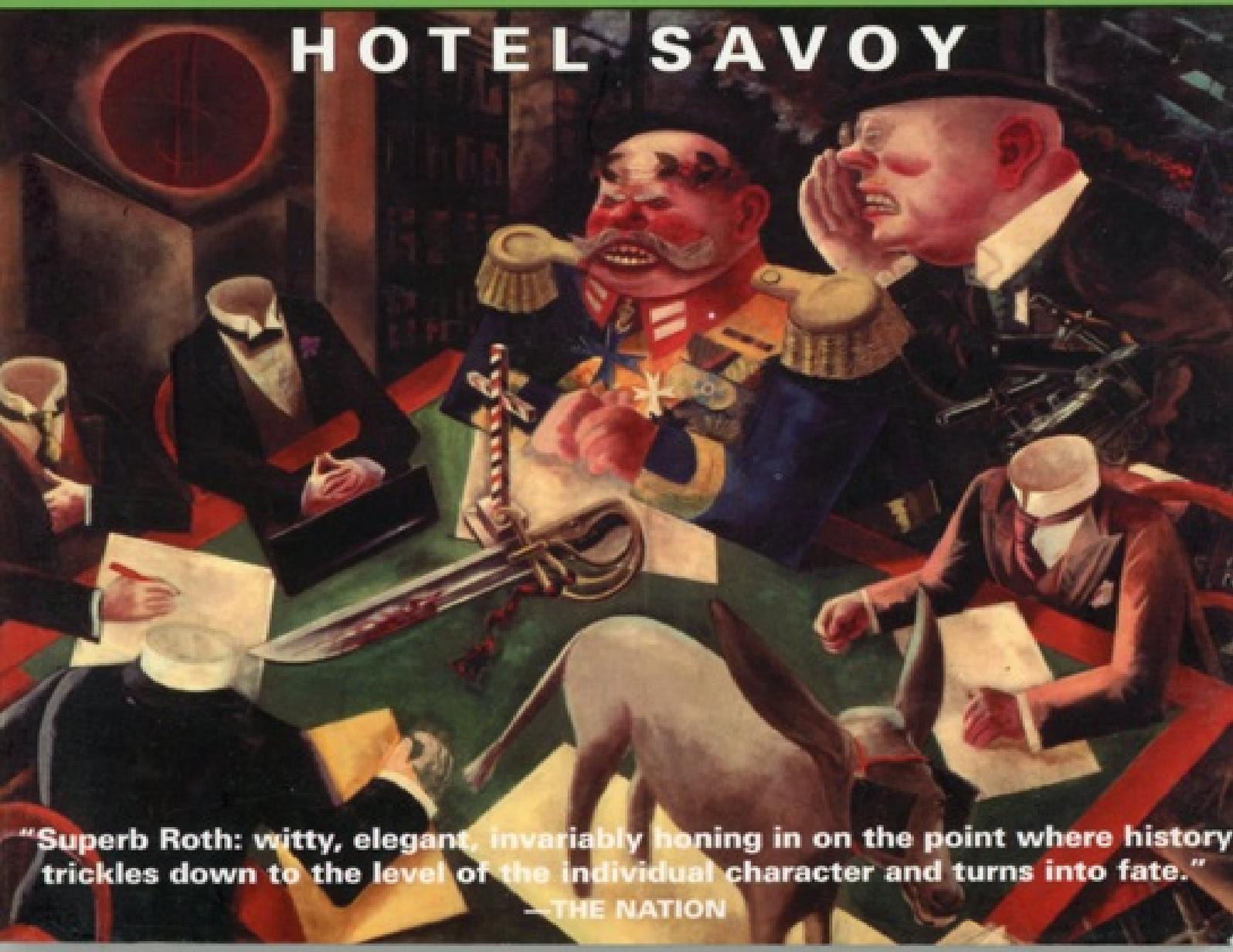


Joseph Roth

HOTEL SAVOY



"Superb Roth: witty, elegant, invariably honing in on the point where history trickles down to the level of the individual character and turns into fate."

—THE NATION

Joseph Roth titles
published by The Overlook Press

The Radetzky March

The Emperor's Tomb

Tarabas

Confession of a Murderer

Job

Flight Without End

The Silent Prophet

The Spider's Web and Zipper and His Father

Hotel Savoy

Three Novellas:

The Legend of the Holy Drinker

Fallmerayer the Stationmaster

The Bust of the Emperor

Right and Left

Copyright

This paperback edition first published in the United States in 2003 by
The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc.
Woodstock & New York

WOODSTOCK:
One Overlook Drive
Woodstock, NY 12498
www.overlookpress.com

[for individual orders, bulk and special sales, contact our Woodstock office]

NEW YORK:
141 Wooster Street
New York, NY 10012

Copyright © 1975 and 1976 by Verlag Allert de Lange Amsterdam
Translation copyright © 1986 John Hoare

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system now known or to be invented without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, or broadcast.

ISBN: 978-1-59020-958-5

Contents

[Copyright](#)

[BOOK ONE](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Chapter XI](#)

[Chapter XII](#)

[Chapter XIII](#)

[BOOK TWO](#)

[Chapter XIV](#)

[Chapter XV](#)

[Chapter XVI](#)

[Chapter XVII](#)

[Chapter XVIII](#)

[Chapter XIX](#)

[Chapter XX](#)

[Chapter XXI](#)

[Chapter XXII](#)

[Chapter XXIII](#)

[Chapter XXIV](#)

[Chapter XXV](#)

[Chapter XXVI](#)

[Chapter XXVII](#)

[Chapter XXVIII](#)

BOOK ONE

I

I arrive at the Hotel Savoy at ten o'clock in the morning. I am determined to rest for a couple of days or a week. My relations live in this town – my parents were Russian Jews. I mean to raise enough money to continue my journey westwards.

I am on my way back from three years as a prisoner of war, having lived in a Siberian camp and having wandered through Russian towns and villages as workman, casual labourer, night watchman, porter and baker's assistant.

I am wearing a Russian blouse which someone gave me, breeches which I inherited from a dead comrade, and a pair of still wearable boots the origins of which I cannot myself remember. After five years I stand again at the gates of Europe. The Hotel Savoy, with its seven storeys, its gilded coat of arms and its uniformed porter, seems to me more European than any other hotel in the east. It holds out the promise of water, soap, English lavatories, a lift, chambermaids in white caps, a chamberpot gleaming like some precious surprise in the little brown-panelled night cupboard; electric lamps blooming in shades of green and rose, like flowers from their calyx; bells which ring at the push of a button; and beds plump with eiderdowns, cheerful and waiting to receive one's body.

I am thankful once again to strip off an old life, as I so often have during these years. I look back upon a soldier, a murderer, a man almost murdered, a man resurrected, a prisoner, a wanderer.

I can sense the first light, the roll of the drums as the company marches, rattling the windowpanes of the top floors. I can glimpse a man in white shirt-sleeves, the sharply moving limbs of the soldiers, a gleam of light through the woods shining on the dew. I dive into the grass facing the 'imaginary enemy' and feel the overwhelming wish to go on lying there in the silky grass which tickles my nose.

I can hear the silence of the hospital ward, the white silence. One summer morning I get up, hear the healthy trill of the larks, relish the morning cocoa and buttered rolls and the smell of iodine, the first 'regulation diet' of the day.

I inhabit a white world of sky and snow. Barracks cover the ground like yellow scabs. I enjoy the last sweet drag on a scavenged cigarette butt and read the personal columns of an age-old newspaper from home, repeating the names of familiar streets, recognising the owner of the corner grocery, and a porter and a certain blonde Agnes with whom I have slept.

I listen to the delicious rain during a sleepless night, to fast melting lumps of ice in morning's laughing sunshine. I grasp the splendid breasts of a woman met along the way and laid down on the moss; the white pride of her thighs. I sleep the sleep of the

dead in the hay barn. I stride across ploughed fields and listen to the thin voice of a balalaika.

One can absorb such a lot and yet remain unchanged in body, in walk, in behaviour. One can drink from a million glasses and never quench one's thirst. A rainbow may quiver with all its colours but can never change the spectrum.

I could arrive at the Hotel Savoy with a single shirt, I could leave with twenty trunks and still be the same old

Gabriel Dan. Perhaps it is because this notion has made me self-confident, lordly and arrogant that the hall porter salutes me, the wanderer with the Russian blouse, and that a page boy takes me in hand although I have no luggage.

A lift bears me upwards, each of its sides a mirror. The lift-boy, a man in middle age, lets the rope glide through his hand, the cabin rises, I sway and find myself thinking that I could enjoy this upward motion for quite a long time. I enjoy the swaying feeling and calculate how many wearisome steps I would have had to climb but for this noble lift. As I rise ever higher, I throw my bitterness, my wanderings and homelessness, all my mendicant past, down the liftshaft from which it can never reach me again.

My room – one of the cheapest – is on the sixth floor, number 703. I like the number – I am superstitious about them – for the zero in the middle is like a lady flanked by two gentlemen, one older and one younger. A yellow coverlet lies on the bed; not, thank God, a grey one to remind me of the army. I turn the light on and off a couple of times, open the door of the cupboard for night-time use, the mattress gives beneath my hand and bounces back, water sparkles in its carafe, the window gives onto a courtyard in which cheerfully coloured laundry is flapping, children are shouting and hens are wandering at will.

I wash myself and slowly slide into bed, treasuring every second. I open the window, the hens are cackling loudly and merrily, like a sweet lullaby.

I sleep dreamlessly the whole day through.

II

The late sunshine reddened the topmost windows of the house opposite; laundry, chickens, children had vanished from the courtyard.

As I arrived that morning it had been drizzling. Because in the meantime it had cleared up I felt as if I had slept for three days, not one. My weariness had left me and I was in good heart. I felt curious about the town and my new life. My room seemed friendly, as if I had lived there for a long time. The bell was familiar, and the doorhandle, the light switch, the green lampshade, the clothes cupboard and the washbasin. Everything was homely, like a room in which one has spent one's childhood. Everything was consoling and warm, like returning again to someone beloved.

The only new thing was the notice on the door which read:

QUIET IS REQUESTED AFTER 10 PM NO RESPONSIBILITY CAN BE TAKEN FOR VALUABLES LEFT IN THE ROOM. THERE IS A SAFE IN THE HOTEL.

KALEGUROPULOS. HOTELIER

The name was foreign, Greek, and I amused myself by declensions: Kaleguropulos, Kaleguropulu, Kaleguropulo – a vague recollection of boring school periods; of a Greek master resurrected from forgotten years in a bottle-green jacket. I buried the memory. Next I decided to stroll through the town, perhaps to look up a relation if time permitted, and to enjoy whatever the evening and the town might offer.

I go along the corridor to the main staircase and take pleasure in the handsome square flagstones of the hotel passage, in the clean red stone and the steady echo of my footsteps.

I walk slowly downstairs. From the lower floors come voices, but up here everything is silent. All the doors are shut, one moves as if it were an old monastery, past the doors of monks at prayer. The fifth floor looks exactly like the sixth, one could easily confuse them. Up above and here, too, a standard clock hangs facing the stairs, but the two clocks do not tell the same time. The one on the sixth floor says seven o'clock, on this floor it says ten past and on the fourth floor it says ten to seven.

Upon the flagstones on the third floor lie dark red carpets with green borders and one no longer hears one's footsteps. The room numbers are not painted on the doors but mounted on little porcelain signs. A maid passes with a feather duster and a wastepaper basket. They seem here to pay more attention to cleanliness. This is where the rich live, and the cunning Kaleguropulos lets the clocks run slow, because the rich

have time.

On the mezzanine the two wings of a door were standing wide open.

This was a large room with two windows, two beds, two chests of drawers, a green plush sofa, a brown tiled stove and a stand for luggage. Kaleguropulos' sign was not to be seen on the door – perhaps the residents at this level were allowed to be noisy after ten o'clock, and perhaps the management did take responsibility for valuables – or did they already know about the safe, or did Kaleguropulos inform them personally?

A scented woman with a grey feather boa rustled out of a neighbouring room. This is a lady, I say to myself, and walk close behind her down the last few stairs, admiring her little polished bootees. The lady pauses for a while at the hall porter's, I reach the doors at the same time as her, the porter salutes and I feel flattered that perhaps the porter thinks that I am the rich lady's escort.

I decided, since I had no idea of what direction to take, that I would follow her. She turned right out of the narrow street in which the hotel stood, and there the market square widened out. It must have been market day. Hay and chaff were scattered about the pavements, shops were just being shut, locks were clicking, chains rattling, householders were making for home with little handcarts, women wearing bright headscarves were hurrying, carefully carrying full pots in front of them and bursting market bags over their arms, with wooden spoons sticking out of the top. A few lanterns cast their silvery light into the dusk, the pavements turned into a parade where men in uniform and in civilian clothes twirled their slender canes, and waves of Russian scent ebbed and flowed. Coaches came bumping along from the railway station, piled high with luggage, their passengers muffled up. The road surface was poor, uneven and potholed, the worst places covered with rotten duckboards which rattled surprisingly.

Even so, the town looked friendlier in the evening than by day. In the morning it was grey, coal dust from the gigantic chimneys of nearby factories drifted over it, dirty beggars crouched at the street corners, garbage and night soil buckets were piled in the back alleys. Darkness, however, hid everything; filth, vice, pestilence and poverty alike; darkness was kindly, motherly, forgiving and concealing.

Houses which are merely decrepit and tumbledown look ghostly and secret in the dark, their architecture capricious. Crooked gables become delicate in the shadows, dim light beckons mysteriously through half-darkened window panes, two paces further on a blaze of light streams out from windows as tall as a man giving onto a confectioner's where mirrors reflect crystal and candelabra and from whose ceiling amiable angels swoop and stoop. This is the rich world's confectioner and in this industrial town it earns and spends money.

This was the lady's destination but I did not follow her in because it occurred to me that my money must last me for quite a time before I could continue my journey.

I sauntered along, saw dark groups of busy Jews in kaftans, listened to loud gossip, to greetings and greetings returned, to cross words and long talk. Talk of feathers, percentages, hops, steel, coal and lemons flew into the air, out of mouths and aimed at ears. Suspicious looking men with rubber collars seemed to be policemen. I reached unconsciously for my breast pocket where I kept my passport, just as I had reached in my army days for my cap if one of my superiors was about. I was coming home, my papers were in order, I had nothing to fear.

I went up to a policeman and asked directions to the Gibka, where my relations lived, my rich uncle Phöbus Bohlaug. The policeman spoke German, a lot of people hereabouts spoke German; German manufacturers, engineers and merchants dominated society, business and industry in this town.

It was about a ten minute walk and I thought about Phöbus Bohlaug, of whom my father used to speak with envy and hatred on returning tired and depressed from unproductive committee meetings. Every member of the family spoke the name Phöbus with respect, almost as if they were indeed referring to the Sun God. Only my father called him 'Phöbus, that oaf' – because he had allegedly done some curious business with my mother's dowry. My father had always been too cowardly to demand the dowry. All he used to do, and always at the same time of year, was to look in the visitors' list and see if Phöbus Bohlaug had arrived at the Hotel Imperial. If he had, he would invite his brother-in-law to tea in the Leopoldstadt. My mother would wear a black dress and, by then, rather scanty artificial jewellery. She admired her rich brother as if he were someone very strange and royal, as if the same womb had not borne them both and the same two breasts suckled them. My uncle used to come, bringing a book for me. An aroma of gingerbread would emanate from the kitchen, in which my grandfather lived and from which he only emerged on special occasions, as if newly minted, freshly washed, with a white starched dickey, twinkling through spectacles which were much too weak, leaning forward to look at his son Phöbus, pride of his old age. Phöbus had an expansive laugh, an expansive double chin and red rolls of fat at the back of his neck. He smells of cigars, and sometimes of wine, and kisses everyone on both cheeks. He talks a lot, loudly and cheerfully, but if asked whether business is good his eyes start out of his head, he shrinks into himself and might at any moment begin to tremble like some freezing beggar. His double chins disappear behind his collar. 'Business is no good these days. When I was small I could buy a poppyseed cake for half a kopeck, and today a loaf of bread costs ten. The children – touch wood – are growing up and cost money, Alexander asks for pocket money every day.'

My father would twitch at his cuffs and put his hands back on the edge of the table, smiling when Phöbus addressed him, but sulky and weak and praying for his brother-in-law to have a heart attack. After two hours

Phöbus would stand up, press a silver coin into my mother's hand, another into Grandfather's, and slip one into my pocket. My father would see him down the steps, because it was dark, holding the petrol lamp high in his hands and my mother would call, 'Nathan, mind the shade!' Father minded the shade and, since the front door was still open, one could hear the resonant voice of Phöbus.

Two days later Phöbus would be gone and my father would announce that 'the oaf had already left.'

'Stop it Nathan,' my mother would say.

I came to the Bibka, an elegant street on the outskirts of town, with low white houses, new and yet ornamental. I saw lighted windows in the Bohlaugs' house but the door was closed. I debated for a while whether I should go up at such a late hour — it must have been ten already – and then I heard the sound of a piano and a cello, a woman's voice, and a rattle of cards being shuffled. I thought that it would not do for me to join that company in the suit I was wearing. Everything depended on my first arrival, so I decided to put off my visit to the next day and returned to the hotel. The

journey in vain had put me out of sorts. The porter did not salute me as I entered the hotel. The liftman did not bestir himself when I rang the bell, but came over unhurriedly, studying my face. He was a uniformed man in his fifties, an elderly lift-boy. I was annoyed that in this hotel the lift was not operated by small rosy-cheeked youngsters.

It occurred to me that I had intended to take a look at the seventh floor, and so walked upstairs. The corridor above was very narrow, the ceiling was lower, grey steam poured out of a laundry and the place smelt of damp clothing. Two or three doors must have been ajar because one heard voices arguing. As I suspected, no clock hung on this floor. I was on the point of going downstairs when the lift ground to a halt, the gate opened, the liftman gave me a puzzled look and a girl stepped out. She was wearing a small, grey, sports hat, and turned in my direction. Her face was brown and she had large grey eyes with black eyelashes. I said good evening to her and proceeded down stairs. On the bottom stair something made me look up again and I thought I glimpsed the beer-coloured eyes of the liftman looking in my direction. I locked my door because I was unaccountably frightened. I began reading an old book.

III

I am not sleepy. A bell from a church tower sends regular strokes into the gentle night. Above me I hear cautious, soft, unceasing footsteps, which must be a woman's. Was it the young girl from the seventh floor who walked so restlessly back and forth? What was troubling her?

I looked up at the ceiling under the sudden impression that it had become transparent. Perhaps one might see the delicate soles of the girl in grey. Would she go barefoot or in slippers? Would she be wearing grey stockings of half-silk? I remembered how I and many of my comrades had longed for a leave which would enable us to ease our longing for a pair of buckskin shoes. The legs of healthy peasant girls were there to be stroked, they would have broad feet, their big toe widely spaced from walking through the muddy fields and along the muddy roads. The hard ground of the autumn fields was the nuptial bed beneath their bodies. Strong thighs. A minute of rapid love in the dark before the command to fall in interrupted. I thought back to the schoolteacher, no longer young, in a village in the military zone. She was the only woman in the place who had not taken flight from the war and its onslaught. She was a sharp-tongued young woman, over thirty and known as the 'barbed wire entanglement', but there was not a man within a radius of some kilometres, far and wide, who would not have courted her. She was the only woman with shoes, even if her stockings had holes in them.

In this enormous Hotel Savoy with its 864 rooms, and indeed in the whole town, there were perhaps only two people awake, the girl overhead and myself. We might as well lie side by side, I, Gabriel, and the brown girl with the friendly face and the big grey eyes with dark eyelashes. To hear the tread of this gazelle so clearly the hotel ceilings must be very thin. I imagined to myself that I could detect the scent of her body. I decided to find out if the steps were really those of the girl.

In the corridor there burned a little dark red glowworm of a light; shoes, boots, women's shoes stood outside the bedroom doors, all as expressive as human faces. No such light burned on the seventh floor, but feeble light shone from opaque glass. A thin yellow beam shone through a chink from room 800, this must be the room of the restless pacer. I can see through the keyhole and it is the girl. She is walking in some white garment – it is a bath robe – back and forth, stopping for a moment to glance at a book before resuming her pacing.

I make an effort to divine her face, but only glimpse the gentle curve of her chin, a quarter of her profile when she stands still, a cascade of hair and now and again as she takes a long stride the peignoir parts to reveal a glimmer of brown skin. From

somewhere came a painful cough, someone spat resonantly into a spittoon. I went back to my room. As I closed my door I thought I saw a shadow in the corridor. I pulled the door open, so that the light from my room shone into the corridor. But no one had been there.

Overhead the pacing had stopped. The girl was probably asleep by now. I lay down on the bed in my clothes, and drew the curtains back. The soft greyness of first light slid gently over the room's furnishings.

The inescapable onset of morning was announced by a bell ringing and the rough shout of a man's voice in some unrecognisable language.

A floor waiter came, wearing a green baize apron. His rolled up sleeves revealed his muscular forearms, dark with curly hair as far as his elbows. Evidently maid service was only for the first three floors. The coffee was better than might have been expected, but what was the use of that without a maid in a white cap? This was a disappointment and I wondered whether there were any possibility of moving to the third floor.

IV

Phöbus Bohlaug sits in front of a gleaming copper samovar, eating ham and scrambled egg and drinking tea with milk. 'My doctor has prescribed eggs for me,' he says, wiping his moustache with a napkin and proffering his face to be kissed as he sits in the chair. His face smells of shaving soap and eau de Cologne. It is smooth, soft and warm. He wears a wide bath robe and must just have come out of his shower. On a chair lies a newspaper and a heart-shaped piece of his hairy chest is visible since he has not yet put on a shirt.

He makes the point once for all, 'You look fine.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Since yesterday.'

'Why have you come today?'

'I came yesterday, but I heard that you had company, and wearing this suit I didn't want ...'

'Good Lord – it's a perfectly good suit! No one is ashamed these days. Millionaires don't wear better suits than that these days! Even I only have three suits. A suit costs a fortune.'

'I didn't know that. I've only just come back from prisoner-of-war camp.'

'Did you get on all right? Everyone says it's pretty good in prison camp.'

'It was pretty bad, too, at times, Uncle Phöbus.'

'I see, and now do you mean to continue your journey?'

'Yes. I need money.'

'I need money, too,' joked Phöbus Bohlaug, 'we all need money.'

'Probably you have some.'

'Have I? How do you know I have? I came back from being on the run and pulled my affairs together again. In Vienna I gave your father money – his illness cost me a pretty penny – and I raised a tombstone to your late mother, a lovely tombstone – even then it cost me around two thousand.'

'My father died in a hospital for incurables.'

'But your mother, bless her, died in a nursing home.'

'What are you shouting for? Don't excite yourself, Phöbus!' says Regina. She comes out of the bedroom, holding her corsets in her hand, garters dangling.

'This is Gabriel.' Phöbus introduced us.

I kissed Regina's hand. She sympathised with me about my sufferings during imprisonment, and about the war, the times, the younger generation, and her husband.

'Little Alexander is here, otherwise we would have asked you to stay with us,' she

said.

Little Alexander appears in blue pyjamas, bows and clicks his bedroom slippers. During the war he had transferred opportunely from the cavalry to the service corps. He is now in Paris, studying 'export', as Phöbus has it, and is spending his leave at home.

'You're putting up at the Savoy?' asks Alexander with the assurance of a man of the world. 'There's a beautiful girl staying there' – and he winks in the direction of his father – 'her name is Stasia and she dances at the Variétés; unapproachable, I can tell you. I wanted to take her to Paris with me' – he moved nearer to me – 'but she says she'll go on her own, when it pleases her. A fine girl.'

I stayed to lunch. Phöbus' daughter came with her husband. The son-in-law 'helped in the business'. He was a well set up, good-humoured, reddish blond man with a bull neck, who spooned away bravely at his soup, left a clean plate and never opened his mouth while the conversation rolled over him.

'I am just thinking,' said Frau Regina, 'that your blue suit would fit Gabriel.'

'I have a blue suit, yet?' asked Phöbus.

'Yes,' said Regina, 'I'll fetch it.'

I tried in vain to fend it off. Alexander clapped me on the shoulder, the son-in-law said 'quite right' and Regina brought the blue suit. I try it on in Alexander's room, in front of the big standing mirror. It fits.

I appreciate and understand the need for a blue suit, 'good as new', for polka-dotted brown ties and for a brown waistcoat. That afternoon I leave with a brown cardboard box in my hand. I am to come again. The hope of travel money still hums quietly inside me.

'You see? I've fitted him out,' said Phöbus to Regina.

V

The girl's name is Stasia. The programme of the Variétés does not bill her by name. She dances on cheap boards in front of an audience of local and Parisian Alexanders. She executes a couple of movements from an oriental dance, then sits down crosslegged before an incense burner and waits for the curtain. One can see her body, blue shadows under her arms, the swelling of a brown breast, the curve of her hip, her thigh revealed by the short tricot.

There was a farcical brass band. The absence of violins almost hurt. There were old humorous songs, rubbishy jokes by a clown, a dressed up donkey with the bottom of its ears painted red, trotting patiently back and forth. Waiters in white, smelling like beer cellars, passed between the rows carrying mugs overflowing with froth. The beam of a yellow spot shone diagonally from a capriciously sited opening in the ceiling, the dark backcloth of the stage gaped like the cry of an open mouth, the compere croaked like the bearer of evil tidings.

I wait at the stage door; once again it is like the old days when as a boy I waited in the side alley, pressed into the shadow of a doorway, melting into it until the sound of quick young steps rang out from the pavement, flowering miraculously from the barren paving stones.

Stasia came out in company with men and women, their voices mingled.

For a long time I was lonely in the midst of thousands. Now there are a thousand things which I can share: a glimpse of a dilapidated gable, a swallow's nest in a cupboard of the Hotel Savoy, the irritating beer-yellow eye of the old lift-boy, the bitterness of the seventh floor, the mystery of a Greek name, of a suddenly living grammatical concept, the melancholy recollection of an awkward Aorist tense, the constrictions of my parental house, the laughably ponderous Phöbus Bohlaug and 'little Alexander's' life saved by his transfer to the army service corps. Living things took on more life, things that were generally condemned seemed even more detestable, Heaven was nearer, the world at one's feet.

The door of the lift was open and Stasia was seated inside. I did not hide my delight and we wished each other good evening like old acquaintances. I greeted the inevitable lift-boy drily. He pretended not to know that I should get out at the sixth floor and took us both to the seventh. Here Stasia emerged and disappeared into her room, but the lift-boy waited on, as if he had a passenger to collect: why was he waiting there with his scornful yellow eyes?

I therefore proceed slowly down the stairs, listening to hear if the lift is going to come down. Finally, when I am halfway down, I hear the watery sound of the lift in

motion. I turn back. From the top storey the liftman is starting down the stairs, having sent the lift down empty, coming down himself slowly and grumpily on foot.

Stasia was probably expecting my knock.

I try to apologise.

‘No, no,’ says Stasia. ‘I would have invited you before, but I was afraid of Ignatz. He is the most dangerous person in the Hotel Savoy. I know your name, too, Gabriel Dan, and that you have come out of prison camp. I took you yesterday for a – colleague – an artiste,’ she hesitates: perhaps she fears that I shall be insulted?

I was not. ‘No,’ I reply. ‘I don’t know what I am. Earlier on I wanted to be a writer, but I went to the war and now I feel there is no point in writing. I am a solitary person and cannot write for the public.’

‘You live directly above my room,’ I say, for lack of anything more fascinating.

‘Why do you walk about all night long?’

‘I’m learning French. I’d like to go to Paris and do something. Not dancing. A stupid fellow wanted to take me with him to Paris and since then I keep thinking I’ll go.’

‘Alexander Bohlaug?’

‘You know him, and you arrived yesterday?’

‘You know me, too.’

‘Have you been talking to Ignatz already?’

‘No, but Bohlaug is my cousin.’

‘Oh! Excuse me!’

‘No, no, I beg of you. He *is* a stupid fellow.’

Stasia has a couple of chocolate bars, and brings out a spirit stove from the bottom of a hatbox.

‘Nobody must know about this. Even Ignatz doesn’t know. I hide it in a different place every day. In the hatbox today, yesterday in my muff, once between the cupboard and the wall. The police forbid spirit stoves in the hotel. But it is only possible – I mean for people like us – to live in hotels, and the Savoy is the best I know. Are you staying long?’

‘No, just for a few days.’

‘Oh, then you won’t get to know the Hotel Savoy. Santschin and his family live next door. Santschin is our clown – would you like to meet him?’

I wouldn’t, but Stasia needs some tea.

The Santschins do not live next door, but at the far end of the laundry, by the laundry. The roof slopes here and is so low that one is afraid of bumping the ceiling. In reality one does not reach it by a long way. It only gives the illusion of threatening. Generally speaking all dimensions shrink in this corner, as the result of the grey steam from the laundry which blinds you, shortens all distances and puffs out the walls. It is hard to accustom oneself to the air which is constantly steaming, blurs outlines, smells damp and warm, and turns people into unreal shapes.

Santschin’s room is steamy, too, and his wife quickly shuts the door behind us as if some wild animal lurked outside. The Santschins, who have lived here for six months, are well versed in shutting doors quickly. Their lamp, burning in a grey corona, reminds one of photographs of constellations surrounded by nebulae. Santschin rises to his feet, slips one arm into a dark jacket and nods in greeting to his guests. His head

seems to rise out of the clouds like some supernatural manifestation in a religious picture.

He smokes a long pipe and talks very little. The pipe limits his conversation. By the time he is half way through a sentence he has to stop, reach for his wife's darning needle and scratch about with it in the bowl of the pipe. Or a fresh match has to be struck and the matches have to be found. Frau Santschin is warming milk for the child and needs the matches just as often as her husband. The matchbox moves endlessly from beside Santschin to the washbasin on which the spirit stove stands, but sometimes it is left on the way and disappears without trace in the mist. Santschin bends down, knocks over a chair, the milk is hot and is taken off the stove whose flame flickers until something else is put on to warm, because of the risk of the matches not turning up again.

I offered my own box of matches first to one Santschin and then to the other, but neither of them wished to avail themselves of it and went on searching instead, leaving the stove to burn in vain. Finally Stasia spotted the matchbox in a fold of the coverlet on the bed.

A second later Frau Santschin is looking for the keys so as to extract the tea from the trunk – it could 'after all' be stolen from its tin. 'I hear something rattling somewhere,' says Santschin in Russian. We all stand still and listen for the rattling of keys, but nothing stirs. 'They can't rattle of their own accord,' yells Santschin, 'move around, all of you, then we'll hear them soon enough.'

But they made themselves heard only when Frau Santschin found a milk stain on her blouse and reached rapidly for her apron so as to avoid a repetition of the accident. The keys turn out to be in the apron, but not a single tea leaf is in the trunk.

'Are you looking for the tea?' asks Santschin suddenly. 'I finished it this morning.'

'Why do you sit there like a clot, saying nothing?' screams his wife.

'In the first place I have said something,' replies Santschin, who is a man of logic, 'and in the second place no one has asked me. In this household you should realise, Herr Dan, that I always come last.'

Frau Santschin had an idea: one could buy tea from Herr Fisch, if he were not actually asleep. There was no chance of his lending any. For profit he would gladly sell it.

'Let's go to Fisch,' says Stasia.

First, Fisch must be woken. He lives in the last room of the hotel, 864, and free of charge, because the merchants and industrialists of the town and the distinguished guests on the lowest floors are paying for him. Rumour has it that he was at one time married, well thought of, and a well-to-do factory owner. Now he has lost everything along the way; through carelessness, who can tell? Private charity keeps him going, but he does not admit it and calls himself a 'lottery dreamer'. He has the faculty of dreaming lottery numbers which must infallibly win. He sleeps all day, lets himself dream lottery numbers, and bets them. But even before a draw he has another dream, sells his ticket, buys another with the proceeds, the first one wins, the second one does not. Many people have become rich through Fisch's dreams and live on the first floor of the Savoy. Out of gratitude they pay for his rooms.

Fisch – his first name is Hirsch – lives in constant anxiety because somewhere, at some time, he has read that the government is going to abolish the lottery and

introduce tombola.

Hirsch Fisch must have dreamed 'lovely numbers', for it is a long time before he gets up. He admits no one to his room, greets me in the corridor, listens to Stasia's wish, shuts the door again and after quite a time opens it with a packet of tea in his hand.

'We'll put that on our account, Herr Fisch,' says Stasia.

'Good evening,' says Fisch, and goes to bed.

'If you have any money,' Stasia recommends, 'buy a ticket from Fisch,' and she tells me about the Jew's wonderful dreams.

I laugh, because I am ashamed to give in to my belief in miracles, something to which I am very prone. But I am determined to buy a ticket if Fisch will part with one.

The life stories of Santschin and Hirsch Fisch filled my mind. Everyone here seemed to be shrouded in secrecy. Have I dreamed that steam from the laundry? What lived behind this door and that one? Who had built this hotel? Who was Kaleguropulos, the manager?

'Do you know Karegulopulos?'

Stasia did not know him. Nobody knew him. Nobody had set eyes on him, but if one had the time and the inclination one could position oneself just at the time he did his rounds of inspection, and then look at him.

'Glanz tried it once,' says Stasia, 'but he didn't see Kaleguropulos. Incidentally, Ignatz says there will be an inspection tomorrow.'

Even before I can go downstairs, Hirsch Fisch buttonholes me. He wears a shirt and long white underpants and holds a chamberpot stiffly out in front of him. Tall and haggard as he is, he looks in the dim half-light like someone risen from the dead. The stubbly hair of his grey beard stands up threateningly like small sharp spears. His eyes are deep set, overshadowed by powerful cheekbones.

'Good morning, Herr Dan! Do you think that the little lady will pay me for my tea?'

'Surely she's likely to?'

'Listen, I've dreamed some numbers! A certainty! I shall bet today. Have you heard that the government means to abolish the lottery?'

'No!'

'It would be a great misfortune, I can tell you. What do poor people live on? What can make them rich? Must one wait until an old aunt dies, or one's grandfather? And then the will says that everything is left to the orphanage.'

Fisch talks, holding the chamberpot in front of him, apparently forgotten. I glance at it and he notices.

'You know, I save money by not tipping. Why would I need a floor waiter? I keep myself tidy. These people steal like magpies. Everyone has had something stolen by now, but not I. I look after myself. Ignatz says they will do rounds today. I always go out. If someone is not there, they aren't there! If Kaleguropulos finds something not to his liking he can't put me on a charge. Am I his recruit?'

'Do you know the owner?'

'Why should I know him? I'm not interested in new acquaintances. Have you heard the latest? Bloomfield is coming!'

'Who is that?'