

The Old Book Peddler

***and other tales
for bibliophiles***

Stefan Zweig

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STEFAN ZWEIG

The Old-Book
Peddler and
Other Tales
for Bibliophiles

Translated by
THEODORE W. KOCH

Northwestern University
THE CHARLES DEERING LIBRARY
Evanston, Illinois

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The Old-Book Peddler

PREFACE

For some years I have been interested in the literature of book-collecting, especially in the form of the bookish short story which originated in France more than a century ago, with the publication of Charles Nodier's "Le Bibliomane." I have translated a score of these tales for bibliophiles, from the French, German, and Italian. Certain book lovers have taken an interest in these analyses of typical though imaginary collectors, and I have been encouraged to continue the work of collecting and translating these tales.

Stefan Zweig, one of Europe's foremost men of letters, who is also well-known as a collector of books and autographs, has written several very charming pieces in which he has shown his keen appreciation of the psychology of the bibliophile. With Mr. Zweig's kind permission I have translated these delightful tales and prefaced them with his "Books Are the Gateway to the World," and, as an epilogue, I have added his "Thanks to Books."

Two of these contributions are clothed in the form of fiction—"The Old-book Peddler" and "The Invisible Collection." To my thinking the four contributions have much more unity than one might expect. I only hope that readers of the collection will enjoy their flavor and philosophy as much as I enjoyed turning them into English. I wish to thank my friend and colleague, Professor Werner Leopold, for his kind help in some of this work.

THEODORE W. KOCH

The Charles Deering Library
Northwestern University
June, 1937

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THANKS TO BOOKS

Books Are the Gateway to the World

All progress on earth depends mainly on two inventions due to human ingenuity. The invention of the wheel, which rolls onward with dizzying revolutions around its axle, enables us to move about physically. The invention of the art of writing excites our imagination and gives expression to our thoughts. That nameless man who first, somewhere and at some time, bent the hard wood around the spokes, taught mankind to overcome the distances that separate lands and peoples. With the first wagon intercourse became at once possible; freight could be transported and men could travel and learn. It brought an end to the limitations set by nature, which assigned certain fruits, metals, stones and products, each to its own narrow home. Countries no longer lived by themselves but in relation to the whole world. The Orient and the Occident, the South and the North, were brought together by the invention of vehicles. Just as the wheel in all its various uses, as a part of locomotives, of automobiles and of propellers, overcomes the physical law of gravitation, so the art of writing, which likewise has developed far beyond the written roll, from the single leaf to the book, has overcome the tragic limitations of life and experience that hemmed in the individual human being. Because of books no one need any longer be shut up by himself, within his own narrow confines, but can share in everything that has happened or is happening, in all the thoughts and feelings of the whole of humanity. Everything or practically everything that takes place in the world of thought depends today on books, and that form of life, imbued with intelligence and raised above material considerations, which we call civilization, cannot be imagined without books. This power of the book to enlarge the soul and to build new worlds, which is active in our personal and private lives, very rarely obtrudes itself on our consciousness and then only in moments of special significance. Books have been a part of our daily lives so long that we cannot be gratefully conscious of their marvelous character every time we use them. With every breath we inhale oxygen and by this invisible nutriment we give a mysterious chemical refreshment to our blood; but just as we pay no attention to this fact so we are scarcely aware that we are continually taking in food for the mind through the eye when we read, and are thus giving refreshment or weariness to our spirit. For us, who are the heirs of thousands of years of writing, reading has become almost a

bodily function, something automatic; and inasmuch as we have held books in our hands since we began to attend school, we have become so accustomed to have them with us that we take one up almost as indifferently as we do a coat, a glove, a cigarette, or anything else that is produced in countless numbers for our use. Familiarity breeds contempt, and it is only in the truly productive, thoughtful and contemplative moments of life that we see as really wonderful that to which we are accustomed. Only in these pensive moments are we reverentially aware of that magical power to move the soul which comes to us from books and makes them so important in our lives that now in the twentieth century we cannot even imagine what our inner life would be without the miracle of their presence.

Such a moment comes rarely, but for that very reason it is long remembered, often for years. I still remember the day, the place and even the hour, when it became definitely clear to me in what a profound and creative manner our inner, private world is interwoven with that other visible as well as invisible world of books. I think that I might, without immodesty, give an account of this moment of spiritual clarification, for though it is merely a personal experience, it reaches far beyond my own insignificant self. I was about twenty-six years old at the time and had already written books, so that I knew something about that mysterious transformation which a dim idea, a dream, a bit of imagination undergoes and the various phases it must pass through before it is ultimately changed by means of strange concretions and sublimations, into the bound, rectangular object which we call a book—a thing for sale, with a price stamped upon it, lying apparently without will, like a piece of merchandise under the glass of a show case. Yet each copy is awake and has a soul; though for sale, it is its own master, while at the same time belonging to the man who inquiringly turns its leaves. Even more truly does the book belong to the man who reads it, but most of all, in a complete and final sense, to the man who not only reads it but enjoys it. Thus I had had some experience with this indescribable process of transfusion by which the events of one's own life are fused with the events of another's, feelings with feelings, spirit with spirit; but the full magic, the breadth and vehemence of the influence of print on another's being, had nevertheless not become fully apparent to me. I had pondered the matter vaguely but had not thought it through completely. Then this experience happened to me, on the day and at the hour which I shall describe briefly.

I was traveling on board ship—it was an Italian vessel—in the Mediterranean, from Genoa to Naples, from Naples to Tunis, and thence to Algiers. The trip took some days and there were very few passengers. So it came about that I often had talks with a young Italian belonging to the crew,

a sort of assistant to the steward, who swept the cabins, scrubbed the deck and did various other chores of the same nature, which in the ordinary scale of things are looked upon as rather menial. A fine young fellow he was, good to look at, this swarthy, black-eyed lad, whose teeth flashed when he laughed—and he laughed often. He loved his rapid, melodious Italian and he never forgot to accompany his musical speech with vivid gestures. He had a genius for mimicry and caricatured everybody—the toothless captain when he spoke; the old Englishman walking stiffly across the deck, with his left shoulder pushed forward; the cook, who after dinner paced majestically in sight of the passengers and turned the eye of a connoisseur on their waistcoats, which he had just filled. It was a joy to chat with this dark young savage with his clear brow and his tattooed arms. For years, he told me, he had tended sheep on the Lipari Islands, where he lived, and he showed the kindly trust of a young animal. He soon discovered that I liked him and would rather talk with him than with any one else on board. He therefore told me all about himself, frankly and freely, as he saw it, so that after two days we were almost friends or at least comrades.

Then suddenly, overnight, an invisible wall arose between us. We had landed in Naples, the ship had taken in coal, passengers, food and mail, the usual provisions at a harbor, and was again on its way. Proud Posilipo looked like a small hill and the drifting clouds over Vesuvius had the appearance of pale cigarette smoke, when he came suddenly up to me, smiled broadly and with pride showed a crumpled letter which he had just received and now asked me to read to him.

At first I did not understand. I thought that he, Giovanni, had received a letter in a foreign language, French or German, evidently from a girl—I knew that girls must admire a young fellow like him—and now he wanted me to translate her message into Italian. But no, the letter was in Italian. What did he want me to do, then? Read the letter? No, he repeated, almost impatiently, I was to read the letter to him, read it aloud to him. And then the truth flashed upon me. This young fellow, handsome as a picture, intelligent, endowed with native tact and real grace, belonged to those seven or eight per cent of his fellow countrymen who, according to statistics, cannot read. He was illiterate. And for the moment I could not recall that I had ever in Europe spoken with one of this vanishing race. This Giovanni was the first European I had ever met who did not know how to read, and I probably gazed at him in surprise, no longer as a friend, no longer as a comrade, but as a curiosity. Of course, I read the letter to him, a letter written by some seamstress or other, a Maria or Carolina, and containing what young girls write to young men in all countries and in all languages. He watched my lips

closely while I read, and I noticed the effort he made to remember every word. He frowned heavily and his face contracted as if in torment, while he exerted himself to listen carefully and to forget nothing. I read the letter twice, slowly, clearly; he attended to every word, and became more and more content, his eyes beamed, his lips opened like a red rose in summer. Then one of the ship's officers who had been standing at the rail came towards us, and Giovanni slipped away.

That was all, the whole reason for my subsequent thoughts. But my real experience was only beginning. I lay back in a steamer chair and looked out into the soft night. The strange discovery troubled me. This was the first time that I had met an illiterate person, and a European at that, whom I knew to be intelligent and whom I had talked to as to a friend. I was bothered, even tormented, wondering how the world would appear to a brain like his, shut off from everything written. I tried to imagine what it would be like not to be able to read. I tried to put myself in the place of people like him. He picks up a newspaper, and cannot understand it. He picks up a book, and there it lies in his hand, an object lighter than wood or iron, with four sides and square corners, a colored, purposeless thing; and he puts it aside, does not know what to do with it. He stands in front of a book store, and these handsome, yellow, green, red, white rectangular objects, with backs ornamented in gold, are to him only painted fruit, or sealed perfume bottles whose fragrance cannot be caught through the glass. He hears the sacred names of Goethe, Dante, Shelley, Beethoven, and they mean nothing to him; they are lifeless syllables, an empty, senseless noise. He has no suspicion, poor fellow, of the rapture that suddenly comes from a single line in a book, breaking forth from the rest like the silvery moon from lifeless clouds; he knows nothing of the deep emotion you feel when something you read about suddenly seems to become a part of your own experience. He is walled in by himself, because he knows nothing of books; his life is dull, troglodytic. How, I asked myself, can a man endure such an existence, cut off from relations with the whole world, without smothering, without feeling utterly impoverished? How can a man endure to know nothing but what accidentally meets his eye or ear? How can he breathe without that larger air of the world which is poured forth from books? I redoubled my efforts to imagine the situation of a man who cannot read, who is shut off from the world of thought. In my eager endeavor to picture to myself his way of living I proceeded with as much ingenuity as a scientist might use in reconstructing the life of a Patagonian, or of a stone age man, from the remains of a pile-dwelling. But I was unable to get inside the brain, inside the way of thinking, of a European who had never read a book; I could no

more do it than a deaf person can form a conception of music from mere descriptions of it.

When I failed to understand his inner life, that of an illiterate, I tried to clear my thoughts by imagining what my own life would be like without books. First I tried for the moment to dismiss from my consciousness everything that I had learned from written words, from all the books that I had read. But immediately I failed. My very nature, that which I conceived of as my own very self, at once dissolved completely and disappeared when I tried to take away what books and culture had given me in knowledge, in experience, in power to go beyond my own horizon, and so to feel more deeply conscious both of the world outside and of my own self. Wherever I turned my thoughts, every object and every circumstance was bound up with recollections and experiences which I owed to books, and every single word suggested countless associations with things I had read or learned. When, for instance, I reflected that I was now on my way to Algiers and Tunis, at once a hundred associations flashed through my mind, involuntary, clear as crystal, in connection with the word “Algiers”—Carthage, the Baal worship, Salammbo, the passages in Livy which describe how the Carthaginians and the Romans, Scipio and Hannibal, encountered each other at Zama, and at the same time the same scenes from Grillparzer’s dramatic fragment; and color was shed over these by a picture of Delacroix and a description of nature by Flaubert. The wounding of Cervantes during the attack on Algiers, in the reign of Charles V, and a thousand other events became strangely alive to me as I uttered or merely thought of the short words Algiers and Tunis. Two thousand years of battles and medieval history, and countless other matters rose from the depths of my memory. Everything that I had read and learned since boyhood gave value to these two names as they passed through my mind. And I understood that this gift or grace of being able to roam far in thought and follow up numerous connections, this magnificent and only right way of viewing the world from many different levels at the same time—that this was granted only to the man who, reaching out beyond his own experience, had become the possessor of the contents of books, which were drawn from many lands and people and times; and I was shocked to think how narrow the world must seem to the man who has no books. And further, the very fact that I could have a thought like this, could feel so deeply because poor Giovanni lacked the inspiration that comes from a knowledge of the great world—this ability of mine to be deeply moved by the accidental fate of a stranger, did I not owe this to those works of imagination with which I had busied myself? For when we read, what else are we doing but living the lives of other people, seeing with their eyes,

thinking with their brains? From this vivid and grateful moment I recalled, with increasing vividness and gratitude, countless blessings that I had received from books. One instance after another came into view like the stars in the heavens. I remembered definite moments which had taken me out of the narrow limits of my ignorance, had revealed new values to me, and had given me, though still only a boy, emotions and experiences that transcended my own narrow and undeveloped existence. This was the reason—and now I understood it—why my youthful imagination had soared aloft when I read Plutarch's "Lives," or "Mr. Midshipman Easy," or the "Leather Stocking Tales," for a wider, more vivid world then broke through the walls and forced itself into my calm home and at the same time drew me out with it. Books gave me my first vision of the wide, measureless world, and a desire to lose myself in it. Most of our emotions, our wishes for things beyond ourselves, this best part of our being, all this sacred thirst, is due to the salt, as it were, which is contained in books, and which compels us again and again to drink in new experiences. I remembered important decisions of mine caused by books, during which, as in other such nights, one gladly neglected sleep for the sake of happiness. The more I thought of these things the better I realized that a man's mental world consists of millions of monads of single impressions, only a very few of which are the result of his own observation or experience; everything else—the essential, complex mass—comes from books, from what he has read, experienced indirectly, learned.

It was wonderful to think of all this. Long-forgotten happy experiences, which had come to me through books, now occurred to me. One reminded me of another; and just as when you look up at the velvety sky at night and try to count the stars, new stars, hitherto unnoticed, constantly come into view and confuse the count, so I now became aware, as I looked deep into my inner world, that this other firmament is also lighted by a countless number of individual flames, and that our mental capacity for enjoyment gives us a second universe, which revolves about us with its twinkling stars, filled like the other with unheard music. I had never been so close to books as in this moment, when I did not hold one in my hand but was merely thinking of them, though I did this with all the feeling of one who has awakened to a full realization. This had been accomplished through my contact with this poor illiterate, who, though fashioned like me, was prevented by his one deficiency from penetrating with love and creative energy into the higher world. Through him I came to realize the full magic of books, which daily open the universe to those who can read.

When a man has in this way come to a full realization of the limitless influence of writing and print, of this medium for conveying thought, whether he be thinking of a single book or of books in general, then he smiles with pity at the despondency which today has seized upon so many, even those who are intelligent. They complain that the time for books has come to an end; that technical developments are now to the fore. They say that the phonograph, the cinema and the radio are more precise and more convenient means of conveying language and thought, and have already begun to replace books; that the rôle of books in the history of civilization will soon be a thing of the past. This is a narrow view, a stunted way of thinking! What miracle has technical skill ever accomplished that surpasses or even equals the marvelous effect of books through thousands of years! Chemistry has not produced an explosive with such far-reaching power, sufficient to shake the world; it has not made steel plates or reinforced concrete that can outlast this small bundle of printed sheets. No electric lamp gives out such light as proceeds from many a thin pamphlet, and no power current created by technical skill equals that which fills the soul when it comes in contact with a book. Ageless and indestructible, changeless through the centuries, storage batteries of the highest potency in the smallest and most usable form, books have nothing to fear from technical developments, for is not technical skill learned and improved by means of books, and by nothing else? Everywhere, not merely in our own times, books are the alpha and omega of all knowledge, the beginning of every science. The more intimately a man associates with books the more profoundly he experiences the unity of life, for his personality is multiplied; he sees not only with his own eyes but with the countless eyes of the soul, and by their sublime help he travels with loving sympathy through the whole world.

The Old-Book Peddler:

A Viennese Tale for Bibliophiles

I had come back to Vienna and was returning from a visit to the suburbs, when quite unexpectedly I ran into a downpour of rain which, like a wet whip, quickly drove the people into doorways and under cover. I, too, hastily ran for shelter. Fortunately there is now a café on every street corner in Vienna. So, with dripping hat and thoroughly drenched shoulders, I ran into the café directly opposite. Once inside, I could see that it was a suburban café of the conventional, almost standardized sort. It lacked the newfangled contraptions of the German type of music halls which are common in the heart of the city. It was old Viennese, middle-class, and was completely filled with petty tradespeople who devoured newspapers more avidly than pastry. Now towards evening the air, already stifling, was in addition shot through with smoke rings. But still the café looked neat with its unmistakably new velvet sofas and its bright aluminum cash register. In my haste I had not taken the trouble to look at the name outside. As I sat there, relaxed and gazing impatiently through the panes overspread with a bluish haze, I wondered when it would please the tiresome rain to pass on a few miles further.

Thus unoccupied I felt myself slipping into that sluggish passivity which imperceptibly exudes from every genuine Viennese café like a narcotic. In this state of vacuity I observed the people one by one. The artificial light of the smoking room cast a sickly gray around their eyes. I watched the girl at the cash register as she mechanically dealt out to the waiter sugar and spoons for each cup of coffee. Only half-awake, I read unconsciously the most trivial placards on the walls, and this dulling of the senses brought on a sort of apathy which soothed me. But suddenly I was jerked from my half-slumber in a queer manner. An inner excitement began to stir uncertainly and restlessly in me, just as a slight toothache begins of which one knows nothing at first, not even whether it has its origin on the left side of the face or the right, in the lower teeth or in the upper. I felt only a dull tension, a mental restlessness. For suddenly—I should not have been able to say how—I became conscious of the fact that I must have been here before, years

ago, and that through some association I was bound up with these walls, these chairs, these tables, this strange smoky room.

But the more I strove to grasp this association, the more maliciously and shiftily it eluded me—like a jellyfish gleaming uncertainly in the lowest depth of my consciousness, and yet not to be gotten hold of, not to be grasped. In vain I fixed my eyes on every object in the establishment. Of course, some things I did not recognize, as for instance the cash register with its clinking, recording keys; or that brown wainscoting of artificial rosewood—all that must have been installed later. And yet—and yet I had been here before, twenty years or more ago! Here, hidden in the unseen, like the nail imbedded in wood, lingered something of my old self, now long since outgrown. Forcibly I reached out and drove all my faculties into space and at the same time into my own self—and yet, confound it! I could not reach it, this elusive recollection drowned in the depths of my own being.

I fretted, as one always frets, when some difficulty makes one aware of the insufficiency and imperfection of one's mental powers; but I did not give up hope of somehow seizing this recollection, for my memory is so strangely constituted that I knew I needed only the slightest clue. This memory of mine is both good and bad, now obstinate and self-willed, but then again inexpressibly faithful. It often completely engulfs in its darkness the essentials of happenings as well as of faces, of reading as well as of experience, and will reveal nothing from this lower world at the mere command of the will, without compulsion. But should I grasp the most fleeting hint—a picture post card, a few lines on an envelope, a musty newspaper—straightway the forgotten thing quivers, like a fish on the hook, from the dark agitated water, corporeal and concrete. Then I know a person's every trait—his mouth, the gap left by a missing tooth on the left side of his face when he laughs—and the broken cadence of his laughter—and how at the same time his moustache begins to tremble and a new, a different face emerges. Then, all at once, I visualize all this in its entirety and remember every word that this man ever said to me years ago. But, in order to see and sense something past, I always need a physical stimulus, a little help from reality. So I closed my eyes in order to reflect with still more intense concentration, to create and grasp that mysterious fishing hook. But nothing! Again nothing! Buried and forgotten! And I was so enraged at the faulty self-willed organ of memory between my temples that I could have pounded my forehead with my fists, as one pounds a damaged automaton which unjustly refuses what is asked of it. This rebuff from within disturbed me so much that I could no longer remain sitting, and from sheer chagrin I rose to get some relief. Strangely enough, no sooner had I taken the first steps

through the room than the first phosphorescent glimmer began to shine and gleam within me. To the right of the cash register, I reminded myself, the room should lead into a windowless room, lighted only by artificial light. So it proved to be. There it was, this rectangular, indistinctly outlined back room—the card and billiard room—with a different paper on the wall, but otherwise unchanged. Quivering with joy I instinctively looked around, taking in one object after another. I felt that I should soon know everything. In the room were two unused billiard tables, at first barely visible, resembling stagnant green ponds covered with slime. In the corners were placed card tables, at one of which two councillors or professors were playing chess. A small square table stood in the space close to the iron stove, on the way to the telephone booth. Suddenly it all came back to me and at once I knew in a flash, with a single staggering shock of flaming joy: *Mein Gott!* Of course, this was Mendel's place—Jacob Mendel, Mendel the old-book peddler—and after twenty years I was once more at his headquarters, the Café Gluck on the upper Alserstrasse! How could I have forgotten him, “Buch-Mendel,” for so inconceivably long a time, this most strange and legendary man, this secluded world wonder, famed in the university and in a small, reverent circle! How could I forget him, the peddler and wizard of books! Here he had sat regularly every day, from morning until evening, a symbol of knowledge, the celebrity and the renown of the Café Gluck!

For only an instant was it necessary to look within, behind closed eyelids, and then his unmistakable and distinct figure rose out of my stimulated imagination. Instantly, I saw him almost bodily, as he always sat there at the small, square table with its grayish dirty marble top at all times overloaded with books and miscellaneous publications. I saw him calm and unperturbed, his bespectacled eyes fixed with a hypnotic stare on his book. I saw him with his badly polished, blotchy bald spot, humming and muttering as he rocked his body backward and forward—a habit which he had brought along with him from *heder*, the Jewish school for children in the Near East. Here and only here, at this table, he read his catalogues and books as he had been taught to read in the Talmudic school, softly singing, and swinging himself—a black rocking cradle. For as a child falls into sleep and sinks away from the world through this hypnotically rhythmic movement, so too, according to the belief of those pious people, one falls into the grace of concentration, thanks to this rocking and swinging of the inert body. And in fact, this Jacob Mendel saw and heard nothing of what was going on around him. The billiard players nearby were noisy; the attendants ran; the telephones rang; the floor was scrubbed; the fire in the stove was made. He noticed nothing of all that. Once a live coal fell from the stove. The

parquetry smelled of scorching wood and was smoldering two steps from Mendel when a guest, who had noticed the danger because of the disagreeable odor, began to put out the fire. But Jacob Mendel himself, only a few inches away and surrounded by the smoke, had noticed nothing. For he read as others pray, as players play, and as drunkards stare stupefied into space. He read with such touching absorption that all reading by other men has ever since appeared to me profane. In this little old-book peddler from Galicia, Jacob Mendel, I as a youth had seen for the first time the great secret of unremitting concentration which marks the artist as well as the scientist, the man who is truly wise as well as the one who is stark mad—this tragic fortune and misfortune of complete demoniacal possession.

An older colleague of mine from the University had taken me to him. At that time I was investigating, with but little success, Mesmer, the Paracelsian physician and magnetizer, who even today is not given full recognition. The general run of books on the subject proved to be inadequate and the librarian whom I (unsuspecting novice that I was) had asked for information, grumbled at me coldly. Proofs and literature were my business, not his. It was then that my colleague mentioned Mendel's name to me for the first time. "I'll go with you to Mendel," he promised. "He knows everything and gets you everything. He'll fetch you the rarest book from the least-remembered German secondhand book shop. He is the most efficient man in Vienna, and, besides that, a unique character, a 'book-saurian' of a passing race of bygone ages."

So the two of us went to the Café Gluck, and, behold, there he sat, "Buch-Mendel," the old-book peddler, bespectacled, bearded, clad in black, reading and swaying like a dark bush in the wind! We approached. He did not notice us. He sat there, reading and rocking his body to and fro over the table in the manner of a pagoda tree. On the hook behind him swayed his threadbare black coat, bulging stoutly with periodicals and business notes. My friend coughed loudly to announce us, but Mendel, his thick spectacles obstinately pressed close to the book, had noticed nothing as yet. Finally, my friend knocked on the table top as loudly and forcefully as one knocks on a door. Then, at last, Mendel waked up and with a quick, instinctive movement pushed his clumsy steel-rimmed spectacles up on his forehead while from under bristling ash-gray brows he turned his strange, piercing eyes on us—small, black, watchful eyes—quick, sharp, darting back and forth like the tongue of a serpent. My friend presented me and I explained my errand. First I used a subterfuge which my friend had expressly recommended to me. Seemingly angry, I complained of the librarian who had not wanted to give me any information. Mendel leaned back and spat

with elaborate care. Then he gave a short laugh and with an accent reminiscent of the East said: "He did not want to? No—he could not! He is a *parch*, a beaten jackass with gray hair. For more than twenty years I have known him—God help us—but he has learned nothing so far. Such as he can pocket the salary—that is the only thing he knows how to do! They should rather lay bricks, these doctors, instead of having to do with books!"

With this outpouring of his heart the ice was broken, and a good-natured motion of his hand invited me for the first time to the square table, the marble top of which was scribbled over with notes—to this altar of bibliographical revelations which was as yet unknown to me. I quickly explained what I wanted: the contemporary works on magnetism as well as all later books and polemics for and against Mesmer. As soon as I was through, Mendel closed his left eye for a moment, exactly as a marksman does before shooting. And, in fact, this gesture of concentrated attention lasted only a second. Then, as if reading from an unseen catalogue, he enumerated fluently two or three dozen books, each with its place of publication, date and approximate price. I was dumbfounded. Though prepared, I had not expected this. But my stupefaction seemed to please him, for at once he continued playing on the keyboard of his memory the most amazing bibliographical paraphrases of my subject. Did I want to know anything about the somnambulists, or about the first attempts at hypnotism, or about Gassner, exorcism, Christian Science, and Madame Blavatsky? Again he rattled off names, titles, descriptions. Now I appreciated what a unique memory I had come across in Jacob Mendel—a veritable encyclopaedia, a universal catalogue on two legs! Completely stupefied I stared at this bibliographical phenomenon, swaddled in this mean-looking, even somewhat greasy garment of a common Galician old-book peddler, who, after he had rattled off about eight names with seeming indifference, but inwardly satisfied with his trump card, cleaned his spectacles with a handkerchief which once upon a time might have been white. To hide my amazement somewhat, I timidly asked him which of these books he could possibly get for me. "Well, we'll see what can be done about it," he muttered. "Come back tomorrow. In the meantime Mendel will get you something. And what cannot be found in one place will be found somehow in another place. If a man has sense, he also has luck."

I thanked him politely, and from sheer politeness I blundered into an awkward bit of folly by proposing to write down for him on a piece of paper the titles of the books which I wanted. At that very instant I felt a warning thrust of my friend's elbow. But too late! Mendel had already thrown me a look—what a look!—one which at the same time was triumphant and hurt,

scornful and superior, an altogether kingly look, the Shakespearian look of Macbeth as Macduff demands from the invincible hero that he yield without battle. Once more he gave a short laugh, his large Adam's apple moving up and down in his throat. Apparently he had with difficulty swallowed a rude word. And he would have been in the right if he had shown every conceivable rudeness, good honest old Mendel; for only a stranger, an ignoramus (an *amhorets*, as he said) could have been so insolent as to presume to write down for him, Jacob Mendel—Jacob Mendel himself—the title of a book, as one might do for an apprentice in a bookshop, or a library underling; as if this incomparable, this brilliant book-brain had ever needed such a gross expedient! Only later did I understand how much I must have grieved this secluded genius with my polite offer; for this small, wrinkled, hump-shouldered Galician Jew, whose face was covered by his beard, this Jacob Mendel was a Titan of memory. Back of this chalky, grimy forehead, overgrown with stray hairs, there was imprinted, as if with cast-metal type in the invisible spirit writing of the memory, practically every author and title which had ever been printed on the title-page of a book. Mendel knew the place of publication, the publisher, the price, of every worth while book—of the one that appeared yesterday as well as of one that was two hundred years old. At the first shot, and with unfailing vision, he remembered at the same moment the binding, the illustrations and the facsimiles. He saw every work, whether he himself had handled it or had only sighted it from afar in some window or library, with the same visual clarity as the creative artist sees his inner creation, as yet invisible to the outer world. He recalled at once when a book had perchance been offered in a catalogue of a Regensburg antiquary for six marks, that the same book in a different edition could have been bought in Vienna two years before at an auction sale for six kronen, and in the same breath he also gave the name of the buyer. No, Jacob Mendel never forgot a title, nor an item. He knew every plant, all the infusoria, every star in the ever-revolving and ever-agitated cosmos of the entire book-world. In every branch he knew more than the experts; he had mastered the libraries better than the librarians themselves. He knew by heart the stocks of most firms better than their owners, in spite of their lists and index cards, although there was at his disposal nothing more than the magic of his memory—an incomparable faculty which could be illustrated by a hundred separate examples. To be sure, this memory, so demoniacally unfailing, let itself be schooled and formed by the eternal mystery of every perfection, by means of concentration. Outside of his books this remarkable man knew nothing of the world; for all the phenomena of life began to assume reality for him only when they had recast themselves into letters, when they had collected themselves in a book, and had become as it were sterilized. But he

did not even read the books themselves because of their significance, because of their factual contents and spiritual meaning. Only their authors and titles, their prices, their outward forms, their title-pages drew his attention. In the final analysis, though unproductive and uncreative, and only a register of a hundred thousand titles and names stamped into the soft cortex of a mammalian brain, instead of being written in a book catalogue, yet this specialized bookseller's memory of Jacob Mendel was in its unique perfection not inferior as a phenomenon to that of Napoleon's memory for faces, that of Mezzofanti for languages, that of a Lasker for chess openings, that of a Busoni for music. Put into a seminar, in a university, this brain would have instructed and surprised thousands, even hundreds of thousands of students and scholars, and would have been useful to scholarship, an incomparable gain for those public treasures which we call libraries. But this higher world was forever closed to him, to this little uneducated Galician book peddler who had not gone much further than the Talmudic school. So the fantastic faculty could only find expression in a mystic science at the marble-topped table in the Café Gluck. Our intellectual world still awaits the coming of that great psychologist who, as Buffon arranged and classified the species and varieties of animals, will in his turn describe and differentiate the various kinds and prototypes of that magic power which we call memory. He will have to remember Jacob Mendel, that genius of prices and titles, that unknown master of bibliographical lore.

Because of his vocation, of course, Jacob Mendel appeared to the uninitiated to be no more than an unimportant book peddler. Every Sunday there appeared in the *Neue Freie Presse* and in the *Neues Wiener Tageblatt* the same stereotyped advertisement: "Am buying old books, paying highest prices. Immediate attention. Mendel, Obere Alserstrasse"—and then followed a telephone number which was really that of the Café Gluck. He rummaged through stocks and with the help of an old town porter, every week he dragged new spoils into his headquarters and thence away again, for he had no license for a regular bookshop. So he stuck to his petty dealing and his poorly paying business. Students sold him their textbooks, and through his hands these textbooks passed from the older generation to the one that was for the moment younger. Besides that he acted as an agent and secured all desiderata for a small extra charge. His good advice was cheap. However, money had no place in his world; no one had ever seen him in other than the same threadbare coat, morning, afternoon, and evening—taking his milk and two rolls and at noon eating something brought to him from the nearby restaurant. He did not smoke, he did not play; one might say he did not live. But both his eyes lived behind his spectacles and incessantly

fed that enigmatic brain tissue with words, book titles and names. And the impressionable fruitful mass sucked this abundance into itself as a meadow sucks in thousands and thousands of rain drops. People did not interest him, and of all the human passions he knew perhaps only this one: vanity—conceded to be the most human of all. When anyone, after having become tired of searching in a hundred other places, came to him for information and he could give it, this alone gave him satisfaction, together with the fact that a few dozen people who lived in Vienna and abroad also needed and prized his knowledge. In every unwieldy conglomerate of millions which we call a city, there are always set in here and there a few small facets which reflect one and the same universe on their tiny surfaces, invisible to most and prized only by the connoisseur who shares the same enthusiasm. And all these connoisseurs of books knew Jacob Mendel. Just as people who wanted to get advice regarding a page of music went to Eusebius Mandyczewski at the Society of Music Lovers—a man who, in his gray cap, sat there in a friendly fashion among his reports and notes and with the first upward look smilingly solved the hardest problems—even as today everybody who needs information concerning old Vienna theatres is sure to apply to the omniscient Father Clossy—so did the few orthodox bibliophiles with an equally confident “matter-of-courseness” drift to Jacob Mendel in the Café Gluck as soon as there was some particularly hard nut to crack. It gave me, young and curious as I was, a peculiar delight to watch him during such consultations. Generally, if an inferior book was laid before him he snapped its covers together contemptuously and merely grumbled: “Zwei kronen.” But before some unique or rare copy he drew back respectfully and spread a newspaper under it; and one saw that all of a sudden he became ashamed of his dirty, inky fingers and black finger-nails. Then he began to turn over page after page—lovingly, carefully, and with great respect. At such moments no one could disturb him, no more than one could disturb a true believer during his prayers. In fact, every one of these actions—looking at, handling, smelling, and weighing—had something of the ceremonial of a religious ritual. His bent form moved back and forth while he was muttering and growling, scratching his head and uttering strange, primitive sounds—a long, almost startled “ah” or an “oh” of a transport of delight, and then again a terrified “oi” or “oiveh” when some pages appeared to be missing or to have been mutilated by a bookworm. Finally, he weighed the old book, sniffed and smelled the ungainly quarto, with half-closed eyes, as a sentimental girl smells a tuberose, and with just as much emotion. The owner, of course, had to be patient during this somewhat detailed procedure. But, having examined the book, Mendel ungrudgingly—yes, even enthusiastically—gave all the information possible. Unfailingly he added

wide-ranging anecdotes and dramatic recitals of prices of similar copies. In such moments Mendel seemed to become brighter, younger, livelier. Only one thing could incense him beyond bounds: that was, if by chance a novice attempted to offer him money for his appraisal. Then he would draw back offended like some trustee of a gallery into whose hand a passing American wants to press a tip for his information—because to be permitted to handle a valuable book meant to Mendel what it means to someone else to be introduced to a handsome woman. These moments were his Platonic love nights. Only a book, never money, had any sway over him. Therefore, great collectors, among them also the founder of a new American University, sought in vain to secure his services as an adviser and purchaser for their libraries. Jacob Mendel refused. He could not be thought of otherwise than as at the Café Gluck. Thirty-three years ago—a young man then, of short stature and rather bent—still wearing a soft, black, downy beard and curled forelocks, he had come from the Near East to Vienna, to study Jewish theology. However, he soon foresook the hard monotheistic Jehovah to devote himself to the sparkling and thousand-fold polytheism of books. At that time he discovered the Café Gluck, and gradually it had become his studio, his headquarters, his post office, his world! As an astronomer, alone in his observatory, watches every night through the tiny aperture of the telescope the myriads of stars—their secret paths, their wandering pell-mell, their extinction and rekindling—so Jacob Mendel looked through his spectacles from the square table at the Café Gluck into that other universe of books—likewise always revolving and always coming into existence—into that world above our world.

Of course he was highly respected at the Café Gluck, the fame of which was bound up for us with his invisible professorial chair rather than with the name of the great musician, Christoph Willibald Gluck, the creator of *Alceste* and of *Iphigénie*. Mendel belonged in the café inventory as fully as did the old cherry-wood cash box, as did the two badly-patched billiard tables, or the copper teakettle. His table was guarded like a sanctuary, for his numerous clientèle and inquirers were politely urged by the members of the establishment to order something or other, so that, as a matter of fact, the greater part of the gain from his knowledge poured into the wide leather pouch which the head waiter carried on his hip. Therefore Mendel enjoyed many privileges. He had free use of the telephone; his mail was reserved for him and all his orders were taken care of; the old, honest dressing-room woman brushed his coat, sewed on his buttons and every week carried his small bundle of wash to the laundry. To him alone might dinner be brought from the nearby restaurant. Every morning Herr Standhartner, the owner,

came in person to his table and greeted him (of course, usually without it being noticed by Jacob Mendel, immersed in his books). Exactly at half past seven in the morning Mendel came in and only when the lights were put out did he leave. He never spoke to the other guests, he read no newspapers, noticed no changes; and when Herr Standhartner once politely asked him whether he did not read more easily now by the electric light than formerly by the flickering light of the Auer lamp, he stared in surprise at the incandescent bulbs. Though the change had involved noise and hammering for several days he had quite failed to notice it. Only through the two round apertures of his spectacles, through these two glancing and absorbing lenses did the millions of black infusoria of letters filter into his brain. All other happenings streamed past him like a meaningless sound. Properly speaking he had spent more than thirty years, that is, all his waking hours, alone here at this square table reading, comparing, calculating, in an unremitting and lasting dream broken only by sleep.

Therefore a sort of fear seized me when I saw the oracular marble-topped table of Jacob Mendel in this room as solitary as a gravestone. Now, grown older, I appreciated for the first time how much there disappeared with every such man, first because everything unusual becomes more precious from day to day in our world irremediably becoming more and more standardized. Moreover, out of a secret presentiment, the young, inexperienced man in me had liked this Jacob Mendel very much. In him for the first time I had approached the great secret that everything individual and superior in our life is brought about by a rousing of one's inner energy, by a lofty monomania which is divinely akin to madness. That a devotion to the purely spiritual, that a complete immersion in a single idea could still happen today, a withdrawal not less complete than that of an Indian Yogi or of a medieval monk in his cell, and that this could happen in an electrically-lighted café next to a telephone booth—this truth I, young man that I was, had learned much more fully from an unknown, unimportant dealer in old books than from our contemporary writers. And yet I had been able to forget him—at any rate during the years of the War and in a devotion to my own work not unlike his own—but now before this empty table I felt a sort of humility and at the same time a renewed curiosity.

Where was Mendel? What had become of him? I called the waiter and asked him. No, he was sorry, he did not know a Herr Mendel, no man by that name frequented the café, but the head waiter might know. This individual pushed his bay-window heavily in our direction, hesitated and reflected. No, to him also Herr Mendel was unknown. But perhaps I meant Herr Mandl, the Herr Mandl of the hardware business in the Florianigasse?

A bitter taste came to my lips, a taste of transitoriness. What does one live for if a gust of wind blowing behind us carries away the last trace of us? For thirty, perhaps forty years, a man had breathed, read, thought, spoken, in this room a few square meters in size, and it was only necessary for three or four years to pass, for a new Pharaoh to come, and Joseph was forgotten; no one remembered Jacob Mendel, "Buch-Mendel." Almost angrily I asked the head waiter whether I might speak with Herr Standhartner, or whether there were not some of the old help still left in the establishment? Oh, Herr Standhartner—why, good Lord! he had sold the café long ago—he had died, and the old head waiter now lived on his small property near Krems. No, no one was there any more—but, wait! Of course—Frau Sporschil, the dressing-room woman, was still there; but she certainly would no longer remember individual guests! Immediately it occurred to me: one does not forget a Jacob Mendel. I had her come to me.

She came from her room in the basement, this Frau Sporschil, white haired, ruffled, with a somewhat dropsical gait. She was still hurriedly rubbing her red hands with a cloth. Apparently she had just swept her dark room or cleaned the windows. By her uncertain manner I noticed immediately that it was disconcerting to her to be so suddenly called out under the large incandescent bulbs in the front part of the café. The common people in Vienna immediately scent detectives and police on every side if one wants to question them; so she regarded me distrustfully from under her eyelids, with a carefully assumed look of humility. What good could I want of her? But scarcely had I asked about Jacob Mendel, when she stared at me with brimming and literally flowing eyes, and she spasmodically jerked her shoulders. "*Mein Gott*, poor Herr Mendel, that one should still think of him! Yes, indeed, poor old Mendel!" She almost wept; she was as touched as old people are when some one reminds them of their youth, or of any forgotten but treasured bond. I asked whether he was still living. "Oh, *mein Gott*, poor Herr Mendel, he must have been dead five or six—no, seven years! Such a dear good man, and when I think how long I knew him, more than twenty-five years! Why, he was here when I first came to the place! And it was a shame how they let him die!" She became more and more excited—asked me whether I was a relative. Nobody had ever bothered about him, no one ever asked for him. Didn't I know what had happened to him?

No, I assured her, I knew nothing; she should tell me, tell me all. The good woman appeared timid and embarrassed, wiping her wet hands again and again. I perceived that it was painful for her, a dressing-room woman, to stand in the center of the café, with her soiled apron and her mussed white hair. Moreover, she kept looking anxiously to the right and left to see

whether one of the waiters was not listening. So I suggested to her that we go out into the card room, to Mendel's old place; there she should tell me all. Touched, she gratefully nodded to me that I had understood her. The old and somewhat shaky woman preceded, and I followed. Both waiters watched us in astonishment. They scented a relationship, and several guests also were surprised at such an ill-matched pair. And there, at his table, she told me about the fall of Jacob Mendel, "Buch-Mendel" as everybody called him. Later some more details came to me from another source.

Well, then, he came as usual every day at half past seven in the morning, even after the outbreak of the War, and he sat there and studied all day as of old. In fact, they all felt and had often spoken about it, that it had never penetrated his consciousness that there was a war. And I know that he never looked into a newspaper and never spoke with any other person. But even when newsvenders uttered their murderous cries, calling out their newspaper extras, and all other people came running together, he never rose or listened to them. He did not notice at all that Franz was missing, as well as the billiard-room attendant, who had fallen at Grölitze. He did not know that the son of Herr Standhartner had been captured at Przemyśl. He never said a word as the bread became worse and they had to give him a wretched concoction of fig coffee instead of milk. Only once he wondered why so few students were coming. That was all. "*Mein Gott*, the poor man! Nothing gave him pleasure or concern but his books."

But then, one day, it happened. About eleven o'clock in the morning, in broad daylight, a policeman came with a detective. He pointed to the badge in his buttonhole and asked whether a certain Jacob Mendel did not frequent the café. Then they went straight to the table of poor Mendel, who without any misgiving believed that they wanted to sell him some books or ask him something. But they soon asked him to come with them and they led him away. It was a real disgrace for the café! All the people gathered around poor Herr Mendel as he stood between the two men, his spectacles pushed up to his hair, looking back and forth from one to the other, not quite knowing what on earth they wanted of him. She, however, had told the policeman, *stante pede*, that there must have been a mistake—a man like Herr Mendel could not harm a fly! Whereupon the detective immediately shouted at her that she should not mix into official affairs. Then they took him away, and he did not come around for a long time—for two years. To this very day she did not know exactly what they wanted of him at the time. "But I'd take an oath," said the old woman excitedly, "that Herr Mendel could not have done anything wrong. They made a mistake; on that point I

am ready to put my hand into the fire. It was a crime against a poor innocent man, a crime!”

And she was right, the good, pathetic Frau Sporschil. Our friend Jacob Mendel had really done nothing wrong. It was only later that I learned the details. He had simply perpetrated a mad, a pathetic piece of folly—one that was even in those insane times improbable—to be explained only on the ground of his complete absorption, of the detachment of his unique existence.

This is what had happened. In the office of the military censor, whose duty it was to watch over all correspondence with foreign countries, a postal card was intercepted one day, written and signed by a certain Jacob Mendel. It was regularly stamped, but—incredible!—it was directed to an enemy country! On the postal card, which was addressed to Jean Labourdaire, Bookseller, Quai de Grenelle, Paris, this Jacob Mendel complained of not having received the last eight numbers of the *Bulletin bibliographique de la France*, though the yearly subscription had been paid in advance. The under-official in the censor’s office, an enlisted man, a *Gymnasium* professor, who in private life had a taste for Romance languages, but who was now thrust into a blue military coat, was amazed when this card came into his hand. A stupid joke, he thought. Among the two thousand letters which he ransacked every week and held up against the light in his search for dubious information and suspicious phrases, he had never come across such an absurdity. To think that anyone should carelessly send a letter from Austria to France, should so light-heartedly and so simply mail a postal card to an enemy country, as if these boundaries had not been bristling with barbed wire since 1914, and as if on every single day France, Germany, Austria, and Russia were not lessening one another’s male population by a few thousand! Therefore he put the postal card in the drawer of his desk as a curiosity, without following up this absurdity with a report. But, a few weeks later, another postal card came from this same Jacob Mendel addressed to John Aldridge, Bookseller, High Holborn, London, asking whether he could not supply the latest numbers of the *Antiquarian*. Again it was signed by the same strange individual, Jacob Mendel, who with touching naïveté added his full address. Buttoned up in his uniform, the *Gymnasium* professor now began to feel somewhat uncomfortable under his coat. Could there be, after all, some mysterious code hidden behind this idiotic joke? In any case, he stood up, clicked his heels together and laid both cards on the table in front of the Major. The Major drew up both his shoulders: a strange case! Then he advised the police to find out whether a Jacob Mendel actually existed. An hour later Jacob Mendel had been arrested and, still quite giddy with

surprise, had been led before the Major. The latter laid the mysterious postal cards before Mendel and asked him whether he admitted having sent them. Excited by the officer's serious tone and especially because he had been disturbed in the reading of an important catalogue, Mendel blurted out almost rudely that, of course, he had written these cards! He should think that one still had the right to claim a periodical for which the subscription had been paid. The Major turned around in his chair to the Lieutenant at the next table. They winked at one another understandingly: "a thorough fool!" Then the Major considered whether he should merely scold the simpleton and turn him out, or take up the case seriously. In such perplexing difficulties one almost always decides to draw up a protocol. A protocol is always good. If it serves no purpose, no harm is done; only one more meaningless sheet of paper among millions is covered with writing. In this case, however, it harmed a poor, unsuspecting man, for at the third question something ominous came to light. First, his name was demanded: "Jacob, *recte* Jainkeff, Mendel." Occupation: "Peddler" (that is to say, he had no bookseller's license, only a peddler's permit). The third question proved disastrous: his birth place? Jacob Mendel mentioned a small village near Petrikova. The Major raised his brows. Petrikova, was that not in Russian Poland, near the boundary? Suspicious! Very suspicious! He now inquired more sharply, when had Mendel acquired Austrian citizenship? Mendel's spectacles stared darkly and in surprise; he did not quite understand. "The devil," rapped the Major, "where were his papers and his documents?" Mendel answered that he had no other papers than his peddler's permit. The Major wrinkled his forehead more and more. How about his citizenship then? Let him finally explain that. What had his father been, Austrian or Russian? Serenely Mendel replied: "Naturally Russian." And he himself? Oh, well, in order not to have to do military service he had smuggled himself over the Russian border thirty-three years ago and had since been living in Vienna. The Major became more and more agitated. When had he gotten his Austrian citizenship? "What for?" asked Mendel. He had never troubled himself about such things! Then he was still a Russian citizen? And Mendel, long since bored by this dreary questioning, replied indifferently: "Why, yes, I suppose so."

The Major, horrified, threw himself back so violently that his chair creaked. So that was it! In the midst of the War, at the end of 1915, after the great offensive and the battle at Tarnów, a Russian walked the streets of Vienna unmolested, wrote letters to France and England, and the police did not care! And under such circumstances the blockheads in the newspaper offices still wondered why Conrad von Hötzendorf had not reached Warsaw

at once! And under such circumstances as these they still were amazed at General Staff headquarters that every movement of the troops was reported to Russia by spies. The Lieutenant too had risen and stood by the table; the conversation quickly turned into a cross-examination. Why had Mendel not at once registered himself as a foreigner? Mendel still unsuspecting, said in his singing Jewish jargon: "Why should I have registered myself all at once?" In this twisted question the Major saw a challenge and he asked threateningly whether Mendel had not seen the proclamations? "No!" Perhaps he didn't read the newspapers either? "No!"

Had Jacob dropped into the office from the moon the two officers could not have stared at him with greater surprise as he stood there, already beginning to perspire profusely because of his precarious position. Then the telephone rang, typewriters rattled, orderlies hurried, and Jacob Mendel was delivered to the military prison, to be removed with the next transport to the concentration camp. He did not understand what they wanted of him, but he was not particularly worried. What mischief, after all, could this man with the golden collar and rude voice plot against him in whose rarefied world of books there were no wars, no misunderstandings, but only knowledge and the eternal desire for still greater knowledge of numbers and words, of book titles and names! So he trotted good-naturedly down the stairs between the two soldiers. Only when at the police station they took all the books from his coat pockets and demanded his wallet, in which he had a hundred important slips and the addresses of his customers, only then did he begin to struggle and rave. They had to overpower him. But unfortunately in the scuffle his spectacles clinked to the floor, and this magic telescope which enabled him to look into the intellectual world broke into a thousand pieces. Two days later, dressed in his thin summer coat, he was transported to a concentration camp of Russian civil prisoners near Komorn.

What anguish of soul Jacob Mendel experienced during those two years in a concentration camp, without books, his beloved books—without money, among indifferent, rude, mostly illiterate companions, the flotsam and jetsam of humanity—what he suffered there, separated from his rarefied world of books—the only one for him—like an eagle with clipped wings cut off from its ethereal element—of that all testimony is lacking. But gradually the world, grown sober after its madness, came to know that of all the cruelties and crimes of this war, none was more thoughtless, more superfluous, and therefore morally less excusable, than this rounding up and herding behind barbed wire of unsuspecting alien civilians, unfit for military service. They had lived in a foreign country as in their native places and because of their trusting faith in the sacredness of the right of asylum,

respected even among the Tungusians and the Araucanians, had failed to flee in time. It was a crime against civilization, committed with equal thoughtlessness in France, Germany and England, on every parcel of European earth gone mad. And perhaps Jacob Mendel would have become mad, as did so many others who were innocent, or he might have died of dysentery, of exhaustion, or of some mental disorder, if an incident, a typically Austrian one, had not brought him back once more into his own world in the very nick of time. After his disappearance letters came again and again from distinguished customers to his old address. The former governor of Styria, Count Schönberg, a fanatical collector of works on heraldry; the former Dean of the Theological Faculty, Siegenfeld, who was working on a commentary on Saint Augustine; the eighty-year old retired Admiral of the fleet, Baron von Lisek, who still kept on correcting his Memoirs—they all, his faithful clients, had written repeatedly to Jacob Mendel at the Café Gluck. Some of these letters were forwarded to the forgotten man in the concentration camp. There they fell into the hands of the Captain, who happened to be a good-natured fellow and who was greatly astonished at the distinguished acquaintances this half-blind, filthy little Jew had. Since they had broken his spectacles—he had no money with which to buy a new pair—he was always crouched in a corner, gray, sightless and dumb, like a mole. One who had such patrons must in spite of appearances be somebody of importance. So the Captain permitted Mendel to answer these letters and to ask his patrons to intercede for him. They did not fail him. With the passionate solidarity of all collectors, his Excellency as well as the Dean began to pull wires and under their joint guarantee poor old Mendel, after more than two years of confinement, was permitted to return to Vienna in the year 1917—of course, under the condition that he report to the police every day. Nevertheless, he was permitted to return to the free world, to his old, small, stuffy garret. Once more he could pass the book displays which he loved so well and, above all, he could return to his Café Gluck.

The worthy Frau Sporschil was able to tell me, from her own recollection, of Mendel's return from an infernal lower world. "One day—Jesus, Maria, Joseph!—I think I can't believe my own eyes! The door opens—you know how, slantwise, the width of a crack—just as he always comes in, and there he stumbles into the café, poor old Mendel! He wore a ragged military coat, full of patches, and something or other on his head, something that was at one time perhaps a hat—one that had been picked from the rubbish heap. He wore no collar and he looked like death; with his gray face and his gray hair, and so thin that it was a pity! But he comes in, just as if

nothing had happened. He asks nothing, says nothing, goes over to the table and takes off his coat, but not as quickly nor as easily as he used to do, and he had to breathe heavily while doing it. And he had no book about him as he used to have. He just sits down and says nothing, but keeps on staring in front of him with empty, popping eyes. Only, by and by, when we brought him the whole bundle of letters and papers which had come for him from Germany, he began to read once more. But he was no longer the same."

No, he was not the same, no longer the *miraculum mundi*, the magic register of all books. All who had seen him then told me sadly the same story. Something in his usually quiet demeanor and look which suggested that he was reading as if in a trance, seemed irremediably destroyed. In its mad course the horrible bloody comet must have crashed into a solitary and peaceful star, the brightest one in his book-world. His eyes, accustomed for decades to the delicate, silent, insect-like letters of print, must have seen something dreadful in that human herd encircled by barbed wire. His eyelids cast a heavy shadow over his pupils which at one time had flashed so quickly and ironically; his eyes, formerly so lively, gleamed faintly, sleepily, red-rimmed behind his repaired spectacles which had been bound together with thin twine. And, even more dreadful, in the fantastic architecture of his memory some column must have fallen in and the whole structure have become confused; for so delicate is this brain of ours, this regulator of our knowledge, so nicely balanced is it that a small vein clogged up, a shattered nerve, a fatigued cell, or a displaced molecule suffices to break the composite harmony of a mind. And in Mendel's memory, this sole keyboard of his knowledge, the keys refused to function on his return. Now and then, when someone did come for information, he stared at him, exhausted; and he no longer quite comprehended, he misunderstood and forgot what was said to him. Mendel was no longer Mendel, as the world was no longer the world. No longer did complete absorption rock him back and forth while reading, but instead he would generally sit staring vacantly, his spectacles turned mechanically toward the book, and no one could have said whether he was reading or merely brooding darkly. Sometimes, so Frau Sporschil said, his head dropped heavily on the book, and he fell asleep in broad daylight. Then at other times he would stare for hours at the strange, foul-smelling acetylene lamp which had been put on his table during the period of the coal shortage. No, Mendel was no longer Mendel, no longer the wonder of the world, but only a wearily breathing, useless bundle of beard and clothes, lumped meaninglessly in the once Pythian chair; no longer the fame of the Café Gluck, but a disgrace, a blemish, ill-smelling and unpleasant to look upon, an embarrassing, superfluous *schnorrer*.

Such he seemed to the new proprietor, Florian Gartner, from Retz. The latter having become rich as a flour and butter profiteer during the hunger year of 1919, had talked the honest Standhartner out of the Café Gluck for eighty-thousand rapidly disappearing paper kronen. With his firm peasant hand he quickly fell to, quickly changed the venerable café into something stylish; bought at an opportune time new arm-chairs in exchange for worthless bills, put in a marble front and was already negotiating for the annexation of the adjoining store to convert it into a dance-hall. During these rapid improvements he was of course very much inconvenienced by this Galician *schnorrer*, who all day long, from morning until night, occupied a table all by himself and, moreover, drank only two cups of coffee and consumed only five rolls. Of course, Standhartner had especially committed his old guest to Gartner and had tried to explain what a significant and important man this Jacob Mendel was. He had, so to say, at the transfer of the inventory, listed him as an encumbering charge to the establishment. But, besides the new furniture and the bright aluminum cash register, Florian Gartner had provided himself with the unscrupulous conscience of profiteering days, and only waited for a pretext to turn out this last remnant of suburban shabbiness from the café which had now become elegant. Soon a good excuse seemed to present itself, for Jacob Mendel was in a sorry plight. The last banknotes he had hoarded were pulverized in the paper mill of the inflation and his customers had scattered. The weary man had no strength to drag books together and to mount stairways once more as a peddler. From a hundred small indications one could see that he was faring miserably. It was now very seldom that he had anything brought for him from the restaurant and he delayed longer and longer to settle the small account for his coffee and rolls—at one time it ran for three weeks. Even then the head waiter wanted to put him out. But the good Frau Sporschil, the dressing-room woman, took pity and guaranteed his account.

During the next month the catastrophe occurred. In checking the invoices of the baked goods, the new head waiter had noticed several times that they did not tally. More and more of the rolls billed and paid for appeared to be missing. His suspicion, of course, immediately fell on Jacob Mendel; for at various times the tottering old town porter had come to him with the complaint that Mendel had owed him money for the last six months, and that he could not get a farthing out of the book peddler. So now the head waiter watched him especially, and two days later, hidden behind the stove, he succeeded in catching Jacob Mendel as he rose furtively from his table, went to the other room, and, quickly taking two rolls from the bread-basket, greedily stuffed them into his mouth. When settling up, the old

man maintained that he had eaten none. Now the mystery of the vanishing rolls was explained. The waiter immediately reported the incident to Herr Gartner, and he, glad of the long-sought-for pretext, roared at him before all the people, accused him of the theft and thought that he was magnanimous in not calling the police immediately. Then he ordered him to clear out at once and for all, and be damned! Jacob Mendel only trembled. He said nothing, but rose heavily from his seat and went out.

“ ’Twas a pity,” said Frau Sporschil as she described his departure. “I’ll never forget—how he rose—his spectacles shoved up on his forehead, which was as white as a sheet. He hadn’t taken the time to put on his coat, though it was January and you know, of course, what a cold year it was. And in his fear he left his book on the table. I did not notice it until later and wanted to take it to him, but he had already stumbled through the door and I’d not have dared to go out on the street, for Herr Gartner placed himself in the doorway and shouted after him so loudly that the people stopped and came running in a crowd. Yes, ’twas a shame! I was ashamed to the very bottom of my soul. Such a thing could not have happened when old Herr Standhartner was around—that one should be driven out into the cold for taking a few rolls! In Herr Standhartner’s time the old man could have eaten all his life for nothing, but the people of today, why, they have no heart! To drive out a man who had sat in the same place day after day, over thirty years—it really was a shame, and I’d not like to have to account for it before the Lord—not I!”

The good woman had become very much excited and with the passionate talkativeness of old age she repeated again and again her remarks about what a shame it was and about Herr Standhartner, who would not have been capable of such a thing. At last I had to remind her to tell me what had become of our Mendel, and whether she had ever seen him again. She pulled herself together, but became even more excited. “Every day when I passed his table, every time, you may well believe me, it gave me a shock. It always made me think where can he be now, poor Herr Mendel, and if I had known where he lived I’d have gone to him with something warm to eat, for where was he to get money for coal and food? And so far as I know, he had no relatives anywhere. But, at last, when I heard nothing and still nothing from him, I began thinking to myself, everything must be over with him, and I should never see him again. And I even wondered whether or not I should have mass said for him, for he was a good man, and we had known each other—more than twenty-five years!

“But one morning, in February, at half past eight, just as I was polishing the brass window-rods, all at once—I thought that I’d drop dead—the door opens suddenly and Mendel comes in. Of course, you know he always used to come sideways and so bewildered, but this time ’twas in a way different. I noticed at once that he walked to and fro, that his eyes were shiny. *Mein Gott*, how he looked, all bone and beard! Seeing him in such a state made me suspect that he paid no attention to anything around him, that he was going around in broad daylight like a sleep-walker. He had forgotten everything, all that about the rolls and about Herr Gartner and how shamefully they had thrown him out. He does not know what he is doing, thank Heaven! Herr Gartner had not yet come in and the head waiter was just drinking his coffee. Then and there I rushed over to him to explain that he mustn’t remain, he would only be thrown out once more by the ruffian.” At that point she looked around timidly and corrected herself. “I mean, by Herr Gartner. Well, ‘Herr Mendel,’ I called to him. He stares at me. And then, in that moment, *mein Gott*, it was terrible—in that moment he must have remembered everything, for he starts back and begins to tremble. One could see that not only his fingers but also his whole body was shaking, even his shoulders, and he quickly stumbles back to the door. There he collapsed. At once we telephoned for the emergency ambulance, which took him away, in a fever, as he was. In the evening he died of galloping pneumonia, the doctor said, adding that he was not quite conscious at the time when he came to us, but was only driven on like a sleep-walker. *Mein Gott*, when you sit in the same place for thirty-six years, day in and day out, then indeed such a table is your home.”

We continued speaking of him for a long time, we the last two who had known this strange man—I, to whom when still a young man he, in spite of his microscopically unimportant existence, had given the first notion of a life completely immersed in intellect; she, the poor, fagged dressing-room woman, who had never read a book, but was attached to this comrade of her poor, lower world only because she had brushed his coat and sewed on his buttons for twenty-five years. And yet we understood each other amazingly well, sitting at his old, abandoned table in the communion of the shadow which we had conjured up, for remembrance always unites and doubly so every remembrance in love. Suddenly, in the middle of her chatter she recalled something and exclaimed: “Good Lord, how forgetful I am! I still have the book, the one which he left on the table! Where could I have taken it to him? And then, as no one called, I thought afterwards that I might keep it as a remembrance. There is nothing wrong in that, is there?” Quickly she brought it over from her alcove. With difficulty I suppressed a little smile;

for fate, always playful and sometimes ironical, maliciously likes to mix the comic with the tragic. It was the second volume of Hayns' *Bibliotheca Germanorum erotica et curiosa*, the compendium of amorous literature so well known to every book collector. Curiously enough this shabby catalogue had fallen as the last legacy of the deceased wizard into these weary, chapped and unlettered hands, which had never held any book other than a prayer-book. *Habent sua fata libelli*. It was with difficulty that I could compress my lips against the smile which was involuntarily surging up from within, a momentary hesitation which confused the good woman. Was it after all something valuable, and did I think that she might keep it?

Affectionately I shook hands with her. "You may keep it without fear. Our old friend Mendel would have been glad that at least one of the many thousands who are indebted to him for a book still remembers him."

And then I felt ashamed in the presence of this honest old woman who had remained faithful in a simple and yet most human way to the departed. For she, though unlettered, had preserved at least one book with which to remember him better; while I—I had forgotten "Buch-Mendel" for years—I, of all people, who should have known that one creates books only in order to unite oneself with other human beings after one is gone and so to defend oneself against the inexorable enemies of all life: transitoriness and oblivion.

The Invisible Collection;

An Episode from the Post-War Inflation Period

Two stations beyond Dresden an elderly gentleman entered our compartment, greeted us courteously and then, looking at me, nodded again to me especially as to an acquaintance. At first I could not remember him, but as soon as he gave me his name, with a little smile, I knew at once who he was—one of the best-known art dealers and antiquarians of Berlin, at whose shop before the war I had frequently examined and bought old books and autographs. At first we talked of indifferent things. Suddenly, without any transition, he said:

“I must tell you where I have just been. For the experience I have had is about the queerest one that I, an old art-peddler, have met with in my thirty-seven years of business. You yourself probably know how the art trade is going nowadays, since the value of money has evaporated like gas. The newly rich have suddenly discovered their interest in Gothic Madonnas and incunabula, in old engravings and pictures. One cannot find enough for them. One must even take care that they do not empty your house and room entirely. If they could, they would like to buy the cuff links from your shirt sleeves and the lamp from your desk. Consequently it becomes more and more difficult to replenish the merchandise. Pardon me for thoughtlessly calling these things which used to be revered by our class ‘merchandise’—but these terrible people have made one used to considering a wonderful Venetian fifteenth century book merely as the equivalent of so and so many dollars and a drawing by Guercino as a reincarnation of a few one thousand franc bills. Against the importunate urging of these suddenly eager buyers no resistance avails. As a result I was entirely sold out from one day to another and should have liked to have closed up the shop. I was so ashamed of seeing in our old business, which my father had inherited from my grandfather, nothing but miserable stuff which in former times no peddler in Northern Germany would have put in his cart.

“In this difficult situation it occurred to me to look over our old ledgers, to hunt up old customers from whom I might perhaps get back a few of their duplicates. Such an old customers’ list is always a kind of morgue, especially in these times, and it really didn’t tell me much that was new. Most of our former clients had long since had to dispose of their possessions

at auction, or had died, and from the few steadfast ones nothing was to be hoped. But then I suddenly found a whole bundle of letters from perhaps our oldest customer, whom I had only forgotten to think of because since the beginning of the World War, since 1914, he had never addressed any order or inquiry to us. Strange to say, the correspondence extended back over almost sixty years. He had bought even from my father and grandfather, and yet I did not remember that he had ever entered our shop in the thirty-seven years of my own connection with the business. And everything pointed to the fact that he must be a strange, old-fashioned, eccentric person, one of those forgotten Menzel or Spitzweg Germans who as rare specimens have survived down to the present day in small provincial towns. His long-hand letters were like copper-plate, beautifully written, the amounts underlined with ruler and red ink. Besides, he always repeated the figures, so as to be sure of avoiding errors. This, as well as the exclusive use of detached blank pages and economical envelopes, pointed to the pettiness and fanatical economy of a hopeless provincial. Moreover, the strange documents were always signed both with his name, and with the clumsy title: *Retired Councillor of Forestry and Agriculture, retired Lieutenant, decorated with the Iron Cross of the first class*. As a veteran of the war of 1870, he must be at least eighty years old, if he were still living. But this eccentric, ridiculous cheese-paring miser showed as a collector of the old graphic arts a quite unusual prudence, knowledge, and excellent taste. As I was putting his orders together, one by one, covering almost sixty years, the first of which was still billed in *Silbergroschen*, I became aware that, at the time when it was still possible to buy a great number of the most beautiful wood engravings for a few marks, this little provincial had quietly brought together a collection of engravings which could probably take a very honorable stand beside the much advertised ones of the newly rich. For even what he had bought from us alone in little amounts, in marks and pfennigs, in the course of half a century would represent today an astounding value, and besides it was likely that he must have bought no less advantageously at auction sales and from other dealers. Since 1914 no new order had arrived from him; but, on the other hand, I was so familiar with all events in the art trade that the auction or the sale of the whole collection of such a size could not have escaped my attention. Therefore, it was probable that this strange man was still alive or else that the collection was in the hands of his heirs.

“I was so interested in the affair that I took the train immediately the next day, that is to say last night, straightway into one of the most impossibly Saxon provincial towns that there are in Saxony. As I was strolling from the little depot through the main street, it appeared to me

almost incredible that there, in the midst of these trivial, nondescript houses, with their middle class junk, that in any one of these rooms there should live a man who could own the finest of Rembrandt's etchings, besides remarkably complete series of engravings by Dürer and others. I was astonished when I was told in the post office, in answer to my question whether a Councillor of Forestry and Agriculture was living here, that the old gentleman was indeed still alive. I went to see him that very morning—not without considerable nervousness, I must admit.

“There was no difficulty in finding his apartment. It was on the second floor of one of those economical, provincial houses which some speculative mason-architect had hastily put up in the eighteen sixties. The first floor was inhabited by an honest merchant-tailor; on the second floor left was the shining nameplate of the postmaster; on the right was a white porcelain plate with the name of the Councillor of Forestry and Agriculture. I rang the bell with some hesitation. Immediately the door was opened by a very old, white-haired lady, with a neat black cap on her head. I handed her my card and asked whether the Councillor of Forestry was at home. Astonished, and with a certain mistrust, she looked first at me and then at the card. In this out-of-the-way town, in this old-fashioned house, a visitor from the outside world seemed to be something of an event. But she told me kindly to wait, took the card and went into the room. First, I heard a low whispering and then suddenly a loud, boisterous masculine voice: ‘Oh, Mr. R—, from Berlin, the great antiquarian! Let him come in! Let him come in! I am very glad to meet him!’ And then the dear old lady came tripping back and invited me into the parlor.

“I took off my wraps and entered. In the middle of the modest room there stood, very erect, an old but still sturdy man with a bushy mustache, in a braided half-military lounging robe, who cordially held out both hands to me. But in spite of this friendly gesture of obviously joyful and spontaneous greeting there was a strange rigidity in the way he was standing there. He didn't take a single step to meet me and I had to go straight up to him, a little puzzled, in order to grasp his hands. And as I was going to grasp them, I noticed from the immovable horizontal position of these hands that they were not looking for mine, but were expecting them. And in the next moment I understood it all. The old gentleman was blind!

“From my early childhood I had always been uncomfortable in the presence of blind people. I could never quite help feeling ashamed and somewhat embarrassed at realizing that a man was entirely alive and yet knowing at the same time that he did not sense me in the same way as I did

him. And then, too, I had first to overcome a shock when I saw those dead eyes under the bristling, white, bushy brows, rigidly staring into empty space. But the blind man did not leave me much time for such embarrassment, for as soon as my hand touched his, he shook it very heartily and renewed the greeting in an impetuous, comfortably boisterous way. 'A rare visit!' he said, laughing heartily. 'Indeed, a miracle, that for once one of those great Berlin men finds his way into our little town! But we have to be cautious when one of you dealers takes the train to come here. In my home they used to say, 'Close your gates and your pockets when the gypsies come.' Yes, I can imagine what you are coming for. Business is going badly now in our poor impoverished Germany. There are no buyers and, therefore, the gentlemen think again of their old customers and look for the lost sheep. But I am afraid you will not have any too much luck with me. We poor old pensioners are glad if we have our crust of bread at the table. We cannot run in the race any more, with the crazy prices that you ask nowadays. People of our class are sidetracked forever.' "I immediately put him right, and told him that he had misunderstood me, that I had not come to sell him something, but that I had just been in the neighborhood and did not want to miss the opportunity to pay my respects to him as an old customer of our firm and one of the greatest collectors of Germany. Scarcely had I said the words 'one of the greatest collectors of Germany' when a strange change took place in the face of the old man. He was still standing upright and rigid in the middle of the room, but now an expression of sudden brightness and innermost pride came into his attitude and he turned in the direction where he supposed his wife was, as if to say: 'Do you hear that?' And his voice full of joy, without a trace of that harsh military tone in which it had pleased him to speak a moment before, but softly, almost tenderly, he turned toward me: That is indeed very kind of you, but you shall not have come in vain either. You shall see something that you do not see every day, not even in your smart Berlin—some items more beautiful than any that can be found in the Albertina or in Paris, curse her! Well, when one collects for sixty years he gets all kinds of things which are not just to be found in the streets! Louise, please get me the key to the cupboard.

"And now something unexpected happened. The dear old lady, who was standing beside him and had taken part politely in our conversation, with a smiling, gently listening kindness, suddenly lifted both hands towards me imploringly, and at the same time made a decided negative movement of the head, a sign that I did not immediately understand. Then she approached her husband and put her two hands gently on his shoulders. 'But Herwarth,' she said warningly, 'you do not ask the gentleman whether he has time to look at

the collection now. It is almost noon, you know, and after dinner you must rest for an hour. The doctor has expressly insisted on that. Would it not be better for you to show the gentleman all those things after dinner? We can then have coffee together. Then, too, Anna Marie will be here. She understands everything so much better and can help you.' And again scarcely had she finished these words when she repeated, as it were in front of the unsuspecting man, that imploring and urging gesture which I now understood. I realized that she wanted me to decline an immediate inspection and I improvised an appointment for dinner. I said that it would be a pleasure and an honor for me to be allowed to see his collection, but it would hardly be possible before three o'clock, but that then I should come very gladly.

"Peeved, like a child whose best toy has been taken away from him, the old man turned around. 'Of course,' he grumbled, 'these gentlemen from Berlin never have time, but on this occasion you will have to take time, for this is not merely three or five pieces. This is a collection of twenty-seven portfolios, one for each artist, and none of them half empty. Well, at three o'clock then, but be on time; otherwise we won't get through.'

"Again he extended his hand to me into empty space. 'Look here,' said he, 'you may be glad or vexed, and the more vexed you are the gladder I shall be. That is the way we collectors are. Everything for ourselves and nothing for the others.' And again he shook my hand vigorously.

"The little old lady accompanied me to the door. I had noticed in her all the time a sort of uneasiness and an expression of embarrassed timidity. Suddenly, close to the entrance, she stuttered with a quite depressed voice: 'Might—might—my daughter Anna Marie call for you before you come to our house? It is better for several reasons. I suppose you dine at the hotel?'

" 'Certainly, I shall be glad, and it will be a pleasure for me,' said I.

"And indeed, an hour later, when I had just finished my dinner in the little dining room of the hotel on the market place, an elderly spinster, very plainly dressed, entered the room and looked around. I approached her, introduced myself and said that I was ready to go with her at once to see the collection; but she suddenly blushed and asked me, with the same embarrassed confusion which her mother had shown, whether she could not say a few words to me first. And I saw immediately that it was hard for her. Whenever she wanted to pull herself together and tried to speak, an embarrassed red flush covered her whole face, and her hand played

nervously with her dress. At last she began hesitatingly, and she stammered again and again:

“ ‘Mother has sent me to you—she has sent me to you—she has told me everything and—we want to ask you a great favor—that is, we should like to inform you before you come to see Father—of course, Father will want to show you the collection—and the collection—the collection—is not quite complete any more—a number of pieces are missing—indeed, quite a lot—’

“Again she had to stop for breath. Then she suddenly looked at me and said hastily: ‘I must talk to you quite openly. You know these hard times. You will understand everything. After the beginning of the War, Father became completely blind. Even before that time his eyesight was somewhat impaired and the excitement has robbed him of it entirely. You know that, in spite of his seventy-six years, he still wanted to join the army in France and when the army did not make headway immediately, as it did in 1870, he became terribly excited and from then on his eyesight failed very rapidly. Otherwise he is still quite hearty. Until a short time ago he was able to walk for hours, even to follow his favorite sport, hunting. But now his walks are all over, and his collection is his only joy. He looks at it every day. Of course, he does not actually see it. You know he does not see anything any more. But every afternoon he gets out all of his portfolios so as to at least handle the prints, one after another, always in the same order as he has known them by heart for decades. He is no longer interested in anything else and I must read to him from the paper about all the auction sales, and the higher the prices he hears of the happier he is—for that really is the most terrible thing, that Father does not understand the prices and our times any more. He does not know that we have lost everything and that it is impossible to live on his pension for more than two days in the month. Then too, the husband of my sister was killed in the War and she was left behind with four little children. But Father does not know anything at all of our financial difficulties. At first we economized, economized even more than before, but that did not answer. Then we began to sell—of course, we did not touch his beloved collection. We sold the little jewelry that we had, but that certainly was not much, for during sixty years Father had spent on nothing but his prints every cent that we could save. And one day there was nothing left. We did not know what to do. And then—then—Mother and I sold one print. Father would never have allowed it. He does not know how badly off we are. He does not know how hard it is to get a little food through illicit trade. Nor does he know that we have lost the War and that Alsace-Lorraine has been ceded to France. We do not read such things to him any more from the paper, so that he will not get excited.’

“‘The first piece which we sold was a very valuable specimen, a Rembrandt etching. The dealer offered us many thousand marks for it and with that we hoped to be free from worry for years. But you know how the money melts away! We had put the balance in the bank, but after two months it was all gone. So we had to sell another specimen, and then another one, and the dealer always sent the money so late that it had depreciated by the time it arrived. Then we tried auction sales and there too we were cheated, in spite of the millions they paid us. Before the millions reached us they were always nothing but worthless pieces of paper. In this way gradually the best part of his collection dwindled away, except for a few good pieces, just enough to pay for the barest necessities, and Father has no idea of it. That is why my Mother was so frightened when you came today. For if he opens his portfolios to you everything will be betrayed. In the old portfolios, each of which he knows by the touch, we have put facsimiles of other specimens in place of the ones sold, so that he does not notice it when he handles them. And if he can only touch them and count them (he remembers the order exactly) he has precisely the same pleasure as before when he saw them with his open eyes. There is nobody in this little town whom Father would have considered worthy of showing his treasures to. And he loves every single copy with such a fanatical love that I believe his heart would break if he knew that all that has long since disappeared from under his hand. Since the former curator of the Dresden Print Department died, you are the first one in all these years to whom he has offered to show his portfolios. Therefore, let me ask you—’

“And suddenly the aging spinster lifted her hands, and tears came into her eyes.

“‘—Let me beg of you, don’t make him unhappy! Don’t make us unhappy! Don’t destroy his last illusion! Help us to make him believe that all these specimens, which he will describe to you, are still there! He would not live through it if he even suspected it! Perhaps we have done him a wrong, but we could not do otherwise. Didn’t we have to live? And human lives, four orphan children such as those of my sister’s, are after all more important than printed sheets. And then, up to this day we have not robbed him of any pleasure. He is happy that he can go over his portfolios, every afternoon for three hours, and speak to every specimen as if he were talking to a human being. And today might be his happiest day, for he has been waiting for years to have an opportunity to show his favorite prints to a connoisseur. Please, I implore you with uplifted hands, do not take this joy from him!’

“All this had been said in such a pathetic way that my story cannot of course do justice to it. Goodness knows we dealers have seen many of these people who have been cruelly robbed, relentlessly cheated by the inflation, whose most precious family property, centuries old, has been pilfered away from them for a song. But here destiny willed a special situation which touched me deeply. Of course, I promised her to be silent and to do what I could.

“We went to the house together. On the way I learned, full of resentment, with what ridiculous amounts they had cheated these poor ignorant women; but that only strengthened my resolution to help them in their extremity. We went upstairs and as soon as we opened the door we heard from inside the room the joyfully boisterous voice of the old man: ‘Come in! Come in!’ With the acute hearing of a blind man he must have recognized our steps on the stairs.

“‘Herwarth has not been able to sleep today; he is so impatient to show you his treasures,’ said the little old mother smilingly. A single glance from her daughter had already reassured her about my agreement. All the piles of portfolios were spread out waiting on the table and, as soon as the blind man felt my hand, he took hold of my arm without further formality and pushed me down into the arm chair.

“‘All right, let us begin at once. There is much to be seen and the gentlemen from Berlin never have time. This first portfolio here is Master Dürer and, as you will see, rather complete,—and, at that, one copy more beautiful than the other! Well, you will see for yourself. Look here!’ He opened to the first sheet of the portfolio. ‘The big horse.’!

“And now he took from the portfolio, with that same tender care which people use to touch fragile things, with extremely cautious, highly considerate finger tips, a passepartout in which there was framed an entirely blank yellow sheet of paper, and he held the worthless scrap before himself, full of enthusiasm. He looked at it for minutes, without really seeing, but he held the blank sheet with his hand spread out ecstatically at eye level. His whole face expressed magically the strange attitude of a keen observer. And in his eyes, staring with their dead pupils, I suddenly saw—was it a reflection of the paper or a gleam from within?—a mirrored brightness, a knowing light.

“‘Well,’ he said proudly, ‘have you ever seen a more beautiful copy? How sharply, how clearly every detail stands out in relief there! I have compared this copy with the one in Dresden, but that has a flat and dull look

in comparison. In addition, the pedigree! Look there!’—and he turned the sheet around and pointed with his finger nail to a place on the back of the blank sheet, so that I had to look involuntarily to see whether the signs were not actually there.—‘There you have the stamp of the Nagler collection. Here are the ones of Rémy and Esdaille. They would never have thought, those illustrious former owners, that their copy would ever get here into this little room.’

“A chill went up my spine when the unsuspecting man praised so enthusiastically an entirely blank sheet. And it was ghastly to see how he pointed with his finger nail, with minute exactness to the invisible collectors’ signs which no longer existed except in his imagination. I felt choked with horror. I did not know what to answer. But as I looked up confused to the two women I saw again the hands of the trembling and excited old lady lifted up imploringly. Then I regained my self-possession and began to play my part.

“‘Incredible!’ I finally managed to stammer. ‘A wonderful copy!’ And immediately his whole face began to glow with pride. ‘But that is nothing,’ he said triumphantly, ‘you should see the *Melancholia*, or the *Passion*, a colored specimen which is hardly to be found elsewhere in the same state. Look here!’—and again his fingers moved tenderly over an imaginary picture—‘This freshness, this rough, warm tone! Berlin, with all its art dealers and museum professors, would go wild over this!’ “And in this fashion the rushing talking triumph continued for fully two hours. No, I cannot describe to you how ghastly it was, to look with him at these one or two hundred blank scraps of paper or poor reproductions which were so incredibly real to the memory of this tragically unsuspecting man that he praised and described every one of them with the most precise details, without mistake, in perfect order. The invisible collection, which long since must have been dispersed all over the world, still existed unimpaired for this blind man, so pathetically cheated, and the passion of his vision was so overpowering that I almost began to believe in it too. Only once the somnambulist assurance of his examining enthusiasm was terribly interrupted by the danger of an awakening. Looking at an *Antiope* (a proof copy which indeed must have had an immeasurable value) he had again praised the distinctness of the print and at the same time his nervously sensitive finger had followed affectionately the lines of the impression, but without the refined tactile nerves finding that familiar depression on the entirely different sheet. Then, suddenly, a shadow seemed to glide over his forehead; his voice became confused. ‘Isn’t that—the *Antiope*?’ he murmured, a little embarrassed. Whereupon I started up at once, hastily took

the mounted sheet out of his hands, and enthusiastically described the etching, with which I too was familiar, in all possible details. Then the face of the blind man lost its tension and its expression of embarrassment, and the more I praised the more a jovial cordiality, a jolly warmth began to blossom forth in this sturdy, old-fashioned man. 'Here at last is somebody who knows something about it,' he said joyfully, turning triumphantly to his family. 'At last, somebody from whom you hear also how much these prints are worth. You, always full of distrust, have scolded me because I have invested all my money in my collection. It is true that for sixty years there has been no beer, no wine, no tobacco, no travel, no theatre, no books for me, nothing but saving and saving for these prints. But some day you will see, when I am no longer here. Then you will be rich, richer than anybody in town, and as rich as the richest people in Dresden. Then at last you will be glad of my folly. But as long as I live, not a single print shall leave the house! They must carry me out first, and then my collection.'

"And with that he stroked the long-since rifled portfolios tenderly, like something living. It was ghastly and yet at the same time pathetic for me, for in all those years of the War I had not seen such a perfect, such a pure expression of happiness on any German face. And beside him stood the women mysteriously resembling the female characters in that etching of the German master depicting the women who had come to visit the tomb of their Savior and stood before the empty tomb with an expression of terrified fright and at the same time of ecstatic belief and joy at the miracle. Just as in that picture the faces of the disciples glow with an unearthly realization that Christ had risen from the dead, so these two aging, worn-out, miserable, middle-class women were affected by the childlike joyful happiness of the old man, half laughing, half in tears. I have never seen a sight so pathetic as this one. But the old man could not get enough of my praise. Again and again he piled up the portfolios, and turned them over, thirstily imbibing every word. So it was a relief for me when at last the deceitful portfolios were put aside and he had reluctantly cleared the table for the coffee. But what was my guilty breath of relief in comparison with the exalted, tumultuous joyfulness, with the high spirits of the old man who seemed to be thirty years younger!

"He told many a story about his quests and purchases. He got up awkwardly, again and again refusing help in order to bring out another and still another print. He was elated and intoxicated as if with wine. But when, at last, I said that I had to leave, he was actually scared, acted glum like a stubborn child, and stamped his feet spitefully and said that it was impossible, because I had scarcely seen half of the collection. And the

women had a hard time to make him understand that he must not be stubborn and delay me any longer, because I would miss my train. When at last, after desperate resistance, he gave in and we began to say good-bye, his voice became quite soft. He took my hands and his fingers stroked them caressingly, even up to the wrists, with all the feeling of a blind man—as if they wanted to know more about me and to express to me more love than words were able to do. ‘You have given me a great, great joy with your visit,’ he began with heartfelt emotion, which I shall never forget. ‘It was a real blessing for me to have at last an opportunity to look over my beloved pictures with a connoisseur, and you will see that you have not come in vain to this blind old man. I promise you here, before my wife as a witness, that I will add a clause to my will, entrusting your old and reputed firm with the auction sale of my collection. You shall have the honor to administer this unknown treasure’—and with that he laid his hand affectionately on the rifled portfolios—‘until the day that it will be dispersed over the world. Only promise me that you will make a beautiful catalogue. It shall be my monument! I do not want a better one.’

“I looked at his wife and daughter. They stood close together and sometimes a tremor ran from one to the other, as if they were a single body trembling with their common emotion. And I myself was in a somewhat solemn mood when the pathetically unsuspecting man charged me with the administration of his invisible, long-since dispersed collection, as if it were a great treasure. Deeply stirred, I promised him what I could never fulfil. Again his dead eyes began to glow. I realized how his longing from within tried to sense me bodily. I noticed it from the tenderness, from the loving pressure of his fingers, which were holding mine in thankfulness and as a pledge.

“The women accompanied me to the door. They did not dare to speak because he would have caught every word with a sensitive ear, but with what warm tears, with what overflowing thankfulness did they look at me, radiantly! Quite stunned, I found my way down the stairs. In reality I felt ashamed. Like the angel in the fairy tale, I had entered the room of poor people, had made a blind man see for an hour by just lending my help to a pious fraud and by lying outrageously. I had really come as a shabby jobber in order to get a few precious specimens out of somebody through a ruse; but what I got out of it was worth much more. I had for once had a chance to feel pure enthusiasm alive in a dull joyless time, a kind of intellectually transparent ecstasy, entirely devoted to art, which our people seemed to have lost long ago. And I somehow felt—I cannot express it in any other way—full of awe, though I was still ashamed and did not really know why.

“I was already down in the street when I heard a window opening above me and my name called. Indeed, the old man had insisted upon looking after me with his blind eyes in the direction in which he supposed I was going. He leaned out so far that the two women had to protect him carefully, and waving his handkerchief he called out ‘Safe journey’ with the merry refreshing voice of a boy. That sight was unforgettable to me. That happy face of the white-haired old man up there in the window, soaring high above all the morose, hurrying, bustling people in the street, was softly lifted out of our real and repulsive world by the white cloud of a bountiful imagination. And again I was reminded, as so often before, of the true old saying—I think it is Goethe’s—‘Collectors are happy people.’ ”

Thanks to Books

There they are, waiting and silent. They neither urge, nor call, nor press their claims. Mutely they are ranged along the wall. They seem to be asleep, yet from each one a name looks at you like an open eye. If you look their way or reach a hand toward them they do not call out, nor are they insistent. They make no demands. They wait until advances are made to them; then for the first time they open up. First, when there is quiet about us, peace within us; then we are ready for them. Some evening on returning from a tiresome round of duties, some day when one is weary of his fellow men, or in the morning when clouded and heavy with dream-laden sleep,—only then is one ready for books. You would like to hold a parley and yet be alone. You would like to dream, but in music. With the pleasurable presentiment of a pleasant experiment you go to the bookcase: a hundred eyes, a hundred names silently and patiently meet your searching glance as the slave women of a seraglio look to their master, humbly awaiting the call and yet blissful to be chosen. And then, as the finger gropes about on the piano to find the key for a hidden melody, gently it yields to the hand, this dumb white thing, this closed violin—in it all the voices of God are locked up. You open up a book, you read a line, a verse; but it does not ring clear at the moment. Disappointed, you put it back almost roughly, until you find the right book for the moment. Then suddenly you are seized, you breathe rapidly and as you carry it away to the lamp, The Book, the happily chosen volume glows, dazzles with an inner light. Magic has been done; from delicate clouds of dreams there stalks forth phantasmagoria. Broad vistas open up and your vanishing senses are lost in space.

Somewhere a clock ticks. But it does not penetrate in this self-circumscribed time. Here the hours are measured by another unit. There are books which traveled through many centuries before their word came to our lips; there are new books, just born yesterday, just yesterday begotten out of the confusion and necessity of a beardless boy, but they speak magic languages and one like the other soothes and quickens our breathing. While they excite they also comfort; while they seduce they also soothe the open mind. Gradually you sink down into them; there come repose, vision and a calm suspense in their melody in a world beyond this world.

You leisure hours, carrying us away from the tumult of the day; you books, truest and most silent companions, how can we thank you for your ever present readiness, for this eternal lifting, elevating influence of your presence! What have you not been in the darkest days of the soul's solitude, in military hospitals and army camps, in prisons and on beds of pain! You who have always been on the watch, have given dreams to men and a bit of tranquillity in moments of unrest and torture. God's gentle magnet, you have always been able to draw out the soul into its own sphere if it were lost in everyday routine. You have always, in all periods of gloom, widened the inner heaven within us to something greater.

Little fragments of eternity, quietly ranged along the plain wall, you stand there unpretentiously in our home. Yet when the hand frees you, when the heart touches you, you break through the everyday prosy surroundings; your words lead us as in a fiery chariot up from pettiness into the eternal.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

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[The end of *The Old Book Peddler and other tales for bibliophiles* by Stefan
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