

10-12

THE CREMATOR

Ladislav Fuks

The Devil's neatest trick
is to persuade us that
he does not exist.

GIOVANNI PAPINI

I

'My gentle one,' Mr. Karel Kopfkringl said to his beautiful, blackhaired wife on the threshold of the Predators' House as a faint early spring breeze stirred his hair, 'so here we are again. Here, on this dear, blessed spot where we met seventeen years ago. I wonder whether you still remember *where* it was, Lakmé?' And when Lakmé nodded, he smiled tenderly into the depths of the building and said: 'Yes, in front of that leopard over there. Come, let's go and have a look.' After they had crossed the threshold and were walking towards the leopard through the heavy, sweltering stench of the animals, Mr. Kopfkringl said:

'Well, it seems to me, Lakmé, that nothing has changed in those seventeen years. Look, even that snake in the corner over there is where it was then.' He pointed to the snake in the corner gazing down from the branch at *a very young pinkfaced girl in a black dress* outside the cage, 'I wondered then, seventeen years ago, why they put the snake in the Predators' House since there's a special house for snakes . . . and look, even that railing is still here . . .' he pointed to the railing in front of the leopard which they were approaching. Then they reached the leopard and came to a halt.

'Everything is as it was seventeen years ago,' said Mr. Kopfkringl, 'except perhaps for the leopard. The one we saw has probably been called to meet his Maker. Gracious Nature probably freed him from his animal fetters long ago. Well, you see, my dear,' he said, watching the leopard behind the bars who had its eyes half closed, 'we always talk of gracious Nature, merciful fate, benign God. We weigh and judge others, censure them for this and that – that they are suspicious, slanderous, envious and I don't know what, but what we are ourselves, whether we ourselves are kind, merciful, good . . . I always have a feeling that I'm doing awfully little for you. That article in today's papers about the father who ran away from his wife and children in order not to have to support them, that's terrible. What's that poor woman and her children going to do now? Perhaps there's some law which will protect her. Laws at least should protect people.'

'There is bound to be such a law, Roman,' Lakmé said quietly. 'I am sure they're not going to let the woman and her children starve to death. You keep saying that we live in a decent humanitarian stale where justice and goodness reign. Yes, you say so

yourself. And I suppose we're not badly off, Roman . . .,' she smiled. 'You have a decent salary, we have a large, beautiful flat, I look after the household and the children . . .'

'No, we're not badly off,' said Mr. Kopfkringl, 'thanks to you. Because you had a dowry. Because your late mother supported us. Because your aunt from Slatiňany is supporting us, who, had she been a Catholic, would certainly be canonized when she dies. But what have I done? I've perhaps furnished that flat of ours, but that's all I have done, even if it is a beautiful flat. No, my dear,' Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head and looked away at the leopard, 'Zina is sixteen, Milivoj fourteen, they're precisely at the age when they need most, and I have to take care of you all. That's my sacred duty. I've had an idea how to increase my income.' And when Lakmé looked at him in silence, he turned to face her and said:

'I'll get an agent and give him a third of my commission. Mr. Strauss will do it. It will help you as well as him, my heavenly one. He's a good, tidy fellow. He's had a shocking life. I'll tell you about it Tater. Who wouldn't help a good man? We'll invite him to The Silver Casket restaurant.'

Lakmé pressed herself against him, her eyes smiling and gazing at the leopard behind the bars whose eyes were still half closed like a big good-natured dog. Mr. Kopfkringl, too, was looking at the leopard with smiling eyes. Then he said:

'Do you see, my gentle one, animals can feel tenderness. They can be nice when we are able to reach out to them and enter their sad, reserved souls. How many people would become good, nice, if there was someone to comprehend them, to understand them, to caress their withered souls a little. Why, I suppose everybody needs love, even the police who clamp down on prostitutes need love; evil people are evil only because nobody has ever shown them a bit of love. Of course, this particular leopard is different from the one seventeen years ago, but even this one will be freed when the time comes. He, too, will see the light one day when the wall which surrounds him collapses, and the brightness which he's not yet able to see will illumine him. Did our own beautiful one get her milk today?' he asked, thinking of the cat they had in the flat, and when Lakmé nodded without a word, Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at the leopard for the last time. Then they slowly walked back towards the exit through the heavy, sweltering stench of animals from the dear, blessed spot outside the leopard's cage, where they had met seventeen years ago. Mr. Kopfkringl glanced at the corner towards the snake, which was still watching the pinkfaced girl in her black dress outside the cage, and said: 'It's strange that they've put a reptile with the predators, perhaps it's here only as a decoration or a complement . . .,' then he tenderly led Lakmé over the threshold onto the path bordered with shrubs, at which point Lakmé smiled and said:

'Yes, Roman, ask Mr. Strauss to come to the restaurant. But give him the *correct* name of the restaurant, so that he won't have to search for it.'

And Mr. Kopfkringl halted there, in the faint early spring breeze, which had stirred his hair, there on the path bordered with shrubs, and nodded kindly. His Soul was at

peace as is the case with people who have just held a service before the altar. He looked up at the clear, sunny sky, stretching far and wide. He gazed at it for a while, and then raised his band and pointed vaguely at it as though drawing attention to the stars, not visible in daylight, or to a magnificent picture or an apparition. . . . And next Sunday at noon . . .

Next Sunday at noon, during the lunch he was buying at the Silver Casket, Mr. Kopfkringl said to a small, stoutish gentleman who had a good-natured look about him:

‘Mr. Strauss, did you have to look for this restaurant?’ And when Mr. Strauss, the small, stoutish gentleman, shook his head good-naturedly, Mr. Kopfkringl gave a sigh of relief, and Lakmé, so it seemed, did likewise. ‘I’m so glad that you haven’t been looking for the restaurant,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl, ‘you know, if one says *The Boa* ...’ Mr. Kopfkringl glanced fleetingly at the signboard of the restaurant by that name, behind the tree-tops, ‘if one says *The Boa*, it’s quite clear. Everybody knows beforehand what to expect from a boa. Why, its very name indicates it, I suppose, unless it’s a tame and trained one. Not long ago I read in the papers about a trained boa which was able to do sums; *divide by three*. But a silver casket is a mystery. Nobody knows until the last moment what such a casket might contain until it’s completely opened and examined . . . well, Mr. Strauss, I’ve a little, modest proposal.’

Mr. Strauss, the small, stoutish gentleman, smiled unassumingly at Lakmé, the blackhaired beauty, and at Zina, who was also blackhaired and beautiful. He obviously derived pleasure from their beauty; they were sitting at the table in a graceful, indeed tender manner, if it is at all possible to sit tenderly. He smiled at Milivoj too, who was also blackhaired and good-looking, but probably still somewhat Bull; he was sitting and gaping a bit. Mr. Kopfkringl joyfully called for the waiter to bring more drinks and sweets.

The sun shone from the tree-tops onto the table on that warm, early spring Sunday at noon. The *Boa*, otherwise *The Silver Casket*, was, in fact, an open-air restaurant. Even a band played there, and in the front there was a parquet floor on which one could dance. Into the sunshine breaking through the trees on this early spring Sunday the waiter brought drinks and sweets. Mr. Strauss and Zina had a glass of wine, Lakmé had tea. ‘You know, Mr. Strauss,’ smiled Mr. Kopfkringl glancing at an adjacent tree where a small notice hung on a hook: *Drapes and Curtains repaired by Josefa Brouček, Prague-Hloubětín, 7 Kateřinská Street*, ‘you know, Mr. Strauss, my dear one comes from a German family really, from Slatiňany, and in her home they used to drink tea, she likes tea . . .’ Mili took a lemonade and a sweet. ‘Mili likes sweets, Mr. Strauss,’ smiled Mr. Kopfkringl and glanced again at the small notice with Josefa Brouček’s advert on the adjacent tree. ‘Mili is particularly fond of choc-ice, he has a sweet-tooth, the little brute.’ Then he looked at his hand with its pretty wedding ring, which rested alongside a small cup of coffee, and said: ‘And I’m abstemious. I don’t drink. I don’t drink, and if I do, then only a drop, just symbolically. Nor do I like cigarettes. I didn’t even get used to them in the war when we were fighting for

Austria. I don’t like alcohol or nicotine. I’m abstemious.’ Mr. Kopfkringl had a sip of coffee, and glanced at the bandstand where the musicians were taking their seats. At a table near the parquet floor he caught a glimpse of an *elderly woman in spectacles* with a foaming glass of beer beside her and said:

‘Well, Mr. Strauss, you’re a commercial traveller in confectionery. You’re in regular contact with shop-assistants ‘and shopkeepers and that in itself most be an extremely pleasant job. People who deal in confectionery most be gentle, kind, good. You know, Mr. Strauss, I can’t help it, but I feel quite sorry for them. that if you offered those nice people something else beside your firm’s goods? It’s not the sweets I’m concerned about, but they themselves, those gentle, kind, good people . . . But have no fear,’ he gave a quick smile, ‘no insurance companies, no insurance policies, but something entirely different. While you are offering them sweets, you could dive into your brief-case again and take out application forms for the crematorium. Five crowns commission for every subscriber to cremation.’

The band began to play some lively music, clarinets and fiddles struck up, the double-bass as well, and three couples went onto the dance floor. One of the couples consisted of an *elderly fat little man in a stiff white collar with a red bow tie* with a very young, pinkfaced girl in her black dress. The little man grabbed her’ back and began to circle with her on the same spot as though he were in a cape. Sitting at the table near the dance floor was the elderly woman in spectacles with the foaming glass of beer beside her; she was shaking her head with a bitter smile. Then she blew the foam to the ground and took a swig.

‘You know, Mr. Strauss,’ Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at the table, lit by the sun behind the tree-tops, ‘God arranged it very well for people. The fact that some suffer, that’s something else. Animals Buffer too. At home I have a splendid book in yellow cloth. It is a book about Tibet, about Tibetan monasteries, about their highest ruler, the Dalai Lama, about their fascinating faith. It reads like the Bible. Suffering is an evil we are supposed to eliminate or alleviate at least, to *shorten*. But people commit evil because they’re surrounded by a wall which prevents them from seeing the light. However, God arranged it well. He did well when he said to man ‘Remember that dust you are and to dust you shall return.’ He did a good thing when he formed man from dust, but mercifully granted him the opportunity to turn into dust again. After all the hardships and torments life brings, after all the disappointments and imperfections of love . . .’ He glanced at the elderly woman in spectacles with the glass of beer beside her, sitting by the dance floor, ‘God granted in his mercy man the chance to turn to dust again. A crematorium, Mr. Strauss, is greatly pleasing to God. Why, it helps him to *accelerate* the transformation of man into dust. Just imagine, if man were formed from some flameproof material. If he were, well...’ Mr. Kopfkringl shrugged his shoulders looking at the elderly woman in spectacles with her glass of beer beside her, ‘then you’d be welcome to pot him under ground. Fortunately, he’s not flame-proof. Do you know how long it takes before man turns to dust in the ground? Twenty years, but even then the skeleton does not disintegrate completely.

In the crematorium it takes a mere seventy-five minutes even with the skeleton, now that they have installed gas instead of coke. People sometimes object that Jesus Christ was not cremated but buried in the ground. Well, Mr. Strauss,' said Mr. Kopfkringl with a smile, 'that was something else. I always tell those nice people: the Saviour was embalmed, wrapped in linen and buried in a tomb cut in the rock. Nobody's going to bury you in a cave, nor embalm nor wrap you in linen . . . Arguments, Mr. Strauss, like the one that the coffin will split under the weight of the soil, and how painful it would be should the earth fall on the head, such arguments, of course, won't stand up. Why, when a person is . . .,' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a nod, 'dead, he no longer feels it . . . But there is another reason for cremation. Look, Mr. Strauss, if people didn't have themselves cremated but were buried in the ground, what would the furnaces be for?' After a moment of silence, Mr. Kopfkringl glanced towards the dance floor and said:

'We live in a good, humanitarian state which builds and furnishes crematoria . . . for what? For no earthly reason? So that people visit them like museums? Why, the sooner man returns to dust, the sooner he'll be liberated, transformed, enlightened, be reincarnated. Besides, the same applies to animals. There are countries, 1~1r. Strauss, where it is the custom to cremate animals after death: in Tibet for example. That book of ours about Tibet is amazing,' Mr. Kopfkringl glanced at the tree where the notice 'Drapes and Curtains repaired by Josefa Brouček, Prague-Hloubětín, 7 Kateřinská Street' hung on the hook, and added: 'I had no idea that there's a Kateřinská Street in Hloubětín. I only know the Kateřinská Street in Prague II.'

The band finished playing. The clarinets and fiddles fell silent, the double-bass as well, and the couples left the parquet floor. The elderly fattish little man in the stiff white collar with the red bow tie left with the pinkfaced girl in her black dress, and the elderly woman in spectacles nearby took a swig. Mr. Kopfkringl called the waiter, paid and everybody got up.

'You're fond of music, Mr. Strauss,' said Mr. Kopfkringl with a smile as they were leaving 'The Boa, otherwise 'The Silver Casket, Restaurant. 'Sensitive people love music. Wretched and poor are those, I once read, who die without having learnt the beauty of Schubert or – Liszt. Are you, by any chance, related to Johann or Richard Strauss, the immortal creator of "Der Rosenkavalier" and "Till Eulenspiegel"?'

'Unfortunately not, Mr. Kopfkringl,' said Mr. Strauss good-naturedly, looking at the restaurant's signboard, under which the pinkfaced girl in her black dress was talking to a young man and the elderly woman in spectacles was slowly approaching them from the direction of the tree. 'I'm not, but I like Strauss's music. Not because of the name, though,' he smiled, 'I'd probably like it even if my name was Wagner, for example. Which way would you like to go . . .'

'We're not going home yet,' said Mr. Kopfkringl with a kind smile, 'it's an early spring Sunday', and I'd like my family to have a bit of fun. I'd like *to refresh them a bit, divert their thoughts, so I'm taking my dear ones to Madame Tussaud's . . .*' he gave a smile.

'Oh, Madame Tussaud,' said Mr. Strauss.

'Of course,' said Mr. Kopfkringl apologetically, 'it's not the real Madame Tussaud. It's just a tawdry sort of imitation, but what do I care? It's better to see a commonplace, tawdry imitation than nothing. *It is,*' he said and pointed beyond the trees and shrubs, 'over there . . . Mr. Strauss, how glad I am . . .'

'A nice, witty fellow,' said Lakmé after Mr. Strauss had taken his leave with a polite word of thanks. They were then walking slowly to Madame Tussaud's under the trees and shrubs in the sunny afternoon of an early spring Sunday. 'If you think that it will be worthwhile . . .'

'It will, my dear,' smiled Mr. Kopfkringl, 'I get fifteen crowns for every subscriber, but I can't go round and see people like a pedlar. I work long hours. Sometimes I have a lot of duties in the evening. Where would I get time for the children, for you...? Mr. Strauss has far more opportunities in going round the confectionery shops. He can kill two birds with one alone. I'm only sorry I offered him one third of the commission and not half. I wouldn't like to cheat him. I wouldn't like to be like that trained boa which was able to divide by three, but no longer by two. Indeed, my dears, you have no idea,' he said, 'what Mr. Strauss has been through already. First some evil person deprived him of his position as porter in the porter's lodge. He retired. He was there because there was something wrong with his liver,' he smiled sadly at Zina who was walking by their side, 'this is sad, indeed. Our Mr. Vrána, our watchman from the lodge in the courtyard, has got something wrong with his liver as well, and that's why he's there. Then Mr. Strauss lost his wife, she died of *consumption of the throat,*' he smiled sadly at Lakmé, 'then he lost his son, he died of *scarlet fever,*' he smiled at Mili, who was walking slowly behind them. 'What hasn't he gone through already! Actually, I'm surprised that he hasn't gone mad yet. Well, he's survived everything, thank God. And I'm going to increase his commission on the grounds that he's successful,' Mr. Kopfkringl said resolutely. 'I'm sure he's going to be successful.'

'Yes,' Lakmé gave a nod, 'he's certainly a good businessman. He's Jewish.'

'Do you think so, my dear?' smiled Mr. Kopfkringl. 'I don't know. His name doesn't prove it. Strausses are not Jewish. Strauss means ostrich.'

'Names do not mean anything,' smiled Lakmé, 'after all, you know yourself how they can be changed. You yourself call The Boa 'The Silver Casket: lucky that Mr. Strauss didn't look for it . . . You call me Lakmé instead of Marie and you want me to call you Roman instead of Karel.'

'That's because I'm a romantic and I love beauty, my dear,' Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at his darkhaired beauty and took her tenderly by the arm, smiling at Zina at the same time.

'I didn't know,' said Zina, 'that people would be sitting outside under the trees at the restaurant already. After all, spring hasn't come yet. I didn't know either that you can dance there at lunchtime. I thought you could only dance at the 5 o'clock tea parties and in the evening.'

'People dance in the middle of the day at The Silver Casket, and people already sit outside because it's warm,' said Mr. Kopfkringl glancing at the trees and shrubs under which they were walking. Then he turned round to look at Milivoj who was still walking slowly behind them, and added with a tender smile:

'So that we can have a bit of fun for once, refresh ourselves a bit and divert our thoughts . . . We're here already.' They had just reached a tent with a wooden box-office and a coloured signboard which said:

WAXWORK A LA MADAME TUSSAUD
THE GREAT PESTILENCE – BLACK DEATH
IN PRAGUE 1680.

VII

The Sudetenland had been occupied and Kopfkringl's flat was glowing.

'How nice our dear dining-room is,' said Mr. Kopfkringl to Lakmé by the table in the kitchen putting sandwiches on a big tray. 'Our dear dining-room looks as if a wedding was taking place in it. Our own beautiful one is sitting at the head of the table . . .' Mr. Kopfkringl pointed to a kitchen chair. 'Her Mila here, two class-mates of our own beautiful one, Lenka and Lála here, Jan Bettelheim here and over there Vojta, son of the unfortunate Mr. Prachař from the third floor. You know, my gentle one,' he said to Lakmé, who was now putting salted almonds into little bowls with her delicate fingers. 'When I look at them all sitting in that dear dining-room of ours, they remind me of a scene from some beautiful old picture by a famous painter. It was clever of Zina's Mila to bring his camera along. If the pictures come out well they'll be a beautiful memory for the rest of our lives.' Then Mr. Kopfkringl said, putting chocolate rings and cakes on the second tray: 'Indeed, our Zina is beautiful, like you, my heavenly one, and your late mother. And how well she looks in that new black silk dress! It's just right for going out, the theatre, walks with her parents . . .' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile. 'If she had fair hair instead of black like both her dear class-mates, she'd look like an angel. Should the young Mila gel her . . . but I hope he will,' he gave a smile. 'He's a very nice boy. His photo didn't lie and he's from a good family. His father, Mr. Janáček, is a great expert on machines, and he's also some sort of official in the Sokol¹, and Mila appears to be very happy with Zina. I noticed his glance during the toast. His name Miloslav could be different though, like Svatobor or Zlatko², for example. Miloslav is too mundane, but that doesn't matter. Names don't mean anything, as you say, my dear. Mila is interested in physics, things electric, and machines; besides, I've always been interested in these things myself, I must ask him whether he's fond of music . . .'

'They're still children,' smiled Lakmé, adjusting the white lace collar on her dark dress. 'After all, it's what you call puppy love. Many things can still happen . . .'

'Of course,' said Mr. Kopfkringl with a glance at the white lace collar, 'many things can still happen. The future is always uncertain. None of us knows what's in store for us, or what we shall escape from, the only certainty we have in our lives is death. But everybody remembers his puppy love with pleasure. Our own beautiful one will remember it for the rest of her life. Will the two wine bottles be enough . . .?' asked Mr. Kopfkringl, putting spoons on the table. 'Perhaps they will. I'm abstemious, I've got coffee and you've got your tea in there, my heavenly one. Mili's got a sweet tooth and so has Jan Bettelheim, they'd rather eat chocolate rings and cakes. Did you notice how little they drank during the toasts? They certainly won't become alcoholics, thank God . . . Well, in fact, the bottles are only for the two girls, Misses Lenka and Lála, and Zina, her Mila and the son of the unfortunate Mr. Prachař. That boy Vojta drank a lot, let's hope he won't be like his father, it would be a pity. However, we mustn't suspect the worst, nor about the smoking either. I haven't seen Mrs. Prachař for a long time now but we mustn't let on, Zina especially. I wonder how Mila's going to take pictures of us. God willing, the pictures will come out well. It would be a beautiful memory of this day.'

'I don't think I've told you yet, Roman,' smiled Lakmé, taking plates out of the dresser, 'that Willi has written. Look, I've found his postcard in here,' and she took the postcard out of the dresser. 'I hope it doesn't matter that I forgot. It came this morning. He's inviting you and Mili to see a boxing-match next week. He says Chat you should see something real for once . . .'

Mr. Kopfkringl took the card, read it and with a glance at the dresser returned it to Lakmé, smiling.

'Next Wednesday at the Youth Club,' he gave a smile. 'Well, perhaps we could go, what with Willi asking us out and all that. We haven't really talked properly ever since that Sudetenland affair. But why is he asking us to the Youth Club? It's a Czech club, after all, and a boxing-match of all things! I had no idea that he enjoys boxing, or did I?' Then he said: 'Mili will no doubt be surprised when I tell him. He's never seen a boxing-match before, it'll be something of a revelation for him. I hope it won't have a bad influence on him, the good boy; I think that boxing is rather rough. Get Zina, my gentle one . . .'

Lakmé ran out to gel Zina. Zina came at once; she had on her new black silk dress and looked very nice in it. They picked up the dishes, almonds, plates and spoons from the table, and went out. In the doorway Zina said:

'I didn't know that we'd be serving sandwiches and sweets now. I thought they would be on the table during the toast.' 'It's better to bring out one thing after another,' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile. 'If everything was laid out on the table there'd be no surprises. It's just like the casket which contains something new each time you open it. It's better to see things gradually, one after another, rather than all at once. . . '

In the dining-room they were indeed sitting as though in a scene from a beautiful picture. Perhaps it was because they all sat at the table together, the cat having joined them into the bargain. Mili was holding her by the belly over the edge of the table,

¹ Falcon – Czech national gymnastic association

² Very old-fashioned names

Jan Bettelheim was pulling her tail and Vojta was holding a glass of wine to her snout. Both Lenka and Lála were laughing. They did indeed have fair hair; Lenka was slitu, Lála rather fat. Mila was laughing, turning his head and looking over his shoulder at the camera which was resting by the newspaper on the cabinet behind his back.

‘Well, have something to eat, dear children,’ urged Mr. Kopfkringl in a kind manner, when the dishes had been put on the table. ‘Everything must be eaten up. Young ladies . . .’ he smiled at Lenka and the fattish Lála, ‘Mr. Janáček, boys . . .’ he turned to Jan Bettelheim and Vojta, and then he said: ‘Mili, don’t torture the innocent one. Let her go. We can call her when we start taking pictures.’

‘Oh yes, that’s a French minister,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl when Mila glanced at the spot over the door where the Nicaraguan president was now hanging as the picture of the wedding procession had replaced it by the window beside the wall chart. ‘A former professor at the Collège des Sciences Sociales, later Minister of Pensions . . . It used to hang by the window beside the wall chart,’ he pointed. ‘Now there’s a picture of a wedding procession hanging there instead. I bought this wedding procession,’ Mr. Kopfkringl got up and took down the picture of the wedding procession, ‘for Zina from Mr. Holý in Nekázanka. Mr. Holý is an elderly, lonely fellow, a widower; he lost his wife nine years ago. He has a beautiful pinkfaced daughter, called Marta. A wedding, dear children,’ Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at the picture he was still holding in his hand, ‘is a big event. It happens only once in a lifetime, it can never be repeated; in fact, you take it with you to your grave. Of course, there are people who divorce each other,’ Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head and put the picture back on the wall. ‘They divorce each other and remarry, such things happen from time to time . . . But whether this is wise or good,’ Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head, ‘that’s a question. I don’t agree with it. A husband should be faithful to his wife and a woman should be faithful to her husband. A wedding is a sacred ceremony.’ Mr. Kopfkringl glanced at the wedding ring on his finger and seated himself at the table. ‘This kind of sacred ceremony should take place only once in your life. It’s almost akin to pronouncing somebody dead,’ Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile, ‘the most responsible and sublime official act which can be carried out in this world. Or a funeral, which also takes place only once in your life. Well, Mr. Janáček, so you’ve brought your camera along,’ he glanced at the boy. ‘Do you think it will be alright in this light?’

‘It will,’ replied Mila swiftly. ‘Shall I try it now?’

‘Perhaps we could wait until you’ve had something to eat,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl. ‘A fellow looks better when he’s *full*. He looks kind of more real then, more *alive*. And indeed, you haven’t had anything to eat yet,’ he pointed to the table. ‘Go on and have something to eat, Mr. Janáček, look what we’ve got here. Young ladies,’ he turned to Lenka and the fattish Lála, ‘you’re not eating either, or perhaps you’re slimming . . .’ and inwardly he thought: Slimming, that’s a good thing. One can at least save on the wood . . . and he said aloud: ‘After all, you’re still young.’ Then he urged Vojta and Jan to have something, and Zina poured the wine. The two fairhaired girls and Vojta

took a drink and helped themselves to sandwiches. Jan and Mili took cakes, and then Vojta fixed his eyes on the bookcase.

‘That’s my little bookcase,’ Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile. ‘It contains books you can read time and time again, and they’re still as charming and exciting as they were the first time. You never get tired of Uhem . . . Zina dear,’ Mr. Kopfkringl turned to Zina, ‘turn on the radio; there’s a nice opera on just now. It’ll form a kind of background or complement to our conversation . . .’ Then he said:

‘That bookcase contains the two books I like best of all. The yellow one,’ he pointed into the distance, ‘is about Tibet and the Dalai Lama. The second one beside it, bound in black covers, is not really a book; it’s only a few pages long. It was almost impossible to have them bound, but they are precious pages. They’re *lams* . . . But it occurs to me that we haven’t seen the papers yet,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl while the music from the radio struck up. It was a lively Siciliana from Verdi’s “Sicilian Vespers”, sung by an excellent singer . . . ‘We haven’t seen the papers yet although we live in such eventful times, particularly after the occupation of the Sudetenland. Great things are happening nowadays,’ he said, fetching the newspaper which had been left lying beside Mila’s camera on the cabinet. Turning over the pages he read:

‘“Boy, a minor, drove car . . . A bricklayer who was pushing a hand-cart was knocked down, and a coachman fell from his seat but was only slightly injured. As it was established later, the car was driven by a seventeen-year-old boy, a minor. He took his father’s car for a drive around Prague . . .” This couldn’t happen to you, Mili,’ Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at Mili, who was eating a chocolate ring. ‘We don’t have a car. You only have that game of yours of dividing cars into coloured, green and white ones . . . This is more likely to happen to Jan, they have a car,’ Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at Jan Bettelheim, who appeared to be listening to the music. ‘But Jan is a nice, well-behaved boy who prefers music, going to the opera and concerts to taking his uncle’s car. Your uncle,’ Mr. Kopfkringl put the newspaper aside for a moment and looked kindly at Jan, ‘is a rare person. An excellent physician. An outstanding expert. Besides, it’s a wonderful thing to be a doctor. I read once that a physician is a kind of angel among people, he helps those who are stricken. What’s more beautiful than helping those who are stricken? A doctor helps relieve people of their pain and suffering . . .’ he said slowly . . . and then after a moment’s silence in which the singer finished her Sicilian aria, he said: ‘Dr. Bettelheim is also an outstanding expert on pictures . . . That was the Siciliana from Verdi’s “Sicilian Vespers”.’ Then he picked up the newspaper again and read:

‘“Live aerial killed woman”,’ he read and glanced at Lakmé, who was just at that moment adjusting the white lace collar on her dark dress. ‘How careless women are. They are not the slightest bit careful. If that woman were to be cremated, all that would remain of her in an hour and a quarter would be two kilograms of ashes. Mili . . .’ he looked up at the boy as the radio began to play the Mignon song about the country where the lemon trees bloom. ‘You also get all sorts of ideas. Don’t ever dream of putting a banger in your mouth. You might pay dearly for jokes like that.’

The banger would explode in your mouth and you could become a cripple for the rest of your life. You also go straying about a lot, Mili,' Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head, looking for another piece of news in the paper. 'You ought to stop it. Look at Jan,' he indicated Jan Bettelheim. 'Whenever he goes out, he goes only as far as the bridge. I'm sure he'd never dream of going to some place in Suchdol and spending the night in a haystack, particularly not now,' Mr. Kopfkringl raised his head. 'The time is not right for romantic wanderings nowadays. You know perfectly well what has happened; they have occupied the Sudetenland, we are virtually living in a military camp. The police probably haven't much sympathy for romantic boys. That's Marta Krásová³ singing,' Mr. Kopfkringl pointed to the radio. 'It's the Mignon song about the country where the lemon trees bloom . . .' and then, after a further moment of silence in which, as it seemed, Jan Bettelheim was listening to Mignon, Mr. Kopfkringl bent over the newspaper and said:

'There's another thing here. "Serious accident in bed. J. Kašpar from Kosmonosy slepl in his bed by the table. One evening he put a big kitchen knife on the table. During the night he had a wild dream, and while he was dreaming he took the knife and stabbed himself in the right arm with all his might ..." He was apparently left-handed,' Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head. 'Lucky he didn't stab himself in the heart or stomach, poor thing. Just think,' he put the newspaper aside for a moment, *'even dreams can be fatal*. Well, come on, children, go on eating,' he urged everybody again in a kindly fashion. 'We're having a family party and you don't seem to be having anything. My heavenly one . . .' And Lakmé gave a smile urging everybody to eat and drink, and they all ate. Zina, Míla, Vojta, Lenka, the fattish Lála took a drink, and then Míla glanced at the wall chart by the window.

'Mr. Janáček is looking at that dear gentle wall chart of ours,' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile while a singer began to sing Mephistopheles' cavatina from Gounod's "Faust". 'You probably don't know what this wall chart means. Well, Mr. Janáček, it's our kind of timetable of death,' he said. 'You're interested in things electric, machines, physics, Mr. Janáček. They all have a future, the world is about to be taken over by automation. Personally I like various automatic machines and mechanisms, even if I don't talk much about it. Perhaps the automation and mechanics of this timetable of death will be still more refined one day than it is now,' Mr. Kopfkringl got up and took the chart down from the wall to the accompaniment of Mephistopheles' song on the radio. 'More so than it is now, and then things will gel even better and *faster*. It appears to be complicated,' Mr. Kopfkringl smiled towards the table. 'In reality, however, it's not so complicated. These numbers stand for funeral numbers,' he pointed and the ring on his finger flashed. 'These indicate the length of the services taking place in the hall; these stand for the first and second furnace, and these indicate the length of time it takes for the transformation to occur. This also includes waiting periods on the dead-end track; with two furnaces it can't be

otherwise. If there were only one furnace, as is the case in many towns in the country, in Chrudim near Slatiňany for example, the waiting period on the dead-end track would be increased by several hours. When there are two furnaces it increases by thirty minutes at the most. If we had three furnaces the waiting period would be completely eliminated. Then dead-end tracks would not be necessary at all. Everybody would leave the funeral hall straight for . . . Death,' Mr. Kopfkringl pointed to the wall chart and the ring on his finger flashed anew. 'Death is the only certainty in a man's life. There's nothing certain in a man's life except for the certainty that he's going to die, and so it's necessary to prepare and equip everything which follows after that. That's precisely what cremation does. Cremation is better for one than burial,' said Mr. Kopfkringl putting the chart back on the wall. 'Precisely because it's more automatic and mechanical, it accelerates the return to dust from which man has come, and, in fact, assists God. But chiefly it helps man himself. Death liberates man from pain and suffering . . .' he looked at Jan Bettelheim, 'removes the wall which surrounds him during his lifetime and restricts his vision. It enlightens him. Don't be afraid of cremation, my dear children,' Mr. Kopfkringl smiled gently, at which everybody laughed. 'That's Mephistopheles' cavatina from Gounod's "Faust", it's finishing now . . .' he pointed to the radio.

'Has anybody ever come to life after they'd been put into their coffin?' asked Míla, and Lenka, the fattish Lála and Vojta laughed. Only Jan Bettelheim was more serious, he was listening to the radio. A sweet duet for soprano and tenor from the last act of Donizetti's "Don Pasquale" could now be heard . . . and Mr. Kopfkringl, obviously pleased with the boy's attention, gave a gentle smile and said:

'Of course not, Mr. Janáček, of course not. That has never happened in the course of my profession yet. Not even Mrs. Strunný came to life, although she looked life-like in the coffin, nor Miss Čárský although she was thirty and was about to get married . . .'

'But somebody once did come to life in their coffin,' Vojta objected. 'I read once...'

'Me too,' said the fattish Lála . . .

'It has happened once,' Mr. Kopfkringl interrupted them kindly. 'It has happened but only because that person wasn't really dead. He was really alive when they put him into his coffin but they did not realize it . . . Only two people in history, who were really dead, were given the opportunity to come back to life in the coffin, and they were the daughter of Jairus, and Lazarus. But these were exceptions, a miracle. And then, Jairus' daughter was not in a coffin at all but at home in bed. And Lazarus was not in a coffin either but wrapped in linen in a tomb cut in the rock. But it is absolutely impossible for anybody to come to life once he has spent an hour and a quarter in the furnace, and his urn has been filled up with ashes,' said Mr. Kopfkringl sipping his coffee, while the sweet duet from "Pasquale" played on the radio. 'Once the urn is filled up with the ashes it's the end, even if you had a great mind to put yourself together again, jump out and walk about in this wide world of God's for a

³ Famous Czech opera singer.

few days longer like poor Mrs. Strunný or Miss sárský apparently. Cremation is absolutely reliable and completely rids you of the fear that you might come back to life. The person who opts for cremation will be absolutely certain for the rest of his life that there's nothing to worry about, and that he can die in peace. Even if we believed that cases of people coming back to life can occur nowadays, cremation will spare them all suffering. But my dear children, there really is nothing to worry about,' Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head with a smile gazing at the table. 'It doesn't happen nowadays. Once somebody is pronounced dead he is perfectly dead. Medical science is reliable nowadays in the diagnosis of death. Dr. Bettelheim would be the best person to confirm it if he were here, and the crematorium is an absolutely reliable mechanism. In the Middle Ages it was possible that people could come back to life now and then. But in those days people didn't even know how to deal with things which were simpler than something like the responsible and sublime official act of pronouncing somebody dead. They didn't know how to deal with the plague for example. That's the duet,' smiled Mr. Kopfkringl at Jan, who was still listening rather attentively to the music, 'from Donizetti's "Don Pasquale".'

'But isn't it possible to get the ashes of two different people mixed up . . .?' Jan Bettelheim now asked in a strange manner, for he was apparently not listening only to the radio but also to Mr. Kopfkringl, and Mr. Kopfkringl, obviously pleased, shook his head anew.

'Even that can't happen,' he said. 'There's no chance of that. It could have happened in the Middle Ages when they used to burn large numbers of heretics at the stake at one and the same time. In the crematorium each person is cremated separately, that is to say, cremated by means of red-hot air. Neither the body nor the coffin must come into contact with flames, that's a rule, there is even a sort of law for that ... and at each transformation the ashes pass through the grates automatically. However, supposing it could happen,' Mr. Kopfkringl mused a little, 'supposing it could happen, it wouldn't be such a tragedy as it may seem. 'That's to say, there's no difference in human ashes. The ashes of a prime minister are the same as those of a waitress; the cremated remains of the director of our crematorium will be the same as those of a beggar . . . It doesn't even matter what sort of blood one has; whether there is or isn't a drop of German blood is absolutely insignificant,' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile. 'All of us have the same forebears, we all come from and return to the same dust, we all have the same origin. And nobody can be blamed for his secondary, transient, actual origin, it has no value whatever. In the end, the same grey-white ashes will remain of everybody.'

The cat then approached the table, and Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile and said:

'In some humanitarian countries they even cremate animals after their death. The laws there serve not only people but animals as well. Animals are our brothers and we shouldn't inflict pain even on them. Even the most terrifying beast of prey will not hurt anyone who can understand their sad, reserved souls. Not even a leopard . . .' Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at Lakmé, who was at that moment sipping her tea, and at her

white lace collar which shone prettily on her dark dress. 'There's a beautiful passage about it in our beautiful book about Tibet. The passage tells about a boy's face-to-face encounter with a leopard in the jungle. The boy went to sleep in the bush one night, and when he woke in the morning he saw a leopard lying a few feet away from him. They stared at each other and the leopard didn't do him any harm. The boy then became a monk and later the Dalai Lama. This calls for a pure heart; tender, brotherly souls are able to feel it. Go on, my heavenly one,' he stroked the cat 'we'll call you when we start taking pictures. To immortalize your present likeness ... one day you won't recognize yourself . . .' he added quietly and then he said:

'They're playing a big aria from Bellini's "Norma" on the radio now. It's being sung by a famous Italian singer . . . I think there's still something in the papers we haven't read yet. After the occupation of the Sudetenland we now live as if we were in a camp under siege,' and then, while the Italian soprano was singing the Casta diva from "Norma" on the radio, Mr. Kopfkringl picked up the newspaper once more.

'Yes, here,' he said. "'Study on girl with two heads". A study about a girl with two heads...' he smiled with a glance at the table and read: "'The girls, joined together from birth, had separate heads, necks, upper limbs and chests with the appropriate inner organs, but a joint stomach and only one pair of lower limbs. They had separate spines and therefore a double nervous system, double spinal chord and double brain. Their mental life was quite independent. Each one went to sleep and woke up separately. The monstrosity survived for one year.'" Just imagine, Jan,' with a smile Mr. Kopfkringl turned to Jan Bettelheim. 'Supposing this *monstrosity* was cremated, then their ashes were mingled together and nothing happened. It would even have been impossible to separate the ashes in this case . . . Just imagine, Zina, my little one,' he turned to Zina with a smile, 'imagine if you had two heads, you'd be able to do two things at the same time, think of two different things, have two different feelings. That means a double length to one's lifetime. Indeed, what a blessed life. Well, my dear children, let's have one more drink. My heavenly one, give some more to the girls and boys, perhaps not to Jan and Mili, they don't drink, they're still young. They're still playing the aria from "Norma" on the radio.' Then Mr. Kopfkringl had a sip of his coffee, glanced at the half empty dishes of sandwiches, chocolate rings and cakes and the bowls of almonds, and said:

'So you've at least had a little something to eat, at least *appeased your appetite* a little . . . Well, Mr. Janáček, how about having a go with the camera?'

They formed a group, Mr. Kopfkringl taking the cat on his lap and seating himself, with Lakmé, in the middle. Zina and Mili stood next to them, and the other boys and girls positioned themselves behind them. And Mila wagged his finger jokingly, told them to sit still for a moment and took a picture of them to the accompaniment of the divme music from "Norma".

'A photograph,' said Mr. Kopfkringl after it had been done, 'is, as it were, a kind of eternal conserve of the present, actual time. Pictures are also taken in our crematorium, only you don't have to wag your finger jokingly, nor tell people to sit

still for a moment, for the pictures are being taken of people in their coffins. It's not necessary to wag a finger at them, and they're still for ever . . . People buy them for remembrance. The mourners, of course . . .' he added.

Mr. Kopfkringl kept the cat on his lap and Mila took another picture of him, just with his family -- with Lakmé, Zina and Milivoj. This time he did not wag his finger and they sat still for a moment without being told to do so.

'People like remembering a funeral or a wedding when they go through their family albums,' said Mr. Kopfkringl after it had been done, 'the two most sacred ceremonies in one's life. It's a remembrance for ever.'

Then the son of the unfortunate Mr. Prachař offered to take a picture of them all so that Mila could join them, and Mr. Kopfkringl gave a nod. Again he sat with the cat on his lap, Lakmé beside him, and the others standing behind them.

'And now you with Zina,' smiled Mr. Kopfkringl at Mila after this had been done. 'Now I'm going to take a picture of you, if you would care to adjust it for me, Mr. Janáček.' And after Mila had adjusted it and joined Zina, Mr. Kopfkringl took the picture and said:

'Nothing is certain in human life. The future is always uncertain, and this uncertainty is the source of all fear. But *at least* one single thing is certain in life, and that is death. So in fact, indeed . . . God be thanked for it . . .'

The big aria from "Norma" had finished on the radix and silence set in the dining-room for a while.

'Perhaps they'll come out well, God willing,' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile, still thinking of the photos. 'It'll be something to remember for the rest of our lives. Put your camera away, Mr. Janáček, in case it gets damaged . . .'

'I would like to ask you a question,' said the fattish Lála with a glance at 1~-'lila who was putting his camera into its case, and at Mili who was tucking into almonds, and after Mr. Kopfkringl had nodded with a kind smile, she said:

'What about embalming? When somebody is embalmed as they used to do in ancient Egypt, for example . . .'

'That would be a longish exposition, Miss Lála,' smiled Mr. Kopfkringl and made a slight movement with his hand. 'It's actually *against nature*. Against nature because then man does not return to dust whence he came, or because it takes thousands of years before he disintegrates. It is only possible to embalm saints or exceptional figures in history for whom it's no longer a necessity that they return to dust. They could embalm some pharaohs in Egypt, the Saviour could have been embalmed, Moses too, for example . . . the Dalai Lama could be embalmed in Tibet nowadays . . . but a Mrs. Strunný or Miss Čárský, that would be a sin. It wouldn't help them, rather the reverse.' Then Mr. Kopfkringl turned to Zina and said:

'Well, and now, since it's your seventeenth birthday and since you have such distinguished guests, you ought to play something for us on the piano. I'm sure,' he turned to the fattish Lála, 'you're fond of music, Miss Lála, and so is Mr. Janáček . . .' and when they nodded, Mr. Kopfkringl said: 'Sensitive people love music. That's

good. Mr. Janáček, are you by any chance related to . . .' but then he turned to Zina again and said: 'Let's enjoy some piano music. Have you got Mahler's "Kindertotenlieder" here, Zina?'

They went into the living-room which contained the piano with the flies hanging above it. Zina began to play some lively music, and Mr. Kopfkringl remembered that he must tell Mili about going to a boxing-match with Willi next Wednesday.

IX

'Oh, what a Christmas this year,' Mr. Kopfkringl smiled at Lakmé in the dining-room. She was at that very moment wiping the chair-seats. Then he glanced at the corner with its big Christmas tree, and said: 'What a blessed Christmas. New subscribers for cremation are simply pouring in. Everyone is abandoning the ground in favour of furnaces and ashes. In fact, I've bought the presents for both our *shining ones*,' he said, probably thinking of the children, 'out of the commission. Mr. Strauss is highly successful. What a good, conscientious fellow. I wonder where he'll be this evening. He had to leave the porter's lodge,' Mr. Kopfkringl glanced at the spot over the cabinet where the family photograph taken on Zina's birthday was hanging. 'His wife died of consumption of the throat, his son of scarlet fever . . . and I've found another one. Who is it?' he smiled at Lakmé's question as she continued to clean the chair-seats. 'Another good fellow, also conscientious and honest, a Mr. Rubinstein. This time there can't be much doubt that he's Jewish,' he gave a smile. 'Rubinsteins are Jewish. He used to be Liba's salesman, the bed-linen firm, but Liba collapsed. It seems that people somehow buy less bed-linen. Mr. Rubinstein has been selling bed-linen and now he'll be offering cremation,' he gave a smile. 'It's the same thing really. Both are concerned with making beds and going to bed. One is temporary, in bed for one night, the other is for ever, in the coffin for eternity. Mr. Rubinstein is also fond of music, particularly Mozart and Friml⁴. . . But there's one thing I don't like about Mr. Rubinstein, namely, that he's divorced,' he approached Lakmé standing by the chair and gently stroked her hair. 'I'd rather he wasn't. Or if it has to be, then I'd rather he were a widower like Mr. Strauss or Mr. Holý,' he stroked Lakmé anew. 'However, it's no concern of ours, and it's not for us to weigh and judge; who knows what was behind it. Not every marriage, my heavenly one,' he gave a sigh, 'can be as beautiful and happy as ours. Pity,' he said, approaching the tree in the corner, 'what a pity that your late mother won't come here any more. When I am lighting the candles tonight she will only be able to come as a spirit. On the other hand, Willi is going to *appear* here at five o'clock . . .'

'You talk as if he were a ghost,' smiled Lakmé with a glance at the chair. 'Is Erna coming too?'

'Erna's not coming,' said Mr. Kopfkringl. 'She probably has her hands full this evening. I expect they're having guests, the Germans from the Prague SDP. Never

⁴ Czech composer of operettas

mind,' he gave a smile, 'Willi's not going to stay long. He just wants to tell me something. Probably that I'm a renegade and a coward,' he gave a smile, 'that I don't have any feelings for my blood, that I'm not performing my duties. Still, he won't say such things on Christmas Eve, I hope,' he smiled anew. 'He's probably coming to wish me a happy Christmas. Well, let him come,' he said then, 'we've got cakes and almonds as well . . . The divine ones are here,' he said quickly, for the sound of the key turning in the lock could be heard.

In the hall, under the Maryborough picture, Zina and Mili were taking off their shoes. On the floor, beside the shelves for shoes, stood a shopping bag which moved slightly by itself.

'They had very big ones there,' Mili exclaimed, all aflame, 'like this. Such huge ones. But she bought two smaller ones,' he pointed at Zina.

'Anežka also bought two smaller ones,' said Zina. 'Two smaller ones are better than one big one, silly.'

'Well hurry up, my dears, go and fill the bath,' urged Mr. Kopfkringl kindly, gazing at the bag which moved by itself beside the shelves for shoes. 'I know they're opening their gills and gasping for breath. Anežka is going to kill them towards evening.'

They ran into the bathroom. Mr. Kopfkringl took the carp⁵ out of the bag, put them carefully on the bottom of the beautiful white bath and turned the taps on. 'Then he stood over the bath with bowed head as if standing over a catafalque, Zina and Mili beside him. They watched the carp tossing about on the bottom, and the water filling the bath little by little. They watched the carp as they grew more lively and then, when there was enough water, as they began to swim calmly around.

'Sweet,' Mr. Kopfkringl raised his head and glanced at the ventilator from which a cord was hanging, fastened on a hook under which there was the yellow butterfly on the wall. 'Nothing is going to happen to the little carp now. The little carp are in their element now. Let's leave our dear bathroom.'

'Why is Anežka going to kill them for us?' asked Mili, also glancing at the ventilator. 'Can't you do it?'

'Why, my child,' smiled Mr. Kopfkringl kindly. 'Of course I can do it. It's only that I don't like doing it. Anežka is an old hand, she's been doing it for us for years. Don't you know why? Why, because it gives us a pretext to give her something for Christmas,' he gave a smile and added: 'She's a good old soul.'

Towards evening Anežka came to kill the carp.

Mr. Kopfkringl heard her talking to Lakmé in the hall. He came out into the hall, greeted the good old soul kindly and called towards the kitchen:

'My gentle ones, come into the dining-room, Anežka is here.'

And inwardly he thought, I say it as if I was announcing an executioner.

'Don't go into the kitchen yet,' he said to Zina and Mili as he stood by the tree in the corner of the dining-room. 'Stay here for a while. You don't have to see it. This is no,' he smiled at Mili, 'boxing-match. Where's Rosana?' he asked and Mili said: 'In the kitchen.'

Mr. Kopfkringl approached the cabinet, gazing at the family photograph for a while. He sat there in the middle, next to Lakmé, with the cat on his lap, with Zina and Mili standing on either side of them. Then he gazed for a while at the standard lamp, which was turned off, and at the chair beneath it. Then he reached for the newspaper on the cabinet.

'A nine-year-old boy is missing', 'he read after he had turned to the inside pages. 'He left home three days before Christmas Eve, and has not come back so far. His parents and the police have been looking in vain for . . . ' Mili turned away towards the window, and Mr. Kopfkringl had to smile. Then the click of the kitchen door could be heard, and Mr. Kopfkringl turned round.

'The carp are in the kitchen now,' he nodded at the children. 'There's room on the table now, and Anežka is getting the board, knife and mallet out . . . ' Then the sound of a blow could be heard from the kitchen.

'One of them is now dead,' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a nod, glancing at the wall chart by the window, that most sublime timetable. 'Which one could it have been? The smaller or the bigger one? The wall surrounding him has collapsed and he has seen the light. His soul,' he straightened the newspaper, which he was holding in his hand and walked slowly with it towards the bookcase, 'is now in the ether.' Then he looked at the newspaper again and read:

'A woman allegedly committed suicide because of hunger. This morning at 8 o'clock, in Dr. S.' villa, the police found . . . ' Mr. Kopfkringl read the news item to the end and glanced at Zina, who was at that very moment arranging her hair in front of the small mirror. Then the sound of a second blow could be heard from the kitchen and Mr. Kopfkringl, standing by the bookcase, nodded his head.

'Now the second one is dead,' he said, glancing at the wall chart by the window, the most sublime timetable. 'Which one could it have been? His wall has collapsed too, and his soul is in the ether. You'll be taking their air-bladders,' he smiled at Mili and took the book about Tibet out of the bookcase. 'You'll play with them as you have always done ever since you were small. But they're not really the souls⁶ of the carp, that's only what people call them. They're airbladders. Their real souls could have been reincarnated by now,' Mr. Kopfkringl opened the book, 'possibly into cats. They're our younger brothers. We shouldn't really kill and eat them, it's cruel. Well, there you are. In a moment your heavenly mother will put them on the kitchen stove, on that little furnace of ours, and fry them,' he said, putting back his book about Tibet and taking out the copy of the laws on cremation bound in black covers. 'They'll arrive on our festive dining-table at seven o'clock. But God has arranged it

⁵ A traditional Czech Christmas dish

⁶ In Czech the air-bladders are also called "souls"

so and that's good. By eating them on Christmas Eve we *accelerate* their rebirth. The Saviour ate them too,' said Mr. Kopfkringl, putting back the copy of the laws on cremation. 'He also ate lamb . . .' Then he gave a smile, put away the newspaper in the cabinet and extended his hands to Zina and Mili.

'Come, my gentle ones,' he said, 'we'll give Anežka her present. A pretty red apron.'

When Anežka had left, Willi came.

He exchanged greetings with Lakmé and the children in the hall and took off his coat. He had on an elegant new suit. Then he entered the dining-room. There was a bottle of wine ready on the table.

'You've got a nice tree there,' said Willi. 'What about the carp, have you got that?'

'Two,' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile. 'My heavenly one is going to fry them in a moment. In a moment she's going to put them on that little furnace of ours. Her late mother,' he said, 'used not to fry the carp. She used to make *sweet jellied carp*, in a *foreign style*. We do them in the Czech style. You've come to tell me that I'm a renegade and a coward . . .' Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile.

'I never said that,' Willi turned away from the tree. 'I only said that you don't feel your German blood, and that *we* fight for happiness and justice. We,' he gave a laugh, seating himself at the table, 'strong people who are one-hundred-percent. I said,' he said and poured a little wine into his glass, 'that fighting for sublime goals doesn't create hell for decent people, but for our adversaries. For war-mongers. Do you like violence?' Willi smiled in a kind of attentive manner, if it is at all possible to smile in an attentive manner, and raised the glass to his lips. When Mr. Kopfkringl did not answer immediately, he said: 'Do you like those who are responsible for our poverty? Do you keep your fingers crossed on their behalf? So that they can bury us still deeper? For them to make beggars of us? Have you ever seen a *bloodletting*?' he asked lightly and said: 'They cut the vein here, on the arm, and put leeches on it. They used to do it in the Middle Ages to fight the plague . . . I always thought,' he said and took another sip of wine, 'that you were against violence, that you're concerned with peace, justice and everybody's happiness. Well, look here,' he said and rapped the table with his fingers, 'to give you some proper information for once. I always thought that you didn't like war, that you haven't forgotten how people suffer in war, and not only people. You talked about horses once . . . 'Well, this republic is an enormous barrel of gunpowder. The source of a new World War. Our enemies' bastion.'

'It's a humanitarian stale,' objected Mr. Kopfkringl. 'A humanitarian stale, it has good laws . . .'

'Laws on cremation,' Willi interrupted him. 'We've got them, too. Every humanitarian stale has them, except perhaps for the Vatican which doesn't recognize cremation. But why didn't this humanitarian stale gram us, us Germans, the right to self determination? Why did it make it difficult for the Germans in the Sudetenland to send their children to German schools? Why did they make raids on our people in

the borderland and shoot them? What . . .?' he said in answer to Mr. Kopfkringl's objection as to whether it was true. 'Is it true? Don't you know? And what about the poverty here? You yourself have admitted to that, that you haven't been able to put an end to poverty entirely. There are beggars here, there are women here who sell skinned cats in the markets instead of rabbits . . . That would not be possible in the Reich even now, although we're not yet home and dry by a long chalk. I'd stake my life on it that there's not a single beggar in the Sudetenland today, and how long is it since the Führer liberated them?' he said and took a swig. 'No, Karl, to make things clear. It must not come to war. Violence must be suppressed, everywhere. This republic is lost. Poland will not lift a finger for it. Beck made an agreement with Goering on the share which will fall to him once the republic is liquidated, and the Little Entente has fallen into decay. It's over.'

'Has it really gone that far?' Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head and wanted to add something, but Willi interrupted him forcefully.

'Even further,' he said. 'This republic is only *one* bastion of the enemy. There are still other enemies and the Führer is going to settle accounts with them too. We Germans,' he said and gave a smile, 'are destined to bring order. We are going to establish a new, happier, and just order in Europe,' Willi rose, crossed the dining-room and then halted by the cabinet.

'We're upholders of a strong, proud spirit,' he said, glancing at the family photograph in which Mr. Kopfkringl sat in the middle, with the cat. 'Pure Germanic blood flows in our veins. Blood is our greatest honour and it cannot be outweighed either by education or by gold . . . it's a gift from above . . . Yes,' Willi glanced at his friend Kopfkringl, 'noone who's got it will disclaim it.'

'We're upholders of a luminous civilization,' he went on, gazing at the picture of the wedding procession and at the wall chart by the window, the most sublime timetable, the timetable of death. 'We know what life is. We understand it as no other nation does, we got it from above as a christening present. You too . . .,' he turned to his friend Kopfkringl, 'especially you. But why! Because you have German blood which you won't disclaim. Do you think it's a coincidence?' Willi smiled at the picture of the wedding procession. 'This is no coincidence. This is predestination.'

'We are going to establish a superior, universal morality, and,' he approached the Christmas tree on which there were many candles waiting to be lit, 'a new world order. You're one of us. You're an honourable man, sensitive, a man of responsibility, and most of all . . .' Willi turned round, 'strong and brave. A pure Germanic soul. Nobody can take it from you, mein lieber Karl⁷. You can't take it away, even if you wanted to a hundred times over, *not even you yourself*. Because it's been given to you from above. It's your gift too. Your *predestination*. You're one of the chosen,' Willi pointed to the ceiling as if pointing to the sky. Mr. Kopfkringl was sitting behind the table, on which stood a bottle of wine and a half empty glass, and gazed at Willi, who

⁷ my dear Karl

was standing in front of the Christmas tree, smiling softly. There was a moment of silence and then a rap on the door could be heard. Lakmé came in carrying a bowl of almonds.

‘Willi will *not have* almonds today,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl. ‘Thank you, my noble one. We’ll join you soon.’

When Lakmé left, Willi seated himself at the table and, as it seemed, emptied his glass with relish. Mr. Kopfkringl refilled it.

‘I must be going,’ said Willi kindly. ‘Erna’s waiting. We’re spending Christmas Eve in the Casino. In the German Casino in Růžová Street,’ he moved his hand, ‘with that white marble entrance and the three steps. There’s going to be a big gathering. Factory owners, deputies, professors from the German Charles University. Only some of them of course . . . I’m going to confer about something with Boehrmann, the leader of the Prague SDP. You won’t,’ he said, ‘find a more luxurious establishment in Prague than our German Casino, Karl. The way we’ve furnished it,’ he looked round the walls of the dining-room, ‘is simply a miracle. Beginning with the carpets, mirrors and pictures, and ending with the lavatories and bathrooms. Beginning with the food and ending with the service. There are *excellent waitresses, barmaids and hostesses*. Magnificent, ravishing women, they’re breathtaking,’ he gave a smile. ‘They’re German of course. Only fellow-countrymen are admitted to the Casino. German nationality. No Czechs. We won’t put up with trouble-makers and spies in our own house. Well, I’m going to Vienna and Berlin in January,’ Willi rose. ‘I’ll be given a new car in Berlin. Karl,’ he extended his hand to his friend Kopfkringl, who had risen as well. ‘Everything depends on one’s ability to see the whole. To think about the future. About a better life for our children. About a more joyous life for mankind. Well, it seems to me that you’re better informed about Tibet than about happenings here at home.’ He gave a smile. ‘Well, merry Christmas and all the best for the New Year. You’ve got a loose curtain there,’ he nodded his head in the direction of the window. Indeed, the outer edge of the curtain had slipped off its cord and was hanging loose below the rod. ‘Well, have a good time. I’ll just say goodbye to the family,’ he said.

By seven o’clock Lakmé and Zina had laid the dining table. Both had their best dresses on. Zina wore the black silk dress she had received for her birthday; Lakmé had the dark silk dress with the white lace collar. Mr. Kopfkringl lit the candles on the tree and turned on the radio. Then they all seated themselves at the table.

‘I thought,’ said Zina, ‘that we’d light the candles when we start giving presents.’

‘It’s better to light them before dinner,’ smiled Mr. Kopfkringl. ‘After all, they’re not lit often, only once a year. They’re lit more often on graves and catafalques. Well, Christmas is really beginning now,’ he pointed to the radio on which carols could be heard, ‘and we have to remember all these dear good souls of ours who are not with us or who don’t understand us. Our own beautiful one,’ he smiled into the corner where the cat was licking her plate, ‘our eternal Rosana. Our aunt from Slatiňany, that faithful good soul of ours, always ready to help, who, had she been a Catholic, would

certainly be canonized when she dies, and who is a saint even during her lifetime. Our gentle ones,’ he said, thinking of the children, ‘should visit her again some time with a bunch of lilies. Your late mother, my heavenly one,’ he smiled at Lakmé, ‘and her sweet-jellied carp in the foreign style. Well, perhaps she can see us now, perhaps she’s here. Perhaps she really came when I lit the candles and is now standing by the tree over there. But perhaps she’s in a different body now. We mustn’t be so conceited as to believe that she is no longer reincarnated, that she has reached her goal already. That’s very rare; some pharaohs, saints, one of the Dalai Lamas ...’ Mr. Kopfkringl glanced towards the bookcase, smiling. ‘And what may Mr. Mila Janáček be doing, my lovely,’ he smiled at Zina. ‘He’s having dinner with his parents and thinking of you. He gave you a nice present and sent a nice Christmas card. He’s a good boy, he’s fond of music, physics and machines. He’s from the best family and deserves happiness in his life. And what about the young Misses Lenka and Lála, your fairhaired class-mates? The Bettelheims,’ Mr. Kopfkringl looked at Mili, ‘are also having a feast now. They celebrate Christmas like us. I don’t think they’ve ever observed any Jewish festivals. At the same time, he comes from a distinguished Hungarian Jewish family, that good noble philanthropist of ours, Dr. Bettelheim. He invited me up to his surgery once and told me that,’ he said with a glance at the picture of the wedding procession by the window. ‘He told me that in connection with the beautiful old picture he’s but hanging on the wall there. It depicts the abduction of a woman by Count Bethlén which failed . . .’ Mr. Kopfkringl looked round the walls of the dining-room . . . then he stared at the ceiling as if he was seeing the starry sky, and then he glanced at Mili again and said: ‘And what may the Prachařs be doing? Poor Mrs. Prachař, I haven’t seen her for a long time now; poor Vojta Mr. Prachař’s son.’

New carols could be heard on the radio. Mr. Kopfkringl gazed at the Christmas tree for a while and then at the cat, who came up to him, and then he said:

‘It’s Christmas Eve, my dears, and the Temple of Death is idle today. Today it’s deserted and empty. Even Mr. Dvořák is not there, nor Mr. Vrána in the porter’s lodge, who sits there because he’s but something wrong with his liver . . . even Mr. Fenek with the nail on his little finger isn’t in the porter’s lodge. He’s *somewhere* at home. I wonder how he is spending his Christmas Eve...? And what may Mrs. Strunny and Miss Čárský be doing...?’ he said, listening to the radio on which “Sweet Was the Song the Virgin Sang” could now be heard. ‘If they were in the ground they’d look horrifying now, poor things . . . luckily they’re not in the ground but are dust in the urn and their souls are undergoing further reincarnation. There are only a couple of corpses lying in the preparation room in the Temple of Death today, waiting for the festival to finish. Christmas Eve is not a day of death but of birth,’ he said with a glance at the radio on which “While Shepherds Watched” could now be heard, ‘and so there’s no cremation. Just like Saturday afternoon,’ he smiled at Mili, ‘there’s no cremation on Saturday afternoon either . . . But there should be one on Christmas Eve. Precisely because Christmas Eve is a day of birth. There should be

many funerals on such a joyous day so that as many souls as possible could extricate themselves, free themselves, fly up into the universe, and find new bodies. Christmas Eve should be generous to the dead as well. At least these dear fried carp will get something out of it . . .’ he added. On the radio, they had just begun singing “God Rest You Merry Gentlemen”.

When they had finished the fried carp, Mr. Kopfkringl put the newspaper and a bottle of wine on the table. “Come All Ye Faithful” was on the radio. They filled and then clinked their glasses, though he only wetted his lips. ‘Just symbolically,’ he said, ‘I’m abstemious. On the other hand, I’m also a pure Germanic soul. Yes . . .’ he smiled at Lakmé, who glanced up, ‘Willi told me that today. Predestined, chosen,’ he smiled towards the glass. ‘He and Erna are having dinner in the German Casino today. The Casino is in Růžová Street. It’s but a white marble-covered entrance with three steps. Willi’s having dinner in high society. In case I should forget,’ he smiled at Lakmé, who looked saddened somehow, ‘the newspaper is full of accidents again. A woman committed suicide, allegedly because of hunger.’ He looked at the newspaper and read out the news item and then read another piece: “Mad dog bit five-year-old girl. Yesterday afternoon, a dog, belonging to Karl B. in Loučen, broke loose from its kennel, ran out of the door onto the path where children were playing, and . . .” And here’s something else,’ Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile. ‘I’d completely overlooked it, an advert. *Drapes and curtains repaired,*’ he read, to the accompaniment of the children’s chorus singing “Little Jesus, We Will Rock You”. . .’ by *Josefa Brouček, Prague Hloubětín, 7 Kateřinská Street* . . . in case I should forget,’ he smiled at Lakmé. ‘The curtain over there is giving trouble. We’ll put it right before we start giving presents, so that our flat will be flawless and without blemish – like paradise.’

Lakmé got up and went to the window. Mr. Kopfkringl put aside the newspaper, took his chair and put it close by the curtain. Lakmé got up on it, and adjusted the cord, standing on the tips of her toes a little. ‘It’s working,’ Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile after he had helped Lakmé jump down and checked the curtain. Then he embraced Lakmé and stroked her white lace collar.

‘So,’ he said, ‘and now we are going to bring out the sweets for those who have a sweet tooth and give presents. Not every family has as many presents at Christmas as we do. There’s still a great deal of poverty in our country and in the world. Willi also told me today,’ he gave a smile, ‘that everything depends on the ability to see the whole. To think about the future. About a better life for our children and for those who will follow after us. About a happier life for mankind. So, it seems to me,’ Mr. Kopfkringl smiled somewhere in the direction of the bookcase, ‘that Willi spoke like a book . . .’

Then the radio began to play and sing “Jesus Christ, Our Saviour Was Born”. Mr. Kopfkringl brought out the presents which he had hidden in the living-room. Lakmé got stockings, an enormous jar of sweet-smelling cream with a golden and black label and a box of chocolates. Zina got a handbag, a box of chocolates and a piano score from Chopin’s “Funeral March”. Mili got a basket of chocolate rings, a little white car

with a red cross, and a black pillow adorned with golden and silver tassels. And an adventure book called “Death in the Primeval Forest” into the bargain.

XIII

‘I couldn’t get here in time,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl to Srnec, in a rather dry though not unkind manner, in the director’s office a few days after his visit to the Casino and the lookout tower. ‘Something unexpected has happened. I was holding a consultation.’ ‘The director glanced at Mr. Kopfkringl and did not say a word. Not a muscle moved in his face, and neither did his eye. Mr. Kopfkringl bowed slightly and left. ‘The director,’ he said to himself on the staircase, on his way to the cloakroom, ‘is uneasy, as if he sensed that something’s happening around him. That he’s being weighed up and discussed. That he’s not going to be here much longer now. He’s not a bad fellow,’ he said to himself, ‘but what’s the good of it? We can’t put up with evil-doers in this sort of place. Why, nobody would have evil-doers in this sort of place, that’s obvious; human. What he said about cremating the Germans in the ovens, that’s . . .’ Mr. Kopfkringl shook his head violently, covered his eyes with his hand and quickened his pace in order to reach the cloakroom as soon as possible. He arrived in the cloakroom and changed his clothes. In front of the furnaces, he smiled at Zajíc and Beran who were watching the thermometers coldly and in silence. From the funeral hall, “my Czech Lands, my beautiful Czech Lands...” could be heard through the loudspeaker. He asked them where Mr. Dvořák was, and Zajíc jerked his head towards the preparation room at the end of the corridor.

‘You’re adjusting the dress,’ he smiled at Mr. Dvořák, who was standing over an opera coffin in the preparation room and putting flowers on the dead woman. Then he went closer, looked in and said: ‘She has a beautiful dress, the sweet one, a black silk dress with a collar, of course. People usually have their best dresses on in the coffin. For example, they put on a dress they’ve only worn a couple of times during their lifetime, Mr. Dvořák. Everybody wants to look beautiful in the coffin, Mr. Dvořák.’

Then he said:

“This is Miss Vomáčka. She used to sell wine and spirits in a buffet, poor young lady . . . She’ll go to the viewing room in a moment. Mr. Pelikán will take her. This coffin,’ Mr. Kopfkringl pointed to the coffin marked with number seven which had been nailed down, ‘is nailed down, it will not be put on view. It’ll go straight to the funeral hall. A contagious infection. Mr. Kalous . . . You hardly ever smoke now, do you, Mr. Dvořák?’ Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile and glanced at the iron rod on the floor of the preparation room in front of the niche which was covered by a curtain. ‘Well, you’ve settled down well now. Mr. Pelikán’s coming,’ he pointed to the door, and when Mr. Pelikán came in with a trolley, Mr. Kopfkringl glanced once more at the young lady in the coffin, adorned with flowers, nodded at Mr. Pelikán and said: ‘You can carry on. Miss Vomáčka is ready . . .’

As Mr. Kopfkringl was leaving the building, Mr. Fenek crept out of the porter's lodge.

'Mr. Kopfkringl,' he raised his soft, tear-stained eyes, and both his voice and hand with the long nail on his little finger were shaking, 'isn't the morphia . . .'

'Mr. Fenek,' said Mr. Kopfkringl rather harshly and stopped. 'If you don't stop pestering me I am going to inform the police. You know that morphine addiction is an offence. It's a perversion which is not compatible with a man's honour. I don't want to hear another word, or else I'll take you to the lunatic asylum.' Then he glanced at Mr. Fenek, who almost staggered, and said a little more kindly:

'I'm not going to give you anything, Mr. Fenek, I'm protecting your health. If you don't have any sense then I must have it for you. I won't have you on my conscience. I'm an honourable and healthy man. I don't even drink or smoke, I'm abstemious, and, as you can see, I'm also alive. Don't bother me any more.'

Mr. Fenek crept back into the porter's lodge, completely crushed. 'Just look at that,' thought Mr. Kopfkringl and stepped out of the building into the courtyard. 'I've shown him a bit of strength again and it frightened him. Just look at that. How mankind benefits from strength, from a show of character. The weak and inferior are a burden, they can't contribute to the battle for tomorrow.' In the porter's lodge in the courtyard he caught a glimpse of Mr. Vrána, who sat there because he had something wrong with his liver. It seemed to him that as Mr. Vrána spotted him he turned away...

When he came home, to the dining-room, his heavenly one was standing by the window, under the picture of the wedding procession and the wall chart, the most sublime timetable. He merely smiled at her black hair, feeling regret at the same time. Then he caught Mili hiding something quickly by the little mirror which was hanging in the diningroom. He saw that it was a photograph, and said to himself, ah, that's life. Not only Zina and that Mila of hers, it's Mili now as well. Well, of course, the children are maturing, growing up . . . He approached the radio and turned it on.

'That poor Mr. Fenek of ours,' he said, 'asked me for morphia again. He's a weak, soft man who's finished . . . it's a perversity. I wonder what's happening to Mr. Prachař and his drinking, and what about his unfortunate son, Vojta? I haven't seen his wife for maybe a year now ...' Then Almaviva's sweet cavatina from "The Barber", which he sang to Rosina beneath her balcony, could be heard on the radio . . . and Mr. Kopfkringl turned round, went to Mili standing by the little mirror, and reached out his hand. 'Well, show me your sweetheart,' he extended his hand, 'your first love, so that we can get to know her too . . .'

After hesitating a little, Mili gave him the photo. But it was not a girl. It was the butcher's apprentice.

'That's the butcher's apprentice,' Mili faltered and glanced at the cat. 'Well, you know, that boxer.'

After a moment's silence, Mr. Kopfkringl gave a smile and said: 'How did you get hold of it? You know each other?' 'Why, you sent me to get the programme yourself so that

I'd know *who* was going to box . . .'

Mili, and then he revealed that he had twice been to the Youth Club, where they had their training.

'Why,' said Mili, 'it said come and see us . . . Well, that leaflet,' he said, 'that application form which Mr. Reinke gave me . . .'

'But that's wonderful, Mili, to be friends with a boxer,' said Mr. Kopfkringl after a while, and thought, he's friends with a boxer, perhaps he won't be so soft, so effeminate after all, as Willi says; perhaps he'll get over it. Then he said aloud: 'You must be hard, courageous, one hundred-percent, Mili. After all, you've got German blood. From me . . .' he added knitting his brows. 'After the holidays you'll go to the German grammar school. Well, yes,' he smiled at Lakmé, who was taken aback and looked dejected, and turning back to Mili, who was gazing at the cat. He said:

'It's certainly a good thing to go out with a boxer. Boxing is a combative sport, ein Wettkampf⁸. The Führer considers it ope of the best. If only you didn't stray about so much, Mili. You'd better not even go to the bridge. Is that boxer of yours training hard?' he gave a smile, returning the photo to the boy, and when Mili nodded, he said: 'What is he telling you, what do you two talk about . . .'

And then to his horror, he learned what the boxer was telling him, what the two were talking about. Why he was training so hard. Why he was learning so hard how to box. Why his punches had to be driven home. Because the Germans had poured into our country. Because they were bullies. Because they had taken our freedom . . . As he spoke, Mili's face took on a sheepish look and he gazed at the cat. Mr. Kopfkringl kept control of himself and shook his head sadly. There's still time to enlighten him, he thought, gazing at Mili. I'm going to explain it to him soon, make him see sense, convince him. And he went to the radio, where Almaviva was just finishing his sweet song to Rosina, and lightly pushed the cat aside who had got between his legs.

Before the Whitsun holidays, the Gestapo arrested Josef Zajic and Beran in the crematorium. Then came the turn of the director, Snec. 'It seems rather hard,' said Mr. Kopfkringl, the NSDAP member with the sterling German soul, to himself, 'what the Gestapo has done. But there was probably nothing else to be done about it, nothing at all. After all, the happiness of millions of people is at stake. We'd be committing an offence against the people,' said Mr. Kopfkringl to himself, 'an offence against mankind if we didn't know how to get rid of evil-doers, if we sat on our hands and just looked on at their destructive work.' So, the Gestapo arrested Zajic, Beran and the director, Snec, in the crematorium . . .

Mili and Zina went to Slatiňany for the Whitsun holidays to stay with their good aunt, who, had she been a Catholic, would have been canonized when she died, though she's already a saint: they went to her with a bunch of lilies. It was during those days that a decision on an important matter in Mr. Kopfkringl's life was to be made: on his promotion.

⁸ a contest

‘My heavenly one,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl to Lakmé in the dining-room, ‘the children have gone to Slatiňany for the Whitsun holidays to stay with our aunt, with that good soul of ours, who’s already a saint . . . and we’re alone. They’ve arrested Mr. Zajic, Beran and Srnec, the director, at my workplace . . . God knows why, apparently because of their feelings of hostility towards the Reich, the German people, mankind . . . that?’ he smiled at Lakmé, who was horrified, ‘why are you frightened? Because they’ve arrested Zajic, Beran and the director? Don’t worry, nothing’s going to happen to them, why should anything happen to them? They’ll just transfer them to another place of work . . .’ Then he said: ‘I’m supposed to become the new director instead of Mr. Srnec. I’m supposed to become director because I’m an expert . . . Since we’re on our own now, my dear, how about putting our best clothes on and having a nice little dinner-party? Without wine, of course, I’m abstemious . . . and then we’ll have a bath in our beautiful bathroom as is proper after a Roman banquet. Could it be our heavenly wedding anniversary today?’ he smiled tenderly. ‘Or, at least, the blessed anniversary of the day we met in the zoo by the leopard . . .? No, it isn’t. Alright, but let’s pretend it is . . . come,’ Mr. Kopfkringl took Lakmé by her arm and led her to the kitchen to get the food ready.

Towards evening, when the food was ready, Mr. Kopfkringl asked Lakmé to put on her best dark silk dress with the white lace collar. After she had put it on he took her into the dining-room and seated her at the table. He brought sandwiches, almonds, coffee and tea, turned on the radio, and then sat down at the table too.

‘Do you hear, my heavenly one?’ he smiled tenderly. ‘That they’re playing now is the chorus and bass from Donizetti’s “Lucia di Lammermoor”. It’s interesting. It’s such perfect funeral music, and yet it’s not played in our place very often. Anyone having it played in our hall would indeed have an uncommon funeral. They played the “Unfinished” for Mrs. Strunný once, Dvořák’s Largo for Miss farský, and Friedrich von Flotow’s “Last Rose of Summer” for Miss Vonáčka recently. The flaw is that it’s not the deceased who choose the music, as a rule, but the mourners! And they don’t choose according to the taste of the dead but according to their own. They choose things they like themselves, not what their departed ones would like to have had.’ Then he said:

‘This is Lucia’s big aria from the third act. It’s sung by an excellent Italian singer.’

And as they ate to the accompaniment of Lucia’s big aria on the radio, Mr. Kopfkringl said:

‘Our life is before us, my *purest one*. The whole world is open for us, my ethereal one. The sky is open for us.’ He pointed and glanced at the ceiling as though drawing attention to the stars, a magnificent picture, or an apparition. ‘The sky over which not a single little cloud has passed during the whole nineteen years of our being together, the sky I sometimes see over my Temple of Death when nobody is being cremated. But I’ve noticed that our ventilator in the bathroom is broken. I’ll have to have it repaired tomorrow. For the time being I’ve put a string with a noose in there, so that we’ll be able to switch the ventilator on from the chair. That curtain over there in the

corner . . .’ he pointed to the window, ‘which Willi told us about on Christmas Eve, has not been any trouble since. Do you hear that beautiful song?’ He pointed to the radio from which the sounds of Lucia’s big aria wafted over to them. ‘How very true it is that those who die without ever learning the beauty of music are poor. Where’s Rosana, I wonder . . .?’

After dinner, Mr. Kopfkringl kissed his heavenly one and said:

‘Come, my *indescribable one*, before we undress, let’s get the bath ready.’

He took the chair and they adjourned, the cat watching them.

‘It’s hot in here,’ said Mr. Kopfkringl in the bathroom and placed the chair under the ventilator. ‘I probably overdid the heating. Switch on the ventilator, my dear.’

When Lakmé got onto the chair, Mr. Kopfkringl stroked her ankle, cast the noose round her neck and said to her with a tender smile:

‘What if I hanged you, my dear?’

She smiled down at him, perhaps not understanding him very well. He returned her smile, kicked the chair away and that was that.

He put on his coat in the hall and went to the German Criminal Investigation Department. He made a statement: ‘She apparently did it out of despair. She had Jewish blood and could not bear living by my side. Perhaps she sensed that I was going to divorce her, that it was not compatible with my German honour.’ And inwardly, he said to himself: I was sorry for you, my dear, I really was. You were dejected, withdrawn. Of course. No wonder. But as a German I had to make the sacrifice. I’ve saved you, my dear, from the suffering which would otherwise have been in store for you. My heavenly one, how you would have suffered in the just and happy new world, on account of your blood . . .

Lakmé was cremated in Chrudim near Slatiňany . . . and Mr. Karl Kopfkringl was – after the Whitsun holidays appointed director of the Prague crematorium. He *pensioned off* Mr. Vrána of the *porter’s lodge* in the courtyard, who sat there because he had something wrong with his liver. He’s old now, he thought, he’s been here ever since I came, almost twenty years ago. Let him have a rest. He gave notice to Mrs. Podzimek, the cleaning woman, to quit. After all, she was almost frightened here, he said to himself, *I’ll rid her of her fear then, of that curse . . .* But he kept Mr. Dvořák. ‘You know, Mr. Dvořák, what I like about you is that you don’t smoke and drink . . .’ he told him, ‘that you’re abstemious . . .’ And he also kept Mr. Pelikán and Mr. Fenek too for the time being. I ought to save him, he sometimes thought to himself in his office, he’s hardly able to stand. When he passed the porter’s lodge, Mr. Fenek cried, cringing like a dog.

In: Fuks, Ladislav. *The Cremator*. Translated by Eva M. Kandler. London: Marion Boyars, 1984.