

Chapter 4

TARR left Bertha punctually at seven. She looked very ill. He resolved not to go there any more.

Very low, feeling strangely upset, he made towards Vallet's; when he reached it, it was full of Americans. He gave all these merry school-children, with their nasal high-spirits, a dark look and sat down. Kreisler was not there; afterwards he went on a hunt for him and ran him to earth at the Café Toucy.

Kreisler was not cordial. He emitted sounds of gruff surprise, shuffled his feet and blinked. But Tarr sat down in front of him. Kreisler grinned unpleasantly, summoning the waiter he offered him a drink. After that he settled down to contemplate Bertha's Englishman at his leisure, and to await developments. He was always rather softer with people with whom he could converse in his own harsh tongue.

Tarr naturally sought out Kreisler on the same principle that he thrust himself upon the Liepmann group: a bath of Germans was his prescription for himself, a voluptuous immersion. To heighten the effect, he was being german himself—being Bertha as well.

But he was more german than the Germans, Kreisler did not recognize the portrait entirely. Successive lovers of a certain woman fraternizing, husbands hobnobbing with their wives' lovers or husbands of their unmarried days is a commonplace of german or scandinavian society, and Tarr brought an alien intensity into the situation.

Kreisler had not returned to Bertha's. He was too lazy: but he concluded that she had better be given scope for anything the return of Tarr might suggest. He, Otto Kreisler, might be supposed no longer to exist: his mind in short was working up for some truculent action. Tarr was no obstacle: he would just walk through this fancy-man like a ghost when he saw fit to 'advance' again.

PART V

'You met Lowndes in Rome didn't you?' Tarr asked him.

Kreisler nodded.

'Have you seen Fräulein Lunken to-day?'

'No.' As Tarr was coming to the point Kreisler condescended to speak—'I shall see her to-morrow morning.'

A space for protest or comment seemed to be left: but Tarr smiled at the tone of this piece of information. Kreisler at once grinned, mockingly, in return.

'You can get out of your head any idea that I have turned up to interfere with your proceedings' Tarr then said. 'Affairs lie entirely between Fräulein Lunken and yourself.'

Kreisler met this assurance truculently.

'You could not interfere with my proceedings. I do what I want to do in this life!'

'Capital! *Wunderbar!* How I admire you!'

'Your admiration is not asked for!'

'It leaps up involuntarily! Prosit! But I did not mean, Herr Kreisler, that my desire to interfere, had such desire existed, would have been tolerated. Oh no! I meant that no such desire existing, we had no cause for quarrel. Prosit!'

Tarr again raised his glass expectantly and coaxingly, peering steadily at the German. He said 'Prosit' as he would have said 'Peep-oh!'

'Prost!' Kreisler answered with alarming suddenness, and an alarming diabolical smile. 'Prosit!' with finality. He put his glass down with a crash. 'That is all right. I have no *désiré*' he wiped and struck up his moustaches 'to quarrel with anybody. I wish to be left alone. That is all.'

'To be left alone to enjoy your friendship with Fräulein Lunken—that is your meaning? Am I not right? I see.'

'That is my business. I wish to be left alone.'

'Of course it 's your business, my dear sir. Have another drink!'

He called the waiter. Kreisler agreed to another drink.

Why was this Englishman sitting there and talking to him? It was in the german style and yet it wasn't. Was Kreisler to be shifted, was he meant to go? Had the task of doing this been put on Bertha's shoulders? Had Tarr come there to ask him, or in the hope that he would volunteer a promise, never to see Bertha again or something

of that sort? On the other hand, was he being approached by Tarr in the capacity of an old friend of Bertha's, or in her interests or at her instigation?

With frowning impatience he bent forward quickly once or twice, asking Tarr to repeat some remark. Tarr's german was not so good as it might have been. But another glass of french Pilsener, and Kreiser became engagingly expansive.

'Have you ever been to England?' Tarr asked him.

'England?—No—I should not mind going there at all! I like Englishmen! I feel I should get on better with them than with these French. I hate the French! They are all actors.'

'You should go to London.'

'Ah to London. Yes, I should go to London, it must be a wonderful town! I have often meant to go there. Is it expensive?'

'The journey?'

'Well, once you're there. Life is dearer than it is here, I have been told.' For the moment Kreiser forgot his circumstances. The Englishman seemed to have hit on a means of escape for him: he had never thought of England! A hazy notion of its untold wealth made it easier for him to put aside momentarily the fact of his tottering finances.

Perhaps this Englishman had been sent him by the *Schicksal*. He had always got on well with Englishmen!

The notion then crossed his mind that Tarr perhaps wanted to get him out of Paris. That was it. He had come to make him some offer of hospitality in England. At once, in a bargaining spirit he began to run England down. He must at all costs not appear too anxious to go there.

'They say, though, things have changed. England's not what it was,' he said, shaking his head heavily from side to side.

'No. But it has changed for the better.'

'I don't believe a word of it! It's rotten. I've heard!'

'No, it's quite true. The last time I was there it had improved so much that I thought of stopping. Merrie England is played out, there won't be a regular Pub in the whole country in fifty years. Art will flourish you see if it doesn't! There's not a *real* gypsy left in the country. It's fantastic: not one genuine one. The sham art-ones are dwindling!'

'Are the *Zigener* disappearing?'

'Rather! There's not a true-blue Romany Rye from Land's End to John o' Groat's!'

'The only Englishmen I know are very *sympathisch*.'

'Of course.'

They pottered about, on the subject of England, for some time. Kreiser was very tickled with the idea of England.

'English women—what are they like?' Kreiser then enquired with a grin. Their relations made this subject delightfully delicate and yet, Kreiser thought, very natural. This Englishman was evidently a description of pander, and no doubt he would be as inclined to be hospitable with his countrywomen in the abstract as with his late fiancée in concrete fashion.

'A friend of mine who had been there told me they were very "pretty"'—he pronounced the english word with mincing slowness and mischievous interrogation marks in his distorted face.

'Your friend did not exaggerate: the britannic lasses are like languid nectarines! The tiller girls are a pale shadow of what you see in Britain. You would enjoy yourself there.'

'But I can't speak english—only a little. "I spik inglesch a leetle"' he attempted with pleasure.

'Very good! You'd get on splendidly! They're most partial to the german brogue.'

Kreiser brushed his moustaches up, sticking his lips out in a hard gluttonous way. Tarr watched him with sympathetic curiosity.

'But—my friend told me—they're not—I don't know how to describe it—not very kind. Are they easy? They are great flirts—so far—and then *boy!*—you are sent flying! They are teasers, what, are they not!'

'You would find nothing on the lines of *Fasching*—no official *Anagelassenheit*, you understand me. No you would not find anything to compare with the facilities of your own country. But you would not wish for that?'

'No?—But, tell me, then. They are cold?—They are of a calculating nature?'

'They are practical, I suppose, up to a certain point. But you must go and see.'

Kreiser ruminated.

'What do you find particularly attractive about Bertha?' Tarr asked in a discursive way. 'I ask you as a German. I have often wondered what a German would think of her.'

Kreiser looked at him with resentful uncertainty for a moment. He took a draught of beer and smacked his lips.

'You want to know what I think of the Lunken?—She's a sly prostitute, that's what she is!' he announced loudly and challengingly. 'Ah!'

When he had given Tarr time for any demonstration and decided that nothing was forthcoming he thawed into his sociable self. He then added:

'She's not a bad girl! But she tricked you my friend! She never cared *that*—he snapped his fingers inexpertly—'for you! Not that! She told me so!'

'Really? That's interesting.—But I expect you're only telling lies. All Germans do!'

'All Germans lie!' Kreiser exclaimed shrilly.

'"*Deutsches Volk—the folk that deceives!*"' is your philosopher Nietzsche's account of the origin of the word *Deutsch*.'

Kreiser sulked a moment.

'No. We don't lie! Why should we? We're not afraid of the truth, so why should we?'

'Perhaps, as a tribe, you lied to begin with, but have now given it up?'

'What?'

'That may be the explanation of Nietzsche's etymology. Although he seemed very stimulated at the idea of your national certificate of untruthfulness: he felt that, as a true patriot, he should react against your blue eyes, your beer, and the childish frankness.'

'*Quatsch!* What did Nietzsche know about the Germans? He was a Jew! Nietzsche!'

'You've mixed him up with Wagner.'

'Nietzsche was always *paradoxical*: he would say anything to amuse himself. You English are the greatest liars and hypocrites on this earth!'

'"*See the Continental Press!*" I only dispute your statement because I know it is not first-hand. Hypocrisy is usually a selfish stupidity.'

'The English are *stupid* hypocrites then! We agree. *Prosit!*'

'The Germans are uncouth but zealous liars! *Prosit!*'

He offered Kreiser a cigarette. A pause occurred to afford the acuter national susceptibilities time to cool.

'You haven't yet given me your opinion of Bertha. You permitted yourself a truculent flourish that evaded the question.'

'I wish to evade the question!—I told you that she has tricked you. She is very underhand—*malin!* She is tricking me now, or she is trying to. She will not succeed with me!'

He put his finger to the side of his nose.

'"*When you go to take a woman you should be careful not to forget your whip!*"' *That* Nietzsche said too!'

'Are you going to give her a beating?' Tarr asked.

Kreiser laughed in ferocious ironical fashion.

'You consider that you are being fooled in some way by Fräulein Lunken?'

'She would if she could. She is nothing but deceit. She is a snake. *Pfui!*'

'You consider her a very cunning and double-faced woman?'

Kreiser nodded sulkily.

'With the soul of a prostitute?'

'She has an innocent face, like a Madonna. But she is a prostitute.'

He paused; then he shouted 'I have proofs of it!'

'In what way has she tricked me?'

'In the way that women always trick men!'

With resentment partly, and with hard picturesque levity, Kreiser met Tarr's discourse.

This solitary drinker, particularly shabby, who could be 'dismissed' so easily, whom Bertha with accents of sincerity 'hated, hated!' was so different from the sort of man that Tarr expected might attract her, that he began to wonder. A certain satisfaction resulted from these observations.

For that week he saw Kreiser nearly every day: a regulation 'triangle' was then set up. Bertha (whom Tarr saw constantly too) did not actually refuse admittance to Kreiser (although he usually had first to knock a good many times), yet she prayed him repeatedly not to come any more. Standing always in a drooping and desperate condition before him, she did her best to avert a new outburst on

his part. She sought to mollify him as much as was consistent with the most absolute refusal. Tarr, unaware of how things actually stood, seconded his successor.

Kreiser, on his side, was rendered obstinate by her often tearful refusal to have anything more whatever to do with him. On one occasion he attempted to repeat his initial performance. They were fighting on the floor when Tarr entered. With curses, panting and dishevelled, Kreiser desisted and retired to the kitchen. Tarr placed himself upon the settee. Bertha remained where she was, rolling over upon her face. Shortly Tarr heard Kreiser leave the house.

'I'm sorry to have barged in,' he said.

As Bertha did not speak, he withdrew, quietly closing the two doors after him—he had still retained his latch-key.

Kreiser had come to regard Tarr as part of Bertha, a sort of masculine extension of her: at the Café he would look out for him, and drink deeply in his presence.

'I will have her. I will have her!' he once shouted towards the end of the evening, springing up and calling loudly for the waiter. It was all Tarr could do to prevent him from going, with assurances of intercession.

His suspicions of Tarr at last awoke once more. What was the meaning of this Englishman always there—what was he there for after all? If it had not been for him, several times he would have rushed off and had his way with this disaffected mistress, the eagle's way. But he was always there between them: and in secret, too, probably, and away from him—Kreiser—he was working on Bertha's feelings, and preventing her from seeing him. Tarr was the obstacle! Yet there he was, arguing and palavering, offering to act as an intermediary, and meantime preventing him from acting. He alone was the obstacle, and yet he talked as though he were nothing to do with it, or at the most a casually interested third party:—that is how Kreiser felt on his way home after having drunk a good deal. But so long as Tarr paid for drinks he staved him off his prey.