

MEMOIR OF A
TRIANGULAR CHILD

by

Edward Hamlin

Excerpt

BOOK ONE

G A R G O Y L E

1.

In August of 1934, when my poppa packed his bags and went to bury his friend Otto, I was still too young to have any friends among the dead. Otto would have been a good friend to have, I suppose, if his keen sense of politics helped him to open any doors in the world beyond, but the sad truth was that I could hardly even remember his face. For obscure reasons he'd stopped coming to visit us long ago. By the time I was five or six years old his traditional holiday postcard, always from America, no longer found its way to our box, and Momma could no longer count on her basket of marzipan roses when he went down to see his relations in Munich. By a chain of such omissions Otto quietly made his changed feelings known to us. On the single occasion when my father had dared to place a direct call to him—determined to have things out—he got no further than the housekeeper, a surly bulldog who hung up the instant he identified himself. I remember the night well: Poppa paced the floor for hours, carrying on with us the conversation he had meant to carry on with his old friend. Such were our relations with Otto in his last years.

Not that we hadn't tried to save the friendship. Again and again my parents had asked him up, knowing how much he loved the mountains. But at a certain point these invitations were met with such an arch silence that Poppa's dignity curtailed them forever. And so, as families do, we'd gradually killed Otto off. Though we had word of him now and then, though we knew perfectly well that he was flourishing in Trier, in time we began speaking of him as one speaks of a dead man. Slowly we forced his jaunty life story, his booming voice, even his erstwhile love for us to crawl from the plain past tense into the glacial darkness of the pluperfect, the absolute zero of our esteem.

So it was that when I gazed down on Otto's death telegram I felt little more than a slump in his name—a collapse of its gutted *o*'s, a razing of the sharp, turreted *t*'s. Sadly, the death of this raven-haired, six-foot-two slice of garrulous, rough-breathing Germankind—this man who'd always worn a white rose boutonniere and had once nearly convinced me that pigeons were descended from the dinosaurs—meant even less to me

than the death of President Hindenburg, whose moustachioed scowl, at least, had never deserted us. Otto's might have been a face in a newspaper, ruined by a drop of rain.

And then Poppa's grief arrived to stun us all.

His first reaction to the news had been matter-of-fact. Sighing tiredly, he knocked the embers from his pipe and shook his head once or twice. "Drove himself like a dog, Otto did," was all he said. Only later, when Momma and I were no longer in the room, did we hear him begin to sob. We rushed to his side and found him a wreck of tears. Odd noises were escaping from him, words stifled in the palm of his hand, disastrous groans. A frantic pulse appeared just below his left eye. With trembling fingers he struggled to light his pipe, giving up only when a fumbled match fell and singed a hole in the tablecloth.

After several minutes he got up and left the room. Poppa lumbered off into the parlor, dragging Momma's worried gaze after him, until finally we heard him shut himself into the master bedroom. When he reappeared he announced that he had decided to go down to Trier for the funeral. There was a train in one hour. Momma stared at him in disbelief. A weird calm had stolen over him, as if he'd come downstairs to confess some unthinkable crime. If he was still my father, this was a side of him I'd never known.

Momma could not talk him into eating supper before leaving for the train. His bags were already poised on the landing. He seemed to be obsessed with the fact that Otto had only been thirty-eight: again and again I heard him repeat the number. When Momma tried to reason with him he only shook his head, snorted, and muttered "Otto, Otto," as if some voice inside his skull kept asking, "Who is dead, Jakob? Who is dead?"

The nearby woods were filling with thunder. A shiver came onto the air, making the light go brittle. Momma and I lit a fire, listening to the tinder snap and sizzle as the first raindrops strayed down the chimney. "This rain is a godsend," she said quietly, "the beds are bone dry . . . and just when all my roses are trying so hard to bloom . . ."

But now a horn was bleating. I looked out the window and saw a black taxicab crawling toward us through the dusk, its single headlight blazing in the light rain. Poppa swept his bags up and swung out the door without even kissing Momma goodbye,

seeming exasperated with her, with the mizzled evening, with everything that lacked the power to bring Otto back.

When the car had disappeared down the Mathilde Allee she moved to the back door and stood gazing out at the garden, touching the moist screen and sniffing at the earth. "This rain will do my roses a world of good," she said in a near-whisper, to no one but herself. "Poor Otto. The poor man." I left her there, sensing that she wanted to be alone, and she held her post for nearly an hour, smoothing her dress, sighing, making tiny private noises until the darkness was complete.

All that evening it rained, and then long, long into the night. The garden drank its fill and began to float away, its thousand green hands flapping desperately, utterly helpless against the deluge. Momma hated thunderstorms, and tended to lose her nerve when lightning threatened. During her impressionable years a favorite uncle had been struck down while walking home from a friend's funeral; though he'd lived through it, he suffered the rest of his life from intermittent epileptic seizures, a burden his niece felt to be wildly unjust. Now there was another dead friend, and another thunderstorm . . . I wasn't too surprised, really, when Momma asked me to join her in the master bedroom that night. She was embarrassed, and shy, and so honestly frightened; there was no way to refuse her. Small as I was, I was still her only bulwark against the elements. Besides, I didn't want to be on my own that night either—who, after all, likes to crawl into a lonely bed when the sky is exploding, shattering itself to pieces overhead, and a death has gutted out the day?

What a dismal night we had, she and I. Momma tossed and turned constantly, restless as a feverish girl, while I lay awake in my father's place unable to sleep. The weight of Poppa's body had left a permanent dent in the mattress; Momma kept diving toward me in a hot wave, crowding me miserably. I found myself wondering whether they slept facing each other or turned toward their separate walls. I wondered if they ever fell asleep in each other's arms. I could almost hear his gargantuan snoring—did she ever stare up at the ceiling and pray for him to stop? Two o'clock found me plotting an elaborate guerilla raid in my head, planting snipers in all the backyard shrubbery, sending a courier to scuttle along the fenceline, caching crates of shells under the berry bushes, the storm growling away all the while in secret maneuvers of its own . . .

Not even sleep could help me. When I finally dropped off, my dreams were full of mischief. I'm sure that Momma's thrashing set their tone as much as the chaos outside. At one point I snapped awake to the sound of millstones pulverizing human bone, crushing a skull into rubble and then into a pinkish meal: it was Momma, grinding her perfect white teeth with grim determination. I caught her chin in my hand and held it until she stopped, moaning.

All this was bad enough; but when the rain returned the next night she asked me to sleep with her again, pleading with tired eyes. By the third night she didn't even need to ask.

It was midway through Poppa's trip—as our friend Triska dozed by the fire like a loyal hound—that I had the hardest night of all. From sheer exhaustion I had managed to drop off right away, and after refreshing itself at the lake of oblivion my sleeping brain wandered into a long dream. For hours I worked away at an inward fable, honing it, putting its every color and scent right, only to have it explode in my unsuspecting hands . . .

It's raining: I'm a child: I'm bathing in the kitchen by soft lamplight. Momma is kneeling beside the wooden tub to scrub my back, her skin and hair smelling of wet grass. As she works she hums the tune of "Hänschen, Hänschen," a nursery rhyme I love.

Suddenly there is a flash outside. The steamed-over window shines brilliantly for an instant, catching my eye, then goes black again. Wiping the steam away, I lean forward and peer into the darkness.

A single eye of lamplight stares out across the lawn, smothering the dusk with a leaden glow. Under the steady rain the flowerbeds are cowled in mist. Great craters have been scooped up from the mound of leaves at the edge of the yard, and straight ahead, faintly visible through the streaked glass, the iron gazebo raises its twisted halberds into a small cupola, a bleak shrine floating out in the night.

At last I spot him.

There, resting on his haunches atop our little gazebo's iron loveseat, sits a great ebony-black panther. The muscular shoulders support a smooth triangular head whose

eyes are fixed coldly upon me. Enthroned within the arched gazebo, the huge cat radiates a tremendous composure—were it not for the faintly steaming pelt it could be mistaken for a statue, a sculpture in obsidian. With aristocratic calm the panther begins to lick itself, grooming one powerful shoulder with a long red tongue that flashes through the curtain of rain. And then the gaze returns, oceanic and dark, rolling through the window with the sound of the storm.

"Did I hurt you?"

Momma's stopped scrubbing. I can't find my voice. I sense her peering out the window, which is beginning to cloud over again. But then she goes back to work, blind to the odd visitor. "Now don't crouch forward like that," she goes on, "I can't reach your shoulders. Why are you being so stubborn, Eli? And what is it you see out there? You can't tell me you haven't seen enough of this rain for awhile."

Quickly the black face vanishes.

I doubt the vision, I'm not sure of it at all. The rain is tidal, seductive, unending. Momma finishes her scrubbing and vanishes into an uncertain littoral of the unconscious, suddenly of no interest. And so I sink into the warm tub, immersing myself in my tiny sea, water unto water. I loll underwater for a dimensionless dream-hour, slowly breathing the tepid water, a prowling coelacanth lost to human time.

Sometime later there is a brisk rap at the back door. I jump from the tub as if electrocuted, splashing suds all over the floor. Momma, back at her chores, comes bustling into the room and spins me into a warm towel.

"Why must you always make such a mess, Eli? You needn't bathe the floor too, you know, it's perfectly clean. And now we have company!" Deftly she throws a cloth over the puddles on the flagstone floor. "Get yourself into these," handing me my clean pajamas and robe, "but dress in the parlor, do you hear?" Snatching up the sodden cloth she pulls a folding screen in front of the tub and then tugs at her apron strings. I flee the room in panic, torn between trying to tell her what I've seen and running for cover—

"Momma!"

"Go this instant!" Without another word I dive into the drafty parlor, clutching my clothes miserably and dripping from head to toe.

Shivers come over me. I hear her go out into the vestibule which connects the kitchen to the back steps. There is a long silence during which I wait for a panther's roar, a scream, a struggle, but then her voice returns, muffled by the half-closed door and actually rather calm. I sit down in her chair, thankful that her exasperation hasn't kept her from warming my pajamas by the fire.

"I hope you'll pardon our mess," she says over her shoulder as she lets herself back into the house, shining with rain, "but it's my son's day to bathe: any mother's nightmare, I suppose." "Nightmare," I echo, puzzled. I've got the arms of her rocker in a death-grip. Gracefully she adjusts a chair, setting the room to rights. "Please, come in." The fire snaps loudly, wildly; perhaps even angrily, I don't know, everything seems alive to me, everything is on the qui vive. The copper pans hung from the wall, for example, are rolling like giant eyes as Momma scuttles about, they are definitely following her every move . . .

Lean and dark, mindful of the mood of the hour, the gypsy Triska leaves the shadows and walks straight to the table. For a long while he and Momma face each other without a word. He's drenched: the rain streams down his gaunt, diamond-shaped face, pooling at the cusps of his mouth, gathering into a cold bead at the tip of his chin. As I watch, his small hands spring to the chair like sparrows set on the alert.

With a crisp cough she finally breaks the silence. Smiling to himself, he steps back from the table and undoes the red scarf that is matted over his head. When he shakes it out his thick black curls tumble into the room, grapes from a woman's apron pocket . . .

To judge from his high leather boots, his fuzzy coat and rakish hair, he could be an Elizabethan vagabond; but here he is in our kitchen, preparing to pass a rainy evening of the twentieth century in our company. And another thing: when he steps back to the table I notice something long and slender protruding from the rear flap of his coat, something glistening black which curls and swishes as he moves across the stone floor. His tail, for that is indisputably what it is, seems to have a will of its own.

"They say it's going to rain all night," he says softly.

"Oh? Well, it hardly matters," Momma replies, "the garden's ruined anyway." She sighs sadly, putting on the same long face she wore for Otto's death. "Uh! Let it

rain, let it pour. We're high enough in the mountains that we won't float away, I suppose."

He eyes her appreciatively, furling his red scarf. "So you think we're safe up here on Ararat, do you?"

Crack! goes the thunder, startling Momma cruelly. She hugs herself as I've seen her do a hundred times before, during every summer storm.

"Thunder frightens me, Triska."

"You, as well, Frau Weiss? Did you know that thunderclaps are actually the steps of dead men, men departing this world for the next?"

"Otto," she says dully. "The main thing is, if this keeps up I'll never grow another flower in those poor battered beds. Can I offer you some tea and a dry towel?"

But without waiting for an answer she moves to the counter and touches the cutting board. Taking up the teapot she turns it upside down in the air, peers into it, shakes it, peers again.

A flash of lightning photographs her: her shoulders hunched, her delicate, blonde-lashed eyes squeezed shut like two tiny fists. When the sharp thunderclap comes, the teapot flies from her hands and smashes into a thousand pieces against the stone floor and I'm running, flying, plunging toward her—

"Momma!"

"Momma!" I screamed, bursting from sleep in a sweat, but her cool hands were already stroking my face. "Eli, dear, it's only a nightmare, wake up, wake up now . . ."

"Momma!"

"You've had a bad, bad dream, darling."

"Momma!"

2.

So it was that the gypsy Triska entered my dreams, and to this day he refuses to leave them. If he weren't somehow with me still, I suppose, I wouldn't need to write this at all. He glows and swims in my blood like a pre-historic fish, reminding me of what once was, of what never was, of what might have been.

I've gone over that night in 1934 a thousand times, asleep and awake and roaming the wilderness in between, but still I can't account for the enormous impact it was to have on us Weisses, the quiet explosion it set off in our lives. It was nothing, really: he came, he chatted, he slept by the fire to ease Momma's fears in my father's absence. Yet it is perfectly clear that his friendly visit was the real beginning of all our troubles. If I still dream of him as half-man, half-panther, as friend and predator, it can only be because I've failed, even after so many years, to understand how his kindness could have been so poisonous.

By the time of the fateful visit we'd already known him for quite awhile. Though I can scarcely imagine it now, the simple fact is that Triska first glided into our house on the wings of an ugly rumor.

"The truth!" rattled my poppa one day. "These days the truth leads a wretched life." He was sitting at the kitchen table with his after-dinner pipe, the newspaper propped on a belly pleasantly distended by Momma's good sausage stew.

"What's the poor *Neuesten* done to anger you now?"

"Just more gutter press . . . here's a front page article blaming the Brausch child's disappearance on—can you guess?—*gypsies*." He snapped the offending article with his fingers. "That's stooping rather low, wouldn't you say? They need a sacrificial lamb, that's the beginning and end of it. They'll see that he gets a good monkey trial, then off to the gallows in Bad Godesberg—*futsch!*" He thrust his hand down like a hangman springing the trapdoor. Momma knitted her brow, gathering up the last glasses and silverware.

"Surely they can't hang anyone, with the boy still missing?"

"Naturally they can, and they will."

"But they have no remains, no evidence."

"Kati," he said lugubriously, "everyone knows that gypsies kidnap children for the sheer profit in it."

"So you agree with them?"

"Of course not! The few gypsies we get around here are nothing but harmless shills. This poor fellow they're framing just had the bad luck to move into town at the wrong moment, when the wolves were on the prowl."

"Still, I wouldn't want to associate with them."

"Certainly there are disreputable gypsies, Katarina, I won't dispute that. More than enough of them. But to accuse a man in the absence of any evidence! Listen to this: *'There have long been reports in the Rhine area of gypsy bands which move through the smaller villages and steal children for profit. One case, heard by the Köln magistrate last October, involved a man of gypsy blood and an infant German girl who was shown to have been purchased from the accused for the price of ten thousand marks. Local police are investigating a possible gypsy role in the disappearance of the Willy P. Brausch child earlier this month; in the mean time all local gypsies are being kept under the watchful eye of Kommandant Fischel. The town council is slated to begin inquiries into the gypsy question generally on Monday the 13th . . .'* Now tell me what sort of journalism this is! Everyone in this town knows there's only one gypsy around to be pilloried: this is direct character assassination of a man who has done nothing but mind his own business since the day he settled here."

"You mean that oddball out at the old house?"

"Of course. He's exactly the one they're after."

My mother resumed her chair, the dishes stacked to dry. Her blonde hair was slightly undone and she fretted with it as she spoke. "He *is* a recluse. I know I wouldn't want to find myself alone around there . . . But Jakob, I thought gypsies never settled down."

"I suppose there are as many sorts of gypsies as there are Germans, or Catholics, or even Jews, *Herzi*. Some of them must get a roosting urge now and then."

"Ours just felt the need to have a roof over his head, you think?"

"Hm, *ja*. And now they'll hound him out of town, you'll see. If not to the gallows."

"Still . . . who would choose to live in that old place?"

Late in the summer of 1932, the electrician Willy Brausch arrived home to find the windows of his infant son's nursery thrown wide, giving free passage to a breeze soured with smoke from a nearby tannery. Worried for his son's health, he strode over to pull them shut. In passing the crib, unfortunately, he noticed that the child was missing.

A stepladder was later discovered in the shrubbery along with a pair of rough gloves bearing traces of paint from the windowsill. Young Frau Brausch, who from then on would be shunned as a careless mother, was dozing peacefully in the parlor, having drifted off over a bit of sewing as her child slept.

Thus began a long ordeal which the local press devoured joint by joint. After a sluggish investigation the police at last agreed with Herr Brausch that the child had indeed been kidnapped. But as Brausch loudly protested, if it took the authorities three full weeks to decide on the crime, how could they ever hope to catch the criminal? From the beginning the papers played on the theme of bureaucratic folly. Quickly Brausch's righteous anger galvanized our small provincial town, sparking letters of indignation in the *Neuesten Nachrichten* and the *Behndorfer Zeitung*. And before long, in response to the torrent of criticism, the child's wan photo began materializing on kiosks and lampposts, on bulletin boards and tavern doors, framed by two bolts of stern Gothic print which offered a substantial reward for information leading to the arrest of the kidnapper.

Under the huge eyes and chubby cheeks of the missing infant the indignation of the town was magically transformed into fright. In a strangely delayed reaction, mothers throughout Behndorf began to realize that their children, too, might be in danger—and mine, like so many others, began escorting me wherever I had to go, keeping an eye out for signs of menace along the placid, tree-lined roads.

As the investigation dragged on fruitlessly the newspapers thought to suggest a gypsy involvement in the crime. The climate of fear proved wonderfully hospitable to such an idea. Like any European town, Behndorf was infiltrated now and then by bands of roaming gypsies whom one could see loitering around the Bach statue in the central

square, swathed in green shawls with baubles which tittered and jangled as they walked. Tirelessly, but always careful to look pathetic, they plied the passersby for change, while the good burghers, offended by their strong smell of garlic, all but spat in their hands.

The trouble was, when the gypsies were needed they were no longer in season. The better part of them, in fact, were in France, wending their way northward after the annual pilgrimage to their patron saint in her seaside shrine near Avignon. And so, exactly as my father had predicted, attention turned to the sole gypsy in residence, scouring him for a telltale cloven hoof, a damning mark of Cain.

High up on one of the volcanic bluffs which marked the outer boundary of the village, perched as regally as a howdah atop a kneeling elephant, there sat an old mansion, a monument to the dazzling wealth of the world before the great wars. Legendary through all the region, it had held sway on its precipice for nearly half a century, having been erected in the Nineties by an eccentric Köln banker bent on having an utterly secluded mountain retreat. Though some found the house to be beautiful, many considered it a monstrosity, the architectural equivalent of a lunatic's chatter, and during its long vacancy there were those who proposed that it be razed to the ground. Children called it the Madhouse, and threatened to lock each other in its cellar for frightening lengths of time. Older boys took their girls there with the idea of scaring their chastity away. Peasants grazed their sheep right up to the cracked doorstep, ignorant of the frightening legends and on the lookout for loose metal objects they could cart away for their own use. In this way the mansion had entered our local lore, becoming many things to many people: everyone knew of it and had their opinion on it, whether aesthetic, demonological, or otherwise.

No wonder the place was confused about its own identity—Poppa, who was a fitful reader of Freud, had long since diagnosed it as having a multiple personality disorder, and would explain exactly what he meant at the slightest provocation. But I believe he was right. As one circled it on the brushy footpath its madness unfolded step by step, tic by tic. One had only to look up, to observe the rolling distortions of its face, in order to imagine the manic glare of its owner. On the mansion's northern exposure, heavy Norman arches supported a battlement of Gothic windows; nothing odd here, as

one saw such places everywhere in the Rhineland. But as one strolled on toward the eastern face, oak beams began to crisscross wildly overhead, forming polygons of stucco which, for reasons known only to the artist, were painted randomly in white and black. To confuse things more, the southern face proposed a fine Mediterranean terrace of curled ironwork and slate tiles, the perfect counterfeit of a seaside villa in the south of France. And on the western face—the one we Behndorfers could see from the outskirts of town—a lonely English dormer caught the light of the setting sun and burned with orange virulence, staring down like a giant Cyclopean eye.

It was in this wreck of a place, long since abandoned by its presiding genius, that the gypsy Triska had installed himself. Here Poppa and I would come to watch him visit with his black squirrels, or listen again to the death throes of the gypsy Vapra, or serenade the quilted woods with his violin; it was here, too, that we would see his art come over him in a fever, no less bewildering to him than it was to us and surely no less frightening. Here we would discover the particulars of Triska's private universe. But all this would take time, and trust—for at first we were stupefied by the more practical question of how this odd, shiftless loner, this no-account gypsy who seemed have no honest profession whatsoever, had managed to land himself in the legendary mansion on the hill. And we were not the only ones who wondered. Not at all. Would that we were, for our poor friend's sake.

In ordinary times, no ordinary gypsy could possibly have afforded a place like the Kölner's, no matter how many innocents he might introduce into the black market. But these were no ordinary times, and Triska was no ordinary gypsy. Through an extraordinary chain of events an opportunity presented itself, and our friend, finding fortune smiling upon him, immediately smiled back.

Triska's luck began with the 1909 death of the original owner, a very rich banker by the name of Horst Lafnitzegger. Smearred in the papers for carrying on a love affair with his young valet, the old man was found gassed to death in his bed, apparently a hopeless suicide. When the will was read out it was discovered that he'd deeded the mansion over to the same valet, who was poor, uneducated and barely eighteen years old—a street kid with no prospects whatever. The house's furnishings were to go, too, including a dozen priceless books from the library of William Blake and a Tintoretto

Annunciation. The boy would have no idea what he had! What would he do in the company of Blake, of Tintoretto? It was an outrage. A crime. This valet should be thrown in prison, not made into an overnight millionaire. Eyebrows were raised, the police were put on alert, and the family, led by an adamant Horst Lafnitzegger II, wasted no time in mounting a lawsuit aimed at grabbing back every scrap of the estate. Justice would be done, Lafnitzegger declared from the boardroom of his father's bank, his hair pomaded for the press: it was time to put an end to the absurdity and the slander. He would vindicate the Lafnitzegger name at last.

In the climate of scandal the Lafnitzeggers' chances should have been excellent. But every card fell wrong for them. With some clumsy bribery the younger Lafnitzegger tried to get the valet arrested for murder; the police took his money and demurred. The press, too, failed to listen to money, and opted to portray the quarrelsome Lafnitzeggers as bloodsuckers rather than noble aristocrats. All too quickly the trial began . . . and in only three days was derailed by war. Horst Lafnitzegger II, enlisting when his club threatened to expel any young man who did not, failed again to buy his way free, and within a matter of weeks collided with a British bullet at Ypres. After a day's agony he died, leaving no will at all, and no instructions as to how his own considerable birth-trust should be divided. Certainly he never knew that his rival, the valet Hans, had died a swifter death in the same battle, and not more than fifty yards from his trench—for this was the final irony in their long and poisonous struggle.

With both litigants dead, the trial was dissolved and the Lafnitzegger mansion fell into the hands of bureaucrats. After twelve years of impoundment during which it suffered the depredations of every sort of vagrant and curiosity-seeker, the mansion on the hill was at last offered for sale by the beleaguered, cash-poor German government. Notices began to appear in 1930, when I was eight years old. Most Behndorfers, I am sure, assumed that it would be snatched up by a wealthy local—by the doctor Knoss, for example, or perhaps by the dentist Hüber with his taste for showy grounds; through all its trials, after all, it had become a kind of huge curio, an emblem, and its grounds, with some attention, could certainly be made lovely again . . .

Instead Behndorf was shocked to learn that the Lafnitzegger place had been bought by a foreigner, and to make matters worse, a foreigner from somewhere in the

East. Word of the travesty spread rapidly. The first to lay eyes on the new tenant was the lawyer Hausmann, whose services were engaged for the signing of the deed.

Hausmann reported that the buyer was a small, oddly dressed Slav who either had no German or liked to have others think so; a garlicky Balkan type, shifty and dull-witted. "I kept my hand on my wallet the whole time, let me tell you," said the lawyer over and over. What made the business still more suspect was the fact that the Slav had produced the entire downpayment in currency, withdrawing a phenomenal number of banknotes from two trunks and heaping them before the government retainers without a flinch. Now, the price had been kept low, as the point was to be rid of the place. But cash! The stranger seemed little more than a vagabond, a gypsy. Professing no first name, he signed all official papers with the exotic sobriquet **TRISKA**. It was from this curious name that Hausmann, who was considered a man of the world thanks to a stint with the Hussars, confidently concluded that the buyer was a Slav.

Only later, when the newcomer was seen chatting with the peasants who parked their vegetable carts at the edges of town and when the greenish coat and red scarf had stamped themselves on the public imagination, did the Behndorfers revise their opinion of his provenance, deciding that he was in fact a gypsy. But between gypsy and Slav there was as little difference as between Slav and ape. To the Behndorfers he might as well have arrived from the Serengeti in a steel cage.

"My, I see what you mean about this gypsy business," said Momma as she skimmed the paper. "They make no bones about it, do they? *Police are interviewing all gypsies in the area, hoping to uncover the trail of the kidnapper . . .* They hardly leave a doubt as to who they mean."

"Eh!" snapped my father. "Read *browbeat* for *interview*, I'd say. It's the worst sort of witchhunt! You'd think the *Neuesten* would tire of trying to control such a dull town. You'd think they'd leave it to the elected officials now and again—but no. If I were even vaguely acquainted with that poor man I'd warn him to pull up stakes and run." He began to root the spent tobacco plug from his pipe, falling into a brooding spell. Momma went on reading the paper for several minutes, leaning over the table with her hands folded in her lap. But when I got up to leave the room she caught my gaze, giving me a serious smile.

"Now, young man, you wouldn't ever have anything to do with strangers, would you?"

3.

Though I had every good intention of heeding Momma's warning, curiosity soon got the better of me.

Had I been a little older or wiser, perhaps, I might have nipped things in the bud, but as it was I faced a peculiar obstacle: the burning curiosity was not mine, but Poppa's. A few days after his protests at the dinner table he took me aside, averting his eyes in a way that was entirely unlike him.

"How about a little walk this afternoon?" he proposed. "What a beautiful day it is for a hike in the mountains." This was not Poppa speaking at all. Normally he preferred his sedentary routine of tutoring boys in foreign languages, disdaining what we called, in those days, "physical culture." My eyes must have given me away, for he added, "I think your mother would appreciate some time alone." This was accompanied by an indecipherable wink. Having nothing beyond a little kickball in mind for the afternoon, I said I'd go along, and with a great air of conspiracy we retreated into the kitchen so that he could mislead Momma with a story about going to the post office to check on a shipment of books, stopping in to see the bookseller Fögli, and so on. It's odd that she failed to spot the ruse, but she did not. And so we set out, making an initial detour toward town in case she might be watching from the window.

Though the day was a cool one for September, we'd both dressed too warmly for the uphill trek. Soon we had to stop for a rest. We lodged ourselves upon a ridge that commanded a sweeping view of the River Ahr's basin some hundreds of meters below. My poppa, more than a little winded, removed the dead pipe from his mouth and began using it to point out landmarks: the narrow Ahr, threading through its brown banks with a sluggish current; the haze of smoke which marked a riverside smelter at Koll; three crooked, half-naked peaks of the Siebengebirge; a deep green carpet thrown over a stand of towering cedars which I knew to be beautiful, churchlike, when one stood on the spongy floor of needles and looked up at their high boughs . . .

And off to the west, clinging to the leg of a mountain like a horde of spiders, were the Behndorf silver mines. A faint chirp was coming from their direction; steady columns of smoke rose from the coal-powered tram engines and conveyors, flattening as they reached the cooler air and dulling the glitter of the corrugated roofs. Most dramatic of all was a huge metal pulley which reversed itself every few revolutions like an immense wheel of fortune, hauling both men and ore from the depths of the mine every minute of the day.

"When can I go see the mine, Poppa?" I demanded.

Here was a venerable debate. My parents had always been divided on the question of my visiting that small metropolis, Poppa in favor, Momma opposed. Though we lived only a few miles from the worker's colony, the distance might as well have been that from Behndorf to Manchuria. Whatever I knew of it I had on the authority of my friends, who in turn had it from older brothers and sisters, who in turn . . . but there the line of transmission grew vague. The place had taken on a kind of bardic existence, livelier in the telling than in brute fact. "When can I go?" I said again, since Poppa was ignoring me.

"Hm," he grunted, "as soon as you can wangle papers for the journey, I suppose." He tossed a stone down the hillside. "Speak to your mother again when she's in the proper mood. Best that you don't mention it again until then—do you understand?" To seal the matter he got to his feet and relit his pipe. "Off we go."

Ten minutes later we'd negotiated the narrow, curving rock path the peasants used for their goats and came upon an open field. The grass was russet with the change of season; frost a few nights before had wiped away the summer insects. The only signs of life were some gaunt sheep foraging here and there in the scrub, their dull bells jangling quietly as they turned to watch us pass. Under some gnarled apple trees stood a small, battered mare, hobbled by a rope tied between her front and rear legs. Poppa, seeming to know his way, turned off onto a rockier path which shot abruptly up the side of the mountain and disappeared into a colonnade of maples.

The Ahr had slipped away beneath an overhanging scarp, leaving behind its lush green levee. The smoke and low groan of the mine floated up from far, far below. In the bluish mid-afternoon distance we caught glimpses of other mountains which slept in the

Rhine gorge, slumped like winded dinosaurs along the river's winding course. But at the top of the path we were graced with the most stunning view of all: before us lay a hazy landscape taking in the whole Ahr valley, snatches of the Rhine glinting in the slanted sun, and the smatter of red roofs here and there marking villages flung into the hills by men of a different era. A few meters more and suddenly a sheer wall was rising before us, a green and white awning, a wide bandage of ivy teeming with birds.

We had arrived.

Every arch of the gypsy's house was hand-carved, every finial svelte as a Greek urn. With a little imagination one could picture the servants walking about in their white summer livery, the housekeeper beating rugs over the back balcony, the stakes and wickets deployed for croquet across a close green in back—a home perpetually full of guests and marzipan, sherry and lively conversation. Even peeling paint and crumbling steps, even the riot of building styles did nothing to cloud its beauty. "So Mediterranean!" Poppa exclaimed as he admired the broad patios and ironwork. "The man must have summered on the Côte d'Azur . . ."

We were at the rear vestibule. Poppa reached for the old bellrope and gave it a tug, but the bell was gone; the rope snapped and fell in a noose around his shoulders. With a chuckle he gave a few tentative raps at the window, peering into what seemed to be a cloakroom long neglected. There wasn't a hint of an answer. In fact, the place seemed utterly deserted. "Perhaps we've missed him," he said, trying a different window. Behind us, a yard mantled with birds filled the afternoon with a flowing afternoon lieder. I sat down on the cool stoop and squinted my eyes to make the pines shimmer against Triska's ultramarine sky.

Telling me to stay put, Poppa struck out for the front of the house, no doubt to try the main bell. A few minutes later I heard him coming back around from the opposite direction, having completed his circumnavigation. But when my eyes followed the sound of his steps they found not Poppa, not my rumpled and winded father with his kinked beard and his wonderful voice, but the coal-black gaze, steely hair and red scarf of the lord of the manor, the scandalous hermit himself—for it could only have been the gypsy, the very object of all the talk.

4.

He was smiling at me.

Triska approached from a toolshed tucked behind some apple trees. The pale yellow sleeves of his shirt were rolled up over a pair of dusty hands, the velvet vest decorated with a smudge of soil. Evidently he'd been gardening.

He was unlike any man I'd ever seen. Even the swarthy Italians who ran the mines and rented the front pews at the Michaelskirche seemed less frightening than this stranger with his sharp face and queer clothes. When he stepped in front of the sun I stopped breathing entirely. It was no effort at all to imagine him stealing down a shaking ladder, the ugly Brausch baby swaddled in his arms.

"Good afternoon, *mein Herr*," he said in confident German. "My name is Triska." Shyly I took the hand he offered, looking away at the moment our skin touched. It was warm and smooth: a feminine hand. Patiently he waited for me to look up again, plucking blackberries from an overgrown bush next to us. Eventually he asked me my name.

"Eli Weiss, sir."

"*Schön!*" he said, "Lovely! Is that from Elijah, by any chance?"

"No, *mein Herr*. Just Eli."

"Ah, Eli the old judge, then. A very fine name at that. And a very old one. Do you know your Bible, Eli?"

"Only a little, *mein Herr*."

"Then sometime I will tell you the story of old Eli. One should know everything one can about one's betters, you know." When he paused, the air swelled with birds. "The animals are wonderful here, really wonderful," he went on, gazing out over the lawn and wild groves with his hands on his hips. "They drew me to this place, as a matter of fact. But tell me, Eli, what brings you here?"

"My father, *mein Herr*. He wants to meet you."

"To meet me! Now there's a surprise." Triska's face tightened subtly but his tone was still reasonable and friendly. "Well, I suppose I shouldn't feel such a stranger here after all. May I offer you a glass of milk and a little cake? The kitchen is hardly settled,

but I think I can find something for someone who's come all this way. Or are we neighbors, actually?"

"No, *mein Herr*. It's a long way." *Poppa!* I cried in my heart, *Where are you?* As much as I craned my head around, scouring the grounds, there was no trace of him anywhere. He might as well have stepped off the edge of the earth.

"So you came with your father? Where is he? I'd very much like to meet him."

I kept my mouth shut, afraid my heart might leap from it. The notorious gypsy watched me kindly, peacefully, unruffled by the silences that shot through our talk. His long arms dropped to his sides as idly as damp laundry. No Behdorfer, surely, would have had the patience to dissipate such long minutes with an unbudging child. At last a sigh drained from him, breaking the impasse.

"Shall we walk?"

Suddenly I was bolting down the path, my eyes melting into hot angry tears.

When I spun around the corner of the house I ran headlong into Poppa who was strolling with his hands full of stones. He caught me up in his arms, dropping his payload onto the flags with a huge clatter. "What in the world!"

"The man!" was all I could say. Poppa looked along the trellised path, and slowly, against the clinging weight of my body, began to retrace my sudden flight.

The gypsy was walking briskly in our direction, but as soon as he saw us he halted, his whole body tense, his eyes crackling.

"Herr Weiss? I am Triska." The stranger extended his hand from five meters away, making no move to close the gap. Poppa, too, stood his ground. I felt him thinking with his every muscle. For a moment there was only the rasp of his breath and the chant of the birds.

"I'm afraid I've startled your son," the gypsy went on. "We were just talking, and—" He broke off nervously and dropped his outstretched hand. "I hope you will accept my apologies. I am no good with children." Still Poppa watched him sharply, waiting for something, for some sure sign. His brows had reared up in doubt.

It was then that the gypsy stepped carefully toward us, taking one measured, symbolic pace forward.

Poppa, raised in a Europe which still knew and cultivated such elegant gestures, understood immediately. His face untightened all at once.

"Think nothing of it, *mein Herr*. Eli is often uncomfortable with strangers. Herr Triska, I am Jakob Weiss."

"But the pleasure is all mine, Herr Weiss," said the gypsy with relief, bowing slightly. "Would you be kind enough to let me repay you with a cup of tea?"

"*Sehr gern*."

The stranger turned and waved us into the house through a pair of glass-paned doors. As I passed I hid my eyes, angry with my father for reasons I barely understood.

Inside, Triska had us sit at a small circular table that seemed to float in a sea of rummage. On every side lay crates in various stages of being unpacked. Stacked against the walls were countless bundles of books bound up with stout leather cords. The sun, perhaps still wary of mischief, filtered tentatively through the lace curtains, filling the room with a diffuse light. In the kitchen the gypsy began rooting through a crate, making an enormous racket.

"If you're at all like me, Herr Weiss, you find moving to be the worst of all life's ordeals."

"Of course," Poppa agreed through the open dutch door. "How long, exactly, have you been here?" From the disheveled look of the place he might have arrived only the day before, though we knew better.

"I know why you ask. I must apologize for this state of affairs," replied the gaunt man, "but certain boxes refuse to be unpacked. My problem is that I spend far too much time outdoors. These dead things"—he materialized in the dutch door and gestured to the crates—"never seem quite as needy as my birds and trees." Having said this he smiled and went back to his noisy burrowing, leaving Poppa to send me a significant look.

"If you don't mind my asking, Herr Triska, where did you live last?"

"It is simply *Triska*, Herr Weiss—Triska is my Christian name."

"I see," said Poppa, abashed. "And you must call me Jakob, of course."

"An honor—" There was a deafening crash. The gypsy reappeared at the door, a battered teapot in hand. "I knew it was here. You are my first real guests, gentlemen, if

you omit the unwelcome ones. But to answer your question, Jakob, I've come from Berlin. I had a lovely old flat just off the Kantstrasse, fully equipped with shower in the kitchen."

"Yes, but where is home?"

"Ah! I'm afraid I hardly know how to answer that question, Jakob. Home is where I rest my feet, no?" When Poppa frowned he added: "I travel, you see. My work takes me so many places."

"Hm."

"I am a leather merchant. And a craftsman," pointing with his eyes to the corner of the room, "as you might surmise." Hunched against the wall was a huge bail of leather sheets, a pair of heavy shears atop them. "I do small things, personal things mostly. Fine things," he smiled.

"Most interesting," Poppa dissembled.

"And you, Jakob, what is your work?"

"Oh, I'm a tutor in languages—Latin, Greek, French, English, Hebrew . . ."

"Remarkable!" the gypsy cried, popping up once again at the dutch door. "I admire a man of erudition."

"Well, this sort of thing's been in the family for several generations."

"Oh? A rabbinical family?"

"Yes, in fact."

"Very good," Triska said rather curtly, as if approving our pedigree. For a few moments the conversation subsided awkwardly and we heard the din of the teakettle being swung about the stove. Poppa took the opportunity to inspect a few of the baled books along the wall. When our host came in with the tea tray he remarked, "You're interested in politics, Triska?"

"Yes, I suppose I am. Though not in politicians."

"Eh," said Poppa, "say no more." A faint glow was kindling in his eyes. "And it seems you like our German poets quite a bit, too," gesturing to a precarious hill of poetry volumes.

"Very much so. I read them to improve my German." A small, private twist of a smile, well aware of what it did not reveal. "Yours is a very difficult and beautiful tongue, Herr Professor."

"As are all old languages, once you learn to feel their inner lives. May I smoke?"

"Of course." The gypsy handed us cups of steaming tea. "You are also a reader of poetry, Jakob?"

"Oh, Greek poetry a bit, occasionally the French—my tastes are limited, I'll confess. Though I've had a certain attraction to Heine lately."

The gypsy set his tea down abruptly and stared at us with sparkling black eyes. "How odd that you would mention him!" And then he began to recite, his voice a curious singsong of burring *r*'s and throaty *g*'s:

*"Doch uns gebührt es, unter Gottes Gewittern,
Ihr Dichter!"*

He nodded, letting his last line dangle. After an awkward pause Poppa blew a cloud of smoke, cleared his throat and strung along:

*". . .mit entblösstem Haupte zu stehen,
Des Vaters Strahl, ihn selbst, mit eigener Hand
Zu fassen und dem Volk ins Lied . . ."*

And again the gypsy:

". . .Gehüllt die himmlische Gabe zu reichen."

Triska clapped his hands in delight. "So!" he exclaimed, catching my eye with a twinkle.

Poppa smiled, flushing in the sun. "You recite well, quite well, Triska. But that is Hölderlin, you know, not Heinrich Heine as you thought."

Another queer smile came. "Naturally, Jakob. I know it is Hölderlin. I only wanted to see whether you were more of a poetry lover than you admitted—and so you are." He winked so rapidly I barely caught the flick of his lashes. "Forgive me."

Herr Jakob Weiss was taken aback. His shoulders stiffened; he scowled; he glared at the man edgily. But then, with no outward warning at all, he melted into his old good humor, letting go of a wide, deep laugh that filled the room. "Touché, sir! And you *are* forgiven. I'll try not to feel too much the fool."

"One who reads Hölderlin so lovingly could hardly be a fool," parried our host gracefully, glancing at the carpet and then bringing his eyes back to rest lightly on my father's. "It will be a pleasure to know you, Jakob."

"Yes . . .yes. But I never suspected . . ."

The gypsy withdrew a slender cigarette from a small silver box and brought it to his lips, never ceasing to smile his demure, baffling smile.

"No," he said, "of course you didn't."