

Munich 1919

It was well after eight when the first speaker rose, and S., owner of the Sterneckerbräukeller, stood behind the bar, surveying the dim room. Three dozen guests had signed the register by the door, and he estimated another dozen who hadn't. He surveyed the crowd -- the usual grimy workers, the unemployed clerks masquerading as professors, but also tonight a few men in collars and cravats, men who really could be *Professoren*. Already S. had sold nineteen plates of sausage, and appetites showed no sign of flagging. If he ran short of fresh sausages, he could substitute smoked ones; people listening to orators, even such paltry orators as these, paid less attention to what was on their plates.

He watched his nephew Heinz-Uwe serve another *wurstteller*. Each plate meant another fifty pfennigs coming in, and S. needed every last one. He owed the butcher money, and he owed Herr Riegert, who had advanced him six cases of Riesling bought in a mistaken late-summer burst of optimism; and if the weather got cold, he would soon owe somebody for coal. There were other items he needed as well -- matches, mustard, soap, the things nobody thought about until they went missing. During the War one had accepted such shortages, but now the War had been over for a year, the government fallen and the Kaiser fled, and things had scarcely improved. One day in the spring, during the riots, S. had watched from his window as people gathered around a horse killed by Red Guard bullets -- fell upon it like vultures and stripped the carcass to its bones. Sometimes it seemed that the whole country was in the grip of a nervous disorder.

At the front of the room the speaker addressed his audience in a wheedling voice. S. knew him by name -- Feder, a sallow, intense man, alleged to be an engineer but engaged exclusively these days with lecturing on the evils of capitalism.

"International finance is creating a nation of interest slaves," Feder was saying. "We must distinguish good capital from the bad." S. had heard him before, peddling his huge schemes -- the state should buy up all the land, capital should be restricted to building factories and railroads, and on and on. S. never listened because none of it could ever happen. Idly he scanned the audience, spotting Drexler,

the cross-eyed machinist, and near him the captain who had had his nose shot off at Ypres, a face like a bad dream. There were dozens of such groups afoot in Munich, from Spartacists and anarchists to Freikorps thugs. S. let them all come, as long as they paid and didn't wreck anything. Business was business, whatever the politics. Beer isn't black or red, he told his wife; *wurst* turns equally left and right.

It was dark in the room now, dark enough so that S. could no longer respectably squeeze more light out of the day. He listened to Feder prattle on about Versailles, and his gaze wandered again to the captain and his mask of scars.

Put the lamps on, he said to Heinz-Uwe, but keep them low. With such faces, we should do these people a favor.

His nephew went around lighting the lamps. S. stood at the bar, topping off a row of pilsners, and tried to wipe from his consciousness the dull stain of Feder's voice. There were sounds he liked to listen for as he worked -- the clanging bell of the streetcar outside in the Lendenstrasse, the clop of a horse's hoof, the swallows that twittered at sunset in the tiny yard out back. The birds sang and sang, oblivious whether things went well for humans or badly. S. envied their heedlessness.

Tonight he was listening also for the putt-putt of Joachim, the boy next door, on his motorized bicycle. Joachim spent his mornings running newspapers all over town and the rest of the day "organizing" things; earlier S. had sent him out to "organize" some potatoes. It was yet another evil that had come back from the war -- the traffic in phantom supplies, the bribes and rumors and the sudden, unexplained absence or presence of things. But S. needed potatoes. And so all evening he had been listening for the putt-putt in the yard.

Sending Heinz-Uwe to tend the front room -- the larger of the two rooms, but all too often nearly deserted -- he moved out from behind the counter and dove into the bluish haze of smoke that rose from men puffing pipes on the long benches. He cleared two tables, taking the plates and carrying them out to the kitchen.

His wife stood at the counter slicing radishes. Behind her a coil of sausages sizzled in a pan on the stove.

"So who is saving the world this time?" She spoke without looking up.

"Drexler's people. You know him, the squinter. I believe they call themselves the German Workers Party."

She glanced up, and he knew what she was thinking: There was surely less work represented in that entire room than the two of them together did in a day.

"You know, I asked this Drexler if they wanted to move out front, and he stared at me as if I was trying to trick him." S. mimicked the man's square-jawed, squinting glare.

His wife shook her head. "All the social graces of a cabbage," she muttered.

On such remarks the two of them carried themselves through the evenings, but tonight S. felt the humor growing thin. He rubbed his forehead.

"Has the boy come by?"

"Haven't seen him."

"Well, maybe he got his hands on something good out there. Maybe he's organizing a little surprise for us."

S. showed his wife what he hoped was a cheerful smile. He watched her spear a sausage from the pan with a fork, shake it off onto a plate, and array alongside it radish slices, mustard and finally a roll. "A Kaiser *brötchen*," she said, handing it to him. "For the German worker."

Emerging into the smoky room, he saw that Feder had given way to Drexler and Harrer. Harrer wrote in the so-called nationalist papers, grimy broadsides that blamed Jews and Bolsheviks for everything. The man went about half-shaven, in a filthy suitcoat, and he limped – a twisted clubfoot that sent him bobbing across a room like a rag tossed into the sea. The squinter, the limper, the captain without a face: perhaps they should call themselves the German Cripples party, S. reflected. Circling, he collected a trayful of beer glasses and returned to the counter to wash them, as Harrer launched into his talk, reading from a rumpled sheet of paper.

"I should like to discuss the following theme," he began. "Who is responsible for the World War?"

S. concentrated on washing the glasses. The worst thing about the war, he thought, was how it had turned over all the rocks in Munich, and every last beetle who in normal times would remain hidden had crawled out to stand in the open. S. knew too well the membership of the groups who spent their evenings in beer halls and restaurant cellars like his. Most were mere boys from the neighborhood, and pathetic boys at that – the ones who had bad skin or stuttered, who hated their fathers but cowered before them; who were desperate for a uniform. Then there were the thugs, soldiers from the front, grown cruel on violence and living for revenge alone. And finally came their so-called leaders, the Drexlers and Feders -- failed professors who toddled with ideas like toys, waving their pamphlets and quaking with joy at the unexpected good fortune of having finally found an audience upon whom to spew out their visions of a new Germany.

It was all just talk; empty phrases that brought nothing. The weakling, the professor and the thug. They were about as likely to create that new Germany, S. believed, as a pig was to fly. He had no use for idle chatter. In such times as these, one had to work more, not less.

From the front room Heinz-Uwe came bearing a tray piled with dishes. "Do you need me?" he asked. S. waved him by with an impatient gesture and moved out from behind the counter. He went through the room, taking beer orders and retrieving empty plates. Harrer meanwhile had finished his lecture to lukewarm applause, and now a member of the audience stood up, a ridiculous figure in a greasy frock-coat and drooping moustaches who introduced himself as "Professor Doktor Baumann." The man began to speak, in a whining and self-important voice.

As he did, S. heard through the back window the sputtering cough of Joachim's motorcycle.

He removed his timepiece from his vest pocket: nearly ten. A smile came to his face as he pictured the machine, its sidecar full with potatoes, and on top of that something extra, whatever it was that had been keeping Joachim out, the fruit of a night's digging through Munich. The boy was clever, S. reminded himself; he knew when a thing was worthwhile.

There remained the round of beer glasses to fill, and he did it at a leisurely pace, savoring the mystery prize awaiting him in the other room. Who knew what it might be? A wireless radio apparatus? An overcoat for his wife? Such thoughts were grandiose, he knew; but he allowed himself the pleasure nonetheless. At last, with the beers underway and "Professor" Baumann embarked on a maundering apology for Crown Prince Rupprecht and the Bavarian Royal House, S. draped his dishtowel over his forearm and went back through the swinging door into the kitchen.

His wife stood at the wash basin, scrubbing a pan; Heinz-Uwe swept the floor. In the corner, potatoes were piled like stones. The boy himself was nowhere to be seen.

"So," said S., looking around. "No secret surprise from the black flea markets?"

His wife harrumphed.

"Oh well." He sighed. "I confess it - I was dreaming of a radio hidden in those potatoes."

"Potatoes?" She looked at him. "Where do you see potatoes?"

Frowning, S. proceeded to the pile by the door. Stone by stone he hefted them, and every last one was wrong; they were too big, too round, the skin held a violet tint. He cut into one with his fingernail and looked at the pale meat.

"How lovely," he said, tossing it back. "A heap of turnips."

His wife shrugged. Heinz-Uwe swept, his head down.

"Perhaps can someone tell me what I am supposed to do with a heap of turnips?"

The usual, his wife said. Peel them, cook them, eat them. Serve them, if they had to.

He stared at her. "But these are *turnips*! Who am I now, the turnip king of Munich?" S. felt his face swelling and reddening. He looked toward the back door. "No wonder he ran out of here like a thief!"

His wife turned to him. "He is a boy," she said in a low voice. "You told him to get something and he got something. You should thank him."

He held up a hand to quiet her. "Listen here," he started. A sudden fear of where his words might go struck him, and he broke off, shaking his head. "These are *turnips*!" he managed in a throttled voice, then turned and pushed back through the swinging door and into the restaurant.

Incredibly, the mustachioed professor was still droning on, to the rustling impatience of his audience. S. started in again with washing glasses, trying to shut out the man's voice and get himself under control. But he was shaking; and as he stared down at his own hands rooting about in the gray water, he thought of his daughter, who had sent a healthy fiancé off to the War and gotten back three-fourths of a man, lungs ruined by gas and one leg left behind in the mud of Belgium. In the center of Munich, men were sleeping on park benches and pawning their overcoats for food; doctors everywhere refused to see you unless you brought a brick of coal for the stove. He shuddered to think of himself, stupid with optimism, plodding along day to day, dumb as a cart horse. They were living their lives in an open sore, with no sign of healing. Tonight he had a pile of turnips in his kitchen; a year hence, perhaps they would be eating roots. And now here stood this so-called Professor, resembling nothing so much as a drunken coachman, promoting his grand solution: Bavaria should remove itself from the Reich and attach itself to Austria. S. imagined hurling a beer stein at him, then another and another, until every last glass lay in bits.

A commotion in the room interrupted his thoughts. A man in a worn, dark-blue suit had risen and stood rebuking the professor in vehement tones. To leave Germany for Austria was senseless, he charged, a finger aimed in the professor's face; anyone claiming otherwise was a fool or a traitor. "We don't want a smaller Reich – that is the logic of the enemy! A German is a German wherever he is, and wherever he is, there is Germany!"

See here, Professor Baumann started, but the speaker in the blue suit pushed his objections aside like so much plowed earth. *Jawohl!* someone in the audience called out. Others chimed in until, amid a general buzz of scorn, the professor gathered up his hat and skulked out the door.

The new speaker moved a few steps toward the front, allowing S. a better look at him: hair neatly parted, face pink and soft-looking for a man clearly in his 30s, moustache clipped in a comical toothbrush style. S. recalled him from earlier, asking politely for water instead of beer. Now he spoke, and as he did, a certain stiffness in his bearing seemed to melt away. Every day, he said fervently, posed a new insult to Germany. Black African troops brought by the French consorted openly with German women. In the shipyards, German workers were commanded to build ships for England, ships used to enforce the treachery of Versailles. As for the so-called republic in Weimar, what could you expect of a government with a saddler's apprentice for a chancellor and a constitution written by a Jew? "Ladies and gentlemen, these are deliberate provocations! These are insults to the greatness of Germany!"

From the kitchen Heinz-Uwe appeared and stood beside him, looking on as the speaker hectored the audience -- lofting his words in a curious manner, as if addressing not three dozen, but three thousand.

Eine echte Kanone, Heinz-Uwe murmured. A real cannon.

S. nodded. When you listened, it was the usual roster of villains, the same old phrases. And yet there was something in the man's voice, a low rumble that rolled and trilled, rising, hanging on the high notes with a liquid, almost musical quality. S. watched him gesture, raising a hand with fingers curled, as if holding an invisible goblet. His hand was graceful, its fingers long and womanly, and the man himself seemed to look at it for a long instant with fascination. Then he crushed it into a fist. "Things cannot continue in this way!" he shouted, glowering at his listeners. "To German misery there is one answer only -- German will and German iron!"

The pale eyes shone with a raging sorrow, face flushing, and for a moment S. thought the man would weep tears of pure conviction.

Behind them the kitchen door swung open, and out came his wife.

"What in God's heaven is all this hullabaloo?" She looked over to the wild-eyed speaker haranguing the crowd. "Who is this little puppet supposed to be?"

S. said nothing. He was distracted by a sensation of something moving outward from the man in the blue suit and into the assembled listeners, poured into their glistening upturned faces as from a pitcher into empty glasses.

His wife turned to him and Heinz-Uwe. "And you two - what will you eat when you have swallowed this silliness?"

They were S.'s own words, thrown back in his face - *Show me the lecture I can eat and drink*, he liked to say, *and I will happily step to the table* - but instead of answering he put a finger to his lips to quiet her and, drying his hands on his dishtowel, stepped out from behind the counter. □□