



# SINISTER

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

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B E N D  
S I N I S T E R

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*Vladimir Nabokov*

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NEW YORK

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Cover art by Carol Devine Carson

Cover photograph by Alison Gootee

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich, 1899–1977.

Bend sinister / by Vladimir Nabokov.

p. cm.

Reprint, Originally published: New York: McGraw Hill, 1947.

eISBN: 978-0-307-78788-0

I. Title.

PS3527.A15B4 1990

813'.54—dc20

89-405

v3.1



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## INTRODUCTION

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*BEND SINISTER* was the first novel I wrote in America, and that was half a dozen years after Shakespeare and I had adopted each other. The greater part of the book was composed in the winter and spring of 1945–1946, at a particularly cloudless and vigorous period of life. My health was excellent. My daily consumption of cigarettes had reached the four-package mark. I slept at least four or five hours, the rest of the night walking pencil in hand about the dingy little flat in Craigie Circle, Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I lodged under an old lady with feet of stone and above a young woman with hypersensitive hearing. Every day including Sundays, I would spend up to 10 hours studying the structure of certain butterflies in the laboratory-paradise of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology; but three times a week I stayed there only till noon and then tore myself away from microscope and camera lucida to travel to Wellesley (by tram and bus, or subway and railway), where I taught college girls Russian grammar and literature.

The book was finished on a warm rainy night, more or less as described at the end of Chapter Eighteen. A kind friend, Edmund Wilson, read the typescript and recommended the book to Allen Tate, who had Holt publish it in 1947. I was deeply immersed in other labor but nonetheless managed to discern the dull thud it made. Praises, as far as I can recall, ran out only in two weeklies—*TIME* and *The New Yorker*, I think.

The term “bend sinister” means a heraldic bar or band drawn from the left side (and, popularly, but incorrectly, supposed to denote bastardy). This choice of title was an attempt to suggest an outline broken by refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being, a wrong turn taken by life, a sinistral and sinister world. The title’s drawback is that a solemn reader looking for “general ideas” or “human interest” (which is much the same thing) in a novel may be led to look for them in this one.

There exist few things more tedious than a discussion of general ideas inflicted by author or reader upon a work of fiction. The purpose of this foreword is not to show that *Bend Sinister* belongs or does not belong to “serious literature” (which is a euphemism for the hollow profundity and the ever-welcome commonplace). I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment (in journalistic and commercial parlance: “great books”). I am not “sincere,” I am not “provocative,” I am not “satirical.” I am neither didacticist nor an allegorizer. Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of “thaw” in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind and so on, leave me supremely indifferent. As in the case of my *Invitation to a Beheading*—with which this book has obvious affinities—automatic comparisons between *Bend Sinister* and Kafka’s creations or Orwell’s clichés would go merely to prove that the automaton could not have read either the great German writer or the mediocre English one.

Similarly, the influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my books, or at least of this book, on my epoch. There can be distinguished, no doubt, certain reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of Fascists and Bolshevists, of Philistine thinkers and jack-booted baboons. No doubt



too, without those infamous models before me I could not have interlarded this fantasy with bits of Lenin's speeches, and a chunk of the Soviet constitution, and gobs of Nazi pseudoefficiency.

While the system of holding people in hostage is as old as the oldest war, a fresher note introduced when a tyrannic state is at war with its own subjects and may hold any citizen hostage with no law to restrain it. An even more recent improvement is the subtle use of what I shall term "the lever of love"—the diabolical method (applied so successfully by the Soviets) of tying a rebel to his wretched country by his own twisted heartstrings. It is noteworthy, however, that in *Bend Sinister* Paduk's still young police state—where a certain dull-wittedness is a national trait of the people (augmenting thereby the possibilities of muddling and bungling so typical, thank God, of all tyrannies)—lags behind actual regimes successfully working this lever of love, for which at first it rather haphazardly gropes, losing time on the needless persecution of Krug's friends, and only by chance realizing (in Chapter Fifteen) that by grabbing his little child one would force him to do whatever one wished.

The story in *Bend Sinister* is not really about life and death in a grotesque police state. Most characters are not "types," not carriers of this or that "idea." Paduk, the abject dictator and Krug's former schoolmate (regularly tormented by the boys, regularly caressed by the school janitor); Doctor Alexander, the government's agent; the ineffable Hustav; icy Crystalsen and hapless Kolokololiteishchikov; the three Bachofen sisters; the farcical policeman Mac; the brutal and imbecile soldiers—all of them are only absurd mirages, illusions oppressive to Krug during his brief spell of being, but harmlessly fading away when I dismiss the cast.

The main theme of *Bend Sinister*, then, is the beating of Krug's loving heart, the torture and intense tenderness is subjected to—and it is for the sake of the pages about David and his father that the book was written and should be read. Two other themes accompany the main one: the theme of dim-brained brutality which thwarts its own purpose by destroying the right child and keeping the wrong one; and the theme of Krug's blessed madness when he suddenly perceives the simple reality of things and knows but cannot express in the words of his world that he and his son and his wife and everybody else are merely my whims and megrims.

Is there any judgment on my part carried out, any sentence pronounced, any satisfaction given to the moral sense? If imbeciles and brutes can punish other brutes and imbeciles, and if crime still retains an objective meaning in the meaningless world of Paduk (all of which is doubtful), we may affirm that crime is punished at the end of the book when the uniformed waxworks are really hurt, and the dummies are at last in quite dreadful pain, and prettily Mariette gently bleeds, staked and torn by the lust of forty soldiers.

The plot starts to breed in the bright broth of a rain puddle. The puddle is observed by Krug from a window of the hospital where his wife is dying. The oblong pool, shaped like a cell that is about to divide, reappears sub-thematically throughout the novel, as an ink blot in Chapter Four, an inkstain in Chapter Five, spilled milk in Chapter Eleven, the infusoria-like image of ciliated thought in Chapter Twelve, the footprint of a phosphorescent islander in Chapter Eighteen, and the imprint a soul leaves in the intimate texture of space in the closing paragraph. The puddle thus kindled and rekindled in Krug's mind remains linked up with the image of his wife not only because he had contemplated the inset sunset from her deathbed, but also because this little puddle vaguely evokes in him my link with him: a rent

his world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty.

And a companion image even more eloquently speaking of Olga is the vision of her divesting herself of herself, of her jewels, of the necklace and tiara of earthly life, in front of a brilliant mirror. It is this picture that appears six times in the course of a dream, among the liquid, dream-refracted memories of Krug's boyhood (Chapter Five).

Paronomasia is a kind of verbal plague, a contagious sickness in the world of words; no wonder they are monstrously and ineptly distorted in Padukgrad, where everybody is merely an anagram of everybody else. The book teems with stylistic distortions, such as puns crossed with anagrams (in Chapter Two, the Russian circumference, *krug*, turns into a Teutonic cucumber, *gurk*, with an additional allusion to Krug's reversing his journey across the bridge); suggestive neologisms (the *amorandola*—a local guitar); parodies of narrative clichés ("who had overheard the last words" and "who seemed to be the leader of the group," Chapter Two); spoonerisms ("silence" and "science" playing leapfrog in Chapter Seventeen); and of course the hybridization of tongues.

The language of the country, as spoken in Padukgrad and Omigod, as well as in the Krug valley, the Sakra mountains and the region of Lake Malheur, is a mongrel blend of Slavic and Germanic with a strong strain of ancient Kuranian running through it (and especially prominent in ejaculations of woe); but colloquial Russian and German are also used by representatives of all groups, from the vulgar Ekwilist soldier to the discriminating intellectual. Ember, for instance, in Chapter Seven, gives his friend a sample of the three first lines of Hamlet's soliloquy (Act III, Scene I) translated into the vernacular (with a pseudo-scholarly interpretation of the first phrase taken to refer to the contemplated killing of Claudius, i.e., "is the murder to be or not to be?"). He follows this up with a Russian version of part of the Queen's speech in Act IV, Scene VII (also not without a built-in scholium) and a splendid Russian rendering of the prose passage in Act III, Scene II, beginning, "Would not this, Sir, and a forest of feathers..." Problems of translation, fluid transitions from one tongue to another, semantic transparencies yielding layers of receding or welling sense are characteristic of Sinister-bad as are the monetary problems of more habitual tyrannies.

In this crazy-mirror of terror and art a pseudo-quotation made up of obscure Shakespeareanisms (Chapter Three) somehow produces, despite its lack of literal meaning, the blurred diminutive image of the acrobatic performance that so gloriously supplies the bravura ending for the next chapter. A chance selection of iambic incidents culled from the prose of *Moby Dick* appears in the guise of "a famous American poem" (Chapter Twelve). The "admiral" and his "fleet" in a trite official speech (Chapter Four) are at first mis-heard by the widower as "animal" and its "feet," this is because the chance reference, coming just before, to a man losing his wife dims and distorts the next sentence. When in Chapter Three Ember recalls four best-selling novels, the alert commuter cannot fail to notice that the titles of three of them form, roughly, the lavatorial injunction not to Flush the Toilet when the Train Passes through Towns and Villages, while the fourth alludes to Werfel's trashy *Song Bernadette*, half altar bread and half bonbon. Similarly, at the beginning of Chapter Six, when some other popular romances of the day are mentioned, a slight shift in the spectrum of meaning replaces the title *Gone with the Wind* (filched from Dowson's *Cynara*) with that of *Flung Roses* (filched from the same poem), and a fusion between two cheap novels (by Remarque and Sholokhov) produces the neat *All Quiet on the Don*.

Stéphane Mallarmé has left three or four immortal bagatelles, and among these is *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* (first drafted in 1865). Krug is haunted by a passage from this voluptuous eclogue where the faun accuses the nymph of disengaging herself from his embrace “*sans pitié du sanglot dont j'étais encore ivre*” (“spurning the spasm with which I still was drunk”). Fractured parts of this line reecho through the book, cropping up for instance in the *malarme* *ne donje* of Dr. Azureus' wail of rue (Chapter Four) and in the *donje te zankoriv* of apologetic Krug when he interrupts the kiss of the university student and his little Carme (foreshadowing Mariette) in the same chapter. Death, too, is a ruthless interruption; the widower's heavy sensuality seeks a pathetic outlet in Mariette, but as he avidly clasps the haunches of the chance nymph he is about to enjoy, a deafening din at the door breaks the throbbing rhythm forever.

It may be asked if it is really worth an author's while to devise and distribute these delicate markers whose very nature requires that they be not too conspicuous. Who will bother to notice that Pankrat Tzikutin, the shabby old pogromystic (Chapter Thirteen) is Socratic Hemlocker; that “the child is bold” in the allusion to immigration (Chapter Eighteen) is a stock phrase used to test a would-be American citizen's reading ability; that Linda did not steal the porcelain owlet after all (beginning of Chapter Ten); that the urchins in the yard (Chapter Seven) have been drawn by Saul Steinberg; that the “other rivermaid's father” (Chapter Seven) is James Joyce who wrote *Winnipeg Lake* (*ibid.*); and that the last word of the book is *not* a misprint (as assumed in the past by at least one proofreader)? Most people will not even mind having missed all this; well-wishers will bring their own symbols and mobiles, and portable radios, to my little party; ironists will point out the fatal fatuity of my explications in this foreword and advise me to have footnotes next time (footnotes always seem comic to a certain type of mind). In the long run, however, it is only the author's private satisfaction that counts. I reread my books rarely, and then only for the utilitarian purpose of controlling a translation or checking a new edition; but when I do go through them again, what pleases me most is the wayside murmur of this or that hidden theme.

Thus, in the second paragraph of Chapter Five comes the first intimation that “someone is in the know”—a mysterious intruder who takes advantage of Krug's dream to convey his own peculiar code message. The intruder is not the Viennese Quack (all my books should be stamped Freudians, Keep Out), but an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me. In the last chapter of the book this deity experiences a pang of pity for his creature and hastens to take over. Krug, in a sudden moonburst of madness, understands that he is in good hands: nothing on earth really matters, there is nothing to fear, and death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution. And as Olga's rosy soul, emblemized already in an earlier chapter (Nine), bombinates in the damp dark at the bright window of my room, comfortably Krug returns unto the bosom of his maker.

September 9, 1963  
*Montreux*

—VLADIMIR NABOKOV

AN OBLONG PUDDLE inset in the coarse asphalt; like a fancy footprint filled to the brim with quicksilver; like a spatulate hole through which you can see the nether sky. Surrounded, note, by a diffuse tentacled black dampness where some dull dun dead leaves have stuck. Drowned, I should say, before the puddle had shrunk to its present size.

It lies in shadow but contains a sample of the brightness beyond, where there are trees and two houses. Look closer. Yes, it reflects a portion of pale blue sky—mild infantile shade of blue—taste of milk in my mouth because I had a mug of that colour thirty-five years ago. It also reflects a brief tangle of bare twigs and the brown sinus of a stouter limb cut off by its rim and a transverse bright cream-coloured band. You have dropped something, this is your creamy house in the sunshine beyond.

When the November wind has its recurrent icy spasm, a rudimentary vortex of ripples creates the brightness of the puddle.

Two leaves, two triskelions, like two shuddering three-legged bathers coming at a run for a swim, are borne by their impetus right into the middle where with a sudden slowdown they float quite flat. Twenty minutes past four. View from a hospital window.

November trees, poplars, I imagine, two of them growing straight out of the asphalt: all of them in the cold bright sun, bright richly furrowed bark and an intricate sweep of numberless burnished bare twigs, old gold—because getting more of the falsely mellow sun in the high air. Their immobility is in contrast with the spasmodic ruffling of the inset reflection—for the visible emotion of a tree is the mass of its leaves, and there remain hardly more than thirty-seven or so here and there on one side of the tree. They just flicker a little, of a neutral tint but burnished by the sun to the same ikontinct as the intricate trillions of twigs. Swooning blue of the sky crossed by pale motionless superimposed cloud wisps.

The operation has not been successful and my wife will die.

Beyond a low fence, in the sun, in the bright starkness, a slaty house front has for frame two cream-coloured lateral pilasters and a broad blank unthinking cornice: the frosting of a shopworn cake. Windows look black by day. Thirteen of them; white lattice, green shutter. All very clear, but the day will not last. Something has moved in the blackness of one window: an ageless housewife—ope as my dentist in my milktooth days used to say, a D

Wollison—opens the window, shakes out something and you may now close.

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The other house (to the right, beyond a jutting garage) is quite golden now. The many-limbed poplars cast their alembic ascending shadow bands upon it, in between their own burnished black-shaded spreading and curving limbs. But it all fades, it fades, she used to sit in a field painting a sunset that would never stay, and a peasant child, very small and quiet and bashful in spite of its mousy persistence would stand at her elbow, and look at the easel, at the paints, at her wet aquarelle brush poised like the tongue of a snake—but the sunset had gone leaving only a clutter of the purplish remnants of the day, piled up anyhow—ruins, junk.

The dappled surface of that other house is crossed by an outer stairway, and the dormer window to which this leads is now as bright as the puddle was—for the latter has now changed to a dull liquid white traversed by dead black, so that it looks like an achromatic copy of the painting previously seen.

I shall probably never forget the dull green of the narrow lawn in front of the first house (the one which the dappled one stands sideways). A lawn both dishevelled and baldish, with a middle parting of asphalt, and all studded with pale dun leaves. The colours go. There is a last glow in the window to which the stairs of the day still lead. But it is all up, and if the lights were turned on inside they would kill what remains of the outside day. The cloud wisps are flushed with flesh pink, and the trillions of twigs are becoming extremely distinct: and now there is no more colour below: the houses, the lawn, the fence, the vistas in between, everything has been toned down to a kind of auburn grey. Oh, the glass of the puddle is bright mauve.

They have turned on the lights in the house I am in, and the view in the window has died. The sky is all inky black with a pale blue inky sky—“runs blue, writes black” as that ink bottle said, but it did not, nor does the sky, but the trees do with their trillions of twigs.

KRUG HALTED in the doorway and looked down at her upturned face. The movement (pulsation, radiation) of its features (crumpled ripples) was due to her speaking, and he realized that this movement had been going on for some time. Possibly all the way down the hospital stairs. With her faded blue eyes and long wrinkled upper lip she resembled someone he had known for years but could not recall—funny. A side line of indifferent cognition led him to place her as the head nurse. The continuation of her voice came into being as if a needle had found its groove. Its groove in the disc of his mind. Of his mind that had started to revolve as he halted in the doorway and looked down at her upturned face. The movement of its features was now audible.

She pronounced the word that meant “fighting” with a north-western accent: “*fakhtung*,” instead of “*fahtung*.” The person (male?) whom she resembled peered out of the mist and was gone before he could identify her—or him.

“They are still fighting,” she said. “... dark and dangerous. The town is dark, the streets are dangerous. Really, you had better spend the night here.... In a hospital bed” (*gospitalish* *krivka*—again that marshland accent and he felt like a heavy crow—*kriv*—flapping against the sunset). “Please! Or you could wait at least for Dr. Krug who has a car.”

“No relative of mine,” he said. “Pure coincidence.”

“I know,” she said, “but still you ought not to not to not to not to”—(the world went on revolving although it had expended its sense).

“I have,” he said, “a pass.” And, opening his wallet, he went so far as to unfold the paper with question with trembling fingers. He had thick (let me see) clumsy (there) fingers which always trembled slightly. The inside of his cheeks was methodically sucked in and smacked ever so slightly when he was in the act of unfolding something. Krug—for it was he—showed her the blurred paper. He was a huge tired man with a stoop.

“But it might not help,” she whined, “a stray bullet might hit you.”

(You see the good woman thought that bullets were still *flukhtung* about in the night, meteoric remnants of the firing that had long ceased.)

“I am not interested in politics,” he said. “And I have only the river to cross. A friend of mine will come to fix things tomorrow morning.”

He patted her on the elbow and went on his way.

He yielded, with what pleasure there was in the act, to the soft warm pressure of tears. The sense of relief did not last, for as soon as he let them flow they became atrociously hot and abundant so as to interfere with his eyesight and respiration. He walked through a spasmodic fog down the cobbled Omigod Lane towards the embankment. Tried clearing his throat but merely led to another gasping sob. He was sorry now he had yielded to that temptation for he could not stop yielding and the throbbing man in him was soaked. As usual he discriminated between the throbbing one and the one that looked on: looked on with concern, with sympathy, with a sigh, or with bland surprise. This was the last stronghold

the dualism he abhorred. The square root of I is I. Footnotes, forget-me-nots. The strang quietly watching the torrents of local grief from an abstract bank. A familiar figure, albe anonymous and aloof. He saw me crying when I was ten and led me to a looking glass in a unused room (with an empty parrot cage in the corner) so that I might study my dissolving face. He has listened to me with raised eyebrows when I said things which I had no busine to say. In every mask I tried on, there were slits for his eyes. Even at the very moment whe I was rocked by the convulsion men value most. My saviour. My witness. And now Krug reached for his handkerchief which was a dim white blob somewhere in the depths of h private night. Having at last crept out of a labyrinth of pockets, he mopped and wiped th dark sky and amorphous houses; then he saw he was nearing the bridge.

On other nights it used to be a line of lights with a certain lilt, a metrical incandescen with every foot rescanned and prolonged by reflections in the black snaky water. This nigh there was only a diffused glow where a Neptune of granite loomed upon his square roc which rock continued as a parapet which parapet was lost in the mist. As Krug, trudgin steadily, approached, two Ekwilist soldiers barred his way. More were lurking around, an when a lantern moved, knight-wise, to check him, he noticed a little man dressed as *meshchaniner* [petty bourgeois] standing with folded arms and smiling a sickly smile. The tw soldiers (both, oddly enough, had pockmarked faces) were asking, Krug understood, for h (Krug's) papers. While he was fumbling for the pass they bade him hurry and mentioned brief love affair they had had, or would have, or invited him to have with his mother.

"I doubt," said Krug as he went through his pockets, "whether these fancies which hav bred maggot-like from ancient taboos could be really transformed into acts—and this fo various reasons. Here it is" (it almost wandered away while I was talking to the orphan—mean, the nurse).

They grabbed it as if it had been a hundred krun note. While they were subjecting the pa to an intense examination, he blew his nose and slowly put back his handkerchief into th left-hand pocket of his overcoat; but on second thought transferred it to his right-hand trous pocket.

"What's this?" asked the fatter of the two, marking a word with the nail of the thumb h was pressing against the paper. Krug, holding his reading spectacles to his eyes, peered ov the man's hand. "University," he said. "Place where things are taught—nothing ver important."

"No, this," said the soldier.

"Oh, 'philosophy.' *You* know. When you try to imagine a *mirok* [small pink potato] witho the least reference to any you have eaten or will eat." He gestured vaguely with his glass and then slipped them into their lecture-hall nook (vest pocket).

"What is your business? Why are you loafing near the bridge?" asked the fat soldier whi his companion tried to decipher the permit in his turn.

"Everything can be explained," said Krug. "For the last ten days or so I have been going the Prinzin Hospital every morning. A private matter. Yesterday my friends got me th document because they foresaw that the bridge would be guarded after dark. My home is o the south side. I am returning much later than usual."

"Patient or doctor?" asked the thinner soldier.

"Let me read you what this little paper is meant to convey," said Krug, stretching out

helpful hand.

“Read on while I hold it,” said the thin one, holding it upside down.

“Inversion,” said Krug, “does not trouble me, but I need my glasses.” He went through the familiar nightmare of overcoat—coat—trouser pockets, and found an empty spectacle case. He was about to resume his search.

“Hands up,” said the fatter soldier with hysterical suddenness.

Krug obeyed, holding the case heavenward.

The left part of the moon was so strongly shaded as to be almost invisible in the pool of clear but dark ether across which it seemed to be swiftly floating, an illusion due to the moonward movement of some small chinchilla clouds; its right part, however, a somewhat porous but thoroughly talcpowdered edge or cheek, was vividly illumined by the artificial-looking blaze of an invisible sun. The whole effect was remarkable.

The soldiers searched him. They found an empty flask which quite recently had contained a pint of brandy. Although a burly man, Krug was ticklish and he uttered little grunts and squirmed slightly as they rudely investigated his ribs. Something jumped and dropped with a grasshopper’s click. They had located the glasses.

“All right,” said the fat soldier. “Pick them up, you old fool.”

Krug stooped, groped, side-stepped—and there was a horrible scrunch under the toe of his heavy shoe.

“Dear, dear, this is a singular position,” he said. “For now there is not much to choose between my physical illiteracy and your mental one.”

“We are going to arrest you,” said the fat soldier. “It will put an end to your clowning, you old drunkard. And when we get fed up with guarding you, we’ll chuck you into the water and shoot at you while you drown.”

Another soldier came up idly juggling with a flashlight and again Krug had a glimpse of the pale-faced little man standing apart and smiling.

“I want some fun too,” the third soldier said.

“Well, well,” said Krug. “Fancy seeing you here. How is your cousin, the gardener?”

The newcomer, an ugly, ruddy-cheeked country lad, looked at Krug blankly and then pointed to the fat soldier.

“It is his cousin, not mine.”

“Yes, of course,” said Krug quickly. “Exactly what I meant. How is he, that gentle gardener? Has he recovered the use of his left leg?”

“We have not seen each other for some time,” answered the fat soldier moodily. “He lives in Bervok.”

“A fine fellow,” said Krug. “We were all so sorry when he fell into that gravel pit. Tell him, since he exists, that Professor Krug often recalls the talks we had over a jug of cider. Anyone can create the future but only a wise man can create the past. Grand apples in Bervok.”

“This is his permit,” said the fat moody one to the rustic ruddy one, who took the paper gingerly and at once handed it back.

“You had better call that *ved’ min syn* [son of a witch] there,” he said.

It was then that the little man was brought forward. He seemed to labour under the impression that Krug was some sort of superior in relation to the soldiers for he started to complain in a thin almost feminine voice, saying that he and his brother owned a grocery



store on the other side and that both had venerated the Ruler since the blessed seventeenth of that month. The rebels were crushed, thank God, and he wished to join his brother so that the Victorious People might obtain the delicate foods he and his deaf brother sold.

“Cut it out,” said the fat soldier, “and read this.”

The pale grocer complied. Professor Krug had been given full liberty by the Committee of Public Welfare to circulate after dusk. To cross from the south town to the north one. And back. The reader desired to know why he could not accompany the professor across the bridge. He was briskly kicked back into the darkness. Krug proceeded to cross the black river.

This interlude had turned the torrent away: it was now running unseen behind a wall of darkness. He remembered other imbeciles he and she had studied, a study conducted with a kind of gloating enthusiastic disgust. Men who got drunk on beer in sloppy bars, the process of thought satisfactorily replaced by swine-toned radio music. Murderers. The respectable business magnate evokes in his home town. Literary critics praising the books of their friends or partisans. Flaubertian *farceurs*. Fraternities, mystic orders. People who are amused by trained animals. The members of reading clubs. All those who *are* because they do *not* think, thus refuting Cartesianism. The thrifty peasant. The booming politician. Her relatives—her dreadful humourless family. Suddenly, with the vividness of a praedormital image or of a bright-robed lady on stained glass, she drifted across his retina, in profile, carrying something—a book, a baby, or just letting the cherry paint on her fingernails dry—and the wall dissolved, the torrent was loosed again. Krug stopped, trying to control himself, with the palm of his ungloved hand resting on the parapet as in former days frock-coated men of parliament used to be photographed in imitation of portraits by old masters—hand on book, on chair back, on globe—but as soon as the camera had clicked everything started to move, to gust, and he walked on—jerkily, because of the sobs shaking his ungloved soul. The lights of the thither side were nearing in a shudder of concentric prickly iridescent circles, dwindling again to a blurred glow when you blinked, and extravagantly expanding immediately afterward. He was a big heavy man. He felt an intimate connection with the black lacquered water lapping and heaving under the stone arches of the bridge.

Presently he stopped again. Let us touch this and look at this. In the faint light (of the moon? of his tears? of the few lamps the dying fathers of the city had lit from a mechanical sense of duty?) his hand found a certain pattern of roughness: a furrow in the stone of the parapet and a knob and a hole with some moisture inside—all of it highly magnified as though 30,000 pits in the crust of the plastic moon are on the large glossy print which the proud selenographer shows his young wife. On this particular night, just after they had tried to turn over to me her purse, her comb, her cigarette holder, I found and touched this—a selected combination, details of the bas-relief. I had never touched this particular knob before and shall never find it again. This moment of conscious contact holds a drop of solace. The emergency brake of time. Whatever the present moment is, I have stopped it. Too late. In the course of our, let me see, twelve, twelve and three months, years of life together, I ought to have immobilized by this simple method millions of moments; paying perhaps terrific fines but stopping the train. Say, why did you do it? the popeyed conductor might ask. Because I liked the view. Because I wanted to stop those speeding trees and the path twisting between them. By stepping on its receding tail. What happened to her would perhaps not have happened, had I been in the habit of stopping this or that bit of our common life.

prophylactically, prophetically, letting this or that moment rest and breathe in peace. Tamin time. Giving her pulse respite. Pampering life, life—our patient.

Krug—for it was still he—walked on, with the impression of the rough pattern still tingling and clinging to the ball of his thumb. This end of the bridge was brighter. The soldiers who bade him halt looked livelier, better shaven, wore neater uniforms. There was also more of them, and more nocturnal travellers had been held up: two old men with their bicycles and what might be termed a gentleman (velvet collar of overcoat set up, hands thrust in pockets) and his girl, a bedraggled bird of paradise.

Pietro—or at least the soldier resembled Pietro, the head waiter at the University Club—Pietro the soldier examined Krug's pass and said in cultured accents:

"I fail to understand, Professor, what enabled you to effect the crossing of the bridge. You had no right whatever to do so since this pass has not been signed by my colleagues of the north side guard. I am afraid you must go back and have it done by them according to emergency regulations. Otherwise I cannot let you enter the south side of the city. *Je regrette* but a law is a law."

"Quite true," said Krug. "Unfortunately they are unable to read, let alone write."

"This does not concern us," said bland grave handsome Pietro—and his companions nodded in grave judicious assent. "No, I cannot let you pass, unless, I repeat, your identity and innocence are guaranteed by the signature of the opposite sentry."

"But cannot we turn the bridge the other way round, so to speak?" said Krug patiently. "I mean—give it a full turn. You sign the permits of those who cross over from the south side to the north one, don't you? Well, let us reverse the process. Sign this valuable paper and suffice me to go to my bed in Peregolm Lane."

Pietro shook his head: "I do not follow you, Professor. We have exterminated the enemy—aye, we have crushed him under our heels. But one or two hydra heads are still alive, and we cannot take any chances. In a week or so, Professor, I can assure you the city will go back to normal conditions. Isn't that a promise, lads?" Pietro added, turning to the other soldiers who assented eagerly, their honest intelligent faces lit up by that civic ardour which transfigures even the plainest man.

"I appeal to your imagination," said Krug. "Imagine I was going the other way. In fact, I was going the other way this morning, when the bridge was not guarded. To place sentries only at nightfall is a very conventional notion—but let it pass. Let me pass too."

"Not unless this paper is signed," said Pietro and turned away.

"Aren't you lowering to a considerable extent the standards by which the function, if any, of the human brain is judged?" rumbled Krug.

"Hush, hush," said another soldier, putting his finger to his cleaved lip and then quickly pointing at Pietro's broad back. "Hush. Pietro is perfectly right. Go."

"Yes, go," said Pietro *who had overheard the last words*. "And when you come again with your pass signed and everything in order—think of the inner satisfaction you will feel when we countersign it. And for us, too, it will be a pleasure. The night is still young, and anyway we should not shirk a certain amount of physical exertion if we want to be worthy of our Ruler. Go, Professor."

Pietro looked at the two bearded old men patiently gripping their bicycle handles, their knuckles white in the lamplight, their lost dog eyes watching him intently. "You may go

too," said the generous fellow.

With an alacrity that was in odd contrast with their advanced age and spindle legs, the bearded ones jumped upon their mounts and pedalled off, wobbling in their eagerness to get away and exchanging rapid guttural remarks. What were they discussing? The pedigree of their bicycles? The price of some special make? The condition of the race track? Were their cries exclamations of encouragement? Friendly taunts? Did they banter the ball of a joke seen years before in the *Simplizissimus* or the *Strekoza*? One always desires to find out what people who ride by are saying to each other.

Krug walked as fast as he could. Clouds had masked our siliceous satellite. Somewhere near the middle of the bridge he overtook the grizzled cyclists. Both were inspecting the anal rub of one of the bicycles. The other lay on its side like a stricken horse with half-raised sad head. He walked fast and held his pass in his fist. What would happen if I threw it into the Kur. Doomed to walk back and forth on a bridge which has ceased to be one since neither bank is really attainable. Not a bridge but an hourglass which somebody keeps reversing, with me the fluent fine sand, inside. Or the grass stalk you pick with an ant running up it, and you turn the stalk upside down the moment he gets to the tip, which becomes the pit, and the poor little fool repeats his performance. The old men overtook him in their turn, clattering lickety-split through the mist, gallantly galloping, goading their old black horses with blood-red spurs.

" 'Tis I again," said Krug as his slovenly friends clustered around him. "You forgot to sign my pass. Here it is. Let us get it over with promptly. Scrawl a cross, or a telephone booth curlicue, or a gammadion, or something. I dare not hope that you have one of those stamping affairs at hand."

While still speaking, he realized that they did not recognize him at all. They looked at his pass. They shrugged their shoulders as if ridding themselves of the burden of knowledge. They even scratched their heads, a quaint method used in that country because supposed to prompt a richer flow of blood to the cells of thought.

"Do you live on the bridge?" asked the fat soldier.

"No," said Krug. "Do try to understand. *C'est simple comme bonjour* as Pietro would say. They sent me back because they had no evidence that you let me pass. From a formal point of view I am not on the bridge at all."

"He may have climbed up from a barge," said a dubious voice.

"No, no," said Krug. "I not bargee-bargee. You still do not understand. I am going to put it as simply as possible. They of the solar side saw heliocentrically what you tellurians saw geocentrically, and unless these two aspects are somehow combined, I, the visualized object, must keep shuttling in the universal night."

"It is the man who knows Gurk's cousin," cried one of the soldiers in a burst of recognition.

"Ah, excellent," said Krug much relieved. "I was forgetting the gentle gardener. So our point is settled. Now, come on, do something."

The pale grocer stepped forward and said:

"I have a suggestion to make. I sign his, he signs mine, and we both cross."

Somebody was about to cuff him, but the fat soldier, *who seemed to be the leader of the group*, intervened and remarked that it was a sensible idea.

"Lend me your back," said the grocer to Krug; and hastily unscrewing his fountain pen, he

proceeded to press the paper against Krug's left shoulder blade. "What name shall I put on the list of brothers?" he asked of the soldiers.

They shuffled and nudged each other, none of them willing to disclose a cherished secret incognito.

"Put Gurk," said the bravest at last, pointing to the fat soldier.

"Shall I?" asked the grocer, turning nimbly to Gurk.

They got his consent after a little coaxing. Having dealt with Krug's pass, the grocer in his turn stood before Krug. Leapfrog, or the admiral in his cocked hat resting the telescope on the young sailor's shoulder (the grey horizon going seesaw, a white gull veering, but no land in sight).

"I hope," said Krug, "that I will be able to do it as nicely as I would if I had my glasses."

On the dotted line it will not be. Your pen is hard. Your back is soft. Cucumber. Blot with a branding iron.

Both papers were passed around and bashfully approved of.

Krug and the grocer started walking across the bridge; at least Krug walked: his little companion expressed his delirious joy by running in circles around Krug, he ran in widening circles and imitated a railway engine: chug-chug, his elbows pressed to his ribs, his feet moving almost together, taking small firm staccato steps with knees slightly bent. Parody of a child—*my* child.

"*Stoy, chort* [stop, curse you]," cried Krug, for the first time that night using his real voice.

The grocer ended his gyrations by a spiral that brought him back into Krug's orbit whereupon he fell in with the latter's stride and walked beside him, chatting airily.

"I must apologize," he said, "for my demeanor. But I am sure you feel the same as I do. This has been quite an ordeal. I thought they would never let me go—and those allusions to strangling and drowning were a bit tactless. Nice boys, I admit, hearts of gold, but uncivilized—their only defect really. Otherwise, I agree with you, they are grand. While I was standing \_\_\_\_\_"

This is the fourth lamp-post, and one tenth of the bridge. Few of them are alight.

"... My brother who is practically stone deaf has a store on Theod—sorry, Emerald Avenue. In fact we are partners, but I have a little business of my own which keeps me away most of the time. In view of the present events he needs my help, as we all do. You might think—"

Lamp-post number ten.

"... but I look at it this way. Of course our Ruler is a great man, a genius, a one-man-in-a-century-man. The kind of boss people like you and me have been always wanting. But he is bitter. He is bitter because for the last ten years our so-called liberal government has kept hounding him, torturing him, clapping him into jail for every word he said. I shall always remember—and shall pass it on to our grandsons—what he said that time they arrested him at the big meeting in the Godeon: "I," he said, "am born to lead as naturally as a bird flies." I think it is the greatest thought ever expressed in human language, and the most poetical one. Name me the writer who has said anything approaching it? I shall go even further and say \_\_\_\_\_"

This is number fifteen. Or sixteen?

"... if we look at it from another angle. We are quiet people, we want a quiet life, we want our business to go on smoothly. We want the quiet pleasures of life. For instance, everybody

knows that the best moment of the day is when one comes back from work, unbuttons one's vest, turns on some light music, and sits in one's favourite armchair, enjoying the jokes in the evening paper or discussing one's neighbours with the little woman. That is what we mean by true culture, true human civilization, the things for the sake of which so much blood and iron have been shed in ancient Rome or Egypt. But nowadays you continuously hear silly people say that for the likes of you and me that kind of life has gone. Do not believe them—it has not. And not only has it not gone——”

Are there more than forty? This must be at least half of the bridge.

“... shall I tell you what has really been going on all those years? Well, firstly, we were made to pay impossible taxes; secondly, all those Parliament members and Ministers of State whom we never saw or heard, kept drinking more and more champagne and sleeping with fatter and fatter whores. That is what they call liberty! And what happened in the meantime? Somewhere deep in the woods, in a log cabin, the Ruler was writing his manifestos, like a tracked beast. The things they did to his followers! Jesus! I have heard dreadful stories from my brother-in-law who has belonged to the party since his youth. He is certainly the brainiest man I have ever met. So you see——”

No, less than half.

“... you are a professor I understand. Well, Professor, from now on a great future lies before you. We must now educate the ignorant, the moody, the wicked—but educate them in a new way. Just think of all the trash we used to be taught.... Think of the millions of unnecessary books accumulating in libraries. The books they print! You know—you will never believe me—but I have been told by a reliable person that in one bookshop there actually is a book of at least a hundred pages which is wholly devoted to the anatomy of bedbugs. Or things in foreign languages which nobody can read. And all the money spent on nonsense. All those huge museums—just one long hoax. Makes you gape at a stone that somebody picked up in his backyard. Less books and more commonsense—that's my motto. People are made to live together, to do business with one another, to talk, to sing songs together, to meet in clubs and stores, and at street corners—and in churches and stadiums on Sundays—and not sit alone, thinking dangerous thoughts. My wife had a lodger——”

The man with the velvet collar and his girl passed by quickly with pit-a-pat of fugitive footfalls, not looking back.

“... change it all. You will teach young people to count, to spell, to tie a parcel, to be tidy and polite, to take a bath every Saturday, to speak to prospective buyers—oh, thousands of necessary things, all the things that make sense to all people alike. I wish I was a teacher myself. Because I maintain that every man, no matter how humble, the last gaberloon, the last——”

If all were alight I should not have got so confused.

“... for which I paid a ridiculous fine. And now? Now it is the State that will help me along with my business. It will be there to control my earnings—and what does that mean? It means that my brother-in-law who belongs to the party and now sits in a big office, if you please, at a big glass-topped writing desk will help me in every possible way to get my accounts straight: I shall make much more than I ever did because from now on we all belong to one happy community. It is all in the family now—one huge family, all linked up, all snuggled and no questions asked. Because every man has some kind of relative in the party. My sister

says how sorry she is that our old father is no more, he who was so afraid of bloodshed. Greatly exaggerated. What I say is the sooner we shoot the smart fellows who raise hell because a few dirty anti-Ekwilists at last got what was coming to them——”

This is the end of the bridge. And lo—there is no one to greet us.

Krug was perfectly right. The south side guards had deserted their post and only the shadow of Neptune’s twin brother, a compact shadow that looked like a sentinel but was not one, remained as a reminder of those that had gone. True, some paces ahead, on the embankment, three or four, possibly uniformed, men, smoking two or three glowing cigarettes, relaxed on a bench while a seven-stringed amorandola was being discreetly romantically thumbed in the dark, but they did not challenge Krug and his delightful companion, nor indeed pay any attention to them as the two passed.

HE ENTERED THE ELEVATOR which greeted him with the small sound he knew, half stamp, half shiver and its features lit up. He pressed the third button. The brittle, thin-walled, old-fashioned little room blinked but did not move. He pressed again. Again the blink, the uneasy stillness, the inscrutable stare of a thing that does not work and knows it will not. He walked out. And at once, with an optical snap, the lift closed its bright brown eyes. He went up the neglected but dignified stairs.

Krug, a hunchback for the nonce, inserted his latchkey and slowly reverting to normal stature stepped into the hollow, humming, rumbling, rolling, roaring silence of his flat. Along a mezzotint of the Da Vinci miracle—thirteen persons at such a narrow table (crochery left by the Dominican monks) stayed aloof. The lightning struck her stubby tortoiseshell-handle umbrella as it leant away from his own gamp, which was spared. He took off the one glove he had on, disposed of his overcoat and hung up his wide-brimmed black felt hat. His wide-brimmed black hat, no longer feeling at home, fell off the peg and was left lying there.

He walked down the long passage on the walls of which black oil-paintings, the overflow from his study, showed nothing but cracks in the blindly reflected light. A rubber ball the size of a large orange was asleep on the floor.

He entered the dining-room. A plate of cold tongue garnished with cucumber slices and the painted cheek of a cheese were quietly expecting him.

The woman had a remarkable ear. She slipped out of her room next to the nursery and joined Krug. Her name was Claudina and for the last week or so she had been the sole servant in Krug's household: the male cook had left, disapproving of what he had neatly described as its "subversive atmosphere."

"Thank goodness," she said, "you have come safely home. Would you like some hot tea?"

He shook his head, turning his back to her, groping in the vicinity of the sideboard as if he were looking for something.

"How is madame tonight?" she asked.

Not answering, in the same slow blundering fashion, he made for the Turkish sitting-room which nobody used and, traversing it, reached another bend of the passage. There he opened a closet, lifted the lid of an empty trunk, looked inside and then came back.

Claudina was standing quite still in the middle of the dining-room where he had left her. She had been in the family for several years and, as conventionally happens in such cases, was pleasantly plump, middle-aged, and sensitive. There she stood staring at him with dark liquid eyes, her mouth slightly opened showing a gold spotted tooth, her coral earrings staring too and one hand pressed to her formless grey-worsted bosom.

"I want you to do something for me," said Krug. "Tomorrow I am taking the child to the country for a few days and while I am away will you please collect all her dresses and put them into the empty black trunk. Also her personal affairs, the umbrella and such things. Put it all, please, into the closet and lock it up. Anything you find. The trunk may be too small  
\_\_\_\_\_"

He wandered out of the room without looking at her, was about to inspect another closet but thought better of it, turned on his heel and then automatically switched into tiptoe gear as he approached the nursery. There at the white door he stopped and the thumping of his heart was suddenly interrupted by his little son's special bedroom voice, detached and courteous, employed by David with graceful precision to notify his parents (when they returned, say, from a dinner in town) that he was still awake and ready to receive anybody who would like to wish him a second goodnight.

This was bound to happen. Only a quarter past ten. I thought the night was almost over. Krug closed his eyes for a moment, then went in.

He distinguished a rapid dim tumbling movement of bedclothes; the switch of a bed lamp clicked and the boy sat up, shielding his eyes. At that age (eight) children cannot be said to smile in any settled way. The smile is not localized; it is diffused throughout the whole frame—if the child is happy of course. This child was still a happy child. Krug said the conventional thing about time and sleep. No sooner had he said it than a fierce rush of rough tears started from the bottom of his chest, made for his throat, was stopped by inferior forces, remained to wait, maneuvering in black depths, getting ready for another leap. *Pourvu qu'il ne pose pas question atroce*. I pray thee, local deity.

"Have they been shooting at you?" David asked.

"What nonsense," he said. "Nobody shoots at night."

"But they have. I heard the pops. Look, here's a new way of wearing pyjamas."

He stood up nimbly, spreading his arms, balancing on small powdery-white, blue-veined feet that seemed to cling monkey-wise to the disarranged linen on the dimpled creaking mattress. Blue pants, pale-green vest (the woman must be colour-blind).

"I dropped the right ones into my bath," he explained cheerfully.

Possibilities of buoyancy exerted a sudden attraction, and with the collaboration of popping sounds he jumped, once, twice, three times, higher, higher—then from a dizzy suspension fell down on his knees, rolled over, stood up again on the tossed bed, tottering, swaying.

"Lie down, lie down," said Krug, "it is getting very late. I must go now. Come, lie down. Quick."

(He may not ask.)

He fell this time on his bottom and, fumbling with incurved toes, got them under the blanket, between blanket and sheet, laughed, got them right this time, and Krug rapidly tucked him in.

"There has been no story tonight," said David, lying quite flat, his own long upper lashes sweeping up, his elbows thrown back and resting like wings on both sides of his head on the pillow.

"I shall tell you a double one tomorrow."

As he bent over the child, Krug was held at arm's length for a moment, both looking into each other's faces: the child hurriedly trying hard to think up something to ask in order to gain time, the father frantically praying that one particular question would not be asked. How tender the skin looked in its bedtime glory, with a touch of the palest violet above the eyes and with the golden bloom on the forehead, below the thick ruffled fringe of golden-brown hair. The perfection of nonhuman creatures—birds, young dogs, moths asleep, colts—and these little mammals. A combination of three tiny brown spots, birthmarks on the faint



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