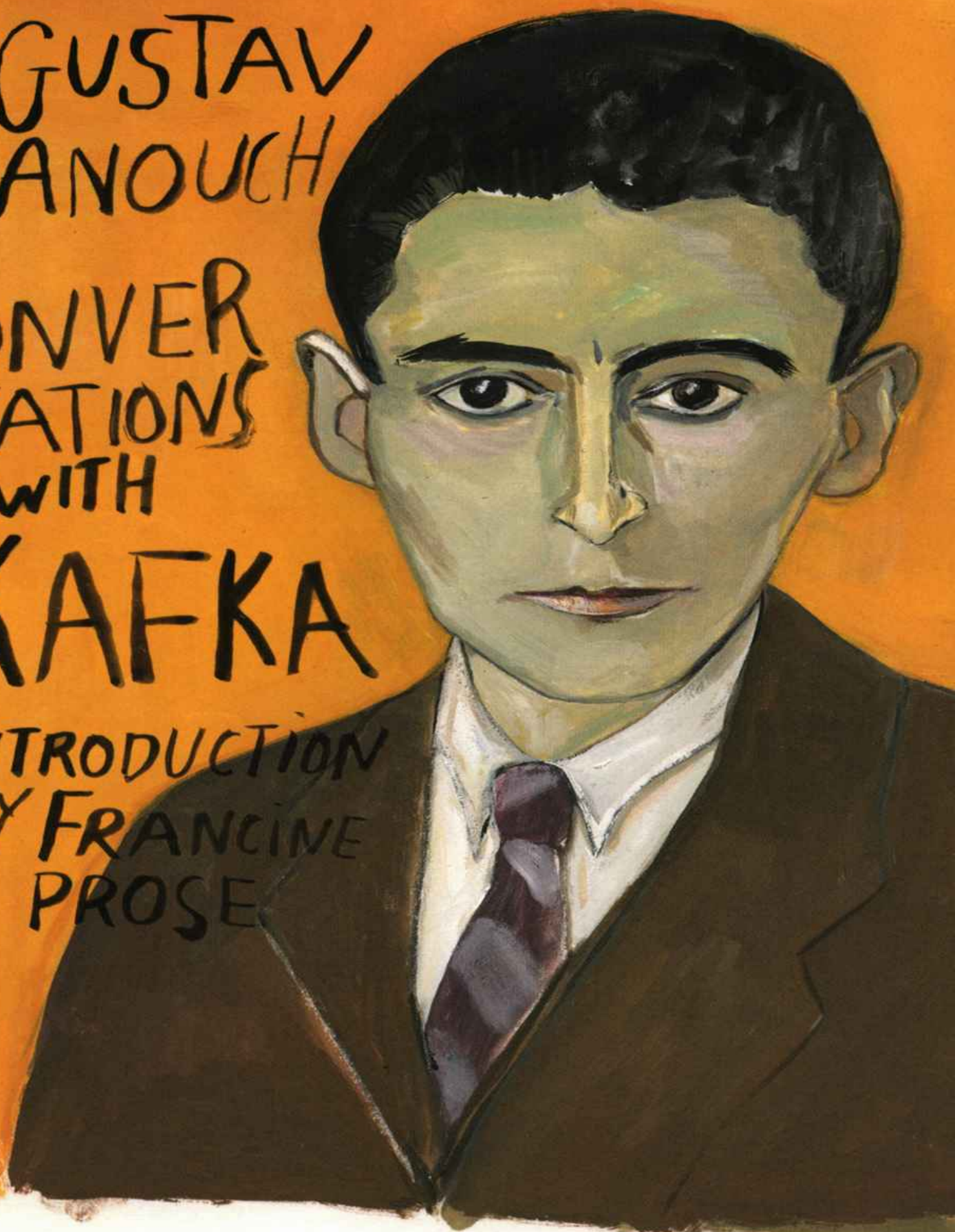


GUSTAV
JANOUCH

CONVER
SATIONS
WITH

KAFKA

INTRODUCTION
BY FRANCINE
PROSE



CONVERSATIONS WITH
KAFKA

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Gustav Janouch
translated by Goronway Rees

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SECOND EDITION
REVISED AND ENLARGED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY FRANCINE PROSE

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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INTRODUCTION



I can't remember when I first read Gustav Janouch's *Conversations with Kafka*, published in this country in 1951 and twenty years later in the expanded version we have today. I do know that by the mid-1980s, I had become such a fan of Janouch's odd and beautiful little memoir that I quoted two excerpts from it, one in a talk I delivered at a writers conference, the other in a novel.

The first of these passages was taken from near the end of the book. Janouch has found out that Kafka has retired after fourteen years at the Workman's Accident Insurance Institution, where Janouch's father, Kafka's colleague, first brought Gustav, as a seventeen-year-old fledgling poet, to meet the celebrated author of "The Metamorphosis." Gustav visited Kafka at the office, and they fell into the habit of taking long walks through the city, strolls on which Kafka seems to have said many amazing, incisive, literary and personal things to his companion and interlocutor, the teenage Boswell of Prague.

After Kafka has gone, presumably to the sanitarium at which he died, Frau Svatek, the office cleaning woman charged with tidying Kafka's messy "paper dungeon," tells Janouch that she has no idea who cleared out the writer's desk. "Kafka came and went as silently as a mouse." As a memento, she gives Janouch Kafka's porcelain tea cup. Every time Janouch looks at the cup, he

remembers something Kafka said on one of their walks, and one passage struck me as so lyrical, wise and peculiar that I decided to quote it to an audience of writers and would-be writers.

Crossing a rainswept square, apropos of something or other, Kafka tells Janouch:

Life is as infinitely great and profound as the immensity of the stars above us. One can only look at it through the narrow keyhole of one's personal existence. But through it one perceives more than one can see. So above all one must keep the keyhole clean.

Reading my lecture at the conference, I remember feeling that everyone in the audience was taking Kafka's advice and mentally resolving to keep the keyhole clean, whatever that might mean.

The second passage cracked me up, and I used it in a novel, a quote lodged maddeningly in the consciousness of a young woman who is inconveniently superstitious and not inclined to expect good fortune. Again, Kafka and Janouch are out walking, gloomily considering the enslavement of mankind. Kafka says:

"The conveyor belt of life carries one somewhere—but one doesn't know where. One is a thing, an object—rather than a living organism."

Kafka suddenly stood still and stretched out his hand.

"Look! There, there! Can you see it?"

Out of a house in the Jakobsgasse . . . ran a small dog looking like a ball of wool, which crossed our path and disappeared round the corner of the Tempelgasse.

"A pretty little dog," I said.

"A dog?" asked Kafka suspiciously, and slowly began to move again.

“A small, young dog. Didn’t you see it?”

“I saw. But was it a dog?”

“It was a little poodle. ”

“A poodle? It could be a dog, but it could also be a sign.

We Jews often make tragic mistakes.”

Looking over these two quotes, I’m struck by how well they capture the tonal range of Janouch’s exchanges with Kafka, conversations on subjects including carpentry, technology, film, photography, crime, money, Darwinism, Chinese philosophy, street fights, insomnia, Hindu scripture, suicide, art and prayer. “Art like prayer is a hand outstretched in the darkness, seeking for some touch of grace which will transform it into a hand that bestows gifts. Prayer means casting oneself into the miraculous rainbow that stretches between becoming and dying, to be utterly consumed in it, in order to bring its infinite radiance to bed in the frail little cradle of one’s own existence.”

Reviewing *Conversations with Kafka* in the November 21, 1971 *New York Times Book Review*, Leonard Michaels described the effect of Kafka’s “stunning presence” filtered through Janouch’s “hagiographical” perspective: “Kafka with a miserable job, deadly disease, rotten home life, yet able to produce rabbinically flavored logorrhea on almost any subject thrown up to him by Janouch. Lest it seem that Janouch, from one conversation to the next, is tossing fish-bits to a brilliantly honking seal, he takes the trouble to tell us about Kafka’s availability to interviewers of every kind.” Janouch, as Michaels notes, also gives us a startling scene in which Kafka’s overwhelming, all powerful father—the tyrant at the terrifying center of so much of his fiction—appears on the street to say, with what sounds suspiciously like tenderness, “Franz. Go home. The air is damp.”

Unsurprisingly, given the origin of their friendship in Janouch's literary ambitions, Kafka and Janouch spend a great deal of time talking about writing, Kafka's ("The Judgment' is a spectre of the night . . . the verification, and so the complete exorcism of the spectre") and, more often, the work of others. Among Kafka's favorites were Rimbaud ("He transforms vowels into colors"), Poe ("He wrote tales of mystery to make himself at home in the world") and Kleist ("His whole life was spent under the pressure of the visionary tension between man and fate, which he illuminated and held fast in clear universally intelligible language"). One could generate a reading list from Kafka's literary advice. Later on, when Janouch meets the girl he will eventually marry, he asks for another sort of advice, for Kafka's views on love, which, as one can imagine, are not highly optimistic.

At some point during the time since I first read Janouch, I heard that a question had been raised about whether Kafka had really said everything Janouch claims. Readers might well wonder, especially when we notice that several of the memoir's walk-on characters (a violin maker, a friend of Janouch's) sound strikingly like Kafka. And how did Janouch memorize verbatim these long flights of improvisational fancy that we ourselves have to read many times before we can get them straight? Later I heard that the person most eager to discredit Janouch (a cache of letters exists in a file at New Directions) might have had some extra-literary, personal, or professional interest in the project.

In the interval between my first reading and this one, I sometimes wondered if, aware of a challenge to its authenticity, I would like the book as much as I had before. I am pleased to report that the questions raised about the book made little difference, or none at all. Perhaps the sharpness of my judgment has been blunted by the debates and doubt that have come to

surround the contemporary memoir. Or perhaps I experienced a new admiration for the skill with which Janouch may have partly described and partly invented a semi-historical, semi-fictional character known as Kafka.

Rereading Janouch, I thought: If Kafka didn't say all these things, he said some of them and should have said the rest. Perhaps he might have admired Janouch's exploration of the line between appropriation, ventriloquism, and spirit possession: channeling, we might call it. I want to believe that Kafka said what Janouch wrote down, just as I want more than ever to pretend that I am walking in Janouch's place, pestering Franz Kafka with sophomoric questions and thirstily imbibing the gnostic, goofy poetry of the master's pontifications.

— FRANCINE PROSE

CONVERSATIONS WITH KAFKA

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One day at the end of March 1920 my father told me at supper to call on him the following morning at his office.

‘I know how often you shirk school to go to the city library,’ he said. ‘So tomorrow you can come to see me. And dress yourself decently. We shall pay a call.’

I asked him where we were going together.

It seemed to me that my curiosity amused him. But he gave me no explanation.

‘Do not ask questions,’ he said. ‘Don’t be inquisitive, and prepare for a surprise.’

The next day when, shortly before midday, I appeared in his office on the third floor of the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institution, he inspected me carefully from top to toe, opened the middle drawer of his desk, took out a green file inscribed *Gustav*, laid it before him and gave me a long look. After a while he said:

‘Why are you standing? Take a seat.’ The anxious expression on my face provoked a faint mischievous narrowing of his eyelids. ‘Don’t be afraid, I’m not going to be angry with you,’ he began in a friendly manner. ‘I want to talk to you as a friend to a friend. Forget that I am your father and listen to me. You write poems.’

He looked at me as if he were going to present me with a bill.

‘How do you know?’ I stammered. ‘How did you find out?’

‘It’s quite simple,’ said my father. ‘Each month I get a large electric-light bill. I looked into the reasons for our increased consumption, and I discovered that you have the light on in your room till late at night. I wanted to know what you were doing, and so I kept my eyes open. I found out that you write and write, and

always destroy what you have written, or else hide it bashfully in the piano. So one morning when you were in school I took a look at the things.'

'And?'

I swallowed hard.

'And nothing,' said my father. 'I found a black notebook with the title, *The Book of Experience*. I was interested. But, all the same, when I discovered it was your diary, I put it aside. I have no desire to ransack your soul.'

'But you read the poems?'

'Yes, those I did read. They were in a dark-coloured portfolio inscribed *The Book of Beauty*. Many of them I could not understand. Some of them I can only describe as stupid.'

'Why did you read them?'

I was seventeen years old, and therefore any intimacy with me was an act of *lèse-majesté*.

'Why should I not read them? Why should I not acquaint myself with your work? I very much wanted to hear a professional opinion by a competent authority. So I had the poems dictated and typewritten in the office.'

'Which of the poems did you copy?'

'All of them,' answered my father. 'I do not respect only what I myself understand. After all, I wanted a criticism not of my taste, but of your work. So I had everything copied and given to Kafka for his opinion.'

'Who is this Kafka? You have never even mentioned him.'

'He's a good friend of Max Brod,' explained my father. 'Max Brod dedicated his novel *Tycho Brache's Way to God* to him.'¹

'But he is the author of *The Metamorphosis*!' I exclaimed. 'An extraordinary story. Do you know him?'

My father nodded.

'He is in our legal department.'

'What did he say about my poems?'

'He praised them. I thought he was only being polite. But then he asked me to introduce you to him. So I told him that you were coming today.'

'So that is the visit you spoke of.'

'Yes, that is the visit, you scribbler.'

My father conducted me down to the second floor, where we entered a fairly large, well-furnished office.

Behind one of two desks standing side by side sat a tall, slim man. He had black hair combed back, a bony nose, wonderful grey-blue eyes under a strikingly narrow forehead, and bittersweet, smiling lips.

'This is certainly he,' he said, instead of greeting us.

'It is,' said my father.

Kafka stretched out his hand to me.

'You needn't be ashamed in front of me. I also have a large electricity bill.'

He laughed, and my shyness vanished.

'So this is the creator of the mysterious bug, Samsa,' I said to myself, disillusioned to see before me a simple, well-mannered man.

'There is too much noise in your poems,' said Franz Kafka, when my father left us alone in the office. 'It is a by-product of youth, which indicates an excess of vitality. So that the noise is itself beautiful, though it has nothing in common with art. On the contrary! The noise mars the expression. But I am no critic, I cannot quickly transform myself into something different, then return to myself and precisely measure the distance. As I said - I am no critic. I am only a man under judgement and a spectator.'

'And the judge?' I asked.

He gave an embarrassed smile.

‘Indeed, I am also the usher of the court, yet I do not know the judge. Probably I am quite a humble assistant-usher. I have no definite post.’ Kafka laughed.

I laughed with him, though I did not understand him.

‘The only definite thing is suffering,’ he said earnestly. ‘When do you write?’

I was surprised by the question, so I answered quickly:

‘In the evening, at night. During the day very rarely. I cannot write during the day.’

‘The day is a great enchantment.’

‘I am disturbed by the light, the factory, the houses, the windows over the way. Most of all by the light. The light distracts my attention.’

‘Perhaps it distracts from the darkness within. It is good when the light overpowers one. If it were not for these horrible sleepless nights, I would never write at all. But they always recall me again to my own dark solitude.’

‘Is he not himself the unfortunate bug in *The Metamorphosis*?’ I thought.

I was glad when the door opened and my father came in.

*

Kafka has great grey eyes, under thick dark eyebrows. His brown face is very animated. Kafka speaks with his face.

Whenever he can substitute for words a movement of his facial muscles, he does so. A smile, contraction of his eyebrows, wrinkling of the narrow forehead, protrusion or pursing of the lips – such movements are a substitute for spoken sentences. Franz Kafka loves gestures, and is therefore economical of them. A gesture of his is not an accompaniment of speech, duplicating the

words, but as it were a word from an independent language of movement, a means of communication, thus in no way an involuntary reflex, but a deliberate expression of intention. Folding of the hands, laying of outstretched palms on the surface of his desk, leaning his body back comfortably and yet tensely in his chair, bending his head forward in conjunction with a shrug of the shoulders, pressing his hand to his heart, these are a few of the sparingly used means of expression which he always accompanies with an apologetic smile, as if to say, 'It is true, and I admit, that I am playing a game: yet I hope that my game pleases you. And after all - after all, I only do it to win your understanding for a short while.'

'Kafka is very fond of you,' I said to my father. 'How did you come to know each other?'

'We know each other through the office,' answered my father. 'We first came to know each other better after my sketch for the card-index cabinet. Kafka was very pleased with the model which I made. We began talking, and he told me that in the afternoon after office hours he took lessons from the carpenter Kornhauser in the Poděbradgasse in Karolinenthal. From then on we often talked about personal matters. Then I gave him your poems, and so we became - close acquaintances.'

'Why not friends?'

My father shook his head.

'He is too shy and too reserved for friendship.'

*

On my next visit to Kafka I inquired:

'Do you still go to the carpenter in Karolinenthal?'

'You know about that?'

'My father told me.'

'No, I have not been for a long time. My health does not permit it any more. His Majesty the Body.'

'I can quite understand. Working in a dusty workshop is not very pleasant.'

'There you are wrong. I love to work in workshops. The smell of wood shavings, the humming of saws, the hammer-blows, all enchanted me. The afternoon went so quickly I was always astonished when the evening came.'

'You must certainly have been tired.'

'Tired, but happy. There is nothing more beautiful than some straightforward, concrete, generally useful trade. Apart from carpentry, I have also worked at farming and gardening. It was all much better and worth more than forced labour in the office. There one appears to be something superior, better; but it is only appearance. In reality one is only lonelier and therefore unhappier. That is all. Intellectual labour tears a man out of human society. A craft, on the other hand, leads him towards men. What a pity I can no longer work in the workshop or in the garden.'

'But you would not wish to give up your post?'

'Why not? I have dreamed of going as a farm labourer or an artisan to Palestine.'

'You would leave everything here behind?'

'Everything, if I could make a life that had meaning, stability, and beauty. Do you know the writer Paul Adler?'

'I only know his book *The Magic Flute*.'²

'He is in Prague. With his wife and the children.'

'What is his profession?'

'He has none. He has no profession, only a vocation. He travels with his wife and the children from one friend to another.'

A free man, and a poet. In his presence I always have pangs of conscience, because I allow my life to be frittered away in an office.'

*

In May 1921 I wrote a sonnet which was published by Ludwig Winder in the Sunday supplement of the *Bohemia*.³

Kafka said on this occasion:

'You describe the poet as a great and wonderful man whose feet are on the ground, while his head disappears in the clouds. Of course, that is a perfectly ordinary image drawn within the intellectual framework of lower-middle-class convention. It is an illusion based on wish fulfilment, which has nothing in common with reality. In fact, the poet is always much smaller and weaker than the social average. Therefore he feels the burden of earthly existence much more intensely and strongly than other men. For him personally his song is only a scream. Art for the artist is only suffering, through which he releases himself for further suffering. He is not a giant, but only a more or less brightly plumaged bird in the cage of his existence.'

'You too?' I asked.

'I am a quite impossible bird,' said Franz Kafka. 'I am a jackdaw - a *kavka*. The coal merchant in the close of the Tein cathedral has one. Have you seen it?'

'Yes, it flies about outside his shop.'

'Yes, my relative is better off than I am. It is true, of course, that its wings have been clipped. As for me, this was not in any case necessary, as my wings are atrophied. For this reason there are no heights and distances for me. I hop about bewildered among my fellow men. They regard me with deep suspicion. And

indeed I am a dangerous bird, a thief, a jackdaw. But that is only an illusion. In fact, I lack all feeling for shining objects. For that reason I do not even have glossy black plumage. I am grey, like ash. A jackdaw who longs to disappear between the stones. But this is only joking, so that you will not notice how badly things are going with me today.'

I no longer remember how often I visited Franz Kafka in his office. One thing, however, I remember very distinctly: his physical appearance as I - half an hour before the end of office hours - opened the door on the second floor of the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution.

He sat behind his desk, his head leaning back, legs outstretched, his hands resting on the desk. Filla's picture, *A Reader of Dostoievsky*, has something of the attitude he assumed. From this point of view, there was a great resemblance between Filla's picture and Kafka's bodily appearance. Yet it was purely external. Behind the outward likeness lay a great inner difference.

Filla's reader was overpowered by something, while Kafka's attitude expressed a voluntary and therefore triumphant surrender. On the thin lips played a delicate smile, which was much more the reflection of some distant alien joy than an expression of his own happiness. The eyes always looked at people a little from below upwards. Franz Kafka thus had a singular appearance, as if apologizing for being so slender and tall. His entire figure seemed to say, 'I am, forgive me, quite unimportant. You do me a great pleasure, if you overlook me.'

His voice was a hesitating, muted baritone, wonderfully melodious, although it never left the middle range in strength and pitch. Voice, gesture, look, all radiated the peace of understanding and goodness.

He spoke both Czech and German. But more German. And his German had a hard accent, like that of the German spoken by the

Czechs. Yet the likeness is only a faint and inexact one; in fact, they were quite different.

The Czech accent of the German which I am thinking of is harsh. The language sounds as if hacked to pieces. Kafka's speech never made this impression. It seemed angular because of the inner tension: every word a stone. The hardness of his speech was caused by the effort at exactness and precision. It was thus determined by positive personal qualities and not by group characteristics. His speech resembled his hands.

He had large, strong hands, broad palms, thin, fine fingers with flat, spatulate finger-nails and prominent yet very delicate bones and knuckles.

When I remember Kafka's voice, his smile and his hands, I always think of a remark of my father's.

He said, 'strength combined with scrupulous delicacy: strength, which finds the small things the most difficult.'

*

The office in which Franz Kafka worked was a medium-sized, rather high room, which nevertheless seemed cramped; it had something of the dignified elegance of the senior partner's room in a prosperous firm of solicitors, and it was furnished in the same style. It had two black, polished double doors. One opened into Kafka's office from a dark corridor, crammed with tall filing cabinets and always smelling of stale tobacco smoke and dust. The other, in the middle of the wall to the right of the entrance, led to the other offices at the front of the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution. To the best of my knowledge, however, this door was never opened. Both visitors and the staff normally used the door from the corridor. They would knock, and Kafka would

answer briefly and not very loudly, 'Please!', while his partner who shared the room would bark a curt and bad-tempered 'Come in!'.

The tone of this summons, intended to make the visitor conscious of his insignificance, was in keeping with the permanent frown that knotted the yellow eyebrows, the painful precision of the parting, which ran down to the back of his neck, in the urine-coloured lifeless hair, the high stiff collar with its wide, dark cravat, the high-buttoned waistcoat and slightly protuberant, watery-blue goose eyes of the man who for many years sat opposite to Kafka in his office.

I remember that Franz Kafka always winced slightly at his colleague's peremptory 'Come in!'. He seemed to bend his head and look at the man opposite with unconcealed mistrust, as if expecting a blow. He adopted the same attitude even when his colleague addressed some friendly remark to him. It was clear that there was a painful constraint in Kafka's relations with Tremel.

So not long after I had begun to call on him at the Institution I asked: 'Can one speak freely in front of him? Doesn't he perhaps tell tales?'

Kafka shook his head. 'I don't think so. Yet men who worry about their job as much as he does are sometimes capable of very dirty tricks.'

'Are you afraid of him?'

Kafka gave an embarrassed smile. 'The hangman always gets a bad name.'

'What do you mean?'

'The hangman is today a respectable bureaucrat, relatively high up on the civil service pay roll. Why shouldn't there be a hangman concealed in every conscientious bureaucrat?'

'But bureaucrats don't hang anybody!'

'Oh, don't they!' answered Kafka, and brought his hands down sharply on his desk. 'They transform living, changing human

beings into dead code numbers, incapable of any change.'

I only answered with a quick nod of the head, because I realized that by generalizing in this way Kafka wanted to avoid any direct discussion of his colleague's character. He was concealing the tension that had existed for years between him and his official working partner. And Treml seemed to realize Kafka's dislike, and so spoke to him *de haut en bas*, both on official and personal matters, in a slightly patronizing manner, with a sarcastic, man-of-the-world smile playing on his thin lips.

Treml's attitude said perfectly plainly: 'I fail to understand why you, the legal adviser to the Institution, should talk to an insignificant sprig of a boy exactly as you do to your professional equals, listen to him with interest, and on occasions even feel you may have something to learn from him.'

Kafka's closest colleague did not conceal his dislike of Kafka and his personal visitors. As he wished to keep his distance from them, he always left the room, at least whenever I visited the office. Kafka then usually gave an unmistakable sigh of relief. He smiled, but it did not conceal the truth from me. So one day I said: 'Life with such a colleague must be difficult.'

Kafka raised his hand in sharp dissent.

'No, no! You're wrong. He is no worse than the rest of the staff. On the contrary; he's much better. He has a great deal of knowledge.'

I disagreed. 'Perhaps he only uses it to show off.'

Kafka nodded. 'Yes, that's possible. Many people do that, without doing any real work. But Treml really works hard.'

I sighed. 'very well, you praise him, but all the same, you don't like him. You want your praise to conceal your dislike.'

Kafka's eyes flickered, he sucked his bottom lip in, while I continued with my analysis: 'To you, he's something alien. You look at him as if he were some strange beast in a cage.'