema through to the entrance of the square and thence to the deserted silence of St Stephen’s Street behind the place of worship. Not a single word passed between them now, only the odd match flared briefly with the answering glow of the lit cigarette, their eyes being fixed on the back of the man in

front or on the pavement as they moved almost unconsciously in step with the others in the freezing cold, and since they were well past the point at which they started, when they themselves had been frightened, smashing whole rows of windows if only that they should be able to see what was behind them, they left things untouched until they reached the nearest corner, when, bypassing the block which had first attracted their attention, they found the blue-enamel-covered iron gate that opened on the icy weed-infested park and a pair of darkened buildings within. Using their iron bars, a few blows were enough to smash the lock and devastate the porter's lodge from which the porter had long fled, but having cut across one of the available paths they found it a much harder task breaking into the first house, because there, having prevailed upon the outer gate, they found themselves faced with two further doors which the inhabitants—having no doubt heard the news from the town and fearing the worst, in other words expecting precisely such an attack—had not only locked with the appropriate keys and bolted as far as possible, but barricaded with tables and chairs piled on top of each other, as if suspecting that they would have to do everything they could to resist the approaching power, with somewhat limited success, as the detachment even now swarming up the stairs demonstrated. The heated corridor that ran down the length of the raised ground floor was pitch dark and the night nurse, who, having heard the racket and was in these last moments attempting to escape by the back door along with those of her assistants who were still mobile, had switched off even the small night-lights in the various wards in the strange hope that by barricading the doors and turning off the lights she was ensuring the safety of her charges, if only because despite every instinct to the contrary no one really wanted to believe that the evil set loose in the street would take the form of a treacherous attack upon the hospital. But that it did, and it was as if it were precisely their silence that betrayed them, for once the last doors had been forced open and the light switches located in the corridor, those sheltering under their blankets in the first wards on the right were the first to be found and tipped out of their beds, but since at this point the mob had finally run out of ideas no one knew what to do with those writhing piteously on the floor: they felt a cramp in their arms as they went to touch them, there wasn't strength enough in their legs to kick out at them, and so, as if to demonstrate that their destructive power was no longer capable of locating a target, their actual acts of destruction grew ever more ridiculous

and their helplessness ever more patently clear. Because ultimately they wanted to distance themselves from what they had come to do, they merely swept through and passed on, tearing the sockets out of the wall and smashing against the same wall whatever instruments happened to be ticking or buzzing or glimmering, going on to throw whatever medication happened to be in the lockers on to the floor and stamping on bottles, thermometers and even the most innocuous items of personal possession, following this with the general destruction of glasses-cases, family photographs, and even the rotting remnants of fruit left in paper bags; now dividing into smaller units, now coming together again, they advanced in tides, but rather disorientated at meeting a completely unarmed victim, not understanding that the dumb fear, the utter lack of resistance which allowed that victim to bear this onslaught, was increasingly robbing them of power and that, faced by this sapping mire of unconditional surrender—though this is what had hitherto given them the greatest, most bitter pleasure—they would have to retreat. They stood under the flickering neon lights of the corridor at the very limits of silence (the distant screaming of the nurses was faintly audible behind closed doors) then, instead of seizing upon their prey again in fury and confusion or continuing their ravages on the upper floors, they waited for the last of their group to rejoin them then staggered out of the building like some ragtag army, all discipline lost, working their way back across the park to the iron gates to hesitate there for long minutes in the first clear indication of their lost momentum and indecisiveness, and if they no longer had any idea of where they should go or why, it was because, unbearable as it was to recognize and admit the fact that their infernal mission, like that of the exhausted detachments in front of the cinema and the chapel, had come up short, they had simply run out of murderous energy. The knowledge that they had made a crude rush at things and failed in their mission, the mission they had undertaken at a single gesture from their leader, to wipe out *everything,* suddenly imposed an intolerable weight on them, and when, after a period of confused meditation, they finally left the hospital gates, it was obvious that the possibility of the whole enterprise, including all their merciless acts of havoc and destruction, being senseless, so disorientated them that not only had their steps lost their previously uniform brisk tempo but their very *esprit de corps* was itself damaged in some way; the lethally disciplined squadron had become a pitiful rabble, the cohesive force of uncontrollable

disgust had vanished to leave behind some twenty to thirty crumpled, introspective individuals who half suspected, half knew, but did not care what was to happen next because they had entered some empty, infinitely empty, terrain which not only had trapped them but was preventing them even forming the desire to escape. They smashed up one more shop (the sign above it said AUNDR OWROOM), but even as they were tearing off the grille and breaking the door open their every movement showed that they were embarking not on a new wave of destruction but on a retreat: it was as if each of them had been struck by a fatal bullet and, half collapsing, was seeking some last place of refuge where his miserable agony might be ended, and indeed, once having crossed the threshold, turned on the light and surveyed the place, packed as it was with washing machines—the premises reminded them more of a factory than a shop—there remained nothing in their eyes of that earlier ruthless look; having fallen prisoner to their own actions, locked into their own refuge, they felt it didn't really matter where they were and for a long time listened expressionlessly to the creaking of the door they had left swinging behind them, only moving away from the entrance once its arresting siren song had died away in the freezing blank-faced showroom. One of them, as if suddenly coming to consciousness in the general nausea or recognizing for the first time the gravity of the situation afflicting his companions, curled his lip contemptuously, turned on his heels and, hissing something ('… Shitheads! …') behind him, loudly stamped his way out into the street again in an attempt to register some kind of protest, asserting his right to surrender, if surrender was called for, as an individual; another began hitting one of the machines ranged before them in precise and anonymous military order with an iron bar, then, seeking out its most sensitive points, succeeded in tearing the motor from its broken plastic casing and smashed the part into flying smithereens; the others, though, no longer registering the actions of the first two, did not touch anything but set uncertainly out along one of the narrow corridors formed by the ranks of machines and, wanting to put as much distance between themselves and anyone else, lay down on the lino-covered floor. To locate a sufficient distance, or to disperse in this forest of washing machines to the degree that they lost sight of one another—though this was what they most desired—was well nigh impossible, except for a few of them, but this minority certainly did not include Valuska, who, in any case —though this was no longer of any significance—took it for granted that

that was the reason people remained close to him, and why, for example, the person sitting up, two rows away, looking in front of him with a sour expression, was busily scribbling in a little book, for, after all, someone had to note that the most ruthless of them all, his terrifying custodian, who had just departed having left behind him the memory of his bulk, his hat, his broadcloth coat and boots, not to mention his liberated victim, might himself, for all they knew, 'have recovered himself'. It was all the same to Valuska whatever they intended to do with him; whether they decided to finish him off there and then or later was of no interest to him, for there was no fear left in him, nor did he try to escape, since the discovery that he had no desire to escape from whatever power inhabited this murderous and healing night was enough to make escape impossible; he might very well have escaped a particular group, for there were many opportunities to do that, but not the terrible burden they carried, from that there was to be no escape ever again—in so far as such a burden was perceptible to a person so utterly blinded in the first shocking and decisive moment of his complete rebirth. Because the awful helplessness he felt in front of Mr Eszter's house when—prior to his later enlightenment—his friend in the market square rescued him, put his arm about him and they marched off down the main road 'with the scrape and shuffle of boots and leggings', and some hundred or so yards further down, at some literally silent word of command, began their assault upon the houses; and the terror he felt when he picked up their desperate momentum, when he might have rushed to the forefront, feeling the powerful grip of the comradely hand on his shoulder which every so often, as if by way of warning, tightened its grip and practically held him back; this helplessness and sheer terror at the dilemma he faced when, on the one hand, he wished to defend the person being beaten and, on the other, to be the person administering the beating, precluded either resistance or escape, nor did it allow him to suspect that from all those decades, from that entire forest of illusions, it should have been the one considered most irredeemably stupid, that is to say he himself, that this infernal night should so mercilessly have chosen. Valuska no longer knew where they were going, he registered only the beating down of another door, and, for the first time since they started, they had begun breaking all the windows and smashing the lights above the gateways, eventually pushing their way into one of the houses. With his apparently evil escort at his side, an escort who propelled him along with a justifiably relentless pleasure, he was swept

with the mob into a little building where things began to happen in extraordinarily slow motion: even the sounds were slow as an old woman stepped in front of them, shouting, and a couple moved towards her with expressions of unbearable indifference on their distorted faces. He could still see the fist of one of them swinging in a relaxed fashion while the woman tried to back away but failed to move an inch—he could still see this—then, with a superhuman effort, as if every movement entailed the shifting of an enormous weight, he turned his head away and fixed his eyes on a corner of the terminally silent room. And there was nothing in that corner except a vague rolling shadow which slowly settled where the rotting floorboards entered the sharp angle of the wall which had none of the usual furniture to cover it, no bed, no wardrobe, quite bare with a sour smell—only the corner of a room could look so empty and smell so sour, and yet to Valuska's eyes it was stuffed full of horrors, as if whatever happened or might have happened had soaked into it: it was like staring into the eyes of a leering monster he didn't until then realize existed at all. Nor could he withdraw his gaze from it: however he was shoved about the room his eyes remained fixed there and saw nothing but that corner in the sharpest detail with its unmoving shadow which resembled nothing so much as a squatting dwarf that had been generated out of darkness and thick vapour; it blinded him, it burned into his consciousness, it held his eyes as if on a tight chain, and it didn't matter now that they were leaving, he dragged it around with him wherever they went … He moved forward with them when they moved, he stopped when they stopped, but he was unconscious of all this, as he was of anything he did or that was done to him, and he remained in that state for a long long time, crushed by the weight of silence that had fallen on him, whatever racket they were making up ahead or immediately at hand. For hours, hours that could not be measured in terms of minutes or centuries, he dragged this terrible image round with him and was wholly oblivious to everything he suffered and by now he could not tell what was stronger, the chains with which it bound him or his own agonized desperation as he clung on to it. At one moment someone seemed to be lifting him off the ground, but the inappropriate power the other expended on this operation unbalanced him: 'What makes him so light?' the other muttered angrily and let him down again or rather shoved him furiously aside; then, much later, he thought he was lying on the pavement and they were pouring rough spirits into his mouth and this made him stand up again,

and once more there was the hand on his shoulder or under his arm, the hand which presumably had more than once prevented him running away and which now powerfully gripped him and needlessly maintained its grip, for even if he had no idea that he might wake to his present state, the burden of the image he carried with him, the blank significance of the corner of that room, still exerted its influence: that was all he saw wherever he was tossed or pushed or swept, anything else simply flashed before him as they passed —a figure running, fire blazing, all in a mist. It was impossible, however he tried, to free himself of it, because as soon as he forgot it he remembered it again, and it made no difference where he was, in one place or another, he remained slave to the numbing power of its attraction—then, suddenly, a deathly fatigue overtook him, his half-frozen toes began to ache in his icy boots, he wanted to lie down on the pavement (had he done so before?) but the man in the broadcloth coat—Valuska could not quite see him as a tutelary presence yet—scratched his unshaven chin and offered some mocking reproof. These were the first words that penetrated his consciousness and the not unmerited derision in the voice ('What's up, half-wit, you want more brandy?') reminded him where he was and whom he was with, and, as if that terrible corner with its timelessly sour smell had turned into a theatre-set with nightmarish lighting, accommodating the whole of this horrific night, he took in, for the first time, the fearsome, distorted features of his 'teacher'. No, it wasn't brandy he wanted, if he wanted anything at all, but sleep; he wanted to fall asleep and freeze to death on the pavement so he shouldn't have to understand the experience that had begun to assume clearer contours in his mind, he just wanted it all to end, nothing more; fortunately, the manner and tone of the question left him in no doubt that he should promptly forget this idea, and, assuming that the question had somehow addressed his true desires, he shook his head violently, got up and, giving an involuntary shudder as he felt his companion laying his hand on his shoulder again, fell into step and obediently marched beside him. And he examined this face with the darkly blinding corner behind him; he noted its hawk-like nose, the thick stubble on its chin, the inflamed eyelids, the heavily abraded skin under its left cheekbone, and the frightening and complex thing wasn't that he couldn't sound the infinitely deep well of fury in it, but the resemblance it bore to the face he met yesterday in the market square; he had to understand that the man to whom his sudden and unforeseen attack of anxiety had led him

in Kossuth Square, after his parting from Mr Eszter, was most certainly identical with the one who acted as his conductor in this carnival of hatred, and who now functioned—perhaps wholly involuntarily—as a surgeon mercilessly cutting his whole life open; there was nothing to disguise the fact that those frightening features were those of the man who was there the day before and the day before that, and so on, down to some wholly innocent original face; and that it was the cumulative effect of all of these faces, haunting, cold but wearing an entirely human expression that was practically aglow with the blinding certainty of its absolute power which promised new and supremely inventive forms of ruthlessness; that it was he who was directing each and every movement of this irresistible march, including Valuska's own trials and tribulations as he stumbled down the desperate stations of complete collapse, though something in his manner suggested that the brutally instructive drama he unfolded before Valuska, while dragging him along by the arm, was in some way intended to serve as a form of cure, a cure that entailed a certain amount of necessary suffering (no gain without pain), and that this was a situation he was clearly enjoying. Valuska stared at that face, and as he examined it he began to understand that the 'hauntingly cold' expression he found on it was growing ever less enigmatic, since the ruthless mask might only be the unforgiving mirror of something that he, in his thirty-five years of muddle and sickliness, had perhaps been incapable of seeing, thought Valuska, but immediately modified that 'perhaps' to 'no, absolutely certainly', so that he should not leave unrecorded the decisive moment when he finally woke from his protracted slumber and stumbled on his own long-lost identity. The dumb silence broke, the blinding light behind his captor went out together with its unmoving shadow, and a little space, a park, came into focus as he looked around, a park and a path, then a set of iron gates, and he no longer felt any astonishment that it should be him alone, with his unforgivable blindness, and not the crowd gathered at the hospital, who was the alien creature here. Nothing of that astonishment remained, there was not the faintest necessity for flight, since the emptiness that had shuddered through him in those first few minutes had annihilated him too: pieces of him were rolling away for ever in all directions; he had disappeared in a single flash, had been reduced to nothing, so that the only thing he was aware of now was the hot, bitter taste of reality on his palate and an aching in his legs, particularly the left one. The unearthly fog, which in Wenckheim Avenue had presented these

ugly functionaries of darkness as the unlikely creatures of a destructive yet magnetic power, lifted, and now, as he looked at them with new, suddenly acquired clarity of vision, and recalled them as they had been in their assembled hundreds, it seemed quite obvious to him that there wasn't, nor had there ever been, anything otherworldly or alien about them, that they, and not only they but their 'destructive and magnetic' leader, had lost their 'demonic' quality; in fact, now the scales, which had grown ever larger, ever darker with years of looking at things the wrong way, had fallen from his eyes for ever, he knew himself disillusioned, free of the false comforts to which his dimwittedness had deservedly condemned him by hiding *'the true nature of reality'* from him. His awakening was swift, rending, very much the proverbial bolt from the blue: the man he thought he was no longer existed, so, when, after a long period of indecision, the group that had adopted him left its post at the hospital gates and houses, telegraph poles and each and every paving stone had settled back into its old position, he understood as something perfectly self-evident that his mind, 'a mind that desired to restock itself', which no longer made panicky lists but was preparing to take a steady, indifferent view of things, could not help but regard the pillars that supported the contemporary world as anything but broken columns. Mornings and afternoons, evenings and nights, had collapsed into each other, and forces he had, until yesterday, imagined as existing in some eternal equilibrium—silent as the perfect machine, functioning delicately out of sight—now assumed a barren, crude, cold and peculiarly repulsive, albeit sobering and absolutely clear, aspect: the home he had so naively loved, that house in the garden, had lost every last vestige of whatever cheap magic it had held for him; now, when he turned his mind to it for one last indifferent moment, nothing seemed to remain except a set of rotting walls and a bulging uneven ceiling—a laundry room that belonged not to him but to Harrer; no path led to it now, nor did any road lead anywhere else, for as far as the 'moonstruck wanderer' was concerned, every gap, every opening, every door had been walled up if only so that he, the now convalescent patient, should find 'the terrifyingly real entrances into the heart of the world' ever more readily. He trudged in thick darkness among the donkey-jackets and greasy macs, staring at the pavement under his feet and thinking of the Peafeffer, the depot and the Komló, aware that these were inaccessible to him, that all the streets, all the squares, each bend and corner, had somehow dissolved and broken up, though at the same time

he could see the old route of what had been his serpentine meanderings ever more sharply, more completely, as if on a map, but since the landscape underlying the map had disappeared and he felt unable to take a single step in that which had taken its place, not at least the way he used to do, he thought it best to forget whatever had preceded this bleak unfamiliar town at which he had arrived like a newborn child, somewhat unsteady on his feet, it might have been yesterday … or before … or whenever it was. He'd forget the mornings: the taste of half-remembered dreams, the slow awakenings, the tea steaming in the polka-dot-patterned cup before he left the house; he'd forget the dawn spreading over the railway and the smell of newsprint at the depot in the faint blue haze, the post-boxes he passed from seven in the morning to about an hour before noon, all the doors, window-sills and letter-boxes in gateways, and the hundred different movements which ensured that, day by day, all the magazines should arrive at the doors, window-sills, letterboxes and bins—in two places under the threshold doormats—of the appropriate subscribers. And he would wipe from memory the question he would religiously address to Mrs Harrer about whether it was noon yet and time for him to start, and the clanking of the pots in Mr Eszter's kitchen and the long line waiting for the cook at the Komló; he'd let the house in Wenckheim Avenue collapse about its owner's ears, forget the gate, the hallway, the cautious knocking, let Bach and the piano finally go to hell and allow the dim light of the sitting room to fade into the darkness for ever. He'd not give another thought to Mr Hagelmayer, nor would he demonstrate the eclipse of the sun to anyone ever again; he'd not bring to mind that counter, or the cheap glasses, or the cloud of smoke drifting above waves of muttered conversation, and on no account would he set out at closing time for the water-tower … He drifted along with the others to the 'scrape and shuffle of boots and leggings' and once the enfeebled group had crossed the Körös Canal and reached the fence of his mother's house in Maróthy Square, neither the sudden appearance of his mother's terrified face, nor her voice sliding down the intercom at the gate, meant anything to him, and the house itself with its yard, its bare trees, and the two and a half rented rooms hidden behind them, meant even less, so much less that he simply turned his head away. He didn't want to see it, nor any of his earlier haunts, but even as he was following one step behind his fearsome master, his valedictory survey of the past was brought to an abrupt end, for here, in Maróthy Square, contrary to all his expectations, he was

overwhelmed by a sudden feeling that, should he persist with it, a treacherous sense of bitterness would utterly floor him; some dangerous, mysterious, intense pain that, while denying the complexity of the specific operation, was likely to suggest that any truly ‘objective assessment’ was a deeply risky enterprise. He rejected the idea that confronting this ‘dangerous, mysterious intense pain’ head-on should entail deliberately ‘forgetting’ anything and thought the likelihood of that danger extraordinarily remote, for he, ‘who could overcome false illusions’, he, of whom no one would have expected such stern resolution, he, who was no longer daunted by any thought of pain or danger, was the surest guarantee of that: he had taken his dreadful lessons to heart and could now declare himself to be ‘just like the others’. If he weren’t so mortally tired he would have liked nothing better than to announce to the others that they should rest assured as far as he was concerned for his ‘heart’ was ‘dead’ and it was pointless mocking him now that he ‘had learned to stand on his own two feet and understood everything’: he no longer believed the world was ‘an enchanted place’ for the only power that really existed was ‘that declared by force of arms’; and while he couldn’t deny that they had terrified him at first, he now felt himself capable of adjusting to their ways and was ‘grateful for the privilege of being offered a glance into their lives’. So he went on with them, past Maróthy Square, waiting patiently until he should recover his strength and could explain to them how naïve and childlike his assumptions had been, consoling himself with the illusion that, though the cosmos was vast and the earth merely a tiny speck within it, the force that drove that cosmos was, ultimately, joy: joy that ‘from the dawn of time had saturated every planet, every star’, and that they should regard him as one who had assumed that all this was good and that, furthermore, it had some secret core, a central point, not precisely a meaning but some kind of substance or mass, lighter, more delicate than a single breath, whose unforgettable radiance could not reasonably be denied and could be ignored only by those who failed to look. If only his terrible exhaustion had faded with his obsessions, for he also wanted to tell them that after what, for him, had naturally been a terrible night, he had completely sobered up. You should imagine me, he would say, as a man who has lived his entire life with his eyes closed, and when I opened them, those millions of stars and planets, that universe of delight, simply disappeared. I saw the hospital gates, the houses, the trees on either side and you all around me, and I knew

at once that everything that really existed had found its place in me. I looked between the roofs at the barely visible horizon and not only had that secret universe disappeared, but I had too, as had the best part of thirty years of constantly thinking about it; wherever I turned my head I saw nothing, everything had taken on its true shape. It was like in the cinema ‘when they turn the lights on’. This is what he would have said, and also that he felt like someone who had moved from the infinitely large compass of a ‘giant globe’ into a bare, lowland sheepfold that frightened him at first; from a diseased but playful dream to an awakening in the desert where nothing beyond the immediately tangible possessed any reality and where no element of the landscape was capable of transcending itself, because, as he would have added, he had finally realized that nothing, apart from the earth and the objects disposed across its crust, actually existed, while, on the other hand, anything that did exist in such a manner was of an extraordinary weight, imbued with extraordinary power and a meaning that collapsed in on itself, which required no validation by any outside power. He’d have asked them to believe him, for now, like them, he knew there was ‘neither heaven nor hell’, since one could not call into the balance anything but that which actually existed; that it was only Evil that required an explanation, not Good, and that therefore there was ‘neither good nor evil’, and that there was one law and one law only, that of the strong which dictated that ‘the stronger power was absolute’. You couldn’t, in fact you didn’t need to, conclude anything from this, not even that ‘a man who was a slave to his feelings was one who had everything to lose’; not at all, he would have explained, because, for the first time, he was no longer aware of any functioning feeling himself; he just needed a little time—not deferral, simply time—until the diseased brain in his head began to work in a normal manner, because at the moment it could only pound and drum and hammer and was incapable of doing what it should do; as, for example, resolve why, if the whole shebang was so firmly set in stone, did everything that should have been self-evident seem so puzzling, and why things that should have been clear and final lost their outlines; in other words, how could the night and everything that had happened in it seem so clear yet obscure at the same time … By the time he had reached this point in his reflections they were no longer marching along the main road and had entered Mr Sajbók’s showroom and were sitting among the washing machines in the Keravill store, but because of ‘the stressful mental overtime’ he had been doing, he

had no idea how long they had been in there. His guardian had disappeared some time ago and the man who replaced him was on the last pages of his notebook, so he estimated that at least an hour must have passed; then, once he had decided that ‘it didn’t really matter much’, he went back to what he was doing before he had woken from his dream, which was rubbing his frozen feet. Throwing off his boots and leaning against the nearest washing machine for support, he sat there like someone who had decided to move in for good and take his place among the machines in the low hall. He watched the man with the notebook for some time, then, pulling his boots back on, tied up the laces, and, because he felt it might be dangerous, he tried every way he knew to prevent himself falling asleep in an unguarded moment. No, he encouraged himself, he would most certainly not fall asleep, the grinding exhaustion in his limbs would come to an end, and the pounding in his head would eventually stop, so he might be able to speak again, for he absolutely had to speak to the others and tell them that if he had listened to those who controlled his fate he would not have been here with his head pounding but beyond all this, full of self-confidence, all he had to do was accept the good advice that had been showered on him. He’d mention his mother, who apart from constantly scolding him had, by way of *warning* (a useless warning as it happened), cast him out for ever, and who even the night before had warned him that unless he adopted a normal way of life she would grab him by the hair and shake him until he was prepared to understand ‘the way things were’ in her view, and, of course, Mrs Eszter too, whose example he so stupidly failed to follow, who wasn’t what he had thought her to be but someone hard, smart and ruthless who crushed everyone who stood in her way; for it was the first time he had seen her so clearly and understood at last the significance of the police chief, the booming voice and the suitcase; he also understood that he should not have crumbled as he did, but learned from her, yesterday, in her room in Honvéd Passage for example, when she overcame the opposition of the committee and more or less cleared the way for the crowd in the market square. But, most importantly, he had to tell them about Mr Eszter, who, with infinite patience, had for years been telling him that what he saw did not exist and that all he thought was false, for he had been stupid enough not to believe him, imagining him to be the victim of some great consuming error, whereas it had been he himself who was the victim; he had to talk about him, the most outstanding figure among them, Mr Eszter, who saw things

more clearly than anyone: it was indeed no wonder that the sad weight of his knowledge should have resulted in such an unfortunate illness. How often had Valuska sat in the armchair listening to him saying things like, ‘Anyone who believes that the world is maintained through the grace of some force for good or beauty, dear friend, is doomed to early disillusion’; not a day went by but Mr Eszter instructed him, ‘Look at me! I am the result of not learning from experience. Like everyone else,’ but he had understood nothing of this, being blind and deaf, and quite unable to hear the words of warning, so now, when he reflected on the years they had spent together, he was astonished that he hadn’t got bored with his own constant mutterings about light, space and ‘the enchanting mechanism of the cosmos’. On the other hand, he thought, if his old master could see him now (or rather a few moments later, once his strength had returned) he would certainly be surprised to find that the extraordinary amount of time he had spent on Valuska’s instruction, all those hundreds of homilies, had not been entirely wasted since he could see for himself that his pupil now regarded the world exclusively in terms of ‘what he had learned in the drawing room’. When precisely Mr Eszter would have a chance to see all this he had no idea, since, for him, nothing now remained of the house in Wenckheim Avenue, for he belonged here for good now: yes, that was all settled, Valuska nodded (‘It has been decided …’), rubbing his inflamed eyes and propping his feet on the washing machine facing him, for he suddenly felt as if the ice-cold floor beneath him had begun to slope steeply away. By this time he was only vaguely aware of someone going up to his new guardian, taking his notebook, turning a few pages and asking, ‘What is this?’ to which his keeper mumbled, ‘God knows … your last will and testament …’ then they grinned at each other … the other threw the notebook away … he heard the words, ‘crisp and brilliant’ … something about ‘sharp frost …’ and, last of all, ‘Stop scribbling, clever dick.’ That was the last because, by now, the ice-cold floor was tilting so much that he had begun to slide down it, slipping and rolling over, until he fell into a bottomless pit and continued falling for an extraordinary length of time, flopping helplessly, until, finally, he touched solid ground and found himself on the ice-cold floor again, at which point he opened his eyes. He was no longer propped against a washing machine but lying beside it on the lino, curled up tight as a hedgehog, so cold that his every sinew was trembling, and what was difficult to understand was not so much that the

floor was not really sloping but that his own exhaustion had made him feel as though it was, nor that he hadn't really fallen headlong but had simply fallen asleep; no, what was really difficult to understand, once he had fearfully dragged himself upright again, was that he was in Mr Sajbók's showroom and alone. He ran hither and thither, up and down endless rows of washing machines, but was soon forced to admit that there was no mistake: they had gone and left him behind, he was really and truly on his own; but he couldn't understand how it had happened, and found himself asking aloud, 'What now?' his voice echoing in the empty hall; then, slowing down so as to calm himself, he forced himself to go at walking pace, and after a few minutes of this, he did actually feel much calmer. Because, he reasoned, nothing could change the fact that he was one of them now, even if they didn't happen to be here, the bond between them being unbreakable; and so, he decided, he would rest a little until they returned and go over and over in his mind everything he had learned from them until he understood it better. He therefore returned to 'his own' washing machine, leaned back against it again, stretched out his legs and was just about to settle to some serious thinking when, a couple of metres from him on the floor, not far from the spot where his new keeper had sat, he noticed a familiar object. He knew immediately that it was the discarded notebook and thinking of this he felt a sudden flush of excitement, for he couldn't imagine that its owner and author would have simply abandoned the book to its fate, as something not worth keeping, but was sure that he had deliberately left it for him to read. He walked over to it, picked it up, smoothed out the crumpled pages, returned to his place and, resting it on his lap, surveyed the spiky scrawl, and, once started, forgot everything else but read through it with alert and grave attention.

> … and then it made no difference whether we bore left or right, we simply flooded every street and square, for one thing and one thing alone drove us and confronted us at every turn, a hollow sense of fear combined with resignation that left us with some hope of mercy; nor were there any orders or words of command, no attempt at calculation, no taking of risks and no danger, since there was nothing left to lose, everything having become intolerable, unbearable, beyond the pale; each house, each fence, each advertising pillar, telegraph post, shop or the post office, even the lightly drifting odours of the bakery, had

become intolerable; intolerable too every precept of law and order, every petty demanding obligation, the continuous and hopeless expenditure of energy in the attempt to suggest that there might be some point to all this rather than be faced by the unyielding, indifferent, universal incomprehensibility of things; intolerable too the inexplicable ground-rules of human conduct. No amount of screaming would have helped us find a chink in the enormous armour of silence that slowly descended on us, so we proceeded without a word, hearing only the scrape and rumble of our own progress over the crisp and brilliant sharp frost, unstoppable and tense to the point of snapping, down those dark airless streets, seeing no one else, never stopping to look at each other, or if we did, only to note a hand or a foot, for we were a single body with one single pair of eyes, ardent for one single act of destruction, one single fatal impulse, impervious to entreaty. And there really was nothing to oppose us: heavy bricks swam effortlessly in the air to smash shopfronts and the dirty, blindly flickering windows of private houses, while stray cats stood as if rooted to the spot by the blinding light of reflectors and suffered passively, not moving a muscle, while we strangled them, and young trees allowed themselves sleepily to be turned out of their beds of cracked soil. But nothing could assuage the unconscious fury of our new and tragic understanding, our sense of having been cheated, our fear, for, however we looked for it, we could not find a fit object for our disgust and despair, and so we attacked everything in our way with an equal and infinite passion: we broke up shops, threw from the windows anything that was movable and ground it under our heels outside, and if we couldn’t move it, we smashed it to pieces with iron bars or pans of shutters; then followed hairdriers, bars of soap, loaves, coats, surgical boots, tins of food, books, suitcases and children’s toys, unrecognizable fragments of which we trod on so we could turn over cars parked at the side of the road, so we could tear down desolate signs and billboards, occupy and wreck the telephone exchange because someone had left the lights on in it, and we left the building only to join the jostling crowd at the gates once the two female telephone operators had also been trodden underfoot, lost consciousness, and slid down the wall like two used rags, lifeless, their hands slumped in their laps, while torn telephone wires hung in tangles

from the blood-covered table and the switchboards lay in an unrecogizable mess on the floor, obscuring the view. We saw that nothing was impossible now, convinced that all common everyday knowledge was useless, understood that what we did was meaningless since we were only a moment's victims in an infinitely vast arena, that from such an ephemeral position there was no way of estimating the precise magnitude of that vastness, for the force of sheer velocity can know nothing of the nature of a speck of drifting dust, for motion and object can have no consciousness of each other. We smashed and pounded everything we could lay our hands on until we arrived back where we started, but there was no stopping, no brake, the blinding joy of destruction impelled us to surpass ourselves time and again, so we trampled, always dissatisfied, always silent, over the remains of hairdriers, bars of soap, loaves, coats, surgical boots, tins of food, books, suitcases and children's toys, so as to provide ever more material to lay over the roadside debris which now extended over the whole town, one patch of waste merging with another, and in order to breach the petty and false mire of submissiveness and resignation which sought to defend that which was indefensible. We found ourselves back in streets that led to the square in front of the church, with the impenetrable night all about us, our energies raging bloody and unchecked within us; we felt dangerously light of heart, aware of the intoxicating heartbeat of resistance; everything was a challenge, a kind of suffocating weight we had to shed. There was a point where a number of side-streets and alleyways converged on the main road, and at the far end of one of them we could make out three figures in the darkness (the vague outlines of a man, a woman and a child, as it turned out a few steps later) who, having spotted the threatening mob approaching them, were paralysed with fear, then tried backing up keeping close to the wall, hoping to disappear in the dense darkness: but they were too late, nothing on earth could help them, and even if they had succeeded in concealing themselves so far in shady corners on what was probably their homeward journey, they could find no shelter now, their fate was utterly sealed, because there was no more place for them in the ruthless halls of justice where we operated, since we were sure it was our task to stamp on the dying embers of family, hearth and home, and they were dying in any case, all thought of

‘refuge’ being hopeless and superfluous; it was pointless seeking a hiding place, pointless trusting to the future; all joy, all childish laughter, all the false consolations of solidarity or seasons of goodwill had been clouded over, obliterated for ever. A few of us, about twenty or thirty in the front rank, set straight off after them, and once we reached the closed rectangle of the square in front of the church and had given the fugitive group a good looking over, we started making our way to them over the ruins and piles of rubble, and, though they were clearly trying to escape to the safety of one of the side-streets, their stiff postures showed they needed every ounce of their rapidly dwindling confidence not to break into a desperate run but keep up the appearance of people calmly making their way home. We could have reached them in a few strides if we really wanted to but that would have meant giving up the dark, as yet unknown, aura of magic or mystique, full of the tempting surprises, risks and dangers, of pursuit, which is the spell that haunts the hunter as he patiently tracks the hunted deer, and prevents him dispatching it until the animal itself is terminally exhausted and, reconciled to its fate, more or less offers itself up; so we did not charge at them immediately, but let them believe they might avoid danger and escape the annihilating effects of our close attention: that it would be like waking from a bad dream. Whether we were a real threat to them or if it was merely a laughable misunderstanding, that, of course, they couldn’t decide for the time being, and they probably continued in that state of mind for some few minutes before realizing it was no mistake, no misunderstanding, that they were in fact the objects of some as yet unclear menace, that it was undoubtedly them we were following, that they, and no one else, were the targets fixed on by this dour, unspeaking group, since, short of breaking down the doors of these bourgeois houses with their thick walls and trembling occupants, we could find no one in our path but them, these stray sheep far from the fold; by some peculiar ill-luck it was only they who could satisfy and, at the same time, increase our terrible hunger for adequate and properly punitive recompense. The child clung to its mother and the mother hung on to the father, who kept turning round, ever more frequently, ever more anxiously, walking ever faster: it was no use though, the distance between us did not increase, and if we did slow down now and then it was only so that

we might move even closer to them the next time, because, strangely enough, we felt a wild excitement knowing how they must be swinging between waves of hope and disappointment. They took the first right turn down another side-street and by this time even the woman, who was now clinging to her husband with clear desperation, and the child, who kept glancing back at us with uncomprehending terror in its eyes, had been forced into a run, so they shouldn't trip as they kept pace with the man, who was walking faster and faster and who, naturally, had not yet made up his mind whether to make a real dash for it, fearing that if he did so we too would be compelled to run, in which case he would have absolutely no hope of saving both his family and himself at the moment of what, for them, must have been still unimaginable contact. The bitter, evil pleasure of seeing these three lonely shadows helplessly swaying ahead of us, not even knowing for certain what was in store for them, exceeded even the power of the spell cast by the sight of the smashed-up town, meant more than the satisfaction occasioned by all the pieces of useless stuff we had trampled underfoot, for in that perpetual holding back, in the sheer joy of deferral, in that infernal putting off, we savoured something wry, mysterious and ancient that lent our least movement a fearsome dignity, the kind of unimpeachable pride possessed by all barbaric hordes, even when they know they might be scattered far and wide the day after, mobs whose momentum is unstoppable since they have appropriated even the thought of their own death, should they decide to make an end, their mission done, having had their fill for ever of both earth and heaven, with misfortune and sadness, with pride and fear, as well as with that base, tempting burden which will not allow one to give up the habit of pining for liberty. There was a dull murmuring somewhere in the distance which quickly died away. In front of us a few stray cats were sidling through gaps in the fence into silent courtyards. It was freezing cold and the air was so dry it scratched our throats. The child started coughing. By now—their route clearly having led them out of town rather than homeward—the man too recognized that their situation was increasingly hopeless; occasionally he hesitated before a possibly familiar entrance, but only for an instant since it wasn't difficult to calculate that by the time someone opened the door to their knocking or ringing and they stepped

inside to evade their pursuers, we would have caught up with them—not to mention the fact that they would have to accept that this transparently childish recourse would solve nothing, for he was forced finally to realize that whatever they did, whatever they tried, they were lost. But just as a hunted beast keeps going to the end, he too refused to surrender; you could see that the father, charged with the protection of his dependants, was desperately contriving ever new strategies, each hope that glowed then rapidly faded directed some uncertain manoeuvre which was almost immediately abandoned as useless, each plan failed, all hope false. Suddenly they took a sharp right down a narrow street but by now we were sufficiently acquainted with the town (some of us, in fact, were local people) to forestall him; five or six of us ran round the block and by the time they reached the main road we had blocked off the way to the police station which left them with no alternative but to head for the railway station instead, looking ever more harassed, ever more terrified by the persistent dumb detachment that followed them. The man had picked up the exhausted child, then, at the next corner, he passed it on to the woman with one rapid movement and shouted at them, but the woman, after disappearing down another street for a few moments, quickly hastened back to her husband as if recognizing that she was unable to assume sole responsibility for flight together with the child, clearly feeling that she could bear anything but to be eternally parted from him. The fact that we seemed to be pushing them in some specific and sinister direction completely confused them, which was the only reason they gave up the notion of turning off down some potentially valid escape route back towards the town centre at the next comer, perhaps hoping that should they reach the railway station unscathed they would find secure shelter there. We were steadily catching up with them, ever more electrified by the pursuit while they were growing ever more tired, so that slowly, even in the darkness, we could make out the shape of the man's bent back, the long fringe of the woman's thick scarf, the handbag that kept bouncing off her hip, and the furry ear-flaps of the child's hat which had come untied and were occasionally rising and falling with the icy wind as they stared terrified back at us and could, in their turn, see us clearly with our heavy overcoats, our muddy boots, in one great mass as we proceeded towards them, and

here and there a few of us with dead cats slung over our shoulders or iron bars in our fists. By the time they reached the empty square in front of the station only ten or eleven paces separated us, so they had to sprint the few yards remaining in order to tear open the heavy entrance gates and rush down the silent and deserted hall with its blind, curtained counters, but whatever hope still remained in them was immediately crushed because there was not a soul in sight, each door and window bore a clumsy lock, the waiting room was a hollow echoing box, and if they hadn't noticed a faint light burning in the staffroom, their story and ours would have come to an unavoidable end right there and then. But it wasn't to last much longer anyway, for when we heard a window creak open on the side of the building and spotted the shadow of a man running almost certainly for help, crossing the tracks and disappearing under one of the carriages of a long goods train in an attempt to vanish right under our noses, three of us immediately left the others to deal with the lock on the frail little door of the staffroom and set off in pursuit of him, then, having reached the little group of houses scattered behind the tracks, separated and approached him from three directions at once. The squeaking of his boots and the way they kept sliding along the ground, not to mention his loud, sibilant breathing, were perfect indicators of his precise position, so it wasn't too difficult to corner him once we passed the buildings, which appeared to be frozen in sleep, and reached the ploughed fields behind. By now the man himself realized that he was trapped; he carried on running a little way down deep furrows that were cold and hard as steel but then it was as if he had come to a brick wall that left only the route back, and so, as if bracing his back against the night sky behind him, he turned round and faced us …

He kept turning the spiral-bound squared pages of the notebook as he devoured their contents, and so, having reached the end of the account, he turned over again and found himself back at the beginning, where, recalling his disturbingly guilty self of the day before and recognizing today's much more frightening figure in that fragment of corrective text which seemed to lead back to its beginning, he too started again in the belief that what didn't go down properly the first time might be fully absorbed the second time around: most importantly so that he should be able to overcome the as yet

terribly repulsive aspect of the whole, the essence of which seemed to lie in the impression that every sentence kept recurring; secondly, so that, like a colt accommodating itself to the pace of his mother, he should tie himself as closely as possible to the headlong rush of the dark, galloping narrative; and lastly, so that he should be able to understand more completely its deeper significance, which was directed specifically at him, and thereby double his strength, so he might be able to join his comrades in 'the war that was raging outside'. He read through it twice more, but was forced to suspend his studies at that point as the lines were increasingly running into each other, and in any case he felt certain that if he couldn't quite 'conquer his disgust' and 'find strength' in the experience, not entirely, not just at the moment, he had nevertheless located the hidden 'import' of the little he did understand with deadly accuracy. So he put the notebook into his pocket, rubbed his arms and legs, and then desiring to master the obstinate trembling that no amount of resolution seemed able to moderate, he got up and took a walk among the washing machines, but since this was of no great obvious help in the matter, he quickly abandoned the project, made his way over to the entrance, opened the door and, raising his eyes to rooftop level, gazed into the empty space beyond. He stared into nothingness, into the strangled dawn whose soggy light did not so much flood as soak through the eastern sky, and he did not care that it signalled the beginning of a new day, but was focused on one thought: 'There is a war going on out there, and it's only worth waking to the dying night if you are prepared to be utterly ruthless'; a war—he kept scanning the rooftops—where everything is engaged in a conflict that has no rules; a war in which one side must continually besiege the other, in which to aim at anything but victory was pointless. It was a struggle in which the only power to remain standing was that which looked for no reasons, which was content to accept that the whole thing should remain without an explanation, because—and here he remembered The Prince's advice—it simply didn't exist; and thinking this he fully acknowledged for the first time the justice of Mr Eszter's contention that chaos really was the natural condition of the world and, this being eternally the case, you simply couldn't begin to predict the course of events. It's not even worth trying, thought Valuska, and wiggled his aching toes inside his cold boots; it's as pointless to predict as to judge, since even the words 'chaos' and 'outcome' are entirely redundant, there being nothing one can posit as their antitheses, which further implies that

the very act of naming is enough to put paid to them, for ‘there is simply one damned thing after another’—this was etched into their very meaning - so any connection they might appear to have with each other is wholly based on a series of confusing contradictions. He stood at the open door, gazed into the pink light of dawn, and saw for himself how everything out there actually was ‘one damned thing piled on another’: the bottom layer consisted of the intercom at the gate, the whale, the curtains at Mr Eszter’s house, the pots he carried the food in, the gun, the smoking cigar, the old woman who wasn’t able to back away, the taste of cheap brandy and the high-pitched shriek of The Prince’s voice; next came his bed at Mr Harrer’s; then the hall with its brass doorknob at the house in Wenckheim Avenue; and on top of the pile, a broadcloth coat, the dawn, these rooftops, and he himself complete with notebook in pocket; everything crushed in an enormous press, ground down, chewed up, torn to pieces by each other, everything real, everything unpredictable. It was one war, one battle, one conflict after another, a state—Valuska gazed at the crushed terrain in front of him—where each event was self-evident, and it wasn’t as if there was anything surprising about this, he could accept it all perfectly naturally, even, when to cap everything in this heap of chaos, a tank suddenly appeared accompanied by a troop of about a dozen soldiers. He had been aware of the thrumming of its engine for some minutes, but had only a brief glimpse of it as it gently brushed aside the newspaper-stall, for he immediately retreated from the doorway back amongst the washing machines, then, after taking a moment’s thought, quickly made his way to the far end of the showroom where, by pushing at a back door that was light enough for even him to open, he found himself in the shop yard. Some people might have suggested that he was frightened by the clumsy tank, but Valuska would not have believed them for an instant, for the truth was that he didn’t feel adequately prepared, and his sudden decision simply allowed him to draw breath. ‘Must gain time,’ the thought rattled round his head much as the tank rattled out there in the High Street. He had to ‘steel himself to the task’, for if he eventually succeeded in this enterprise what was there to stop him in some way taking part in the perpetual conflict out there? Some people might have suggested that now, as he was climbing over the yard gates and starting to run down a narrow alley, he was exactly like the figure described in the man’s notebook, and might have provided proof of this by pointing to his hunted expression and the exhaustion

evident in his every movement which gave him the appearance of someone utterly crushed, and he might have answered, no, not at all, these were merely appearances, he was not at all crushed and not in flight from anything, it's just that, for now, he was avoiding open conflict. Until yesterday, when he was still doing his endless rounds, he had never known —for he had never needed to know—where precisely he was at any given time, while now he was perfectly aware of his position, and therefore also of where precisely he was heading, something he calculated by taking careful stock of everything around him. In this way he emerged from the alley into a little street, which was the right decision, and this became the principle of choice thereafter, to prefer alleys and narrow streets and never to venture out on to the wider roads, indeed avoiding their very vicinity, or, if he absolutely had to cross over one, he did so in the manner of the cats that used to hang about lampposts at night, peeking out, appraising the situation, and only then slipping across. He proceeded, now creeping, now dashing, then slowing uncertainly down, prepared to stop at the slightest alarm, and even though he was always aware of his position and what he should do at the next crossroads, he had no 'ultimate destination' for he did not think he was fleeing from anything behind him, nor, most importantly, towards anything in front of him; in other words he fully accepted the paradox implied in the conclusion that his movements had direction but no aim. And he had absolutely no intention of deluding himself in this respect but accepted the necessity of all such things in so far as all such things existed in their own natural state of chaos, that is to say he too must act on necessity and do what he had to do, as he would do, just a little later, soon, in a very little while, as soon as he had had an opportunity to 'take a deep breath', gird his loins and gather his strength, the only thing to concern him being that this opportunity was continually delayed on account of always having to creep and run and slow down, which allowed him not a moment's rest. He would have refused to believe that he was being hunted, or even that he was one among many being hunted, but he had to admit that ill-luck was certainly dogging him whichever way he turned because he kept bumping into them however he tried to avoid this; he could never be free of them, sooner or later they crossed his path, and eventually he began to feel as though he was running down a labyrinth with no exit. This started in the town centre when in one half-hour he almost ran into them three times, first in Jókai Street, then Arpád Street, and finally at the junction where Forty-

Eight Avenue joins Petöfi Square. Each time he was saved by pure chance, by some deep gateway, or, in Petöfi Square, by the baker's yard, and soon he developed enough presence of mind to avoid them by ducking into the nearest convenient shelter as soon as he spotted them, thereby persuading himself that this was proof of his cool-headedness, his ability to cope without flinching as the soldiers and tanks passed by. He retraced his steps to the fork at the Korvin Passage, took a right, then made a large detour behind the law courts (and the prison), and had almost reached the safety of a web of narrow streets that extended eastwards from the meat factory when, suddenly, he once more heard the unmistakable grinding, thrumming, squealing sound of an engine near by and saw a troop of soldiers at the end of Calvin Street in front of the chemist's, and it was simply good luck and —as he had to admit with a little pride—his own improving reflexes that prevented them catching sight of him as he peeked out over the rim of an ornamental fountain at the other end. For he immediately ducked and flattened himself against it, hardly drawing breath in case they should decide to make an incursion, God knows why, down Calvin Street; then he ran as fast as his legs could carry him, uphill, through the side streets, and made his mind up to enter the old Roman town, where he hoped to shelter for a while, a strategy that seemed quite attractive until he almost collided with the iron monster at the next corner. This was the point at which he began to feel it made no difference which way he chose, the tank could read his mind and would always anticipate him, but he was unwilling to surrender to the nagging if immediate conclusion that this was a sure sign that they were pursuing him: he was not 'the man in the notebook', his 'fate wasn't sealed', nor was he, he protested, some kind of 'hunted deer' with the tank and the soldiers as his 'hunters'. No need to prove this, he thought, as he made his way back past the cemetery of the Holy Trinity; it was not as if he had any difficulty in deciding whether they were 'a real threat or merely a laughable misunderstanding', for he didn't 'hesitate occasionally' before 'a possibly familiar entrance', but simply pricked up his ears every so often to listen out for the sound of an engine and kept going, exhausted it was true, but not 'terrified' or 'resigned' and, most certainly, not like 'a hunted beast', 'helpless and forlorn'. He did, however, have to admit that it had been some time since he had made a conscious choice in the matter of his direction, and rather than nearing a place of potential rest he seemed to be getting ever further from it, and, no use denying it, there was something

disturbing in the otherwise insignificant fact that the place he seemed to be approaching was indeed the railway station, though, he thought, the similarity ended there, and so, since these contrary thoughts continued to disturb him, he decided simply to throw the notebook away, for it would surely be a serious mistake to waste any part of his remaining strength. By this time he was about a hundred yards from the station and even compared to how he had been feeling before he seemed in pretty bad shape: his boots were hurting his feet and so as to save himself any more agonizing pain, he was obliged to put most of his weight on his left leg, his chest ached every time he breathed, his head was pounding unbearably, his eyes were burning, his mouth was dry and because (who knows where and when) he had lost his postman's bag, he could no longer cling to that for comfort, so it was not surprising that, dizzy and cramped as he was, he should have thought he was imagining things or had heard a ghost when the voice of Mr Harrer whispered at his back from one of the gateways he had just passed. Harrer didn't actually say anything but made a simple noise, 'Psst! Psst!' then excitedly beckoned Valuska over, tugging him violently through the gate, and, having taken a peek out towards the station, stood there, unmoving and silent for a full half-minute or so. 'My dear friend, I cannot help you, we haven't seen each other, we haven't met, and if you're caught, you must tell them you haven't seen me or heard from me since yesterday; don't try to answer now, just nod to signal you have understood, though …' Harrer gabbled all this into his ear a little later while Valuska still thought he was obliging a ghost and it was only the smell of his breath that seemed extraordinarily familiar, he couldn't think why. 'We know exactly what you've been up to,' whispered the ghost, 'and if it were not for that good woman, Mrs Eszter, a lady, God bless her, you'd be in real trouble because your name is on the list, and that would be the end of it but for the good lady's kind heart. You have a lot to thank her for, everything, you understand me?' Valuska knew he should be nodding but as he didn't in fact understand anything he shook his head instead. 'They're looking for you! They'll hang you!! You are capable of understanding that, aren't you?' Mr Harrer had lost his temper and looked as if he desperately wanted to clear off as fast as he could. 'Listen! The good lady told me to go and find the poor unfortunate, meaning you, and though she didn't then know for sure that you were on the list, it wasn't too hard to guess you would be, since everyone knew you'd spent the whole night roaming the streets with them;

find him, she said, because if the soldiers get to him first they won't wait to hear his excuses, they'll hang him just like that. Do you undertand?!' Valuska nodded uncertainly. 'At last. Now pull yourself together and get out of here, anywhere will do, north or south …' Harrer pointed into the vague distance. 'You give them the slip, you hop to, you vanish from town, now, immediately, and be grateful to her, the lady, God bless her. Now go, be careful by the station, but follow the tracks and stick close to the trains as they're not guarding those. Understand?' Valuska nodded again. 'Good, I should hope so. Your task is to get to the tracks, I don't want to know the rest, I'm not even here, you get to the tracks and keep going, no messing about, no delay, but stick to the tracks, right? You go as far as you possibly can then take shelter in some barn or whatever, then we'll see what we can do, the good lady said.' 'Mr Harrer,' Valuska whispered, 'you don't need to worry on my account, I'm perfectly fine now … what I mean is, I know everything … I'll go right away and wait for the word … I only wanted to say that I am a little tired and could do with a rest somewhere, because …' 'What are you talking about!' the other interrupted him. 'A rest! You want to wait here with a rope around your neck? Listen! Personally, I don't care, you do as you like, we haven't seen each other, not a word about me having met you … ! Understand? Then nod! Now go!' With that the ghost slid out from under the gate, as if he had addressed that last remark to himself, and by the time Valuska was fully aware of it he had disappeared. The fact that this Mr Harrer was so unlike the Harrer he had known, and that his appearance was rather like the materialization of some unlikely spirit, was not something he should wonder at ('There is, after all, a war on …'), Valuska realized, but the memory of the whispered words, 'They'll hang him,' struck a sudden terror into him, exacerbated by his being left alone, and he was so oppressed by it that when he quit the shelter of the gate and set out for the station, he had to confess that his vigilance was nowhere near as intense as it had been, in fact it was at a dangerously low level. He felt dizzy again and swayed a few steps until the dire words ringing round his head ('They'll hang him') began to die away, then he stopped, banished the image of the reappearing tank from his mind, and concentrating solely on the rail tracks, said to himself—he couldn't say it to Mr Harrer now —'Everything will be all right.' It'll be all right, he continued, walking towards the station, because, surely, everything would work out the way Mr Harrer suggested, leaving town straight away, not for ever, but just until

order was restored, following the tracks, leaving the soldiers behind. He reached the square, which seemed to be entirely deserted, flattened himself against the wall, and examined every corner with even greater care than usual, then, having judged the moment to be right, took a deep breath and crossed the square at a run so that he could duck down the opposite street, after which he could skirt by the signal box and reach the tracks themselves. He succeeded in crossing over and was quite sure no one had seen him, but, just as he was about to run again, somewhere beside him, below him perhaps, from the very foot of the nearest wall, a weak little voice shyly addressed him ('Sir … We're here …'). There was nothing threatening in it but it was so unexpected that he instinctively leapt back into the road, and in so doing, caught his right foot on the edge of the pavement, and for a moment it seemed he would fall flat on his face. With considerable difficulty, arms waving all over the place, he managed to remain on his feet and turn round, and though he did not recognize them at first he couldn't believe his eyes when he did, thinking it was not like the meeting with Mr Harrer, these really were ghosts. The police chief's two children stood by the wall, both wearing outsize trousers that concertina-ed round their ankles and the same police tunics they had put on for his benefit on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion; now, once again, they were staring at him, saying nothing, then a sob broke from the smaller one and the elder furiously raised his hand to silence him, if only to disguise his own state of mind. It was the same police coat, the same two children, but they bore no resemblance to the two he had left in the over-heated flat yesterday night; nevertheless he went over to them, did not ask them anything but simply told them to go home. 'Now … immediately!' Immediately, Valuska repeated, and it was only the tone of his voice that told them there was no time for explanations; so saying, he took them by the shoulders and tried gently to shift them, but they resisted, refused to budge, as if they hadn't understood. The smaller one kept sniffling and bawling while the bigger one answered in a choking voice that they couldn't leave here as their father had woken them at dawn, made them put these clothes on and fired his gun at the ceiling, commanding them to wait in front of the station, shouting how everyone was a spy or a traitor, and that there was a purge going on, then slammed the door on them saying he had to defend the house as long as he was able. 'But we're so cold now,' snivelled the elder one. 'Mr Harrer was here before but he paid no attention to us, and my little brother keeps

shivering and crying and I don’t know what to do with him. We don’t want to go home, please take us with you till Dad comes to his senses!’ Valuska took a good look at the square then ran his eyes down the street, finally concentrating his gaze on the pavement at his feet. A few inches from his toes he discovered a small brown pebble around which the concrete seemed to have completely worn away, and which therefore seemed to be supported by nothing. He flicked at it with the side of his boot and the pebble rolled away, and after skipping once or twice settled on its flatter side. He didn’t bend down for it but couldn’t take his eyes off it either. ‘Where’s your bag?’ the younger one asked him, forgetting to sniff for a second, then picking up where he had left off. Valuska did not answer him but watched the pebble, then quietly said, ‘Go home,’ indicating the direction with the slightest movement of his head, and waved his hand for them to go. He himself set off in the opposite direction, no longer feeling empty but melancholy instead, turned past the signal box to tell them not to follow him and thereafter ignored them—and so the three proceeded, moving past the sleepers, one sniffing, the second tugging at him so he should not fall behind and the third, some ten steps ahead, limping on his left foot, in complete silence.

Silently they shook their heads as if confused or ashamed, their eyes cast down, as if there were something secret about the fact that they knew him, and even when they did venture a word or two (‘ … Round here? … No …’), the deep silence remained whoever he asked and, as he stood before the haberdasher’s, the thought flashed through his mind: it is because they don’t want me to know, they don’t dare honestly to admit that they are lying to me, and an impotent fury seized him because they refused even to guess where he was, which was the most frustrating thing of all; this dumb omniscience, the rejection implied by that universal pact and the averted eyes, the odd undisguised look of resentment and accusation that revealed everything except what he really wanted. He interrogated them from door to door, from pillar to post, ranging down both sides of the main road, but however he asked they said nothing and he began to feel there was a wall between them which prevented him turning left or right. It was precisely their silence that suggested he was looking in the right place, but as the numbers of those who dared venture out of their houses grew, so it became clearer that they would all refuse to answer him; he’d never be able to discover what had happened, not from them. They were all looking towards the market square, and when he reached the fire-vehicle in front of the cinema and tried talking to the firemen, they impatiently shrugged him off with hoses in their hands, and the soldiers too motioned him onwards as if directing traffic, so he eventually stopped asking people altogether since it seemed quite certain now that the man he was looking for was there, and there in some peculiarly terrible way; thinking this he pulled his coat about him and sometimes walked, sometimes ran, whichever way he was blown, past the Komló Hotel, then over the little Körös Bridge, past double rows of frightened-looking faces, as far as he could go. He didn’t make it into Kossuth Square because a new and much more hostile troop of soldiers with their backs to him closed it off from the main road, pointing their machine-guns at the square, and when he tried to sneak between them, one of the front rank turned round to say something, then, seeing it hadn’t worked, suddenly turned right round, released the safety-catch and, pushing the barrel into his chest, barked, ‘Back, old man! There’s nothing to see here!’ Eszter took a fearful step back and was about to explain what he was doing, but the soldier, suspecting some danger in his insubordination, nervously sprang into combat pose and threatened him with the machine-

gun again, growling even more menacingly (if that was possible): ‘Back! The square is closed! No one crosses it! Fuck off!’ The tone of the threat didn’t sound as though he would have a chance to say anything himself, and this display of high-alert readiness, almost at snapping point, convinced him that if he didn’t respond to the instruction and give the soldier space, one false move would result in him pulling the trigger; so he turned back towards the Körös Bridge, but having done so veered away again, since the military barricade hadn’t so much frightened him as equipped him with the kind of desperate resolve that regards an obstacle as no more than something to be essayed a second time from another direction, and then again and again until the attempt succeeds. Another direction—down the High Street, he thought agitatedly—and he began to run as fast as his legs and lungs allowed him, down by the side of the canal, skirting the square, gasping, his mind abuzz, thinking that if nothing else remained, he could break through the cordon because he now felt he had to get to the square and check for himself that his friend was not there, or perhaps discover that he was, which meant considering the worst, the most extreme, most terrifying possibility, something he couldn’t bear to think of just at that moment. He ran, or rather stumbled beside the canal and kept telling himself not to panic: discipline was the thing, the fear which clutched at his heart should not overcome him, and he knew that the way to achieve this was to do what he had done unconsciously so far, that is to say look neither left nor right but keep going straight ahead. It was true: since he had dashed from the house without either his hat or his stick and set out for town, he had been aware of the scale of vandalism outside but nothing would have persuaded him to turn and look at it, and it wasn’t so much the sight itself that frightened him—for he didn’t care about that, he was interested only in Valuska—but the thought that he might see something among the ruins that would allow him to piece together everything that had happened and therefore discover what had happened to him. He feared finding a peaked cap at the foot of some wall, a dark-blue piece of material from a postman’s cloak on the pavement, a single boot on the road or a discarded bag, its buckles undone, from which a few stray ragged magazines spilled out, like the guts of a cat that had been run over. The rest didn’t interest him, or, more accurately, he was incapable of comprehending his circumstances, if only because at a certain point Mrs Harrer’s account had ceased to hold him, and he had room in his head only for the obvious question of cause not

effect, not of what in particular had been destroyed or who had done the destroying, for any attempt to know, or even guess, what had happened in the course of the night lay beyond his already overstretched powers of concentration. He admitted that his own mental state was as nothing compared to the state of the town; he conceded that when the harm inflicted was of such a cataclysmic nature, his own siren song - the question of Valuska, where he was and what had become of him—could be of no interest to anyone else; to him though, unforgivably underprepared as he was, it was the only issue that mattered and it wholly consumed him everywhere he went: it seemed to chain him to the canal bank, it obliged him to rush along, it imprisoned him in his situation, and even if there were chinks in the bars of his prison he had no strength to look out through them. There was in fact a deeper issue at stake here, a question within the question, the burden of which he had had to drag about with him, which was what would happen if Mrs Harrer had misled him, or if her husband had made a mistake in the terrible chaos, if his herald of the dawn, through no fault of her own, was mistaken about his lodger's fate? This was something he had to come to terms with while, at the same time, continually dismissing the woman's account as practically an impossibility, for to be present at such acts of barbarity, to bear witness to such a brutal assault, actually to take part in this inhuman farce as a living spectator and still to be wandering the streets somewhere, unharmed, would be, he felt, tantamount to a miracle, or at least as unlikely as its opposite was unbearable, for it never ceased to bother him that having 'woken late' he was unable to defend his friend and might therefore have lost him for ever, and if this was the case then he, who a few hours ago had all to gain, would be left with 'absolutely nothing'. Because after a night that was as decisive in its effect on others as on him, on this morning which was to see the last act of his 'complete retirement' he really was left with nothing but Valuska, nor did he desire anything else but to have him back, though he understood that in order to achieve this he would have to behave in a more considered manner, by, for example, he thought as he clambered up to the High Street from the canal bank, overcoming his 'terrible urge to smash and break everything', regaining his self-control and not 'breaking through the cordon' by 'any act of violence'. No, he decided, he would behave quite differently henceforth; he would not demand but enquire, he would describe Valuska first, they'd identify him, then he'd ask to speak to the officer in charge, explaining to

him who Valuska was and how his whole life was proof of his innocence so they shouldn't regard him as anyone who might have been 'complicit' in anything but rather as someone who had been swallowed up by things and couldn't get out again; that they should regard him as a victim and immediately absolve him, for in his case the substantial element of any charge would either reflect a misunderstanding or indicate a falsehood; that, in short, they should give Valuska to him as a kind of 'lost property' since no one else would want to claim him—and here he'd point to himself—no one but Eszter himself. Having got so far in selecting an appropriate strategy and in his choice of words, it did not occur to him again that he would not find his friend there, so it came as a great shock when, having made contact with the group of soldiers guarding this part of Kossuth Square, and given a careful description to one of the artillerymen, the man shook his head. 'No chance, sir! There's no one answering to that description among them. This lot of rogues are all wearing fur caps. A postman's cloak? A peaked cap? No,' he waved his gun at Eszter to signal that he should go, 'there's no one of that sort here, that's for sure.' 'May I ask just one more question?' Eszter raised his hand to show that he was quite prepared to obey immediately. 'Is this the only collection point for them or … are there others?' 'All the filthy rabble are here,' growled the soldier with contempt. 'I'm pretty sure the rest have escaped or we've shot them already and they're dead.' 'Dead?' Eszter repeated dizzily, and, ignoring the command to go, set off, swaying a little, behind the line of artillery, but the men being tall as well as closely ordered, he could not see either through them or over them; so he became obsessed with the thought of finding some vantage point, and, turning off down towards the further end of the market square, he stopped in front of the smashed entrance to the 'Golden Flask' chemist's shop, where he noticed—still somewhat in sleepwalker mode—that the statue had been knocked off a nearby pedestal. The top of the base reached roughly to his stomach but at his age, and especially now that all his strength seemed to have deserted him, climbing it was a far from easy proposition; on the other hand there seemed to be no alternative if he wanted to prove to himself, as he had to, that the soldier had made a mistake and that Valuska was clearly there ('He has to be there, where else could he be?'), so he leaned against the pedestal and, after a few unsuccessful attempts, managed to get his right knee on top of it, at which point he rested, then, using his left foot, he pushed hard against the

pavement and clutched at the rim on the other side and so, having twice slid back, managed eventually and with great difficulty, to attain the top. He still felt very dizzy and naturally, because of his efforts, everything, not only the square, seemed to be covered in a kind of pulsing darkness, and it became highly doubtful whether he would succeed in staying on his feet; but then, slowly, things started to clear up … he saw the double cordon of soldiers arranged in a semicircle, and behind them, to one side, on the left, between János Karácsony Street and the burned-out church, a few Jeeps, some four or five covered trucks, and lastly, gathered in the circle, with their hands locked behind their necks, a crowd of entirely silent and immobile figures. Of course it was impossible to pick out at this distance a single figure from that dense mass of furcaps and peasant headgear but Eszter did not doubt for a second that if he was there he would find him: he would have found a needle in a haystack if that needle were Valuska … but not in this particular stack, for as soon as he started to comb through the mass of bodies he felt that his 'lost property' really wasn't there, and though the soldier's answer had been enough to disorient him, it was the last word that was the last straw; he was rooted to the spot and could do nothing but stand and stare at the crowd, knowing full well it was all a pointless exercise. He wanted to move, he wanted to climb down, but he was frightened to actually do it because the thought of going away and facing a truth he could not bear to confront was actually worse than remaining there, brooding over people whose identity was of no account to him, even when Valuska was not to be found among them. For whole minutes he stood there vacillating between staying and going, and whenever he made the slightest move to go a voice whispered, 'Don't!' but as soon as he obeyed it another one whispered, 'Do!' and he became conscious of having made a decision in the matter only once he found himself some twenty yards on from the base of the fallen statue. He had not the slightest notion, nor indeed a smidgen of control over where he was going, moreover he was quite certain that had he chosen another route, that was just as likely to lead him to Valuska; all he could do, he felt, was to do as he had done before, in other words look neither to the left nor the right but keep his eyes fixed on the ground at his feet. But what was the point? He raised his head, if only because he knew that he was bound eventually to discover that this kind of walking-as-if-blind wouldn't save him from anything; he had to prepare himself, he exhorted himself, this continual procrastination in the face of certainty did

more harm than good, and worst of all, it was ridiculous; but all his resolve came to nothing when, cutting through the crowd of Jeeps and trucks, he gave what was intended to be merely a passing glance down János Karácsony Street and saw the chaos. At the near end of the street a great pile of jackets, coats and trousers lay strewn across both pavement and road by the wrecked frontage of Wallner's tailor's shop, while a few houses on, some thirty or forty people who must have emerged from the various doorways stood in a group, encircling something he could not see; but whatever it was he immediately forgot to behave in the intended circumspect manner and he ran through the obstacle of abandoned coats, jackets and trousers, slipping and sliding, headlong, unconscious, heartbroken, as if every brake in his body had suddenly given up the ghost, not realizing that whatever he was screaming in his head could not be heard by anyone else, his despair growing when they seemed unwilling as he approached, to part, if only a little, and let him through. And, as if this were not enough, just before he reached the point when he might have been able to break through the improvised cordon, a man with a doctor's bag suddenly emerged from the crowd, a short fat man, caught Eszter's arm, stopped him and started pulling him away from the gaggle, nodding his head towards the far side as if to indicate that he had something to say to him.

Provaznyik was the doctor's name and his impromptu appearance, while unheralded, did not surprise Eszter one bit, but not for the simple reason that he lived nearby, but because it seemed to be an unmistakable sign that his most terrifying fears and apprehensions were justified; it justified his notions of what he was about to see and perfectly fitted into the picture in which a doctor's presence needed no explanation, for, after all, what else would he be doing other than the round of the streets with the soldiers, separating the wounded from those whom Mrs Harrer had earlier referred to as the victims. 'If I were you,' Provaznyik shook his head once they had attained what he judged to be a reasonable distance between themselves and the others and he had stopped, 'I wouldn't bother to look. Such sights are not for people like you, believe me …' he stated with all the objective authority of an expert who knows that the less the layman understands of such spectacles the more hysterically he tends to react, though experience

told him that the most kindly intended warning often elicited the most directly contrary behaviour. And this was precisely the case here, for Eszter was by no means deterred by his well-meant advice, quite the opposite in fact, for if there had remained in him the merest capacity for self-control, the last two sentences obliterated it and he tried to wrench himself free of the doctor's grip so as to rush directly over to the crowd and, if necessary, break through the ring by force, but since Provaznyik was not prepared to relinquish his grip quite so easily, he made a few more puny efforts to free himself then suddenly gave up the struggle, bowed his head, and asked only, 'What happened?' 'I can't tell you anything for certain yet,' the doctor answered gravely after taking a little thought, 'strangulation seems likely, or that at least is what the immediate evidence seems to indicate. The poor victim,' he relaxed his grip, and threw his arms wide in indignation, 'obviously cried out and the murderers had to stop the noise.' But Eszter was beyond hearing the end of his speech and had set out towards the crowd again, so Provaznyik, satisfied that the other had calmed down a little, no longer tried to prevent him but merely gave a wave of resignation and followed him, while Eszter, though not entirely calm, was certainly not the impetuous force he had been; he did not run and, having reached the ring, did not push anyone out of the way, but merely touched the shoulders of a few of them so that he and the doctor might be let through. People turned and drew silently aside, immediately forming a corridor he could pass down through the tight ring which immediately closed about him leaving no way out, imprisoning him like a trap, so he was forced to look at the body lying spread-eagled on the ground, its arms flung wide, the mouth open, the eyes starting from their sockets as the head lolled over the edge of the pavement into the gutter, and was obliged to meet that frightened fixed stare which was no longer in any position to betray the perpetrator of the deed, the head that could no longer speak but would appear merely to be listening, having turned to stone, like his own that could no longer tell what it found most shocking: to see and understand the significance of 'someone's life leaving the body for ever' in such a terrible way, or—though at this particular moment the thing he saw before him was more than familiar—to discover that it wasn't what he expected to find. The corpse did not have a coat, only a flannel suit and a green sweater that had become completely twisted, and, since it was impossible to know how long it had lain here, it seemed very likely that it would soon be frozen if it wasn't so

already, a matter only Provaznyik was competent to judge, and he, having avoided Eszter, was already engaged in his presumably interrupted examination, and the crowd drew closer, following the doctor's every movement, and began to mumble speculatively about whether the leg or the wrist or the neck might break if it were lifted—as if the most important question was whether the body could be transported or not. As a consequence the space in the middle shrank even further and the guardians of the corpse, two soldiers engaged in an attempt to talk to a woman who appeared incapable of speech, interrupted their interrogation and called on the bystanders to step back, or else, they warned, 'they would be made to disperse' and by the time people had grudgingly retreated, they themselves had given up trying to elicit a few inarticulate words from the witness, whose face, in any case, was almost wholly covered by the handkerchief she was sobbing into, and had also started watching Provaznyik as he gently flexed the dead one's jaw and then proceeded tenderly down the limbs. Eszter was aware of none of this, all his energy being absorbed in the effort of wrenching his eyes from the other's horrific gaze, though he could only avoid this petrifying image of death when the doctor, as he moved around the body, interposed his own form between them for a couple of minutes; from that moment on no one existed for him except Provaznyik; his eyes were practically glued to him so he shouldn't have to confront that image again, not for an instant, and because he was sure that this ad hoc coroner had not so much misunderstood as deliberately misled him before, he skirted the corpse with him and once the other got down on his haunches in order to continue the examination, he stood behind him and bellowed, 'Valuska, doctor! Tell me, have you found Valuska?!' At mention of his name the crowd suddenly stopped their mumbling, the woman cast a panicky glance at the soldiers and they glanced at each other as if this precisely had been their topic of conversation, and, while the doctor, who didn't even glance up at Eszter, shook his head (then whispered to him by way of warning, 'But from what I hear it's not a good idea to talk about that now …'), one of them took out a sheet of paper and ran his finger down the lines of writing, stabbing at it at one point, and showed it to his colleague, who then fixed his eyes on Eszter and boomed at him, 'János Valuska?' Yes,' Eszter turned to them, 'he's the one I mean, the very man,' at which they called on him to tell them everything he knew of the 'individual in question', and since he understood from this that the two soldiers would

supply the information just now denied him by Provaznyik, he replied by asking them a question (‘What I want to know is, is he alive?’), then launched into his prepared speech of complicated explanations in defence of Valuska, but didn’t get very far. They quickly let him know that he should stop right now, as, in the first place, they were the ones asking the questions round here, and, in the second place, they were not interested in ‘angelic beings, postmen’s cloaks or pots’, and if he meant to divert the attention of the authorities he was not helping himself ‘by rambling on like this’, all they wanted to know was Valuska’s whereabouts, where he was, but Eszter, misunderstanding them, replied that they could rest assured, there was no better place for the person they were seeking than his own house, at which point they lost patience, looked at each other furiously, and Eszter could see he was not likely to find an answer here either. They might note, he assured them, that his own position more or less accorded with theirs; he too thought that one had to take the greatest pains to ensure that any decision made was one that served the interests of people at large, they could certainly count on him there, but they should also understand that in order to be able to help them he should be told the truth about Valuska, and, since he could see that they were not going to say anything about this matter of such central importance to him (although it was their duty to do so) they should not be surprised that, until he received a direct answer to his question, he was not going to answer any more of theirs. The soldiers did not respond to this, they just looked at each other, then one of them nodded and said, ‘Right then, I’ll stay here,’ and his companion seized Eszter by the arm with no more than a, ‘Let’s go, old man!’ and, pushing him ahead, led him through the wall of staring faces. Eszter made no protest as he thought that this sudden turn of events meant they had bowed to his demands and accepted his ultimatum, and since his rough treatment did not change the nub of the matter he didn’t mind that it resembled the treatment meted out to prisoners; so they went some thirty or forty yards until the soldier shouted at him to turn left and he was obliged to leave Karácsony Street and head in the direction of the canal, and though he had no idea where they were going, he was happy to obey the command in the belief that wherever it was, at least ‘all would be revealed’ once they got there. They carried on marching and he had only just decided not to pursue the matter further for the time being, when, having reached the canal bank, he couldn’t resist trying again (‘At least let me know if he is alive …?!’) but his escort cut

him so rudely short he realized it would be better if he postponed his enquiries and continued in silence, until he was commanded to cross the canal by the Iron Bridge then turn down a short passageway, when he suspected that their destination must, provisionally at least, be the High Street. Where to from there, he couldn't begin to guess, since any public building would do as a prison or charnel house in an emergency, and this train of fruitless speculation only resulted in the previous image of horror returning to torture him, only this time the situation was not the foot of some wall 'amongst the rubble' but in a temporary mortuary. As he had suspected, they emerged in the High Street, at which point he decided to stop guessing and concentrate his strength on banishing such images and ordering the thoughts that whirled about them: he would go over his impressions, examine them closely, and decide what was fact and what was mere shadowy premonition, he would weigh every word, each look, every apparently insignificant detail, in case something had missed his careful scrutiny, anything that might countervail his sense of doom, in case there was something in what Mrs Harrer, Dr Provaznyik and the soldiers had said which might suggest that Valuska was simply a prisoner and that he was sitting somewhere, frightened, uncomprehending but unharmed, waiting to be set free. But whichever way he looked at it, the hope of getting his friend back in one piece lacked a little substance, for apart from Mrs Harrer's account there was nothing else to support it, and he was soon forced to admit that the words and details he conjured either cast him into the deepest doubt or—and here the corpse in the street came to mind—swept away any hope whatsoever, and, by the time they had rounded the Water Board office and turned down Town Hall Street, he was already wishing he had not undertaken the risky venture of 'ordering his thoughts', for, however he tried to avoid it, he kept coming up against the image of the corpse, which seemed to have taken on an extraordinarily personal significance. He had to identify the corpse time and time again, he had to confront the fact that while in Karácsony Street—apart from the shameful sense of relief and the sheer horror of looking on death—the knowledge of the person of the victim had led his thoughts into a far from reassuring direction: it weighed on him and frightened him, since the murderous attack, or so it seemed to him, was not directed at any random target, not at all, indeed it suggested what they might find, what he had to prepare himself for, once they had reached their destination. The ruthless act that killed that woman was rather

too close to Valuska for comfort, and even if he couldn't quite follow the reasons behind it, he felt that the fate of one must prefigure the fate of the other; he could no longer ignore the fact that the head that lolled over the edge of the pavement belonged to Mrs Plauf, and this meant that nothing could prevent him projecting the boy's image on to the stiff, brutally executed body of his mother. He couldn't explain to himself what the woman might have been doing here in the middle of the night, particularly this woman, Mrs Plauf, who, no doubt, unlike he himself, would have been aware of what was going on, a woman who, he was sure even though he did not know her well, would, like all other women in town, have been most reluctant to leave her house after dark; he couldn't understand this, nor, given the other possibility that they had broken in on her, why they should have dragged her out, it was all too strange, too mysterious why the connection between mother and son should be made so self-evident. There was nothing to justify his confidence in this but there was no question in his mind of having to justify it, as his instinct had told him so, and he was wholly captive to his instincts though he had tried in vain to pretend it was not so; he knew that the attempt to free himself from the uncertainty that tortured him had been entirely successful and that the weighing up of chances led only to the annihilation of any chance whatsoever. He no longer believed in a favourable outcome and he did not comfort himself, as they walked the last few steps, with the thought that any such consolation was to be had: he utterly resigned himself to whatever might happen and resisted any hysterical hope of resolution, and when the soldier barked at him ('Right!') he turned to command and entered the doors of the town hall like a tame and broken man; then, at the foot of some stairs, another soldier joined them and they led him upstairs where he had to wait by a door, surrounded by a ring of locals, while his escort went in then quickly returned for him, so he might usher him into an enormous hall where he was told to sit on a chair by the entrance with four other people. His escort saluted and departed when the business was done, and Eszter obediently took his place on the chair designated for him, making no attempt to look around, hanging his head as if he had no strength left to raise it, as he was feeling as ill as he had done the previous afternoon—perhaps it was the contrast between the excessive warmth inside and the biting cold outside, or the humidity; perhaps, now that he was finally sitting down, it was simply his system protesting against the long walk which had tired him out. It took

a good few minutes for this sense of weakness and dizziness to pass and for him to recover some of his strength, but once he had done so it was a mere few seconds before he realized and understood that they hadn't brought him where they were supposed to, that what waited for him was not what he had anticipated, that all his anxiety and speculation, all his hopes and despairs, had been superfluous, or at least over-hasty: this wasn't a prison, nor a mortuary; he wasn't going to get any answers only more questions, and in fact there was no point in talking any more or even in being here, since, looking round, Eszter could see that Valuska was nowhere to be seen, neither dead nor alive. Opposite him on the far side the enormous windows were covered with thick heavy curtains, and the great twilit hall with its high entrance seemed to be divided into two equal halves as if by an invisible line; the half where he was sitting by the wall was occupied by a man with a badly bruised face, somewhere in the middle, wearing a quilted jacket and rough boots; a step in front of him stood a young soldier, hands clasped behind his back (some kind of officer, as far as Eszter could tell), and behind them, in the corner, who else but his own wife, who clearly showed no interest in what was happening here and was intensely examining the other half of the hall, where there was little to be seen in the darkness, not at first glance anyway and even then only faintly, except a high-backed, ornately carved chair with its back to them, which, as far as he could remember, had served to support the dignity of every mayor since time began. Sitting immediately next to his left in the row of chairs was an astonishingly corpulent, almost preternaturally fat man, making whistling noises as he breathed as if he wanted to make the very air he was taking in that much heavier, who, taking occasional puffs of a scented cigar, would be shaken by a terrible fit of coughing now and then, when he would keep looking round for an ashtray that he couldn't find, so that eventually he would have to drop his ash on the carpet. The other three to the right of him were constantly fidgeting in their anxiety and when Eszter recognized them and greeted them quietly they replied only with curt nods, then pretended not to be the people he had met yesterday in front of the White Collar Club of the stocking factory, who then could barely bring themselves to part from him: now they turned their heads to concentrate on Mrs Eszter and the officer at the further end of the dark hall, debating in occasional whispers who should be the first if and when, as Mr Volent remarked, 'they succeed in breaking that shameless criminal' and 'the lieutenant' finally let them

speak. It wasn't too hard working out what this often repeated phrase referred to because, even if his bitter certainty that Valuska's fate had been decided had killed off any curiosity he had concerning matters in hand, his eyes too were fixed on the heavily roughed-up figure in the centre and the officer assigned to him who made no attempt to disguise his impatience, and it was clear at a glance that what annoyed his three acquaintances was indeed the 'shamelessness' of the man in the quilted jacket, for judging by this unshakeable 'shamelessness', the interrogation (it must have been an interrogation), which reminded him rather of a duel, seemed most unlikely to reach a speedy end. The 'lieutenant', who had been forced, on account of Eszter's arrival, to make a temporary halt in the proceedings until Eszter settled down after his sick spell and had also fixed his eyes on them, said nothing, but leaned forward, his face twitching, his eyes flashing threateningly, staring into the eyes of the other as if, unable to proceed any other way, he trusted in this steely penetrative gaze not merely to force his opponent to yield but to annihilate him completely. But the man didn't even flinch and stared back as if to say he would not be frightened by this, nor by anything else. If anything the look on his bruised face suggested a kind of implacable, mocking contempt for the officer, and when the officer felt he'd had enough of this and turned furiously away from him, the man responded only with the merest fleeting smile since it was clear that he had absolutely no interest in the polished insignia ranged across the officer's chest, in the annihilating power of his 'steely' gaze, nor in what, in his frustration, he had resolved to do: that is to say in whether the officer could cope with him personally or whether (and judging by the state of his face, thought Eszter, it wouldn't have been the first time he had chosen this alternative) he was sent to be dealt with by others who had so far failed to soften him up with any amount of beating, who might, after all, persuade him to confess by—here Volent's voice drifted into Eszter's consciousness—'breaking the man's dumb resistance'. The officer took a step back and finally burst out, bellowing at his prisoner ('Why don't you open your gob?!'), while the other spat at him, 'I told you. Give me a loaded gun, empty the room and I'll talk all right …' then shrugged as if to say, 'I'm not about to start bargaining with you,' and that was all, but it was enough to suggest what had been happening before Eszter arrived, the aim of the duel being to get the man in the quilted jacket to speak and reveal what it was everyone by the wall, even though they were themselves dying to speak, was longing to

hear. There was something they wanted to know about the night's events from this man, who was probably chosen entirely at the whim of the soldiers from among the 'filthy rabble' in the market square; they wanted details, they wanted precisely what the lieutenant himself, after his affirmative answer to the condition proposed ('Then drop dead all by yourself'), demanded—'facts, circumstances, precise details'—so that, all this being given, they might be able to put together a picture of events that was thoroughgoing, universally applicable and generally reassuring for everyone, soldiers and citizens alike. Eszter, on the other hand, wanted to know nothing of this, or indeed of anything, since he was convinced that all such 'facts, circumstances and details', however good, could, in the worst eventuality, do nothing more than skirt around the question of Valuska and certainly would not lead to him, so he would just as soon have blocked his ears when the two parties, having decided to satisfy the conditions of the proposal, started a tense but fast question and answer session in which the officer snapped out the questions and the prisoner replied with deliberately provocative, impertinent and inhumanly cold answers, a dialogue that after the long silence that preceded it, appeared remarkably slick and polished.

Name?

What's that to you?

Tell me your name!

Forget my name.

Place of residence?

You don't want my mother's name by any chance?

Answer the question I asked you.

Drop it, redshank.

It's not me you are insulting, but the authorities.

Fuck the authorities.

We agreed that you should answer, but if you go on like this I'm not giving you a gun, I shall have your tongue cut out instead. I'm not joking. Stand up straight. What objective did you have in coming to town?

To have a good time. I like circuses. I've always liked them.

Who is The Prince?

I don't know any princes. I don't know anyone.

Don’t lie to me.

Why not?

Because it’s a waste of time. I’ve met people like you before.

Well, if you say so. Let’s go on. Is that gun in your holster the one you’re going to give me?

No. Did The Prince tell you to shoot yourselves in the head if the rebellion was put down?

The Prince never commands.

Then what did he do?

What do you mean? It’s nothing to do with you.

Answer me.

Why? You wouldn’t understand anything anyway.

I’d like to warn you that you will not be able to irritate me however hard you try. When did you first begin to follow the fate of the circus?

I don’t give a shit for your warning.

When did you first see The Prince?

I only saw his face once. They always wrap him in a fur coat when they bring him out of the truck for us.

Why do they have to wrap him up?

Because he’s cold.

You said you saw his face once. Describe it!

Describe it! You are not just an idiot, you bore me.

Where is his third eye? At the back? On his brow?

Why don’t you bring him here, if you dare. Then I’ll show you.

Why should I be afraid of him? Do you think he’ll turn me into a frog?

What’s the point, you’re already a toad.

I might change my mind and dash your brains out on the floor.

Try it, redshank.

Just you wait. At what time did The Prince emerge from the truck yesterday?

What time? I'm telling you, you don't understand anything.

Did you personally hear what he said?

Only those who were standing close to him heard him.

Then how do you know what he said?

The general factotum understands him. He always interprets nice and loud.

What did he say yesterday evening, for example?

That toads like you are no use to anyone.

He commanded you to 'tear down everything'. Correct?

The Prince never commands.

He said, 'Build a new world upon the ruins!' Correct?

You're pretty well informed, redshank.

What does it mean? Explain it to me: build a new world upon the ruins.

Explain it to you? Pointless.

All right. What's your job? You don't look like a tramp.

Why? Do you think you look any better? What are those baubles on your chest? I wouldn't go round dressed like that.

I asked you what your job was.

I dug the soil for you lot.

You're not a peasant.

No, but you are.

You speak as if you had some education.

You're on the wrong trail. You really are a small-time operator.

It's all the same to you if I shoot you like some filthy stray dog then?

Brilliant guesswork.

Why?

Because I don't want to dig soil for you any more.

What do you mean by that?

You're an earth shifter yourself. Like a bloody earth-worm. You dig and dig—and you enjoy it too. Not me.

Is that some kind of code you're talking in?

Sure. I'm an educated man, remember? Yes, code …

Answer me: when they put The Prince back in the truck you all left the square. Under whose orders? Describe them. Who told you what to do? When you got to the post office, whose idea was it that you should split into smaller groups?

What an imaginaton you have!

Give me the name of the man in command.

We only have one leader. And you'll not catch him.

How do you know he has escaped? Did he tell you? Did he tell you where?

You will never catch him!

Is The Prince some devil out of hell?

Oh, it's not as simple as that. He's flesh and blood, but his flesh and blood are different.

If nothing matters to you, explain to me how he got you all under his spell? Does your Prince exist at all? Why attack the town? Why did you come here? To lay it waste? With your bare hands? What do you want? I don't understand you.

I can't answer so many questions at once.

Then tell me this: were you involved in the murders?

Yes. But not enough.

What?

I told you. Not enough.

You killed a child at the station and I am asking you, not as your interrogator but as man to man: is there nothing sacred to you?

Man to man, I'll tell you: nothing. When are you going to give me that gun?

I think I'd rather wring your neck. Very slowly.

I had nothing to do with the child. But go on, wring it.

Are all those people in the square, those hundreds, are they all like you?

How should I know?

I feel like vomiting.

You seem to have lost your patience after all. Why is your whole face twitching? Where's your military discipline?

Stand to attention!

I already am. You've handcuffed me, I've got an itchy nose.

Interrogation over. I'll hand you over to the military tribunal! Get over to the door!

You said you'd give me a gun.

To the door with you!!!

A smart soldier boy like you, and a liar. Military tribunal. Where are you? Hasn't anybody told you nothing's working? Military tribunal indeed.

I told you. Move. To the door!

You've gone really red. Redshank. The name fits. But I don't give a shit. See you, redshank.

Two soldiers stood in the doorway and when the man in the quilted jacket reached them they grabbed his arm, dragged him from the hall and shut the door behind them. One could still hear them as they started down the stairs, then everything fell silent, the lieutenant adjusted his tunic and the rest watched him wondering whether he'd regain control of his temper. It wasn't clear who precisely was counting on what, but in any case it seemed that those in the hall—all, with one exception—were waiting for the lieutenant to make a remark addressed individually to them, something that, unlike the depravity of the man in the quilted jacket, might have the effect of drawing them together and in response to which they might be able to give voice to their own sense of outrage. The one exception was Eszter, for the effect of the interrogation was quite different on him; what he discovered from the man with his wrists handcuffed behind his back, in the course of cross-questioning, did not infuriate him but left him in an even more advanced state of apathy than before, for it confirmed his worst fears that Valuska, having got mixed up with people like this, would certainly not have survived to tell the tale. It wasn't simply that he no longer wanted to explain anything himself, he wouldn't have had the strength to do it; he couldn't even raise enough energy to contribute to the furious muttering that ensued once the lieutenant had calmed down and neglected to address some 'individual remarks'—any remark that might have elicited a

vehement display of communal emotion—to those by the wall, who were desperately anxious to express a view, for it was all the same to Eszter if ‘the man was an absolute scoundrel’; he didn’t care whether ‘such people could be killed with guns at all’; and when his nearest neighbour, Mr Volent, clearly expecting some form of approval, whispered to him, ‘Death is too good for him, don’t you think, the godless swine?’ he responded to his friendly overture with the merest nod and continued sitting immobile, a silent interloper in the chorus of whisperers, who persisted in staring straight ahead of him with a deeply troubled expression on his face even after the rest had suddenly fallen silent. The door opened but he did not hear it, someone quietly swept before him but he did not raise his head, nor did he notice it when the lieutenant called one of those sitting by the wall into the middle of the room, and, when he finally looked up, he was almost surprised to find his fat neighbour standing in the place formerly occupied by the prisoner, and, somewhere in a corner at the back, to discover Harrer, who seemed to be feverishly relating something to Mrs Eszter; Eszter, however, showed no sign of surprise and this sudden change in the cast of actors failed entirely to rouse him from his state of indifference, so he did not see any particular significance in the fact that Harrer—once the woman had left him in the corner and went over to approach the lieutenant, presumably in order to convey a piece of useful information—first winked at him then clearly tried to communicate something to him with a few reassuring hand gestures. He had no idea what was going on, nor what all this winking and ever more public form of gesturing from the opposite corner might mean, but whatever it was intended to signify left him utterly cold, and much to Harrer’s obvious annoyance, he turned his head away. He gazed at the officer who kept giving tiny nods as he listened to Mrs Eszter’s message, but what the subject of the conversation was remained a mystery until the lieutenant rewarded the whispered account with a confidential look and, interrupting the hardly begun interrogation of the new witness, turned on his heels, marched over to the presidential chair and, standing to attention, spoke: ‘Colonel, sir! The man we dispatched has returned. He says the chief of police remains in his flat, but is still under the influence of alcohol, not sober enough to produce’. ‘What was that!’ a furious voice snapped back, as if its owner had been rudely roused from a state of deep contemplation. ‘He’s pissed as a newt, sir. The policeman we were looking for is drunk and unconscious and no one can wake him.’ Eszter strained his

eyes for a while, trying to penetrate the general gloom which was particularly thick on the far side of the hall, but in vain; it was impossible to see anyone from where he was sat and had been sitting since his arrival, nevertheless, knowing that the chair, which was surely intended for giants, must be occupied by somebody hidden behind its high back, he did eventually locate a hand in the darkness just as it was slowly descending to the chair's ornately carved right arm. 'What a dump!' the voice crackled out again. 'One gets smashed out of his head, another is shit scared and stays at home indoors and won't come over even with an escort. What do you think we should do with these gutless bastards?!' 'One must draw the appropriate conclusions, colonel, sir!' 'Correct! Clip a pair of handcuffs on them both and get them round here on the double!' 'Yessir!' The lieutenant clicked his heels together, then, passing the order on to the two soldiers outside, added, 'Should I continue the interrogation, sir?' 'By all means, Géza, my boy, by all means …' came the answer, in a tone that, to Eszter, suggested a kind of listless intimacy: the invisible occupant of the chair recognized the necessity of correct procedure but wished at the same time to imply that he found it personally distressing that his lieutenant should be saddled with tasks so clearly below his station. How far he was right or mistaken in indirectly attributing this state of mind to the colonel, Eszter—who, for the first time, had regained the trace of a capacity to transcend his own depressed state of mind—learned only much later, because for the time being, when he started to examine the mysterious circumstances he seemed to be faced with as best he could, all he could discover was that beside the chair in the middle of the bare hall, which served not only as the seat of the man who appeared to want to remain in the background while having overall charge of interrogations and possibly of all military operations, there was also an enormous gilt-framed picture that practically covered the dark-green hangings of the notable hall, showing a battle appropriate to the historical dignity of the place. This was all, and no more, that he could make note of in that first minute, and even these impressions appeared as uncertain hypotheses rather than facts, though any further questions regarding this particular leader of the army of liberation, questions regarding the exclusion of light, for instance ('Possibly reasons of security …?'), like why, if they drew the curtains, did they not switch on the two chandeliers that dangled from the ceiling, or what the lieutenant-colonel in the chair, with his back to people but facing the historical scene in the

painting, was actually doing in this darkened temporary HQ, did not lie in his immediate power to answer, if only because at that point Harrer sneaked over to him from the far corner, sat down in the recently occupied chair, and, now that the lieutenant had returned, acted as if he were interested only in the newly commenced interrogation of Eszter's ex-neighbour, never taking his eyes off them, but cleared his throat and tried to tell him that he had moved closer only so that he might succeed in informing him of something that all his winks and hand gestures had failed to convey earlier. 'Everything is all right with him—you know who I mean,' Harrer whispered, eyes still fixed on the lieutenant; everyone's attention, including the three men watching beside him, as well as the officer himself, was fully focused on events in the centre of the room. 'But not a word, professor! You know nothing! If they ask you tell them you have seen neither hide nor hair of him since yesterday! You understand?' 'No,' Eszter looked up at him. 'What are you talking about?' 'Don't turn to me!' Harrer warned him, hardly able to disguise his anxiety that he might have to name the individual concerned, and repeated as if explaining the matter to a child: 'Him! I found him at the station, I told him which direction to take in order to escape, he should be miles away by now, all you have to do is deny everything if asked!' he gabbled, and when, glancing up at Volent, he noticed that the rest seemed to be aware of the whispering, he added simply, 'Everything!' Eszter stared uncomprehendingly before him ('What's there to deny … ? What … him?'), then, suddenly, a hot flush shot through him, his head snapped to attention and, not giving a fig for Harrer's firm injunction but suppressing an outright cry, he burst out, loudly enough for every eye to be turned on him, 'Is he alive?!' The other grinned confusedly under the lieutenant's furious gaze, and spread his arms apologetically as if to shift the responsibility, intending to imply that he could not be held responsible for what the man sitting next to him cared to do, but the increasingly desperate smile he presented to the officer only made the latter more angry, and it even seemed likely that he would not let the matter rest there, so Harrer thought it advisable to get up immediately and, in order not to disturb the interrogation with the sound of his shoes, to tiptoe carefully back into his corner behind Mrs Eszter, who never once took her eyes off her husband. Eszter would have loved to follow him, but when he leapt up to do so, the lieutenant barked at him ('Silence!'), so he was compelled to sit down again and—having thought through the matter at lightning speed—

quickly realized that there was no point in throwing questions at Harrer, since he would only repeat what he had already said in that roundabout way of his. He didn't need to hear it again, it was as clear as day now what was meant by 'Him', the 'station' and by the expression he was 'miles away by now', but the fear of disappointment warned him to remain calm and not to allow the meaning of the words to enter directly into his consciousness; he sipped at them, carefully, and concluded that he should investigate the reliability of the information as thoroughly as he could, but then the news broke through the shaky barriers of his scepticism and more or less swept all his fears away, so he abandoned all thought of investigating the truth of Harrer's story. Because what he had heard brought Mrs Harrer's account to mind and in that moment he knew that the story must be true in every detail; the present report validated what he had heard at dawn and that, in turn, validated the present without a shadow of doubt as far as he was concerned, and, as in a single flash, he saw Harrer on his way to the station, speaking to Valuska, then saw his friend beyond the town's precincts, and suddenly he felt an extraordinary sense of relief, as if an enormous weight had been removed from his shoulders, a weight he had carried from the moment he set foot outside his house in Wenckheim Avenue. What he felt was indeed relief and, at the same time, some entirely new excitement seized him, for, having thought the matter through, he quickly realized that the chance, or rather, misunderstanding, that had brought him here could not have brought him to a better place, for he was precisely where he might settle the affair of his friend, where, if some kind of charge had really been mistakenly levelled at Valuska, he could persuade the authorities to drop it. Not a trace remained in him of his previous helplessness and despair, in fact he was running a little ahead of the tasks that confronted him, but when he started to get lost in the details of Valuska's return he pulled himself up, reminded himself of the need for sobriety and concentrated entirely on the effort to catch up with events in the hall and follow the course of the interrogation in the middle, since he had concluded that the best way of putting together a clear picture of all that had happened was by assembling information from the various witnesses and drawing the appropriate conclusion. He completely shut out everything else and, after a few sentences, it became obvious to him, as to everyone else, that the current witness, the enormous man who had been his neighbour, was none other than the circus manager, or rather the director, as the man, who reminded

Eszter of some Balkan landowner, kept delicately pointing out to the lieutenant in his own highly courteous manner, if only because the lieutenant, who held some documents in his hand at which he glanced from time to time, insisted in using the language of the ‘work permit’ by referring to him, despite every attempt to correct the term, as simply ‘the head of the company’, that is to say whenever he managed to interject a question in the endless stream of words issuing from the mouth of the witness. However he tried though, however frequently he commanded the man to ‘answer only the question put before you’, he did not seem to be having much success and looked ever more exhausted in the process, and as for stopping his flow, that was impossible, for the director, while acknowledging each warning with a slight bow and an ‘of course, naturally’, was not to be shifted for a moment, and not only picked up each sentence precisely at the point where he was impatiently interrupted but never once lost the thread of the argument he had been pursuing, talking ever more loudly as if with the purpose of addressing the far end of the hall, stressing and restressing the importance of ‘helping the officers present to a clearer understanding of the principles of art, and particularly the art of the circus’. He talked of the nature of art, and the thousands of years of neglect that led to misconceptions about the liberties that should be accorded to it (‘as in our case!’), drawing a wide circle with the dead cigar between his fingers as he explained that the unexpected, the shocking, the extraordinary had been one inevitable aspect of great art, just as much as the audience’s ‘unreadiness’ and ‘unpredictability’ in the face of revolutionary artistic change, and how the exceptional nature of theatrical production (he nodded as he spoke to the lieutenant who was again trying to interrupt him) was bound to confront the ignorance of the public, from which it clearly does not follow that, as some earlier witnesses had appeared to insist, the creator who strives to enrich the world with ever newer inventions should make any allowance for this ignorance, for the reason that—and here the director referred to his long years of experience, for if he could say anything at all with confidence it was this—that, beside its own ignorance, the public prized nothing so much as novelty, the greater the novelty the better, and the thing they treated in such a whimsical fashion was the very thing they most voraciously demanded. He said that he felt he was among people to whom he could speak his mind freely, so, while sticking closely to the lieutenant’s question, he just needed to say something, a single sentence, no more, that might

seem unrelated: however difficult it was for him to do so, he had to admit, that in the aforementioned conflict between the liberating artist and the lack of preparedness of those at whom his work was directed, and he didn't want to sound alarmist about this, there wasn't very much hope of a satisfactory resolution, for it was 'as if the Creator had set them in amber for ever', the general public were frozen in their attitude of unreadiness, and so whoever put his faith in the power of an extraordinary spectacle was bound to come to a sad end. A sad end, repeated the director in ringing tones, and if the lieutenant—and here he dipped his cigar respectfully in the direction of the officer—were asking him whether he regarded the work of his humble, but highly committed, colleagues, as well as himself, as heroic or ridiculous in the circumstances, he would prefer, and no doubt they would understand this, not to express an opinion, or at any rate he believed that in the light of the tensions he had revealed and the supplementary point he had just made there was really not much more to explain, being certain that the clear innocence of his company in the matter of the regrettable incidents of the previous night was something he had concisely but firmly, even loudly, to state—if only because of the testimony of the local population, whose accusations demonstrated their narrow outlook—though he knew that he was wasting his breath because as soon as he opened his mouth he would be told to shut up. Perhaps he might begin—he lit what remained of his cigar—by saying that his production was concerned with the art of the circus, nothing else, so the first part of the accusation, that every attraction, every item on the bill, was merely a front, was patently false, and that he, the director of their common creative endeavour and their spiritual father, never had, nor ever would have, any ambition beyond confronting the ever growing audience with 'the phenomenon of an extraordinary being', and as concerned himself—if they would allow him a bitter if amusing turn of phrase—this was quite enough to be getting on with. And if this first charge was so lacking in logic, how much more was it the case with the second, according to which, as he understood from the words of hysterical local people at the outset of the interrogations, the member of his company known as 'The Prince'—he blew out smoke and waved it away before the lieutenant's face—was supposed to be the chief agitator behind the recent riots, which was not only impossible but, if he might be permitted to say so, perfectly ridiculous, if only because the accusation was directed precisely against the one figure who, because he had wholly identified with his

controversial role even within the company itself, had most to fear from such violent developments, and who, once he saw that the director's anxiety was justified, that the public was mistaking his stage role for reality and was therefore becoming susceptible to inflammatory rhetoric, was so terrified that, contrary to all reasonable argument, far from assuming leadership, he feared the passions of the crowd might be turned on him, and so contrived, with the assistance of his colleagues, to escape as soon as the violence began. After all this, the director said, as he put his hand behind his back, obliged to flick his ash on the floor again, the conductors of these interrogations, whom he deeply respected, might very well think that the subject was closed, it being clear as daylight that the accusations levelled against the circus were false; the over-excited performers should try to calm down and go back to what they knew best, their craft, and as concerned the rest, the investigation of the events and the apportioning of guilt, these were best left to those people best equipped to carry it out—to whose authority he naturally bowed and who he would in all respects obey, though, at the same time, his conscience obliged him to reveal everything and so, deeply affected as he was by all that had happened, he would like, by way of farewell, to make a decisive contribution to the undoubted success of the enquiry. He wanted to say something about those twenty or thirty hardened hooligans, one of whom, to the astonishment of them all, they had just been able to observe from close quarters; no more than twenty or thirty desperate scoundrels who, ever since the start of their tour of the southern lowlands, had insinuated themselves into the audience at every step, from village to village, from performance to performance, and tried their uttermost to invest each and every appearance of the company with danger. These people exploited the up to now reasonable travelling support of the company, a reasonable support which yesterday night lost all vestiges of control because their imaginations had been inflamed, their susceptibilities and credulity stretched beyond all measure, by the rumours then put about —indeed, still being put about—that 'our excellent colleague' was not acting the role of a prince but really was one, a kind of 'prince of darkness'—the director smiled piteously at the expression—who strode about the world like an avenging judge and accepted the offer of his recruits to act as executives of his justice, as if that man, said he, raising his arms heavenward in indignation, blessed with all the gifts of his profession and yet, and here he slowly lowered his arms, subtly shifting the nature of his

indignation, ‘stricken as he was with terrible physical handicaps, wholly dependent on others to provide him with the bare necessities of life and utterly helpless otherwise’ might have been capable of such a thing! This will be enough to convince you, said he, giving the lieutenant a hard stare, how base, how cynical, how hideously depraved this gang is, who, as we have heard said before, really do hold ‘nothing sacred’, a fact with which he, as director, had been all too familiar from the beginning of the tour, for every place they performed he had been careful to request the local authorities for assistance in order to ensure that the evening should pass without incident. And everywhere they went they had been granted this, so, naturally, he requested it here too; his first stop, as always, had been the police station, but at the time the authorization guaranteeing the security of his artistes—indeed of art itself—was granted him by the chief officer, he had no idea he was facing a man incapable of discharging his duties. He was deeply disappointed by this, he said, quite astonished, since there were only twenty or thirty rogues to manage, and here he stood now, his company broken up, his terrified colleagues ‘scattered about the world’, and he had no idea who would compensate him for the material, but, above all, psychological, losses he had had to suffer as a result. Of course, he protested, he understood that this was not the moment for the addressing of personal grievances, nevertheless, until his turn came round, as, he was sure, it quickly would, he would like to remain in town if they would grant him the permission, and in the meantime he simply asked that the investigating officers should deal ruthlessly with the offenders, and, in that hope, he would now take his leave, passing the officer the copy of the official authorization should he have any use for it, willing to offer any feeble assistance he could in order to help them clear up the matter and uncover the truly guilty men. His speech really finished at last, the director produced a piece of paper from an inner pocket of his fur coat, and handed the ‘performance permit’ over to the helpless officer, who could barely stand on his feet for exhaustion, then, holding the freshly extinguished cigar at some distance from him, he gave a curt nod to the far end of the hall and the assembled witnesses and marched through the door, briefly turning round in the doorway to add, ‘I am staying at the Komló Hotel’, and left interrogators and interrogatees equally dumb and looking like a defeated army in the wake of an all-conquering horde. Harrer, Volent, everyone was in the same condition—not so much convinced as flattened by the sheer

weight of the director's rolling, irresistible cadences, by the combined force of something that comprised statements, arguments, pleas and revelations, in fact so utterly buried were they under it they needed someone to come along and dig them out, and it was not surprising that it took them some time before they recovered all their faculties and the numbness slowly drained from them; before the lieutenant, wounded and furious, set out to pursue the orator who had taken charge of his own fate, but glanced at the document in his hand and stopped again while Mrs Eszter and Harrer merely stared at one another; before Volent and his companions, who seemed to have turned into living statues while listening to the protestations, pulled incredulous faces, waved their arms and started speaking all together at once. Eszter remained aloof from the general hubbub which did at least reveal the state of everyone's mind, for it was far from him to pass any judgement on anything, he was merely learning, taking things in, as if the speech and the reaction to it were of equal importance, nevertheless it seemed advisable to tender his request in a manner appropriate to the mood of the investigation committee and, especially, to try to judge the state of mind of the man who seemed most likely to make the decision regarding Valuska in the light of the director's statement and the passions aroused by it. But this was easier said than done, for when the lieutenant, clearly undecided, went over to his chief, clicked his heels and asked, 'Should I have him brought back, sir?' the latter responded merely with a regretful wave of his hand which signified either utter indifference or bitter resignation; then, after a long silence, in a voice that, this time, sounded unmistakably bitter, added, 'Tell me, Géza, my boy, have you had a really good look at this picture?' in response to which the officer, to cover up his confusion, replied in ringing tones, 'Beg to report, no, sir!' 'Then be so good as to observe,' the wistful voice continued, 'the order of battle at the top, there in the right-hand corner. Artillery, cavalry, infantry. This,' he cried suddenly, 'is not a rout led by impudent hoodlums, but the art of war!' 'Yessir!' 'Look at the hussars there in the middle, and there, you see them? The regiment of dragoons splits into two in a pincer movement and surrounds them! Note the general, there on the hill, and the troops there, on the field, and you will observe the difference between a filthy little sty and a war!' 'Yessir! I will conclude the interrogations at once.' 'Please don't bother, lieutenant! I can't bring myself to listen to any more screeching, to any more ridiculous nonsense, in this filthy hole! How

many are left?' 'I shall be quick, sir!' 'Do hurry, Géza, my boy,' the other excused him in the most melancholy manner, 'Do get on with it!' Even now only his hand was visible, but by this time Eszter was quite certain what he was doing: as the highest-ranking officer present, he was obliged to sit through the entire interrogation, and being impatient, Eszter decided, he was clearly finding consolation by surveying the nobly painted scene in a half-light that soothed him, while remaining keenly aware that the turn of events that had brought him here was somehow unfair, in which case, thought Eszter, it would be better if his own request were framed concisely, condensed into two or three sentences, and that if it were so framed it would find favour. It wasn't his fault that things didn't work out like this, that no amount of circumspection would have elicited a sympathetic hearing, for the three men before him quickly destroyed any hopes he might have harboured by obeying the lieutenant's invitation and launching into speeches of their own. The very first words they spoke about how they would like 'to shed new light on the matter' brought a twitch to the officer's face as he glanced towards the presidential chair, and so they continued by 'refuting utterly the slanderous allegations against a town in mourning, allegations made by the man who had himself been responsible for the shameful events'. There was no question but that the circus and its claque comprised an indivisible whole and there wasn't enough water in the world (screamed Mr Mádai) to wash this filthy band and its crew of bandits clean; it was wicked and pointless trying to fill people's heads with the 'whaler's' protestations of innocence because there was no fooling these old grey heads, they'd been around a bit, they were made of sterner stuff and could see through 'a threadbare tissue of lies'. It was a lie, they clamoured over the lieutenant's forlorn orders (the lieutenant suspected the worst), that they should rely wholly on the facts, a lie, they cut across each other, that this terrible catastrophe was caused by a few disruptive elements in the crowd, since it was clearer than daylight who had launched this infernal attack in the name of the last judgement. Because, in the final analysis, they protested more mysteriously, it was the most awful hogwash to assert that the 'wicked sorcerer' played no part in all this (though in the vehemence of their protestations they failed to notice that the occupant of the presidential chair had abandoned his earlier invisibility, stood up and started to stride menacingly towards them) for, in the final analysis, they continued, everyone knew that it wasn't 'twenty or thirty hooligans' but the devil's

own chosen who had stormed the defenceless town, and that there had been countless signs and portents of this in the preceding months. As to details, why, they had plenty of details ‘of water-towers brought down by distant influence, of church clocks that had been stopped for centuries suddenly and spontaneously starting to move again, of trees uprooted all over the district’, announcing in the meantime that they, at least, ‘were ready to do battle with satanic powers’ and offering ‘the support of their weak arms to the regular forces of law and order’. But at this point they ran out of time for the leader of the aforementioned regular forces reached them and bellowed at them with a clarity that even Mr Mádai could understand: ‘Enough of this, you blasted fools! How long, do you think,’ he bent over the retreating and terrified figure of Mr Nadabán, ‘can I bear to put up with this claptrap! Who are you to play havoc with my patience! Ever since dawn I have had to listen to nothing but retarded babble, and you think you can carry on like this with impunity?! To me, who the day before yesterday in Telekgerendas locked every shithead fool up in the asylum?! You think I’ll make an exception of you?! Don’t delude yourselves, I’ll have the whole stinking place behind bars, this filthy hole where every godforsaken idiot behaves as if he were the centre and keeper of the universe, God blast him! Catastrophe! Of course! Last judgement! Horseshit! It’s you that are the catastrophe, you’re the bloody last judgement, your feet don’t even touch the ground, you bunch of sleepwalkers. I wish you were dead, the lot of you. Let’s make a bet,’ and here he shook Nadabán by the shoulders, ‘that you don’t even know what I’m talking about!! Because you don’t *talk,* you “whisper” or “expostulate”; you don’t *walk* down the street but “proceed feverishly”; you don’t *enter* a place but “cross its threshold”, you don’t feel *cold* or *hot,* but “find yourselves shivering” or “feeling the sweat pour down you”! I haven’t heard a straight word for hours, you can only mew and caterwaul; because if a hooligan throws a brick through your window you invoke the last judgement, because your brains are addled and filled up with steam, because if someone sticks your nose in shit all you do is sniff, stare and cry “sorcery!” What would really be sorcery, you degenerates, is if someone were to wake you up and you realized that you lived not on the moon but in Hungary, with north at the top and south at the bottom, in a place where Monday is the first day of the week and January the first month of the year! You haven’t the faintest notion of anything, you couldn’t tell a trench mortar from three stacks of air-rifles but go wittering

on about “the cataclysm that signals the end of the world”, or some other garbage, and think I have nothing better to do than tramp the roads between Csongrád and Vesztö with two hundred professional soldiers to defend you from a bunch of yobs!!! Look at this specimen,’ said he to the lieutenant, indicating Mr Volent, then pushing his face right into that of his victim. ‘What year is this, eh?! What is the name of the prime minister?! Is the Danube navigable?! Look at him,’ he looked round to the lieutenant, ‘he hasn’t a clue! And they’re all like him, the whole lousy town, this whole leper colony is full of them! Géza, my boy,’ he called, his voice turning indifferent and bitter, ‘drag the circus truck out to the station, pass the matter over to the military tribunal, leave four or five detachments in the square and get rid of these delicate souls, because I just … I just want to be through with it!!!’ The three worthies stood before him as if a bolt from hell had scored a direct hit on them, not breathing, unable to speak a word, and when the colonel turned away they were incapable of moving a muscle; under the circumstances it wasn’t too hard to see that without some outside help none of them could understand what they should do, so the lieutenant pointed decisively at the door and ushered them out of it double quick as if that was all the help they needed and they would somehow make their way home by themselves. Not Eszter though, whose hopes of a favourable hearing had been dashed by the colonel’s unexpected outburst; he didn’t know what to do, to stand or sit, to stay or go. He remained indifferent to anything except the best way of exonerating Valuska, but after all that had happened even a crisp, precise formulation seemed singularly unpromising, so he sat there like someone about to get up and watched as the thick-set, red-faced colonel pulled at his military moustache and, with his exhausted lieutenant in tow, retreated in a huff to the corner where Mrs Eszter stood waiting. There was not a crease in his uniform in that vast hall, and his whole being seemed somehow ironed out, both without and within; his decisive stride, his ramrod-straight back, his obscene but direct manner of speaking combined to produce this effect, this ideal, and he was satisfied with the result as was patently clear from the sound of his voice, that crackling, snappish instrument made to command, with which he now addressed Mrs Eszter. ‘Tell me, madam, how a practical sober woman like you could stand this year after year?’ The question required no answer but you could see that Mrs Eszter, who raised her eyes to the ceiling as if contemplating one, did after all want to say something, something that was

fated not to be said because the colonel at this point happened to glance in the direction of the far wall and saw that one of the witnesses had in scandalous fashion succeeded in remaining there, and, with clouded brow, he bellowed at his lieutenant: ‘I told you to get rid of everyone!’ ‘I’d like to make a statement concerning János Valuska,’ said Eszter, rising from his seat, and seeing that the colonel had turned away and crossed his arms, condensed all he had to say in a single sentence, stating quietly: ‘He is wholly innocent.’ ‘What do we know about him?’ the colonel barked impatiently. ‘Was he one of them?’ ‘According to the unanimous testimony of the witnesses, he was,’ the lieutenant answered. ‘He’s still at liberty.’ ‘Military tribunal for him then!’ the colonel retorted, but before he could regard the matter as finished and continue his conversation, Mrs Eszter cut in. ‘Allow me to make a brief comment, colonel.’ ‘My dear lady, you know that you are the only person in this place whose voice I am happy to hear. Excepting my own, of course,’ he added with the most fleeting of smiles to acknowledge the joke, but joined in the loud and raucous laughter that followed and echoed round the walls, as if to signify the company’s astonishment that he, who was the complete master of the situation, should be so eminently capable of dazzling them with not only his self-control but —remarkably—his wit. ‘The person in question,’ said Mrs Eszter, once the laughter had died away, ‘is not accountable’. ‘What do you mean, madam?’ ‘I mean he is mentally deficient.’ ‘In that case,’ the colonel shrugged, ‘I’ll lock him up in the asylum. At least there’s someone I can lock up …’ he added, twirling his moustache with a suppressed smile, thereby alerting the company to the irresistible punchline of another marvellous joke, ‘… though the whole town belongs in the loony-bin …’ Laughter was certain to erupt at this point, and so it did, and as Eszter gazed at them, particularly noting his wife, who had not cast a glance at him, he understood that everything had been decided, that he had no means of persuading the humorous company to a more appropriate evaluation of the facts, so the best thing for him to do was to leave the room and go home. ‘Valuska is alive, that is all that matters …’ he thought and stepped through the door, cutting through the group of locals and military hanging about the entrance, descending the stairs with the fading echo of Mrs Eszter’s and the colonel’s competing gales of laughter in his ears, making his way down the ringing ground-floor corridors of the town hall, and, when he reached the street, trusting to his instinct and automatically turned right towards Árpád Street,

so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't hear when one of the bystanders at the gate, one who had succeeded in overcoming his horror at seeing the picturesque delights of the town in such a ruinous condition, greeted him faintly: 'Good day, professor, sir …' Nothing matters, thought Eszter, and probably because he had worn his coat throughout the interrogations in the warm hall started to shiver halfway down Árpád Street. Nothing, he kept saying to himself as he walked, even once he had arrived at his home in Wenckheim Avenue, more by blind instinct and chance than calculation. He opened the gate, shut it after him and fished his key from his pocket, but it seemed that Mrs Harrer, no doubt by design, having taken some thought, had left the door open, and so he put the key back in his pocket, pushed the door open, proceeded down the hall between the rows of bookcases, and, keeping his coat on so he should warm up a bit, settled down on the bed in the drawing room. Then he got up, went back out into the hall, paused a moment in front of one of the bookcases, tilting his head to examine the titles, then went into the kitchen and adjusted a glass by the sink so it shouldn't be carelessly knocked over. But then he decided not to keep his coat on, so he took it off, took a clothes brush and carefully dusted it down, and once he had finished returned to the drawing room with it, opened the wardrobe, removed a hanger and hung the coat away. He looked at the stove where the embers were still glowing, threw on some kindling in the hope they would catch light, and, since he wasn't hungry, did not go back into the kitchen to make himself some dinner but decided to wait till later and have a cold meal, which would do perfectly well, he thought. He would like to have known the time, but since he hadn't wound his wristwatch last night it still showed a quarter past eight, and so, as this had happened to him before, he did what he usually did in such circumstances and consulted the clock on the tower of the evangelical church, but, of course, the boards he had put up prevented him opening the window. So he brought in the axe and pried the planks off, opened the window wide and leaned out; then, glancing now at the tower, now at his watch, he set the latter to the correct time and wound the spring. His eye next fell on the Steinway, and thinking that nothing would calm him as effectively as 'a bit of Johann Sebastian' he sat down to play, not as he had done in recent years, but as 'Johann Sebastian himself might have done in his day'. But the piano was out of tune, and had to be readjusted to the full Werckmeister harmonic scale, so, opening the lid, he found the tuning key, found the frequency modulator in the cupboard,

removed the music stand so that he might be able to get to the keys, rested the modulator in his lap and sat down to work. He was surprised to find that it was much easier in this fashion to *retune* the instrument than it had been, a few years earlier, to tune it to the Aristoxenus system, but even so it took him a full three hours before every note was where it should be. He grew so absorbed in this that he was only half aware of any extraneous sound, but suddenly, out in the hall, a really loud noise roused him, there was a draft, doors were being slammed, and he seemed to hear Mrs Eszter's voice shouting: 'This goes here! And put that down at the end, I'll put it away later!' But he was no longer interested, as far as he was concerned they could slam doors and shout at each other 'till they were blue in the face': he ran his fingers quickly down the scale to check the pitch once more, then turned to the right page in the score, placed his hand on the pure, consoling keyboard, and struck the first chords of the Prelude in B Major.

SERMO SUPER SEPULCHRUM

Conclusion

IT WAS THE CHERRIES PRESERVED IN RUM THAT she liked best. The others were nice too, but now, after precisely two weeks of tense preparation, the day had come when, before the very important event to follow in the afternoon, there was sufficient time to consider minor details and she might decide which particular preserves of all those stored in the cupboard of the temporary secretarial office, preserves selected from among various hams and other cold meats taken from Mrs Plauf's apartment under the 'social use' rule and brought to the cellar of the town hall where she and Harrer had divided them up between themselves, she would most prefer for breakfast, and she had firmly chosen this one, not because the peach or pear fell short of the cherries in quality, but because when she tasted the delicate concoction prepared by 'Mrs Plauf who had met such a sad fate' the fruit soaked in rum, with its 'subtly resistant acridity', reminded her of an evening visit that seemed to belong to an almost antediluvian past, and her mouth was immediately filled with the taste of victory, the triumph she had hardly had time to savour but now at last could wallow in as she sat at her ease behind her enormous desk with the whole morning ahead of her, since she had nothing to do but lean over the jar with a teaspoon so not a drop should be spilt, and lift out one cherry after another, breaking the skins gently with her teeth, wholly immersed in the undisturbed enjoyment of office and reviewing the vital steps that had led to it. It was, she believed, no exaggeration, to refer to the events of the last fourteen days as 'a veritable transfer of power' which had propelled 'one who had deserved it' from a room in Honvéd Passage, rented by the month, and an undeniably prophetic though hardly, at that stage, significant post on the women's committee, straight to the secretarial office of the town hall; no exaggeration at all, she thought as she bit another cherry in half and spat the stone into the litter basket at her feet, since this mark of honour was really no more than 'the direct consequence of the recognition of her superior lucidity of mind', a superiority that had delivered the fate of the town, with a firmness that bore no question, once and for all into her hands, which were entirely capable of exercising the appropriate powers, so that she should do with the town whatever (she almost said, 'whatever she wanted') she, Mrs Eszter, who only a fortnight ago was unforgivably sidelined but was now mistress of all she surveyed ('… and, let us add,' she added, trying a brief smile, 'had carried off all the laurels at one go'), thought fit to do in

its present or future interest. Naturally there was no suggestion that the office had merely ‘fallen into her lap’, for she had earned it, having risked everything, but she didn’t mind people saying that ‘her rise was meteoric’, for when she thought it over, she herself could think of no better figure of speech; none, since it had taken only fourteen days for the whole town to be ‘spread at her feet’, fourteen days, or rather, a single night, or, to be even more exact, a mere few hours in which everything was decided, including ‘who was who and who had real power’. A few hours, Mrs Eszter marvelled, that’s all it took, when on the fateful evening, or to be more accurate, early afternoon, some sixth sense told her the task was not to prevent the likely course of events but, on the contrary, to give them *full play,* allow them the maximum scope, since deep down in her bones she felt what ‘those three hundred or so sinister bandits’ in the market square might mean to her, provided—and she had to countenance the possibility—‘they were not merely an army of mother’s boys who, when it came to it, would run from their own shadows’. Well, she leaned back in her chair, they really did shrink from nothing, but she, once having decided on a course of action, had never lost her head, had taken every possibility into account, and moved with absolute and fatal precision only when she had to, and ‘events’ moved so steadily in the desired direction, at the desired pace, that occasionally, particularly later in the night, she began to feel she was plotting and directing their course, rather than taking advantage of their, in any case, favourable essence. Certainly she had a clear idea of her own worth—she leaned forward and popped another cherry into her mouth—but no one could have charged her with arrogance or hollow vaingloriousness, she thought, though ‘they should allow her’, at least now, in the present circumstances, in her solitary cherry picking, ‘the credit, not only for the stroke of genius in conceiving of the timetable of events, but for her care over detail’, without which the grandest schemes are doomed to disappointment. No, she admitted it, it didn’t require an above-average intelligence to wind the few members of the committee she herself had organized in Honvéd Passage round her little finger on that memorable afternoon, especially the mayor, who was paralysed with fear; nor did it take any great effort to arrange that the chief of police, who, as the night wore on, was growing dangerously sober and was about to send out for reinforcements, should, unknown to the others, be smuggled by her (on the pretext of showing him out) into her lodger’s quarters where her female

tenant kept the unmanned ‘bag of booze’ serviced with her awful wine right until morning so he would be safely tucked up in dreamland; it was ‘no problem’—Mrs Eszter curled her lip—enticing her blindly obedient follower, Harrer, to find ‘that half-wit Valuska’ who might instinctively have suspected something and put together certain facts in his ‘addled brain’, to find him and silence him by persuading him to leave by the most direct way: no, all this leading of the distinguished company by the nose did not require ‘any particular intelligence’, but the im-pecc-able (the secretary tapped her teaspoon on the table for emphasis) timing of events, now that was something! Ultimately, to have arranged matters so that every part of the machinery should be oiled and working smoothly, ‘planning on the hoof and bringing the plan to realization’ in order that she should be able to sweep away every obstacle before her well-placed allies, all in one blessed moment, and then to build on that precise moment so that she should develop an immediate reputation for muscle, which would in turn raise her to the position of the most likely leader of the resistance, all this, ‘even had the conception itself been of a far more modest nature’, amounted to an achievement—she brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen on to her forehead—that was ‘not exactly ordinary’! Very well, she waved away her own interjection, there was no need to explain that her work on all those apparently insignificant details would have amounted to nothing if she had lacked the central vision by which her plans for the future ‘stood or fell’, since it was as clear as daylight that apart from the harmonization and timing of all the details, the thing that *really* mattered was the timing of the *whole,* in other words to decide, sound out and in-stinct-ual-ize the perfect moment when she could employ Harrer ‘in the police chief’s name’ to bring into play the two policemen in the Jeep who had been waiting prepared for hours, wholly ignorant of the reason for delay, behind the Milk Powder Factory—prepared to go for ‘immediate’ reinforcements, to the county capital … If the ‘forces of liberation’ had arrived too early there would have been only ‘some minor acts of vandalism’, a few broken windows, a smashed shop-front or two, and by the following day life would have carried on as before: if too late, the scale of the conflict might have swept her away too, and it would have been all in vain; yes, thought Mrs Eszter as she recalled ‘the tense atmosphere of those heroic hours’, she had to find the median point between those two extremes, and—she looked round the secretarial office in triumph—thanks to Harrer’s valuable services as

messenger and to the availability of constantly fresh information, she did find that point and that meant she had nothing to do but to allow news of the *in*flux of soldiers to filter *out* through her door in the person of the deathly pale mayor who was dying to get home, then compose her mind as to what she should say while the two policemen returned with the message: 'Would the town's saviour care to come over to the town hall?' In retrospect perhaps her greatest moment had been when she stood before the colonel and, without having to change a word of her speech, could tell him the precise truth, though she had to admit that she could scarcely have done anything else, since something in her heart at the first moment of their meeting told her that the commanding officer of the liberating forces would 'liberate' not only the town, but herself. Everything, even to that point, had been as easy as pie, and since she took care in her preliminary remarks to disown the title so generously bestowed on her (to the effect that she was no hero, she did only what any feeble woman might do in similar circumstances, surrounded as she was by impotence, helplessness and cowardice enough to bring a blush to anyone's cheeks), all she needed to do was to present her information in the best order and in simple, clear and precise sentences to convey the 'sad, but true' fact that there had been a social breakdown owing to 'inadequate arrangements on the part of the authorities', nothing more, the chief police officer not being in 'the proper place at the proper time', for if he had the mob could not have been brought to the point of lawlessness by a small group of drunken hooligans. She would not claim, she added when she had finished her account of events, that this state of anarchy was not representative of the town's condition, for that was precisely what it was, since the circumstances that had allowed this vandalism to flourish had their root in 'the general lack of discipline'. She would be astonished, she waved her hand in the direction of the council-chamber door on that 'most glorious of dawns', if the colonel had the patience to listen to the testimony of all those local people waiting outside, which would be enough to try a saint's patience, for he would soon see what a pitiable gathering of lily-livered cowards she had had to cope with these last few decades in the noble cause of 'law, order and clear thinking' so that they might attain some sense of *reality* (the secretary shivered with pleasure at the word even now in the midst of her meditations) and be led away from 'the foul marsh of illusions in which they foundered' back to health, action and a respect for re-a-li-sm, which demanded that all the self-deluded,

mystificatory, paralysed members of society should simply be ‘swept away’, along with those who cravenly hid from responsibility, from ‘the daily appointed tasks’ incumbent on them, and those who failed to realize or attempted to ignore the fact that life was a war where there were winners and losers, lulled as they were by the mystical illusion that weaklings might be insured against their fate, who attempted to ‘stop any breath of fresh air’ by suffocating the source with soft little pillows. Instead of muscles they cultivated rolls of fat and bags of skin; instead of fit bodies they encouraged wasting and excess; instead of clear bold looks they went about with self-centred little squints: to come to the point, they chose saccharine illusions over reality! She didn’t want to get carried away, but she was forced to live in an atmosphere that she could describe only as stifling, Mrs Eszter burst out bitterly to the colonel, but he knew as well as she did that no matter which end of a fish you take, head or tail, as the saying goes, it stinks just the same; the court had only to look at the state of the streets to see what a sorry pass the patently unfit leadership had brought the town to, and no doubt they would draw the inevitable conclusions from that … Though at this point, she recalled with a blush, she was hardly aware of what she was saying as she was falling ever more under the colonel’s spell, and he, before ‘the saviour of the place’ found herself utterly flustered, thanked her for her report with a simple nod, and with ‘a look that said everything’ invited her to be present at the interrogations; yes, she had fallen under his spell, a hot flush ran through the secretary, that nod had bowled her over, since her ‘heart’ told her, not with a single thump but with a veritable rumble of thunder, that though no one in her fifty-two years had managed to ‘set off that mechanism’, here was one who could! Here was someone who immediately drew her into his enchanting presence, someone with whom she immediately established ‘a silent dialogue’, someone who could (no, ‘did’, she corrected herself with another blush) make something she had never even dared to think might happen come true! It was a wonder that ‘such a feeling really existed’ and it wasn’t simply romantic nonsense that people fell in love ‘at first sight’, ‘blindly’ and ‘for ever’; that there was a condition in which one stood as if struck by lightning and wondered agonizingly whether the other felt the same! For ever since the interrogations had begun, she really had ‘just stood there’ for hours on end in the council chamber, and even though she did not neglect to pay due attention to the increasingly advantageous procedure, her spellbound being

was ‘essentially’ focused, from beginning to end, on the colonel in the background. His build? His bearing? His appearance? She would have found it difficult to say, but until ‘their fate was sealed’ she waited, now in heaven, now in hell (‘He is thinking of me … No, he hasn’t even noticed me’), for the moment that he stood up—yes, he was standing up!—and came over to her to give her some secret sign, practically to declare his affection! It was all fire, all flames within, high on a peak one moment, deep in the pits the next, though no one would have known this to look at her, because even then, when, in the course of dealing with the matter of Valuska, thanks to her presence of mind, they managed to free themselves of Eszter (who, fortunately, had failed to reveal his name) in the most marvellous way without any agonizing prelude, and then, by a kind of mutual conspiracy, got rid of Harrer too by sending him about various commissions, so that finally they were left alone in the hall; even then she was capable of exercising remarkable control over her facial muscles if not her feelings, which she covered with a happy smile at the corner of her lips, there being nothing left that could stop her. She took a cherry, slipped it into her mouth, but did not bite it, simply sucked at it and thought back to the empty hall and the ten to fifteen minutes that followed: the colonel had begged her pardon for his earlier loss of temper, to which she answered that it was understandable that a real man should fail to keep his temper in the presence of so many ninnies, then they talked a little about the state of the nation, and in the course of passionately declaiming one thing and mildly decrying another, he interjected a passing remark about how wonderfully those ‘two tiny earrings’ suited her. They talked about the future of the town and agreed that ‘a firm hand was what was needed’, though they would have to discuss the precise details of how and when the next day under calmer circumstances, the colonel declared, gazing deeply into her eyes, while she, after a moment’s thought, accepted the idea, and, since she had always considered her individual life as subject to the public good, suggested the best place for this might be with a cup of tea and some nice little cakes in her own apartment at 36 Béla Wenckheim Avenue … So everything was pretty well arranged, Mrs Eszter nodded approvingly as she slowly squashed the cherry against the roof of her mouth with her tongue, everything, since there was nothing else that might explain this mutual attraction, this surge of feeling and, now she could say it, the veritable explosion of their discovery of each other, for beside the sheer sense of

delight, it was, for her, the compatibility, the immediate recognition of their having been made for each other, the extraordinary speed and power of the tide that swept them together, that seemed the most wonderful, the way—as it soon transpired—not only for her, but for him too, 'things' had been resolved in a moment, and there was no real need for those ten or fifteen minutes—the colonel's words died quietly away in her—merely to 'build a few bridges'. She hadn't hesitated, she hadn't stopped to weigh things up, she had prepared for the evening by giving only half her mind to the immediate issues involved in the so-called, but in all probability, short 'interregnum', giving speeches at her gate, consoling the bereaved, making announcements to the effect of 'tomorrow we start rebuilding our future', then—since who was she now to fuss over minor matters of transportage? —arranging with Harrer the transfer of her hastily packed effects by a bunch of layabouts from Honvéd Passage to the house in Wenckheim Avenue, and having assigned the wholly unresisting Eszter, whom events had once again bypassed, to the servants' room next to the kitchen, proceeding to throw out the tired old furniture and, putting her bed, chair and table in their place, installing herself in the drawing room. She dressed herself in her finest clothes, the black velvet outfit, the one with the long zip at the back, prepared water for the tea, arranged a few pieces of cake on an aluminium tray covered in paper, and carefully brushed her hair behind her ears. That was all there was to it, no more was needed, for in their two persons—the colonel, who arrived at precisely eight o'clock on the dot, and she herself, unable any longer to control her feelings—two wholly consuming passions had met, two passions that required nothing apart from each other, two souls who celebrated their eternal union through the corresponding 'union of the body'. She had had to wait fifty-two years, but it had not been in vain, because that wonderful night a real man taught her that 'the body was worth nothing without the soul', because that unforgettable encounter, which lasted well into dawn before they fell asleep, brought not only sensual fulfilment but—and she hadn't been ashamed to use the word on that dawn—*love.* She would never have thought that this wonderful realm existed at all, that she'd get to know quite so many 'delightful manoeuvres in that delicious battle' or that the 'swell of the rising tide' in her heart could be so liberatingly intoxicating, though the key that unlocked the hidden recesses of her being—she shut her eyes and blushed all over again as she confessed it—lay in the colonel's hands. In the

figure of her colonel, whom she addressed, ‘quite naturally’ by this time, as Peter, in whose strong arms she had suffered ecstasy some eight times, and who with his own hands had sealed this jar of preserves with cellophane and a rubber band, she had found someone with whom she could arrange the town’s future but at the same time discuss the situation in general. What kind of country was this, they asked in complete agreement (and now that she recalled it, it was seven times), that required a military tribunal, an officer with absolute authority and a full *military unit* at his disposal to march to and fro in order to preserve local law and order? What kind of country was it where soldiers were employed as firemen to flit here and there and put out the fiddling flames started by a few emboldened hooligans? ‘Believe me, my dear Tunde,’ the colonel grumbled again, ‘I can hardly bear to look at the single tank you saw in the main square, I’m so ashamed of it! I drag it about with me like the old ruffian with the cigar does his whale. I show it to give people a fright, for apart from one or two training exercises I can’t remember a single occasion when I’ve fired the thing, and I didn’t set out with the idea of running a circus but to be a soldier and, naturally, I want to fire it!’ ‘Then fire it, Peter … !’ she replied flirtatiously, and he did, seven times, one after another, for every agreement and command could wait till the next day, it was the present that interested them now, the inexhaustible joy of being together, in love; then, at dawn, he bade her farewell in front of the house, and as he got into the waiting Jeep they said those words that wanted to say so much more (‘Tünde!’ ‘Peter!’) and he shouted out the promise she had not forgotten as he was leaving in the still dim light from the window of the disappearing Jeep: ‘I’ll call round whenever I can!’ No one who knew her at all—she rose from the writing desk—could say that she had ever lacked the strength, but the energy with which she attacked the task of planning after that decisive night surprised even her, and within fourteen days she had not only ‘swept away the old and established the new’ but on further ‘continuous surges of energy’ she had earned local people’s praise and support, local people who, according to all the evidence, had finally come to recognize that it was ‘better to burn in a fever of activity than to put your slippers on and hide your head in the pillows’, people who, since she had gained their confidence, no longer con-de-scend-ed to her, but on the contrary—she stepped over to the window, her hands behind her back—‘looked up’ to her. The fact was—she scanned the street from one end to the other—she had found herself in a situation

where whatever she did met with immediate success, everything came easily and naturally to hand, and the entire ‘assumption of power’ was no more than child’s play: all she had to do was to reap the fruit of her labours. The first week had been spent chiefly in ‘picking up the threads’, that is to say in carefully watching whether the fates of the more prominent witnesses and ‘the analysis and investigation of the vandalism’ were really proceeding according to plan, or rather, accorded to the elements of the account she had given that memorable day in the council chamber, and noting with amazement how everything was falling perfectly into place, how every judgement, human or divine, that affected those who had taken part seemed, almost supernaturally, to support her position. The circus had done its valuable work, because, even if The Prince and his factotum had not yet been caught, the director (‘the old cigar-smoking ruffian’ as Peter referred to him) had been deported, the whale removed and the prison was stuffed with ‘various aiders, abetters and accomplices’, and, so that local events should not trigger even minor incidents in the surrounding area, they cleverly spread the rumour that the company had been working under the instruction of foreign intelligence agencies. The chief of police, at least until his transfer to Vas County, had been assigned for three months to an alcohol-dependency institution somewhere out in the sticks and his two boys placed in a children’s home, and, in the meantime, the powers of the old mayor—who was allowed to keep his title—had been transferred to his newly appointed secretary. Valuska, who hadn’t got very far that ‘epoch-making morning’ (‘epoch-making’ for him to be sure), if only because he had stopped to ask directions of a policeman the previous night, had been sectioned ‘for life, for all practical purposes’ in a secure ward of the town’s mental asylum. Harrer had been appointed to the town hall staff as a temporary secretarial assistant until some permanent post could be found for him, and, to cap it all, the town had been advanced a considerable amount of credit for ‘development’. That was just the first week—Mrs Eszter cracked her knuckles behind her back—by the second her tidy yard and orderly house movement had ‘got up a real head of steam’, so that within five days of ‘the terrible riot’, shops had opened and their shelves were beginning to show ‘signs of commercial activity’; the whole population was going about its business and had continued to do so; all the administrative departments were up and functioning, with the old staff, it is true, but with a new spirit; there was teaching in the schools, telephone

communications had improved, fuel was available once more so that traffic could get moving again, albeit in a much reduced but still valuable fashion, trains were running quite well in the circumstances, the streets were fully lit at night and there was plenty of wood and coal to keep the fires burning; in other words, the transfusion had been successful, the town was breathing again and she—she moved her neck gently to refresh herself—was standing at the apex of it all. There was no time to ponder how things might proceed from here, for at that moment her hitherto uninterrupted reflections were brought to an abrupt end by a knock on the door, so she returned to her desk, hid the preserve jar, adjusted her chair, cleared her throat and crossed her legs. Then, once she had pronounced a loud and resonant 'Come in!' Harrer entered, shut the door behind him, took a step towards the desk, stepped back again, hesitated, crossed his hands in front of his lap and, in his usual shifty way, cast sharp glances here and there to see whether anything important had happened in the interval between his knocking and the invitation to enter. He was bringing news, he said, 'concerning the matter' with which the good lady had entrusted him last Monday: he had at last found a man who, in his opinion, might be accepted into the new police force at a low level, in that he satisfied both requirements, being, on the one hand, local, and on the other—Harrer blinked—having already shown his 'suitability on a specific occasion'; and, since there was plenty of time left before the funeral he had brought him straight here from the Nile public house, and because he had assured him that anything that might be said would remain confidential, behind closed doors, the 'person in question' was willing to put himself 'to the test', and therefore, Harrer suggested, they might conduct the interview right here and now. 'Now, perhaps,' the secretary retorted, 'but not here!' then, after a moment's thought, she gave Harrer a real dressing down for not being careful enough, asking him finally what he was doing in the Nile when his place should have been beside her from morning till night, and, dismissing his excuses, explained to him that half an hour from now, not a minute earlier or later, he should appear together with the 'person in question' at the house in Wenckheim Avenue. Harrer didn't dare say anything, just gave a nod to signify he understood, and another in response to the parting remark, '… and the secretarial car should be waiting in front of the house at a quarter past twelve!' then slipped out while Mrs Eszter, with a careworn expression on her face, made a note to herself that unfortunately she must get used to the fact that

‘someone in her position cannot relax for a minute’. But she did not seriously fear that her splendidly industrious, but impulsive right-hand man (‘you have to watch him or he gallops off on some daft idea …’), who had to be kept on a tight leash, had entirely spoilt what had promised to be a quiet morning of ‘the enjoyment of newly gained power’, for as soon as she left the office and stepped through the doors of the town hall in her simple leather coat, tens if not hundreds of people turned immediately to her, and once she reached Árpád Street ‘a veritable guard of honour’ might have been formed of the citizens conscientiously labouring in front of their houses. Everyone was hard at work: grandfathers, grandmothers, men, women, large and small, thin and fat, were all busy with pickaxes, spades and wheelbarrows clearing up the ice-bound rubbish on the pavement and the areas designated for them in front of their gates, clearly going at it with ‘great relish’. Each little group, as soon as she reached them, stopped work for a moment, downed pickaxe, spade and wheelbarrow, greeted her with an occasional cheerful, ‘Good day!’ or, ‘Taking the air, are we?’ and, since it was an open secret that she was the president of the movement’s evaluation committee, set to work again even more heartily than before, if that was possible. Once or twice she heard voices some way ahead of her announcing, ‘Here comes our secretary!’ and there was no reason for her to be embarrassed by the fact that her heart was thumping proudly halfway down Árpád Street; she continued at a brisk pace, moving past them with a little wave here and there, though once these greetings started showering down on her with ever more vehemence towards the end of the street, she couldn’t help but relax her well-known grim expression—grim because she carried so much expectation and responsibility on her shoulders!—and almost smile. Had she not repeated a hundred times in the last fortnight that it was best to draw a veil over what had passed, because it was only ‘by considering “what should be” and “what we want” that we get from square one to square two’; no, she had never ceased filling their ears with that ‘clarion call’, but now, for the first time, following this rewarding display of confidence, she herself considered taking that advice, thinking, ‘Yes, let’s draw a veil over that,’ but as she turned the corner of the avenue she reminded herself, ‘What was I to you, or you to me?’ The masses cannot achieve anything without a leader, but without their confidence—she opened the gate to the house—the leader is impotent, and these particular masses were ‘not at all such bad material’ though, she immediately added,

she herself ‘was no ordinary leader’. We shall be all right, ladies and gentlemen, she reflected with satisfaction as she thought of the people in Árpád Street, and later, once there had been some progress, ‘the leash need not be so tight, nor the secretary so demanding’, since, in the last analysis, there was nothing more she herself wanted, as everything she desired—her feet rang down the floor of the hall—*was hers already.* She had recovered what had been taken from her and gained all she had hoped for, since power, indeed the *supreme* power, was in her hands, and her ‘crowning achievement’ had, she might say, as she entered the drawing room in a deeply moved state of mind, ‘literally’ fallen into her lap. Her thoughts were running on a little as they did in the office, or just because they tended to do so anyway, and especially in the last two weeks when they ran so repeatedly to the man she never stopped expecting day and night but who, unfortunately, had failed to ‘call round’. Sometimes she woke from a dream to the sound of a Jeep, at other times, and ever more frequently, chiefly at home in the drawing room, she had a sudden feeling … it couldn’t be and yet … she had to turn round because she felt that someone—it was he!—was standing behind her, which didn’t mean that she was anxious about his absence, simply that ‘life was empty without him …’—a feeling entirely understandable in one ‘whose heart was full of love’. She waited for him morning, noon and night, and in her imagination she saw him as she always did, commanding a tank as it careered along, dignified, not moving a muscle, then putting his eyes to the binoculars hanging round his neck and ‘scanning the far horizon’ … It was this heroic image that flashed before her now, but dissolved like smoke when she heard someone ‘shuffling around’ the hall again, someone across whom she had quite definitely ‘drawn the veil of the past’, but who, nine days after Valuska’s fate had been decided, went out every day at precisely eleven in the morning, returning at about eight at night, to deposit an appeal on his behalf. This was really the only evidence she had that Eszter was still alive, that is apart from the occasional flushing of the toilet, the dull distant sound of the piano that had been taken through into the servants’ room, and the bits of news she was sometimes given about him: otherwise, it was as if he wasn’t there, as if his little lair had nothing to do with the rest of the house. Altogether she had seen him once or twice that fortnight, chiefly on the day of ‘the historically significant repossession’ of the house, and since her security arrangements by which the servants’ room was inspected each evening had

always reported the same thing—the opened scores, the works of Jane Austen piled into two columns, and the occupant, that is if he was in, either reading (‘The sheer bloody boredom of it!’) or playing the piano (‘Bloody romantics!’)—she had put an end to them the day before. It was not only that he no longer presented any kind of threat to her, but because she ‘had not the slightest shred of interest’ in either his doings or his existence, and on the rare occasions she did think of him she was forced to ask herself, ‘Was this the force you triumphed over?’ Over this dummy, this fool, this ‘creaking wreck’ who, through his loyalty to that half-wit, had reduced himself to a mere shadow! Because that’s all he was, thought Mrs Eszter as she heard him shuffle down the hall, a feeble shadow of even his former self, a pitiful geriatric, a terrified rabbit, ‘a trembling old ratbag, whose eyes are always watering’, who, instead of shaking off the shackles of the very memory of Valuska, had got himself so wrapped up in his ‘fatherly’ feelings that he had forfeited the utterly incomprehensible respect in which he had been held and was now suddenly regarded as ‘a subject of general ridicule’. From the morning on which Valuska’s fate had been so reassuringly decided, instead of shutting himself away as before, he dragged himself through town, in full sight of everyone twice every blessed day—once at eleven when he went out, once, at about eight, when he returned—in order to sit in the Yellow House with the completely silent Valuska in his stripy gown (apparently he couldn’t bring himself even to open his eyes now) and, so people said, talk to him or, like a real headcase, simply sit in silence himself. There was no sign at all that ‘this living monument to the most humiliating defeat’ would ever come to his senses, sighed Mrs Eszter as she heard the distant noise of the gate eventually being closed, since this, no doubt, was what they would go on doing as long as they lived, much to the amusement of this town at the threshold of a new age, sitting silently beside each other, gently holding hands; yes, that is how it would most probably be, she thought as she stood up and started arranging the room for ‘the interview’, though it didn’t matter to her either way, for what harm could this tiny blemish in her past do to her current position, here ‘at the pinnacle’, and in any case she could bear this twice-daily ‘quiet, funereal procession’ down the hall, at least until she could find ‘an opportune moment’ to arrange a long-overdue quick divorce. She pulled the table and chair closer to the window so the ‘candidate’ should have no opportunity of ‘clutching at anything for support’ in the room, which was pretty bare in

any case, and when, after a good minute (‘You’re late!’ Mrs Eszter frowned), Harrer appeared escorting the ‘soldier-to-be’, ushering him to the centre of the room, the latter, who had arrived confidently, with his chest puffed out, quickly, and according to plan, softened under pressure. He’s as strong as a bull, thought the secretary as she appraised him from behind the table, while, under the combined pressure of Harrer’s first, appropriately intimidating, questions and the ‘vulnerability’ of standing in the centre of the room, this ‘native of the Nile’, who was ‘stinking of booze’, gave up any appearance of ‘self-confidence’, at which point the woman in command of the situation took over and let it be known ‘by way of a little warning’ that this was no place for playing ‘pig-in-a-poke’ and that they wouldn’t waste time on ‘pub-crawlers’, and that he should listen very carefully to what she said as she would say it only once. Let there be no misunderstanding, she announced, her face as cold as ice, ‘the purpose of our interrogation is to decide whether we should throw you to the authorities straight away or whether we have any use for you’, but that the only way he could persuade them to the latter opinion was by giving a fully detailed and entirely accurate account of the events of ‘that’ night. That was the only way, she raised her index finger, since accuracy and copiousness of detail were ‘an earnest of his intention’ to become a useful member of society, otherwise he could go before the judge, which meant prison, and in cases such as his, this meant for life. He had absolutely no desire to go to prison, the interrogated man answered uneasily, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, especially as Vulture—he pointed to Harrer—had promised him there would be no problems provided that he ‘dished the dirt’. He hadn’t come to give himself up, ‘he wasn’t born yesterday’, there was no need for threats, he had come of his own free will to confess everything and would take them through events line by line, because, he said, as he scratched at a healing bruise on his chin, ‘he knew the score’; they wanted policemen, and he was here because he was fed up with the Nile. We’ll see what we can do, Mrs Eszter replied with a severe dignity, but first they wanted to hear whether he had committed any crime so serious that ‘not God himself could save you from the full force of the law’, and that once he had told them everything, ‘word by word, line by line’ then, and only then, would she, the secretary to the council, be able to tell whether she was in a position to help.

Yes, ma'am [the man cleared his throat], it made a big enough stink, you could smell it a mile away, I should say. But we weren't no part of it, not till we heard in the Nile that there was a bit of a ruckus in town, so I say to the others, to Gyömrö and Feri Holger, right fellas, your country needs you, we'll soon knock some sense into them. 'Cause we're known, ma'am [madam secretary, Harrer corrected him], I mean madam secretary, as the heavy brigade, because, to be honest with you, the three of us, how should I put it … well, you know, when we get bored we go and sort a few things out and people are a bit scared of us, I mean they avoid us like the plague, 'cause whenever we look up from our beers the place goes quiet, if you know what I mean. No, but all this was small shit compared to what was going on when we got to the High Street, just where it meets the main road, and I told Gyömrö, come on, man, get a move on, 'cause I'm not joking, this lot will leave nothing for us to do, and so, no point denying it, we got stuck in too. But then there was a big flair up because just as we'd started beating up a few guys, we saw this was another kind of stunt altogether, this lot are picking on civilians, so I say to Feri Holger, coffee-break guys, and he carefully lays two patients down, comes over and Gyömrö too, and we put our heads together and work out what we should do. But there's a great crowd there by this time, all come down from the market square like the Russian army or something, so I say, OK, fellows, it looks like revolution, time to get out of here. But Gyömrö, he says, as far as he can remember the shops used to open up at such times, and the poor could help themselves, so we should go and see, 'cause, I mean, there's this little grocer's nearby, full of excellent booze, let's go see if it's open today, then we can take off. Well, it really was open, but it wasn't us that smashed the locks in, madam secretary, the door was in godamned splinters when we arrived, we just went in 'cause it was open and tried to save a few bottles, but the guys before us had made such a job of it, we couldn't find a single one that hadn't been broken. We got a bit annoyed at that 'cause we thought it wasn't right, I mean here we were, all this godamned liberty and freedom for everyone, scratching around the place, dry

as a bone, and I'm telling you, I swear by my dear mother [he put his hand on his heart], we didn't want nothing, just a sip or two, then off home, 'cause me, I like a bit of a fight, I put myself out a bit, if you see what I mean, but we had nothing to do with what was going on then, and generally I like things quiet, and that's why I think I'd make a good policeman, and you, Vulture, you hold your trap [he addressed the clucking Harrer], you got enough to answer for … Anyway, off we go, we look at the club—nothing; we call in at the bar in the High Street—that's smashed up too, so we think to ourselves, not much glory here, fellows, let's try further out. So we go to whatsitsname, the Cowherd, but then Feri Holger perks up and say he knows somewhere down Friars' Walk, one of those soda shops, and there, I got to be honest with you, we did break the door down. We didn't do nothing, just looked in the store at the back and found a few foreign liqueur things, and we looked at the labels, and they seemed all right. I know, I know [he nodded at Mrs Eszter], I'm coming to the point, 'cause this was the thing, you see, that led to real trouble, 'cause we weren't used to that foreign stuff and God, we felt so weird after we drunk it, I swore then I'd never touch another drop of it. 'Cause soon after that a bunch of the guys turn up with iron bars and they start smashing everything up, and I say to one, gimme one of those, what I mean to say is I admit it, we joined in pretty much. But don't you start thinking I'm usually like that, madam secretary; it was that fucking booze did me head in, and even then, looking back on it, I don't think we did too much damage, a mirror and a few glasses on the bar as I remember, nothing to merit a real beating … I told you to keep your trap shut, Vulture [he silenced Harrer once again], I'll pay the cost of that mirror or whatever, if it's going to be such a big thing to the fucking owner. I dunno what they fucking put into that fucking booze (pardon my language), but I was out for hours, I didn't know where I was or what was what, then suddenly I see I'm sitting on the pavement, in front of the Komló, and the cold is killing me. I look around and I see the cinema is burning and the flames are already so high [he gestured upwards] and I say to myself, things are getting a bit serious here. I dunno how I got

there or where the hell Gyömrö or Feri Holger have sauntered off to, I mean I couldn't tell you if you was to torture me, I just mingled with the other lads, I simply didn't click [the candidate reddened in fury] what the fuck was happening!! I felt godamned awful, I tell you, I stood there, my stomach and liver burning up, with the burning cinema there in front of me, and to be honest, I really believed, like a fucking idiot, that it was me that set it alight, 'cause, God help me, I couldn't remember a thing, I'd no idea what I'd been up to, I just stared at the flames thinking: was it me? or wasn't it? and I really had no idea what to do. 'Cause I couldn't go till I was sure, and I didn't know whether it was or wasn't me that done it, I mean I know now, but then I didn't, so eventually I say to myself, this is it, you really had better get out of here now … So I go through the German Quarter, lots of little streets, God knows what, so that I shouldn't meet the people I just left all over again, and I stop for a breather by the gates of the cemetery, leaning up against the bars like this [he showed them], and suddenly there's someone talking behind me. Well, fuck me, pardon my language, they've come for me too, I don't usually run like a scared rabbit, you can see that by looking at me, madam secretary, but I got so scared, someone speaking to me in the silence like that. 'Course, it was only one of the guys from the fight who knew it was time to blow, and he says, let's change coats and I'll go down the street and you go up it, that way we'll throw them off, so I say, fine, let's swap. But there was something about the guy that started bothering me, so I say to him, listen! I wouldn't like it if this coat meant trouble, know what I mean, 'cause don't think for a second I'm gonna answer for what you done! A cheap shit, he was, I mean it was just a grey cloth coat but God knows what he did while it was on him, so I say, I've changed my mind, find someone else to swap with and let's drop the subject. I didn't see a thing he was so lightning fast, the fucker, and I trusted him, thinking he really was a pal. He stabbed me just under my shoulder blade, here [he unbuttoned his shirt and showed the place], though you can bet your sweet life, madam secretary, it was the heart he was after. But he did me, the shit, I was flat on the street, and by the time I woke up, the wound

was hurting like hell, and the cold was killing me again. No wonder and all, ‘cause I had no coat on me, it was gone with everything that was in it—ID, cash, keys—and the fucking grey cloth coat lying there beside me on the ground, so what, in God’s name I ask you, could I do, I put it on, then full speed into the cemetery. ’Cause I was sure the guy had done something pretty heavy and I wasn’t so stupid as to be caught on account of a coat, but I had to put something on or I’d have frozen stiff in that cold, and I thought I was best going through the cemetery. I didn’t dare go home on account of the cinema, I didn’t have an ounce of sense left in me ‘cause of that, and what with the wound and the blood and the pain, you understand, I didn’t have no strength to make it out of town, so, in a word, I stayed there. I found an open crypt, respect due and all that, gathered a bit of wood at the end of the cemetery, and made a fire best as I could, staunching the blood with my vest, and waited for night. I could have bled to death there, madam secretary, but I’ve got a good constitution, so I could hold out that long, and then eventually, I snuck home, and seeing as I didn’t have the key I had to wake the old woman to let me in, and soon as I shut the door behind me, what with no ID, no cash, no nothing, I burned the fucking coat to a cinder. Then fetch the doctor, on the double, there’s one nearby, get bandaged up, take some pills, three days on me back then … well … I dunno, madam secretary, that’s all there is to it, I’ve left nothing out, that’s all I done wrong apart from a few fights in the past … I dunno how you see it, I mean whether, what with my record, I could still be a policeman, but when Vulture came round to see if I felt like volunteering, provided I told you everything dead straight, I thought … yeah, I’ll volunteer … ‘cause, me, I think I could be a useful member of society, though I dunno what you think about this couple of mistakes I made, I mean, well …

… well, Mrs Eszter shook her head for some time, humming to herself and staring sternly at the table, and eventually said, yes, yes … pursed her lips, continued humming, then, finally, drummed a brisk little tattoo on the table with her fingers, looked the candidate—who seemed at the point of collapse—up and down a few times, and then, by way of conclusion,

mumbled, almost to herself, ‘I’d like to see the man who can sweep *this* under the carpet,’ then looked as though she was ready to administer the *coup de grâce.* The problem, she confessed to Harrer, over the head of the candidate so to speak, was far more serious than she had been led to believe, for, ‘after all’, she was seeking men of unimpeachable character, and though one might describe the present candidate as a troublemaker, loiterer, burglar, desecrator of graves, in fact as many things, it wouldn’t occur to anyone to describe him as—and here she flashed a smile at Harrer alone—precisely unimpeachable. She, for her part, would not wish to cast doubts on his sincerity, but, she sighed, still keeping her eyes on Harrer, there really was ‘precious little’ here to work on, so she didn’t know whether, in all conscience, she could assume responsibility for him, but if she did, that is after consultation with ‘an appropriate specialist’, she could be pretty certain that the best she could offer was a ‘maximum probationary period’. ‘Probationary … ?’ the would-be officer of the law swallowed and looked to Harrer for some explanation as to what that might entail, or if nothing else for a simple dictionary definition of the word, but the latter was not about to embark on any kind of exposition for at this point the secretary glanced at her watch and gave a brief right-handed wave to her right-hand man to signal that he should ‘clear the room’ since she had to leave very soon. Harrer dragged the confused and terrified recruit through the door (you could hear him being admonished in the hall: ‘Don’t you understand? She’s taken you on, stop struggling, you lunk!’), while Mrs Eszter stood up, folded her arms under her breasts and, following her new habit, looked out of the window ‘to take stock of the world’, thinking to herself that, well, this was only a first step, but ‘at least we’re heading in the right direction with big lunks like him’, it was part of planning for the future, the foundations on which she would build and succeed, for by the time they had appointed a new chief (she waved to the chauffeur waiting by the car), he would be greeted by a competent, indeed potent force, heavily staffed by people who were eternally obliged to the secretary. Those were the stakes, she reflected, as she donned her leather coat and clicked the steel press-studs into place one after another: these were necessary precautions, carefully considered and, above all, soberly thought out, precautions that ‘wouldn’t collapse like silly little daydreams but were built on what lay solidly to hand’. For indeed, what else mattered—she checked her handbag again—but fitness for the job, and the most important thing was never to

‘yield’ to illusions, such as ‘people meant well or that there was a benevolent God or some kind of force for good in charge of human affairs’, which were generally clap-trap and lies of the most lethal sort (she stepped out into the hall) that she, for one, was ‘not prepared to swallow’; and as for ‘beauty’, ‘fellow feeling’ and ‘the good inside us all’, please! she puffed out her cheeks at the mention of each one, or even if she wanted to wax particularly lyrical, the best she could say was that society was (she passed through the gate) ‘a foul marsh of petty self-interest’. A marsh, she pulled a face and occupied the forward rear seat of the black Volga: a marsh where the wind bent the reeds, the wind, in this case, being her; and so she waited for Harrer to get in the front door, and, once he did so, said simply, ‘Let’s go!’ then leaned back comfortably in the yellow mock-leather padded seat and watched the houses as they swept by. She watched the houses, though now that most people capable of walking had made their way to the cemetery there were only a few industrious citizens in the street, and, as always when she sat in the car at that point of ‘mobile command’, full of the inimitable magic sensation of ‘sweeping by’, she could see with maximum clarity—like some landowner driving about his estate—that this really was all hers, potentially hers, for the plans to make it hers were in place, and until then, she smiled through the window of the Volga, ‘you can work all you like with your wheelbarrows and pickaxes, because we’ll soon make a start on your souls …’ Even Harrer did not know that the TIDY YARD … epithet represented only the first stage of the movement, and that the ORDERLY HOUSE part—and here the car turned from St Stephen’s Road into the Central Cemetery—was something that would follow only after the streets and gardens were tidy and ‘you could eat off those pavements’, when the committee for competition would make a complete tour of every house and she would hand out numerous prizes of her own (prizes that would outstrip those of the ORDERLY HOUSE committee) for ‘the simplest and most functional lifestyle’. But we mustn’t run ahead of ourselves, Mrs Eszter admonished herself, we must concentrate on what lies immediately before us—the burial, for example, she thought as she sat in the Volga and took stock of the vast crowd gathered before the catafalque, so that there should be no hitches on this highly significant occasion when ‘everything should go like clockwork’, since this was her first opportunity to address the crowd who longed for renewal and for congress with its leader, *this,* this would mark her first ‘proper’ public appearance, the first chance she had of

proclaiming their ‘unity’. Now we’ll see whether we are worthy of people’s confidence, she cautioned Harrer, then stepped from the car and, with her customary decisive stride, set out for the catafalque through the crowd that immediately opened before her, then, having reached it, positioned herself at the head of the coffin, tapped the microphone a couple of times to make sure it was working, and, as a last gesture, sternly surveyed the scene before reassuring herself that her right-hand man had made a thoroughly competent job of the funeral arrangements. The orders she had given three days ago stipulated that the funeral service should express the spirit of the new age, which meant dispensing not only with the Church’s presence but with ‘all the usual saccharine appurtenances’; Harrer should junk all the ‘redundant trash’ and ‘give the whole a social character’, as indeed he had done; she nodded to the stage-struck producer in acknowledgement, surveying the unplaned coffin as it rested on a simple but well-polished butcher’s block beside a small open red box (its inscription, ‘For outstanding sporting progress’, hidden of course) which served to display the ‘posthumously awarded’ medal that marked the status of the departed, and, instead of the usual candelabra—a little startling perhaps but effective—two men who used to be Harrer’s assistants, who, for lack of time, had now been fitted out as hussars and carried two great plastic broadswords (borrowed from the local costume shop) in their firm hands, the purpose of which was graphically to remind the crowd of the reason they had gathered here, which was to bury an exemplary and heroic figure. She surveyed the coffin with Mrs Plauf inside it and, while the assembly quieted down and realized that things were ‘about to start’, contemplated the memory of her—she could say it now—‘pre-revolutionary’ visit. Who would have thought then, she asked herself, that just over a fortnight later this ‘little dumpling’ would, by her agency, be beatified as an exemplary hero; who would have thought that night when she left the suffocatingly cosy flat in such a temper that just sixteen days later such an idea might even occur to her, that she should be standing here by the coffin, no longer angry, on the contrary—no point denying it—when she recalled the figure of Mrs Plauf and her idiotic ways, she really felt rather sorry for her. Though whatever happened to her, she meditated on the catafalque, was chiefly her own fault for not being able to bear the disgrace, as her neighbour described it, and setting out to drag her son through the street by his hair after dark, setting out at that time simply, as luck would have it, to bump into some brigand who was just in

the process of disguising himself, and who—according to the witnesses cowering behind their curtains in Karácsony János Street—'dedicated' five minutes of his precious time to 'amusing himself with her' in the lowest way possible before 'silencing' her. It was a personal tragedy, she decided with a sad face, tough luck, a truly tragic turn of events at the end of a 'sheltered life', since she, after all, was the last person to deserve such a fate, not having laid herself open to it, but at least, she reflected as she took leave of her, she is getting a hero's send-off, and at this point she snapped open her handbag, took out the typed copy of the speech, and, seeing that she had everyone's complete attention, took a deep breath. But just as she was doing so, owing to some muddle over the arrangements, four more hussars appeared from behind her back and, before she could interrupt them, took two planks cut to size, slipped them under the coffin, raised it and, following their instructions, started off with it in the direction of the crowd of mourners, who, having grown accustomed to unusual procedures, immediately and without any question, made way for them. She cast a withering glance at the deeply flushed Harrer, who stood as if rooted to the spot, but it was no use: if this was the way things were then there was nothing to be done but set off after the four hussars, who were cleaving their way through the startled crowd towards the freshly prepared grave with enormous gusto, clearly delighted that it should have been they, the physically strong, to whom Mrs Plauf was lighter than a feather, who had been chosen for this momentous task. It wasn't only the speaker who was obliged to keep step with them, but, if they did not wish to be left behind, the whole assembly too, and, what was more, in order to maintain a modicum of dignity, everyone had somehow to disguise the fact that they were 'practically running'—though this proved to be the least of their troubles, for the real problem was with the coffin itself, the hussars, despite numerous low whistles and whispered warnings, jauntily continued swishing along, oblivious of the fact that it too was tossing and bouncing in a jaunty, though rather more dangerous, fashion. Gasping and choking, they arrived at the grave with commendable dignity in the circumstances, and 'it would be no understatement to say' that everyone was much relieved to see that the coffin was still intact, and if nothing else, the strangeness of this 'last journey', accompanied by continuous whispering, had engendered a real fellow feeling among them, ready as they were to take their last farewells, so that everybody there was wholly intent on Mrs Eszter as she

finally launched into her speech, holding two fluttering sheets of paper in her hand.

Those of us who are gathered here know that all life ends in death. Now some of you might be thinking, that is nothing new, but, as the poet said, there really is nothing new under the sun. Death is our destiny, it's the full stop at the end of the line, and not a child born today can hope to escape it. We are all aware of this, and yet, even now, it is not altogether sadness that we feel, but a kind of determination, a raising of the spirits, for the woman we are burying, my fellow citizens, was far from ordinary. I don't like grand gestures or fancy phrases, so all I say is that, today, we are taking leave of a real human being. Here we stand at the graveside, all of us, large and small, old and young, because this is where we want to be, at the end of someone's life. Someone we loved, someone who did what she had to do, someone to whom modesty was a byword, someone whose life we all celebrate, particularly now, at her death. And in her life we celebrate courage, courage that puts us all—you, me, even her own self—to shame, because, my fellow citizens, this simple woman was the only one among us who dared to resist those whom none of us opposed. Was she a hero? I ask myself. Yes, most certainly: that noble word is the right one for Mrs József Plauf, and with all my heart I endorse it. It was her son she set out to find on that night of tribulation, her son, but, my fellow citizens, I know, you know, and indeed she herself knew, that she did so on behalf of us all, to show us that courage and the spirit of battle were not altogether dead in our sheltered age. She showed us how to live; she showed us what it is to retain our humanity in the most adverse of circumstances; she showed us and all succeeding generations how we may behave provided our hearts are in the right place. Today we bid farewell to a mother with an ungrateful son, a widow who remained faithful after the death of two husbands, a simple woman who loved beauty, a woman who sacrificed her life so that we may better enjoy ours. I see her now on that dreadful night, saying to herself: this is truly unbearable. I see her now, putting on her coat to struggle against overwhelming odds. My fellow citizens: she knew that she might fail; she knew that her frail limbs were inadequate to the inevitable conflict with those desperate and evil men; she knew it all, and yet she did not flinch from danger because she was a human being, a human being who

never gave up. The power of the many triumphed and she perished, but I say to you, it is she who was the victor and it was her murderers who perished, because she, in her isolation, was capable of inflicting defeat on them, in that all the assailants became objects of ridicule. She humiliated them. How? By her resistance, by her unwillingness to surrender without a fight, she, who all by herself took up the battle, which is why I say victory is hers. Go then, Mrs József Plauf, go to your well-deserved resting place, rest from your suffering: your spirit, your memory, your strength set us a truly heroic example and remain with us. You belong to us: it is only your body that perishes. We return you to the earth that bore you, not weeping that your bones must turn to dust, not weeping because we have your real presence here with us, for ever, and the workers of decay have nothing but your dust to thrive on.

The unchained workers of decay were waiting in a dormant state for the necessary conditions to be established, as soon enough they would be, when they might recommence their interrupted struggle, that predetermined, merciless assault in the course of which they would dismantle whatever had been alive once and once only, reducing it into tiny insignificant pieces under the eternally silent cover of death. The unfavourable circumstances had lasted weeks, even months: that is to say the outside, or rather, *outer* temperature, had been far too low, and, as a result, the constitution that should have ended had been frozen rock hard, its stricken assailants reduced to impotence, the condemned structure itself so firmly suspended in it that nothing did in fact actually happen; a perfect, complete stasis possessed the field, turning the body into a stable waxwork, an existence without content, a unique gap in time, as everything ground to an utter halt. Then there followed a slow, a very slow awakening; the body escaped its icy captivity, and once again the assault proceeded to command with ever increasing ferocity. Now the attack was concentrated on the albuminous matter of the muscles, culminating in an irresistibly one-sided dissimulatory exchange of material; the adenozintriphosphatase enzymes continued their assault on the central fortress of the general energy level, the ATP, and this resulted in the energy of the torn cell tissue, whose position was quite indefensible, being linked to the breakdown of actomyosin related to the ATP, which inevitably led to the contraction of the muscles. At the same time the continuously

dissolving and naturally shrinking adenozintriphosphate could not be replenished by either a source of oxidization or glycolysis, and owing to a complete lack of resynthesis, the whole apparatus began to ebb, so that finally, with the concurrent support of the accumulated lactic acid, the contraction of the muscles was succeeded by rigor mortis. This in turn became subject to the law of gravity, and the blood gathered at the deepest points of the weird system, which, having been the main target of the offensive—at least until the final annihilating defeat—now faced a two-pronged assault on its fibrin content. The fibrinogen that in the first stages of the assault, even before the ceasefire, had been circulating in fluid form through the cardiovascular system, now lost two pairs of peptides from its activated trombin, and the fibrin molecules that formed everywhere as a result combined to form a highly resistant suspension composed of chains. None of this lasted long though because following the outbreak of anoxia associated with death, the plasminogens that had been activated into plasmin broke down the fibrin chains into polypeptides, so that the struggle —now in support of the attack from the other direction of great masses of adrenalin with its fibrin-dissolving properties—having reversed the process that enabled the blood to flow, at the same time ensured the resounding success of the units delegated to oppose haemostasis. The battle against the suspension was more fraught with difficulties and they would certainly have taken much longer had not the quality of the liquid medium simplified the task somewhat, so that the next stage, the elimination of the red blood cells, was now imminent. With the concomitant curtailment of the tissue's ability to resist liquid, the intercellular material gathered in loosely co-ordinated bands around the major veins, as a result of which the membranes of the blood cells became permeable, and the haemoglobin could begin to drain off. The red blood cells lost their colouring agents and these mingled with the irresistible fluid, colouring it, then seeped through the tissues, thus ensuring another significant victory for the ruthless forces of destruction. Behind the lines of this well-co-ordinated campaign, at the very moment of death, the internal enemies of the helpless, once miraculous, organism revolted and launched a simultaneous attack on both muscles and blood, overrunning any obstacle to their progress, such as carbohydrates, fats, and especially the once inimitably elegant mechanism of albumin, much in the manner of 'a palace revolution'. The battalion consisted of so-called fermented cell-tissue, and the manoeuvre was of the type known as

autodigestiopostmortales, but it left no doubt that this apparently objective selection of targets merely obscured the sad state of affairs, for it might have been more correct to regard it as ‘a below-stairs revolt’. *Treacherous* servants, these were, who even when the organism still buzzed with life had to be kept in check by the deployment of an entire inhibitor system, for their activities, which were supposed to be confined to the breaking down and preparation of material in the granaries of the empire, might well exceed the bounds of their appointed task and they might start to attack the very organism they were supposed to serve, so it required permanent and extreme vigilance on behalf of the inhibitors to keep them down. To give but an example, the proteolytic enzymes, the proteasics, had originally been given the task of catalysing the hydrolysis of the leukocytes, by breaking down the peptide bonds, and, it was only the forceful action of mucin that prevented them exterminating the albuminous matter along with the hydrochloric acid of the stomach. It was much the same with the carbohydrates and fats where the NADP and the coenzyme-A on the one hand and the lipase and dehydrogenized fatty acid on the other were obliged to remain in the custody of a troop of inhibitors, since without them nothing could have prevented the combined reductive enzymes escaping. By now there was nothing to slow them down, no resistance, so, with the onset of favourable temperatures the ‘palace revolution’ had already broken out, or rather continued, and the blood in the veins of the stomach’s mucous membrane that had turned to haematinic acid had dissolved parts of the stomach wall, so the battalion, composed chiefly of hydrochloric acid and pepsin, could launch an attack against the allies of the abdominal cavity. As a result of the endeavours of the enslaved enzymatic unit the glycogen in the liver decomposed into its simple elements and this was followed by the autolysis of the pancreas, the term autolysis throwing a pitiless light on the truth it hides, which is that from the moment of birth every living organism carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. Though the greatest part of the work could proceed only slowly, no doubt because of the relatively low supply of oxygen, putrefaction galloped on apace, that is to say the nitrogenous compounds including the micro-organisms entrusted with the breaking down of albumin completed their task, which micro-organisms, soon reinforced by the front-line troops, then began their operation among the intestines that harboured them in enormous numbers, so that from there they might be able to extend their control over the whole realm. Apart from

a few anaerobic microbes, the batteries consisted chiefly of aerobic putrefactors, but it would be almost impossible to list the various units that comprised them, since, beside the various bacteria, including proteus vulgaris, subtilis mesentericus, pyocyaneous, sarcina flava and streptococcus pyogenes, a vast amount of other micro-organisms took part in the decisive battle, the earliest clash of which took place in the blood vessels beneath the skin, then in the walls of the stomach and the groin and later between the ribs and in the canals above and below the collar-bone, where the hydrogen sulphide produced by the process of putrefaction combined with the haemoglobin in the blood to produce, on the one hand, verdoglobin and, combined with the iron contained in blood colouring, ferrous sulphate on the other, in order that these might then invade the muscles and internal organs. Once again, thanks to the forces of resistance, bodily fluids containing the blood colouring continued to penetrate the steadily decomposing tissue, and the slow exodus of basic building materials persisted until they reached the surface of the skin at which point they began streaming away into the deep. Running parallel to the unfolding heterolysis were the exploits of an anaerobic micro-organism called clostridium perfringens, a highly effective bacterium which rapidly bred in the intestine, launched its external operations in the stomach and the veins but quickly spread through the entire system, producing blisters in the chambers of the heart, under the integument of the lungs, and made a substantial contribution to incipient blisters forming on the putrefying skin which eventually peeled off. The once invulnerable realm of proteins, so complicated at first appearance yet so logical in its workings, had quite collapsed by now, the albumose peptones first, followed by the amido group, nitrogenous and non-nitrogenous aromatic matter, and finally the organic fatty acids: from them were created various acids including formic, vinegar, butter, valerian, palmitin and stearin and certain inorganic end-products, such as hydrogen, nitrogen and water. With the help of nitrites and nitrate-bacteria, the ammonia in the soil, oxidized to nitrous acid, which, in the form of salts, crept up the narrow roots of plants to return to the world from which they had come. Some of the decomposed carbohydrates melted into the air as carbon dioxide so that—theoretically at least—they might, for once in their lives, take part in the process of photosynthesis. So, through various delicate channels, a superior organism welcomed them, dividing them neatly between organic and inorganic forms of being, and

when, after a long and stiff resistance, the remaining tissue, cartilage and finally the bone gave up the hopeless struggle, nothing remained and yet not one atom had been lost. Everything was there, it is simply that there was no clerk capable of making an inventory of all the constituents; but the realm that existed once—once and once only—had disappeared for ever, ground into infinitesimal pieces by the endless momentum of chaos within which crystals of order survived, the chaos that consisted of an indifferent and unstoppable traffic between things. It ground the empire into carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and sulphur, it took its delicate fibres and unstitched them till they were dispersed and had ceased to exist, because they had been consumed by the force of some incomprehensibly distant edict, which must also consume this book, here, now, at the full stop, after the last word.