

David Thornley

THE APARTMENT

My memories are in the hands of strangers; and I have not the faintest inkling of what may befall them, so it has proven impossible for me to steer or direct my own thoughts. This melancholy situation first began when I was appointed Hausmeister of the empty apartment block on Verwandlung Strasse. For the first two weeks my duties — which had been described to me as light, befitting someone with lungs weakened by exposure to trench-gas and tuberculosis — proved to be light indeed, for not one single tenant occupied any of the other five apartments in the block. In response to my enforced inactivity and to dispel the inevitable boredom that eats like a cancer at the soul I began to write in my diary some rudimentary notes about the people who might one day take up residence. These notes were not in any way to be mistaken for an attempt at writing, so many of them were sentences of an incomplete nature, and little attention was paid to grammar or the correct use of the full stop and the comma, to say nothing of syntax. No, no, one cannot confuse my meagre note taking with writing. It was about that time when the first of my tenants arrived. Frau Engelhaft and her small companion dog Blondi moved into number 2 on the ground floor adjacent to my own rooms; for I had taken the liberty of assigning number 1 apartment to myself in order that I could more efficiently monitor the comings and goings of those tenants who would live on the second and third floors.

The next to arrive — if my memory serves me correct, and I have no reason to suppose that in this particular instance it does not — was Herr Schuld, a man with the mean spirited disposition of a clerk and the enormous girth of a Burgermeister. This one I placed in number 6, thinking to myself that the exercise of climbing to the third floor each day would help him to lose weight. If the building had been in possession of an attic, I would have gladly insisted that he live there, but alas the building was no so well blessed. During the following week all of the remaining apartments were taken by other tenants. I made a note in my diary that with all the apartments let, my duties would inevitably increase and my days would seem shorter for the appearance of so many new names and faces. Each successive Friday I carefully, so as not to include a single mistake, completed the "Form of Residence" and handed it to the Praefekt of Polizei who appeared punctually at five o'clock to collect it. Because of the severe penalties imposed upon any Hausmeister who submitted incorrect information; I had found it no more than my duty to note down in my diary the comings and the goings of all my tenants. Indeed I had noted that Frau Engelhaft had for some days been accustomed to taking her afternoon stroll

without the companionship of her dog Blondi. When she returned I intercepted her movements and enquired as to her dog. Favoured me with a look of such desolation on her face that a field of burnt barley could not adequately express such wretchedness, Frau Engelhaft informed me that her beloved Blondi had passed away the previous week. Sometimes the call of winter rooks is constantly in one's ears. Though the dog was healthy and appeared to want little in life other than the warmth of an occasional hand it had refused to eat anything for six or seven days and had subsequently died. I offered my condolences but secretly wished for nothing other than to check the notes in my diary and ascertain whether I was guilty of incorrectly completing the "Form of Residence" and handing it to the Praefekt of Polizei containing a falsehood for which I might yet be brought to task.

My fears — if indeed fears they were and not a reaction to the black potatoes I had eaten with my soup — were groundless. With my customary efficiency I had failed to note the presence of Frau Engelhaft's dog Blondi for the simple reason that it had not been seen by me to note. The following day I observed that Herr Schuld no longer retained the generous girth of a Burgermeister, but instead had lost so much weight that he looked positively ill. In my diary I found it necessary to speculate as to whether his heart remained the strong the vital organ that had propelled him through his youth and into middle-age, or whether it was tired and had been weakened by climbing so many stairs each day, and God forbid it should thump inside that depleted chest for one last thump and then thump no more. As I looked up from my writing desk through the partially opened door across the foyer and onto the stairs, my glance was held for a moment before being hurled mercilessly down by the slumping form of Herr Schuld, whose arms flailed about him like a man drowning in a mountainous sea of threadbare carpet. The Praefekt of Polizei made only slight hesitation before informing me that death had been instantaneous. I thanked the Praefekt of Polizei for his prompt attendance but secretly despised his superior attitude and the smartness of his uniform, and wrote in my diary that I wished to see him posted to the Polizei Training Academy in Bad Toll. That Friday a new Praefekt of Polizei informed me that his predecessor had been so posted.

The terrible truth was now realised, though unheard of and completely without precedent but none-the-less the truth for all that; what I wrote in my diary — or in the case of Frau Engelhaft's dog Blondi it was what I did not write in my diary — became the reality. For six days I had failed to note that Blondi walked with Frau Engelhaft, and more importantly I had not recorded one word about the dog being fed, and the dog died of starvation. Simply by writing in my diary about Herr Schuld's need to reduce his weight, I had condemned the poor man to exercise himself to the point of death. All that was several years ago. Since that realisation I have found it necessary to conscientiously write down every

detail of the tenants' day in my diary. My failure to record a single detail might prove fatal. If I do not record birthdays the tenants do not age, if I make no note of brushing their teeth they suffer from tooth decay and their teeth drop out of their mouths, without my daily writings they do not leave their apartments and go to work. The responsibility is enormous; I must describe in the most intimate detail every aspect of their personal hygiene lest they conceal a rotting toe or a gangrenous leg. Every day I must rise at 5 o'clock to begin writing how the tenants will wake-up and prepare for their respective days, undress, dress, wash, eat, sleep, work, travel, read the newspaper, write to friends, feed the canary, clean their boots, make the fire, switch on the light, move their bowels, iron their shirt, play with their children who must also appear in such intricate detail in my notes. Without a break for lunch or dinner I must write continually for 18 hours every day in order to propel all of my charges safely through their respective days. Over the past year I have lost two more tenants, dead before their time, condemned by my exhaustion. I always dreamed of one day becoming a writer.

