Blue Flames

1

THE taller of the two gendarmes frowned and repeatedly cleared his throat; he had had an uneasy feeling right from the moment when he first entered the ghetto. The two of them were just passing the bandstand of the Ghettoswingers, and the shrilling of the trumpets did not abate in the slightest. The gendarme's weary mind vaguely registered the shouts of the tanned youths, calling someone named Woodpecker and exhorting him not to slack off, but sing; he replied by saying they could all go to hell because he was on his way to the blacksmith's shop to get some exercise. Then they waggled their shoulders and yelled:

Up and down and down and up
Our ship goes rolling.

The gendarme was irritated, and felt a desire to hit the boy. It was a persistent feeling, and he could not get rid of it.

"They're crazy!" he said, bending down slightly towards his smaller companion. "In this heat."

"They're on a ship," grinned the other. "It's not so hot there."

He pushed his helmet a little to the back of his head and blew beads of perspiration off his lips.

The taller gendarme had pale, cheese-colored cheeks in a lean, pockmarked face. The collar of his service shirt stood out stiffly from his emaciated neck. As he

tried to moisten his dry lips, his Adam's apple jogged up and down in his throat.

"Still," he repeated, "in this heat!"

"What do you care—here?" said the smaller one.

The taller one did not reply any more. Now and again he nodded his long horselike head sleepily, without moving his parched lips. His distrustful, green eyes scanned everyone in the street, but he said nothing and never stopped. They traversed the town with long quick strides, like a knife cutting bread.

"They say Holler is behind it all," the smaller one spoke up after a while.

"That's what I say," said the taller one wearily. To himself he swore at the heat.

"It stands to reason," he added, "that if you make such a racket, you'll only get knocked about more."

"More or less," replied the smaller one. "If you were here you wouldn't care."

The dusty smell of the chestnuts and lime trees clung to their mouths.

"Phew!" spat the tall one.

"If the commandant has allowed them to, why shouldn't they have a little fun?" muttered the smaller one with a frown.

"Even so," the taller one insisted.

Their heavy army issue boots slid along the pavement, and they listened to the clinking of their hobnails. That was an ordinary pleasant sound, but above and beneath it squawked the jazz. The youths behind their backs roared as if they were drunk.

"What's that coming?" asked the taller one suddenly, and licked his lips.

Before the other could reply, a carriage came into view and rattled towards them.

The taller one slowed his pace a little.

A piebald horse with white and grey spots scattered over his rump jutted out of the silver-polished harness. Enthroned in the purple of the now much-faded

blankets which covered up the patches in the upholstery of the seat behind the coachman, sat Ignatz Marmulstaub, member of the Council of Elders.

"Will he stop?" asked the taller gendarme inquiringly.

"He might," replied the other.

"He should," the tall one corrected him. In spite of all the compassion he felt for this town because it was a Czech town, he felt pleased that here at last was something he could tackle; a job worthy of a sergeant of the gendarmerie who was already half on duty; and on the other hand the responsibility of someone who would never be freed from the obligation of accounting for himself to the gendarmes on the highway.

"Mr. Marmulstaub," the coachman said in a confidential undertone as he half-turned towards him, "the gendarmes!"

"Where?" came from his passenger. "Ah! In front of us. You'll have to go slower."

He leaned out of the coach.

"Your obedient servant, gentlemen," he said in a gruff voice. And he was going to add something about the weather and the heat.

They did not as much as raise their eyes.

"Do you think he ought to stop?" the taller one asked his companion, bending down towards him.

"He could," said the smaller one.

"Rightly speaking, he should," the taller gendarme insisted in a loud and stubborn voice.

Marmulstaub colored, thinking: too late to stop now. He had simply missed it. And then: they weren't addressing him. On the contrary, they didn't even respond to his greeting. And anyway, they didn't call him back, and they looked so uncouth in their polished helmets covered with green cloth.

"He drives around like a king," murmured the taller gendarme angrily without moving his narrow head.

"Well, that's not such a big impertinence," replied the smaller one, "considering the heat."

"Damned cheek, I call it," countered the taller one.

"They drew to the side," said the smaller one in a languid tone. "That's enough for me."

"They couldn't do less," added the tall one.

"We were in the middle of the road, and our boots are for pedestrians," the smaller one replied calmly.

"Too much mollycoddling, that's what I say," complained the taller one.

"Oh, well, it's so terribly hot, pal," the smaller one evaded a reply. He had actually meant to say it wasn't worth talking about. Now he took his helmet off. He had sparse, straw-colored hair, wet and crumpled with perspiration.

"It is that," agreed the taller one, and he too lapsed into silence.

Then he swallowed some saliva he had laboriously gathered on his tongue. The Adam's apple, which protruded like a knuckle of a fist rammed inside his throat, leaped erratically upwards and fell again.

They passed through a narrow gate in the fence which ran round the ghetto. The concert in the main square was only a barely perceptible sound now, almost inaudible. The SS man who walked up and down the other side of the fence was given a perfunctory salute and replied in the same mute way.

The smaller gendarme put on his helmet.

2

"No," Marmulstaub answered the coachman when they had reached the square. "Don't wait for me."

He had decided not to use the carriage anymore. It attracted too much attention to himself, as he could

see from his encounter with the gendarmes. And others, too, were irritated by it, he could see that right now by looking at the people in the square.

"You know what?" he said. "Take the carriage away for repairs. It creaks abominably."

"It creaks all right," replied the coachman, who was just thinking the same thing, "because I have nothing to grease it with."

Just as he left, the music stopped.

"What's up?" someone asked Marmulstaub.

"Why?" he replied. "I don't know."

"Can't you hear it?"

"What should I hear?" he asked, but at that very moment he, like everyone else, heard the murmur of the car belonging to Herr von Holler, which carried through the cleft of sudden silence, the car's horn cutting across the hush of the crowd and ringing out sharply over their heads. Ignatz Marmulstaub, however, was quick to notice that Herr von Holler, the ghetto commandant, was not in the car, its only occupant a mere private of the Signals Corps.

The crowd thinned out.

"Why don't you go on playing," he said in a hoarse voice. This wretched town, he thought, hangs its tail and sits on its backside even when it doesn't have to. After all, he had turned his back on those gendarmes a while ago, and nothing had happened.

He delighted in their almost tangible astonishment. The people kept their eyes glued to his face as though they could interpret even the motions of his lips and tried to guess in advance what shape his thoughts would take.

"You can go on playing!" he repeated huskily.

He noted with pleasure that the concert was beginning anew.

At that moment he caught sight of little Liselotte.

She, too, had seen and heard him, was his first

thought. In the joy that welled up in him he forgot all about the gendarmes.

"Good afternoon, miss," he greeted her, narrowing his eyes.

"Good day," she replied.

"It's a fine day today, and there's music," he said. "Quite a change, isn't it."

"But it's also advisable to keep out of sight because one can't tell what might happen. That is another change."

"What could happen?" he smiled. "After all, everything has already happened."

"I have more errands than I have leisure in any case," she said. "Even though there is music."

"Can I help you in any way?" he inquired.

"No, it's all women's stuff," she said.

"Still, I might be able to do something for you," he suggested.

"I must do it myself," she said quickly, noticing at the same time how he was looking her all over.

"Always without me, Miss Liselotte," he said reproachfully. "Always without me."

"Good-bye!"

"Yes," he muttered, more to himself than to her.

He threw his jacket over his other arm. With his right hand he now began, swiftly and impatiently, to wipe his perspiring brow, and to scratch himself on the chest and under the armpits. His face went red, for he felt that the little one had lied to him. He had accurate information about her, let her not forget that, and he knew what he knew.

He stood there jacketless, with large round shoulders, his head bowed heavily over his chest, and his shirt unbuttoned right down to the semicircle of the trousers' top. From under drawn brows he followed what went on around him, watching the youth with a conductor's baton as he carved triangles in the hot air.

Then his eyes began to rove, appraising the clusters

of human bodies. Here and there his gaze would rest, and he would narrow his large, dark eyes, which then took on a deep purplish tinge as they merged with the reddish swollen pouches under his eyes and the red-colored mesh of threadlike veins in the corners.

The sun was burning hot, and the women were dressed in the lightest of dresses. His eyes traveled hungrily along the white thighs of girls, slipping right down, down their calves to the ankles and back again, up along their throats, now shining with beads of perspiration, and their red or pale lips. In each and every one of them he saw in his mind's eye something of Liselotte, her narrow waist and her breasts like small, halved apples. Eagerly he linked his imaginings with the sound of her voice and with her scent. Hot blood pulsed through his veins. Yet, despite this internal fire, his appearance was one of almost immovable tranquillity, the only sign of life, indeed, being the constant rubbing together of his extraordinarily small, delicate, and white hands.

A little way from the railing stood some small, thirteen-year-old girls from L 410. He felt them all over with his purplish gaze, saying to himself that here there were no little girls.

But he was disturbed by the glances he knew were being directed at his back.

3

For some time now Herr von Holler had been looking out for his car, which was not back yet. Then he left the window, walked slowly across the room, and reached for the telephone, studying the pinkish crescents on his fingernails and listening to the gentle whirring of the fan.

He dialed a number and waited.

"Von Holler," he said at last. "Heil Hitler! Why am I calling you? Do you want to be present this evening at Löwenbach's interrogation?"

In his mind's eye he saw the small courier in civilian clothes.

"Heil Hitler!" said a voice. "When?"

"Tonight, if you have no other program."

"Not really," rasped the voice.

"It'll be good fun," the commandant continued, trying to prolong the conversation. "The fat one is going to assist. The one you saw yesterday. I've just sent for him."

"I remember," said the voice. "You have an inexhaustible sense of humor."

"You flatter me," said Herr von Holler. "But sometimes it is necessary. Just imagine you were cleaning the dunghill and then took a hot bath."

"One day you're going to lose that Jew of yours," crackled the voice at the other end. "I hope you will not miss him."

"His time hasn't come yet," said the commandant.

"Not willing?" hooted the voice.

"For the time being," parried Herr von Holler.

"Exaggerated," came from the receiver.

"Someone has to be last. That's no advantage. Let it be him."

"You cannot do without one ugly Jew, but on the other hand you want us to bleed the ghetto and rid you of a whole half of them at a time."

"You must understand, he's my secret weapon. Apart from the knout, the bullet, and the rope. Often a single word is enough. A word from him, that is."

"In short, that rotten Jew of yours is so excellent," clanged the voice, "that he is on velvet and doesn't even know it."

"I wouldn't like to enlarge upon it over the telephone," evaded the commandant.

"One of these days we'll put him in the waxworks for you," chuckled the voice. "You and your pet Jew!"

Herr von Holler did not reply for a moment. Did that half-grown civilian nincompoop think, he said to himself, that just because he was a courier plying between Berlin and the HQ he could threaten him? Of course his, von Holler's, fortress was overpopulated. That wouldn't matter so much for its own sake, he thought, but it did matter in view of the forthcoming filming of the ghetto!

"Well then, if you want to come," von Holler said in a tone which indicated that the conversation was at an end, "I'll give you a call."

"Accepted with thanks," came the voice. "What time?"

"At eight."

"Right!" replied the voice.

And the phone went dead.

Von Holler began to pace the room with long strides, tall and bony, proud of his noble origin and of his ability to put on a rough or genteel air, according to who his interlocutor was. If only he knew the extent and the limits of the authority vested in the man from Berlin, he would find the right tone for dealing with him, too.

He stopped by the table. Picking up some papers, he glanced through the lists of names which Marmulstaub had brought him, scanning them with curious eyes. But the weak glimmer of interest quickly vanished—they were names for a museum. They lacked the romantic touch which they had once possessed. Then his gaze was attracted by the dark brown desk diary with the von Holler coat of arms. Thursday had been ticked off for some reason. Oh, yes, he recalled, today Marmulstaub's jazz band was performing. And the fat one would most likely be there. What a pity he had not thought of telling the officer who had gone to fetch Marmulstaub.

4

Meanwhile the coachman had unharnessed the piebald outside the town gate between two slopes.

"The Council of Elders has sent me," he said. "Namely, Mr. Marmulstaub. The carriage needs a complete overhaul. It was idle for a long time."

"Mr. Marmulstaub is going to drive in it?" asked the blacksmith, doubtfully inspecting the gig.

"All the gentlemen from the Council are going to drive in it," the coachman rebuffed him.

From the blacksmith's shop came the monotonous clatter of hammers.

"Hey, boy!" the blacksmith, a lean man with clever eyes called into the open door. "Come here a moment."

A lanky youth in a leather apron came out.

"This is Woodpecker," said the blacksmith. "We'll give him the job."

"Overjoyed," said the youth. "What's this for? A coronation?"

"Something like that. It's for the greater glory of the town," said the lean one.

"Delighted," muttered the boy angrily.

"Don't make fun of it," the coachman murmured, turning to the blacksmith. "That's neither nice nor proper."

"This is overtime work, isn't it?" complained Woodpecker. "And for what? Three kicks for lunch! And there is music in the square."

"Mr. Woodpecker," the coachman said to the boy, "we need it soon."

Then he itemized all the faults of the vehicle.

"All right, then. Tomorrow," said the blacksmith. "Suit you?"

"Suits me fine," said the coachman.

He patted the horse on the muzzle, and was annoyed

to see Woodpecker offer it an empty palm, which the piebald licked rewardlessly. He walked away with the horse collar and harness over his left arm. He was an elderly man, and his burden made him bend almost double.

The boy made no move to help him. As soon as he was alone with the gig, he aimed a vicious kick at it. It was considerably dilapidated. He scratched the backs of his hands, and lost even the last vestige of inclination to start the work of repairing the carriage. The wheels seemed to him to be clocks with plump hands and transparent faces, through which he could see the Ghettoswingers playing in the square where he had left them not so long ago. Tramp and Mylord among them. And the girls from L 410.

He went off to have a wash.

"I'm going," he told the blacksmith, who was a bachelor and lived over the shop. "I know pretty well what's wrong with it now, and I've repaired a thing or two already."

"That'll do," said the blacksmith. "It's too hot today, anyway, and you still have a restless nature. You can finish it tomorrow. The toad won't croak."

5

The German automobile was coming back. Herr von Holler's dispatch rider had taken to the Council of Elders the food ration papers which were normally delivered by the Council's chairman, Löwenbach. It was actually for these papers that he went to the HQ shortly after lunch, and he had not come back. The sound of the horn, its clamor shattering the curtain of silence, was again borne above the crowd.

The eyes of the crowd sought comfort in the face of

Ignatz Marmulstaub. Again as before, he felt he was the center of their attention, and he was again pleased by it. Somewhere in that crowd, he told himself, was little Liselotte. The thought that she, too, witnessed how he was looked up to took away the bitterness of the thoughts that preceded it.

Then he actually saw her.

Some tall youth behind him was shouting, with a whole gang of boys accompanying him:

Wiggle your backside,
You lazy girl!

He saw at once that it was meant for her, and he wondered that she only smiled inanely and pretended not to hear.

One of the youths began to spit, aiming at the toes of Marmulstaub's shoes.

"Good shot, Tramp!" the others yelled.

Irritated, Marmulstaub stood aside, stepping on the tall youth's foot as he did so.

"Sorry," he murmured.

"Like hell," shouted Woodpecker, bending down and nursing his foot in his hand.

Marmulstaub had turned round and thus lost the little one from sight.

"Well, wiggle that backside of yours!" hooted Woodpecker in an angry tone, but more for the benefit of his friends than of the fat man next to him. "It's big enough, anyway!"

"Go to hell," said Marmulstaub darkly. "Idiot!"

His purplish eyes investigated the crowd. He could not see her any more.

"After all, I didn't do it on purpose," he said apologetically.

And suddenly he realized that the looks which the people were now giving him were not in the least admiring. He was annoyed by their ill-concealed malice.

"Look at him," said Woodpecker. "He swears at me although he almost crushed my toes. The ugly toad!"

Marmulstaub blanched. Helplessly he stared after Woodpecker, who had easily penetrated the thick throng of people who had frustrated his efforts at finding the girl. But that did not hurt him any more. That nickname should not have been uttered. He felt sick.

He turned away from the swarming crowd and the syncopated music, accompanied by the wild shouting of the youths who performed all the town's calls and ditties.

He sought to escape from this noisy outer world into the silence of introspection. He no longer perceived the multitude around him and the din—he was quite alone. Now he could ponder the dreadful incompatibility of his own spiritual system and the surrounding world. His was an elevated spirit, the others were rabble. He had the pleasure of something that was infinitely removed from this moment and this town, not only in time or distance.

He did not hear any further derisive echoes. He only felt the cooler air brought here by the wind from the river Oder, and, automatically and without thinking, he put on his jacket. Closing his large, dark violet eyes, he listened to the music that gushed forth on strings of infinite delicacy inside him, a minute web of tones and a wave of images.

6

"Out of the way!" shouted the First Officer as he pushed through the crowd.

He returned to the square. Physical contact with people repelled him. He felt a temptation to pull out his pistol and shoot his way through the throng.

"Make way, you scum!" he yelled. "Do you hear?"

He had to find that fat pig of a Marmulstaub because the commandant had no one of lesser rank handy, and the dispatch rider had taken the car to deliver those grub papers! And, to crown it all, Marmulstaub was neither at the Council of Elders nor at his home.

"Get away from here!" he yelled. "All of you!"

Then he climbed on to the wooden rail that surrounded the Ghettoswingers.

"Shut up!" he shouted.

And he found that they obeyed him at once, even though he had not even turned round to face them.

"Marmulstaub to me!"

Marmulstaub stood a little farther off. He raised his eyes from the ground and lifted an arm. His small, white palm dangled in the air. He gathered himself together quickly. The darker green uniform, different from that worn by the gendarmes, had frightened him.

The First Officer had already seen him. So he was here, after all, he thought. Satisfied, he climbed down again, motioning the band to resume playing. They did so immediately. You had to yell at the Jews, he told himself. Then they understood.

Marmulstaub's eyes roved the crowd. Was there really only malice in the faces which he passed? Perhaps not, he thought. But he could find no sympathy anywhere. And yet, he told himself, a little while ago they had all but kissed his feet, every single one of them.

Herr von Holler's First Officer was waiting for him by the railing, and nobody knew why. Lo, Marmulstaub meditated, there was the Book of Life open in front of him. What would he read in it if it were pushed under his nose? What did the icy reserve which he felt all round him mean?

He stopped at a distance which he felt the officer would consider respectful enough and bent in a deep

bow. In his head, which was aproaching the dust of the pavement, he weighed everything he knew about himself against his estimate of what the others knew, those others who were watching him now. Even thus, with his forehead to the ground which he preferred to look at rather than the uniform (for, in spite of everything, a German uniform still inspired fear in him), even thus he felt his own terrible lack of security.

Yet there was consolation in the knowledge that between the lines of human thought there was always a space in which one could read differently. Marmulstaub slowly straightened himself. Not for a moment did he contemplate revenge against his Jewish town for the hostility he divined behind his back. Did those who did not find his efforts useful want to see his head roll in the dust? Did they wish this through a desire for justice? Or through envy?

He saw his two hands. Well, they were clean, he told himself with satisfaction. Clean. And yet—he thought as he resumed a completely upright posture—and yet they had hung on him an invisible reproach. That nickname . . . And when they feared trouble a while ago, they had bent their gaze on him. And none of them could deny that the well-nigh imperceptible favor shown him by Herr von Holler—so scantily shown at that—was a useful drop in the insignificant ocean of other people's actions.

"If you please," he said. "I'm at your service, Herr Kommandant Stellvertreter!"

It occurred to him that perhaps he would not even be required to go with the First Officer, in which case the humiliation would be transformed into an honor, for it would mean that this German officer had had to come and find him in order to have a word with him.

"Don't babble!" barked the officer. "Come on, you're coming with me!"

"May I ask where to, sir?"

"To the commandant's office."

"On foot?" he inquired politely.

Nevertheless he felt that he could no longer save anything in the eyes of the crowd.

"Naturally on foot, Jew!" said the officer, shaking his head slightly in astonishment and spitting disgustedly.

"Jawohl," replied Marmulstaub apathetically.

"Stop your chatter and get along!"

But Marmulstaub was not thinking of the reason for this call from the commandant. To that extent at least he was calm. And, as always when anything was about to happen, his mind now fixed again on the vision from which he was forcibly torn only by the external interruption of the officer. Carpets in a long, silent corridor. Then he saw a city within a city, far removed from the hubbub of life, or rather its present travesty. A citadel of the spirit. A place surrounded by Rome.

"This way!" shouted the officer.

"At your service, sir," replied Marmulstaub.

Undisturbed, his imaginings dwelt on in that place. He was a librarian there, sorting out Judaic documents.

The echoes of distant melodies once again ceased to touch him. Let the music which he had raised for the town out of the commandant's very bones and sinews play on without him! He would remain, as hitherto, merely the initiator of everything. A hawser. A lever. Let others tug and pull, but there had to be something else, as well: a traction force, a firm point.

He found that at this moment he was quite well disposed toward that offensive nickname. Almost as though it did not belong to him.

"Terribly hot today, wasn't it?" he addressed the officer amicably. "But now it is getting a little cooler at last."

"Who asked for your opinion, you stinking Jew?" replied the officer furiously. "Get a move on! Faster!"

Marmulstaub noted with satisfaction that Herr von Holler's second-in-command continued to use the

formal mode of address, and he stepped out a trifle quicker.

"I'm coming," he answered calmly, adding guilelessly: "Surely we needn't hurry so."

7

The commandant motioned him to a chair and spoke quite affably. He had immediately dismissed his deputy, so that they were alone in the office. He sensed the disquietude of the man in front of him, and he therefore began the interview more mildly than he had intended.

"The ghetto, I hear, is indulging in wild music," he said.

"In moderation, Excellency," replied Marmulstaub.

"Then that's all right," said the commandant.

"Certainly, sir," nodded Marmulstaub. He waited for what was to come. He was sure something was coming, and was prepared to disarm the commandant by prompt acquiescence to everything he might want, in order to avoid any unpleasantness. But the other uniforms he had met earlier that day had weakened him. He knew he was trembling.

"Have you seen Löwenbach?" Herr von Holler asked him.

"No, I haven't," he replied.

"That's just the point," said the commandant. "You should have paid more attention to him."

Marmulstaub's anxious eyes searched the commandant's sinewy face.

"I don't understand, Excellency," he quavered.

"Don't be frightened," added the commandant. "For the time being he is still alive and well."

He stopped speaking. Marmulstaub went on trembling.

"I gave him your lists to sign, and he refused. You know that we don't like that sort of thing. Quite apart from the fact that these are to be labor transports, and all of them are to come back to us."

"I am not frightened," whispered Marmulstaub.

"You will deputize for Löwenbach. That's why I wanted to speak to you."

"It is too great an honor, sir," said Marmulstaub, who had grown completely pale.

"Don't be so modest!" said the commandant.

"And Mr. Löwenbach?" he asked quickly. "Has anything happened?"

"I trust he will agree. For the present he is here, downstairs. Let's hope he's not too cold. However, I cannot guarantee it."

The red color which had meanwhile begun to return to Marmulstaub's fat cheeks vanished at once. He had been right in thinking that there were unpleasant things coming. He was now equally sure that this was still not the end of it. The uniform. He had known, hadn't he, that if Herr von Holler were in uniform, it would all be so much the worse. But if Löwenbach was under arrest, what then? All of a sudden he caught sight of the commandant's narrow eyes and knots of muscle, and he understood: the signature!

"I can't deputize for him," he whispered. "The gentlemen of the Council haven't approved the nomination."

"Don't talk rot! We are not Parliament!"

"I only ventured, Excellency. . . ."

"We are going downstairs now to ask Löwenbach if he agrees. I have some business there anyway. I'm only waiting for my guest to arrive." He glanced at his watch, adding: "But there's still time."

"For God's sake, no, Excellency," murmured Marmulstaub, trembling.

"What are you afraid of?"

"I . . . I am not afraid, Excellency."

He saw what was going to happen as clearly as if it were actually taking place before his eyes. The man from Berlin would incite the commandant, and vice versa. In the end, Löwenbach would agree to anything. And he, Marmulstaub, was to be present.

"A transport is being prepared on the basis of these lists, sir," he began.

"Only preparations are being made at present."

"And Mr. Löwenbach's signature . . . is that so necessary?"

"As far as I am concerned, no," said the commandant.

"I see," whispered Marmulstaub, feeling a wild, secret joy at the thought that these tendons and knots of muscle were not omnipotent. There was something that had authority over them.

"And then, it is necessary that things should be done the proper way," Herr von Holler went on. "As you know, we have a visitor here. I don't want anything to be missing."

"And may I ask if there is anything that you miss?" asked Marmulstaub cleverly. All at once he felt calmer.

"Your notes, for instance," came the crushing reply.

"I took the liberty of supposing, Excellency, that you preferred me to give you my views by word of mouth."

"How am I to interpret that?" said Herr von Holler. "As mistrust? Is that what you wish me to read into it?"

"No, sir, no! Please!"

It came to Marmulstaub for the second time that he would have to give in, or the commandant would have him dragged down to the cellar to join Löwenbach. And he saw that this blackmail would continue until he pulled out his fountain pen. His joy at the unknown authority of his imagination dissolved before the muscular and sinewy face of the commandant.

And yet he decided, in the shadow of the preceding admission of Herr von Holler, to reveal the only thing he knew.

"Excellency, Mr. Löwenbach intimated to me that perhaps not all the transports would be labor ones, and that they were not to return."

"That's why he is in the cellar!" The commandant rose abruptly to his feet.

Marmulstaub felt uneasy sitting down. Still, he said to himself, it worked. His trump card. He got up from his seat, too, now, feeling sad. After all, when it was by word of mouth he had never refused this fellow anything.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"That is nothing but swinish propaganda. We punish that here. You know how."

"Certainly, Excellency. I would myself take measures if it were to spread to the ghetto."

"That sounds better, Marmulstaub," muttered Herr von Holler. "The cellar is big and very cold. It is full of rats. I should hate to see you there, too."

"Thank you," whispered Marmulstaub.

The commandant sat down again, leaving Marmulstaub to stand.

"Prepare everything for an inspection of the town," he said. "I don't want to come across anything that is not in order."

"In what way, sir?"

"I wish to take my guest round the town. There's going to be trouble if I find anything wrong!"

Marmulstaub, however, was convinced that this was only the commandant's new ruse to get him to sign. The slight pleasure he had felt at his revelation and at the commandant's having risen from his chair—as well as at the fact that he still had not signed—was gone. At the same time he felt a sharp disappointment at the realization that Herr von Holler was not trembling under the threat that he, Marmulstaub, might tell some-

one in a position to investigate the matter that the transports were not coming back, while his own body trembled violently at a mere hint from the commandant that he might be put among the rats. With him it was all completely different.

"I had a short list of defects, sir, to which I have for some time been meaning to draw your attention." And Marmulstaub began to search his pockets.

"But you no longer have it," said the commandant with chilly, almost indifferent scorn.

"I must have put it somewhere . . ." said Marmulstaub defensively.

After a short pause he added: "I'll find it by tomorrow."

If only the commandant did not have his uniform on, he would be easier to talk to.

"That's all," said Herr von Holler. "Have you a pen?"

"I have," Marmulstaub whispered, "my oral consent, Excellency . . . ?"

"You can keep that!"

The scraping of the nib could be heard distinctly in the silent office.

"May I go now, Excellency?"

"Don't you want to have a word with Löwenbach?" asked the commandant, and he suddenly felt a strong urge to burst into laughter. If he did take the fat man down, he would surely fall apart, the coward. And then that dwarf from Berlin would think he wasn't fit even for the waxworks.

"I would prefer to go and look for those lists of defects," said Marmulstaub cautiously.

"Are you afraid of the rats? You fox!"

"No, sir," replied Marmulstaub. "Not of the rats."

"Löwenbach wouldn't bite you," laughed Herr von Holler. "All right, you can go." And then he added, "Is it true what your wise men say, that he who touches

is touched?" and smiled again. "Oh, you always want back with the caveman, don't you?"

The blood came back into the face of the man in the black overcoat so rapidly that the commandant could not keep back an amused smile. But it was not a pleasant smile; it was just as unpleasant as his whole sinewy, muscular, and highly colored face. Better get rid of him, he thought. He was sure to shit in his pants if he was forced to attend the interrogation. And that, if you please, was his pet Jew, his exhibit! He had secured such a name for him. Had even ensured that he would be the last to go. Perhaps he had really overrated the fat man's usefulness.

Marmulstaub was filled with an immense relief. But in spite of that relief, from somewhere inside him (where his imaginings created the vision of a pair of hands—someone else's hands and yet somehow also his own—clasped together, fine, white, and unsoiled) a feeling of sadness was conveyed to his consciousness, sadness at the fact that he had signed after all. That his signature would remain for all time, and that someone might see how he had helped himself out of trouble. Still, he was happy to see that he enjoyed the commandant's confidence. And happy that he need not be present when Herr von Holler took his guest down to the cellar to Löwenbach. And that he was allowed to leave by himself.

He returned to the town. On the road he met the two gendarmes whom he had already encountered earlier that afternoon.

"Your obedient servant, gentlemen," he greeted them, and pulled out his pass.

"Well, well," said the smaller gendarme to the other, "the gentleman is on foot."

"And what about the carriage?" jeered the taller one. But he was only speaking to his companion.

They took no notice of his pass.

8

A man from Marmulstaub's office stopped him at the intersection of the main L Avenue and the highway.

"Mr. Marmulstaub," he began, "have you also heard that there will be new transports?"

"No," he replied in a friendly voice, "I haven't heard that."

He felt a sudden twinge of regret for this town. Tomorrow, perhaps, it would already begin to shake in its foundations. He had had to lay before Herr von Holler lists of people which concerned almost half of the whole town. He decided to be merciful and to keep back as much as possible. Mustn't torment them.

"They say that Mr. Löwenbach has not returned from the *Kommandatur,*" the man went on. "He refused to sign something, they say."

"I know nothing about that," said Marmulstaub curtly. "Did he say anything about it before he left?"

"They say he did," said the man. "What do you think—about the transports?"

"I don't know," he repeated.

"And Löwenbach—will he come back?"

"I don't know," he muttered darkly.

"Did they put him in the cellar?"

"Man," said Marmulstaub, "are you interrogating me or what?"

"Someone said," the clerk continued remorselessly, "that they would be labor transports."

"I tell you I don't know, man, I don't know, really," Marmulstaub tried to ward off further questioning. "If I knew, I'd tell all of you in time. Everything."

"And what about our women?" the man rambled on.

"I don't know!"

"Will they come too?"

"Leave me in peace, will you!"

And he walked on, fearing all the time that he would be bothered again.

The Ghettoswingers were still playing in the square, but only a few people remained to listen. These young greenhorns, Marmulstaub thought, were always carefree. Youths like that one in the afternoon. Nothing ever happened to them. It was because they had no feeling of responsibility, he said to himself. Irresponsible in everything and always. He suddenly felt envy toward Woodpecker, whose face he now pictured in his mind, but whom he did not know, and he wished he could, by some process of reincarnation, assume the irresponsibility of that longish, semichildish face with its expression of impudent innocence and swear at people, calling them frogs and toads. Where could he possibly have put that list of defects which he had thought to remove in cooperation with the commandant's people in the interests of this very town? Could he use this to redeem himself? No, he thought, that was impossible. Löwenbach had thrown the glove too insolently and too far. He would have to pick it up. Then it crossed his mind that it was bad luck that the commandant had had to think of him, of all people. Still, his hands were clean, because Herr von Holler had to call *somebody*. It might just as easily have been someone else. If it came to anything, he would have to be forgiven. Yes, his hands were clean. He began to pity Löwenbach. He remembered the mention of the rats. Even his thoughts were unsoiled.

He felt tired. Something seemed to weigh him down and choke him. Sad and depressed, he thought of sending for little Liselotte. She had rejected him in the afternoon, but now, now he could send for her as the deputy of former chairman Löwenbach. He entered his house and called a servant.

9

Here they called Liselotte Lizzy. She was sitting in Room 20 of the youth dormitory at 710 Q Street.

When Woodpecker had called for her and told her that tomorrow they would be saying good-bye to the Fortress and that they would like to see her before they went, she put on a jacket and came with him.

"I know it already," she said. "The sparrows on the roof are chirping about it."

"Fine, Lizzy," he murmured.

"Where are we going? To number 20?"

"That's right, Lizzy," he said.

"All right then. Let's go," she replied. She had the feeling that somewhere something was about to end today. She could see no reason why she should refuse. She had refused once before today—in the square that afternoon. The fat fellow, first among those who knew how to make life pleasant for themselves even here and who, she was sure, would always manage to make life pleasant for themselves.

With the agility of a cat she climbed on to one of the top bunks, let her legs swing down, and whistled to herself as she saw the boys' eyes licking her calves. She had been here on several other occasions, but never had there been so many boys.

"Here, some pancakes for you, Lizzy," said Woodpecker. They ate, washing the food down with water which they all called rum.

"You've used too much garlic," criticized Lizzy, her mouth full.

"Not us," said Woodpecker, adding: "The social worker made them for us."

"Who's that?" asked Lizzy, and climbed up again.

"Oh, that's a woman," Woodpecker laughed, "who gives you a lot of advice, and if you have the runs, she hides your lunch—in her own stomach. Understand?"

"But she's got to be pretty ugly," interjected Mylord, "or she wouldn't take the job."

"Well, gents," cut in Tramp, "tomorrow night hardly half of us will be here. And quite possibly not a single one."

He jumped up next to Lizzy and put his arm round her shoulders.

She looked at him in surprise and threw away a toothpick she had in her hand.

But then she understood without having to ask.

"Hey, Tramp," called Mylord, the Ghettoswingers' first trumpet player, "give Lizzy our best wishes."

Then they started to talk in whispers.

Tramp pulled the blanket so that it hung down like a curtain across his bunk.

"Throw us up that rum!" he demanded.

Woodpecker threw him a bottle of water. All they saw was Tramp's hairy hand as it stretched out, caught the bottle, and vanished.

The Kid sat by himself a little apart from the others.

Having earlier distributed the contents of a parcel he had received from his parents, he was now reading a letter admonishing him to look after himself and to come home in good health.

Tramp jumped down.

Lizzy was drinking; they could all hear the water gulping in her throat.

When Mylord climbed down she began to sing.

"Not bad," commented Mylord. "Woodpecker's turn."

Woodpecker heard how they all accompanied Lizzy's singing, and he continued to hum to himself even when the others had stopped.

> I'll get me a new pair of skates
> or behind a nunnery's gates
> unburden my heavy heart.

Then everything was just that song.

"How about a break?"

Woodpecker was back with the others.

"Don't be silly," called out Lizzy. "Later."

Woodpecker was fastening his trousers with a piece of string. The song kept sounding in his ears. There was everything in it. Something that was behind him and something a long way ahead. And also this moment. He tied a knot on the string.

One by one the boys climbed up and, after a while, clambered down again.

The Tramp bowed in front of the Kid.

"For God's sake, how many more?" said Lizzy in a thick voice.

"She's a bitch!" said Woodpecker under his breath, "but she has staying power."

"Christ's sake, Lizzy," pleaded Mylord. "You wouldn't let the Kid go away immaculate, would you?" Then he added: "He is just fourteen today!"

The Kid was terribly bashful.

"All right, then. Him and no more," said Lizzy hoarsely.

"I don't want to," said the Kid quietly.

"Don't be silly," Mylord exhorted him.

"Such an opportunity, you silly little punk," said Woodpecker loftily.

"Sure," said Tramp. "Such an opportunity!"

"But I don't want to," repeated the Kid.

And then, while he undressed and pulled himself up on to the bunk and breathed heavily, Woodpecker, Mylord, Tramp, and the others called out to him in encouragement.

And the Kid did not even notice that Lizzy had not stopped humming.

Afterwards, she went out into the corridor to have a wash.

"Don't make a noise," Woodpecker warned her.

Then they sat her in their midst, feeling very masculine as they embraced her with a proprietary air

which they had just earned the right to adopt, and they sang about the nunnery and the skates.

Lizzy stroked the Kid's head.

Then she combed his hair, and no one laughed to see it.

"Shall I see you home?" asked Woodpecker. "We're going to pack." Then he added: "We got these things ready for you before you came."

And they began to fill her pockets with all sorts of things.

"We couldn't take it with us, anyway," murmured Woodpecker. "So why let someone else grab it?"

The things included towels, combs, hairbrushes, and various odds and ends such as a darning kit and jars. At first she tried to refuse, but then she took everything they gave her.

When she was downstairs, they threw a fine quilt after her.

"That's from the Kid," chuckled Woodpecker.

"Thanks!" she called.

"Bye-bye, Liz!"

"See you!" she replied.

And as she went home, loaded with the boys' gifts, she felt just as sad as she had before, when Woodpecker called for her.

10

"Well, Kid," said Woodpecker harshly, "didn't kill you, did it?"

The Kid bowed his head. Taking a pencil out of his knapsack, he began to scribble a postcard to his parents.

"You can sleep with me tonight," continued Woodpecker. "One blanket will do for us both."

"Why did you have to throw just his woolen one after Liz?" Mylord asked him.

"Well, he had to pay something, didn't he?"

"Let me alone," spoke up the Kid. "I don't mind."

He sat on the stool and wrote.

Woodpecker and Mylord left to say good-bye at L 410.

The others also disappeared, and the Kid was left all by himself.

Dear parents, he wrote, *we're leaving for somewhere, but please don't worry, I am grown-up now.*

He counted the words: fourteen. Almost half the permitted number.

They call me Kid and everyone is nice to me.

That was twenty-four. Another six to go.

I'll write again as soon as possible.

He crossed out "as soon as possible," writing only "soon" instead, and signed his name.

For a time he just sat there as if carved out of wood.

Then he carried the card out into the corridor and pushed it into the mailbox.

But he did not come back.

First he stood a long while next to the mailbox, and then huddled himself in a corner against the wall, wishing it had not happened; or that he might be going somewhere else than with Woodpecker, Tramp, Mylord, and the others; that it was many, many years later; or that they were all dead; or at least that he himself were dead.

The wall was cold and grey. Someone had scratched all kinds of hieroglyphics on it. Why did they all say he was grown-up now? What was it that had changed? Was that all it was? He gazed into the bowl of the sink

on the wall, the disappointment he felt darker than night. And his parents were far, far away. His mother. A cramp took hold of him. The slippery white basin fascinated him. Then he began to vomit.

11

The servant waited for Liselotte until nine. When he had returned the first time to report no success and Marmulstaub had ordered him to go back and bring her even if he had to wait till midnight, all thoughts of tasting his master's tidbit for himself left him.

"Find out immediately where she is!" said Marmulstaub angrily.

That was something his servant was unable to do. None of the women who lived in the same room with Liselotte knew where she was to be found.

"You can't wait for her here," they said. "This is a woman's dormitory."

He felt too embarrassed to put any more questions to them and he could not explain anything. Marmulstaub would never forgive him if he did that.

So he settled down in the corridor and waited. The tower clock chimed the half-hour. Half past nine.

No one appeared in the corridor all this time, only an old woman, unable to sleep, had once walked past.

"Shameless creature!" she spat at him. "Don't you know what's in store for us?"

Completely taken aback, he gasped for breath. The old woman judged him with a glassy stare.

Then all was silence. The clock chimed ten. At that moment he saw the girl.

"Where have you been all this time?" he called in

a muted voice. "You're not allowed out after eight, and my master is waiting for you."

"Your master?" she asked in surprise. "Who's that?"

"Mr. Marmulstaub," he said.

"Your master can kiss my ass," she blurted out.

With a somewhat weary agility she opened the door with her elbow.

"Couldn't you lend a hand?" she suggested.

The servant held the door for her.

Liselotte threw the things she had brought with her under her bed. Relieved, she unmade the bed, not intending to go out anymore.

The servant stood in the open doorway, appraising her with his eyes.

She paid not the slightest attention to him now, and climbed into bed.

This roused him to anger.

"I'll give him your message, woman," he muttered, enraged, the first words that came into his head. "But on your own head be it!"

She made no reply. With a tired but at the same time determined gesture she pulled the blanket right up to her throat.

"Well?" whispered the servant.

"And you too!" she flung at him.

"What!" he said in a raised voice. "You vessel of impudence."

"Be quiet!" hissed someone.

"Unheard of!" added the servant as he closed the door carefully behind him.

He had seen the uselessness of his efforts already at nine o'clock. Now he walked back wondering fearfully whether it would be enough to say—if someone stopped him in the street—that he had not been out on his own behalf, but upon the order of the new deputy chairman of the Council of Elders, Ignatz Marmulstaub.

Mouselike, he crept along the house walls.

Luckily no one saw him. The ghetto was asleep.

12

"Go to bed," said Marmulstaub sleepily. "It's official business, and we'll settle it tomorrow."

But he himself could not go to sleep. Although he tried hard to direct his thoughts to Liselotte or at least to the lost list of defects, something impelled him to dwell on the events of the afternoon. There in the darkness in front of him he saw. like a pair of ghosts, the SS uniforms of Herr von Holler and his second-in-command. And then he saw Löwenbach. In his imagination he was stifled by the dungeon in the cellar. Where could he have lost that list? In his mind's eye he also saw the small queer man in civilian dress who had accompanied the commandant the day before yesterday. Why did Herr von Holler wait for him last night? Did he perhaps want to take him down to see Löwenbach? He felt his forehead. He was sure he had a temperature. His pulse was racing. And his heart. What was he afraid of, he asked himself, why was he afraid? He must not breathe so loud. The sound of his own breathing frightened him. Heavily he rolled over on the bed. With the palm of one hand he wiped his forehead and both cheeks. He swallowed with difficulty. He had pulled out his handkerchief several times during the afternoon, it occurred to him. And in the carriage he had even taken his jacket off. Yes, that was it, in the carriage! Before that tall, gangling lout threw that word in his face. He was suddenly firmly convinced that he had seen the blue envelope with the folded octavo sheets lying on the purple seat. He concentrated on this thought with a physical effort, and felt perspiration ooze out all over his body and his pulse pumping crazily. Confused, he swallowed whole mouthfuls of saliva. He mustn't give in to the fever. But the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that he really had left the list there. And since that

afternoon interview with Herr von Holler forced its way to the forefront of his consciousness, he conceived the idea of linking his tour of inspection with his own intention of taking a look at the shop where they were repairing the carriage, at the faded and torn purple of the seat, or of making inquiries of whoever was repairing it. But he was unable to make that the focal point of his thoughts. Still he saw his signature, even if illegible, on the list from which the transport was to be assembled. Why had Löwenbach not signed the thing? Again he wiped the sweat off his face. He ought to have known that he could not make himself an obstacle in the path of a man such as von Holler. If for nothing else—if for nothing else!—he deserved to be punished. Fool. Why didn't he see that himself? For Marmulstaub had exonerated him in every other respect.

13

"Nobody's going anywhere," said Woodpecker at eight in the morning. "I asked downstairs. It was all a lot of talk."

His way took him past the fence, on the other side of which two gendarmes were going on duty. They looked familiar to him, but he did not realize that he had seen them the day before in the square. The taller one bent down to the other and was speaking away at him. Woodpecker did not even turn to look after them. He only saw that they entered the gate of the German *kommandatur*. What might they want there, he wondered idly, but then he forgot all about them.

So nothing had happened.

Just a panic, that was all.

But there was yesterday. Remember, how he had

got out of repairing that carriage? And Lizzy and the Kid. And there had been something in the air, something that said that nothing mattered, that he need not fear anything. At least inside him, right inside. An experience, a real experience for life, as Tramp was fond of saying.

Yesterday's ditty about the skates and the nunnery came into his head. Tam-ta, tam-ta, tam . . . He could not get rid of it, its every note conjuring up for him a picture of yesterday's evening with all the details of their leave-taking at 410. But over and above all, those moments before it.

He began to imagine how next Thursday the wild melodies would again come pouring out of their trumpets. That was life. One day life was going to be just that and nothing else.

The workshop welcomed him with the grey pounding of hammers and the bluish hissing of flames above the blacksmith's bellows. He put on his leather apron, thinking disgustedly that he had in front of him an entire afternoon on that damned carriage.

"Good thing you're here," the blacksmith greeted him. "That's it, don't give way to panic. Have you heard the whispers up your way?"

"I should say so," replied Woodpecker.

"Well, it's possible, my boy," added the blacksmith, speaking more quietly, "that it's going to be said out loud. And that it will be true. But even then we won't land on our asses."

"I couldn't care less if we do go," said Woodpecker as he laid both the axles of the coach on the ground in front of him. "At least I'll get to know something new."

"That's what I say, kid. It seems to me you know a thing or two already—such as girls—or perhaps a good feed?"

"Not that," said Woodpecker, going red in the face. Did they perhaps know about Lizzy, he wondered.

"Here, take a look at this, you scamp," said the blacksmith quietly.

Woodpecker glanced at the paper the other held out to him, and in the relief which he immediately felt he almost blurted out that that was nothing, that he had the same or something very similar at home, and that it was his duty to pass it on to someone else just as the blacksmith himself was doing. And that his paper said exactly the same thing—that the Allies were giving the Germans a beating. He breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing about Lizzy then.

"What does it say?" he asked, and read perfunctorily: "Death to the Fascists . . ." Then his voice fell, with disappointment as much as relief, and he looked at the blacksmith. "I know this."

"Hide it," murmured the blacksmith, adding: "Well, I have to run along, kid. Let me know, won't you."

"Sure," Woodpecker said with a laugh, patting the pocket into which he had thrust the leaflet.

He lit the fire, and as he pumped the bellows he watched the bluish flames swell up into the air and to either side. His mind was fully occupied elsewhere—there was yesterday, and now there was this leaflet, all of it rousing in him the notion that somewhere behind a barrier there was life waiting for him and putting out its tentacles to reach at him with these events. His fantasies found form in the flickering flames.

"Well, boys," said the blacksmith when he came back a few moments later, "there's no mistake about it: the old gentleman, Mr. Löwenbach, hasn't come back. Something's up. Maybe a transport."

And he left again immediately.

"He's going to scout round for news," muttered the other blacksmith, who was usually in charge of the workshop in his absence, "until . . ."

Woodpecker waited, curious to know what the blacksmith was going to say.

But the other was silent, while Woodpecker reflected

that the whole thing was probably not so terribly serious. Again he saw everything in the fire: Lizzy, pressing Mylord's hand, and the Kid, crouching on his stool and writing. Yesterday seemed to disappear in the transparent flames which now held a bluish promise of better things to come: everything would change when Russia and England with America defeated Germany and Lizzy would walk along the street with her children and nobody would stop her. And the Kid would ride a junior bicycle and his parents would wrap him up in cottonwool because they wouldn't know any better.

He raised his eyes. Rot, he thought. Nothing but dreams. Better think about getting Lizzy to come to number 20 again one of these days.

14

The doors of the blacksmith's shop flew open violently.

"Attention!" shouted the blacksmith, who was standing by the door, with great presence of mind.

Englebert von Holler, SS, and his civilian companion entered the workshop, all of whose occupants tensed expectantly.

"At ease! Carry on work!" said the commandant.

The first thing that came into Woodpecker's mind was to put his hand in his pocket and throw the leaflet in the flames. But before he could move, two other SS men and the two gendarmes, the tall one and the small one, whom he had met that morning, came into the shop. Damn, said Woodpecker to himself. What a mess!

The taller of the two gendarmes took up a position directly behind Woodpecker. He instantly recognized the loud-mouthed boy of yesterday afternoon, and

again felt an urge to box his ears. Just like that, more in a fatherly fashion now than anything else. Yesterday he could not have imagined the tanned hooligan in a leather blacksmith's apron such as the one he had on now, standing there so strangely silent.

"Where's the foreman?" asked the commandant, without much interest.

"I am substituting for him," said the blacksmith. "He's working outside." Scouting round for news, that was what he was doing, he thought. And certainly a damn sight luckier than he was, even though he was so very careful about everything.

"Stop that hammering!" shouted the small man beside Herr von Holler.

The workshop grew quiet, and Woodpecker wondered how this would end. All of a sudden he saw it all as a sporting event, though, to be frank, it didn't look too good. It didn't look good at all. A real jam. Because he had that thing in his pocket and was unable to take it out and throw it away unobserved.

"Are you working on anything for us?" the commandant asked.

"Yes, Herr General," replied the blacksmith. "The fittings for the door of your Mercedes."

"I'm not a general, idiot! Don't you know the badges of rank?"

"No," stammered the blacksmith.

"What else?"

"Nothing—only the carriage . . . for Herr Marmulstaub."

"What carriage?"

"A creaking one, sir," faltered the blacksmith. But he did not mean it as a joke.

"Who is repairing it?"

"Woodpecker . . . I mean Mahler, sir."

"Stand aside! Woodpecker-Mahler to me!"

Woodpecker came up to him as slowly as he could. This is bad, he kept repeating to himself. This is bad.

Although the distance separating him from the commandant was small, he shuffled along for what seemed to be a very long time. He had paled slightly, for it had occurred to him what the possible consequences might be. You are in a pretty pickle, boy, he seemed to hear the foreman say.

The small man standing beside the commandant cast a severe look at the tall gendarme behind Woodpecker. He understood at once what was expected of him, and he prodded the boy. He can take that in place of the box on the ears, he thought irritably, saying out loud:

"Get a move on!"

Herr von Holler had in the meantime turned to the small fellow.

"They're shaking like leaves in the wind. You can see for yourself. We have long ago liquidated the pigsty of tolerance here," he said with satisfaction in his voice. (Perhaps the tiny idiot had heard something about that already, he reflected.)

"Are you sure?" queried the small one.

"I think so," replied the commandant nonchalantly, thinking of the ruin that was Löwenbach last night and of the astonishment shown by the half-pint of a man at his elbow, who had after all not expected such an interrogation.

15

Woodpecker saw only the pair of eyes on a level with his face, the strangest eyes he had ever seen. They were narrow, green, all-knowing and able to look inside you. He also noticed the thin straight nose with nostrils slightly distended and overgrown with thick black hairs, as well as the ginger mustache above the compressed lips. But the muscular and sinewy face of the comman-

dant escaped him, it seemed completely alien and incomprehensible. So this was his enemy. But he did not know as yet in what way they were to fight.

Herr von Holler held his short, silver-and-diamond-studded cane in a gloved hand. It shone, casting a dazzling aura around it.

"Mahler?" he inquired.

"Yes," nodded Woodpecker.

"Who is this brat who swaggers like this?" demanded the courier, though he saw quite clearly that the boy was far from swaggering—he was merely much taller. As soon as he heard the man's words, he bent his knees a little to make himself appear smaller.

"Would you mind lending me this?" asked the small man, pointing to the commandant's cane. Then he took it, gave a slight leap, and hit Woodpecker on the forehead.

"There, that's it," he said when Woodpecker bent farther still.

"Excuse me," said Herr von Holler, taking back his cane.

The boy's eyes wandered helplessly around the workshop. He had known this would happen, so what was he so surprised about, he reflected. He would pretend that it hurt him more than it actually did. Even so, he was in a mess. God, if Tramp or Mylord or the blacksmith could see him now! He must crouch down a bit more so as not to rile that runt of a man any more than necessary. Then they might think he was afraid and would not search his pockets. On the other hand it occurred to him, that was just the sort of thing they did. Well, he must be on his toes and wait.

The courier's eyes bored into him.

"What has he got on him?" he asked, but the question sounded as if it were addressed to the commandant.

"Do you smoke?" asked Herr von Holler, pretend-

ing not to notice the little man and looking as if the whole affair were beginning to amuse him.

"No," said Woodpecker.

"Turn your pockets out," the commandant ordered him. "It'll be too bad for you if I find the least scrap of tobacco!" And, turning to the courier, he added: "Tobacco, that's my specialty."

"You won't," said Woodpecker insolently.

"Take out everything," continued the commandant, "and turn them inside out."

So here it was, thought Woodpecker, this was it. As bad as he had imagined it would be. How was he to get out of this jam, how was he to fool them? Slowly he began to empty his pockets, turning round as he did so to prevent the commandant from seeing that he was leaving one pocket out. The fight was on. He would have to keep his wits about him if he was to get the better of those two. Or else it was going to be even worse than he had expected. Good job he had the apron on, he could at least pretend that it was difficult to get at the pockets.

"It seems that he doesn't smoke," said the commandant, amused.

"This one too!" barked the courier, and ripped the boy's apron off.

Woodpecker had kept his hand there too long. He saw now that he was losing the contest. With exaggerated slowness he pulled out his handkerchief. Or perhaps it was not so slow, after all. The whole thing seemed to him—certainly at this moment—more like a game of hide-and-seek. Then he took out his penknife and a lump of sugar he had brought for his break.

"Well . . ." said the commandant.

"He's got something there," snapped the courier.

"Let's have a look," said Herr von Holler, and put his hand in the boy's pocket.

Woodpecker went deathly pale. It struck him suddenly that this was no game, nor had it been right from

the start. He was in for it now and no mistake. With everything included, and he had heard of the things they did to people. He was not likely to go home now, and, who knew, perhaps he would never go anywhere again. Perhaps, also, not even a fraction would come true of everything he had thought about such a short, and yet such a long, while ago—over the blue flames.

Herr von Holler unfolded the sheet of paper he had extracted from Woodpecker's pocket. His expression changed.

"So," he said as he passed the leaflet to the courier, "this kind of thing is being carried around here! After all my precautionary measures. Very well."

"Filth!" muttered the other after a moment, his small pig's eyes glowing with excitement.

Woodpecker now felt the eyes of all upon himself. The foreman was out. What was he to say, he wondered, when they asked him, as they were sure to do straight-away. He'd say something, but not the truth. *Just something.*

"Where did you get this?"

Here it was. They were asking already. Must he reply at once? His eyes searched the ground.

That damned fool, Marmulstaub, Herr von Holler swore to himself. Why the hell did he have to drag him here of all places?

"Well? Why don't you speak?"

"I don't know," said Woodpecker.

"How did you get hold of it?" hissed the courier. He leaped up and hit the boy in the face with his fist.

And then he was showered by blows from both of the men standing in front of him.

Suddenly it all seemed silly to him. He could not possibly tell them, surely they must see that for themselves. He just did not know. That was all the answer he could give them. They had no sense of fair play. He ducked a blow only to get another from the other side. (Now a tooth fell out.) If he acted differently, he

thought, it would be a dirty thing to do. That brought him to the end of this chain of thought. There was no more to it, nothing more to be said. Perhaps they were going to beat him good and proper, he told himself, and then some more. And not only here and now. There were still the SS men and the gendarmes. But not even then could he blab. Well, could he? He could take it all right, he told himself (and swallowed a second tooth . After all, they could not beat him forever. They would get tired in time. But he would not. He could take more. Maybe he would soon stop feeling the blows even.

Then he was conscious only of the orange glow from the commandant's ring every time the fist came near his face. He was not going to blab, he thought once more, wearily. What would the foreman say if he did?

"Perhaps this would loosen your tongue," he heard Herr von Holler say menacingly.

Woodpecker saw a pistol in the commandant's hand. Well, the game was up, he told himself with finality. The game was up, and he had lost. Without being really aware of it, he clenched his teeth.

"Now will you talk, you bastard!" hissed the little man.

"Talk!" yelled Herr von Holler.

16

Marmulstaub puffed as he searched the smithy yard with his dark-purple gaze. At last he caught sight of his carriage, its wheels gone because Woodpecker had taken the axles into the workshop. With short steps he hurried to the carriage, feeling pleased both that he had brought the commandant here and that he would not have to climb up high. What was there that Herr

von Holler could find amiss here? Nothing. On the contrary, Marmulstaub thought contentedly, here they were working for his garages! Clumsily he clambered up on the box. Once there, he saw the foreman on the other side, well concealed from sight and pretending to be examining the creaking springs.

"What're you doing here, man?"

"Mending your coach, dear sir," replied the blacksmith, irritated that the toad should be nosing about just here. He had seen him arrive with the commandant, but Marmulstaub had left him as the armed SS men entered the workshop. The blacksmith's anxiety about the boy in the smithy was transformed in the course of his conversation with the fat man into a blind fury. "What business is it of yours, anyway? What're you looking for? Or are you a Nazi, too?"

Marmulstaub ignored this outburst with the calmness of condescension. He did not even raise his eyes. "My carriage," he said. "All right. Didn't you by any chance find a blue envelope here?"

"No," replied the foreman, gazing questioningly into Marmulstaub's dark blue eyes.

"You are an insolent fellow," said Marmulstaub.

It suddenly struck the blacksmith that if the fat man were really looking for his envelope, this was an opportunity to call the boy out from the workshop.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I'm a little nervous."

"Forget it," said Marmulstaub, and he climbed heavily to the other side. For forgetfulness, he thought, was the burying place of human folly in which all words and deeds were interred. With his small white hands he explored the purple seat right at the back.

"Somebody else was working here yesterday," said the foreman. "You can call him and ask him yourself."

The fat man suddenly seemed to change in his eyes, he seemed kind and almost gentle. And his word, thought the blacksmith, carried a lot of weight with the commandant. He implored him with a gaze.

"Who?" asked Marmulstaub. He could see that the other man was badly shaken by something.

"Ask for Woodpecker," came the eager reply. "He's there with them—in the workshop."

Marmulstaub climbed down without saying anything. He pulled his coat straight and cleaned his shoes. Then he disappeared behind the smithy door, and the foreman again hid behind the coach.

17

"Marmulstaub!" shouted the commandant as soon as the fat man entered. It was the second time that he had raised his voice. "You idiot! Where have you taken us?"

"Excellency . . ."

"Where have you brought us, you stupid ass? This is the limit! We are doing our best for you—a coffee-house, and Catholic services on Sundays. Hostels for the children and music for the whores. And the lousy rebels' nest is not even being shelled. This is mutiny! Here, you read it!"

Marmulstaub caught the leaflet as it was thrown to him.

Then he noticed the boy; realizing in spite of his fear and confusion that it was the hooligan who had insulted him the day before. It was a wonder he had recognized him, though, seeing that the boy was bloody all over. So I haven't escaped it, thought Marmulstaub, only it is the boy instead of Löwenbach. He was still standing in front of the commandant in an extremely uncomfortable posture, bent almost double.

"I wouldn't give it to him, if I were you," said the little man in a quiet, irritated voice. "You are taking him too much into your confidence."

The commandant threw Marmulstaub an ominous look.

Marmulstaub remained as he was, undecided whether to read the leaflet or not.

The courier spat in front of him.

The fat man automatically took a step backwards. The commandant's greenish grey uniform with the silver epaulettes and the black skull and crossbones on the cap terrified him. His condition was aggravated by the sleepless night he had spent, by the suspense in which he had been until that moment of relaxation a little while ago, by the sight of the boy, and the diamonds on the commandant's cane, as well as by the pistol in his other hand.

"It is impudent," he said humbly. "I can only say, Excellency . . ."

Horrified, he looked at the boy and blinked his eyes. Why had this happened? After all, he had forgiven him that word.

"I have finished with you, Marmulstaub!" said the commandant. "The transport will leave tomorrow. You will put it together right now, from that rag you signed in place of Löwenbach." In the eyes of the fat man he saw an unspoken question. "Where to? You'll find out! Blockhead!"

"Excellency . . ."

"Don't babble! You'll go with them, you bloody fool, you idiot! You can piece Löwenbach together on the way. And tell this one to talk, or you'll be taking his corpse along tomorrow!"

"Yes, Excellency," whispered Marmulstaub.

But as he turned obediently towards the boy to urge him to speak, he saw in his eyes a glow that frightened him.

Woodpecker had suddenly begun to hate them all: the tiny man who had to spring up at him whenever he wished to hit him in the face, preferring therefore to beat him about the hips and thighs instead, and Herr

von Holler, who had looked so mild at first, and the fat toad because he trembled and kept quiet. Woodpecker's hate now included even the foreman, who was the only one lucky enough to leave the smithy in time. All of a sudden the commandant lost his knotty and sinewy incomprehensibility. Everything around Woodpecker—the commandant's face and the faces of the others—merged into something bestial, something that bore only a faint and almost imperceptible resemblance to human countenances. He was seized by a desperate longing to return their blows, and his eyes sought that familiar piece of metal, the carriage axle he had been repairing.

And still Marmulstaub did not speak.

"Speak up, or I'll kill you!" threatened the commandant. "Who wrote it?"

"I did!" shouted Woodpecker wildly, his eyes having found the axle. "And the Russians and. . . ."

He jumped for the iron rod, bent down to the ground, and then straightened up again (he could not tell whether it took him long or not). He began to wave the axle furiously and thresh all around him, blindly, for he could not see for blood. At first his eyes misted only gradually, but then the scene in front of him seemed to dissolve into darkness and he saw nothing anymore. He heard a shot, then another. He closed his eyes. Opening them once more, he felt he could almost see the sharp points which penetrated his chest in countless places, and he forced himself to keep his eyes open a little longer. Grasping the axle more firmly in his hands (it was indescribably heavy now, yet at the same time without any weight at all) he struck with it where he thought he saw the commandant's cap.

Marmulstaub groaned. He had expected the second and third shots to be directed at him.

Both, however, ploughed into the body of the boy.

18

Just before eleven both the gendarmes, the tall and the small one, reported to Herr von Holler, who had a bandage on his head.

"Take both of them to the trucks!"

The cellar into which they had to descend to carry out the order was dark and filled with a heavy stench. Rats scurried about under their trouser legs.

"Out, quickly!" said the taller gendarme, and caught hold of Löwenbach's arm.

"I can't," he whispered.

"You must!" said the gendarme.

The smaller gendarme pushed his helmet to the back of his head and supported fat Ignatz Marmulstaub.

"Thank you," said Marmulstaub hoarsely.

"All right, come along!" said the small gendarme when they were outside.

In a few moments they were marching through the ghetto, a strange procession before which people stood aside, unwittingly forming a line on either side of the street.

On the left side, where Marmulstaub walked with downcast eyes, the people began to spit demonstratively, muttering among themselves in a menacing rumble. In their invective they, however, refrained from gesticulating, afraid that such gestures might be mistakenly thought by the gendarmes to be meant for them.

On the right side, where the taller gendarme half-dragged the pitiful wreck of a man, the pair was accompanied by commiserating glances.

They arrived at the "bigwigs' " house in which both of them lived. Although it was against Herr von Holler's orders, he having commanded that the two men be taken directly to the train, the gendarmes allowed them to go up to wash and change.

They waited outside, promenading up and down the pavement in front of the house.

"Hot, isn't it?" said the taller gendarme, his Adam's apple jumping wildly up and down his throat. "As bad as yesterday."

"It's been like this for almost a week now," replied the smaller gendarme. "How about going to the river this afternoon?"

Just at that moment the crowd which had gathered in the street made a dash for the house.

"Out, all of you!" shouted the tall gendarme. He managed to chase most of the intruders out.

"Have you gone crazy?" the smaller gendarme upbraided them as he waved others back from the staircase and through the passage into the street.

At last they succeedeed in driving out everyone who had no business to be in the house, a small woman with a vividly painted face being the last to go. Marmulstaub was sitting on the floor, weeping and groaning.

"Come on, get up," said the taller gendarme.

"Thank you," said Marmulstaub hoarsely.

The tall gendarme nodded to his companion, indicating that it was time they were going.

Out in the street once more, he bent down to the smaller gendarme. "This infernal heat!" he said in a strangled voice.

"I don't mind it," replied the other wearily, pushing his helmet back from his forehead.

Soon they reached the railway station.

The Ghettoswingers stood assembled by the side of the train. They began to play, at a word of command from Herr von Holler, just at the moment when two SS men accompanied by the little man from Berlin were throwing Woodpecker's canvas-shrouded body into the last cattle-truck. They did not shut the truck's sliding door until David Löwenbach and Ignatz Marmulstaub had got in.

The trumpets screamed. Mylord pressed the mouthpiece to lips which were completely devoid of blood. The saxophones wailed a familiar melody:

We are becoming seasick,
An ill-fated crew are we.

Hope

SIMON stopped at the foot of the stone staircase. The stairs exuded the chillness of the earth and the greyish reflection of the rainy day. Only a few moments ago he had assured himself that it was unnecessary to keep watch today, since the curfew was still in force. We're not allowed out, he kept saying to himself, and so no one will come in, either. But then he caught sight of Chana's eyes. He cast a quick, distrustful look at the figure of the old Jew from Essen, sitting there all hunched up as if to keep out the cold. And since it was his turn today, he at last picked himself up and went out.

He sat down underneath the small roof made out of old crates. His body moved every time he breathed, filling his lungs with the sharp, malodorous aftertaste of excrement and lime. His throat was constricted. He rocked automatically backwards and forwards and from side to side as though trying to extricate himself and to avoid the streaming rain. This movement told him that he was still capable of something—that he was capable of more than just sitting still. However, he was glad that nobody else knew about it: they couldn't ask more of him than of the old man from Essen. And yet, on the other hand, he longed to be able to let someone into the secret of his strength, and to have it appreciated.

Even now, when everything was deadened by the rain, the pungent smell of the courtyard seemed to him