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presents:

Came the Stranger

by Hermynia Zur Mühlen (1883-1951)

London: Frederick Muller, 1946.

No translator named. No indication that the work was translated.

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German title:

Als der Fremde kam.

Vienna: Globus Verlag, 1946.

[The German edition appeared after the book's publication in English.]

Dr. Patrik von zur Muehlen
Trierer Strasse 57
D-53115 Bonn
Germany

Dear Mrs. Ockerbloom,

Professor Gossman asked me to inform you about the copyright problems concerning the books of Hermynia Zur Muehlen. Indeed, these problems seem to be very murky, but I can help you to clear them up.

The marriage of Hermynia and my great-uncle Viktor von zur Muehlen was dissolved in 1920, so that neither the family as a whole nor any member of it is entitled to the copyright of her novels, fairy tales, essays etc. In 1938 she married her second husband Stefan Klein, a citizen of Czechoslovakia; he died nine years after her in 1960 – as we know – without a testament. They had no children, and neither had brothers or sisters who could claim the copyright.

The Publishing House – the Malik Verlag – where most of her books were published belonged to the Communist Party; it does not exist today.

Moreover, German copyright had a validity of 50 years (now 70 years) and Hermynia Zur Muehlen died in 1951; hence no other publisher, such as S. Bermann Fischer, or anybody else, can enter a protest against any form of reprinting, re-editing or republishing of her books; the books are available for everybody.

With respect to her translated books there we have the same situation. As I know, all of her books were translated by herself anonymously or under a pseudonym (i.e. Lawrence H. Desberry), perhaps revised by a native speaker.

In the last fifty years many of her books have been reprinted or republished without any problems. In many cases the publishers asked me or relatives of mine and always we gave the same answer. I would much appreciate seeing her works published, whether printed or posted to the internet or in any other form.

Sincerely yours

Patrik von zur Muehlen

Came the Stranger

A NOVEL

by

Countess Hermynia Zur Mühlen

LONDON

Frederick Muller Limited

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W.G.1

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To My Husband

Oct. 1946

THE TYPOGRAPHY OF THIS BOOK
CONFORMS TO THE
AUTHORISED ECONOMY STANDARD

67
35

PART ONE—PEACE

*

MORNING

STANDING on the veranda of the old manor-house, Clarisse Herdegen looked upon the young day. All around her the garden still lay dreaming in the soft twilight of an early dawn, but lower down, where it gently sloped towards the river, pale sun-rays were flitting across the path, growing stronger and brighter while she watched them. There was an unearthly beauty about the March morning; it seemed to Clarisse as if time were stretching towards eternity; mysterious, endless. A gentle breeze sprang up and danced from tree to tree.

Clarisse went down the yellow stone steps and, turning, glanced at the big bow-window in the left wing. The green shutters were still closed. She smiled a trifle wryly. Had she really expected to see the window open? Just because Robert had promised last night, "Of course I shall get up early and help you."

How well she had got to know that "I shall" during the twenty years of her married life; the good intention that invariably came to nothing. Rather crossly she mused upon the fact that mankind could be divided into three parts: those who said "I shall" and never stuck to their purpose, kind, charming, lovable men and women who were not to be relied upon; those who said "I shall" and always kept their promise. (Clarisse's smile grew mocking and hard; reliable, odious; dominating people like me); and those rare and precious souls who never promised anything but always silently did what had to be done. She did not know many of them; there was Marianka, of course, and little

Sister Veronica at the orphanage and . . . now Clarisse was smiling softly, affectionately: the old man coming along the path, dear, kind old Ján; still handsome; still as straight as a die; although he had been a young man when she was a child. He had worked on the estate when it had been one of the largest in the country, before the Great War, and had gone on working here after it had been reduced in size by the land reform laws. When Clarisse, impoverished by the war, had decided upon selling the greater part of Korompa and resolved to grow roses for the market, old Ján had at first been miserable. He had fretted and fumed and mourned for his beloved knot-garden, that had been the pride of his heart. He could not understand why "his little Clarisse" had to earn money "all of a sudden," and the idea of selling roses shocked him.

Gradually he had got accustomed to the change, and now he even sometimes boasted of the fact that Korompa grew the roses for the big park of Petržalka, the pleasure-grounds belonging to Bratislava; and that people came from all parts of the Republic to visit the famous rose-garden.

Hidden by Ján's back, Marianka trundled along, a big yellow skein of bast hanging from her arm. Her red apron shone gaily in the sun and her good old wrinkled face wore an expression of happiness. Clarisse felt ashamed of her bad temper. She had got up moody and tired, as only the nerve-racked do after a sleepless night, complaining to herself: work, nothing but work. I'm fed up with it; and no one ever appreciates what I do. Meeting the gentle brown eyes of the old peasant-woman, she remembered that Marianka's whole life had consisted of work and worry, heart-breaking work on a farm much too small to feed the family. When her husband had died, leaving her with a bevy of small children, she had come to work at Korompa, at first in the fields, later on in the rose-garden. "I do like my work," she often said. "It's lovely growing roses."

She never complained; she never quarrelled with her lot. Her soul seemed full to the brim with a peaceful joy that nothing could destroy. Clarisse recalled the first days of the

young Republic; Marianka had gone about radiating happiness.

"At last we've got our own State," she had said exultingly. "The Magyars are no longer masters of Slovakia. I always knew it would happen one day."

Clarisse hurried to meet them.

"Am I late?" she asked apologetically.

Ján growled something unintelligible. In his eyes Clarisse had never ceased being the small girl who used to steal "his" first strawberries. He was fond of her, but he did not hold with spoiling her.

Marianka smiled. "No. The *angelus* has not rung yet."

They walked towards the large greenhouse where the roses were waiting to be packed and taken to town. A wave of tepid air met them. Marianka took the bast from her arm and fetched the osier-baskets.

"I wonder what people will think of our new rose," Jan said proudly, putting out his hand for a tiny plant. "They've never seen anything like it. I put two away," he added, "the first plant for Our Lady of Marianka, the second . . ." He hesitated and looked at Clarisse.

"We thought," Marianka explained, "that we really ought to send the second plant to Lana. The rose is so beautiful; I'm sure our President would be pleased."

Clarisse nodded silently. For an instant all three thought lovingly of the old man at Lana, of Masaryk, who had liberated a country and created a State.

"All right," Clarisse said, "but better not tell Mr. Joseph." Old Ján laughed. "I know. He's still a monarchist. But he's a good man all the same."

They set to work. With infinite precaution the delicate plants were lifted out of their bedding of earth and covered with moss and straw; for the air was still chilly and the wind blew cold.

"Svata's come home for the holidays," Marianka said joyously.

"He looks half dead," the old gardener grumbled. "As thin as a lath."

Marianka's happy smile faded and her face grew dark.

Svata, the youngest of her children, the only one who still was alive, was a source of worry to her.

"What's the matter with him, Marianka?" Clarisse asked kindly. Svata had been a delicate child and hard to rear.

Marianka's resigned gesture said more than words could have done, but Ján was less reticent.

"He's suffering from the disease so many of us are suffering from," he said with a bitterness that amazed Clarisse. "Poverty." He threw Marianka a disapproving look. "I never could understand why our boys have all got to study at the university. Svata's as bad as the others. He wants to be a doctor. So he's got to live in town and pore his eyes out over his books. And be half-starved, and meet wicked men who don't believe in God; and see how well off others are. Of course that sets him thinking how unjust everything is; and he begins to wonder about God and gets wicked too. And Marianka starves herself, because the boy insists upon being a doctor. What an idea. Couldn't he have become a priest? Then our bishop would have paid the piper."

"But, Ján, if he does not feel himself called to the priesthood?"

A roguish smile lit up the old face, and Clarisse knew that Ján was thinking of her cousin Aladar, who did not seem "called" either. She saw in her mind's eye the parish priest of the neighbouring townlet, the well-knit, slender figure, the thin, intellectual face, the dark, dreamy eyes that could blaze with sudden fury when Aladar saw a mean or cruel deed; and that then did not hold in their depths the least trace of Christian charity. In such moments not only the scholar vanished; but also the priest gave place to the captain of Hussars who had returned from the war disgusted and horrified, and had entered the priesthood, hoping thus to find his own salvation and that of humanity. He was not exactly popular with his bishop, and though he had been made a monsignore, a prelate, he would probably remain in the small parish all his life. He did not mind; he was not ambitious. He only wanted to discover the roots of the evil that had poisoned the world. He frequently believed he was on the verge of

the great discovery, but after some time he regularly found a new source of evil mentioned in the works of patristic writers and mystics. Just now he had taken up the fight against the heresy of the Manichees, that, according to him, had spread since the Great War and was the cause of all things evil and unhappy. Lost in thought, Clarisse looked serious, and old Ján, who knew her well, was afraid of having offended her. He tried to make amends.

"It's Baroness Margit who ought to wear the cassock," he said in a propitiating voice. "She would have made an excellent archbishop."

Clarisse hastily veiled her eyes beneath heavy, white lids. She feared the old man seeing anger and bitterness looking out of them. Margit, always Margit. . . She was loved, admired, and praised by all, even though some people did laugh at her, good-naturedly and indulgently, as one laughs at an *enfant terrible*. Clarisse turned up her nose: *enfant terrible* at thirty-four. . . Of course Margit did not look a year older than twenty-five, but then *she* had never had to work for her living.

The roses were packed and Clarisse returned to the silent house and went to her bedroom. Tommy, the little yellow dog with the big black eyes, was sitting on the sofa. He greeted her with a wildly wagging tail. She sat down beside him and patted his dear tousled head.

She was feeling deadly tired; her back ached and a black mood of discouragement and depression fell upon her. She groped for the small yellow paw and held it tight, whilst Tommy snuggled closer. But even the comforting warmth of his little body did not make her feel better. She shivered, and went and stood in front of the gigantic, old-fashioned green-tiled stove, in which great logs were burning brightly. How she feared and hated these moods that took her by the throat and mauled her like a wild beast; torturing doubts, a crushing sense of utter futility.

Aunt Anny, her dead mother's sister, often scolded her gently.

"You've inherited these silly moods from your French ancestress, Victoire. She nearly drove her poor husband

mad with them. Don't give way, my child. After all you've got enough to eat; the world is beautiful; and God has given you a charming husband."

Clarisse seemed to hear the soft low voice sounding in her ears, but she shook off the haunting memory and thought angrily: my charming husband . . . What's the good of having a charming husband if he does not understand one, and one does not understand him. Margit and he understood each other . . . She shivered again, remembering the dark days five years ago when her cousin Margit had come to live with her brother Aladar. Robert had suddenly woken up from his moody dreams and become human and even cheerful. Margit had had time to spare for him, time to sit for hours in his study, talking, listening, looking up at Robert with those lovely violet eyes of hers. Under her influence he had grown younger, less reserved; almost talkative. The winter had seemed endless to Clarisse. She had gently been shelved; thrust aside; forgotten. She had not even tried to put up a fight. What was the good of it? What was the good of anything in the world? She grew thin and pale and almost as morose and taciturn as her husband had been. Then, one spring day—Clarisse still remembered the golden haze floating over the garden—Margit had come out on the veranda and had asked her, without mincing words:

"Do you care for Robert?"

Clarisse had felt an icy shiver run down her spine. The answer had stuck in her throat, she could only say:

"Why?"

"Look here," Margit had said, "don't let's pretend. You know what I mean. I've fallen in love with him and I think I could make him grow fond of me if I tried." She had smiled. "I don't think I should have to try very hard." Then, growing serious, she had added: "But I don't hold with taking a man away from a woman who loves him. Tell me the truth. You know you're terribly queer, sometimes you seem as cold as an icicle, then again you're affectionate and perfectly sweet. I never know which is the real you."

Clarisse had remained silent. She will take him away

from me, she had thought despairingly. I shall lose him for ever. How am I going to live without him? Of course we don't understand each other. Perhaps, because he is too sensitive; perhaps because I am too hard, because I have got into the habit of treating him like a stranger, or, worse still, like a child. Nevertheless . . .

Margit had been watching her. After a short while she had said rather wistfully:

"Don't trouble to say anything. It's all right. Try and forgive me, Clarisse, if you can."

She had lit one of the eternal cigars she insisted upon smoking, had puffed at it in silence for a minute or so and then suddenly begun to laugh.

"You must not believe that I'm being terribly generous and self-sacrificing. I've just come from an awful scene with Aladar. After telling me what he thought of me, and I can't say that his thoughts were very flattering, he told me to choose between Robert and the parish. And as the parish really can't get on without me . . ."

She had kissed Clarisse and gone out of the room, and, for a few months, out of Robert's and Clarisse's life. When she returned she was once more the old friend; the gay companion; the merry, pugnacious Margit whom the parish loved and feared.

At Korompa life had gone on as before. Robert, haunted by an obscure sense of guilt, had tried to make it up with his wife. But as he hated scenes and heart-to-heart talks, he had expected her to understand his remorse without his having to put it into words. One day he brought home Tommy, a tiny woolly creature, and laid him on Clarisse's lap.

"I thought perhaps you would like to have him."

She had known quite well what he wanted to say, and had felt like falling on his neck, but a sudden feeling of anger had made her answer:

"*He*, at least, will not be unfaithful to me."

Robert had stepped back as if she had struck him, and left the room. They went on living under the one roof, without quarrelling, good friends in the eyes of the world; but

Clarisse's sensitive face grew harder as the years went by, and Robert often gave the impression of a man who does not know where he belongs and feels desperately lonely.

Clarisse made an impatient movement, and Tommy jumped from the sofa and stood up on his hind legs. His black eyes looked at her adoringly; she stooped and took him in her arms: darling, at least I've got you. . . .

The room was bathed in a golden light. The sunbeams fell straight upon the portrait of a thin, small woman with enormous black eyes: the almost legendary ancestress of the Herdegens, grandmaman Inez, who still lived on in the hearts of her descendants as if death had no power over her. Aunt Anny, the faithful upholder of family tradition, was wont to consult the dead woman in intricate affairs: what would grandmaman Inez have done?

Clarisse gazed at the portrait. What was it that had given that strange immortality to grandmaman Inez? She almost feared meeting the black eyes, the severe, rather other-worldly look of a woman who had never considered herself and lived for others all the many years of her life. With a sudden sense of humility Clarisse thought: how different from me.

The weariness left her as unexpectedly as it had come, and with it her depression disappeared. She put down Tommy and went into the bathroom.

Going downstairs half an hour later, she saw Robert come through the veranda door. He threw her an apologetic glance; Clarisse responded with an unpleasant smile.

"So sorry, dear, I overslept myself." He looked at her like a small boy who expects to be punished for some misdeed.

She walked past him without a word and went into the dining-room. He followed her slowly and said, rather crossly, for he hated people not accepting unspoken apologies:

"It's absurd your getting up in the middle of the night. You might just as well drive to town an hour or two later."

Clarisse lifted her eyebrows whilst she gave him the same

answer she had given him for years whenever she had to bring the roses to Bratislava:

"You really should know by now that the roses must be bedded out the same day, darling."

The "darling" was an afterthought, meant to hide the impatience betrayed by her voice; but Robert heard only the tone and his face grew dark, whilst his eyes took on what Clarisse called their "orphan-look". Dear me, she thought, how awful, I've spoilt the whole morning for him. I wish he would not look at me like that, I never know whether I want to kiss and comfort him or to smack his face. She whistled for Tommy, who was standing at the open door, and sat down at the breakfast table.

"Joseph did not come home till morning," Robert said gloomily. It did him good to tell her something unpleasant.

Clarisse shrugged and poured herself out a cup of coffee. "He's hopeless."

Robert took up arms for their cousin.

"Some people," he declared rather sententiously, "sentitive people must . . ."

"Drink," she interrupted him impatiently. "If only he were not so clever. When I think of his last book . . . It really is a shame. If he were a fool and wrote badly . . ."

"As other people do, eh, Clarisse?"

There, she had done it again. Of course he thought that she had meant him and his unfortunate poems. She smiled unkindly and said, her voice trembling with nervousness:

"Oh, for goodness sake, don't trot out your inferiority complex. You know it's only a pose. Stop looking like a child martyr, and give me some coffee. I've been up ever since five o'clock."

Why did I tell him when I got up, she thought, half remorsefully; he's sure to imagine I meant to reproach him.

But, strange to say, he did not feel hurt.

"My poor Clarisse. And I slept whilst you worked. What a shame."

Eager to make amends, he not only poured her out a second cup, but heaped toast and jam on her plate as if she had been starving for days. Her face grew softer and she

told herself—how often had she done so during her married life?—I really could not have married a nicer and kinder man. Probably he can't help writing bad poems, poor dear, and living in a world of his own where there is no such thing as work and money and all the horrible little vexations that spoil my life. She smiled and looked younger and prettier.

"Thank you, darling."

The door flew open and a thin, tall, slovenly-looking man entered the room.

"Joseph, how nice that you've come to breakfast. Sit down. Robert, be an angel and bring another cup."

Joseph Braun sat down heavily.

"I don't want any breakfast. I was dead drunk last night."

He's rather proud of it, poor Joseph, Clarisse thought compassionately. She had a weakness for her clever cousin and forgave him most things.

"Yes, I've been drinking hard. I know I ought to be ashamed of myself. A captain on half-pay of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy that has ceased to exist—and a good thing that it has; I found that out last night. . . . I want to apprise you that I have given up being a monarchist . . . Kindly make a note of it."

He stared at them expectantly, awaiting an outcry or at least some sign of amazement, and looked greatly disappointed when Robert only asked dryly: "Why?"

"I met a man from my old regiment last night in Bratislava. If the monarchists are like him . . . you can't imagine the crass stupidity and vulgar greed . . ."

"Some of them are quite decent," Robert interposed. He suffered from a chronic sense of justice that sometimes drove Clarisse wild.

"I don't know. Anyhow, I'm fed up with them. I always judge an idea from its adherents. When I was a Red . . ."

"I know, a tram conductor called you a dirty Jew." Clarisse knew the story by heart. "And you were furious, partly because he had taken you for a Jew, partly because

you remembered your Jewish grandparents and felt insulted as a Jew."

Joseph looked hurt.

"No need to rub in the Jewish grandparents; you must not forget, my dear cousin, that they're on my father's side. Your late mother and my mother were sisters."

"Don't!" Robert called out. "It's only just half-past eight. For goodness sake don't get talking family. It always reminds me of the gospel I never could learn by heart as a child: 'and begot and begot'. According to the doctrine of heredity, we Herdegens, always marrying cousins, ought to walk about on our hands and feet, and bark."

"The Herdegens who did not marry cousins are much more likely to do so," Joseph said spitefully.

Clarisse laughed and lit a cigarette.

"You're thinking of the Bredars. But they never belonged. They always were Prussians."

The sound of wheels on the drive made her jump up.

"I've got to hurry."

Joseph shook his head disapprovingly.

"If you had a decent car instead of the sorry old jades . . ."

"You'd say: if you had a pair of decent horses instead of the old bus."

Clarisse kissed Robert on the tiny bald place on his head, and he was annoyed because he felt that she wanted to draw attention to it. To Joseph she gave only a short nod; the sorry old jades still rankled. Smiling back at her husband, she ran from the room.

"She's an angel your wife and my cousin," Joseph declared wistfully. "No other woman would have a drunkard like me in her house; not even for a day. And she lets me have the whole right wing; without my paying for it," said Joseph, whose father was a millionaire, and whose books brought in a small fortune. "Besides, she treats me like a human being and never preaches like that odious Margit does. I don't deserve her kindness, I really . . ." He was growing maudlin, his voice began trembling ominously. "I really don't deserve it."

Robert hurriedly put a cup of coffee before him.

"Coffee without milk and sugar. Just the thing for a drunkard. You're perfectly right. But what has made a drunkard of me? What is it that drives me into pot-houses and ale-shops?"

"Drink your coffee while it's hot."

Joseph sipped it and made a face.

"No sugar, no milk, as bitter and horrid as my life."

He hastily put down the cup and reached for the sugar-basin. The sound of voices came through the window. The roses were being put into the old phaeton.

"Yes, Clarisse is an angel. There she goes, poor dear, earning money for you and herself. Rather vulgar though, selling flowers. A kind of white-slave traffic in roses. Just the thing for our times. If only your late father-in-law had not loved reading Baudelaire and Mallarmé and had not believed that a country that brought forth such men must be able to stabilise its currency and that he would be perfectly safe speculating in French francs . . . Poor Uncle Stanislas. But, of course, if you call a boy Stanislas he's bound to ruin himself. *Nomen est omen.*"

"Don't say that. Think of your namesake, of great-uncle Joseph who married the French girl and lived to be ninety. He was sober, sensible, and tolerant; not like you." Robert's face grew thoughtful. "Your mother once told me that Joseph had adored his French wife. After her death he looked upon the world as a kind of waiting-room at the station from where the trains left for heaven. Your mother often says charming things."

He got up.

"Come along, old man. The post has brought a big parcel from the bookseller. Let's see what he sent."

The horses knew their way. Clarisse, who was driving, could give herself up to her thoughts. How often had she driven from Korompa to Bratislava? She could not remember. As a small girl on the uneven road with the carriage almost submerged in mud during spring and autumn; ash-

trees growing wild on both sides. To-day the road was even and straight. Gazing at the rain-washed, glittering asphalt, Clarisse felt something akin to pride. The road seemed a symbol. Villages and towns had become connected; far-away places, hidden away in the valleys of the Carpathian mountains, were lonely no longer. Perhaps the rather too tidily trimmed trees were a symbol, too; the slight exaggeration of a young Republic that had a lot of tidying up to do.

Driving past a swampy meadow covered with snowdrops, they turned to the left and saw in the distance the steeple of Aladar's church. Shortly before reaching it they came to a green hill, the village Mount Calvary. As usual when Ján was with her, Clarisse pulled up the horses; the old gardener bared his head, crossed himself and murmured: "We praise and bless Thee, Lord Jesus, for by Thy holy Cross Thou hast saved the whole world." He must have said the words more than a thousand times, and Clarisse must have heard them just as often; but to-day they struck her as never before: salvation by the Cross, by pain and suffering—how ill the thought fitted in with the bright sunny morning.

She gave the horses their heads and drove on. They reached the townlet with its fine Gothic church and Gothic tower hall. The place was neither a borough nor a village; it gave the impression of a young town that had suddenly stopped growing. Aladar's presbytery stood in a big garden behind the church. Clarisse would have offended him mortally had she not looked him up on her way to town.

Stopping in front of the house, she heard loud, excited voices. She drove into the courtyard and saw the parish priest surrounded by three Sisters of Charity. He was leaning against the yellow wall, looking miserable as always when he had to come to a decision. Margit was just about to enter the house, followed by a small boy. Turning round, she saw Clarisse.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "Our courtyard has been turned into a lunatic asylum." She threw an angry look at one of the nuns. "Go into the kitchen, my son. The cook will give you something to eat." She gave the boy a gentle push and came back.

Aladar clutched at her arm.

"Don't run away. Stay here for goodness sake. You know that I . . ." He stopped short, but an expressive gesture spoke his utter helplessness.

Sister Martha, fat, red-faced and greatly excited, thrust herself forward.

"We can't take in all the stray brats of the country," she said in a hard voice.

The Mother-Superior, white-haired, with a fine, tired face, interposed gently:

"After all, it's for me to decide, Sister Martha."

"Yes. But *I've* got to look after the children."

The old nun seemed to shrink into herself.

"You're right, Sister," she said in a low voice, "I'm old and cannot work any longer. Nevertheless . . ."

"Let Father Jeszenak decide," advised little Sister Veronica, who, round-faced and big-eyed, looked like a child.

Clarisse tried to hide a smile: Aladar was called upon to decide . . .

But before the priest could open his mouth Sister Martha forestalled him:

"We know nothing whatever about the boy. I believe he isn't even a Christian," she said spitefully.

The priest nodded.

"I think so, too. He certainly looks like a little Hebrew."

"A dirty Jew," Sister Martha said scornfully.

The big dark eyes under the heavy, weary lids suddenly opened wide and glared at the nun; but the priest's voice remained gentle, unpleasantly so, with a touch of haughtiness.

"You would probably have used the very same words to describe our Lord if you had lived at Nazareth and had belonged to the master-race of the Romans, Sister Martha."

She flushed an ugly red.

"I . . . I . . ."

Margit came to her brother's aid. She was less gentle than he, and more supercilious. She stared at the nun without saying a word, till Sister Martha grew nervous and began to fidget. Margit smiled, it was an odious smile, and said:

"*Tiens, tiens.* And you're supposed to be a Sister of Charity."

Then she suddenly lost her temper, and Clarisse wondered where her cousin had heard the impossible expressions she was using.

The old Mother-Superior turned away to conceal a smile. Noticing it, Margit grew calmer, and said:

"Don't you think I'm right, dear Mother-Superior? What is one to do when an elderly sadist comes along in the guise of a Sister of Charity and dares to contradict her parish priest and . . ."

Aladar lifted his hand.

"Stop talking," he said with a sigh. "Don't make such an awful noise. I want the child to go to the orphanage. I also want him to be treated with great kindness. Further I want Sister Martha to read the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 25, and the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 25. Both to be done before she goes to sleep to-night."

He eyed the nun with mournful disgust.

"The Corinthians must have been somewhat like Sister Martha," he added thoughtfully, "otherwise St. Paul would not have had to write that letter. But I don't know . . ." His dark eyes grew round and childlike and his voice dreamy. "I always had an idea that the Corinthian women were good to look at, whereas . . ."

He broke off, his eyes still gazing with displeasure at the red face of the nun.

Clarisse choked with suppressed laughter. She knew that Margit's rudeness was as nothing compared to Aladar's words and his long penetrating look. And she asked herself whether he, who had come to the priesthood rather late in life, knew it too. One could never tell with Aladar.

"The Baroness has insulted me. She has called me a sadist."

Sister Martha puffed out her red cheeks and snorted, eager for battle.

The priest nodded.

"She was wrong. I cannot agree with her, Sister Martha.

The Marquis de Sade was a well-bred, hyper-cultivated man, and his cruelty was purely a sexual . . ."

"Aladar!"

"Aladar, please!"

His eyes more childlike than ever, Aladar looked at Margit and Clarisse.

"What have I said? I merely mentioned a well-known historical fact."

Then his glance fell on little Sister Veronica, and he smiled apologetically.

"You're right. What I said was not meant for little girls."

He turned to the young nun.

"Tell me all about the boy, Sister Veronica. You found him and took him to the orphanage, didn't you?"

"Yes. He's deaf and dumb, poor dear," the little nun said compassionately. "A railway man found him hidden in a cattle truck. I was in the market-place buying vegetables for our children when I met them. The boy isn't from our part of the world. He seems frightened to death, poor darling."

"Will you fetch him, my child?" the priest said kindly, and a moment later the young nun returned with the boy. He was clinging to her hand and shaking all over.

The priest went closer and began talking to him in the deaf and dumb alphabet. At first the boy only stared at him in a bewildered way; then he, too, lifted his hands and began to move his fingers. It looked as if he were repeating the same words over and over again. After a little while the priest cut short the strange conversation.

"Take him home," he said to the nuns, and his voice was full of pain. "And be very kind to him."

He walked slowly towards the house. His sister and Clarisse took leave of the nuns and followed him into the large, rather cheerless library. Aladar sat down and gazed at the books filling the shelves and book-cases.

"It's always the same," he said despondently. "Always the same."

"What did the boy say?" Margit inquired.

"He said: 'They're all dead, my parents, my grand-

parents. Men are wicked. They're dead, they're all dead.'"

The hopeless words sounded like the tolling of a bell, sad, hollow and threatening. "Dead, dead." Margit looked furious. Her compassion always wore the red garb of anger.

"I'd like to murder Martha," she said.

"Yes, but the old nun is an angel," Clarisse interposed.

"You're right. She's a real saint. Much too good for our world . . ."

The priest seemed to come back from a great distance. He looked at the two women and the familiar room as if he had never seen them before and was trying to place them.

"Saints," he said, more to himself than to the others, "never before have we needed them so badly as nowadays." He grew animated: "If the heresy preached by the Manichees . . ."

Clarisse jumped up and ran to the door. Opening it wide, she waved to her cousins. She had no time to listen to Aladar's lecture on the Manichees; besides she had heard it more than once.

"I really must go. I'll never get to town in time."

"Drop in for a cup of tea on your way home," Margit begged. "I've got a lot to tell you. I'm terribly annoyed with . . ."

"With whom?"

"With everyone. Just imagine, Svata, the silly boy . . ."

"Tell me another time, I really must go. Ján is cracking his whip to call me."

"Just a moment. I must . . ."

But Clarisse had already reached the courtyard and had jumped into the carriage. They drove slowly through the place. The small houses jutted out, gazing with curious, sparkling eyes at the opposite side of the narrow street. Their lower parts were painted blue and red and the colours shone brightly in the sun. A large, almost fashionable-looking shop stood out against the tiny ones. Behind the glittering pane lay cotton-reels of various colours, respectable-looking black and brown darning cotton, coloured skeins of wool, gaily painted darning-balls, thimbles in all sizes. The

peculiar smell of a haberdashery shop came through the open door; a mixture of wool, cloth-dressing, milk-coffee, moth-balls and cowslips. Clarisse waved to Elisabeth Vyskocil, who was washing the steps.

"Are you all well and happy?" she called out, and smiled at the girl's enthusiastic: "Oh yes, thank you; ever so well." A happy woman and the wife of a happy husband. Rather a pleasant sight.

At a turning of the road stood the orphanage with red geraniums in the window. In the niche of the wall over the front door, a figure of Christ opened wide its arms and an inscription in faded gold letters proclaimed: "Suffer the little children to come to Me." Remembering Sister Martha, Clarisse smiled mockingly.

They left the townlet all golden in the morning sun. On both sides of the road green fields gleamed softly in the strong light. In the distance a wide silver ribbon grew larger and came closer: the Danube.

At a cross-road stood a shrine with a statue of Our Lady. A figure that had been kneeling before the Madonna got up quickly, hearing the carriage drive past. A stony, transparently pale face turned towards Clarisse, who gave a friendly nod. To her amazement the girl standing in the road shook her head violently and lifted a clenched hand in a threatening gesture. Ján said grumpily:

"She's a beast, that Emma Leberfinger. Just like her father. Never a kind word for anyone. And the way she runs after the boys. She makes her poor sister's life a hell; because Elisabeth demeaned herself by marrying a Czech! As if fine missy would not have been only too glad to become Mrs. Vyskocil."

Clarisse remained silent; the stony hostile face seemed to be floating in the air, keeping beside the carriage and threatening her.

The following hours belonged to the roses. Spring had come late this year and the plants had to be bedded out with great care. Ján gave the orders. Clarisse would never have

dared to treat the experienced gardeners of the great public park so cavalierly. The eldest of them had worked here at the time when the Magyars were masters of the country. He wore his moustache with a martial twirl and looked every inch a soldier, even when only cutting away a tiny branch that had got broken during the drive. He spoke Hungarian, and Ján, who had gone to a Magyar school—there being no others in his time—could understand him. The young Slovak who in the new Republic had been taught in his native tongue, and did not know a word of Hungarian, spoke German with the old Magyar. Neither of them seemed to mind or to see anything funny in it. They were only interested in the roses, the new dwarf rose, the *Rosa Rouletti* that was being planted in the rock garden—beginning with the third plant the greenhouse of Korompa had brought forth; because the first was being kept for Our Lady of Marianka and the second was going to Lana. The gardeners also grew enthusiastic about another plant, the lovely child of an Austrian dog-rose and the French bloom called *Antoine Ducher*. When summer came it would flame in many colours, coralline, brownish-red, copper and orange. The third gardener, who came from the Austrian Burgenland, grinned proudly: "There you are. The world can't get along without us Austrians." The old Magyar gave a contemptuous smile, but the young Slovak laughed good-naturedly.

Clarisse was feeling tired again. "I'm getting old," she thought; and rebelled body and soul against the passing of youth, a youth that the Great War had robbed of happiness, peace and security. "We're all partially cracked and haunted by a nameless fear. Robert still tries to escape from the horrors of a war he cannot forget, by writing poetry and holding himself aloof from a world which he has never been able to understand ever since he joined up in 1914. And poor Joseph too, driven to drink, desperately trying to find out where he belongs and always being disillusioned. Aladar also, in his own way; how well I remember him as captain of the Hussars; so light-hearted and gay. Who would have thought that he would become a priest?" She smiled: if

ever there was a round peg in a square hole . . . She often wondered what it was that made him so popular with his parishioners. For months at a time he never gave them a thought; buried in his books; intent upon proving that once again the Manichee-heresy was poisoning humanity as it had done in the days of St. Augustine. Then something seemingly unimportant happened and the cranky scholar awoke, sharp-eyed and keen, suddenly remembering that he was responsible for the spiritual welfare of his parish. His male parishioners he treated rather as he had treated his soldiers, and as to the female ones, the old women of both sexes said he had not forgotten that long ago he had made love to every woman he met. They disapproved of this weakness. Margit was frequently forced to listen to their complaint and, unfortunately, the bishop, too.

Clarisse recalled the little scene with Sister Martha; then she thought of the child. Was it right to leave the terrified boy at the orphanage? The Mother-Superior and little Sister Veronica would of course pet and spoil him; but the other nun, the woman with the cold eyes and the harsh voice, who seemed to have taken a dislike to the boy . . . One really ought to . . . Clarisse shook her head: one ought to do so many things; but she was much too tired and taken up by her own troubles. Besides, why not be honest? She did not really care. After all, Margit was there, Margit who had a finger in every pie and who could always be relied upon to do what was needful.

Old Ján cleared his throat, croaking like a raven, and Clarisse looked up.

"We've come to the last bed," Ján said. "I think the tea-roses would look well over there. And they'd get just as much sun as they want."

Clarisse followed him to the place he pointed at. Kneeling down she began bedding out the roses. How good the earth smelt. Sometimes she thought that nowhere else did the earth smell so good, so fertile, so fresh. She had lived in the country for so many years that she had learnt, like a peasant, to love the earth; to love its mysterious forces and hidden fertility. A great tenderness flooded her whole being;

love for the park; the town; the whole land. She smiled, thinking of her Viennese relations, half reproachful, half condescending: "How you can stand living in a Slovak village, we'd go melancholy mad . . ."

How long had she been living on the estate? Had she really ever lived anywhere else? Could she bear to live anywhere else? Taking over the badly-managed estate after the Great War she had felt as if her father had left her a small paradise. Robert, too, had grown fond of Korompa. He enjoyed the quiet and the solitude although he pretended that the sleepy surroundings were bad for his writing. Never failing to add, with a wistful look: "If you cared the least bit for my poems, Clarisse, it would not be so bad."

The last rose had been planted. Clarisse was glad that the long day was over. During the last years she had acquired the habits of an elderly cat, hating to leave her home for more than an hour or two.

Pale mist rose from the dark flowing waters of the Danube; twining round bare branches; floating over garden paths; soaring up, driven by the wind; bringing damp cold in its train. The sadness of a spring gloaming clutched at Clarisse's heart. She shook herself impatiently, trying to drive away the harrowing thoughts. Why did they always return? Now that she was forty her life ought to be more peaceful, her outlook more cheerful. She was living in a country that was sure of a happy, prosperous future; amongst a people she loved. Why did an unreasoning secret fear lie ambushed in her soul, always ready to break out and attack her? She turned round, looking for Ján.

"Let's go," she said nervously. She knew that her mood would change for the better as soon as she held the reins. They drove over the bridge; past the graceful steeple of the Franciscan church; past the new skyscrapers that Clarisse hated; to the high road. It gleamed yellow in the twilight; the ash trees, swathed in mist, seemed to bar the way with black and hostile arms. Old Ján, tired out by the day's work, fell asleep; and Clarisse felt as if she were driving all alone in a silent country over which hovered the shadow of death.

She was glad to reach the townlet although here too life was beginning to glide into sleep. All the windows were shuttered; the street was deserted; but somehow the silence seemed kindly and comforting. Two people came out of a small house: a man and a woman. The woman stopped and called out: "Clarisse!"

"Margit!"

Of course Margit had to come along just as she was driving past. Now she would be dragged to the presbytery, made to drink tea and to listen to Margit's endless tales about the parish. It would be quite dark before she got home. But Margit's thoughts were elsewhere. Patting one of the horses, she said:

"We've just been assisting twins to come into that queer world of ours."

"Twins?"

Screwing up her eyes Clarisse recognised Doctor Hynek Silberthal. He said good evening, adding:

"Baroness Margit ought to have been a midwife. I'd never have pulled little Anicka through without her help."

Margit snorted angrily as always when she was praised, and lit a cigar. Its red end shone in the darkness like a tiny star.

"Why," she mused aloud, "must poor women always have twins? We've been with Anicka ever since noon. I was horribly afraid of her dying on our hands. And now, instead of going home and having my tea I must look up the Hrubins. The old woman wants me to talk to the boy. She's afraid he's becoming an atheist." She puffed at her cigar, then she suddenly switched over to her *idée fixe*: "How much simpler life would be if there existed no village of Ruzomberok and no Father Hlinka."

Clarisse sighed resignedly; she knew all about Margit's pet aversion.

"That old man with his eternal slogan of a free and independent Slovakia drives our people crazy. Beware of false prophets..."

Ján made an angry gesture and Margit, who always saw everything, said hastily:

"Mind, I'm not saying anything against the old man personally. But I really don't know what he wants. It was all right as long as the Magyars oppressed us; and of course he *was* a martyr and *was* in prison for quite a time. But he really might keep quiet now and prepare for death instead of stirring up our boys and inciting them against the government in Prague. He's got hold of Svata, too, and the old woman wants me to bring the boy to his senses."

"He's fond of you; he'll believe what you tell him."

"I know, but why *I*? Couldn't Aladar tackle him and tell him what's what? He did try once but unfortunately he discovered a certain resemblance between the old man of Ruzomberok and a heretic who lived in the third or fourth century, and was so delighted by his discovery that he kept Svata sitting in the library for hours whilst he lectured on heretics, ancient and modern. When the poor boy left the house it was, naturally enough, under the impression that his parish priest was absolutely mad."

The doctor laughed.

"Don't laugh!" Margit turned upon him like an angry cat. "You haven't got to worry about the salvation of a parish and its bodily welfare. And it's not up to you to prevent your brother getting into his bishop's black books and..."

She broke off short. A broad-shouldered, tall figure came out of the shadows walking along heavily. At every step the cassock slipped aside revealing shining black jack-boots.

"Talk of the devil," Margit said crossly.

"Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ," said the young priest, using the usual Slovak greeting. Margit's "In eternity" sounded more like a curse than a pious response. "Are you coming to see us, Father Gogolak?"

"Later on if I may. I've got to go to mother Hrubin first."

"You mean Svata. Oh, I know, and my brothers know all about it too. If I were you, Father, I'd stop preaching my new and wicked gospel."

Standing beside the carriage like a black ghost the tall figure stiffened. It was too dark to see the young priest's face

but Clarisse sensed the wild anger and hatred distorting his features.

"Perhaps you would kindly allow me to take counsel with the Monsignore at least as far as spiritual questions are concerned. That's to say if the Monsignore has leisure for that kind of thing," he added with a sneer.

Ignoring his insolence, Margit laughed.

"So long, Clarisse. Good-bye, doctor. I'm going to accompany Father Gogolak to the Hrubins. I'm sure he'll be glad of my company. Come along, Father."

She waved to Clarisse and went off, taking the same giant steps as the young priest who walked reluctantly by her side.

Clarisse turned to the doctor.

"Why was Margit so disagreeable? What is it all about?"

"I don't quite know. People tell queer tales about the priest of Sokolovce; but you know what gossips they all are." He fell silent for a moment; then he said in a different tone: "Wish me luck, Countess Clarisse. I'm getting married next month."

Clarisse felt uncomfortable. She was fond of the doctor and the idea that he was going to marry affected, fair-haired Else Gerstner worried her. What did the man want to marry for? Why did anyone marry? Her "All the best" did not sound very convincing. She noticed it herself and said quickly:

"I never expected it. I always thought..."

"Because Else refused me so often?" The doctor laughed softly. "I must confess that you might have knocked me down with a feather when she said: 'Yes.' But she has changed a lot since she came home. And even her parents, who did not want her to marry me... after all I'm a Jew; and I only came here ten years ago, whereas the Gerstners have been in Bratislava for three hundred years. I believe they used to sell jewels to the Empress Maria Theresia. Well, even they seem rather pleased."

"I'm so glad," Clarisse said mechanically and untruthfully. "Else is charming. I do hope you will be very happy."

"Thank you."

In the faint light of the carriage lamps Clarisse saw a blissful smile on the doctor's face. Apparently even the cleverest men are idiots when it comes to judging a pretty woman. She nodded to the doctor.

"I've got to go. Come and see us soon. Good night."

"Good night."

They drove on in the dark. Clarisse was longing for her easy chair, a cup of tea and the bright, cheerful comfort of the old manor-house. Ján said abruptly:

"Baroness Margit ought not to abuse Father Hlinka. It makes people angry."

"But listen, Ján..."

"I don't want to say anything. I know nothing. But one has got to be careful nowadays."

He ceased talking and only the hoof-beat of the trotting horses and the noise of the wheels sounded in the night.

They reached Mount Calvary. The moon had risen and the white clouds floating across the sky had a sickly, leprous colour. One of them hovered over the three crosses on the hill-top, seeming to touch them with ghostly hands. Ján crossed himself and murmured a prayer. Clarisse spurred on the horses. She did not want to see the uncanny light illuminating the crosses, nor the small shrines climbing up the hill. She had always been afraid of the cruelly realistic figures of Mount Calvary, of the pain and suffering they portrayed so mercilessly.

She drew a deep breath on seeing in the distance the lights of the manor-house. How kind a thing lights were; they helped us to bear the night; they tided us over the darkness till dawn brought relief. Once more her mood changed. To-morrow the garden would again be bathed in sunshine; tulips and hyacinths would come out; the olive tree on the lawn would be covered with tiny buds and the damp meadows on the river bank would be turned into a field of gold by the gently swaying dandelions. Winter was past; death had been conquered; we lived again; the whole world lived; everything would sprout and grow, blossoms would smell sweet in the spring air and the corn in the fields would ripen. Life was good after all.

Driving up to the house she saw Robert standing on the steps.

"I'm glad you're back at last. You're terribly late."

She laughed, pleased to know that her absence had caused him uneasiness, and jumped out of the phaeton. Tommy, standing beside her husband, barked joyously and frisked about madly. Robert took her arm.

"Come into the house. It's growing chilly."

Through the open door yellow light and delightful warmth flowed out. Music greeted her. Joseph was seated at the piano in the drawing-room, playing a Mozart sonata.

Elisabeth Vyskocil was a happy woman. Having closed the shutters she was tidying up the shop and at the same time, as she frequently did when evening came, counting over her blessings; tasting them one by one like a child munching sweets. First of all there was big Hanus, the kind, gentle, affectionate giant with the flaxen hair and the child-like blue eyes; with the chanting intonation and the pathetic helplessness of a man who has to express his love in a language in which he does not feel at home. On duty, gendarme Hanus Vyskocil was neither clumsy nor timid, although even here he would often have liked to look the other way; if only people would have let him. Elisabeth stooped and picked up a cotton-reel that had fallen off the shelf. She had had to pay a heavy price for her happiness. Her father who lived in a small white house at Petrzalka, on the other side of the Danube, had never forgiven her for marrying a Czech.

She could still hear his rasping voice: "My daughter, my daughter wants to marry a Czech! A Leberfingler wants to mate with a Czech! Haven't I told you time and again that the Leberfingers came from Swabia to Pressburg in the reign of the Empress Maria Theresia? Yes, to Pressburg, for it is a German town and that is its real name, not the Hungarian *Pozsony* or the Slovak *Bratislava*. And you want to marry an alien, a gendarme whom the Czechs have sent here to oppress the Germans? Only the other day one of

those savages made me pay a fine because I had no lamp on my bicycle . . . Yes, he dared to make me pay a fine, me, Hermann Leberfingler, whose ancestors came from Germany to this godforsaken country. Of course your mother takes your part. Serves me right for marrying a Viennese who teaches my children to flout the duty they owe their father. You're not going to marry that Vyskocil or whatever the fellow's name is. I won't have it. Understand?"

Elisabeth, nineteen and madly in love, had wept and waited impatiently for two years till she came of age. Of course things might have been worse, because after all she had spent these years in the place where Hanus was quartered, with her aunt Marie who owned a haberdashery shop, and was half paralysed, so that she needed a help. Poor Aunt Marie. Elisabeth stood motionless for a moment, duster in hand, looking at the faded photograph of her aunt hanging on the wall. It was to her she owed one of her chief blessings: the shop. When she first came to stay with her aunt, Elisabeth had felt as if one of her childhood dreams had come true. All the lovely things she used to admire behind a glass pane partly belonged to her now. She could touch the brightly coloured Berlin wool, could fashion a star from the glittering thimbles that gleamed and twinkled like real ones when the sun shone in at the window. She could unroll yard measures and laugh, watching the undulating movement of the ribbon. Her eyes never wearied of gazing at the square red boxes in which solemn dark hair-pins reposed, and at the round blue ones, containing silvery safety-pins. Pink and white tissue paper covered small cream-coloured tidies, embroidered with very blue forget-me-nots and very red roses. The more serious and severe canvas was kept uncovered, revealing beautiful cross-stitch work, those tempting but dangerous patterns, working at which the tyro so often made a mistake in counting and had to undo the whole thing. Aunt Marie even sold scissors, big ones with dancing twins on their blades, and others so small and delicate that one hardly dared to touch them with one's clumsy fourteen-year-old hands. The day was not long enough to enjoy all the wonderful things the shop contained. Even

after owning it for two years Elisabeth still felt a thrill thinking that the whole shop with all its delightful goods belonged to her. Hanus, who was clever with his hands, had made new shelves for the shop and also carved an angel for the crib of her second great blessing: little Hanus, asleep in the large and comfortable room behind the shop.

What a pity her mother had not lived to see the baby; she had died a year before Elisabeth's marriage, and two days after the wedding her father had married again, giving Elisabeth and Emma a young stepmother. Elisabeth's bright face clouded over. Of course she had had to take in her poor sister when their stepmother turned her out of the house. What would have become of Emma; all alone; uncared for; and so terribly afflicted? Hanus had agreed at once and at first everything had gone well. Then the black days came, the hours when Emma hated everyone and everything; when she felt the most miserable and loneliest creature on earth; crying out in her despair, weeping, shrieking till at last she broke down, a prey to spasms that threw her from side to side. After the attack, lying in bed, deadly pale and exhausted, she was tortured by the terrible fear that the neighbours might have heard her cries, might have noticed something.

Folding her thin hands she implored Elisabeth:

"Don't tell anyone. No one must ever know. The people would laugh at me. Elisabeth, Hanus, are you sure that no one knows, that no one will ever know?"

She hated the doctor her sister had had to call several times, because he knew her secret; and hated Clarisse Herdegen, who had once been in the shop when the fit came on; but most of all she hated little Hanus. At present, of course, he was harmless enough; but later on, when he would be six or seven, he was sure to tell the other children about his "funny aunty" who rolled on the floor and shrieked. Even during the blessed days and months when Emma was as quiet and sensible as other people; when she went everywhere and helped her sister in the house and the shop; she did not cease hating the child. Poor Emma, but perhaps she would be cured one day. If she could find a good husband,

thought Elisabeth, who looked upon a good husband as a remedy for all ills.

Hearing the clock strike seven she grew nervous; Emma ought to be home by now; she had been out since morning; Elisabeth hurried into the bedroom; little Hanus was fast asleep; she could leave him alone for a little while.

She put on her coat, took her torch and went to look for Emma. She had not far to go. As she turned into the next street Emma came towards her. She seemed to be in a hurry and was singing at the top of her voice. Elisabeth felt frightened, but Emma did not show the least anger; she took her arm, laughed, sang, tripped along like a little girl, jumped for joy. At home she fell upon Elisabeth's neck.

"I'm saved, Elisabeth. I shall get well, I shall get perfectly well."

It was a shout of exultation; Emma warbled, trilled, her voice growing shriller with every word. Elisabeth looked at her anxiously.

"Don't look like that, I'm not going to be ill. Listen, let me tell you all about it. I was kneeling before Our Lady, you know the shrine at the cross-road; and a man came along. But perhaps he wasn't a man, perhaps he was a saint, an angel, a prophet . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"He spoke to me and his dark eyes rested on my face. I don't know what happened to me but my heart burnt within me and I told him everything. All about my affliction, my misery, my fear, everything . . ."

She broke off, laughing blissfully.

"What did he say?"

"I wish I could tell you what I felt listening to him. He was like a living flame. Once it seemed to me as if he were lifted up and floating in the air. And I, too, was lifted up. He told me that a new saviour had come, greater and more powerful than Christ, a saviour who would lead his nation from victory to victory. He and his people would conquer the earth and be mighty and happy. But the new saviour will also punish," her voice broke into a shriek, "he will revenge the wrong done to us."

"Who has wronged us?" Elisabeth asked, slightly bewildered.

"I must not tell you. Not yet. But if I follow *Him*, if I spread *His* gospel I shall grow well and strong."

Elisabeth felt an icy shiver run down her spine.

"Who was the man? You can't believe everything a stranger tells you."

"That's what he said. He told me that many will not believe in him and his master, because we are a depraved generation. And all those who do not believe will be punished. And also those who are not chosen as I am, as..."

She stopped dead.

"Go on."

"You're a spy. You want me to tell you everything, to make a traitor of me."

Again her voice grew shrill. Her words were incoherent, running one into the other as if she were drunk.

"You'll see," she went on. "You will see, all of you, also Vyskocil, yes, Vyskocil, and Doctor Silberthal, and the Herdegens and all my enemies. Shut up!" she yelled, when Elisabeth tried to put in a word. "Shut up! Who are you? What are you? An angel has blessed me and promised me that I shall see the new, the real saviour. And you dare to contradict me? Take care! The same blood flows in our veins but your child is unclean and it will have to serve me like all the others, like all those to whom our mercy will grant life. Don't touch me; you who have mated with an inferior race; you are unclean, unclean..."

Elisabeth drew back from the threatening hands and flaming eyes. The door opened; she turned round.

"Hanus, thank God."

An agonized shriek greeted his entrance, a laugh full of hatred and mockery. "Vyskocil, the Czech, Vyskocil!" Then came the dull sound of a falling body; wildly twitching limbs; mad cries that seemed to rend the fragile figure till at last unconsciousness mercifully brought peace to tortured body and soul.

When they had gone to bed Hanus said to his wife:

"We can't keep Emma any longer. I'm worried to death

when you and the child are alone with her. After all there are lunatic asylums enough in the Republic."

Elisabeth was crying and trembling all over. Her cheeks were burning and her hands were icy cold.

"Hanus, darling, she hasn't got a soul to care for her. I angered her. It was foolish of me to contradict her. Please, darling, don't send her away."

She tried to smile, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Listen, Hanus, we're so happy. We must thank God for all He has given us. Wouldn't it show Him how grateful we are if we let the poor soul stay with us? Won't He say to us one day: 'What you did to the least of them...?'"

Hanus sighed. His wife was right, but it seemed hard to believe that God wanted them to keep a mad woman in their house. Nevertheless, he gave in; it would have been cruel to send Emma away.

"It will bring us luck," Elisabeth said. "You'll see. I wonder who the stranger was?"

"She dreamt him. We don't breed prophets in our country. Good night, darling."

He blew out the candle. The night-lights before the picture of the Virgin burnt peacefully and threw a golden gleam on little Hanus. In the next room Emma tossed on her bed, moaning in the dark.

The land lay deep in sleep. A tiny breeze played with the tender stalks of the winter corn; it looked as if the fields were breathing. Through the window of the inn at the outskirts of the townlet a pale light oozed. It was Saturday, and the men sat longer over their beer than on other days.

Svata Hrubin had come a short time ago and seated himself at a table in the darkest corner. He stared in front of him with unseeing eyes, but it was not the drink that fuddled his brain. He was trying to find the answer to a painful thought that had haunted him ever since he had begun his studies at the university. He had left his mother asleep; the kitchen untidy with many parcels Margit Jeszenak had brought. Svata shrugged angrily. Up to a year ago he had

thought it natural that the rich should help his mother, for the love of God. To-day it made him feel ashamed and humiliated. He looked round. How poverty-stricken everything was: the room, the men. What had changed since that day many years ago when the people had joyously cried in the streets: "We are free. We don't belong to Hungary any longer"? He remembered the cold winter days; the soldiers returning from the front, drinking and looting. His face grew grim. There was a reason why he should not forget. The shot that had hit the small boy in the leg had healed up badly, and Svata still walked with a slight limp. That, too, was one of the things that made him feel bitter. As to other events, he could hardly recall them. He only remembered his mother crying and saying: "At least our Tamas did not die in vain. We're free at last."

Yes, what *had* changed? The Slovaks had got their own school, where the children were taught in their mother-tongue; roads had been built; the people had ceased being a despised race; but poverty, heart-rending poverty had remained. And was it really so much better to have the Czechs in the country than the Magyars? Of course, the people in Prague were well-off; they grew rich and could say that the Republic was flourishing. But the Slovaks? He had never thought of all this before. He had only been struck by it during the last terrible winter term he had spent, starving and half-frozen, in the capital. The other students, the Germans, the Magyars and, still more, the Jews, had relations who came to their aid; besides, most of them had money of their own. Why? The young priest of Sokolovce had put this question to him and laughed scornfully when Svata had not known what to answer. But, after all, a priest was bound to know more than he. Of course many of the students did not hold with priests; some did not even believe in God. They made fun of Svata because he went to Mass on Sunday and had hung a picture of Our Lady in his shabby little room. He did not want to listen to their talk. If there were no God and no life beyond the grave, why resign oneself to starvation and cold? Better be a thief, a swindler, a burglar, a robber, a murderer, if need be.

A polite voice with a strong German accent disturbed Svata's musing. Speaking in Slovak, the voice asked permission to sit at his table. Svata looked up in surprise. People here did not stand on ceremony as a rule. He saw a tall, dark-haired, well-dressed man, who bowed stiffly, sat down, and ordered a bottle of wine.

They got talking; Svata was amazed to see how quickly he grew intimate with the stranger. They spoke of the medical profession.

"So you'll pass your last examination in two years?" the stranger said, pouring out a glass of wine for the young man.

"Where are you going to practise?"

"I don't know yet."

"Of course the capital would be the best place for you. I know all about it, because my youngest brother is a doctor, too. You get more patients and you can find all the instruments you want. A doctor needs a lot of instruments."

Svata's face grew hard. He put down his glass. The stranger had touched him on the raw. Instruments, he could not bear to think about them. Where was the money for them to come from? He thought of Doctor Silberthal's consulting-room with the shiny, brightly-polished surgical instruments lying in a row; such a long row. And with every year one kept needing more and more. The stranger did not seem to notice Svata's sudden moodiness. He talked on, speaking of new medical discoveries; of electrical instruments a doctor simply *must* possess, adding with a malicious smile:

"But a doctor's waiting-room is just as important. You must have fine, expensive-looking furniture and good pictures. And, of course, all the best periodicals. Sometimes the waiting-room does the trick."

Svata felt his cheeks grow hot. There would be no fine, expensive-looking furniture in his waiting-room, and no good pictures; as to the periodicals. . . . Of course other people could afford that kind of thing. . . . He emptied his glass and the stranger filled it anew. They went on talking, and it seemed to Svata as if the stranger was undesignedly tearing away a merciful veil from a hidden figure till at last reality

stood before his eyes, naked and sinister. He felt himself growing more bitter, more angry. What good are schools and universities to us if we are so desperately poor, if, having finished our studies, we are no better than beggars?

The stranger paid his bill. They left the inn together. A car was parked outside. "We'll meet again," the stranger said, getting into the car.

The bright eyes of the car lamps faded away and Svata set out for home. He was rather drunk, and the road seemed to slip from under his feet. Confused thoughts rushed crazily through his brain: the most modern and expensive instruments . . . a fine waiting-room . . . good pictures . . . He saw himself walking along the banks of the Danube, a book in his hand. It was less cold outside than in the damp, unheated room. Oh, the grey desolate days on the bank of the sullen, lead-coloured river, a bit of dry bread in one's pocket, a hole in one's boots, through which the damp came. Then the way home; walking through the town, past well-lit, heated coffee-houses and delicatessen-shops; stopping before a shop window where tailors' dummies displayed beautiful fur coats. Sometimes he passionately wished that he had never come to town, had never seen all the good things money could buy and did buy for others. A poor peasant leads a peaceful life; he knows the pinch of hunger and cold, but he takes it as a matter of course. At least it had been thus when Svata's father had lived.

Svata had reached the church. In the white moonlight the gargoyles grinned at him like wicked goblins. Their huge mouths seemed to be grinding and crunching some small and helpless thing. They, too, Svata thought, feeling dazed and bewildered, want to devour us. Lifting his eyes he saw, floating on a white stone cloud, an angel who pointed to the cross above him. Svata burst out laughing. The cross. That's what they teach us. The cross that has not saved the poor.

Livid with rage, he sullenly walked on. For the first time in his life Svata Hrubin passed a church without baring his head.

Marianka Hrubin sat up in bed and groped for the matches. She found them and lit the candle standing on the chair beside her. In its weak light she could see the grandfather clock. Half-past one, and Svata not home yet. Her heart felt heavy; it lay in her breast like a stone; she could hardly breathe.

She had feigned sleep when Svata had left the cottage on tiptoes. One must not bother the young; they had their own worries and sorrows. She had learnt that during the last few years. But she had never seen Svata as he was now, so embittered, so full of hatred. And he had been such a good child, helpful and affectionate. Marianka's glance fell upon a coloured print representing the Madonna, her heart pierced by seven swords. She smiled wistfully and nodded to the picture: "You knew all the sorrows of the world, holy Mother of God," she whispered. "Except one. You never had to be afraid that your son might grow up a bad man. And yet He was poor, too . . ."

Her face worked, but she swallowed her tears. A long life had taught her that weeping led to nothing. One must bear things patiently and pluckily; then God was sure to help. Perhaps she might spend less on herself, perhaps she might find some work to do in the evening, so as to let the boy have a little more money when he went back to town.

Her face grew brighter. She would talk things over with Baroness Margit, who always knew what was best. If only Svata had not been so proud; Doctor Silberthal had frequently offered him money—not as a gift, as a loan—because Svata was so clever and was sure to be such a good doctor one day. Now she was smiling. On her tired old face a merry, almost roguish smile came and went. Her boy would be a doctor; that was nearly as good as being a priest; for if a priest looked after souls, a doctor cured men of bodily ills. In her youth Svata would never have had a chance of studying at the university; but now they had their own Slovák elementary schools and high schools; they had everything they wanted. Why on earth did people go on complaining? Like Father Gogolak, who was always attacking the government at Prague. If one were to believe him, everything was

the fault of the Jews and the Czechs. . . Surely it could not be right for a priest to say such things. And the old man in Ruzomberok . . . Many said he was a saint and, of course, he did a lot of good and was kind to the poor; and the Magyars had sent him to prison years ago because he had always stood up for the rights of the Slovaks. Nevertheless, he was a hard, merciless man, and his deep-set eyes spoke more of hatred than of the love that Christ had taught. She sighed. There were so many things she found hard to understand. Only a few years ago the country had been so peaceful and happy. No man had asked the other: "Are you a Slovak, a Magyar, a German, a Czech, a Jew?" But now, that question seemed to have become terribly important. No wonder our boys grew confused. But Svata ought to have been different; had she not taught him as a child that all men were the children of Our Father in heaven? Of course the big town was full of danger for young people. There was such a rushing and racing along that thoughts began to race about too; and wicked thoughts have a way of creeping into young hearts and taking root there; growing strong and powerful. . . Still musing, her head sank on her breast and her eyes closed. She had worked hard all day long. She dozed a little while; then she awoke with a start. Hadn't the house door creaked? No, it was only the wind. The dog woke up in the kitchen and barked. A car drove past. Marianka blew out the candle and took up her beads. Better to pray than to worry. Svata was sure to grow up a good man, as his father had been before him. Why meet trouble half-way? She crossed herself and let the beads slip through her fingers till sleep came; kind and comforting; bringing away anxiety and sorrow.

In the cosy sitting-room of the presbytery, Margit Jeszenak sat knitting. She still kept up the habit of a generation that had knitted grey and scratchy stockings for the poor all the year round. Nowadays, only the old people wore them; the young girls hid them with a disdainful smile in a drawer or at the bottom of an old painted chest. Margit knew it, but

she kept on knitting just the same. It was part of her life, as were the soups she made for the sick, the minor ills she cured, the cigars she smoked, the evening prayer, the morning prayer she frequently forgot, being too busy; and the strange feeling she harboured for her brother, a queer blend of admiration, scorn and pity. She thought of him now, sitting in his study with the priest of Sokolovce, doing his best to convince the young man of his errors, expecting a fanatic to listen to the dictates of logic, sense and humanity; poor Aladar.

She could hear their voices, her brother's soft tone and the hard clipped accents of the younger man. Aladar seemed to be losing his temper, for his voice grew steadily lower; always a bad sign. Margit felt rather nervous. No one could be—always in the most charming way—more odious and provoking than her brother; and it might be risky to irritate the rabid young man. The Empire clock on the writing table had struck midnight some time ago. Surely Father Gogolak ought to set out for home; he had a long way to go. Margit put down her knitting, lit a cigar and looked round absent-mindedly. The room, she thought, had the look of a family museum; portraits of ancestors hanging on the walls and, in a silver frame on the writing-table, the last photograph of poor mama, taken in 1930. Instead of an affectionate dedication to her two children, the old lady, an Austrian Herdegen by birth and, after her marriage, a passionate Hungarian by choice, had written on the photo: "*Nem, nem, soha!*" (No, no, never!) the wild protest of the Hungarians against the peace treaty of Trianon. In 1920 she had left her town-house at Bratislava with the air of a dethroned queen; never to return. From that time on she had lived in Budapest. She refused to see her children, who had remained in Slovakia, and did not even answer their letters. When she died she left her fortune to the Hungarian nation, and the only legacy that came to Aladar and Margit consisted of their Hungarian surnames and a copy-book bound in red leather, in which she had written patriotic Hungarian poems.

Margit smiled; poor mama; ever since her daughter could

remember, the slender, dark-eyed little woman had hated someone or something. First, after her marriage with Bela Jeszenak, the Austrians, then the Serbs, then the Reds, and then, most of all, the Czechs. "We have been annihilated," she used to say angrily, "our thousand years have become as a day. But the people beyond the frontier, the Slavonic barbarians, the heathen, the freemasons, they are creating a new State, and the stupid Slovaks, who can hardly read or write, strut about giving themselves airs."

A door banged; heavy steps, followed by lighter ones; and then Aladar's voice:

"Come back, Father. You misunderstood me. I did not mean to offend you." No answer, and then again Aladar's voice, stern and imperious: "As your superior I command you to come back."

The heavy steps stopped. The study door was opened and closed. Aladar sat down wearily in an easy chair, tearing the worn leather covering still more and absent-mindedly playing with the horsehair sticking out of the hole. He pointed to the armchair opposite: "Sit down."

The priest of Sokolovce obeyed. His face was as expressionless as if he had drawn a mask upon it. Only his fingers kept moving, and he nervously dug his nails into the palm of his right hand. Aladar Jeszenak looked at him, and suddenly his pale face was suffused with colour.

"My son," he said, and perhaps no one had ever heard him speak in that tone, "my son, I must say *pater peccavi*. I have sinned against you. My temper got the better of me. Forgive me."

Father Gogolak lifted his eyes; the mask was still covering the lower part of his face; but the look he gave the older man was bewildered and almost frightened.

"Forgive me," Aladar repeated. "It's always the same, always my unfortunate temper. . . ."

"I was not hurt personally, Monsignore. The individual is absolutely unimportant."

Aladar forgot to be remorseful and grew impatient.

"There you go again," he said angrily. "The old dangerous heresy. Every single man is important, because

once a *man* was so terribly important that we were all saved by His individuality."

"My ideas," Father Gogolak said slowly, "correspond to the teachings of Christian humility. The nation alone is important, we are but a tiny part of it."

Aladar shrugged.

"False doctrines have a way of dressing in holy garbs; at least before they are in power."

"The other day in Ruzomberok . . ."

The older man flew into a passion:

"Don't talk to me of the spider who sits in Ruzomberok and catches silly flies. He's the evil genius of our country."

"He's a martyr, a saint."

"One can also be a martyr of evil, of crime; they are the most dangerous of all."

"He knows that we have been betrayed; and knows who oppresses us; and who is bleeding the land . . ."

"Don't go on. We'd only quarrel again. We must talk things over in the daytime. One's thoughts are clearer and more reasonable in the sunlight. Stay with us overnight, Father; it has grown late."

"No, thank you. I must go home."

The stern face had become gentle and kindly.

"I should like to have you here as my guest; not the rebellious parish priest of Sokolovce, but"—Aladar smiled charmingly—"little Pavel, whom I knew as a child and . . ."

"Whom you saved from a life of misery, Monsignore, taking him away from the black village where everything stank of coal, and the people's thoughts were as black as the alleys. I escaped from the black hell; but others are still living in darkness and stench. That's the reason why I . . ."

"Don't fool yourself, my son. You're not fighting for your people, only *against* the others."

The young priest got up.

"If I have been wanting in respect, Monsignore," he said stiffly, "I beg of you to forgive me."

"I have been wanting in charity, my son. Go in peace, and on the long way to Sokolovce meditate upon the psalm: 'Behold how good and how blessed it is for brethren to dwell

in unity'. He put his hand on Father Gogolak's shoulder. "We all got on so well together in our Republic, even if we did quarrel from time to time. Why can't it remain so? Don't be stupid, you youngsters."

The priest of Sokolovce bowed silently and left the room. Aladar sighed, stretched himself, and went to seek Margit.

"I thought he'd never go away," she said crossly. "Why on earth do you waste your time trying to convert the man?"

Her brother threw himself on the couch and lit his pipe. "I did feel more like murdering than converting him once or twice during our conversation," he admitted. "You know, Margit, it was much simpler being captain of the Hussars. It's hard work to love your neighbour when he is as mean, as stupid as . . ."

"He's not stupid, he's mad for power. He's so ambitious that it's like touching live coal when one comes close to him."

"If only the young men would not run after him."

"Young people run after every man or woman who beats a drum. Why won't good people beat drums? Why do you poor fools always believe that good is bound to be victorious without our doing anything about it? You are a theologian, Aladar, you must have heard of original sin."

He nodded, blowing blue clouds of smoke into the air.

"I know. Our hearts have grown slothful."

She looked anxiously at his pale, tired face.

"Do go to bed, my dear. To-morrow is Palm Sunday, and you'll be terribly busy."

He gave her a queer look.

"Yes, to-morrow they'll still sing *hosanna*; how soon will they yell *cruxifige*?"

He shuddered.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I suddenly felt cold. What's that noise?"

"A car drove past. Funny, as late as all that."

"Probably the doctor."

Margit had gone to the window and looked out.

"No, it's a big black car."

She closed the shutters, took her book and lit a last cigar.

"I'm going to bed. Good night."

After a little while the presbytery was asleep. Wrapt in the black veil of night, the whole townlet slumbered peacefully.

The black car stopped where the road left the town and serpented on, accompanied right and left by fields and meadows. A man looked out. A tall figure approached with heavy steps.

"Can you tell me," said the man in the car, "which turn I must take to get to Sokolovce?"

"The first to the left. I'm going there, too."

"I'll give you a lift," said the man in the car. "Get in, Father."

He stressed the last word mockingly; and when the car drove off he laughed without apparent cause. After that he remained silent.

In the moonlit night one could hear nothing but the noise of the motor and from time to time the low cry of an owl in the coppice.

A small oil-lamp was burning before the big crucifix in the dormitory of the orphanage. The trembling flame threw dancing shadows on the tortured face and the pierced hands. The Mother-Superior was passing between the beds. The night, when the younger Sisters, tired from the day's work, slept, was her happiest time. She was not too old to look after the sleeping children, to pull up a blanket, to pet a child that was moaning in its dreams. She loved the quiet hours in the dormitory when the children were her very own and she could do something for them. Age and weakness were a heavy burden to her. During her long life no work had seemed as hard as the idleness to which she was now condemned.

She stopped beside the bed in which the strange boy was lying, and suddenly her ivory pale face flushed a bright red. The nights were still cold, and all the children had two blankets; only the little deaf and dumb boy had a single one, an old, threadbare one at that, a blanket that had been

out of use for a long time. Sister Martha . . . The old woman felt her temples throb. How could the Sister be so cruel, so merciless to a helpless creature, a child? Something dangerously like hatred rose in her, and her tired eyes hurriedly turned to the crucifix, whilst her trembling lips formed the words: "Teach me to be merciful towards the merciless, Lord."

The boy cried in his sleep, and put out his small hands as if to ward off a blow. The old nun sat down on the bed and gently stroked the curly head. Without opening his eyes the boy caught hold of her right hand and held it tight. He lay very still, and the frightened expression on the small face gave way to a smile. Then he slowly opened his black eyes and saw before him a face all tender kindness and longing to help and comfort. The eyes were so full of love they made the old face look young. He heaved a sigh of relief and went to sleep again, still holding tight to the thin, old hand.

The nun sat on the little bed for a long while. Her lips moved soundlessly. She prayed for "her" children and for all children; for all the men and women who suffered and had lost their home, for the whole unhappy, wicked world. Her tender thoughts and prayers caressed the little stranger and confided him to One who was more powerful and even more loving than an old, old woman. At last the boy loosened his hold and rolled over to the other side. For a little while the nun could not get up, because her back had grown stiff from stooping. As soon as she was able to move she hurried to her cell, took the blanket off her bed, carried it downstairs and tucked the boy in.

Lying in bed a few minutes later, she felt cold; but old people are apt to do so; besides, it would soon be morning, and she would have to get up. Her thoughts returned to the little stranger, and again her pale face flushed with anger. She ought to scold Sister Martha, but she never could cope with her. Perhaps if she asked Baroness Margit . . . She would know what to do and she was not afraid of hurting anyone's feelings. But, of course, she had not got to be so careful; she was not a nun.

The bitter cold in the cell and the no less bitter thoughts and fears kept her awake for a long time. When at last she fell asleep, pale stripes of light glided through the shutters and little Sister Veronica, drunk with sleep, was just stumbling out of bed, and preparing to ring the bell that called the nuns to prayer.

NOON

IN the glory of a May morning the procession wended its way along the narrow path between the fields. A warm wind played gently with the white and lilac blossoms of the acacias and swept on, spreading the sweet scent that mingled with that of the incense from censers merrily swung by small choir-boys. Red and blue flowers grew between the corn stalks, and in the calices of the wild pansies dewdrops were sparkling.

Behind the priest and the choir-boys came the orphans, dressed in their Sunday clothes, their faces washed and their hair brushed until they shone. Sister Martha marched at their head and the Mother-Superior came last, holding the small stranger by the hand. The boy seemed frightened and clung close to her whilst she kept whispering comforting words the deaf child could not hear. The mute appeal of his eyes pained the old woman; it told of the terrible loneliness in which the child lived, enclosed between walls of silence, alone with terrifying memories. Watching the wistful little face, the old nun decided to get the parish priest to teach her the deaf and dumb alphabet. She could not let one of her children live in the orphanage, double orphaned; amongst boys and girls who, however well brought up they were, could not help laughing at the boy who was not able to speak. Margit had had a talk with Sister Martha about Christian charity; a talk lacking the tiniest trace of the virtue she was preaching, and since that time the nun was a little kinder to the boy. But he seemed to sense the dislike she

felt for him; he ran away as soon as he saw her. He liked best sitting with the old nun; and the Mother-Superior, who had loved the orphans during fifty years for God's sake, suddenly discovered with dismay that she was loving the strange boy with a purely human, maternal love, that, she feared, had nothing to do with duty or religion. She was grateful to the child for making her feel useful. Ever since Franta—they had called the boy after the saint on whose feast he had come—lived in the orphanage, she had ceased being only the "venerable old Mother-Superior" who had nothing to do but to rest after a life of work. She was once again a human being, capable of helping others. Thus she had been delivered from a temptation she had frequently yielded to; the wild revolt against merciless old age, against the cruel night, when none can labour any longer.

On one side of the procession walked the parish clerk, old Novak, watching the children with eagle eyes. He sang and prayed louder than the others and did not for a single instant forget to keep up his official dignity.

Clarisse followed behind the orphans. She loved the spring procession that implored God's blessing for the fields. The sunny May day made her forget her vague and unreasoning fears and despondent moods. Terrible things were happening beyond the Czech frontier, but at home, in their country, the crops were ripening in the sun; and in the hearts of men kindness and understanding were growing and spreading. The children, tripping gaily in front of her, would have a goodly heritage when they grew up. She looked at Joseph, walking beside her, and wondered why he had come. The idea that he looked upon the procession with the eyes of a writer seeking a subject, irritated her; but after the first look her anger passed away. His face did not wear its usual supercilious expression; it had become the face of a man who has lost his way in the wilderness and is desperately seeking for an unknown goal.

They had reached the big, black cross standing between the fields, and the procession stopped.

"*Benedices coronae anni benignitatis tuae,*" sang the priest.

And the shrill, squeaky voices of the choir-boys replied: "*Et campi tui replebuntur ubertate.*"

The Latin words floated in the air. Clarisse was struck by a voice behind her back saying the responses clearly and stressing the correct Latin accent. Turning round, she perceived Svata Hrubin. So he had come after all . . . probably for the sake of his mother, who was standing beside him, proudly watching her learned son.

The priest sprinkled holy water in the four directions of the compass and the procession moved on, leaving the path for the high road that led to the parish church. A car came from the opposite direction; it stopped, and the driver bared his head.

"From anger, hate and ill will, liberate us, O Lord," prayed the procession. And behind Clarisse Svata Hrubin's hostile and spiteful voice said loudly, almost drowning the words of the prayer: "What the devil does the dirty Jew mean by taking off his hat to the Blessed Sacrament?"

Clarisse gave a start. Joseph grinned maliciously, and said:

"The German plague seems to be catching."

"Not here, not for our people," Clarisse replied passionately. "Just look at them. They would never . . . No, it can't happen here."

"Yesterday," her cousin said mockingly, "there was a fight at the inn between Slovaks and Czechs. The baker Schneeberger sat at a table in the middle of the room and urged on the Slovaks, who were beastly drunk. Later on a few Magyars joined in the fight; but by that time things were already confused. The whole thing began with the charming Hlinka slogan: 'Get out, Czechs!' Strange to say, the baker, who is an old miser, had been treating the Slovaks. In a dark corner a stranger sat and laughed. Hallo!"

"What is it?"

"Here's the stranger."

A black car raced past. A tall man was driving.

"If I were a pious Catholic," Joseph said in a queer tone, "I would cross myself."

"Why?"

"The man's uncanny. I walked home by way of Mount Calvary last night and met him at the top of the hill. He did not see me. He was standing in front of the crucifix, talking to it. I only caught a few words. He was saying: 'He or you, but believe me, Jew from Nazareth, this time you will not be victorious.' It made my flesh creep to hear him, and I took to my heels. Of course I was pretty drunk."

"You must have dreamt it," she said without believing her own words. "And now stop talking. Old Novak is looking at us and putting his fingers to his lips. Quite right too."

They walked on in silence. All around them stretched the green fields that had just been blessed and given into God's keeping. The sleepy calm of noon brooded over the earth. Clad in a mantle of peace and joy lay the tender, lovely Slovak country with its bright patches of little villages and farms, pathetic in the poverty it had bravely borne for so long a time, together with Magyar oppression.

The litaney was at an end. The procession began a Slovak song. Some of the men made faces and did not join in the singing. Joseph grinned. "The Magyars, of course. They wouldn't sing a Slovak song to save their lives."

"Don't!"

Clarisse looked at him imploringly. She did not want to hear about ugly and evil things. For one day she wanted to become one with her beloved country and its people, whose kind and devout hearts were sending out a message of good will to earth and heaven.

Clarisse's dreamy and happy mood changed slightly when Robert, waiting for her at the garden gate, called out as soon as he saw her:

"Aunt Anny has come. He too," he added, and these two words sufficed for a whole biography. Aunt Anny's husband, Anton Braun, had been an also-ran all his life; the son of a millionaire father and a mother who had been a famous wit and beauty during the palmy days of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Perhaps it had been a reaction to

his highbrow and rather affected mother that had induced him to marry the most stupid of all the Herdegen girls; but also the prettiest. At that time, in the eighties, the marriage of Anny Herdegen to a banker's son had made a great sensation. But the Herdegen relations had comforted themselves with the reflection: "After all, the Brauns are so rich that one can hardly call them Jews . . . And Tony was baptized as a baby. Besides, he's so good-looking, all the girls are in love with him . . . And the Herdegen family was badly hit by the depression in the seventies, they even had to sell Wohan, poor dears . . . Besides, they've got five daughters . . . And dear Anny has inherited her mother's brains who, poor darling, was always something of an idiot . . ."

They impressed upon Anny, who, head over heels in love, only had eyes for her Tony, that she must never forget she was making a misalliance and must bring up her children according to the Herdegen tradition; even if they would only be Brauns. They married, as was befitting for a *née* Herdegen, in St. Stephen's cathedral and went to Italy for their honeymoon. After they had come back and settled in the beautiful little palais Tony Herdegen had bought for his bride, something strange happened: in the course of a few years, clever, well-read Tony Braun was absolutely put in the shade by his lovely, silly little wife. Perhaps because he had had a surfeit of good things and had ceased to care for them; whatever the cause he suffered from intermittent boredom as other people suffer from malaria. Perhaps he saw things too clearly and, unable to cope with the disgust events and men called forth in him, felt the futility of all things. Anny knew neither boredom nor disgust. A pious Catholic, she believed that everything would turn out well in the end and if she *did* meet with a disappointment she consoled herself with one of the articles of her faith: "Man is by nature a beast, but he can always become a saint. One never knows; so why worry?" The only grief that threw a shadow on her life, although not a very dark one, was that, as she said, the Lord had thought right to reduce the seven children she had wanted to one—that one being "poor Joseph." She loved him tenderly and did not understand

him in the least. Clarisse, her favourite niece, knew her complaints by heart:

"What is one to do with him? When the Great War broke out he joined up as a volunteer at seventeen. I cried and prayed to St. Joseph and lit candles to him; and the boy came home safe and sound. Not only that; he was even decorated. But when I told him how glad I was to see him decorated, he said: "Vanity of vanities." That's the way he used to talk at that time. And he cursed the war and the old Emperor and even the Emperor Carl who, poor fellow, was such a lamb. And then he—Joseph, not the Emperor Carl—went and became a Red! I cried, for after all no Herdegen had ever been a Red; and I lit a candle before the statue of St. Francis of Borgia, because I remembered he had been a gentleman before becoming a saint and I thought he'd understand my grief."

She stopped for breath and lit a cigarette whilst Clarisse tried to make sense of what she had just heard. But Aunt Anny had an excellent quality: she never expected an answer. During the many years of her marriage she had grown used to her conversations consisting of monologues.

"Then Joseph," she began anew, "brought a few Reds to our house and they were really nice. They did not eat with their knives and were very polite and kissed my hand. And the things they said—that it's wrong for some people to starve whilst others over-eat—did not shock me in the least. I'd been saying that myself for ages; and if I'm not mistaken there's something about it in the Gospel too. So I was quite happy again and I gave a lot of money for strikes and that kind of thing, and Joseph said I was a clever woman; a thing no one had ever said before. Of course I did not really believe it, but I was pleased all the same. But what did the boy do then? He suddenly became a monarchist! I hated the idea for I thought: more riots and more people being shot dead and more misery; and I tried to reason with him. 'Look here, Joseph,' I said, 'we've got a Republic and the Reds are doing a lot for the poor. All the things we ought to have done and never did. Just look at the community houses the city has built. Of course they look rather awful;

but what a blessing for the children. And now you want the whole old gang back again. Red tape and people getting promoted because their aunt married the grand-niece of a Cabinet Minister. Your nice friend, you know the good-looking one who writes for the social democrat paper, explained to me only the other day that it's always the poor who have to pay for everything. Don't be silly. The monarchy is dead; let it sleep in its grave.' But he only flew into a rage and called me a fool and told me that I did not understand him. So I gave up trying to keep up with his ideas and stopped lighting candles and praying to the saints to give him a little more sense. No saint in the calendar could cope with such a weather-cock. But if Joseph expects me to give money for the monarchists he's mistaken."

All this she had told Clarisse during her last visit. Now she was informed that her son had left the Monarchist Party.

"He only did it," she said at dinner, "because he had a good look at the members. Listen, Joseph, if you have a good look at people they are almost sure to disgust you, but if you look closer still, you'll nearly always feel sorry for them, because they're just poor fools. Think of yourself. When I look at you with your hair not cut for weeks and your trousers not pressed for months, you look exactly like a doss house."

Joseph laughed and Robert tried to hide a smile. She noticed it.

"You know perfectly well what I mean, like the people in that sad play by the Russian whose name I always forget. What is it, Tony?"

"Gorki," Anton Braun replied. It was the only word he had spoken during dinner.

"Gorki, of course. He also wrote a charming book, something about a murder case and a kind-hearted whore. It made me cry. Of course I'd just had the flu and was feeling terribly depressed. But it's a fine book all the same."

"For goodness sake, mama, don't mix up all Russian authors and don't try to go in for literature," Joseph said impatiently.

She looked surprised.

"But, darling, don't you remember? You brought home a lot of Russian books and told me to read them. The story of the kind-hearted whore was bound in red linen. Ever since I read it I always smile at the whores I meet in the Kärtner Strasse. Once one of them cocked a snoot at me. I don't know why."

Joseph shrugged and said hastily:

"Tell us how things are in your part of the world."

"YOUR part of the world!" Aunt Anny was indignant.

"As if you weren't an Austrian too, Joseph."

"I'm not going to have anything to do with a vocational State," Joseph said harshly.

"Darling, no one in Austria really knows what a vocational State is. And I never noticed our having one. You want to know how things are? We're trying desperately to get rich foreigners to come and stay at our beauty spots, but of course our idiotic government spoils all our chances in February '34, and when we hear a plane we look up and say: 'Have our German brothers come to annex us?'"

Her husband's face grew dark. "Don't, Anny," he said. "It's nothing to laugh about."

"Nonsense, they'll never dare to, the dirty Prussians. The French won't let them and the English and the Italians, and you too"—she looked at Robert—"You Czechs."

"They'll all leave you in the lurch," Joseph said vehemently. "The Great Powers because they don't want to burn their fingers and the Czechs because they cannot do anything about it." His face grew red and distorted. "My God, when one thinks of what can happen, what is happening already. And we go on living as if nothing was wrong. We eat and drink and beget children and enjoy the sun and grumble over the rain and watch the crops ripen; to-day they have been blessed in this country. But beyond the German frontier another kind of harvest is ripening in blood and mud. We turn on the wireless and listen to Mozart and Beethoven, and for our sins, to Richard Strauss, but in Germany ears delight in another kind of music: cries of pain, moans, sobs, hopeless weeping. And because all of us turn away, so as not to see, and put our hands to our ears so as

not to hear, the devil's seed will spring up in many countries and the new German symphony will blare out, accompanied by military marches. It will sound from the old walls of the Hratschin, from the tower of St. Stephen, over the Hungarian plain, and the Dutch canals, maybe over all Europe."

He put his hands to his head, jumped up and ran from the room. His father gazed after him sadly and shook his head.

"My poor boy," he whispered.

Aunt Anny's eyes were wet.

"Poor darling. I always said that writing was bad for one's nerves. We did not bring him up well, Tony. We ought to have taught him that whatever may happen, justice and the grace of God remain victorious in the end."

Three clever, well-read people looked almost gratefully at the silly little woman whose simple faith had comforted them more than science and knowledge and cleverness could have done.

There had always been a party for the orphans at Korompa on Whit-Monday. Clarisse loved the parties, not only because they brought happiness and merry laughter to the rather dreary old park but also because they represented a link with the past. She liked to think of great-grandmother Zdenka tripping along the garden path in a bright silk frock, a ribbon in her curls, followed by great-grandfather Chotek, the children and the parish priest with whom great-grandmother and great-grandfather used to converse in Latin. Later on, after the sad years of 1866 when Prussia had attacked Austria and had been victorious, grandmother Bogumila had walked in the garden on Whit-Monday, followed by grandfather Herdegen who, for her sake, lived the greater part of the year in Bohemia, spending the winter at Prague in the old palace; the summer on the estate grandmother Bogumila had inherited from her father. It was about that time that a certain hostility had sprung up between the Viennese and the Prague Herdegens, the former accusing grandfather Herdegen of having gone over to the

"Bohemians". He had been famous for his calm dignity and good temper; but he would forget both when attacking the supercilious arrogance of German-speaking Austrians. The Austrian line of the family he mentioned with a mixture of scorn, dislike and compassion. Clarisse remembered the endless arguments when Aunt Anny's father came to Korompa.

Many years later Clarisse's mother, who had also married a Herdegen, gave the party on Whit-Monday. Clarisse remembered her playing with the orphans, a fragile, fair-haired woman, with thick plaits wound round her small head; always cheerful and kind, although life had been unkind to her and five of her children slept in the family vault at Prague.

Absorbed by her memories, Clarisse had reached the lawn. She was carrying a big basket filled with small, brightly-coloured paper windmills. Her glance fell upon the Bohemian olive tree in the middle of the lawn. She loved it; as a child it had taught her to understand the words of the Bible she had had to learn by heart: "like an olive lovely in the fields." From the other side of the garden came Margit, heavily laden, and Aunt Anny, proudly carrying a flag.

"Just imagine, Clarisse," she said, "what my poor father would say if he saw his daughter bearing a Czechoslovak flag."

Margit laughed.

"That's nothing to what my mother would say."

Aunt Anny shook her head disapprovingly.

"I don't care for politics. As far as I can see, they have never done any good, always excepting the men who become Cabinet Ministers, of course."

She attached the flag to the olive tree from which the wind blew it away at once.

"Let me do it," Margit said a trifle impatiently. She hated to see anything badly done. "You don't know how to tie a string. Tell me, Clarisse, who is coming this afternoon?"

"Half the town as usual. Unfortunately the Bredars are coming too."

"I never knew they had arrived."
"Yes, Gisela rung me up. They came the day before yesterday."

"Horrible people. I never can remember what makes them relations of ours."

Aunt Anny had the pedigree of all her close and distant relations at her fingers' ends. "It's very important," she used to say, "to know whether there have been criminals in a family, in case one's daughter wants to marry one of the sons, or the other way round." She was able to enlighten Margit:

"At the time of the Vienna Congress," she explained, "Antoinette Herdegen married a Prussian, Count Bredar. Her son, Wilhelm, also married a Herdegen, Therèse, the daughter of Stanislas and beautiful Bozena. Therèse was an awful woman who had ten children. Eberhart Bredar is a grandson of hers. Do you understand?"

"More or less. And where," Margit asked, teasingly, "does the criminal come in?"

"They've all got a criminal bent. What can you expect from a man who marries a woman like Gisela?"

"Heavens," Clarisse interrupted them, "I've quite forgotten that the swings must be fastened to the trees."

"Don't worry. Robert promised to do it," Aunt Anny said.

Clarisse made a face and swallowed a: "That's just it. If he had not promised, he might perhaps have done it," and hurried to the small copse where the swings had been fastened to the oak trees for more than a century on every Whit-Monday.

To her surprise, she saw all five hanging from the trees. Then she noticed Uncle Tony, and thought: "I might have known it. He heard me ask Robert to do it." Her mood changed. Like many women, she was able to bear the big misfortunes of life with a certain gallantry, whereas small worries and disappointments invariably upset her. Seeing her, Uncle Tony smiled.

"Everything is ready," he said. His voice was low and he talked slowly; sometimes

Clarisse had the impression that the words hesitated before leaving his tongue. Of course he hardly ever had a chance of speaking; Aunt Anny had such a lot to say that others hardly got in a word.

"I'm glad you're here," Clarisse said, sitting down on a tree-trunk. "I want to talk to you about Joseph. I'm worried about him. He has not written a single line for months. I don't know . . ."

The old man made a gesture of resignation.

"He can't cope with life."

"But he ought to." Clarisse was terribly hard, as far as other people were concerned. "After all, we've all of us had the same experience and lived through the same times without becoming . . ."

She broke off short, and blushed.

He finished the sentence for her:

"Drunkards," he said.

Clarisse looked unhappy. She had not meant to hurt the dear old man.

"You see, it's just that . . ." She tried to find the right words to express her ideas without wounding Joseph's father.

"If he were not so gifted . . . it would not matter if he were a bad writer. But his talent really ought to replace the backbone he hasn't got."

"My dear, I sometimes think that talent and liberty have something in common. Do you remember what Nietzsche said: 'Free to do what?' One could just as well ask, gifted for what? If a man uses his talent only for laughing at things, for denying the difference between good and evil, or, like my poor boy, for shouting his disgust in the marketplace and telling men that they are worse than wild beasts . . ."

"It's rather hard not to think so."

The old man looked at her searchingly and said, almost solemnly:

"'Yet 'tis he that Thou has placed but a little lower than the angels and with glory and honour has ringed him.' It seems to me that the words of the psalmist and Anny's 'poor fools' give the right synthesis. I'm not breaking my heart

about Joseph, because I know that he has many of his mother's traits."

Clarisse looked bewildered, and the old man smiled.

"You're surprised at my saying that? I know that the whole family makes fun of Anny, and I'm not going to pretend that she's clever or learned; but tell me, Clarisse, have you ever known that silly little woman, as you all call her, leave anyone in the lurch? Doesn't she always give up her own wishes for the sake of others? Does she belong to the people, and their name is legion, who are merciless towards others and lenient towards themselves?" He grew angry. "And then you come along and laugh at her because she does not make sheep's eyes when the name of a poet is mentioned, and does not declare that a single line written by Stephan George is more sublime than the Sermon on the Mount; because she does not know when to put a semi-colon; because she does not write bad plays and call them her *life work* . . ."

He stopped abruptly, embarrassed by his own anger. Then, meeting Clarisse's eyes, he laughed.

"Forgive me, my child. I know I'm absurd. And I did not mean you nor your husband, nor the Jeszenaks. I was thinking of that hell-cat Gisela-Bredar, who came to see us in Vienna the other day and who told Anny 'All stupid women ought to be hanged'."

Clarisse smiled.

"Poor Uncle Tony. Gisela is coming to tea to-day. They're spending the summer on their estate. Please be nice to her. I've got to protect her from Joseph and Aladar and Margit. She's a red rag to them. And you know how awful Aladar can be."

"Yes. Forgive my losing my temper. But I do so dislike that woman. There's nothing genuine about her, except maybe her selfishness. And you see," he added, almost shyly, "Anny's the most genuine person I ever met."

"It must be lovely to be blessed with that kind of character."

He nodded, and said very kindly:

"My dear, yours might be worse. I want to thank you

for having Joseph here. He's never stayed in the same place for such a time. You know how restless he is as a rule. I'm always glad when he's at Korompa. He needs sane surroundings; needs things about him that are in a state of development and growth. He's seen too many things pass away and decay."

"Of course," a voice behind their backs was raised in expostulation, "there they stand gossiping. Clarisse, do you know that it's past noon? The brats are coming at two; we'll never be ready in time. No one knows where the sawdust for the fishing tent is; and the post has just brought three cases and Robert has hurt his thumb trying to open them; and Aunt Anny is dressing it; and old Ján won't let me have the flower-pots for blind man's buff; he pretends that he can't spare a single one. And the chemist's wife has come from Bratislava and has brought the sweets for the orphans; lovely blue and pink paper bags, tied with silk ribbons. And Joseph is trying to express our gratitude by flirting with her; but, being accustomed to the modern girl, he's overdoing it, and poor Mrs. Weiss is not quite sure whether his intentions are strictly honourable; and does not know how to behave. She's as red as a peony and keeps wiping her forehead. And Robert has asked Doctor Silberthal and his wife to lunch; and the cook is furious because no one has told her. I had to send Aladar to the kitchen to calm her down. Luckily, he's wearing his violet sash; that'll impress Marketa. And . . ."

"Stop, Margit, stop. I'm coming. Be a dear and put the windmills in the fishing tent and tell Ján he *must* give you the flower-pots. He always makes a fuss about them."

She ran off, told János, the coachman of the Jeszenaks, where the sawdust was, opened the cases and begged Aunt Anny to unpack them, inquired mockingly how Robert's wounds were, and made him go off in a huff, then hurried to her room and sat at the toilet-table, hot and rather out of breath.

She looked in the glass and smiled, pleased with what she saw: I'm really quite pretty and my cheeks are as rosy as a girl's. That's because I have been running. Gisela would

tell me that a woman has to make up if she wants to be well groomed. But, thank goodness, my skin isn't as fallow as hers. According to her, a lady—I wonder what she calls a lady—must have nails as if she had just murdered someone. The one thing she fights shy of is a bath.

She drew the comb through her hair; it crackled and stood out like a rather untidy halo, framing her sensitive face. I am getting a bit grey, she told herself, it's a blessing I'm fair, it does not show so much. She put on a light summer frock and hurried downstairs.

In the sitting-room Aunt Anny was trying to persuade Mrs. Weiss to stay for lunch. The chemist's pretty wife, still rather shocked at Joseph's love-making, kept repeating that she would "only be in the way, and was afraid of being a nuisance", whilst every word and every gesture of her small white hands betrayed how much she wanted to accept the invitation. This was a kind of rite strictly observed on every Whit-Monday, ever since she had begun bringing sweets for the orphans' party.

Clarisse went up to Doctor Silberthal, who had not been to see her since his wedding. She did her best to hide the dislike she felt for the pretty affected bride and greeted her cordially, wondering the while what on earth had induced her old friend to marry the girl. Of course she must be at least ten years younger, and was really lovely; and he had been in love with her for the last two years.

Hearing the bride call her cousin by her first name, Margit grinned maliciously. Clarisse did not move, but she suddenly seemed transported to the other end of the room, and her face became absolutely expressionless. The family called it her "wall-face". Noticing it, the bride said hurriedly:

"Forgive me. I'm so accustomed to call people by their Christian names. You see, at Berlin, where I spent a whole year, all the people I knew . . ."

Of course, Margit thought grimly, Berlin, Germany. That's the Gerstners all over. Vienna does not exist, nor Prague, only Berlin. Why did the silly goose marry Hynek and not an S.S. man? It would have been just the thing for her.

Clarisse, slightly ashamed of her unintentional rudeness, smiled pleasantly.

"Of course, Else. It's only that I can't believe you're really grown up. I can still see you as a tiny tot and . . ."

She broke off, the excuse would not do; she racked her brains for something to say, unable to find the right words. Luckily, Aunt Anny came up.

"You won't remember me, my child," she said kindly. "But we're kind of related. I've got a silver coffee-pot that came out of your father's shop. I got it many years ago as a wedding present." She turned to the doctor, of whom she was very fond. "So you've only just been married? That's right. I like people to marry, and really don't know why young people abuse matrimony nowadays. After all, we're not disembodied souls, to put it prettily. Don't you think I'm right, Aladar?" she called to her nephew, who was just coming in from the garden.

"What did you say, Aunt Anny?"

"That marriage is a good thing because we're not disembodied souls. Oh, sorry, I quite forgot that you know nothing about it. Never mind, I suppose there must always be priests who go in for chastity . . . What *are* you laughing at, Margit? I did not say anything funny, did I, Aladar?"

"No, Aunt Anny. Whatever you say always has a hidden and deep significance. Even if you *do* use wrong verbs."

"Oh, don't talk about style, Aladar; I hear more than enough of it from Joseph."

She looked at Mrs. Weiss, who was coughing and choking.

"Laugh, my child, laugh. I don't mind. I'm accustomed to people laughing at me. I always was the silliest of all the Herdegen girls."

"And the prettiest," Aladar said gallantly.

"That's true; although your mother was pretty, too. At least before she became a crank with her adoration of her idiotic Magyars."

She stopped dead and looked round nervously.

"Thank goodness, there's no Magyar in ear-shot. All those nationalities make life a burden. You've got to keep on watching your step so as not to hurt their feelings. Exactly

like in the old monarchy. The most touchy are your local Germans."

"Heavens," Clarisse said, looking at her watch, "we must go and have lunch. The children will be here in no time."

"I really think I'd better not accept your kind invitation," Mrs. Weiss said hesitatingly. "I'm sure you'd rather . . ."

Margit caught hold of her arm.

"Oh, do come along. I'm starving."

She dragged her out of the room and the others followed.

A golden afternoon hovered lovingly over the park and the old yellow manor-house. A golden haze vibrated in the hot air; on the big damp meadow it seemed to have fallen from the sky and changed into gleaming dandelions. It painted the old copper-beech a burnished red and flew in the air in the shape of golden-brown bees, humming lazily. The whole garden seemed to breathe the unearthly bliss of the first Whit-Sunday.

The orphans arrived punctually at two o'clock. They wore their best clothes, and their young eyes shone as if they too had been scoured with a brush as their little hands had been. As usual, they were terribly shy at first, making the grown-ups feel uncomfortable too, so that for a little while the atmosphere was almost gloomy. Twenty children made, according to their sex, a curtsy, or bowed stiffly, whispering almost inaudibly: "Praised be the Lord Jesus Christ."

Sister Martha made them line up, and walked down the line like a sergeant, pushing back a small foot here and a small hand there. Then she lifted her hand and twenty young voices broke into song.

The deaf and dumb boy had not lined up with the others; Sister Martha had noticed it and thrown him an angry look; but she had not said a word. She had been finding out, to her dismay, that after having permitted her to reign supreme for three years, an old, tired, sick woman had suddenly remembered that after all *she* was the Mother-Superior. From the day on which the boy had set foot in the orphanage the old woman had come alive again. Her heart that had belonged

to God alone had returned to earth, recalled by the child who was afraid of everyone except her and whom she had to protect and comfort. She had been a severe Mother-Superior in her youth, almost too strict with the nuns, though never with the children. Old age had made her gentle and kind and full of understanding. After fighting against it during a long life, she had come to accept the fact that human beings were far from being angels. Nevertheless, the last months had set her a new and difficult task: trying to understand a soul entrusted to her care. Perhaps understanding was not the right word, for how could one understand a woman who enjoyed humiliating a child and never had a kind word nor a caress for it? Sister Martha had always been rather hard upon the orphans. "Their life won't be an easy one," she was wont to say. "Better teach them how unkind the world is while they're young." But she had never been unjust before. Sometimes it seemed to the old woman as if an evil spirit had entered into the nun.

Sister Martha was telling the orphans to go and kiss the ladies' hands. She added in a whisper:

"You need not kiss Mrs. Weiss's hand."

The Mother-Superior kept back the orphans with a gesture and beckoned to Sister Martha. "Why not?" she asked. "She's always so kind to our children."

"Christian children must not kiss the hand of a Jewess. I've explained it to them. One does not kiss the hand that crucified Our Lord."

The old woman stood aghast. She had never heard the nun speak in such a tone. Franta, frightened by Sister Martha's angry face, hid his head in the Mother-Superior's wide blue skirt. The orphans stood waiting, shy and bewildered.

"You will," the Mother-Superior told them, stressing every word, "kiss Mrs. Weiss's hands and thank her nicely for the sweets she has brought you. Go."

Twenty pairs of feet were set in motion as the orphans obeyed.

"I really can't understand you, reverend Mother," Sister Martha said passionately. "I . . ."

A very gentle, very cold voice interrupted her.

"Would you kindly tell me, dear Sister, since when have you known that the Jews crucified Our Lord?"

The Mother-Superior turned away to hide a smile. She knew her Monsignore; the gentle voice sounded ominous.

Sister Martha changed colour.

"It isn't only that, Monsignore, but the Jews are conspiring to destroy Christianity, they want to exterminate it."

"I should advise you not to talk about things you don't understand, Sister."

"I am only a humble servant of the Lord," the nun cried, losing her self-control, "but some things are as clear as . . ."

"I was thinking of Christianity," said the cold, gentle voice. "And that seems to be something you don't know anything about."

"Father Gogolak says . . ."

Aladar Jeszenak towered above her. His dark eyes were blazing. The man who now addressed the nun was neither the retiring scholar trying to discover the evil that poisoned the world, nor the kindly, absent-minded pastor of the parish; here spoke the captain of Hussars, the superior officer who brooked no contradiction.

"Look after the bodily welfare of the orphans, Sister Martha. Teach them to wash themselves properly and to brush their teeth; but don't dare to meddle with their young souls. Do you understand me? I'm not going to let you teach your filthy ideas to the children. It can't be done in our country. I won't have it."

He turned away, and doing so just caught the infuriated whisper:

"Servant of the Jews!"

The Mother-Superior caught her breath. What was going to happen? But the priest only turned round and said in a low voice:

"You're right, Sister Martha. I am the unworthy servant of Our Lord who, according to His holy will, was born a Jew; and who died for all poor sinners, also for you and me."

Sister Martha burst into tears. The orphans, who had gone round kissing hands, were just coming back. Seeing

the nun in tears, they looked frightened. Some of the smaller ones began to snivel, ready to burst out crying in their turn. Five little girls lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. They had never seen Sister Martha cry and felt as if the world were coming to an end. Tommy, the dog, who had been jumping about, pricked up his ears and began to bark wildly. People came running from all sides. Margit was the first to reach the small group. She had seen her brother walk away hurriedly and could guess the reason for Sister Martha's tears.

"Just my idea of a jolly party," she whispered to Aunt Anny, who had come up a good second. "Auntie, for goodness sake, take the brats away. They'll all be howling in a second."

Catching hold of damp little hands she pushed the children forward.

"Go along, children. Auntie is coming with you. You can fish in the sawdust and pull out lovely things. After that we'll play blind man's buff, and then you'll have some chocolate and cake."

What Miss Margit said sounded good, and the orphans wiped their eyes. The smaller ones clung to Aunt Anny's hands and her frock. The bigger ones looked at the Mother-Superior and Sister Martha, mutely asking permission to go. The old woman nodded and prepared to follow them, with Franta clutching at her hand. She did not want *her* boy to be left out.

"Come, Sister Veronica," Margit said. "Let's leave Sister Martha alone. She'll stop crying as soon as she loses her public."

The big childish eyes in the little round face framed by the white wings threw her a frightened glance.

"She's crying so terribly, poor dear."

Margit drew in her claws; the young nun had a way of making her feel ashamed.

"She'll come round soon, my child. Sometimes people want to be alone." She marched off, and Sister Veronica followed her reluctantly.

Sister Martha wiped her eyes, but they brimmed over

again. To be treated like that . . . She remembered angrily that she had gone to bed at two in the morning because she had had to press the girls' Sunday frocks. Of course the old hag never did a thing; and Veronica was so clumsy and slow. The young souls, the priest had said. As if the young souls living in a country governed by Jews and freemasons were not sure to become the prey of the devil. To think that she had not known all this before . . . The gentleman who had picked up the parcel she had dropped the other day had explained everything to her. He had also given her several pamphlets that told one all about the conspiracy of the Jews against the Christians; and that only one man could save them, a man whom God himself had chosen. Of course the pamphlets contained other things too, terrible things. She had hardly dared to read them. She ought to confess having read such blasphemous words; on the other hand, if the pamphlets spoke the truth she need never go to confession again. She could not ask Monsignore Jeszenak about it, he was a lackey of the Jews and perhaps had even been a freemason in his sinful youth. She blushed a bright red, thinking of the young captain of Hussars. People told queer tales about him. To think that he had dared to treat her like a kitchen maid, quite forgetting that she was a spouse of Christ . . . But if the terrifying things the pamphlet had told her were true, she did not want to be a spouse of Christ any longer. She was not going to follow a false saviour . . .

She felt giddy and sick. Her head ached. For an instant she put her hands to her throbbing temples; letting them fall to her side, her right hand touched the crucifix of the big rosary hanging from her belt. Mechanically she whispered: "Who died for us on the Cross."

Once again her eyes filled with tears. Were not her thoughts a treason against God, the most terrible crime a human being could commit? Like Judas? Mother of God, preserve me from sin . . . The Virgin . . . she remembered a sentence she had read in one of the pamphlets; words used to design the Madonna; words that she was not even permitted to say to a lost woman . . . She tore her mind away from the shameless expression and tried to think of other

things. One of the pamphlets also proved that the Jews had caused the Great War. If there had been no war she would now be a happy wife. Her Alois would surely have been promoted to a good post; he had been so conscientious, so hard-working. You had to be so if you wanted to keep your job at the post office . . . She could not even lay flowers on his grave. He was buried somewhere in Russia, in that far-away, dangerous country that was governed by Jews.

Hearing steps she looked up, glad to have her mind taken off her painful thoughts. Her face grew bright as she recognized her cousin, Emma Leberfinger. They had become great friends during the last few weeks. Poor Emma, who had to live with her sister and her sister's Czech husband, treated like a servant by both of them. No wonder the girl often suffered from strange moods. But she seemed much better; she went about with a radiant face, her head proudly thrown back. She had given up going to Mass on Sunday and only laughed if anyone remarked upon it. She had also grown much more sociable, one could often see her go into the baker's house, and she had even made it up with her step-mother.

Seeing Sister Martha, she ran up to her.

"You've been crying. Who has dared to be unkind to you?"

She took Sister Martha's hand and pulled her towards the stone bench under the big plane-tree, talking eagerly all the while.

For the first time in his life Svata Hrubin had not wanted to go to the orphans' party. He had always rather enjoyed it, but to-day he felt like a stranger and it hurt him to think that he did not belong. Once he had passed his examinations, he would be a gentleman and just as good as the people here; till then he was but a poor student, the son of old Marianka Hrubin, a labourer on the estate. As to the Herdegens, of course the Countess was a Slovak, but her husband's people had been Austrians. The parish priest he had always disliked, and he hardly knew the Viennese Brauns;

besides people said that Joseph Braun was a Bolshevik, or at least had been one. The only person he liked was Margit. She guessed that the boy secretly longed for kindness and understanding and was nicer and gentler to him than to anyone else. Of course he was not always easy to get on with, and if the medical student, seeing her flushed face, sometimes thought "too high blood-pressure", his diagnosis was wrong. Margit was only swallowing the impatient words that came to her lips when listening to Svata's diatribes.

"What the boy really needs," Margit said to her brother, "is someone to talk to, who makes him feel clever, someone he likes. He'd be all right if he could feel superior, say once a day."

It had been Margit who, seeing him saunter along aimlessly, had stopped the carriage and forcibly dragged him in, saying: "I want you to come, Svata. I've got to hunt for a Latin quotation for my brother in the library at Korompa; you may help me."

They had spent a pleasant hour in the big library, at least Svata had enjoyed it; and afterwards Margit had passed him on to Aunt Anny and he had found it impossible to resist her charming smile and her pretty broken Slovak. There had been a single unpleasant moment when Father Gogolak had come up to them; a black shadow in the sunlit garden; his face expressionless, but his dark eyes smouldering. He had stopped for an instant.

"I'm going to Ruzomberok to-morrow, Svata. Are you coming with me?"

Seeing the other hesitate, he had laughed scornfully.

"You seem to be an easy prey."

And he walked on without another word.

The orphans were romping on the lawn, laughing and yelling at the top of their voices. Gisela Bredar, who had come with her daughter, Isolde, shook her head.

"I really can't understand you, Clarisse. The brats are ruining the lawn."

"I know. But if the small ones fall down at least they don't hurt themselves."

"And that makes up for a ruined lawn?"

"Yes."

Clarisse smiled unpleasantly. Two minutes spent in Gisela Bredar's company sufficed to irritate her.

Gisela stared at her with a laugh. Her laugh always maddened Clarisse; it sounded like two pieces of wood rubbed against each other.

"I would never allow it. My garden is sacred."

"As all things that belong to you, eh, Gisela?"

The plain woman with the hard horse-face said mockingly:

"That's you all over, Clarisse. Your incorrigible Austrian carelessness . . ."

"Czech!" Clarisse declared angrily.

"What do you mean? As if you did not know that Bohemia seceded from German Austria only because . . ."

"Because German Austria, as you call it, oppressed our country and preferred every German-speaking idiot to the cleverest Czech."

Clarisse felt furious, not only with Gisela Bredar, but also with herself. Even if one did dislike one's guests, one ought not to let them see it. But how can one be nice to a woman who prides herself upon her bad manners, claiming that life is too short for politeness and consideration of other people's feelings? She's a German of the Germans, Clarisse told herself, lighting a cigarette with trembling hands.

"How nervous you are," Gisela said superciliously. "You'd feel much happier if you took an interest in intellectual things. Look at me. I simply don't know what nerves are. But, of course, my writing helps me to bear all the evils flesh is heir to. Why not try and become creative, too, Clarisse? Why not try and write *the* book of your life? It would do you good and teach you to love and understand your neighbour."

"I wonder who is my neighbour?"

Playing on the lawn with the orphans, Robert glanced at his wife and saw the red light. He hurried up to the two women and said amiably, bent upon diverting the conversation into less dangerous grooves:

"How well Isolde is looking."

He did not understand why Clarisse suddenly smiled sweetly at him and softly clapped her hands together, marking applause. She knew that Gisela could not bear to hear that someone else was looking well; she even grudged people looking ill.

Gisela frowned.

"How do you expect her to look at her age? She has no worries; she never thinks. She vegetates like a cow. I feel desperate thinking that I gave life to so unintellectual a daughter. I simply cannot understand it. Isolde has grown up in a wonderfully cultivated atmosphere. Ever since she was born she has breathed the pure air of German culture, the like of which no other country can attain. Ever since she was ten I have shared all my thoughts and dreams with her. I read all my poems and plays to her in the manuscript. She has enjoyed the supreme blessing of being in daily touch with a woman who lives for her art only and dedicates all her life to that sublime purpose."

Margit had approached them unperceived. She gazed at Gisela with wide open, innocent eyes and said, imploringly:

"Do say it again, Gisela, please. Sublime aim! How perfectly lovely. All my life I have been longing to talk that way. Tell me, does it come easy to you?"

Gisela Bredar threw back her horse-head with an ungraceful gesture.

"Your foolish words cannot hurt me, Margit. A woman who spends her whole life amongst stupid Slovak peasants cannot be expected to be refined or to possess any delicacy of feeling."

"Are you talking of the kind of thing you call refinement and delicacy of feeling in the Reich?"

Clarisse hastily turned a laugh into a cough; she always enjoyed a tussle between Margit and Gisela.

"What do you know about the German soul?" Gisela's wooden voice had grown shrill.

"How can I," Margit said, her lovely violet eyes more innocent than ever, "know anything about a thing that does not exist?"

Gisela snorted and turned her back upon her.

"We were speaking of my daughter, Clarisse. Be thankful that you have no children. When I consider what I have done for the girl. How many precious hours of my life I have sacrificed to her. My friends all say: 'What a lucky girl to have you as a mother.' And what is the result? Talk to Isolde for five minutes; if you did not know that she was my daughter you would never believe it."

Isolde was standing beside her mother, her eyes lowered, her cheeks red with shame, twisting her fingers in an agony of embarrassment. Joseph had been listening silently; pale with fury as always when he had to look on whilst a weak creature was being baited by a strong one. Taking the young girl's arm, almost roughly, he said:

"Come along, Isolde. Let's go and play with the children."

Sad, grateful eyes looked up at him; a tiny, timid smile came upon the girl's face, and Clarisse, watching her, thought, why, she's quite pretty. I never noticed it before.

Gisela shrugged and remarked spitefully:

"I can't help it. Every time the Jew calls one of us by her Christian name I feel a cold shiver of disgust run down my spine."

Robert gave her an angry look; had the woman not noticed that Aunt Anny had sat down beside her? She must have heard Gisela's words. But Aunt Anny never grew flustered. She smiled sweetly at her niece by marriage.

"I suppose you meant Joseph when you said the Jew, my dear? Funny how badly you people control your feelings. Now, I myself hate speaking to Germans, but I always say a little prayer before talking to you or your husband and then, somehow, I dislike you much less." She laid a pretty white hand almost caressingly on Gisela's arm. "Do tell me, my dear; I get so muddled up; according to German laws I'm a Jewess, too, isn't that so?"

Gisela shrugged again.

"We, in the Reich," she replied ponderously, "have understood that . . ."

"Really." Aunt Anny's voice, gentle though it was, be-

trayed the justified pride of the Herdegens, who looked back upon many generations of decent, if not always clever ancestors. "Really, you in the Reich have *understood* something. How extraordinary!"

Margit burst out laughing.

"What a delightful family gathering. Where is dear Eberhart? He really ought to be here to represent the Prussian Junker. What is your husband doing, Gisela? Is he on service with the S.S.? It always amuses me to remember that the English call those gangsters the Black Guard, but they ought to spell it in one word."

"I forbid you . . ."

"What does our charming cousin forbid?" Aladar asked softly.

Gisela fell silent, she feared the priest's merciless tongue. Aunt Anny caught hold of Aladar's arm.

"Never mind, Monsignore dear. It's no earthly good talking to Germans. They can't understand."

One of the bigger orphan girls came running towards them, looking half-frightened, half-pleasantly excited.

"Countess Herdegen, Miss Margit, come quick, Mrs. Silberthal has fainted."

Gisela smiled mockingly.

"How these bourgeois love making a fuss."

But no one listened to her; the women were hurrying to the house, and Aladar, suddenly finding himself alone with her, hastily fled to the other end of the garden.

Else Silberthal was lying on the big couch in the drawing-room. She had recovered from her faint and tried to smile, seeing Clarisse and Aunt Anny come into the room.

"I'm all right," she said. "It was only the heat."

The doctor nodded.

"Please don't worry. My wife is quite well. I only want her to remain quiet for a little before I take her home."

Aunt Anny looked knowingly.

"Young married women often do faint," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. "That's no reason for being anxious. Come, Clarisse, don't make Else talk, leave her alone. Besides, we've got to give the orphans their chocolate."

They left the room. Else tried to sit up, but her husband gently laid her back amongst the cushions.

"You really must give up romping with the children, darling," he said. "I've been wanting to tell you to take things easy for the next few months. You've got to be careful."

She grew pale again and stared at him with big, frightened eyes.

"You, you know, Hynek?"

He smiled a trifle wryly.

"You forget that I'm a doctor. I have known it for weeks."

"But . . . you married me all the same?"

"I love you," he said very gently, looking slightly embarrassed.

She caught hold of his hand and kissed it.

"How good you are to me."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I'll never forget how good you have been to me. And you must forgive me. You know how terribly strict my parents are. I've been in hell ever since I came home. And he, the brute . . . He only laughed when I told him, and nearly threw a fit when I said: 'Now you've got to marry me.' The brute," she repeated, her pretty doll's face ugly with hate.

"Don't talk about it, my dear. Let's forget it and be happy."

She pulled his head down and kissed him as she had never kissed him before.

"Yes, Hynek darling, we'll be happy, terribly happy. You can't imagine how glad I am not having to hide it from you any longer."

"When do you expect the child?" he asked, the lover giving way to the doctor.

"In about five months."

She still clung to him and he felt her body tremble.

"Don't cry, darling," he said soothingly. "Don't excite yourself. It's all right."

She held him tight with both her arms.

"I'll never forget how good you've been to me, Hynek. Never."

Coming from the meadow, where the orphans were drinking chocolate and eating an incredible amount of cake, Clarisse saw the Bredars' car driving up, and turned to her husband with a frown.

"That damned swastika! Must I let that Bredar chap fly his beastly flag in our place?"

"Please, don't make a scene," he said nervously. "Let's hope and pray that Aladar won't see the flag. Look, Bredar has brought a friend."

Eberhart Bredar greeted his relations and introduced the stranger:

"A friend of mine, Herr von Brachleben," he said, and the tall, dark-haired man clicked his heels together and bowed stiffly.

"Delighted to meet you," he said.

Sister Martha, walking past with Emma, stopped dead. Her face flushed and her knees began to tremble. Wasn't that . . .? Of course, it was the gentleman who had talked to her and given her the pamphlets. She turned away and began running in the direction of the meadow. Emma remained motionless and gazed ecstatically at the stranger. Her pale face grew rosy, her breath came fast. She, too, had recognized him, the saint, the prophet, the preacher of the new gospel.

Her eyes sought his; but the man turned his head away, and Emma understood that the others must not guess that they knew each other; because the others were enemies. She folded her hands and did not move till they had gone into the house. Then she walked on slowly. She felt as if she were able to soar like a bird, as if she were soaring over the gravel path, her feet not touching a single stone. She knew that she belonged to the elect; that she had been chosen to rule over all the men and women whose mockery she had always feared. She wanted to cry out, to drown the shrill voices of the orphans with the clamour of her own voice, but

she remembered in time that she had to guard her secret. She fought down the shrieks trying to burst from her throat and felt an icy fear clutch at her heart. My God, was it coming back? Was she not cured yet? Of course he had said she would have to suffer . . . but if this terrible thing overcame her now, in sight of all these people . . . She shivered, imagining the ghastly humiliation. Turning, she began to run towards the garage. The door was open and she saw the Bredars' car and the red flag with the big, black swastika. "The sign of salvation," the stranger had called it. Whilst she gazed at the flag it seemed to grow bigger, to screen the house and the garden from her sight. It turned into the sky; a red and sinister-looking sky with the swastika shining in it like an enormous black sun. Emma fell on her knees and lifted her folded hands. Her eyes grew dark and big; she could not tear them away from the sign of salvation.

After tea Gisela said to Herr von Brachleben:

"You must get my cousin to take you into the garden and let you have a look at her private Zoo. She has a passion for dirty Slovak children."

"Our children," Margit snapped, "are not dirty. And as to the Zoo . . ." she broke off but her face betrayed that she thought Gisela and her family fitter occupants of a Zoo than "our" children.

"I'd love to," Herr von Brachleben said politely. "I always enjoy mixing with the common people."

They walked along the path. Violet and dark blue shadows were ushering in the evening. The sky, so bright a golden colour at noon, had faded and turned into a pale blue dome dotted with tiny rosy clouds. Only the lawn, trampled by countless little feet, was still bathed in the sun; its rays fell upon the romping children and upon a stone bench close by, on which Marianka Hrubin was sitting, a small tired-out boy sleeping on her lap.

Clarisse stopped to speak a few words but Marianka took no notice of her; she seemed to see no one but the stranger. For a moment she looked almost frightened; then she raised

her head and stared at the man. He returned her stare and Clarisse suddenly had the absurd feeling that here, in the peaceful garden at Korompa, two enemies had met, two adversaries were measuring their strength. Marianka's eyes, hard and cold, never blinked; she seemed to hold the man with her gaze and after a second he lowered yellowish lids over dark eyes and turned away. The old Slovak crossed herself and caught the sleeping boy closer as if to protect him against an invisible danger. Then a radiant smile lit up her face; the smile of a conqueror looking upon his vanquished foe, Clarisse watched her in silence, absent-mindedly hearing the harsh German voice at her elbow: "A charming little picture, Countess."

She hardly understood what the man was saying. The lawn and the playing children had suddenly become unreal; she felt as if for an instant the sunny present had vanished and she had looked upon the future. The leaves of the olive tree threw black shadows on the stranger's face and Clarisse started back in sudden horror. Grotesquely distorted by light and shadow, the features had lost all semblance of humanity; one of the demonic gargoyles from Aladar's church stared with an evil leer at the merrily laughing children.

All the year round the Mother-Superior looked forward to Whit-Monday. In the afternoon Ján drove her to the foot of Mount Calvary and left her there for an hour. For the last five years the walk from the orphanage to the hill had been too much for her weary feet and her tired heart. She loved to climb the hill, loved stopping at every shrine and meditating on the passion of Our Lord. She had always undertaken her pilgrimage alone but to-day Franta had clung to her and refused to remain with the others.

Hand in hand they walked up the hill. The child stared with round eyes at the life-sized figures in the shrines. Hundreds of years ago a Czech artist whose name no one remembered had carved them. The old woman, gazing upon them devoutly, did not know that they were works of art.

She felt only that they were alive; that they did not portray a pious legend, but real suffering and pain and man's inhumanity that had remained the same it had been then. She saw Our Lord breaking down beneath the burden of the cross, His tortured body pressed close to the earth, as if it were the only merciful thing around him. She saw the Roman soldiers and the mob laughing and mocking, saw Him drag His weary feet on and on, growing exhausted on the endless way . . . And always surrounding Him the crowd, grinning, yelling, delighting in His pain. She felt glad when she reached the top of the hill where the three crosses stood, and read the words: "Father, into Thy hands . . ." It was good to know that after the awful moment of utter forsakenness death had come, bringing peace and rest. And it was also comforting to remember that His last loneliness had been consoled by a man, a miserable sinner, a robber who had recognized his God. The face of the repentant sinner on the cross was strangely pathetic, full of childlike surprise, hope and gratitude. That's how I should like to die, the old woman told herself; so sure that all my sins were forgiven.

She felt that the small hand clutching her own had grown cold and damp, and turned an anxious look upon Franta. Big tears were running down his cheeks. He pulled away his hand and said in the mute language that hurt the Mother-Superior:

"Oh, poor, poor man. Did the Nazis do that?"

The old woman did not know what to say. The boy grew impatient; his small fingers moved quickly:

"He looks so kind, like my father did. I'm sure the Nazis killed Him."

Like my father . . . What sorrows had the child undergone? What had the young eyes, looking so pitifully at the cross, seen? Again the question came:

"Tell me, did the Nazis do that?"

The old nun nodded silently. What did it matter what one called men who were evil incarnate, who hated all that was good? She nodded again and the child nodded too and looked almost pleased. The nun lifted her hands and said with her thin fingers:

"He was a good man, my little Franta. He loved you and you must love Him too."

The small fingers said "yes", and the boy smiled at the figure on the cross, tenderly, trustingly, as he must have smiled at his dead father. Then he went closer. The cross was so low that the feet of Christ almost touched the ground. Gently, as if afraid of hurting Him, little Franta, standing on tiptoes, stroked the sad dead face and kissed the hand pierced by a nail. Then he turned to the Mother-Superior:

"We must come and see Him again. He is all alone. It is awful to be alone. After they had taken father away mother never stopped crying."

Mother, what had become of her? The boy did not know. He only knew that men had come and dragged her away. Had the Germans killed her? Was she being tortured in a concentration camp? Franta believed her to be dead like his father.

A wild hate flared up in the old woman; hate for a nation that committed such crimes; against the men and women who looked on without a word, not caring what happened to others, or, still more frequently, gloating over the misery their eyes fed upon. Falling on her knees before the crucifix her lips framed a prayer: "Oh Lord, do not forgive them, never forgive them, for they know what they do."

Shaken by the intensity of her feelings she gazed upon the deaf and dumb boy and felt an urge to cry out in his stead; and for all those who were mutely suffering in German hands, unable to voice their despair. Oh, to lift up a voice, powerful enough, loud enough to awaken an indifferent world; to clamour for help and justice—and for punishment on an inhuman people.

It came as a shock to see the boy smile at her, confidently and almost happily. He put out his hand and pointed at the steep path leading to the plain.

Gradually swallowed by the shadows that grew more dense the lower they came, a weary old woman and a tired child walked down the hill. Reaching the high road where Ján was waiting for them, they heard a honk; the Bredars' car flashed past, the swastika flapping in the wind.

NIGHT

DRIVING home one day Clarisse noticed that the berries of the ash trees had turned a bright red. She felt dismayed. The ripe berries proclaimed the end of summer, and Clarisse hated autumn with its wild gales, its mournful rains, its long dark evenings, and its frost. The red berries gleaming in the dark foliage seemed like a threat to her and those she loved. Besides, this September day found her more depressed than usual; a dream had frightened her; a silly dream. A sensible woman would have laughed it away, but she kept recalling it. She had dreamt of a great festival; of streets, bright with flags and banners; of laughing children scattering flowers. She had somehow known that they were expecting someone very dear to them. In the old plane trees lining the street birds were singing; the sky was so bright a blue and the sun so golden, it almost hurt the eyes. The happiness of the thronging crowd seemed a living and glowing thing; something one could almost touch and feel. Sitting in the carriage, Clarisse had watched the gay scene with growing delight, sharing the affectionate expectation of the men and women all around her. They must have waited for a long time, for Clarisse dreamt that she fell asleep. Starting from her doze, she saw a deserted street, an endless, white desolate path leading through a wilderness. The birds had stopped singing; there was not a single sound to be heard; the unbroken silence was like an icy hand laid upon the land. Longing to get away from the gloomy, gruesome spot, Clarisse took up the reins. But the horses did not move. Above her head the sky was as black as a catafalque. A wild wind came shrieking from the north, tearing the last leaves from the trees, and whirling them through the air. The black clouds grew darker and darker; it began to snow. Clarisse was trembling with cold and a nameless fear; she wanted to flee the ghostly spot, but she

knew that she could not escape, that she was condemned to wait; she did not know what for. At last an indistinct shape grew visible in the distance. It came closer and now she could see two black horses slowly wading through the snow, their big shaggy heads hanging mournfully. They were drawing a hearse and in the cold white light of the snow-covered plain Clarisse saw a coffin. She must have cried out for she awoke trembling from head to foot and could not go to sleep again.

Now, seeing the red berries with their reminder of approaching winter, she recalled her dream and again the well-known hopeless depression overcame her. I wonder, she thought wearily, whether my black moods are not caused by my having to play the part of an energetic and capable woman, I who was born weak and helpless. She had always had to encourage others when anything went wrong, to smile when she felt like crying. The first years of her married life on the half-ruined estate lived on in her memory; the fight against debt; the heart-breaking struggle against odds too strong for her. After three terrible years that had killed her youth, she had sold the greater part of Korompa, feeling as if she were a traitor to the dear old place; and taken up growing roses. Robert had remained a mute spectator; he was sorry for her; he felt remorseful, but he seemed unable to help her, unable to escape from the horrors of a four years' war, that kept haunting him, unable to cope with life. He knew that he ought to help his wife, but he wanted only to forget what had happened, and what was happening. Like a child he clung to Clarisse, as he had clung to his mother. She had been a kind of sundial for him; as long as she registered sunny hours all was well, but as soon as a shadow fell upon her, Robert too was submerged by gloom and a kind of weakly, childish ill-temper that drove her wild; till the other woman came, Margit, who understood him; who pitied him without contempt; who had no moods of her own. Clarisse shook herself impatiently and the horse, misunderstanding the movement, trotted more briskly. Why think of the past? Clarisse asked herself. Why think at all? As if I did not know what was wrong with me; I suffer

from the disease my whole generation suffers from: a cowardly fear of bodily and mental pain, of sorrow and worry; fear of the cross, Marianka would say, she who bears hers so gallantly. We want to be happy, always, at all costs; as if happiness were everything . . .

Looking up she saw the steeple of Aladar's church coming to meet her and decided upon stopping for an hour at the Jeszenaks'. Strange to say, Margit's company always cheered her up and the quiet of the old-fashioned rooms calmed her nerves. But to-day the presbytery did not seem to be an asylum of peace; loud, excited voices came from the courtyard; Clarisse distinguished a boyish one, from time to time nervously putting in a word or two, and Margit's angry and coldly mocking by turns.

Clarisse smiled: judgement-day at the presbytery. Once a week Margit used to sit in judgement, seated on a stone bench, the criminal facing her. Of course she pretended that she only took over the unpleasant task because Aladar would not do so and left it to her, as he left everything concerning the parish. But Clarisse knew that her cousin rather enjoyed the chance of speaking her mind to the sinful members of the parish and of leading them back to the path of righteousness. Margit knew that they would soon stray from it again; but she claimed that virtue was a thing that required to be practised. "If my scolding induces them to behave decently for half a day," she was wont to say, "the next will make them behave decently for a whole one. In due course of time they will learn to behave decently for a whole month. That's the utmost one can expect from poor human nature."

Clarisse threw the reins to Aladar's coachman, who had heard the carriage drive up and had come to meet her, and walked to the back gate. As she was putting her hand on the latch the gate flew open and a boy rushed past her, his cheeks burning, his eyes blazing. He held his left hand pressed to his throat as if to protect it from some invisible danger. Having reached the street he began to run as if

wild beasts were on his heels. Margit, hearing steps, turned round.

"Clarisse! How nice. But don't expect me to be good company. I'm boiling with rage. Come, let's go and sit with Aladar."

Seeing them enter his study the priest frowned and said wearily:

"What on earth was up just now? I really think one could hear you yell as far as Bratislava, Margit. How do you expect me to work if you make such a noise?" He noticed Clarisse and nodded to her. "Thank goodness, you at least have a low and soft voice."

Lighting a cigar his sister said crossly:

"That's the first time a member of my parish has dared to defy me."

She broke off and looked at her brother, expecting a question. But Aladar avoided the snare. "Are you all well at Korompa?" he asked Clarisse. She nodded, and before she could say a word Margit forestalled her:

"Never mind the relations," she said severely. "Of course they're well. Why shouldn't they be so? Don't hide behind conventions, Aladar. Listen to what I'm going to tell you." She grew angry again. "Just imagine that cheeky brat, Laci Kadar, daring to wear a *Bocska*-tie."

"What did he wear?" Clarisse said, absolutely non-plussed.

Margit's irritation turned against her.

"You don't even know what a *Bocska*-tie is? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Of course if people will be like that . . . But perhaps you do know that we've got some Magyars living in the parish?"

"Of course."

"And that they are all rebellious and bad citizens?"

"Yes; you seem to have told me that before. But what about the tie?"

Aladar joined in:

"The tie is the badge of our Magyar irredentists," he explained. "It dates from the sixteenth, to be quite correct from the beginning of the seventeenth century."

He leant back in his easy chair and went on talking in a pedantic, schoolmasterly way, glancing the while surreptitiously at his sister. He knew that he was annoying her, but he wanted to pay her out for the noise in the courtyard.

"Bocsday," he said, in the tone of a lecturer, "was Prince of Transylvania and the leader of the Hungarian rebellion in 1617. Quite a decent fellow. The black tie with the gold fringe was part of the rebel's uniform."

Margit's long slender fingers drummed impatiently on the arm of her chair. The minute her brother stopped talking she flew at him:

"Of course, that's the kind of thing you *would* know. But what you don't know is that Laci had a row with the gendarme Vyskocil and that he told the man he was not going to let a dirty Czech order him about." Her lovely violet eyes flamed. "And of course you don't know either that the Magyars keep on inciting the people against the Czechs, that they're hand in glove with the Germans, that they're simply mad with nationalism."

"It isn't only nationalism," the priest said reprovingly.

"What is it?"

Aladar took up his pipe. Wrapped in blue smoke he went on lecturing the two women, kindly, gently, inexorably.

"It's also a question of economics."

Margit shrugged impatiently.

"It is, my dear, even if you make faces at me. Why do you always refuse to recognize certain facts? Or is it that you are unable to understand them? Take old Kadar. He's been a railway official for years and has not been promoted since 1917."

"Do you expect the Ministry of Transport to promote a man who frankly admits his hostility towards the new State? You know how the old fool keeps abusing our government."

Aladar lifted his hand.

"Don't interrupt me, my dear. Old Kadar is convinced that he would have been station-master for the last five years if the Magyars still ruled the country. The same thing holds good for most of his countrymen. You must not forget that since the new Republic was created they have come down

in the world, financially and socially, and of course they feel bitter about it."

"Aladar, surely you're not siding with them?"

Her brother shook his head and gazed at her mournfully.

"I hate logical women," he said. "They're a *ludus naturae*. All the same you might be a trifle more logical. And a little knowledge of national economy would do you a world of good."

Margit grinned maliciously.

"Now you're talking like Tido Prohazka."

Clarisse, unable to follow the conversation, asked:

"But what on earth has all this to do with the *Bocsday*-tie?"

"Quite a lot, my dear. For all these people Hungary has become the Promised Land. They imagine that they would be rich and powerful if the former state of things came back. Can you really believe that our Magyar landowners who have lost part of their estates by the land reform, even if it were not too great a part, are passionately fond of the Republic?"

"Laci is neither a railway official who has not been promoted, nor a landowner," Margit said, driven into a corner, but not willing to give in. "What makes such a nationalist of the young idiot?"

"What school does he go to?"

It was a purely rhetorical question; Aladar knew the answer in advance.

"Of course his father, the old fool, is sending him to the Hungarian school in Bratislava."

"Where he is taught that the Magyars are the salt of the earth. Naturally he also hears the same kind of thing at home."

"What's the good of our having Hungarian schools if that is the result?" Clarisse said a trifle impatiently.

"A nation that has been oppressed for centuries cannot oppress her minorities."

Clarisse struggled with a yawn. She was beginning to be bored, and she knew her cousins; they were capable of arguing for another hour.

"The boy is almost a child," she put in during the first tiny pause in the discussion, caused by the adversaries relighting pipe and cigar. "I really can't understand why you are making such a fuss about the whole thing, Margit."

"A child! Don't be silly, Clarisse. The boy will be grown up in about three years. All those brats will be grown up. What's going to happen then? But you only see what's under your nose. Children, indeed!"

She threw a withering glance at Clarisse.

"As we are having a heart-to-heart talk, my dear Aladar, and are speaking of pests, you really might pay a little more attention to our Germans in the parish. For instance, to that old brute, the baker Schneeberger. A hypocrite if ever there was one. Besides he gives short weight; I'm sure of it. He ought to be hanged."

She brushed the ash from her cigar and said hurriedly, so as not to give her brother a chance:

"God alone knows what has happened to the people. We used to get on so well together. I ought not to say so, as it was really due to me; but our parish was a model of good-neighbourliness. Of course the old man in Ruzomberok, who really might by now be gathered to his fathers, makes a lot of mischief, but the Germans are worse. They stir up the Slovaks against the Czechs, against the Jews, and unfortunately some of our people believe them. Speaking of Slovaks, Aladar, you really ought to have that damned cad, Father Gogolak, on the mat. He . . ."

"My dear Margit, I really can't allow you to call a priest a damned cad."

"If you only knew what of course you don't know, the kind of thing he preaches from the pulpit. Let him corrupt his own parish if he wants to, it's so tiny it does not matter; at least not much. But I won't have him coming to my parish and inciting our people against Doctor Silberthal and the other Jews who are every one of them much more decent than your Father Gogolak."

She fell silent, staring moodily in front of her.

"You know, I often think that Father Hlinka is not the only man behind the scenes. There must be another one of

whom we know nothing. Why are the Bredars still here? I don't like it."

"What harm can they do in our little parish?"

"Oh, Aladar, that's you all over. Little parish! Don't you know that things always begin in small country towns or in villages? The women come to market and gossip and talk scandal and tell one another how much better off the people in the Reich are since the government has ousted the Jews. Believe me, I know all about it. Marianka Hrubin and some of the older women are worried to death about it. And ever since the Bredars and their odious guest have been here things have grown steadily worse. I don't trust our dear relations."

"They never see anyone," Clarisse said. "Gisela is writing a play on the Napoleonic times and Germany's war of liberation. And her husband . . ."

"I dislike him even more than her. He's such a humbug. He walks about with a mask upon his face, and doesn't open his mouth. Have you noticed that his eyes never change? They're always the same, whether he's laughing or frowning. I really think one ought to expel them all."

"Don't be silly," the priest said crossly. As soon as the conversation concerned itself with every-day facts he grew bored. "It can't be done and it would not make the slightest difference if . . ."

Margit interrupted him.

"That's what you're always saying. If I acted up to it our whole parish would consist of robbers and murderers."

"Man is wicked from his youth on."

Clarisse smiled; when Aladar began quoting scripture it was a sign that he had talked enough and wanted to be left in peace.

"Of course natural man is a wild beast," Margit admitted. "But what about the grace of God that can make a human being of him? Sometimes I get the impression as if our Monsignore forgot all about divine grace."

Aladar smoked in silence. When Margit called him Monsignore he knew that she did not feel inclined to bow to his judgment and was only gathering strength for a new attack.

He looked longingly at a fat volume on his writing-table and tried to change the subject.

"I hear the Bredar girl is staying with you, Clarisse."

"Yes, we've had her for a week. Gisela pretends that the presence of a low-brow stops the flow of her inspiration and is only too glad to get rid of the poor child."

"The typical female of the intelligentsia," Aladar said with a shudder. "I really think I preferred the times when our women were ladies and charmingly stupid."

"Like Aunt Anny," Margit smiled not unkindly. "What's the girl like?"

"Shy, nervous, but rather a dear. She's made great friends with Joseph."

Aladar whistled.

"My dear, with the Jew, as Gisela calls him? Isn't that a bit risky?"

"He's old enough to be her father."

"That's no reason why he should not fall in love with her," Margit said. "Wouldn't it be fun to see Gisela and Eberhart with a so-called Jewish son-in-law?"

Clarisse felt annoyed. At first she told herself that she did not know why, but a second later she had to admit the reason for her apparently groundless irritation. For the last three years Joseph had never looked at another woman. He had admired her and her only. She felt as if she were being robbed of a thing that had suddenly become precious to her. She wanted to drive home at once, to find out whether Aladar was right . . . of course, for the girl's sake only . . . it really would be a catastrophe if . . .

"I've got to go," she said hurriedly, and blushed meeting Margit's quizzical smile.

"Be an angel and look in at Elisabeth Vyskocil's on your way home," Margit said. "She's having such a bad time, poor child, what with that awful sister of hers and the sudden hostility of our village idiots against her husband. It will do her good to have a talk with you, and I want the parish to see you going into her shop."

Clarisse nodded and said good-bye. Reaching the haberdashery shop she pulled up. Elisabeth had heard the carriage

wheels and come to the door. She seemed very glad to see Clarisse and eagerly dusted a chair on which there was not a single speck of dust. Then she fetched little Hanus and showed her visitor how much he had grown. But she looked worried and her voice was less gay than usual.

Clarisse was surprised to see that the little shop remained empty. At this time the women usually came in to buy needles, pins or cotton-reels. Involuntarily she glanced at the clock.

"No," said Elisabeth, guessing her thoughts. "It's not too late for customers. It's quite early still."

She sighed. Her round face grew almost haggard and her lips trembled.

"Ever since Hanus had to arrest young Wagner for burgling, the Germans have given up buying here. And they're not the only ones; quite a lot of Slovaks have ceased coming. They're angry with us. But what on earth was Hanus to do? He caught the boy red-handed. And now wherever I go people lay their heads together and whisper. The other day, after church, some of them pointed at me with their fingers and laughed." She looked round and lowered her voice. "But that's not the worst. My sister, Emma, I really think she's gone mad. She won't talk to Hanus; she's hardly ever at home and if I say something to her she only laughs and does not answer. And the child," her voice broke, "she calls him the 'bastard', poor little fellow. Of course I know she's ill, but after all . . . Sometimes I think she's got a lover," she added shyly. "She goes out in the evening and comes home with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes."

"It would be a blessing if she married. At least you would get rid of her."

"Yes, but somehow I don't think that she'll marry. She says such queer things and keeps talking about a new saviour, about the elect to whom she belongs . . . and we don't belong. Sometimes she frightens me."

She wiped her eyes and said sadly:

"She's quite given up going to church on Sundays, and when she meets Father Jeszenak she looks the other way. She says he's sold himself to the Jews."

The little door-bell gave a shrill tinkle and Marianka Hrubin came into the shop. She greeted Elisabeth with a kindly smile. "Don't cry, my child." It was as if she knew what was troubling the young woman. "Things will get better, you'll see. I want a reel of white and a reel of black cotton, my dear."

She stood before the counter, her shoulders bowed, her back round from bending. The face framed by the red kerchief was somewhat paler than usual; a small tired, overworked old peasant woman. Yet Clarisse felt as if together with Marianka quiet and peace and hope had come into the little shop. The old woman looked round.

"You'll have your customers back again in a few days, Elisabeth," she said consolingly. "Our people may listen to the fool propoganda for a little while; but they'll soon find out their mistake."

She patted little Hanus's flaxen curls and put the cotton-reels into her apron pocket.

"Are you going home, Marianka?" Clarisse asked.

"Yes."

"I'll give you a lift."

"Thank you. It will be a blessing not to have to walk the whole way."

She clambered into the dog cart and stowed away her big basket.

"Svata has come home," she said. "He was staying with a friend at Trnava, but last night he suddenly turned up. I had quite given up the idea of seeing him during the holidays."

Her face was radiant with happiness.

"He is a good boy after all. And he works so hard."

Clad in violet and blue shadows the evening came. In the meadows the haycocks smelt sweetly and in the fields the corn had already been tied in sheaves. A great quiet lay over the land.

"The harvest is fine," Marianka said. "It's a real joy to look at the fields."

What about your own harvest, my poor Marianka? Clarisse reflected. A tiny field, a small meadow, hardly big

enough for your cow. And yet you are glad because other people's harvest is good. She looked at the old peasant sitting beside her with a feeling akin to reverence. The woman was no longer old Marianka Hrubin who worked at Korompa, the kind, slightly absurd creature whom Clarisse had known ever since she could remember; she had somehow become mysterious. She shared that mystery with the generous fertile earth, with the whole tenderly beautiful Slovak country. It was the mystery of goodness, of—Clarisse wondered what made her think of the word: immortality.

They reached the cottage and Clarisse had to come in and drink a glass of milk. Marianka would have been hurt had she refused. Sitting in the small kitchen that looked as clean as if no one ever cooked in it, Clarisse felt happy and calm for the first time on this fear-burdened, desolate day. Marianka bustled about; lit the fire in the hearth—Svata would be home soon and supper had to be ready for him—pushed a plate straight; wiped a pot. On the window-sill stood a gaily painted vase with red berries.

"Autumn," Clarisse pointed to the berries.

"Yes, I'm looking forward to the long evenings. I've got such a lot of mending and sewing to do for Svata. And I only find time in autumn and in winter. I love winter best of all, on account of Christmas." She laughed, her eyes twinkling merrily. "No, dear Countess Clarisse, not because you and Miss Margit give me such a lot of nice presents, but because I love to see the crib in church, with the holy Child lying in the manger. It makes me feel happy all over."

"When don't you feel happy, Marianka?" Clarisse asked with a touch of envy.

"When I'm worried about Svata. But I never worry for long. I know that things will come right."

Without her knowing it her eyes wandered to the picture of the Virgin on the wall. She looked at it as mothers, talking of their children, are wont to look at one another.

Clarisse disliked leaving the cottage; she knew that a different atmosphere would greet her at home. She had quarrelled in the morning with Robert because he had

forgotten to give Ján an important message; and was afraid of his dismal looks and orphan-eyes; of Joseph's malicious observations and, though she did not admit it to herself, of Isolde's youth.

Whilst Clarisse got into the dog cart Marianka remained on the doorstep. She stood motionless. Bathed in the rosy light of the setting sun, her figure seemed to be part of the cottage and the country around her, whose child she was.

The horse fell into a trot. On both sides of the high road meadows and fields gleamed white, an endless, pale sea under the evening sky.

The baker Schneeberger was the model of a respectable citizen; a virtuous husband, a severe father and an honest tradesman. Margit Jeszenak knew quite well that she was wrong when she accused him of giving short weight; but then Margit did not care what she said when her temper was up. No tradesman in the whole place was politer to his customers; more respectful to the gentry; more obliging and eager to serve. He worked from morning till night, his only relaxation being the yearly visit he paid his brother who was a book-keeper in a chemical factory in Germany; his whole life consisting of doing his duty as a loyal citizen and father. Perhaps the seven children he had given the State—that they also had a mother he hardly ever remembered—would have been happier had he taken his paternal duties less seriously. At least pretty, seventeen-years-old Poldi envied the other girls whose fathers did not think quite so much of their dignity as heads of the family. The three big boys, fifteen, fourteen and thirteen, were the very spit of their father, clumsy hobbledehoes, with the baker's cold and cunning eyes. They hated school and could not keep up with their classmates. Strange to say, the baker did not seem to mind their bringing home bad marks. "They've got other things to think of," he would say to his wife, who wept copiously when the boys failed to pass their examinations. "Never mind. Nowadays there are more important things in the world than book learning. The wind from the north will

scatter text-books and maps. To-day youth plays its part in the life of a nation, and that's a good sign."

Smiling, the baker gently patted his small paunch. He loved to hear himself speak and perhaps he was so fond of his three eldest boys because they were good listeners. His wife, Mathilda, sighed. Her whole life was nothing but housework, sighing and child-bearing; thank God the latter was done with at last.

"Poldi must sleep in the kitchen," the baker continued. "I want her room for a guest."

"Who is coming?" Fritz, the eldest of the boys, asked.

"A German brother from the Sudetenland," his father replied solemnly, adding in a changed tone: "No need to talk about it. Should anyone ask you, say that the gentleman is a business friend of mine. Understand?"

Fritz nodded and looked wise. He would not betray the secret; after all it was not the first his father had trusted him with. On Sundays he and his two brothers hiked all over the country, their pockets full of leaflets and pamphlets. Cautiously approaching villages and boroughs—they rather enjoyed playing Red Indians in the realm of politics—the boys went in and out amongst "our people", distributing literature and getting information.

"I want you," the baker told his wife, "to cook a hot supper for us; soup and joint. We shall be three or four people."

She stifled a sigh; she had intended to go and see her mother who lived in a neighbouring village; of course the people had to come to-night; her usual luck.

Although the August evening was sultry all the shutters were closed and pretty Poldi was told to go and spend the evening with a girl friend. The table was laid in the living-room—as a rule the family ate in the kitchen. On the baker's right hand sat the "business friend", pasty-faced, with a long pointed nose that kept moving, and watery blue eyes. Two of his front teeth were missing; he was wont to tell all and sundry that the "Reds" had knocked them out. At the top of the table Herr von Brachleben was seated, urbane, every inch of him the aristocrat who condescends to sit at

meat with common people. At his left hand sat the priest of Sokolovce, dark, saturnine and taciturn. At the bottom of the table the three boys were crowded together, well behaved, silent and terribly excited.

The business friend, whom the others called Hermann, pushed back his plate and said in a voice as sharp and pointed as his shoes:

"The suffering of our people has become unbearable. I want you to keep this fact before the Führer's eyes, Herr von Brachleben."

The baker lifted his hand.

"Just a moment, gentlemen."

He nodded to his wife, who had come in with the coffee.

"Go to bed, Mathilda. You are tired. We shan't want anything else."

She left the room, and Hermann, rather irritated by the interruption, began anew:

"The suffering of our people . . ."

"We know," the Prussian said. "We know all about the crimes committed by the Czechs against our German brothers in the Sudetengau. I can only hope and trust that the Sudeten-Germans themselves have got their eyes open at last. So many of them still seem blind and ignorant of what is happening."

Hermann felt hurt.

"I can assure you that I am doing my duty, and even more. I daily, nay, hourly, risk my life and my liberty, and I can only trust that I will not be forgotten in high places when the day comes."

The Prussian nodded; he felt slightly annoyed. How touchy these people were, how individualistic. "You can be sure that we know all about it," he said. "But I cannot help telling you that much remains to be done. For instance, the Jewish question." He glanced at the priest of Sokolovce. "Don't you think I am right, Father?"

The deep-set, dark eyes returned his look, and the priest's big, bony hand fell heavily on the table, making the cups rattle.

"We have enemies," he said passionately. "You have

probably heard of Father Hlinka's words, that the Lord gave us the Jews and we therefore have to try and get on with them. These words, spoken more in jest than in earnest, have done a lot of harm. Especially in the countryside. In town, where the Jew is the business rival of the Christian tradesman, things are far easier for us. But even there you will find priests preaching a weakly, sentimental love of all men and attacking the racial dogma from the pulpit." He made an impatient gesture. "And the masses are stupid and easily led."

"As to the priests," the Prussian sneered. "They are sure to trim their sails to the wind when the time comes. I don't want to offend you, Father, but that has always characterized the Roman Catholic clergy."

"The higher clergy!" Father Gogolak cried, his face distorted with anger. "Bishops and archbishops have a lot to lose and are therefore ready to adapt themselves to any system. But men like Monsignore Jeszenak, who goes about looking like a beggar, or the parish priest of Piestany, Sinderlar . . ."

"He's been bought over by the Czechs," the baker said, disdainfully.

An old hostility, older by far than the new German gospel, flared up in the priest of Sokolovce. His dark eyes glared at Martin Schneeberger. How dared the Protestant sit in judgement on the Catholic clergy? Herr von Brachleben, who had been silently watching the two men, said hastily:

"What about the women? Surely you, Father, ought to twist them round your little finger."

He accompanied his words by a dirty smile, but the young priest did not notice it.

"The young women," he declared, "are easier to influence than the old ones. I know of two likely to be of great use to us: Emma Leberfinger . . ."

"An hysterical goose," the baker interrupted him rudely.

The Prussian shook his head. "Don't say hysterical, my friend. The girl has grasped the fact that our movement is not only a political but also a religious one. That it preaches the only true religion. We, in the Reich, have discovered how

useful that point of view can be. Believe me, the girl is not to be despised."

"A crazy fool," grumbled the baker; he was not accustomed to being contradicted.

Herr von Brachleben threw him a strange look.

"If you are going to let yourself be influenced by prejudice . . ." He made a tiny pause, then added, "I am afraid . . ." and broke off. But the last words had sounded far more like a threat than an expression of fear, and the baker grew small.

"I never meant . . . you misunderstood me, Herr Scharführer . . ."

"I hope so. And the second woman you had in mind, Father?"

"Sister Martha from the orphanage. I believe you know her."

"Slightly. Yes, a Sister of Charity ought to have a certain influence on the people here. But I cannot say that I'm satisfied with the work done up to now. We'll never get on at that snail's pace."

"That's what I keep saying," Hermann cried. "How long is our poor suffering Sudeten people to languish under the Czech yoke?"

He had leant across the table and was spitting out the words like an angry cat. Herr von Brachleben looked undeniably bored.

"Spare us your propaganda speeches, Hermann," he said brutally. "Keep them for meetings."

Lighting a cigar, he looked round the room. His glance fell upon a portrait of President Masaryk that the loyal citizen Schneeberger had hanging in his living-room. He grinned. "Your Republic won't live much longer, old man," he said with a sneer. "Better hurry up with your celebrations; else it might be too late for them." He turned to the baker.

"The list of our adversaries in the place," he barked.

Martin Schneeberger got up, unlocked a drawer and took out a piece of paper that he gave the Prussian. Herr von Brachleben studied it with lifted brows.

"Quite enough for this tiny place . . . Prohazka, of course, the damned Communist and his gang . . . Hm, yes, I rather expected to find her name here, the Jeszenak woman, pokes her nose into everything and is very popular in the parish." He read on, muttering to himself. After a while he looked up in surprise: "Marianka Hrubin? The old woman who works at Korompa? Surely she does not count. A stupid Slovak peasant?"

"She has great influence upon the people," the baker said nervously; he had expected praise and was feeling bitterly disappointed. "Everyone likes her," he added.

Father Gogolak sided with him.

"She is the most dangerous thing a political adversary can be, a woman who is not only honest and good but also obstinate and decidedly shrewd."

He sounded irritated; the "stupid Slovak" rankled. Even if the Germans from the Reich were absolutely right, it did not make their arrogance less unbearable.

"You misunderstood me, Father." Herr von Brachleben was all amiability and cordiality. "Believe me, no one admires the Slovak nation more than I do. I only thought, as the good woman . . ."

"Is poor, wasn't that it?" The young priest stared at the Prussian, hatred in his eyes. "Of course there exists no worse crime than poverty. But why is she poor? Why are we all so desperately poor?"

"Surely I need not tell *you*, Father. As a parish priest you are in a position to know how the Jews fleece the people; how they batten on them; how they are plotting their ruin; here as well as all over the world."

"I know," Father Gogolak said. "But don't forget the Czechs. We have become a Czech colony. Why haven't they built more factories in our country? Why have we been condemned to remain a poverty-stricken, agrarian district to the end of time? Why have they put Czech officials over us? Why have they sent Czech gendarmes here?"

Hermann began to fidget.

"All that is as nothing compared to the agonies our Sudeten Germans are suffering," he yelled at the top of his

voice. "Is nothing compared to the oppression endured by a part of the great German nation!"

The Prussian drummed on the table. Really, these people from the Succession States could drive one mad. No discipline, no sense. And to think that he was expected to work with them.

"Gentlemen," he said imperiously, "we are losing our time. Let's get to work." He stopped and looked at the three boys. "Don't you think it would be better if the boys..." he hesitated.

The baker stood up for his sons.

"They are more reliable than many a grown-up man."

The Prussian looked into three pairs of admiring, adoring young eyes and nodded graciously. Of course, the new generation would be important in a few years' time; exceedingly important.

"I never doubted it. Let's get a move on, gentlemen."

The voices grew lower. Sometimes paper rustled in an impatient hand. The room was full of cigar smoke. Once the baker got up and put out the big chandelier. The light fell through the chinks in the shutters. No need for the men going home from the inn to see it and to ask themselves what kept the Schneebergers up so late. In villages and in small towns eyes are twice as sharp and curious as in cities.

September had come with crystal weather; there was a breath of autumn in the frosty air. The leaves of the chestnut trees were turning yellow. On fine days one could see the range of the Small-Carpathian Mountains in the distance.

Clarisse was working in the rose garden. Even now she had more than enough to do; roses won't allow you to neglect them. Old Ján was painting the greenhouse; it smelt of fresh paint and the new white colour reflected the rays of the autumn sun.

Clarisse could hear merry voices coming from the tennis-court. She frowned. Of course; Joseph and Isolde; I really ought to send the girl home. I can quite understand

her having fallen in love with Joseph; he can be fascinating when he likes, but that the old fool should fall for her... She scratched her finger on a thorn and grew cross; of course it was not only the scratch. At my age, she thought wistfully and a trifle guiltily, one clings to every tiny scrap of happiness, and if a little goose comes along and steals one's best friend it does hurt. Besides, it's annoying to think that I, too, might still look young and pretty, if only Robert... Her sense of humour got the better of her and she laughed softly; after all she could not expect Robert to earn money so that she could keep young for another man. Not that there was any danger of Robert doing so. Strange, that he, too, had grown more human since the girl had come. Of course he enjoyed being admired; who doesn't? And one had to admit that Isolde—what a name to give a child—was very sweet, affectionate like a kitten, and somehow pathetic, now that she was no longer browbeaten by that awful mother of hers. Clarisse often wondered how it was possible to be so pleased with little things. Aunt Anny, who had spent a few days on the estate last month, had looked at the girl and said musingly: "Do you know whom she's like? Poor Antoinette, who was made to marry the Prussian and who died of homesickness. Don't you remember her portrait in my blue sitting-room?"

Clarisse had shivered unaccountably; did the chain connecting us with the past never break? And was it a good or a bad thing?

"Too soft, too weak," had been Aunt Anny's judgement on Isolde, tempered by: "But very sweet all the same." And then the incorrigible romantic that she was, awoke in Aunt Anny: "Just the thing for my boy. He needs a gentle, tender, rather stupid wife."

"Good Lord, surely you're not thinking... Just imagine the Bredars! They would never allow their daughter to marry..." Clarisse had stopped dead, red with embarrassment; but Aunt Anny had only laughed.

"You mean they would never let the girl marry a Jew? Darling; Isolde isn't eighteen yet. In a year or so the whole madness in the Reich will have blown over and the Bredars

will have acquired a new set of everlasting political opinions and will be only too glad to see the girl make a good match!"

Clarisse watched the man and the girl approaching the greenhouse; Isolde, rosy and bright, looking as if she had just come from her bath and not been playing tennis for the last two hours; Joseph, Clarisse had to admit it, looking about ten years younger than he had done a month ago.

"Look, darling," he said, "our good Clarisse is already hard at work."

Our "good" Clarisse . . . the "good" hurt her, it seemed to push her aside, kindly and a trifle patronisingly. It dated her, it made an old woman of her, or, what was even worse, an elderly one. For an instant she almost hated Robert, asleep in his comfortable bed.

"Someone has got to work," she said harshly.

Two young frightened eyes looked up at her; Isolde had never heard her speaking in that voice before. Involuntarily she drew closer to Joseph, who put his arm round her shoulder.

"Cross? Indulging in one of your black moods?" he asked mockingly.

She forced a smile.

"Not really; only hot and dirty and probably half-starved. Be a good girl, Isolde, and make tea for me."

Isolde nodded eagerly.

"Of course. You know I would love to help you in the garden, Aunt Clarisse. But you never let me."

The small, round face had grown bright again, and Clarisse regretted her words; nevertheless, she said rather unkindly:

"No one ever helped me, my child. Why should anyone do it, now that I'm growing old?"

Joseph stared at her in surprise.

"How can one be cross on such a lovely day?"

"I've never known you to be cheered up by a fine day before."

He laughed and looked at the girl.

"I don't know what's come to me. To-day I somehow feel that this crazy world of ours is rather beautiful."

His frankness touched Clarisse.

"You're quite right. Now run along, children, and make tea. I'm coming at once."

She had slightly stressed the word "children". Whilst speaking it she felt as if she were saying good-bye to something she had been very fond of. Stooping low, she picked up the basket; whatever happened—and what had happened after all?—creepers have to be tied up. Something plucked at her skirt. Looking down, she saw Tommy frantically wagging his tail and asking to be patted. Her hand sought his tousled head and lay there for a minute, clinging to the soft warmth. When she straightened herself, she heard a low puffing and wheezing; Marianka came, pushing a wheelbarrow full of earth. Her face was red and damp with sweat but her eyes were as merry as ever. How unreal all those vague feelings of mine are, Clarisse thought; this woman carting the earth for the roses is real, this woman who, with a smile on her face, is pushing a wheelbarrow that is much too heavy for her; this woman who accepts worry and work and old age as she accepts rain and wind, the summer's heat and the winter's frost. Her eyes grew soft. She ran to meet Marianka.

"It's much too heavy for you, dear. Let me push it."

The old woman gave her a grateful look.

"Yes, my good Countess Clarisse." (This time the "good" did not hurt.) "After all, you're a young woman still."

She laid a hand on her aching back.

"Just a minute to get my breath." She looked round. "Isn't it a beautiful day? Look at the swallows; they're getting ready to fly south."

The blue sky was dotted with tiny dark spots, madly flying swallows whose shrill voices filled the air.

The postman was old and garrulous, and frequently late. On this morning of the 15th of September he had not come at his usual time, and Robert grumbled at breakfast because there was no paper.

"Nothing will have happened," Joseph consoled him, emptying his cup.

Clarisse got up.

"Never mind. I'll bring you a paper. Aladar can give me his."

She drove slowly along a deserted road; a strange silence seemed to brood over the land; thin white mist rose from the fields and streamed in the air. No one was working in the fields, she did not meet a single cart. The whole country seemed to wait for something, breathless with expectation.

When Clarisse reached the square in front of the church she was surprised to see it full of people. But they, too, were as silent as the fields and the meadows had been; only a few women were crying softly. A big black flag hung at half-mast from the steeple, and its darkness seemed to tinge the whole town with gloom. An old peasant came up to Clarisse and lifted his hat; but instead of greeting her he only said: "He is dead. God rest his soul." And a woman, standing beside him, sobbed: "Yes, he is dead."

There was only one man of whom the people could talk that way; only one who was He for them all, whom they loved and trusted. Clarisse turned pale and hurried to the presbytery. Aladar came to meet her with a sad face and he, too, said as the old peasant had done: "He is dead. God help us."

They sat in the study, Margit from time to time wiping her eyes with an impatient hand and smoking furiously. Clarisse, always trying to escape from grief and sorrow, said irritably:

"Of course it's terribly sad. But, after all, he was very old and had been unable to do anything for months."

"He was here," Aladar said. "It meant so much simply knowing that he was alive. Whatever happened, however much our people grumbled, the feeling that he lived, that his spirit lived amongst us, was a comfort, giving us strength and hope. As long as he was alive our country had a guardian angel."

Margit sniffed.

"Couldn't it have been the old man in Ruzomberok?"

"It's always the wrong people who die," Clarisse said. She wanted to get up, to leave the house, to fly from the sorrow darkening the room. But she was afraid of the grief that would meet her in the square before the church, in the streets, the roads; the bitter grief of a nation and a country. She was afraid of seeing weeping women and sad-looking men, but most of all, she feared her own thoughts, that were as black and sad as the flag hanging at half-mast from the steeple. She knew that as soon as she was alone all the old futile torturing fears would return, the forebodings that sent cold shivers along her spine. Why cannot we be as our ancestors were, she asked herself angrily, people who lived only for themselves, who knew only their own lives, who did not love a country or a State? How easy life was for them. How simple living must have been after Waterloo . . . Why were we born in our times?

Memories haunted her; a 28th of October, the day on which the Republic had been proclaimed at Prague . . . Her journey to the capital . . . flowers, flags, banners, singing, streets through which the first President drove . . . Then calm, hopeful years building up the young Republic . . . Peace in Europe, seventeen good, fertile, promising years . . . All that ended to-day with a black flag that seemed to cover the whole country . . . And not only her own country, but all those others, too, that were threatened by the eternal enemy of humanity: Germany.

At last she made up her mind to go home. Leaving the presbytery garden she met Hanus Vyskocil. He held himself less straight than usual and his kind, child-like eyes were red. But to-day no one threw him an angry look. Driving through the place Clarisse noticed that the largest black flag was hanging from the baker's house.

At home they already knew what had happened; Marianka had told them and Korompa, too, was wrapt in mourning.

The sky had grown dark. Big drops fell from the grey clouds. It got dark much too early. Night came, black and impenetrable, accompanied by the wailing of wind and the pattering of rain. The whole country wept; the old trees

sobbed; telegraph-poles moaned; the old weather-cock on the roof turned shrilling and creaking. Damp yellow leaves were blown against the window panes.

Clarisse, unable to sleep, heard strange noises, a scratching and scraping, a hasty running and tripping. She knew that the mice were playing in the old walls; nevertheless, she could not prevent herself from thinking of moles, those uncanny rodents of the night that undermine everything. She seemed to see them; a big thin one had the face of Father Gogolak, another one reminded her of Emma Leberfinger. They kept on coming in flocks, running in all directions, digging, throwing up earth. Where they had been, the fields dried up, the houses crumbled to dust, the earth opened. They undermined banks; and rivers flooded villages and towns. They ran along streets, black and sinister; and wherever they appeared men and women vanished as if the plague had stricken them.

At last the morning came, and the rain stopped. A red dawn bathed the country in a weird light. The lawn was covered with rose leaves. The chestnut tree before the dining-room window stood in a pool of sere leaves and plaintively stretched black bare arms towards a merciless sky.

PART TWO

THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

*

THE BEAST SPRINGS

WINTER had come early with heavy snowfalls and a bleak, desolate sky. The heavy black clouds hung so low that they seemed to touch the earth and to smother all living things. Never before had Clarisse felt so desperate an urge to hide herself, to lead an isolated life, to shut out the world. On that fateful 14th of September a door had closed with a bang for her. Behind that closed door terrible things were being done, cruel pains were being suffered. The whole country had somehow grown smaller; it had lost touch with a bright and happy world—perhaps because that world had ceased to exist. Life at Korompa had grown dreary. In November the Bredars had left for Berlin; after an odious scene that Clarisse could not think of without her heart beating madly and her hands growing cold. She had been fortunate in not coming into close touch with brutality and meanness during the course of her guarded life; but on that rainy afternoon when the Bredars came to fetch Isolde, she had been face to face with cruelty and brutality incarnate.

Someone—Clarisse suspected Emma Leberfinger—had warned the Bredars that their daughter was becoming intimate with the "Jew" and Gisela had appeared at Korompa, foaming with fury, behaving like a madwoman, as Robert had said afterwards, spouting dirty and obscene words. She had shrieked and yelled like a fishwife; had accused Clarisse of having played the go-between; of having acted as pander between her daughter and Joseph; of having

tried to pollute pure German blood, thus venting her hatred against the master-race. She had put questions to her daughter that made Clarisse blush to the roots of her hair.

"Have you slept with the Jew, you tart?" Her shrill tone had risen to a shriek; and Clarisse had felt as if her pretty sitting-room would never be clean again; as if the vulgar German voice would go on living here for ever; as if not only a single brutal and debased woman were yelling horrible words but a whole bestialised country; a country that was terribly, fearfully close to Czechoslovakia.

"Of course you never gave it a thought; you never considered your father's career, or my reputation. How can I look the Führer in the face, knowing that my daughter . . . My daughter, a Bredar, the granddaughter of a Prussian general . . . Having an intrigue with a Jew, like a waitress . . ."

Robert had been listening silently to her ravings; a look of utter disgust on his face. Now he said calmly:

"Don't you think you'd better control yourself, Gisela? Your manners may be all right in the Reich, but we are not used to that kind of thing."

His calm drove her frantic. She turned upon him.

"Shut up, you traitor! A German who became a Czech!"

"An Austrian," Robert corrected her gently.

"Austria is a German country. It belongs to the Reich. Soon we shall come to the aid of our oppressed brothers in the *Ostmark*."

"I don't think my former countrymen will feel grateful for your aid."

"That's your opinion," she said mockingly. "But I can tell you . . ."

Eberhart slightly lifted his hand; it was a tiny gesture, but his wife fell silent as if the hand had been laid upon her lips. His face was a blank; only his cold, blue eyes stared at Gisela with a menacing look. He said coldly:

"Don't get excited, my dear. My daughter will come to her senses and remember what she owes her German blood and her family. The Bredars do not mix with inferiors."

Clarisse was trembling with anger.

"Your wife," she said, turning to Eberhart, "has just mentioned the Führer, whom she wants to look in the face. That sounds as if the Bredars *did* mix with inferiors." The old Herdegen pride awoke in her. "Why shouldn't they? Who are the Bredars when all is said and done?"

"I forbid you to insult the Führer."

"Don't you think, Eberhart," Robert's voice was as calm and as low as ever, "that you are not in a position to forbid anything in our house, in our country?"

"Your country! Red Czechoslovakia! We'll see . . ."

"You'll probably see more than you will like."

Bredar turned to his daughter.

"Come, Isolde. I am not going to remain another instant in the house of a traitor and a lackey of the Jews."

The girl stared at him. She had not spoken a single word during the whole disgusting scene. Her face was very pale and drawn.

She went up to Clarisse and kissed her.

"I don't know how to thank you, Aunt Clarisse. Before I came here I did not even know that people could be decent and human." Her lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears. "Tell Joseph that I love him and that I shall love him all my life . . ."

Gisela laughed scornfully.

"I'll teach you to go about proclaiming your love for a Jew, you shameless hussy. As for him, the vile seducer of an innocent girl; his name is down on the list and . . ."

"Gisela!"

She gave a start.

"You are right, Eberhart. What is the good of talking to them? They are not worthy of hearing German words." She threw a glance at Clarisse. "After what has happened, you will hardly expect us to associate with you when we come here next year."

Isolde began laughing hysterically.

"Do you know why they are coming back? By whose order? Do you know why their friend is staying on? Beware of him. He . . ."

Her father's heavy hand closed her mouth with a blow. He dragged her away from Clarisse.

"Come."

At the door Gisela turned.

"Don't forget to send on Isolde's clothes and all the other things she brought here. One can never know with people like . . ."

Robert opened the door.

"Thank God, I'm not a German," he said fervently, "else I might easily forget how civilized people treat guests. Go; you taint the very air."

A few minutes later they heard the car driving away. Clarisse sat down and burst into tears. Robert stood beside her, looking helpless and miserable. He longed to comfort her; but one never knew how to treat Clarisse. Silently smoking, she thought with a tinge of bitterness: he can't find a single kind word for me. He is probably thinking that Margit would have stood up to that ghastly woman. But her vulgarity simply paralysed me.

"Poor girl," Robert said after a while, "having to live with those brutes."

"Poor Joseph."

Robert shrugged.

"After all, he might have known . . ."

"Isn't it queer that men cannot be just to one another?" Clarisse asked angrily. Perhaps she stressed her anger because she could not help feeling a certain relief; Isolde had gone, youth had gone; she would no longer have to look upon a happiness she herself had lost.

"I'm glad that Joseph was in town," Robert said gently. He was surprised at Clarisse's irritation; but he had long ago given up trying to understand her.

"You'll have to tell him."

Clarisse was so tired that she felt as she never wanted to get up from her armchair; as if she never wanted to speak another word. How good it would be to close one's eyes; to sleep, never to wake up again; to know nothing about a world in which people like the Bredars lived and prospered. Robert looked dismayed.

"You know that I'm no good at telling people bad news." His voice had a plaintive sound.

"Of course you expect me to do it. As you expect me to do everything unpleasant and difficult."

She broke off abruptly, horrified at the sound of her own voice; it had reminded her of Gisela's. She put out her hand.

"Robert . . ."

But he had turned away and left the room.

Joseph changed colour when she told him, nodded silently once or twice, laughed—an unpleasant laugh—and said:

"Rather a pity."

That was all.

He stayed at Korompa the whole winter. His dejection, varying when he was drunk, and he frequently was, with wild fits of hatred against everyone and everything, got on Clarisse's nerves. Sometimes she felt unable to bear the bitter disdain with which he spoke of all things; sometimes, and that was even worse, she felt he was right: there was nothing decent, clean and good left in the world; every attempt at doing good, at being kind and helpful was worse than futile. There was a tiny trace of personal annoyance mixed up with these considerations; after all, Joseph had only known Isolde for a few short months; how could he, who was always finding fault with all the women he knew, really have cared for the charming, but silly, girl?

"He was in love," Margit said in her matter-of-fact way. "Besides, we're all continually criticising him, and the little goose adored him. Of course it did him good. But he's sure to get over it. One gets over most things. Don't let Joseph's unhappy love affair turn your pretty hair grey, Clarisse."

She was sitting at the window, and Clarisse, looking at her, saw in the merciless light of the winter sun that Margit's own hair had turned white at the temples. She stared at the light, silky curls that gave the lovely face a softer and kinder look. Margit noticed it and smiled wryly:

"My dear, there are other things in the world besides love affairs and misunderstood women who mourn for a lover, who never was one," she said mockingly, puffing hard at her cigar. "Yes, Clarisse, much more important things. Evil spirits; if I had not always believed in the devil, the anti-Christ, not the one with horns and goat's feet, but the incarnation of evil, I'd do it now. I can watch him sneaking in everywhere; and poisoning souls. You live on the estate, seeing no one but the family, Marianka and old Ján; how are you to know . . ." She stopped, pushing back her curls impatiently, and Clarisse noticed with concern that her hands were trembling.

"What's the matter with you, dear?" she asked anxiously.

Margit drummed on the arms of her chair.

"Tell me, are the people in the other countries blind?" she asked passionately. "Or don't they want to see, because that comes easier? I should like to make every foreign statesman look after a small parish; then he could observe *en miniature* what's wrong with the world. He'd . . ." She broke off with an angry little laugh. "And Aladar, who never sees a thing. Dear God, why couldn't I have been the parish priest instead of him? I'd have shown Father Gogolak where he gets off. But of course it had to please Providence to make a weak woman of me; I must sit at home and knit stockings for the poor—who don't wear them, small blame to them—and watch the parish going to the dogs. Because no one does anything."

"I'd never have called you a weak woman."

"Can I thunder from the pulpit? Have you ever considered what an enormous help it is to tower above your neighbours? Can I threaten the parishioners with hell-fire?" She sighed impatiently. "Do you know what they are up to now? Someone, probably that idiot Emma Leberfinger and, maybe, Sister Martha, go about telling people not to buy the candles and the gold and silver threads for their Christmas tree in Mrs. Kraus's shop, because the Kraus are Jews. Luckily our people know that Mr. Huber, the good German Aryan, is much more expensive, and go on buying in the Jewish shop. But, of course, some of the

mud sticks. And poor Mrs. Kraus is half-dead with fear. She's lived through one pogrom already; in '18; when the soldiers came home; and she's convinced that there will be another soon. And her husband is very ill, heart trouble, and five children . . ." She shook her head and said softly: "One really ought to murder Emma Leberfinger and those who stir her up. It would be a good deed."

Clarisse could not suppress a smile at Margit's idea of a good deed; yet she knew that many people in the small town did not laugh at her cousin, but considered her—notwithstanding her eternal cigar and her somewhat rough manners—a kind of guardian angel.

Mrs. Kraus, looking up at her with frightened black eyes when she entered the shop to buy Christmas cards, also said something about angels, and the man standing before the counter turned round and smiled at Margit:

"You're a good woman," he said.

"That surprises you, eh, Mr. Prohazka? I, too, am amazed at a Red paying me a compliment just because I behave as a decent Christian ought to."

Tido Prohazka laughed.

"Your parish certainly does not seem to be of your way of thinking," he said with a broad grin. "Last night the good Christians smashed my windows."

"Dear God!" The woman behind the counter turned pale. "Has it begun already?"

"And the letters I get," Tido Prohazka went on, still smiling. "Anonymous, of course. I'm a lackey of the Jews. I've been bought over by the Czechs. I'd better go and live in Prague. But then, of course, it suits me to stay here and lord it over the town. There was one writing I recognized," he added slowly. "I think I ought to talk to Monsignore Jeszenak about it, because, after all, the man is his subordinate, if that's the right expression. But," his smile grew kindly teasing, "perhaps I'll better talk it over with you, Miss Jeszenak."

Margit had blushed a rosy red; she sat down on a chair before the counter.

"I know whom you mean, Mr. Prohazka. But I've got to

admit that I'm no match for him. He seems possessed by an evil spirit."

"I can tell you the name of the evil spirit," the post-office clerk said. "What is the Prussian doing here? Why is he staying on at the Bredars' place? He says he's writing a book and needs quiet surroundings. If he wants to work, why does he drive all over the country? You meet him at the most out-of-the-way places. In all villages and small towns where people are discontented."

Margit sighed angrily.

"I've been to Bratislava and have talked about the man to the Chief of the Police. But he says they've got nothing to go on. Surely the fact that the man's a German should suffice to have him expelled."

Tido Prohazka smiled.

"You must not generalise. Even in the Reich . . ."

"Oh, for goodness sake, don't trot out your good, innocent Germans who are being terrorised by a gang of criminals. A nation that calmly looks on whilst people are being tortured and killed . . . How many million inhabitants has the cursed country? Sixty, I believe. And not even thirty millions rose up and said: Stop it, we're not going to stand that kind of thing any longer. If thirty-one million had said it, the whole Hitler devilment would have been swept away long ago."

"We don't know everything . . . Remember the oppression, the terror . . ."

"Look here, Mr. Prohazka, let's be frank. I don't like the Reds, because they're too materialistic and have a tendency to forget that man does not consist of body and brains only, but has also got a soul. And you probably dislike the Catholics, because, unfortunately, so many of us are cowards and worse, and quite ready to side with the Nazis. But I'm perfectly sure that you would never go over to those brutes, and, I trust, you're convinced that I would not either. Nor would my brother," she added with a trace of embarrassment.

He nodded and was going to say something, but before he could open his mouth the door flew open and a bundle of

red leaflets fell into the shop. Huge black letters proclaimed: "Christians, do not buy in Jewish shops. Do not carry your hard-earned money to the Jews who are bleeding you white and who intend to become masters of the country."

Margit picked up a leaflet.

"Clever," she said coldly. "All nations have been considered. The order is printed in Slovak, Hungarian and, of course, German."

She jumped up, her eyes blazing.

"Who threw the leaflets into the shop?" she said, her voice shaking with rage. She opened the door and ran into the street. Tido Prohazka followed her. The street was deserted. In the distance they could see two trousered legs racing in the opposite direction.

Mrs. Kraus was crying bitterly. She thought of her sick husband, and her five children, and remembered that her great-grandparents had already lived in the town. Her tears fell hot on a coloured Christmas card, representing the Child in the manger, holding a banner upon which was written in golden letters: "Peace to men of goodwill."

"There's something in the air," Hanus Vyskocil said, seating himself at the supper-table. "Something that used not to be there before."

Elisabeth put a plate in front of him.

"Eat, Hanus. You've had a busy day."

"Formerly," Hanus said, not to be diverted from his grievance, "when I arrested a man he called me a cur. I did not mind that; I should hate to be arrested myself. And I don't like having to arrest other people. But if I come upon the son of the vet smashing a window I've got to take him to the station. Thank you, dear, no more potatoes. What was I saying? Oh yes, I remember: formerly they called me a cur, but now they've taken to saying *Czech* cur. And in church they won't sit beside me. You saw it yourself last Sunday."

Elisabeth nodded silently and went to the door.

"What are you doing?"

"I only wanted to make sure . . . Emma, she's got into the habit of listening at doors. She's become so wicked, Hanus, I ought not to say so; after all she's my sister; but I can't trust her. She won't let me into her room; the door is always locked. The other evening I came past and heard her talking. At first I thought she was saying her prayers, because she said: 'My Saviour, my God' . . . But somehow it did not sound like a real prayer. And then she said: 'You have exalted your faithful servant, and you will make me mighty and destroy my enemies.' She stopped and I heard her kissing something."

The gendarme laughed good-naturedly.

"She's probably in love. And all her silliness comes from reading too much. One never sees her without a book or a pamphlet."

"Why won't she let me come into her room? Why does she hate me? What have I done? What has little Hanus done? She sometimes looks at him as if she wanted to murder the child."

"That's only your fancy." He looked at her tenderly. "Of course women who expect a child do get that way. Go and see Doctor Silberthal; he'll give you some medicine."

She burst into tears.

"You don't know what she said when she saw that I was going to have a baby. She laughed and looked me all over. 'Another child by the Czech, another bastard, you shameless bitch.'"

The shop door banged. Elisabeth gave a little cry.

"So she was listening at the keyhole. She must have heard everything. I'm afraid of her, Hanus. I'm terribly afraid of her."

She ran into the next room and came back with little Hanus in her arms.

"Thank God nothing has happened to him. Thank God she did not hurt him."

Sitting down beside her husband on the wooden bench, she wiped her eyes.

"We were so happy," she said with a sob. "You and I and little Hanus. And now . . . and now . . ."

Gendarme Vyskocil was not cursed with too vivid an imagination, but holding his wife tight, it seemed to him as if he heard in the distance an evil, almost bestial laugh.

Clarisse had not been the only one to close her doors and draw her curtains, in an attempt to live exclusively in the present. Doctor Silberthal had done the same, with the difference that he occasionally felt unhappy about it; as if he were neglecting a duty; as if he were giving way to cowardice by trying to forget the sufferings of others for fear they might destroy his own happiness. Up to the last year his whole life had consisted of work and of bitter memories of student days in Vienna, where the anti-semitism of his fellow students had made life a burden to him. Their unconcealed hostility towards the "Jew" had changed a cheerful, sociable boy into a taciturn and lonely man, filled with distrust of all Christians. The only people he had felt at home with had been the Herdegens, the Jeszenaks and some of his poor patients. But now everything had become different; he had a home; the woman he had loved for so long was his wife; a child—he kept forgetting that it was not his and grew fonder of the boy from day to day. Since the baby had been born, Else had become contented, affectionate and passionately in love with her husband. Hynek Silberthal sometimes asked himself, with the unfortunate inclination to self-torture he was prone to, how much of her love he owed to her hatred for another man. But he shook off this thought as he shook off all other painful ones; closing his eyes and his ears; not seeing and not hearing things that could threaten his happiness. Why not enjoy love and life as others did?

He pushed away the morning paper lying on the breakfast table. He did not want to know what was going on in the world; what was happening beyond the Czech frontier. It was encouraging to think of that well-fortified frontier protecting their country against a barbarous nation. The only important one was the frontier in the Sudetenland; Austria seemed to be coming to her senses at last; and Hungary would

never do anything that might irritate England and France. England, France and Russia—during these days they represent protecting divinities to many an anxious heart—powerful, trustworthy friends, who would never leave them in the lurch. Of course there were some sceptics, as for instance, Joseph Braun, who tried to frighten one with absurd forebodings. But hardly anyone believed them.

The doctor's house was quiet and peaceful; happiness lived behind drawn curtains that shut out the world, till one day one of these curtains was drawn aside by a rough hand. Svata Hrubin came home, coughing and feverish, and Marianka made him go and see the doctor. The boy was taciturn and sullen whilst the doctor examined him. He looked round the room, his eyes smouldering, his cheeks burning. But he did not say a word till the doctor sat down at his table to write a prescription.

Then the boy burst out:

"Life has been kind to you, doctor. You can afford all the instruments you need. You've got enough money. Money, money, that's the backbone of your race. But as to us... What's the good of studying, of passing one's examinations? When I've passed my last one I'll be the same beggar I am to-day."

The young voice sounded so desperate and so filled with hatred that the doctor looked up in dismay.

"But," Svata went on, and now his tone had changed and was threatening, "it won't always be so. The day is coming when every man will be put in his place. Slovakia will belong to the Slovaks. We will not look on helplessly and watch aliens grab everything we..."

"Aliens, Svata?"

"Yes, aliens. People who do not belong here; who ought to remember that they are here only on sufferance; whom we have tolerated too long."

"Who has been teaching you these things, Svata?"

"I need no one to teach them to me. I've only got to open my eyes; they tell me that..."

"There is no room for me and my people in this country, eh, Svata? That our place is in Palestine?"

The boy grew slightly embarrassed. He lowered his eyes, shocked by the pain he saw in the doctor's face.

"It would be a blessing for the whole world if you left the countries that have borne with you too long."

"Does your mother say so too?"

Svata Hrubin flushed a deep red.

"My mother is a simple soul. She does not understand. She believes that all men are God's children and ought to love one another. Not even a long life of poverty has made her see what's wrong with the world."

He took the prescription the doctor was holding out to him.

"What do I owe you?" he asked arrogantly.

Hynek Silberthal stared at him in amazement.

"Why, Svata, since when...?"

The boy put his hand to his head. His forehead was damp. He felt ashamed. Had not the doctor always been his friend? Had he not helped him whenever he could? Had he not studied with him during the holidays, explaining and repeating things with great patience?

"It's... I only... I did not mean you, personally. If all Jews were as decent as you are. But you see..."

He broke off and looked at the doctor with unhappy, bewildered eyes.

"I did not want to hurt you," he said in a low voice.

"Never mind. I've been told that kind of thing before. Don't forget to take a teaspoon of the stuff three times a day and stop in bed for a week. Shall I come and see how you are getting on, or would you rather have nothing to do with the Jew?"

Svata stood in the middle of the room, nervously clenching and unclenching his hands and looking at the doctor with Marianka Hrubin's soft brown eyes.

"I'm sorry. I really don't know what made me... And... if you do come, don't tell my mother."

Hynek Silberthal smiled kindly and a trifle wistfully.

"You may be quite sure that I shall never say anything that might grieve your mother. And it would grieve her, if she knew..."

Svata interrupted him, saying inconsequently:

"How easy life is for people who believe in God. How wonderfully easy. Perhaps it would have been better for me not to study medicine. To be a peasant as my father was. There are so many things I cannot understand. I get all muddled up. I simply don't know what to believe: the old teaching, or the new one."

"The gospel tells you that every tree is known by its fruit. What fruit does the new teaching bear, Svata?"

The boy nodded slowly, hesitatingly.

"That's what my mother says. But then she is convinced that the anti-Christ has risen in Germany, and that the last fight between him and God has begun." He smiled almost apologetically. "She's a simple soul."

He put out his hand, drew it back nervously, put it out again. The doctor took it without a word and held it for an instant.

"Thank you, doctor, and . . . I really did not mean to offend you."

He almost ran from the room. Hynek Silberthal felt his limbs go leaden; he sank into an armchair. For an instant the carefully closed door had been opened, the curtain had been drawn back and before the window stood life, naked, grinning and ghastly. Far away sounds reached his ears: moans, cries, whips lashing bare backs. He shivered. Then his whole body stiffened; he shook his head and said out loud: "It can't happen here. Not in Czechoslovakia." He repeated the words as if trying to convince himself. Then he opened the door into the waiting-room.

"The next," he said.

Margit Jeszenak was engaged in making a scene.

"You can't do it, Aladar. I won't have him in the house." She puffed furiously at her cigar, blowing clouds of smoke into the study. "I can't bear him. I hate his round expressionless face and his false smile. Let him stay at the Golden Lion. Why is he coming here? What does he want?"

Aladar sighed.

"I've got to ask him to stay with us, my dear. It can't be avoided. After all he's a colleague. You must not permit politics to make you forget your manners."

"Politics! It's not only politics. I simply can't stand swindlers, especially when they wear a cassock."

"I really don't know why you dislike Tiso so much. At least he's one of the moderate members of the Hlinka Party. He may be stupid, but he can't help that. Besides, many people say that he's not stupid at all."

"Stupid or not; he's as ambitious as they make them. And as false and cunning too. When the old sorcerer in Ruzomberok dies, Tiso will become his successor. You'll see what will happen then."

"You always exaggerate."

"And you never see anything. You see nothing, Aladar, you hear nothing, and if by chance you do, you turn away and close your eyes, and stop your ears, for fear something might interfere with your studies. You waste your time by trying to find out what poisoned and depraved humanity in the old times and in the Middle Ages, but what is depraving it here and now does not interest you in the least. For goodness sake put away your books, give up studying the patristic writers. Hell is loose."

"You've been saying that for years, Margit."

Aladar took his briar from his pocket and Margit threw him the matches with an impatient gesture. She hated Aladar's pipe and looked upon it as her brother's ally. Hidden by smoke clouds his face did not betray when she had made a hit.

"Yes, for very many years," the priest repeated.

"Dear me, the paltry little sins we, or rather I, had to fight against. Stealing apples, telling stories, taking away your neighbour's character, breaking the sixth commandment . . . that was about all. But to-day . . . This morning old Svoboda's youngest daughter came here and asked me to find her a situation. Just imagine what the silly, sixteen-year-old brat said: 'But not with Jews and not with Czechs.'"

Aladar smiled wryly. "I heard you yelling," he said.

"I never yell. I only asked her, quite kindly: 'Why not with Jews, you little fool?' What do you think she answered: 'Because they rape Christian girls.'"

"Yes," Aladar replied with a sigh of resignation. "I also heard your answer: 'If a girl is as ugly as you are she ought to be grateful if anyone wants to rape her.' Tell me, Margit, do you really think that the sister of the parish priest ought to say such a thing?"

"If the parish priest omits saying it," she said grimly. "Then I asked her, still very gently: 'And why not with Czechs?'"

Aladar put down his pipe and sat up.

"What did she say?"

"That she wanted a permanent situation, and that the Czechs won't be here much longer. Whereupon I asked her, still with Christian forbearance: 'Who says that, you idiot?' and she flushed, turned up her eyes as Emma Leberfinger does and remained silent. I also asked her, very kindly: 'I suppose you go to confession to Father Gogolak, my child?'"

"No, Margit, I'm sorry to contradict you, but you said: 'I suppose you frequently confess to that young humbug, Father Gogolak.'"

She made a face at him.

"You pretend not to hear a thing when you are writing your sermons, yet you always manage to hear what was not meant for your ears. Besides what I said is absolutely unimportant, the important thing is what the brat said. But that's not all. I've got some more news for you."

"Good Lord, what else?"

Margit laughed maliciously.

"Martha is leaving for Bratislava."

"Martha, whom on earth do you mean?"

"The woman who calls herself a Sister of Charity. I went to the orphanage this morning, and the Mother-Superior told me. The poor old thing is miserable, thinking of Martha's soul. I tried to comfort her by explaining that Martha had not got one, but she kept crying and saying: 'Every human being has a soul.'"

"It's the doctrine of the Church."

"I know; but there must be a mistake somewhere. Do you really claim that the Germans have souls?"

"I've got to believe it, however hard I find it."

"Do you by any chance also believe that they were created in God's image?"

"For goodness sake, stop talking theology. Tell me what Sister Martha intends doing."

"Miss Martha Kurz"—Margit stressed the 'Miss'—"has suddenly discovered that she no longer believes in the Jewish religion—that's what she calls Catholicism—and that her conscience commands her to bear witness to her change of heart. Her words, not mine."

"I can't believe it."

"You ought to have seen it coming, Aladar. But then you never do notice anything. One day the roof will fall in and you'll be killed, because you never noticed that the house was being undermined. You're really not fit to look after souls."

The priest grew angry; perhaps because he knew how right his sister was. "Mind your own business," he said curtly, his eyes blazing.

"Don't come the captain of the Hussars over me. It does not impress me in the least. Keep that tone for your dear guest."

He smiled propitiatingly.

"Margit, please, do behave like a lady when the man comes."

"I always do. All right, I'll be terribly polite."

Although she kept her promise, Aladar felt uncomfortable the whole evening. The guest found himself at dinner sitting opposite to a very charming society woman, whose innocent violet eyes never left his face. She listened with an air of reverence to his slightest words, agreed with them and twisted his sentences so that he hardly recognized them. She talked with a child-like smile about "our government" in Prague and "our dear President Benes, for whom we ought to thank God on our bended knees. As you said just now, Monsignore."

Monsignore Tiso, who had not dreamt of saying so, grew slightly confused. Was it possible that a trap had been set for him in the house of a colleague? He glanced nervously at his host; but Aladar's face expressed nothing; no one could have guessed what he was thinking. Monsignore Tiso's eyes returned to his hostess. She smiled sweetly, looking very pretty and extremely stupid. She must be stupid, the guest thought, only a stupid woman could be so terribly tactless. How fast she talked! He could hardly follow her. He began to dislike her sweet smile; it bewildered him. What a pity to have such a good dinner spoilt by a chattering girl. He tried hard to interest his host in theological problems, but Monsignore Jeszenak apparently did not care for theology, and only answered with a yes and a no. Monsignore Tiso did not know that his host was sitting on thorns; to Aladar a guest was sacred, and surely the man could not but understand Margit's spiteful insinuations.

She poured out a glass of wine for the guest.

"Poor dear Tuka," she said sadly, and Aladar felt murderous towards her. The one name not to be mentioned in their guest's presence. "I often think of him. He's a real martyr, isn't he, Monsignore? Of course some people don't think so. I've even heard it said that he was nothing but a traitor, bought over by the Magyars. But surely that's a vile slander; he was such a friend of yours, wasn't he? And you always saw eye to eye till he was, what shall I say, found out. I really . . ." She stopped dead for an instant. Aladar had kicked her under the table. "Oh, Aladar, you kicked me," she said innocently. "Don't fidget. Do be careful, you might have hurt our guest."

Monsignore Tiso grew taciturn. The name Margit had spoken had spoiled his appetite. He gazed at her searchingly. Were those lovely eyes really so child-like? Was the girl really so stupid? He began to feel very uncomfortable. Aladar glowered at his sister and did not say a word. Margit was enjoying herself immensely. She sweetly asked the most insidious questions, waiting respectfully for an answer. She kept tripping up Monsignore Tiso, and getting him to say things he did not want to say. Aladar longed to smack her.

It was a long and decidedly unpleasant evening. The guest, suspicious and confused, was glad when the clock struck eleven and he could say good-night.

"He'll never come again," Margit said gleefully after the study door had closed behind the plump figure. Aladar poured himself out a glass of brandy.

"You were odious, Margit. But you're right. What a humbug, what a liar!"

Taking up a book he gazed at it wistfully.

"It's my turn to say, the time for reading and studying is past. We've got to fight."

He stretched himself, his face suddenly young. Margit, watching him, thought tenderly: that's how he must have looked storming a position at the head of his men. She smiled:

"We'll fight, Captain."

The same evening little Sister Veronica was kneeling in the small chapel of the orphanage trying to pray for Sister Martha, big round tears coursing down her round, childish face. Her poor little brain was terribly bewildered. How could such things be? Such faithlessness, such wickedness? Yes, wickedness, for Sister Martha had even tried to lead her into temptation; had wanted her to commit a terrible sin: to deny Our Lord, to adore a false prophet. She had given her horrible books to read; the young nun shuddered, thinking of them. She had at first tried to win her by flattery; seeing that little Sister Veronica did not respond to it, she had had recourse to threats: "You'll see what will happen to you when we come into power."

Little Sister Veronica was far from being a heroine; recalling the words, her heart almost stopped beating and she felt greatly afraid. Would she have to suffer martyrdom as so many saints had done? Of course she ought not to be frightened, a religious must have the strength to die for God and her faith. But . . . life was so sweet and she was so fond of the orphans. The idea of having to give up all she loved seemed unbearable. Sister Martha had described

in detail, gloatingly, with sparkling eyes and an evil smile, what happened to those who dared to rebel against the new masters of the world. She had spoken of concentration camps where the enemies of the master-race were tortured and put to death, beyond the frontier, in the Reich. Little Sister Veronica had wiped her eyes: "Oh, poor people!"

"You don't understand. They're sub-human, Jews and Reds. They have got to be exterminated."

"Why?"

"Because we have decreed it."

"*We*?" Little Sister Veronica had stared at her with wide open eyes. "Whom do you mean when you say *we*?"

"The Germans, of course."

"But you're not a German. You were born at Bratislava. You're a Czechoslovak."

"Shut up, you fool. I am a German. The blood that flows in my veins proclaims me a member of the master-race. I belong to the nation that is oppressed by the Czechs and exploited by the Jews."

"But surely no one ever did you any harm, Martha?"

"What happens to my people, happens to me."

Little Sister Veronica had to listen to Sister Martha's threats and diatribes evening after evening. It began as soon as the Mother-Superior had gone to her room. The young nun caught hold of the rosary hanging from her belt and held tight to the crucifix. From time to time she put her hands to her ears, so as not to hear the blasphemies Sister Martha uttered. When the elder woman spoke of the Virgin, using words the younger one had never heard before, little Sister Veronica forgot her fear and cried out: "Keep silent. I won't have you say such things."

To-day, kneeling before the picture of the Mother and the Child, she remembered the awful words followed by a mocking laugh and a: "All right, stick to your Jewish God. You'll regret it."

Little Sister Veronica shivered, recalling Sister Martha's voice. She decided not to pray for her any longer; she must have sold herself to the devil to have become so cruel. Much better pray for all the humiliated, suffering men, and women,

and children; to ask God to deliver them from the German fiends; to send good and gallant men to fight for them. What else could she do? She was only a little Sister of Charity whose youth was spent loving God and the orphans. She thought of Franta whom Sister Martha had treated so unkindly, because he was a Jew, and also of Franta's dead father, of all the fathers and mothers the Germans had murdered. When would God punish the murderers? Of course the early Christians had to suffer too, yet later everything had come all right. But how terribly they had suffered, poor dears. She lifted her rough little hands in an imploring gesture: "If it must be, give me strength to suffer martyrdom for the sake of all those unhappy people, dear God. But punish the anti-Christ, hurl him back to hell, him and his people. Do not let them rule over us. Protect our country. And if it has to be, give me courage to die for the sake of all those suffering in German hands. You know how weak I am, how terribly afraid. Give me strength."

The flame burning in front of the altar trembled slightly and its red light fell upon the pale face with the frightened eyes and upon the small, hard, peasant hands.

February was ushered in by rain and wind. The big, white plains turned grey; the frozen brooks thawed. There was a smell of damp earth in the air.

"Spring is coming," Marianka said cheerfully. "We'll soon be able to work in the garden."

"It's much too early," old Ján grumbled. "You'll see we'll have frost again."

He was ill-tempered and taciturn. Something seemed to worry him; but he would not say what it was. Sometimes he gazed at the awakening country and shook his head. He did not call Clarisse to show her the first snowdrops lifting their white heads above last year's dried grass, as he had always done before, and she was glad that he omitted the small rite. She, too, did not believe in the coming of spring; the winter had been too long, too cold. She looked with a strange, unaccountable dread upon Nature's new year; what

was it going to bring in its train? I'm growing old, she told herself, trying to explain her despondency. We all are. I wonder why? She felt a great void in her heart; never had she been so far away from those she loved; never had she felt so much like an alien in a strange country. Spring would bring fresh work; the roses were waiting. But what was the good of roses in a world like ours? What was the good of anything?

"Don't be silly," Margit said, hearing her voice the question. "Fighting evil is never futile. But you're much too weak to fight, too soft, too decadent. Besides you only care for your own life; as soon as that begins to age you feel that the end of the world has come."

Joseph, on the other hand, agreed with Clarisse. "Why write?" he said. "There was a time when I really believed I had something to say. But what have I to say to the men and women of our times?" He laughed grimly. "To think how many editions my books went through in Germany. They've all been burnt and I'm rather glad of it. Why should the Germans read a book written by a more or less decent man? Let them keep to their own authors; to the writers who belong to them, or those who proclaim that art is a thing apart, meaning of course that you must never fall out with any party, because one never can say what might happen."

Nevertheless, he wrote feverishly, spending half the night at his writing-table.

"I can't help it," he said, almost apologetically. "One must make some use of one's talent. And if I can't influence people for good—and I've given up believing that—I can at least attack cruelty and meanness, and set cowardice in the pillory."

"Don't you think it's rather risky?" Clarisse said. She was in a cynical mood and wanted to annoy him.

He stared at her.

"How can your father's daughter say such a thing? A Herdegen? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Why should I be more decent than others?"

"Because life, fate, God, call it whatever you like, has

been very generous towards your race and you've got to pay it back by behaving decently."

"Sentenced to a life of courage and decency," she mocked.

He gave her an angry look.

"How I hate the words: why should I be different? They are the root of all evil, they justify the herd running after the bell-wether because he bleats loudest; the herd: cruel because it is cowardly; brutal and inhuman because it is afraid. The herd: the incarnation of vileness, vulgarity, selfishness. Don't you know that if only a single million of average men and women, not heroes, not saints, just people like you and I, had risen up in that god-forsaken country beyond our frontier and had fought against the beast, fought openly, without fear, without compromise, the whole nightmare would have been over by now? One million out of sixty. I ask less than Margit who talks of thirty millions. But every man and every woman over there has acted according to that damned point of view: what can a single individual do against a whole nation?"

Clarisse laughed.

"I never knew you wanted to be a hero."

"Why not, if it can't be avoided? Besides, what is heroism?"

"Living, not only dying for truth and justice," Robert said, from behind the book he was reading.

Clarisse stared at him in amazement.

"You too?"

"If you have not found out by now what is at stake and what must be done, you never will," her husband replied with unwonted vehemence.

She hung her head. The long quiet winter had wrought a change in the two men; and she had not even noticed it. Perhaps Margit was right, and one ought to . . . of course one ought to, if only one were not so tired of it all and so faint-hearted.

Joseph threw the evening paper on the round table in the sitting-room.

"I always expected it," he said, pale with rage. "The damned traitor!"

"What's happened?" Clarisse asked, looking up from her book.

"*Finis Austriae.*"

"What do you mean? Talk sense."

"Austria has knuckled under. A madman or a traitor, I don't know which, has given in. Schuschnigg has gone to Berchtesgaden."

"I can't believe it."

"Read it yourself. The paper-hanger whistled and the Austrian Chancellor came to heel. Traitor!"

"Don't you think we'd better wait and see? We don't know what has really happened," Robert said soothingly.

"Surely it's clear enough. He's sold the country, the unfortunate little country."

"I'm sure he didn't," Robert said. "He's not a statesman. God knows, he is madly prejudiced, but he loves Austria and he'd never deliver her up to a criminal."

"If it's the only way to remain Chancellor . . ."

Clarisse had taken up the paper with trembling hands. She felt sick with nervousness. There had been a time when she and many others would have asked impatiently: "Why should we care what happens to a country that has done us so much harm?" But these times were past. To-day real friendship united Czechoslovakia and Austria, and many of her former adversaries felt nothing but pity for the small neighbour, browbeaten and menaced by the Reich.

What had really happened they only knew on Sunday, when the Chancellor, speaking at Innsbruck, proclaimed the plebiscite. Joseph seemed to revive.

"I wronged the man. Everything can still come right. Now the Great Powers *must* see how things stand." He laughed. "I got a letter from mama. She writes like a young girl; thrilled and deliriously happy." He took up the letter. "Just listen: 'The beastly Prussians won't get thirty per cent of the votes. Never have I seen Vienna looking like it does since Sunday. The people are transformed. One sees only happy faces.'" He smiled. "Isn't that mama

all over? The millennium has come. Ah, well, let's hope so. I'll have to go to Vienna to vote. The first time in my life that I have no doubts as to how to vote."

He left Korompa on Friday, gay, full of hope.

"Listen in," he said, getting into the carriage. "Celebrate our resurrection with us."

They did listen in; but what they attended was a funeral, not a resurrection. Late in the afternoon—they had just sat down to tea—came the short incomprehensible news: the plebiscite had been postponed. It was repeated again and again, sounding more menacing with every repetition; till at last, towards midnight, a small country cried for help; desperately imploring aid from the whole world; and its cry remained unanswered . . .

They listened in silence to the Chancellor's speech; to his declaration that Austria was yielding to force, and, for the last time, to the old national anthem by Haydn. They heard the speeches of the Austrian traitors: Seyss-Inquart, Wilhelm Wolff and all those others who had sold their country for money and a good position. Then, in the chilly small hours of the morning, a harsh German voice proclaimed:

"You are now going to hear the Horst-Wessel song."

"That's the end," Robert said dully. "The Germans must be marching in by now."

Clarisse tried to keep back her tears. Was that really to be the end of so many hopes, of so much joy?

"It can't be. Someone must intervene. Someone must come to their aid."

"Who?"

Laden with bitterness and reproach, the question sounded through the room, and was swallowed up by a sinister silence. Robert and all those who were asking it in fear and trembling knew the merciless answer in advance:

"No one."

Clarisse could not remain at home doing nothing. She was terribly anxious about Aunt Anny, Uncle Tony and,

most of all, Joseph. She drove to Bratislava. Perhaps she would be able to get in touch with her relations from there.

The Slovak capital seemed to have gone into half-mourning; the kind of mourning one wears for a distant relative. The streets looked dreary; many people seemed suddenly aged and slightly bowed down; only slightly, for after all the blow had not fallen on them; only upon a neighbour. Clarisse stopped at a hotel close to the station and went to meet every train coming from Austria. She was proud of her country. Czechoslovakia opened her arms wide and took in even those who had been her adversaries. She did not call the people who had crossed her frontiers "aliens"; her compassion was untainted by superciliousness; she was glad to help, and did it generously. A mighty wave of pity had carried up men and women; never before had they reached such heights. Of course, it came natural to feel compassion with the refugees. The people getting out of the trains or arriving in motor cars from the frontier were a pitiful sight. Many of the women were weeping, the men looked pale and nervous; some faces were red and distorted by rage and hatred. In a trice the whole town was overcrowded. Many of the refugees had fled for the second time; they seemed more weary and discouraged than the others; their eyes roved about nervously, as if looking out for the merciless giant hand that was trying to grasp them the second time. Would they find peace and security here? Or were they doomed to flee on and on to the very ends of the earth?

Zapletal, the head waiter at the hotel, looked after the refugees like a father. "Better have some food at once," he said kindly. "After you've eaten things will look quite different." He did not serve them as if they were strangers; he treated them like long-lost children who have come home at last and for whom nothing is good enough. Clarisse felt touched, as she watched the little man with the bald head and the short legs eagerly hurrying from one table to another and accompanying every dish with a kind and encouraging word.

Motor cars tore past as if the man at the wheel could not believe that he was safe; as if he still heard the pursuing

enemy behind him. "To-morrow," a woman whispered, her voice as thin and as brittle as a thread, "to-morrow he will enter Vienna. God help all those who did not escape in time."

There were so many of them, so many. Clarisse thought with a shiver of what would happen when the Führer of the Germans entered the Austrian capital. What were the beautiful Viennese streets looking like to-day? She could imagine it; the papers wrote of yelling, shouting, looting mobs. It was a comfort to hear that not all the Viennese had "sold themselves to the devil," as Zapletal had said; to be told of acts of unexpected, unhopd-for kindness; of bank clerks, wearing the swastika, warning old clients: "The financial police have ordered us to note the name and address of all those who take something out of their safe," and who, when trembling voices obediently wanted to give name and address, shouted impatiently: "Can't you see that I'm busy. I have not got time for you," and pushed men and women almost roughly away from the counter. Chauffeurs had tried to console weeping women: "Get in. As long as you're in my car, nothing will happen to you." Workers had stepped in between Jewish women and young Aryans attacking them: "Go to the devil! You're not going to touch her!" Clarisse gave a sigh of relief. At least it was not quite as bad as in Germany.

But even here one saw rejoicing faces—German faces—unable to conceal their delight. During the first night she spent at the hotel, she heard brutal young voices yelling: "Siegheil! Siegheil!" It had sounded like the roaring of wild beasts scenting their prey.

She could not sleep and got up early. The dawn was pale and sad; an icy wind blew from the north. Yet the streets were not deserted as usually at this hour; motor cars kept driving past, and from the station came a long row of weary, frightened people.

Clarisse lifted her eyes to the green hill, rising behind the station; a single tree stood straight and defiant on the hill-top. How lonely it looked, how deserted! It could look beyond the frontier, it knew what was happening. Suddenly

a terrible dread overcame Clarisse; if the wild hordes did not stop in Austria they would come from that direction. Their planes, that flew so low over Vienna, would fly over this hill; perhaps a bomb would hit the lonely tree . . . For an instant she thought that she heard the roar of an engine in the air. Looking up, she felt an immense relief seeing nothing but an empty, desolate, grey sky. They will not dare . . . *We* have got allies, we have got friends, we are not alone and deserted; like the tree, like Austria . . .

She returned to the hotel and rang up Robert, but he had not heard from the Brauns. Zapletal, serving her a breakfast she did not feel like eating, for, as he declared: "Man must be fed, whatever happens in the world," glanced at her compassionately, for Aunt Anny had stayed at the hotel several times and was popular with the staff. "Don't worry about her. She belongs to the people who always come out on top. Eat your egg," he added kindly, "it's quite fresh. And don't be anxious about Mrs. Braun; God will protect her; He won't let her fall into German hands."

He said "German" without any of the insulting adjectives people used in those days; but the contempt expressed by his tone, and the look of his usually so kind eyes, made the name of that nation something vile, despicable, hardly human. Clarisse smiled. If all our people are like him, if they're too sane, too good, too pious, to become infected with the German plague, then things may still come right. She, who had always been a pacifist, thought with delight of the fortifications that protected Czechoslovakia in the North; of the great munition factories; of the well-equipped army. No, we are not helpless, we can defend ourselves . . .

Waiting at the station, she sought comfort in those thoughts. Whenever a train arrived, and one never knew when that would be, she ran from one carriage to the other, scanning each figure, each face, hurrying to the exit, for she might have overlooked the Brauns in the crowd. She stood there, her eyes glued to those passing by, feeling cold with disappointment as one unknown figure after the other came past and those she was longing to see did not arrive.

"Are you too expecting someone, Countess Herdegen?" a

shaky voice asked, and turning round, Clarisse saw pretty Mrs. Weiss, who came to Korompa every Whit-Monday, bringing sweets for the orphans' party. She did not look pretty to-day; her big black eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, red rims telling of sleepless, tearful nights; her face was a yellowish white and her hands were nervously picking at her coat.

"My sister and her husband . . ." she said, swallowing her tears. "I did so hope they would come. They were only married a year ago . . . They were so happy. And my sister is expecting a baby."

Her voice broke. Clarisse put her arm round the little woman's shaking shoulder.

"The frontiers are open," she tried to comfort her. "Perhaps they will come from the other direction."

Mrs. Weiss wiped her eyes.

"Forgive me, but I've been waiting and waiting, day and night, half-dead with fear . . . And I keep asking myself, if the Germans will really come to a stop at our frontiers; if they were to come here . . . But surely that will not happen? God won't permit it, will He? My children . . . The eldest boy is going to leave school this year . . . We were so glad to think that he'd help his father . . . But if they come he won't be allowed to study at the university. . . And the girl . . . Dear God, I dare not think of what would happen to her . . ."

Clarisse took her arm.

"Come to the hotel with me," she said gently. "We'll have a cup of tea and a little rest. The next train is not due for two hours or so. We'll go and meet it; I'm expecting my Aunt Anny."

"Mrs. Braun? Of course, Mr. Braun . . ."

A mocking laugh made her break off; a spiteful voice said very loudly:

"Look, father, our fine lady from Korompa, arm in arm with a Jewess!"

Clarisse turned round quickly; she saw Emma Leberfinger standing beside her father and pointing at her with a squat thumb. Old Leberfinger looked slightly embarrassed;

after all it was still risky to insult the gentry as if they were common people. As to the Jewess . . .

"Be quiet, Emma. You know the Jews are always thrusting themselves forward; and the Christians are too harmless to notice it. But that's going to come to an end also in our country."

Clarisse felt her cheeks burning with anger. She wanted to say something, but the words stuck in her throat. She could only utter a single one. "German," she said in the tone the head waiter had used, "German."

"Thank God," old Leberfinger replied, his voice still tinged with a certain respectfulness, "thank God."

Clarisse dragged Mrs. Weiss from the station. On the short way to the hotel the little woman almost broke down.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, trying in vain to steady her voice.

"You mustn't mind; the girl is ill, hysterical, half insane."

"But the old man . . . My God, what is to become of us? Why are men so wicked? What wrong have we done?"

Soldiers came marching past. Clarisse looked at them with a feeling of profound satisfaction; one of them noticed it and smiled at her. Their steps resounded in the street.

Having reached the hotel, Clarisse wanted to ring up Robert, but the telephone was engaged. An old woman was holding the receiver and crying in a voice shrill with nervousness:

"Is that Vienna speaking? Is that Vienna?"

She dropped the receiver and said dully:

"Vienna does not answer."

It sounded like a message of death; as if the lovely town beyond the frontier had died and only her grave-diggers had survived and were standing beside the grave, an evil leer on their faces.

Having met several trains in vain, Clarisse decided to drive home. To-day Hitler was entering Vienna; no one would be allowed to leave the city; it was no use waiting here any longer. She arrived at Korompa tired and dispirited.

"No news?" Robert had heard the carriage wheels and came to the gate to meet her.

"No. What can have happened?"

He shrugged despondently.

"I can't imagine. After all, they've got their car. Let's try and ring them up just once more."

"It's no good; Vienna does not answer," Clarisse said wearily.

He grew excited.

"Just think of it! Vienna is at an hour's distance and cut off from everywhere as if it were in another planet. What is the use of the telegraph, the telephone, the wireless, all the wonderful inventions of our times? A barbarian horde occupies a city and takes possession of them."

They had reached the house and went in. Robert lit a cigar. "I'm off to Vienna to-morrow," he said calmly.

Clarisse stared at him; was that a stranger standing beside her, or the man who had never been able to come to a decision, who had always left everything to her? It struck her that he had not said: "I shall."

"You'd better lie down," he said. "You look dead tired. I'll get you a cup of tea."

She smiled gratefully. How pleasant it was to give way for once, to be taken care of. He covered her feet with a rug, and she put out her hand.

"Forgive me, my dear," she said.

He looked at her perplexedly.

"What on earth am I to forgive you?"

She blushed.

"Unkind thoughts, doubts, petty spite. I've often been terribly unfair to you."

He laughed.

"My dear child, all that was so long ago, centuries ago. To-day a single thing is of importance: to save human beings from the German hell. If I hire a car I might be able to smuggle over a few."

He kissed her hand and, seeing her close to tears, said in a matter-of-fact tone:

"Margit was here. She pulled a man out of the river,

He had escaped by swimming and was half-dead with cold when she saw him struggling in the water. So she jumped in with all her clothes on and got him out." He laughed. "You ought to have heard her talk about the Germans; you'd never believe that she was educated in a convent . . ."

Towards evening Marianka came and asked for bed-linen.

"I've got a family from Vienna stopping with me," she said. "And as I was just going to do my wash to-morrow, I haven't got any clean sheets."

"How on earth did the people come to your house?" Clarisse asked; the tiny farm stood away from the high road.

The old woman smiled almost mischievously.

"We're pretty close to the frontier. So I thought if I crossed it, carrying a basket with eggs, making a half-stupid, half-cunning face, as if I wanted to sell them on the sly, maybe I'd find some people who did not know the way and bring them to safety. I really did; a whole family, father, mother and child."

Robert frowned.

"It might have turned out badly for you, Marianka. You'd better not do it again."

She laughed good-naturedly, but with a spice of obstinacy.

"I know the frontier. Formerly, under the Magyars, I often slipped over and brought my late brother a goose or a chicken. You remember one had to pay duty, even at that time. We used to meet in the first village beyond the frontier. And I really can't sit at home doing nothing, as long as those poor people over there are in danger. And if it should turn out badly, well, I'm almost sixty; time for me to go home to God. But as long as I live I've got to help the poor devils."

Robert, Margit, Marianka . . . Clarisse smiled, her eyes suddenly wet. She felt she had found an answer to the question she had been asking herself ever since she had grown up; why were we born? Marianka had given the reply in words a child could understand: "To help one another."

Clarisse started up from an uneasy sleep. Surely she had heard someone crossing the hall? She slipped into her dressing-gown and hurried from the room. Robert was opening the front door. Yes, she was not dreaming; that was Joseph's voice; and Aunt Anny's.

She ran downstairs. The Brauns were standing in the hall, together with two strangers, a man and a woman.

"Here we are!" Aunt Anny called out, catching sight of her. "I'm sure you've been anxious about us, poor darling. Yes, we managed to get away, after the great reception, when the brutes were all dead drunk. One man wanted to stop us on the Austrian side of the frontier, but a second one said: 'They're Czechs. I know them. They always drive past here.' And the Czech gendarme told us: 'The frontiers are closed from to-day on; but there's still one minute left to midnight. Drive on.' Such a good fellow; it really was half-past one."

She turned to Robert.

"Darling, ring up Mrs. Weiss and tell her that I've brought her sister and her brother-in-law. We're old friends, so I thought I'd better bring them along."

The dark-eyed man took a step forward and said apologetically:

"I warned Mrs. Braun. I begged of her not to run so great a risk. If the Germans had seen Jews in her car . . . But she said: 'All right; if you won't come, I'll stay here, too.'"

Joseph laughed a trifle nervously.

"Can't you hear her saying it? She's as obstinate as a mule."

"I was perfectly right, my dear. And now Resi must go to bed at once and have something hot to drink. In her state of health, so long and exciting a drive is not exactly the right thing. Don't contradict me, my child. Be good and go to bed. To-morrow we'll drive you over to Bratislava, and you'll see your sister."

The young wife tried to stammer a few broken words.

"Don't be silly, child. I could not have left you in Vienna, could I? For goodness sake don't cry, it's bad for the baby."

Come, I'll help you undress. Where are you putting them, Clarisse?"

Having helped the young wife to bed, Aunt Anny came down to the sitting-room.

"Tea, how good. Give me a cigarette. I ran short of them on the way here; it was awful."

She sat down and lit her cigarette. Clarisse looked at her in surprise. Anton Braun had not said a word; now he sat motionless in his arm-chair, a broken man whose veiled eyes did not seem to see the pretty comfortable room, but a scene of horror that paralysed him. Joseph had cursed wildly for a while and drunk one glass of brandy after the other till he fell asleep on the sofa. But Aunt Anny was the same as ever; a little paler, perhaps, her face a little more drawn, but cheerful and calm.

"Thank God I got those people across the frontier," she said, thirstily sipping her tea. "I did not think it could be done. I sat beside Joseph, who drove the car, because I look so absurdly Aryan, and I smiled at every man, woman and child we met, even at the brutes wearing the swastika. Now that we're safe I must admit that it was rather exciting at times."

Joseph woke up and said sleepily:

"You were right after all, mama."

"Of course I was right. You and your father may be clever, but I know more about human beings. Tony wanted to leave Vienna on the first day, but I said: 'No, we'll wait till the beast enters in state. On that day all the men will get drunk.' Apropos getting drunk; stop drinking, Joseph. Eight glasses of brandy are quite enough. What was I saying? Oh, yes, that we decided upon leaving to-day. Give me another cigarette, Robert, they're excellent. Where do you get them? Well, I hunted a whole day for the address of the Levis; at last I found it, written in my diary. You can't imagine, Clarisse, what a lot of Levis there are in Vienna. I got quite giddy looking for mine in the directory. Of course we could not leave town without them. Don't, Joseph, you've really had enough."

"And . . . and . . . what is . . . ?"

Clarisse wanted to ask what Vienna was like now; but her lips refused to form the question.

Aunt Anny guessed it.

"What is Vienna like? Well, I shouldn't call it exactly pleasant. You remember that we live, or rather lived, on the road to Linz? They came marching past our house, our dear German brothers, our faithful former allies. Shoulder to shoulder, wasn't that the slogan in 1914? I stood behind the railing and watched them. You know they really aren't human. Their faces seemed carved with a blunt knife, somehow they looked to me like dead men who had died in their sins. Not a single one had the grace to look ashamed. Their silly bombers flew so low they almost touched the roofs, and made no end of a noise. The first thing they did was to post machine-guns at all the street corners; I suppose because we were so glad to see them and they felt so safe amongst us. I kept thinking: just wait till bombers raid your towns and exterminate you, every one of you devils. Then the women came up from the provinces, dolled up as if for a dance. Yes, do give me another cup of tea, Robert, and a little more milk, please. Thank you. What was I saying? Oh, yes, I was telling you about the women; they behaved like bitches in heat. They shrieked at the top of their voices, talking about *him*, and rolled their eyes, and waggled their behinds. Disgusting. I wanted to smack their silly faces; the shameless bitches."

She stopped dead and looked round.

"Dear me, where is the cat?"

"What cat?" Clarisse asked, feeling confused.

"My Mitzi. Surely you did not think I'd leave my pussy to the tender mercies of the Germans. Tony, do go and look for her. I'm sure she's asleep in the car. Robert, please, get a bowl of milk, she must be terribly hungry."

Her husband had already left the room and returned with a sleepy tabby in his arms, that he laid on Aunt Anny's lap. She kissed it and gently drove away Tommy, who tried to poke his nose into the soft fur.

"Don't worry her, Tommy, she's a poor refugee. Wake up, Mitzi, you're safe. We're in Slovakia. Wake up, pussy."

Mitzi stretched herself and mewed plaintively; she hated being disturbed in her sleep. Aunt Anny stroked her gently and went on talking.

"Of course, we had to drive right into a whole procession that was marching to the station to meet him. Lorries and trucks, crowded with men and women, and the devil's cross floating over them. The workers all yelled and shouted: 'Heil Hitler', as if they had been paid for doing it. Maybe they were. That once; later they'll have to do it for nothing. The 'classes' drove in their own cars; a good many were acquaintances of ours. I also saw a few writers and journalists; but rather less than I had expected. At a street corner an old man was crying bitterly. A young thug with a swastika went up to him and yelled: 'Stop blubbing. Only traitors cry to-day.'"

"Yes," Joseph put in, "and mama stuck out her head and yelled in her turn: 'Can't you see that he's weeping for joy? Surely any idiot can see that.'"

"Good Lord, Aunt Anny, how could you?"

"Was I to look on whilst the young brute knocked the old man down? The young beast grinned at me and said: 'You're on your way to receive the Führer, aren't you? Heil Hitler.'"

Joseph nodded.

"I felt my blood freeze waiting for what mama was going to say."

"Joseph, as if I wasn't as cautious as cautious can be. After all we *did* have Jews in our car and I had to be careful. I nodded and grinned back and said: 'I should love to receive him,' then we drove on and everything was all right."

She leant back with a sigh.

"I'm growing old, my children. My bones hurt me. Thank God we're here. Once things looked decidedly bad. Some youngsters—they're the worst—held up our car, shouting: 'The Jews are running away. Stop them!' Joseph was green with fright and Resi almost fainted. But I smiled at the young brutes and said: 'Oh, please, don't stop me. Can't you see where we're going to? I'm in a hurry.' They looked hard at me and let us drive on without another word,

thinking I wanted to be in time for the arrival of the Führer. I hadn't even told a lie, God knows that I was in a hurry."

Tony Braun came back from some far-away country and looked at his wife. A little smile came upon his face.

"As long as there are people like you, dear . . ."

She looked at him, her eyes filled with love.

"Yes, my dear Tony, all my life I've been told that I was the most stupid of the Herdegen girls, but to-day I proved myself wiser than you all." Her still lovely face suddenly altered; she looked old and unhappy. "I can still see the old man crying in the street," she said, her voice shaking. "I know how he felt. My poor country, my poor dear country."

She drew her hand across her eyes and swallowed hard. Then she smiled.

"Things will come right again," she said. "They must. The devil has tried more than once to get the better of God, but it always ended with his defeat. Believe me, it will happen again. Give me another cup of tea, Clarisse. You've made me talk so much that my throat is absolutely parched."

THE RED LIGHT

GRADUALLY the perturbation caused by the annexation of Austria died away. For a few weeks fear and horror still tossed their waters and flooded the country. Then the waves grew smaller and at last receded, only rising anew when new refugees succeeded in crossing the frontier. Men and women, saved as by a miracle, walked in the streets of Bratislava, hardly daring to lift their eyes when they approached the Danube that connected this country with the one they had lost. Speaking of Austria their voices shook. They gave the impression of warning ghosts, returned from the dead, prophesying evil days to come, and many avoided them, so as not to have to listen to their gloomy forebodings.

One day, when the air was filled with fragrant spring scents

and the sky a sapphire blue, a ship came sailing down the river; a ghost-ship, that was not permitted to cast anchor in any port; crowded with passengers who were not allowed to go on land in any country. There were women and small children on board, half-dead of starvation.

Margit, always ready to do what was nearest, hired a boat and rowed out to the ship, bringing food to the hungry. She returned home pale and distracted.

"How many centuries of Christianity," she said despairingly to her brother, "have not taught us to love our neighbours? Try and imagine what that ship riding the waves signifies. It is not allowed to cast anchor, its passengers are not allowed to go on land; as if the ship were plague-stricken. Why? Because the passengers are Jews, because an insane nation, led by a criminal, has decided to exterminate the Jews. Please," as he tried to put in a word, "don't talk to me of certain international laws that prevent our letting the people on land. This ghastly chime, this unspeakable horror, has become possible because we are cowards, every one of us." She sat down wearily and suddenly shuddered violently. "If you had seen the faces I saw. The absolute hopelessness, the despair, the big eyes of the children asking a terrible why? . . . and in some of the older faces such an incomprehensible, almost inhuman patience." She grew angry, as always when moved by pity. "Yes, it's our fault. I mean you and me, when I say 'our'. You, Aladar, have not even been capable of making a small parish follow the teachings of Christ. And I, who have not shown the parish how one ought to live. We all look the other way when we reach the banks of the river, we cannot even bear to see what others are suffering. For how many centuries have our ancestors turned away their eyes so as not to see misery crying out to them, because they were as callous and as cowardly as we are?"

Her eyes filled with angry tears.

He nodded sadly.

"You are right; we all have to say *mea culpa*."

"What's the use of that? It's only an excuse for doing nothing."

She shook herself; her mobile face expressed disgust and hatred.

"As I came on land there were some people standing on the quay, grinning all over their ugly faces. I saw old Leberfinger and Emma; the former nun, Martha; a few German wine-growers, and, standing slightly apart, the Prussian. I also saw one other I had not expected to see: Svata Hrubin."

"Poor Marianka!"

She talked on without taking any notice of his exclamation.

"Wherever I go I find traces of the Prussian. Have you heard that someone went up Mount Calvary last night and painted with oil-colours on the crucifix: 'Rot, damned Jew'? That's how things are in our parish."

She grew thoughtful and slowly lit a cigar.

"I always hated the old man in Ruzomberok, the saint, as the fools here call him. But when he dies things will be worse still. Then we'll have to fight the man with the round, deceitful face and the maddening unction; the man who is as false as hell and who will be, more than Hlinka ever was, the evil genius of Slovakia. The . . ."

He interrupted her impatiently:

"Words, Margit, nothing but words. We are helpless, the only thing we seem able to do is to talk."

"Then do that at least," she said passionately. "Proclaim the teaching of Christ; be a new voice crying in the wilderness. Perhaps a few will listen to you and influence others. Look at the Prussian; he makes use of every man, every woman, every child; no one is too small, too unimportant, to be harnessed to his chariot. But you, we . . . we're afraid of causing a scandal, afraid things might get unpleasant. Afraid, always afraid; and others suffer because we are cowards."

She grew calmer and said in a gentler tone:

"Aladar, you have wasted so many years. Do begin doing something, please."

Looking up, she saw that her brother had grown deadly pale. He said dully:

"I know. When I can't sleep I see my guilt rising up

before my eyes and I read on the wall the manethkel: too late, too late."

Getting up she went and sat on the arm of his chair. "I am hurting you, my dear, I know; but I cannot help it. I keep seeing the ship and those faces, those pitious faces. And also the brutes, grinning on the quay."

She fell silent; the face turned to her was almost as pathetic, as miserable as were the faces of the men and women who could not go on land in any country. She longed to say something kind and comforting; but what could she say?

She gently stroked his greying hair; then, becoming again her old matter-of-fact self, she said:

"I've got no time for talking. Aunt Anny has picked up three refugees who want to go abroad. I've got to write letters to English friends, to ring up the British Consul, to do all the things the poor devils are afraid of doing themselves. And I've got so many other things to do. But if Aunt Anny wants a thing done, she gets it done. She's like an old terrier; she never lets go. Seems to me her generation was a better one than ours is."

She smiled at her brother, who had not heard a single word, and left the room.

Clarisse drove to Bratislava, accompanied by old Ján. They were taking a few late plants to the rose-garden. The old man was cross.

"Those damned Sudeten Germans," he grumbled. "Laying down conditions; that silly ass Henlein with his eight points. Trying to lord it over us all. Did you read that he claims the right of following a German policy?"

Clarisse nodded absent-mindedly. She had not read a paper for weeks. She was afraid of the black headings; she did not want to know what was happening. After all, one could not do anything. Aunt Anny, whose whole conversation turned upon the refugees and their fate, got on her nerves. She sometimes felt as if the kind, gentle woman with the sweet smile was trying to rob her of her individual life.

And there was old Ján, talking of the things she wanted to forget.

"Stop, please," said the old voice. "We've reached Mount Calvary."

She pulled up. The old man bared his head and she heard him mumble the well-known words: "By Your holy Cross . . ." Then he turned to her.

"To-day many people are following Our Lord on His way to Calvary. Shall we be spared? I don't think so. We seemed to have reached the first station; we are praying in the garden: 'Remove this chalice from us'; and those who ought to help us are sleeping."

Unable to control her irritation, Clarisse lashed the horses, which broke into a brisk trot. She looked about her; how lovely the May morning was with its green fields, the meadows bright with flowers, and in the distance the small villages. She thought of her home, of the peaceful days at Korompa that went past so quickly, of Robert, who seemed to have grown fonder of her during the last few months. She admitted to herself, not without a slight feeling of remorse, that she had not been so happy for a long time. Perhaps it was wrong to feel happy whilst others were suffering; but how good it was. After all, her life had known very little real gladness; it had been darkened by financial worries, by the episode with Margit, by too much work . . . Her youth had vanished without her having enjoyed it. Surely it could not be wrong to cling to the tiny scrap of happiness she had at last found; to cling all the tighter because she knew that it could not last?

They drove through the little town without stopping at the presbytery. Clarisse wanted to avoid Margit; her cousin belonged to the people who *would* talk of unhappy things. Although it was early, the town was wide awake. Women in bright blue and yellow skirts, red kerchiefs round their heads, sat in the market-place behind big baskets. Elisabeth Vyskocil, carrying a shopping bag, waved to Clarisse. How pale the girl was, how sad she looked. I ought to talk to her, to find out what is the matter, Clarisse thought, but I don't want to know why she looks sad, I don't really want her to tell

me what is troubling her. She drove on. At the bend of the road a wide blue ribbon seemed to come to meet them: the Danube.

Old Ján cursed under his breath.

"I used to be so fond of the river. But ever since the German devils have occupied the other side . . ." He shaded his eyes with his hands, peering over the water. "The ship has gone. We did not let the people come on land. What a damned shame." He spat on the ground and excused himself with a horrified look at his lack of manners.

"Forgive me, Countess Clarisse. I could not help it. I'm sure you understand."

She did not want to understand. Do leave me in peace, she mutely implored the old man sitting beside her, his face grim and hard. I don't want to get mixed up with all the dirt and horror and the misery. For God's sake leave me in peace, you and all the others. Her hands trembled and the horses, noticing that something was wrong, fell into a canter. It did her good to gather up the reins tighter, to force the horses to a trot. As long as she was struggling with them she could not think of anything else.

She spent a peaceful hour in the park on the Slovak side of the bridge. The head gardener talked exclusively of his roses that were especially lovely this year. The only thing that existed for him was the piece of land where the rose-garden was. He spoke of the next year, of new kinds of roses he wanted to plant, of peaceful and lovely things.

Driving back through the main street, it seemed to Clarisse as if the pace of the town had become swifter, somewhat hectic. The people walked faster than usual, the shops were crowded, everyone seemed eager to buy. She had promised Aunt Anny to look up Mrs. Weiss. Both sisters were in the shop. They looked happy and Clarisse stared in amazement at little Mrs. Weiss. She could hardly believe that she was the same woman who had waited with her at the station, trembling, weeping, desperate with fear. She had grown plump and her smile was merry. Yet it was she who invoked the memory of those black days.

"I always tell the children how much we owe Mrs. Braun.

If she had not been so kind . . ." She did not bring the sentence to its cruel end.

"Yes," Mrs. Levi said. "Mrs. Braun came to our house like an angel, a real angel. It's heavenly being in Czechoslovakia. Here we are safe and are still looked upon as human beings."

Her words shocked Clarisse.

"Don't say 'still'. It will always be so in our country."

She said it with a certain pride, till she remembered how many had said the same in Vienna and had believed it. The black shadow returned.

"Henry," Mrs. Weiss said, "is leaving school this year and going to the University. And you ought to see my sister's little girl; such a lovely baby."

Clarisse saw before her smiling faces, telling of a calm and modest happiness, work, a home, children. But the shadow grew darker as she heard Mrs. Levi say:

"Yes, we're well off. But the others, those who are still in Austria . . ."

The others, the men and women who had lost everything, had been robbed of everything; life is so short; to think that men exist who are wicked enough to destroy the pitiful fleeting joy we can call our own before death snatches it away.

"They don't even spare the children."

The children . . . Clarisse had passionately longed for children and had suffered bitterly because they had been denied to her. She recoiled from the words the other woman had spoken. Mrs. Levi noticed it.

"It's true," she said harshly. "Not even the children."

It was noon and the sun shone brightly through the large windows, but the shop seemed suddenly to have grown dark, with a darkness filled by piteous little ghosts, frightened, ill-treated, tortured children: children who were forced to look on whilst their parents were being dragged away, or killed before their eyes. Children like little Franta at the orphanage, branded for life by the suffering they had witnessed.

A customer entered the shop and Mrs. Weiss served him. How strange, Clarisse thought, an instant ago we were face to face with inhumanity and savagery and now both the

women talk of aspirin and cough lozenges as if they were the most important thing in the world.

She forced a smile and took leave of the women. Reaching the old Michaeler-Gateway she got out and went on foot. She had some shopping to do. Feeling hungry she entered a café. She saw Else Silberthal sitting in a corner and went and sat at her table. The girl did not seem pleased to meet her, looking embarrassed and uncomfortable. Clarisse felt in the way, but she could not well get up and sit at another table.

"Can I give you a lift home, Else?" she said kindly.

Else blushed.

"No, thank you. I'm staying overnight."

Her fingers played nervously with her little bag and she kept gazing out of the window. Her part of the conversation consisted of a yes and a no. Clarisse grew annoyed; she would much rather have been alone. The girl noticed it and began talking, hastily, feverishly.

"I came over to see my parents. My mother isn't well."

"I'm so sorry."

"Oh, it's nothing serious. But I have not been to Bratislava for ages and one gets so countrified and dull living in our small town. Of course I'm very fond of it; nevertheless . . ."

She put down her cup and looked out of the window.

She's expecting someone, Clarisse thought. Someone she does not want me to meet. How long has she been married? Not quite two years . . . It's rather soon . . . She felt slightly repelled; silly goose, she ought to be glad to have such a nice husband . . . She smiled; if I were Aunt Anny I should say to her: "Look here, my child, why commit adultery? One always gets found out, besides it's really not worth while and it's a sin." But then I'm not Aunt Anny; what business is it of mine?

"Clarisse." Else gazed at her with wide open frightened eyes. "What are you smiling at in such a funny way?"

"Nothing, I just remembered something funny."

The girl looked alarmed. Her eyes went to the clock on the wall. Clarisse did not finish her tea; she paid and got

up. Else seemed relieved. She took an almost affectionate leave of her. Reaching the door Clarisse nearly ran into Herr von Brachleben.

She flushed with anger; that man, of course it had to be that man. Does Else not know who he is, what he is? I suppose I ought to warn her. She's so young, not quite twenty, almost a child . . . and her husband . . . Shall I go back and sit at her table till the man goes away? Perhaps I'd better . . . But once again she felt too tired and too bored to act. Going past the café she looked in at the window. Herr von Brachleben was sitting at Else's table, talking eagerly whilst she listened intently, a queer expression on her pretty doll's face.

Walking along the narrow street with its old baroque houses Clarisse gave herself up to a feeling of anger, mixed with uneasiness. She thought of Hynek Silberthal, of his kindness, his helpfulness, his love for the fair-haired soulless little doll who was, after two years of marriage, having an intrigue—and with that cad . . . A hard voice made her start: "How do you do, Countess?"

Looking up she saw an elderly, showily dressed and badly-made-up woman standing before her. At first she could not remember who it was. Looking closer she recognized Sister Martha who had left the orphanage in January. Seeing the mocking grin on the puffy face her mood grew darker still. She bowed stiffly and hurried on.

She did not want to think of the orphanage; the Mother-Superior had complained to Margit that Sister Martha had set the children against Franta before she left. What had been good-natured teasing had turned into ugly, malicious bullying. In vain did the old nun scold, and little Sister Veronica spend hours in the small chapel praying for her orphans, tired out but kept awake by the idea that her dear good children had somehow been changed into little demons. They were rough and brutal; they laughed when they succeeded in making Franta, the "Jew-brat", cry. Little Sister Veronica pleaded with them, rebuked them, and some-

times, her temper getting the better of her, even smacked them. But the children did not seem to mind and kept on bullying the deaf and dumb boy. Profoundly shocked, the young nun discovered how easy it was to pervert children. She knew who had taken over the work Sister Martha had left undone; and every time the dark sinister figure of Father Gogolak approached the orphanage she became agitated and unhappy. The priest of Sokolovce had suddenly become interested in the orphans; he brought them sweets and images to put in their prayer books, and neither she nor the Mother-Superior could prevent his talking alone to the bigger girls and boys. Racking her brain in a vain effort to understand the changed world that surrounded her, little Sister Veronica frequently felt that the priest of Sokolovce left a dirty trail wherever he had been, like slugs that had crawled over flowers. Look at Svata Hrubin with whom she had played as a child. He'd been such a good, kind boy, and so pious too. But ever since he consorted with Father Gogolak and the uncanny Prussian he had altered. He did not go to Mass on Sundays; he never paid a visit to Monsignore Jeszenak or Doctor Silberthal when he was at home for the holidays. Little Sister Veronica knew that Marianka lit a candle every week before the picture of the Virgin, praying for the son who grieved her so terribly.

On this Saturday in May, Marianka was again kneeling before the Madonna. Tears chased each other on her wrinkled face and fell on her folded hands. But she was not praying; she was questioning herself: how could the boy she had always taught to love God and his neighbour have grown so wicked? How was it possible that he believed the teachings of the anti-Christ, that his lips spoke only words of hate and malice? What did I neglect when he was small? she asked, always ready to blame herself. I must have been a bad mother. But I had so little time for the child; I had to work. He was so kind-hearted as a child, but the other day when the ship with the refugees was not permitted to cast anchor and I said to him: "Poor people, if one could only help them," he only laughed, such an ugly laugh; his darling face grew quite ugly, and he said: "Serves them right, the

bloody Jews." I could hardly believe it was my boy talking. I really think I'd rather see him dead than cruel and inhuman. But he must not die as long as his heart is so hard, so wicked. I'll atone for him, I'll try and help all who need it, only, dear Lord, let my Svata become a good boy again, as he used to be."

Pulling out her big red handkerchief she wiped her eyes. The Mariankas of this world have little time for praying and weeping; perhaps that is the reason why their prayers and their tears carry so much weight in the eyes of God.

Life at Korompa flowed on harmoniously, in keeping with the lovely spring days following one another in unbroken beauty. Only Joseph did not fit in. Since the book was finished he had again taken to drinking. Sick with disgust at the news from his country he tried desperately to find oblivion, but it eluded him. The more he drank, the clearer his sight seemed to become, the more terrible grew the pictures his imagination painted. "If one could write what one feels and knows," he said, "perhaps the world would wake up before it's too late, perhaps. But who can write such things? How find words for atrocities and crimes impossible to describe?"

He had subscribed to foreign papers and insisted upon reading them out aloud. Clarisse left the room as soon as he began. But it was no use; at dinner he quoted from *The Times*, writing about Henlein's visit to London—not his first. The article was almost favourable to the man and did not betray the least interest in the fate of the Czechoslovak Republic. "They'll leave us in the lurch," Joseph shouted, seeing Clarisse put her hands to her ears and determined to make her hear. "All of them. Even if M. Bonnet does swear that France will keep her engagements. It won't be the first time he perjures himself."

Aunt Anny, unable to resist her son's passionate interest in politics, had discovered some old letters hidden in a chest in the garret, and was greatly struck by one of them, written

at the time of the Vienna Congress by their common ancestor, Carl Herdegen.

"If the Prussians really get Saxony, and it looks like it, we shall never be able to feel safe again. Prussia is rotten to the core and it will be a black day for all Europe when she becomes powerful; for all the other German States will follow her lead. The German is incapable of rational thinking; that may sound like a paradox as the nation has brought forth great thinkers; nevertheless, it is true. The average German cannot think; he can only feel. And his feelings are attracted by all evil things. He has not changed since the days of the Romans. I greatly fear that the Congress, that intended to secure peace, is preparing terrible wars. Mankind seems hopelessly blind . . ."

Joseph nodded, looking almost pleased.

"A wise man, our ancestor. God knows that the statesmen were blind at the time of the Congress, though much less so than to-day when they do not want to see." He shrugged angrily. "What has become of Gladstone's England? Of the country that always took up the cudgels for the weak and the oppressed?" He banged the table in a drunken fury. "Can't the fools see what is happening? The whole affair of the Sudeten Germans . . . Yes, I know that the Germans suddenly drew back after having concentrated troops at our frontier. But they won't always do so." His face grew crimson with rage. "The Western Powers want us to make concessions," he yelled. "They believe that they are safe, but they're mistaken. If they give in again it will be Poland's turn next, and after that Germany will set out to conquer the whole world."

"Don't shout so," Aunt Anny said softly. "They can't hear you in London and Paris, and Moscow," she added with the slight touch of dread the Soviets still inspired in her, notwithstanding the many "charming Reds" she had met. Joseph knew the tone and laughed mockingly; then his gaze fell upon her face and he grew gentler. His mother had aged rapidly during the last months. She hardly ever spoke of Austria but her son knew how she grieved for the country and the people there. Still harder to bear was the feeling of

shame that made her heart beat faster and her cheeks flush, remembering how many of her countrymen, and women too, were only too ready to obey German orders and to vent their lust for power and greed on the helpless and innocent. Her black eyes, an heirloom from the Spanish ancestress, had sunk deep into their sockets and their red rims spoke of sleepless nights. But she kept her smiling face and her cheerful manner. She had to, for the sake of her husband who had never got over the shock that had made an old and broken man of him. Besides, she had to be merry for a new guest who had come to Korompa a week ago. Clarisse, who avoided all refugees so as to escape all sad and hopeless things, had been forced to take in the small refugee from her own country. Margit had driven up one morning, accompanied by little Franta.

"You must keep him," she had said. "The children bully him to death and the Mother-Superior can't protect him. The boy is almost as miserable and as frightened as when he came here first. I'd take him home to the presbytery but I'm afraid he would not be happy there. Our people have become almost as bad as those beastly orphans."

She stroked the curly head and said musingly:

"Poor little dumb creature who cannot even tell what he fears and dreads." She looked at Joseph standing beside her in the hall. "So many cannot do it," she said passionately, "so many are doomed to remain dumb. Speak for them, you, to whom God gave a voice to cry out against injustice."

He looked at her as if he had never seen her before. Then he nodded silently, a strange expression in his face.

Franta remained at Korompa. Aunt Anny, who, like Margit, believed in always doing the nearest thing, got Aladar to teach her the deaf and dumb alphabet. She and the boy became inseparable and gradually he grew less shy and learnt to laugh like a real child. Sometimes, though, his little face grew sad and he told Aunt Anny what had happened in Germany. She took him on her lap and held him tight; her pretty old face hard and angry. The boy could not tell how he had come to Slovakia; a man, a railwayman who had been his father's friend, had come to their

house the night Franta's mother had been dragged away, and had carried the boy off. He remembered sitting in a cellar and then, later, hiding behind crates in a train. He did not know how long he had remained in hiding. At a station a stranger had discovered him and taken him out.

Even when he had grown tame enough to play with Robert, Joseph and Uncle Tony and to walk about the garden with Marianka and old Ján, Franta did not make friends with Clarisse. Did he sense that she avoided him because seeing him made her feel guilty? Did he feel the cold egotism hidden behind her smile? She was inconsequent enough to be hurt by the child's dislike and envied Aunt Anny whom he had trusted from the very first. Uncle Tony smiled, hearing her say so.

"Do you wonder at it? Did you ever meet a human being, or an animal either, who did not make friends with Anny? Somehow they know that she loves them and never thinks of herself."

"But why should one always be thinking of others? They only repay you in ingratitude."

Clarisse was out of temper; she had quarrelled with Robert because he had wanted to give up the empty wing of the house to refugees. Of course it had been Margit's idea; Clarisse had refused curtly and now her face flushed, remembering Robert's reproachful look. Then, too, old Ján had been most annoying, talking unceasingly about "those poor devils in Austria"; Tommy had bitten off the head of her loveliest rose one day before the flower show, and Joseph had been undeniably rude when she told him not to read the paper to her. She was cross and depressed. The scene with Robert had upset her. They had been such good friends for months, but the minute she had said: "I don't want strangers in my house," her unkind words had built up anew the wall between them that she had believed down for ever. She was angry with herself, but also with her husband; surely he ought to know how deeply rooted the fear of pain and sorrow was in her soul. How could he ask her to take misery and hopelessness into her house, to see with her own eyes what wrong could be done to human beings, what wrong

was being done? How could he expect her to live under the same roof with the heart-rending dread: "If it should happen here; if even this country were not safe?" She was ashamed of her cowardice; but her repugnance was stronger than her shame. She admired Marianka and Aunt Anny who forgot their own worries in helping others, who planned for others, trying to build up new homes for them, a new life. Is it not queer, she thought, listening absent-mindedly to Uncle Tony's words, how much alike the two women are, the Slovak peasant and the former Countess Herdegen? With the sole difference that the Slovak peasant is much wiser.

From time to time Isolde wrote to them, pitiful, despairing letters. Her father had been given an office in Vienna; they were living in a beautiful little *palais* that had belonged to an Austrian. The Austrian was in a concentration camp; perhaps they would come to Slovakia in summer.

Aunt Anny devised the most romantic plans: they would kidnap the poor child, one really could not let her go on living with her awful parents. Once safely at Korompa . . . She smiled mysteriously and Joseph, guessing her thoughts, said impatiently:

"Good Lord, you don't think that I'd let her marry a Jew in our days?"

His mother looked up at him with a childlike smile.

"Why not, if she loves you? After all the poor child can't help having such ghastly parents. Besides, she's not a real Bredar; she has got a dash of the Herdegens."

"Fifty per cent of German blood suffices to make a person incurable."

"Antoinette's great-grandchildren can't all be real Germans." Aunt Anny was in her own way a relativist; for her past, present, and future were as one; Antoinette Herdegen, who had died young about a hundred years ago, was as familiar to her as Clarisse and Robert were. She talked of her as if she had seen her a few weeks ago, and in her eyes Isolde was not the daughter of the S.S. Scharführer and that "awful Gisela", but the great-granddaughter of dear sweet Antoinette Herdegen.

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"I want grandchildren," she said pleadingly, "and I'm growing old; you'd better hurry up, Joseph."

"They won't like having a Jewish grandfather," Joseph said spitefully.

"The silly little brats ought to thank God for their Jewish grandfather, as you ought to for your father. Just imagine how stupid you would have been but for him. What a blessing you took after him and not after me."

He smiled, touched by her genuine humility.

"Sometimes, mama, I think that you are wiser than all of us."

She looked at him nervously.

"Darling, surely you can't be drunk at ten in the morning?"

"I haven't touched a drop."

"Then stop talking nonsense. Now listen to me, Joseph; something must be done. You can't leave that unfortunate girl . . ."

She was prevented from finishing her sentence by little Franta coming to look for her. She got up quickly to meet him; the little child took her hand and pulled her away. Joseph watched them going into the garden. His eyes grew tender. "Perhaps," he thought, "I'd have done better if I had inherited your kindness, you dear, sweet, stupid angel."

THE LAST RESPITE

HOUSES gay with flags, sunlit streets, animated men and women, many of the latter wearing the brightly-coloured costume of the country, small girls in white, rushing about mad with excitement, processions solemnly marching behind banners, church-bells ringing out merrily, bands blaring, the blue vault of the summer sky smiling down at the Slovak capital that was celebrating the anniversary of the Republic.

Worry and dread and secret hostility had vanished; a fraternal spirit had taken possession of the people, who to-day found themselves united in the same love of their country, their State. The older men, who retained the memory of former times of the Magyar oppression, drew a deep breath in the fresh air of liberty. The Republic, born as by a miracle from the horrors and the misery of war, had brought them what they had been longing for, had given them the rights they had dreamt of. Their hearts were filled with gratitude and gladness. A single thought fell as a shadow on many faces: the idea that he who had founded the State was no longer there to celebrate its birth together with them.

The young people who did not remember the Magyar rule, and who had grown up free and independent, were carried away by the mood of happiness all round, and for once forgot to grumble and to heap reproaches on the "men at Prague" and to blame them for many a thing they called unbearable; and no one cared to remind them of their grievances.

The German and Magyar minorities were much too discreet to disturb the general harmony by a false note. Old Leberfinger walked in the procession as solemnly and as loyally as all the others, he and the local Germans wisely concealing what their real feelings were. Perhaps they sent their thoughts across the frontier and dreamt of a day on which they would triumph and the others would weep; perhaps. Their faces did not betray them.

When it grew dark the banks of the Danube were illuminated; the sombre waters reflected the twinkling lights, patches of silver spread over black velvet. The night came slowly as if the happy day longed to linger, knowing that its passing would usher in a future bereft of joy and gladness.

But the frontier, although forgotten for a day, still lived and sent its poisonous breath across the river. Clarisse, who had come to town with Aladar and was sitting with him in the hotel lounge, saw a different kind of procession come past. The grey, rainy sky and the low, heavy clouds formed a fitting background for the shabby men who marched

along slowly. Leading them and standing out sharply from the dull shapeless mass strode a man with a hard ascetic face and large smouldering eyes beneath beetling brows. He reminded Clarisse of a prophet of the Old Testament, a seer come to warn and upbraid; one of those who call down God's wrath on a depraved world.

"Hlinka," Aladar said laconically, and Clarisse, who had never seen the old man from Ruzomberok, gazed at him curiously.

The men were singing, they looked pathetic in their poverty and their faith. The pale, thin faces expressed an inconquerable hope and an infinite patience. Beholding them one seemed to see Poverty herself who had set out from the hamlets, villages and lonely farms on her way towards a happier, brighter, more just world. On both sides of the procession walked well-dressed young priests and students; amongst them loomed the heavy, sinister figure of the priest of Sokolovce.

The minute the masses stopped singing, the priests and the students lifted their voices.

"Slovakia for the Slovaks!" they cried in blustering tones. "Palestine for the Jews! Get out, Czechs!"

The hostile words acted like a spell. Faces grew ugly, distorted, malignant. Hate incarnate thronged the street; the frenzied fury of the exasperated masses; cupidity, ferocity. Again and again the young priests and the students shouted their slogans, till at last the whole procession yelled them, possessed by an evil joy, drunk with cruel lust.

One of the last to walk past the hotel was Svata Hrubin. He looked as poverty-stricken and as shabby as the others, and he, too, yelled at the top of his voice, his face hard and angry.

Clarisse shuddered; what she saw was the enemy in her own country; hidden in villages and on remote farms, ready to rise in arms as soon as the old man with the prophet's face called upon them. Aladar Jeszenak shook his head sadly.

"The country poor," he said. "You must not blame them too much. They cannot understand why they are still so terribly poor. When our Republic was founded, they

thought Heaven had come to earth. Now they are disappointed, and that makes them rebellious."

"But the old man, but Hlinka, surely he knows better? He must be aware that he is playing with fire."

"If they'd made him a bishop," Aladar said dryly, "we should have been spared a lot of bother. But when frustrated ambition becomes a leader of the poor you must always expect trouble. Old Hlinka is not really a bad man; but he's a maniac when it comes to the independence of Slovakia. Besides, he's eaten up with ambition."

The procession had disappeared in the drizzling rain; from the distance one could still faintly hear the menacing cries. Clarisse leant back in her chair and lit a cigarette with shaking hands. Looking into her pale face, Aladar said kindly:

"It frightened you, seeing them march past, eh?"

"It was the sudden change in their faces . . . the terrible result a few silly slogans can have . . . and the young priests; somehow they frightened me most of all."

She fell silent; Else Silberthal had come into the lounge, accompanied by a man Clarisse did not know. Seeing her and Aladar, she hastily took leave of him and walked up to their table.

"Come and sit with us," Clarisse said with the rather forced amiability she always showed the girl.

"Wasn't that Karmasin who just came in with you?" Aladar asked in a queer voice.

Else blushed.

"Yes."

"I really don't think your husband would like you to go about with him," Aladar said in the pastoral tone one so rarely heard from him.

"Why not?"

"Because the man is a Nazi and is stirring up our Germans."

Else Silberthal grew visibly stiff.

"I should not call it that, Monsignore. He only stands up for their rights. That's his duty as the leader of the German minority."

The priest laughed mockingly.

"Yes; the leader. He rather admires himself in that part. As to their rights. God knows that our minorities have more than enough."

"That's what *you* say. But I know better. The Germans have become outlaws in Czechoslovakia. When I think of the unfortunate people in the Sudetenland; of the two farmers who were shot dead by Czech policemen, their sole guilt consisting in their being Germans . . ."

"They were not shot dead, they were only shot at," Aladar replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "And the policemen were perfectly justified. Surely no one can reproach our government with being unfair. It even yields to perfectly unreasonable claims, it . . ."

"Obeying orders," the girl said scornfully. "The May crisis came to an end and . . ."

Aladar sat up very straight; his eyes blazing. Poor Else, Clarisse thought with a secret satisfaction. But Aladar only lit his pipe and smiled at the girl.

"Do you really think, Mrs. Silberthal, that you know enough about politics to be able to judge things?" he asked paternally.

"I know enough to be sure that England will never risk irritating the great German Reich for the sake of an artificial State that has grown into a menace to all Europe."

Zapletal, the head waiter, who had just brought a pot of coffee for Else, joined in the conversation.

"England is on our side," he said confidently. "And France, and Russia. We may be sure of that."

The girl threw him an angry look. When he had gone, she said: "How dare that man! Joining in our conversation; a waiter!"

Aladar smiled.

"I thought the Germans went in for social equality?"

Else changed colour and said vehemently:

"Did you notice the provoking way the man mentioned Soviet Russia?"

Aladar lifted his hand to his mouth and yawned; Clarisse noticed, with a smile, that he did not hide his yawn.

"Oh, please, don't put on the old record," he said, his voice gentler than ever. "Russia is our friend, and her internal affairs are no business of ours."

"It's rather strange," Else said pointedly, "to hear a Catholic priest take the part of the Bolsheviks. Of course, that's the result of the pernicious Jewish liberalism that has done such a lot of harm."

The priest made an impatient gesture.

"Didn't I beg you not to put on old records? As to Jewish liberalism, you really might know what a lot Christianity owes to the Old Testament." He gazed at her with most un-Christian aversion and asked sweetly: "Is it possible that the wife of our dear Doctor Silberthal should dislike Jews?"

She grew pale with anger.

"The Jews . . . of course, there are some exceptions . . . But even you must admit that they are aliens in the midst of our nation."

Aladar smiled unpleasantly.

"If you are thinking of the Slovak nation, I should have said the Germans were."

"How can you speak of Jews and Germans in the same breath?"

"You're right; it's an insult to the Jews."

Clarisse burst out laughing.

Else threw her a furious look.

"Of course," she said, losing her self-control, "so many aristocrats have intermarried with Jews. That explains a lot."

"I always thought that the German papers were banned," Aladar said to Clarisse, "but I must have been mistaken. This young lady talks exactly as the people in the Reich write." Unexpectedly he lost his temper and turned upon Else.

"Aliens! When I think of what my parish owes to your husband, the man I admire more than anyone else, the man who serves me as a model when human stupidity and meanness nauseate me and I feel like killing off every man and woman I know. An alien, our doctor?" He grinned spitefully. "I would not stress the alien, my dear young woman;

according to the laws of your beloved Third Reich you're a Jewess, too."

"Aladar," Clarisse said nervously.

He had spoken so loudly that the porter Takács came running up to see what was happening. The priest gave him a nod.

"There's nothing wrong, Takács, no one is being murdered. We are just talking politics, that's all."

The fat porter grinned.

"We all know Monsignore Jeszenak's temperament," he said, and returned to his desk.

Aladar was already regretting having once again lost his temper.

"Look here, Mrs. Silberthal," he said apologetically, "you're a very lovely woman, so it does not matter much if you talk nonsense. Only don't go too far."

Else stared at him; the last thing she had expected was to be paid a compliment. An instant ago she had hated him; now she was not quite so sure as to her feelings. Bewildered and uneasy, she got up and took leave of them; Clarisse noticed with amusement that the girl was much more ungracious towards her than the priest. She gazed after Else with a smile.

"You and Margit are very much alike," she said, still smiling, to her cousin, who was angrily puffing at his pipe.

"What a ghastly girl! Whenever I meet that kind of woman I thank Providence that I entered the priesthood. I've got to go now; no, don't get up; finish your coffee. I'll come back and fetch you."

Left to herself, Clarisse fell into a brown study. Poor Hynek Silberthal; of course the whole thing might be nothing but a caprice on the girl's part; the Gerstners had always boasted of their German descent. After all, Else had known that she was marrying a Jew . . . A military band passed the window, trumpets blaring. Clarisse felt a lump in her throat. But a few days ago it had really looked as if our soldiers would no longer march peacefully in the streets, as if war was inevitable, as if for our Republic there would be no more happiness, no future. Thank God that the un-

bearable tension of the last days, the agonising fear that made one's hand tremble on the knob of the wireless, the breathless strain were over. Thank God.

Whenever Clarisse remembered that summer she could not understand how it had been possible to be so happy and carefree. A hot June had gently flowed into a still hotter July, like the waters of the river Vaha lazily streaming into the Danube. Of course many things were happening; but they seemed unreal and remote; perhaps because there were so many of them. Perhaps also because she still tried to keep them out of her life. She sensed darkly that a country, her country was fighting for its existence, but in the garden the roses glowed red and yellow and filled the air with fragrance, and over the whole land brooded the stillness of a mellow summer, ripening the crops and bathing the fields in glimmering gold.

Margit came frequently for half an hour; too often for Clarisse, who feared her coming and her merciless words. Of course Margit's world was a small one, consisting of the parish and a few scattered farms. But even this tiny world seemed filled with unrest. Clarisse sometimes thought, rather scornfully, that her cousin grew excited about perfectly unimportant things: words overheard by chance or repeated by "silly gossips"; a fight at an inn, a smashed window; insignificant trifles that meant nothing to her, but much to Margit Jeszenak. Margit counted the people who came to Mass on Sunday and visited those who had stayed away, trying to find out what had prevented their coming. She discovered Nazi pamphlets in remote villages and seemed to have anti-German spies in the whole country; she sent poor Hanus Vyskocil on many a wild goose-chase, hunting for "conspirators"; and grew thin and nervous. When something went wrong with the presbytery wireless she drove Clarisse to despair by coming over every evening to hear the news. Clarisse looked upon the wireless as a personal enemy; shortly before the clock in the sitting-room struck nine, she felt her hands grow clammy, and cold shivers run along her spine.

In a few minutes they would all sit around and listen to the voice they had got to know so well. She revolted against the daily rite; what business was it of hers that the Germans were attacking Czechoslovakia in papers and speeches; that the Polish press insulted the country; that the Hungarians roared their idiotic slogans? What business was it of hers that England was sending an observer to Prague, a man who did not know anything about the country, and that the Sudeten Germans graciously approved of him? Why did Joseph get so terribly wrought-up? After all, the French had declared that their promises to us were sacred. Surely that ought to suffice.

She spent whole days in the garden. Her eyes caressed the flowers and the dear Bohemian olive tree, standing lovely in the middle of the lawn. She avoided Marianka, who was looking more worried every day. She wrapped herself in a gay indifference, as in a warm cloak that protects one from the cold blast. Sometimes she felt very lonely; the others seemed far away; so alien. Tommy alone stuck to her, the dear little dog, who kept by her side as if wanting to protect her from her own thoughts. Yet the depressed moods never lasted long; there remained her delight in summer, in flowers and trees, in the river softly gurgling between green banks, and an ever increasing love for the fields, the meadows, the forests and the mountains; for everything that was part of her own beloved country.

Thus August came.

PART THREE—THE PASSION

*

GETHSEMANE

A THUNDERSTORM was brewing over Mount Calvary. Ebony black clouds, interspersed with ominous sulphur-coloured ones predicting hail, were racing across the sky. The green slopes of the hill glimmered palely, distorted shadows scurried madly over the pointed roofs of the small shrines. The wind raged, filling the sultry air with unearthly shrieks. Then suddenly a deathlike quiet fell upon all. The leaves hung motionless as if carved out of wood, the clouds had turned to grotesque figures of stone. The silence, the awful calm seemed a prophecy of terrible things to come. It was as if the heavens and the earth were awaiting in breathless suspense some horror; the thought of which made their hearts stop beating. After an instant the storm came back with a wild cry, thrashing about, tearing at branches, stirring up violently eddying dust. But still the clouds grudged the parched earth the rain it was thirsting for. Flashes of lightning set the dusky sky ablaze; thunder boomed a weird accompaniment to the song of the wind.

Herr von Brachleben laughed.

"You'll soon be hearing that kind of noise all over the country, but it won't be thunder, even if the sound *does* come from the sky."

A red flash of lightning lit up the dimmed landscape, and Emma Leberfinger gave a shrill cry.

"I'm not going to stand under this tree any longer. I'll be struck by lightning."

Her face, that had grown drawn and haggard during the last weeks, gleamed white in the leaden light, her eyes rolled

in their sockets so that only the iris was visible. Martha, no longer Sister Martha, said uneasily:

"You're right. Let's go. I hate this place, it is uncanny."

"Heroines," the Prussian mocked. "You call yourselves German women and are afraid of a thunderstorm!" He had meant his words to sound like good-natured chaff, but somehow he was unable to hide his scorn and something strangely akin to hate.

Svata Hrubin, his eyes glued to the black clouds, interposed prosaically:

"It's going to pour in an instant. Let's go into the chapel. What's the good of getting our clothes spoilt?"

The Prussian frowned.

"We've come here to talk about important things and you're thinking of your clothes, Hrubin!"

The young Slovak sensed the hidden scorn and replied brusquely:

"We're not all as rich as you are, Herr Scharführer."

"It's your own fault, Hrubin, if you never have any money. Surely I've told you more than once . . ."

"I don't take bribes. I am working for the sake of the movement, not for money."

His rudeness irritated the other man.

"You would not be the only one to take a bribe. People even whisper that your beloved leader, the saintly Father Hlinka . . ."

"Don't you dare to slander the dead. If you had seen the people kneeling in the street in front of his house when he was dying, if you had heard them praying for him, if you knew . . ."

"Shut up! I'm not interested in legends." The Prussian remained silent for a moment, then he asked spitefully: "What about his successor? Would you call him incorruptible, too?"

Svata Hrubin shrugged and did not answer. His face expressed embarrassment and something like shame.

"But you are right," the Prussian said propitiously: "It's going to pour. Why get soaked? Come on, the others seem to be late."

The women had run ahead and were standing in the chapel at the top of the hill, panting and trying to regain their breath. The men entered the chapel. Martha was looking nervously at the big crucifix over the altar and the trembling flame of the sanctuary lamp.

"Why must we come here?" she asked in a whisper.

Herr von Brachleben eyed her with a sneer.

"I chose this place on purpose, because I want you to get rid of your idiotic superstitions. What are you afraid of, Martha? Of a carved figure, of a small piece of dough that you fools adore?"

"Don't!"

Svata Hrubin hardly knew that he had cried out; something stronger than his will had protested against the blasphemy.

"Sit down!" the Prussian yelled. "I'm fed up with your stupidity."

Svata turned away, an expression of disgust on his face. He hardly knew whether he still clung to the remnants of his faith or not, but he could not help remembering how often his mother had knelt before this altar in prayer. His love for her hallowed the little chapel. Emma Leberfinger did not seem shocked at the Prussian's words.

"We adore a different god," she cried ecstatically. "The only true god. A different saviour, who will deliver us from evil, our redeemer: Adolf Hitler!"

Herr von Brachleben gazed at her approvingly.

"That's right. You at least have understood my teaching, Emma, and you may be sure that you will not wait in vain for your reward." Lifting his hand with a wooden gesture, he glanced at his wrist-watch. "Where are the others?" he said impatiently. "I'm not accustomed to be kept waiting." He shook his head angrily. "Discipline, you Slovaks don't know what discipline is. But you'll have to learn it."

His overbearing manner annoyed Svata Hrubin afresh.

"We are as we are, Herr Scharführer," he said coldly, "and I don't believe you have any cause for denouncing us."

"Sit down!" Herr von Brachleben cried. "Or would

you rather kneel?" he added with a sneer. He sat down himself and lit a cigarette. "Want to smoke, Hrubin?"

"No, thank you."

The door flew open and a few bedraggled figures entered, shivering and drenched to the skin. They were headed by the baker, Schneeberger, followed by the veterinary, Weber, and several Slovaks. The three Schneeberger boys came last, wearing immense swastika badges. Noticing the badges, the Prussian's face grew red with fury.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" he yelled. "Didn't I forbid you to wear the swastika? Have you forgotten where you are? Off with the badges. Schneeberger, if you can't even keep your family in order, how do you expect to manage a Gau . . .?"

The baker began stammering excuses; for an instant he hated his sons, whose thoughtlessness had perhaps robbed him of a high position. The three boys obeyed; taking off the badges, they laid them on the altar. They knew nothing of the reverence and awe the Slovaks felt; they had always been taught that everything Catholic was silly superstition. The Prussian ran his eye over the men, counting them.

"Five are missing," he said harshly. "Where's your eldest son, Weber?"

"He's in bed with tonsillitis, Herr Scharführer."

"Tonsillitis," the Prussian spat the word. "The Führer calls him, but he does not come, because, poor boy, he has tonsillitis! He lies in bed like an old woman, and you've probably called the doctor, eh, Weber?"

"Yes."

"The Jewish doctor?"

"There's no other doctor in the place," Svata said sullenly.

"I did not ask you, Hrubin. You'd better leave off being impertinent and contradicting me. You say there's no other doctor in the place? Maybe, for the moment. But that's no excuse for calling in the Jew. Don't you know, Weber, that Jewish doctors have a way of killing off their Christian patients?"

The veterinary remembered how often he had called

Doctor Silberthal to his delicate boy and how, when Franz had almost died of pneumonia, the doctor had spent three nights running at the boy's bedside and pulled him through. Perhaps he ought to tell the Prussian about it; it might explain his behaviour. But he lacked the courage; and, after all, Silberthal was a dirty Jew.

"It's perfectly true," Emma cried. "He always tried to make me believe that I was ill. God alone knows what poisons he prescribed for me. Since he has given up treating me I am well and strong." She began to laugh, loudly, spasmodically, her laughter growing shriller and wilder till she was unable to stop.

The Prussian cursed under his breath. These damned women; it was too bad that one could not get on without them; but they were far more efficient than the men, because they did not mind taking a risk and did not fear the authorities. Yes, unfortunately, one needed them, this epileptic fool most of all. She carried out every order and no one suspected her, no one imagined her to be a dangerous enemy. He let her laugh on till she was exhausted and fell silent, struggling for breath. Then he said gently:

"You are right, Emma. But now we must get down to business, dear child. Come closer, all of you. I've got some good news." He waited till all had sat down, also Svata Hrubin, before he spoke again.

"The British observer, whom you read about in the paper, has ceased being a source of danger to us. He is staying at Prince Hohenlohe's castle and, as you probably know, the Prince, a charming and clever man, sympathises with our movement. Better still, a few days ago the Englishman met Konrad Henlein and they talked together for five hours."

The Slovaks looked bored. They were not interested in the British observer, nor in the Sudeten-Germans. They did not want to belong to the Reich, as those others did; they only wanted Slovakia to become an independent State. Besides, they did not know who Prince Hohenlohe was. Watching them closely, the Prussian felt annoyed; damned Slovaks, an inferior race if ever there was one, stupid, too lazy to think, clinging to their faith, fed by their priests with idiotic

superstitions . . . hadn't old Novak bowed to the altar and made the sign of the Cross before sitting down, and every one of them had taken off his hat before entering the chapel?

"What holds good for the oppressed and tortured Germans of Czechoslovakia, Novak," he said, looking fixedly at the old town clerk, "also holds good for you Slovaks. In a short time there will not be a single Czech left in your country. You will be liberated, masters of your State."

"The day will come!" Emma Leberfinger exclaimed. "The day will come!"

"Yes, the day will come," Herr von Brachleben repeated the familiar words with a certain impatience, "but you must not believe that liberty will come to you overnight. You have got to fight for it. Give me the reports," he added in a commanding tone.

The baker jumped up hastily and put some documents before him. The Prussian took them up and turned over the pages, muttering to himself. "Good. But not enough. It's high time something happened. We've got no time to lose, we've got to speed up the propaganda. We've got to hurry. Do you understand? *To hurry!*" He threw a glance at the page lying in front of him. "You seem exceedingly remiss in one part of the work, a most important one. Can't you get the Magyars of your town to join us? There is only a single Magyar name on the list."

"We dislike having anything to do with the Magyars," old Novak said frankly. "You see, we cannot forget the old times, we're always thinking of . . ."

The Prussian's hand smashed down on the pew. "You're not to think, you fools! You've got to obey! Understand?"

Svata Hrubin felt his cheeks burning. Obey? Obey the stranger, the Prussian? In their own country? The other Slovaks looked dismayed. The Germans nodded approval; they did not mind Prussian manners.

Outside, the thunderstorm was raging. The gale rattled the stained windows that threw strange red and blue shadows on the altar and the big crucifix. For an instant the figure of the Saviour seemed to come alive. Flashes of lightning lit up the dark. The rain rushed past the chapel, roaring like a

mighty river. Svata Hrubin felt tired. He closed his eyes. With the rush of water in his ears he felt as if he were in a small boat, tossed to and fro by the wild waves. Where was the river carrying him? Where was it carrying all those who sat in the chapel? Where was it carrying the whole country? As in a dream he heard the stranger speaking, giving short orders, blaming, praising. Now he was talking of the Government at Prague, attacking the Cabinet. The Slovaks pricked up their ears. They enjoyed the Prussian's mocking and hostile words. "The President is bringing the Republic to rack and ruin . . ." Some of the men thought sadly: if only the old man was still alive, he belonged to us, he was a Slovak, too . . . None of them cared for the new President, the quiet, taciturn man with the worried face whom they did not understand . . . The Prussian was telling them that the President planned to rob them of all their rights, to turn Slovakia into a slave State, as the Magyars had done, maybe even worse.

The Slovaks' faces grew grim.

Emma Leberfinger was lost in thought; she did not care for politics; she did not understand them. Prague was but a far-away city to her. Only when the name, the beloved, adored name sounded in the chapel she awoke from her dreams, Adolf Hitler, once a poor man, a man despised and scorned, who had not had where to lay his head and who had, nevertheless, become the ruler of a mighty nation, of the mightiest, the greatest nation of the world, of the nation that would bring them true liberty, German liberty, on the thrice blessed day when he would be master of the earth . . . She heard the stranger say: "The Jews . . ." and smiled. To repay all she had undergone during her whole life, pain, fears, shame, illness; to see others suffer; to see them helpless; to determine their fate; to take away what was theirs; to live in the fine houses still belonging to the Jews; to watch their women sweep the streets; to spit in their faces, to see them weep; those stuck-up women who kept servants and never worked, whose whole life was nothing but ease and pleasure . . . She tried to think of some by name, but all the Jews in the little town were poor. Of course that was just

their cunning, they were only waiting for an occasion to rob the Christians of all they possessed . . .

Old Novak cleared his throat. He felt uncomfortable. He had fought in the Great War and had seen his fill of dead men. He did not want to watch men being hanged, even if they *were* Jews. He did not want anyone to be harmed, he only wanted to see Slovakia free and independent . . .

Svata Hrubin nodded approvingly from time to time, but he, too, did not agree with all the stranger said. Of course the Jews must leave the country and go to Palestine; of course they must not be permitted to be doctors and take the bread out of the Slovaks' mouths. But to kill them . . . to drag them to concentration camps . . . The Scharführer was speaking of the "subhuman race". What nonsense! The student of medicine awoke in Svata; biologically, there was no such thing . . .

"We will not spare a single one, neither the old men, nor the women, nor the children. We will exterminate the whole dirty breed." Marianka Hrubin's son involuntarily shook his head; the children too? Why the children? After all, they could not help being born Jews.

Herr von Brachleben sensed that he had lost touch with his audience. Some of the younger men, the two women and the Germans looked at him with sparkling eyes, evil smiles on their faces, but the older Slovaks . . . He could not understand it; in the Reich Jew-baiting had always been the best propaganda; it had pleased and enflamed all, no matter what class they belonged to. Damned Slovaks! The Prussian went on talking for a short while, then he fell silent, looking angry and almost bewildered.

"We'd better go whilst it's pouring, there's less danger of our meeting anyone," he said imperiously.

The men got up. Old Novak stopped in front of the altar. The Prussian watched him intently. Yes, the old fool was bowing and making the sign of the Cross. Mad rage got the better of the stranger. With a single jump he reached the altar and ran up the steps. Standing before the altar, he put out his hand and grasped the arm of the figure on the Cross.

"I'll teach you to say 'Heil Hitler,' you Jewish son of a bitch!" he yelled, and tried to tear the arm from the Cross.

The Germans laughed uproariously, Emma Leberfinger giggled, Märtha hid her face in her hands. The Slovaks stood gasping, paralysed with horror.

The Prussian dragged at the arm till the rotten wood gave way. With a triumphant laugh he lifted the arm.

"There, now say 'Heil Hitler' properly, dirty Jew!"

With a splintering sound the arm broke and fell on the altar steps. Old Novak cried out as if in pain, and Svata Hrubin said angrily:

"You ought not to have done that, Herr Scharführer."

The Prussian knew he had blundered; he had not taken into consideration that Slovakia was not the Reich, where he had used this dramatic trick more than once, applauded by enthusiastic masses, who had afterwards trodden on the crucifix and smashed it to pieces. Damned Slovaks.

He turned round, and was about to say something, when he saw that only Emma Leberfinger, old Novak and Svata Hrubin had remained in the chapel. Through the wide-open door he heard running steps die away.

"Come on," he said angrily.

Svata Hrubin gave him a strange look, turned his back upon him and sat down in the back bench.

"Come on, Novak," the Prussian cried furiously.

The old town clerk shook his head.

"We've come to the sundering of our ways," he said firmly. "If that's how your free Slovakia is going to look, I prefer the Czech rule."

The Prussian and Emma Leberfinger left the chapel. It was still raining hard and the wind had not abated.

It was very dark in the chapel. The pale flame of the sanctuary lamp fell on old Novak, who had picked up the broken arm and laid it reverently on the altar. Tears were coursing down his wrinkled face, but his eyes looked hard and angry. He knelt on the altar steps and began to pray.

Old Novak was not the only one to seek God's help during these endless, sultry days. Harassed people prayed in churches and synagogues for themselves and their country and for the men at Prague in whose hands lay a momentous decision.

Working in the garden, old Ján said to Clarisse:

"What did I tell you? We've all got to climb Mount Calvary. As yet we are still in the garden and the disciples are sleeping fast, but in the distance we can hear nails being driven into the cross. It's a heavy cross. Shall we have the strength to carry it? And where are we going to find a Simon of Cyrene?"

"Nowhere," said Joseph, who had come out into the garden.

"I'm afraid," the old man said sadly, "I'm terribly afraid that we Slovaks are going to betray the Republic."

"Why do you think so?" Clarisse said in a tone of dismay. During these terrible September days even she was unable to escape the dread and the desperate anxiety hanging over the whole land. Perhaps because Robert's sister wrote such worried letters from Prague, perhaps because she was frightened by the wild anti-Czech propaganda of the Viennese radio; the speaker being a Slovak.

"Why? Because we are stupid," Ján said crossly. "Yes, we *are* stupid. We've forgotten the Magyars who grudged us everything, even our own language. We expected the Czechs to turn a poverty-stricken country into a prosperous one over night. We were annoyed because they sent Czech officials to Slovakia. Who on earth should have taken over the administration? I, or old Novak? Or the others who had gone to Magyar schools and did not even know their mother tongue properly? And now we are allowing ourselves to be fooled by people who have either been fooled themselves or bought over by the German devils, by the atheists, the men who desecrate churches and cemeteries and call the holy Virgin a Jewish whore, as Doctor Goebbels has done."

"She was a Jewess," Joseph put in. He wanted to know what the old man would answer.

"I know, of King David's race. And that's why no Jewess will come to harm as long as I can prevent it."

Joseph turned away feeling slightly ashamed; the old man had not tumbled in the trap he had set him.

"If I met only people like Marianka and old Ján," he said to Clarisse when the gardener had gone to the greenhouse, "I might almost regain my faith in humanity."

"And your mother?"

"Yes, and my mother. Poor dear, she really deserves a better son."

"She's proud of your books."

"My books, my books . . ." He passed his hand over his tousled hair and stared angrily at Clarisse. "Can you understand that I almost hate them at times? Only really good people ought to be allowed to write books. Unfortunately," he added dryly, "they nearly always write badly, at least in Central Europe. But sometimes I feel that I should like to tell my readers: you can be beasts, but you can also be saints; choose."

"They'd rather be beasts," Clarisse said cynically. "It's so much easier."

"Must everything always be easy? That's the curse of our generation: we won't take any trouble, we fight shy of giving up anything, we want a pleasant life and a good time at all costs. Don't laugh, Clarisse, I know perfectly well that a drunkard has no right to say that, but you're just as bad in your own way. Your one idea is to avoid pain and trouble. You live for yourself only."

"Who doesn't?"

"Your husband for instance."

"Robert?"

"Yes, you seem to have forgotten how often he risked his life smuggling people over the Austrian frontier. He's not a coward as we are, he does not turn away his eyes when he meets human misery, he . . ."

"He rather enjoys being miserable himself," she said spitefully.

Joseph looked at her a moment with an expression of distaste on his face, then he turned away without a word.

and left her. She remained alone in the gloaming. Blue shadows were gliding across the paths and taking on strange shapes; there were instants when they seemed real and substantial as so many things in life, security, joy, happiness that turned into shadows and vanished as soon as night drew close.

Margit Jeszenak got up and turned off the wireless with an impatient hand. Aladar looked up.

"Don't; I want to hear . . ."

"Haven't you heard enough? Can you bear to listen to a voice that speaks of his inability to understand how Englishmen could be on the verge of war 'because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing?' They know nothing of us! Our good friends. We accept the most humiliating and unjust terms, we give in, and a few days later we are something that does not really exist, something the Western States know nothing of."

"What can we do?"

"Show fight. Let the people in the Reich see that *we* are not afraid of them, even if all the others are.

Aladar slowly lit his pipe. The door-bell rang and the maid put her head into the room.

"The Gendarme Vyskocil wants to know whether he may come in."

"Of course."

Hanus Vyskocil stood in the study looking shy and uncomfortable. Aladar was struck by the fact that the other man did not address him but his sister.

"I only wanted to ask you, Miss Margit, what the Prime Minister said. Of course, we don't understand a word of English, and I'm sure you listened in. Did he say that they will stick to us?"

Margit drew up a chair and offered him a cigarette. She was trying to gain time. Looking into the gendarme's trusting face and anxious eyes she could not make up her mind to tell him the truth.

"You must not forget, Vyskocil, that in times like these . . . When a statesman makes a speech . . . He cannot say all he wants . . . he must be terribly careful, a single thoughtless word could do a lot of harm . . ."

She broke off, turning away so as to avoid seeing the look of pain on the honest face.

"I was afraid of it," Hanus Vyskocil said, and the hand holding the cigarette fell heavily on his knees. "Yes, I was afraid of it. People are saying that our government has declared: 'Our best friends have betrayed us.' But I did not want to believe it. I can't really believe it even now."

His kind blue eyes were sorrowful, his sunburnt face had changed colour, he looked like a frightened, unhappy child.

How many eyes, Margit thought, have the same look; how many in our country have to-night lost faith in friendship, loyalty, in everything good and decent? She tried to say a few comforting words but Aladar interrupted her.

"It's better to know how things really stand. From to-day on we've got to depend on ourselves," he said, his voice grim and hard. "We've got to trust in our army and in the justice of our cause."

"Yes," Hanus Vyskocil replied eagerly. "You are right, Monsignore. Justice and truth must be victorious in the end."

He could not guess why the priest blushed a dark red; Aladar Jeszenak had suddenly found out that he put far more trust in "our soldiers" than in the victory of a just cause.

"I've got to go," the gendarme said slowly. "Elisabeth is expecting me home." He got up heavily as if his feet had turned to lead. "Thank you," he said dully. "Thank you; good night."

The streets were crowded. In the place in front of the church Tido Prohazka was surrounded by men listening to his words. The Communist had spent five years in the States and spoke English. He was explaining what he had heard on the wireless and airing his views.

"The capitalists," he was saying, "of course they want to go on doing business with the Germans, the capitalists of

France and of England. As long as we have got the capitalist system we can't expect anything else."

Old Novak shook his head.

"Maybe you're right as to the capitalists. But the masses? Are the English and French masses going to allow their statesmen to wrong us? Will they simply look on whilst we are being attacked, whilst we..."

"The peoples always want peace," Tido Prohazka declared solemnly. "Every nation wants peace."

"Not the German one," a young woman cried.

Tido Prohazka shook his head.

"Don't say that. If the German Government should really declare war on us, the German masses..."

"Will be only too ready to fight," the young woman said violently. "Don't talk to me about the German peoples. Aren't they all taking an active part in Jew-baiting? Don't they persecute religion?"

"The church," Tido Prohazka enlightened her, "has at all times sided with the rich."

"Not our Monsignore," Hanus Vyskocil said impulsively. "He's always on the side of the poor."

He fell silent abruptly. Living in a hostile atmosphere, he had grown accustomed to keep silent. But to-day no one had an unkind word for the "Czech". Old Novak put his hand on Hanus's arm.

"Don't look so unhappy, Hanus," he said kindly. "If the cursed Germans should dare to attack you we'll fight on your side. Of course we've grumbled a lot, not without reason, and have abused you Czechs, but when it comes to fighting we know that we are brothers."

The gendarme drew a deep breath of relief. The old man's words had done him good.

More and more people came from all sides, young ones and old ones, women and children. The place had the same look as during the parish fair, but to-day there was no merry laughter and no music. Questions were asked, answers given, surmises, sometimes shrewd, sometimes absurd, were uttered. Doctor Silberthal was seen leaving his house and in a trice he was surrounded by those who had not been able to get

close to Tido Prohazka. He was no longer the "dirty Jew", the enemy; in this black hour he belonged to them and was, just as they were, the citizen of a country whose fate hung in the balance.

The Germans stood together, Martin Schneeberger with a sneer on his lips, the veterinary looking excited, Emma Leberfinger smiling blissfully and, in their midst—the older Slovaks kept throwing angry glances in his direction—the priest of Sokolovce, a massive figure in his black cassock, his face as if hewed out of stone.

Night had come but the people did not go home. They stood about waiting without really knowing what they were waiting for. A drizzling rain began to fall but no one paid any attention to it, only some women took shelter under the Gothic arch of the church door; whatever happened one had to take care of one's clothes. A boy came running up and pulled old Novak by his sleeve. The old man listened to his whispered words, nodded and called out in a ringing voice:

"Don't go home. There's important news coming. I'm off to the Town Hall. I'll be back soon."

The clock in the church tower struck half past ten whilst he was speaking.

The crowd knew what his words portended. As in all small Slovakian towns the parish clerk acted as town crier and went about beating his drum when some important news was to be made public. Old Novak hurried away as fast as his legs could carry him.

The rain stopped. Stars came out, thousands of them, twinkling and trembling in the dark sky. The people spoke in whispers as if they were in church. A breathless feeling of suspense had taken hold of them. What would the next hour bring? Like a throttling hand evil forebodings took them by the throat. Fear made their hearts heavy. From time to time a deep breath or a sigh was to be heard. Then all was silent again. Old Novak did not return. What had happened? Would the news he was bringing be good or bad? Some of the men began walking about, too nervous to remain standing in one spot. Their steps resounded in

the silence. Mrs. Kraus, who had come running from her shop, burst into tears and would not let herself be comforted by Elisabeth Vyskocil who was standing beside her.

"It will be the same again as it was in 1918," she sobbed. "At that time they looted our shops and our houses but at least they did not kill us. Whereas now, now..." Her voice was heavy with the fear of thousands of persecuted, hunted men and women. She threw a frightened glance at the Germans, who were talking eagerly and laughing from time to time. A figure stepped out of the shadows and stopped. Svata Hrubin did not know which group to join. He felt with a sharp stab of pain that he belonged neither to the one nor the other. Old Ján saw him and somehow sensed the student's irresolution.

"Stay with us as your mother would," he whispered.

Svata put his hand to his head. He felt giddy and the ground beneath his feet seemed to rock. Confused thoughts raced through his brain; a free and independent Slovakia... A country where the Slovaks would be masters of all... Yes, he had wanted to fight for that. But a Slovakia "liberated" by the Germans...?

"Go into church," old Ján said, not unkindly, "and ask God to give you sense, you poor fool."

In the distance a faint sound could be heard, the muffled beat of a drum, getting louder as it came closer.

"He's coming!"

"That's old Novak with his drum!"

"Now we'll know!"

The dull beat of the drum sounded ominous and uncanny in the dark. Now it had grown very loud. A long roll, then the voice of the town crier:

"The Government has ordered full mobilisation. Civil aviation to cease."

A gasping sigh came from the crowd, swallowed by a new roll of the drum, and again the voice:

"A message from the President: 'Citizens, the decisive moment has arrived. Keep calm, be brave and faithful. Your struggle is for justice and your fatherland. Long live free Czechoslovakia!'"

A deadly quiet fell upon the place before the church, a silence fraught with feeling. Then a confused din of voices.

"Full mobilisation... Thank God, at last... Free Czechoslovakia... Dear Lord, another war... We'll teach the damned Germans... We've given in time and again and they want more and more... Damn Hitler... Damn the Germans..." And then suddenly a cry as from a hundred throats:

"Long live free Czechoslovakia!"

Another roll of the drum and steps dying away in the distance.

The spot where the Germans had stood was empty. They had felt that discretion was the better part of valour.

Followed by Margit, Aladar Jeszenak came from the presbytery. He marched along like a soldier. The captain of the Hussars, not the priest. Reaching the edge of the crowd he stopped. His voice rang out buoyantly:

"You have all heard the news, the blessed news. We are not going to surrender. We are going to fight. Come to church and pray for our country and celebrate the decision of our Government with the *Te Deum*." Looking round his glance fell upon Svata Hrubin. "Come, my son, light the candles. You've served Mass more than once as a boy, you know where things are kept."

Svata Hrubin hesitated. Margit whispered softly:

"Do, Svata. Your mother will be so pleased when she hears..."

The ground beneath his feet grew firm, his eyes saw clearer than before and his heart was no longer a stone in his breast. Slowly, reluctantly, he moved forward, then suddenly, as if afraid of changing his mind, he ran to the door and entered the church.

The candles on the altar sparkled. Coming in from the dark the people blinked their eyes. The schoolmaster who was also the organist walked up the nave. Aladar Jeszenak knelt on the altar steps. The prayer he spoke was short but fervent. He prayed for their country, for the land in which liberty still reigned, for the young Republic he loved so

passionately. Then the organ sounded through the church; and men and women joined in the *Te Deum*:

"We praise Thee, O God . . ."

Leaving the church the crowd heard in the distance the roll of the drum that was waking the country from its sleep and proclaiming that Czechoslovakia was not going to surrender to a barbarous foe.

Tommy stood at the garden gate barking like mad. During his short life he had never seen so many people at one time. They kept step, marching along under the autumnal sky, their eyes filled with a great gladness, their faces proud and defiant. They knew their strength.

What did it matter that the Germans had, in agreement with the Western Powers, already occupied the third zone in the Sudetenland? We'll take it back. We'll also stand up to the Poles. They're circling like vultures over our land, scenting the carcass, but we are not dead yet, we are very much alive. We are not going to allow our country to be bartered away whatever our former friends have agreed to in Godesberg. We won't let them sell Czechoslovakia in exchange for their own security.

Some of the soldiers looked round with loving eyes, how beautiful the country was, it was worth fighting for.

Leaning on a rake Marianka stood beside the small barking dog. Her eyes were wet, of course one had to fight if the anti-Christ attacked the country, but the boys marching past were so young, so terribly young. As young as my Tomas was, she thought, but then he, poor boy, had to die for an alien country, not for his own . . .

More and more soldiers marched past, an endless row. The dust beneath their feet swirled and eddied.

Slowly, gradually the sound of their steps died away and the marching figures vanished, making room for another column, for the peasants who were taking their horses to the capital. The animals walked along with firm slow steps; during their whole patient life they had drawn the plough, had helped to tear up the blessed earth that gives man the bread he needs, had brought home the harvest when the

first flames of autumn had painted the leaves in a hundred shades, pulling the carts laden with golden corn and with fragrant aftermath. The big, strong horses with the gentle eyes and shaggy, well-kept manes were an incarnation of peaceful, life-giving work. The peasants walked beside them; some horses were led by women. Widows, Marianka thought compassionately, many of them must be widows of the Great War. The peasants kept close to their horses as if wanting to feel their presence to the very last and wishing to show their affection to the loyal friends who had always helped them. Perhaps they also longed to feel that there was something good and kindly left in that mad world of ours.

Many of the older faces bore the same expression of bewilderment to be seen in the horses' eyes. How can a nation, the tired human eyes asked, want war? Are there no fields in Germany asking to be tilled, no herds and flocks to be tended, no women and children to love and take care of? Don't the German peasants love their farms, their fields, their villages?

From Aladar's church the bell was ringing for the angelus. The men bared their heads and crossed themselves. Some of the faces grew brighter. Surely God will not permit evil to triumph over good, surely the Lord who created the fertile earth and the good, patient horses, will protect our country and his wrath will strike those who desire the death of thousands of innocent men.

From time to time a horse neighed. Did it feel homesick for the familiar fields and meadows, for the warm stable, for the village pond where it used to bathe when evening came? Or was it crying out for help, was it accusing those who had taken it away from its home?

Slowly, patiently, the peasants walked on beside their horses, gently patting a shining back or an arched neck. Their sons had passed the same way to fight for their country, maybe to die. In the peasants' hearts flared anger against the strange, incomprehensible nation beyond the frontier who did not love peace and life, who yearned for destruction and death.

Joseph came to breakfast at an unusually early hour.

"Up already?" Clarisse asked with a look of surprise.

"I've got to go to town."

"Why?" his mother asked, passing him the milk.

"I'm going to join up. I don't want to sit at home whilst others are fighting."

Aunt Anny grew pale but she only nodded and said:

"You're right, my boy. I hate war, but this war, our war . . ."

Her voice broke, she stooped and picked up the cat that made itself comfortable on her lap, purring loudly.

Clarisse felt amazed; she knew how Aunt Anny loved her only son and had expected objections, reproaches. But the old lady said calmly:

"The war won't last long."

"Why?" Robert asked.

"The people over there will find out that it's not worth while."

"The Germans think every war is worth while," Robert said bitterly. "They love war for its own sake. For the sake of killing." He sighed. "I wish I could join up too, but I'm too old, they won't have me. Besides there's my game arm."

He does not think of me, Clarisse felt deeply hurt. Of course, if he had married Margit . . . She wanted to say something unkind, to wound him.

"You used to be a fervent pacifist," she mocked with an ugly, sneering smile.

He looked at her as if she had spoken to him in a language he did not understand.

"This war is different," he said coldly.

Clarisse felt herself blushing. Why must she always think of herself, even to-day? She tried to explain away her words:

"Some one must stay at home and look after the estate."

"Your estate. You don't need me. You've always got on perfectly well without my help."

"Don't quarrel, children," Aunt Anny said. "Not now." Her eyes rested upon her son and Clarisse suddenly saw a deadly fear looking out of them. But the pretty old face

smiled gallantly. "I'm so glad Svata has not got to go," she said.

"Why not?" Joseph asked absent-mindedly.

"My dear, have you forgotten that he limps? At least Marianka won't have to worry about her boy."

"He'll only go about stirring up the Slovaks." Clarisse hated herself for saying it but she felt desperate.

Robert got up.

"I'm coming to town with you," he told his cousin, and Clarisse knew that he was running away from her, from her selfishness, her caprices, her sharp tongue, trying to escape from all that she did not want to be and could not help being. Joseph nodded shortly. Getting up he went and stood beside his father's chair. Uncle Tony had not spoken a single word during breakfast, his face looked old and grey.

"Father," Joseph hesitated; as a rule he and the taciturn old man had little to say to each other. The father could not understand the son's futile revolt, and the son hated the old man's weary resignation. Sometimes he remembered hazily a young father who had been a merry playfellow and a good friend, but all that was so long ago, it might have been on another planet. He had not intended to say anything to his father but looking up he had met the old man's affectionate, almost tender gaze.

"Father, I know how you hate war, I'm afraid it will hurt you, but . . ."

"Have you considered that you may have to fight your own countrymen, Austrians?"

"The men looting and murdering in Vienna and the provinces are no longer my countrymen. Austria is dead for ever."

His father shook his head. "Not dead, only stunned. When a man gets a blow on the head . . ."

Joseph looked incredulous.

"If I have a fatherland it's this gallant, decent little country defending itself against wild beasts."

Tony Braun looked at him curiously.

"Have you learnt to believe in something at last, my boy?"

"Yes." Joseph looked and spoke like a man making a confession of faith. "I believe in the brotherhood of all decent human beings."

Tony Braun shyly laid a wrinkled hand on that of his son. "Thank God, my boy. Go and fight for it and—come back."

His voice was not quite firm but his tired eyes were shining and his face was bright with gladness. He looked at his wife and said softly: "He's your son, Anny."

She returned his look and Clarisse turned away. She did not want to see the trusting love those eyes betrayed. These two were old and had lost everything they had possessed, yet . . . yes, they were the happiest couple Clarisse had ever met.

The telephone bell rang and Robert took up the receiver. "It's Margit speaking," he said. "She wants you to come over at once, Clarisse. It's terribly important." He smiled good-naturedly. "Margit always thinks everything's terribly important. Shall I say that you're coming?"

"Yes. She's quite right, everything is important," Clarisse said, marvelling at her own words as soon as she had spoken them.

Driving through the familiar landscape she repeated the words to herself. The air was diamond clear. The sere leaves of the ash trees fell to the ground with a tiny rustling sound. In the distance weeds were being burnt and the acrid smell filled the air. There was a gentle wistfulness hovering over the land. Habit made Clarisse pull up at the foot of Mount Calvary; she had quite forgotten that old Ján was not beside her. In the cold blue light of the morning the three crosses on the hilltop stood out sharply. Lower down, in the second shrine, a heavy cross was being laid on bruised shoulders. Mechanically she whispered the words she had heard so often: "By your holy cross you have saved the world." To-day she did not dread the significance of the words; salvation through the cross, through gallantly born suffering, through a love stronger than death—was not that the answer to the bewildering riddle of life?

The horses grew restive and Clarisse slackened the reins.

She drove on slowly, her eyes resting on the peaceful country that had patiently borne so many crosses, that was bearing a new one, perhaps the heaviest of all, courageously and bravely, with a confident smile because it felt sure of its resurrection.

Doctor Silberthal was seated in Margit's sitting-room at the presbytery.

"Perhaps you can do something, Countess Clarisse," he said. "The girl is so fond of you."

"What girl?"

"Little Sister Veronica," Margit explained. "If we can't do something soon she'll die."

"I never knew she was ill."

"She's not ill," said her cousin. "She's killing herself." She gave an impatient laugh. "It's that damned mysticism. The crazy girl is convinced that she ought to sacrifice her life to save those who are being tortured in the Reich. She won't eat, she won't sleep, she prays and prays like mad, the little goose."

Doctor Silberthal gave her a queer look.

"Perhaps the 'crazy girl' is saner than we are," he said coldly. "Sometimes I'm at a loss to understand why we don't all go mad thinking of the things that are happening day by day beyond the frontier."

"The Mother-Superior would like you to invite Sister Veronica to Korompa for a week or so," Margit told her cousin. "Maybe a change would do her good."

"Of course she must come," Clarisse said quickly. For once she did not seem to mind a stranger in the house.

"Let's go," the doctor said. "Of course I don't know whether Sister Veronica will agree. But something must be done and I'm at my wits' end."

Little Sister Veronica was playing in the garden with the orphans. Clarisse was shocked to see how pale the girl was and how thin she had grown. The grey eyes looked enormous in the small drawn face and the merry smile had vanished from her lips. Just like a little madonna at the foot of the cross, Clarisse thought pityingly.

"Sister Veronica," she said kindly, "I want you to do something for me."

"I'd love to if I can."

How dull, how listless the young voice was.

"I want you to come to us for a week. Aunt Anny isn't well at all and I'm too busy to look after her. It would be very kind of you if you could manage."

The doctor looked pleased. Women were cleverer than men; if the girl thought that she could be useful to Clarisse she might accept the invitation.

"But the children," little Sister Veronica looked anxious. "Our Mother . . ."

"I'll come here every day," Margit promised. "Don't worry, we'll get on all right. And little Franta will be glad to see you again," she added cunningly.

Sister Veronica smiled wistfully.

"You don't know how troublesome the children can be."

"I've managed worse and older children, Sister Veronica."

The smile on the small face suddenly grew merry, almost roguish.

"I know, Baroness Margit. It's a real blessing that Father Gogolak gave up coming here since you talked to him about it. I always knew that my dear children were good, but if a wicked man . . ."

She stopped short, blushing to the roots of her hair. Was it not wrong to call a priest wicked?

"So you're coming to Korompa?"

"I really don't know whether . . ."

"You had better go, my child," the Mother-Superior said. "We really can't refuse if Countess Clarisse wants your help."

"If I come," little Sister Veronica declared in a firm tone, "I've got to tell you something first. Perhaps Countess Clarisse will not want to have me in her house when she knows . . . I must confess a sin, a heinous sin."

Clarisse gazed dumbfounded at the young nun; it seemed impossible that the good, kind little girl had committed even the tiniest of sins. The doctor pricked up his ears. If

the girl unburdened her mind he might at last discover the cause of her mysterious illness.

"Speak, my daughter," the old nun said kindly.

Little Sister Veronica folded her thin hands. She stood in front of them like a child in the presence of severe teachers.

"I . . ." she broke off in confusion, took a deep breath and went on hastily, as if afraid her courage might fail her, "I'm a miserable sinner. I'm afraid of becoming a martyr. I know that in Germany people are being tortured and killed for their faith, and I . . . I'm a coward . . . I keep dreading that the Germans will come here and that I shall have to die for my faith or perhaps for my neighbour. I really don't think I could do it. Whenever I pray for persecuted and hunted men and women I hear threatening voices, I see the foes coming closer, carrying scourges and red-hot tongues, as on the pictures of the martyrs. And I want to run away as fast as I can. I know you will all despise me, but you can't despise me more than I do myself. Everyone must have the strength to die for his faith and his neighbour . . . But I . . . I . . ." She turned to the old nun with a gesture of humility, "Venerable Mother, do not send me away, do not say that I am not worthy to be religious. I've really tried ever so hard. . . I remind myself of Our Lord on Mount Calvary, of all the martyrs, of all the people who are suffering to-day, and yet I . . ."

She hid her face in her hands and burst into tears.

"Sister Veronica," the old nun said, deeply moved, "my poor little child."

"You're not afraid, venerable Mother, tell me, you're not the least bit afraid?"

"No," the old woman said gently. "But then I'm very old, my dear, and old people lose their fear. Believe me, Sister Veronica, it's better to fight your fear than not to feel it."

The girl lifted her head, an expression of hope came upon her face.

"It's not that I mind dying for the sake of others, but to suffer pain . . ."

She shivered.

"You have already undergone the martyrdom you dread so much, Sister Veronica," the doctor said gravely.

She gazed at him with wide open eyes, trying to understand.

"I . . . ? But nothing ever happened to me."

"Your martyrdom is fear."

Her grey eyes never left his face, she looked grateful, glad as if delivered from a heavy burden.

"Is that really true?"

The Mother-Superior nodded. "The doctor is right, my child. And now you'll go to Korompa, won't you?"

"Oh yes, it will be lovely to go. But before leaving I've got to say good-bye to Elisabeth Vyskocil, she's always so unhappy, poor dear, because her sister . . ." She fell silent, it was wrong to speak evil of one's neighbours, but when she thought of Emma . . .

"Come, we'll drive home at once," Clarisse said, afraid that the little nun might change her mind.

"Yes, but, please, may I also go and see Mrs. Kraus? She's so terribly worried and I'd like to say a few comforting words to her."

"Whom else do you want to say good-bye to?" Margit asked with a smile.

Little Sister Veronica grew animated. If she were allowed to go and see all her friends, leaving the orphanage would come much easier. Listening to the names Clarisse felt amazed. The girl seemed to have known and shared all the sorrows and apprehensions borne by the inhabitants of the small town. Margit experienced a most unusual feeling of humility seeing that the little nun knew much more about the parish than she did. Sister Veronica took over an hour to say good-bye. Margit and the doctor accompanied her, Margit out of curiosity and the doctor because he did not dare to leave his patient lest she should suddenly become a prey to fresh scruples and refuse to go. Waiting in front of a small house whose owner had been called up a few days ago, leaving a young wife and a small child behind, the doctor said to Margit:

"My grandfather was a pious Jew. He used to tell me about the thirty-six just men for whose sake God spares the world, unknown saints who lead a hidden life. When I'd been naughty the idea comforted me. Later on I gave up believing in them, somehow I feel as if I were beginning to do so again." He grew serious. "Poor little soul. It's good to know that there are people like Sister Veronica living amongst us."

Margit was surprised to see the little nun stop before the post-office.

"I've got to see Mr. Prohazka," she explained. "He's always been so kind to the orphans and, poor dear, his brother is still in Vienna. I'm praying ever so hard to get him out." Seeing Clarisse smile a trifle incredulously, she added eagerly. "I've fasted and prayed for him every day. But I must mortify myself. Nothing can be done without sacrifice," she added with childish wisdom. She ran up the steps and entered the post-office to say good-bye to red Tido Prohazka.

As they were getting into the phaeton the baker Schneeberger came past. He lifted his hat and bowed politely. In his buttonhole he wore a ribbon with the Czechoslovak colours. Margit burst out laughing.

"You can see that the soldiers have marched through town," she said loudly, "and that our Germans are not quite so stupid as they look."

The baker had heard her words, as he was meant to. His fat face grew crimson but he remained silent, standing with his hat in his hand. We have got to suffer for the movement, he thought, but when the day comes . . . He imagined himself master of the town and he knew exactly what would happen to his enemies. It was an encouraging and pleasant thought.

Leaving Margit at the presbytery gate, Doctor Silberthal walked home. Else was sitting in the garden with the baby. Seeing him, the little boy crowed happily and stretched out his small hands. The doctor stooped to take him up.

"Leave the child alone!" Else said harshly.

"Why?"

"I don't want you to play with him."

The baby, expecting to be taken up, began to cry. Else grew angry.

"Shut up!"

The doctor took the boy in his arms and caressed him.

"Leave the child alone. Don't touch *my* child!"

At last he understood. Gently seating the baby on the lawn, he turned to his wife.

"You've got a queer way of saying *my* child. What do you mean by it?"

Would she be so cruel as to tell him the bitter truth?

She gazed at him. His calm manner and still more the deep sadness of his face irritated her. For weeks all he said and did irritated and seemed alien to her.

"You wouldn't understand."

"I'm afraid I *do* understand. Just as I understand why you lock your bedroom door."

"I can't help it," she said passionately. "Something has come between us. We don't belong together, we two."

"Since when have you known it?" he asked, trying hard to keep his voice from betraying what he was feeling.

"I always knew it. I always felt that I was living with a stranger, a man alien to me in all he said and did. You can't understand me, and I . . ."

He remembered a summer's day and a sobbing woman saying: "I'll never forget how good you have been to me . . ."

She was lashing herself into fury.

"I committed a crime when I became your wife. A crime against myself and my race. Thank God that the worst did not happen. Thank God that I did not bear you a child."

What she is saying, he thought with a feeling of nauseating mortification, countless women are saying to their Jewish husbands in the Reich and in Austria. But I never thought that my wife, that Else . . . We have been so happy and she seemed so fond of me . . .

"Darling," he said with a great tenderness, "don't let them fool you."

"I've been fooled already, by you, on the day you took advantage of the terrible situation I was in." Her face flushed an ugly red. "You are our enemy. You side with the Czechs, our oppressors, with a sub-human race, you . . ."

"I belong to a sub-human race myself, don't I, Else?"

She shrugged silently, her fingers nervously pulling up blades of grass.

He tried to carry the attack into the enemy's camp.

"I've been wanting to ask you not to see so much of Emma Leberfinger and not to let her come to the house," he said quietly. "The girl is dangerous. She's very ill, one never knows what she is going to do."

She laughed mockingly, a hateful little laugh.

"Emma has been perfectly well since you gave up treating her."

He stared at her.

"You even believe that slander?"

She looked at him full in the face and he drew back before the mad hatred in her eyes.

But he would not give in yet, he knew that he was pleading in vain, but how could he relinquish his happiness, his home, all that had made life beautiful to him, without a struggle?

"Else," he said gently, coming a step closer.

"Don't touch me," she cried. "Don't ever touch me again."

The boy came towards them, crawling over the lawn. He waved a paper in his small hand. The doctor glanced at it.

"I see," he said coldly. "That's where you get your ideas from. Of course, I'd quite forgotten that since last week the papers from the Reich are no longer banned in Slovakia."

"Yes, thank goodness. At least one learns the truth about what is happening in the country and in the world."

"I don't want to talk politics, Else. But I do want to learn the truth, the truth about us, you and me. I really think you owe me that much."

"I owe you," she mocked. "Ah, well, I might have expected it, Shylock clamouring for his pound of flesh."

He gave her a last long look before turning away and going

into his consulting-room. Although the sun was shining brightly he felt deadly cold. How empty the room was, as empty as the house, as his whole life. He no longer tried to deceive himself, this was not a passing mood. Else had meant every word she had spoken. For weeks he had noticed that she was becoming colder towards him, inimical, but he had not had the courage to admit it to himself. He sank upon the chair and stared into the room. Deep sadness overcame him. Why should he go on working, why go on living? He had lost the tiny island that had been his home, from now on he would always be an exile, a man without friends, rejected by all, unwelcome to the country that barely tolerated him, doomed to eternal solitude. His sad eyes did not see the familiar room, they stared fearfully into a terrible void.

The bell rang, patients came. He examined them as in a dream. The last to come was Marianka Hrubin, who had hurt her finger. Whilst he was dressing it, her kind, brown eyes looked at him anxiously.

"Aren't you well, doctor?"

How strange that someone should notice how he looked, that a human voice should ask him in a kind tone whether something was the matter with him.

"No," he said. "Only tired."

The kind eyes did not leave his face; she nodded.

"The days are long and weary, doctor. And you do such a lot for us. The town would be lost without you."

What had Else said? Sub-human?

"I often think of you when I get tired, doctor, you see I'm growing old. But when I think of you and remember that you never get any rest, not even at night, I feel ashamed of grumbling." She smiled. "And it's not only that, we all know that our doctor never sends a bill to a poor patient, and sometimes, when he leaves a cottage, there's money on the table that was not there before."

"Our doctor," how good that sounded, a man who belonged, no tolerated alien.

"There you are," he said. "You'd better take care of that finger, Marianka."

"Thank you." She got up and suddenly took hold of his hand.

"The times are bad, my dear, and men are wicked, even here. Don't let them hurt you. Things will change and God will never forget what you have done for us."

The hard old hand held his in a tight grasp and he felt as if he were drawing strength from its touch.

"Svata," Marianka said, "sends his love and wants to know whether he may come and see you."

"Svata?" The doctor looked surprised. "You've invented that message, Marianka."

"No." Her face grew radiantly happy. "He's come to his senses, thank God. It cost me a lot of candles and prayers," she added, almost childishly, "but at last the blessed Virgin took him in hand. May he come?"

"Of course."

She let go of his hand. "Now you look better, doctor. I'm off."

He went to the window and watched her walking along the street, small, with bowed shoulders and slightly dragging feet. He felt a deep gratitude. How clear those old eyes had seen, how kind her words had been. The room was much less empty than before, the walls no longer looked down on him with a hostile stare. He straightened himself. No, one does not run away from a world where Mariankas have bad fingers that must be dressed, one does not throw away a life that can be of use to them. One stays here for the Mariankas' sake and defies one's enemies.

Marianka stopped in front of the church. She put her hand into her apron-pocket. Yes, she had enough money left for a candle.

The blessed Virgin will think that I really might give her a rest. But I can't help her, she thought. Poor man, he looks awful, as if he wanted to lie down and die. I'm sure it's that horrid wife of his. I did so want to help him, poor dear. But I'm not educated, I can't find the right words. I'll tell Mrs. Braun to go and see him, she'll know what to say, because she's a lady, and not only that, but also a good woman.

She nodded, smiled and, leaving the sun-bathed street, entered the dusky church.

Old Ján stood in the Vyskocil shop and scratched his head. "Pale blue, Mrs. Braun told me. Is that cotton really pale blue, Elisabeth?"

He looked dubiously at the cotton-reel Elisabeth had put on the counter in front of him.

"Yes, it really is," Elisabeth reassured him. She was still pale and weak after the birth of her second child, and this was her first day in the shop.

"I also want some red wool for a cardigan for Franta," the gardener added.

Elisabeth fetched the wool from the shelf and sat down.

"Have you heard," old Ján said, "how we've been treated at Vienna? They did not even let our delegates attend at the conference. Of course, we Slovaks are not good enough for them. I was quite right when I spoke of the way of the Cross. To-day they are dividing our garments as the soldiers did on Mount Calvary, tearing out a piece here and a piece there. Will that go on for ever? They assail us like brigands. The first were our Polish brothers, and now it's the Magyars' turn. God damn them. To-morrow our people have got to evacuate the territory that the Italians and the Germans gave to the Magyars."

Elisabeth nodded silently. For days she had been hearing about it incessantly. The Hungarian frontier was close to the town, and many had friends living in the territory ceded to the Hungarians.

"Benes," the old man went on, "would never have allowed it. But, of course, *he* had to leave the country because that damned Hitler wanted it. And now our people are losing their homes without even knowing why."

"Some say"—Elisabeth looked worried—"that the Czechs will not be allowed to remain here, the Slovaks will drive them out."

"Nonsense! Why should they? Tiso has declared that we are on the side of the Czechs. Not that I trust him, the

mealy-mouthed humbug, but what can he do? After all, he must have seen in Vienna how things stand."

"If we had to leave Slovakia . . ." Elisabeth looked round the beloved little shop and her heart grew heavy—"it would be awful. I love the country and the town and everything here."

Never before had the shop seemed so beautiful to her as on the day Emma had said mockingly:

"Ah, well, you won't be here much longer, you Czechs."

Elisabeth's eyes gazed lovingly at the shelves, the cotton-reels, the shining knitting-needles, the hundreds of small but precious things that were a part of her life.

"To think that the children will lose their home," she added mournfully.

"We ought to have fought in September," old Ján said truculently. "When mobilisation was ordered no one wanted to know whether the other man was a Czech or a Slovak . . . Afterwards . . . We broke down under the cross and there was no one to help us carry it." Noticing her sad face, he went on soothingly: "Things are sure to get better again, Elisabeth, also for you and the children. But"—he lowered his voice—"send Emma away. She goes around telling vile lies about Hanus, and the people are stupid and believe them."

"Hanus never harmed anyone."

"I know. But you see, when a thing is repeated again and again something always sticks in the people's minds. I thought Emma would come to her senses after the damned Prussian had left." He laughed. "He did not enjoy the tincan serenade our boys played to him. He got cold feet and left the next day."

"It must have been awful," Elisabeth said, unable to conceal her pleasure at the thought. "I wonder who was at the bottom of it?"

Old Ján smiled cunningly.

"I don't know," he replied, but his voice did not carry conviction. "Who do you think, Elisabeth, is likely to think of that kind of thing?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"How can I guess?"

"I've been told the Baroness Margit was mightily amused when she heard of it," the old man said with a mischievous grin. "She's a dear; our Baroness is. But even our Monsignore is waking up. Last Sunday he let them have it from the pulpit. The priest of Sokolovce dare not open his mouth. Don't you worry, Elisabeth, nothing will happen to you. But get rid of Emma, believe me."

He pocketed the cotton-reels and the wool and left the shop.

Elisabeth remained alone. The grey November day slowly made way for the night. She went to close the shop, there would be no more customers to-day. Hanus was coming home late; he had had to go to Bratislava. The deep silence enveloping her made her feel uneasy. As soon as it grew dark she became nervous. The old man was right; if only Emma would go away. She recalled what her sister, seeing the new baby for the first time, had said: "Another sub-human brat," and how she had spat on the floor, staring at the infant with hostile eyes. Emma had not spoken to Hanus for weeks and had even refused to take her meals with him. She was always so well-dressed now, where on earth did she get the money for her clothes? The other day she had been to a meeting in Bratislava and had come home looking like a madwoman. She had walked up and down the shop, saying with a spiteful laugh: "On the day you have to get out, the shop will belong to me. And maybe Mrs. Kraus's shop, too. We're going to sweep the town clean with an iron broom. All our enemies are going to be destroyed." Her laughter grew louder. "If you knew what I heard to-day. But you don't know. You don't even know who I am."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I belong to the elect, I am no longer a common mortal as all the others are. On the day my Saviour enters the town I shall meet him at the head of the crowd, dressed all in white like a bride, a big bunch of flowers in my hand. He will lift me up beside him; he knows what I have suffered and dared for his sake. He will reward me. Whenever you tell me to

fetch something, to tidy up the shop, to go to the butcher for you, I ask myself: 'How dare she order me about? Doesn't she know that he has given me a virtue no mortal possesses, except he, of course!' All the people will obey and serve me, every man and every woman in the town. And I shall decide who is to live and who is to die." A cruel smile had curled her lips. "Oh, how they will grovel to me, the high and mighty gentry from Korompa, and the Monsignore and his odious sister. But I shall not forget to repay them for every single thing they did to me, for every scornful look, for every mocking laugh, for every supercilious word. Martha believes that she, too, is going to be powerful and great; but I was the first; I joined the elect on the day the stranger saw me kneeling before a false saint, and the day he chose me. Martha will be my servant as well as all the others. And I shall say: that man must die, that woman must die, yes, and that child, too, and there will be weeping and lamentation and great mourning in our town, and the river will run red with blood and the streets will be filled with dead. When I think of it, I feel myself rising from the earth, soaring up, as I am doing now."

Her voice had broken, she had reeled and burst into wild laughter. Her madly gesticulating hands had knocked boxes and trays from the counter. Seeing them hit the floor, her laughter had grown louder. She had run to the shelves, had caught hold of the goods and thrown them all over the shop, crying at the top of her voice: "You're in my hands, all of you, in my hands..."

Elisabeth had fled into the back room, where the children were sleeping. Here she had waited with bated breath and wildly beating heart till at last she had heard the dull thump of a falling body and had known that Emma was lying on the floor, her limbs convulsed, foaming at the mouth.

She had not told Hanus about it; she was afraid of Emma's anger; and, in spite of all, she pitied the sick woman. But from that day on she began to tremble when evening came and she was alone in the shop, knowing that Emma might come home any moment.

She went to the door and looked out for Hanus. But her

eyes saw nothing but the black night and her ears heard no approaching steps, only the monotonous, desolate song of the rain.

II

ERE THE COCK CROWS . . .

AGAIN a long procession drove along the high road at Korompa, but this time Tommy did not bark. His kind little dog's heart seemed to sense that anguish and grief incarnate were going past. Sitting in carts and old-fashioned wagons packed with their meagre possessions, men and women came from the direction of the new frontier, perched on straw mattresses and blankets, pots and pans piled up beside them and, here and there, looking lost and out of place, a plant that had stood on a window-sill quite recently, or had hastily been dug out in a small garden, a keepsake of a home lost for ever. In one of the carts a little girl held a cage with a gaily singing canary in her arms, sleeping cats lay on women's laps, small, shaggy, wildly barking mongrels stood beside some of the drivers. Many of the men wore blood-soaked bandages round their heads, several had their arms in primitive slings; the Magyars had not taken an affectionate leave of their former neighbours.

The people were very quiet, as if not daring to talk aloud or to voice their complaints. Women wept silently, men stared with a bewildered look at the alien country. Officially, the people were called *evacuees*, and hardly anyone considered what was hidden behind that single word: a pitiful lost happiness, the home where these men and women had been born and had grown up, the village where their dead rested forever in the green churchyard, or at least would rest as long as the Magyars permitted it. If it is possible to drive the living across the frontier, surely it is also possible to open the graves and ban the dead.

The children sat wide-eyed, gazing at the unfamiliar surroundings. They did not understand what had happened,

did not know why they had suddenly lost their own world, the cottage on the river bank, the village green, the old church, the little garden. Their young eyes kept asking: "Why?" Sometimes they put out their little hands for a familiar piece of furniture as if it were the only real thing left in a vanished world. The parents looked harassed. What was the new life going to be like? Where would they settle down? Like a ghost-picture their old home, yesterday's home, floated in the air before them; they carried it with them as they carried their goods and chattels, but with every turn of the wheels it grew more and more remote. Also the people who had been their neighbours for so long turned into shadows when they thought of them. It seemed inconceivable that old friends had been capable of striking them, of chasing the children as if they were cattle, of making one hate and fear them. . . .

"He's bartered them away, the devil," old Ján said grimly, watching the carts drive past. "Sold them like sheep, for thirty pieces of silver, Judas! You'll see, he will also barter away our Republic, that honourable man and saintly priest, Monsignore Tiso."

Clarisse could not answer, she felt a lump in her throat and surreptitiously wiped her eyes. Robert turned away to hide his anger. Aunt Anny, always on the practical side, said dryly:

"Crying over them won't do them any good. Better give them something to eat." She lifted her hand and stopped the foremost car.

At first the evacuees were shy and suspicious; what did the strange woman, speaking broken Slovak, want? But it was impossible to misunderstand her smile, and after a short while they were all sitting in the dining-room, drinking coffee and eating bread and butter. Marianka and Aunt Anny served them. Gradually, warmed by the hot coffee and the kindness of their hosts, the evacuees grew less reserved and began telling them what had happened. Nothing very important if considered *sub specie aeternitatis* or looked upon with the eyes of a statesman. A day had come, a day like all others, with a tiny nipping frost in the early morning and a

clear blue sky overhead, when the villagers had been told by the authorities that they had to leave their village forever. To say farewell to their cottage with the virginia creeper, to all that had been familiar and dear. To go away from the scenes of their childhood and youth, to which clung the remembrance of small joys and great sorrows; to leave behind them the place where their children had been born and their parents had died. No more to see the cow and the chickens, the mischievous goats and gentle sheep, the quacking ducks, all the old friends, that others now called their own. They had got up early in the frosty morning and driven off on their little, old carts and wagons, along unknown roads, towards a strange land, an alien world.

"I'd chosen such a beautiful grave for myself," an old woman told Marianka. "The finest in the whole churchyard. I'd already paid a sum on account; the rascal did not even give me back the money. That's what the Magyars are like." She sniffed up her tears, and Clarisse felt almost shocked at the idea that a human being could weep for a grave, that even a grave could be a home. Listening to Marianka's comforting words, the old woman nodded: "I'm sure to find a nice grave here, too, but it won't be the same."

A young girl was crying bitterly.

"To drive us out without a single kind word after all the years we had lived together. When the first cart left they laughed and yelled: 'The Slovaks are going!' And a man made a speech from the steps of the town hall, all about the thousand-year-old Magyar empire that was being reborn to-day. And they all shouted *Ěljen*."

Some of the men were cursing under their breath. The children, consoled by the cake Aunt Anny had fetched from the kitchen, laughed and played with Tommy, who, regardless of his duties as a host, walked about amongst them, frantically wagging his tail.

When the sad procession moved on again, little Sister Veronica was sitting in one of the carts. She had decided that she ought to look after a young woman who had had a baby five days ago and seemed weak and ill. "I know something about nursing," the little nun told Clarisse, "and

I really can't leave Bozena and the baby alone with the husband, who does not in the least know how to look after them. I'm sure Mother-Superior won't mind my going with them as far as Bratislava. I'll come back as soon as Bozena has found a home."

She drove away with the exiles as if she belonged to them, carrying a small canvas bag, the big rosary hanging from her belt. Her thin young arms held the baby tight. She was smiling happily; she felt no fear of the unknown; she was at home wherever men needed help. A single thing made her feel uneasy. Robert had given her a hundred Czech crowns for the sick woman and she was frightened to death of losing them. Little Sister Veronica had never possessed a hundred crowns during her whole young life. She sat in the last cart, and Clarisse watched the white wimples of her head-dress billowing like tiny sails in the dusk, till the cart vanished behind a turning of the road.

Joseph returned to Korompa in the first days of December, disgusted and furious, because "they" would not take him.

"Myocarditis," he said angrily. "Something wrong with my heart. Drink, of course; I might have known. I went as far as Prague. I made a nuisance of myself to all my old friends, getting them to pull strings. It was no good. So now I've come back, to sit at home, no use to anyone and a burden to myself. Decent men who cannot go and fight, die. I saw Karel Capek once or twice; he's done for. If ever a man dies of a broken heart it will be he. We others haven't even a heart to break. What a generation!"

They were huddled close to the huge green-tiled stove in the little sitting-room. The wind was driving the snow against the windows, the flakes fell densely, weaving a soft thick curtain between the house and the night.

Joseph was telling them about Prague.

"The whole city is held in a vice-like grip of apprehension; it takes away one's breath. You're surrounded by drawn and haggard faces. Everyone knows that the worst is

yet to come. Only the damned Germans strut about as if they owned the town."

Robert asked about his sister.

Joseph chuckled. "Christine has become an arch-Czech, she's quite forgotten that she was born in Vienna. She refuses to talk German, and I had to talk English or French with her, because she won't talk the 'language of those brutes beyond the frontier.' She's sent the eldest boy to England and wants him to stay there for good." He lit a cigarette. "It's queer that the people at Prague never complain or grumble, as they would have done in Austria. They bear their fate and their fears with a dignity—how seldom you can use that word nowadays—that struck me as almost natural. Of course, when they read articles about the men of Munich, or when the French papers praise them for having sacrificed themselves for the sake of Europe, you catch a queer expression in their eyes. They want neither pity nor praise, they want justice."

He knocked the ash off his cigarette and turned to Robert. "What are our local Germans doing?" he asked.

"Keeping in the background."

"Margit claims that they stir up the Slovaks worse than ever," Aunt Anny said.

"She ought to know. She's really clever and intelligent."

Clarisse pricked up her ears. Joseph was not in the habit of saying kind things about Margit. Had he forgotten Isolde? Of course, the girl had not written for months, although the Bredars were still in Vienna.

The next time Margit came, Clarisse teased her with her conquest. She could hardly believe her eyes, seeing Margit blush a rosy red.

"You're not fair to him," her cousin said. "He's different from us, because he sees things clearer and has more imagination. No wonder he gets disgusted with life. If he only . . ."

"Had a nice sensible wife, that's what you were going to say, isn't it?" Clarisse's voice sounded a trifle malicious.

Margit laughed and turned away. Speaking over her shoulder, she said: "I really do think that I should not mind

being that nice, sensible wife myself." Turning round she looked Clarisse in the face. "I really believe that you are still remembering . . . My dear, that was nothing but a transient winter's madness on both sides. Robert never really cared. You're the only woman he loves."

Clarisse shrugged.

"He certainly has a knack of hiding his feelings."

"Do you ever try to discover them? If you would forget yourself just for once in a way and see how lonely he is, how lost, how terribly he wants a woman who . . . Don't look at me that way and for goodness sake don't think that I want him for myself." Getting up, she put an arm round Clarisse's shoulder. "Don't be silly, darling. You might be quite happy together."

"Quite," Clarisse mocked. "How I hate the word."

Margit grew serious.

"That's what's wrong with you, my dear. You always want things to be perfect, a perfect life, a perfect happiness, a perfect love. Maybe all that existed a long time ago. But to-day we are all of us—call it divided into two parts, and one of them does not belong to us but to humanity as a whole. Excuse the ghastly expression, but there's no other. We cannot live for ourselves only. Perhaps the tie linking us to our fellow-men is really a chain that chafes us, perhaps, I don't know. Anyhow, it exists and we cannot break it, however hard we try."

"What an easy life our ancestors had. When I think of great-grandmother Laetitia, who was so terribly in love with her husband; she was able to live only for herself and her happiness. She never had to see what we saw the other day, the evacuees from Hungary."

"I don't know. I can't tell you when people first ceased having a life of their own, but I know—Aunt Anny loves to talk about it—that the quite old lady, grandmaman Inez, never allowed her serfs to be whipped. That looks as if she had a kind of fellow-feeling for them."

"Aunt Anny says that you are rather like her, Margit, the sole difference being—it's Aunt Anny talking, not I—that grandmaman Inez was a lady."

Margit laughed and lit a cigar.

"She hadn't got to look after a parish. That kind of thing makes you vulgar. And, after all, what is a lady, or a gentleman? According to my ideas, someone who stands up for his convictions, even if he has to pay a heavy price for it, and who fights for the defenceless."

"You certainly do that, my dear," Clarisse said cordially.

"In my own way, perhaps it's not the right way, but I know no other. I have neither the sweet kindness of little Sister Veronica nor Aunt Ann's gay charity. I lose my temper seeing what beasts people make of themselves, it seems such a waste. They might just as well be humane and nice. I don't expect them to be saints. Speaking of saints, little Veronica is quite well again. I went to the orphanage yesterday and she came running to meet me, radiant with joy, calling out at the top of her voice: 'Just imagine, Baroness Margit, I'm not frightened any longer. The other day when we were driving in the dark and I held the baby in my arms, all my fears vanished and I knew that I would have the strength to die for God and my neighbour. I would not even mind much if it did hurt!'"

"Dear little soul."

"I always feel cheap after I've been talking to her."

Margit fell silent, furiously puffing at her cigar.

"Do you really think, Clarisse," she said at last, hesitatingly, "please, don't laugh at me, but do you really think that Joseph . . ."

Clarisse did laugh, but not unkindly.

"My dear, you look like a young girl who's in love for the first time in her life, and you're thirty-six."

"I feel like a young girl. Terribly silly and very happy. Be a dear, Clarisse, ask me to come here as often as you can."

"Joseph's wife won't have an easy life," Clarisse warned her. "He'll always be a spoilt child, and you'll have to be a wife, a mistress, a mother and a nanny all in one."

"I know. He'll drive me mad with his sensitiveness and his being so terribly sorry for himself, poor darling. Nevertheless . . ."

"Do you really want to marry him?"

"Yes . . . Even if I have to propose."

"Then do try and make yourself look pretty. You know you can look lovely, give up dressing like an old woman and . . ."

"I haven't got time for that kind of thing. Besides, I want him to be fond of me just as I am, in spite of my untidiness, in spite of my cigars—I know he hates them. In spite of my bad temper. I don't want him to be blind to my shortcomings."

Joseph was not the man to be blind to anyone's shortcomings—not even his own. His hypercritical mind saw faults and blemishes even where there were none, but he suddenly made an amazing discovery, finding out that there was nothing on earth he could not talk about with Margit. She was a good listener, perhaps being the sister of a priest predestined her for it, and, at least so it seemed to him, had become gentler and even rather charming during the last few months. She it was who persuaded him to begin writing again.

"After all, there's always Switzerland left," she said, "and it's such a decent little country. You can't go on doing nothing but brood and be miserable, Joseph. Sit down and write. Tell your readers what you have seen. Make them understand what is happening. Make them see, feel, touch, smell the horror Germany has brought over the world. Put the German nation in the pillory. Fight the silly illusion that there are 'good' Germans; nothing can be more harmful than that illusion. Try at least."

"I can't. My mind has become a blank. I seem unable to formulate a sentence, it's—how can I explain it to you? Imagine a child building a castle of sand on the seashore, the minute the castle is finished the waves rush in and destroy it. All my ideas, all my subjects are drowned by the waves of horror and disgust that keep rushing in. No, I can't write."

"You must. It's cowardly to give in like that, cowardly not to fight evil with all the means God has given us. And you *can* write."

"Maybe. But I haven't got enough backbone."

"That's a thing you're trying to convince yourself of

because it makes life simpler, besides pandering to your terrible laziness."

He gazed at her in silence for a moment, then he said impulsively:

"What lovely eyes you've got."

She nodded absent-mindedly.

"I know; I've been told that ever since I was a child."

"You've got a funny way of acknowledging a compliment."

"Was it a compliment? I thought you were trying to change the subject."

He was still looking at her intently.

"Do you know that you are rather nice?" There was an undertone of surprise in his voice. "I used to think you odious, what with your imperious manner and your unbearable energy."

"Shall I tell you a secret?"

"Yes."

"With a few exceptions, no woman is really energetic. At the most we're tough, which is quite another thing. It's you men who compel us to assume that pose. What could I have done, Aladar being what he is? Someone had to look after the parish whilst the parish priest spent his whole time hunting for the root of all evils."

"He seems to have given it up. I'm told that his sermons put the fear of the Lord—and of the Monsignore—into the parishioners' souls, and that he's a regular bloodhound hunting down Slovak Nazis."

"Thank God, though it's a bit unfair that a man who wears a violet sash impresses people so much more than I do."

He laughed. "I prefer listening to your sermons, Margit."

"Then you will try and write, Joseph? Please do."

"I could always try. But what am I to write about? I can think of nothing but Prague as I saw it last, a city foreseeing its destruction. The old walls and towers of the Hradshin rising above the town, an empty husk ever since the man who might have saved the country has had to leave the castle. The desolation of the grey walls surrounded by snow,

the agony of hearts turned to ice by the treachery of their friends. . . ."

"It rather looks as if you had got a subject."

"I wonder why I can always think of something when I talk to you."

She smiled, put out her cigar, and said regretfully:

"I've got to send you away. I must go to the orphanage; the old woman is ill and little Sister Veronica needs help."

"Can you really manage the brats?"

"Of course. It's lucky they like me and believe what I tell them."

"You are rather charming, Margit, even I must admit it."

His words about her lovely eyes and the "charming" accompanied her all day long; the orphans had never seen her so indulgent and merry before. After dinner Aladar gave her a queer look and said:

"What's happened to you, Margit? You're looking really pretty and you're much less disagreeable than you used to be. Can it be the mellow touch of approaching middle age?"

Her laugh sounded a trifle forced; only a brother could say that kind of thing.

Aunt Anny felt overjoyed. Once again she saw in her mind's eye Joseph as a happy husband and father, she saw his children, whose number would not, so she hoped, be restricted by God to one, as it had been in her case. Sitting beside her husband on the sofa, she was smoking a last cigarette before going to bed and musing aloud, as was her wont.

"Margit must be about thirty-seven. She could easily have four children, two boys and two girls. Just think, Tony, how lovely it would be to have babies in the house. What a pity. . . ." She broke off hastily.

He smiled indulgently.

"You were going to say, what a pity those unborn babies will be only Brauns and not Herdegens."

"I never thought 'only', Tony. But surely you under-

stand that it grieves me to think that the nice part of our family is becoming extinct. After all, the old Herdegens used to be a decent lot. They have left a goodly heritage for Margit's and Joseph's children. But don't believe that I do not value the Brauns; you know how fond I was of your poor father. What was I going to say? Darling, why will you always interrupt me, it's an awful habit of yours. Oh, yes, I remember, it will be a good thing for Joseph to marry an energetic, matter-of-fact woman."

Tony Braun was much too tactful to remind his wife that during the "Isolde episode", as she called it, she had kept repeating what a blessing a gentle, adoring wife would be for Joseph.

"This is the first time I feel bad at our having lost all our money. You see, they might have twins, the Herdegens often do."

"Don't you think you'd better wait and see whether they are really going to marry, darling? I'm afraid that Joseph . . ."

"Nonsense, he's madly in love with her. He bought two new ties at Bratislava and had his hair cut without my having to insist upon it for days."

"Don't be too pleased, Anny."

"Why? It's the very best thing for Joseph."

"Yes, perhaps. But certainly not for Margit."

"My dear." Aunt Anny sounded vexed and incredulous. "Our son! What more can she want?"

"If he were only your son, my dear. But nowadays, to marry a man who is half a Jew . . . I don't really know whether Joseph ought to . . ."

"Don't talk like a German, Tony."

"Do try and see things as they are."

"Oh, nonsense, if they love each other nothing else matters. Don't you know that I should marry you at once, if we were young again?"

"You're different, my dear."

She laughed softly and looked pleased.

"I'm afraid that Joseph shares my opinion," Tony Braun said despondently.

"Ah, well, it's up to Margit. You may be sure she'll wangle a proposal."

"You're forgetting how obstinate Joseph is."

"I know, exactly as you are." She frowned, smiled and added thoughtfully: "Margit ought to seduce him. Once they've slept together he'll have to marry her; after all, she's the sister of a monsignore, imagine the scandal . . ."

Tony Braun, the grave and taciturn, burst out laughing like a schoolboy.

"You immoral old woman! Anny, you're simply impossible!"

"I've thought of telling her, but, after all, she's a woman and must know what to do."

"What a blessing Joseph can't hear you."

"Don't be so terribly moral. If there's no other way . . . I should so love to know that our boy is happy before I die. Almost as happy as we have been, darling, not quite, that's impossible, for after all Joseph isn't you."

She slowly put out her cigarette and, sitting down before the toilet-table, began combing her silky white hair. "Clarisse," she went on dryly, "ought also to sleep with her husband. Then they would probably make it up for good. It's absurd the way they're going on. How old is Clarisse? About forty and still pretty as long as she does not look cross. And Robert's such a decent fellow, so kind, so helpful, a bit of a bore, of course, like Joseph . . ."

"I never knew you considered our son a bore."

"Idiot, you really might know that I did not mean him but the other Joseph Herdegen, you know, the one who married a Frenchwoman and was so keen on reform; Laetitia's father."

She slipped out of her dressing-gown and got into bed.

"They ought to call the children by the old Herdegen names," she said dreamily. "I'd like the eldest girl to be called Inez."

The old year was slowly dying. Never had Clarisse known a month to be so long as this December 1938. Endless,

snowy, grey, dreary days dragged on their weary way, the only cheerful sight was Franta playing in the garden with Tommy.

Robert's sister, Christine, and her husband came for Christmas. They could not be called enlivening guests. Clarisse hardly recognised her sister-in-law; the handsome, merry woman had aged and become the mere ghost of herself. She was terribly restless, unable to sit quiet, rushing off to the Aladars, driving day in, day out to the capital, taking endless walks and rushing home again, afraid of being late for the news. She listened-in to Prague, to London, to Paris, to Moscow, to Vienna, smoking one cigarette after the other, throwing it away, clasping and unclasping her thin hands. Boleslav, her husband, was calmer but no less depressed than his wife.

"Thank God the boy is in England," Christine said, "at least he will be safe if . . ."

She had fallen into a habit of not finishing sentences, of suddenly stopping dead and staring into space with wide-open eyes, that got on Clarisse's nerves.

"You're exaggerating, don't be such a pessimist," she tried to comfort the younger woman.

"I'm not. All this is but a breathing space before the storm . . ." She laughed angrily. "You can't even call it that. At home I used to wake up morning after morning with a start, my brain reeling with questions: is Berlin threatening us again? Have the Germans massed their armies on the frontier? Are those our planes flying overhead or enemy ones? Have the Poles, the Hungarians, claimed new territory? What are the Slovaks doing? Will the evening still find us a free country? Every noise in the street boded evil, every ring of the telephone . . ."

She fell silent, took a cigarette, lit it with trembling hands and began smoking.

"The boy writes from London . . ."

She paused and stared round the room.

"What does he write?" Robert asked gently.

She gazed at him as if he were a stranger. Then, as if coming back from a great distance: "Oh, yes, of course, the

boy . . . He tells us that we're wronging the English, that they could not have acted differently, that they were not prepared." Her voice shook with rage. "Why weren't they prepared? Once Austria had been occupied we all knew . . ."

And again the nerve-racking pause.

"Let's hope they will soon be prepared." Boleslav said grimly. "Else there may be the devil to pay, and not only for Czechoslovakia."

"Do you really believe that the Germans will dare to declare war on us?" Clarisse asked in a tone of dismay. Her brother-in-law was an official of the Ministry of the Exterior and always well informed.

"They've been preparing for war ever since the Weimar Republic," he replied harshly. "Why shouldn't they dare?"

"Dear Boleslav," Aunt Anny said incredulously, "surely it's impossible. When was the Great War? Not quite twenty-five years ago. They can't have forgotten it. The German people . . ."

"The German people will be thrilled to the core at the idea of killing and looting. You don't know the Germans, Aunt Anny."

"I'm not defending them," she put in hastily. "God knows that no decent human being could. But surely they are not as stupid as all that?"

"You'll see," Christine said, getting up and walking up and down the room. "You'll see. What time is it, Robert? Almost nine? Turn on the wireless, please."

After an endless evening their guests went to bed, and Robert said to Clarisse, who was holding her head with both hands, struggling with a racking headache:

"I want to thank you for being so patient with Christine, poor soul. I can imagine how she gets on your nerves. But we must not forget that she knows more than we do and has been living in an atmosphere of anguish for months."

"Whenever I hear her talking, I'm reminded of old Ján, who says that the country is climbing Mount Calvary, going the way of the Cross. I really think he's right. We've heard our death sentence, we've had the cross laid on our shoulders, we can see the mocking masses beyond the

frontiers, our friends have betrayed us . . ." To her own surprise her voice broke. "Will they crucify our Republic, will they really be allowed to do it?"

He put his arms round her, it suddenly seemed the natural thing to do.

"Don't cry, my dear. We shall need all our courage during the months to come."

She clung to him desperately.

"I've none left. I don't know what has come to me. I hardly know myself. I'm weak and cowardly. I only want to hold on to something and I don't even know what to."

"How about trying to hold on to me?"

Still clinging to him, she lifted her eyes to his face. Something she saw there made her smile, although her eyes were still brimming over.

"Did Aunt Anny preach you a sermon upon matrimony?" she whispered, half laughing, half crying.

He nodded. "I should not exactly call it a sermon," he said with an amused smile. "She told me that we were fools, throwing away a lot of happiness and that married life was a very good thing, but . . ."

He stopped, looking slightly embarrassed.

She laughed outright, delighted to see him blush like a girl.

"You need not go on. I know what she said."

"And what do you think about it, Clarisse?"

"That she was right."

He kissed her as he had not kissed her for years; then, holding her very tight, he said in the matter-of-fact tone he always used to hide his feelings:

"Aunt Anny is the wisest of us all, she who used to be the prettiest, but also the most stupid, of the Herdegen girls."

Christmas came. Clarisse had dreaded it, but Franta's mute delight in the glittering Christmas-tree and his presents did not leave much room for repining and anxious forebodings. Even Christine did her best not to spoil the holidays. Franta had lost his shyness and made friends with everyone,

even with Clarisse. She had grown unaccountably fond of the boy and would have hated losing him. On Christmas Day the Mother-Superior came to Korompa and talked about having the boy back at the orphanage. Clarisse had begged to be allowed to keep him. She had not noticed the wistful expression of the old eyes resting on the child and filling with tears seeing the boy's fingers excitedly declare he would rather stay here, because he loved Tommy and Marianka and old Ján, and Aunt Anny, and Uncle Robert, the small fingers were busy totting up names, and Uncle Tony and—she came last but nevertheless he did not leave her out—Aunt Clarisse.

The old nun had nodded silently. She was accustomed to give up her own wishes, she had been doing it during a lifetime. For an instant she experienced a feeling of revolt, thinking how much Clarisse had and how little the child meant to her. But the next moment she was saying:

"As long as Franta is happy. I'm only too grateful to you for keeping him."

Again the small fingers moved eagerly: "I'll come and see you very often," they promised, and the Mother-Superior had smiled at the boy and thought, if you come often, my little Franta, you'll have to go to the churchyard to find me. But at least it won't hurt me any longer that you come "only on a visit."

The Boleslavs left. Christine kissed her sister-in-law more affectionately than she had ever done before. "In case we don't meet again," she whispered.

"We'll come to Prague in April," Clarisse said.

"In April?" Christine's laugh was not pleasant to hear. Robert put in hurriedly: "If ever you need us, send a wire and we'll come at once."

Buttoning his coat, Boleslav turned to Aunt Anny.

"I really advise you to go to England, all three of you. You've got relations there. At least I seem to remember that one of Laetitia's many daughters married an Englishman."

Aunt Anny was only too delighted to talk family; the horses could wait.

"Yes, Antoinette, not the first Antoinette, Joseph's sister, but the second one, his granddaughter, married an English diplomat. I stayed with her daughter in the country, many years ago. A delightful woman with charming children. Terribly English though, without a single Herdegen trait. We don't hear from them all the year round, except at Christmas, when they send such lovely cards."

"That's typically English," Robert said with half a smile. "They always seem to have forgotten your existence, perhaps they really have, but if ever you need help, they're sure to turn up, without making a fuss, not understanding you in the least—for after all we're only poor benighted foreigners—kind in a practical, unimaginative kind of way, feeding your body and letting your soul starve, but as staunch friends as anyone could wish for."

Old Ján's head appeared in the open door. He knew that once Aunt Anny got talking, the guests of the manor-house were likely to miss their train.

"The horses are cold," he said reproachfully.

Christine kissed her brother and got into the carriage.

"*Au revoir*," Clarisse called out.

A pale, haggard, unhappy face looked out of the carriage window.

"Good-bye," said Christine.

The Herdegens spent New Year's Eve with the Jeszenaks as they had done for years. Margit met them at the door.

"Aunt Anny," she whispered, "you're ill."

"I'm perfectly well, my dear."

"Oh no, you've got the most awful rheumatic pains."

"I've never had rheumatism in all my life. I . . ."

Margit grew impatient.

"I persuaded the doctor to come here by telling him that you were ill. I don't want him to be all alone to-night."

"Alone?" Clarisse looked surprised. "Is Else staying with her parents?"

"Whatever you do, don't talk about that beastly woman. And don't forget your rheumatism, Aunt Anny."

The old lady sighed submissively.

"I'm so bad at lying. Why must you always play Providence, Margit?" She felt almost annoyed, but seeing the doctor's tired, downcast face, she lied like a hero, mentioning symptoms that nonplussed her listener. A queer kind of rheumatism, he thought, but then women were always bad at describing their pains.

"You really might have come earlier and heard me preach," Aladar said almost petulantly. "It was a very fine sermon."

"Darling," Aunt Anny said from the corner where she was sitting with the doctor, "we know your sermons by heart. You keep saying the same things that have been said from the pulpit for I don't know how many years."

"And have not yet become part of men's lives," the priest said bitterly. "But to-day's sermon was different. I believe I have at last discovered the root of all evil."

"Dear me, the Manichees again, or whatever they call themselves?" Aunt Anny lifted imploring hands. "Can't you give them a rest? Don't lecture on them to-night, Aladar, please."

"I was not thinking of the Manichees, we ourselves bear in us the root of all evil, because we have only *preached* and never *lived* our teaching. If, for instance, I . . ."

"Stop!" Margit cried out. "Don't for goodness sake go in for the typical New Year's Eve remorse. It's too cheap."

"That's just it. Everything in our life has been cheap: our faith, our loves, our hates, our remorse. We have always fought shy of paying the price." He glanced at Tony Braun. "You know what I mean, Tony, the others are too young to understand me."

Margit dragged Joseph off to the kitchen. On New Year's Eve the maid had the evening off; that was an old Herdegen tradition. Aunt Anny gazed after them with a smile.

"Perhaps Joseph will make up his mind to-night," she said. "Then they might marry before Lent."

Hynek Silberthal gave her a strange, almost hostile look. She noticed it and said in an amazed tone:

"Why do you look like that, doctor? After all God Him-

self saw that it was not good for man to be alone. And you of all people ought to know that a happy family life . . .” Meeting Margit’s furious look, she broke off in confusion.

“I only know that such a thing does not exist outside the covers of a book. Neither do love and loyalty.”

“But, Hynek . . .” Aunt Anny was so horrified that she called the doctor by his first name.

“My dear wife,” the doctor said coldly, “has left me because she did not want to go on living with a Jew, and because she could no longer bear to have her pure Aryan blood contaminated by my touch.”

A painful silence ensued, broken at last by Aunt Anny’s vulgar but heartfelt: “The little beast!”

“I should like to spare Joseph, who is much too highly strung as it is, the same kind of experience,” the doctor said in a low voice to the old lady.

“That kind of thing could never happen in our family,” Aunt Anny declared positively. “After all, Tony was born a Jew too and I would never have left him.”

“But then you, dear Mrs. Braun . . .”

“I’m no better than other women and more stupid than most.” Aunt Anny sounded almost angry. “But certain things are not done.”

“That depends upon the people who do them.”

“My poor boy.”

All unhappy people were children in Aunt Anny’s eyes, her children. She was the only one present who did not feel the distressing shyness that overwhelms most people forced to look upon the naked grief of a fellow-man.

“My poor boy, but you must not let that wicked little goose break your heart. I can imagine how you feel, but don’t forget, Hynek, that you’re not alone, we’re here, we’re your friends and so are many others in our town.”

He managed to smile.

“You must forgive me, I really did not intend to spoil your evening. I would never have come, but for your rheumatism . . .”

“I’m not suffering from rheumatism, but now I know

why Margit told me to say so. What a blessing to be able to move my arm again. If you only knew, Hynek, what trouble I took telling you the correct symptoms.”

In spite of all, the doctor could not help laughing: “Correct? My dear lady . . .”

“Do you mean to say they weren’t even correct? That’s what happens when I take to lying. No,” she said almost violently, seeing the doctor get up, “you’re not going home. Do you want to make me feel miserable on New Year’s Eve? If you really insist upon going I shall come with you. I’m not going to leave you all alone to-night.”

“Better give in, doctor,” Tony Braun said. “You can’t cope with my wife’s obstinacy. She’s capable of following you, standing all night before your house and ringing the bell every two minutes.”

The doctor smiled, looking touched and rather pleased. “Then I suppose I’ll have to stay. Your obstinacy, dear Mrs. Braun, is the talk of Bratislava. You ought to hear Mrs. Weiss and her sister speak of it.”

Aunt Anny laughed.

“All stupid people are obstinate. Poor mama always used to say so whenever I behaved like a mule.” She leant back in her chair. “Give me a cigarette, Hynek; now that my rheumatism is cured, I can smoke again, thank goodness.”

In the kitchen Margit was saying:

“Give me the butter, Joseph, please. And cut some bread. I’m going to make toast.”

She threw a huge log into the old-fashioned range, poured milk into a pot, went to the cupboard and said without turning round:

“Won’t you marry me?”

He dropped the knife with a clatter and stared at her.

“Have you taken leave of your senses, Margit?”

She put cups and plates on the kitchen table and replied dryly:

“Not so far as I know. But as you can’t make up your mind to propose to me, it seems I’ve got to do it.”

He picked up the knife without saying a word and was about to go on cutting bread.

"Joseph, you pig!" she cried. "Wipe the knife. There's a cloth."

She threw it over to him and waited till he had wiped the knife. Then she said, as dryly as before:

"Look here, my dear, you're fond of me and I'm fond of you and we're both not getting any younger. That's why I thought . . ."

She fell silent, waiting for an answer.

"I've no right to ruin your life," he said in a low voice.

"I quite agree; so you are going to marry me?"

"I did not mean it that way. Do you remember how things are to-day, Margit. Shall I expose you to the ignominy of being the wife of a Jew? Do you expect me to brand you?"

"I'm a pious Catholic," she replied with a slight smile.

"I believe baptism to be a sacrament and therefore valid."

"It does not prevent my being a dirty Jew in the eyes of the world."

"As if I cared what idiots call you."

She came quite close. In the greenish light of the kitchen lamp her pretty face looked deadly pale and her violet eyes seemed bigger than ever.

"Am I too old?" she asked.

He laughed. "I'm three years older, my dear."

"Not pretty enough?"

"You know quite well that you are a pretty woman."

"Not clever enough?"

"Don't talk nonsense."

She remained silent for a little while before asking softly, hesitatingly: "Is it that you don't care for me? Tell me the truth, please."

"My dear, that's the worst of it, I do care."

She lifted her lovely eyes to his face and he turned away quickly, unable to bear the tender love looking out of them.

"So you're going to marry me?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"No."

She shrugged impatiently.

"Think of your parents, Joseph. Haven't they been happy?"

"Times were different when they married. Besides they're unique."

"Why shouldn't we be unique, too?"

She sat down on a stool and looked up at him.

"Listen," he said. "It's impossible. I know myself. I should always live in fear of our quarrelling, and we would quarrel . . ."

"Of course we would. It would take an angel not to quarrel with you and I'm far from being one."

"Every time we quarrelled," he said dully, "I should feel: now she's telling herself, I *did* make a mistake, he is different from us."

"I'm afraid if we were married 'us' would only mean you and me."

He pushed back the bread plate with a nervous hand and began walking up and down.

"You don't know—how could you?—how hard it is for me to trust anyone, how I keep fearing a thoughtless word that might separate me from a person I loved. I've been disillusioned too often. And to-day . . . Remember what you told me about Hynck Silberthal, who is much more decent and much less aggravating than I am."

"I'm not Else."

"I know. All the same . . ."

She got up, very slowly, because her legs were suddenly feeling like cotton wool.

"All right," her voice had sunk almost to a whisper. "We won't talk about it any more, at least not to-day. But don't flatter yourself that you've got rid of me. I've inherited the Herdegen obstinacy, besides all clever people are obstinate. And I see that I'm cleverer than you are, my poor Joseph." Her voice grew tender. "You'll need me one day, if not to-day, then to-morrow. Don't forget, my dear, that I'm only waiting for the word to come to you. Don't let me wait too long."

He said nothing. He ought, he told himself, to have felt

unhappy and angry with Margit for making life still more complicated; but somehow he did not.

Unexpectedly she burst out laughing.

"Just imagine if the parish knew! Our Baroness proposes to a man and he says no! And Aladar too, who's so terribly old-fashioned and conventional."

"How can you laugh?"

"I was born cheerful. You'll see how pleasant it is to have a cheerful wife. Now carry up the tray and for goodness sake don't look so miserable. You're a fool, Joseph, but a darling fool. Take care, you're dropping everything. Dear me, the milk is beginning to boil. Run along."

She pushed him gently towards the door and opened it for him.

"Look out on the stairs. The electric light does not work."

He said, falling into bathos: "You're driving me out into utter darkness."

The tears in her eyes dried up as by magic, she could hardly prevent herself laughing. How she had hated his dramatising himself, how absurd it had always seemed to her, to-day it suddenly struck her as pathetic. "I'm a fool," she told herself, "an old fool. I've got to be careful not to show my feelings so as not to frighten him away." For an instant her eyes grew wet again and she angrily wiped them on the dishcloth. Then she ran up to the range; the milk was about to boil over.

At a quarter to twelve old Novak came as he did year by year to wish the parish priest a happy New Year and, as always on this occasion, he shook his head when Aladar said: "Stay here for a little while, have a glass of wine," waiting to be persuaded and, after a few minutes, giving in, sitting a bit embarrassed but happy in the study, drinking his wine, taciturn at first but exceedingly talkative after the first glass. As he was always the first to know what happened in the town, he had a lot to talk about.

"The damned Prussian is coming here again," he said. "His rooms are being got ready for him."

Margit threw her brother a triumphant glance. "I've been expecting to hear it," she said.

"People say," the old man went on, "that the priest of Sokolovce has been to Austria."

"I know," Margit said.

Her brother stared at her.

"Where on earth do you know it from?"

She laughed shortly.

"Somebody told me. Perhaps we can take action against him now. Anything else, Novak?"

"Emma Leberfinger got a letter from Countess Bredar, the silly goose is half crazy with vanity and shows it to everyone. The Countess writes that Miss Isolde has married an S.S. Standartenführer."

Joseph burst out laughing and Margit gave a little start. Of course he was thinking: that's the loyalty and faithfulness one can expect . . .

"I always thought that all S.S. men were homosexual," Aunt Anny remarked innocently.

Old Novak, who was slightly deaf, put his hand to his ear: "I beg your pardon, I did not catch what you said."

Aladar frowned upon the old lady and replied hastily:

"It's all right, Novak. Go on telling us the news."

"The baker Schneeberger has taken down the pictures of our Presidents and put them in the attic. And the vet has refused to treat Mrs. Kraus's dog because he's a Jewish dog."

The old clock in the church tower gave a snoring sound as always before striking the hour. Aunt Anny looked at her husband.

"Come and sit beside me."

The two old people sat hand in hand as they had done on every New Year's Eve ever since their marriage, waiting for the clock to strike midnight. But to-day Aunt Anny's other hand held the doctor's in a tight grasp, she did not want him to feel lonely. The clock began striking; the deep-toned sounds reverberated in the air with a booming hollow bass. Aladar reached for his glass. "To our country," he said gravely. "To free Czechoslovakia, to-day, in the new year, and always."

The bells rang out, solemnly, almost sadly, waking the sleepers. They sang their tune above snow-covered fields and slumbering meadows, above rivers and hills and ice-bound mountains, above remote villages and small towns, above lonely farms and cottages. They proclaimed the new year of which no man could say whether it would be happy or unhappy.

Aunt Anny's eyes were veiled in tears as she whispered to her husband: "Last year . . . Do you remember?"

He nodded silently. Last year . . . they had sat at a window of their small *palais* in the Freyung and had listened to the deep-mouthed bells of St. Stephen. They had hoped and prayed for one thing in the new year: an independent Austria, a happy, carefree Vienna. What had become of the unfortunate country and the dear, lovely old city?

"God save you from that fate," Aunt Anny whispered, her voice shaking.

An ugly noise drowned the last word, a mocking, imperious honking, hostile, exulting. Margit ran to the window and drew back the curtains.

A black car was slowly driving past the presbytery. In the pale light of the street-lamp she saw, ominous and sinister, the red flag with the black swastika.

The clouds sent forth snow by day and by night. The dense white flakes fell without ceasing, covering the whole land. They muted every sound, they erected walls between farms and cottages, they pressed heavily upon the fields and meadows as if they would never set them free again. The leaden-hued clouds did not let the sun through. The days were lit up by the pale, dead white of the snow. They dragged on endlessly, as if paralysed by the soft merciless flakes.

Sometimes a storm sprang up and the ground became a whirlpool of white dancing stars. Branches moaned under their burden of snow and broke with a sharp crack when the wind lashed out at them. They fell on the ground and in an instant were buried out of sight. Only the telegraph

poles stood upright, black and desolate, on both sides of the high road. Their wires glittered and trembled fearfully as if they knew that they carried evil news from one country to the other.

Not that anything really important happened during these winter days. In the Western democracies statesmen complacently talked of peace and conciliation, of new and happier times to come.

Aladar's small parish knew little peace. Again the people had grown restless, again they seemed waiting with bated breath for something unknown, again a strange hostility flared up between the inhabitants of the town. Angry words were spoken, at night stones crashed through window-panes, swastikas were painted on the walls of the presbytery and the Jewish houses. The gendarme Vyskocil was busy. He looked worried and came home late, too tired to play with the children or to chat with his wife. The little shop was again deserted and Elisabeth noticed that many of her former friends avoided her. Mrs. Kraus, too, waited for hours in vain for the whining sound of the door-bell. The bright picture postcards were covered with dust, the stationery grew yellow on the shelves. Sometimes the three Schneeberger boys stopped before the shop window and looked in, grinning maliciously.

"It's coming," Mrs. Kraus repeated desperately. "At night I can't close an eye; I keep expecting them to smash the house-door, to come rushing in, to carry off everything. They will beat the children, they will drag my sick husband out of bed. Dear God, what wrong have we done?"

During the short days and the long nights there were many who put this question to God, and to their fellow-men who had changed from friends to enemies. The youngest Schneeberger boy told the reason to the youngest Kraus boy: "You're Jews, that's why you must be annihilated." He repeated the word several times, delighting in its sound.

The Kraus boy ran home weeping and told his mother, who called upon the parish priest. "You must forbid people saying such things," she sobbed. "You must protect us."

Aladar tried to comfort her and when she had gone he

smoked furiously, walking up and down the study. He had been fighting the new wave of anti-semitism and hostility towards the Czechs for many a week, from the pulpit and in long talks with his parishioners. But somehow he never seemed able to find the right words. It was much easier for the adversaries who appealed to the evil in man. It's too late, he told himself despondently, too late. I ought to have taken up the struggle years ago. Now I've lost the battle. Nevertheless, he went on fighting, although he had to admit that he had less influence in the parish than Marianka Hrubin. He always knew when she had been somewhere before him, the people listened with greater understanding to his words and were more ready to believe them. He knew the reason; after all Marianka belonged to them, her life was as hard and as poverty-stricken as their own, whilst he remained the *Baron*, even though the Republic had done away with titles, the fine gentleman and—since a few weeks—also the *Magyar*. He had laughed grimly when a young Slovak had called the word after him; but he knew what harm it might do. He also knew who had spoken it first, not a Slovak but the man who was living again in the Bredar castle, the Prussian whom one hardly ever saw but whose influence made itself felt in the whole district.

Life at Korompa was not more cheerful than that at the presbytery. Clarisse suffered from her usual winter moods. Joseph was so ill-humoured that he even got on his mother's nerves, and Robert was quieter than usual. He was worried about his sister at Prague. Christine wrote often; terribly depressing letters.

"Our local Germans are at it again. Did you read Kundt's speech? They seem to believe that they have got us in the hollow of their hand. Is it true that Slovakia is going to secede? We keep hearing strange rumours. What will happen if she does?" And in every letter, like the refrain of a mournful song: "Aunt Anny and her family must leave the country; they must go to England as soon as possible."

Aunt Anny smiled tolerantly. "Nonsense, Christine exaggerates. We're perfectly safe. The Slovaks are good people, even if Mr. Tuka talks big and tries to stir them up

against the Jews. Rather disgusting, he really might remember that it was a Jew who took in his wife and looked after her whilst he was in prison for taking bribes. But that just shows the kind of man he is. What was I saying? Oh yes, that even if Tuka and Tiso do their best to imitate German Jew-baiting . . . Monsignore Tiso ought to be ashamed of himself, after all he's a priest and ought to know better. Besides he would never have been a Monsignore if there had been no Jews, I mean in the old Testament. At the utmost he might have become an old heathen priest, I never can remember what those unpleasant people who used to sacrifice human beings were called."

Tony Braun did not share his wife's sanguine expectations. "We thought the Austrians were good people too," he reminded her. "And think of what is going on in Vienna to-day." But he too did not want to leave Slovakia. He could not bear the idea of living on charity, of being tolerated in a strange country, of being looked upon with a mixture of pity and scorn, a refugee, an alien who did not belong . . . Joseph ought to go to England, he said, he could earn his living there and at least they would not have to worry about him . . .

Robert was hardly ever at home. Aladar and Margit had taken him in hand; they forced him to speak at meetings, to accompany them on their drives across country. "The people like you," Margit said. "You've somehow got the reputation of being wise. Perhaps they'll believe what you tell them." She was absolutely taken up by politics and seemed to have forgotten Joseph. Notwithstanding his firm decision on New Year's Eve, he felt slightly annoyed at her never having time for him. He sulked, there was no other word for it, and kept assuring himself that he did not miss her. He could not get on with his writing, whenever he stopped for a moment he heard a soft voice saying: "Don't let me wait too long."

On Ash Wednesday, during the service, Marianka's cottage was burnt to the ground. Red flames lit up the snow-

bound plain. The old beams crackled and gave way. Coming home, Marianka found smoking ruins. Clarisse, who had driven her back from town, watched the old woman take in with a long look the loss of all that had been her own. How many years ago had she come to the cottage, a happy bride? How proud she had been of her home, her tidy rooms, her shining pots and pans, her gaily-painted plates and cups. Here her husband had died, leaving her alone with seven small children. Life had been hard for Marianka but no one had ever heard her complain. She had found work and had been happy with the children. Three had died young, the two eldest boys had emigrated to the States. She had heard from them for several years, then the letters had ceased coming. When Tomas was old enough to help her, war had broken out. He had been killed in 1917. Of all her babies only Svata, the youngest, was left. For his sake she kept her home cosy, for him she had tended the flowers in the garden and the single apple tree that bore fruit for him. Her whole life had been closely knit to the small cottage of which to-day there remained nothing but a smoking ash-heap. Marianka did not say a word. For a moment she covered her face with her hands. When she let them sink she looked calm and self-possessed. She turned to Clarisse, who was standing beside her, pale with anger, close to tears. "Never mind," she said, as if the younger woman had been in need of consolation. "I'm old and Svata wants to live in town as soon as he has passed his examinations."

Clarisse saw something gleaming on one of the blackened beams and went closer; it was a big swastika, drawn with white chalk. Wild rage overwhelmed her, how could anyone do such a thing: rob a poor woman of all she possessed, destroy her past and her present, do this to Marianka whose whole life was goodness and helpfulness? And, making a mock of her pain, paint the devil's cross on the ruins of her home, as a sign of victory over a defenceless old woman? But gazing at Marianka she recognised that the word was wrong, the woman calmly looking at the ashes was not defenceless. Something living in her was stronger than all the wrongs done to her. Even if she were robbed of every-

thing, if she were beaten, tortured, killed, she would remain stronger than her enemies. The invisible strength to bear and suffer without breaking down, the arms of her faith and her goodness were invincible and immortal, as immortal as the country around her, the rivers and the mountains, as immortal as justice and right, as charity and love, as immortal as God.

Clarisse gave a start, Marianka was laughing. She had picked up a handful of ashes and was letting them trickle through her fingers. "Ash Wednesday," she said. "The priest hardly touched my forehead with the ashes; as if he had known."

Then she perceived among the ashes something bright and shining and ran up to it with her small, elderly steps. She stooped and gave a joyful little cry.

"Svata's cup! The cup all my children drank from. It's not even cracked."

She held up a cup on which roses and forget-me-nots were painted; golden letters proclaiming it to be a "Souvenir from Piestany". "My husband brought it home in the first year of our marriage," she told Clarisse. "At the time he worked in the casino garden at Piestany. Little Marka was the first to drink from it."

She was overjoyed. "I must take great care of it," she said. "I want Svata's children to have it." She held the cup tight during the whole drive to Korompa, sometimes gently passing her hand over the painted flowers.

Arrived at the manor-house, Marianka insisted upon having the smallest room, and hardly dared to sit in the deep arm-chair Clarisse drew up to the stove. "It's much too soft for me," she said. "And such lovely silk."

Aunt Anny, sharing the head waiter Zapletal's opinion that whatever happens man must eat and drink, came with coffee and bread and butter and sat down beside Marianka, chatting away. Only once did the old Slovak woman wipe her eyes, remembering the picture of the Virgin that had been destroyed by the fire. "I was so fond of it. I prayed before it such a lot, and never in vain." She pocketed her handkerchief and smiled at Aunt Anny. "You know what

it feels like to lose your home," she said. "But, of course, your loss was much greater because you were rich."

"Do you know that I felt as you do, Marianka? The only thing I really minded was losing a portrait of Joseph when he was three. He was so sweet, in a blue velvet dress, with long brown curls."

They got talking about their children and never noticed that it had grown dark till Clarisse entered the room. "The Monsignore has come to see you, Marianka."

"Oh, poor man! Coming all that way after having preached such a long sermon!"

But she was flattered nevertheless, and Clarisse, watching both, asked herself, with a little smile, when Aladar had last been so charming to a woman and had—she could not find a better word—paid such delightful court to her.

Margit, who had come with her brother, dragging Hanus Vyskocil in her train, said furiously: "We must find out who did it. Such a dirty trick. Of course it must have been the Germans. The cheek of painting the swastika on the ruins. Yes, it must have been the Germans. I'd bet anything that the ugly brute at the Bredars' castle knows all about it, and probably the priest of Sokolovce, too. Vyskocil, you must find the criminals."

"It won't be easy," said Hanus, frowning painfully. "They know how to organise things, you can never prove anything."

"It will have to be done," Joseph said decidedly. "To burn down our Marianka's cottage. Hanging would be too good for the brutes."

Margit nodded, and declared dreamily:

"It would be rather amusing to see the Bredar castle in flames."

The Gendarme Vyskocil gave a start and looked nervous.

"For goodness sake, Miss Margit!"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to set fire to it."

"But all the boys who would go through fire and water for you . . . Promise you won't repeat your words to anyone, now that I've heard them."

He got up. "I've got to go. We can't afford to lose

time," he said in an official tone. He saluted stiffly and left the room.

"Poor Marianka," Joseph said compassionately.

"If I could only get hold of the brutes."

"Don't do anything foolish, Margit. Remember that you're the sister of the parish priest."

"I'm fed up with going through life labelled sister of the parish priest. You can't imagine how that kind of thing paralyses one."

He laughed. "I can't say I ever noticed it."

She gazed at him and something she saw in his eyes made her catch her breath. She looked round; they were alone in the drawing-room.

"Won't you marry me, Joseph?" she asked, and he, bewildered and delighted at being with her after so long a time, said: "Yes."

Thaw came overnight. In the small hours Clarisse was awakened by a splashing noise. It was raining hard. The water ran from the roof, the trees impatiently threw off the wet snow and straightened themselves, it smelt of damp earth, fertility, life. March, Clarisse thought, spring is here, now everything will come right. The earth will again bear fruit, the flowers will come out, the trees will be covered with leaves. The day of resurrection is drawing near.

She got up early and went into the garden. The rain had stopped, but the gentle breeze had turned into a wild gale that took away her breath. Her feet sank deep into the swampy meadow.

Old Ján came from the greenhouse.

"We've got to go to work," he said. "We're late this year. I was afraid of the plants growing too big." He frowned. "I simply can't believe that we won't go to our *Au* any longer; that the Germans have occupied the other side of the bridge, in a friendly way of course. I hate the idea of our roses being squeezed into the small Mountain-Park at Bratislava. Damn the Germans!"

Clarisse nodded; for an instant she had forgotten that

the rose-garden belonged to the territory occupied by the Germans. But even the remembrance could not darken her glad mood. In a few days' time she and old Ján would again drive to Bratislava, the roses carefully packed in their osier baskets. They would stop at the foot of Mount Calvary and the old gardener would mumble his prayer. Perhaps the heavy cross would at last be lifted from the bruised shoulders of the country, perhaps Czechoslovakia had, in sacrificing herself, saved the Republic and all Europe.

She lifted up the dog that had run after them and laughed, seeing the traces of his dirty little paws on her skirt. "Tommy," she said gaily, "life is good after all."

Old Ján frowned, how could a grown-up woman be so childish?

"Life might be quite good," he said venomously, "if there were no Germans left."

The ringing telephone recalled Clarisse to the house. She found Marianka nervously standing in front of it—she hated the telephone, which she believed to be an invention of the evil one—and calling "Hallo, hallo!" into the receiver without pausing for an answer. Clarisse took the receiver from her and recognised Margit's voice, joyous and excited.

"Hell has broken loose. Thank God the Czechs are waking up. They've discovered some kind of conspiracy. Yes, our autonomists, your honest, loyal, trustworthy Tiso. What did you say? Oh, no. I need not be cautious any longer, he's been kicked out, together with the rest of the ministers. And our S.A., the Hlinka Guards, have been disarmed. The Germans go about hanging their heads and being polite. Yes, I've been in town, I heard the news quite early in the morning. Tell Joseph to come over, I won't find time to drive to Korompa."

Clarisse slowly replaced the receiver. Her joy had been short-lived, just an hour, a bright spring hour. Now the world with all its troubles claimed her again. She shook herself impatiently. What was she worrying about? After all, Margit's news had been good, it could hardly have been better. If the Slovak politicians were made to understand that they could not go on undermining the Republic . . . And

if the world saw that Czechoslovakia was strong enough to keep her house in order . . .

When the roses are out, she thought hopefully, our Republic will have been relieved of a grievous burden and Slovakia will not have betrayed it. She never wanted to, only the Germans and some Slovak leaders are traitors. But they are done for, they can't do any more harm.

She ran upstairs to tell Robert the good news.

III

THERE WAS DARKNESS OVER ALL THE WORLD

ON Saturday Clarisse drove to Bratislava. The town was in a turmoil. Excited groups filled the streets and squares. During the night the Jewish quarter had been looted. The Germans sauntered along, proudly displaying the swastika; the Magyars openly wore the Boczkay-tie, a razor blade hidden in its wide knot—in case a policeman should try to tear it off. Anxious faces peeped out of windows. Clarisse saw an old peasant woman sitting in the market place, calling out to a young Slovak wearing the swastika: "Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ!" The familiar Slovak greeting sounded like an angry challenge. The young man gave a start, grew nervous and, frightened by the threatening figures surrounding him, stammered: "In all eternity." Accompanied by mocking laughter, he ran away quickly. Clarisse went to see Mrs. Weiss. The chemist's wife was nervous and unhappy.

"We ought to go away," she said. "They've been looting the Jewish shops. We could hear them shouting all night long. We also heard the Germans giving orders. It's come. I always said it would. But where are we to go? Where shall we be safe? In Hungary? They won't allow us to

cross the frontier. Dear Lord, what a small world it is." She tried to calm herself. "You must forgive me. But tell me, what are we to do? Did you see that they painted the words 'Jewish shop' on our door? It was done in the night—I saw it first when I came here in the morning. That's the way it begins. My sister says it was just the same in Vienna. And if it repeats itself here . . .?" She sighed. "I wanted to go to the British Consulate. But you simply can't reach it. The whole street is full of people wanting a permit. Dear God, if only the children were safe."

"Send the children to Korompa," Clarisse said impulsively. "They will be quite safe there."

The little woman stared at her incredulously. "May I really? Only the three youngest. They're good children. They won't be any trouble. My husband and I would be very grateful. Perhaps, after all, it won't be quite as bad as we fear. And if we knew the children were safe . . ." She blushed. "The girl is fourteen," she whispered, "and very pretty. And everyone knows what they do to Jewish girls."

"Look here," Clarisse said kindly. "I'll come back about six and fetch the children."

Mrs. Weiss burst into tears and wanted to kiss her hand. Clarisse could hardly prevent her doing it.

"I had forgotten that people could be so kind," the little woman sobbed. "That anyone could be kind to us. How can I thank you?"

Clarisse ran away from the tears and the grateful words, repeating: "I'll be back at six."

Walking past the Jesuit church, she heard singing and went in. The church was lit up. An old priest was kneeling on the altar steps. The singing stopped and the priest began saying the Rosary. The church was crowded. At last Clarisse found an empty bench and knelt down.

The doors were wide open; the March day was unusually warm. A confused murmur came from the street, gradually growing louder and swelling to wild yells that drowned the priest's voice.

Were these sounds rending the air really men's voices? Were they not rather the roaring of wild beasts? Clarisse

had never heard anything like it before, except perhaps at a zoo. She could not understand the words the masses outside were repeating; they fused into a single yell; they thundered deafeningly against one's ears, becoming wilder and more violent with every minute.

The people in church grew nervous. Heads turned towards the open door. Some got up, but sat down again immediately. No one dared to move from his place. The brutal voices kept beating against the old walls like rushing waters, threatening to flood the church. There was no one who did not feel that at any minute wild beasts would come bursting in to bring him to bay.

Clarisse was no coward. Up to this day she had only feared intangible things, personal grief and pain. But now she suddenly understood the mad panic that drove cars along the streets at a murderous speed, the fear that had trembled in every word Mrs. Weiss had spoken, the apprehension and anguish she had seen in the faces of the refugees who had come to the Slovak capital a year ago. She felt her hands growing icy and her forehead being covered with cold sweat. Her knees knocked against each other, a slow paralysis crept over her. Glacial cold seemed to pervade the church; black mist rose from the ground, pierced by dancing red sparks. Clarisse was unable to think; confusedly she wanted to hide—it did not matter where—any place would do where there were no men, no yells and shrieks, only trees and flowers and quiet.

Korompa with its stillness and security was as distant as if it had been on another planet. The way back seemed endless. Between her and the old manor-house stood the brutal, roaring masses, a living wall one could neither pass by nor break through.

The candle flames on the altar trembled as if they, too, shared the fear that was filling the church, and would go out any minute. It grew dark; the sky must have become overcast. The figures of kneeling men and women became dim, black shadows in the dense obscurity, moving nervously, grotesquely distorted.

Would the horror never end? How could the old priest

kneel on so placidly? Clarisse saw his lips move and the beads slip through his fingers, but she could not catch a word of the prayer, and the rioting in the street grew louder still.

The open door . . . How awful it was; open to danger and death. Surely it must tempt the wild beasts outside to come rushing in, to destroy and kill.

Clarisse was the only member of the family who was not really pious. She went to church because she had always done so, because all the Herdegens did it, because it was part of the family tradition. She said her morning and evening prayers, looking upon them as an act of politeness towards God, a power that seemed alien and slightly uncanny in her eyes. In this hour of fear a childish but sincere prayer mounted to her lips: "Dear God, let someone shut the door, dear God . . ."

A shadow came out of the dark, a small, plump figure, a woman. She walked slowly down the nave, approached the entrance, stood for an instant framed by the stone arch, closed the door quietly and slipped the heavy iron bolt. Then she returned to her seat and knelt down.

A strange quiet fell on all; gentle, soft, comforting. The wild voices could still be heard, but they sounded distant and harmless. Between them and the people in the church stood the old oaken door. The waves beat against an island they could no longer harm. From the altar came the words:

"Glory be to the Father and the Son and to the Holy Ghost." And shaking voices responded: "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

Clarisse drew a deep breath. The black mist that had veiled her eyes dissolved and she felt the blood flowing back into her veins. Her brain began to function again. She thought of the woman who had been the only one not to feel fear. The small, plump figure had been familiar, the tiny, elderly steps . . . And suddenly she knew. Of course, it had been Marianka, our Marianka, who is afraid of nothing in the world. The sense of security Clarisse felt was not only due to the closed door; as long as Mariankas live amongst us, the world can still be saved. We hardly notice

these humble saints of everyday life, but their presence keeps our souls alive like rain falling on a parched soil, making it fertile. Clarisse bowed her head reverently, thanking God for having blessed the earth with simple, kindly souls who atone for the wicked and the callously indifferent.

Leaving the church, she walked fearlessly through the crowd of demonstrating Magyars, who, still breaking into wild shouts from time to time, were slowly dispersing. She was feeling unusually benevolent, which was fortunate, for on the drive home her patience was put to the test. The Weiss children, less grateful than their mother, behaved as if Clarisse was kidnapping them. The two boys kept begging piteously to be taken back to Bratislava; they wanted to protect their mother and their aunt.

"One never knows what may happen," twelve-year-old Emil, a slender and precocious boy, declared. "One never knows what the mob will do." His handsome dark face expressed scorn and disgust.

Paul, aged ten, said angrily:

"What's the good of our going to Korompa? We ought to be in town, that's where things will happen. Please let me get out here and walk back, Countess Herdegen."

He gazed at Clarisse reproachfully, and she urged the horses on, fearing that the boys might try to jump from the carriage.

Irma, the dangerously pretty girl, cried almost all the way home.

"Poor mother," she wailed, "we've never been away from her before. What will she do without us? And poor father. And poor aunty . . ."

It was a blessing that the family was a small one, else the litany of lamentations would never have come to an end.

Old Ján was grumpy because his horses had had to wait for the children and because he was uncomfortable, squeezed in between the boys. A troop of soldiers came marching past. Irma gave a cry: "My God, the Germans!"

Clarisse found it difficult to soothe her; strangely enough

she did not grow impatient; she was able to understand a torturing fear that she herself had known a few hours ago. She chatted gaily with the children, told them about Korompa, about Tommy and Franta, who would love playing with them.

"He's a Jew, too, isn't he?" Emil asked, adding as Clarisse nodded: "Poor devil!"

Paul grew angry. "Don't say that. We're proud of being Jews. Father is always telling us to be proud of it."

Irma, who had cheered up a little, began crying anew.

"Poor mother, poor father, poor aunty. Last night they looted the Jewish quarter, they kept yelling *Siegheil* all the time. We could hear them quite well. We did not go to bed at all, not knowing what was going to happen. And now night is coming again. If they should loot our house... Poor mother, poor father, poor aunty."

Clarisse felt dismayed. What a terrible experience for children. Even if the worst did not come to pass, if things somehow came right again, would not these children be fear-ridden all their life? Would they not always imagine themselves surrounded by enemies? Must they not grow up distrustful and filled with suspicion? Even if that were all, she reflected, feeling a wild hatred flare up in her, even if children were robbed only of a carefree childhood and youth, of childish pleasures and delights, did not that suffice to condemn to eternity a nation that committed this crime or allowed it to be committed?

Dusk fell. Bushes and trees took on menacing and strange shapes. Last year's dry leaves rustled beneath the wheels, and in the pale light of the carriage lamps, long, distorted shadows glided across the road. Irma drew closer to Clarisse and stopped crying. Clarisse put an arm round the girl and Irma slipped her hand into hers and held it fast.

When they reached Korompa Robert came to meet them, and Clarisse felt a thrill of happiness seeing the glad expression on his face when he lifted the children out. "You've brought them here, Clarisse," he said. "That was sweet of you."

Aunt Anny came hurrying into the hall.

"Oh, Mrs. Braun!" the children cried enthusiastically, running to meet her. Seeing her they felt at home at once. She praised them for having obeyed their mother and promised to drive to Bratislava the next day and bring back news of their family. She seemed so delighted to see them that the children somehow felt as if they had done something clever in coming here. Joseph, hearing the merry voices, came into the hall with Margit and said with a laugh:

"Isn't mama like a hen gathering her chicks around her? I always expect her to begin clucking."

"Just think what a grandmother she'll be," Margit said teasingly, and laughed, seeing him blush a dark red.

The following day brought bad news. The Czech troops were withdrawn. The Slovak police and the Hlinka Guards were to take control.

From that day on also in Slovakia heavy jackboots marched through the streets, menacing to trample everything under foot. The Hlinka Guards were willing pupils of the great German Reich and none could say whether they would remain so.

Elisabeth Vyskocil was packing. With tearful eyes she kept nervously looking out into the unusually crowded street. She was surprised to see so many people pass the shop, for the weekly market would only be the day after to-morrow. Turning away from the door, she stepped back into the shop. After all, it was no business of hers. After next week the whole town and the whole country would be no business of hers. She was angry with Slovakia. They were being driven out, only because Hanus was a Czech. Was that a reason for having to leave everything one clung to with all one's heart? Just because he was born in Prague? . . . Her shop, her dear little shop . . . Her father had wanted to buy it, but Elisabeth had refused. How could she bear Emma to have it, to let Emma serve her customers, to take the goods from the shelves and put them back . . .? No, anyone but her sister.

She took a tied-up parcel out of a drawer, and tears coursed down her face. She had not even had time to open it. Yet she had been so proud when the parcel arrived, the lovely lace collars from Prague, that no other shop in town had in stock . . . Prague, the big city they were going to. She quailed before the noise and the bustle, the speeding cars, the many strangers in the streets. She could not imagine living anywhere but here, where she knew everyone. Though it might be better not to know people, at least they could not disappoint one. She asked herself passionately who had stuck to them during these last black days, and smiled a scornful little smile. The presbytery, of course, and Korompa, and Marianka Hrubin, but that she had always expected. A few, very few men and women—almost all of them elderly or old people—had come into the shop and said a kind word. But the young ones had kept away, even those who had been her best friends. Last night, after it had grown dark, Mrs. Kraus had entered the house by the back door. "I've been wanting to come all the time, Elisabeth," she had whispered. "But I was afraid of being seen. Miss Emma . . ."

She had sat in the kitchen and gazed around mournfully. "So you and Mr. Vyskocil are really leaving the town? We all feel terribly bad about it. Who is going to protect us?"

"I do so want to stay," Elisabeth had said, choking over the words.

"It's better to go. You'll be safer at Prague."

Mrs. Kraus fell silent and both women sat for a while without speaking. Elisabeth hunted in vain for reassuring words.

When Mrs. Kraus had left, Elisabeth had gazed after the retreating figure; she walks all crumpled up, like an old woman, she thought, and she keeps looking from side to side; one can see how frightened she is. She remembered a time, not so very long ago, when she had been proud of having Mrs. Kraus, who always used to do her shopping in the capital, as a customer.

Standing in front of the shelves, she considered what she

would take with her. "Leave all the goods," Hanus had told her, but there were so many things she grudged Mrs. Miller, who had bought the shop. Those painted darning balls . . . how pretty they looked; she would pack up two of them, one for Hanus' mother at Prague. And the lovely coloured ribbons; a lot of them in the Czechoslovak colours. At the time of the mobilisation people had bought them by the yard. No, she could not let them fall into the thin, claw-like hands of Mrs. Miller, greedily outstretched for everything that belonged to others.

There was a soft knock at the back door. Elisabeth went to open it and stopped dead seeing the eldest Schneeberger girl. Pretty Poldi was panting slightly, her cheeks a bright red; her smile a trifle embarrassed. Elisabeth stiffly inclined her head. She had not forgotten how the baker had come into the shop with Mrs. Miller and, looking round, had said grandiloquently: "So this shop is at last going to be German property; that's as it ought to be."

Poldi Schneeberger stammered something, then, plucking up courage, she said: "I wanted to say good-bye, Mrs. Vyskocil. Father has gone to Bratislava, that's why I came to-night. He'd kill me if he knew . . ."

"It's very kind of you, Poldi."

"Kind! You've been awfully kind to me. You always waited ever so patiently when I could not pay. You know what Father is. He sits on his money like a hen on her eggs. And you've been so badly treated, you poor dear. It's a beastly shame. Don't look at me like that, it's not my fault that I'm my father's daughter and the sister of those horrid boys."

She sat down on the chair Elisabeth had drawn up and added: "Vlado says so, too."

Elisabeth smiled. The only one in town who did not know that pretty Poldi and the young Slovak were lovers was the baker.

"Of course, if Vlado says so . . ."

Poldi blushed.

"It's not only that, Mrs. Vyskocil. Svata Hrubin says the same, and you know how clever he is."

"Svata?"

"Yes, he came home the night before last. Vlado says he's half crazy with anger and talks queer. He told him that awful things were going to happen."

Elisabeth sighed. She could hardly imagine anything worse than what had happened to Hanus and her. But perhaps there might be even worse things, perhaps . . .

"Vlado," the girl said with an air of mystery, "sends his love. He could not come, because—" she lowered her voice to a whisper—"don't tell anyone, but he's gone."

"Gone?" Elisabeth did not understand what the girl was saying.

Poldi nodded, looking proud and knowing.

"He's crossed the frontier, he's gone to Russia."

"Why?"

"He's not the only one. Three of his friends went with him. The boys say that there will be a war, and they want to fight against the Germans. But, for goodness sake, don't tell anyone. Vlado made me swear not to talk about it." She put out her hand. "I've got to go. Those terrible boys are somewhere about; they must not see me. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Vyskocil, give my love to your husband and tell him that Vlado said that he and all the other Czechs would be able to come back soon."

She looked into Elisabeth's sad face and fell on her neck.

"You're not angry with me, are you, my dear? Mother sends her love, too, and best wishes. She would have loved to come, but she's afraid of father."

She left the house and vanished in the crowd that was growing bigger and more and more turbulent. Elisabeth felt surprised. What on earth had brought all the people here? She put on a coat, took a last look at the children, who were both fast asleep, and went out.

How changed all the familiar faces appeared. Some of them glad, a few worried. The whole place was filled with excitedly whispering and talking men and women.

"Let's hope for the best," she heard an old peasant saying.

"That's all we can do, hope for the best!"

Elisabeth turned in the direction of the church. She

could hardly squeeze through the crowd. Slowly walking on, she caught scraps of talk.

"At last. We've been waiting long enough." That was the veterinary speaking.

"It's a shame, a beastly shame. After all, he must know who the man is he is siding with."

"That's what they call free Slovakia!"

"The day will come, the day will come!" three young voices shouted.

A tall figure, wearing jackboots, came striding along. The people made way; some with angry looks, some reverently. A few children, Elisabeth recognised the Kraus boys amongst them, began to run. With unswerving steps, as if he owned the town, the priest of Sokolovce walked on. At the church door he ran into Aladar Jeszenak.

"What do you want?" the parish priest asked curtly.

Father Gogolak looked at him with a sneer.

"That's a question I might ask, Monsignore. In a few days' time there will be no room for Magyars in our country."

"Only for traitors?" Aladar gave back in a ringing voice.

People came from all sides, joyfully anticipating a row.

"You'd better be careful, Monsignore."

"Why? Surely you don't expect me to be afraid of you."

Aladar Jeszenak laughed; it was an unpleasant, contemptuous laugh, and the priest of Sokolovce changed colour. Standing behind Aladar, old Novak joined in the laugh.

"The servants of the Czechs and the Jews are played out," Father Gogolak shouted, and a murmur of assent came from the crowd.

"And the men who have sold themselves to the Germans are masters of the town, that's what you mean, eh, Father?"

"Wait and see!" yelled the eldest of the Schneeberger boys, running up and stopping beside Father Gogolak.

"I must say that I cannot admire your friends and followers, Father Gogolak. Young scamps who are in need of a good thrashing for playing truant; thieves, and cheats and poor fools whom God may forgive because they know not what they do."

The priest of Sokolovce lost his temper.

"It won't do you any good to turn up your aristocratic nose, Baron Jeszenak. The people are not willing to be exploited by the gentry any longer," he shouted.

Aladar laughed. "Did you say exploit the people?" With two fingers he lifted the shabby cassock that Margit kept imploring him to throw away, and showed it to the crowd. "Do I really look as if I grew rich by exploiting the people? As far as I can see, the parish priest of Sokolovce is better dressed than I am. I couldn't afford those beautiful jackboots. And as to the gentry, what about Herr von Brachleben? He lives in a castle, I don't." He shrugged. "What's the good of talking? There's just one thing I want to say." His voice grew louder and more imperious: "I forbid you to enter my church, Father Gogolak. I'm not going to have it desecrated by a man who preaches the devil's gospel. I would have to get it consecrated anew, and that would be a great nuisance," he added dryly.

Suddenly he had got the crowd on his side. Laughter filled the place; only a few people looked frightened at the idea that a priest could be forbidden to enter a church.

"Next Sunday I shall say mass here," the priest of Sokolovce cried.

"And sing the *Te Deum*, Father, because Hitler graciously received Monsignore Tiso, eh? Of course you've got to thank God for so great an honour."

"To-morrow," Father Gogolak yelled at the top of his voice, "we shall sing the *Te Deum*, after the assembly of the diet."

"I'd advise you to practise the *Miserere*, Father. The day will come when you will have to sing it, and not only you."

Aladar Jeszenak had slowly drawn back. He was standing in the church door, with head erect, his dark eyes blazing.

"If any of you want to come to church and pray for our poor country," he said harshly, "they can come. The followers of his reverence, the parish priest of Sokolovce, are politely requested to remain outside."

He signed to the verger, who was standing close.

"Light the candles, my son. We are going to pray the *De profundis*, for never before has Slovakia fallen into such an abyss of shame. Let us cry out of the depths to the Lord and ask Him to forgive us and to give us back our honour."

He stopped and gazed intently at his parishioners. How were they going to react?

The first to come was old Novak, and the second—Aladar felt slightly surprised—Svata Hrubin. They were followed by many women and men, and some half-frightened, half-amused children. Now they thronged so close to their priest that one could no longer see him.

The priest of Sokolovce remained standing in the square before the church, together with the Germans of the town and a few Hlinka Guards. He stared with a fascinated look at the church door that was just being closed with a loud bang. His face was deadly pale. The baker said something, but he gave no answer. His mind refused to believe that someone had dared to defy him. But he would make Monsignore Jeszenak pay for his insolence. And not only him, but also all those who ran after him like sheep, following him into the church which he, the priest of Sokolovce, who in a few days' time would be the most powerful man in the country, had been forbidden to enter. He would repay them in compound interest. He looked around. His hostile gaze met a pair of pale blue eyes staring at him. The stony cruelty and the mad lust for power in his face was reflected in the thin, slightly crooked mouth: "The day will come," Emma Leberfinger said. "Our day will come."

The next day, on Tuesday, March 14th, the priest of Sokolovce sang the *Te Deum* in his parish church. Slovakia had seceded.

At Korompa they were once again listening in. Margit and Aladar had come over, too nervous to remain at home. Margit was telling them of the encounter between her brother and Father Gogolak.

"That was yesterday," Aladar said wearily.

Yesterday—in space and time there existed a day that was called yesterday. Some unknown force had taken hold of it and its significance and had hurled it into a black abyss, where it had disappeared. Yesterday they had still been able to hope. To-day . . . And what would the morrow bring?

Marianka had come with Svata, who was staying at Korompa for the holidays. She sat in a corner and kept falling asleep, her tired head sinking on her breast.

"Do open the window, Robert," Clarisse said, "I feel as though I were suffocating."

"Better not," Tony Braun interposed. "It might not be safe to-night."

He was thinking of Vienna and of a similar night.

"Just for a moment. I can't breathe."

Clarisse got up and opened the window. It was a beautiful starlit night. The peaceful dome of the dark blue sky formed a great arch above the sleeping towns and villages, the countryside and the dark rivers flowing towards the same goal they had sought for hundreds of years. Clarisse had the strange impression of having experienced all this before, of having waited like this, tortured by nerve-racking suspense. It had been in a town, very far from here, in a night filled with forebodings, heavy with fate. In such a night, she told herself, I stood at a window, but only for a short while. Then I ran out of the house, into the street, a crowded street. I mingled with happy, excited masses. They were fighting, fighting against a country far more powerful than their own. They believed in victory, because they were fighting for justice. And I fought with them . . . She shuddered. Something white glittered below the window! Snow? How absurd, it had melted long ago. Nevertheless, her eyes saw an endless desert of snow, lonely, desolate.

Where and when had she seen it before? And how did she know that she belonged to the vanquished—that the fighters for justice had been conquered? She hastily closed the window and sat down.

"How queer," Aunt Anny said musingly, "you're not a

beauty, Clarisse, but just now you looked exactly like Marie Christine."

"Marie Christine?"

"You know, the lovely Herdegen girl who fought with the Polish rebels against the Russians and was exiled to Siberia. I showed you her portrait in my Vienna drawing-room. It was painted by Isabey."

Her words were like an icy blast from the far-away past, and once again Clarisse asked herself: Does the chain never break? Do our ancestors come alive again in nights as this? Do they send us a message? Do they tell us, a weaker, later generation, to be strong, gallant, faithful? She leant back in her chair without a word.

Joseph turned the knob of the wireless. Aunt Anny cried out: "Don't, Joseph, not Germany!"

But it was too late. A hard voice proclaimed that the President of the Czech Republic, Hacha, had arrived in Berlin with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and that they would be received by the Führer to-night. A military march followed.

"Just as it was in Vienna," Tony Braun whispered.

"But surely Chamberlain said in the House only to-day that the British guarantee remained valid in the case of our being attacked," Clarisse said.

Aunt Anny was crying. "The poor people at Prague. Poor Christine."

The slow-paced hours dragged on. Marianka woke up, went into the kitchen and returned with a pot of steaming coffee. Robert suddenly remembered something. He went to the telephone, took up the receiver and rang up Doctor Silberthal. "Come to Korompa," he said. "I don't like the idea of your being in town to-night." He talked for a while, repeating his invitation. Then he put back the receiver and sat down frowning.

"Is he coming?" Clarisse said.

"No, one of his patients is very ill; he can't leave her."

Svata Hrubin got up.

"What is it, Svata?"

"I'm going to stay with the doctor," the young man said

curtly. "One never knows what may happen. To-night the Hlinka Guards are sure to be dead drunk."

Marianka nodded eagerly. "Yes, do go, my boy." Her face was radiant.

"You must drive," Robert said. "Wait, I'll help you with the horse. And I'll give you my revolver, in case . . ."

"I think I'd better come with you," Aladar said, getting up. "I'm a better shot than Svata."

He followed them and must have persuaded Svata to take him along, for Robert came back alone.

"Isn't it like a thriller?" Aunt Anny said. "Revolvers, shooting Monsignores . . ."

"Life has become a thriller," her son replied. "The sole difference being that the criminals escape."

He turned the knob and again the hard German voice filled the room: "The Führer has received President Hacha and the Minister of Foreign Affairs."

"Poor devils," Aunt Anny said compassionately.

The stars disappeared; the sky became overcast. The night was very dark. There must have been a thunderstorm somewhere; the wireless emitted crackling sounds, the voices faded out. The pauses were unbearable. What was happening during the time? What could happen? How long did the pauses last? Only five minutes? Surely the wireless had been silent for hours?

Dead, mute seconds dropped like rain into a space filled with icy fear and paralysing lassitude.

Then again the ominous crackling, drowning a human voice talking in the distance. Tony Braun put his hands to his ears.

"Turn off the wireless, Joseph. This stammering and stuttering is even worse than silence."

A flash of lightning cut sharply through the dark, illuminating a figure that stood before the window. Clarisse suddenly lost her nerve and cried out: "Look, Robert, there's someone in the garden . . . What is he doing there?"

She remembered that a Hlinka Guard had come to the house yesterday afternoon and had, speaking in a tone of command, forbidden them to take in Jews. The Weiss

children . . . She did not know what she was afraid of, but in such a night anything might happen.

The children were fast asleep; little Emil was smiling happily. How gently they were breathing, how calmly . . . Clarisse wanted to touch them, to make sure that they really were safe, but she feared to wake them. What would have become of their world when they opened their eyes in the morning?

She felt reluctant to go back to the sitting-room, where the others were waiting, listening intently, trying to catch a word; where the very walls seemed to breathe suspense and anxiety. She remained standing at the top of the stairs. A pale gleam lit up the long, narrow passage, but the lower part of the staircase well was dark. It resembled a black pond of unknown depths. Clarisse put her hand to her damp forehead. How absurd, how silly to give way to fancies, to the feeling that this night a huge dark lake surrounded the country, a lake into which it had to dive without knowing how deep it was. Or was it not rather a descent into hell?

She heard steps approaching the stairs and shrank back. But it was only Robert come to fetch her. She remembered why she had run upstairs. "Have you been in the garden?" she asked nervously.

He laughed. "Yes, it was only old Ján making a round. He's just as spook-ridden as you are and pretends the Germans are going to attack us, or maybe the Hlinka Guards. Silly old man."

She went downstairs and took his arm.

"Tell me," she said desperately, "what has happened to our world? Are we living in the Middle Ages that we must guard against robber bands?"

"I wish we were living in the Middle Ages; at least they had some humane feelings left."

They returned to the sitting-room. How cheerful and bright it looked with the old familiar furniture and the family portraits. Clarisse walked up to a faded picture of a young woman with an intelligent, rather sad face: the French ancestress of the Herdegens, Victoire.

"She," Clarisse said, pointing to the picture, "must have

known such nights during the French Revolution. They sat in the dark and waited for the dawn and the tumbrils to go by, on their way to the guillotine."

"Yes, but she lived to see the end of the terror." Margit smiled at Joseph, "as we shall." He shook his head and she said eagerly: "We shall, my dear, but only if we keep up our courage."

"Stop, there's something coming through, yes, news . . ."

The night was endless. When the small Empire clock Victoire Herdegen had brought from France struck two, Clarisse could hardly believe that it was so early. Had really only five hours passed since they had come in here after dinner?

The thunderstorm had stopped. Now the voice coming through the wireless was perfectly clear, they could understand every word. Germany reported that the Führer was still in council with President Hacha. The word "President" was stressed in a slightly mocking way. Then a name, Moravska Ostrava . . .

"What did he say?" Aunt Anny asked.

"The town has been occupied by German troops."

"Good Lord, what does that mean?"

Margit jumped up and ran to the wireless, standing quite close to it as if she wanted to wrest its secrets from it. But the voice faded away and was replaced by music.

"Moravska Ostrava," Tony Braun repeated dully.

They remained motionless, stunned by the news, trying to understand what it signified, unable to do so.

"Try and get England," Margit said.

But all they heard was a confused murmur, a noise as of rushing waters, as if the sea that protected the island drowned all other sounds.

"France . . ." Clarisse hardly recognised her own voice.

"I can't get it. I've tried several times."

The stars grew pale. It was very dark, the evil hours of early morning when life is weak and death grows powerful reigned over the earth.

Joseph kept turning the knob. Most of the broadcasting stations remained silent. How strange—was there a country,

a town that did not want to hear what was happening? Was it possible that in other lands people were sleeping peacefully?

"I'm going to Prague to-morrow," Robert said. "I must fetch Christine."

"If you can," Joseph's voice sounded harsh and angry.

The sitting-room was filled with cigarette smoke. Grey ashes, overflowing from ashtrays, fell on the carpet. The end of all things, Clarisse thought wearily, of Marianka's cottage, of Slovakia's loyalty, of our Republic, of our lives—ashes, nothing but ashes; something burnt out and dead. Aunt Anny was again wiping her eyes. "The poor people at Prague, the poor, unfortunate people."

Her words conjured up a blacked-out town, where life was holding its breath. From its hill, the Hradshin looked down on the houses it had protected for so long a time. The old castle was dark and sad, a dead, soulless husk of stones and mortar.

Were there people in the streets? Did they stop and ask each other what was happening? Were women sobbing in dark rooms? Were men clenching their fists in helpless rage? Was the town preparing to fight? Were soldiers marching through the city, or waiting for an order that did not come?

And abroad, in other capitals? Were people feverishly listening to the wireless? Were the streets less empty than usually at this hour? Surely all the ministries must be lit up, the telephones constantly ringing, couriers coming and going. To-night at least, foreign statesmen would not sleep, as they had done up to now, to-night . . .

A voice, Berlin! "President Hacha has just signed a declaration: 'In order to secure final pacification I place the destiny of the Czech people and country with confidence in the hands of the Führer of the German Reich.' The Führer will issue a proclamation in about half an hour's time. Heil Hitler!"

They looked at each other, what did it mean? Surely not . . . ?

The limping hours suddenly began to run, to race as if afraid of missing something; it was as if the nation beyond

the frontier had militarised time itself, and it was marching along at a quick step.

"At home," Aunt Anny whispered, "after that the bombers came . . ."

The bombers . . . filling the peaceful night with their roaring, singing the wild song of death and destruction. They were flying low, almost touching the roofs, black, enormous, sinister.

The clock struck five.

The wireless proclaimed: "The Luftwaffe and German Infantry have begun occupying Bohemia."

Marianka cried out. "Are they really occupying our country, our Republic?"

"Wait, Marianka, there's more to come."

"About nine o'clock the first troops will march into Prague."

Joseph laughed. "*Finis Europæ*," he said. "But it's their own fault."

Dawn shed its cruel light over the earth. The lamps struggled in vain against the evil day that had come. Old Ján knocked at the window. "I'm going to bed," he said in a sleepy voice. "Nothing can happen now."

They could not make up their minds to tell him what had happened. Deadly fatigue made their heads swim. Marianka had pulled her beads from her pocket and was praying under her breath. Once she stopped to say: "That, too, will pass away."

Margit seemed to wake from a stupor. "Yes," she cried, "it will pass away. No, Joseph, don't say anything. I don't want to hear your words. I want to believe, to believe with my whole heart and soul, that it will pass and that we shall be free again."

The room had grown light. Robert got up and put out the lamps. They could no longer shut out the day, the black day of March 15, 1939.

The old manor-house dreamt in the rosy dawn. In the tall poplar tree opposite the window, a blackbird burst into song.

In the afternoon Christine arrived with the two children. Clarisse was struck on seeing how greatly she had changed. She was no longer the nervous, restless woman who had stayed with them for Christmas. Her face was hard, it looked as though hewn from stone; she did not cry, she did not even complain.

"It's better now that the worst has happened," she said calmly. "At least," she smiled a strange smile, "we can begin fighting."

"Fighting, now?" Clarisse could not grasp her meaning.

"Yes. We've only been beaten on the outside. But our Republic lives on underground, till she rises from the dead."

Marianka came into the room; she had heard the carriage wheels and wanted to know who had come. Seeing Christine, she stopped dead. Her kind, old face grew a dark red.

"It's our fault," she said sadly, shamefacedly.

Christine put out her hand.

"No, my dear. Only the fault of a few men, of your leaders." She smiled kindly and added: "I owe it to the Slovaks that we could leave Prague. One of them, an official, gave me a Slovak passport. And I was not the only one."

"Thank God," Marianka said reverently. "Thank God."

"I'm going back to-morrow," Christine said. "I suppose I may leave the children here?"

"Of course. But I won't let you return to Prague." Robert declared decisively.

"I must go."

"Boleslav?"

"He was arrested this morning. But it's not only that. Having a Slovak passport I can do a lot. No, don't try and persuade me to stay here. I must go home. Do you really expect me to leave my people in the lurch?"

"And Prague, how does . . ." Aunt Anny did not dare finish the question. She knew too well how a city occupied by the Germans looked.

"To-night," Christine said, her voice trembling with hatred, "Hitler will sleep in the Hradshin. In our Hradshin."

And Henlein is to be his representative. I suppose you know what that means?"

She leant back wearily in her chair. Marianka took the children upstairs.

"I saw them march in when I went to the station," Christine said. "I studied their faces, expecting to see at least in one or two compassion or shame. Believe me, I did not see a single human face, only frozen masks of cruelty and lust for power."

"It was just the same in Austria," Aunt Anny said softly. Christine suddenly forgot her fatigue and grew animated.

"Aunt Anny, you must leave the country, and Joseph, too; Joseph can't remain here."

"Nothing will induce me," Joseph said sullenly.

"They will come here, too, as friends of course. You're not safe. The Vienna Nazis will denounce you."

He shrugged silently and lit a cigarette.

"They're talking about a concentration camp in Milovice," Christine said passionately. "Do you want to fall into their hands? Aunt Anny, can't you make him see reason?"

Joseph's mother sighed. "You know him, dear. He will only do what he feels like doing. And as long as he stays here, I shall, too."

He laughed. "We'll see who is more obstinate, mama, you or I."

"All right, my boy. But don't flatter yourself that you are."

Christine left the next morning, looking almost cheerful, as if she were not going to meet danger, perhaps death. Aladar drove her to Bratislava and accompanied her to the station. He had been the only one who had not tried to hold her back. Perhaps because he alone shared her hope. He, too, could not believe that the Republic would remain in German hands.

"Don't do anything too foolish," he implored her, standing in the draughty station.

"I won't. To-day every single man and woman who can work underground is important. We'll all understand that

as soon as the first awful days have passed, and won't let the enemy provoke us."

The train drew in.

"Pray for us," she whispered. "And don't be foolhardy yourself. There are evil days in store for you, too."

She got in and put her head out of the window. For an instant her hard face grew tender. "Give my love to the children. My Hungarian friend is coming to fetch them next week. They will be quite safe on her estate; and if I should not see them again . . ."

He nodded silently. The train began to move. Aladar gazed after it. He stood like a sentry on guard. The train grew smaller and smaller till nothing was left of it but a cloud of smoke on the horizon.

Aladar slowly left the station and went back to the excited, seething town.

Entering the post office the day after, Margit was shocked at the sight of Tido Prohazka. What had happened to the man. Was he ill? In the dim light his face looked almost green, deep shadows lay beneath his eyes, his nose jutted out sharply and two deep wrinkles ran from it to the corners of his mouth.

"Aren't you well?" she asked.

They were alone in the small post office. He bent forward and said dully: "Now I can't wait any longer."

"Wait? What for?"

"For the German people to rise up and to say: 'Stop, we do not attack a peaceful country, we are not going to commit this wrong.'"

"Did you really believe they would?"

"Of course I did. As a communist I had to. You can't understand it, Miss Margit. I was in Germany under the Weimar Republic. I saw the meetings, the processions; I heard the people shout: 'No more war.' It must have been about 1920. I worked together with German comrades and I believed the solidarity of the masses to be stronger than anything else. I did not mind the better classes going with the

Nazis. They were afraid of losing their money. I could even understand some of the workers letting themselves be fooled for a certain time . . . But, to-day, surely they must know where they are going to? To-day . . ."

She looked at him compassionately; never before had she seen a man so rudely awakened from his illusions.

"I've waited and waited." Tido Prohazka's voice betrayed many hours filled with the bitterness of frustrated hope. "All this last week I've waited for a cry from beyond the frontier, for a 'Stop, that's going too far!' For a gesture of solidarity, of fraternity."

He pushed the stamps over the counter.

"On the 15th, at nine in the morning, I gave it up. And now I keep asking myself: how can such a thing be?"

"It's a question we all are asking," Margit replied.

"Maybe; but it's different for you. You never built up your whole life on the solidarity of the working class. You never saw in it the salvation of humanity. You were never convinced . . ."

"But even in the Great War all that fell to pieces."

"I know. But remember, in the meantime we have had the Russian revolution, the Austrian, the German revolution, the workers have learnt to think, have become politically conscious . . ."

He hung his head, a broken man. Margit looked at him pityingly. What could she say to comfort him?

"Don't give way, Mr. Prohazka. Of course it must be terrible for you. But remember that there will be work left for you in our country. We shall want your help."

He smiled mockingly.

"I'll soon be behind prison bars, my dear Miss Margit. Tuka will have the time of his life fighting the Reds and the Jews. Just look at our new Cabinet. Tiso, Prime Minister; Tuka, Vice-President; Durciansky, Minister of Foreign Affairs. Don't you think they will dance to the tune their new protectors pipe?"

"But, the Slovaks, the people?"

"I don't believe in them any longer. I don't believe in anyone except myself."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? It's true, unfortunately. I went on believing in the German masses for five years. Believing and waiting. To-day I know that I was a damned fool."

He seemed to have forgotten to whom he was talking, or perhaps he was feeling so miserable, so desperate that he did not care who heard his words as long as he could unburden his heart.

"The Party, too," he said in a low voice. "It did not fight. It proved itself a broken reed in the Reich . . . It will do the same here. I don't want to have anything more to do with it."

"Oh, no, Mr. Prohazka," Margit cried impulsively. "You must not say that, you must stick to the Party."

Looking up he saw Margit's big, violet eyes gazing at him almost imploringly. For the first time since many days Tido Prohazka burst out laughing.

"I never expected you, the sister of our parish priest, to ask me to remain loyal to the Party. It's a mad world, Miss Margit."

"Listen," she said earnestly. "Only a single thing is important: to fight against the enemy. It really does not matter whether we're red or black. On the 15th of March a new, and I hope and trust a stronger, solidarity was born. We must believe that or die. It won't be easy for us, because here the enemy is posing as a friend, because our government . . . Look here, I can't talk about it, it makes me sick . . . But that's just the reason why . . ." She stopped, her eyes asking a question.

He nodded. His cheeks were no longer pale and his eyes looked less dull.

"You're perfectly right," he said as gravely as she had spoken. "I ought to be ashamed of myself. To think that you had to come and show me where my duty lay. Nevertheless, I'd like to thank you."

Two men entered the post office. Tido Prohazka said in an official tone:

"Is that all?"

"Yes, thank you. No, wait, I want to send a wire."

She went to the green desk standing against the wall, took up the pen and began writing. Already, she thought, everyone is distrusting everyone else. One can never know, every man and every woman may be a secret enemy, a German agent.

After the men had gone she returned to the counter. Tido Prohazka put out his hand for the telegram.

"No," Margit said. "I didn't write it. I only wanted an excuse for staying here and saying good-bye to you."

She put out her hand and he took it in a firm grasp.

"Be careful, Miss Margit. We can't afford to lose you." He smiled teasingly. "The parish can't afford to lose you."

Margit nodded, a lump in her throat. She could hear herself declare proudly—how long ago had it been?—"The parish can't get on without me." To-day her parish had ceased to exist, she did not even know for certain who amongst the parishioners was an enemy and who a friend. It was an odious situation.

More people came and Margit turned away. She had recognised Herr von Brachleben, and following him, the veterinary. The Prussian wanted to send off a wire, but all of a sudden Tido Prohazka, who spoke German excellently, could not understand a word the other man said. Margit smiled, amused and reassured. If Tido Prohazka could enjoy annoying the Prussian he must be feeling better.

On her way home she put the stamps in her purse, thinking, I must write to Christine to-night. Then she suddenly remembered that she did not know where Christine was, that she would perhaps never know. Slovakia had become an island in a hostile sea and no one could tell when the waves would come rushing in and swallow her.

There was unrest in towns and villages. No one felt like working. The wireless blared through open windows; men sat in inn-parlours over their beer, talking politics. There was fighting in the streets, the Hlinka Guards marched through towns and villages, and the Germans behaved as though the country belonged to them.

The baker Schneeberger strutted about, gleefully watching his boys painting huge swastikas on houses and shops. He delighted in the idea that the sacred sign could now be painted openly on enemy buildings. Perhaps the boys rather missed the adventurous excursions, when they had tip-toed through the town at night, menaced by gendarmes and the town clerk, hurriedly drawing the sign. The baker's shop had been promoted to the *Brown House* of the town. Mysterious cars parked in front of it, strangers came and went and the baker was a much greater man than the veterinary, who had joined the party a year later than he.

It was Friday; market-day. The women sat beside their immense baskets, selling their goods. Their heads, with the brightly-coloured kerchiefs, looked like big, gently moving flowers in the sun. Heads were nodded and shaken, moving as fast as the tongues did. Like bees rumours were buzzing through the small town; they settled down here and there, flew away and went on buzzing over the whole country.

"He's taken over the protection of Slovakia. It was in the paper yesterday."

"But surely we're not a protectorate as Bohemia is?"

"No, no, it's different. We're independent."

"Independent? There are German soldiers quartered in Vrbove."

"As close as all that? Then they're sure to come here, too."

"And to stay here for good."

"But we're independent all the same."

"I don't call that independent."

"They say that thousands have been arrested at Prague."

"The laws against the Jews are being introduced."

"It would be rather a good thing if we did the same here."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Anicka, fancy a good Catholic saying such an un-Christian thing!"

"We made a mistake, we ought to have stuck to the Czechs."

"Nonsense! We wanted our liberty."

"What's the result? The Magyars will devour the whole country. People say that they want Bratislava."

"Let them want it. They won't get it."

"At Ratzersdorf our soldiers fought the Germans."

"It won't be the only place where they'll fight them, the brutes."

"Shut up, there's a Hlinka Guard."

"Look, Elisabeth Vyskocil hasn't gone yet."

"Don't be unkind to the poor soul. Do you want her to fall into German hands? Hanus was born at Prague."

Elisabeth kept close to the houses, trying hard to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. She was at her wits' end. What were they to do? On the 21st, in three days, all the Czech troops and the police force had to leave Slovakia. But Hanus had declared that wild horses would not drag him to Prague. He was not going to be a slave of the Germans. A great change had come over him. His merry kindness had vanished. Elisabeth hardly recognised her Hanus in the suspicious, distrustful, sullenly angry man who hardly said a word, and spent hours staring in front of him. He had hoped to the very last, expecting a miracle, help from somewhere. But the miracle had not occurred and he was living amongst enemies who grudged him the tiny bit of land on which their house stood. The shop was sold; the house was to be sold to-morrow. In three days they would be homeless and no one would take them in.

"Marianka says we can stay at Korompa," Elisabeth told him. "And Baroness Margit wants us to come to the presbytery. She'd let us have two rooms."

Hanus had remained silent, gazing at her with the veiled, almost crafty look she had learnt to fear.

"Do say something, Hanus dear. After all, we must live somewhere."

"We've got no place to go to. There's no room for our feet in this world."

"Old Novak also offered us a room," Elisabeth began again, timidly.

Hanus laughed mockingly. "Poor old fool. Do you want him to lose his job for our sake?"

He had turned away and looked out of the window. It was a fine day, in the distance he could see the dark lines of the Carpathian Mountains. Maybe, over there, on the other side of the mountains, he thought confusedly. But his wife, the children . . . Suddenly he had realised, with a feeling akin to horror, that he no longer cared for his wife and his children; there was only one thing he wanted: to fight against those who had robbed him of his country. Perhaps the path over the mountain passes would lead him into battle. . . .

Elisabeth guessed his thoughts. Walking along she was pondering them. Some of the women called out a kind greeting. Little Sister Veronica came out of the orphanage, carrying a big basket. She ran up to Elisabeth.

"I was just coming to see you, Mrs. Vyskocil. Mother-Superior sent me. We know what a bad time you are having, you poor dear, and she wanted me to ask you whether you would like us to take the children. We'd love to have them."

The orphanage, her children at the orphanage! Elisabeth felt herself changing colour; her cheeks grew a bright red, her ears began to burn. Had things come to such a pass that *her* children must go to the orphanage? . . .

Without saying a word, she shook her head and hurried on, leaving little Sister Veronica standing dumbfounded. Of course she ought not to have been so rude, the old Mother-Superior had meant to be kind, and the children in the orphanage were well fed and well treated. A sharp voice behind her exclaimed:

"Just fancy, that woman's still here! Ah well, we'll soon see the last of her."

"Frightful cheek to walk about as if nothing had happened, to go to the market as if she belonged here. Someone really ought to tell her off."

She recognised the voices, the veterinary's wife and Mrs. Miller, the German woman who had bought the shop. The veterinary's wife blocked her way. "Still here, Mrs. Vyskocil?" she said spitefully. "I thought you and your Czech husband had taken to your heels long ago."

Elisabeth recoiled. She began to tremble; would they

all fall upon her? Would they attack her? She saw the Schneeberger boys, and coming her way, Emma. If her sister stirred up the women against her, if . . . She wanted to run, to escape from all the hateful eyes angrily staring at her, but she was unable to move. Shaking all over, she leant against a wall. The veterinary's wife was still blocking her way.

"At least the gendarme will no longer arrest innocent children!" she cried. "At least decent people will be safe again."

A big crowd gathered around them. Many were laughing. How ugly, Elisabeth thought vaguely, human laughter is. And now she heard a voice she knew but too well. "Yes, that's what happens to people who betray their race, and marry a Czech; who give birth to Czech bastards."

The laughter grew louder, menacing, obscene.

"Don't you think you might let us pass, Mrs. Weber?" said a gentle, haughty voice. "After all, you don't own the market place, do you? It might be a good idea if you went home and prepared dinner for your husband, poor man, he always looks half starved as it is."

Margit Jeszenak was standing beside Elisabeth, smiling, amused. She looked the veterinary's wife through and through and her smile grew mocking.

"You'd better keep your mouth shut," the woman cried. "You and your brother will see what is going to happen to . . ."

Margit laughed good-naturedly.

"I like things to happen. It amuses me."

"You poke your nose into everything." The veterinary's wife was losing her temper under Margit's quizzical stare. "Just wait, when our people come from Vienna . . ."

"The Germans and the priest of Sokolovce will kidnap us and drag us into the vineyards, that's what you were going to say, eh?"

The veterinary's wife stopped dead, as if a hand had been laid on her mouth. How did Margit Jeszenak know . . .?

Margit nodded condescendingly and replied to the mute question.

"I make a point of always knowing everything," she said amiably. Then she took Elisabeth's arm and pushed the veterinary's wife aside with a quick, unexpected thrust. "Come along, Elisabeth. These women stink."

The crowd drew back and Margit walked on slowly, still holding Elisabeth's arm. The gendarme's wife was crying bitterly. Going past Mrs. Kraus's shop they saw the shutters being closed.

Margit gave a deep sigh. "Poor soul, how long shall we be able to protect her? She ought to go away . . ."

The roll of a drum drowned her voice. Old Novak came from the town hall, beating his drum, preparing to make known a decree of the town council. He looked cross and disgusted, one could see how much he disliked his duty as a town crier. The sound of the drum faded away and the voice of the town clerk rang out:

"All the Jews in town are to bring their wireless sets to the post office by four in the afternoon. In default of which . . ."

He caught up his stick and drummed like mad.

A few Jewish women, who had come to market with their shopping bags, began to run, accompanied by mocking laughter. The ugly noise seemed to whip them on and they ran faster and faster.

Margit had stopped, her small face red with anger.

She pushed Elisabeth into a doorway and ran after old Novak.

"Stop," she cried, "the parish priest also wants a decree published."

She stood beside the old man, her head held high, her eyes blazing. Old Novak stopped beating his drum. Margit's clear voice rang out:

"Whoever wants to listen in is welcome at the presbytery!"

The old man shook his head. "You ought not to have done that," he whispered nervously. "It will only create bad feeling."

She laughed. "No one will dare to come, anyway," she replied in a low voice. "But I had to teach the mob a

lesson. Look at the cowards, Novak, there's not a single one who dares say a word."

Walking slowly, with firm steps and looking round like a lion-tamer who wants to keep his eyes on his animals, she returned to where Elisabeth stood.

"Come on, let's buy our vegetables," she said.

When Elisabeth came home Hanus was not in the house. She waited for him all day long, growing more and more frightened. Evening came, but Hanus had not returned. Had something happened to him? His wife stood at the door waiting. The hours raced. The clock in the church tower struck eight, half-past. Dear Lord, where was he? Surely he had not deserted her and the children? Soon it would be night, black, threatening night, when anything might happen. Hanus. . . Hanus. . .

Behind her back, Emma was rummaging in the shop. Elisabeth turned round. Even now she could not bear her sister touching all the things she had been so fond of.

"What are you doing?" she asked impatiently.

"Tidying up."

"You've no business to tidy up here."

Emma laughed. "I've got to know where things are."

"Why?"

"Because I'm taking over the shop."

"You?"

"Yes. As soon as you and the bastards have left. Father has rented it for me."

The bottom fell out of Elisabeth's world. Emma mistress of her shop, Emma standing behind her counter, Emma opening her shutters in the morning and closing them at night. . .

"I always wanted to have the shop," the mocking voice went on. "I'd have got it if you had not been such a legacy-hunter. But, of course, at that time you were a fine lady, the wife of Gendarme Vyskocil. And the people flattered the Czech, because the gendarme could have arrested them

if he pleased." She burst out laughing. "Where is the Gendarme Vyskocil? Why doesn't he come and arrest me?"

She put out a clumsy hand for a cardboard box, it opened and coloured silk skeins fell out; her lovely silks; they had come from the capital but a week ago and Elisabeth had delighted in their delicate colours. Now they were lying on the dusty floor.

"Take care!" she cried out.

Emma's laughter grew louder.

"Don't you tell me to take care. Look what I'm doing with your beloved skeins!"

Her heavy foot in the dirty boot trod on the silk skeins, crushing them.

"I'm crushing them as you will be crushed, all of you. Look, look!"

The delicate pink and pale blue, the golden coloured and green, the violet and lilac skeins seemed to writhe with pain under the merciless foot, they grew pale and grey, tearing, breaking, lying on the floor, like broken butterflies. Emma was as a woman possessed. She put out her hand for the shining thimbles, the delicate small scissors, the gaily-painted darning-balls, and flung them on the floor.

"Look, look." Again and again the merciless foot stamped on the beautiful things Elisabeth had taken such care of.

"Hanus!" Elisabeth cried out wildly. "Hanus!"

"It's no use calling him. He won't come back!"

Standing at the door, her eyes glued on the darkness beyond, Elisabeth fell to her knees with a sob. Behind her back she kept on hearing the merciless foot, stamping on her happiness, on her life.

"I think it's for to-day," Margit said at breakfast. "Last night they came from Vienna and slept at the presbytery of Sokolovce."

"I can't imagine how you always manage to know everything," Aladar said, lighting his pipe.

She laughed softly. "Shall I tell you who keeps me informed?"

"I must admit that I'd like to know."

"Sit tight, you'll hardly be able to believe it."

"Well, who is it?"

"Poldi Schneeberger."

"Don't make fun of me."

Margit shook her head with a smile.

"Have you never heard of young girls having a pash for elder women? Especially when those women make it possible for them to meet their lovers?"

"Margit, what have you been doing again?"

"Nothing wrong, don't worry, my dear. Poldi is almost eighteen; why shouldn't she have a boy friend? And Vlado is quite a good match."

"I really don't know what you are talking about."

"You are slow in the uptake, you must be getting senile. Perhaps you know how strict old Schneeberger is?"

"Yes."

"Poldi has a bad time at home, and now more than ever, because the old man wants her to marry a member of the Party. So, as I'm kind-hearted and a bit sentimental, I allow the girl to meet Vlado here."

"In the presbytery! Margit!"

"Oh, don't be so prudish. Anyway, my kindness has been repaid. For about a year Poldi has kept me informed of the German plans."

The priest sighed deeply. "Margit, if people find out that the presbytery has become a clandestine meeting-place! Just imagine the scandal."

She shrugged. "Don't get excited. They're engaged. And, anyway, they're not going to meet here for some time. Vlado has crossed the frontier. He's in Russia. I believe Vyskocil is too. I met Elisabeth about an hour ago; Hanus did not come home last night. Oh, yes, I almost forgot to tell you. Elisabeth and the children are coming to stay with us."

"The children too?"

"Do you mind?"

Aladar gave a gesture of resignation.

"What use would it be if I minded? But do tell me why you said just now that 'it's going to be for to-day'?"

Margit grew grave.

"Poldi came quite early this morning. I'm to warn Mrs. Kraus and the other Jews. Poldi thinks that the Germans will loot the shops."

"Have you done anything about it?"

"Yes, I rang up the manor-house; they're coming here. After that I went and warned all those who may be in danger. I've got to go out at once; I promised Mrs. Kraus to stay with her. You might let me have your revolver, Aladar."

"Certainly not. I can see you shooting and hitting all the wrong people."

"It would have been a help. Well, I'll have to see what I can do without it."

Getting up, she put out her cigar and walked towards the door. Aladar got up too.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Do you expect to be the only person who does anything?" he asked, slightly huffed.

She remained silent.

"If you see the verger, Margit, send him to me. And . . . don't do anything foolish, my dear. The people have taken leave of their senses and you won't make them see reason by flirting with them or trying to impress them with your authority. Of course," he added, seeing his sister look annoyed, "you must help Mrs. Kraus. But don't provoke people, don't come over them with your high and mighty airs. That irritates them more than anything else."

"You ought to know."

"I do. Run along, we've no time to lose. And send the verger here."

She hurried out of the house, drove the verger from his garden, where he was weeding the path, and turned into the narrow street where the Krauses lived.

A few minutes later the old church bell pealed out like mad; it wailed and shrieked, it grumbled and tolled. People

stopped in the streets, wondering what had happened. The more curious hurried towards the church; nowadays so many things happened, and no one wanted to miss a sensation.

The church was lit up. The parish priest stood before the altar, wearing his clerical robes. But his face was not turned towards the altar, but towards the nave.

"Sit down," he commanded, and after the people had obeyed, he said harshly:

"It is possible that many of you have entered this church for the last time. God gives you one more chance, the last, of atoning for your sins. Do not lose it."

He paused, and his parishioners began whispering. What had happened? What did the Father mean?

Aladar lifted his head imperiously and the whispers died down.

"I have heard," he said very slowly, stressing every word, "that Germans have come from Vienna, and from several parts of Slovakia. They want to prove their mettle to the Reich by looting the shops and houses of our Jewish fellow-citizens. Maybe by committing even worse crimes. Listen to me, your parish priest: Whoever lifts his hand against a defenceless woman or man, whoever steals but a loaf of bread, will never again enter this church. I shall deny him the sacraments, his children will not be baptised, his sick will die without receiving absolution and without extreme unction. And he will be cursed for ever."

The imperious voice stopped. A deep silence fell upon the church. One could hear the people breathing hard, and, sometimes, sighing in dismay.

"But he, too, who stirs up others, and be it only by a word; who approves of the crimes committed by God's enemies, will never again enter this church. He will live and die as a heathen, because he has broken the commandment of loving his neighbour, because he is guilty of homicide, because he has committed the sin that cannot be forgiven . . ."

Again a pause and again the awful, terrified silence.

"Go home and tell those who did not come to church

what you have heard. And do not flatter yourselves that you can sin without being found out. God sees every act of yours, He hears every word, He knows your most secret, evil thoughts. If innocent blood is spilt, His revenge will strike you. And now let us pray an Our Father. Try and understand the words, remember that God is the Father of all those who are in need and in danger, and do not forget that whatever you do to one of the least of these you have done to the Lord. Kneel down!" Once again it was the Captain of the Hussars commanding: "Pray."

Timid voices whispered Amen after the prayer had been spoken. Then the people shuffled out, quickly dispersing as soon as they reached the street.

Aladar followed them slowly. Still wearing full clerical garb, he walked through the town silently, a mute warning and a mute threat.

Towards noon the Germans from the Reich and the Austrian Nazis arrived. Their cars were parked in front of the Brown House, where they were solemnly received by the local Germans and the Hlinka Guards.

At first sight the Austrians looked more good-natured and less brutal than the men from the Reich, but only at first sight. They still had to prove that they were just as efficient as the real Germans, no slackers, perverted by humane feelings. They entered the Brown House, where the priest of Sokolovce was waiting for them.

The streets were crowded with talking and gaping masses. Their mood was not vicious as yet, but it might change any moment. Just now they were content to stare and to wait.

Others, too, were waiting, but they were not pleasantly excited, not filled with a mean malice that looked forward to "repaying" some imaginary slight, not crazed with the lust for power or greed and envy. Behind bolted doors and closed shutters they were trembling with fear or shaken by impotent fury. Children were crying, parents were angrily whispering: "For God's sake, don't make a noise. If they don't hear anything they may go past."

They: the word signified the irresponsible, unscrupulous masses amongst which the individual vanished. The multitude that sheltered every crime, permitting the individual to rob, to loot, to torture, to kill. The dark, many-faced monster marched through the streets with heavy steps, it seemed something abstract, intangible, ghostly, and in its train came the black fear of death, settling over the streets and alleys like a cloud.

Had one of those, shuddering at the sound of the heavy steps, been asked a few hours later: "How many of them were there?" he would not have known what to answer: fifty, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand. He had seen heads, innumerable heads; eyes, innumerable eyes; fists, innumerable fists; jackboots, innumerable jackboots. He had heard a roaring of voices that drowned the voice of the wind and the gentle song of the distant river. What he had seen were not men as he had known them, not individuals, not fellow-citizens; they were the masses, a black lava, thrown out by the volcano Germany, overflowing, rushing on, mercilessly, irresistibly, destroying everything that crossed its path.

Brutal hands hammered at closed doors. "Open!" If the order was not obeyed at once, the sound of hatchet blows and of splintering wood filled the street, accompanied by uproarious laughter.

The masses stopped before Doctor Silberthal's house. Two men entered and dragged him into a car with curtained windows. Howling and shrieking, the crowd surrounded the house.

"Kill the cursed Jew!" yelled the priest of Sokolovce.

A small, plump figure ran forward fearlessly, and Marianka Hrubin cried:

"Because he cured you when you were ill? Because he never asked for money? Is that the reason why you want to kill him?"

She was brutally pushed aside and the crowd thronged into the house. It invaded the consulting-room and made a rush for the table with the surgical instruments. Some were hastily slipped into gaping pockets, others were thrown out of the window.

"Smash everything!" a hard voice with a North-German accent commanded. "He has defiled German blood."

A wild roar of dirty laughter followed the words. The filth that had been carefully hidden in many hearts came to the top, and branded many a face. Lips grew loose and an evil spark lit up stupidly-staring eyes. More and more people were attracted by the noise and now the lust of destruction overwhelmed even those who had been indifferent and merely curious at first. They ran to the kitchen and threw plates and cups on the floor, laughing to hear them break. They tore down curtains and smashed window panes. In the bedroom they slashed the sheets and the blankets. Wiser, more practically-minded men looted the wardrobe and the chest of drawers.

Svata Hrubin had been dragged along by the crowd. The noise and the tumult bewildered him. He did not know whether he wanted to attack the looters or whether, infected by the lust for destruction, he wanted to smash the expensive instruments that he was too poor to buy. Standing before the table he gazed at those left by the mob. And suddenly he knew that he would not destroy them, that he could not do it. They were too beautiful; even in such a moment the medical student gloated over them. As to stealing them, Marianka Hrubin's son was incapable of such an act.

Shocked by the temptation he had felt for an instant, and deafened by the wild yells filling the house, he slowly went into the sitting-room that had escaped so far. The quiet surrounding him as soon as he had shut the door had a sobering effect. He looked round, gazing at the bookshelves, the old armchair by the stove, the pictures on the walls. His eyes fell on a portrait representing two kind-looking, smiling old people, Hynek Silberthal's parents.

Svata had seen the picture before, but he had always just glanced at it. To-day, letting his eyes rest on it, he suddenly felt that the people looking out of the old-fashioned golden frame were real human beings, a woman, who held her little son in her arms, as Svata's mother had done, a man, as proud of his clever boy as the old Slovak woman was. How cheerful they looked, how kindly they smiled at him, who had once

been their son's friend. *Had been*, no, who *was* their son's friend. If they knew that their son . . . Svata recalled with disgust the faces he had seen a few minutes ago, distorted by hatred and brutality, by envy and vileness: glaring eyes, wide-open mouths, showing yellow teeth, greedy hands stretched out for things they did not really want yet grudged their rightful owner. In the distance he could hear crashing and the sound of splintering wood, the bestial laugh of unbridled cruelty and unleashed brutishness.

In this minute he recognised that he, Svata Hrubin, Marianka Hrubin's son, did not belong to the looting and destroying masses. That he did not believe what they believed, did not want what they wanted, did not love what they loved, did not hate what they hated. Again he looked at the portrait, but this time without a feeling of shame. The old people came alive, he talked to them, he promised them to stand by their son. And when, shortly afterwards, a troop of young men and Hlinka Guards crowded into the room he remained standing in front of the picture, childishly convinced that he must protect it, that nothing must happen to the old people, that, more than anything else on earth, he wanted to see them sitting on in their quiet room, smiling and happy.

A young Hlinka Guard discovered the picture and shouted:

"Down with the old Jews. Burn them!"

A few men came closer and reached out for the picture.

"Don't touch it!" Svata cried.

His words called forth mocking laughter.

"Svata, the protector of the Jews!"

"He wants to take the picture home and worship it."

"Oh, leave him in peace. Of course he wants the frame. Let him take away something from the Jew's house."

"How much did the Jews pay you, Svata?"

That was the voice of Father Gogolak.

A German from the Reich stepped up.

"Kill the lackey of the Jews!"

Marianka Hrubin's son remained motionless. Never had he felt so calm. He experienced nothing but an icy hatred and the wish to save the picture. His fearless glance

roved over the yelling crowd, his face expressed unutterable scorn.

"That's all you can do," he said coldly. "Destroy, kill."

"Get away from the picture," yelled the eldest Schneeberger boy, pushing his way through the crowd.

Svata did not move.

The second Schneeberger boy crept behind him and thrust a knife into the picture. He kept thrusting it into the two figures, again and again, the lust of murder was in his eyes.

Svata's fist shot out and the boy reeled back. Then Svata tore the portrait from the wall and pressed it to his breast. He had caught his finger on the nail that held the picture and it was bleeding. He thought confusedly that the two kindly old people had been hurt by the crowd after all and that it was their blood staining the floor. But he would save them yet. He lifted his head. The fury in his eyes made the Schneeberger boys recoil. Then he saw that more people were coming into the room. He recognised Aladar Jeszenak, still wearing his priestly robes, but grasping a most unclerical-looking revolver; Tido Prohazka and old Novak followed him. They fought their way through the crowd and now the four men were standing side by side, ready to fight.

In the passage the baker Schneeberger's voice rang out: "Set fire to the house. Let's smoke out the Jews!"

His words proved a distraction. The crowd burst into shouts of joy and rushed from the room.

Svata Hrubin ran out of the house into the street. He still held the picture tightly pressed to his breast. He ran like a hunted man, along the main street, turning into narrow alleys. He could not stop, his feet seemed to move of their own accord. He ran and ran.

When he reached the high road he saw clouds of smoke rising up. The air was filled with a sharp, pungent smell and the wind drove tiny black soot-flakes before it.

Having watched the flames licking the woodwork of Doctor Silberthal's house, the mob marched off in high good

temper. Behind it drove slowly two cars with curtained windows.

Mrs. Kraus sat beside her sick husband's bed. Robert had taken the children to Korompa, whilst Joseph was going round the town collecting other Jewish babies.

"Dear Lord, they will tear him out of bed; it will be the death of him; his heart's so bad," Mrs. Kraus moaned. "Dear God, dear God! They'll break and smash and loot everything in the shop."

"They won't," Margit's voice came through the door connecting the shop with the bedroom.

"Do go home, Miss Margit. You can't help us. They will only hurt you."

Margit peered through a crack in the shutter into the street. She saw that the mob was turning to the right, where the wine merchant, Winter, had his shop. A few Hlinka Guards stopped before the Kraus shop, together with about twenty other young men. She looked out again and nodded with a pleased smile.

Heavy fists knocked at the door. "Open!"

"My God!" Mrs. Kraus cried out.

Margit got up and opened the door. Seeing who had come to meet them, the men looked dumbfounded and stopped dead for an instant. Noticing that all of them belonged to the parish, Margit felt reassured.

"What do you want?" she said quietly. "Don't make such a noise. There's a sick man in the house."

Her calm manner bewildered the men. Wherever they had gone, they had been received with tears and imploring words, with fear and trembling, and here stood the sister of their parish priest, admonishing them and telling them not to make a noise. Somehow it seemed funny and a few of the men began to laugh. Margit watched their faces growing more human and drew a deep breath. Then she said reprovingly:

"You'd do better to weep. Have you taken leave of your senses? Don't you know that Father Hlinka would turn in

his grave if he knew that his Slovaks were obeying German orders? Didn't he say: 'God gave us the Jews?'"

She had always hated the old man of Ruzomberok, but perhaps he might do some good for once after his death.

The beloved and venerated name made the men prick up their ears. Margit was quick to take advantage of it.

"He would ask: 'Is it possible that my Slovaks blindly obey foreigners?' Who are your leaders? Aliens from the Reich, from Vienna, Germans from Bratislava and the local Germans, who have always despised you and called you stupid Slovaks. Aren't you ashamed to obey such men?"

"The Jews have got to leave the country," a young Hlinka Guard called out.

"Because the foreigners want it, eh, Sano?"

If only they would go away; Margit began to grow nervous. If the Germans came here, everything would go wrong. She discerned a familiar face.

"You were in church this morning, Karol. Are you deaf or didn't you understand what the Father said? Do you want the church bell to remain silent for ever? Do you want to die like dogs, without absolution, without God's forgiveness? Do you want to be put away in unconsecrated earth, to be cast out for ever by God and man?"

Karol, who had been about to enter the shop, took a step back.

"And you, Jozo, you were always my best pupil. Do you remember how hard we studied together? You are cleverer than the others and also pluckier. Tell them to go away."

"Hungarian," yelled a boyish voice.

Her answer came as a lash from a whip.

"Your dear parents, Bela, came from Hungary when you were twelve and I can remember you yelling: '*Nem, nem soha!*' The Father and I were born at Bratislava, as were our parents and our grandparents."

Would they never go? Margit saw red. Unconsciously her hands groped backwards towards the table where her riding whip lay. Oh, to strike at the stupid red faces, to strike at them blindly, wildly. But she kept smiling and gazing at the men with kindly superciliousness.

"Do go away," she said gently. "Mr. Kraus is very ill and you're not Germans to attack a sick and helpless man."

The men looked at each other doubtfully. Their excitement had died down, some of them were fond of Margit and did not want to displease her, others still stood in a certain awe of the sister of their parish priest. They remained standing in front of the shop and Margit, knowing that any minute another and more dangerous troop might come round the corner, pressed her lips together, silently praying for a miracle. Another minute or two of nerve-racking suspense, then the miracle she had prayed for came to pass. Karol suddenly turned on his heels and the others followed him like sheep. A minute later the narrow street was deserted.

Margit sank on a chair and burst into tears. Mrs. Kraus came running from the back room.

"How can I thank you, Miss Margit? Please, don't cry."

"I'm only crying because I couldn't thrash the brutes," Margit admitted frankly. "There, let's shut the door. I can hear steps."

But those who came hurrying up were no enemies but a reinforcement. Old Novak came, brandishing a thick stick, panting, truculent, every inch a hero. "I only just heard that you were here," he said.

Behind him came Tido Prohazka, also armed with a stick. Mrs. Kraus began telling them what had happened. According to her, Margit had kept in check at least thirty Germans and twenty Hlinka Guards.

"How on earth did you do it, Miss Margit?" Tido Prohazka gazed at her in surprise.

She smiled teasingly. "By the well-known wiles of the Catholic Church." She took up her riding whip. "You stay here, both of you," she said. "I'm going to have a look round."

When she reached the market-place she saw the two cars with the curtained windows drive off at a rapid pace.

The main street was filled with broken objects the looters had dropped. Most of the windows were broken, the doors torn out of their hinges or smashed by hatchet blows. A crowd came marching round the corner. At its head walked

Emma Leberfinger, carrying a big picture of the Führer and crying out in a loud voice:

"Holy, holy, holy is our Lord and Saviour, Adolf Hitler. Holy, holy, holy."

She staggered as if she were drunk. Her shrill voice went on crying:

"Holy, holy, holy is our Lord and Saviour, Adolf Hitler."

Reaching the high road she turned round to those following her.

"Look how he has blessed me, behold me, the handmaid of our Lord. I am cured, I am strong. He has made me mighty above all men. Look, my feet do not touch the earth, I am rising above you, I am soaring. Look, look..."

She stumbled, regained her foothold and pressed the portrait to her breast.

"Do not forsake me, my Saviour. I am well, I am cured. Do not let the disease gain power over me. Holy, holy, hol..."

With a wild shriek she tripped over a broken jug and fell, her face in the dust. Those marching behind her stumbled over her writhing body, falling on her, crushing her. Her last mad cry turned into a strangled, terrible rattle.

The vineyards are close to Sokolovce. Deep cellars have been built in the hills, dark and damp and filled with a musty smell that takes away one's breath. Here the cars with the kidnapped men stopped.

The priest of Sokolovce stood at the top of the steep stairs leading into the cellars and gazed with evil glee on the prisoners. He had been waiting a long time for this day. Now at last his enemies were in his power and he could decide their fate. Slowly he walked down the steps and posted himself at the entrance, where all had to pass him. From time to time he laughed loudly and gave a rough push to the man walking past. But he said nothing, as if a word might disturb the solemn act, the devil's mass of hatred he was celebrating in his heart.

The Germans and the Hlinka Guards did not feel the need

for silence. They made jokes, asked mocking questions and shrieked with laughter when one of the kidnapped men, reeling under a rough thrust, stumbled on the steep stairs and fell head forward. One of them, a butcher's boy of Piestany, kicked the prisoners and yelled with delight if his victims dared to moan.

Now and then one of the older Jews ventured to reproach a Hlinka Guard—none of them thought of addressing an Austrian or a German. The Guards gave rude or sneering answers; sometimes if the man reproaching him was a former friend, the Slovak turned away his head without a word.

Doctor Silberthal, who had been the first to descend into the cellar, stooped over a man bleeding from a blow on his head and tried to dress the wound.

"This isn't a Jewish hospital," bawled a Viennese. "Let the fellow bleed his fill. It will do him good."

The doctor ignored the brutal words and went on dressing the wound till he, too, was hit on the head and lost consciousness.

By now the cellar was crowded. The priest of Sokolovce walked slowly from one man to the other, insulting all. He was followed by several of the Germans. They came to a boy, almost a child, who was crying bitterly. The priest of Sokolovce turned away with a look of disgust, but one of the Germans yelled: "Shut up, you bastard!" and seeing that the boy continued to cry, lifted his hand.

In a trice a Hlinka Guard stepped up to him. "He's *our* prisoner. Don't you touch him."

The German turned round, red with rage: "How dare you?"

But three other Hlinka Guards had come up and their faces did not wear a pleasant look. The German laughed scornfully and followed Father Gogolak without a word.

The first Hlinka Guard squatted down beside the boy and said, not unkindly: "Stop crying, Jinda. I'll take you home to-morrow. This is no place for children."

Night came, much too early for the prisoners. The cellar was lit up at both ends by a pale light, whose weak flame was unable to pierce the darkness. A black fog filled the

cellar; gigantic figures emerged out of it. Hlinka Guards bringing new victims, or relieving guard. Their huge shapeless shadows ran along the steep stairs, turned to headless bodies, to endless, wildly moving arms, to immense hands reaching out for the kidnapped men. Agonising fear made the prisoners' blood freeze. What would happen in the dark? Was death waiting to pounce upon them? Would the Germans and the Hlinka Guards attack them to-night, strike them, torture them, cut their throats? Or would they go away and leave them to starve?

The candle flames were trembling in the cold draught. My God, the prisoners were thinking, don't let the candles go out. Don't let us remain in the dark. Let us at least see what is happening.

Hlinka Guards walked about, called over names, striking at faces that annoyed them. Some of them stopped in front of the wealthier Jews and fell to whispering: "What will you pay me for taking a message to your wife?"

"What will you give me if I let you escape?"

Then they climbed the stairs and proceeded to the presbytery of Sokolovce where the "victory" was being celebrated. Four guards remained on duty, sleepy and cross because they could not join their friends.

Now at last the kidnapped men dared to talk in whispers, to ask each other questions, to give vent to their feelings. The least sound made them start. What was it? Had a shot been fired in the distance? No, only the wind had banged a door, or a tyre had burst. Gradually the paralysing fear infected them all. This waiting in the dark, not knowing what was going to happen, was agony. The prisoners recalled what they had read and heard about the concentration camps. If they should be deported to Germany or Austria? To one of the notorious concentration camps? The idea was unbearable. Another thought came to torture them: what had happened to their wives and their children? Were they still alive? Had they too been dragged into cars and thrust into cellars?

The boy was crying with hunger till weariness made him fall asleep. The others did not dare close their eyes; the

Germans and the Hlinka Guards might return any minute and attack them whilst they were sleeping . . . They tried to recall the faces of the guards. Had there been a single one from whom you could expect mercy, compassion? Perhaps Karol, who had been almost kind to the boy. Of course it might be possible to bribe one or the other. But it was too risky.

The hours dragged on. Would the night never end? How long had they been here? They had lost all count of time. And what would happen when to-morrow came?

The air grew more fetid and suffocating, but notwithstanding the heat the men shivered with fear.

In the distance they could hear shouts and drunken singing. Then quiet again. An old man who had got a kick in the stomach moaned aloud. The boy woke up and began crying anew. A guard was snoring. Then, suddenly, they heard steps.

Those who had fallen asleep started up, the whispers faded away, a dead silence reigned. Were the enemies returning, maddened by drink? The prisoners threw furtive glances towards the entrance. Was this the end? Were they hearing death draw close? But the approaching steps were soft and light. Something came down the stairs; something white gleamed palely in the dark. The boy sat up suddenly and gave a cry of joy. The small figure standing on the last step ran up to him.

"Sister Veronica!" the boy cried, stretching out both hands.

"Hush, Jinda. Karol let me come in, but the others must not know of it."

She took from the market bag hanging from her arm bread, and bottles filled with water, and carried them from one to the other, stopping in front of each, talking kindly, dressing wounds, speaking words of comfort.

"You'll be free to-morrow. Father Jeszenak has gone to Bratislava, to see Monsignore Tiso about it. Don't be afraid. No one will hurt you." Her gentle encouraging smile was good to see.

The men in the cellar felt as if in a dream. Could such a

thing really be true? Kindness and helpfulness, could a Christian . . . ?

Doctor Silberthal had taken the bandages from Sister Veronica and was busy dressing wounds. Turning to the young nun he whispered:

"Go home, my child, if they found you here . . . They're dead drunk. Go home as fast as you can."

But little Sister Veronica, who had trembled at the idea of martyrdom for months, only smiled:

"I may stay here. Mother-Superior gave me permission."

For her that was the one thing needful. She was not breaking her vow of obedience, and even if she risked her life—she was too innocent to be afraid of what the doctor was thinking of—she was doing right; Mother-Superior had allowed her to come.

The old man who had been kicked in the stomach was running a temperature. He was not sure whether the little figure in the nun's robes was real or only a dream. He called her in a plaintive voice:

"Come here, Sister, let me touch your hand, then I'll know that it's really you." He moaned again, and little Sister Veronica knelt down beside him. The doctor came up.

"Can't we do anything for him?" the young nun asked anxiously.

The doctor shook his head. "If I had some morphia . . ."

Little Sister Veronica put her arms round the old man. The big crucifix from her rosary struck his hand. She looked up in dismay. "He did not mean to hurt you," she said hurriedly, and the old Jew replied with a smile: "I know it, my child."

The white wimple of her headdress gleamed palely, yet it seemed to light up the whole cellar. Many who had lost hope began hoping again. Perhaps they would be permitted to return home after all; perhaps they would see their families again; perhaps this nightmare would come to an end.

Loud laughter sounded from above, a man came reeling to the top of the stairs and peered into the cellar: "Have the Jews croaked?"

He put his foot on the first step; the men in the cellar

caught their breath and little Sister Veronica posted herself firmly in front of the old man. But the staircase was steep; the drunken man laughed and went away again.

The frosty grey dawn brought new fears in its wake. What would happen now, when day broke? Karol came into the cellar and caught little Sister Veronica by her fluttering wide skirt. "You must go."

"I can't. Poor Mr. Roth is so bad, I must stay with him."

"You must go."

"I must not."

He stared at her: "Why?"

"Because I may not leave a sick man. My duty . . ."

"If the others find you here . . ."

"I won't betray you, Karol."

"I know, but you . . ." Karol was obviously upset. He had seen reeling figures approaching.

"I'm perfectly safe."

He shrugged nervously. Steps resounded on the stairs. Drunken voices echoed in the cellar. It was too late.

Laughter and smutty jokes greeted the discovery of the young nun. She was dragged upstairs. A German from the Reich took hold of her arm.

"A pretty girl. That's what I missed last night; you need women for celebrating victory. Come along, little girl."

"Don't you see she's a nun?" said one of the Hlinka Guards angrily.

"All the better. I've never slept with one before."

The Hlinka Guard thrust him back.

"Run, Sister, run," he cried. Little Sister Veronica began to run. But she did not get far. The German had recovered from the blow and was calling after her: "Stop! Come back, you little bitch!"

He stooped and picked up a stone. Without taking aim, he threw it and hit little Sister Veronica on the temple. She fell to the ground without a cry. Lying there, her white face framed by the white wimple, she looked very small and young, like a child that had stumbled over a stone. Hlinka Guards stooped over her; then one after the other slowly, reverently bared his head. When they lifted her up, the

small dead face was smiling peacefully, lit up by the first rays of the morning sun.

The Hlinka Guards who carried little Sister Veronica back to the orphanage did not return to the vineyards, and the German who had thrown the stone counted himself lucky that he had passed the Austrian frontier before being killed by his Slovak friends.

Three days later the kidnapped men were set free. They came back to their looted, ruined homes, to their almost crazy wives, past the destroyed Synagogue—a burnt-out ruin, with staring, dead eyes where the windows had been. They returned to an evil world that was no longer their own, to a town that had become an enemy fortress. They went on living in the place where they had lived for so long a time, but it had become alien to them. The windows they passed seemed to glance at them with hostile looks; every knock at the door could be death claiming an entrance. The nights had grown short, nevertheless they seemed endless. Men and women waited for the dawn behind bolted doors and closed shutters, and did not dare to sleep before day had come. But even sleep brought no rest. They kept seeing the vineyards in their dreams. They breathed the fetid air. They heard the voices of their torturers and felt anew the agony of fear and suspense. The morning did not bring relief; they passed their days in foreboding and unrest.

The small town was strangely quiet. Looting had stopped. Only once there had almost been a fight when the Germans had tried to be present at little Sister Veronica's funeral, although the parish priest had let them know that they were to keep away.

The Hlinka Guards marched up in uniform, and Aladar Jeszenak hated seeing them walk behind the coffin. But he knew that the little dead nun had more influence with them than anything he could say, and he kept silent. Before the churchyard the Hlinka Guards stood sentry, and refused to let the Germans enter.

"You killed her," Karol said, hatred in his voice and his eyes. "You shall not be there when her coffin is lowered into the grave."

Some of the Germans tried to force a way in. But they did not get further than the gate. The baker was the first to draw back. He cursed the dead nun who sowed the seeds of discord between the Germans and the Slovaks, and caused a hostility that grew stronger with every day; invisible at first like a spark under a thick cover of ashes, but never more to be extinguished and ever ready to burst into flame.

At Korompa trunks were being packed. Numerous anonymous writers had threatened Clarisse and Robert, vowing to set fire to the house if the Jews remained there any longer. The Brauns, fearing to bring misfortune to their hosts, had at last decided to go to England, and even Joseph could no longer refuse to accompany his parents. Tony Braun was miserable. He loved the estate, where he and his wife had spent so many summers, where little Joseph had romped as a boy, where they had found a new home after the occupation of Austria. Here he had still belonged. Now he would have to live in an alien country. He was obliged to go to foreign consulates, to stand about waiting, to ask for permits. He hated what he called his "beggar rounds" so much that at last Aunt Anny went for him, accomplishing in a few days' time what he had not been able to attain during weeks. She did not feel humiliated, and the pleasant young man at the British Consulate was glad to see her; it was a relief to talk to a woman who neither wept nor complained and never thought it his fault, when things took longer than she had expected. She also went to the Hungarian Consulate at Bratislava, for she had routed out an old schoolfellow who was taking the Weiss children. "Let Cato do her bit," she said, "she could easily take fifty children and never notice it. I must try and send her others."

She was as cheerful as ever, even more so, for Joseph and Margit had married in the early days of May and her greatest

wish had been fulfilled. "Not quite my last," she remarked. "Now I want grandchildren."

"I'm sorry to leave you," she told Clarisse who was helping her to pack. "But we're too dangerous guests. And I'll be glad when I've got Joseph safely across the frontier."

For a moment the smile faded from her face and Clarisse saw in it the torturing fear she had come to know so well.

May was lovely. Clarisse sometimes asked herself how it was possible that flowers came out in a world so filled with sorrow and grief. Was not the very air poisoned? Everything had become alien to her, even her beloved garden, even her dear olive tree. The whole country was changed. At an hour's distance German soldiers were quartered, they marched past Korompa on their way to Piestany where they took the waters. They carried small dictionaries in their pockets, designed to promote fraternisation with the Slovak friends. The dictionaries included short and significant invitations: "Mariska, pot, Anicka, pot!" Come along, Mariska, come along, Anicka. But neither Mariska nor Anicka came. They smiled mockingly and turned their backs upon the soldiers, their wide, starched skirts swinging around their slender legs in the beautifully polished boots.

The last evening had come. The rooms, filled with trunks, suddenly looked empty and strange, although the familiar furniture still stood in its place. Aunt Anny kept rushing about madly, collecting forgotten things, tidying up. She did not want to sit quiet and think of to-morrow.

Margit was sitting on the veranda with Clarisse. "You'll look after Aladar, won't you?" she said. "He's not as young as he was. And he will miss me." She gave an impatient sigh. "I do wish I could stay here. I always hated running away. But it can't be helped, Joseph must leave the country."

Clarisse nodded silently. She was sad and discouraged; she felt somehow broken up as if a piece of her own life were being torn off.

"Oh yes, I almost forgot to tell you, Clarisse, Elisabeth Viskocil is coming here to-morrow with the children."

"What on earth . . . ?"

"My dear, you know what people are. She's a pretty young woman and Aladar is not an old man. If she stayed on at the presbytery the whole town would have something to gossip about. And we can't afford a scandal just now. So I told her she could come and stay with you."

Clarisse shrugged, smiling a trifle wryly. "Whom else have you asked to Korompa?"

"Surely you don't mind? What is the poor thing to do? She refuses to leave the place in case Hanus should come back. She's afraid of his not finding her."

"If he comes back. We've not heard from him."

"He's sure to be in Russia like so many others. Anyway Elisabeth thinks so. Don't for goodness sake tell her that you don't believe it. She's half crazy as it is. She sits at the window all day long waiting for him."

Clarisse saw a faded little picture rise before her, Elisabeth in her little shop, smiling, pretty, happy, and the kind giant Hanus with the childlike blue eyes, holding little Hanus in his arms and looking tenderly at his wife. The picture faded away, making room for another one, a haggard, pale-faced, miserable Elisabeth, sitting at a window and waiting . . . a ruined life, dead happiness. And this tiny world of joy and innocent gladness had been destroyed by the Germans.

"Don't let her go to town," Margit said. "At least not for a month or so. I don't want her to go past her shop and see that beastly Mrs. Miller standing behind the counter. Promise."

"I won't forget."

"And if Emma should be discharged from the lunatic asylum, look out that she does not come here. I'm afraid of her trying to kill the children." Margit grew thoughtful. "Isn't it kind of symbolical that the masses ran after a mad-woman? A woman who had never been sane?"

"Aren't we all mad?"

Margit shook her head, looking annoyed.

"Look here, Clarisse, if you give way to that kind of idea you'll never be any use. And you've got to be. You must help others, you must save whoever and whatever can be saved. You must try not to think of yourself."

"If I can."

Marianka stepped out on the veranda. "Mr. Joseph can't find his shaving tackle; he's already unpacked the whole trunk."

Margit jumped up with a little laugh. "That's Joseph all over. And the trunk was so well packed! I'm coming." She ran into the house and Clarisse, following a sudden impulse, said: "Marianka."

The old woman stopped in the doorway. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes. Stay with me for a little while."

Marianka looked surprised but drew up a chair without saying a word. Clarisse gazed at her and slowly her depression vanished. After a few minutes' silence Marianka said: "I'll call Tommy, he can keep you company. I must help the others to finish packing, the suitcases have not been touched yet. And Marketa needs me in the kitchen, and . . ."

"Who does not need your help, Marianka?"

The old woman laughed. "That's what I'm here for, my dear."

She got up heavily, wearily. Then, looking at Clarisse's face, she smiled kindly. "They'll come back one day," she said gently. "I'm quite sure they will. And then everything will be all right again."

She nodded encouragingly.

"You'll see, my dear."

Her hurried steps faded away but Clarisse had the strange impression that Marianka had not left her, as if she were everywhere at the same time, smiling, helpful, patient and wise.

The next morning they all got up much too early and sat about nervously, tired and cross. Aladar had come over. He was looking ill and sulky as always when he felt moved. Margit avoided being alone with him.

"Poor Aladar," Aunt Anny said. "Such a pity a priest can't marry. If you had a nice wife you wouldn't be lonely now."

"What a ghastly idea."

"I can't understand you, Aladar. Of course you've got to look upon the Church as your bride, but you must admit it's rather a large concern to live comfortably with."

"He won't have time to be lonely," Margit declared. "He'll be so busy looking after the parish. Mind you write often, Aladar, and tell me everything, what the people are doing, how they behave, who marries, who has babies, who dies. And don't buy anything in the Miller shop, and if the horses should fall ill don't call in Weber but get the vet from Piestany. And for goodness sake don't forget that Elisabeth is to come here to-morrow, and the books on my writing-table must be sent to Svata at Bratislava, and write me Hynek's address as soon as you know it, maybe he's still in England, and . . ."

The carriage wheels sounded on the gravel of the drive. They got up.

"Don't, please, come to the station," Aunt Anny implored. "Saying good-bye there is something awful. The train never leaves and one keeps saying the same things again and again and there comes a moment when one simply longs for the others to be off."

"You'll write at once, won't you?" Clarisse asked.

"What did I tell you, dear? If you come to the station you would say it at least twenty times."

They were standing in the hall surrounded by luggage.

"Departure from Egypt," Aunt Anny remarked. "But the Jews did not get seasick, as I'm sure to do. Ah well, it's only about an hour's crossing. Where are the others?"

They, too, had come into the hall. Clarisse, looking at them, felt that she had such a lot to say. She wanted to speak all the kind, affectionate words she had omitted saying, all the good wishes; but the lump in her throat made her mute.

"I'm coming with you part of the way," Robert declared. "Aladar will be glad of my company when he gets home."

Aunt Anny put on her hat. "Come along, we'll miss the

train." She kissed Clarisse. "*Au revoir*, darling, in a few years' time."

They were gone. How empty the hall looked, how deserted; the whole house suddenly gave the impression of having been uninhabited for years. Clarisse went into the garden, hoping to feel less lonely amongst the trees and flowers. Little Franta was weeding his own flower-bed. Dear little chap, Clarisse thought. I'll keep him for good. The child smiled at her and she felt pleased. Tommy rushed out from behind a *vigelia* bush, where he had been digging up a plant, and jumped upon her. Franta, Tommy, at least she still had them. Then her thoughts turned affectionately and with slight resignation to Robert. We must try to get on together, must try to be kind to each other. Of course we shall quarrel again, I'll shock him and he will annoy me, but all that won't matter as long as we can manage to feel that we belong together.

Old Ján was standing at the greenhouse door and beckoning to her.

"Come quick, Countess Clarisse. The new rose has come out overnight."

She entered the greenhouse. The new rose that had come from France last year was of a radiant, almost unearthly beauty.

"We've never grown a lovelier one," the gardener said. "What a pity . . ." He left the sentence unfinished but Clarisse knew what he was thinking: what a pity that Petr-zalka, our Petr-zalka belongs to the Germans now, our lovely park; that our roses bloom for them, that our trees give them shade. If only we could take away for ever from that vile nation that wantonly destroys life, happiness and beauty and gloats over the misery of others the sun, the rain, the flowers, the trees, the light, the earth . . .

Sadly gazing at the rose she recalled the day when old Ján, standing in front of a new bloom, had said proudly: "The first plant goes to the Virgin of Marianka, the second

to Lana." Were that day and to-day really only separated by two short years?

Noticing that her eyes grew wet, Ján, who hated to see women cry, said hastily: "On the day our armies march into Prague I shall send the rose to the Hradshin. Don't cry, Countess Clarisse, we'll both live to see it."

How long the day was; every minute seemed a tiny eternity. Clarisse sat on the veranda and gazed into the garden, but she did not see it. Before her eyes passed the last years with all their fears, their forebodings, their sorrows. She saw the shadow falling on the land, growing denser and blacker; she saw the cross laid on the shoulders of a people, saw the nation ascending Mount Calvary, panting, covered with wounds, saw the three crosses in the glaring sun and lived through that third hour when the veil of the temple was rent and it grew dark over the land. What did the Gospel say? "And the graves were opened." Clarisse shuddered. How many graves would be opened before the resurrection?

The sun grew pale, evening came, the garden vanished in the shadows. Franta went to bed. Enveloped in silence and loneliness the house seemed deadly quiet. Not only our house, Clarisse thought, but also many other homes are empty, deserted, and innumerable people are all alone who were happy with their families only a short time ago. How many have had to leave their country, to live in alien lands; tolerated, pitied, and secretly despised? How many have become aliens in their own country? Who drove them out? Who left ruined homes and ruined lives wherever they passed?

She got up and stepped into the garden trying to escape her thoughts. Standing at the gate she waited for Robert, but the road too was deserted and she heard no sound. The deadly quiet, the sorrowful silence, the empty garden and the empty house seemed a nightmare. She returned to the drawing-room and sat down at the piano, but every tune she played sounded weird in the empty room. She closed the

piano with an impatient bang. How terrible waiting was; she remembered Elisabeth Viskocil whose whole life had shrunk to waiting.

It was quite dark when Robert came.

"Forgive me," he said, kissing her. "I know I'm late, but Aladar would not hear of my going."

Clarisse nodded; the presbytery too had become lonely and cheerless, as everything here.

"Is Aladar greatly depressed?" she asked compassionately.

"He'd never show it, you know him. But he kept saying: 'I must tell Margit, I must ask what she thinks, Margit is sure to know what to do,' and then he'd shake his head and look around as though he could not believe that she had really gone."

"Poor fellow."

Robert smiled. "He's got so many plans that he won't have much time to miss her. He really seems cut out for an underground worker, and do you know, I believe he rather enjoys it."

Clarisse's thought left her cousin to roam farther afield. Aunt Anny and her family . . . they were sitting in the train, they must have crossed the frontier long ago. They were wearily listening to the rumbling of the wheels, hearing them sing a joyless song: "Onward, onward, onward." Waiting for them was an unknown, alien world . . . and they were not the only ones. Clarisse suddenly felt that all she had seen and experienced was but a tiny part of an immense happening, a faded image in a half-blurred mirror of what was going on all over the country, and also across the frontier, in Austria. Probably it was a blessing that one could only grasp part of it; the whole was so terrible that no man could bear knowing it.

Sitting in his armchair and smoking his cigarette, Robert burst out laughing. His wife looked up with a start.

"What *are* you laughing at?"

"Aladar has got a new bosom friend, Tido Prohazka. He turned up at the presbytery in the afternoon, to keep the Father company, he said. Aladar behaves towards him like

a pupil towards a greatly admired and rather incomprehensible master and Prohazka tries hard not to shock the parish priest. If only he knew how hard it is to shock Aladar!"

"Dear me, I almost forgot that Margit made me promise to make friends with Prohazka."

"No need to worry about him. He's got over his shock, and he and Aladar are wonderfully suited. I also saw Zapletal, who sends his compliments, and some others whose names I may not tell you." He chuckled. "The presbytery has been turned into an underground meeting place."

"And you, what about you?" she asked a trifle anxiously.

"We'll both do whatever we can, won't we, dear?"

She nodded silently and thought of Christine of whom they did not even know whether she was still alive. I must say good-bye to my own life, Clarisse told herself, and perhaps to everything that has made it happy and beautiful. But to-day she did not recoil from the idea, she had at last learnt her lesson and knew that for all of them there was a single thing left: fighting the enemy.

After dinner they sat in the small sitting-room. Aunt Anny's cat, that had looked for her mistress all day long, had at last gone to sleep on Robert's knees, and Tommy, slightly jealous, had settled down on Clarisse's lap. Blowing a smoke ring into the air and watching it dissolve she said with a smile:

"Here we are sitting with our dog and our cat like Darby and Joan."

"And with each other," he added quickly, for her voice had been wistful.

"Yesterday . . ." Clarisse swallowed hard. The train with all her dear people was rushing along in the dark, carrying them farther and farther away. Would she ever see them again? She looked round despondently. "Everything seems so empty," she said in a small voice.

He nodded. "There is a deadly quiet and empty time coming for all of us. A time of waiting."

"What for?"

"The war."

"Do you really think . . . ?"

"The war *must* come. It will be a ghastly war, but the evil the Germans represent can only be driven out by another perhaps even greater horror."

She remained silent, too deeply moved for words. Another war, again the murdering of a whole generation, again misery and sorrow . . . And yet one had to long for the war. She passionately wished it had broken out already, longed to know that bombs were raining down on the hateful country that was as guilty as hell and that had taught decent men and women to hate, and to hope for one thing only: the annihilation of everything German.

Robert's calm voice recalled her to reality. "The Bredars are back," he told her. "Their car passed me on the road."

Clarisse felt a shiver run along her spine. Their coming had been the beginning of all, or rather the coming of their guest. And now they were here again. What did it mean?

"Where the carcass is, there will be gathered together the vultures," Robert said a trifle ponderously.

How well she knew that kind of remark. How often it had annoyed her in the past. To-day it did her good, it sounded so familiar and somehow comforting. She laughed, wondering an instant later that she was able to do so. Was life really so much stronger than sorrow, horror and even death? She put out her hand for a fresh cigarette. Tommy growled softly because her gesture had disturbed him. The cat on Robert's knees was purring loudly. It was as if nothing had happened, as if no terrible catastrophe was overshadowing the whole world. There was a sudden crackling sound and the lights went out. Clarisse gave a little cry. What had happened?

"The fuse," Robert said soothingly, adding in a tone of annoyance: "And we haven't got a single spare one in the house."

They sat in the dark, their cigarettes gleamed red in the blackness all around. Clarisse grew nervous. Ever since she was a child she had hated the dark, it had always seemed peopled by ghosts. Robert smoked on placidly. The darkness

seemed to grow denser. The old trees before the window rustled mournfully in the breeze and the weather-cock creaked plaintively.

"Do light a candle, Robert. We can't sit in the dark for ever. I can't bear it."

Putting out his cigarette, he got up. At the same instant the door was opened and a bright yellow ray fell into the room. In the doorway stood Marianka with a lamp. Marianka drove away the dark.

Clarisse drew a breath of relief. Now the room looked familiar again. Marianka said something but Clarisse hardly listened. The old Slovak woman put the lamp on the table and left the room.

Robert stared musingly into the light.

"Do you remember," he said softly, "what Karel Capek wrote shortly before his death? 'Our hearts are longing for the light but at least we still possess the humble lamp. Even its pale ray enables us to look into the future. Let all of us light our lamps so that men may find their way home in the dark. Night has come; do not put out a single light burning in our country. It would be a sin.'"

"Yes," Clarisse said, "if only a single man should find his way home by the light of our lamp we must keep it burning, for his sake."

The small lamp bathed the room in a golden light and Clarisse thought of all those who were sitting in the dark throughout the whole country, in distant Prague, whose streets resounded with the heavy steps of the German invader, in many, many towns and villages and farms. The shadow of death was hovering over all of them.

She felt afraid of the dark outside. Hastily getting up she walked to the window. Perhaps the darkness might appear less threatening, less fearful if she looked out. Pulling back the curtains she stared into the black void and for a moment her heart almost ceased beating.

"Robert, come quick. Look."

He came and stood beside her.

In the black night, beneath the starless sky from which black clouds hung low, a tiny light was moving. Burning

brightly, steadily, it seemed to float through the garden, out into the road.

Now that their eyes had grown accustomed to the dark they saw where the light came from. Marianka was walking through the garden holding a lantern. Wherever she came it grew light. She carried the light, bearing it over meadows and fields, between hedges and bushes, far into the land.

Gradually it faded away but they knew that it was still burning, a sanctuary lamp from which, on resurrection day, all other lamps would be lighted. They knew that no man and no nation, no violence and no inhumanity could put out this light.

Marianka Hrubin bore the lamp through the night, lighting it up for all those who were wearily wandering through the valley of darkness and despair.