

Alexander Grin

## THE SEAKER OF ADVENTURE

translated by Barry Scherr

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...Denn eben wo Begriffe  
fehlen,  
Da stellt ein Wort zur rechten  
Zeit sich ein.

*(Faust)*

### I. A TRIP

The traveller Ammon Root returned to his native land after an absence of several years. He stayed with Tonar, an old friend of his, who was the director of a joint-stock company and a person with a shady past-but also a fanatic for decorum and probity. On the very day of his arrival Ammon quarrelled with Tonar over a newspaper editorial, called his friend a minion of the minister, and stepped outside for a walk.

Ammon Root was one of those people who are more serious than they appear at first glance. His travels were not mentioned by the newspapers, nor did they cause a single map to make the slightest change in its depiction of the continents, but they were still absolutely necessary for him. "To live means to travel," he would say to those people who were attached to life just on the side of it that is most warm and steamy, like a hot pie. Ammon's eyes-two eternally greedy abysses-ransacked heaven and earth in their search for new spoils; abysses-everything he saw plunged headlong into them and was packed away once and for all in the fearful crush at the bottom of his memory, to be kept for his own use. In contrast to tourists Ammon saw far more than the museums and churches where the viewers, pretending to be experts, seek ethereal beauty in poorly-executed paintings.

Out of curiosity Ammon Root stopped in at a cafeteria that served vegetarian food. About a hundred people were sitting in the large rooms, which smelled of varnish, paint, freshly-dried wall-paper, and some other particularly abstinent odour. Ammon noticed the absence of any old people. An extraordinary silence, which was out of keeping with even the concept of food, inspired the appetite of anyone coming in to be prayerfully delicate and bodiless, like the very idea of herbivory. The pious but ruddy faces of the health fanatics cast indifferent glances at Ammon. He sat down. The dinner, served to him with a ceremonial and somewhat accentuated solemnity, consisted of a repulsive gruel called "Hercules", fried potatoes, cucumbers, and some insipid cabbage. Ammon

poked around with his fork in this gastronomical paltriness, ate a piece of bread and a cucumber, and drank a glass of water; then he snapped open his cigarette case, but he remembered that smoking was prohibited and looked around gloomily. At the tables mouths were chewing sedately and delicately in a death-like silence. Ammon was hungry and sensed opposition welling up within him. He well knew that he could just as easily have not stopped in here -- nobody had asked him to do so -- but' it was hard for him to resist his chance whims. Staring at his plate, Ammon said in a low voice, as though to himself, but clearly enough so that he could be heard:

"What garbage. I'd love to have some meat now!" At the word "meat" many people gave a start, and several dropped their forks; all pricked up their ears and looked at the impudent visitor.

"I'd really like some meat!" Ammon repeated with a sigh.

Somebody coughed emphatically, and another person began to breathe noisily in the corner.

Ammon grew bored and went out into the foyer. A servant handed him his coat.

"I'll send you a turkey," said Ammon, "eat to your heart's content."

"Oh, sir!" objected the emaciated old servant, sadly shaking his head. "If only you were used to our regimen...."

Ammon went out without listening to him. "Now the day's been spoiled," he thought, as he walked along the shady side of the street. "That cucumber has stuck in my throat." He wanted to return home and did so. Tonar was sitting in the living room at the open piano; he had finished playing his favourite bravura pieces but was still under the spell of their great liveliness. Tonar liked everything that was definite, absolute, and clear: for example, milk and money.

"Admit that the article is stupid!" said Ammon as he entered. "I'd like to give that minister of yours my boot in the ... but the police inspector is an efficient fellow."

"We," retorted Tonar without turning around, "we businessmen look at things differently. Loafers like you, corrupted by travels and a romantic outlook, admire anyone who plays at being a Harun al-Rashid. To be sure, instead of harassing the speculators who finagle us on the stock market, it is much easier to don a false beard, hang around various dens, and booze it up with petty thieves."

"But if somebody's an interesting person," said Ammon, "then I appreciate him for that alone. You have to appreciate truly interesting people. I've known a lot of them. One, a hermaphrodite, was wed to a man and then, after getting divorced, married a woman. A second, who was once a priest, invented a machine that sang bass; he grew rich, killed a circus snake with his teeth on a bet, kept a harem in Cairo, and now is a cheese merchant. A third is remarkable for being a true phenomenon. He possessed a startling ability to concentrate the attention of all those around him exclusively on himself; everyone was silent in his presence, and only he spoke-a little more intelligence, and he could have done whatever he pleased. A fourth blinded himself of his own volition, so as not to see people. A fifth was a sincere, forty-year-old fool; when people asked him what he was, he answered that he was a fool and laughed. Interestingly, he was neither a madman nor an idiot, but simply a classical fool. A sixth ... the sixth ... is myself."

"Yes?" Tonar asked ironically.

"Yes. I'm against false humility. I have seen a lot during the forty-five years of my life; I have experienced a lot, and I have participated a lot in others' lives."

"But.... No!" said Tonar after a silence. "I know a truly interesting person. You bundles of nerves live in want. You always have too little of everything. I know a person who leads an ideally beautiful normal life, who is perfectly well-bred and possesses outstanding principles, and who lives in the healthy atmosphere of farm work and

nature. By the way, that is my ideal. But I am not a person of one piece. You ought to have a look at him, Ammon. His life is to yours as that of a juicy red apple is to a rotten banana."

"For God's sake!" exclaimed Ammon. "Show me this monster!"

"As you wish. He's from our circle."

Ammon laughed when he tried to imagine a peaceful and healthy life. Eccentric, hot-tempered, and brusque-at times he felt vaguely attracted to such an existence, but only in his imagination; monotony crushed him. There was so much appetizing mental lip-smacking in Tonar's account that Ammon became interested.

"If it's not ideal," he said, "I won't go, but if you assure...."

"I guarantee that the most immoderate claims...."

"I've never yet seen such a person," interrupted Ammon. "Please write me a letter of recommendation by tomorrow. Is it very far?"

"A four-hour ride."

Ammon, who was pacing up and down the room, stopped behind Tonar's back; carried away by the impressions that were in store, he put his hand on his friend's bald spot, as though on a lectern, and recited:

My native fields! To your serenity,  
To sparkling moonlight shining pensively,  
To languid mists meandering through winding vales,  
To the naive allure of ancient myths and tales,  
To rosy cheeks and eyes with hearty gleam,  
I have returned; and now your features seem  
Unaltered, while the very soul of grace  
Preserves my dream amidst this native place!

"Are you really forty-five years old?" asked Tonar, settling heavily into his armchair.

"Forty-five." Ammon approached the mirror. "Who is there to pull out my grey hairs for me? And will I indeed be travelling, travelling, travelling for a long time yet-perhaps forever?"

## II. ARRIVAL

Early in the morning Ammon saw the blue and white snow of mountains from his train window; their jagged thrust stretched in a semicircle around a hilly plain. A sunny stripe of the sea was shining in the distance.

The white station-building, with wild grape vines entwined about its walls, cordially came running up to the train. Emitting puffs of exhaust steam, the engine came to a halt; the cars clanged, and Ammon disembarked.

He saw that Lilia was a truly beautiful place. The streets along which Ammon drove, in the carriage that he had hired to go to Dogger's, were not impeccably straight; their gentle winding caused the eye to constantly expect extensive vistas. Meanwhile Ammon was quite diverted by the buildings' gradually unfolding diversity. The houses were dotted with little balconies and stucco moulding, or they displayed semi-circular towers; grey arches against a white facade and roofs turned up or down, like the brim of a hat, provided diverse welcomes to the onlooker. All of this had quite an attractive appearance, immersed as it was in the majestically blooming gardens, the flower-beds, the sunlight, and the sky. The streets were lined with palms; their umbrella-like tops cast blue shadows onto the yellow midday earth. Now and then in the middle of a square there would be a fountain, as ancient as a granddad and full of water that rippled from

the falling spray; in places a winding stone staircase rose in a side-street, and above it, shaped like an eyebrow, would arc a small bridge, as light as the arm of a girl held akimbo.

### III DOGGER'S HOUSE

When he had ridden through the town Ammon caught sight of a garden and a tiled roof in the distance. The gravel-covered road led along an avenue of trees to a simple entrance that was in keeping with the entire house, which was built of light-coloured, unpainted wood. Ammon

walked up to the house. It was a one-storey log building with two projections on the sides and a terrace. The climbing greenery filled the facade's piers with flowers and leaves; there were many flowers everywhere -- carnations, tulips, anemones, hollyhocks, asters, and gilly-flowers.

Dogger, who had been standing by a tree, approached Ammon with the relaxed, effortless steps of a powerful man. He was hatless; his strong neck, pink from sunburn, was hidden by his curly blond hair. Dogger was as powerful as a broad-chested statue of Hercules that had come to life, and he produced an impression of indestructible health. Ammon very much liked the bold features of his hearty face, his warm grey eyes, and his small beard and moustache. Dogger's outfit consisted of a canvas shirt and pants, a leather belt, and high boots of soft leather. His handshake was firm but quick, while his deep voice rang out clearly and freely.

"I'm Ammon Koot," said Ammon, bowing, "if you've received Tonar's letter, I'll have the honour of explaining to you the reason why I came."

"I received his letter, and you are first and foremost my guest," said Dogger with a courteous smile. "Let's go in; I'll introduce you to my wife. Then we'll talk about everything you wish to discuss."

Ammon followed him into a very simple living room with high windows and modest furniture. Nothing stuck out; on the contrary, everything was designed for subtle comfort. Here and in the other rooms that Ammon visited the furnishings were forgotten, as the body forgets pieces of clothing that have long since become familiar. There were no paintings or prints on the walls. Ammon did not notice this at first: the piers' emptiness seemed to be casually draped with the folds of the window curtains. The tidiness, cleanliness, and light imparted a nuance of tender solicitude for the things with which, like with old friends, people live their entire lives.

"Elma!" said Dogger, opening the hall door. "Come here."

Ammon was impatient to meet Dogger's wife. He was interested in seeing them as a couple. Before a minute had gone by a beautiful smiling woman in a smart open-sleeved house-dress emerged from the dim light of the hall. Her every movement spoke of overflowing good health. A blonde of about twenty-two, she sparkled with the refreshing calm of contented young blood, with the gaiety of a well-rested body, and with the majestic good nature of enduring happiness. Ammon thought that everything must be just as harmonious, beautiful, and joyful on the inside, where her body worked in mysterious ways: her heart of steel meticulously pumped scarlet blood through her blue veins, while her pink lungs vigorously inhaled air to refresh the blood, warmed amidst white ribs beneath the white breast.

Dogger, without ceasing to smile -- which seemed to be more of a need than an effort for him -- introduced Root to his wife; she began to speak freely and lustily, as though she had known Ammon for a long time.

"Being a traveller, you will be a little bored at our place, but that will only be good for you ... yes, good."

"I'm touched," said Ammon, bowing.

Everyone sat down. Dogger, like Elma, sat in silence, smiling ingenuously, and gazing directly into Ammon's face; their expressions said: "We see that you are also a very homely person; it is an easy matter to sit silently with you and not be bored." Despite the winning simplicity of his hosts and the furnishings, Ammon did not trust what he saw.

"I very much want to explain the purpose of my visit to you," he said, getting down to the necessary lie. "In the course of my travels I have become a zealous photographer. In my opinion this pastime can involve quite a bit of artistry."

"Artistry," Dogger nodded.

"Yes. Every landscape passes through hundreds of phases every day. Each time the sun, the time of day, the moon, the stars, or a human figure make it different: they either add to it or take something away. Tonar tempted me with his description of Liliana's charms: the city itself, the surroundings, and your marvellous estate. I feel that my camera is stirring impatiently in my suitcase and that the shutter is snapping by itself from impatience. Have you known Tonar for long, Dogger?"

"For a very long time. We became acquainted while we were both negotiating to buy this estate, but I outbid him. We're on most excellent terms, and sometimes he drops by. He likes country life very much."

"It's strange that he doesn't live like this himself," said Ammon.

"You know," rejoined Elma, putting her head onto her arms and her arms onto the back of the chair, "to do that you have to be born a person like myself and my husband. Am I right, dear?"

"You're right," said Dogger pensively. "But, Ammon, I'll show you the farm while dinner is being prepared. Will you come along, Elma?"

"No," the young woman refused with a laugh, "I'm the hostess, and I must look after things."

"In that case..." Dogger stood up. Ammon did so as well. "In that case we'll set off on our trip."

#### IV. OUTSIDE

"A true seeker of adventure," Ammon said to himself as he walked alongside Dogger, "differs from a tritely curious person in that he thoroughly explores any obscure situation. Now I have to look into everything. I don't believe Dogger." Without further introspection he surrendered himself to his impressions. Dogger led Ammon along the garden's vaulted avenues to the backyard. Their conversation touched on nature, and Dogger, with a subtlety that one would not expect from his appearance, penetrated to the very core of the chaotic and contradictory feelings-as slight as the flicker of an eyelash -- produced by natural phenomena. He spoke rather phlegmatically, and yet any general concept of nature suddenly ceased to exist for Ammon. Nature, like a house made of blocks, collapsed before his very eyes into its constituent parts. Then, just as carefully and imperceptibly, as though playing, Dogger restored what had been destroyed; he harmoniously and methodically fused the disintegrated concept back into its original form, and Ammon again saw the momentarily lost aggregate of the world's beauty.

"You are an artist, or you ought to be one," said Ammon.

"Now I'll show you the cow," said Dogger animatedly, "it's of a good breed and a healthy specimen."

They emerged into the cheery, spacious yard, where a lot of poultry was wandering about: variegated hens, fiery roosters, motley ducks, irritable turkeys, baby chickens as yellow as dandelions, and several pairs of pheasants. A huge chained dog was lying in a green kennel with his tongue hanging out. Pigs that looked like pink logs glittered within an enclosure; a donkey flapped its ears and cast a good-natured sidelong look at a rooster, which was rummaging with his claw in some manure under the donkey's very hoof; and flocks of blue and white pigeons flew through the air-this bucolic sight indicated so much peaceful joy that Ammon smiled. Dogger surveyed the yard with a satisfied air and said:

"I very much like animals that are of a congenial nature. Tigers, boa constrictors, snakes, chameleons, and other anarchists are unpleasant to me. Now let's look at the cow."

Ammon saw four giant cows in the barn, where small but clear windows let in plenty of light. Dogger approached one of the cows, which had crescent-shaped horns and was the colour of yellow soap; the beast exuded strength, fat, and milk; the huge, pink, black-spotted udder hung almost to the ground. The cow, as though realising that she was being inspected, turned her heavy, thick muzzle towards the men and flicked her tail.

Dogger stood with arms akimbo-which made him look like a peasant-and looked at Ammon, the cow, and again at Ammon; then he gave the cow a solid slap on the rump with the palm of his hand.

"A beauty! I call her Diana. She's the best specimen in the district."

"Yes, she's impressive," Ammon affirmed.

Dogger took down a red copper bucket that was hanging in a row with some others and began to roll up his sleeves.

"Watch me do the milking, Ammon. Then try the milk."

Suppressing a smile, Ammon put on an expression of keen attention. Dogger squatted, placed the bucket beneath the cow, and by skilfully squeezing the teats caused streams of milk to strike forcefully against the resonant copper. Very soon the bucket contained a couple of inches of milk, all frothy from the spray. Dogger's serious face, his motherly treatment of the cow, and the sight of a man doing the milking so convulsed Ammon that he could not restrain himself and began to roar with laughter. Dogger stopped milking, looked at him with amazement, and finally burst out laughing himself.

"I can tell you're a city-dweller," he said. "You don't find it ridiculous when morbidly excited people jump about in front of each other and lift their feet in time to music. But healthy pursuits directly related to nature make you laugh."

"Excuse me," said Ammon, "I imagined myself in your place and.... And I'll always be ashamed of myself for this."

"Forget it," Dogger calmly rejoined, "it's just nerves. Try some."

He brought an earthenware mug from the depths of the barn and poured out some of the thick, almost hot milk for Ammon.

"Ah," said Ammon when he had drunk it, "your cow has nothing to be ashamed of. I positively envy you. You've discovered life's simple wisdom."

"Yes," Dogger nodded.

"Are you very happy?"

"Yes," Dogger nodded.

"I couldn't be wrong, could I?"

"No."

Dogger unhurriedly took the empty mug from Ammon and unhurriedly took it back to its former place.

"It's ridiculous," he said when he returned, "it's ridiculous to boast, but my life is truly filled with joyful peace."

Ammon offered him his hand.

"I salute you with all my heart," he uttered slowly, in order that he might detain Dogger's hand a while longer. But Dogger, smiling ingenuously, likewise pressed Ammon's hand and did so without a trace of impatience-even willingly.

"Now let's go have lunch," said Dogger, as he walked out of the shed. "We'll be able to look at the rest this evening, if you're interested: the meadow, the kitchen-garden, the greenhouse, and the seedbeds."

They returned along the same road. On the way Dogger said:

"Those who seek ugliness and disease in nature, rather than health and beauty, lose a great deal."

No words could have been more appropriate than these amidst the sweetbriar and jasmine that lined the fragrant pathways, along which Ammon Root walked and observed Dogger out of the corner of his eye.

## V. THE DRAGON AND THE SPLINTER

Ammon Root had rarely experienced so robust and pure and simple a life as that with which fate had brought him into contact at Dogger's estate. A remnant of suspiciousness stayed with him until the end of lunch, but the Doggers' affable manner and the natural simplicity of their movements, smiles, and glances enveloped Root with a winning aroma of happiness. The hearty lunch consisted of butter, milk, cheese, ham, and eggs. Ammon also liked the servant who brought in and cleared away the food; she was a sedate woman and, like everyone in the house, healthy.

At Elma's request Ammon spoke a little about his travels. Through a sense of inner opposition that a born city person characteristically experiences in the country, where he is somewhat of an alien, he then began to speak of the season's novelties.

"There's a new operetta by Rastrelli - *The Pink Gnome* - which is worse than his last piece. Rastrelli is repeating himself. But Sedir's concerts are enchanting. His violin-playing is powerful, and I think that a violinist like Sedir could rule an entire kingdom with the help of his bow."

"I don't like music," said Dogger, breaking an egg. "May I offer you some goat's-milk cheese?"

Ammon bowed.

"And you, madam?" he said.

"My tastes coincide with those of my husband," Elma answered, reddening a little. "I don't like music either; I'm indifferent to it."

Ammon did not immediately find anything to say in reply, since he believed what he had heard. These calm and self-possessed people had no reason to pose for effect. But Ammon began to feel a little like he did when he was sitting in the cafeteria that served vegetarian food.

"Well, there's no point in arguing the matter," he said. "A small painting by Alar, 'The Dragon with a Splinter in His Paw', fascinated me at an exhibition in the spring. The efforts which the dragon makes while rolling on his back like a dog in order to get rid of the wood sliver are very convincing. It is impossible to doubt that dragons exist after you look at this painting depicting their everyday life. However, my friend found that even if this dragon had been drinking milk and licking its chops...."

"I don't like art," Dogger remarked curtly.

Elma looked at him, then at Ammon, and smiled.

"That's enough of that," she said. "When were you last in the tropics?"

"No, I want to explain," Dogger softly interrupted. "Art is a great evil - I'm speaking, of course, about real art. The theme of art is beauty, but nothing causes so much suffering as beauty. Imagine the most perfect work of art. There is more cruelty lurking in it than a person could bear."

"But there is also beauty in life," Ammon rejoined.

"The beauty of art is more hurtful than the beauty of life."

"What is your conclusion, then?"

"I feel a loathing for art. I have, as they say, the soul of a philistine. I stand for order in politics, for constancy in love, and for inconspicuous but useful work in society. And on the whole for industriousness, honesty, responsibility, serenity, and moderate self-esteem in one's personal life."

"I cannot disagree with you," Ammon said guardedly. Dogger's assured tone had finally persuaded him that Tonar was right. Dogger was a rare example of a person who had created a special world of indestructible normalcy.

Suddenly Dogger laughed merrily.

"There's nothing to discuss," he said. "I'm a cheerful and simple person. Elma, will you come for a ride with us? I want to show our guest the kitchen-garden, the meadows, and the surroundings."

"Yes."

## VI. THE PIT IN THE FOREST

Except for the pit in the forest Ammon did not learn anything new from the ride. Dogger rode on the right-hand side of Elma, and Ammon on the left; Ammon did not make any further mention of Dogger's conviction and spoke about himself, his meetings, and his observations. He sat in a simple black saddle atop a beautiful, well-fed, and gentle horse. They came across several people who were engaged in clearing ditches and in digging the earth up around the young trees; these were Dogger's workers, stocky young fellows who took off their hats respectfully. "A beautiful couple," Ammon thought, looking at his hosts. "Adam and Eve were probably like this before the Fall." Impressionable, like all wanderers, he began to be imbued with their austere indulgent attitude towards everything that was not part of their own lives. The inspection of Dogger's holdings compelled him to utter several compliments: the kitchen-garden, like the entire estate, was a model. The lush meadow, sown with choice grasses, was a joy to behold.

A forest stretched beyond the meadow, which abutted a mountain-side, and when the riders had reached the edge of the woods they came to a halt. From this high spot Dogger serenely examined his holdings. He said:

"I like property, Ammon. And now, have a look at the pit."

Dogger rode into the forest and stopped next to a dark damp pit beneath a canopy formed by the thick foliage of old trees. Light percolated through to this place with reluctance; it was chilly here -- as in a well -- and hushed. Wind-fallen branches filled the pit; roots extended into it; and a tree trunk, snapped off by a storm, had been tossed over the chaos of forest litter and ferns. A pungent odour of mushrooms, mould, and earth came from the vast hollow, and Dogger said:

"You can feel the presence of mysterious creatures and beasts here. I sense the wary steps of polecats, the swishing of snakes, and the protruding eyes of toads that look like a person with dropsy. Bats circle about here in the moonlight, and the round eyes of owls glitter in the darkness. It seems to be some sort of a night club."



"He's dissembling," thought Ammon, and his distrust of Dogger flared up anew, "but what's at the bottom of it?"

"I want to go home," said Elma. "I don't like the forest."

Dogger looked at his wife tenderly.

"She objects to the dark," he told Ammon, "and so do I. Let's return. I feel good only at home."

## VII. NIGHT

At eleven-thirty Ammon took leave of his hospitable hosts and headed for the room which he had been assigned in the house's left wing; the room's windows looked out into the yard, which was separated from the house by a narrow garden filled with flowers. The furnishings exuded the same health and fresh cosiness as the entire house: a metal washstand; furniture made out of unpainted light wood; clean curtains, sheets, and pillows; a warm grey blanket; a mirror in a simple frame and flowers on the window-sill; a massive desk and a cast-iron lamp. There was nothing superfluous; everything was necessary and purely functional.

"So this is the kind of place I have landed in!" said Ammon, taking off his vest. "Rousseau would have envied Dogger. The speeches by Dogger about nature and the pit in the forest were beautiful; they run counter to the abominable triviality in the rest of what he says. There's nothing else for me to do here. I'm convinced that it's possible to vegetate sensibly. However, let's have a bit more of a look."

He sat down on the bed and fell to thinking. The steel table-clock struck twelve. Dampness from the meadows and the smell of flowers wafted in through the wide-open window. Everything slept; the stars were shining above the black roofs like the lights of a distant city. Ammon grew sadly troubled as he thought about people's constant dreams of a good, joyous, and healthy life; he could not understand why the most impressive efforts of this sort-like, for instance, Dogger's life -- lacked the wings of enchantment. Everything was admirable, tasty, and clean; delicate and useful; beautiful and honest-but insignificant, and one felt like saying: "Ah, I was at an exhibition again! There's an exemplary person on view there...."

Then he mentally began to sketch the possibilities of another order. He imagined a fire, the crackling of beams, the fire's tempestuousness, Elma's love for a worker, and Dogger's becoming a drunkard, a lunatic, a drug addict; he fancied him a religious fanatic, an antiquary, a bigamist, and a writer, but none of this fitted the owners of the estate in Liliانا. The trepidation of a nervous, destructive, or creative life was out of character for them. The house was so well-equipped that the possibility of a fire was, of course, completely out of the question, and Dogger was fated never to experience the fear and chaos of a burning building. Two young lives, the acme of creation, pass through year after year, hand in hand -- sensibly, intelligently, carefully, and happily.

"And so," said Ammon, "I'm going to bed." He had folded back the blanket and was about to turn out the light, when he suddenly heard a man's quiet steps in the corridor; someone was walking past his room and was walking as people usually do when everyone in the house is asleep at night: tautly and lightly. Ammon listened attentively. The steps faded away at the end of the corridor; five, ten minutes passed, but no one returned, and Ammon carefully opened the door.

A fixture suspended from the ceiling illuminated the corridor with an even nocturnal light. There were three doors in the passageway: one, closer to the centre of the house, led to the servants' quarters and was opposite Ammon's room; a second was directly to the left of Ammon's and, judging from the padlock on it, was the door to a pantry or an

uninhabited room. To the right, at the end of the wing, there were no doors at all -- it was a dead end with a high closed window looking out onto the garden; yet that was precisely where the steps had died away.

"He couldn't have vanished into thin air!" said Ammon. "And it could hardly have been Dogger: he said that he sleeps as soundly as a soldier after battle. There's no reason for a worker to enter the house. The window at the end of the corridor leads into the garden; even if Dogger, for reasons beyond my knowledge, had taken it into his head to go for a walk, there are three doors at his service that all lead outside, and besides, I would have heard the frame slam, but I didn't."

Ammon turned around and closed the door.

He half believed the steps to be significant and half did not. His thoughts wandered in the realm of wonderful superstitions and legends about human life, whose purpose is to glorify the name of man and raise it from the swamp of the everyday into the world of mysterious fascination, where the soul obeys its own laws, like God. Ammon again made himself imagine the sound of steps. Suddenly it seemed to him that an unknown "someone" could peer into his open window; he quickly put out the light and pricked up his ears.

"Oh, how stupid I am!" said Ammon when he did not hear anything else. "Any number of people could be walking about in the night for whatever reason!... I'm simply a narrow professional, a seeker of adventure, and nothing more. What kind of secret could there be amidst the scent of hay and hyacinths? One has only to look at Elma's homey beauty to discard these stupidities."

Nevertheless, instinct took issue with logic. For half an hour Ammon stood by the door and peered through the keyhole, waiting for new sounds as a person in love awaits a rendezvous. Through this small opening, which looked like a boot-sole stood on end, he saw the pine panelling on the wall and nothing more. His spirits fell; he yawned "and was about to go to bed, when the same steps again resounded clearly. Ammon held his breath, like a swimmer who has dived beneath the water, and looked through the keyhole. Dogger was coming from the dead end and was walking past Ammon's door on tiptoe. His head was above Ammon's field of vision; he had on trousers and a shirt with unbuttoned sleeves -- he was not wearing a jacket. The steps faded away, there was the muffled sound of an inside door closing and Ammon straightened up; despite the situation's logic, irrepressible suspicions churned within him. Too prudent to assign them any specific form, for the time being he was satisfied to keep on repeating one and the same question: "Where could Dogger have kept himself at the end of the corridor?" Ammon circled about the room, now grinning and now pondering; he ran through all the possibilities: a love intrigue, somnambulism, insomnia, and a walk, but everything was left up in the air owing to the closed window and the dead end; and although the window, of course, could be opened, it seemed inexcusably flippant to think that a solid and respectable person like Dogger would use it as a means of exit into the garden.

Ammon decided to examine the hall thoroughly; he put on felt slippers and went out of his room, but he left his revolver, since he saw no need for it. The tranquil silence of the brightly lit corridor had a sobering effect on him; he felt ashamed and wanted to return, but the past day, which had been filled to excess with the humdrum simplicity that waries a lively soul, nudged Ammon towards artificial invigoration of his unsatisfied fantasies. He quickly walked to the end of the corridor and up to the window, making certain that it was closed tightly and fastened by solid upper and lower bolts; he looked around and saw a small door that lacked posts and was flush with the wall -- this small door, knocked together from thin boards, was apparently cut out and installed after the house had been built. Looking at the door, Ammon thought that it probably led to some steps that had been constructed in order to enter the garden next to

the house from inside the corridor. Now that he had found out where Dogger had disappeared, Ammon quietly reached out, flipped the latch and opened it.

It opened into a corridor. It was dark beyond the door, although several steep steps, leading up and not down, were visible. The staircase was bordered by the narrow walls; in order to enter, it was necessary to bend low. "Is it worth it?" thought Ammon. "This is probably the passage to an attic where clothes are dried or pigeons live.... However, Dogger is not a pigeon fancier, and he obviously does not take in laundry. Why did he come here? Oh, Ammon, Ammon, instinct tells me that there is game about. So what if I just fire a blank-if I go up, then at least it will be all over, and I'll sleep until tomorrow's yoghurt with a conscience as clear as a calf's. If for whatever reason Dogger takes it into his head to visit the attic and finds me, I'll pretend that I heard steps there; after all, thieves are always an excellent pretext in cases like this."

Ammon took a look around, closed the door tightly behind himself, and, illuminating the staircase with a match, began to ascend. At a small landing the staircase turned left; on the upper end there proved to be a somewhat more spacious landing, where, beneath the roof's steep pitch, was a door leading to the attic. Like the lower door, it was not locked. Ammon listened in order to make sure that there was nobody behind the door. The silence reassured him. He boldly lifted the latch, and the match was extinguished by a rush of air. Ammon stepped over the threshold into darkness; the rather stuffy air of a habitable room frightened him. In a hurry to make sure that he had not ended up in a worker's or a servant's cubbyhole, Ammon lit a second match, and the shadows raced away from its yellow light into the corners, making the surroundings distinct.

The first thing Ammon saw was a candle on a huge table in the centre of the room, he lit it, and as he looked around retreated to the door. A white curtain on the back wall hung down to the floor; similar curtains were hanging on the walls to the right and the left of the entrance. A screen window in the slanted ceiling let in the light of distant stars. Ammon hastily examined the corners without further scrutinizing the table, which was piled high with a multitude of various objects. He found only neglected litter, crumpled paper, and broken pencils. Ammon straightened up, walked to the back wall where the cords for the curtain were hanging on a nail, and pulled them. The curtain rose.

Ammon stepped back at a sudden flash of daylight-the ground rose to the level of the attic, and the wall disappeared. Three paces from the traveller a woman with small bare feet was standing on a path that led to some hills and had her back turned to him. A simple black dress, which inexplicably laced any hint of mourning, emphasised the whiteness of her bare neck and arms. All the lines of her young body were distinguishable beneath the thin fabric. A thick bun of bronze hair covered the back of her neck. The picture's supernatural, painful veracity went beyond the bounds of the human; a live woman stood before him in the wondrous void of the distant prospect; any moment, Ammon felt, she would turn and look at him over her shoulder. He smiled in perplexity.

But at this point the brilliant brush's triumph was terminated and at the same time intensified. The woman's pose, her slightly drawn back left hand, her temple, the cheek's shape, the fleeting exertion of her neck in turning, and numerous mute traits that were beyond analysis gripped the viewer with the expectation of a miracle. The artist had fixed the instant for eternity; it lasted and remained the same as ever-as if time had disappeared but at each following instant would resume its flight, and the woman would glance over her shoulder at the shaken viewer. In overpowering expectation Ammon looked at the head, which was fearful in its readiness to reveal its mysterious features; his heart was pounding like that of a child who had been left in a dark room; and with an

unpleasant feeling of impotence before an unrealisable but clear threat, he let go of the cords. The curtain fell, but it still seemed to him that if he reached out he would encounter a warm, live shoulder beyond the canvas.

"Genius knows neither moderation nor limits!" he said excitedly. "So, Dogger, this is where you leave to milk the cows? My powerful instinct has guided my discovery. I'll shout it to the whole world; I'm ill from ecstasy and fear! But what's over there?"

He rushed to the curtain which hung to the left of the entrance. His hand became tangled in the cords; he impatiently tore at them, pulled them down, and raised the candle over his head. The same woman-in the same charming vivacity that was deepened still further by her face's radiance-stood before him having fulfilled her exquisite threat. She had turned around. The artist had put into this face the total essence of maternal tenderness and feminine caress. The fire of pure, proud youth shone in the tender but resolute eyes; the bronze silk of her hair above her finely etched eyebrows appeared to be a diadem. Her mouth, with its noble and youthful features, exuded love and intelligence. She stood half-turned but had revealed her entire face, and she sparkled with the youthful strength of life and with a joy as disturbing as sleep filled with passionate tears.

Ammon looked at the picture mutely. It seemed to him that he had only to utter a single word in order to break the paints' silence, and then the woman would approach him with lowered eyelashes, still more beautiful in her movements than in the distressing immobility of the miraculously created living body. He saw the dust on her legs, which were ready to move on, and the individual hairs behind her little ear were like the radiant attire on heads of grain. Joy and yearning held him in tender captivity.

"Dogger, you're a despot!" said Ammon. "Could anyone strike a more painful blow to the heart?" He stamped his foot. "I must be delirious," cried Ammon. "To paint like that is impossible; no one on earth could or would dare to do this!"

And the actual eyes of a woman gazed at him still more expressively, more intently, and more deeply.

Ammon was almost frightened, and with his heart beating violently he pulled the curtain over the painting. Something held him to the spot; he could not bring himself to pace up and down, as he usually did when he was disturbed. He was afraid to stir or to look around; the silence, in which only his breathing and the crackling of the burning candle were audible, was as unpleasant as the smell of fumes. Finally, overcoming his numbness, Ammon walked up to the third canvas, uncovered the painting ... and the hair on his head bristled.

What had Dogger done in order to produce a nightmarish effect that could rekindle superstitions? The woman stood before Ammon in the same pose, with her head turned around while she continued walking; but her face was unaccountably transformed, and yet it was the same -- down to the last feature-as the one at which Ammon had just looked. The mocking eyes met his with an inscrutable vividness, and the effect was fearsome. Now, at a closer range, their gaze was sombre; the pupils glittered differently; the mouth, which had an evil and base expression, was prepared to bestow a loathsome smile of madness; and the beauty of her wondrous face had become repulsive: it exuded a ferocious, greedy fire and was capable of strangling a person or of sucking someone's blood; a reptile's lust and a demon's passion illuminated its vile oval, which was full of aroused voluptuousness, gloom, and frenzy; and an infinite agony seized Ammon when he looked closely and discerned in this face a readiness to begin speaking. The half-opened lips, between which her teeth shone repulsively, seemed to be whispering; the figure's former soft femininity emphasised still further the horrible aliveness of the head, which all but nodded from the frame. Ammon sighed deeply and let go of the cord; the

curtain rustled as it sped down, and he fancied that a diabolical face had winked at him and hidden itself beneath the falling folds.

Ammon turned around. A large and thick folder lying on the table drew his distracted attention; when he opened it, he found it full of drawings. But they were strange and wild.... Ammon examined one after the other and was struck by the superhuman skill of fantasy evidenced in them. He saw flocks of ravens flying over fields of roses; hills that were covered, as though by grass, with electric lights; a river, dammed up by green corpses; hirsute, interlaced hands that were gripping bloodied knives; an inn, full to overflowing with drunk fish and lobsters; a garden in which gallows with executed men had taken strong root; the huge tongues of execution victims hung to the ground and children were swinging on them and laughing; corpses, which were reading yellowed tomes in their graves by the light of luminescent pieces of rotten wood; a swimming pool, full of bearded women; scenes of depravity, such as a feast of cannibals who were skinning a fat man; in the same drawing, a hand jutted out of a cauldron which hung over the fire; weirdly hideous figures, who had red whiskers and blue heads of hair, and who were one-eyed, three-eyed, and blind, paraded before him one after the other—one was eating a snake, another was playing dice with a tiger, a third cried, and jewels fell from his eyes. In almost all the drawings gold sequins were strewn over the clothes of the figures; they had been done with care, as in general any beloved work is done. Ammon leafed through the drawings with a terrible curiosity. The door slammed; he jumped away from the table and saw Dogger.

## VIII. THE EXPLANATION

Even at the most dangerous moments Ammon never lost his self-possession; however, taken unawares, he experienced momentary confusion. Dogger had apparently not expected to see Ammon; he stopped at the door irresolutely and looked around, but soon he grew pale and then flared up so that his bare neck reddened with anger.

"By what right did you come here?" he shouted, striding over to Ammon. "How am I to regard this? I didn't expect such a thing! Eh? Ammon!"

"You're right," answered Ammon calmly, without lowering his eyes. "I had no right to enter. But I would have felt guilty only if I hadn't found anything; now that I've seen something here, I dare think that I've thus acquired the right to reject the charge of impudence. I'll say more: had I found out after I left what I would have seen if I had gone upstairs, and had I not done so -- then I would have never forgiven myself for such an omission. My motives were the following.... I'm sorry, but the matter demands frankness, whether you like it or not. I had vague doubts about your cows, Dogger, and about the turnips and the well-fed pheasant hens; when I accidentally came upon the true path to your soul, I attained my goal. The fearful power of a genius guided your brush. Yes, my eyes stole your secret, but I am no less proud of this thievery than Columbus was of the Western Hemisphere, since my calling is to seek, to pursue, to make discoveries!"

"Shut up!" cried Dogger. His face did not contain a trace of placid equanimity, but nor did it show any malice, which is out of place in people of lofty character; it expressed distressed indignation and pain. "You still dare.... Oh, Ammon, you, with your conversations about that accursed art, caused me to lose sleep owing to agonies that are beyond your comprehension, and now, bursting into here, you want me to believe that your deed is praiseworthy. What makes you think you can take such liberties?"

"I am a seeker, a seeker of adventure," Ammon coldly retorted. "I have a different set of morals. There would be no merit in dealing with people's hearts and souls and never being cursed for these experiments. What good is a soul that lays itself servilely open to view?"

"However," said Dogger, "you are daring! I don't like people who are too daring. Leave. Return to your room and pack. You'll be given a horse at once; there's a night train."

"Fine!" Ammon walked towards the door. "Farewell!"

He was at the door when suddenly both of Dogger's hands seized him by the shoulders and spun him around. Ammon saw the pathetic face of a coward; he sensed Dogger's boundless fright and, not knowing what was the matter, grew pale with alarm.

"Not a word," said Dogger, "absolutely not a word to anyone! For my sake, for God's sake, have mercy-say nothing to anyone!"

"I give you my word; yes, I give you my word. Calm down."

Dogger let go of Ammon. His gaze, filled with hatred, stopped on each of the paintings in turn. Ammon walked out, descended the staircase, went into his own room, and prepared to go. Half an hour later, accompanied by a servant and without encountering Dogger again, he went out through the dark entrance from the garden side, where a carriage stood; he climbed in and rode off.

The starry dew of the sky, the agitation, the limitless, fragrant darkness, and the breath of roadside thickets intensified his enchanted exultation. The earth's huge, blind heart beat muffledly in time to Ammon's exultant heart, greeting its son the seeker. Ammon groped uncertainly but tenaciously for the true nature of Dogger's soul.

"No, you can't get away from yourself, Dogger, no," he said, remembering the drawings.

The coachman, who was racking his brains over the guest's sudden departure, timidly turned around and asked:

"Is there some urgent matter, sir?"

"Matter? Yes, precisely-a matter. I must go to India at once. My relatives there have come down with the plague-my grandmother, sister-in-law, and three first cousins."

"Is that so!" the peasant said in surprise. "Goodness me!"

## IX. THE SECOND AND LAST MEETING WITH DOGGER

"My friend," Tonar said to Ammon upon opening a letter, "Dogger, whom you visited four years ago, requests that you go to him immediately. Since he does not know your address, he's transmitting his request through me. But what could have happened there?"

Ammon, without concealing his surprise, quickly walked up to his friend.

"He's asking me over? How does he express himself?"

"As they used to do at the end of the eighteenth century. 'I shall be greatly indebted to you,'" read Tonar, "'if you inform Mr. Ammon Koot that I would be most grateful to him if he would meet with me at once....' Won't you explain what this is about?"

"No, I don't know."

"Really? You're a sly one, Ammon!"

"I can only promise to tell you afterwards, if things go all right."

"Very well. My curiosity's been aroused. What, are you already looking at the clock? Take a look at the train schedule."

"There's a train at four," said Ammon, pressing the buzzer. A servant appeared in the doorway. "Hert! High boots, a revolver, a laprobe, and a small travelling-bag. Farewell, Tonar. I'm going to Liliana's cheery meadows!"

Not without trepidation did Ammon heed the strange man's summons. He still remembered the painful blow that the two-faced woman in the wondrous paintings had dealt to his soul, and he involuntarily connected the paintings with Dogger's invitation. But it was pointless to try and guess what Dogger wanted from him. Undoubtedly, something serious was in store. Deep in thought, Ammon stood at the train window. With the thoroughness of a blind man who gropes for something that he needs, he mused upon all his knowledge of people, of all the complex junctures of their souls, and all the possibilities that followed from what he had seen four years ago; but, dissatisfied, he finally refused to predict the future.

At eight o'clock in the evening Ammon stood before the quiet house, in the garden where flowers prayed vividly, luxuriantly, and joyfully, to the sun setting amidst silvery clouds. Elma met Ammon; the musical clarity was missing from her movements and expression; a grieving, nervous, suffering woman stood before Ammon and softly said:

"He wants to speak with you. You don't know-he's dying, but, he still hopes he'll get well; please make believe that you consider his disease to be nothing at all."

"We must save Dogger," said Ammon after a moment's thought. "Has he kept anything secret from you?"

He looked Elma straight in the eye and imparted a cautiously significant tone to the question.

"No, nothing. And from you?"

This was said gropingly, but they understood each other.

"Probably," said Ammon inquisitively, "you were not left in the dark regarding the haste of my previous departure." "You must excuse Dogger and ... yourself."

"Yes. For the sake of that which you know well, Dogger must not die."

"The doctors are deceiving him, but I know everything. He won't live out the month."

"It's absurd," said Ammon, walking after Elma, "I know a person who's a watchman in a garden and is one hundred and four years old. But he, to be sure, understands nothing of paints."

When they came into the sick-room, Dogger was in bed. The early twilight shaded his transparent face like a light, airy fabric; the sick man's hands were under his head. He was hirsute, thin, and morose; his eyes, which glittered expressively, rested on Ammon.

"Elma, leave us alone," wheezed Dogger, "don't be offended."

The woman smiled at him sadly and left. Ammon sat down.

"Here's still one more adventure, Ammon," Dogger began to speak weakly. "Enter it in the column for extremely distant journeys. Yes, I'm dying."

"You must be a hypochondriac," said Ammon light-heartedly. "Come now, that's just a weakness."

"Yes, yes. We practise lying. Elma says the same as you, while I pretend that I don't believe death is near, and she is satisfied with that. She doesn't want me to believe what she herself believes."

"What's wrong with you, Dogger?" "What?" Dogger closed his eyes and smiled grimly. "You see, I drank some cold spring water. I must tell you that for the past eleven years all the water I drink has been neither too hot nor too cold. Two years ago, in the spring, I was walking in the nearby hills. The snow runoffs rushed along sparkling stone channels among vivid greenery, pounding on every side. Blue cascades whipped up snowy foam and leaped from ledge to ledge; they jostled one another like frightened

herd of sheep which streams through a tight gate in a living wave of white backs. Oh, Ammon, I acted unwisely, but the stifling hot day tortured me with thirst. The sky's oppressive heat beat down on my head from the precipitous heights, and the profusion of water foaming about increased my sufferings. I was far from home, and I felt an uncontrollable urge to drink this savage, cold, carefree water that had not been defiled by a thermometer. An underground spring was not far away; I bent down and drank-the icy fire scorched my lips. The tasty water smelled of grass and fizzed like sparkling wine. Rarely does one have occasion to quench his thirst so blissfully. I drank for a long time and then ... I became ill. Sick people, you know, often have very keen hearing, and I, albeit not without making an effort, overheard Elma and the doctor behind the doors. He did a good job of beating around the bush for a while, but all the same he gave me grace for not longer than the end of the month."

"You acted unnaturally," said Ammon with a smile.

"Partly. But I'm becoming tired of speaking. Those two pictures in which she turned around ... where do you think they are?" Dogger grew agitated. "There's a box on the table; open the little grave."

Ammon got up and slightly raised the lid of a beautiful casket; from the rush of air a bit of white ash flew up and landed on his sleeve. The box, which was filled to the top with fluffy ash, explained to him the fate of the brilliant creations.

"You burned them!"

Dogger's eyes motioned assent.

"If this isn't madness, then it's barbarity," said Ammon.

"Why?" retorted Dogger meekly. "One of them was evil, while the other was falsehood. I'll tell you their story. The task to which I dedicated my entire life was to paint three pictures that would be more perfect and more powerful than anything that exists in art. No one even knew that I was an artist; no one, except for you and my wife, has seen these paintings. The grievous good fortune that befell me was to depict Life by separating what is essentially inseparable. This was more difficult than sorting out, kernel by kernel, a wagonload of grain that has been mixed with a wagonload of poppy seeds. But I did it, and you, Ammon, saw Life's two faces, each in the full splendour of its might. When I had committed this sin, I felt that my whole body, my thoughts and my dreams, were drawing me irresistibly toward darkness; before me I saw its complete embodiment ... and I could not resist. Only I know how I lived then, no one else. But it was a dismal and morbid existence of horror and decay!

"The things that now surround me, Ammon -- nature, farm work, air, a vegetable-like happiness -- represent nothing but a hurried flight from myself. I couldn't show people my fearful pictures, since they would have extolled me, and I, urged on by vanity, would have used my art in accordance with my soul's bent-on behalf of evil-and that would have destroyed me. All my soul's dark instincts pushed me towards evil art and an evil life. As you see, in the house I honestly eliminated every temptation: there are no pictures, drawings, or statuettes. Thus I destroyed my memory of myself as an artist, but it was beyond my power to destroy those two, who fought between themselves to possess me. For whatever you may say, they really were not so badly done! But life's diabolical face at times tempted me; I shut myself up, buried myself in my fantasies-the drawings-and became intoxicated with nightmarish delirium ... that folder no longer exists either. You kept your promise to be silent, and since I trust you, I ask that after my death you exhibit my third painting anonymously; it is truthful and good. Art was my curse; I renounce my name."

He was silent for a while and then began to cry, but his tears did not arouse any offensive sensation of pity in Ammon, who saw that no person could commit a greater



act of violence against himself. "The man has burned himself out," Ammon thought. "Fate has given him an unbearable burden. But soon he will have peace...."

"And so, Ammon," said Dogger, growing calm, "will you do this?"

"Yes, it's my duty, Dogger; I truly admire you," said Ammon, who, contrary to his own expectations, became more upset than he wanted to be. "I admire your talent, your struggle, and ... your ultimate staunchness."

"Give me your hand!" Dogger requested with a smile. His hand-shake was firm and brusque.

"You see, I'm not completely weak yet," he said. "Farewell, restless, thieving soul. Elma will give you the painting. I think," Dogger added naively, "that people will write about it."

Ammon and his friend, a thin brunette with a face as mobile as a monkey's, slowly made their way through the dense crowd that had filled the hall to overflowing. Amidst the other frames and portrayals, above their heads, stood a woman who was about to turn around and who seemed alive to troubled eyes; she was standing on a road that led towards some hills. The crowd was silent. The most perfect work of art in the world displayed its power.

"It's almost unbearable," said Ammon's friend. "Why, she really will turn around."

"Oh, no," Ammon disagreed, "fortunately, that's only a threat."

"Fortunately? I want to see her face!"

"It's better this way, my dear," he sighed, "let each person imagine for himself what that face is like."