Boris and Arkady Strugatsky. The snail on the slope

Origin: "Ulitka na sklone"

Chapter One

From this height, the forest was like foam, luxuriant and blotchy, a gigantic world--encompassing porous sponge, like an animal waiting in concealment, now fallen asleep and overgrown with rough moss. A formless mask hiding a face, as yet revealed to none.

Pepper shook off his sandals and sat down with his bare legs dangling over the precipice. It seemed to him that his heels at once became damp, as if he had actually immersed them in the warm lilac fog that lay banked up in the shadows under the cliff. He fished out the pebbles he had collected from his pocket and laid them out neatly beside him. He then selected the smallest and gently tossed it down into the living and silent, slumbering, all-enveloping indifference, and the white spark was extinguished, and nothing happened--no branch trembled, no eye half-opened to glance up.

If he were to throw a pebble every one and a half minutes, and if what the one-legged cook, nicknamed Pansy, said was true and what Madame Bardot, head of the Assistance to the Local Population Group, reckoned, if what driver Acey whispered to the unknown man from the Engineering Penetration Group was untrue, and if human intuition was worth anything at all, and if wishes came true once in a lifetime, then at the seventh stone, the bushes behind him would part with a crash, and the director would step out onto the soft crushed grass of the dew-gray clearing. He would be stripped to the waist in his gray garbardines with the lilac braid, breathing heavily, sleek and glossy, yellow-pink and shaggy, looking nowhere in particular, neither at the forest beneath him nor at the sky above him, bending down to bury his arms in the grass, then unbending to raise a breeze with his broad palms, each time the mighty fold on his belly bulging out over his trousers, while air, saturated with carbon dioxide and nicotine, would burst out of his open mouth with a whistling gurgle.

The bushes behind parted with a crash. Pepper looked around cautiously, but it wasn't the director, it was someone he knew, Claudius-Octavian Haus-botcher from the Eradication Group. He approached without haste and halted two paces away, looking Pepper up and down with his piercing dark eyes. He knew something or suspected something, something very important, and this knowledge or suspicion had frozen his long face, the stony face of a man who had brought here to the precipice a strange, alarming piece of news. No one in the whole world knew what this news was, but it was already clear that everything had altered decisively; what had gone before was no longer significant and now, at last, everyone would be required to contribute all he was capable of.

"And whose might these shoes be?" said he, glancing about him.

"They're not shoes, they're sandals," said Pepper. "Indeed?" Hausbotcher sneered and withdrew a large notepad from his pocket. "Sandals? Ver-ry good. But whose sandals are they?"

He edged toward the brink, peeped cautiously down and stepped back smartly.

"Man sits by the precipice," he said, "next to him, sandals. The question inevitably raises itself: whose sandals are they and where is their

owner?" "They're my sandals," said Pepper. "Yours?" Hausbotcher looked doubtfully at the large notepad. "You're sitting barefooted, then? Why?"

"Barefoot because I've no choice," explained Pepper. "Yesterday I dropped my right shoe and decided from now on, I'll always sit barefoot." He bent down and looked between his splayed knees. "There she lies. I can just drop this pebble in. . "

Hausbotcher adroitly seized him by the arm and appropriated the pebble.

"It is indeed just a pebble," he said. "That, however, makes no difference as yet. Pepper, it's incomprehensible why you're lying to me. You can't possibly see the shoe from here--even if it's there, and whether it is or not is another question, which will be gone into later--and if you can't see the shoe, ergo you can't hit it with a stone, even if you possessed the necessary accuracy and actually did wish to do that and only that. I mean hitting. . . . But we'll sort all that out presently." He hitched up his trousers and squatted down on his haunches.

"So you were here yesterday as well," he said. "Why? For what reason have you come a second time to the precipice, where the other Directorate personnel, not to mention temporary staff, only come to obey the call of nature?"

Pepper slumped. This is just plain ignorance, he thought. No, no, it's not a challenge, nor is it spite, no need to take it seriously. It's just ignorance. No need to take ignorance seriously. Ignorance excretes itself on the forest. Ignorance always excretes itself over something.

"You like sitting here, seemingly," Hausbotcher went on insinuatingly. "You like the forest a lot, seemingly. You love it, don't you? Answer me!" "Don't you?" asked Pepper.

"Don't you forget yourself," he said aggrieved and nipped open his notepad. "As you very well know, I belong to the Eradication Group and therefore your question, or rather your counterquestion is entirely devoid of meaning. You understand perfectly well that my attitude to the forest is defined by my professional duty; what defines your attitude to it is not clear to me. That's bad, Pepper, you need to think about that. I'm advising you for your own good, not for mine. You mustn't be so unintelligible. Sits on the edge of the cliff in bare feet, throwing pebbles. . . . Why, one asks? In your place I'd tell me everything straight out. Get everything sorted out. Who knows, there could be extenuating circumstances. Nothing's threatening you anyway. Is it, Pepper?"

"No," said Pepper, "that is, of course, yes." "There you are. Simplicity disappears at once and never comes back. Whose hand? we ask. Whither the cast? Or, perhaps, to whom? Or, as it may be, at whom? And why? And how is it you can sit on the edge of the cliff? Is it inborn or have you done special training? I, for example, am unable to sit on the edge of the cliff, and I can't bear to think why I might train for such a thing. I get dizzy at the thought. That's only natural. Nobody needs to sit on the cliff edge. Especially if he doesn't have a permit to enter the forest. Show me your permit, if you please, Pepper." "I haven't got one." "So. Not got. Why is that?"

"I don't know. . . . They won't give me one, that's all."

"That's right, not given out. This we know. And why don't they give you one? I've got one, he's got one, they've got one, plenty of people have them, but for some reason you don't get one."

Pepper stole a cautious glance at him. Hausbotcher's long emaciated nose was sniffing, his eyes constantly blinking.

"Probably it's because I'm an outsider," suggested Pepper. "Probably that's why."

"I'm not the only one taking an interest in you, you know," Hausbotcher confided. "If it were only me! People a bit higher up than me are taking an interest. Listen, Pepper, could you come away from the edge, so we can carry on. I get dizzy looking at you."

Pepper got up and began leaping about on one leg as he fastened his

sandal.

"Oh dear, please come away from the edge!" cried Hausbotcher in agony, waving his notepad at Pepper.

"You'll be the death of me someday with your antics."

"That's it," said Pepper, stamping his foot. "I shan't do it again. Let's go, shall we?"

"Let's go," said Hausbotcher. "I assert, however, that you haven't answered a single one of my questions. You pain me, Pepper. Is this any way to go on?" He looked at the bulky notepad and placed it under his armpit with a shrug. "It's very odd, definitely no impressions, let alone information."

"All right, what should I answer?" said Pepper. "I just wanted to have a talk with the director here."

Hausbotcher froze, as if trapped in the bushes. "So that's how you go about it." His voice was altered.

"Go about what? There's no going about. . . ."

"No, no," whispered Hausbotcher, gazing about him, "just keep silent. No need for any words. I realize now. You were right."

"What've you realized? What was I right in?"

"No, no, I haven't understood anything. I haven't understood, period. You may rest absolutely assured. Haven't understood a thing. I wasn't even here, I didn't see you."

They passed by the little bench, climbed the crumbling steps, turned into an alley strewn with red sand, and entered the grounds of the Directorate.

"Total clarity can exist only on a certain level," Hausbotcher was saying. "And everybody should know what he can lay claim to. I claimed certainty on my level, that was my right and I exercised it fully. Where rights end, obligations begin. . . ."

They passed the ten flat cottages with tulle curtains at the windows, passed the garage, cut across the sports ground, and went by dumps and the hostel, in whose doorway stood a deathly-pale warden with motionless pop-eyes, and by the long fencing beyond which could be heard the snarling of engines. They kept quickening their pace and as there was little time left, they began to run. But all the same, they burst into the canteen too late, all the seats were taken. Only at the duty table in the far corner were there two places, the third being occupied by driver Acey, and driver Acey, observing them shuffling in indecision on the threshold, waved his fork at them, inviting them over.

Everybody was drinking yogurt and Pepper took the same, so that they had six bottles on the crusted tablecloth, and when Pepper moved his legs a bit under the table, making himself more comfortable on the backless chair, there was a clink of glass and an empty brandy bottle rolled out between the little tables. Driver Acey swiftly grabbed it and thrust it back under the table; more glass clinked.

"Careful with your feet," he said.

"I couldn't help it," said Pepper. "I didn't know."

"Did I know?" responded Acey. "There's four of them under there. Prove your innocence later if you can."

"Well I, for instance, don't drink at all," said Haus-botcher with dignity.

"We know how you don't drink," said Acey. "That's how we all don't drink."

"But I have liver trouble!" Hausbotcher was growing uneasy. "Look, here's the certificate." He pulled a crumpled exercise-book page out from somewhere; it had a triangular stamp. He shoved it under Pepper's nose. It was indeed a certificate written in an illegible medical hand. Pepper could only make out one word "antabus." "I've got last year's and the year before that as well, only they're in the safe."

Driver Acey didn't look at the paper. He drained a full glass of

yogurt, sniffed the joint of his index finger, and asked in a tearful voice:

"Well, what else is there in the forest? Trees." He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "But they don't stand still: jump. Got it?"

"Well?" asked Pepper eagerly, "what was that-- jump?"

"Like this. It stands still. A tree, right? Then it starts hunching and bending, then whoosh! There's a noise, crashing, I don't know what all. Ten yards. Smashed my cab. There it is standing again." "Why?" asked Pepper.

" 'Cos it's called a jumping tree," explained Acey pouring himself more yogurt.

"Yesterday, a consignment of new electric saws arrived," announced Hausbotcher, licking his lips. "Phenomenal productivity. I would go so far as to say that they weren't electrosaws but saw-combines. Our saw-combines of eradication."

All around they were drinking yogurt out of cut glasses, tin mugs, little coffee cups, paper cones, straight out of the bottle. Everybody's legs were stuck , under their chairs. And everyone probably could show his certificate of liver, stomach, small intestine trouble. For this year and for the last several.

"Then the manager calls me in," Acey went on, raising his voice, "and he asks why my cab's stove in. 'Again,' he says, 'sod, giving people lifts?' Now you, Mr. Pepper, play chess with him, you might put in a little word for me. He respects you, he often talks of you, 'Pepper,' he says, 'he's a character! I won't give a vehicle for Pepper and don't ask. We can't let a man like that go. Understand, all you zombies, we couldn't carry on without him!' Put in a word, eh?"

"All right," Pepper brought out in a low voice, "I'll try."

"I can speak with the manager," said Hausbotcher. "We served together. I was a captain and he was my lieutenant. He greets me to this day, bringing his hand to his headgear."

"Then there's the mermaids," said Acey, weighing his glass of yogurt. "In big clear lakes. They lie there, get it? Nothing on."

"Your yogurt's putting ideas into your head," said Hausbotcher.

"I haven't seen them myself," rejoined Acey. "But the water from those lakes isn't fit to drink."

"You haven't seen them because they don't exist," said Hausbotcher. "Mermaids, that's mysticism."

"You're another mysticism," said Acey, wiping his eye with a sleeve.

"Wait a bit," said Pepper, "wait a bit. Acey, you say they're lying ... is that all? They can't just lie and that's all."

"Maybe they live underwater and float up onto the surface, just like we go out onto the balcony to escape from smoke-filled rooms on moonlit nights and, eyes closed, bare our face to the chill, then they can just lie. Just lie and that's all. Rest. And talk lazily and smile at each other. . . ."

"Don't argue with me," said Acey, looking obstinately at Hausbotcher. "Have you ever been in the forest? Never been in there once, have you, to hell."

"Silly if I did," said Hausbotcher. "What would I be doing there in your forest? I've got a permit into your forest. And you, Acey, haven't got one at all. Show me, if you please, your permit, Acey."

"I didn't see the mermaids myself," repeated Acey, turning to Pepper, "but I entirely believe in them. Because the boys have told me. So did Kandid even, and he was the one who knew everything about the forest. He used to go into that forest like a man to his woman, put his finger on anything. He perished there in his forest."

"If he did," said Hausbotcher significantly.

"What do you mean 'if'? Man flies off in his helicopter, three years no sight or sound. His obituary was in the paper, we held the wake, what more d'you want? Kandid crashed, that's for sure."

"We don't know enough," said Hausbotcher, "to assert anything with complete certainty."

Acey spat and went to the counter to order another bottle of yogurt. At this, Hausbotcher leaned over and whispered in Pepper's ear, his eyes darting:

"Bear in mind that touching Kandid there was a sealed directive. ... I consider it right for me to inform you, because you are a person from outside."

"What directive?"

"To regard him as alive," said Hausbotcher in a hollow whisper and moved away. "Nice, fresh yogurt today," he announced loudly.

Noise increased in the canteen. Those who had already breakfasted were getting up, scraping chairs, and making for the exit, lighting up and throwing match-sticks on the floor. Hausbotcher surveyed them malevolently and said to everyone as they passed: "Strange behavior, gentlemen, you can surely see we're having a discussion."

When Acey returned with his bottle, Pepper spoke to him.

"The manager didn't really say he wouldn't provide me with a vehicle, did he? He was just joking, wasn't that it?"

"Why should he? He likes you, Mister Pepper, bored without you and it's just not worth his while to let you go. ... Well if he lets you, what's in it for him? No joking."

Pepper bit his lip.

"How the devil can I get away? There's nothing more for me to do here. My visa's running out, and anyway I just want to get away."

"Anyhow," said Acey, "if you get three reprimands, they'll sling you out in two shakes. You'll get a special bus, they'll get a driver up in the middle of the night, you won't get time to collect your bits of things. . . . Here the boys work it this way. First warning, a reduction in rank; second, you're sent to the forest to expiate your sins. Third reprimand, thank you and good night. If I wanted the sack, for example, I'd drink half a jar and sock this guy in the jaw," he indicated Hausbotcher. "They'd take away my privileges and transfer me to the crap-wagon. Then what do I do? Drink another half-jar and give him another one--got it? They'd take me off the crap-wagon and send me out to the biostation to catch some old microbes. But I don't go. I drink another half-jar and give it to him across the chops for the third time. Well that's the end of it. Sacked for hooligan conduct and deported in twenty-four hours."

Hausbotcher waved a threatening finger at Acey.

"Misinformation, misinformation, Ace. In the first place, at least a month must elapse between the actions, otherwise all the misdemeanors will be regarded as one and the transgressor will simply be put in jail without any further steps being taken within the Directorate. Secondly, following the second misdemeanor, they send the convicted man to the forest at once under guard, so that he will be deprived of any opportunity to carry out a third offense at his own discretion. Don't pay any attention to him, Pepper, he knows nothing about these matters."

Acey took a mouthful of yogurt, frowned, and wheezed out a confession.

"True, enough. I really . . . well. I'm sorry, Mister Pepper."

"Doesn't matter, what the. . . ." said Pepper sadly. "I still can't hit a man in the face whichever way you put it."

"It doesn't have to be the . . . jaw," said Acey. "You can make it the ... the behind. Or just rip his suit." "No, I can't do it," said Pepper. "Too bad, then," said Acey. "That's your trouble, Mister Pepper. Here's what we'll do. Tomorrow morning around sevenish, come around to the garage, get in my truck, and wait. I'll take you." "You will?" Pepper was overjoyed. "Well I've got to take a load of scrap metal to the mainland. We'll go together."

Somebody suddenly gave a terrible shout in the corner. "What do you think you're doing? You've spilled my soup!"

"A man ought to be simple and straightforward," said Hausbotcher. "I don't understand, Pepper, why you want to get away from here. Nobody wants

to leave,just you."

"I'm always like that," said Pepper. "I always do the opposite. Anyway, why should a man always be simple and straightforward?"

"A man ought to be teetotal," announced Acey, sniffing the joint of his index finger, "what d'you think, eh?"

"I don't drink," said Hausbotcher. "And I don't drink for a very simple reason, one that anyone can understand. I have a liver complaint. You can't catch me out, Ace."

"What gets me about the forest," said Acey, "is the swamps. They're hot, get me? It turns me around. I just can't get used to it. You plop in somewhere . . . then you're off the brushwood road. There I am in my cab, can't climb out. Just like hot cabbage soup. There's steam coming off it and it smells of cabbage soup--I tried a mouthful once, but it's no good, not enough salt or something . . . no, the forest is no place for a man. What more do they want to know about it? They drive their machines on and on into it, like a hole in the ice--and they still write if off, and down they go, and they still. ..

"Green odorous abundance. Abundance of colors, abundance of smells. Abundance of life. And all of it alien. Somehow familiar, a resemblance somewhere, but profoundly alien. The hardest part was to accept it as alien and familiar at one and the same time, derived from our world, flesh of our flesh--but broken away, not wishing to know us. An apeman might think the same way about us, his descendants, grieving and fearful . . ."

"When the order comes out," proclaimed Hausbotcher, "we shall move some real stuff in there, not your lousy bulldozers and landrovers--in two months will turn it all into ... er ... a concrete platform, dry and level."

"You will turn it," said Acey. "If you don't cop one in the jaw, you'll turn your own father into a concrete platform. For straighforwardness sake."

The siren started up thickly. The glass in the windows rattled and above the door a massive bell hammered out, lamps flickered on the walls, while above the counter a large sign lit up: "Get up and leave!" Hausbotcher rose hastily, adjusted his watch and without a word went off at a run.

"Well, I'm off," said Pepper. "Work to be done."

"Time to go," agreed Acey. "Time's up."

He divested himself of his quilted jacket, rolled it up neatly, and moved the chairs so as to lie down, using the jacket as a pillow.

"Tomorrow at seven, then?" said Pepper.

"What?" asked Acey in a drowsy voice.

"I'll be here tomorrow at seven."

"What d'you say?" Acey asked, tossing about on the chairs. "Place is going to the dogs, bastards," he mumbled. "How many times have I told them to get a sofa in here. . . ."

"To the garage," said Pepper. "Your truck."

"Ah-h. . . . Well, to do that thing, we'll see. It's not that easy."

He tucked up his legs, stuck his palms under his armpits, and started snuffling. His arms were heavy and a tattoo could be glimpsed under the hair. "What destroys us" was written there, also, "Ever onward." Pepper made for the exit.

He crossed an enormous puddle in the backyard on a board, skirted a mound of empty jam-jars, crept through a hole in the fence, and entered the Directorate building via the service entrance. It was cold and dark in the corridors, which reeked of tobacco, dust, and old papers. There wasn't a soul anyway, no sound could be heard from behind the leatherette doors. Pepper went up to the second floor by way of a narrow staircase without a handrail, clinging to the dilapidated wall. He went up to a door above which a sign flickered on and off. "Wash your hands before work." A large black letter M showed up on the door. Pepper thrust at the door and experienced a slight shock on discovering it was his own office. That is, of course, it wasn't his office; it was Kirn's, chief of Science Security, but Pepper had put a table in there and now it stood sideways near the door by the tiled

wall; half the table was, as usual, taken up with a mothballed Mercedes. Kirn's table stood by the large, well-cleaned window; he was already at work, sitting hunched-up and consulting a slide rule.

"I wanted to wash my hands," said Pepper, at a loss.

"Wash away, wash away," Kim nodded. "There's the washbasin. It's going to be very convenient. Now everybody will be coming to see us."

Pepper went over to the basin and began washing his hands. He washed them in hot and cold water, two kinds of soap, and special grease-absorbent paste, rubbed them with a bast whisp and brushes of varying degrees of stiffness. After that he switched the electric dryer on and for some time held his moist pink hands in the howling stream of warm air.

"They announced at four that they were transferring us to the second floor," said Kim. "Whereabouts were you? With Alevtina?"

"No, I was at the cliff-edge," said Pepper, seating himself at his table.

The door opened wide and Proconsul entered the room with a rush, waved his briefcase in greeting, and disappeared behind the curtain. The door of his study creaked and the bolt shot home. Pepper took the sheet off the Mercedes, sat without moving, then went over to the window and flung it open.

The forest wasn't visible from here, but it was there. It always was there, though it could only be seen from the cliff. Anywhere else in the Directorate something was in the way. In the way were the cream structures of the mechanical workshops and the four-story garage for staff cars. In the way were the cattle-yards of the farm area and the washing hung out near the laundry with its spin dryer permanently out of commission. In the way was the park with its flowerbeds and pavilions, its big-wheel and plaster-of-paris bathers, covered with penciled grafitti. In the way stood cottages with ivy-draped verandahs adorned with the crosses of television antennae. From here, however, the first-floor window, the forest was hidden by a high brick wall, incomplete as yet, but very high, which rose around the flat-roofed one-story Engineering Penetration building. The forest could only be seen from the cliff-edge.

However, even a man who had never seen the forest, heard nothing about it, never thought about it, wasn't afraid of it, and never yearned for it, even such a man could easily have guessed at its existence if only because of the simple existence of the Directorate. I, for example, have thought about the forest, argued about it, dreamed about it, but I never even suspected its actual existence. I became convinced of its existence not when I first went out onto the cliff-edge, but when I first read the notice near the entrance: "Forest Directorate." I stood before this notice with a suitcase in my hand, dusty and dehydrated after the long journey, reading and re-reading it, and felt weak at the knees, for now I knew that the forest existed and that meant that everything that I had thought about it up till now was the toyings of a feeble imagination, pale impotent falsehoods. The forest exists and this vast, somewhat grim building is concerned with its fate.

"Kim," said Pepper, "surely I'll get into the forest. I'm leaving tomorrow, after all."

"You really want to go there?" asked Kim absently. "Hot green swamps, irritable and timorous trees, mermaids, resting on the water under the moon from their mysterious activity in the depths, wary enigmatic aborigines, empty villages . . ." "I don't know," said Pepper.

"It's not for you, Peppy," said Kim. "It's only for people who've never thought about the forest, who've never given a curse about it. You take it too much to heart. The forest, for you, is dangerous, it will trap you."

"Very likely," said Pepper, "but after all I came here just to see it."

"What do you want the bitter truth for?" asked Kim. "What'll you do when you've got it? What'll you do in the forest, anyway? Cry over a dream that's become your destiny? Pray for it to be different? Or, who knows,

maybe start to re-work what there is and must be?"

"So why did I come here?"

"To convince yourself. Surely you realize how important it is--to be convinced. Other people come for different reasons. Maybe to see miles of firewood, or find the bacteria of life, or write a thesis. Or get a permit, not to go into the forest but just in case: come in handy sometime and not everybody's got one. The limit of their little intentions is to make a luxury park out of the forest, like a sculptor producing a statue from a block of marble. So they can keep it trim. Year in, year out. Not let it be a forest again."

"It's time I got away from here," said Pepper. "There's nothing for me to do here. Somebody's got to go, either me or all of you."

"Let's multiply," said Kim and Pepper seated himself at his table, found the wall-plug by feel, and plugged in the Mercedes.

"Seven hundred and ninety three, five hundred and twenty-two by two hundred and sixty-six, zero eleven."

The machine began to chatter and leap. Pepper waited for it to settle, then hesitantly read out the answer.

"All right. Clear it," said Kim. "Now, six hundred and ninety-eight, three hundred and twelve, divide for me by twelve fifteen. . . ."

Kim dictated the figures, Pepper picked them out, pressed the multiplier and divider keys, added, subtracted, derived roots, everything proceeded as normal.

"Twelve by ten," said Kim. "Multiply."

"One oh oh seven," dictated Pepper automatically, then woke up and said: "Wait, it's lying. It should be a hundred and twenty."

"I know, I know," said Kim, impatient. "One zero zero seven," he repeated. "Now get me the root of ten zero seven. . . ."

"Just a minute," said Pepper.

The bolt clicked again behind the curtain and Proconsul appeared, pink, fresh, and satisfied. He began to wash his hands, humming the while "Ave Maria" in a pleasant voice. After this he announced:

"What a marvel it is after all, this forest, gentlemen! It's criminal how little we talk and write about it! And it is indeed worthy of description. It ennobles, it arouses the highest feelings. It facilitates progress. We, however, are totally unable to stem the spread of unqualified rumors, stories, and jokes. There is no real forest propaganda being done. People talk and think about the forest hell knows. . . ."

"Seven hundred and eighty-five multiplied by four hundred and thirty-two," said Kim.

Proconsul raised his voice. His voice was powerful and well modulated. The Mercedes became inaudible.

" 'As if we lived in the forest. . .' 'Forest people . . .' 'You can't see the wood for the trees.' 'If you're in the forest, you're after firewood.' That's what we have to fight against! To eradicate! Let's say that you, Monsieur Pepper, don't fight against it, why not? After all, you could do a detailed, meaningful lecture on the forest at the club, but you do no such thing. I've been keeping tabs on you for quite a while, it's been wasted time waiting. What's the matter?"

"Well, I've never been there, have I?" said Pepper. "That doesn't matter. I haven't been there either, but I've read a lecture, and judging by the response, it was most useful. It's not whether you've been in the forest or not, it's a matter of ridding the facts of this encrustation of mysticism and superstition, laying bare the essence of things, having cleansed it of adornments placed upon it by philistines and utilitarians. . . ."

"Twice eight divide into forty-nine minus seven times seven," said Kim.

The Mercedes got going. Proconsul once again raised his voice:

"I did it as a trained philosopher. You could do it as a qualified linguist. I'll give you the points and you can develop them in the light of the latest linguistic research ... if that's the theme of your thesis?"

"It's 'Stylistic and Rhythmic Characteristics of Feminine Prose in the Late Heian based on Makwa-no Sosi,' " said Pepper. "I'm afraid that . . ."

"Ex . . . cell . . . ent! Just the thing. And emphasize the fact that it's not swamps, it's excellent therapeutic mud-baths; not jumping trees but the end product of high-power research; not natives or savages, rather an ancient civilization of proud, free, modest, and powerful people with noble intentions. And no mermaids. No lilac veils of fog, no veiled hints--forgive me for a poor pun-- That will be excellent, mynheer Pepper, just splendid. It's a good thing you know the forest, so's you can introduce your own personal impressions. My lecture was good too, but, I fear, somewhat over-speculative. As the basis of my material, I made use of conference minutes. Whereas you as one who has researched into the forest . . .."

"I'm not a forest researcher," said Pepper earnestly. "I'm not allowed into the forest. I don't know the forest at all."

Proconsul, nodding absently, wrote something swiftly on his shirt cuff.

"Yes!" said he. "Yes, yes. It is the bitter truth, alas. Alas, we still find pockets of formalism, bureaucracy, heuristic approach to the personality. . . . You can talk about that as well, by the way. You can, yes you can, everybody talks about that. Meanwhile, I shall attempt to get your speech agreed with the higher-ups. I'm damned glad that you'll give us a hand in our work after all, Pepper. I've had a very careful eye on you for a very long time. . . . There you are then. I've noted your name down for next week!"

Pepper unplugged the Mercedes.

"I won't be here next week. My visa has expired and

I'm going tomorrow."

"Well, we'll fix that somehow. I'll go to the director, he's a club member himself, he'll understand. You can reckon to stay another week."

"No," said Pepper. "That won't be necessary." "Oh, yes it will!" said Proconsul, looking him straight in the eye. "You know perfectly well it is, Pepper! Good day."

He brought two fingers to his temple and made off, waving his briefcase.

"It's like a spider's web!" said Pepper. "Am I a fly to them or what? The manager doesn't want me to leave, Alevtina doesn't and now this one. ..."

"I don't want you to leave either," said Kim.

"But I can't stand it here anymore!" "Seven hundred and eighty-seven, multiply by four hundred and thirty-two. ..."

"I'll leave all the same," thought Pepper, depressing the keys. "I'll leave anyway. You may not want it but I will. I shan't be playing ping-pong with you, or playing chess, or sleeping with you, or drinking tea with jam. I don't want to sing you any more songs or calculate for you on the Mercedes, sort out your arguments for you or now read you lectures you won't understand anyway. And I'm not going to think for you, either. Think for yourselves, and I'm leaving. Leaving. Leaving. You'll never understand that thinking isn't a pastime, it's a duty. . . ."

Outside, beyond the incomplete wall, a piledriver thumped heavily, pneumatic hammers knocked, bricks spilled with a roar. Four workmen in forage caps were sitting side by side, stripped to the waist and smoking. As a finishing stroke, a motorcycle roared into life under his window and ticked over noisily.

"Somebody from the forest," said Kim. "Better multiply me sixteen by sixteen."

The door burst open and a man ran into the room. He had on a boiler-suit and an unbuttoned hood dangled on his chest from a length of radio flex. From boots to waist the boiler-suit bristled with the pale-pink arrows of young shoots while the right leg was entwined with an orange plaited liana of endless length and which trailed along the floor. The liana was still twitching a bit and it seemed to Pepper a very tentacle of the

forest, which would reach out at any moment and drag the man back--through the corridors of the Directorate down the staircase, along the yard wall, past the canteen and the workshops, then down the dusty road, through the park, past the statues and pavilions, up to the entrance to the Serpentine, to the gates, but not into them, past them to the precipice, and down. . . .

He was wearing motorcycle goggles, and with his face thickly powdered with dust, Pepper did not at once recognize Stoyan Stoyanov from the biostation.

He was holding a large paper bag. He made several steps on the tiled floor with its mosaic picturing a woman taking a shower, and halted in front of Kim, concealing the paper bag behind his back and making odd head movements as if his neck was itching.

"Kim," he said, "it's me."

Kim made no reply. His pen could be heard tearing and scratching the paper.

"Kimmy," Stogan said, ingratiating. "I'm asking you, on my knees."

"Get lost," said Kim. "Maniac."

"It's the very last time," said Stoyan. "The very, very last little time!"

He moved his head again and Pepper saw in the depression at the back of his skinny shaven neck a tiny little pink shoot, sharply pointed and already twining, trembling, avid.

"Just pass it over and say it's from Stoyan, that's all. If he starts telling you to go to the cinema, tell him you've got urgent overtime. If he offers you tea, say you've already had some. And don't accept any wine if he suggests it. Eh? Kimmikins! For the very last time for ever and ever!"

"What're you fidgeting about for?" Kim asked irritably. "Here, turn around!" "Got one again?" asked Stoyan, turning. "Well, it doesn't matter. Just so you hand that over, nothing else matters."

Kim, leaning forward over the table, was busy with his neck, kneading and massaging, elbows spread. He bared his teeth from squeamishness and muttered curses. Stoyan patiently shifted his weight from foot to foot, head bent and neck extended.

"Hello, Peppy," said he. "Long time no see. What're you doing here? I've brought some again . . . what can I do? . . . Very, very last time ever." He unwrapped the paper and showed Pepper a small bunch of poison-green forest flowers. "Boy, what a smell! What a smell!"

"Stop pulling, you," cried Kim. "Stand still. Maniac.

Useless."

"Maniac. Useless," agreed Stoyan ecstatically. "But! For the last time ever and ever!"

The pink shoots on his boiler-suit were already wilted and wrinkling, raining down on the brick face of the lady under the shower.

"There," said Kirn. "Now get out."

He moved away from Stoyan and threw something half alive, squirming and bloody into the waste-bin.

"I'm going," said Stoyan. "Right away. But, well, our Rita's acting up again. I'm afraid to be away from the biostation. Peppy, you might come over and have a word with them, eh?"

"What next!" said Kim. "Pepper's not needed there."

"What d'you mean, not needed?" Stoyan exclaimed. "Quentin's fading away before your eyes! Just listen. Rita ran off a week ago--all right. Okay, what can you do? But, she came back that night all wet, white, and icy cold. The guard was questioning her, unarmed, and she did something to him, so he's been senseless ever since. And the whole experimental compound has been invaded by grass."

"Well?" said Kim.

"Quentin cried all morning. . . ."

"I know all about that," Kim broke in. "What I don't get is how Pepper comes into it."

"What d' you mean how? What're you talking about? Who else if not Pepper? Not me, eh? And not you. . . . We're not calling in Hausbotcher, Claudius-Octavian."

"Stop it," said Kim, slamming his palm on the table. "Get back to work and don't let me see you here in working hours again. Don't make me lose my temper."

"All right," said Stoyan hastily. "Okay. I'm off. You'll hand it over?"

He placed the bouquet on the table and ran off, shouting as he left: "and the cess-pit's working again."

Kim picked up a broom and swept all the droppings into a corner.

"Mad fool," he said. "And that Rita. . . . Now calculate the lot again. To hell with them and their love affairs. . . ."

The motorbike started banging nerve-rackingly under the window, then all was quiet, with only the piledriver thudding behind the wall.

"Pepper," said Kim. "Why were you at the cliff this morning?"

"I was hoping to catch sight of the director. I was told he sometimes does physical jerks there. I wanted to ask him to send me but he didn't come. You know, Kim, I think everybody lies here. Sometimes I even think you do."

"Director," said Kim, ruminating, "you know that's an idea. You're on the ball. You've got guts. . . ."

"All the same, I'm leaving tomorrow" said Pepper. "Acey's taking me, he promised. Tomorrow I shan't be here, official."

"I never expected that, no," continued Kim, unheeding. "Plenty of guts . . . maybe we should send you over there, to sort things out. . . ."

Chapter Two

Kandid woke and thought at once: I'll go tomorrow. At the same moment Nava stirred in the other comer.

"Are you asleep?" she asked.

"No."

"Let's talk, then," she suggested. "We haven't spoken to each other since yesterday evening after all. All right?"

"All right."

"First you tell me when you're going."

"I don't know," he said, "soon."

"That's what you always say: soon. Soon, or the day after tomorrow. Maybe you think it's the same thing? Well no, you've learned to talk now. At first you mixed everything up, mixed everything up, mixed the hut up and the village, grass and mushrooms, even people and deadlings, mixed them up you did and then you'd mutter away. We couldn't make it out, couldn't understand a word. . . ."

He opened his eyes and stared at the low, lime-encrusted ceiling. The worker ants were on the move in two even columns, from left to right loaded, right to left empty. A month ago it had been the other way around, right to left loaded with mushroom spawn, left to right empty.

A month hence it would be the other way again unless someone told them to do something else. Dotted here and there along the column stood the big black signalers motionless, antennae slowly waving, awaiting orders. A month ago I used to wake up and think I'd go the day after tomorrow but we never went, and long before that even I used to wake up and think the day after tomorrow we'd be off at last and we never went. But if we don't go the day after tomorrow, this time I'll go on my own. I used to think like that before as well of course, but this time it's for sure. The best thing would be to go now, straight away, no talking or trying to persuade. But that needed a clear head. Better not. The best thing would be to decide once and for all: as soon as I can wake with a clear head, be up, and straight out into the street and away into the forest, and not let anybody start talking to me. That's vital: don't let anybody start talking to you, distracting you

with their whining, starting your head buzzing, especially just here above the eyes, till your ears start ringing and you feel like vomiting and the whining goes on and on right through you. And Nava was already talking. . . .

". . . so that's what happened," Nava was saying, "the deadlings took us along in the night, and they can't see very well at night. Blind as bats, anyone'll tell you that, even that Humpy, though he doesn't belong here, he's from the village that was next to ours, not this one of ours where you and I live now, but ours where I lived with mam, so you can't know Humpy, in his village everything's covered in mushrooms, the spawn fell and that's something not everybody likes, Humpy went away from the village straight away. It's the Accession, he says, and now there's no place for people in the village. . . . So-o-o. There was no moon that night and they probably lost the track, anyway they all bunched together, us in the middle, and it got so hot, you couldn't breathe. . . ."

Kandid looked at her. She was lying on her back, legs crossed, arms folded behind her head. Only her lips moved endlessly, and from time to time her eyes flashed in the half darkness. She went on talking even when the old man came in and seated himself at the table. He drew a pot toward him, sniffed at it noisily and with a slurp set to. At that Kandid got up and with his palms wiped the night sweat from his body. The old man was champing and slobbering, not taking his eyes from the bin with the lid protecting it from mold. Kandid took the pot away and set it next to Nava to stop her talking. The old man sucked his teeth comprehensively.

"Not very tasty," he said, "it's the same everywhere you go these days. And that path's all grown over I used to go along; I used it a lot too, I went to the training there and just bathing, I often went bathing in those days, there was a lake there, now it's just a swamp and it's dangerous but somebody still goes along there otherwise how come there's so many drowned bodies? And reeds. I can ask anybody: how come there's paths through the reeds? And nobody can tell me, and no more they ought. What have you got there in that bin? If it's berries in soak I'll have them, I love soaked berries, but if it's something of yesterday's then it doesn't matter, I won't eat leavings, you can eat your own leavings." He paused, looking from Kandid to Nava and back again. Getting no answer he went on:

"You can't sow anymore where the reeds have grown over. They used to sow there before. They had to for the Accession, and they took everything to Clay Clearing, they still take it there but they don't leave it on the clearing, they bring it back. I told them they shouldn't, but they don't know the meaning of the word. The elder asked me straight out in front of them all: 'Why shouldn't we?' Buster was standing there, look, where you're standing, closer even, and Ears just here, say, and over there where your Nava's lying, there are the Baldy brothers, and he asks me in front of them, in front of everybody. I tell him don't you realize, I tell him, we're not alone here. . . . His father was a very wise man, or maybe he wasn't his father, some say he wasn't and to be sure it doesn't seem like it. 'Why,' he asks me, 'can't I ask why I shouldn't in front of eyeryone?' "

Nava got up and, passing the pot to Kandid, started tidying up. Kandid began to eat. The old man fell silent and watched him for a while chewing on his lip before observing: "That food's not good, you shouldn't eat it."

"Why not?" asked Kandid to tease.

The old man cackled.

"Eh, listen to him! Dummy, you'd do better to keep quiet. You'd be better off answering what I keep asking, does it hurt much when you have your head cut off?"

"What's it to you?" shouted Nava. "Why do you keep prying?"

"Shouts at me," announced the old man. "Lifts up her voice against me. She's borne no child and raises her voice against me. Why don't you have a child? Living with Dummy all this time and no child. Everybody has them but not you. You shouldn't go on like this. Do you know what 'shouldn't' means?

It means undesirable, not approved, and since it's not approved it means you shouldn't. What you should do may not be clear but what you shouldn't do, you shouldn't. Everybody should know that and you most of all seeing as how you live in a village not your own, got a house given, got Dummy for a husband. Maybe he's got a different head stuck on him, but he's got a healthy body, you've no right not to have a child. So that's it, shouldn't, not desirable. . . ."

Nava, by now bad tempered and sulky, snatched the bin from the table and went off into the pantry. The old man looked after her then went on, snuffling:

"How else can shouldn't be understood? It can and ought to be realized, shouldn't is harmful. . . ."

Kandid finished his meal and plunked the empty pot in front of the old man. Then he went out onto the street. The house had been heavily overgrown during the night and the only thing visible in the surrounding greenery was the path made by the old man and the place by the door where he had sat fidgeting waiting for them to wake up. The street had already been cleared, the green creeper, thick as a man's arm, which had slid out of the network of boughs hanging above the village on the previous night and put down roots in front of the house next door had already been chopped up and fermenting fluid poured on it. It had turned dark and was going nicely sour. It gave out a strong appetizing smell and the neighbor's boys sat around it and tore out chunks of the soft brown matter, damp and juicy, and stuffed them into their mouths. When Kandid walked past, the eldest shouted with his mouth full, "Dumbling--deadling!" but the cry was not taken up, they were all too busy. Otherwise the street, orange and red from the tall grass in which the houses lay drowned, somber, and mottled with dusky green patches where the sun penetrated the forest roof, lay deserted. From the direction of the field could be heard the monotonous ragged choir of voices: "Hey, hey, make it gay, right way, left way, hey, hey."

From the forest came the echo. Or maybe not an echo. Maybe deadlings.

Hopalong was sitting at home, of course, massaging his leg. "Sit down," was his affable greeting. "Here I've put some soft grass for visitors. They tell me you're going?"

Once more, thought Kandid, once more from the very beginning.

"What's the matter, leg hurting again?" he inquired, seating himself.

"Leg? No, it's just nice sitting here and giving it a rub. When are you off then?"

"Just as we've been fixing it, you and I. If you were to come with me then we could go the day after tomorrow. Now I'll have to find somebody else who knows the forest. I can see you don't want to go."

Hopalong cautiously extended his leg and spoke weightily:

"As soon as you leave me, turn left, and carry on till you get to the field. Across the field, past the two stones and you'll see the road straight away, it's not much overgrown, there's too many boulders on it. Along the road you'll pass through two villages. One's deserted, mushroomy, mushrooms started growing there, so nobody lives there, there's funny folk living in the other village, the blue grass went through there twice and since then they've been sick, no need to start talking to them they won't understand a word, it's like they've lost their memory. Through there then and on the right you have your Clay Clearing. No need for guides, you can get there on your own, no sweat."

"We'll get as far as Clay Clearing," agreed Kandid, "and after that?"

"What do you mean, after that?"

"Across the swamp where the lakes used to be. Remember you were telling me about the stone road?"

"What road? To Clay Clearing. Well I'm trying to tell you, aren't I? Turn left, across the fields up to the two stones. . . ."

Kandid heard him out before speaking.

"Now I know the way to Clay Clearing. We'll get there. But I have to go

further, as you know, I must get to the City, and you promised to show me the way."

Hopalong shook his head in sympathy.

"To the Ci-i-i-i-ty, ah now, is that where you're heading. I remember, I remember . . . yes to the City . . . you can't get there, Dummy. To Clay Clearing now, that's easy; past the two stones, through the mushroom village, past funny village, then Clay Clearing'11 be on your right. Or to the Reeds, say, turn right as you leave me through the scrub, past Bread Fen, then keep following the sun. Where the sun goes, you follow. It's three days travel, but if you really have to go, we'll do it. We used to get pots there before we planted our own. I know the Reeds like the back of my hand, you should have said that's where you wanted to go. No need to wait till the day after tomorrow either, we'll start tomorrow in the morning, we needn't take any food with us, seeing as we're going by Bread Fen... .

"You know, Dummy, you speak so fast it hurts to listen to you. A man's just started to take in what you say when you shut your mouth. Well, we'll go to the Reeds, tomorrow morning we'll go. . . ."

Kandid heard him out once more.

"Listen, Hopalong, I don't have to go to the Reeds. The Reeds aren't where I want to go. Where I want to be isn't the Reeds." Hopalong was listening and nodding. "I want to go to the City. We've often spoken of it before I told you yesterday I wanted to go to the City. I told you the day before I wanted to to the City. I said a week ago I wanted to go there. You told me you knew the way to the city. You said that yesterday. And the day before. Not to the Reeds, to the City. I don't want to go to the Reeds [don't let me get mixed up, he thought, maybe I'm mixed up already. Not the Reeds, the City. The City and not the Reeds]. The City, not the Reeds," he repeated aloud. "Understand? Tell me about the road to the City. Not to the Reeds, to the City. Still better, let's go to the City together. Not to the Reeds together, together to the City."

He stopped. Hopalong started rubbing his sore knee again.

"Likely when they cut your head off, Dummy, something got damaged in there. Like my leg. It used to be just an ordinary leg like anybody else's, then once I was going through the Anthills at night, carrying an ant queen and I put this foot in a hollow tree and now the leg's twisted. Why it's twisted nobody knows, but it doesn't walk straight, and that's a fact. But it'll get me to the Anthills. And I'll take you along. What I don't get is why you told me to get food ready for the trip-- the Anthills is only a stone's throw from here."

He looked at Kandid, floundered, mouth open.

"Of course you don't want to go to the Anthills, do you? Where is it, now? I know, the Reeds. Well I can't go there, I'd never make it. See how twisted this leg is? Listen, Dummy, what is it you've got against going to the Anthills? Let's go there, eh? I've never been there once since that day, maybe the hills aren't there anymore. Let's have a look for that hollow tree, what say?"

He'll sidetrack me, I know it, thought Kandid. He leaned over on his side and rolled a pot over to him.

"Good pot you've got here," he said, "I don't remember when I saw a pot as good as this ... so you'll take me to the City? You told me nobody knows the road to the City except you. Let's go to the City, what do you think, will we make it?"

"Make it? Course we'll make it! To the City, of course we will. And you have seen pots as good as these, know where? The funny folk make them like that. They don't grow them, you know, they make them out of clay, they're not far from Clay Clearing, I told you: left away from me and past the two stones as far as Mushroom Village, only nobody lives there anymore so there's no sense in going. Why should we? Haven't we seen mushrooms before? Even when my leg was all right I never went to Mushroom Village, I only know the funny folk live two ravines past there. Yes ... we could go tomorrow,

yes. . . . Listen, Dummy, let's not go there eh? I don't like those mushrooms. There's mushrooms in our part of the forest, that's different, you can eat them, they taste good. Over there they're sort of green and they smell rotten. Why do you want to go there? You'll bring spawn back with you as well. We'd better go to the City. A lot nicer. Only we can't go tomorrow, there's food to get together and we'll have to find out the way--or do you know the way? If you do, I won't need to ask. In fact I can't think who to ask. Maybe the elder knows --what do you think?"

"Don't you know the way to the City yourself?" asked Kandid. "You know a lot about it, don't you? You even got to the City almost once, didn't you? Only you got frightened of the deadlings and decided you couldn't get through on your own. . . ."

"I wasn't frightened of deadlings any more than I am now," objected Hopalong. "I'll tell you what I am afraid of, though. Are you going to be quiet all the way? That's something I could never do. There's something else as well . . . don't get angry at me. Dummy, just tell me, or if you don't want to say it aloud, whisper, or nod, or if you don't even want to nod just close that eye of yours, the right one in the shadow, nobody'll see only me. The question I want to put is this: aren't you just a teeny bit of a deadling? I can't stand deadlings, you know, I get the tremble when I see them, can't do a thing with myself. . . ."

"No, Hopalong, I'm not a deadling," said Kandid. "I can't stand them myself. If you're afraid I'll be too quiet for you, just remember we'll not be alone, I've told you often enough, Buster's going with us, Barnacle, and two men from New Village."

"I'm not going with Buster," said Hopalong with decision. "First Buster took my daughter away and didn't take care of her. Lost her, he did. I didn't mind him taking her, I do mind him not taking care of her. He was going with her to New Village and robbers set on him and took my daughter and he gave her up. Your Nava and me looked ages for her but we never found her. No, Dummy, there's no sense messing with robbers. If we went to the City, you and I, there'd be no peace from them. Now if it were the Reeds, no trouble at all. We'll start tomorrow."

"The day after," said Kandid. "You'll go, Buster, Barnacle, and the two from New Village. And we'll get right to the City."

"If there's six of us, we'll get there," said Hopalong confidently. "I'd never get there on my own of course, but if there's six of us, we'll get there. With six of us we'd get as far as Devil's Rocks, only I don't know the way there. Shall we go to Devil's Rocks? Listen, Dummy, let's go to the City and decide there, eh? There's food to get ready though, and plenty of it."

"Okay," said Kandid, rising to his feet. "So the day after tomorrow, we start for the City. Tomorrow I'll go to New Village, then I'll see and remind you."

"Come around," said Hopalong. "I'd come to see you, only my leg aches, no strength in it. You come around. We'll have a chat. There's a lot of folk don't like talking to you, Dummy, it's pretty hard going, you know, but I don't mind, I've got used to it, I even like it. Come around, and bring Nava with you, she's a good girl, your Nava, no children though, they'll come she's young yet, that Nava of yours. . . ."

Out on the street, Kandid wiped the sweat away with his palms. Somewhere near, somebody cackled and started coughing. Kandid turned and saw the old man waving a knotted finger of warning.

"The City, eh? So that's where you're off to? That's interesting, nobody's ever got there alive, what's more it's not done. Even you should know that even if you have got a transplanted head."

Kandid swung off to the right along the street. The old man trailed along in the grass after him, muttering:

"If it's not done, then it's always forbidden in some sense or the other, of course ... for instance, it's not done without the elder or the

assembly, with the elder and the assembly it is permissible, of course, though not in every sense. . . ." Kandid was walking as quickly as the ennervating heat and humidity would allow and the old man gradually fell behind.

On the village square, Kandid caught sight of Ears. Ears, staggering and crossing his bandy legs, was moving around in circles, sprinkling handfuls of brown grass-kiHer from a huge pot slung around his belly. Behind him the grass was already smoking and shriveling. Ears had to be avoided and Kandid tried to do just that, but Ears smartly changed direction and came face to face with him.

"Ah . . . Dummy!" he cried joyously, hastily un-slinging the pot from his neck and setting it on the ground. "Where are you off to. Dummy? Home, is it to Nava? Well could be wrong but your Nava's not at home, your Nava's in the field, with these eyes I saw her going to the field, you may believe me or not. . . . Maybe, of course, she hasn't gone to the field, could be wrong. Dummy, but your Nava definitely went along tha-at alley over there and if you go along there the field's the only place you come to, and where's else should she go, your Nava? Not looking for you, would she be. . . ."

Kandid made another effort to get by but again ended up face to face with Ears.

"No need anyway to follow her to the field. Dummy," he went on convincingly. "Why go after her? I'm just killing off the grass then I'll be calling them all here, the land surveyor came and said the elder had told him to tell me to kill the grass on the square because there's to be a meeting on the square. As there's a meeting they'll all come here from the field, your Nava among them if it's to the field she's gone, and where else could she have gone along that alley? Although now I think of it, you can get to other places than the field there, you can. . . ."

He suddenly stopped and gave a shuddering sigh. His eyes screwed up, his hands lifted palms upward, as if of their own accord. His face broke into a sweet smile, then abruptly sagged. Kandid about to make off, stopped to listen. A small dense purplish cloud had formed around Ears' bare head, his lips quivered and he began to speak swiftly and distinctly, in a voice not his own, a sort of announcer's voice; the intonation was alien and the style was one no villager would use, it was as if he spoke an alien language so that only certain phrases seemed comprehensible.

"In the far Southlands new . . . are going into battle. . . . retreating further to the South ... of the victorious march . . . the Great Harrowing in the Northern lands has been temporarily halted owing to isolated and sporadic . . . new advances in Swamp-making are giving extensive areas for peace and new progress toward ... In all settlements . . . great victories . . . work and efforts . . . new detachments of Maidens . . . tomorrow and forever calm and amalgamation."

The old man had caught up to Kandid and now stood at his shoulder interpreting wildly:

"All the settlements, hear that? That means here as well. . . . 'Great victories.' It's what I always say, you can't . . . calm and amalgamation . . . you've got to understand. Here as well, if they say everywhere . . . and new detachments of Maidens, got it?"

Ears fell silent and dropped to his haunches. The lilac cloud had dissipated. The old man impatiently tapped Ears on his bald pate. He blinked and rubbed his ears.

"What did I say?" he asked. "Was it a broadcast? How's the Accession going? Progressing or what? And you don't go to the field, Dummy, at a guess I'd say you're going after your Nava, but your Nava ..."

Kandid stepped over the pot of grass-killer and hurried on.

The old man was no longer audible--either he'd got caught up with Ears or else he'd gone into one of the houses to get his breath back and have a bite to eat on his own.

Buster's house stood on the very edge of the village, There an embattled old woman, neither aunt nor mother, said with a sneer full of malice that Buster wasn't at home, Buster was in the field and if he was at home, there'd be no point in looking for him in the field, but as he was in the field, why was he, Dummy, standing there for nothing?

In the field the sowing was in progress. The oppressive stagnant air was saturated with a powerful range of odors, sweat, fermenting fluid, rotting grain. The morning harvest lay in great heaps along the furrow, the seed already beginning to sprout. Clouds of working flies swarmed over the pots of fermenting fluid and in the heart of this black, metallic-glinting maelstrom stood the elder. Inclining his head and screwing up one eye, he was minutely examining a single drop of whey on his thumbnail. The nail was specially prepared, flat, polished to a gleam and cleaned with the necessary fluids. Past the elder's legs the sowers crawled along the furrows, ten yards apart. They had stopped singing by now, but the heat of the forest still oohed and aahed, obviously now, no echo.

Kandid walked along the chain of workers bending and peering into the lowered faces. Finding Buster, he touched him on the shoulder and Buster at once climbed out of the furrow without question. His beard was clogged with mud.

"Who're you touching, wool on yer nose?" he croaked, looking at Kandid's feet. "Somebody once touched me like that, wool on yer nose, and they took him by his hands and feet and threw him up in a tree, he's up there to this day, and when they take him down he won't do any more touching, wool on yer nose. . . ." "You coming?" asked Kandid shortly. "Course I'm coming, wool on yer nose, when I've prepared leaven for seven; it stinks in the house, there's no living with it, why not go, when the old woman can't stand it and I can't bear to look at it--only where are we going? Hopalong was saying yesterday we were going to the Reeds, and I shan't go there, wool on yer nose, there's no people there, in the Reeds, never mind dames. If a man wants to grab somebody by the leg and throw him into a tree, wool on yer nose, there's nobody there, and I can't live without dames any longer and that elder'll be the death of me. . . . Look at him standing there, wool on yer nose, staring his eyes out and him as blind as a mole, wool on yer nose . . . somebody once stood like that on his own, he got one in the eye, doesn't stand anymore, wool on yer nose but I'm not going to the Reeds, just as you like. . . ." "To the City," said Kandid.

"Oh well, the City, that's another affair altogether, I'll go there all right, specially as I hear tell there's no City there anyway, that old stump's lying his head off--he comes in the morning eats half a pot and starts, wool on yer nose, laying down the law: that's not right, you shouldn't do that. ... I ask him: who are you to tell me what's right and what's wrong, wool on yer nose? He doesn't say, he doesn't know himself. . . . Mutters on about some City."

"We'll set off the day after tomorrow," said Kandid. "What are we waiting for then?" burst out Buster. "Why the day after tomorrow? I can't sleep at night in my house, the leaven is stinking, let's go this evening, somebody once waited and waited, they gave him round ears and he's stopped waiting, never waited since. . . . The old woman's cursing there's no life, wool on yer nose! Listen, Dummy, let's take my old woman with us maybe the robbers would take her, I'd give her up all right!"

"The day after tomorrow we'll go," repeated Kandid patiently. "You're a good fellow, making up so much leaven, from New Village, you know. . . ."

He failed to finish; from the fields came shouting.

"Deadlings! Deadlings!" roared the elder. "Women home! Run off home!"

Kandid looked around. Between the trees on the extreme edge of the field stood the deadlings: two blue and quite close, one yellow a bit farther off. Their heads with the round eye-holes and the black slash of a mouth slowly revolved from side to side. Their huge arms hung loosely along the length of their bodies. The earth where they stood was already smoking,

white trailers of steam mingled with gray-blue smoke.

The deadlings knew a thing or two and so behaved with extreme caution. The yellow one had the whole of his right side eaten away by grass-killer while the blue ones were covered in rashes caused by ferment burns. In places, the skin had died off and hung in rags. While they stood and stared about them, the shrieking women fled to the village and the menfolk, muttering threats, crowded together with pots of grass-killer at the ready.

Then the elder spoke. "What are we standing here for, I ask you? Let's go, why stand here?" Everyone moved slowly forward, spreading out into a line, toward the deadlings. "Get them in the eyes," the elder kept shouting. "Try and splash them in the eyes. Best get the eyes, not much good if we can't get their eyes. . . ."

The line sang out ominously. "Ooh-hoo-hoo, get out! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Nobody was inclined to get too close.

Buster, picking the dried mud from his beard, walked next to Kandid and shouted louder than the others; between shouts he argued with himself.

"No, no-o-o, we're wasting our time, wool on yer nose, they won't stay, they'll run in a minute. . . . Deadlings are they? Rubbish, I'd say, they won't stay. . . . Hoo-hoo-hoo! You lot!"

Coming within twenty paces of the deadlings, the men stopped. Buster hurled a clod of earth at the yellow one, but with surprising agility it stuck out its broad palm and deflected the clod to one side. Everybody started hooting and stamping their feet, some displayed the pots and made threatening motions toward the deadlings. Nobody wanted to waste the fluid and nobody wanted to drag all the way to the village for more. The deadlings were battered and wary, they could be got rid of this way.

So it turned out. Steam and smoke thickened under the deadlings' feet, they were faltering. "Well that's it" was said along the chain. "They've given ground, they'll turn in a minute. . . ."

The deadlings imperceptibly altered, as if they were turning inside their own skins. Their eyes and mouth disappeared from view--they had turned their backs. In a second they were retreating, flickering among the trees. Where they had stood, a cloud of steam slowly settled.

The men, in an excited hubbub, moved back toward the furrow. It was suddenly realized that it was time to return to the village for the meeting. They set off.

"Go onto the square," repeated the elder to everyone. "Onto the square. The meeting will take place on the square, so everyone must go to the square."

Kandid was looking for Barnacle, but he was nowhere in the crowd for some reason. Barnacle had disappeared somewhere. Buster was talking nervily beside him.

"Remember, Dummy, when you jumped on that deadling? Yes, jumped on him, you did, wool on yer nose, took him by the head an' all, cuddling him like your Nava, wool on yer nose, and what a yell. . . . Remember, Dummy, what a yell you gave out with? You got burned, and then came out in blisters, wet and painful as well. . . . Why did you jump on him, Dummy? Somebody did that, jumpy-jumped on a deadling, took all the skin off his belly, now he doesn't jump anymore; tells children to jump, wool on yer nose. . . . They say, Dummy, you jumped on his back so he'd carry you to the City, but you're no dame, why should he carry you away with him? Anyway there's no City at all, it's that old stump making up his words City, Accession. . . . Who's seen this Accession? Ears gets drunk on beetles and goes out burbling, the old stump listens, then he wanders off everywhere, guzzling other people's food and repeating. . . ."

"I'm going out to New Village in the morning," said Kandid. "I'll be back at night, I shan't be here during the day. You see Hopalong and remind him about the day after tomorrow. I've been reminding him and I'll do it again, still, you do it, otherwise he'll wander off . somewhere."

"I'll remind him," promised Buster. "I'll remind him if I have to break

his other leg off."

The whole village had come out onto the square. Everybody was talking, shoving and scattering seeds on the bare earth so that stems might come up and provide soft seating. Children were mixed in underfoot; their parents were pulling them along by their ears or hair to avoid a mix-up. A column of poorly trained ants attempting to drag worker-fly larvae straight across the square were being driven off by the cursing elder. He was asking by whose orders there were ants here, it was a disgrace that's what. Ears and Kandid were suspected, but the matter was not conducive to proof.

Kandid found Barnacle and wanted to talk with him, but failed as the assembly was then declared open and as always the old man crawled forward to speak first. What he spoke about nobody could understand but everybody sat quietly listening and hissed at their scuffling children not to scuffle. Some--those seated most comfortably well away from the sunny spots--fell into a doze.

The old man went on at length about what was not "right" and in what senses this was to be understood. He called for a mass Accession, threatened victories in North and South, cursed the village and, separately, New Village, announced that new detachments of Maidens were everywhere and that neither in the village nor in the New Village was there calm or amalgamation, that all this was a consequence of people forgetting the word "shouldn't" and thinking everything was permitted. Dummy, for instance, was set on going to the City, though nobody had summoned him. The village bore no responsibility for that, seeing as he was foreign, but if it turned out by chance that he was a deadling after all, and such an opinion existed in the village, then nobody knew what would happen, especially as Nava, though of course she was an alien too, had had no children by Dummy, and this was not to be tolerated, yet the elder tolerated it. ...

Toward the middle of the oration, the elder dozed off as well, but hearing his own name, started and immediately gave a threatening bark: "Hey! No sleeping! You can sleep at home," he said, "that's what houses are for, sleeping in, nobody sleeps on the square, meetings are held on the square. Nobody has ever been allowed to sleep on the square, nobody is allowed and nobody will be." He glanced toward the old man.

The old man gave a satisfied nod. "And so we have our general 'not permitted.' " He smoothed his hair and announced: "A bride has been announced at New Village. And we have a groom, Loudmouth, whom you all know. Stand up. Loudmouth, and show yourself, no better not, you just sit there, everybody knows you anyway. Now we have the question: shall Loudmouth go to New Village or alternatively shall we bring the bride here to the village. . . . No, no. Loudmouth, sit you down, we'll decide this without you . . . those sitting next to him keep a good hold on him till the meeting is over. Who has any opinion, let him speak."

There turned out to be two opinions. One (Loud-mouth's neighbors for the most part) demanded Loudmouth's dismissal to New Village, let the rest live here. Others, calm and serious men, living well away from Loudmouth proposed the opposite, women were getting short, some had been stolen, therefore the bride should come to the village. Loudmouth was that all right, but suppose there would be children, let there be no doubt, that was for sure. The argument was long, and at first to the point. Then Hopalong unfortunately shouted out that it was wartime and everybody was forgetting that. Loudmouth was instantly forgotten. Ears started to explain that there was no war and never had been, there was and would be the Great Harrowing. Not Harrowing, objected someone in the crowd, it was Essential Swamping. The Harrowing was over long ago, the Swamping had been going on for years, Ears didn't know a thing, how could he, he was Ears wasn't he? The old man got up and rolling his eyes, croaked out hoarsely that there was no war, no Harrowing; there was no Swamping either, there had been, was, and would be the Personal Struggle in North and South. How was there no war, wool on yer nose, came from the crowd, when there was a whole lake full of drowned

bodies past Funny Village? The meeting exploded. What about the drowned bodies? Where there was water you found bodies, past Funny Village wasn't like here, you couldn't go by Funny Village, they ate out of clay there, lived under clay, gave their wives to the robbers, now people talked about drowned bodies. It wasn't drowned bodies, no struggle and no war, it was Calm and Amalgamation in the interests of the Accession! Why then was Dummy going to the City? Dummy was going to the City, therefore the City existed, and if it existed where was your war? It must be Amalgamation! Anyway did it matter where Dummy went? Somebody went as well once, they gave it him right in the nose and he doesn't go anywhere anymore. . . . Dummy was going to the City because there was no City, they knew Dummy, Dummy was a fool if ever there was one, and if there was no City, how could there be Amalgamation? There was no Amalgamation, there had been one time mind you, but that was ages ago . . . and no Accession either! Who says there's no Accession? What do you mean? What's that? Loudmouth . . . hold Loudmouth! They've let him go! Why couldn't they hold onto him?

Kandid, knowing this would go on for long, attempted to start a conversation with Barnacle, but Barnacle was in no mood for conversation. "Accession," he shouted. "Then what about the deadlings? You're forgetting the deadlings! Why? Because you haven't any idea what to think about them, that's why you're all shouting about this Accession! . . ."

They went on shouting about the deadlings, then about the mushroomy villages, then they got tired and began to quiet down, mopping their faces and shrugging one another off wearily. Soon it transpired that everybody had fallen silent and only the old man and Loudmouth were carrying on. Everyone came to their senses. Loudmouth was borne down and his mouth stuffed with leaves. The old man went on for a while but lost his voice and became inaudible. Then a disheveled representative from New Village got up and pressing his hands to his breast and staring about him, began to beg in a broken voice that Loudmouth shouldn't be sent to New Village, they had no need of him, they had lived a hundred years without him and could do it again, they should bring the bride to the village and then they would see New Village would make no trouble over a dowry. . . . Nobody had the strength to start arguing again--they promised to think about it and decide later, especially as the matter wasn't urgent.

People began to drift off to dinner. Barnacle took Kandid by the arm and dragged him to one side under a tree.

"Right, when do we leave?" he asked. "I'm so fed up here in the village, I want off into the forest, I'll be ill of boredom here soon. ... If you're not going, say so and I'll go alone, I'll talk Buster or Hopalong into going too."

"We're going the day after tomorrow," said Kandid. "You've prepared food?"

"Prepared it and eaten it. I haven't got patience to look at it, lying there and nobody to eat it except the old man--he's getting on my nerves, I'll make a cripple of him yet if I don't go soon. . . . What do you think, Dummy, who is that old man and why does he eat everybody out of house and home, where does he live? I'm a traveled man, I've been in a dozen villages, I've been with the funny folk, I've even visited the skinnies, spent the night there--nearly died of fright, but I've never seen an old man like that, he must be a rare specimen, that's why we keep him and don't beat him, but I've no patience left to watch him rummage around my pots day and night--he eats in the house and takes stuff away with him, why my father used to curse him before the deadlings smashed him up. . .. Where does he put it all? He's just skin and bones, there's no room inside him, but he can lap up two jars and take two away with him, and he never brings any jars back. . . . You know, Dummy, maybe we've got more than one old man, maybe there's two or even three? Two sleep while one works. When he's had his fill he wakes up the next and goes to sleep himself. . . ."

Barnacle accompanied Kandid as far as the house but declined to have

dinner, out of tact. After chatting for fifteen minutes about how they lured fish in the Reed-bed lake by wiggling their fingers, and promising to drop in on Hopalong to remind him of the journey to the City, and asserting that Ears was no Ears at all, but only a very deranged man, and that the deadlings caught women for food, since men had tough flesh and the deadlings had no teeth, and promising to prepare fresh supplies and drive off the old man without mercy, he at last departed.

Kandid got his breath back with difficulty, and before going in stood awhile in the doorway shaking his head. You, Dummy, don't forget that tomorrow you've to go to New Village, early in the morning, don't forget: not to the Reed-beds, not to Clay Clearing, but New Village . . . and why should you go there, Dummy, better go to the Reed-beds, lots of fish there . . . good fun. ... To New Village, don't forget, New Village, don't forget Kandid . . . tomorrow morning to New Village . . . talk the boys into it, you'll never get to the City with just the four of you. ... He entered the house without realizing it.

Nava was still absent, but the old man was seated at the table waiting for someone to put his dinner out. He squinted testily at Kandid and said:

"You walk slow, Dummy, I've been in two houses-- everybody's having dinner but here there's nothing. . . . Likely that's why you've got no children, you walk slow and there's nothing in the house at dinner time. . . ."

Kandid went right up to him and stood there for some time, reflecting. The old man continued:

"How long will you take to get to the City, if you're as late as this for dinner? It's a long way to the City, they say, a mighty long way, I know everything about you now, I know you've decided to head for the City, only thing I don't know is how you're going to reach it if you spend a whole day getting to a pot of food and still don't get there. . . . I'll have to go with you, I'll lead you there, I should have gone long ago, only I don't know the road, but I've got to get to the City to fulfill my duty and tell everything about everything to the proper person. . . ."

Kandid took him under the arms and hoisted him swiftly from the table. The old man was dumbfounded. Kandid carried him out of the house in outstretched arms and placed him on the road; he wiped his hands on the grass. The old man recovered his wits.

"Just don't forget to take along food for me," he said to Kandid's back. "Take a lot of good stuff for me, because I'm going to fulfill my duty and you're going for your own pleasure and though 'not done'. . . ."

Kandid returned to the house, sat down at the table and lowered his head onto clenched fists. Never mind, I'm leaving the day after tomorrow, he thought. Let me not forget that: day after tomorrow. Day after tomorrow, he thought, day after tomorrow.

Chapter Three

Pepper was awakened by the touch of cold fingers on his bare shoulder. He opened his eyes and perceived someone standing over him, dressed in underwear. The room was dark, but the man was standing in a shaft of moonlight. Pepper could make out his pale face and

staring eyes.

"What do you want?" whispered Pepper. "You have to vacate," the man whispered in return.

It's only the warden, thought Pepper, relieved. "Why vacate?" he asked loudly, raising himself on his elbow. "Vacate what?"

"The hotel is overbooked, you'll have to vacate the room."

Pepper glanced around the room in confusion. Everything was as it had been, the other three bunks were empty as before.

"You needn't stare," said the warden. "We know the situation. In any case the sheets on your bed have to be changed and sent to the laundry. You

won't be washing them yourself, not brought up to. . . ." Pepper understood. The warden was very frightened and was being rude to keep his spirits up. He was in that state where one touch and he would cry out, squeal, twitch convulsively, call for help.

"Come on, come on," said the warden and pulled the pillow from beneath Pepper's head in a sort of weird impatience. "Sheets, I said. . . ."

"Look, what is this," said Pepper. "Does it have to be now? In the night?" "Urgent."

"Good God," said Pepper, "you're off your head. Well, all right. . . . You collect the sheets, I'll get by. I've only got this one night left."

He slid from the bunk onto the chilly floor and began stripping the pillowcase off. The warden, as if frozen to the spot, followed his movements with bulging eyes. His lips quivered.

"Repairs," he said finally. "Repairs got to be done. All the wallpaper's peeling off, the ceiling's cracked, the floors need re-laying. . . ." His voice took on a firmer note. "So you've got to vacate in any case. We're starting repairs right away here."

"Repairs?"

"Repairs. Look at that wallpaper. The workmen will be here directly."

"What, now?"

"Right now. Why wait? The ceiling's full of cracks. Just take a look."

Pepper began to shiver. He left the pillowcase and picked up his shorts.

"What's the time?" he asked.

"Well after twelve," said the warden, again whispering, and, forsome reason, glancing around.

"Where on earth shall I go?" said Pepper, pausing with one leg in his shorts. "You'll have to fix me up. Another room. ..."

"Full up. And where it isn't, repairs are under way."

"In the duty room, then."

"Full up."

Pepper stared at the moon in despair.

"Well, the storeroom will do," he said. "The storeroom, the laundry, the isolation ward. I've only got six more hours to sleep. Or maybe you can fix me up in your place. . . ."

The warden began rushing about the room. He ran between the bunks, barefoot, white, and terrible as a specter. Then he stopped and groaned:

"What a business, eh? I'm a civilized man as well, graduate of two colleges, I'm not a savage or anything. ... I know it all. But it's impossible, get me? It's absolutely out of the question!"

He bounded up to Pepper and whispered in his ear, "Your visa has run out! Twenty-seven minutes ago it ran out and you're still here. You mustn't be here. I beg you. . . ." He collapsed onto his knees and drew Pepper's boots and socks out from under the bed. "I woke up at five to twelve covered in sweat," he mumbled. "Well, I thought, this is it. This is the end of me. I ran off just as I was. I don't remember a thing. Clouds over the streets, nails catching my feet--and my wife's expecting! Get dressed, please, get dressed. . . ."

Pepper got dressed in a hurry. He found it hard to think. The warden kept running between the bunks, shuffling across the moonlit squares, now glancing out into the corridor, now looking out of the window, whispering, "Good lord, what a business."

"Can I at least leave my suitcase with you?" inquired Pepper.

The warden clacked his teeth.

"Not at any price! You'll be the ruin of me. .. . You might have some sympathy. . . . Good lord, good lord... ."

Pepper gathered his books together, closing his case with difficulty, and picked up his raincoat. "Where shall I go now?" he asked.

The warden was mute. He waited fidgeting with impatience. Pepper hefted his suitcase and went off down the dark and silent staircase to the street.

He paused on the verandah and while attempting to control his shivering, spent some time listening to the warden instructing the somnolent duty clerk: "He'll ask for readmittance. Don't let him in! He's got ... [inaudible sinister whisper] Got it! You're responsible. .. ." Pepper sat down on his suitcase and placed his raincoat across his knees.

"I'm afraid not, sorry," said the warden behind him. "I must ask you to leave the verandah. I must ask you to vacate the hotel premises completely."

He had to go down and put his case on the roadway. The warden stamped around, muttering: "I must ask you. . . . My wife . . . and no fuss. . . . Consequences . . . can't be done. ..." and left, white underwear gleaming, stealing along the fence. Pepper glanced at the dark windows of the cottages, the dark windows of the Directorate, the dark windows of the hotel. There was no light anywhere, even the street lighting was off. There was only the moon, round, brilliant, and somehow malevolent.

He suddenly realized he was alone. He had nobody. All around people were asleep and they all like me, I know that, I've seen it many times. Yet I'm alone, just as if they'd suddenly died or become enemies . . . and the warden--kind, ugly man, a martyr to Basedow's disease, a loser who latched on to me the very first day. We played the piano together, four hands, and argued. I was the only one he dared to argue with and next to whom he felt himself a real person, not just the father of seven children. And Kim. He had returned from the chancellery and brought a huge document case with him, full of informers reports. Ninety-two denunciations of me, all written in one hand and with different signatures. That I steal official sealing wax at the post office, that I brought an underage girl in my suitcase and am now keeping her in the bakery cellar, and much besides. . . . And Kim read these denunciations and threw some into the wastebasket, and kept others to one side, muttering: "I'll have to put some headwork in on that." And that was unexpected and horrible, senseless and repulsive. . . . How he would timidly glance at me and drop his eyes at once.

Pepper rose, gripped his case and wandered off, following his nose. His nose led nowhere. Not that there was anywhere to lead to along these dark empty streets. He kept stumbling, the dust made him sneeze, and he fell a time or two. The suitcase was incredibly heavy and somehow ungovernable. It rubbed its.bulk against his leg then swung out to one side and then, returning from the dark, struck his kneee a tremendous clout. In the park's dark alley where there was no light at all and only the statues, like the warden, glimmered shakily in the gloom, the case got caught up in a thread of his trouser-leg and Pepper abandoned it in despair. The hour of despair had arrived. Weeping and blind with tears, Pepper struggled through dry, dusty, spiky hedges, rolled down steps, fell, painfully striking his back, and finally drained of strength and gasping with exasperation and self-pity, went down on his knees at the edge of the cliff.

The forest, however, remained indifferent. So indifferent that it was invisible. Below the edge was inky blackness. Only on the far horizon something layered, gray, and formless lazily reflected the rays of the moon.

"Wake up," asked Pepper. "Look at me just this once, while we're alone, don't worry, they're all asleep. Surely you need at least one of us? Or don't you understand what a need is? It's when you can't do without . . . when you think all the time about . . . when all your life you've been striving toward. ... I don't know what you are. Nor do those who are dead sure they know. You are what you are, but I can hope that you're what I've wanted to see all my life: kind, intelligent, indulgent, and considerate, perhaps even grateful. We've dissipated all that, we've no energy or time for it, all we do is construct historical monuments, ever higher, ever cheaper, but consideration is something we can't manage. But you're different, because from a long way off I came to you, not believing you actually existed. So you really don't need me? No, I won't lie. I'm afraid I don't need you either. We've caught sight of each other, but came no closer. It shouldn't have been that way. Perhaps they stand between us? There are

plenty of them and only one of me, but I'm--one of them, you, probably can't pick me out in the crowd, maybe it isn't worth the trouble.

Maybe I invented those human characteristics that would appeal to you myself, to you that is, not as you are, but as I had imagined you to be. ...

Suddenly from beyond the horizon, bright white puffs of light slowly swam up and hung, dissipating and at once to the right under the cliff, under the overhanging rocks, searchlight beams began hunting wildly, haring about the sky and encountering massed banks of fog. The light balls above the horizon continued to thin out and disperse and turned into silvery clouds before extinguishing. A minute later the searchlights went out.

"They're afraid," said Pepper. "I am too. I'm afraid for myself but I'm afraid for you as well. You don't know them after all, yet. Even I don't know them at all well. All I know is they're capable of any extreme, the furthest extremes of stupidity and wisdom, cruelty and pity, fury and restraint. There's only one thing they lack--understanding. They always substituted some sort of surrogate for understanding, be it faith, disbelief, indifference, or neglect. That always turned out to be the simplest way. Easier to believe than comprehend. Easier to become disenchanted than to comprehend. I'm leaving tomorrow, by the way, not that that matters. I can't help you here, here everything's too solid and well-established. I'm just too obviously superfluous here, alien. I'll find the pressure point though, don't worry. It's true they can ruin you irretrievably, but that needs time and plenty of it. They've yet to find the most effective, economic, and above all, cheap method of approach. We'll keep up the struggle, it will have been worth it. ... Good-bye."

Pepper got up from his knees and wandered back by way of the bushes, the park, the alley. He tried without success to locate his suitcase. After that he got back to the main street, empty and illuminated only by the moon. It was already after one when he halted outside the Directorate library, it was open invitingly. The windows were hung with heavy curtains but inside it was brightly lit, like a dance hall. The parquet floor had dried out and squeaked desperately; all around were books. The shelves groaned under the weight of books, books lay in heaps on tables and in corners, and apart from Pepper and the books there wasn't a soul in the library.

Pepper lowered himself into a big old armchair and stretched out his legs; reclining he calmly placed his arms on the rests. Well now, what are you standing there for, said he to the books. Lazy devils! That's not what you were written for? Tell us, you tell me how the sowing went, how many acres? How many acres "of the wise, the good, the everlasting"? What are the prospects for the harvest? Above all--how is it sprouting? Quiet now, you there, what's your name two-volume! How many people have read you? How many understood? I've a lot of affection for you, old man, you're a good, honest friend. You never bawled or boasted or beat your chest. Good and honest. Those who read you also become good and honest, at least for a time. At least to themselves. You know, though, don't you, that some are of the opinion that goodness and honesty are not all that indispensable if we're to forge ahead. For that you need legs. And boots. Even unwashed legs and dirty boots. Progress can be perfectly indifferent to concepts of goodness and honor, as it has been indifferent up to now. The Directorate, for example, has no need of goodness or honor in order to function properly. Pleasant, desirable, but by no means essential. Like a knowledge of Latin to a bathhouse attendant, or biceps on an accountant. Or respect for women to Hausbotcher. ... It all depends on your definition of progress. You can define it so the famous "for all that" appears: an alcoholic but for all that an outstanding specialist; a lecher but for all that an excellent preacher; a thief, you know, a rogue, but for all that what an executive! A murderer but for all that, what discipline and dedication. . . . You can also look on progress as a transformation of everyone into good and honest men. Then we'll live to hear people say: he's a specialist, of course, knows his stuff, but he's a dirty type, he'll have to go. ...

Listen, books, do you know there are more of you than there are people? If all the people were to disappear, you could populate the earth and supply their place. You've got good and honest among you, wise and erudite, frivolous rattles, sceptics and madmen, murderers, corrupters of children, children, prophets of doom, complacent fools, and hoarse demagogues with flaming eyes. You wouldn't know why you were here either. Why are you here, anyway? A lot of you give knowledge but what use is it in the forest? It has no connection with the forest. It's like drilling the principles of fortification into a future builder of sun cities, and then no matter how he tried to build sanatoria or stadia, he kept producing gloomy redoubts complete with bastions, scarps, and counterscarps. All you've given to people coming to the forest is prejudice, not knowledge. . . . Others of you instill mistrust and depression. And that's not because they're miserable or cruel or suggest hope be abandoned, but because they lie. Occasionally they lie radiantly, accompanied by rousing songs and jaunty whistling, sometimes maudlin, moaning, and defensive, but--they lie. For some reason nobody ever burns books like that and never removes them from libraries, never has there been a case in human history where a lie has been given to the flames, unless people chanced not to understand it, or indeed believed in it. In the forest they're not needed either. They're never needed. Probably that's why there are so many of them ... or rather it's because people like them. "Dearer to us than the bitter truth. . . ." What? who's that talking there. . . . Oh, it's me ... as I was saying, there are other books. . . . What? . . .

"Quiet. Let him sleep." "Why sleep. Better have a drink." "Stop scraping about like that. . . . Here, it's old Pepper!"

"What if it is, watch you don't fall." "He's sort of unlooked-after, he's pathetic!" "I'm not pathetic," mumbled Pepper as he woke up. A library stepladder stood opposite Pepper. On its top step sat Alevtina from the photo laboratory, while below, driver Acey was holding the steps with his tattooed arms and gazing upward. "He's always wandering about like a lost soul," said Alevtina, looking at Pepper. "No supper, likely. He wants waking up, a glass of vodka at least. What do people like that dream about, I wonder?"

"Ask me what I'm seeing awake!" said Acey gazing up.

"Anything new?" asked Alevtina. "Never seen it before?"

"Well, no," said Acey. "Can't say it's especially new, but it's like the movies--you see it twenty times over but it's still nice."

On the third step from the bottom lay pieces of a massive strudel, on the fourth were laid out cucumbers and peeled oranges, a half-empty bottle and a plastic pencil-cup stood on the fifth step.

"Look as much as you like as long as you keep the steps steady," said Alevtina, and she set to work getting weighty journals and faded folders down from the top shelves of the stack. She blew the dust off and frowned as she flipped the pages; she put some to one side and replaced the rest. Driver Acey snuffled loudly.

"Do you need the year's before last?" asked Alevtina.

"There's only one thing I want just now," said Acey mysteriously. "I'll just wake Pepper up."

"Keep near the steps," said Alevtina.

"I'm not asleep," said Pepper. "I've been watching you for ages."

"You can't see anything from there," said Acey. "Come over here, Monsieur Pepper. We've got the lot here, women, wine, fruit. . . ."

Pepper got up, stumbling on one numb leg, and came uo to the steps; he poured himself a drink. "What did you dream about, Peppy?" inquired Alevtina from aloft.

Pepper glanced up mechanically and averted his eyes at once.

"What I dreamed . . . rubbish. ... I was talking to the books."

He drained the drink and took a piece of orange. "Just a minute there. Monsieur Pepper," said Acey. "I'll have a drink myself."

"So do you want the year before last's?" "I'll say!" said Acey, splashing into his glass and choosing a cucumber. "And for the one before that. I always need it. I've always had it and can't do without it. Nobody can. Some need more, some less ... I always say, why lecture me? What I am, I am." Acey tossed down his drink with the greatest of pleasure and crunched into a cucumber. "But you can't live the way I live here. I'll put up with it just a little bit more and then I'll drive my truck into the forest and catch myself a mermaid. . . ."

Pepper stood holding the steps and tried to think about the following day, while Acey seated himself on the bottom step and began relating a story of his youth. He and a group of cronies caught a couple on the edge of town, beat up the boyfriend and chased him off and tried to make use of the dame. It was cold and damp and being extremely young nobody could achieve anything, the lady friend was crying and afraid and one by one the boys drifted off. Acey on his own tagged after her for a long time through the dirty backstreets, grabbing at her, swearing. He kept thinking he would make it, but nothing transpired until he had got her to her own house and there in the dark hallway he had his way up against the iron railing. In Acey's account the incident seemed extraordinarily thrilling and cheerful.

"So the mermaids won't escape me," said Acey. "I never let go and won't start now. What I have in the window is what's in the shop--fair dealing."

He had a darkly handsome face, bushy eyebrows, lively eyes, and a full mouth of excellent teeth. He looked very like an Italian. Except that his feet smelled.

"Good lord, what've they been doing," said Alev-tina. "All the folders are mixed up. Here, hold this lot for a bit."

She bent down and gave Acey a pile of papers and journals. Acey took it, scanned several papers, read to himself, lips moving, and counted the folders.

"I need two more."

Pepper kept holding the ladder and looked at his clenched fists. Tomorrow at this time I won't be here, he thought. I'll be sitting next to Acey in the cab. It'll be hot. The metal will just be starting to cool down. Acey will switch on the headlights, settle down more comfortably with his elbow out of the window and will start up about world politics. I'm not going to let him talk about anything else. Let him stop at every snack bar. Let him pick up anybody he wants, even let him make a detour to deliver somebody's repaired motorbike. But we're going to talk about world politics only. Or I could ask him about various cars, fuel consumption, accidents, murders of bribe investigators. He tells a good story, and you can never guess if he's telling the truth.

Acey drank another, smacked his lips, glanced at Alevtina's legs, and continued his narration, fidgeting and making expressive gestures, bursting out in delighted laughter. With a scrupulous adherence to chronology he related the story of his life, from year to year, month to month. The cook at a concentration camp where he'd done time for stealing paper (the cook had commented meanwhile: "Don't let me down, Acey, see you don't! . . ."), the daughter of a political prisoner at the same camp (it was all the same to her, she was sure she was a goner anyway), a sailor's wife in some seaside town, who was trying this way of revenging herself on her tomcat of a husband for his multitudinous betrayals. A certain rich widow, from whom Acey had had to flee in the middle of the night clad only in his drawers, as she wanted Acey under her wing and force him to traffic in drugs and shameful medical preparations. Women he'd transported when he was a taxi-driver; they paid him in coin for each of their guests, and at the end of the night with their bodies. ("I says to her, what's all this then, nobody thinks about me, you've had four and I've not had one yet. . . .") Then a wife, a fifteen-year-old girl whom he married on a special dispensation--she bore him twins and finally left him when he attempted to use her in payment for the use of his friend's lady friends. Women ... birds

. . . stinkers . . . butterflies . . . shits . . . bitches. . . . "So you see I'm no lecher," he concluded. "I'm just a man with a bit of spirit, not some gutless impotent."

He finished off the liquor, collected up the folders, and left without saying good night, scraping the parquet and whistling. Oddly bent forward as he was, he was surprisingly like a cross between a spider and a neanderthal. Pepper was looking helplessly after him when Alevtina spoke.

"Give me your hand, Peppy."

She sat down on the top step, put one hand on his shoulder and leapt down with a small shriek. He caught her under the arms and lowered her to the floor; for some time they stood close to one another, face to face. She kept her hands on his shoulders and he kept holding her under the arms.

"I've been thrown out of the hotel," he said. "I know," she said. "Let's go to my place, okay?" She was kind-hearted and warm and looked him in the eyes calmly, though without any particular assurance. Looking at her, one could imagine many kindly, warm sweet pictures and Pepper avidly flicked through them all, one after the other, and tried to imagine himself next to her, but was suddenly aware that it wasn't working. Instead of himself he kept seeing Acey, handsome and naked, economical in movement and smelling of feet.

"No, thank you," taking his hands from her. "I'll get by all right."

She immediately turned from him and set about collecting the leftovers onto a newspaper.

"Why 'get by'?" she said. "I can put you up on the sofa. Sleep till morning, then we'll find you a room. You can't sit in the library every night. . . ."

"Thank you," said Pepper. "Only I'm leaving tomorrow."

She looked around at him in astonishment. "Leaving. For the forest?"

"No. Home."

"Home. . . ." She slowly wrapped the food in the newspaper. "But you've wanted to get into the forest all the time. I've heard you myself."

"Yes, you see, I did want to. But they won't let me go. I don't even know why. And there's nothing for me to do in the Directorate. So I've fixed it. Acey's taking me away tomorrow. It's three already. I'll go to the garage, get into Acey's truck and wait till morning. So don't you worry. . . ."

"So, we'll be saying good-bye. . . . Maybe we'll go to my place anyway?"

"Thanks, but better in the truck. ... I'd be afraid of oversleeping. Acey won't wait for me, will he?"

They went out into the street arm in arm and walked toward the garage.

"So you didn't like Acey's storytelling?" she asked.

"No," said Pepper. "I didn't like it at all. I don't like it when people talk about that. Why? It's sort of embarrassing ... for him, you and me ... for everybody. It's too pointless, all of this. Just one vast boredom."

"It usually is," said Alevtina. "But don't be embarrassed for me. I'm absolutely indifferent. . . . Well, this is your road. Kiss me good-bye."

Pepper kissed her, aware of a vague regret. "Thank you," she said, turning away quickly and walking off in another direction. For some reason, Pepper waved a hand after her.

He came into the garage, which was lit up by blue lamps and, stepping across the snoring guard on his car-seat, found Acey's truck and got into the cab. It smelled of rubber, gas, and dust. On the windshield hung a spreadeagled Mickey Mouse. Nice and cozy, thought Pepper. I should have come here straight away. All around stood silent trucks, dark and empty. The guard snored sonorously. The trucks slept, the guard slept, the whole Directorate slept. And Alevtina was undressing before the mirror in her room alongside her neatly-made bed, large, double, soft, and very warm. . . . No, no sense thinking about that because during the day the chatter got in the

way, the tapping of the Mercedes, the whole busy, meaningless chaos, but now there was no eradication, no penetration, no security, or the other sinister stupidities. There was a dream world above the abyss, transparent like all dream worlds, invisible and inaudible, not a whit more real than the forest. The forest was at this moment more real: the forest, after all, never slept. Or perhaps it slept and dreamed us. We are the forest's dream. An atavistic dream. The crude ghosts of its cooled sexuality. . . .

Pepper lay down, curled up, and put his rolled-up raincoat under his head as a pillow. Mickey Mouse swung gently on his thread. On seeing the toy the girls always cried: "Ah, isn't it pretty!" and driver Acey answered: "What's in the window's always in the shop." The gear-lever dug into Pepper's side and he didn't know how to remove it or whether it could be. Maybe if he moved it, the truck would move, slowly at first then quickening straight toward the sleeping sentry while Pepper flung himself about the cab pressing everything he could reach with a hand or foot, and the guard getting ever closer, his open snoring mouth already visible. Then the truck would leap and turn viciously, slamming into the garage wall; the blue sky would be seen through the hole. . ..

Pepper woke up and saw it was already morning. Mechanics were smoking in the gaping garage doors, the square in front of the garage was yellow with sunlight. It was seven o'clock. Pepper sat up, wiped his face and looked at himself in the rear mirror. Need a shave, he thought but he didn't get out of the truck. Acey wasn't around yet and he had to wait for him here on the spot, since all the drivers were forgetful and always went off without him. There were two rules governing relations with drivers: first, never get out of the cab if you can be patient and wait; secondly, never argue with the driver who's carrying you. If worse comes to worst, pretend to be asleep.

The mechanics at the doors had thrown away their cigarette butts and ground them out carefully with their heels. They came into the garage. Pepper knew only one of them and he was no mechanic, he was the manager. They passed by Acey's truck, where the manager paused by the cab and, placing his hand on the wing, for some reason glanced under the vehicle. Then Pepper heard him giving orders:

"Move now, get the jack."

"Where is it?" asked the unknown mechanic.

"!" said the manager calmly. "Look under the seat."

"How should I know," said the mechanic, irritably. "I kept telling you I was a waiter." There was silence for a while, then the driver's door opened and the frowning tense face of the waiter-mechanic appeared. He glanced at Pepper, gazed around the cab, tugged the wheel for some reason, then put both arms under the seat and started feeling around.

"Would this be the jack?" he asked quietly.

"N-no," said Pepper. "I believe it's the starting handle."

The mechanic raised the handle to his eyes, examined it, placed it on the step, and thrust his arms once more under the seat.

"What about this?" he asked.

"No," said Pepper, "I can be absolutely sure of that one. It's a calculating machine. Jacks aren't like that."

The waiter-mechanic wrinkled his low forehead and looked the machine over carefully.

"What are they like then?" he inquired.

"We-11 ... a sort of metal rod . . . there's different kinds. They've got a sort of movable handle."

"Well there's a handle on this, like a cash register."

"No, it's a different handle altogether."

"What happens if you turn this one?"

Pepper was completely at a loss. The mechanic waited for a moment, placed the machine on the step, and got back under the seat. "Would it be this?" he said.

"Could be. It looks very like it. Only there should be another metal spoke to it, a thick one."

The mechanic found that, too. He hefted it in his palm, saying: "Okay, I'll take this along to him for a start," then left, leaving the door open. Pepper lit a cigarette. Somewhere behind him came the sound of metal clanking accompanied by swearing. The truck began creaking and trembling.

There was still no sign of Acey, but Pepper wasn't worried. He was picturing them bowling down the main street of the Directorate and no one looking at them. Then they would turn toward the settlement dragging a cloud of yellow dust behind them. The sun would rise higher and higher, it would be to their right and would soon start scorching, then they'd turn from the settlement onto the main road, it would lie long, even, gleaming and monotonous, on the horizon mirages would flow like great shining pools. . . .

Once again the mechanic walked past the cab, rolling before him a heavy rear wheel. The wheel raced along the concrete floor and it was obvious the mechanic wanted to stop it and lean it up against the wall. The wheel, however, wobbled a little and ponderously trundled out into the yard, the mechanic in awkward pursuit, but being outdistanced. At this point, they disappeared from view. Out in the yard the mechanic began shouting despairingly. Came the tramp of many feet past the gates and shouts of: "Catch it! Come in from the right." More people ran past.

Pepper noticed that the truck was not standing as evenly as before and looked out of the cab. The manager was busy with the rear wheel.

"Hello," said Pepper. "What're you . . ." "Ah, Pepper, friend!" the manager cried happily, continuing his work. "You stay there, stay there, don't get out! You're not bothering us. Jammed, blast it. One came off fine, the other's jammed."

"How's that? Something broken?"

"Don't think so," said the manager, straightening up and wiping his brow with the back end of the palm with which he held the spanner. "Just rusted in a bit, probably. I'll do it right away. Then we'll get the chessmen out. What d'you say?"

"Chess?" said Pepper, "but where's Acey?"

"Acey? That is, Ace? Ace is our senior lab assistant. He's been sent to the forest. Ace doesn't work with us anymore. What d'you want him for?"

"Nothing, just . . ." said Pepper quietly. "I just thought . . ." He opened the door and leapt down onto the cement floor.

"No need to get out. You could have stayed there, you're not in our way."

"Why sit in here," said Pepper. "This truck's not going anywhere, is it?"

"No, it isn't. Can't go without wheels, and these want taking off. That's all I needed--jammed! Ah, to ... Never mind, the mechanics'll take them off. Let's go and set up the board."

He took Pepper's arm and led him into his office. They sat down at a table, the manager pushed away a heap of papers, set out the board, and disconnected the telephone.

"Are we going to play with a clock?" he asked.

"Well I don't know, really," said Pepper.

It was dim and cold in the office, blue tobacco smoke floated between the cupboards like frozen seaweed, and the manager, warty, rotund, and covered in mottled patches, was like a gigantic octopus opening the lacquered shell of the chess board with two hairy tentacles, and busily extracting its wooden innards. His round eyes held a dull gleam, the righthand one, the false one, was permanently directed toward the ceiling, whereas the left one, lively as a mercury dot, rolled freely in its srcket, fixing its stare in turn on Pepper, the door, and the board.

"With a clock," the manager decided finally. He took a clock from the cupboard, wound it up and, pressing the button, made his first move.

The sun was coming up. From the yard came a shout of "come in from the right!"

At eight o'clock, the manager, in a difficult position, went into deep thought, then abruptly ordered breakfast for two. Cars were rumbling out of the garage. The manager lost one game and proposed another. They breakfasted solidly, two bottles of yogurt and a crustly strudel apiece. The manager lost a second game and offered a third, his good eye gazing at Pepper with devoted admiration. He played an identical queen's gambit every time, indefatigably sticking to an inevitably losing variation. He had, as it were, worked out his defeat perfectly and Pepper moved his pieces absolutely automatically feeling like a programmed machine; neither in him nor in the world was there anything except a chess board, clock buttons, and a firmly fixed program of action.

At five to nine the tannoy crackled and announced in a sexless voice: "All Directorate personnel to stand by telephones. The Director will address all staff." The manager became most serious, reconnected the telephone and put the receiver to his ear. Both his eyes were now contemplating the ceiling. "Can I go, now," asked Pepper. The manager frowned horribly, placed his finger to his lips, then waved his hand at Pepper. An unpleasant quacking resounded in the receiver. Pepper left on tiptoe.

There were lots of people in the garage. Every face was stern and impressive, even solemn. No one was working, everybody had telephone receivers pressed to their ears. In the yard, only the waiter-mechanic, sweaty, red and tormented, pursued his wheel, breathing heavily. Something very important was taking place. This can't go on, thought Pepper, it just can't. I'm always left out, I never know anything, perhaps that's the whole trouble, perhaps everything's really all right, but I don't know what's what, so I'm always superfluous.

He sprang into the nearest automatic telephone, snatched the receiver, and listened eagerly. He could only hear the ringing tone. At once he was aware of a sudden fear, a nagging apprehension that he was missing something again, that somewhere everybody was getting something, and he, as usual, was going without. Leaping over the ropes and inspection pits, he crossed the construction site, gave a wide berth to a guard blocking the road with a pistol in one hand and a receiver in the other, and shinned up a ladder onto the partially-built wall. In all the windows he could make out people frozen to telephones in attitudes of concentration; just then something whined above his ear and almost at once he heard the sound of a revolver shot. He leaped down into a heap of rubbish and rushed to the service entrance. It was locked. He yanked at the handle several times until it came off. He flung it to one side and for a second debated what to do next. There was a narrow open window alongside the door and, covered in dust, his nails torn, he climbed in.

There were two tables in the room in which he found himself. At one sat Hausbotcher with a telephone. His eyes were closed, his face stony. He was pressing the receiver to his ear with his shoulder and jotting something down with a pencil on a large notepad. The other was vacant, on it stood a telephone. Pepper took off the receiver and began to listen.

Hissing. Crackling. An unfamiliar squeaky voice: "Directorate can in practice only control an infinitesimal area in the ocean of the forest, which laps the continent. The meaning of life does not exist, nor does the meaning of action. We can do an extraordinary amount, but up to now we have not understood what, out of what we can do, we really need. It does not resist, it simply takes no notice. If an action has brought you pleasure--well and good, if it hasn't--it was pointless." More hissing and crackling. "We oppose with millions of horsepower, dozens of land-rovers, airships, and helicopters, medical science and the finest logistics theory in the world. The Directorate has at least two major failings. At the present time similar actions can have far-reaching cipher communication in the name of Herostratus, so that he remains our dearly beloved friend. It

cannot create at all without destroying authority and ingratitude. ..." Hooting, whistling, noises like an explosive cough. ". . . it is particularly fond of so-called simple solutions, libraries, internal communications, geographical and other maps. The ways it regards as shortest, so as to consider the meaning of life for everyone at once, and people don't like that. Personnel sit with their legs dangling over the cliff, each in his own place, tussle together, make jokes and hurl stones, each trying to hurl a heavier stone, at the same time, the expenditure on yogurt does not help grafting or eradication, nor the due amount of forest security. I am afraid that we have not realized what we really want, and nerves, let us face it also need to be trained, as capacity for receptivity can be trained. Reason does not blush or suffer from pangs of conscience, since a question from a scientific, a correctly posed one, becomes a moral one. It is deceitful and slippery, it is impermanent and dissimulates. But someone must irritate, not relate legends, and carefully prepare himself for a trial exit. Tomorrow I will receive you again and see how you have prepared yourself. Twenty-two hundred hours--radiological alarm and earthquake. Eighteen hundred-- meeting of all off-duty personnel in my office, so to speak, on the carpet. Twenty-four hundred--general evacuation. . . ."

Through the receiver came a sound of pouring water. Then everything went quiet and Pepper noticed Hausbotcher watching him with sternly accusing eyes.

"What's he saying?" asked Pepper in a whisper. "I can't understand a thing."

"Hardly surprising," said Hausbotcher icily. "You picked up the wrong telephone." He dropped his eyes, noted something on his pad and went on: "That is, incidentally, an absolutely impermissable contravention of the rules. I insist that you replace the receiver and leave. Otherwise I shall summon official personnel."

"All right," said Pepper. "I'll go. But where's my telephone? This isn't mine. Where's mine, then?"

Hausbotcher made no reply. His eyes had closed again, and he once more pressed the instrument to his ear. Pepper could hear croaking noises.

"I'm asking you, where's my phone?" shouted Pepper. Now he could hear nothing at all. There was hissing, there was crackling, then came the rapid beeps of the signing-off signal. He dropped the instrument and ran out into the corridor. He opened the doors of the offices one after another and everywhere saw staff familiar and unfamiliar. Some were sitting or standing, frozen into total immobility, like wax figures with glassy eyes; others were treading from one corner to another, stepping over the telephone wires they trailed after them; still others were feverishly writing in thick exercise books, on scraps of paper, or the margins of newspapers. And every one of them had the telephone clamped close to his ear, as if afraid to miss even a word. There were no spare telephones. Pepper attempted to take a receiver away from one of the entranced ones, a young man in a boiler-suit. He, however, at once came alive, began squealing and kicking, at which the others began shushing and waving their hands. Somebody shouted hysterically: "Disgraceful! Call the guard!"

"Where's my telephone?" Pepper was shouting. "I'm a man like you and I have a right to know! Let me listen! Give me my telephone!"

He was pushed out and the doors locked in his face. He wandered up to the last story, where, almost into the attic, next to the never-working elevator machinery, there sat two duty mechanics at a table, playing noughts and crosses. Pepper leaned against the wall, out of breath. The mechanics glanced at him, gave him an absent smile, and once more bent over the paper.

"Haven't you got your own telephone?" asked Pepper.

"Yes," said one. "Naturally. We haven't come to that yet."

"Well, why aren't you listening?" "You can't hear anything. Why listen?" "Why can't you hear anything?"

"Because we've cut the wire."

Pepper wiped his face and neck with a crumpled handkerchief, waited till one mechanic defeated the other, then went downstairs. The corridors had become noisy; doors were open wide, staff were coming out for a smoke. Lively, excited, exhilarated voices exclaimed and buzzed. "I'm telling you the truth. Eskimos invented the Eskimo ice cream. What? Well, all right, I just read it in a book. . . . You can't hear the assonance yourself? Es-ki-mos. Es-ki-mo. What? . . ." "I saw it in the Hiver catalogue, a hundred and fifty thousand francs--and that was in fifty-six. Can you imagine what that would be today?" "Funny cigarettes. They say they aren't putting tobacco into cigarettes anymore. They get special paper, crush it, and saturate it in nicotine. . . ." "You can get cancer from tomatoes as well. Tomatoes, a pipe, eggs, silk gloves. . . ." "Did you sleep well? Imagine, I couldn't get to sleep all night: that piledriver keeps thumping all the time. Can you hear it? Like that all night. Hello, there, Pepper! They were saying you'd left. . . . You're staying, good lad!" "They've found that thief at last, remember, all those things kept disappearing? It turned out to be the discus-thrower from the park, you know, the statue near the fountain. He had something filthy written on his leg, too." "Peppy, be a pal, lend me five till payday--tomorrow that is. . . ." "But he wasn't after her. She kept throwing herself at him. Right in front of her husband. You won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. . . ."

Pepper went down to his office, said hello to Kirn, and washed his hands. Kim wasn't working. He was sitting quietly with his hands on the table, gazing at the tiled wall. Pepper took the dust-cover off the Merce-des, plugged it in, and glanced expectantly at Kim.

"Can't work today," said Kim. "Some goon is going around repairing everything. I'm sat here not knowing what to do."

At this point a note on his desk caught Pepper's eye. "To Pepper. We are to advise you that your telephone is located in office 771." Signature illegible. Pepper sighed.

"No use sighing," said Kim, "you should have got to work on time."

"Well, I didn't know," Pepper said. "I was intending to leave today."

"It's your own fault," Kim said shortly.

"Anyway I did hear something. Kim, you know. I didn't understand it at all. Why was that?"

"Hear something! You're a fool. You're an idiot. You missed such an opportunity I can hardly bear to speak to you. I'll have to introduce you to the director. Out of pity."

"Do that," said Pepper. "You know," he went on, "sometimes I thought I caught the sense of something, some scraps of ideas, I think very interesting ones, but I'm trying to recall them--and nothing."

"Whose telephone was it?"

"I don't know. Where Hausbotcher sits!"

"Ah-h, yes, she's having a baby. Hausbotcher's out of luck. Gets a new assistant, works six months--and a baby. Yes, Pepper, you got a woman's telephone. So I don't know how I can help you. . . . Nobody listens to it all right through, women either, I suppose. After all, the director is addressing everybody at once, but at the same time everybody separately as well. Understand?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I for instance, recommend listening like this. Put the director's speech into one line, omitting punctuation marks, and choose the words at random, mentally putting down dominoes. Then if the domino halves coincide, the word is accepted and noted down on a separate list. If it doesn't--the word is temporarily rejected, but remains in the line. There are a few other refinements to do with the frequency of vowels and consonants, but that is an effect of secondary significance. Get it?"

"No," said Pepper. "That is, yes. Pity I didn't know that method. And what did he say today?"

"It's not the only method. There is, for example, the intermittent spiral method. It's rather crude, but if the speech is only about equipment and economic problems, it's very convenient because it's simple. There is the Stevenson-Zade method, but that requires electronic gadgets. ... So that, all round, the domino method's the best, but when the terminology is specialized and narrow--the spiral method."

"Thank you," said Pepper. "But what was the director talking about today?"

"What d'you mean, what about?"

"What? . . . Well. .. what about? Well, what did he ,say?"

"To whom?"

"To whom? Well, you for instance." "Unfortunately, I can't tell you that. It's classified material, and after all. Peppy, you're not on permanent staff here. So don't get mad."

"No, I'm not angry," said Pepper. "I'd have liked to know, that's all. ... He said something about the forest and free will. ... I'd recently been lobbing pebbles over the cliff, well, just like that for no real reason and he said something about it."

"Don't you tell me about that," said Kirn nervously. "It's nothing to do with me. Or you either if it wasn't your telephone."

"Now wait a minute, did he say something about the forest?"

Kim shrugged.

"Well, naturally. He never talks about anything else. Anyway, let's stop this sort of talk. Tell me how you meant to get away." Pepper told him.

"You shouldn't beat him all the time," said Kim, thoughtful.

"There's nothing I can do. I'm a pretty strong player, you know, and he's just an amateur. And he plays a queer game."

"That doesn't matter. I'd have thought a bit in your shoes. I'm getting not to like you just lately. . . . They're writing denunciations about you. . . . You know what, I'll fix a meeting with the director for you tomorrow. Go to him and explain yourself fully. I reckon he'll let you go. Stress the fact that you're a linguist, an arts graduate, and got here accidentally. Mention, as if in passing, that you were very keen to get into the forest, but you've changed your mind, because you don't think you're competent." "All right."

They were silent for a while. Pepper imagined himself face to face with the director and was terrified. Domino method, he thought, Stevenson-Zade. . . .

"Main thing, don't be afraid to cry," said Kim. "He likes that."

Pepper sprang to his feet and paced the room in agitation.

"Good lord," he said. "If I only knew what he looks like. What sort of a man he is."

"What sort? He's not very tall, gingerish. ..."

"Hausbotcher was saying that he was a real giant."

"Hausbotcher's a fool. Boaster and liar. The director is a ginger sort of guy, stoutish, small scar on right cheek. Bit pigeon-toed when he walks, like a sailor. In fact that's what he used to be."

"But Acey said he was skinny and had long hair because of his missing ear."

"What Acey is this?"

"Driver. I was telling you about him."

Kim gave an irritated laugh.

"How would driver Acey know about all that? Take my advice, Peppy, and don't be so trusting."

"Acey said he'd been his driver and seen him several times."

"Well, what of it? He's lying, probably. I was his personal secretary and never saw him once."

"Who?"

"The director. I was his secretary for ages till I got my further degree."

"And never saw him once?"

"Well, naturally! You imagine it's that easy?"

"Wait a minute, how do you know he's ginger and so forth?"

Kim shook his head.

"Peppy," said he tenderly. "Dear lad. Nobody's ever seen a hydrogen atom, but everybody knows it has an electron shell having certain characteristics and a nucleus consisting in the simplest instance of one proton."

"That's true enough," said Pepper limply. He felt weary. "So I'll see him tomorrow."

"Now, now, ask me something easier," said Kim. "I'll fix you a meeting, that I can guarantee you. But what you'll see or who--that I don't know. Or what you'll hear, either. You don't ask me whether the director will let you go or not, do you? And rightly so, I can hardly know that, can I?"

"That's a different matter, surely," said Pepper. "Same thing. Peppy," said Kim. "Believe me, the same."

"I must seem very stupid," Pepper said sadly. "A bit." "I just slept badly, that's all."

"No, you're not practical, that's all. Why did you sleep badly anyway?"

Pepper told all and became alarmed. Kirn's kindly face flushed and his hair became disarranged. He snarled and grabbed the telephone, dialed furiously and barked:

"Warden? What does this mean? How dare you turn Pepper out? Si-1-ence! I didn't ask what had run out. I'm asking you how you dared move Pepper out? What? Si-1-ence! You don't dare! What? Rubbish, blather! Si-1-ence! I'll walk all over you! You and your Claudius-Octavian! You'll clean out my toilet, you'll go into the forest in twenty-four hours, in sixty minutes! What? Yes ... yes. ... What? Yes ... that's right. Now you're talking. And the best sheets. . . . That's your business. In the street if you like. . . . What? All right. Okay. Okay. Thank you. Sorry to disturb you. . . . Well, naturally. Thanks a lot. Bye." He replaced the receiver.

"Everything's okay," he said. "Marvelous man when all's said. Go and lie down. You'll be living in his flat, he and his family are moving into the hotel room you had, otherwise, unfortunately, he can't. . . . And don't argue, for heaven's sake, it's not at all our business. He decided himself. Go on, go, that's an order. I'll call you about the director."

Pepper went out into the street, swaying. He stood for a moment, blinking in the sun, then set off for the park to look for his suitcase. He did not find it at once since it was firmly held in the muscular gypsum hand of the thieving discus-thrower by the fountain. The filthy inscription on his thigh was not as filthy as all that. A chemical pencil had written: "Girls, beware of syphilis."

Chapter Four

Kandid left before sunup so as to get back by dinner-time. It was about ten kilometers to New Village, the road was familiar, well-trodden, spotted with bald patches from spilled grass-killer. It was reckoned safe to travel on. Warm, bottomless swamps lay to right and left, rotten branches poked up out of the stinking rusty water, the sticky caps of enormous swamp toadstools thrust up their round shining domes. Sometimes by the very road could be found the crushed homes of water spiders. From the road it was hard to make out anything taking place on the swamps; myriads of thick green columns, ropes, threads as shimmering as gossamer hung down from the dense interlocking tree-crowns overhead and sank their questing roots into the ooze. A greedy, relentless greenery stood like a wall of fog and concealed everything except sounds and smells. Every now and again something broke off in the yellow-green twilight and fell with an endless crashing, finishing with a thick, oily splash. The swamp sighed, rumbled, champed, and silence fell again, and a minute later, the fetid stench of the perturbed depths

penetrated the green curtain and drifted onto the road. It was said that nobody could walk across these bottomless places, though the deadlings could walk anywhere, for the good reason thai they were deadlings-- the swamp would not accept them. Just in case, Kandid broke off a branch for himself, not that he was afraid of deadlings, deadlings did no harm to men as a rule, but various rumors went the rounds concerning the fauna and flora of forest and swamp, and some of them might turn out to be true, with all their absurdity-He had gone about five hundred paces from the village, when Nava called him. He halted.

"Why go without me?" asked Nava, somewhat breathlessly. "I told you I'd go with you, I shan't stay alone in that village, nothing for me to do on my own, nobody likes me there, you're my husband, you have to take me with you, it doesn't signify that we've got no children yet all the same, you're my husband, and I'm your wife, we'll have children sometime. . . . It's just, I'll tell you honestly, I don't want children yet, I can't understand why they're necessary or what we could do with them. . . . Never mind what that elder says or that old man of yours, in our village it was quite different: who wants to, has children, and who doesn't doesn't. ..."

"Now, now, go back home," said Kandid. "Where did you get the idea I was going away? I'm just going to New Village, I'll be home for dinner all right. . . ."

"That's all right, I'll go with you then, and we'll come back for dinner together, the dinner's been ready since yesterday, I've hidden it so that even that old man of yours won't find it."

Kandid walked on. It was useless to argue, let her come. He cheered up, even. He felt like tangling with somebody, swinging his stick and taking out on them all the frustration and anger and helplessness built up over how many years was it. On robbers. Or deadlings --it made no difference. Let the little girl come along. My wife, too, wants no children. He hit out with all his force, swung at a dank tree-root on the verge, and almost knocked himself over: the root had rotted completely and the stick went through it like thin air. Several sprightly gray animals leaped out and, gurgling, disappeared into the dark water.

Nava skipped alongside, now running ahead, now lagging behind. Now and again she took hold of Kandid's arm with both of hers and hung on thoroughly contented. She talked of the dinner, which she had so cunningly concealed from the old man, of how wild ants might have eaten it if she hadn't made sure they'd never find it, of how some noxious fly had woken her up and that when she was going to sleep last night, he, Dummy, was already snoring and muttering incomprehensible words in his sleep, and how did you know such words, Dummy, it's amazing when nobody in our village knows words like that, only you know, you always had, even when you were quite ill, knew even then... .

Kandid listened and didn't listen, the usual monotonous drone penetrated his brain, he strode on and pondered dully and at length, about why he could never think about anything, perhaps because of the endless inoculations that went on in the village when they took time off from chattering, or perhaps from something else. . . . Perhaps it was the whole dozy, not even primitive, just vegetable way of life he had led since the long-forgotten days when the helicopter had flown into an invisible barrier at full speed, heeled over, snapped its rotors, and crashed like a stone into the swamps. . . . Probably I was thrown out of the cabin then, he thought. Thrown out of the cabin, he thought for the thousandth time. Hit my head on something, so I never recovered . . . and if I hadn't been thrown out, I'd have drowned in the swamp along with the aircraft, so it's a good thing I got thrown out. ... It suddenly struck him that all this was actual ratiocination and he rejoiced; it had seemed that he'd lost his ability to think clearly long ago, could only affirm one thing: day after tomorrow, day after tomorrow. . . .

He glanced at Nava. The girl was hanging on his left arm and talking

recklessly as she looked up at him:

"They all got into a huddle, and it got terrible hot, you know how hot they are, and there was no moon at all that night. Then mam started pushing me away quietly, and I crawled on all fours between all their legs, and mam never got to see me anymore...."

"Nava," said Kandid. "You're telling me that story again. You've told it to me two hundred times."

"Well, what if I have?" asked Nava, astonished. "You're a queer one. Dummy. What else can I tell you about? There's nothing else I can remember or know about. I'm not going to tell you how we dug a cellar together last week, you saw all that yourself, didn't you? Now if I'd dug the cellar with somebody else, with Hopalong, now, or Loudmouth. . . ." She suddenly livened up. "You know. Dummy, that's interesting now. Tell me how we dug the cellar, nobody's told me about that yet, 'cos nobody saw. . . ."

Kandid's attention was drawn away again, the yellow-green undergrowth floated by on either side, slowly waving, some creature snuffled and sighed in the water, a swarm of soft white bugs, the sort they made intoxicating liquors from, sailed by with a thin whine, the road under their feet was now soft where there was tall grass, now rough from gravel and crushed stone. Yellow, gray, green, blotches--nothing for the eye to latch onto, nothing to lodge in the memory. Now the path turned sharply to the left; Kandid walked on another few paces and halted, trembling. Nava abruptly fell silent.

By the road, with its head in the swamp, lay a large deadling. Its arms and legs were flung out and unpleasantly distorted, it was perfectly still. It was lying on crushed grass, now yellow from the heat, pale, broad, and even from a distance it was obvious that it had been terribly beaten. It was like jelly. Kandid cautiously circled it. He became alarmed. The fight had taken place fairly recently: the crushed, yellowing grass-blades were straightening up as he watched. Kandid carefully surveyed the road. There were plenty of tracks, but he could make nothing of them, while the road made another bend some little way ahead, and what lay beyond that he could not guess. Nava was still looking back at the deadling.

"Our people didn't do it," said she very quietly. "Our people don't know how. Buster always threatens but he can't do this either, just waves his arms all over the place. . . . Nobody from New Village can either. . . . Dummy, let's go back, eh? Maybe they're freaks. They walk here, so they say, not often, but it happens. Better go back, eh? ... What're you taking me to New Village for anyway? Haven't I seen New Village before?"

Kandid lost his temper. What the devil was all this? He'd walked this road a hundred times without meeting anybody, something worth recalling and pondering. And now, when they were leaving tomorrow-- not even the day after, but tomorrow, of course it had to happen!--this one and only safe road becomes dangerous. . . . You could only reach the City through New Village. If there was any reaching the City at all, if the City even existed, then the road to it led through New Village. He went back to the deadling. He pictured to himself Hopalong, Buster, and Barnacle, chattering ceaselessly, boasting, and threatening, as they stamped around this deadling, and then still continuing the boasts and threats, turning back from sin and going back to the village. He bent down and took the deadling by the legs. They were still hot but not enough to burn. With a flurry, he shoved the bulky body into the swamp. The quag champed, groaned, and gave way. The deadling disappeared, a ripple ran across the dark water and died.

"Nava," said Kandid, "go to the village." "How should I go to the village if you aren't going there?" said Nava calculatingly, "now if you were to go to the village too. . . ."

"Stop chattering," said Kandid. "Run away now to the village and wait for me. And don't talk to anybody there."

"What about you?"

"I'm a man," said Kandid, "nobody's going to do anything to me."

"Oh yes they will," objected Nava. "I'm telling you: what if they're

freaks? It's all the same to them, you know, man, woman, or deadling, they'll make you into one of their own kind, you'll walk here, horrible, and grow onto a tree at night. How can I go on my own, when they could be back there?"

"There's no such thing as freaks," said Kandid, without much confidence. "That's all travelers' tales. . . ."

He looked back. There was a bend in the road and what lay beyond that he could not guess either. Nava was saying something to him copiously, fast and whispering, which made it speciaHy unnerving. He took a better grip on his club.

"All right. Come with me. Just stick close to me and if I order you to do something, do it straight away. And keep quiet, close your mouth, and say nothing till we get to New Village. Let's go."

Keep quiet, of course she couldn't. She did stick close by his side, no more running ahead or lagging behind, but kept up a continuous muttering to herself:

at first it was something about freaks then about the cellar, then about Hopalong and how she had walked these parts with him and made a flute. . . . They negotiated the dangerous bend, then another and Kandid had relaxed somewhat, when right out of the tall grass in the swamp came people who halted silently before them.

So it goes, thought Kandid wearily. Just my luck. Always just my luck. He glanced sideways at Nava. Nava was shaking her head and wrinkling up her face.

"Don't you give me up to them, Dummy," she was muttering. "I don't want to go with them. I want to go with you, don't give me up. . . ."

He looked at the people. There were seven of them, all men, all overgrown with hair to the eyes and all with huge knobbly clubs. They weren't local people, they weren't clothed after the local fashion, quite different plants. These were robbers.

"Well. why've you stopped?" said their leader in a deep rolling voice. "Come here, now. We mean you no harm. ... If you were deadlings, then of course, we'd have a different sort of talk, that is no talk at all, we'd take you to little bits, and that's all the talk there'd be. ... Where are you heading for? To New Village, I'd guess. That's all right, you can do that. You, pop, you get along. The little daughter, of course, you leave with us. Don't you fret, she'll be better off with us. . . ."

"No," said Nava, "I don't want to go with them. You hear that, Dummy, I don't want to go with them, they're robbers. . "

The robbers began laughing, not gloating, just from habit.

"Maybe, you'd let us both through?" asked Kandid. "No," said the leader, "both is out. Just now there are deadlings around here, your little daughter would be a goner, she'll get to be a splendid Maiden or some such rubbish, and we get nothing out of that, nor do you, pop, think it out for yourself if you're a man and not a deadling, and you don't look much like one of them, though you've an odd look about you for a man."

"She's still a girl, you know," said Kandid. "Why hurt her?"

The leader was astonished.

"Why do we have to harm her? She won't be a girl forever, when the time comes she'll be a woman, not one of your what d'you call 'em splendid Maidens, but a woman. . . ."

"It's all lies," said Nava, "don't you believe him, Dummy, do something quick as you've brought me here, or they'll cart me off this minute like they did Hopalong's daughter, since then nobody's set eyes on her, I don't want to go with them, better if I become one of them splendid Maidens. . . . Look how wild they are and skinny, they've got nothing to eat by them either, very like. . . ."

Kandid looked about him helplessly, then an idea occurred to him, one that seemed good to him. "Listen, people," he pleaded, "take us both." The robbers approached without haste. Their leader inspected Kandid carefully

from head to foot.

"No," he said. "What do we need somebody like you for? You village lot are not fit for anything, you've got no desperation in you, why you're alive I don't know, we could come in and take the lot of you with our bare hands. We don't need you, pop, you talk a bit queer, no knowing what sort of a man you are, you get yourself to New Village and leave the little daughter with us."

Kandid sighed deeply, took a grip on his club with both hands and said softly to Nava:

"Now, Nava, run! Run, don't look back, I'll hold them back."

Stupid, he thought. Of course it would turn out stupid. He remembered the deadling lying with its head in the dark water, like jelly, and lifted his club above his head.

"Ey-ey!" cried the leader.

All seven, shoving and slithering, rushed forward in a mass. Kandid could still hear the pattering of Nava's heels, then there was no time for that. He was frightened and ashamed, but his fear left him very quickly, since unexpectedly it pretty soon became clear that the only real fighter among the robbers was the leader. Fending off his blows, Kandid saw that the rest of them, while continuing to wave their clubs in an aimlessly aggressive manner, were just knocking into one another tottering from their own heroic swings, stopping often to spit on their palms. One of them suddenly gave a despairing squeal: "I'm sinking!" and collapsed noisily into the swamp, two of the robbers at once threw away their weapons and set to work dragging him out. The leader, however, pressed on croaking and stamping his feet, until Kandid caught him a chance blow on the kneecap. The leader dropped his staff, hissed sharply, and squatted on his haunches. Kandid leaped back.

The two thieves were busy dragging the sinking one from the bog; he was completely stuck, his face had gone bluish. Their leader sat on his haunches and was examining his injury solicitously. The other three, sticks raised, were crowding about behind his back, also examining the injury over his head.

"You're a fool, pop," said the leader reproachfully. "You didn't ought to do that, you village yokel. I've never seen the likes of you, and that's a fact. . . . You can't see what's good for you, village yokel, blasted thick oaf. . . ."

Kandid waited no longer. He turned and raced after Nava as fast as his legs would carry him. The robbers called out after him, jeering and angry, the leader shouting: "Stop him! Stop him!" They didn't come after him, and Kandid wasn't happy about that. He experienced feelings of disappointment and annoyance and as he ran tried to imagine how these clumsy, awkward, and unmalicious people could so terrorize the villages and also in some way destroy deadlings, those agile and merciless fighters.

Soon he caught sight of Nava; the girl was bounding along about thirty yards ahead, banging her hard bare heels down on the ground. He saw her disappear around a bend and suddenly reappear coming toward him, then freeze for an instant and race sideways straight across the swamp, leaping from root to root, amid flying spray. Kandid's heart stopped.

"Don't," he roared, breathless. "Have you gone crazy? Stop!"

Nava at once halted, grabbing at a liana, and turned toward him. Now he saw another three robbers emerging from the bend, who stopped, looking now at him, now at Nava.

"Dummy!" cried Nava penetratingly. "You hit them and run here! You won't sink here don't be scared! Hit them, beat them! That's the way! Go on! Go on! Give it to them!"

"You there," said one of the robbers solicitously, "stop that shouting, just hold on, or you'll fall in, drag you out after. . . ."

Behind him the robbers began stamping and crying:

"Ooh-hoo!" The three in front waited. Then Kandid, seizing hold of his

cudgel at both ends, thrust it ahead of him across his chest and flew at them, knocked all three down and fell over himself. He knocked himself badly on somebody but leaped up at once. Everything swam before his eyes. Somebody again cried out in terror: "I'm sinking." Someone's bearded face thrust at him and Kandid struck it a blow with his staff without looking. The staff broke in half. Kandid flung the fragment from him and jumped into the swamp.

A root subsided under his foot and he very nearly came to grief, but at once leaped for the next and proceeded jumping heavily from one snag root to another, in a spray of black stinking mud. Nava squealed in triumph and whistled as he came toward her. In the rear angry voices resounded: "What happened to you, butterfingers, clumsy devil?"

"What about you, then, tell me that!"

"We let the girl go, the girl won't last long now. . . ."

"The man's gone mad, fighting!"

"He ripped my clothes, blast it, what clothes too, best you can get, my clothes, but he tore them. Not even him, it was you tore them. . . ."

"That's enough talky-talk, when all's done; we've got to catch them, not talky-talk. . . . See, they're running, and you talky-talk!"

"What about you, then, tell me that!"

"He hit my leg, see? Damaged my poor knee, but how he did it, I don't understand, I just swung and . . ."

"And where's Seveneyes? Boys, Seveneyes is sinking."

"Sinking! That's right, sinking. . . . Seveneyes sinking and they talky-talk!"

Kandid came to a halt, and likewise grabbed hold of a liana; breathing heavily, he listened and watched the odd people piled up on the road, flailing their arms about, dragging their Seveneyes out of the bog by leg and head. Gurgling and snoring sounds filled the air. Two robbers were already moving toward Kandid, knee-deep in the black sludge, testing the quagmire with their staves. They were avoiding the root-snags. Lies again, thought Kandid. You could cross the swamp by a ford and everybody said you could only do it by the road. They used the robbers as bugbears, good Lord, what bugtoears!

Nava tugged his arm. "Let's go, Dummy," she -said. "What're you standing there for? Let's go quick ... or maybe you want to fight a bit more[9] Wait then and I'll find you a good stick, then you can beat these two and the Others'11 get scared. Though if they don't, then they'll get the better of you, 'cos you're only one, and they're one . . . two . . . three . . . four. . . ."

"Go where?" asked Kandid. "Will we get to New Village?"

"We'il get there very like," said Nava. "I don't know why we shouldn't get to New Village. . . ."

"G" forward then," said Kandid, who had got his breath back by now. "Show me the way."

Nava lightly sprang off into the forest, into the very depths of the green fog of undergrowth.

"I'm not too sure which way we should go or how," said she as she ran. "But I've been here once, or maybe not once but more. Hopalong and I used to come here, before you came. ... Or no, you were here, only you were still going about witless, couldn't understand anything, couldn't talk, looked at everybody like a fish, then they gavie me to you, I married you, but you don't remember anything, likely. . . ." Kandid jumped after her, striving to keep his breathing regular and keep exactly to her footprints. From time to time he glanced back. The robbers were not far off.

"I came here wilth Hopalong," continued Nava, "when Buster had his wife abducted by thieves, Hopa-long's daughter. He always used to take me with him, wanted to exchange me maybe, or just wanted to take me as his daughter, anyway he went with me into the forest, 'cos he was wasting away with grief for his daughter. . . ."

The lianas stuck to their arms, lashed their faces, and dead tangles of

them dragged at their clothes and tripped them up. From above, detritus and insects rained down, and sometimes heavy, shapeless masses accumulated and plunged downward through the tangle of greenery and swayed about above their heads. To left or right could be glimpsed sticky purple clusters. fungi of some sort, or fruits, or some repulsive creatures' nests.

"Hopalong used to say, that there's a village somewhere here. . . ." Nava spoke lightly as she ran, as if she weren't running at all but lolling on her bed at home: it was obvious straight away she wasn't a local girl, the locals couldn't run. "Not our village and not New Village, some other, Hopalong told me the name but I've forgotten, it was a long time ago, after all, before you came ... or no, you were here, only you couldn't think, and they hadn't given me to you yet. . . . And use your mouth when you breathe, no sense in using your nose, you can talk fine that way too, this way you'll get out of breath, we've a long way to run yet, we haven't got past the wasps, where we'll have to run fast, though maybe the wasps have gone from there since. . . . They were the wasps of that village I was telling you about, but Hopalong used to say there's been no people in the village for ages, the Accession's happened there, he says, so there's no people left. . . . No, Dummy, I'm lying, he was talking about another village. . . ."

Kandid had got his second wind and running was easier. They were now in the very heart of the forest, the very depths of the thickets. Kandid had been as deep as this only once, when he had attempted to straddle a deadling, so as to reach its masters on its back, the deadling had galloped along, it was as hot as a boiling kettle and Kandid had finally lost consciousness from the pain and fallen off into the mud. He had suffered for ages afterward from burns on chest and palms.

It was getting darker and darker. The sky was no longer visible at all, the air became more and more stifling. At the same time, the stretches of open water became rarer, mighty clumps of red and white moss appeared. The moss was soft and cool, and extremely springy, it was pleasant to step on.

"Let's. . . have a rest. . . ." breathed Kandid. "No, what are you thinking of. Dummy," said Nava. "We can't possibly rest here. We have to get past this moss as quick as we can, it's dangerous moss, it's a sort of animal lying down, like a spider, you go to sleep on it and you won't wake up anymore, that's what sort of moss it is, let the robbers rest on it, but likely they know that you mustn't, otherwise that'd be good...."

She looked at Kandid and slackened to a walk. Kandid hauled himself to the nearest tree, leaned his back on it, the back of his head, finally all his weight and closed his eyes. He very much wanted to sit down, to fall down, but he was afraid. He assured himself; they're surely lying around the moss as well. But all the same he was afraid. His heart was beating like a mad thing, his legs might not have existed at all, his lungs were bursting and expanded painfully in his chest at every breath, and everything was slippery and salty with sweat.

"What if they catch up with us?" he heard Nava's voice as if through cotton wool. "What will we do, Dummy, when they catch us up. You're about all in, likely you couldn't fight anymore, eh?"

He wanted to reply: I could, but only managed to move his lips. He was no longer frightened of the robbers. He wasn't frightened of anything. He was only afraid of moving and of lying down in the moss. It was the forest, after all, whatever lies they told, it was the forest, this was something he well recalled, he never forgot that ever, even when he used to forget everything else.

"You haven't even got a stick now," Nava was saying. "Shall I look for a stick. Dummy, shall I?" "No," he mumbled. "Don't bother . . . heavy. . . ." He opened his eyes and listened intently. The robbers were near, and could be heard panting and trampling in the undergrowth, the trampling wasn't very lively either, the robbers too were having a hard time of it.

"Let's get on," said Kandid.

They passed through a zone of dangerous white moss, then a zone of

dangerous red moss, the wet bog began again with still, thick water, on which reclined gigantic pale flowers with a repellent meaty smell, and out of each flower peered a gray, speckled animal, which followed them with eyes on stalks.

"You, Dummy, splash along a bit faster," Nava was saying practically, "or something'll suck you in and you'll never get free afterward, don't think just because you've had an inoculation, you won't get sucked in, 'cos you just will. Then it'll conk out, of course, but that won't help you any. . . ."

The bog suddenly came to an end, and the terrain began to rise steeply. A tall striped grass with sharp cutting edges made its appearance. Kandid looked back and caught sight of the robbers. For some reason they had halted. For some reason they were standing up to their knees in swamp, leaning on their clubs and looking after them. Done in, thought Kandid, they're done in as well. One of the robbers raised his arm and made an inviting gesture, shouting:

"Come on down, what do you think you're doing?"

Kandid turned away and went after Nava. After the quagmire, walking on solid ground seemed an easy matter, even uphill. The robbers were shouting something, two and then three voices. Kandid turned for the last time. The robbers were still standing in the swamp, in the filth, full of leeches; they hadn't even come out onto dry land. Seeing him look back, they started waving their arms desperately and began shouting again discordantly; it was hard to make out.

"Back!" they were shouting, it seemed. "Ba-a-ck! We won't to-ouch you! . . . You're goners, you foo-o-ols!"

You don't catch me, thought Kandid, with cheerful malice. Fools, yourselves, and I believed in you. I've had enough of believing. . . . Nava had already disappeared behind the trees and he hastened after her.

"Come ba-a-ack! We'll let you go-o-o!" roared the leader.

They can't be as done in as all that if they can bawl like that, thought Kandid fleetingly and at once began to reflect that a little farther on and he would sit down and rest, and search out any leeches and ticks he had picked up.

Chapter Five

Pepper presented himself in the director's anteroom at exactly ten. There was a line there already, about twenty people. Pepper was put in fourth place. He took an armchair between Beatrice Vakh of the Aid to Native Populations Group and a morose member of the Engineering Penetration Group. The morose member, judging by the identification button on his chest and the legend on his white mask, bore the name Brandskugel. The anteroom was decorated in pale pink, on one wall hung a board, "No smoking, no litter, no noise," on the other a large picture of pathfinder Selivan's exploit: Selivan with arms upraised, was turning into a jumping tree before the eyes of his stunned comrades. The pink blinds on the windows were tightly down, an enormous chandelier blazed from the ceiling. Apart from the entrance door on which was written "Exit," the room possessed one other door, vast and covered in yellow leather, with the sign "No Exit." This notice was done in fluorescent colors and had the effect of a lugubrious warning. Under it the secretary's desk stood with its four different-colored telephones and electric typewriter. The secretary herself, a plump middle-aged lady in pince-nez, was haughtily perusing the Textbook of Atomic Physics. The visitors talked among themselves in restrained voices. Many were plainly nervous and were compulsively leafing through old illustrated magazines.

It was all extraordinarily like a dentist's waiting room and Pepper again experienced an unpleasant chill, a quiver in the jaw, and a desire to go somewhere else quickly.

"They're not lazy even," said Beatrice Vakh, turning her beautiful red

head slightly toward Pepper. "But they can't tolerate systematic work. How, for instance, can you explain the extraordinary ease with which they abandon their living places?"

"Are you addressing me?" asked Pepper timidly. He hadn't the faintest idea how to explain the extraordinary ease.

"No, I was talking to Monsher Brandskugel." Monsher Brandskugel adjusted his left moustache, which had come unstuck, and gave a muffled mumble. "I don't know!"

"Nor do we," said Beatrice bitterly. "As soon as our groups get near a village, they leave their houses and possessions and go. You get the impression they're absolutely uninterested in us. We've got nothing for them. Do you see it that way?"

Monsher Brandskugel was silent for a while as if pondering and looked at Beatrice through the strange cross-shaped embrasures of his mask. At length he brought out in his previous intonation, "I don't know."

"It's a great pity," Beatrice continued, "that our group is made up exclusively of women. I realize that • there is an underlying reason for it, but we often lack masculine toughness and endurance, I'd call it pur-posefulness. Women unfortunately tend to dissipate their energies, no doubt you've noticed that?"

"I don't know," said Brandskugel, at which his moustaches came off and floated softly to the floor. He picked them up, inspected them carefully, lifting the edge of his mask and, applying spit matter-of-factly, replaced them.

A bell rang sweetly on the secretary's desk. She put aside her book, glanced through her list, holding on her pince-nez with an elegant gesture, and announced:

"Professor Cockatoo, please go in." Professor Cockatoo dropped his picture magazine, jumped to his feet, sat down again, glanced around, grew perceptibly pale and then, biting his lip and with a violently distorted face, pushed off from his chair and disappeared behind the door marked "No Exit." A painful silence reigned in the anteroom for several seconds. Then voices resumed humming and pages rustling.

"We simply cannot find any way of engaging their interest, of absorbing them. We built them convenient day houses on piles. They fill them up with peat and colonize it with insects of some kind. We tried to offer them tasty food in place of the sour filth they eat. Useless. We tried to dress them like human beings. One died, two fell ill. Well, we're pushing on with our experiments. Yesterday we scattered a truckload of mirrors and gilt buttons in the forest. . . . The cinema doesn't interest them, neither does music. Immortal works are just received with giggles. . . . No, we'll have to start with the children. For instance, I suggest catching the children, and organizing special schools. Unfortunately that's linked with technical difficulties; human hands can't touch them, special machines are needed. . . . Anyway, you know that as well as I dp."

"I don't know," said Brandskugel miserably.

The bell tinkled again and the secretary said, "Beatrice, you now. Go through, please."

Beatrice started fussing about. She was about to rush toward the door, stopped, however, looking about her in dismay. She came back, glanced under the chair, whispering: "Where on earth is it? Where?" sweeping the room with her enormous eyes; pulling at her hair, she exclaimed loudly, "Where is it?" and suddenly seized Pepper by the jacket and rolled him out of his chair onto the floor. A brown briefcase was discovered where he had been. Beatrice seized it and stood for some seconds with eyes closed and an expression of immense happiness, pressing the case to her chest; she then moved slowly toward the door of yellow leather and disappeared behind it. Amid a deathly hush, Pepper got up and, trying not to look at anyone, brushed his trousers. Nobody was paying him attention in any case: everyone was looking at the yellow door.

What on earth am I going to say to him? thought Pepper. I'll say I'm an arts graduate, can't be of any use to the Directorate, let me go, I'll leave and never come back, I give my word. And why on earth did you come here? I'd always been interested in the forest, but well, nobody lets me get into the forest. And anyway I got here purely by chance, I'm an arts man. Arts people, writers, philosophers are out of place in the Directorate. They do right to keep me out, I accept this. ... I can't possibly be in a Directorate where they excrete onto the forest, or in a forest where they catch children with machines. I should leave and occupy myself with something simpler. I know I'm popular here, but they like me the way a child is fond of a toy. I'm here for amusement, I can't teach anybody here what I know. . . . No, I can't say that. I have to cry a bit, how can I do that? I'll blow up in there, just let him try and keep me here. I'll blow my top and leave on foot. Pepper pictured himself walking the dusty road mile after mile under the blazing sun, with his case, getting more and more empty-headed. And every step carrying him farther and farther from the forest, his dream, his anxiety, that which had long ago become the meaning of his existence. . . .

They haven't called anybody in for a long time, he thought. The director's probably vastly taken by the children-trapping plan. And why didn't anyone come out of the study? Doubtless, another exit.

"Excuse me," he said, addressing Monsher Brandskugel, "what time is it?"

Monsher Brandskugel looked at his wristwatch and thought for a moment:

"I don't know," he said.

At this, Pepper bent over and whispered in his ear, "I shan't tell anybody. An-y-body."

Monsher Brandskugel hesitated. He fingered his plastic button in indecision, stole a look around, yawned nervously, took another look around, and fixing his mask more firmly, answered in a whisper:

"I don't know."

After which he rose and hurriedly betook himself to the other corner of the anteroom.

The secretary spoke:

"Pepper, your turn."

"How's that," Pepper said, surprised. "I'm fourth."

"Temporary staff Pepper," the secretary raised her voice, "your turn."

"Arguing," grumbled somebody.

"Should get rid of the likes of him," someone on the left said loudly, "with a red-hot broom!"

Pepper got to his feet. His legs were like cotton wool. He was scraping his palms senselessly along his sides. The secretary was looking intently at him.

"The cat knows when he's in for it. . . ."

"However much you twist. . . ."

"We've put up with the likes of him!"

"Pardon me, you may have. I've never seen him before."

"Well, I don't see him every day."

"Quiet!" said the secretary, raising her voice. "Observe silence! And don't drop litter on the floor--you there . . . yes, yes, you I'm speaking to. Now then, Pepper, will you go through? Or shall I call the guard?"

"Yes," said Pepper, "I'm going."

The last person he saw in the anteroom was Monsher Brandskugel, barricaded behind an armchair in the corner, teeth bared, on his haunches with his hand in his rear trouser pocket. Then his eye fell on the director.

The director turned out to be a slender well-proportioned man of about thirty-five, in an expensive superbly-cut suit. He was standing by the open window scattering crumbs for the pigeons clustered on the windowsill. The study was completely empty, there wasn't a single chair, not even a table, on the wall opposite the window hung a small copy of "Pathfinder Selivan's

Exploit."

"Temporary employee Pepper?" the director said in a clear ringing bass, turning toward Pepper the fresh face of a sportsman.

"Y-yes. I..." mumbled Pepper. "Glad, very glad to make your acquaintance at last. How d'you do. My name's Alas. I've heard a lot about you. Shake hands."

Pepper stooping timidly pressed the proffered hand. The hand was dry and firm.

"As you see, I'm feeding the pigeons. Curious bird. One senses enormous potential there. How do you see the pigeon, Pepper?"

Pepper faltered. He couldn't stand pigeons. The director's face, however, was radiating such joy and weird interest, such impatient expectation that Pepper took a grip on himself and lied:

"I like them very much, Monsieur Alas." "You like them roasted? Or stewed? I like them in a pie, myself. Pigeon pie with a glass of good wine--demi-sec--what could be nicer? What's your opinion!"

Once more Monsieur Alas' face expressed the most lively interest and impatient expectation.

"Terrific," said Pepper. He had decided to give up guessing and agree with everything.

"What about Picasso's 'Dove'?" said Monsieur Alas. "I call to mind at once: 'Nor eat, nor drink, nor kiss, the moments fly unchecked. . . .' How exactly that catches the idea of our incapacity to catch and materialize the beautiful!"

"Splendid verses," said Pepper stupidly. "What I first saw the 'Dove,' I, like many another I expect, thought the drawing a poor likeness, or at any rate unnatural. Later, however, in the course of service, I had occasion to observe pigeons closely and I suddenly realized that Picasso, that magician, had seized on that moment when the bird folds its wings prior to landing. Its feet are already touching the ground while the bird itself is still in the air, in flight. The moment when movement turns into immobility, flight into rest."

"Picasso has strange paintings, which I don't understand," said Pepper, demonstrating his independent judgment.

"Ah, you've simply not looked at them long enough.

To understand real art, it's not enough to go through a museum two or three times a year. You should look at a picture for hours on end. As often as possible. And only originals. No reproductions. No copies. . . . Take a look at that picture there. I can see by your face what you think of it. And you're right: it's a bad copy. If you'd ever familiarized yourself with the original, you would understand the artist's idea." "What exactly is it?"

"I'll try to explain it to you," said the director readily. "What do you see in that picture? Formally-- half man, half tree. The picture is static. What can't be seen, isn't caught, is the transition from one essence into the other. The most important element is missing from the picture--the direction of time. Now if you had the opportunity of studying the original you would realize that the artist had succeeded in introducing into the image a most profound symbolic meaning, that he had depicted, not a man-tree, not even a man turning into a tree, but a tree turning into a man and that only. The artist made use of the old legend in order to depict the emergence of a new personality. New from old. Life from death. Intelligence from inert matter. The copy is absolutely static and everything pictured in it exists outside the stream of time. The original contains that time-flow! Vector! The arrow of time as Eddington would have said. . . ."

"Where exactly is the original?" asked Pepper politely.

The director smiled.

"The original, naturally, has been destroyed as a work of art, not permitting ambiguous interpretation. The first and second copies were also destroyed as a precautionary measure."

Monsieur Alas returned to the window and elbowed the pigeons off the

sill.

"Well. We've talked of pigeons," said he in a new, somehow official voice. "Your name?"

"Pardon?"

"Name. Your name."

"Pe--Pepper."

"Year of birth." "Thirty."

"More precisely!" "Nineteen thirty. Fifth of March." "What are you doing here?"

"Temporary employee. Seconded to Science security."

"I'm asking you: what are you doing here?" said the director, turning his distant eyes on Pepper. "I ... don't know. I wish to leave." "Your opinion of the forest. Briefly." "The forest ... is. ... I always... I... fear it. And love it."

"Your opinion of the Directorate." "There are lots of good people here, but . . ." "That's enough."

The director came up to Pepper, clasped him by the shoulders and, looking him in the eyes, said:

"Listen, friend! Drop it! Let's make a threesome? Let's call the secretary in, did you see the dragon? She's no dragon, she's a box of delights! 'Come lads, let's open the long-cherished wine,' " he sang through his nose. "Well? Shall we open it? Drop that, I don't like it. Understand? How does it grab you?"

He suddenly gave off a smell of liquor and garlic sausage, his eyes came together over his nose.

"We'll get the engineer in, Brandskugel. My mon cher," he went on, clasping Pepper to his chest. "He can tell such a tale--you'll not need a bite to eat with it. Shall we?"

"Well, why not?" said Pepper. "But after all, I ..." "Well, what about you then?" "Monsieur Alas, I ..."

"Drop that! What sort of monsieur am I? Kamerad --see? Mio Caro!"

"I, Kamerad Alas, came to request you . . ." "Ask aw-a-y! I shan't be mean! You want money? Take it! Somebody you don't like? Just say and we'll look into it! Well?"

"N-no. I just want to leave. I can't get away no matter what I try. I came here by accident. Permit me to leave. Nobody wants to help me, and I'm requesting you as director. . .."

Alas released Pepper, put his tie right, and smiled coldly.

"You're in error, Pepper," said he, "I'm not the director. I'm the director's personnel officer. Forgive me, I've delayed you somewhat. Please go through that door. The director will receive you."

He threw the door wide before Pepper at the far end of his bare office and made inviting gestures. Pepper coughed, nodded in restrained fashion, and leaned forward as he passed into the next room. As he did so he thought he was lightly struck on the rear. Probably his imagination, or perhaps Monsieur Alas was in some haste to close his door.

The room in which he found himself was a facsimile of the anteroom; even the secretary here was an exact copy of the first one. She was reading, however, a book entitled Sublimation of Genius. The same pale visitors were sitting in armchairs with newspapers and magazines. Professor Cockatoo was here, suffering severely from nervous itch as was Beatrice Vakh with her brown briefcase across her knees. True, all the others were unfamiliar. Under a copy of "Pathfinder Selivan's Exploit" a sign saying "Quiet!" regularly flared and dimmed. For this reason, nobody here talked. Pepper cautiously lowered himself onto the edge of a chair. Beatrice Vakh smiled at him--somewhat warily but welcoming on the whole.

After a minute of apprehensive silence the little bell rang and the secretary put aside her book. "The venerable Luke, go through." The venerable Luke was frightful to look upon and Pepper averted his gaze. Doesn't matter, he thought, closing his eyes. I can stand it. He remembered

the rainy autumn evening when they had brought Esther into his flat, after she had been knifed by a drunken yob in the hallway, and the neighbors hanging onto him, and the glass shards in his mouth--he had chewed the glass when they brought him some water. . . . Yes, he thought, the worst was past.

His attention was attracted by swift scratching sounds. He opened his eyes and looked about him. In the next chair but one. Professor Cockatoo was furiously scratching himself under the arms with both hands. Like a monkey.

"What do you think, should we separate the boys from the girls?" asked Beatrice in a trembling voice. "I don't know," Pepper said irritably. "Co-education has its advantages, of course," Beatrice went on, "but this is a special situation. . . . Lord!" she said, suddenly lachrymose. "Surely he won't throw me out? Where could I go then? I've been thrown out everywhere, I haven't got a single pair of decent shoes left. All my tights are in holes, my powder's all lumpy. . . ."

The secretary put aside Sublimation of Genius to say severely:

"Don't lose your concentration." Beatrice Vakh froze in terror. At once the small door opened and a completely shaven head was thrust into the waiting room.

"Is there a Pepper here?" it inquired in a stentorian voice.

"Yes," said Pepper, leaping to his feet. "To the outbound area with your stuff! Vehicle leaves in ten minutes. Jump to it!" "Vehicle where to? Why?" "You're Pepper?" "Yes. . . ." "You wanted to leave or not?" "I wanted to, but . . ."

"Well, just as you like," bellowed the shaven one angrily. "I'm just supposed to tell you."

He disappeared and the door slammed. Pepper rushed after him.

"Back," cried the secretary, and several hands clutched at his clothing. Pepper struggled desperately and heard his jacket rip.

"The vehicle is there!" he groaned. "You're off your head!" said the secretary peevishly.

"Where are you trying to get? The door marked 'Exit' is over there, where are you going?"

Horny hands propelled Pepper to the 'Exit' sign. Beyond the door lay a spacious polygonal hall, with a multiplicity of doors; Pepper rushed about opening one after the other.

Bright sunlight, sterile-white walls, people in white coats. A naked back, smeared with iodine. Smell of a chemist's shop. Not that one.

Blackness. Whirring of a cine-projector. On the screen, someone being pulled by the ears in all directions. White patches of displeased faces. A voice:

"Door! Shut the door!" Not that one either. . .. Pepper crossed the hall, slipping on the parquet. Smell of a cake shop. A short line with bags. Behind the glass counter glint bottles of yogurt, cakes, and gateaux in colorful array.

"Gentlemen!" shouted Pepper. "Where is the exit?" "Exit out of where?" asked a plump assistant in a cook's hat.

"Out of here. . . ." "It's the door you're standing in." "Don't listen to him," said a feeble old man in the line. "We've got a wise guy around here who just holds lines up. ... Keep serving, don't pay any attention."

"No, no, I'm not joking," said Pepper. "I've got a car, it'll go in a minute. . . ."

"No, it's not him," said a fair-minded old man. "That bloke always asks where the toilet is. Where is the car you speak of, sir?" "In the street."

"What street?" asked the assistant. "There's plenty of streets."

"I don't care as long as it's outside!" "No," said the shrewd old man. "It's the same chap. He's just changed his program. Pay no attention to him."

Pepper looked around in despair, leaped back into the hall and pushed against the next door. It was locked. A testy voice inquired:

"Who's there?" "I have to get out!" shouted Pepper. "Where's the exit

here?"

"Just a moment."

Behind the door came noises, the splash of water, the clatter of boxes being moved. The voice said:

"What do you want?"

"To get out! I must get out!"

"Right away."

A key scraped and the door opened. It was dark inside.

"Come through," said the voice.

It smelled of fumigation. Pepper put his hands up in front of him and essayed several uncertain steps.

"I can't see a thing," he said.

"You'll get used to it in a minute," the voice assured. "Well, come on, why've you stopped?"

Pepper was taken by the sleeve and led on.

"Sign here," said the voice.

A pencil appeared in Pepper's fingers. Now he perceived in the darkness the vague whiteness of paper.

"Have you signed?"

"No. What am I signing?"

"Don't you be afraid, it isn't a death sentence. Sign that you haven't seen anything."

Pepper signed anywhere. He was seized firmly by the sleeve again and propelled between some door curtains, then the voice asked:

"Are there a lot of you here?"

"Four," came from behind the door apparently.

"Is there a line formed? Bear in mind I'm opening the door now and letting a person out. Move up one, don't push and no funny remarks. That clear?" "All right. Not the first time." "Nobody's forgotten his clothes?" "Nobody, nobody. Let him out." The key scraped again. Pepper was almost blinded by the bright light and he was pushed out. Still not opening his eyes properly, he reeled down some steps and only then realized that he was in the Directorate's inner courtyard. Peevish voices were shouting:

"Come on now, Pepper! Get a move on! How long are we supposed to wait?"

In the middle of the yard stood a truck, packed with Scientific Security personnel. Kim was looking out of the cab and gesturing angrily. Pepper ran up to the truck and scrambled aboard, they tugged at him, lifted him and dumped him on the bottom of the truck. The vehicle revved up at once, gave a jerk, somebody stood on Pepper's hand, somebody else gaily sat on him, everyone started up singing and laughing, and they set off.

"Peppy, here's your suitcase," said somebody. "Is it true you're leaving, Pepper?" "Care for a cigarette, Monsieur Pepper?" Pepper lit up, seated himself on his case and turned up his jacket collar. Someone gave him a raincoat;

Pepper smiled his thanks and wrapped himself up in it. The truck sped on faster and faster and although it was a hot day, the head wind seemed savagely penetrating. Pepper smoked, concealing the cigarette in his fist and gazed about him. I'm on my way, he thought, I'm on my way. This is the last time I'll see you, wall. Last time I'll see you, cottages. Good-bye scrap-heap, I left my galoshes here somewhere. Good-bye pool, good-bye chess, good-bye yogurt. It's so marvelous, so easy! I'll never drink yogurt in my life again. Never will I sit down to a chess board. . . ."

The personnel, crowded up near the cab, clutching one another and huddling behind each other from the wind, conversed on abstract subjects.

"It's been worked out, and I've worked it out. If it goes on like this, in a hundred years there'll be ten scientists for every square yard, and the total mass will cause the cliff to collapse. So much transport for food and water delivery will be needed, they'll have to have a continuous transport service between the Mainland and the Directorate; the trucks will go at twenty-five miles an hour, one yard apart, and be unloaded on the move. . .

. No, I'm absolutely certain the top people are considering regulating the recruitment of new personnel. Well now, judge for yourselves: the hotel warden --you can't have the likes of that, seven and one more arriving. All healthy. Hausbotcher thinks something should be done about it. No, not sterilization, necessarily, as he suggests. . . ."

"Hausbotcher is the last person who should suggest that."

"That's why I say, not necessarily sterilization."

"They say the annual holidays are being extended to six months."

They went by the park, and Pepper suddenly realized that the truck was going in the wrong direction. They'd be out of the gates soon and descend by way of the hairpins to the foot of the cliff.

"Here listen, where are we going?" he asked, alarmed.

"What d'you mean--where? To get paid."

"Not to the Mainland?"

"Why on earth should we? The cashier's arrived at the biostation."

"You mean you're going to the biostation, the forest."

"Well of course. We're Science Security and get paid at the biostation."

"And what about me?" asked Pepper in bewilderment.

"You'll be paid as well. You're due for a bonus. . . . Incidentally, everybody got his papers?"

The men fussed about, extracting from their pockets stamped papers of assorted shapes and colors. These they examined intently.

"Pepper, did you fill the questionnaire in?"

"What questionnaire?"

"Pardon me, but what a question! Form number eighty-four."

"I didn't fill anything in," Pepper said.

"Dear sirs! What have we here? Pepper's got no papers."

"That doesn't matter. He's probably got a permit. . . ."

"I haven't got a permit," said Pepper. "I haven't got anything. Only a suitcase and a raincoat. ... I didn't intend going into the forest, I wanted to get away altogether. . . ."

"And the medical check? Inoculations?"

Pepper shook his head. The truck was already rolling down through the hairpins and Pepper took a detached look at the forest, at the level porous layers of it on the horizon, at its arrested storm-cloud seething, the clinging web of mist in the shade of the cliff.

"You can't get away with things like that," somebody said.

"Well now, there aren't any classified objects along the road."

"What about Hausbotcher?"

"Well what of him, if there's no classified objects?"

"Let's assume you don't know that. Nobody does. There now, last year Kandid flew out without documents and where's Kandid now, desperate lad?"

"In the first place it wasn't last year, it was long before that. Secondly, he was simply killed. At his post."

"Oh yes? Have you seen the directive?"

"That's true, there was no directive."

"So, there's nothing to argue about. Since they put him in the bunker at the checkpoint, he's been sitting filling in forms. . . ."

"How did you not fill in the forms. Peppy? Maybe you've got a black mark against you?"

"One moment, gentlemen! This is a serious matter. I propose we investigate employee Pepper to be on the safe side. By democratic methods, so to speak. Who'll be secretary?"

"Hausbotcher for secretary!"

"Excellent suggestion. As honorary secretary we choose our much-respected Hausbotcher. I see by your faces--unanimous. And who will be the secretary's assistant?"

"Vanderbilt for secretary's assistant!"

"Vanderbilt? . . . Well, why not. ... We have Vanderbilt proposed as

secretary's assistant. Any other nominations? For? Against? Abstentions? Hm . . . two abstainers. Why did you abstain?"

"Me?"

"Yes, yes, I mean you."

"I don't see the sense. Why torment a man? He's in a bad way as it is."

"All right. And you?"

"None of your damned business."

"As you wish. . . . Secretary's assistant, note please, two abstentions. Let's begin. Who first? No takers? Then permit me. Employee Pepper answer the following question. What distances have we covered between years twenty-five and thirty; (a) on foot (b) by land transport (c) by air? Take your time, think. Here's paper and pencil."

Pepper took the paper and pencil obediently and set to work remembering. The truck shook. To start with everybody looked at him, but eventually they all got bored.

"I'm not afraid of overpopulation," mumbled somebody. "But have you seen how much hardware there is? On the empty lot behind the repair-shops--have you seen it? And what is it, d'you know? Of course it's in packing cases, nailed down. Nobody's got time to open it up and have a look. D'you know what I saw night before last over there? I'd stopped to have a smoke when I heard a sort of crash. I turn around and I see the side of one of the cases, the size of a house end, cracking open, and widening like a set of gates. Out of the case crawls a machine. I'm not going to describe it, you understand why. But what a sight. . . . It stood there for a few seconds then threw up this long tube with a rotating thing on the end as if it were taking a look around, then it crawled back into the case and the lid shut. I felt bad then and couldn't believe what I'd seen. This morning I think: 'I'll have another look anyway.' I arrived and my skin crept, I can tell you. The packing case was perfectly all right, not a crack, but the side was nailed up from the inside! The nails stuck out as long as your finger, shiny and sharp. And now I'm thinking, why was it climbing out? Was it the only one? Maybe they come out every night and... have a look around. While we're getting over-populated they're organizing a Bartholomew massacre and our bones will go flying over the cliff--or what's left of them . . . What? No thank you, friend, you tell the engineers if you want. After all I saw that machine and how do I know whether that's forbidden or not? There's no markings on the cases. . .." "All right, Pepper. You ready?" "No," Pepper said. "I can't remember anything. It was a long time ago."

"That's odd. I can remember perfectly, for example. Six thousand seven hundred and one kilometer by rail, seventeen thousand one hundred and fifty-three by air (out of that three thousand two hundred and fifteen for personal travel) and fifteen thousand and seven on foot. And I'm older than you. Strange, very strange, Pepper. . . . W-e-ll all right. Let's try the next point. What toys were you specially fond of before you went to school?"

"Clockwork tanks," said Pepper, wiping sweat from his brow. "And armored cars."

"Aha! You remember! And yet it was before you went to school, times, so to speak, a great deal further removed. Though less care-laden, eh, Pepper? So then. Tanks and armored cars it is. ... Next. At what age did women, brackets, men become attractive to you? The expression in brackets is addressed as a rule, to women. Go ahead and answer."

"A long time ago," said Pepper. "It was long, long ago."

"Exactly when?"

"What about you?" asked Pepper. "You say first, then I will."

The presider shrugged. "I've nothing to hide. The first time was when I was nine, when they bathed me and my female cousin together. . . . Now you."

"I can't," said Pepper. "I don't wish to answer such questions."

"Idiot," somebody whispered in his ear. "Tell some lie with a straight face, and that's it. Why torment yourself? Who's going to check you?"

"All right," Pepper said submissively. "When I was ten. When they bathed me and Murka the dog together."

"Splendid!" exclaimed the presider. "Now list me all the diseases of the legs you've had."

"Rheumatism."

"What else?"

"Intermittent lameness."

"Very good. What else?"

"Cold," said Pepper.

"That's not a leg disease."

"I don't know. With you no, perhaps. With me it's the legs. My legs get wet--a cold."

"We-ll, let it pass. Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"As you wish. But I warn you: the more the better."

"Spontaneous gangrene," said Pepper. "Subsequent amputation. That was my last leg disease."

"That's enough then. Last question. Your world-view. Briefly."

"Materialist," Pepper said.

"What sort of a materialist exactly?"

"Emotional."

"I've no more questions. Any questions, gentlemen?"

There were no more questions. Some of the travelers were half-asleep, some were chatting with their backs to the presider. The truck was going slowly now. It was getting hot and the forest's damp and sharp unpleasant • smell was ever-present. The smell never reached the Directorate on normal days.

The truck rolled along with the engine switched off, and far far away could be heard the faint rumbling of a storm.

"I'm amazed, looking at you," said the secretary's assistant, also with his back to the presider. "It's unhealthy pessimism. Man is an optimist by nature, that's one thing. And the second and main thing is--surely you realize the director considers these matters as much as you do? It makes me laugh. In the last speech addressed to me, the director revealed majestic prospects. I caught my breath from sheer admiration, I'm not ashamed to admit. I always was an optimist, but that picture. ... If you want to know, everything's going to be cleared, all these rocks, cottages. . . . Instead buildings of dazzling beauty will rise from transparent and semi-transparent materials, stadia, swimming-pools, aerial parks, crystal bars, and cafes. Stairways to the sky! Slender, swaying women with dark supple skin! Libraries! Muscles! Laboratories! Penetrated by sun and light! A free timetable! Cars, gliders, airships . . . debates, hypnopaedia, stereo-cinema. . . . After their working hours, the workers will sit in libraries, ponder, compose melodies, play guitars and other musical instruments, carve in wood, read poems to each other!"

"And what will you be doing?"

"I shall do wood-carving."

"What else?"

"I shall write poetry. They will teach me to write poetry. I have good handwriting."

"What will I do?"

"Whatever you like!" said the secretary's assistant magnanimously. "Carve wood, write poetry. . . . Whatever you like."

"I don't want to carve wood. I'm a mathematician."

"Well all right! Do maths to your heart's content!"

"I do it now to my heart's content."

"Now you get paid for doing it. Silly. You'll jump from towers."

"Why?"

"There you go--why? It's interesting isn't it?"

"No."

"What are you trying to say, then? That apart from mathematics you're not interested in anything?"

"Well now, that's about right. After a day's work you're so fagged out that you take no interest in anything."

"You're just a narrow person. Never mind, you'll develop. You'll find you have some aptitudes, you'll be composing music, doing a bit of fretwork, or something. . . ."

"Composing music isn't the trouble, it's finding an audience."

"Well, I'll listen to you with pleasure. . . . Pepper here."

"You just think that. You won't do it though. You'll do a bit of fretwork then you'll be off to join the ladies. Or get drunk. I know you all right, I know everybody here. You'll shamble about from crystal bar to diamond cafeteria. Especially if work is optional. I'm afraid to think, even, what it'll be like if they make work optional here."

"Every man is a genius at something," retorted the assistant. "You've only to find what it is. We don't even suspect that I'm, say, a genius at cooking, you, perhaps, a pharmaceutical genius, but we have other jobs and find out little about ourselves. The director said specialists would be put on that, they'll bring to light our hidden potential. ..."

"Potential, now, that's a murky business. I'm not arguing, maybe everybody's a potential genius, only what's to be done if it can only be applied, say, in the distant past or future, and it isn't regarded as genius now whether you've got it or not? Very good if you're a cooking genius. But how's it going to be discovered that you're a cab-driver of genius, or Pepper's a genius at chipping arrow heads, or I'm a genius at finding an X-field about which nobody knows yet and which won't be discovered for ten years? . . . Well then, as the poet said, leisure's black face will turn our way.. . ."

"Boys," said someone, "we've brought no grub with us. While we're traveling and till they pay us. . . ."

"Stoyan'll see us all right."

"Like heck he will. They're on rations there."

"Never mind, we'll last out. There's the checkpoint already."

Pepper extended his neck. In front, the forest stood, a yellow-green wall and the road ran straight into it, like a thread going into a multi-colored carpet. The truck passed by a plywood sign:

ATTENTION! REDUCE SPEED! PREPARE TO SHOW DOCUMENTS!

The striped bar was already visible; it was lowered and had to the left of it a sentry-box, on the right, barbed wire, white insulators, lattice towers with searchlights. The truck came to a halt. Everybody looked at the guard who was dozing with his carbine under his arm, as he stood cross-legged in his box. An extinguished cigarette hung on his lip and the concrete around the box was littered with ends. Next to the box stood a pole with various admonishments nailed to it:

ATTENTION! FOREST! DISPLAY PERMITS! DON'T SPREAD INFECTION! The driver hooted tactfully. The guard opened his eyes and stared muz-zily before him, he then detached himself from the box and walked around the lorry.

"There's plenty of you," said he. "Money, is it?"

"Right first time," said the former presider.

"That's fine, good," said the guard. He circled the vehicle, hoisted himself up onto the step and glanced inside. "Gee, there's a lot of you," he said reproachfully. "What about hands? Hands clean?"

"Yes!" chorused everyone.

"Everybody?"

"Everybody."

"All righty," said the guard, thrusting the top half of his body into the cab. From the cab: "Who's in charge? You? How many you got? Aha . . . you telling the truth? Name? Kim? Well now Kirn, I'm writing your surname down. . . . Great, Voldemar! Drive all the time do you? I'm on guard all the time. Show us your pass. . . . Now, now, no snarling, just show us it. ...

Pass in order, otherwise I'd. . . . Why d'you write telephone numbers on your pass? Wait a minute .. . what Charlotte is this? Ah yes, I remember. Give it here, I'll write it down as well. . . . Okay, thanks. Drive on. Permission to pass."

He jumped down from the step, raising the dust as he did so, went over to the barrier, and dropped on the counterweight. The barrier slowly rose, and the long underpants strung along it dropped into the dust. The truck started up.

There was a hubbub of conversation in the back, but Pepper heard nothing. He was going into the forest. The forest was getting closer, nearing and massing higher and higher, like an ocean wave and suddenly, it swallowed him. There was no more sun and sky, space or time, the forest had taken their place. All there was, was a flickering of murky tints, thick moist air, incredible smells, fumes rather, and an acrid taste in his mouth. Only sound was untouched by the forest: the noises of the forest were overpowered by the roar of the engine and the chatter of the passengers. So here's the forest, Pepper kept repeating, here I am in the forest, he repeated meaninglessly. Not from up above, but inside, not an observer, a participant. Here I am in the forest. Something cool and moist touched his face, ticklish, detached itself and slowly descended to his knees. He looked down: a long, thin, filament of some plant or other, or maybe some animal, or maybe just the contact of the forest, a friendly greeting or a wary feeling out; he did not touch the filament.

Meanwhile the truck roared along the road of glorious advance; yellow, green and brown meekly sank away behind, while along the verges streamed the untidy, forgotten columns of the veterans of the invading army, black bulldozers upended with shields furiously ripped, tractors buried in the earth as far as the driving-cab, their caterpillar tracks squashed flat and trailing behind them, lorries lacking wheels or glass-- everything dead, deserted forever, but maintaining their former fearless gaze ahead, into the depths of the forest with their wrenched radiators and shattered headlights. And all around, the forest stirred, palpitated, and contorted, changing its hues, blurring and flaring up, flowing forward and retreating, deceiving the sight, the forest terrified and mocked and gloated, and it was all strange and it was impossible to describe, and it was nauseating.

Chapter Six

Pepper opened the door of the landrover and looked at the thickets. He didn't know what he was supposed to see. Something in the nature of a nauseating blancmange. Something strange, something indescribable. But the most strange, the most unimaginable thing in this undergrowth was the people, therefore Pepper saw only them. They were walking toward the landrover, slender and neat in their movements, confident and elegant, they walked easily, never backtracking, instantly choosing the exact place to step. They acted as if they didn't notice the forest, as if they were at home in it and the forest belonged to them. They weren't pretending even, they really did think that, and the forest hung above them silently laughing and pointing with myriads of jeering fingers, while adroitly contriving to be familiar, obedient and simple--absolutely trustworthy. Until the time, the day. . . .

"Oh what a wench, that Rita," said former driver Acey to Pepper. He was standing next to the landrover, his somewhat bandy legs set wide across a rasping and trembling motorcycle, which he held lightly with his thighs. "I'd have got my hands on her for sure if it wasn't for her Quentin, he's a sharp one."

Quentin and Rita had approached quite close and Stoyan climbed out from behind the wheel to meet them.

"Well, how is she?" asked Stoyan. "Breathing," said Quentin, closely studying Pepper. "Has the money arrived, then?"

"This is Pepper," said Stoyan. "I was telling you."

Rita and Quentin smiled at Pepper. There was no time to study them but the thought crossed Pepper's mind that he had never seen a stranger woman than Rita or a more deeply unhappy man than Quentin.

"Hello, Pepper," said Quentin, continuing to smile piteously. "Come to have a look? Never seen it before?"

"I don't see it now," said Pepper. And it was true, the unhappiness and the strangeness were impossible to pin down, though linked powerfully.

Rita lit a cigarette and turned away. "You're looking in the wrong direction, man. Look straight ahead of you. Don't tell me you can't see?"

Then Pepper did see and at once forgot about the people. It had appeared like a hidden image on photographic paper, like a figure in a child's puzzle picture "where is the rabbit hiding" and once having found it, it was impossible to lose it from view. It was very close, it began ten paces from the landrover's wheels and the path. Pepper shuddered and swallowed.

A living column rose to treetop level, a sheaf of thin transparent threads, sticky, shiny, writhing and tense, a sheaf penetrating the dense foliage and climbing farther and farther into the clouds. It had its origin in a cesspit, an oily gurgling cesspit, full up with protoplasm, living, active, swelling up in bubbles of primitive flesh, busily organizing and as quickly decaying, pouring out the products of decay onto its flat banks spitting gluey foam. . . . And at once, as if unseen sound-filters had been switched on, the voice of the cesspit stood out from the chugging of the motorbike: gurgling, splashing, sobbing, bubbling, long drawn-out swamp groans; a heavy wall of smells drew nearer of raw sweating meat, pus, fresh bile, serum, hot paste-- only then did Pepper notice that both Rita and Quentin had oxygen masks hanging on their chests; he saw Stoyan squeamishly grimacing and raising a respirator to his face. He himself did not start putting his respirator on, he was somehow hoping that the smells might tell him what his eyes and ears had failed to do. . . .

"It stinks around here," said Acey, revolted. "Like a morgue...."

Quentin was talking to Stoyan.

"You might have asked Kim to see about our rations. We should get danger money. We're due milk, chocolate. . . ."

Rita was smoking pensively, dribbling smoke through her thin mobile nostrils. . . .

Around the cesspit, bending tenderly over it, trembled the trees; their branches were all turned in one direction and drooped toward the seething mass, while along the branches thick hairy lianas wriggled and dropped into the cesspit. The cesspit took them to itself and the protoplasm gnawed around them and converted them into itself, as it could dissolve and make its own all that surrounded it. ...

"Peppy," said Stoyan, "don't goggle like that, your eyes'll pop out."

Pepper smiled, though he knew it looked forced.

"Why did you bring the motorbike, anyway?" asked Quentin.

"In case we got stranded. They crawl along the path--I go with one wheel on the path, the other on the grass, and the motorbike goes behind. If we get stuck, Acey nips off on the bike and gets a tractor."

"You'll get stuck for sure," said Quentin.

"Course we will," said Acey. "This is a stupid idea, I've said so all along."

"You just be quiet," Stoyan said to him. "Your part is small enough. ... Is the eruption soon?" he asked Quentin.

Quentin looked at his watch.

"Well now. . . ." he said. "It reproduces every eighty-seven minutes. So in ... in ... in nothing, there, she's starting already."

The cesspit was reproducing. Out onto its level banks, in a series of convulsive jerks, came spurting out one after another, bits of whitish rippling goo. They rolled along the earth, helpless and blind, then stopped,

flattened out, threw out cautious pseudopodia and suddenly began moving purposefully--still fussing, still prodding about, but now in one set direction, wandering from the direct path, now and again colliding, but in one set direction, along one radius from the womb, out into the thickets, on and out in a single flowing off-white column, like gigantic clumsy, slug-like ants. . . .

"It's a quagmire all around here," Acey was saying. "We'll plop in so deep no tractor'll ever get us out-- the ropes'll just snap."

"Do you want to come with us?" said Stoyan to Quentin.

"Rita's tired."

"Rita can go home and we'll push on. . . ." Quentin was wavering. "How d'you feel, Rita, dear?" he asked. "Yes, I'll go on home," said Rita. "Well, that's fine," Quentin said. "We'll go and take a look eh? We'll be back soon enough I expect. Not long,eh, Stoyan?"

Rita threw away her cigarette end and went off along the track toward the biostation, without saying good-bye. Quentin shuffled in indecision before saying to Pepper in an undertone:

"Allow me ... get past. . . ."

He pushed through into the back seat; at which moment the motorbike with tremendous roar, tore itself from under Acey and bounding high in the air, hurtled into the cesspit. "Stop!" Acey shouted, as he sank to his haunches. "Where are you off to?" Everybody froze. The bike raced over a hummock, squealing wildly, stood on end and fell into the pit. Everybody rushed forward. Pepper thought the protoplasm rose up under the bike, softening the blow; then it easily and soundlessly accepted it and closed over it. The motorbike shut off.

"Clumsy bastard," said Stoyan to Acey. "What the devil are you doing?"

The cesspit had become a maw, sucking, tasting, enjoying. It was rolling the machine around inside, the way a man rolls a mint from cheek to cheek with his tongue. The motorcycle was swirling around in the foaming mass, now disappearing, now surfacing, helplessly waving its handlebars; with every appearance it got smaller and smaller, its metal plating thinner and thinner, now transparent as thin paper. Already the engine innards could be glimpsed through it, then the plating melted away, the tires disappeared, the bike dived down for the last time and appeared no more.

"Swallowed it," said Acey with idiotic joy.

"Clumsy bastard," repeated Stoyan. "You'll pay me for that. You'll be paying me the rest of your life for it."

"Well all right then," said Acey. "So I'll pay for it! Was it my fault? I just turned the throttle the wrong way," he said to Pepper. "That's how it got away. I really wanted to throttle down, Monsieur Pepper, so it didn't rattle so much, well I just turned it the wrong way. I'm not the first or the last to do that. Anyway it was an old bike. . . . I'm off then," said he to Stoyan. "I'm no use here now. I'll go home."

"Where are your eyes wandering then?" Quentin said abruptly with an expression that caused Pepper to step aside involuntarily.

"What's the matter?" said Acey. "I look where I want."

He was looking back at the path, where Rita's orange wrap was flickering under the dense yellowy-green awning of branches as she receded.

"Come on, let me pass," said Quentin to Pepper. "I'll just have a word with him."

"Where're you going, d'you think?" mumbled Stoyan. "Think on, Quentin. . . ."

"What d'you mean, think on? I've known what he was after long enough. . . ."

"Listen, don't be a kid. .. . Just stop it! Just think on!"

"Let go, I tell you, let go my arm!"

There was a noisy struggle around Pepper who was being shoved from both sides. Stoyan held Quentin's jacket firmly by the back and sleeve, as Quentin, now red and sweating, keeping his eyes fixed on Acey, was fending

off Stoyan with one hand while bending Pepper double with the other in his attempt to step over him. He was jerking about and emerging farther from his jacket with each jerk. Pepper chose this moment to tumble out of the landrover. Acey was still looking after Rita, his mouth half-open, his eyes lustful and tender.

"What's she doing wearing trousers," said he to Pepper. "It's the latest craze they've got, going about in trousers. . . ."

"Don't defend him!" roared Quentin in the car. "He's not a sexual neurasthenic, he's just a bastard! Let me go, or I'll give you one as well!"

"They used to wear skirts," said Acey dreamily. "A piece of material wrapped around and fixed with a pin. And I would get hold of the pin and unloose. . . ."

If this had been in the park. ... If it had been in the hostel or the library or the assembly hall. . . . And it had been--in the park, the library and even in the assembly hall during Kirn's lecture on "What all Directorate personnel should know about methods of mathematical statistics." But now the forest was seeing it all and hearing it all--the lascivious obscenity that filled Acey's eyes, Quentin's purple face swaying in the van doorway, some dull, ox-like, droning mumble of Stoy-an's, something about work, responsibility, stupidity and the crack of flying buttons against the windshield . . . and its reaction couldn't be guessed, whether it was one of horror, amusement or a fastidious grimace. "--" said Acey with satisfaction. And Pepper hit him. Hit him on the cheekbone apparently, with a crunch, spraining his finger. Everybody stopped talking at once. Acey held his cheek and looked at Pepper in vast astonishment.

"Don't say things like that," said Pepper firmly. "Not here. Don't do it."

"Well I'm not arguing," Acey said with a shrug. "I only meantthat I'm doing no good here, haven't got a

motorbike you can see that.... So what good can I do here?"

Quentin inquired loudly:

"You want one across the jaw?"

'There you are," said Acey, vexed. "Right across the cheekbone, right on the bone. . .. Good job, you missed my eye."

"No, I mean it, one to the jaw."

"Yes," Pepper said severely, "because here that sort of thing is out."

"Let's go then," said Quentin, lying back in his seat.

"Ace," said Stoyan. "Climb in. If we get stuck you can give us a hand."

"I've got a new pair of pants on," objected Acey. "Better let me drive."

Nobody answered, so he climbed into the back seat next to Quentin who moved up. Pepper got in next to Stoyan and they set off.

The pups had already gone quite a way, but Stoyan, driving with great skill, keeping the offside wheels on the path and the nearside on the dusty moss, soon overtook them and crawled slowly behind carefully using the clutch to adjust his speed. "You'll burn the clutch out," said Acey. He turned to Quentin and began explaining that he'd had no ulterior motive, he had no motorbike anymore anyway and a man's a man and if he's normal always will be, forest or no, no matter whether . . .

"Have you had one in the jaw?" Quentin kept asking. "No, you just tell me, the truth now, have you ever had one on the jaw or not?" Quentin kept asking and interrupting Acey. "No," Acey would answer, "no, wait a minute, you hear me out first. . . ."

Pepper stroked his swollen finger and looked at the pups. The children of the forest. Or perhaps its servants. Or maybe its experiments. They were proceeding slowly and tirelessly one after the other in line ahead, as if flowing along the ground; they oozed across rotting tree stumps, crossed ruts, pools of stagnant water in the tall grass, through prickly bushes.

The track kept disappearing, diving into evil-smelling mud, hiding itself under layers of tough gray mushrooms that crunched under the wheels,

then again appearing, while the pups held their direction and stayed white, clean, smooth; not a blade of grass stuck to them, not a thorn wounded them, they were unstained by the sticky black mud. They oozed along with a kind of stupid unthinking confidence, as if along a road long-known and habitual. There were forty-three of them.

I was dying to get here and now I've arrived, at least I'm seeing the forest from inside and I'm seeing nothing. I could have imagined all this sitting in my bare hostel room with its three empty bunks; late night insomnia, everything quiet all about, then right on midnight the piledriver starts thumping on the construction site. I could have thought it all up: mermaids, walking trees and these pups, turning into pathfinder Selivan--the most absurd things, the holiest. And everything there is in the Directorate I can imagine and bring to mind. I could have stayed at home and dreamed this all up, lying on my sofa listening to symphojazz or voices talking unfamiliar languages on the radio. . . . But that doesn't mean a thing. To see and not understand is the same as making it up. I'm alive, I can see and I don't understand. I'm living in a world someone has thought up without bothering to tell me, or maybe even himself. A yearning for understanding--that's my sickness, thought Pepper suddenly, a yearning for understanding.

He stuck his hand out of the window and held his aching finger against the cool car-body. The pups were paying the landrover no attention. They probably had no suspicion of its existence. They gave off a sharp unpleasant smell; their membrane now seemed transparent and it was as if wave-like shadows moved beneath.

"Let's catch one," suggested Quentin. "It's simple enough, we'll wrap it in my jerkin and take it to the lab."

"Not worth it," said Stoyan.

"Why not?" Quentin asked. "We'll have to catch one sooner or later."

"Doesn't seem right, somehow," Stoyan said. "In the first place, God help us, the thing'll die on us and I'll have to write a report for Hausbotcher."

"We've had them boiled," Acey announced suddenly. "I didn't like the taste, but the boys said it was all right. Bit like rabbit, I can't touch rabbit, to me a cat and a rabbit's just the same; can't bear the stuff. . . ."

"I've noticed one thing," said Quentin. "The number of pups is always a simple number: thirteen, forty-three, forty-seven. . . ."

"Nonsense," objected Stoyan. "I've come across groups of six or twelve."

"That's in the forest," said Quentin, "after that groups scatter in different directions. The cesspit always produces a simple number, you can check the log, I've put all my conclusions down."

"Me and the boys caught one of the local girls once, what a laugh that was!"

"Well all right, write an article then," said Stoyan.

"1 already have," said Quentin. "That'll make fifteen. . .."

"I've done seventeen," said Stoyan. "And one at the printers. Who's your co-author?"

"I don't know yet," said Quentin. "Kirn recommends the manager, he says transport's the coming thing now, but Rita advises the warden."

"Not him," said Stoyan.

"Why?" asked Quentin.

"Don't choose the warden," Stoyan repeated. "I'm not saying anything to you--just keep it in mind."

"The warden used to dilute the yogurt with brake fluid," said Acey. "That was when he was the manager of the barbershop. So me and the boys slipped a handful of bedbugs into his room."

"They say they're preparing a directive," said Stoyan. "Whoever's got less than fifteen articles to their name have to undergo treatment."

"Oh Lord," said Quentin, "that's a bad business. I know what special treatment means, after one of them your hair stops growing and you have bad breath for a year... ."

Home, thought Pepper. Get home as soon as you can. Now there really is nothing for me here. Just then he saw that the pup formation had broken up. Pepper counted: thirty-two pups went straight ahead, while a column of eleven had turned off left and down, where a lake became suddenly visible between the trees-- dark motionless water, quite near the landrover. Pepper glimpsed a low misty sky and the vague outline of the Directorate on the horizon. The eleven pups were heading confidently toward the water. Stoyan shut the engine off and everybody climbed out to watch the pups oozing over a twisted bough at the water's edge and plop heavily one after another into the lake. Oily circles rocked along the dark water.

"They're going down," said Quentin in amazement. "They're drowning."

Stoyan got his map and spread it out over the bonnet.

"Right enough," he said. "This lake isn't marked. There's a village marked but no lake. . . . Here it is written: 'Vill. Aborig. Seventeen point one one.' "

"That's always the way," said Acey. "Who uses a map in this forest? In the first place all the maps are inaccurate and secondly, you don't need them here. Say there's a road here today, tomorrow they'll have barbed wire up and a watchtower. Or you'll find a dump all of a sudden."

"I don't sort of feel like going on farther," said Stoyan, stretching himself. "Maybe we'll call it a day?"

"Surely," said Quentin. "Pepper's still got his pay to collect. Back to the van."

"A pair of binoculars would be handy," said Acey suddenly, cupping his eyes and avidly staring into the lake. "I reckon there's a woman in there bathing."

Quentin halted.

"Where?"

"She's got nothing on," said Acey. "True as I'm standing here. Not a stitch."

Quentin suddenly went pale and made a headlong rush for the van.

"Where is it you see her?" asked Stoyan.

"Over there at the far bank. . . ."

"There's nothing there," croaked Quentin. He was standing on the running-board and sweeping the far bank with his binoculars. His hands shook. "Damned bigmouth. . . . Asking for another one. . . . No, not a thing!" he repeated passing Stoyan the glasses.

"What d'you mean, nothing?" said Acey. "I'm no four-eyes, I've got an eye like a water-level. . . ."

"Wait a minute, wait, don't grab them," said Stoyan. "There's manners, grabbing them out of my hand...."

"There's nothing there," muttered Quentin. "He's pulling your leg. There's plenty of travelers' tales...."

"I know what it is," said Acey. "It's a mermaid. I'm telling you."

Pepper roused himself.

"Give me the binoculars," he said quickly.

"Nothing to see," said Stoyan, holding out the glasses.

"Fine guy to believe, I must say," muttered Quentin, now calming down.

"Honestly, there was," said Acey. "She must have dived. She'll be up in a minute.. . ."

Pepper focused the glasses. He didn't expect to see anything: that would have been too simple. And nothing was what he saw. The unruffled lake, a distant bank overgrown with forest and the silhouette of a rock above the forest's jagged skyline.

"What was she like?" he asked.

Acey began a detailed description of her, with much use of the hands. His narrative was succulent and full of fervor, but it wasn't at all what

Pepper wanted.

"Yes, naturally . . ." said he, "yes . . . yes."

Perhaps she came up to welcome the pups, he thought as he bounced around in the back seat alongside a gloomy Quentin, gazing at the even movement of Acey's ears. Acey was chewing something. She came out of the forest thickets white, cold, confident, and stepped into the water, the water she knew so well, entered into the lake as I walk into a library, sank into the rippling green twilight and swam toward the pups. She met them straight away in the center of the lake, on the bottom, and led them off somewhere, for some reason, at someone's behest, and one more knot of forest events is tied. And perhaps miles away from here something will happen or start to happen; banks of the lilac fog that isn't fog will seethe between the trees, or another cesspit will start up in a peaceful clearing, or mottled aborigines who've just been sitting and watching an educational film and patiently listening to a lecture by Beatrice Vakh, earnestly hoarse, will all of a sudden get up and go off into the forest, never to return. . . . And it will all be replete with profound significance, the profound significance that informs the movements of complicated machinery, and it will all be strange and, therefore, meaningless to us, at any rate for those of us who still can't get used to lack of meaning or accept it as the norm. He sensed the significance of each and every event, every phenomenon about him: that no batch of pups could number forty-two or forty-five and that the trunk of that tree there was overgrown with red moss and no other, that the sky was invisible along the path because of overhanging branches.

The vehicle shook. Stoyan was driving extremely slowly and from some way off Pepper could see a leaning post and a sign with something written on it. The legend had been washed out by rain and faded, it was a very old notice on a very old, dirty-gray board, pinned to the pole with two huge rusty nails. "Here, two years ago, pathfinder Gustave was tragically drowned. Here his memorial will be set up." The landrover made its way around the pole, lurching from side to side.

Whatever got into you, Gustave, Pepper thought. How did you manage to drown here? You were a tough guy no doubt, your head was shaved, your jaw was bristly and square, a gold tooth, tattooed from top to toe, your arms hung below your knees, you'd a finger missing on the right, bitten off in a drunken brawl. It wasn't your heart that sent you off to become a pathfinder, things just panned out that way, you served your time up on the cliff where the Directorate stands now and there was nowhere for you to run to except the forest. And you wrote no articles in the forest, you never even gave them a thought, you thought about other articles written before that and aimed at you. And you built a strategic road, laid concrete slabs and chopped down the forest far away on both sides so that eight-engined bombers could land here if need be. Could the forest put up with that? It drowned you in a dry place, but they'll put a monument up to you in ten years time and maybe give your name to some cafe. The cafe will be called "Gustave's" and driver Acey will drink yogurt there and stroke the rumpled girls from the local choir. . . .

Apparently Acey had two convictions, neither, for some reason, for what might be expected. The first time he'd landed up in a labor colony for stealing stationery from some concern, and the second time for offenses against the passport regulations. Stoyan there was clean. Doesn't drink yogurt, nothing. He loves Alevtina tenderly and purely, whom nobody ever loved tenderly and purely. When article number twenty came out, he would offer Alevtina his heart and hand and would be turned down, his articles notwithstanding, his broad shoulders and beautiful Roman nose notwithstanding, for Alevtina couldn't stand anybody fastidious, suspecting in him (not without reason) a rake of such refinement as to be beyond her comprehension. Stoyan lives in the forest whither, unlike Gustave, he came voluntarily. He never complains about anything although for him the forest is just a vast pile of material for articles, guaranteeing him against

treatment. . . .

One might marvel endlessly at the fact that there were people able to get used to the forest, and yet such people were the overwhelming majority. At first they were attracted by the forest as a romantic or lucrative location, or a place where control was not over-strict, or a place of refuge. Then they got a bit afraid of it, and then they made the discovery that "it's just the same mess here as everywhere else," and that reconciled them to the strangeness of the forest, but nobody intended to live out his old age here. Quentin now, as rumor had it, only lived here because he feared to leave Rita unguarded, and Rita refused to go away from the forest at any price, though she never told anybody why. . . . There, I've got around to Rita. . . . Rita can go off into the forest and not come back for weeks. Rita bathes in forest lakes. Rita breaks all the rules and nobody dares to criticize. Rita writes no articles. Rita doesn't write anything, even letters. It's common knowledge that Quentin cries of a night and goes off to sleep with the canteen assistant if she's not busy with somebody else . . . it's all over the biostation. . .. Good god, they light up the club, plug in the record-player, drink yogurt; they drink a vast amount of yogurt and in the moonlight they hurl the bottles into the lake and see who gets the farthest. They dance, play forfeits and spin the bottle, cards and billiards, they swap women, and by day in their laboratories they pour the forest from one test tube to another, study the forest under a microscope, reckon it up on adding machines, while the forest stands all around them, looms above them, grows up through their bedrooms and in the stifling hours before the thunderstorm, wandering trees come crowding up to their windows, and they also, no doubt wonder what these people are, why they're here and why they exist at all. . . .

A good thing I'm getting out of here, he thought. I've been here, understood nothing, found nothing I wanted to find, but I know now that I never will understand anything, that there is a time for everything. There's nothing in common between the forest and me, the forest is no nearer to me than the Directorate is. Anyway, at least I'm not staying here to be covered in shame. I'm going away, I shall work and wait. I shall hope for the time to come when. . . .

The biostation yard was empty. There was no sign of the truck, and there was no line at the pay-out window. All there was was Pepper's suitcase standing on the porch that barred his way, his gray raincoat hung on the verandah rail. Pepper got out of the landrover and looked around in perplexity. Acey, arm in arm with Quentin was already heading for the canteen, which gave out a clink of cutlery and a smell of burning. Stoyan said: "Let's go and have supper, Peppy," and drove the vehicle into the garage. Pepper, to his horror, suddenly realized what all this meant: a howling record-player, senseless chatter, yogurt, another little glass, eh? And the same every evening, on and on for evening after. . . .

The pay-window rattled and an angry cashier stuck his head out: "Where've you been, Pepper? How long haye I got to wait? Get over here and sign up."

Pepper approached the window on stiffened legs. "Right here--I'll put the total in," the cashier said. "No, no, not there, here. Why're your hands shaking? Here you are."

He began counting out notes.

"But where are the rest? asked Pepper.

"Don't rush. . . . The rest are in the envelope here."

"No, I mean. . . ."

"What you mean doesn't affect anybody. I--canf change the procedure just for you. There's your salary, have you got it?"

"I wanted to find out. . . ."

"I'm asking you, have you received your salary? Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Thank the Lord. Now your bonus. Have you received that?"

"Yes."

"That's it then. Allow me to shake your hand. I'm in a hurry. I have to be at the Directorate by seven."

"I only wanted to ask," said Pepper hurriedly, "where all the rest of the people . . . Kim, the truck . . . they did promise to take me ... to the Mainland."

"Can't do it to the Mainland, I have to be at the Directorate. Excuse me, I'm shutting the window now.

"I won't take up much room," said Pepper.

"That's not the point. You're not a child, you must realize, I'm a cashier. I have payrolls--what if anything happens to them? Take your elbow away."

Pepper took his elbow away and the window slammed down. Through the murky thumb-printed glass, Pepper could make out the cashier collecting up his payrolls, screwing them up any how and stuffing them into his briefcase; then the office door opened, two massive guards came in and bound the cashier's hands, throwing a noose about his neck; one of them led the cashier off on the rope while the other took the briefcase and gazed around the room, catching sight of Pepper as he did so. For a while they stared at one another through the dirty glass, then very slowly and carefully, as if fearing to scare someone, the guard placed the briefcase on the chair and, without taking his eyes from Pepper, reached out for the rifle that was leaning against the wall. Pepper waited, cold and incredulous, as the guard took up the rifle, stumbled and went out, shutting the door behind him. The light was extinguished.

Pepper then fell back from the window, ran on tiptoe to his suitcase, seized it and fled, anywhere, as far as might be from this place. He took cover behind the garage and watched the guard come out onto the porch, holding his rifle at the port, a glance left and right, then underfoot; he took Pepper's raincoat, weighed it in his hand, rummaged in the pockets and after another glance around, went off into the house. Pepper sat down on his suitcase. It was chilly and night was falling. Pepper sat pointlessly staring at the lighted windows, whitened for half their height. Beyond the window shadows moved; on the roof the latticed vane of the radar silently rotated. Crockery rattled, night creatures called in the forest. Then somewhere a searchlight flashed out a blue beam and into it from behind the corner of the building rolled a shovel truck, rumbling and leaping on the rutted road; followed by the searchlight, it reached the gates. In the scoop sat the guard with the rifle. He was smoking, muffled up against the wind; a thick fleecy rope was wrapped around his left wrist and led off through the half-opened window of the driver's cab.

The truck drove off and the searchlight went out. Across the yard, scraping his gigantic boots, passed the second guard, a menacing shadow with a rifle under his armpit. Every now and again he bent down and prodded the earth, looking for footprints, seemingly. Pepper pressed his sodden back to the wall and, motionless, followed him with his eyes.

There came a terrible drawn-out cry from the forest. Somewhere doors slammed. A light went on on the first floor, someone said loudly: "Not half stuffy in your place." Something round and shining dropped into the grass and rolled to Pepper's feet. Pepper froze into stillness once more, than realized it was a yogurt bottle.

On foot, thought Pepper. It'll have to be on foot. Twelve miles through the forest. Through the forest, that was bad. Now the forest would see a pitiful trembling man, damp with fear and fatigue, dead under the weight of his suitcase, yet for some reason clinging onto it. I'll be trailing along and the forest will hoot and yell at me from both sides.

The guard had reappeared in the courtyard. He was not alone. Alongside came something else, breathing heavily and snorting, huge and four-footed. They halted in the middle of the yard and Pepper could hear the guard muttering: "Grab that, go on. . . . Don't eat the thing, then .... It's not

sausage, it's a raincoat, smell it then. . . . Well? Cherchez when you're told. . . ." The four-footed one whined and squealed. "Gaw!" said the exasperated guard. "Hunting fleas is your job. . . . Get on there!" They melted into the darkness. Heels clacked along the porch, a door shut.

Just then something cold and moist knocked against Pepper's cheek. He shuddered and almost fell. It was an enormous wolfhound. It whined very quietly, gave a heavy sigh, and laid its heavy head on Pepper's knees. Pepper stroked it behind the ears. The wolfhound yawned and seemed about to shift itself around to get comfortable when the record-player thundered out from the first floor. The wolfhound silently started up and bounded off.

The record-player raged on, for miles around nothing else existed. And then, just like in an adventure film, the gates were suddenly bathed in blue light and silently opened wide, and an enormous truck slid into the yard like a vast ship lit up with constellations of signal lamps. It stopped and dipped its headlights, which died slowly as if some forest monster were giving up the ghost. Driver Voldemar thrust his head out of the window and started shouting something, mouth wide, and kept it up, straining away, his eyes fierce, then spat and dived back into the cab, came out again and chalked "Pepper!!!" on his door upside down. At this, Pepper realized the truck had come for him, seized hold of his suitcase and ran across the yard, fearing to look back, fearful of hearing shots behind him. He made hard work of scrambling up the two steps into a cab the size of a room and while he got his suitcase settled, then himself a dug-out cigarette, Voldemar kept talking, purple in the face, his voice straining, gesticulating and pushing Pepper's shoulder with the palm of his hand. Only when the record-player stopped suddenly did Pepper at last hear his voice: Voldemar wasn't saying anything in particular, he was just swearing violently.

The truck had not succeeded in passing the gates, when Pepper fell asleep, as if someone had placed an ether mask over his face.

Chapter Seven

The village was very strange. When they emerged from the forest and saw it below in the dip, the silence stunned them. It was so quiet that their joy was dampened. The village was triangular in shape and the sizeable clearing on which it stood was similarly three-sided--a wide clay outcrop without a single bush or blade of grass, as if it had been burned off and then stamped down, completely black and sheltered from the sky by the interlacing tops of mighty trees.

"I don't like this village," announced Nava. "It'll likely be hard to beg a bite to eat there. They're not likely to have food if they haven't even got fields, just bare clay. They're likely hunters, trapping and eating animals, makes you sick to think. . . ."

"Perhaps we've landed up at Funny Village?" inquired Kandid. "Perhaps it's Clay Clearing?"

"How can it be Funny Village? Funny Village is just an ordinary village, like our village only funny folk live there. But here, the quiet and nobody to be seen, no kids, they might be in bed, mind. . . . And why's there nobody about, Dummy? Let's not go into that village, I don't like it at all. . . ."

The sun was setting, and the village below was sinking into shadow. It had the air of being very empty but not deserted, not abandoned, simply empty, unreal, as if it were not a village at all but some sort of stage scenery. Yes, thought Kandid, probably we shouldn't go there, only my feet are hurting and I'd give a lot for a roof over my head. And something to eat. And the night's coming on. ... We've been wandering around the forest all day, even Nava's weary, hanging on to my arm, not letting go. "All right," he said hesitantly, "let's not go."

"Not go, not go," said Nava, "just when I want to eat? How long can I last without eating? I've had nothing since morning . . . and your robbers .

. . that made me mighty hungry. No, let's go down there, have a bite and if we don't like it, we'll leave straight away. The night's going to be warm, no rain . . . let's go, what're you standing there for?"

As soon as they reached the edge of the village someone called them. Alongside the first house, on the gray earth sat a gray man, practically naked. It was hard to pick him out in the twilight, he almost merged with the earth and Kandid was only able to make out his silhouette against the background of a whitewashed wall.

"Where are you going?" asked the man in a feeble voice.

"We're going to spend the night here and in the morning we have to go to New Village. We've lost our way, we ran away from some robbers and lost the way."

"You came here yourselves, then?" said the man weakly. "You've done well then, good people. .. . You come in, come in, there's lots of work to be done and hardly any people left now. . . ." He could hardly bring the words out, as if he were nodding off. "And the work must be done, it's just got to be, got to be. . . ." "Will you give us something to eat?" asked Kandid. "Just now we've got . . ." The man spoke some words that struck Kandid as familiar, except that he knew he'd never heard them before. "It's good that a boy's come, because a boy . . ." He started talking strange, incomprehensible words again.

Nava tugged at Kandid, but he tore his arm away in annoyance."I can't understand you," he said to the man, trying to get a better look at him at least. "Just tell me whether you've got food by you or not."

"Now if there were three. . . ." said the man.

Nava dragged Kandid off to one side by main force.

"Is he ill?" said Kandid angrily. "Did you understand what he was saying?"

"What are you talking to him for?" whispered Nava. "He hasn't got a face! How can you talk to him if he hasn't got a face?"

"How d'you mean 'no face'?" Kandid looked around in amazement. The man was not to be seen;

either he'd gone or had melted into the shadows.

"He's like a deadling," she said. "Only he's not, he's got a smell, but for all that, he's like a deadling. . . . Let's go to some other house, but we won't get anything to eat here, don't think you will."

She hauled him off to the next house and they glanced inside. Everything in the house was odd, no beds, no smell of habitation, inside it was empty, dark, unpleasant. Nava sniffed the air.

"There's never been any food here," she said, repelled. "You've brought me to some stupid village, Dummy. What shall we do here? In my life I've never seen villages like this. There's no children shouting and there's nobody in the street."

They walked on. Beneath their feet lay a cool fine dust; their very steps were soundless and there were none of the usual evening hootings and gurgling from the forest.

•'He spoke in a funny way," said Kandid. "I've been thinking, I've heard that talk somewhere before . . . but when and where I don't remember. . . ."

"I don't remember either," said Nava, after a pause, "but it's true. Dummy, I've heard words like that, maybe in a dream, maybe in our village, not the one where you and I live now, but the other one where I was born, only then that would have been a very long time ago, because I was still very little, I've forgotten everything since, just now it was as if I remembered, but I just can't remember properly."

In the next house they saw a man lying flat on the floor by the entrance, asleep. Kandid bent down and shook him by the shoulder, but the man did not wake up. His skin was moist and cold like an amphibian, he was flabby, soft, and lacked muscle almost entirely. His lips in the semi-darkness seemed black and had an oily gleam.

"He's asleep," said Kandid, turning to Nava. "What d'you mean asleep, when he's looking at us?" said Nava.

Kandid bent over the man again and it now seemed that he was watching them through barely-open eyes. The impression lasted only briefly. "No, no, he's asleep all right," said Kandid. "Let's go."

Unusually for her, Nava said nothing. They made their way to the center of the village, glancing into every house, and in every house they saw sleepers. All the sleepers were plump, fleshy men. There wasn't a single woman or child. Nava was now completely silent and Kandid also felt uneasy. The bellies of the sleepers rumbled heavily. They didn't wake up, but almost every time that Kandid looked back at them as he passed out into the street it seemed that they were following him with quick cautious glances.

By now it had got dark and scraps of sky made ashen by the moon peeped through between the branches; to Kandid it once more seemed weirdly like the backdrop in a good theater. He felt weary to the ultimate degree, to complete and utter indifference. Just now he wanted only one thing; to lie down somewhere under a roof (in case some nocturnal horror fell on him asleep), let it be on a hard stamped floor, but better anyhow in an empty house, not with these suspicious sleepers. Nava was now literally hanging on his arm. "Don't you be afraid," said Kandid, "there's absolutely nothing to be afraid of here." "What d'you say?" she asked sleepily. "I said: don't be afraid, they're all half dead here, I could turf them out with one hand."

"I'm not afraid of anybody," said Nava angrily, "I'm tired out and I want to go to sleep, if you can't give me anything to eat. You keep going on from house to house, house to house. I'm fed up, it's the same in every house anyway, all the people are lying down resting, and you and me are the only ones wandering about. . . ."

Kandid then made up his mind and entered the first house he came across. It was pitch black inside. Kandid pricked his ears trying to determine whether anyone was inside or not, but all he could hear was the snuffling of Nava who had her forehead buried in his side. He found the wall by groping and scrabbled about on the floor to see if it was wet; he lay down placing Nava's head on his stomach. She was already asleep. He hoped to himself he had done the right thing, there was something wrong about this place . . . still, just one night . . . then ask the way . .. they won't sleep in the daytime ... at worst into the swamp, the robbers had gone . . . and if they hadn't. . . how were the lads in New Village? . . . Surely not the day after tomorrow again? .... Not at all, tomorrow . . . tomorrow. . . .

He was awakened by a light and thought it was the moon. Inside the house it was dark, the lilac light was coming in by the door and it struck him as interesting that this light could enter by both the door and the window in the opposite wall, then he remembered he was in the forest and this could be no real moon; he at once forgot all this as the silhouette of a man appeared in the strip of light falling from the window. The man was standing in the house with his back to Kandid, gazing out of the window, and it was obvious by his silhouette that he was standing with his arms behind his back and head bowed. The forest inhabitants never stood like that--there was simply no reason for them to do so--but Karl Etinghof used to like to stand like that by the laboratory window during the rain and fog season when there was no work to do, and the clear realization came to him that this was Karl Etinghof, who had gone absent from the biostation one day and had not returned from the forest. He had been posted as missing without trace. Kandid gave a gasp of ex citement and cried "Karl!" As Karl slowly turned, the lilac light fell across his face and Kandid saw that it was not Karl but some unknown local inhabitant; he came noiselessly up to Kandid and bent over him, hands still behind his back, so that his face became clearly visible--an emaciated, beardless face, indeed quite unlike Karl's face. He straightened up without a word, seeming not to see Kandid, and made for the door, stooping as before, and when he was stepping across the threshold

Kandid realized that it was Karl after all, leaped to his feet and ran after him.

Beyond the entrance he halted and looked up and down the street, trying to suppress a nervous tremor that had suddenly taken hold of him. It was now very bright outside from the luminous lilac cloud hanging low over the village and all the houses seemed two-dimensional and more than ever unreal, while at an angle on the other side of the street rose a long outlandish structure unlike any normal forest building. Near to it figures were moving. The man resembling Karl was heading along for the building; when he reached the crowd he mingled with it and vanished as if he had never been. Kandid also wanted to get to the building but his legs felt like cotton wool and he couldn't move. He was astonished that he could still stand up. Afraid he would fall, he looked for something to support him; there was nothing but emptiness all around. "Karl," he mumbled, swaying, "Karl, come back!" He repeated the words several times, finally shouting aloud in despair; no one heard him, for at that very moment a much louder cry rang out, piteous and wild, a frank sob of pain that rang in his ears and forced tears to his eyes; for some reason he realized at once that the cry came from that long structure, perhaps because there was nowhere else it could be.

"Where's Nava?" he began to shout. "My girl, where are you?" He realized that he would lose her now, that the moment had come for him to lose everything that was close to him, all that linked him to life, and he would be alone. He turned to rush into the house and saw Nava, slowly falling backward. He caught and lifted her without understanding what had happened to her. Her head was thrown back and her open throat was in front of his eyes; where everybody has a hollow between their collarbones, Nava had two and he would never see them again. The screaming sob had not stopped and he knew that he had to go where it was. He was only too well aware what a feat this would be, dragging her over there, but he also knew that they would simply consider it normal procedure, because they didn't understand what it meant to hold a wife in your arms, warm and unique and carry her yourself to a place of weeping.

The cry broke off. Kandid saw that he was standing right in front of the building before the square black door, and strove to understand what he was doing there with Nava in his arms. He did not succeed, for out of the square black door came two women and Karl, all three displeased and frowning, and halted in conversation. He saw their lips moving and guessed they were arguing irritably but the words he could not understand, just once he caught the half-familiar word "chiasmus." Then one of the women, without interrupting the conversation, turned to the crowd and gestured as if inviting all of them into the building. Kandid said, "Right away, right away," and hugged Nava to him more tightly than ever. Once again the loud cry rang out and everybody began shuffling about, the fat people began to embrace one another, hug one another close, stroke and caress each other; their eyes were dry and their lips tightly closed, nevertheless they were crying and shouting, taking farewell of each other, for it turned out they were men and women and the men were saying good-bye to the women forever. No one wanted to go first, so Kandid went up first, since he was a brave man, since he knew he had to and since he knew that there was no help for him in any case. Karl, however, glanced at him and motioned him aside with a barely perceptible shake of the head, and Kandid felt utterly weird because it wasn't Karl after all, but he understood and retreated, knocking into soft and slippery bodies with his back. And when Karl gave

another shake of the head, he turned, slung Nava over his shoulder and ran on rubbery legs along the bright, empty village street as if in a dream; there was no sound of pursuit.

He came to himself as he collided with a tree. Nava shrieked and he lowered her to the ground. There was grass underfoot.

From here the whole village could be surveyed. A fog of lilac luminescence hung in a cone over the village, and the houses looked blurred

as the figures of the people seemed blurred.

"For some reason I can't remember anything," said Nava, "why are we here? We went to bed. Or am I dreaming?"

Kandid lifted her and carried her farther and farther crashing through bushes, tripping over grass, until all around became completely dark. He pushed on a little farther yet, set Nava down once more and sat down beside her. Around them grew tall warm grass, keeping the damp out; never had Kandid chanced upon such a dry, warm, blissful place since he had been in the forest. He had a headache and drowsiness kept coming on; he felt no desire to think at all, there was just this feeling of huge relief that he had been about to do something terrible and had not done it.

"Dummy," said Nava dreamily, "you know. Dummy, I've remembered where I heard talk like that before. You used to talk like that, Dummy, when you hadn't recovered your wits. Listen, Dummy, maybe you've just forgotten. You were very sick then, Dummy, lost your wits altogether. . . ."

"Go to sleep," said Kandid. He didn't want to think. Not about anything. Chiasmus, he recalled and fell asleep at once. Not quite at once. He recalled suddenly that it wasn't Karl that had gone missing; that was Valentine, it was Valentine's name that had been posted up in orders, Karl had perished in the forest and they had put his body, discovered by accident, in a lead coffin and shipped it to the Mainland. But he thought he might be dreaming all that.

When he opened his eyes, Nava was still asleep. She was lying on her stomach in the hollow between two roots, her face buried in the crook of her left arm with her right flung out to one side; Kandid saw a thin shining object in her dirty, half-open fist. At first he didn't realize what it was, and he was occupied with the sudden memory of the strange half-dream of the night, his fear, and the relief he felt at something terrible which had not happened. It then occurred to him what the object actually was, even its name swam into his memory. It was a scalpel. He waited a while, testing the shape of the object with the sound of the word, realizing at the back of his mind that it was correct, but impossible, because a scalpel by its name and shape was monstrously incongruous in this world. He roused Nava.

Nava awoke and, sitting up, began to talk at once.

"What a dry place, I never in all my life thought there were dry places like this, look how high the grass grows, eh, Dummy?" She became quiet and brought the scalpel in her fist close to her eyes. She gazed at it for a second, then squealed and flung it, shuddering, from her. She leapt to her feet. The scalpel sliced into the grass and stood quivering. They looked at it and both were terrified.

"What is it, Dummy?" whispered Nava at last, "what a horrible thing ... is it a thing? Maybe it's a plant? Look, it's all dry around here--maybe it grew here?"

"Why -horrible'?" asked Kandid.

"Why ever not?" said Nava. "You pick it up ... you try, try, go on ... then you'll know why it's horrible. I don't know, myself, why it's horrible. . . ."

Kandid picked up the scalpel. It was still warm, but the sharp point struck cold. Passing a cautious finger along it, he found where it changed from warm to cold.

"Where did you pick it up?" asked Kandid.

"I didn't pick it up anywhere," said Nava. "It likely crawled into my hand by itself, while I was asleep. See how cold it is? It likely wanted to get warm and crawled into my hand. I've never seen anything like it,

I don't know what to call it. Likely it's not a plant, it's some kind of beastie, maybe he's got legs just tucked them up, only so hard and nasty . . . maybe we're asleep, Dummy, you and I?" She faltered all of a sudden and looked at Kandid. "Were we in the village tonight? Surely we were, there was a man without a face as well, and he kept thinking I was--a boy. . . . And we hunted for somewhere to sleep . . . yes, and then I woke up, you had

gone and I started feeling about with my hands. That's when it crawled into my hand!" she said, "but it's surprising, Dummy, I wasn't at all frightened of it then, just the opposite even ... I even wanted it for something. . . ."

"It was all a dream," said Kandid decisively. The hair had risen on his scalp. He remembered all the events of the night. And Karl. And how he had shaken his head just slightly; run while you can. And that when he was alive, Karl had been a surgeon.

"Why don't you say anything, Dummy?" asked Nava, gazing anxiously at his face. "Where are you looking?"

Kandid pushed her away. "It was a dream," he repeated harshly, "forget it. Better hunt up something to eat, and I'll bury this thing."

"What did I need it for, don't you know?" asked Nava. "I had to do something. . . ." She shook her head. "I don't like dreams like that, Dummy," she said, "you can't remember a thing. You bury it deep otherwise it'll get out and crawl into the village and frighten somebody. Good idea to put a stone on top, a pretty heavy one, too. . . . Well, you bury it and I'll go and look for food." She sniffed the air. "There's berries somewhere near here. I never did, berries in such a dry place?"

She ran off lightly and noiselessly over the grass and was soon lost to view beyond the trees. Kandid remained seated, holding the scalpel in his palm. He didn't bury it. He wiped the blade with a handful of grass and tucked it in his blouse. Now he recalled everything and could understand nothing. It was a kind of strange and terrible dream, and owing to some oversight, the scalpel had fallen out of it. What a pity, he thought, today my head's clearer than it's ever been and all the same I can't understand a thing. That means I never will.

Nava quickly returned and dug out from her bosom a pile of berries and several sizeable fungi.

"There's a path over there, Dummy," she said. "Let's not go back to that village, you and I, why should we, let it ... let's you and I go by the path, we're bound to get somewhere. We can ask there the way to New Village and everything'll be all right. It's just amazing how much I want now to get to New Village, never before wanted to so much. Let's not go back to that nasty village, I didn't like it there, you know if we hadn't got away from there, something awful would have happened. If you want to know, we shouldn't have come here, those robbers did shout at you not to go or you were done for, but of course you never listen to anybody. . . . Because of you we nearly got into trouble. . . . Why don't you eat? The mushrooms are filling and the berries are nice, rub them in your palm and make them into crumbs, you're like a kid today. I remember now, mam used to tell me the best mushrooms grow where it's dry, but I didn't know what dry meant, mam used to say that there were lots of dry places before, like on a good road, that's why she understood and I didn't. . . ."

Kandid tried a mushroom and ate it. They really were good, and so were the berries; he felt his strength coming back. He still didn't know what to do next, however. He wasn't keen to go back to the village. He tried to visualize the locality as Hopalong had drawn it on the ground with a stick, and recalled that Hopalong used to speak of a road to the City, a road which should run through these parts. "It's a very good road," Hopalong would say regretfully, "the most direct road to the City, only we can't get there across the quagmire, that's the trouble." He lied. The lame one lied. He had gone across the quagmire and had been in the City probably, but for some reason he lied. But perhaps Nava's path was that self-same road? It had to be risked. But first they had to go back, back to the village. . . .

"We'll have to go back all the same, Nava," he said, after they had eaten.

"Where to? Back to that nasty village?" Nava was upset. "Now why do you say that to me, Dummy? What's there left to see in that village? That's what I can't like about you, Dummy, there's no making any arrangements with you.

. . . We'd already decided that we wouldn't go back to that village, and I found the path for you, now you start saying we've got to go back...."

"We have to," he answered, "I don't want to either, Nava, but we have to. What if they can tell us there the quickest way to get to the City?"

"Why to the City? I don't want to go to the City, I want to go to New Village!"

"We're going straight to the City," said Kandid, "I can't stand any more of this."

"Well, all right," said Nava, "all right, let's go to the City, even better, what's left to be seen in New Village? Let's go to the City, I agree, I'm always in agreement with you, only don't let's go back to that village. You think what you like, Dummy, but for my part, I'd never return to that village. . . ."

"It's the same with me," he said, "but it's got to be done. Don't be angry, Nava, I really don't want to.. . ."

"If you don't want to, why go?" He didn't want to and couldn't explain to her why. He rose and without looking back, went in the direction of the village, through the warm, dry grass, past the warm, dry tree trunks, squinting from the warm sun of which there was unusually much hereabouts, heading toward a horror from which all his muscles were still painfully strained, toward a strange and quiet hope that broke through the horror, like a blade of grass through asphalt.

Nava caught him up and walked alongside. She was angry and was even silent for some time, but couldn't keep it up.

"Just don't think that I'm going to talk to those people, you can talk to them, you're going there, you talk to them. I don't like having anything to do with a man if he hasn't got a face, I don't like that. Expect no good from a man like that, if he can't tell a boy from a girl. . . . My head's been aching since morning, and now I know why. , . ."

They came on the village unexpectedly. Apparently, Kandid had veered off the true direction and the village now opened out among the trees on the right. Everything was altered, though. Kandid didn't at first realize what had happened. Then he did; the village had drowned.

The triangular clearing was awash with black water, and water was entering before their eyes, filling the clay dip, drowning the houses, silently eddying along the streets. Kandid stood and watched helplessly as windows disappeared under the water and waterlogged walls crumbled and sank, roofs caved in and nobody ran out of the houses, nobody attempted to reach the shore, not a single person appeared on the surface of the water. Perhaps there were no people there, perhaps they'd left that night, but he felt it-wasn't as simple as that. It's not a village, he thought, it's a model, it stood forgotten and dusty and then somebody got curious as to what would happen if it were covered with water. It might be interesting? ... So they did it. But it wasn't interesting. . . .

Gently caving in, the roof of a smooth building slid into the water. A light breath seemed to float over the water, waves fled over the even surface and all was over. Before Kandid lay an ordinary triangular lake, for the moment quite shallow and lifeless. Later it would deepen into a gulf, fish would appear, for us to catch, prepare, and place in formalin.

"I know what this is called," said Nava. Her voice was so calm, that Kandid glanced at her. She really was absolutely calm, even, it seemed, pleased. "It's called the Accession," she said, "that's why they had no faces and I didn't understand straight away. Likely they wanted to live in the lake. They used to tell me that the people who lived in the houses can stay and live in the lake, there'll be a lake here now for always, those who don't want to can leave. Take me for example, I would leave, though maybe it would be better living in the lake. But that nobody knows. . . . Maybe we could bathe here?" she suggested.

"No," said Kandid, "I don't want to bathe here. Let's get on to your path. Come on."

I've just got to get out of here, he thought, unless I want to be like that machine in the maze. . . . We all stood around and laughed as it busily probed and searched and sniffed . . . then we filled a small trough in its path with water and it panicked touchingly but only for a moment, then its busy antennae got going again, buzzing and sniffing, not knowing that we were observing it, and in general we couldn't have cared less that it didn't, though it was that which was the most terrible thing of all. If it was terrible at all, he thought. Necessity can't be either terrible or kind. Necessity is necessary, and anything else about it we imagine ourselves, or machines in mazes, if they can imagine. It's just that when we make a mistake, necessity grips us by the throat and we start crying and complaining how cruel and terrible it is, and it's just exactly what it is--it's us who are stupid or blind. I can even philosophize today, he thought. Probably from the lack of humidity. That's all I need, I can philosophize. . . .

"There it is, your path," said Nava angrily, "come on, if you please."

Angry, he thought. Won't let me bathe, I can't talk, it's dry everywhere, nasty . . . never mind, let her be angry, she's quiet, and thank God for that. Who walks these paths? Surely they can't be walked often enough to keep the grass down? It's an odd path all right, it is as if it were dug out, not trampled down. . . .

The path led at first through comfortable dry places, but after some time it descended steeply and became a vicious strip of black mud. The pure forest ended, bogs appeared on all sides, moss grew everywhere, it got damp and stifling. Nava at once livened up. She felt much better here. She was now talking continuously and soon the well-known ringing hum took over and established itself in Kandid's head; he moved in a half-dream, forgetting all his philosophy, almost forgetting where he was going, giving himself up to chance thoughts, not even thoughts, fancies.

.... Hopalong comes hobbling down the main street and tells everyone he meets (and even if he meets nobody, he still puts it out), that Dummy has gone off, yes, and taken Nava with him, to the City, likely he's gone to the Reed-beds, good fish to trick there; just stick your finger in the water--there you are, a fish. Only why should he, if you think about it. Dummy doesn't eat fish, fool, although maybe he'll decide to catch a few for Nava, Nava eats fish, there now he'll feed her up on fish. . . . But why did he go on asking questions about the City? No-o-o, he's not gone to the Reed-beds, we can't expect him back soon.

Toward him along the main street comes Buster and tells everyone he meets that Dummy now, used to go about trying to talk people into going to the City, Buster, let's go day after tomorrow to the City, and when I make too much food so the old woman tells me off, then off he goes without me and without food . . . on his own, yes, wool on yer nose, off he goes, no food, give him one in the eye and put a stop to that, no going with food, and with no food he'd be frightened to go, sit at home, give him one. . . .

And Barnacle stands next to the old man breakfasting at his house and says to him: you're eating again, and eating somebody else's again. Don't think I begrudge it, I'm just amazed how many pots of filling food can be stowed away inside a skinny old man like you. You eat, he says, but you tell me is there really only one of you in the village? Maybe there's really three, or two at least? It's weird looking at you, eat, eat till you're full up, then explain that it's not right to. ...

Nava walked alongside, hanging on to his arm with both of hers, talking with a reckless air:

"And there was another man living in our village, who they called Anger-Martyr, you wouldn't remember him, you were witless then, and this Anger-Martyr was always annoyed at us and he used to ask: Why? Why is it light in the daytime and dark at night? Why is it beetles that get you drunk but not ants? Why are the deadlings interested in women but not men? The dead-lings stole two wives from him, one after the other. The first one was

before my time, but I remember the second, he went about asking why, he asked, did they steal my wife and not me? He deliberately walked whole days and nights in the forest, so's he could be picked up and find his wives, or one of them at least, but of course it didn't work, they don't want men, it's women they need, that's how they're made, and they're not going to change their ways because of any Anger-Martyr. ... He used to ask us as well why we had to work in the fields when there was more than enough food in the forest, just pour some ferment on the ground then eat your fill. The elder says to him: don't work if you don't want to, nobody's grabbing your arm . . . but he still went on: why, but why ... or he would go up to Buster, Why says he, is Upper Village grown over with mushrooms and ours has nary a one? At first Buster quietly explains: the Accession happened up there and not here yet, that's all about it. But he goes on: Why haven't we had the Accession, Buster, after such a long time? What if it hasn't come then asks Buster, you miss it or something? Anger-Martyr won't leave off, he wore Buster out. Buster started shouting, all the village heard him, he waved his fists about and ran off to the elder to complain, the elder got angry as well and called the village together. They all set on Anger-Martyr to punish him, but they couldn't catch him. ... He used to get onto the old man as well an awful lot At first, the old man stopped going to his house to eat then he tried hiding from him but eventually he couldn't stand it: Leave me alone, says he, the food won't go into my mouth because of you, how should I know--why? The City knows why and that's all about it. Anger-Martyr went off to the City and never came back. . . .

Greeny-yellow blotches swam slowly by to right and left, ripe dope-toadstools puffed deeply and hurled out their spores in ginger fountains; a wandering forest wasp tried to sting their eyes, prompting a hundred-yard dash to escape; multi-colored water spiders clung to the lianas fussing about building their constructions; jumping trees alighted and hunched for another jump before, sensing the presence of people, they froze and pretended to be ordinary trees--there was nothing for the eye to rest on, nothing to record. And nothing to think about either, since to think of Karl and last night and the drowned village meant delirium.

"Anger-Martyr was a good man--it was he and Hopalong found you beyond the Reed-beds. They went off toward the Anthills, but drifted over somehow to the Reed-beds and found you there and dragged you in, or rather Anger-Martyr dragged you in, Hopalong just walked behind picking up the things that fell out of you. . . . Ever such a lot of things he picked up, then, he said he got scared and threw them all away. No such thing ever grew in our village, or could ever. Then Anger-Martyr took the clothes off you, very strange clothes you had, nobody could understand where things like that grew or how. . . . Then he cut them up and planted them, thinking they'd grow. But nothing ever grew for him not even a shoot, and he started going around again asking why, if you cut up and planted anybody's clothes they grew, but yours, Dummy, never even sprouted. ... He pestered you a lot, gave you no peace, but you had no wits then, just muttered something or other, like that one with no face, and covered your face with your hand. Otherwise he'd never have left you alone. After that lots of men went over beyond the Reed-beds--Buster, Hopalong, even the elder went, hoping to find another one like you. But they never did. . . . Then they brought me to you. Marry him, say they, while you can, get married, you'll have a husband, he's a stranger, so what? So are you, sort of. I'm a stranger too. Dummy. This is how it was: the deadlings had kidnapped mother and me, it was a night without moon. . . ."

The terrain was again beginning to rise, but the humidity remained, although the forest did begin to thin out. The root-snags, decayed boughs, and piles of rotting lianas had disappeared. The greenery had gone, all around was yellow and orange. The trees were now slender, and the swamp had changed oddly--it was now level, without moss and without mud-heaps. The tangled web of undergrowth had disappeared and visibility was good to left

and right. The grass on the verges was now softer and juicier, blade against blade as if someone had specially selected and planted them.

Nava halted in mid-word, drew breath and said matter-of-factly glancing around; "Where could you hide here? Looks like nowhere to hide. . . ."

"Is someone coming?" asked Kandid.

"A lot of someones, and I don't know who. . . . It's not deadlings, but best to hide anyway. We could stay in the open of course, they're pretty close anyway, and there's nowhere to hide. Let's get on the verge and have a look. . . ." She sniffed again. "Nasty sort of smell, not dangerous, but better if it wasn't there. . . . You, Dummy, can't you smell it? It stinks like over-rotted ferment--a pot of over-rotted ferment covered in mold right in front of your nose. . . . There they are! Eh, little ones, they're all right, you can chase them away, shoo! shoo!"

"Be quiet," said Kandid, taking a closer look.

At first he thought that white tortoises were crawling toward him along the path. Then he realized that he'd never seen animals like this before. They resembled enormous opaque amoebas or very young tree-slugs except that the slugs had no pseudopodia and were a little larger. There were a lot of them. They crawled along in single file, quite quickly, hurling forward their pseudopodia neatly and flowing on into them.

Soon they were quite near, white and shining; Kandid also sensed a sharp, unfamiliar smell and stepped from the path to the verge, drawing Nava after him. The slug-amoebas crawled on past them, one after the other, paying them no attention whatever. There turned out to be twelve of them in all. Nava kicked out at the twelfth and last, unable to restrain herself. The slug neatly tucked in its behind and went on in hope. Nava was delighted and wanted to rush forward and deliver another kick, but Kandid caught her dress.

"They're so funny," said Nava, "and they crawl along the path just like people walking . . . where are they going, I wonder? Likely, Dummy, they're off to that nasty village, they're from there likely, and they're going back now knowing the Accession's happened there. They'll march around the water and head back. Where will they go, poor things? Find another village? . . . Hey!" she shouted, "stop! your village has gone, there's only a lake there now!"

"Be quiet," said Kandid. "Let's go. They don't understand your language, don't waste your breath."

They went on. After the slugs the path seemed somewhat slippery. Met and parted, mused Kandid. Met and went our separate ways. And I was the one to step out of the way. I, not they. This circumstance suddenly seemed extremely important to him. They were small and defenseless, I'm big and strong, but I stepped off the path and let them through, and now I'm thinking about them, they've passed through and probably don't remember me at all. Because they're at home in the forest and there's plenty of strange sights in the forest. Just as in a house there are cockroaches, bedbugs, woodlice, the odd brainless butterfly, or a fly banging against the glass. Anyway they don't bang against the glass. Flies think they're flying somewhere when they fly into the glass. I think I'm walking somewhere, only because I'm moving my legs. . . . Probably I look funny from the side and ... as it were . . . pitiful ... piteable . . . which is correct.

"There'll be a lake soon," said Nava. "Let's get on, I want to eat and drink. Maybe you can catch some fish for me."

They put on speed. The reed-thickets began. Well, that's fine, thought Kandid. I'm just like the fly. Am I like a man? He remembered Karl and remembered that Karl wasn't like Karl. Very possible, he thought calmly, very possibly I'm not the man who crashed his helicopter how many years ago. Only in that case why do I bang against the glass. After all, Karl, when that happened to him, didn't bang against the glass. It'll be strange when I get out to the biostation and they see me. A good thing I thought of that. I've got to think good and hard about that. Good thing there's still lots of

time and I won't reach the biostation all that soon....

The path forked. One arm obviously led to the lake, the other turned off sharply to one side.

"We won't go that way," said Nava, "it leads up and I want a drink."

The path became narrower and narrower, and eventually turned into a rut and petered out in the undergrowth. Nava halted.

"You know. Dummy," she said, "let's not go to this lake. There's something I don't like about this lake, there's something not right about it. I don't even think it is a lake, there's a lot of something there apart from the water. . . ."

"But there is water there?" asked Kandid. "You wanted a drink, I wouldn't mind either. . . ."

"There is water," said Nava reluctantly, "but it's warm, bad water, unclean. . . . You know what, Dummy, you stay here. You make too much noise when you walk, I can't hear a thing, you stay and wait for me, I'll call you. I'll call like a hopper. You know what a hopper sounds like? Well, I'll call like that. You stand here, or better still, sit down. .. ."

She dived into the reeds and disappeared. Kandid then turned his attention to the deep, cushioned silence that reigned here. There were no insects droning, no sighings and suckings from the swamp, no cries of forest creatures, the damp hot air was still. This wasn't the dry silence of the nasty village; there it was quiet like behind a theater curtain at night. Here it was like being under water.

Kandid cautiously squatted on his haunches, pulled off some blades of grass. He pulled up a clump of grass, rubbed it between his fingers and unexpectedly realized that the earth here should be edible and began eating. The turf effectively combatted hunger and thirst, it was cool and salty to the taste. Cheese, thought Kandid, yes, cheese ... what was cheese? Swiss cheese, processed cheese, sweating cheese . . . what was cheese? Nava noiselessly ducked out of the reeds. She squatted beside him and started eating, rapidly and neatly. Her eyes were round.

"It's a good thing we've eaten here," she said finally. "Do you want to see what sort of a lake it is? I want to see it again but on my own I'm scared. It's the lake Hopalong keeps talking about, only I thought he was making it up or he dreamed it, but it looks like it's true, if I'm not dreaming, that is. . . ."

"Let's take a look," said Kandid. The lake was about fifty yards in. Kandid and Nava came down the boggy bank and parted the reeds. Above the water lay a thick layer of white mist. The water was warm, even hot, but clean and transparent. There was a smell of food. The mist slowly eddied in a regular rhythm and after a minute Kandid felt he was going dizzy. There was someone in the mist. People. Lots of people. They were all naked and were lying absolutely motionless on the water. The mist rhythmically rose and fell, now revealing, now concealing the yellowy, white bodies, faces lying back--the people weren't swimming, they lay on the water as if they might on a beach. Kandid retched. "Let's get out of here," he whispered and pulled Nava by the arm. They got out onto the shore and returned to the path.

"They're not drowned," said Nava, "Hopalong didn't understand, they were just bathing here then a hot spring started up suddenly and they all got boiled. . . . That's really awful, Dummy," she said after a silence. "I don't even feel like talking about it... so many of them ... a whole village. . . ." They had reached the place where the path forked. Here they halted. "Now up?" asked Nava.

"Yes," said Kandid, "now up."

They turned right and began to ascend a slope. "And they're all women," said Nava, "did you notice?"

"Yes," said Kandid.

"That's the most awful thing, that's what I just can't understand. Maybe . . ." Nava looked at Kandid, "maybe the deadlings drive them here?

Likely the deadlings drive them here--catch them around all the villages, drive them to this lake and boil them. . . . Listen, Dummy, why did we leave the village? We'd have lived there and not seen any of this. Thought that Hopalong had dreamed it up, lived quietly, but no, you had to go to the City. . . . Well, why did you have to go to the City?"

"I don't know," said Kandid.

Chapter Eight

They were lying in bushes at the very edge of the trees and gazing at the crest of the hill through the foliage. The hill was steep and bare, and its crest was capped by a cloud of lilac mist. Above the hill was the open sky; a gusty wind was bringing drizzle. The lilac mist was motionless as if there were no wind. It was rather cool, even fresh; they were soaked, and had gooseflesh from the cold, their teeth chattered but they couldn't go away; twenty paces from them, upright as statues, stood three deadlings, their wide black mouths open, also looking at the crest of the hill with empty eyes. These deadlings had arrived five minutes before. Nava had sensed them and was set to flee, but Kandid had clamped his palm across her mouth and forced her down into the grass. Now she had calmed down a little; though she still shuddered heavily, it was due to the cold rather than fear. She was now watching the hill, not the deadlings.

On and around the hill something strange was happening, some kind of grandiose ebbing and flowing. Out of the forest, with a dense, deep droning, suddenly erupted enormous swarms of flies, which headed into the lilac fog on the hill and were hidden from view. The slopes were alive with columns of ants and spiders, hundreds of slug-amoebas were pouring out of the bushes, huge swarms of bees and wasps, clouds of multi-colored beetles flew over, under the rain. It sounded like a typhoon. This wave reached the heights and was sucked in, disappeared, and there came a sudden silence. The hill was dead once more and bare; some time passed and the noise and roar rose again and it all erupted again from the mist and headed for the forest. Only the slugs remained on the hilltop. In their place came spilling down the slopes the most incredible animals--hairies came rolling, clumsy arm-chewers came lurching down on frail legs, and there were plenty of others unknown as yet, speckled, multi-eyed, naked, shining half-beast, half-insects. Then the silence again, then the process started up once more, and again, and again, in a frightening, urgent rhythm, an inexorable energy. It seemed as though this rhythm and this energy had always been and would always be. ... Once a young hippocete emerged from the mist with a frightful roar, deadlings came running out from time to time and at once rushed into the forest, leaving white trails of cooling steam in their wake. And the motionless lilac cloud kept swallowing and spitting out, swallowing and spitting out, tireless and regular as a machine.

Hopalong used to say that the City stood on a hill, that thing is the City, perhaps, that's what they call the City. Yes, probably that's the City. But what's the meaning of it? Why is it like this? And the strange activity. ... I expected something like this. . . . Rubbish, I never expected anything like it. I thought only about the masters, and where are the masters here? Kandid looked at the deadlings. These were standing in their former postures, their mouths open as before. Perhaps I'm wrong, thought Kandid. Perhaps they are the masters. Probably I'm mistaken all the time. I've completely forgotten how to think here. If ideas come to me, I can't fit them together. Not a single slug has come out of the fog yet. Question: why hasn't a single slug come out of the fog yet? . . . No, that's not it. Get it straight. I am searching for the source of intelligent activity. . . . Not true, again not true. I'm not interested in intelligent activity at all. I'm simply looking for someone to help me get home. Help me to get through six hundred miles of forest. Tell me which direction to go at least. . . . The deadlings must have masters, I'm looking for these masters,

I'm looking for the source of intelligent activity. He was quite pleased with himself; it was quite coherent. Let's start from the beginning, we'll think it all through--calmly and slowly. No need to hurry, now's just the time to think everything through slowly and calmly. Start from the very beginning. The deadlings must have masters--because deadlings aren't people--because they aren't animals. Therefore they are manufactured. If they aren't people. . . . But why aren't they people? He rubbed his forehead. I've already worked that out. Long ago, in the village, I worked it out twice even, because the first time I forgot the answer, and now I've forgotten the proofs. . . .

He shook his head as hard as he could and Nava quietly whispered at him. He was quiet and for a while lay with his face pressed into the wet grass.

Why they aren't animals--I worked that out before sometime. . . . High temperature. . . . No, no rubbish. . . . Suddenly, he realized with horror that he'd forgotten what deadlings looked like. He remembered only their red-hot bodies and a sharp pain in his palms. He turned his head to look at them. Yes, I ought not to think. Thinking's out for me, right now, when I have to think more intensively than ever before.

Time to eat; you've told me that before, Nava; we set off the day after tomorrow--that's my limit. But I did go! And I'm here. Now I'm going into the City. Whatever it is--it's the City. My brain's overgrown with forest. I understand nothing. . . . I've remembered. I was going to the City, to find an explanation for everything; about the Accession, the deadlings, the Great Harrowing, the lake of drowned bodies ... all a deception it seems, everybody's lied their heads off nobody can be trusted. ... I hoped they would explain how I could get back to my own people, the old man used to keep on saying: the City knows everything--it couldn't possibly not know about our biostation, about the Directorate. Even Hopalong nattered on about Devil's Rocks and flying trees. . . . But surely a lilac cloud couldn't explain anything? It would be terrible if the master turned out to be a lilac cloud. And why "would be"? It's terrible now! It's in front of your nose, Dummy: the lilac fog is the master, here, surely you remember? Yes, and it's no fog either. . . . So that's the way it is, why people are driven away like beasts into dense forest, into swamps, drowned in lakes: they were too weak, they didn't understand and even when they understood they couldn't do anything to interfere with the process. . . . When I hadn't been driven out, when I was still living at home, somebody proved very convincingly that contact between human-oid and non-humanoid intelligence was impossible. Yes, it is impossible. Of course it's impossible. And now nobody can tell me how to get home.

I can have no contact with people, and I can prove that. I can still get a sight of Devil's Rocks, so they say, you can see them sometimes if you climb the right tree in the right season, but you've got to find the right tree first, an ordinary human tree. That doesn't jump and doesn't throw you off, and doesn't try and spike your eyes. Anyway, there's no tree I can see the biostation from. . . . Biostation? Bi-o-sta-tion. I've forgotten what a biostation is.

The forest began to hum and buzz, crackle and snort, once again myriads of flies and ants whirled toward the lilac dome. One swarm passed above their heads and the bushes were deluged with the weak and the dying, the still and the barely twitching, those crushed in the press of the swarm. Kandid sensed an unpleasant burning sensation in his arm and glanced down. Slender threads of mushroom spawn were creeping over the elbow he had propped upon the porous earth. Kandid indifferently brushed them off with his palm. Devil's Rocks was a mirage, thought he, none of that exists. If they told you stories about Devil's Rocks, then it was all lies, none, none of that existed, and now I don't know why I ever came here. . . .

Away to one side came a familiar terrifying snort. Kandid turned his head. At once a mother hippocete looked stupidly out from behind the seven

trees on the hill. One of the deadlings suddenly sprang to life, got in gear, and made a few steps toward the hippocete. Once more came the appalling snort, the trees crackled, and the hippocete made off. Even hippocetes are afraid of the deadlings, thought Kandid. Who isn't? Where can you find someone who isn't? . . . Flies roaring. Stupid, absurd. Flies--roaring. Wasps roaring. . . .

"Mam!" whispered Nava suddenly. "It's mam coming. . . ."

She was on all fours and gazing over his shoulder. Her face expressed huge astonishment and disbelief. And Kandid saw that three women had emerged from the forest, and, without noticing the deadlings, were heading for the foot of the hill.

"Mam!" shrieked Nava in a voice not her own, leapt over Kandid, and raced to intercept them. At that Kandid also jumped up; it seemed to him that the deadlings were right next to him and he could feel the heat of their bodies.

Three, he thought. Three. . . . One would have been more than enough. He looked at the deadlings. This is the end for me, he thought. Stupid. Why did these old birds have to come barging in here? I hate women, always something going wrong because of them.

The deadlings closed their mouths, their heads slowly swiveling after the sprinting Nava. Then they strode off in unison and Kandid compelled himself to leap up from the bushes and face them.

"Back!" he yelled to the women without looking. "Get out of it! Deadlings!"

The deadlings were enormous, broad-shouldered, in mint condition, not a single scratch or rough edge. Their incredibly long arms reached down to the grass. Without taking his eyes from them, Kandid halted in their path. The deadlings were gazing over the top of his head and moved unhurriedly toward him; he faltered, gave ground, putting off the inevitable beginning and the inevitable end, contending with a nervous desire to bs sick and trying to bring himself to make a stand. Behind his back, Nava was shouting: "Mam! It's me. Mam, main!" Stupid women, why don't they run? Too scared to run? Stop, he said to himself, stop, blast you! How long can you walk backward? He was unable to stop. Nava's there, he thought. And those three idiots. . . . Fat, dreamy, indifferent idiots. . . . And Nava. . . . What are they to me anyway, he thought. Hopalong would have made off long ago on his one leg. Buster quicker than that. . . . But I've got to stay. Not fair. But I must stay! Well, stop then! . . . He was unable to stop, and despised himself for it, and applauded himself for it, and hated himself for it, and kept on going backward.

The deadlings stopped. Straight away, as if at an order. The one in the lead froze with one leg in the air, then slowly, as if undecided, lowered it to the grass. Their mouths dropped slackly open and their heads swiveled toward the hilltop.

Kandid, still retreating, glanced around. Nava, legs kicking, was hanging around the neck of one of the women, who, it seemed, was smiling and clapping her lightly on the back. The other two women were standing calmly by watching them. Not watching the dead-lings, not the hill. Not even Kandid, a strange hairy man, perhaps a robber. The deadlings, for their part, were standing stock-still, like some primitive graven image of old, as if their legs grew straight into the earth, as if in all the forest there were no woman left to seize and carry off somewhere, in obedience to orders; from beneath their feet, like the smoke of a sacrificial fire, rose pillars of steam.

Kandid now swung around and walked toward the women. Not walked, but rather trailed, totally uncertain, not believing eyes, ears, or brain anymore. His skull was a seething mass of pain, and his whole body ached from the tension of his brush with death.

"Run," he said again from a distance. "Run before it's too late, why're you standing there?" He already knew he was talking nonsense, but it was the

inertia of obligation, and he continued his mechanical mumbling: "Deadlings here, run, I'll delay them. . . ."

They paid him no attention. It wasn't that they didn't hear or see him--the young woman, a girl really, perhaps a couple of years older than Nava, still slim-legged, examined him and smiled in very friendly fashion--but he meant nothing to them, no more than if he were a big stray hound, the sort that dash aimlessly about in all directions and are willing to stand about for hours near people, waiting for reasons known only to themselves.

"Why aren't you running?" asked Kandid quietly. He expected no answer and received none.

"My, my, my," the pregnant woman was saying, laughing and shaking her head. "And who would have thought it? Would you?" she inquired of the girl. "I certainly wouldn't. My dear," said she addressing Nava's mother, "what was it like? Did he puff and pant? Or did he just twitch about and break into a sweat?"

"It wasn't like that," said the girl, "he was beautiful, wasn't he? He was fresh like the dawn, and fragrant. . . ."

"As a lily," chimed in the pregnant woman, "you were dizzy from his smell, you got all tingly from his paws. . . . Did you have time to squeal?"

The girl burst out laughing. Nava's mother smiled reluctantly. They were all thick-set, healthy, surprisingly cleanly, as if thoroughly washed, which indeed they were--their short hair was wet and their yellowish sacklike garments clung to their damp bodies. Nava's mother was the tallest of them and apparently the eldest. Nava was hugging her around the waist, her face buried in her bosom.

"How should you know," said Nava's mother with feigned indifference. "What can you know about it? You've a lot to learn. . . ."

"All right," said the pregnant woman at once. "How can we know? That's why we're asking you. . . . Tell us, please, what was the root of love like?"

"Was it bitter?" said the girl, and shook with laughter again.

"There, there, the fruit's pretty sweet if grubby. . . ." "Never mind, we'll wash it clean," said Nava's mother. "You don't know if Spider Pond's been cleaned out yet, do you? Or do we have to take her into the valley?"

"The root was bitter," said the pregnant woman to the girl. "She doesn't like recalling it. Strange isn't it, and they say it's unforgettable! Listen dear, you do dream about him, don't you?"

"Not very funny," said Nava's mother. "And sick. . . ."

"We're not trying to be funny, are we?" The pregnant woman was amazed. "We're just interested."

"You tell a story so well," said the girl with a flashing smile. "Tell us more. . . ."

Kandid was all ears, attempting to discover some hidden meaning in this conversation, but could understand nothing. He could only perceive that the two of them were making fun of Nava's mother, that Nava's mother was offended and was trying to hide this or turn the conversation in another direction, and was failing to do so. Nava, meanwhile, had raised her head and was gazing from one to another of the speakers.

"You'd think you'd been born in the lake yourself," said Nava's mother to the pregnant woman, now displaying open irritation.

"Oh, no," said she, "but I never managed to pick up such a broad education, and my daughter," she slapped her belly, "will be born in the lake. That makes all the difference."

"Why don't you leave mam alone, fat old woman?" said Nava suddenly. "Take a look at yourself, what you look like, then start upsetting people! Or I'll tell my husband, and he'll warm your fat backside with a stick, teach you to bother her."

The women, all three, roared with laughter. "Dummy!" Nava started yelling. "What're they laughing at me for?"

Still laughing, the women looked at Kandid. Nava's mother, with surprise, the pregnant woman indifferently, the girl more enigmatically, but with apparent interest.

"What's this Dummy, then?" asked Nava's mother. "It's my husband," said Nava. "See how nice he is. He saved me from the robbers. . . ."

"What d'you mean, husband?" the pregnant woman brought out in a unfriendly tone. "Don't make things up, little girl."

"Same to you," Nava said at once. "What're you butting in for? What's it to you? Is he your husband then? If you want to know, I'm not talking to you anyway. I'm talking to mam. And you butt in, like the old man, unasked and without a by your leave. . . ."

"Are you really her husband then?" asked the pregnant woman of Kandid.

Nava became silent. Her mother embraced her and pressed her to herself. She looked at Kandid with loathing and horror.

Only the girl was still smiling, and her smile was so pleasant and tender that Kandid addressed himself to her.

"No, no, of course not," he said. "She's no wife of mine. She's, my daughter...." He wanted to say that Nava had niursed him, that he loved her very much and he was very pleased that everything had turned out so well, though he didn't understand a thing.

But the girl suddenly dissolved in laughter, her arms waving. "I knew it," she groaned. "It's not her husband . . . it's hers!" she pointed at Nava's mother. "It's . . . her . . . husband! Oh dear, oh dear!"

The face of the pregnant woman expressed cheerful bewilderment and she began to examine Kandid from top to toe with exaggerated minuteness.

"My, my, my ..." she began in her former tone, but Nava's mother said irritably, "Stop it now! That's enough of it! Go away from here," she said to Kandid. "Go on, go on, what're you waiting for? Go on into the forest! ..."

"Who would have thought that the root of love could be so bitter ... so filthy ... so hairy. . . " She intercepted Nava's mother's furious glance and gestured to her. "All right, all right," said she, "don't get angry, my dear. A joke's a joke. We're just very pleased you've found your daughter. It's an incredible piece of luck. .. ."

"Are we going to do any work or not?" said Nava's mother. "Or are we going to stand here gossiping?"

"I'm going, don't get angry," said the girl. "The output's just starting anyway."

She nodded, and once more smiled at Kandid, and ran lightly up the slope. Kandid watched her running--controlled, professional, not womanly. She ran up to the summit and, without pausing, dived into the lilac mist.

"Spider Pond hasn't been cleaned out yet," said the pregnant woman anxiously, "we've always got these muddles with the constructors. . . . What are we going to do?"

"It's okay," said Nava's mother, "we'll go along to the valley."

"I understand, but it's extremely stupid all the same--take all that trouble, carry a nearly adult person all the way to the valley, when we have our own pond."

She gave a vigorous shrug and suddenly pulled a face.

"You ought to sit down," said Nava's mother; she looked about her, stretched out her arm in the direction of the deadlings and snapped her fingers.

One of the deadlings at once left his place and ran up, slipping on the grass in its haste; it fell to its knees and all of a sudden flowed somehow, fashioned itself into a curve, and flattened itself out.

Kandid blinked: the deadling had ceased to exist, what did exist was an apparently comfortable and convenient armchair. The pregnant woman, with a groan of relief, sank into her soft seat and reclined her head against its soft back.

"Soon, now," she purred, extending her legs plea-surably, "make it

soon. . . ."

Nava's mother squatted in front of her daughter and began to look her in the eyes.

"She's grown," said she. "Run wild. Glad?"

"Well of course I am," said Nava, uncertainly. "You're my mam, after all. I dreamed about you every night. . . . And this is Dummy, mam. . .." And Nava started talking.

Kandid stared about him, clenching his jaws, all this wasn't delirium, as he had at first hoped. It was something everyday, very natural, just unfamiliar to him, but there was plenty unfamiliar in the forest. He had to get used to this, as he had got used to the noise in his head, and edible earth and deadlings and all the rest of it. The masters, he thought, these are the masters. They're not afraid of anything. They control deadlings. Therefore, they're the masters. Therefore, it's they who send deadlings after women. Therefore, it's they. . . . He looked at the damp hair of the women. Therefore. . . . And Nava's mother, who was abducted by deadlings. . . .

"Where do you bathe?" he asked. "Why? Who are you? What do you want?"

"What?" asked the pregnant woman. "Listen, my dear, he's asking something."

Her mother spoke to Nava: "Wait a moment, I can't hear anything because of you. . . . What do you say?" she asked the pregnant woman.

"This little lamb," said she. "There's something he requires."

Nava's mother looked at Kandid. "What can he want?" she asked. "Wants to eat, I expect. They're always hungry and they eat an awful lot, it's quite baffling why they want so much food, they don't do anything after all. . . ."

"Little lamb," said the pregnant woman. "Poor little lamb wants grass. Be-e-e! Do you know," she said, turning to Nava's mother, "it's a man from White Rocks. They're turning up a lot more often. How do they get down there?"

"It's harder to understand how they get up there. I've seen how they come down. They fall. Some get killed, some stay alive. . . ."

"Mam," said Nava, "why are you looking at him like that? It's Dummy! Say something nice to him or he'll get annoyed. Strange that he isn't annoyed already, in his place I'd have got annoyed long ago. . . ."

The hill once again began to roar, black clouds of insects covered the sky. Kandid could hear nothing, all he could see was Nava's mother's lips moving; she appeared to be impressing something on Nava. The lips of the pregnant woman, who was addressing him, were also moving and her facial expression indicated that she was in fact talking to him as if to a domestic goat, strayed into the garden. Then the roaring ceased.

". . . .only a mite grubby," the pregnant woman was saying. "Aren't you sorry, now?" She turned from him and began to watch the hill.

Deadlings were creeping out of the lilac cloud on hands and knees. Their movements were uncertain and clumsy, and they kept falling forward, head-first into the ground. The girl was walking among them; she bent down, touching and nudging them till, one after another, they hoisted themselves to their feet, straightened up and, after initial stumbles, strode on more and more confidently and set off into the forest. The masters, Kandid assured himself. The masters. I don't believe it. And what to do? He looked at Nava. Nava was asleep. Her mother was sitting on the grass, and she herself was curled up in a ball next to her and slept, holding her hand.

"They're all weak, somehow," said the pregnant woman. "Time to clean it all out again. Look at them stumbling about... the Accession will never get finished with workers like that."

Nava's mother made some reply, and they commenced a conversation which Kandid couldn't make head or tail of. He could make out only isolated words, like Ears did when the fit was on him. He consequently just stood and watched the girl coming down the hill, dragging a clumsy armchewer by the

paw. Why am I standing here, he thought, there was something I needed from them, they being the masters. . . . He couldn't remember. "I'm just standing, that's all," he said aloud bitterly. "They've stopped chasing me away so I'm just standing. Like a deadling."

The pregnant woman glanced fleetingly at him and turned away.

The girl came up and said something, indicating the armchewer; both women began examining the monster intently, the pregnant one had even risen from her chair. The huge armchewer, the terror of the village children, squeaked plaintively, and made feeble efforts to break loose, helplessly opening and closing its fearful horned jaws. Nava's mother took hold of its lower jaw and with a powerful, assured movement, detached it. The armchewer gave a sob and froze into stillness, closing its eyes with an oily film. The pregnant woman was speaking: ". . . . obviously, insufficient . . . remember my girl, . . . weak jaws, eyes not fully open . . . surely won't stand the pace, therefore useless, perhaps even harmful, like every mistake . . . it'll have to be cleaned up, moved elsewhere, and clean everything up here. . . ."

"The hill, ... dry and dusty. . . ." the girl was saying, ". . . the forest has slowed right down . . . that I don't know yet ... but you said something totally different. . .."

". .. you try it yourself," Nava's mother was saying, "you'll see, go on, try!"

The girl dragged the armchewer off to one side, took a pace backward and began looking at it. It was as if she were taking aim. Her face became grave, tense even. The armchewer tottered on its awkward feet, despondently working its remaining jaw; it whined feebly. "You see," said the pregnant woman. The girl went right up to the armchewer and squatted lightly before it, resting her hands on her knees. The armchewer fell convulsively, paws outspread, as if a heavy weight had dropped on it. The woman laughed.

Nava's mother said: "Stop it now, why don't you believe us?"

The girl made no reply. She was standing over the armchewer, and watching as it slowly and carefully tucked in its paws and attempted to rise. Her features sharpened. She snatched the armchewer upright, set it on its feet, and made a movement as if to embrace it.

A stream of lilac mist flowed between her palms and through the armchewer's body. The armchewer began to squeal, writhing and arcing its body and thrashing its paws. It tried to escape, wriggle away to safety; it tossed about, while the girl followed behind it, looming above it. It fell with its paws unnaturally entwined, and began curling up into a knot. The women were silent. The armchewer was transformed into a multi-colored ball, oozing slime. The girl then walked away and said, glancing aside, "Rubbish, really. . . ."

"Still have to be cleaned up, cleaned up," said the pregnant woman rising. "Get on with it, no sense in delaying matters. Is everything clear?" The girl nodded. "We'll go then and you make a start." The girl turned and went up the hill toward the lilac cloud. She paused by the multi-colored ball, seized a feebly twitching paw and proceeded on her way, trailing the ball behind her.

"Splendid Maiden," said the pregnant woman. "Excellent."

"She'll be a controller one day," said Nava's mother, also getting up. "She's got a bit of character to her. Well then, we must be going. . . ."

Kandid barely heard them. He still couldn't take his eyes from the dark puddle, on the spot where the armchewer had been screwed up. She hadn't even touched it, not laid a finger on it, she'd just stood over it and done what she wished . . . such a sweet girl . . . so gentle and loving. . . . Not even laid a finger on it ... had he to get used to that as well? Yes, he thought. Has to be done. He began to watch as Nava's mother and the pregnant woman carefully set Nava on her feet, before taking her hand and leading her into the forest, down toward the lake. This without noticing him, this without a word to him. He took another look at the puddle. He felt himself

to be small, pitiable, helpless, nevertheless he nerved himself and began the descent after them; he caught up with them and, sweating with terror, followed two steps behind. Something hot approached his back. He glanced back and leaped to one side. At his heels strode a gigantic deadling--heavy, hot, silent, dumb. Well, now, well, thought Kandid, it's only a robot, a servant. I really am doing well, he thought suddenly, I thought that out myself, didn't I? I've forgotten how I got there, but that's not important, what is important is that I understood, I grasped it. I weighed it all up and grasped it--on my own. . . . I've a brain, got it? he said to himself, gazing at the women's backs. You're not so special. . . . I'm not completely incapable.

The women were talking of somebody who hadn't minded their own business and had made themselves a laughing-stock. They were amused at something, they laughed. They were walking through the forest and laughing. As if going down a village street for a gossip. And all around was the forest; they were not walking on a path even, but on light-colored dense grass, which always concealed tiny flowers that hurled spores to penetrate the skin and germinate in the body. And they were giggling and chattering and scandal-mongering, while Nava walked between them and slept, but they did it so that she walked fairly steadily and stumbled hardly at all. . . . The pregnant woman shot a glance back at Kandid and said absently, "You still here? Go into the forest, go on. . . . Why are you following us?"

Yes, thought Kandid, why? What business have I with them? But there is some business, something I have to find out. . . . No, that's not it. ... Nava! he suddenly recalled. He realized that he had lost Nava. Nothing to be done about that. Nava was going away with her mother, all as it should be, she was going to the masters. And me? I'm staying. Still, why am I following them? Seeing Nava off? She's asleep anyway, they put her to sleep. A pang shot through him. Goodbye Nava, he thought.

They came to where the paths forked, the women turned off to the left, toward the lake. The lake of drowned women. They were drowned women all right. . . . Again lies from everybody, everybody mixed up. . .. They passed the place where Kandid had waited for Nava and eaten earth. That was long, long ago, thought Kandid, almost as long ago as the biostation. . . . Biostation. ... He could scarcely plod along; had it not been for the deadling walking at his heels, he would probably have fallen behind by now. Then the women halted and looked at him. All around were Reed-beds, the ground underfoot was warm and squelchy. Nava was standing with eyes closed, imperceptibly swaying, while the women regarded him thoughtfully. Then he remembered.

"How do I get to the biostation?" he asked. Their faces expressed astonishment, and he realized that he had spoken in his native language. He was himself astonished: he couldn't now remember when he had last spoken that tongue. "How do I get to White Rocks?" he asked.

The pregnant woman said, grinning:

"So that's what our little lamb wants... ." She wasn't talking to him, but to Nava's mother. "It's amusing how little they understand. Not one of them realizes. Imagine them wandering to White Rocks and suddenly finding themselves in the battle zone!"

"They rot alive there," said Nava's mother pensively, "they go about and rot as they walk and don't even notice that they're not going anywhere, just marking time. . . . Well anyway, let him go, it can only help the Harrowing. If he rots, that's useful. Dissolves--useful again. . . . But perhaps he's protected? Are you protected?" she asked Kandid.

"I don't understand," said Kandid, cheerlessly. "My dear, what are you asking him? How could he be protected?"

"In this world all things are possible," said Nava's mother. "I've heard of such things."

"Just talk," said the pregnant woman. She inspected Kandid carefully once more. "Now, you know," said she, "he could indeed be more use here.

Remember what the Teachers were saying yesterday?"

"Ah, yes," said Nava's mother. "Indeed yes ... let him. . . . Let him stay."

"Yes, yes, stay," said Nava suddenly. She was no longer asleep and also felt something untoward was taking place. "You stay, Dummy, don't you go anywhere, why should you go anywhere? You wanted to go to the City, didn't you, and this lake is the City, isn't it, mam? ... Or are you offended at mam? Don't be hurt, she's really kind, only she's in a bad temper today. I don't know why. . . . Likely because of the heat. . . ."

Her mother caught her by the hand. Kandid saw that a familiar little lilac cloud had condensed over the mother's head. Her eyes glazed for a second and closed. Then she said, "Let's go, Nava, they're waiting for us now."

"What about Dummy?"

"He'll stay here. . . . There's nothing for him to do in the City."

"But I want him to be with me! Why can't you understand, mam, he's my husband, they gave him to me for a husband, and he's been my husband for ever so long... ."

Both women grimaced.

"Let's go, let's go," said Nava's mother. "You don't understand things yet. . . . Nobody needs him, he's superfluous, they all are, they're a--mistake. . . . Come on now! Well, all right you can come to him afterward ... if you want to then."

Nava was putting up a struggle, doubtless feeling what Kandid was feeling--that they were parting forever. Her mother was dragging her by the arm into the reeds, while she kept looking back and shouting:

"Don't you go away, Dummy! I'll be back soon, don't you think of going away without me, that wouldn't be right, that would be dishonest! All right, you're not my husband, they seem not to like that, I don't know why, but I'm your wife all the same, I nursed you, so now you wait for me! Do you hear? Wait! . . ."

He followed her with his eyes, waving his hand feebly, nodding agreement, and trying hard to smile. Good-bye, Nava, he thought. Good-bye. They were hidden from view behind the Reed-beds, but Nava's voice could still be heard, then she went quiet, the sound of a splash came back, and all was silent. He swallowed the lump in his throat and asked the pregnant woman:

"What will you do with her?"

She was still examining him closely.

"What will we do with her?" said she thoughtfully. "That isn't your worry, lambkin, what we'll do with her. At all events, she won't need a husband anymore. Or a father. . . . But what are we going to do with you? You're from White Rocks, after all, you can't just be let go...."

"What do you want of me?"

"What do we want ... at all events, husbands we don't need." She intercepted Kandid's look and laughed scornfully. "Not needed, don't worry, not needed. Try for once in your life not to be a sheep. Try to imagine a world without sheep. . . ." She was speaking without thinking, or rather, thinking of something else. "What else are you good for? . . . Tell me lambkin, what can you do?"

There was something behind all her words, and her tone, behind the casual indifferent authority, something important, something unpleasant and frightening, but it was hard to pin down and Kandid, for some reason, kept remembering the square black doors and Karl with the two women--just the same, indifferent and imperious.

"Are you listening to me?" asked the pregnant woman. "What can you do?"

"I can't do anything," Kandid said limply.

"Perhaps you know how to control?"

"I did once," said Kandid. Go to hell, he thought, why don't you leave me alone? I ask you how to get to White Rocks, and you start bothering me. .

. . He realized suddenly that he was afraid of her, otherwise he'd have gone long ago. She was the master here, and he was a pitiful, dirty, stupid lambkin.

"Did once," she repeated. "Tell that tree to lie down!"

Kandid looked at the tree. It was a big solid tree with a luxuriant topgrowth and shaggy trunk. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," said she. "Kill that tree, then. . . . Not that either? Can you make the living die at all?" "Kill, you mean."

"Not necessarily kill. An armchewer can do that. Make the living die. Compel something living to become dead. Can you?"

"I don't understand," said Kandid. "Don't understand. . . . What on earth do you get up to on your White Rocks if you can't even understand that? You can't make dead things live either?" "No."

"What can you do then? What did you do on White Rocks before you fell down? Just guzzled and denied women?"

"I studied the forest." She regarded him severely.

"Don't dare lie to me. One man can't study the forest, it's like studying the sun. If you won't speak the truth, just say so."

"I really did study the forest," Kandid said. "I studied. . . ." he faltered. "I studied the smallest creatures in the forest. The ones you can't see with your eyes."

"Lying again," said the woman tolerantly. "You can't study what the eye can't see."

"It's possible," said Kandid. "Only you have to have. . . ." he faltered again. Microscope . . . lenses . . . instruments. . . . That wouldn't get across. Untranslatable. "If you take a drop of water," he said, "if you have the necessary things, you can see thousands upon thousands of tiny animals. . . ."

"You don't need any 'things' for that," the woman said. "I can see you've got corrupted by your dead things on your White Rocks. You're degenerating. I noticed long ago the way you've lost the capacity to see what anybody can see in the forest, even a filthy man. . . . Wait a minute, were you talking about small creatures or the smallest ones? Perhaps you're referring to the constructors?"

"Perhaps," said Kandid. "I don't understand you. I'm speaking of the small creatures that make people ill, but which can cure as well, they help in food production, there's very many of them and they're everywhere. ... I tried to find out their constituents here in your forest, what sorts there were and what their function was. . . ."

"They're different on White Rocks, of course," she said with sarcasm. "All right, anyway, I've got what your work was. You have no power over the constructors, of course. The veriest village idiot can do more than you. . . . What can I do with you? You came here unasked, after. . . .

"I'm going," Kandid said wearily. "I'm going. Good-bye."

"No wait. . . . Stop, I said!" she cried and Kandid felt the burning hot pincers gripping his elbows from behind. He struggled, but it was pointless. The woman was meditating aloud:

"He did come of his own free will. There have been such cases. If we let him go, he'll go off to his village and be completely useless. . . . There's no point in rounding them up. But if they come voluntarily. . . . Know what I'll do?" she said. "I'll hand you over to the Teachers for night work. After all, there have been successful cases. . . . Off to the Teachers, then, off to the Teachers!" She waved her hand and unhurriedly waddled off into the Reed-beds.

Kandid then felt himself being turned about onto the path. His elbows had gone numb, it seemed to him that they were charred through. He strove to break free and the vice gripped tighter. He hadn't grasped what was to become of him and where he was to be taken, who the Teachers were and what this night work was, but he recalled the most terrible things he had seen: Karl's specter in the midst of the weeping crowd and the armchewer screwing

up into a multi-colored knot. He continued to kick the deadling, striking backward in blind desperation, knowing this could never work twice. His foot sank into soft heat, the deadling snorted, and relaxed its grip. Kandid fell flat in the grass, leapt up, turned and cried out--the deadling was advancing on him once more, opening its incredibly long arms. There was nothing to hand, no grass-killer, no ferment, no stick or stone. The squelchy warm earth was giving beneath his feet. Then he remembered and thrust his hand in his blouse; when the deadling loomed above, he struck it with the scalpel somewhere between the eyes, then leaned his whole weight forward, drawing the blade downward to the ground and fell once again.

He lay, cheek pressed to the grass, and gazed at the deadling, as it stood, swaying, its orange carcass slowly swinging open like a suitcase; it stumbled and collapsed flat on its back, flooding the surrounding earth with a thick white fluid, gave a few twitches and lay still. Kandid then got up and wandered off. Along the path. As far as possible from here. He vaguely recalled that he had wanted to wait for somebody, wanted to find something out, there was something he was intending to do. Now all that was unimportant. What was important was to get as far away as possible, though he realized that he would never get away. He wouldn't, and neither would many, many, many another.

Chapter Nine

Discomfort awakened Pepper, sadness, and an unbearable, as it seemed to him, weight on his mind and all his sense organs. Discomfort reached the pain threshold and he groaned involuntarily as he slowly came to.

The burden on his mind turned out to be despair and exasperation, since the truck was not going to the Mainland; once again it was not going to the Mainland--in fact it wasn't going anywhere. It was standing with its engine switched off, icy and dead, doors open wide. The windshield was covered in trembling droplets, which now and again coalesced and flowed in cold streams. The night beyond the glass was lit up by the dazzling flashes of searchlights and headlamps, nothing else could be seen but these continual flashes that made the eyes ache. Nothing could be heard either and Pepper initially even thought he'd gone deaf only realizing after a while that his ears were oppressed by a steady deep chorus of roaring sirens. He began flailing around the cab striking painfully against levers and projections and his blasted suitcase, tried to scrub the windshield, stuck his head out of one door, then the other. He simply couldn't make out where he was, what sort of a place it was and what was going on. War, he thought, my god, it's war! The searchlights beat into his eyes with malicious pleasure, he could see nothing apart from some large unfamiliar building in which all the windows on all the floors were flashing on and off in unison. He could also see an enormous number of patches of lilac mist.

A monstrous voice calmly pronounced, as if in complete silence: "Attention, attention. All personnel to stand by their posts according to regulation number six hundred and seventy-five point Pegasus omicron three hundred and two directive eight hundred and thirteen, for triumphal reception of padishah without special suite, size of shoe fifty-five. I repeat. Attention, attention. All personnel . . ." The searchlights stopped racing about and Pepper was able to make out at last the familiar arch and the legend "Welcome," the main street of the Directorate, the dark cottages lining it and various individuals in underwear standing by them with paraffin lamps in their hands. Then he noticed quite close at hand a line of running men in billowing black capes. These were strung out across the whole width of the street as they ran, towing something strangely bright. Looking more closely, Pepper realized they were dragging something like a cross between a fishing net and one used in volleyball, and at once a cracked voice began screaming by his ear: "Why the truck? Why are you standing here?"

Swaying back, he saw next to him an engineer in a white cardboard mask marked on the forehead in indelible pencil "Libidovich," and this engineer crawled straight across him with his filthy boots, jabbing his elbow in his face, snuffling and stinking of sweat. Then he collapsed into the driver's seat and scrabbled for the ignition key; not finding it, he screamed hysterically and rolled out of the cab on the opposite side. All the street lamps went on and it became light as day, though the people with paraffin lamps went on standing in the cottage doorways. Everyone had a butterfly net in his hand and they waved these nets rhythmically, as if driving something unseen from their doors. Along the street toward and past him rolled four grim black machines one after another, like buses only without windows, their roofs were equipped with latticed vanes. After that an ancient armored car turned out of a side street and followed them. Its rusty turret swung around with a piercing squeal as its machine gun's slim barrel rose and fell. The armored car had trouble in squeezing past the truck; the turret hatch opened and a man in a calico nightshirt with dangling ribbons stuck his head out and shouted angrily at Pepper: "Now what's this, my dear? I've got to get by and you're stuck here!" At this Pepper dropped his head on his hands and closed his eyes.

I'll never get out of here, he thought dully. Nobody here needs me, I'm totally useless but they won't let me go even if it means starting a war or causing a flood....

"I'd like to see your papers," said a leisurely old man's voice. Pepper felt himself clapped on the shoulder.

"What?" said Pepper. "Your little papers. Got 'em ready?" It was an old man in an oilskin coat with an obsolete rifle slung across his chest on a worn metal chain. "What papers? What documents? Why?" "Ah, mister Pepper!" said the old man. "Why aren't you carrying out the procedure? All your papers should be in your hand, open for inspection, like in a museum. . . ."

Pepper gave him his identity card. The old man placed his elbows on his rifle and studied the stamp closely, checked the photograph against Pepper's face, then said:

"Looks as if you've got thinner, Herr Pepper. Your face has lost a lot. You're working hard." He handed back the card.

"What's going on?" asked Pepper. "What's happening is what's supposed to be happening," the old man said, suddenly becoming sterner. "Regulation number six hundred and seventy-five point Pegasus is what's going on. That is, escape." "What escape? Where from?"

"Whatever escape the regulation states," said the old man, commencing to climb down the steps. "Anyway they'll be banging I expect, so protect your ears by keeping your mouth open."

"All right," said Pepper. "Thanks."

"What are you doing here, you old sod, creeping about?" came a bad-tempered voice below. It was driver Voldemar. "I'll give you your little documents! There you are, smell them! Right, got it? Now shove off, if you got it. . . ."

A concrete-mixer was towed by amid a general racket. Driver Voldemar, disheveled and bristling, scrambled up into the cab. Muttering curses he started up the engine and slammed the door. The truck shot forward and roared down the street past the people in underwear waving their nets. To the garage, thought Pepper. Oh well, what difference does it make? But I'm not touching that case again. I just don't want to lug it around, to hell with it. He kicked it hatefully. The truck swerved sharply off the main street, slammed into a barricade of empty barrels and carts scattering them in all directions, and sped onward. For some time a splintered droshky board flapped about on the radiator, then whipped off, and crunched under the wheels. The truck was now traveling along narrow side streets. Voldemar, scowling, with his extinguished cigarette on his lip, bending and twisting his body, manipulated the enormous wheel. No, it isn't the garage, Pepper thought. Or the workshops. Or the Mainland. The side streets were dark and

empty. Just once, cardboard faces with names, hands outstretched flickered in the headlights and disappeared.

"Hell's flames," said Voldemar. "I wanted to drive straight to the Mainland. I look, and there you are asleep, well thinks I, let's just drop by the garage, play a bit of chess. . . . Then I came across Achilles, the fitter, ran off for some yogurt, brought it back, set up the pieces. ... I offer the Queen's gambit, he accepts, so far so good. I go P-K.4, he goes P-B6. ... I tell him: well now start praying. And then it all started.. . . Haven't got a cigarette have you. Pepper?"

Pepper gave him one.

"What's this about an escape?" he asked. "Where are we driving?"

"The usual escape," said Voldemar, lighting up.

"We get them every year. One of the engineers' little machines got away. Order for all, catch it. There they are at it over there. . . ."

The habitations fell away. People were wandering around over open country, lit by the moon. It looked as if they were playing blind-man's buff as they went about on bent legs with their arms spread wide. Everybody was blindfolded. One of them went full tilt into a post and probably uttered a cry of pain, for the others at once halted and cautiously began turning their heads.

"Every year the same game," Voldemar was saying. "They've got photoelements and acoustics of all sorts, cybernetics and layabout guards stuck up on every corner--all the same, every year one of their little machines gets away. Then they tell you: drop everything and go and look for it. Who wants to do that? Who wants to get involved, I ask you? If you just catch sight of it out of the corner of your eye--that's it. Either you get drafted into the engineers or they send you off into the forest somewhere, to the advance base to pickle mushrooms so's you can't talk about what you've seen, for God's sake. That's why the people get around it as best they can. Some of them blindfold themselves so's not to see what's going on. , . . . The brighter boys just run around and shout as loud as they can. They ask people for documents, search people or just get up on the roof and howl as if they're taking part, no risk involved. . . ."

"What about us, are we trying to catch anything?" Pepper asked.

"I'll say we are. The public here are out hunting and we're the same as everybody else. Six hours by the clock we'll be on the hunt. There's a directive: if in the course of six hours the runaway mechanism is not detected, it's blown up by remote control. So everything can stay hush-hush. Else it might fall into unauthorized hands. You saw what a mess-up there was in the Directorate? Well, that's heavenly peace--you see what it'll be like in six hours time. See, nobody knows where the machine's got to. It might be in your pocket. And the charge they use is pretty powerful, just to make sure. Last year, for example, the machine turned up in a bathhouse, and there were plenty of people packed in there--for safety. They think a bathhouse is a damp sort of place, out of the way. .. . Well I was there as well. A bathhouse, that's the place, thinks I. ... So I was blown out of the window, nice and smooth like being on a wave. I hadn't time to blink before I was sitting in a snowdrift, burning beams flying by overhead. . . ."

The land around was flat sickly grass, fitful moonlight, a tired white road. On the left stood the Directorate where lights were racing madly about again.

"What I don't understand," said Pepper, "is how we're going to lay hands on it. We don't even know what it is ... big or small dark or light-colored."

"That you'll see soon enough," Voldemar assured him. "That I'll show you in five minutes. How the clever lads do their hunting. Hell, where's that place. .. . Lost it. Went left, didn't I? Aha, left. . . . Yonder's the machine-depot, we need to be right of that."

The truck veered off the road and went bumping over the hummocks. The storage area was on the left--rows of enormous pale containers, like a dead

city on the plain.

. . . Probably couldn't stand it. It was tested on the vibrostand; they set their minds to tormenting it, dug about in its innards, burned the subtle nerves with soldering-irons, it suffocating from the smell of rosin. They made it do stupid things, they created it to do stupid things, they went on perfecting it to perform stupider things, and in the evenings they left it, tortured, drained of strength in a hot dry cubicle. Finally it decided to go, although it knew everything--the pointlessness of flight, and its own doom. And it went, carrying within itself a self-destruct charge, and is now standing somewhere in the shadows. Softly picking about with its jointed legs, and watching, and listening and waiting. . . . And now it understands with absolute clarity what before it only guessed at: that there is no freedom, whether doors are open before you or not, that everything is stupidity and chaos, there is loneliness alone... .

"Ah!" said Voldemar, pleased. "There she is, the little beauty. . . ."

Pepper opened his eyes but all he saw was a black pond of considerable extent, a swamp in fact. The engine roared, a wave of filth rose and crashed onto the windshield. The engine managed another crazy howl and died. It was very quiet.

"Now that's more like it," said Voldemar. "All six wheels spinning like the soap in a bathtub." He stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray and opened his door a little. "There's somebody else out here," he said, then a shout. "Ho, mate! How's it going?"

"Okay!" from somewhere outside.

"Caught it yet?"

"All I've caught is a cold!" from outside. "And five tadpoles."

Voldemar firmly shut his door, and switched on the light; he glanced at Pepper, gave him a wink, retrieved a mandolin from under the seat and commenced to pluck the strings, his head tucked into his right shoulder.

"You just make yourself at home," said he hospitably. "Till morning, till the tow gets here."

"Thank you," Pepper said meekly.

"This doesn't bother you?" asked Voldemar politely.

"No-no," said Pepper. "Don't mind me. . . ." Voldemar leaned his head back, began rolling his eyes and singing in a sad voice:

I see no limit to my many woes. I wander here alone bereft of sense. Please tell me why you do not want my love. Why trample down a love that's so intense?

The mud was slowly slipping down the windshield and the swamp could be seen gleaming beneath the moon; a car of odd design was sticking up in the middle of the swamp. Pepper switched on the wind-shield wipers and after a while, to his amazement, he discovered that, sunk up to the turret in the quagmire, was an ancient armored car.

Another holds you in his arms tonight;

I stand here anxious, weary, and alone.

Voldemar struck the strings with all his might, sang falsetto, and started clearing his throat.

"Hey, mate!" a voice from outside. "Got a bite to eat?"

"What if?" cried Voldemar.

"We've got yogurt!"

"There's two of us!"

"Out you come! There's enough for everybody! We stocked up--we knew we'd have a job on!"

Driver Voldemar turned to Pepper.

"What d'you think?" he said, delighted. "Let's go, eh? We'll have yogurt, maybe a game of tennis ...eh?"

"I don't play tennis," said Pepper.

Voldemar gave a shout: "Okay we're coming! We'll just inflate the boat!"

Quick as a monkey, he clambered out of the cabin and set to work in the

back of the truck, metal clanked, something dropped and Voldemar whistled gaily. Then came a splash, a scraping of legs along the side and Voldemar's voice calling from somewhere below: "Okay, Mister Pepper! Hop down here, and don't forget the mandolin!" Below, on the brilliant liquid surface of the mud, lay an inflated dinghy, and in it, legs wide apart, stood Voldemar like a gondolier with a sizeable engineer's shovel in his hand; he smiled delightedly as he gazed up at Pepper.

... In the old rusted armored car of Verdun vintage, it was sickeningly hot and stank of hot oil and gas fumes. A dim lamp burned over the iron command table scarred with indecent messages. Underfoot, squelching mud chilled the feet; a dented tin ammunition rack was packed tight with yogurt bottles, everybody was in pajamas and scratching their hirsute

chests with all five fingers, everybody was drunk, a mandolin was droning. The turret-gunner in a calico shirt, not finding room below, was dropping tobacco ash from up aloft and sometimes fell backward himself, saying each time: "Beg pardon, I took you for someone else. ..." and they propped him up again in an uproar. ...

"No," said Pepper. "Thanks, Voldemar, I'll hang on here. I've got some washing to get through. ... I haven't done my physical exercises yet either."

"Aha," said Voldemar, respecting this, "that's a different matter. I'll drift across then and as soon as you've finished your washing give us a shout and we'll come over for you . . . just give us the mandolin."

He floated off with it and Pepper remained sitting and watching him trying at first to row across with his shovel. This just made the dinghy go around in a circle; after that, he began to use the shovel as a pole and all was well. The moon bathed him in its dead light; he was like the last man after the last Great Flood, sailing among the roofs of the highest buildings, very much alone, seeking rescue from loneliness, still full of hope. He poled up to the armored car and banged his fist on the carapace; somebody stuck his head out of the turret, guffawed cheerfully, and dragged him inside upside down. And Pepper was left alone.

He was alone, like the only passenger on a train at night, trundling along with its three battered carriages along some decayed branch line, everything creaks and sways inside the carriage, the smell of locomotive cinders wafts in through the shattered warped windows, cigarette butts leap about the floor along with screwed-up bits of paper. Somebody's forgotten straw hat swings on its hook, and when the train pulls into the terminus, the sole passenger steps out onto the rotting platform and nobody is going to meet him. He's certain nobody's going to meet him, and he'll wander home, brown himself a two-egg omelette on the stove along with a bit of sausage three days old and going green... .

The armored car suddenly began to shake and was lit up with convulsive flashes. Hundreds of brilliant multi-colored threads extended from it across the plain, and the glare of the flashes and the moonlight showed circles welling out from the armored car across the smooth mirror of the swamp. Someone in white poked out of the turret; in a strained voice he proclaimed:

"Dear sirs! Ladies and gentlemen! Salute to tthe nation! With the most humble respect, your Excellency, I have the honor to remain, most respected Princess Diko-bella, your obedient servant, technical supervisor, signature indecipherable! . . ." The armored car once more started shaking and emitting flashes, then subsided.

I will afflict you with vines to cling to yo"u, thought Pepper, and your accursed race will be swept away by the jungle, your roofs will crumble, the beams will fall, your houses will be grown about with wormwood, the bitter wormwood.

The forest was moving in closer, climbing the hairpins, scrabbling up the cliff overhang preceded by waves of lilac fog, and out of it came crawling, gripping, and crushing, myriads of green tentacles, cesspits gaped open on the streets and houses tumbled into bottomless lakes, jumping trees

got up on the concrete runways in front of packed airplanes, where the people lay in piles, anyhow, with their yogurt bottles, slate-gray document-cases and heavy safes, and the ground beneath the cliff yawned and sucked it d'own. That would be so natural, so much to be expected, that no one would be surprised. Everybody would be afraid simply and accept annihilation as a vengeance long feared and expected. Driver Acey would be running like a spider between the swaying cottages looking for Rita, to get what he wanted at last, but be wouldn't have time. . ..

Three rockets went soaring up from the armored car and a military voice bellowed: "Tanks on the right, cover on the left! Crew, under cover!" Someone at once added thickly: "Dames to the left, bunks to the right! Crew to your b-bunks!" Came sounds of neighing and stamping, quite unhuman by now, just as if a herd of pedigree stallions were kicking and thrashing about in that iron box searching for a door to liberty, to the mares. Pepper swung his door wide and peered out. There was swamp beneath his feet, deep swamp, since the truck's monstrous wheels were more than hub deep in the mire. The edge wasn't far off, however.

Pepper crawled onto the back and made the long walk to the tailboard, thudding and clanking as he strode the length of the immense steel trough in the rich moon-shadow. Once there he climbed onto the tailboard and descended by way of endless small ladders to the water. He remained suspended for a time over the icy slime, screwing up his courage, then, as a burst of machinegun fire once more came from the armored car, closed his eyes and jumped. The bog gave way beneath him and continued to do so for a considerable time, it seemed endless, and by the time he touched bottom, the mud was up to his chest. He pressed his whole body down onto the mud, trod with his knees, and used his palms to push off. At first he could only struggle on the spot, but he got the hang of it after a while and began making progress; to his surprise he soon found himself out of the wet.

It'd be a good idea if I could dig up some people somewhere, he thought, just people would do for a start--clean, shaved, considerate, hospitable. No high-flown ideas necessary, no blazing talents. No stunning ideals needed, or self-hatred. Just let them clap hands on seeing me and somebody can run and fill the bath, somebody else provide clean sheets and put the kettle on. Just don't let anybody request documents or demand signatures in triplicate with twenty pairs of fingerprints, let nobody spring to the telephone to report in a meaningful whisper that a stranger had appeared covered in filth, calling himself Pepper, but this could hardly be the truth since Pepper had left for the Mainland and a directive about it had already been issued and would be made public tomorrow. ... No need either for them to be supporters or opponents of anything in principle. They wouldn't have to be principled opponents of drinking as long as they weren't drunkards themselves. Nor would they have to be supporters of truth at all costs so long as they didn't lie or say spiteful things to anybody's face or behind their backs. They shouldn't demand that anyone conform fully to any set of ideals, just accept and understand him as he was. . . . Good god, thought Pepper, is that too much to ask?"

He emerged onto the road and wandered for a long time toward the Directorate. Searchlights flashed on unremittingly, shadows flitted, clouds of multi-colored smoke continued rising. As Pepper walked on, water gurgled and squelched in his boots, his drying clothes hung like a tent and slapped together like cardboard; every now and again lumps of mud fell from his trousers and slopped onto the road, every time deceiving Pepper into thinking that he'd dropped his wallet and papers causing him to snatch at his pocket, panic-stricken. When he had almost reached the machine depot the frightful idea seized him that his papers had got wet and all the stamps and signatures had run and were now indecipherable and irretrievably suspicious. He came to a stop and opened his wallet with icy hands, he pulled out all his identity cards, passes, certificates, and chits and began examining them under the moon. It turned out that nothing terrible had happened; water had

done some damage only to one prolix document on crested paper, certifying that the bearer had undergone a course of inoculations and was passed for work on calculating machines. He put the lot back in his wallet, inserting banknotes neatly between each, and was about to proceed on his way when he suddenly pictured himself coming out onto the highway and people in cardboard masks and beards stuck on anyhow grabbing his arms, blindfolding him, giving him something to smell.

"Search! Search!" they would order. "Remember the smell, employee Pepper?" "Cherchez, mutt, cher-chez" setting him on. Imagining all this; he turned off the road without checking his pace, and ran, stooping, to the machine depot, dived into the shadow of huge, pale containers, got his legs tangled in something soft, and fell full tilt on a pile of rags and tow.

Here it was warm and dry. The rough sides of the containers were hot, something that pleased him at first, but after a while caused him to wonder. Inside the cases all was silent, but he recalled the tale about the machines crawling out of their containers by themselves; he realized that another life was going on inside there and he wasn't afraid. He felt secure even. He eased his sitting position, took off his old boots, peeled off his wet socks, and used the tow to wipe his feet. It was so pleasant here, so warm and cosy, that he thought: Odd if I'm alone here--surely somebody's realized it's far better sitting here than crawling about the waste lands blindfold or hanging around some stinking bog? He leaned his back up against the hot plywood bracing his feet against the hot plywood opposite and felt a strong desire to purr. There was a tiny crack over his head through which he could see a strip of sky pale with moonlight, complete with a few dim stars. From somewhere came rumbling, crashing, the roar of engines, but all that had no connection with him.

Marvelous to stay here for always, he thought. If I can't make it to the Mainland, I'll stay here. Machines, so what? We're all machines. We are the failed machines, or just badly put together.

. . . The opinion exists, gentlemen, that man will never come to terms with the machine. We shan't argue that, citizens. The director feels the same. And in addition, Claudius-Octavian Hausbotcher takes the same view. What is a machine, after all? An inanimate mechanism, deprived of the full range of feelings and incapable of being cleverer than a man. Moreover its structure is not albuminous. Moreover life cannot be reduced to physical and chemical processes, therefore reason. . . . Here, an intellectualyricist with three chins and a bow tie climbed to the stand, tore mercilessly at his starched shirt-front and sobbingly proclaimed:

"I cannot bear it ... I don't want that. ... A rosy babe playing with a rattle . . . weeping willows bending over a pond . . . little girls in white pinafores.. . . They are reading poetry . . . they weep . . . weep! Over the poet's beautiful lines. ... I don't want electronic metal to quench those eyes. . . those lips . .. these young modest cheeks. . . . No, a machine will never be cleverer than a man! Because I ... because we ... We do not wish it! And it will never be! Never!!! Never!!!"

Hands reached out with glasses of water, while two hundred and fifty miles above those snow-white curls, silently, deathly, passed an automatic sputnik-interceptor, keen-eyed and unbearably brilliant, stuffed with nuclear explosive. . . .

I don't want that either, Pepper thought, but you don't have to be such a stupid fool as that. You can, of course, announce a campaign to abolish winter, do a bit of shamanism after eating mushrooms full of drugs, beat drums, screech curses, but all the same, it's better to sew yourself a fur coat and buy warm boots. . . . Anyhow, that grizzled protector of timid cheeks will have his little shout from the platform, then steal an oil can from his lover's sewing-machine case, steal up to some electronic giant, and start oiling its pinions, glancing at the dials and giggling respectfully when it gives him a shock. God preserve us from grizzled old fools. And while you're about it, God, save us from clever fools in cardboard masks.

"In my opinion, it's your dreams," someone announced up above in a kindly bass. "I know from experience that dreams can leave a really nasty feeling. Sometimes it's as if you were paralyzed. You can't move, can't work. Then it all wears off. You should work a bit. Why not? Then all the aftereffects disappear in the pleasure of it."

"Oh I can't bring myself to that," returned a thin fretful voice. "I'm sick of it all. Always the same:

metal, plastic, concrete, people. I'm fed up to here with them. I get no pleasure out of it anymore. The world's so beautiful and so full of different things and I sit in one place and die of boredom."

"You should have upped and transferred to another job," creaked some peevish oldster.

"Easily said--transfer! I've been transferred already and I'm bored stiff all the same. And it was hard getting away, let me tell you!"

"All right, now," said the bass judiciously. "Just what do you want? It almost passes understanding. What can one want if not to work?"

"Why can't you understand? I want to live life to the full. I want to see new places, have new experiences, it's always the same old around here. . ."

"Dismissed!" barked a leaden voice. "Idle chatter! Same old around--good thing. Constant aim. All clear? Repeat!"

"Ah, to hell with you and your orders. . . ."

There could be no doubt it was the machines conversing. Pepper had never set eyes on them and couldn't imagine what they looked like, but he had the feeling that he was hiding under a toyshop counter and hearing the toys talking, toys he'd known since childhood, only huge, and by virtue of that, frightening. That thin hysterical voice belonged of course to a fifteen-foot doll called Jeanne. She had a bright-colored tulle dress on and a fat, pink unmoving face with rolling eyes, fat, foolishly spread arms, and legs with fingers and toes stuck together. The bass was a bear, an enormous Winnie the Pooh bursting out of the container, gentle, shaggy, sawdust-filled, brown, with glass-button eyes. The others were toys, too, but Pepper couldn't place them yet.

"All the same, I suggest you ought to work a bit," rumbled Winnie the Pooh. "Remember, my dear, that there are creatures who are a good deal less fortunate than yourself. Our gardener, for instance. He really wants to work, but he sits here thinking day and night, because he hasn't worked out a plan of action properly. But nobody's heard any complaints from him. Monotonous work's still work. Monotonous pleasure's still pleasure. No reason for talk of death and stuff like that."

"Oh, there's no making you out," said Jeanne the doll. "For you, everything's caused by dreams, or I don't know what. But I've got premonitions. I can't stay still. I know there's going to be a terrible explosion and I'll be blown to tiny pieces. I'll turn into steam. I know. I've seen. . . ."

"Dismissed!" burst out the leaden voice. "I can't stand it! What do you know about explosions? You can run toward the horizon with any speed you like at any angle. But the one whose business it is can overtake you at any distance and that'll be a real explosion, not some intellectual vapor. But I'm not the one whose business it is, am I? Nobody will tell you that, and even if they wanted to tell, they wouldn't be able. I know what I'm saying. All clear? Repeat."

There was a good deal of blind self-assurance in all this. It was probably a huge wind-up tank speaking. With exactly the same blind self-assurance it used to move its rubber tracks forward, scrambling over a boot placed in its way.

"I don't know what you mean," said the Jeanne doll. "But if I fled here to you, the only creatures of my own kind, that doesn't mean, in my view, that I intend at whoever's pleasure to run off to the horizon at some angle. And anyway I would like you to observe that I'm not talking to you. ... If

it's work we're discussing, well I'm not ill, I'm a normal creature, and I need pleasures just as all of you do. But this isn't real work, just a sort of unreal pleasure. I keep waiting for my real work, but there's no sign of it, no sign. I don't know what's the matter but when I start thinking, I think myself into all sorts of nonsense." She gave a sob.

"Well, well, now. . .." rumbled Winnie the Pooh. "On the whole, yes. Of course . . . only. .. . Hmm. . . ."

"It's all true!" observed a new voice, ringing and cheerful. "The little girl's right. There's no real work...."

"Real work, real work!" creaked the old man venomously. "All of a sudden whole seams of real work. Eldorado! King Solomon's mines! They're all around me with their sick insides, sarcomas, delightful fistulas, appetizing adenoids and appendixes, ordinary but so attractive. Let us speak frankly. They get in the way, they prevent you from working. I don't know what the matter is here, perhaps they give off some sort of special odor or they radiate an unknown field, but whenever they're near I go schizophrenic. I become two persons. One half of me longs for enjoyment, yearns to seize hold of and accomplish the necessary, the sweet, the desirable, the other falls into prostration and hammers away at the eternal questions--is it worth it, why, is it moral? . . . You, it's you I'm talking about, what are you doing, working?"

"Me?" said Winnie the Pooh. "Of course . . . why not? It's odd to hear that from you, I didn't expect. I'm finishing a helicopter design and after that ... I was telling you I'd created a marvelous tractor, such pure enjoyment that was. ... I believe you have no grounds for doubting that I'm working."

"No, I don't doubt it, don't doubt it at all," the old one ground out. (Horrible boneless old man, between a goblin and an astrologer, wearing a black plush shawl with gold spangles.) "If you'll just tell me where this tractor is?"

"Well now ... I don't quite understand. . . . How do I know? What business is it of mine? The helicopter interests me now. . . ."

"That's just what I'm talking about!" said the Astrologer. "Nothing's your business, seemingly. You're satisfied with everything. Nobody's in your way. They even help you! You gave birth to a tractor, choking with sheer pleasure, and the people took it away from you at once, to keep you concentrating on your main job, so's you didn't enjoy yourself over much. You just ask him whether people help him or not. . . ."

"You talking to me?" Tank bellowed. "Crap! Dismissed! Whenever somebody goes out on the testing area and decides to stretch his legs a bit, keeping his pleasure going, playing about, taking aim on the azimuth, or let's say the vertical bracket, they raise a racket and uproar, their shouting makes^you feel awful, anybody can get upset by it. But I didn't say that anybody was--me, did I? No! You'll have a long wait to hear that from me. Is that clear? Repeat!"

"Me, too, me as well!" Jeanne began chattering. "I've wondered lots of times, why do they exist? Now everything in the world has a meaning, hasn't it? I don't think they do. Probably they're not there, it's a hallucination. When you try to analyze them, and take a sample from the lower parts, then the upper, then the middle, you're sure to run into a wall or go right past them or you fall asleep all of a sudden. . . ."

"Of course they exist, you stupid hysteric!" creaked the Astrologer. "They've got upper, lower, and middle parts, and all the parts are full of diseases. I know nothing more delightful than people, no other creature has so many objects of enjoyment within itself. What can you know about the meaning of their existence?"

"Oh, stop complicating matters!" said the gay, ringing voice. "They're simply beautiful. It's a genuine pleasure to look at them. Not always, of course, but just imagine a garden. It can be as beautiful as you like, but without people it won't be perfect, won't be complete. Just one sort of

people would be enough to give it life, they can be little people with bare extremities that never walk but just run and throw stones . . . or middling people picking flowers ... it doesn't matter. Even hairy people will do, running about on four extremities. A garden without them is no garden."

"That sort of nonsense could make somebody feel sick," announced Tank. "Bunkum! Gardens reduce visibility, and as for people, they get in a certain person's way all the time, and you can't say anything good about them. Anyhow, if a certain person were to send over a damn good salvo on a building where for some reason people were located, all his desire for work would disappear, he'd feel sleepy, and anybody would fall asleep. Naturally, I don't speak of myself, but if someone were to say it of me, would you object?"

"You've taken to talking a lot about people just lately," said Winnie the Pooh. "Whatever the conversation starts on, you get it around to people."

"Well why on earth not?" the Astrologer jumped in at once. "What's it to you? You're an opportunist! If we feel like talking, then we'll talk. Without asking your permission."

"Please, please," Winnie the Pooh said gloomily. "It's just that before we used to talk mainly about living creatures, enjoyments, plans, but now, I note that people are beginning to occupy a larger and larger part of our conversations and therefore of our thoughts."

A silence ensued. Pepper, trying to move noiselessly, altered his position to be on his side and draw his knees up into his stomach. Winnie the Pooh was wrong. Let them talk about people as much as ever possible. Apparently they had a very poor knowledge of them and it was therefore interesting to hear what they had to say. From out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. . . . When people talked of themselves, they either shoot their mouths off or made you confessions. Sick of it. ...

"You are pretty silly in your judgments," said the Astrologer. "The gardener, for instance. I hope you realize I'm being reasonably objective so as to share the satisfaction of my friends. You enjoy planting gardens and destroying parks. Splendid. I'm with you. But be so good as to tell me what people have to do with it? What connection have those who lift their legs up against trees or those who do it another way? I sense here a certain unhealthy aestheticism. It's as if I were to operate on glands and demand for my fuller satisfaction that the patient be wrapped in a floral gown. . . ."

"You're just cold by nature," the Gardener put in, but the Astrologer was unheeding.

"Or take yourselves," he went on. "You're forever slinging your bombs and rockets about, calculating corrections and playing about with range-finders. Aren't you indifferent whether there's people in there or not? It might be thought that you could spare a thought for your friends, me, for instance, sewing up wounds!" he spoke dreamily. "You can't imagine what that is--sewing up a really good jagged stomach wound."

"People again, people again," Winnie the Pooh said in a crushed voice. "This is the seventh night we've talked only about people. It's queer for me to talk about this but clearly some sort of link, vague as yet, but powerful, has sprung up between you and people. The nature of this link is totally obscure to me, if I don't count you, Doctor, for whom people are an essential source of satisfaction. . . . All around, it all seems absurd to me, and in my opinion the time has come to ..."

"Dismissed!" roared Tank. "The time has not yet come." "Wh-a-at?" inquired Winnie the Pooh, at a loss. "I say the time has not come," Tank repeated. "Some, of course, are incapable of knowing whether the time has come or not, some--I don't name them-- don't even know what time it is that's coming, but someone knows absolutely for certain that the time will inevitably come when it will not only be permissible but necessary to open fire on the people in the buildings! He who does not fire is an enemy! A

criminal! Annihilate! That clear? Repeat!"

"I can guess at something like that," put in the Astrologer in an unexpectedly soft tone. "Jagged wounds. Gas gangrene.. . . Third degree radiation burns."

"They're all ghosts," sighed doll Jeanne. "What a bore! How miserable!"

"Since there's no stopping your talk of people," said Winnie the Pooh, "let us try to elucidate the nature of this bond. Let us attempt to reason logically. . . ." "One of the two," said a new voice, measured and dull. "If the bond mentioned exists, then either they or we are the dominant."

"Stupidity," said the Astrologer. "What's this 'or'? Of course we are."

"What's 'dominant'?" asked doll Jeanne, crestfallen.

"In the present context, 'dominant' means prevailing," the lackluster voice elucidated. "As far as the actual phrasing of the question goes, it's not stupid, it's the only true phrasing, if we intend to argue logically."

A pause. Everybody, seemingly, expected a continuation. At last Winnie the Pooh could stand it no longer and asked: "Well?"

"I am not clear if you intend to argue logically." "Yes, yes, we do," a general murmur. "In that case, accepting the existence of a bond as axiomatic, either they are for us, or you are for them. If they are for us and they hinder your work according to the laws of your nature, they should be eliminated, like any other interference. If you are for them, but that situation does not please you, they must similarly be eliminated like any other reason for an unsatisfactory situation. That is all I can say on the subject of your conversation."

Nobody said a word; from inside the containers came noises of scraping and clicking, just as if enormous toys were settling down to sleep, weary of talking. A general uneasiness hung in the air, as when a group of people who have let themselves go in conversation, not sparing anyone in their urge for eloquence, suddenly realize they've gone too far. "Humidity's rising a bit," creaked the Astrologer in a subdued voice. "I've noticed that for ages," squeaked doll Jeanne. "Its verv nice: new figures. . . ."

"Don't know why, my input's acting up," mumbled Winnie the Pooh. "Gardener, you haven't got a spare twenty-two volt accumulator, have you?"

"I've not got anything," responded the Gardener. After this there came a crash as of splintering wood, then a mechanical whistle and Pepper suddenly saw something shining and moving in the crack above him; he seemed to see someone gazing at him in the shadow between the cases. He broke into a cold sweat, got up and tiptoed out into the moonlight and sprinted off toward the road. As he ran with all his strength he seemed to feel dozens of strange grotesque eyes following him and watching the small pitiful figure, defense-less on the plain exposed to every wind, laughing to see his shadow so much larger than himself; out of fear he had forgotten to don his boots and was now scared to go back for them.

He skirted the bridge across the dry gully and could already make out the outlying houses of the Directorate in front of him: he felt breathless and his toes pained him intolerably. He wanted to stop but heard through the noise of his own breathing the staccato clump of a multitude of feet behind him. At this, he lost his head again and raced on with his last strength, not feeling the earth beneath him, nor his own body, spitting out sticky lengths of saliva, all attempts at thinking gone.

The moon raced with him across the plain and the thudding was getting nearer and nearer. He thought, This is it, finish, and the thudding reached him and somebody white, huge, and hot as a driven horse appeared alongside, eclipsing the moon, drove past and began drawing slowly away, long naked legs pumping in furious rhythm. Pepper saw it was a man in a football shirt with number fourteen on it and white running pants with a dark stripe. Pepper was even more frightened. The multitudinous thudding behind him did not cease, groans and painful cries could be heard. They're running, he thought hysterically. They're all running! It's started! And they're running, but it's late, late, late! . . ."

He caught vague glimpses of cottages along the main street and frozen faces as he strove to keep up with the long-legged number fourteen, since he had no idea where to run to or where safety lay, and maybe they were already distributing arms somewhere, and I don't know where, and I'm out of it again on the sidelines, but I don't want that, I can't be on the sidelines now, because those in the boxes might be right in their way, but they're my enemies too. . . .

He rushed into the crowd, which gave way before him; a square checkered flag flashed in front of his eyes and exclamations of approval rose all around. Someone familiar ran alongside, speaking: "Don't stop, don't stop." Then he stopped, and everybody clustered around and an enormous wrap was thrown around his shoulders. A booming radio announced:

"Second place, Pepper of Science Security Department with a time of seven minutes twelve and three tenths seconds. . . . Now here's the third man coming!"

The familiar figure turned out to be Proconsul: "You're a great lad, Pepper, I never expected anything like this. When your name was announced at the start I laughed, but I see now you should be included in the main group. Away you go and relax, be at the stadium tomorrow before twelve. We have to get over the assault course somehow. I'm entering you for the fitters workshop team. . . . Don't argue, I'll fix it with Kirn."

Pepper looked around. All about him were crowds of familiar people in cardboard masks. Not far off they were tossing in the air and catching the long-legged man who came in first. He flew up to the very moon, stiff and straight as a log, clutching a large metal cup to his chest. Right across the street hung a sign "Finish," underneath it, glancing at a stopwatch, stood Claudius-Octavian Hausbotcher in a severe black coat with an armlet saying: "Ch. judge."

". . . And if you'd taken part in sports dress," rumbled Proconsul, "it would have been possible to take that time into consideration for you officially." Pepper elbowed him aside and wandered off through the crowd on rubbery legs.

". . . instead of sweating with fear sitting at home," someone was saying in the crowd, "better take up sport."

"Just said the same thing to Hausbotcher. It's not being scared though, you're not right there; The search groups should have been better organized. Since everybody's running around, let them at least run to some purpose. . . ."

"Whose invention was it? Hausbotcher's! He never misses a trick. He knows what's what!"

"No need to run around in long underpants though. It's one thing to do your duty in long Johns, all respect due. But compete in them--in my view that's a typical organizational oversight. I shall write on the matter."

Pepper escaped from the throng, and wandered off, swaying along the murky street. He felt sick, his chest was hurting and he kept on imagining those things in the cases, extending their metal necks and staring at the road in amazement at the crowd of blindfolded people in underpants, earnestly striving to understand what link existed between them and the activity of this crowd and, of course, failing to do so; whatever served them as sources of patience must now be near exhaustion. . . .

It was dark in Kirn's cottage. A baby was crying.

The hostel door was boarded up and the windows were dark but someone was walking around inside with a shielded lamp and Pepper could make out some pale faces at the first-floor windows warily peeping out.

An inordinately lengthy gun barrel with a thick muzzle-brake was sticking out of the library door, while on the opposite side of the street a shed was burning up; around the conflagration, men in cardboard masks were prowling about with mine detectors, lit up in crimson flame.

Pepper headed for the park. In a dark alley, however, he was approached by a woman who took his arm and led him off without a word. Pepper made no

resistance, he was past caring. She was all in black, her hand was soft and warm, her white face shone through the dark.

Alevtina, thought Pepper. She's bided her time all right, he thought with frank lack of shame. Well, what's wrong in that? So she waited. Don't know why, or why I'm giving in to her, but it's me she waited for. ...

They entered the house. Alevtina switched on the light and said: "I've waited for you here a long time."

"I know," he said.

"So why were you walking past?"

Yes indeed, why? thought Pepper. Probably because I didn't care. "I didn't care," he said.

"Okay, never mind," she said. "Sit down, I'll make you something."

He perched himself on the edge of a chair, put his hands on his knees and watched her fling off the black shawl from her neck and hang it up on a nail--white, plump, warm. Then she disappeared into the recesses of the house and soon a gas heater began humming and there came a sound of water splashing. He experienced severe pain in the soles of his feet, drew up his leg and looked at the bare sole. The balls of his toes were bloody, and the blood had mixed with dust and dried in black crusts. He pictured himself submerging his feet in hot water, at first very painful, then the pain passing and being soothed. Today I'll sleep in the bath, he thought. And she can come in and pour in hot water.

"This way," Alevtina summoned him.

He rose with difficulty, all his bones seemed to creak together. He limped across the ginger carpet to the door that led into the corridor, in the corridor, along a black and white carpet to a dead end, where the bathroom door was already open wide. The businesslike blue flame in the geyser hummed, the tiles sparkled, and Alevtina bent over the bath sprinkling powder into the water. While he was getting undressed, stripping off his underclothes stiff with dirt, she fluffed up the water; above the water rose a blanket of foam, over the rim of the bath it came, white as snow. He sank into that foam closing his eyes from pleasure and the pain in his feet, while Alevtina seated herself on the edge of the bath and gazed at him, sweetly smiling, so kind, so welcoming, and not a word about documents.

She washed his head as he spat water out and snorted and brooded over her strong, expert hands just like his mother's, just as good a cook too, likely, then she asked: "Want your back rubbed?"

He slapped his ear to get rid of the soap and water and said: "Well of course, surely! . . ." She scrubbed his back with a rough loofah and turned on the shower.

"Hold on," he said. "I want to lie just like this a bit longer. I'll let this water out now, let in fresh and just lie here, and you sit there. Please."

She turned the shower off, went out for a moment, and came back with a stool.

"Lovely!" said he. "You know, I've never felt so good here as now."

"There you are," she smiled. "And you never wanted to."

"How did I know?"

"Why did you have to know in advance? You could have just tried. What had you to lose? You married?"

"I don't know," he said. "Not now, seemingly."

"I thought as much. Loved her a lot, didn't you? What was she like?"

"What was she like? ... She wasn't afraid of anything. And she was kind. We used to daydream about the forest."

"What forest?"

"What d'you mean? There's only one."

"Ours, you mean?"

"It's not yours. It's its own. Anyway maybe it really is ours. Only it's hard to picture it like that."

"I've never been in the forest," said Alevtina. "They say it's

frightening."

"The unknown always is. Everything would be simple if people learned not to be afraid of the unknown."

"Well I think you shouldn't invent things," she said. "If there was a bit less making things up, there wouldn't be anything unknown in the world. Peppy, you're always making things up."

"What about the forest?" he reminded her.

"Well, what about it? I've never got there, but if I did, I don't think I'd do too badly. Where there's a forest, there's paths, where there's paths, there's people, and you can always get by with people."

"What if there's no people?"

"If there's no people then there's nothing to do there. You have to stick to people, they won't let you down."

"No," Pepper said. "It's not as simple as that. I'm going downhill, people and all. I don't understand a thing about them."

"Lord, what on earth don't you understand?"

"Anything. That's what started me dreaming about the forest, incidentally. Only now I see that it's no easier in the forest."

She shook her head.

"What a child you still are," she said. "Why can't you ever understand that nothing exists in the world except love, food, and power. All rolled up together of course, but whatever thread you pull, you're sure to arrive at love, or power, or food. . . ."

"No," said Pepper. "I don't want that."

"Darling," she said quietly. "Who's going to ask you whether you want it or not. Of course, I might ask you: what're you tossing about for, Peppy, what the hell more do you want?"

"I don't think I need anything," said Pepper. "To clear out of here as far as possible and become an archivist or a restorer. That's all the desires I have."

She shook her head again.

"Hardly. That's a bit too complicated. You need something simpler."

He didn't argue, and she got up.

"Here's your towel," she said. "I've put your under-things over here. Come out and we'll have some tea. You'll have all the tea and raspberry jam you want, then go to bed."

Pepper had already pulled the plug and was standing up in the bath rubbing himself down with a huge shaggy towel, when the windows rattled and there came the muffled thud of a distant explosion. Then he remembered the spares dump and Jeanne the silly, hysterical doll. He cried: "What's that? Where?"

"They've blown up the machine," replied Alevtina. "Don't be afraid."

"Where? Where'd they blow it up? At the depot?"

Alevtina was silent for a while, apparently looking out of the window.

"No," she said at last. "Why the depot? In the park. . . . There's the smoke going up. .. . There they all are, running, running. . . ."

Chapter Ten

The forest was invisible. In its place, below the rock as far as the horizon, lay dense clouds. It resembled an ice-field powdered with snow: ice-hummocks and snow dunes, holes and crevasses concealing endless depths--if you jumped down from the rock your fall would be broken, not by earth, warm swamps, or spreading branches, but by hard ice sparkling in the morning sun, powdered lightly with dry snow, and you would stay lying on the ice under the sun, flat, motionless, black. It might be thought to resemble an old, well-washed white blanket, thrown over the treetops. .. .

Pepper hunted around to find a pebble, lobbed it from palm to palm, thinking what a good little place this was above the precipice: pebbles about, no sense of the Directorate, wild thorn bushes all around, faded

untrodden grass, even some little birdy permitting itself a chirp. Best not to look over to the right, though, where a luxurious four-hole latrine was suspended over the precipice, its fresh paint brazenly shining in the sun. Quite a way off, it's true, and possible if you wanted, to make yourself imagine it a summerhouse or some sort of scientific pavilion, but it did spoil the scene.

Perhaps it was actually because of this new latrine, erected the previous turbulent night, that the forest had shrouded itself in clouds. Hardly likely though. The forest wouldn't wrap itself up to the distant horizon for anything so petty, it was used to a lot worse than that from people.

At any rate, Pepper thought, I can come here every morning. I'll do what they tell me, I'll tote up on the broken Mercedes, I'll beat the assault course, I'll play the manager at chess, even try to get to like yogurt: it's probably not too bad if practically everybody likes it. And of an evening (and for the night), I'll go over to Alevtina's and eat raspberry jam and lie in the director's bath. There's something to be said for that even, he thought. Dry yourself with the director's towel and warm your feet up in the director's woolly socks, meanwhile crammed into the director's dressing gown. Twice a month I'll go over to the biostation to collect salary and bonuses, not the forest, just the biostation, and not even there, just to the pay-out window, but no meeting with the forest and no war with the forest, just salary and bonuses. But in the morning, early in the morning, I shall come here and look on the forest from afar and lob pebbles into it.

The bushes behind him parted with a crash. Pepper glanced around warily, but it wasn't the director, just Hausbotcher once again. He was carrying a fat file folder and halted some distance away, looking Pepper up and down with his moist eyes. He clearly knew something, something very important, and had brought this strange alarming information that no one in the world knew of save himself, here to the cliff-edge, and it was plain that everything that had gone before was no longer significant and from everyone would be required to contribute all he was capable of.

"Hello," he said, and bowed, clasping the case to his hip. "Good morning. Did you rest well?"

"Good morning," said Pepper. "Well, thank you."

"Humidity today seventy-six percent," Hausbotcher announced. "Temperature--seventeen degrees. No wind. Cloud cover--nil." He had drawn nearer noiselessly, arms along the seams of his trousers, and, inclining his body toward Pepper, continued: "Double-u today--sixteen."

"What's double-u?" asked Pepper, getting up.

"Quantity of spots," said Hausbotcher swiftly. His eyes became shifty. "On the sun," he said. "On the s-s-s. .. ." He ceased, staring Pepper in the face.

"And why are you telling me this?" asked Pepper with distaste.

"I beg your pardon," said Hausbotcher rapidly. "It won't be repeated. So, just humidity, cloud cover . . . hmm . . . wind and . . . you won't require me to report planetary oppositions?"

"Listen," said Pepper dismally. "What do you want from me?"

Hausbotcher retreated a pace or two and hung his head. "I beg pardon. Perhaps I intruded, but there are a few papers that require . . . that is, immediate . . . your personal..." He held out the file folder toward Pepper, like an empty tray. "Do you order me to report?"

"You know what. . . ." said Pepper menacingly.

"Yes . . . yes?" said Hausbotcher. Without relinquishing the file folder, he began rummaging through his pockets, as if in search of his notepad. His face was blue-tinged as if from sheer zeal.

Fool, fool, thought Pepper, trying to control himself. What was I expecting from the likes of him? "Stupid," he said striving for restraint. "That clear? Stupid and not in the least witty."

"Yes-yes," said Hausbotcher. Bent double, with the file folder clasped between elbow and thigh, he scribbled frantically on the notepad. "One second .. . yes, yes?"

"What are you writing there?" asked Pepper. Hausbotcher glanced fearfully at him and read out:

"Fifteenth June . . . time . . . seven forty-five ... place: cliff-edge. . . ."

"Listen, Hausbotcher," said Pepper, exasperated. "What the hell do you want? Why d'you trail about after me all the time? I've had enough of it, just lay off! [Hausbotcher scribbled.] This joke of yours is sheer stupidity and there's no need to spy around me. You should be ashamed at your age. . . . Now stop writing, idiot! It's damned stupidity! Why don't you do your exercises or get washed, just take a look at yourself, you're like nothing on earth! Ugh!"

He began doing up his sandal straps with fingers trembling with fury.

"They're probably right about you," he panted. "They say you get everywhere and take a note of the conversation. I used to think these were your stupid jokes. ... I didn't want to believe it, I can't stand that sort of thing at all, but it looks as though you're quite brazen about it now."

He straightened up and saw that Hausbotcher was standing staunchly at attention, tears were flowing down his cheeks.

"Just what's the matter with you today?" asked Pepper, alarmed.

"I can't.. . ." mumbled Hausbotcher, between sobs.

"What can't you?"

"Exercises. . . . My liver ... chit. . . and washing."

"Good God in heaven," said Pepper. "Well if you can't, you needn't, it was just a manner of speaking. . . . Well anyway, why are you following me around? Don't you see, for God's sake, it's not exactly pleasant.. . . I've nothing against you, but can't you grasp? . . ."

"Won't happen again!" cried Hausbotcher, ecstatic. The tears on his cheeks dried instantly. "Never again!"

"To blazes with you," said Pepper wearily and walked off through the bushes. Hausbotcher forced his way after him. Old clown, thought Pepper, feebleminded ...

"Absolute urgency," Hausbotcher was muttering, breathing heavily. "Only extreme necessity.. . . Your personal attention."'

Pepper looked around.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed. "That's my suitcase, give it here, where did you get it?"

Hausbotcher placed the case on the ground and was on the point of opening his mouth twisted by the effort of breathing, when Pepper snatched the case handle, not bothering to listen to him. At this, Hausbotcher without a word lay belly-down on the case. "Give me that case!" said Pepper, going ice-cold from fury.

"Never!" croaked Hausbotcher, scraping his knees about in the gravel. The file folder was in his way so he gripped it between his teeth and embraced the suitcase with both arms. Pepper heaved with all his might and succeeded in ripping off the handle.

"Stop this outrageous behavior!" he said. "At once!"

Hausbotcher shook his head and burbled something. Pepper loosened his collar and stared helplessly around. In the shadow of an oak tree not far off, two engineers in cardboard masks were standing for some reason. Catching his glance, they straightened up and clicked their heels. Pepper peered around him like a hunted animal, then hurriedly walked along the path out of the park. There'd been plenty of surprises up till now, he thought feverishly, but this beat all. . . . They were all in it together . . . run, he had to run! But how? He emerged from the park and was about to turn off toward the canteen, but he found Hausbotcher blocking his way once more, filthy and appalling. He was standing with the suitcase on his shoulder, his blue face was bathed in tears or water or sweat, his eyes roved beneath a

white film of moisture, he gripped the file folder with teethmarks on it close to his chest.

"Not here, please. . . ." he croaked. "I beg you . . . to the study . . . intolerably urgent . . . not forgetting interests of subordination. . . ."

Pepper recoiled from him and ran off along the main street. People were standing like statues along the pavements, heads back and eyes staring. A truck speeding toward him pulled up with a squeal of brakes and smashed into a newsstand. People with spades spilled out of the back and began forming up in two ranks. A security guard went by with ceremonial step, holding his rifle at the present-arms. . . .

On two occasions Pepper attempted to turn off into a side street, but each time Hausbotcher appeared before him. Hausbotcher was no longer able to speak, he just moaned and growled, rolling beseeching eyes. Thereupon Pepper ran off toward the Directorate building.

Kim, he thought desperately, Kim won't permit. . . surely Kim wasn't in with them as well? . . . I'll lock myself in the lavatory ... let them try ... I'll use my feet. . . I'm past caring. . .

He burst into the hallway only to be greeted at once with the brazen clangor of the amalgamated local orchestras thundering out a march. Strained faces, protruding eyes, inflated chests flashed before him. Hausbotcher caught him up and chased him up the main staircase with its raspberry carpets, a route forbidden to everyone at all times, through some unfamiliar two-tone halls, past security guards in full-dress uniform with decorations, along slippery waxed parquet, up to the fifth floor along a portrait gallery, upstairs again to floor six, past some bedecked females frozen like mannequins, into a sort of luxurious dead end with fluorescent lighting, and up to an enormous leather door with the nameplate "Director." Nowhere else to run.

Hausbotcher caught up with him and slid under his elbow, croaked horribly like an epileptic and flung the leather door wide before him. Pepper entered, and sank up to his insteps in a monstrous tiger skin, and immersed his whole being into the austere executive twilight of half-drawn door curtains, into the noble aroma of expensive tobacco, in the cotton-wool silence, into the even tenor and serenity of an alien existence.

"Hello," he said into space. But no one was sitting behind the huge table. No one was sitting in the huge armchairs. And no one met his glance except Selivan the Martyr in a vast picture occupying the whole of one side of the room.

Behind him, Hausbotcher dropped the suitcase with a thump. Pepper started and turned around. Hausbotcher was standing, swaying and proffering the file folder like an empty tray. His eyes were dead, glassy. The man'll die any minute, thought Pepper. But Hausbotcher did not die.

"Unusually urgent..." he grated, panting. "Not possible without director's signature . . . personal... would never dare. . . ."

"What director?" Pepper whispered. A terrible surmise had begun to take vague shape in his brain.

"You. . . ." Hausbotcher croaked. "Without your official stamp ... no way. . . ."

Pepper leaned against the table and supporting himself on its polished surface, wandered around it to the chair that seemed nearest. He dropped into its cool leather embrace and took in the rows of colored telephones on his left and the gold stamped volumes on the right. In front of him stood a monumental inkwell with Tannhauser and Venus, and above it, the white beseeching eyes of Hausbotcher and the proffered document case. He drew his elbows in, thought: Well, so that's how it is? You scum, sods, lackies . . . that's it, eh? Well, well, you bastards, slaves, cardboard snouts. . . . Well, all right, let it be. ...

"Stop waggling that over the table," he said severely. "Give it here."

Things began moving in the office, shadows flitted^ a small whirlwind started up and Hausbotcher materialized at his right shoulder; the folder

lay on the table and opened as if of its own accord, sheets of fine quality paper peeped out, and he read a word printed in large letters: DRAFT. "Thank you," he said severely. "You may go."

Once more the whirlwind, an aroma of sweat was sensed and then vanished, Hausbotcher was already by the door pausing, trunk inclined, hands by his seams, appalling, piteous, and ready for anything.

"One moment," said Pepper. Hausbotcher froze. "Can you kill a man?" asked Pepper. Hausbotcher did not hesitate. He pulled out a small notepad and spoke: "Your orders?" "And commit suicide?" Pepper asked. "What?" said Hausbotcher. "Go," said Pepper. "I'll call for you later." Hausbotcher vanished. Pepper cleared his throat and wiped his cheeks.

"Let's assume that," he said aloud. "And now what?"

On the table he observed a desk diary, turned the page, and read the present day's entry. The previous director's handwriting disappointed him; it was large and legible like a primary school teacher's. "Group leaders. 9:30. Foot examination. 10:30. Power for Ala. Try aerated yogurt. Machinization. Reel: who stole it? Four bulldozers!!!"

To hell with the bulldozers, thought Pepper, that's it: no bulldozers, no excavators, no saw-combines of eradication. . . . Good idea to castrate Acey at the same time--can't, pity . . . and that machine-depot. Blow that up, he decided. He pictured the Directorate from above and realized that a great deal needed blowing up. Too much. . . . Any fool can use explosives, he thought.

He pulled out the desk's middle drawer and saw there heaps of papers, blunted pencils, and two philatelic perforation-gauges, and on top of all this, a twisted golden general's epaulette. Just one. He had a look for the other, raking his hand around under the papers, received a pinprick and found a bunch of safe keys. The safe itself stood in the far comer and a pretty odd safe it was; decorated like a sideboard. Pepper got up and crossed the room to the safe; he glanced around him and noticed a good many odd things he'd not seen before.

Under the window stood a hockey stick, next to it--a crutch and a false leg wearing a boot with a rusty skate. There turned out to be another door in the recesses of the office; a rope was stretched across it on which hung some black swimming trunks and several odd socks, a number of them holed. On the door was a tarnished metal plate with the inscribed legend CATTLE. On the windowsill, half-hidden by the curtain, stood a small aquarium; in the pure transparent water among varicolored seaweeds, a plump black axoloti stirred its feathery gills in measured tempo. From behind the Selivan picture protruded a splendid bandmaster's baton complete with horses tails. Pepper was busy with the safe a good while, trying the keys. At last the heavy armored door swung open. The inside of the door was covered in indecent pin-ups from men's magazines, and the safe was practically empty. Pepper found a pair of pince-nez, the left lens broken, a crumpled cap with a mysterious cockade, and a photograph of an unknown family (grinning father, mother with cupid's-bow lips, and two boys in cadet uniform). There was a parabellum pistol too, well cleaned and looked after, a single round up the barrel, another twisted general's epaulette, and an iron cross with oak leaves. There was another pile of file folders in the safe, but they were all empty except for the bottom one, which held a rough draft of an order imposing punishment on driver Acey for systematic nonattendance at the Museum of Directorate History. "That's got him, that's got him, rascal," muttered Pepper. "Fancy that, skipping the museum. . . . We'll do something about this." Always Acey, what the . . . ?

Yogurtomaniac, repulsive womanizer, junky, still, all the drivers were that... no, a stop would be put to it: yogurt, chess during working hours. By the way, what exactly does Kim add up on the broken Mercedes? Or is everything as it should be--some sort of stochastic processes going on. ... Look, Pepper, you don't know much; everybody's hard at work, after all. Hardly anybody loafs around. They work at night. Everybody's busy, nobody's

got any time. Orders are carried out, that I know, seen it myself. Everything looks to be in order: guards do their guarding, drivers drive, engineers construct, scientists write articles, pay-clerks dish out money. . ..

Listen, Pepper, he thought, maybe all this merry-go-round exists just for that--so everybody's kept busy? In actual fact a good mechanic can service a car in two hours. What happens after that? What about the other twenty-two hours? And if in addition competent workmen operate the machines so as to keep them in good order? The answer's not far to seek: give the good mechanic a job as a cook, make the cook a mechanic. That way you can fill twenty-two years, never mind hours. No, there was a certain logic in it. Everybody works, discharging his obligations to humanity, not like well, monkeys . . . and they extend their specialization range. . . . Anyhow, there's no logic at all there, it's an unholy mess, that's all. .. . My god, I'm standing here like a post, while they're defiling the forest, eradicating it, turning it into a park. Something's got to be done, now I'm responsible for every acre, every pup, every mermaid, I'm responsible for it all now. . . .

He moved into action, somehow got the safe shut, rushed over to the table, pushed the file folder from him and pulled out a clean sheet of paper from the drawer. . . . There's thousands of people here, though, he thought. Traditions have been founded, accepted attitudes, they'll laugh at me. ... He recalled the wretched, sweating Hausbotcher and indeed himself in the director's anteroom. No, they wouldn't laugh at him. They'd cry, complain ... to ... Monsieur Alas . . . they'd kill each other. But not laugh. That was the worst part of it, he thought, they didn't know how to laugh, they didn't know what that was or the reason for it. People, he thought, people and little people and littler people. Democracy's what's wanted, freedom of opinion, freedom of criticism, I'll get them all together and tell them: criticize! Criticize and laugh. . . . Yes, they would criticize. They'd do it at length with warmth and ecstasy since they'd been ordered to do it, they'd criticize the inadequate supplies of yogurt, the poor food in the canteen, they'd lay into the street cleaners with particular relish: roads unswept in donkey's years, they'd criticize driver Acey for systematic bathhouse avoidance, and in between they'd hurry to the latrine overhanging the precipice. . . . No, I'll get things in a tangle that way, he thought. A set procedure is what we want. What have I got now?

He began writing swiftly and illegibly on the sheet:

"Forest Eradication Group, Forest Research Group, Forest Military Guard, Assistance to Native Population Group. .. ." What else was there? Yes! "Engineering Penetration Group." Yes, and . . . "Science Security Group." The lot, apparently. So. What did they all do? Odd, I've never wondered up till now what they all do here. What's more, I've never wondered what the Directorate does anyway. How is it possible to combine forest eradication with a forest guard, and assist the local populations at the same time.

Well, now, he thought. For a start, no eradications. Eradicate Eradication. Engineering Penetration too, most likely. Or let them work up top, they're no use down there, anyway. Let their machines cope. Let them build a good road, let them drain that stinking bog.. .. What's left then? The military guard. And wolfhounds. Well, anyway . . . anyway the forest has to be guarded. Only ... he recalled the faces of the guards he had encountered and gnawed his lip doubtfully, Mm-yes. . . . Well all right, we'll assume that. But why the Directorate? Why me! Dispense with the Directorate, eh? He had a feeling of weird gaiety. Now that would be something, he thought. I can do it! Disperse it and that's it, he thought. Who's my judge? I'm the director, the chief. One order--finish!

Suddenly he heard ponderous footsteps somewhere close. The glass chandelier tinkled, the drying socks swayed on the line. Pepper rose and tiptoed to the little door. Just beyond it someone was walking unsteadily,

as it might be stumbling, but nothing else could be heard and there wasn't even a keyhole to look through. Pepper cautiously pulled at the handle but the door did not yield.

"Who's there?" he asked loudly, placing his lips to the crack. No one replied but the footsteps continued. It was like a drunk wandering along, falling over his own legs. Pepper tried the handle again, gave a shrug, and went back to his chair.

Anyway, power has its advantages, he thought. I shan't disperse the Directorate, of course, stupid--why get rid of a ready-made well-knit organization? One simply had to redirect it, turn it onto its true course. Stop the intrusion into the forest, intensify careful research, try to find points of contact, learn from it. ... They didn't even know what the forest was, after all. Just imagine, a forest! Mountains of firewood. . . . No, there was a lot of work ahead. Real, important work. People would be forthcoming, too--Kim, Stoyan . . . Rita . .. Good lord, what was wrong with the manager? . . . Alevtina. . .. Well and why not this Alas as well, no doubt a good man, brains there, doing a silly job that was all. ... We'll show them, he thought cheerfully. We'll show them yet, hell! All right. How are things going just now?

He drew the file folder toward him. On the top sheet was written:

DRAFT DIRECTIVE ON PROCEDURE

1. Over the past year the Forest Directorate has materially improved its work and attained splendid results in all spheres of activity. Many hundreds of acres of forest territory have been taken over, studied, eradicated, and put under military and scientific security. The skills of specialist and worker alike show continued steady development. Organization is being perfected, unproductive spending is being reduced, bureaucratic and other impediments external to productivity are being eliminated.

2. However, alongside the achievements achieved, the harmful effects of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, as well as the Law of Large Numbers continue to be felt, thus lowering the general level of attainment. Our most pressing task is now the elimination of chance effects, productive of chaos and destructive of rhythm as well as inductive of a relaxation of tempo.

3. With reference to the above-mentioned, it is suggested in the future that all manifestations of chance be regarded as exceptional and at variance with the ideal of organization, and involvement in chance effects (probability)--as a criminal activity, or, if the involvement in chance effects (probability) is not attended by major consequences--as a most serious breach of office and production discipline.

4. The guilt of any person involved with chance effects (probabilities), is defined and delimited by articles of the Criminal Code nos. 62, 64, 65 (omitting paras. S and 0) 113, and 192 par. K, or Administrative Codex 12, 15 and 97. NOTE: The fatal upshot of any involvement with chance effects (probabilities) is not regarded per se as a justifying or extenuating circumstance. Conviction, or penalty in this instance, will be imposed posthumously.

5. The present Directive promulgated .. . month .. . day . . . year. No retroactive application.

Signature: DIRECTOR (----------).

Pepper moistened his dry lips and turned the page over. On the next sheet was an order concerning a summons for a member of the Science Security Group, one H. Toity, with reference to the Directive "On procedure," "for malicious indulgence of the law of large numbers, to wit, sliding on the ice with concomitant damage to the ankle joint, which criminal involvement with chance effects (probability) took place on March llth this year." Officer H. Toity should be referred to in all documents henceforward as probabili-trick Toity.

Pepper clicked his teeth and glanced at the next sheet. This was an order too: the imposition of administrative punishment--a fine of four months pay, posthumously--on dog-breeder G. de Montmorency of the military

guard, "carelessly permitting himself to be struck down by atmospheric discharge (lightning)." Further on were requests for leave, requests to do with a lump-sum benefit on the loss of a breadwinner, and an explanatory note from one Z. Lumbago concerning the loss of a reel. .. .

"What in the name of!" said Pepper aloud and reread the draft Directive. He began to sweat. The draft was printed on art paper with a gold edge. I need advice from somewhere, thought Pepper miserably, otherwise I'm done for. . . .

At this the door flung open and into the study, pushing a wheeled cart before her, came Alevtina, dressed with extreme elegance in the latest fashion, and wearing a grave expression on her expertly powdered and made-up face.

"Your breakfast," said she in a delicate voice.

"Close the door and come here," said Pepper. She shut the door, pushed the cart with her foot and, adjusting her hair, came over to Pepper.

"Well now, ducky?" said she, smiling. "Satisfied now?"

"Listen," said Pepper. "This is rubbish. Have a read."

She seated herself on the arm of the chair, put her bare left arm around Pepper's neck, and picked up the Directive with the bare right one.

"Well, I know," she said. "It's all in order. What's the matter? Should I bring the Criminal Code in? The previous director couldn't remember a single article either."

"No, no, wait," said Pepper impatiently. "What's the code got to do with it, what's that to do with it? Have you read it?"

"Not only read, typed. And corrected the style. Hausbotcher's no writer, and he only learned to read here. . . . Incidentally, ducky," she said, solicitously, "Hausbotcher is waiting out there in the anteroom, see him during breakfast, he likes that. He'll do your sandwiches for you. . . ."

"I sent him packing!" said Pepper. "Just you explain to me what I ..."

"You shouldn't send Hausbotcher packing," put in Alevtina. "You're still my little ducky, you still don't know anything." She pressed Pepper's nose like a button. "Hausbotcher has two notepads. In one he writes who said what--for the director--in the other he notes down what the director said. Ducky, you remember that and don't go forgetting."

"Wait," said Pepper. "I want your advice. That Directive .. . I'm not signing crazy stuff like that."

"How do you mean not?"

"What I say. My hand won't move--to sign anything like that."

Alevtina's face became stern.

"Ducky," she said. "Now don't get obstinate. Just sign. It's very urgent. I'll explain it all to you later, but now . . ."

"What's there to explain?" asked Pepper.

"Well if you don't understand, it means you need an explanation. So that's what I'll do later."

"No, explain it now," Pepper said. "If you can," he added. "Which I doubt."

"Ooh, then, my little one," said Alevtina and kissed him on the temple. She glanced at her watch concernedly. "Well, fine, all right."

She shifted her seat to the table, placed her hands beneath her and began, her screwed-up eyes fixed above Pepper's head.

"Administrative work exists as the basis of all else. This work didn't come into being today or yesterday, the vector has its base back in the depths of time. At present it is embodied in existing orders and directives. But it extends far into the future too, and there it waits for its embodiment. It's like laying a highway through a section already marked off, where the asphalt ends and the surveyor stands with his back to the finished section looking into his theodolite.

"That surveyor is you. The imaginary line traveling along the optical axis of the theodolite is the unrealized administrative vector which only

you of all people can see and to which it is your duty to give substance. Do you follow?"

"No," Pepper said firmly.

"Doesn't matter, keep listening. . . . Just as the highway can't turn as it pleases to left or right, but has to follow the optical axis of your theodolite, just so every directive must be a continuation of all those preceding it.... Ducky, sweety, don't probe into it, I don't understand anything about it myself, but that's good really, because probing stirs up doubts, doubts make people mark time, and marking time is the death of administrative activity, consequently yours, mine and every. . . .

"That's elementary. Not a single day without a Directive and everything will be all right. This Directive on procedure, now--it doesn't exist in vacuo, it's tied up with the preceding Directive on nonabsence, and that was linked with the Order on nonpregnancy, and that Order flowed logically from the Injunction on excessive indignation, and that . . ."

"What the hell!" said Pepper. "Show me these injunctions and orders. No, better show me the very first order, the one in the depths of time."

"Now why do you need that?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? You say they stem logically. I don't believe that!"

"Ducky," said Alevtina. "You'll see all that. I'll show you all that. You'll read it all with your dear little short-sighted eyes. But realize, there was no directive day before yesterday and none yesterday if you don't count a petty little order about capturing a machine and that was by word of mouth. . . . What do you think, how long can the Directorate exist without directives? Since yesterday morning it's all been a mix-up: some people are walking around everywhere changing burned-out bulbs, imagine? No, ducky, you do as you like, but the Directive has to be signed. I'm on your side, you know. You just sign it straight off, do the conference with the group leaders, tell them something encouraging, then I'll bring you everything you want. You can read, study, probe . . . better if you don't probe though."

Pepper took hold of his cheeks and rocked his head. Alevtina briskly jumped down from the table, dipped a pen into Venus' skull and held the stem toward Pepper.

"Well write, sweetie, just a quick one. . . ."

Pepper took the pen.

"But I'll be able to cancel the thing later?" he asked fretfully.

"Of course, ducky, of course," said Alevtina, and Pepper knew she lied. He hurled the pen away. "No," he said. "No, never. I won't sign that. Why the hell should I sign lunacy like that when there's probably dozens of sensible and useful orders, and instructions, absolutely essential, really necessary in this bedlam. . . ."

"For example?" asked Alevtina briskly.

"Good lord. . . . Well, anything you like . . . hell's bells. Well, what about . . ."

Alevtina got out her notepad.

"Well, let's say ... let's say an order," said Pepper with extraordinary bitterness, "to the members of the Eradication Group to self-eradicate as soon as ever possible. Yes, indeed! Let them all throw themselves off the cliff ... or shoot themselves . . . make it today! In charge--Hausbotcher. Now that really is something more useful. . . ."

"One moment," said Alevtina. "That is, commit suicide with the aid of firearms today before twenty-four hundred hours. In charge--Hausbotcher." She closed her notepad and considered. Pepper looked at her in astonishment. "So!" she said. "It's all right. It's even more progressive. . . . Sweety, understand this: you don't like the directive--don't bother about it. But issue another. That's what you've done and I've no more to ask of you. . . ."

She jumped down to the floor and busied herself arranging plates before Pepper.

"Here's the pancakes, here's the jam. . . . Coffee in the thermos, it's hot--watch you don't burn yourself. . . . Eat up and I'll do the draft quick as a flash and bring it in half an hour."

"Wait," said Pepper, stunned. "Wait. . . ."

"Who's my clever one," said Alevtina tenderly. "You're great, only be a bit nicer to Hausbotcher."

"Wait," said Pepper. "What d'you think you're doing?"

Alevtina ran for the door, Pepper rushed after her shouting: "Are you crazy?" but failed to catch her. Alevtina vanished and in her place, like a ghost, Hausbotcher materialized out of emptiness. Now slicked and cleaned, now a normal color, as before ready for anything.

"A stroke of genius," he said softly, edging Pepper toward the table, "it's brilliant. It will surely go down in history. . . ."

Pepper recoiled as if from a giant centipede, bumped into the table and pushed Tannhauser onto Venus.

Chapter Eleven

He woke up, opened his eyes and stared at the low, lime-encrusted ceiling. The ants were again heading across it. Right to the left, loaded, left to right, empty. A month ago it had been the other way around, a month ago Nava had been here. Nothing else had changed. Day after tomorrow, we'll go, he thought.

The old man was sitting at the table looking at him and cleaning out his ear. The old man had got terribly thin, his eyes were sunken, he hadn't a tooth left. Probably he'll soon die, that old man.

"Why on earth is it. Dummy," said the old man tearfully, "you've not a thing to eat. Since Nava got taken from you, you've no more food in the house. Not in the morning or at dinnertime, I told you: don't go, shouldn't. Why did you go away? Paid too much heed to Hopalong and went, what does Hopalong know about what's done and what isn't? Hopalong doesn't realize that, and his father before him was just as slow, his granddad just the same, all the Hopalong breed just the same, so they've all died, and so will Hopalong, no way out. . . . Maybe you have got some food, Dummy, maybe you've hidden it, eh? A lot of them do ... if you have, get it quick, I'm hungry, I can't do without food, I've eaten all my life, got used to it. ... So now you've got no Nava, Barnacle killed by a tree as well, . . . that's who always had a lot of food, Barnacle! I used to get through three pots at his place, thought it was always low-grade stuff, nasty, why he got killed by a tree, likely. ... I used to tell him: shouldn't eat food like that. . . ."

Kandid got up and searched the hiding places Nava had devised throughout the house. There was no food at all. After that he went out into the street, turned left and headed for the square, to Buster's house. The old man trailed along behind, sniveling and whining. From the field there came coarse and ragged shouting: "Hey, hey, make it gay, left way, right way. . . ." The forest returned an echo. Every morning, so it seemed to Kandid, the forest had moved closer. In fact, this wasn't so, and even if it was, it would hardly have been perceptible to the human eye. The number of deadlings in the forest, probably, had not increased, but it seemed so. Very likely because Kandid now knew what they were, and that he hated them. Whenever a dead-ling appeared out of the forest, the cry at once went up: "Dummy! Dummy!" And he would go there and destroy the deadling with his scalpel, swiftly, surely, with cruel enjoyment. The whole village would run to view the spectacle and invariably exclaimed in unison and covered their faces, when the terrible white scar opened up along the steam-shrouded carcass. Little bovs no longer teased Dummy, they were now mortally afraid of him, ran and hid at his approach. The scalpel was discussed in whispers at home in the evenings, and by order of the resourceful elder they started making storage bins out of deadling hides. They were good ones, too, big and

tough. . . .

In the middle of the square stood Ears, up to his waist in grass and shrouded in lilac mist; his palms were raised, his eyes glassy and there was foam on his lips. Around him crowded curious toddlers, listening and watching, open-mouthed; this spectacle never wearied them. Kandid also stopped to listen, and the toddlers scattered like leaves.

"Into the battle new. . . ." burbled Ears in a metallic voice. "Successful movement. . . extensive areas of peace . . . new detachments of Maidens. . . . Calm and Amalgamation. . . ."

Kandid passed on. Since that morning, his head had been reasonably clear, and he felt he could think, and bsgan to consider who he was, this Ears, and what his function was. There was some point now in such speculation, since Kandid now knew something, and sometimes it even seemed that he knew a great deal, if not everything. Every village had its Ears, we've got one, New Village has, and the old man used to brag of how special the Ears had been in the now mushroomy village. No doubt there had been a time when many people knew what the Accession was, and understood what successes were being referred to; then, very likely, they had been concerned to inform everybody about it, or had assumed they were concerned, later it dawned that a whole lot of people could perfectly well be done without, that all these villages were--a mistake, the villagers no more than sheep . . . that occurred when it was discovered how to control the lilac mist, and the first deadlings emerged from the lilac clouds . . . and the first villages found themselves at the bottom of the first triangular lakes . . . and the first detachments of Maidens appeared. . . . The Ears had remained and the tradition had survived, something that wasn't wiped out because they had simply forgotten about it. A pointless tradition, as pointless as this whole forest, as all these artificial monsters and cities, which spawned destruction, and these terrible hoyden-amazons, priestesses of parthenogenesis, cruel and complacent mistresses of the virus, sovereigns of the forest, fresh-water plump . . . and this vast activity in the jungle all these Great Harrowings, and Swampings, undertakings monstrous in their absurdity. . . . His ideas flowed freely almost, even automatically, for the last month they had managed to carve for themselves permanent channels and Kandid knew in advance what emotions would spring up in him the next second. In our village this is called "thinking." Here, now doubts would come up. ... I saw nothing after all. I encountered three forest witches. Plenty of strange things in the forest. I saw the destruction of a deceptive village, a hill resembling a factory of living creatures, hellish violence done to an armchewer ... destruction, factory, violence. . . . Those words are mine, my concepts. Even for Nava destruction isn't destruction, it's the Accession . . . but I know what the Accession is. To me it's terrible, revolting, and all because to me it's alien, and perhaps one should say not "a cruel and senseless driving of the forest over people," but "a systematic, superbly organized, precisely thought-out drive of the new against the old," "a well-timed and matured, abundantly powerful offensive of the new against the rotten, hopeless, old order. . . ." Not a perversion, but a revolution. The natural order of things, a natural order I regard from the outside, with the partial view of a stranger who understands nothing and by virtue of that fact, imagines that he knows it all and that he has a right to judge. Just like a little boy indignant at the nasty cock for trampling the poor hen.. . .

He looked back at Ears. Ears was sitting in the grass with his customary dazed look, turning his head, endeavoring to recall who and where he was. A living radio receiver. So, there must be living transmitters . . . and living mechanisms and living machines, yes, the deadlings for example. . . . Well now, why, why doesn't all this, so superbly thought-up, so superbly organized, rouse in me a shred of sympathy--only disgust and loathing. . . .

Buster came up noiselessly behind him and clapped him between the shoulder blades.

"Stands there gawping, wool on yer nose," said he. "There was one gawped like that, they twisted his arms and legs off, no more gawping from him. When are we leaving, Dummy? How long are you going to keep pulling my leg? My old woman's gone to another house, wool on yer nose, and I've been sleeping at the elder's for three nights, just now I'm thinking I'll go and spend the night with Barnacle's widow. The food's so rotten that even that old stump doesn't want to guzzle it, makes a face, says: everything you've got's rotten, you can't bear to smell it, never mind guzzle, wool on yer nose. . . . Only I'm not going to Devil's Rocks, Dummy. I'll go with you to the City, we'll pick up some babes there. If we meet thieves we'll give them half, we won't be mean, wool on yer nose, and bring the other half back to the village, let them live here, what do they want floating about there, there was one floated, gave her a good 'un up the hooter, no more floating and hates the sight of water, wool on yer nose. . . . Listen, Dummy, maybe you lied about the City and those babes? Or maybe you were seeing things--the robbers took Nava away from you, and you imagined it out of sorrow? Hopalong there doesn't believe it; reckons you were seeing things. What's that City in the lake, wool on yer nose, everybody said on a hill, not in a lake. Who can live in a lake, wool on yer nose? We'll all drown in there, there's water there, wool on yer nose, never mind the babes in there, I'm not going in even for them, I can't swim, and anyway what for? Now I could stand on the bank, while you drag them out. . . . You'll go into the water then, and I'll stay on the bank, and we'll soon manage it that way, you and I. . . ."

"Have you got yourself a stick?" asked Kandid.

"Where can I get you a stick in the forest, wool on yer nose?" objected Buster. "That means a trip to the swamp, for a stick. And I've no time, I'm hiding food so's the old man won't guzzle it, anyway what do I want with a stick, I don't intend to fight anybody. . . . There was one who fought, wool on yer nose. . . ."

"Okay," said Kandid. "I'll get you one myself. We leave day after tomorrow. Don't forget."

He turned and retraced his steps. Still the same old Buster. None of them had changed. No matter how hard he had tried to get it into their heads, they couldn't grasp anything, and seemingly, didn't believe what he said.

Deadlings can't be servants to women, you're putting it on there, Dummy, boy, three of them you couldn't drive away. Women are scared stiff of dead-lings, take a look at mine, then tell us again. As for the village going under, that's the Accession happening, nobody needs you to tell them that, what those women of yours have got to do with it I can't make out. . . . Anyway, Dummy, you weren't in the City, go on now, confess, we won't take offense, you tell a rattling good story. Only you haven't been in any City, we all know that, 'cos if anyone gets to the City, they don't come back. ... It wasn't any women took away your Nava, just robbers, our local ones. You could never fight off robbers. Dummy. Though a man you are, of course, of the bravest, and the way you tackle deadlings--that's just terrible to watch. . . ."

Any idea of approaching destruction simply couldn't enter their heads. Destruction was approaching too slowly and began its advance too long ago. Probably, the trouble was that destruction was a concept linked with immediacy, right now, with some sort of catastrophe. They were unable and had no desire to generalize, couldn't and wouldn't think of the world outside their village. There was the village and there was the forest. The forest was the more powerful, but then the forest had always been and always would be more powerful. What had destruction to do with it? What destruction do you mean? It's just life. Now, when a tree crushes somebody, that's destruction all right, but you've just got to use your head and figure out what's what. . . . One day they'd realize. When there were no women left; when the swamps had advanced up to the house walls; when subterranean

springs were tapped and the lilac mist hung over the rooftops. ... Or maybe they wouldn't even then--just say: "Can't live here anymore--the Accession." And go off to build a new village. . . .

Hopalong was sitting before his door, pouring ferment on a prop of mushrooms that had come up during the night, and preparing to breakfast.

"Take a seat," said he affably. "Something to eat? Good mushrooms."

"I will," said Kandid and seated himself alongside.

"Eat up, eat up," said Hopalong. "Now you've got no Nava, while you're adjusting yourself without Nava.

I've heard you're going off again. Who was it telling me? Ah, yes now, it was you yourself said to me: I'm going, so you did. No sitting at home for you. Better if you did, would have been better. ... To the Reed-beds is it, or the Anthills? I'd go with you to the Reed-beds. You and I, we'd turn right down the street, pass by way of the scrub, we would, we'd stock up with mushrooms there at the same time, we'd take along some ferment and eat--grand mushrooms there in the scrub, not like in the village, don't grow anywhere else either, but there eat and eat, never get enough. . . . When we'd eaten, you and I, we'd leave the scrub, then past Bread Fen, eat again there--fine cereals grow there, sweet, amazing, growing on the marsh, on the mud there and cereal's like that coming up. ... Well, after that, of course, straight after the sun, three days walking, and there's your Reed-beds. . . ."

"We're going to Devil's Rocks," Kandid patiently reminded him. "Leaving day after tomorrow. Buster's going too."

Hopalong shook his head, dubiously. "Devil's Rocks. . . ." he repeated. "No, Dummy, we won't get to Devil's Rocks, won't get there. Do you know where it is, Devil's Rocks? Maybe they don't even exist, people just say: Rocks, they say, Devilish. ... So I'm not going to Devil's Rocks, I don't believe in them. If it was to the City now, or the Anthills, still better, that's a stone's throw from here, right next door. . . . Listen, Dummy, let's go, you and I, to the Anthills. Buster'll go too. . . . I've never been there since the time I damaged my leg. Nava often used to beg me: let's go, she says, Hopalong, to the Anthills. . . . Wanted, you see, to have a look at the hollow tree, where I hurt my leg. ... I tell her I don't remember where that hollow tree is, and anyway, maybe there's no Anthills there anymore, it was long ago when I was there."

Kandid masticated mushroom and regarded Hopalong. Hopalong talked and talked about the Reed-beds, about the Anthills, his eyes were downcast and he looked at Kandid only occasionally. You're a good man, Hopalong, and a kind one, a great orator, the elder takes notice of you, and Buster, and the old man is just terrified of you, it wasn't an accident that you were the best friend and companion to the notable Anger-Martyr, a man questing, an unquiet man, one who found nothing and rotted in the forest. . . . However, that's the trouble: you don't want to let me go into the forest, Hopalong, you pity the wretch. The forest is a place of danger and disaster, where many have gone and few returned, and if they have returned they're badly frightened, and, occasionally, crippled . . . one with a broken leg, another with . . . And you pretend, Hopalong, out of cunning either to be a halfwit yourself or to take Dummy for one, but really you are sure of one thing: if Dummy has come back once, having lost a girl, two such miracles can't happen. . . .

"Listen, Hopalong," said Kandid. "Hear me out carefully. Say what you want, think what you like, but T ask one thing of you: don't abandon me, go into the forest with me. I shall need you very much in the forest, Hopalong, we're setting off the day after tomorrow and I want you very much to be with us. Do you understand?"

Hopalong looked at Kandid and his washed-out eyes were inscrutable.

"Surely," he said. "I understand you very well. We'll go together then. So we go out from here, turn left, go as far as the field, and past the two stones, to the path. You can tell this path straight away, there's so many

boulders you can break your leg. . . . Yes, eat them up, Dummy, they're fine. ... By this path, then we'll get to the mushroom village, I've told you about that already, I think, it's empty, all grown over with mushrooms, not like these ones here for example, nasty ones, we won't eat them, you can get sick or die that way. So we won't even stop in that village we'll press on right away and after a time we'll get to Funny Village, they make pots out of earth there, what next? That happened with them after the blue grass went through. Nothing happened, no sickness even, they just started making their pots out of earth. ... We won't stop there either, nothing to stop there for, we'll go sharp right from them and there's your Clay Clearing for you."

Perhaps I shouldn't take you then? thought Kandid. You've been there already, the forest has chewed you over, and who knows, maybe you've already rolled on the ground yelling with pain and fear with a young girl standing over you, biting her delicious lip, her childish littie palms outspread. I don't know, don't know. But I've got to go. Grab one at least, two at least, find everything out, sort every last bit out. . . . After that? Doomed, doomed and wretched. Or rather--happy and doomed, since they don't know they're doomed, that the mighty of their world see in them only a dirty tribe of ravishers, that the mighty have already aimed at them clouds of controlled viruses, columns of robots, the very forest itself, that for them everything is preordained and--worst of all--that historical truth here, in the forest, is not on their side, they are relics, condemned to destruction by objective laws, and to assist them means to go against progress, to delay progress on some tiny sector of the front. Only that doesn't interest me, thought Kandid. What has their progress to do with me, it's not my progress and I call it progress only because there's no other suitable word. . . . Here the head doesn't choose. The heart chooses. Natural laws are neither good nor bad, they're outside morality. But I'm not! If those Maidens had picked me up, cured me and showed me kindness, accepted me as one of themselves, taken pity on me-- well, then, I would probably have taken the side of this progress easily and naturally, and Hopalong and all these villages would have been for me an exasperating survival, taking up too much effort for too long. . . . But perhaps not, perhaps it wouldn't have been simple and easy, I can't stand it when people are regarded as animals. But perhaps it's a matter of terminology, and if I'd learned the women's language, everything would have sounded different to me: enemies of progress, gluttonous stupid idlers. . . . Ideals. . . . Great aims. . . . Natural laws. . . . And for the sake of this annihilate half the inhabitants! No, that's not for me. In any language, that's not for me. What do I care if Hopalong is a pebble in the millstones of their progress? And if I ever manage to reach the biostation, which I probably won't, I'll do everything I can to stop those millstones. Anyway, if I reach the biostation. . . . M-- yes. It's odd, it's never occurred to me before to look at the Directorate from the side. And Hopalong never dreams of looking at the forest from the side. Nor do those Maidens, either, probably. And it's really a curious spectacle--the Directorate, seen from above. All right, I'll have a think about that later.

"We're agreed, then," he said. "We leave day after tomorrow."

"Surely," replied Hopalong at once. "Sharp left from me. . . ."

A sudden hubbub was heard from the field. Women began shrieking. A great many voices began shouting out in unison:

"Dummy! Dummy! Hey, Dummy!"

Hopalong roused himself.

"Doubtless deadlines!" said he, rising hastily. "Come on, Dummy, don't sit there, I want to watch."

Kandid got up, drew the scalpel from his blouse, and strode off to the outskirts of the village.

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