

Ladislav Fuks



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English translation by Mark Corner

Afterword by Rajendra A. Chitnis

Illustrations by Jiří Grus

Layout by Zdeněk Ziegler

Edited by Martin Janeček

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www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz







The Land of the Elves, which was the name of the local hostelry, had been hired out for the afternoon. The window into the courtyard was wide open and in the courtyard itself a tethered horse was at work on a sack of oats. A wedding party was sitting in the saloon.

They were seated at a table covered in a white cloth and decorated with flowers, candles, glasses and a dish full of fancy cakes or kolaches. At the head of the table, under a portrait of the sovereign, the Dowager Princess Augusta, and the Prime Minister, Albinus Rappelschlund, sat a man with big hands that had seen a lot of toil. He was dressed in black with a white shirt made of tow-cloth and was turning this way and that in a clumsy fashion, throwing out nods and smiles in all directions and even through the window towards the horse. This was the bridegroom. Next to him sat someone smaller and fatter, a blonde with a face that was puffy from laughing at nothing. A laurel wreath lay on the table in front of her, while she squirmed and swaggered and put on airs and rolled her eyes this way and that. This was the bride. Next to the happy couple sat a friend of the blonde called Rona, a girl of twenty who had collapsed in giggles, and the two witnesses, swarthy and strange.

The daily papers hung on the wall alongside the wedding table, full of assorted vignettes and titbits about Prime

Minister Albinus Rappelschlund, because today was his name-day. A few side tables had been placed beneath the newspapers.

At the bottom end of the table sat a young man with a dark chequered jacket and a white silk shirt. Delicate, ill at ease and taciturn, this was Lothar Baar. A second young man sat next to him, also well dressed and even more taciturn and ill at ease. This was his classmate from school, Rolsberg. And then right at the end of the table sat an elderly lady in a black and gold scarf, black waistless jacket with sleeves and a long black shiny skirt. She had shoes without heels on her feet and a smallish bag in her lap. This was Natalia Mooshaber.

‘My daughter talks about you all the time’, said Mrs Mooshaber to Lothar Baar at the bottom end of the table. The remnant of wine she’d been given – her glass had been almost empty from the start – was about enough to moisten her lips. ‘She is always talking about the tape she sold you in the shop.’

‘The tape recorder,’ nodded the young man with an embarrassed look towards the head of the table.

‘Just so,’ nodded Mrs Mooshaber, ‘surely you live in a palace somewhere, Mr Baar.’

‘I have private lodgings’, said the young man as he threw another look of embarrassment at the head of the table, ‘my friend Rolsberg and I are staying with a rich merchant who has a villa here.’

‘Do you also take meals with this merchant?’ asked Mrs Mooshaber, while she leaned forward in order to get a view of Rolsberg’s face.

‘Just breakfast,’ said Lothar Baar. ‘The rest of the time we eat in the student canteen.’

‘And you eat well there,’ agreed Mrs Mooshaber, ‘to be sure there’ll be ham and Italian salad, not to mention wine and lemonade. I would like to invite you to our own home, gentlemen, but we are just simple poor folk. We don’t live in a villa but in a run-down house. Why, even now there are masons around repairing the shared balcony...and as for food, we eat oatmeal...’ Mrs Mooshaber glanced through the window into the courtyard where the horse had its sack of oats, ‘...cornmeal too. Now and again I do a bit of baking. I bake, Mr Baar, it’s something I like. That dish of kolaches,’ Mrs Mooshaber pointed discreetly at the table, ‘that was all my own work. For my daughter’s wedding, you see. No one has taken any yet, but wait and see what happens after they’ve eaten the meal. In a little while....’ Mrs Mooshaber suddenly leaned forward and whispered to Lothar Baar, ‘...in a little while the banquet will arrive. The banquet, Mr Baar. They ordered ham and Italian salad,’ she repeated in a whisper, ‘wine and lemonade too. And ice cream, but that comes at the end. Oh yes,’ said Mrs Mooshaber laughing, ‘I like to bake. But other than that, Mr Baar, it’s bread for the likes of us.’

The bride at the head of the table, the plump and simple-minded blonde, was meanwhile laughing and fooling around with Rona and the witnesses. Her new husband beside her, the big hands that had seen much toil resting on the tablecloth, was spinning round, nodding and saying ‘yes’ to everything. When there was nowhere else to spin, he span to face the horse through the window.

‘So you’ll be keeping your own name’, said one of the witnesses to the wedding party, a swarthy fellow with black hair and a low forehead. The plump and simple-minded blonde laughed and gave a bridal nod.

‘He’ll still be a Laibach.’ She gave him a shove and he gave a nod. ‘I’ll be whatever I’m called already. Food’s on its way now.’

‘You see, Mrs Baar,’ Mrs Mooshaber addressed both Lothar Baar and Rolsberg, ‘there’ll be food in a moment. Ham, salad, lemonade, they’ve got it all at the front behind the bar counter. Now there’s something I must tell you, gentlemen,’ and once again she leaned forward for a view of Rolsberg’s face, ‘when I went to school, which will be sixty years back from where we are now, I had a friend called Maria. She was so tiny and frail, the poor crooked thing, but she was bright and kind and the children loved her. She came from a rich family, her father was a farm steward and he had this watch, made from gold it was. Anyway she got married and took her husband’s name but then he died shortly afterwards and she became a housekeeper for a rich family. And she was the housekeeper in this family for two generations. I haven’t set eyes on her in fifty years. Fifty years,’ she nodded as she glanced over the wedding party at the portrait of the sovereign, the Dowager Princess Augusta, hanging on the wall with that of Prime Minister Albinus Rappelschlund, whose name-day it was, ‘fifty years. Did you know, Mr Baar, that I always wanted to be a housekeeper myself, just like my friend Maria? I can set a table and make it fancy. See here...’ she pointed at the white table laid out with candles, posies, wine and kolaches, ‘I could have managed this table too, only they went and ordered everything from the publican.’

‘And you will also be living apart.’ The voice that could now be heard at the head of the table belonged to the second witness, another swarthy fellow with black hair and a

low forehead. The blonde bride gave another foolish laugh and said:

‘He will carry on renting from that Klaudinger woman and I’ll be where I am now. What’s funny about that, eh?’ She gave the bridegroom another nudge and he just responded with a nod and a smile.

‘He’s a nice hard-working fellow,’ Mrs Mooshaber said to Lothar Baar in a quiet voice, ‘well brought up. He’s a mason. He was never in any school for troublemakers or house of correction and he’d do anything for our Nabule. He said that she can have everything he earns. He’ll just keep a bit back for his smokes. She’ll live with me and he’ll have lodgings with Miss Klaudinger, but only at the start, they’re saving up for a flat in the Elizabethan district. I would so like to invite you to our place, gentlemen,’ Mrs Mooshaber repeated, ‘but we are just poor people living in a run-down house with masons repairing the common balcony. All their tools are lying in the passage right in front of my flat. But let me finish telling you about this housekeeper. That’s what I’d have liked to be, just like my friend Maria. I always wanted to have one of those kiosks. You know, those covered stalls where I could sell ham, salad, even lemonade perhaps, but there again....’ Mrs Mooshaber gestured with her hand and glanced up at the newspapers hanging from the wall, ‘I’d rather not tell you about that now. I’d rather tell you what I’m actually doing. I’m working at a cemetery. I water the plants and tend the graves. And I’m attached to the Mother and Child Support Service.’ Mrs Mooshaber suddenly reached into the bag on her lap and took out a card with her name on it.

‘Miss said something about your dealings with the Welfare,’ confirmed Lothar Baar, taking a hesitant peek at the

card which Mrs Mooshaber tucked away again. He cast a somehow bitter glance at the blonde at the head of the table and continued: 'Actually she's a miss no longer but more like a missus.'

Then he spent a while looking at the portraits towering over the wedding party, at the old princess and Prime Minister Albinus Rappelschlund, whose name-day it was, before saying:

'So, Mrs Mooshaber, you have practical experience of children.'

'Indeed I do have practical experience of children,' agreed Mrs Mooshaber, while she took a peek at the head of the table and was going to elaborate further when Rona, the friend of the blonde bride, piped up: 'Where is Wezr, Nabule? Why isn't he here? Where could he have got to, that he was unable to attend his own sister's wedding?' And the blonde bride laughed until the horse behind the window to the courtyard turned round. Then she nodded in the direction of Mrs Mooshaber and said:

'Let her tell you where he is. Let her tell you' (this came with a shake of the head) 'where Wezr is, why he's not here. Why he's not at his sister's wedding.' Mrs Mooshaber gave a start and her eyes opened wide as she blurted out:

'No, my son Wezr is not here, he's elsewhere. He's got work to do...'

The guests at the head of the table squealed with laughter.

'Her son Wezr is not here,' they shouted, 'he's elsewhere. He's got work to do....'

'They want to have a good time,' said Mrs Mooshaber in an apologetic voice to Lothar Baar and Rolsberg, 'you know what it's like with weddings, gentlemen.' Then she went on:

‘Well then, besides what I do for Mother and Child Support, which is unpaid, I work in the cemetery. The one in the centre in Anna Maria the Blessed Square. I water the plants and tend the graves. But you know, gentlemen,’ she went on, once again leaning forward a little in order to catch sight of Rolsberg’s face, ‘I look after something else too. I mean the fact that our building’s caretaker keeps a banner in my flat. A real banner, even two... well, one’s a spare as they say. Two banners, but you know, gentlemen ...’ Mrs Mooshaber was looking at the white tablecloth, ‘they’re black. Black, something you hang from the house when someone dies. I hang the banner from a long pole which I keep in a corridor behind the wardrobe. I have a little pension from my husband, who worked as a coachman for a brewery. I had my children late. There’s Nabule, the bride here, and Wezr, who’s not here because he’s got his work to do. I had them late, after I was forty...’

At this moment a waiter entered the saloon and went up to have a word with Nabule. She gave the bridegroom a nudge and stood up.

‘The feast is here,’ said Mrs Mooshaber in a quiet voice to Lothar Baar and Rolsberg, ‘the feast of ham and salad, which has all been ordered, lemonade too. And once they’ve eaten their fill, they will take my kolaches. Did you know that I spent a whole day baking them for my daughter’s wedding? I added vanilla, almonds and raisins, they’ll taste a treat. When the children were small, Mr Baar, I mean our Wezr, who’s not here, and Nabule the bride, I did what I could for them. I even sang them a lullaby. Just look, Mr Baar,’ Mrs Mooshaber suddenly glanced up, ‘the waiter’s bringing it already. Look, real ham, salad, and such a lot of

it, wine and lemonade, oh my...' Mrs Mooshaber looked at the plates which the waiter was setting down on the unused side tables beneath the newspapers, 'I've only eaten ham and salad once in my life – and that goes for lemonade as well. You know...' She leaned over towards Lothar Baar and whispered. 'It was at my own wedding. And fifty years have gone by since then...'

'It's like being in the Metropol!' yelled Rona with a glance at the ham and salad, 'we could be in the Ritz! And oh crikey! Look at those fancy pastries...'

'Pastries,' spluttered Nabule, her face at this moment looking even more bloated and banal, 'pastries. Ask her who did the baking, she'll spout it all out. Just start her off...' she nodded towards the lower part of the table.

'Yes, I baked them' said Mrs Mooshaber from the other end of the table, 'My daughter's quite right. I spent the whole day baking them for my daughter's wedding. I added vanilla, almonds and raisins, they'll taste a treat. But of course they're better saved for after you've eaten,' she gave a sudden smile, 'after all this salad and ham or we'll be too full up for the main course.' I like baking,' she said with a smile, 'but only now and again. But when dear Rona gets married,' she smiled again, 'I'll bake for her too.'

'Oh isn't she a one for baking,' shrieked Nabule, 'did you hear all that? When little Rona ties the knot she'll be baking pastries for her too. And she cares for the children and she tidies the tombs,' she yelled. 'And what's more, she could offer us a song,' shrieked Nabule.

The place went quiet for a moment and then gales of laughter broke out again.

'A song?' laughed one of the witnesses.

‘She can sing?’ laughed the other.

‘Yes, she’s a hoot’ screamed Nabule.

‘So make her sing,’ shrieked Rona, ‘make her sing...’ And in the twinkling of an eye they had gone quiet and turned to face the end of the table.

Mrs Mooshaber clasped hold of the bag in her lap and spoke in an apologetic and hesitant manner:

‘No, I don’t know how to. I only used to sing when the children were little. A lullaby. Of course I could sing that if you like, just for fun. After all this is a wedding and we’re supposed to be having fun, aren’t we?’ She smiled and everyone gave way to spluttering laughter and Nabule did one of her twirls and then stood up and bounced over to the tables below the newspapers where the plates of ham and salad were laid out.

While she started doing the rounds with the plates of ham and salad, setting them down in front of the guests, Mrs Mooshaber sat up a little straighter at her end of the table and started singing:

*Now it’s good evening and now it’s good night
Now by the power of angelic might*

Everyone was in stitches, laughing, shouting and shrieking. Only the bridegroom sat nodding and smiling, and only Lothar Baar was bewildered and subdued, alongside his even more subdued and bewildered friend Rolsberg, while Nabule went on doing the rounds with the plates of ham and salad and setting them down in front of the guests. And Mrs Mooshaber looked at the guests while she sang:

*Tomorrow in the morning-time
You will once more rise and shine*

She was so determined that the song was as good as she was able to make it, that she didn't even notice that Nabule had put plates of salad and ham in front of everyone else while there wasn't so much as a morsel on the table in front of her. Lothar Baar and Roslberg, on the other hand, did notice and they looked at the blonde in astonishment. But she just exploded in cackles and then all of a sudden burst in unexpectedly on her mother's song.

'Cut it out,' she broke in, 'that's enough howling from you. Shut your gob. Tuck in then,' she said to the guests before going back over to her mother and saying:

'That's enough of the wailing woman. Now get out.'

Lothar Baar and Rolsberg were struck dumb. So was Mrs Mooshaber. But before Lothar Baar and Rolsberg knew what was happening, and before Mrs Mooshaber could recover her composure, with a huge cackle Nabule had reached over to the plate of kolaches, got one into her claws and had hurled it at the ceiling. The kolache rebounded from the ceiling like a ball, fell amongst the flowers and candles on the table and leaked cream cheese and even its raisin topping onto the tablecloth. And then, to the accompaniment of another huge cackle, Nabule took the whole plate in her claws, flounced over to the window and hurled the plate of kolaches at the horse. Then she seized hold of some wine and yelled at the lower end of the table:

'Aren't you gone yet, for Christ's sake? Aren't you off to water your corpses or cosset those mothers and children? Scram!'

Mrs Mooshaber, who up to this point had been sitting stock-still staring at the tablecloth, now showed the first signs of coming to life. The bag shaking in her hand, she stood up and slowly made her way to the door. She left the room looking like an old and withered tree. The pub dissolved into shrieks and yells.

‘She’s off,’ they shouted, ‘she’s going to water the graves.’

‘She’s leaving,’ they screeched, ‘to care for her children.’

‘And make sure to stop at Wezr’s,’ laughed Nabule, ‘the one who’s got work to do.’

‘Tell him to get himself here, Mrs Mooshaber,’ laughed Rona, ‘his work has taken him long enough.’

Lothar Baar and Rolsberg came to life only when Mrs Mooshaber had gone through the door into the bar. They glanced up at all the people chuckling and shouting at the top of the table and looked out of the window at the horse wolfing down the kolaches in the courtyard, and then the two of them jumped up from their chairs.

‘Where do you think you’re off to?’ shrieked Nabule, ‘it’s not curtains yet. The party’s just beginning!’ But Lothar Baar and Rolsberg were already running through the door from the saloon into the bar and from there into the street, only to find the street outside the pub deserted. Of Mrs Mooshaber there wasn’t a trace. They rushed round the nearest corner, but there was still no trace of Mrs Mooshaber. They went back to the bar, but the bartender told them that the lady had definitely left. Back they ran into the street, but there wasn’t a soul to be seen there. There was nothing but a single withered old tree on the pavement opposite.

Mrs Mooshaber had been hiding behind the door of the next house. Only long after Lothar Baar and his friend Rols-

berg had finally departed in a shocked and disturbed state, did she herself venture out and hurry home along the street.

II

It was a beautiful September afternoon as she hurried through street after street, past banners hanging from the public buildings in honour of Prime Minister Albinus Rap-pelschlund's name-day, until at last she reached the square named in his honour. The statue here had been hung with flowers and ribbons of various kinds, but the people going by didn't so much as glance at it, each one preferring to look at the pigeons swarming over the ground. Along the main avenue she had to make her way past a crowd of people in front of the editorial offices of *Our Blooming Homeland*. There was always a crowd of people here discussing sport or breakthroughs in transplant surgery or the different types of seaweed and sky, or even swapping stamps. They were chatting on this occasion about the fact that despite the banners on the state buildings and the fully beribboned statue in the square, the windows of apartments were empty and deserted...indeed they were really empty and deserted, lacking not only people but a single flower, candle, glass of wine or piece of cake, such as were to be found on the name-day of the Sovereign Dowager Princess. And for once no one was so much as burning a stick of incense in their apartment. Mrs Mooshaber made her way past the crowd in front of *Our Blooming Homeland*. Then she passed the glass and laminate fronts of the street stalls, where people were eating ice cream, ham and salad or drinking lemonade.

Keeping her head down, she quickly passed them all and was glad when she found herself running over the white stripes of the asphalt crossing by the *Sunflower* department store. Then she hurried down three drab alleyways and was near to the place where she lived.

It was really an old and dilapidated two-storey house with a large cavernous passageway. This was where a pile of masons' tools was to be found and some bricks, a wheelbarrow and a tub of lime. A woman in her fifties wearing a short summer skirt stood in the passage. Another woman was beside her with a lad of perhaps twelve in ragged clothes. His eye was swollen and he was looking unhappily up and down the street.

'My God, Mrs Mooshaber,' called out the woman in the short summer skirt as Mrs Mooshaber went by, 'have you come back from the wedding already? Is it all done and dusted at *The Land of the Elks*?'

'It was *The Land of the Elves*' said Mrs Mooshaber as she shook her small black bag. *The Land of the Elves*. I had to leave, I wasn't feeling very well. I probably had too much to eat. You know what it's like with weddings. But what's up, Mrs Faber?' Mrs Mooshaber threw a quick glance at the other woman and pointed to the lad. 'What happened to him?'

'He's daft as a brush', said Mrs Faber coldly, without a muscle twitching in her face, 'fat-headed, dim-witted, always answering back, never able to stay still and not the slightest idea of what he's doing. Climbed the scaffolding used by the masons and could have put his own eye out. Brainless halfwit but bold as brass, so he's off to the eye specialist as punishment.'

‘Perhaps he doesn’t need to,’ said Mrs Mooshaber looking at the young lad standing there looking gormless, ‘I tell you what, Mrs Faber, I’ll make him an eyebath and then when it’s cooled you can use a piece of cloth to dab his eyes.’

‘I’m not dabbing his anything’, Mrs Faber replied in her cold voice, still without so much as a muscle twitching in her face, ‘he’s going to an eye doctor. Let the doctor cauterise it.’

‘Now then, Mrs Faber,’ laughed the woman with the short summer skirt, ‘Mrs Mooshaber knows a thing or two about these things. She works in the cemetery and for the Welfare, she’s got a card to prove it. Mrs Mooshaber, don’t you have a card? Anyway, Mrs Faber, you know that much yourself. And besides,’ the woman suddenly added, ‘it’s a national holiday. There won’t be any optho treating eyes today.’

‘There will be somewhere,’ said Mrs Faber while she examined the card which Mrs Mooshaber had taken out of her bag, ‘after all, my husband’s working as usual.’

‘Just stay where you are,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she slipped the card back into her bag, ‘I’ll sort out his eye. Let him come and see me in the evening. And you can come too,’ she said to the woman in the short summer skirt who was the building’s caretaker. Then she gave a quick nod and hurried through the front passage.

Mrs Mooshaber’s flat gave directly onto this passage. The pile of mason’s tools, the bricks, the ‘barrow and the barrel of lime, stood right at her front door. By the door was a corridor containing a pantry and wardrobe, with a very long pole towering up from behind the latter. The corridor led to the kitchen, which had a frosted glass window facing back into the corridor where some stairs began and another door leading to a further room. This further room had a window

facing the courtyard, just next to the main staircase. Dark and meagrely furnished though it was, it was kept tidy. Mrs Mooshaber made for the kitchen, put her bag on a chair and looked at a large cake lying on the table. Then she opened a cupboard and pulled out a threadbare old bag containing a few coppers in savings. She opened it, took a look at its contents and returned it to the cupboard. Then she moved on to the other room. A few bits of clutter were lying around under the bed and the mirror, left there by her daughter Nabule in the morning when she rushed off to the wedding. Mrs Mooshaber went back into the kitchen and, with a glance at the table, the chair and the clock above the stove, seated herself on the ottoman.

‘So that’s how it was, she threw me out’, she said to herself, ‘without so much as a crust to eat, and the kolaches I baked she chucked at that horse. And she did it in front of all those people, including those students. And Wezr,’ she was shaking as she spoke, ‘Wezr will get here any minute now.’

Mrs Mooshaber got to her feet again, looked at the cake lying there on the table, picked her bag up from the chair and tidied it away in the cupboard. Then she took off her black-and-gold scarf, her waistless jacket and her long, black, shiny skirt, before putting on her house clothes and an apron. She proceeded to get the stove going with wood from a box, put a mug of water with a smattering of herbs down on the stove top and poured some more water into a bucket. She then took the bucket next door in order to clean the floor. When she had finished wiping the floor as far as the mirror, she got up to take a breather and that was when she looked through the window at the stairs leading down

into the courtyard. And there was scruffy little Master Faber. She wiped her hands and went to let him in.

The lad glanced nervously around the kitchen. Perhaps he had never been there before. He looked at the ottoman, the table and the cake on top of it, and walked up to the stove. Mrs Mooshaber bent down to the stove and fed the fire a little.

‘So your mother says you’ve neither manners nor sense,’ she said as she dunked a piece of cloth into the mug on the stove, ‘if she says that, I suppose it must be so. Otherwise she wouldn’t say such a thing. After all, she wouldn’t torture herself like that if you were a good boy, would she.’

Having wrung out the piece of cloth Mrs Mooshaber went up to the boy, who was standing by the stove looking at the cake on the table and didn’t move an inch.

‘Your father will be in for a surprise when he gets back from work,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she applied the cloth to the lad’s eye. ‘You normally go and get some beer for his dinner. Hold the cloth for a moment while I tie it on.’ Mrs Mooshaber went over to the sideboard for a bigger cloth, a chequered one, and fashioned a bandage from it for the boy.

‘How can you learn anything at school when you fool around so much?’ she asked and for the first time the lad ventured a reply.

‘I do my lessons’, he said in a whisper as he continued to shake a little.

‘Lessons about what?’ asked Mrs Mooshaber. ‘About trees?’

‘About the life of our Prime Minister,’ he whispered, and went on shaking.

‘So you know all about him?’ asked Mrs Mooshaber as she sat down at the table.

‘Oh yes,’ the lad whispered, standing gormlessly by the stove with the compress on one eye and the other on the cake, ‘we had to know his biography for his name-day.’

‘Tell me then, if you know it all’, said Mrs Mooshaber.

‘Albinus Rappelschlund was born, that is to say he was born....’ With one hand on his chequered bandage, the lad began to recite in a timid voice, ‘he was born...when he was fourteen he was apprenticed as a tanner, and then he left to go to a military school in order to become an officer, but then he left again and went to learn waitering and he was learning to carry plates, plates... but then he moved on again and went to a Protestant college. But then he left it and went, and went...’ the lad went on shaking and speaking in a whisper and staring at the cake, ‘when he was twenty he entered the service of Princess Augusta who had just acceded to the throne. He was promoted to be her valet and then colonel and then minister, minister....and he brought law and order. Five times he took part in a voyage to the Moon...’

‘Go on,’ said Mrs Mooshaber when the lad stopped and couldn’t go any further, ‘what happened next?’ and the lad shifted the dressing over his eye a little before continuing in a whisper, ‘he went on bringing law and order, he gave the people more work...he founded a museum....he built the biggest airport, the Albinus Rappelschlund airport, in the Stadium district of the city....the one the spaceships fly from. Then, then....’ The lad’s eyes wandered nervously here and there and especially towards the cake on the table, and then he ground to another halt.

‘Go on,’ said Mrs Mooshaber, ‘what happened next...’



‘Then,’ the boy finally spoke up, ‘he discovered the traitors who plotted to assassinate Princess Augusta. He brought them to justice and he himself became the Prime Minister. Ever since he’s governed as the only high and mighty one after our sovereign Princess Augusta, who has been widowed in the meantime. But people say...’ suddenly the lad stopped and now he was shaking like a leaf, ‘people say...’

‘Just what do people say,’ asked Mrs Mooshaber, ‘what do they say...’

‘They say,’ now the lad was shivering with fear, ‘they say that the only one in charge is him. They say that the princess has gone into hiding or has already been dead for a long time.’

‘I see,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she rose from her chair, ‘I’ll get the mug for you.’ She took the mug with the potion off the stove and handed it to the boy. ‘Before you go to bed, wet the cloth with this and apply it three times. You’ll be as fit as a fiddle. And don’t be naughty,’ she went on, ‘your mother must have reason to say you’re naughty, she’s not going to worry herself silly about nothing. You climb up the masons’ scaffolding and you misbehave and what can she do with you then? You’ll go to the school for troublemakers and then the house of correction and you’ll end up a labourer, an unskilled pair of hands like as not hired for the day, and you know how it will all end. You know where you’ll end up,’ said Mrs Mooshaber with a shake of the head, ‘behind bars.’

‘Madam,’ began the lad all of a sudden in a pleading tone of voice, as if he had managed to build up some courage, one hand holding the chequered compress and the other holding the mug with the potion, ‘it’s been said that you....’ And then he dried up again.

‘Said that I what’, asked Mrs Mooshaber, ‘what exactly....’

‘It’s been said that you.... the lad geared himself up for another attempt and glanced up pleadingly, ‘that you keep live mice.’

‘Live mice?’ Mrs Mooshaber shot him a glance, ‘live mice? I have mousetraps,’ she went on, ‘mousetraps to catch them with.’

‘Where are they?’ came the boy’s beseeching question, while he kept his eyes on the cake on the table.

‘Right here.’ With a flourish of the hand Mrs Mooshaber indicated certain key strategic areas of the kitchen. ‘Behind the stove, behind the sideboard, behind the sofa. Then there’s the other room and the pantry. In fact everywhere.’

‘Could I see one of these mousetraps?’ asked the boy in a quiet voice. ‘I’ve never seen one. I’ve only seen cages.’

Mrs Mooshaber went over to the sofa, bent down and picked up three mousetraps.

‘But there aren’t any mice in them,’ said the lad in a disappointed tone when Mrs Mooshaber put the traps down on the ottoman. ‘There’s nothing inside them. At least inside cages you can see lions.’

‘They’re empty because no mice were caught in them yesterday,’ explained Mrs Mooshaber, ‘but perhaps some will be caught this evening....’

The lad put the mug containing his potion down on the table for a moment. With one hand on the dressing and the other on the sofa he examined the mousetraps. It seemed as though he had begun to lose his shyness somewhat.

‘How do the mice walk inside?’ he asked, looking at Mrs Mooshaber.

‘They don’t walk inside, they crawl inside, through this little gate-like thing.’ Mrs Mooshaber showed him. ‘The gate snaps shut behind one and there you are. The mouse is trapped inside.’

‘And what do you do with them in the trap, do you kill them?’ asked the boy with another shudder.

‘I don’t kill them, they die of their own accord’ said Mrs Mooshaber, ‘they succumb to the poison.’ She pointed at

the pieces of bacon on the board. 'The mouse gobbles this up, runs around for a bit inside the cage and then falls over. That's when the poison begins to do its work.'

'And where is it, this poison?' asked the youngster, while with one hand on the dressing he examined a mousetrap.

'The poison's on the bacon,' said Mrs Mooshabr, 'you can see it right there – that white powder.'

'And you buy this bacon?' asked the boy, who was now taking another look at the cake on the table. 'You get it from a butcher?'



‘Indeed I do get it from the butcher,’ replied Mrs Mooshaber, nodding in agreement. ‘But without the poison. I sprinkle that on top here. There’s a few pieces of treated bacon on a plate in the larder.’

The lad opened his mouth in surprise and looked very warily at Mrs Mooshaber. It was as if he couldn’t believe his own ears. And then he suddenly and unexpectedly asked:

‘But why exactly do you poison the mice?’

‘Because of all the harm they do,’ said Mrs. Mooshaber.

The lad went quiet again, held on to his dressing, looked at the cake on the table and then spoke up again in a diffident voice:

‘But there are other things that do harm. Many things are harmful but they don’t get killed. Why is it the mice that get killed? Is it because,’ (he added quietly) ‘they don’t speak?’

Mrs Mooshaber fixed her eyes on the trap and nodded.

‘If they weren’t poisoned,’ she said, ‘then before you knew it there’d be a whole regiment coming after us. They’re desperate and they’re bold as brass. They’ll eat anything, potatoes, corn, bread – why, they’d even eat that cake on the table... they’d gnaw away at the furniture and bite holes in the bedclothes. This divan too. They must be poisoned. Otherwise they’ll worry us to death.’

‘I have to go now’, whispered the boy. Putting the mouse-trap down on the ottoman, he took the mug from the table and once again fixed his eyes upon the cake. Mrs Mooshaber guided him to the front door and sent a final remark into the passage:

‘Wet the cloth and apply it to your eye three more times and by tomorrow you’ll be back at school and fit as a butch-

er's dog. Don't get up to mischief, don't upset your mum. You know what will happen to you if you do.'

The clock was striking above the stove when Mrs Mooshaber returned to the kitchen. It was one of those clocks that struck not only the hour but the quarter, half and three-quarter hours. Mrs Mooshaber hurried into her other room in order to finish her washing before darkness had fallen. 'That boy doesn't seem to be so bad,' she said to herself while she was cleaning the floor around the table, 'perhaps he isn't, but then again maybe he's pulling the wool over my eyes. It's only because he was climbing scaffolding that he hurt his eye, and when his mother says he's naughty perhaps he is just that. And don't I know enough and more about naughty children!'

Evening had arrived by the time Mrs Mooshaber finished her washing. Having wrung out the cloths, she draped them over the bucket and left the bucket behind in the room. She went back to the kitchen, rinsed her hands and sat down at the table. She eyed the cake on the table and then the mousetraps on the divan and was on the point of stirring herself to put the mousetraps under the ottoman again when she suddenly froze. Someone was knocking at the front door. Then she heard a woman's voice from outside saying: 'May I come in?' Mrs Mooshaber sighed with relief. It was just the caretaker.

The caretaker was wearing a longer blouse as it was now evening but as ever she was still in the short summer skirt that she had sported during the afternoon.

'It's just little me,' she said in the corridor and headed into the kitchen. Once there she parked herself cheerfully on the ottoman next to the mousetraps.

‘You’ve been baking,’ she said, pointing at the table.

‘Help yourself’, said Mrs Mooshaber while she fed the stove, ‘I’ll make you some coffee to go with it. It’s six o’clock. I’ve just finished cleaning the room.’

‘You’ve been sprucing your room up,’ said the caretaker with a shake of the head. ‘That I can see, given that you’ve got your apron on. Your Nabule is getting married and you stick on an apron and scrub the room. You’d have done better to take a breather, at least on her wedding day. Tell me all about it, Mrs Mooshaber. What was it like? A lot to eat and drink, you said. So much you even overate a little. What treats did you have? Spaghetti?’

‘Wine,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she closed the little door of the stove, ‘ham, Italian salad, lemonade, and some kolaches at the end. As for the table...’

‘Laid out for a banquet, was it?’ The caretaker shook her head and adjusted her blouse, ‘tidy and trim...’

‘Tidy and trim all right,’ agreed Mrs Mooshaber, ‘white tablecloth, flowers and candles, glasses of wine, kolaches...’

‘All you were missing was the incense, then,’ laughed the caretaker, ‘like we have in the windows for the royal name-day. One other thing, Mrs Mooshaber, your Wezr wasn’t there at all, was he? Do you think they didn’t let him out?’

‘You know they wouldn’t do that,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she moved to the sideboard to prepare coffee, ‘they don’t let people out of gaol for someone’s wedding. But he’ll be here soon. It’s been three months now. You gave me a fright when you knocked – I thought it was him. I was afraid that he was on his way here already.’

‘You should call the ratcatcher,’ said the caretaker as she looked at the mousetraps right next to her on the sofa, ‘cats

won't do the job and with you being next to the courtyard and the passage you're right in the front line.'

'A ratcatcher...we'd be waiting till the end of time', said Mrs Mooshaber with a dismissive wave of her hand as she took the coffee over to the stove, 'I don't suppose there'll be anyone from that profession in this city. Ratcatchers were a feature of my youth but they're not around any more. Nowadays everyone has to look out for themselves. Suppose the mice go climbing up the scaffolding which we've got here. Suppose they go crawling right up into the Fabers' place.'

'Did he come for his concoction?' laughed the caretaker as she adjusted her blouse.

'He did,' nodded Mrs Mooshaber while she stood at the stove making coffee, 'I had to show him these here mouse-traps lying on the sofa. He'd never seen a mousetrap before, only lions in cages. He wanted to see a mouse, but as luck would have it none was caught yesterday and so I showed him how the mice crawl inside and eat the bacon. He didn't seem such a bad lad to me,' Mrs Mooshaber went on with a sudden shake of the head, 'but what would I know? It's always Mum knows best and when she talks the way she does it must be because she worries about him. I expect he only does what she tells him when she sends him to fetch beer.'

'When he goes for beer he sneaks some himself', said the caretaker with a smile, 'when you see him on the way home, Mrs Mooshaber, it's always with just half a jugful. Mind you it seems to me sometimes....' the caretaker stopped abruptly for blouse adjustment, 'it seems to me that perhaps he only drinks the beer on his way home because they don't feed him properly. It's out of hunger that he takes the beer.'

The caretaker fell silent and fixed her attention on the cake on the table. Then she started up again:

‘He drinks beer on the way home simply because he’s not getting enough to eat. And did you notice his clothes? I wouldn’t bet my life that he’ll even have a coat to wear this coming winter, because the way that Faber woman lets him go round he almost looks like a beggar. And you know all about this eye business today,’ said the caretaker with more shaking of the head, ‘I’d say there was more to this than meets the eye. I mean she drags him off to the eye doctor and she tells him that the swelling may have to be burned away. The poor lad was in such a fright at the thought, shaking all over he was. I had to find some way of keeping him away from this doctor. And as for the drinking,’ the caretaker went on nodding as she spoke, ‘as for the drinking there may be another reason for it. Perhaps it’s not just that the lad doesn’t get enough to eat. His father doesn’t know when he’s had enough to drink either, decent fellow though he is.’

‘He drinks’, said Mrs Mooshaber with a deep sigh as she brought the caretaker’s coffee to the table, ‘the lad may well take after him. And then it will be doubly bad that he’s been like this from childhood. He be at the schoold for troublemakers and the house of correction and he’ll work as an unskilled pair of hands like as not hired for the day until he ends up...’ Mrs Mooshaber gave a heavy shake of the head and removed the mousetraps from the ottoman, kneeling down with them on the floor beside the caretaker.

‘I’ll put these back where they belong,’ she said as she put them under the ottoman, ‘perhaps they’ll catch something during the night.’ And then Mrs Mooshaber sat down on a chair opposite the caretaker and said:

‘I’ve still got to empty the bucket of water in the next room, but it can wait for now. Mrs Kralec, I want you to know why I got back so soon from the wedding. I want you to understand that I wasn’t at any banquet. They threw me out.’

‘Good God,’ said the caretaker, and gave such a start that she nearly fell off the sofa, ‘threw you out?’

‘Threw me out,’ Mrs Mooshaber confirmed, ‘I was singing a lullaby while Nabule was handing out the ham and salad. She gave the food to everyone except me and then she grabbed hold of the kolaches which I’d baked for the wedding and flung them into the courtyard before throwing me out. She said that I could water my corpses and cosset children. And I was wearing my one and only best clothes for the occasion.’

The caretaker sat stunned for a while until she finally came out with:

‘What about the bridegroom Laibach? Didn’t he do something about it? Slam the table or shout something?’

‘No slamming or shouting,’ said Mrs Mooshaber with a shake of the head, ‘he’s a nice enough chap but he’s not one for speaking out. But that’s the way it is. There were also two students there, the ones who got served by Nabule, and that was the worst thing of all. I felt so ashamed about it happening right in front of them. She threw me out right in front of their eyes, without a bite to eat and no more than a drop of wine.’

‘Mind you, Mrs Mooshaber,’ began the caretaker, still shocked at the news, but at last finding words, ‘mind you, don’t you think they might have been a bit sloshed?’

‘It was too early for that,’ said Mrs Mooshaber with another shake of the head, before going silent for a while.

‘What a terrible thing to happen,’ said the caretaker, breaking the silence, ‘really terrible. So she chucked the kolaches you made for the wedding into the courtyard....’

‘At the horse,’ insisted Mrs Mooshaber, ‘flung them out for the horse to eat....’ And then Mrs Mooshaber rose all of a sudden, went over to the sideboard and opened a small door lower down. ‘Drink your coffee,’ she said as she extracted three new mousetraps from the sideboard. ‘Drink your coffee,’ she repeated and bearing the mousetraps made her way slowly towards the door.

‘Where are you going with them, Mrs Mooshaber?’ asked the caretaker.

‘To the courtyard,’ replied Mrs Mooshaber, ‘to the courtyard. To set traps in the courtyard under the scaffolding. So that those mice don’t climb up the scaffolding. Suppose they got to the Fabers. It will be half six,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she took a peek at the clock above the stove, ‘I will put the traps in the courtyard while I can still see a little out there, and then I’ll take the bucket out of the room. Have some cake with your coffee, I’ll just be a moment.’ Mrs Mooshaber left the kitchen with the traps and went through the corridor into the passage.

Night had already fallen in the courtyard – it was half past six on a September evening – but it wasn’t completely dark. It was a darkness broken by the lights from windows on various floors, so although night had fallen it was possible to see. In what was essentially half-light the courtyard also retained a September evening warmth, while silence reigned everywhere, even on the shared balconies higher up.

Mrs Mooshaber went round the steps at the end of the passage where the dustbin was standing, before continuing

through the silent twilight of the courtyard beneath the scaffolding. She was on the point of bending down to set the snares when she heard a brief and feeble whistling sound from up above. She lifted her head just in time to see a pair of green and black lights high up in the sky, lights which then suddenly disappeared as if they'd slipped away into the stratosphere. Mrs Mooshaber gave a nod and was already bending down when she heard a sort of subdued snapping sound up above her. A plank came down into the courtyard. Then another subdued snap could be heard, followed by a thin board falling into the courtyard. At this very moment the clock above the stove in the kitchen struck the half hour, it being half past six and it being possible to hear the sound through the open window of the room. Silence reigned in the courtyard and on the shared balconies. Carrying her mousetraps, Mrs Mooshaber wrenched herself away from the scaffolding beneath which she'd been standing and edged forwards into the courtyard. She turned her head to look up at the scaffolding on the first and second floors and at the shared balconies. Everything remained enveloped in silence, although she suddenly had the impression that up there on the scaffolding something was moving. Moving around somewhere up there among the planks and boards and posts, breathing in quick and terrible gasps, panting while it persistently, so persistently, kept eyeing her, eyeing Mrs Mooshaber, down in the courtyard below. All of a sudden she shivered strangely.

'If it's a cat', she said to herself as she shook, 'that will be all right. Let it be some cat on the prowl up there, it must be a cat on the prowl.' Surprisingly enough Mrs Mooshaber suddenly made her way back, mousetraps in hand, in the



direction of the scaffolding. When she reached the steps, however, she turned round and ran home.

The caretaker was sitting at the table drinking coffee just like before, though by now she was also eating cake. She glanced up when Mrs Mooshaber appeared at the door.

‘What’s up, Mrs Mooshaber,’ she inquired, ‘has something happened...haven’t you set the traps in the courtyard?’

‘No, I didn’t set them.’ Though Mrs Mooshaber was getting over her shock, she seemed suffused with a strange unease. ‘It’s dark out there, you can’t see any more. I’ll set the traps tomorrow. The thing is, Mrs Kralec...’ Mrs Mooshaber continued as she carved an anxious path towards the table, ‘the thing is...’

‘I heard something fall,’ said the caretaker as she gulped down a mouthful of coffee, ‘something wooden, I think. Did something fall off the scaffolding?’

‘A plank,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she put the mousetraps down on the table and parked herself on a chair, ‘a plank of some kind and a thin piece of board. I expect there’s a cat up on the scaffolding. It was panting in a timorous way while it looked down at me. But it’s good that it’s there and on the prowl. There was another thing up there,’ Mrs Mooshaber added, ‘a spaceship’.

‘Spaceship,’ agreed the caretaker, ‘it’ll be on its way to the Moon. They’re sending three on their way this evening.’ The caretaker had finished with her cake and confined herself to sips of coffee. Mrs Mooshaber looked uneasily at the mousetraps and glanced from time to time at the clock above the stove.

‘The Faber man has a long journey home, after all,’ said the caretaker, ‘he’s at work till six, you know, he even works today when it’s a public holiday. It’ll be seven before he gets home.’

‘He takes the bus?’ asked Mrs Mooshaber with another uneasy glance at the clock.

‘Trolleybus,’ said the caretaker.

‘I’ve never been by trolley.’ Mrs Mooshaber turned her head to face the door to the next room. ‘I’ve only been on the underground once. When I got married, that’ll be fifty years ago now. We started here in Blauental and went to Anna Maria the Blessed Square, then to the Town Hall Station and then to Cemetery Central. In the square at the back of the town hall there used to be a pub, but now the space has been taken up by some modern apartment blocks.’

‘Listen here, Mrs Mooshaber,’ the caretaker said all of a sudden, rising from her seat, ‘Listen, something’s just occurred to me.’ While Mrs Mooshaber glanced anxiously up at her, the caretaker went on:

‘Mrs Mooshaber, do you know someone called Mary Capricorn?’

‘Mary Capri....’ Mrs Mooshaber looked taken aback so the caretaker repeated:

‘Mary Capricorn.’

‘Not someone I know,’ said Mrs Mooshaber, ‘No, I don’t know her. And who might she be, this Mary Capri...’

‘I’ve no idea, Mrs Mooshaber,’ replied the caretaker as she once more took a seat; ‘I don’t know her at all.’

‘But how can it be that you know about her?’ Mrs Mooshaber went on.

‘How can it be that I know about her,’ echoed the caretaker with a laugh, ‘the thing is that I’ve heard about her. I’ve heard that she’s called Mary Capricorn. That’s all I know about her. But if I get to know anything more about her,’ she added quickly, ‘I’ll tell you about it straight away. Straight away, seeing that it interests you to know, I’ll tell you straight away.’

There was a short period of silence while the caretaker sipped her coffee and Mrs Mooshaber stroked the mouse-traps with her palm while she spent a while looking at the clock above the stove. Finally she spoke:

‘All the same I don’t get the thing about this Mary Capri. Is she someone special, or what...’

‘I really do not know about this Mary Capricorn,’ said the caretaker. ‘Just like I’ve told you, don’t think about it, Mrs Mooshaber. The world is full of people and it would addle

our brains to think of each and every one of them. Then the caretaker uttered a sentence which surprised even her. She said: 'I just don't think that it would be possible to think about everyone in the world. It's enough to think about the people we know. I also think now and then about our princess from Thalia and sometimes I even give a thought to the old man. I mean that old man of mine who fled from me.'

The hands of the clock above the stove crept up on a quarter to seven and Mrs Mooshaber suddenly got to her feet.

'Where are you off to now?' asked the caretaker, 'still laying traps?'

'Only fetching the bucket from the other room,' said Mrs Mooshaber. 'Just sit down and have something to eat, you're not eating your cake. I'll be right back.'

Mrs Mooshaber went into the next room and shut the door gently behind her. She took a damp cloth from the bucket and went over to the window to look at the courtyard. And the very moment she looked into the courtyard she had the impression that something was out there waiting to be seen.

It was as if in the darkness of the courtyard, broken by the light from the upper floors, some kind of shadow was lying just a short distance from the window and the scaffolding. In the darkness of the courtyard, broken by the light from the upper floors, a shadow lay as if it had dropped down from the sky. 'It looks,' Mrs Mooshaber said to herself, 'like one of those nosebags they put under a horse's neck, and here it is, fallen from the sky.' Mrs Mooshaber remained standing at the window with the damp cloth in her hand and staring at the shadow, staring for one minute, for two, for three, for no one knew how long, even the caretaker had no idea, and

no one knew what Mrs Mooshaber was thinking all that time. Then the clock in the kitchen struck quarter to seven and Mrs Mooshaber let the cloth drop onto the ground. It fell down with the long thud of a falling tree.

When Mrs Mooshaber stood at the door of the kitchen again the caretaker had a mouth full of cake while her eyes skirted the ottoman.

‘Didn’t you hear something?’ asked Mrs Mooshaber as she stood in the doorway. ‘You didn’t hear anything?’

The caretaker was about to swallow and only silently shook her head.

‘Yes, there was something,’ said Mrs Mooshaber in a voice that sounded strange and unfamiliar, ‘something came down with a splat. Into the courtyard beneath the scaffolding, just as the clock was striking quarter to.’

‘Perhaps it’s one of those rocketships flying back from the Moon,’ said the caretaker with a smile, while she wiped her lips with her palm, ‘there’s one landing this evening at about this time.’

It was getting on for seven when steps could be heard at the entrance to the building.

The caretaker pricked up her ears. ‘Hear that? It’s Faber. He’s coming home from work and he’s likely had a skinful. It’s sure to be him.’

It was him, for sure.

He was about to set foot on the first of the flight of steps when he threw a glance at the silent courtyard into which the darkness had now fallen, to be broken only by the lights from the upper floors, and his unsteady tread ceased. He went round the steps and into the courtyard. Once there he froze to the spot.



There in the darkness of the courtyard, broken only by the lights of the upper floors, a small boy was lying, young Faber, lying on his stomach with his face pressed against the paving and a chequered rag peeping out from under his forehead. Silent and unmoving, he lay like a knot of misery, like a beggar's bundle, a pitiful little ball. In fact he was lying there just like he had a quarter of an hour or even longer beforehand, except that the pool of blood underneath his face had now grown much bigger and was gleaming like a small lake in the night. And silence reigned everywhere.

'Can you hear it?' shouted the caretaker suddenly in the kitchen. 'Can you hear him in the courtyard?'

Mrs Mooshaber's heart missed a beat.

III

After the hearse had left the courtyard at eight in the evening, the inspector opened the door of the police car which had stayed on and said to Mr Faber:

'Come with us, Mr Faber. You'll have to make a statement down at the station. It's just a formality and you'll be back in no time. That empty jug of beer, Dan,' he went on, turning to a young man in uniform who was standing by the car holding the jug, 'kindly hand it over to the lady. Take it, Madam, we have no further use for it.'

'Take the jug, Elizabeth,' said Mr Faber as he got into the car with the inspector, 'take it and stop hanging around all the time in the courtyard. Go into the house, Elizabeth, I'll be back in no time.'

‘Mrs Faber will come to me in the meantime,’ said Mrs Mooshaber decidedly, ‘it would do no good for her to be alone. I’ll make some tea.’

‘Off you go,’ said the inspector from the police car as he opened the back door to the young man in uniform, who had been standing next to the car the whole time, although he’d managed to dispense with the jug. Then the inspector glanced at the surface of the courtyard gleaming in the headlights and said to the caretaker:

‘And you, Madam, could do a little tidying up round here.’

The engine spluttered into life, the headlights flashed their beams around the courtyard and the police car went out through the passage. The courtyard was in darkness once again. A few distraught tenants were left standing there, along with Mrs Faber holding the empty jug and the Steinhägers who lived on the first floor. The blood on the surface of the courtyard, illuminated once again by the lights from the upper storeys of the house, continued to glisten. Then the Steinhägers took Mrs Faber, jug in hand, by the arm and slowly escorted her behind Mrs Mooshaber into the passage. Meanwhile the caretaker dragged herself off to fetch a pail of water, which she used to rinse the blood off the surface of the courtyard and went to wash her hands. Then she followed Mrs Faber and the Steinhägers to Mrs Mooshaber’s apartment.

‘How could a thing like that have happened?’ She was terribly pale and upset when she entered Mrs Mooshaber’s kitchen. ‘Do you think the poor lad really clambered to the edge of the scaffolding and lost his balance? Did he really climb up there this very evening when he went for beer? The inspector said that he took a tumble. Took a tumble. When

I was with Mrs Mooshaber we did hear a banging sound at some point.’

Mrs Mooshaber was standing by the stove with her back towards the table while she made tea. Mrs Faber was sitting on a chair looking as though she had been frozen into the upright position. Her expression remained rigid as she held in her lap the jug which the police had found up on the shared balcony. Mr Steinhäger and his wife were sitting on the ottoman looking shattered, while the pale and distraught caretaker sat next to them. Then she said:

‘It’s terrible the way he fell like that. When he came to see you with that eye of his, you said he’d be as fit as a fiddle by evening. He’d be off to school next day with a spring in his step.’

‘Fit as a fiddle, quick as a squirrel’ whispered Mrs Mooshaber from the stove before turning round and bringing mugs of tea to the table. Then she moved to the sideboard, glanced at Mrs Faber and spoke quietly and hesitantly:

‘You know, Mrs Faber,’ she began in her quiet and hesitant manner, her hands resting on the sideboard, ‘I do not believe in God. When I was still small and at school, the farm steward, or perhaps it was one of the farm hands, I cannot recollect any more, told me to stop praying. He said that there was no use in it, because there was no Lord God to hear. He said I’d do better tending my turnips, because it was at least something to live on, and if I had to believe in something I should believe in Fate. Because I could see the hand of Fate everywhere and there was no need to pray to it. Things happen the way they happen. If there’s anything I believe in now, then it’s Fate. It was Fate, Mrs Faber, so stop tormenting yourself,’ Mrs Mooshaber went on addressing

Mrs Faber while she sat coldly upright in the chair with her features frozen, the jug in her lap. Then Mrs Mooshaber continued to talk, with her hands still resting on the sideboard:

‘My own deal from Fate was much worse. What have I not suffered at the hands of my children, when have they ceased to be a source of worry to me, despite all that I did for their good? I even used to sing them a lullaby. The caretaker knows it, but what good did it do. Off they went to the school for troublemakers and then the house of correction, now my Wezr is behind bars for the third time and I tremble at the thought he could be out again any moment. And as for Nabule, she threw the kolaches I’d baked out of the window at her wedding and then she threw me out too, without giving me anything to drink, not a crust of bread or a drop of lemonade, and I’d worn my one and only best clothes for the occasion. And there are other things, many other things,’ Mrs Mooshaber sighed, ‘things which I do not want to tell you, Mrs Faber. However the caretaker knows what I’m talking about.’

‘I do,’ said the caretaker as the pallor retreated somewhat from her cheeks, ‘some money was stolen, your savings in fact.’

‘Money was stolen,’ echoed Mrs Mooshaber, all the while leaning on the sideboard and looking at Mrs Faber, ‘Wezr stole the few guineas I’d been keeping in a cupboard here. They came to the whole of my savings. Once I threw them into the stove and burned them right in front of him. Then I took to stashing the money in rat poison in the larder. Now that he’s behind bars I keep it in the cupboard once again. But it’s not just the stealing,’ said Mrs Mooshaber with a sigh, ‘Wezr knows some stonemasons who engrave tombstones in the cemetery. I think they may be from that

workshop by the main gate. Who knows whether he doesn't get together with them and attack people, you know what they say, going round that cemetery at night scares the living daylight out of you. I don't mean the main gate by the square but on the other side from the Philipov area, where the park ends. Then there's Nabule on tour at night doing her various rounds. Oh if only I had not had... those children.' For a moment Mrs Mooshaber stopped speaking and silence fell over the group in her kitchen. Mrs Faber continued to sit coldly upright with frozen features, clasping the jug in her lap. The caretaker fingered the blouse below her throat and again went pale. The Steinhägers sat next to her on the sofa, still looking shattered. Then Mrs Mooshaber continued speaking with a shake of her head:

'But since I wanted children, that was that. In any case I had them late, when I was way past forty...I thought I might get some support for my old age. That Wezr would be a soldier or a gentleman of the chamber, that things might one day get a bit easier for me... well, you know...' Mrs Mooshaber suddenly lowered her voice, 'I'd wanted to be a housekeeper or a stallholder from when I was small, to be able to sell things...yes, and now you can see what I've ended up with...'

'But at least you have the Welfare,' said the caretaker, 'you have a card to prove it. You look after other people.'

'I look after other people,' agreed Mrs Mooshaber as she looked at the sideboard, 'I look after others but I can't look after my own family. That I can't do any more. I never could, really. From the time that he went to school Wezr was hitting the other pupils, playing truant and stealing, and it was the same with Nabule. They were always insolent and uncouth.'

Wezr was even drinking from when he was a young lad...’ Mrs Mooshaber stopped talking and looked at Mrs Faber, who was still sitting coldly upright with frozen features, clasping the jug in her lap, ‘you are trembling, Mrs Faber, on the point of collapse, but who knows what might have happened to that lad had he lived? Maybe he would have ended up at the Mother and Child Support Service with Mrs Knorring, he could have been off to the school for troublemakers and the house of correction and finally he’d have ended up a labourer, an unskilled pair of hands like as not hired for the day like my Wezr and he could have ended up, God forbid, behind bars too. It would have frayed your nerves or been the death of you. Oh...’ Mrs Mooshaber shook her head and looked at Mrs Faber, who didn’t so much as twitch a muscle in her face, ‘do not torment yourself so. And take some tea.’

‘Someone should press charges against the masons,’ said Mr Steinhäger from the settee, ‘for not taking the proper security precautions concerning their work on the balconies. They went off yesterday leaving everything as it was. They knew that it was a national holiday today and that they wouldn’t be working, but they did nothing to make the place secure.’

‘That’s not the masons’ fault,’ said the caretaker, ‘it’s the responsibility of the building contractor. They’re responsible for all the equipment outside Mrs Mooshaber’s door and in the passage. If there’s nothing in the way of a light out there at night, it could be the death of someone tripping on those bricks or that ‘barrow. And that tub of lime, I mean if Mrs Mooshaber were to fall into it....charges should be pressed against the contractor.’

‘And who would press these charges,’ asked Mrs Steinhäger in an apprehensive whisper, ‘the Fabers?’

‘What good would that do?’ asked Mrs Mooshaber, moving away from the sideboard and sitting down on a chair, ‘if someone managed to kill themselves on the bricks outside my door or if I fell into that tub, they’d say that we should have paid more attention. They’ll say this lad shouldn’t have gone shinning up the scaffolding. If he hadn’t climbed the scaffolding but had gone up via the balcony in the proper manner, he wouldn’t have fallen down. A contractor will likely as not prove that the boy drank from the jug of beer on his way home and that it went to his head. Take some tea and have a piece of cake.’

The Steinhägers nodded and hung their heads, but the caretaker merely fiddled with her blouse and remained silent. Then everyone drank tea for a while.

Before long the clock by the stove struck nine. Steps could be heard near the passage and for a moment Mrs Mooshaber froze in her seat. But it was obviously only Mr Faber coming back from the police station. Mrs Faber, forever sitting straight as a board and frozen in position with the jug in her lap, rose to her feet without a word and the others rose with her.

‘We will hang out the black flag, Mrs Mooshaber,’ said the caretaker with a sigh, ‘you’ve got it in a wardrobe in the corridor, haven’t you, along with the pole?’ Mrs Mooshaber replied with a nod.

‘I have,’ she agreed, ‘and a spare one besides, I’ll hang it out now for the night. I’m glad that Mrs Faber has relaxed and calmed down a bit. Do not torment yourself,’ she said again as she went to open the door.

‘Just a moment, Mrs Mooshaber,’ said the caretaker when the others had all left and the two of them were alone in

the kitchen, 'just a moment, I have to speak to you. There's something fishy about all this. The inspector said he took a tumble. Took a tumble - that's what he said, but the way he put it made it seem as if he was really trying to say something else. It seemed to me he almost wanted to suggest...well, I don't quite know what.' The caretaker shook her head and fiddled with her blouse before continuing:

'Perhaps it's nothing. I tend to get this funny feeling sometimes. Of course I could be barking up the wrong tree.'

When even the caretaker had taken her leave, Mrs Mooshaber cleared the table, emptied the bucket which had been left in the room, and went out into the corridor. She extracted a neatly folded black flag attached to a wooden dowel from the wardrobe before reaching behind it and taking hold of the pole. The pole was very long and reached as far as the ceiling. When Mrs Mooshaber went through the door into the passage she had to hold it at an angle. Once there she made her way with pole and flag around barrel, bricks and 'barrow, before going out in front of the house.

Ten paces or so in front of the gateway to the house a gas lamp cast its light onto the street. It was too weak to illuminate the area in front of the dilapidated house properly, but the area wasn't dark because light fell from the windows of the floors above, besides which the sky was bright from the many lights and neon signs in other better parts of the city and perhaps even from the fireworks being set off in the area of the airport and the palace in order to honour Albinus Rappelschlund on his name day. Pole and flag in hand, Mrs Mooshaber gave a quick glance down the poorly-lit street and suddenly had the feeling that she'd caught a glimpse of shadows at the corner. The shadows of two people standing

there. Once again Mrs Mooshaber felt her heart miss a beat. She hurriedly attached the dowel to the end of the pole which she used to steer the flag onto a hook protruding above the gate to the house under the first-floor window. The flag unfurled and hung in the air. Again Mrs Mooshaber glanced at the corner of the street. Empty. There were no longer any shadows. Carrying the pole Mrs Mooshaber vanished into the gateway and then to her apartment. She took care to lock the door and returned the pole to its place in the corridor behind the wardrobe. Then she went to the kitchen and for a while was in no state to do anything else.

‘In the morning I was getting ready to go to a wedding,’ she said to herself, ‘and in the evening I went to hang out the black flag. What am I to make of it all? And on top of all that wasn’t this meant to be some kind of public holiday...’

Mrs Mooshaber looked at the sideboard and with her head in a whirl it suddenly struck her that she what she really needed was sleep.

IV

They placed the coffin on the right-hand side of the grave and laid a posy of flowers on a pile of earth behind it. Mr Faber stared at the hole in front of his feet. Mrs Faber, frozen upright, was looking vaguely into the beyond, where an endless line of gravestones met her eyes. Beside the Fabers stood a lowly church official and a few other people were behind him with the Steinhägers, Mrs Kralec the caretaker and Mrs Mooshaber with her big black bag. Pride of place

