RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Auto Da Fé

Elias Canetti

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THE WORLD IN THE HEAD

About the Book

Auto Da Fé is the story of Peter Kien, a distinguished, reclusive sinologist living in Germany between the wars. With a masterly precision Canetti reveals Kien's character, displaying the flawed personal relationships which ultimately lead to his destruction.

Manipulated by his illiterate and grasping housekeeper, Therese, who has tricked him into marriage, and Benedikt Pfaff, a brutish concierge, Kien is forced out of his apartment - which houses his great library and one true passion - and into the underworld of the city. In this purgatory he is guided by a chess-playing dwarf of evil propensities, until eventually he is restored to his home. But on his return he is visited by his brother, an eminent psychiatrist who, by an error of diagnosis, precipitates the final crisis ...

Auto da Fé was first published in Germany in 1935 as *Die Blendung* (The Building or Bedazzlement) and later in Britain in 1947, where the publisher noted Canetti as a 'writer of strongly individual genius, which may prove to be an influential one', an observation borne out when the author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981. Auto da Fe still towers as one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century, and Canetti's incisive vision of an insular man battling against the outside world is as fresh and rewarding today as when first it appeared in print.

Also by Elias Canetti and published by The Harvill Press

PARTY IN THE BLITZ

AUTO DA FÉ

Elias Canetti

Translated from the German by C.V. Wedgwood
under the personal supervision of the author

THE HARVILL PRESS
LONDON

PART ONE

A HEAD WITHOUT A WORLD

CHAPTER I

THE MORNING WALK

‘WHAT are you doing here, my little man?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Then why are you standing here?’

‘Just because.’

‘Can you read?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Nine and a bit.’

‘Which would you prefer, a piece of chocolate or a book?’

‘A book.’

‘Indeed? Splendid! So that’s your reason for standing here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why didn’t you say so before?’

‘Father scolds me.’

‘Oh. And who is your father?’

‘Franz Metzger.’

‘Would you like to travel to a foreign country?’

‘Yes. To India. They have tigers there.’

‘And where else?’

‘To China. They’ve got a huge wall there.’

‘You’d like to scramble over it, wouldn’t you?’

‘It’s much too thick and too high. Nobody can get over it. That’s why they built it.’

‘What a lot you know! You must have read a great deal already?’

‘Yes. I read all the time. Father takes my books away. I’d like to go to a Chinese school. They have forty thousand letters in their alphabet. You couldn’t get them all into one book.’

‘That’s only what you think.’

‘I’ve worked it out.’

‘All the same it isn’t true. Never mind the books in the window. They’re of no value. I’ve got something much better here. Wait. I’ll show you. Do you know what kind of writing that is?’

‘Chinese! Chinese!’

‘Well, you’re a clever little fellow. Had you seen a Chinese book before?’

‘No, I guessed it.’

‘These two characters stand for Meng Tse, the philosopher Mencius. He was a great man in China. He lived 2250 years ago and his works are still being read. Will you remember that?’

‘Yes. I must go to school now.’

‘Aha, so you look into the bookshop windows on your way to school? What is your name?’

‘Franz Metzger, like my father.’

‘And where do you live?’

‘Twenty-four Ehrlich Strasse.’

‘I live there too. I don’t remember you.’

‘You always look the other way when anyone passes you on the stairs. I’ve known you for ages. You’re Professor Kien, but you haven’t a school. Mother says you aren’t a real Professor. But I think you are – you’ve got a library. Our Marie says, you wouldn’t believe your eyes. She’s our maid. When I’m grown up I’m going to have a library. With all the books there are, in every language. A Chinese one too, like yours. Now I must run.’

‘Who wrote this book? Can you remember?’

‘Meng Tse, the philosopher Mencius. Exactly 2250 years ago.’

‘Excellent. You shall come and see my library one day. Tell my housekeeper I’ve given you permission. I can show you pictures from India and China.’

‘Oh good! I’ll come! Of course I’ll come! This afternoon?’

‘No, no, little man. I must work this afternoon. In a week at the earliest.’

Professor Peter Kien, a tall, emaciated figure, man of learning and specialist in sinology, replaced the Chinese book in the tightly packed brief case which he carried under his arm, carefully closed it and watched the clever little boy out of sight. By nature morose and sparing of his words, he was already reproaching himself for a conversation into which he had entered for no compelling reason.

It was his custom on his morning walk, between seven and eight o’clock, to look into the windows of every book shop which he passed. He was thus able to assure himself, with a kind of pleasure, that smut and trash were daily gaining ground. He himself was the owner of the most important private library in the whole of this great city. He carried a minute portion of it with him wherever he went. His passion for it, the only one which he had permitted himself during a life of austere and exacting study, moved him to take special precautions. Books, even bad ones, tempted him easily into making a purchase. Fortunately the greater number of the book shops did not open until after eight o’clock. Sometimes an apprentice, anxious to earn his chief’s approbation, would come earlier and wait on the doorstep for the first employee whom he would ceremoniously relieve of the latch key. ‘I’ve been waiting since seven o’clock,’ he would exclaim, or ‘I can’t get in!’ So much zeal communicated itself all too easily to Kien; with an effort he would master the impulse to follow the apprentice immediately into the shop. Among the proprietors of smaller shops there were one or two early risers, who might be seen busying themselves behind their open doors from half past seven onwards. Defying these temptations, Kien tapped his own well-filled brief-case. He clasped it tightly to him, in a very particular manner which he had himself thought out, so that the greatest possible area of his body was always in contact with it. Even his ribs could feel its presence through

his cheap, thin suit. His upper arm covered the whole side elevation; it fitted exactly. The lower portion of his arm supported the case from below. His outstretched fingers splayed out over every part of the flat surface to which they yearned. He privately excused himself for this exaggerated care because of the value of the contents. Should the brief case by any mischance fall to the ground, or should the lock, which he tested every morning before setting out, spring open at precisely that perilous moment, ruin would come to his priceless volumes. There was nothing he loathed more intensely than battered books.

To-day, when he was standing in front of a bookshop on his way home, a little boy had stepped suddenly between him and the window. Kien felt affronted by the impertinence. True, there was room enough between him and the window. He always stood about three feet away from the glass; but he could easily read every letter behind it. His eyes functioned to his entire satisfaction: a fact notable enough in a man of forty who sat, day in day out, over books and manuscripts. Morning after morning his eyes informed him how well they did. By keeping his distance from these venal and common books, he showed his contempt for them, contempt which, when he compared them with the dry and ponderous tomes of his library, they richly deserved. The boy was quite small, Kien exceptionally tall. He could easily see over his head. All the same he felt he had a right to greater respect. Before administering a reprimand, however, he drew to one side in order to observe him further. The child stared hard at the titles of the books and moved his lips slowly and in silence. Without a stop his eyes slipped from one volume to the next. Every minute or two he looked back over his shoulder. On the opposite side of the street, over a watchmaker’s shop, hung a gigantic clock. It was twenty minutes to eight. Evidently the little fellow was afraid of missing something important. He took no notice whatever of the gentleman standing behind him. Perhaps he

was practising his reading. Perhaps he was learning the names of the books by heart. He devoted equal attention to each in turn. You could see at once when anything held up his reading for a second.

Kien felt sorry for him. Here was he, spoiling with this depraved fare an eager spiritual appetite, perhaps already hungry for the written word. How many a worthless book might he not come to read in later life for no better reason than an early familiarity with its title? By what means is the suggestibility of these early years to be reduced? No sooner can a child walk and make out his letters than he is surrendered at mercy to the hard pavement of any ill-built street, and to the wares of any wretched tradesman who, the devil knows why, has set himself up as a dealer in books. Young children ought to be brought up in some important private library. Daily conversation with none but serious minds, an atmosphere at once dim, hushed and intellectual, a relentless training in the most careful ordering both of time and of space, – what surroundings could be more suitable to assist these delicate creatures through the years of childhood? But the only person in this town who possessed a library which could be taken at all seriously was he, Kien, himself. He could not admit children. His work allowed him no such diversions. Children make a noise. They have to be constantly looked after. Their welfare demands the services of a woman. For cooking, an ordinary housekeeper is good enough. For children, it would be necessary to engage a mother. If a mother could be content to be nothing but a mother: but where would you find one who would be satisfied with that particular part alone? Each is a specialist first and foremost as a woman, and would make demands which an honest man of learning would not even dream of fulfilling. Kien repudiated the idea of a wife. Women had been a matter of indifference to him until this moment; a matter of indifference they would remain. The

boy with the fixed eyes and the moving head would be the loser.

Pity had moved him to break his usual custom and speak to him. He would gladly have bought himself free of the prickings of his pedagogic conscience with the gift of a piece of chocolate. Then it appeared that there are nine-year-old children who prefer a book to a piece of chocolate. What followed surprised him even more. The child was interested in China. He read against his father's will. The stories of the difficulties of the Chinese alphabet fascinated instead of frightening him. He recognized the language at first sight, without having seen it before. He had passed an intelligence test with distinction. When shown the book, he had not tried to touch it. Perhaps he was ashamed of his dirty hands. Kien had looked at them: they were clean. Another boy would have snatched the book, even with dirty ones. He was in a hurry – school began at eight – yet he had stayed until the last possible minute. He had fallen upon that invitation like one starving; his father must be a great torment to him. He would have liked best to come on that very afternoon, in the middle of the working day. After all, he lived in the same house.

Kien forgave himself for the conversation. The exception which he had permitted seemed worth while. In his thoughts he saluted the child – now already out of sight – as a rising sinologist. Who indeed took an interest in these remote branches of knowledge? Boys played football, adults went to work; they wasted their leisure hours in love. So as to sleep for eight hours and waste eight hours, they were willing to devote themselves for the rest of their time to hateful work. Not only their bellies, their whole bodies had become their gods. The sky God of the Chinese was sterner and more dignified. Even if the little fellow did not come next week, unlikely though that was, he would have a name in his head which he would not easily forget: the philosopher Mong.

Occasional collisions unexpectedly encountered determine the direction of a lifetime.

Smiling, Kien continued on his way home. He smiled rarely. Rarely, after all, is it the dearest wish of a man to be the owner of a library. As a child of nine he had longed for a book shop. Yet the idea that he would walk up and down in it as its proprietor had seemed to him even then blasphemous. A bookseller is a king, and a king cannot be a bookseller. But he was still too little to be a salesman. As for an errand boy – errand boys were always being sent out of the shop. What pleasure would he have of the books, if he was only allowed to carry them as parcels under his arm? For a long while he sought for some way out of the difficulty. One day he did not come home after school. He went into the biggest bookstore in the town, six great show windows all full of books, and began to howl at the top of his voice. 'I want to leave the room, quick, I'm going to have an accident!' he blubbered. They showed him the way at once. He took careful note of it. When he came out again he thanked them and asked if he could not do something to help. His beaming face made them laugh. Only a few moments before it had been screwed up into such comic anguish. They drew him out in conversation; he knew a great deal about books. They thought him sharp for his age. Towards the evening they sent him away with a heavy parcel. He travelled there and back on the tram. He had saved enough pocket money to afford it. Just as the shop was closing – it was already growing dark – he announced that he had completed his errand and put down the receipt on the counter. Someone gave him an acid drop for a reward. While the staff were pulling on their coats he glided noiselessly into the back regions to his lavatory hide-out and bolted himself in. Nobody noticed it; they were all thinking of the free evening before them. He waited a long time. Only after many hours, late at night, did he dare to come out. It was dark in the shop. He felt about for a switch. He

had not thought of that by daylight. But when he found it and his hand had already closed over it, he was afraid to turn on the light. Perhaps someone would see him from the street and haul him off home.

His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. But he could not read; that was a great pity. He pulled down one volume after another, turned over the pages, contrived to make out many of the names. Later on he scrambled up on to the ladder. He wanted to know if the upper shelves had any secrets to hide. He tumbled off it and said: I haven't hurt myself! The floor is hard. The books are soft. In a book shop one falls on books. He could have made a castle of books, but he regarded disorder as vulgar and, as he took out each new volume, he replaced the one before. His back hurt. Perhaps he was only tired. At home he would have been asleep long ago. Not here, excitement kept him awake. But his eyes could not even make out the largest titles any more and that annoyed him. He worked out how many years he would be able to spend reading in this shop without ever going out into the street or to that silly school. Why could he not stay here always? He could easily save up to buy himself a small bed. His mother would be afraid. So was he, but only a little, because it was so very quiet. The gas lamps in the street went out. Shadows crept along the walls. So there *were* ghosts. During the night they came flying here and crouched over the books. Then they read. They needed no light, they had such big eyes. Now he would not touch a single book on the upper shelves, nor on the lower ones either. He crept under the counter and his teeth chattered. Ten thousand books and a ghost crouching over each one. That was why it was so quiet. Sometimes he heard them turn over a page. They read as fast as he did himself. He might have grown used to them, but there were ten thousand of them and perhaps one of them would bite. Ghosts get cross if you brush against them, they think you are making fun of them. He made himself as small as

possible; they flew over him without touching him. Morning came only after many long nights. Then he fell asleep. He did not hear the assistants opening up the shop. They found him under the counter and shook him awake. First he pretended that he was still asleep, then he suddenly burst out howling. They had locked him in last night, he was afraid of his mother, she must have been looking for him everywhere. The proprietor cross-questioned him and as soon as he had found out his name, sent him off home with one of the shopwalkers. He sent his sincerest apologies to the lady. The little boy had been locked in by mistake, but he seemed to be safe and sound. He assured her of his respectful attention. His mother believed it all and was delighted to have him safely home again. To-day the little liar of yesterday was the owner of a famous library and a name no less famous.

Kien abhorred falsehood; from his earliest childhood he had held fast to the truth. He could remember no other falsehood except this. And even this one was hateful to him. Only the conversation with the schoolboy, who had seemed to him the image of his own childhood, had recalled it to him. Forget it, he thought, it is nearly eight o'clock. Punctually at eight his work began, his service for truth. Knowledge and truth were for him identical terms. You draw closer to truth by shutting yourself off from mankind. Daily life was a superficial clatter of lies. Every passer-by was a liar. For that reason he never looked at them. Who among all these bad actors, who made up the mob, had a face to arrest his attention. They changed their faces with every moment; not for one single day did they stick to the same part. He had always known this, experience was superfluous. *His* ambition was to persist stubbornly in the same manner of existence. Not for a mere month, not for a year, but for the whole of his life, he would be true to himself. Character, if you had a character, determined your outward appearance. Ever since he had been able to think,

he had been tall and too thin. He knew his face only casually, from its reflection in bookshop windows. He had no mirror in his house, there was no room for it among the books. But he knew that his face was narrow, stern and bony; that was enough.

Since he felt not the slightest desire to notice anyone, he kept his eyes lowered or raised above their heads. He sensed where the book shops were without looking. He simply relied on instinct. The same force which guides a horse home to the stable, served as well for him. He went out walking to breathe the air of alien books, they aroused his antagonism, they stimulated him. In his library everything went by clockwork. But between seven and eight he allowed himself a few of those liberties which constitute the entire life of other beings.

Although he savoured this hour to the full, he did all by rote. Before crossing a busy street, he hesitated a little. He preferred to walk at a regular pace; so as not to hasten his steps, he waited for a favourable moment to cross. Suddenly he heard someone shouting loudly at someone else: ‘Can you tell me where Mut Strasse is?’ There was no reply. Kien was surprised: so there were other silent people besides himself to be found in the busy streets. Without looking up he listened for more. How would the questioner behave in the face of this silence? ‘Excuse me please, could you perhaps tell me where Mut Strasse is?’ So; he grew more polite; he had no better luck. The other man still made no reply. ‘I don’t think you heard me. I’m asking you the way. Will you be so kind as to tell me how I get to Mut Strasse?’ Kien’s appetite for knowledge was whetted; idle curiosity he did not know. He decided to observe this silent man, on condition of course that he still remained silent. Not a doubt of it, the man was deep in thought and determined to avoid any interruption. Still he said nothing. Kien applauded him. Here was one among thousands, a man whose character was proof against all chances. ‘Here, are

you deaf?’ shouted the first man. Now he will have to answer back, thought Kien, and began to lose his pleasure in his protégé. Who can control his tongue when he is insulted? He turned towards the street; the favourable moment for crossing it had come. Astonished at the continued silence, he hesitated. Still the second man said nothing. All the more violent would be the outburst of anger to come. Kien hoped for a fight. If the second man appeared after all to be a mere vulgarian, Kien would be confirmed in his own estimation of himself as the sole and only person of character walking in this street. He was already considering whether he should look round. The incident was taking place on his right hand. The first man was now yelling: ‘You’ve no manners! I spoke to you civil. Who do you think you are? You lout. Are you dumb?’ The second man was still silent. ‘I demand an apology! Do you hear?’ The other did not hear. He rose even higher in the estimation of the listener. ‘I’ll fetch the police! What do you take me for! You rag and bone man! Call yourself a gentleman! Where did you get those clothes? Out of the rag bag? That’s what they look like! What have you got under your arm! I’ll show you! Go and boil your head! Who do you think you are?’

Then Kien felt a nasty jolt. Someone had grabbed his brief-case and was pulling at it. With a movement far exceeding his usual effort, he liberated the books from the alien clutch and turned sharply to the right. His glance was directed to his brief-case, but it fell instead on a small fat man who was bawling up at him. ‘You lout! You lout! You lout!’ The other man, the silent one, the man of character, who controlled his tongue even in anger, was Kien himself. Calmly he turned his back on the gesticulating illiterate. With this small knife, he sliced his clamour in two. A loutish creature whose courtesy changed in so many seconds to insolence had no power to hurt him. Nevertheless he walked along the streets a little faster than was his usual custom. A man who

carries books with him must seek to avoid physical violence. He always had books with him.

There is after all no obligation to answer every passing fool according to his folly. The greatest danger which threatens a man of learning, is to lose himself in talk. Kien preferred to express himself in the written rather than the spoken word. He knew more than a dozen oriental languages. A few of the western ones did not even need to be learnt. No branch of human literature was unfamiliar to him. He thought in quotations and wrote in carefully considered sentences. Countless texts owed their restoration to him. When he came to misreadings or imperfections in ancient Chinese, Indian or Japanese manuscripts, as many alternative readings suggested themselves for his selection as he could wish. Other textual critics envied him; he for his part had to guard against a superfluity of ideas. Meticulously cautious, he weighed up the alternatives month after month, was slow to the point of exasperation; applying his severest standards to his own conclusions, he took no decision, on a single letter, a word or an entire sentence, until he was convinced that it was unassailable. The papers which he had hitherto published, few in number, yet each one the starting point for a hundred others, had gained for him the reputation of being the greatest living authority on sinology. They were known in every detail to his colleagues, indeed almost word for word. A sentence once set down by him was decisive and binding. In controversial questions he was the ultimate appeal, the leading authority even in related branches of knowledge. A few only he honoured with his letters. That man, however, whom he chose so to honour would receive in a single letter enough stimuli to set him off on years of study, the results of which – in the view of the mind whence they had sprung – were foregone conclusions. Personally he had no dealings with anyone. He refused all invitations. Whenever any chair

of oriental philology fell vacant, it was offered first to him. Polite but contemptuous, he invariably declined.

He had not, he averred, been born to be an orator. Payment for his work would give him a distaste for it. In his own humble opinion, those unproductive popularizers to whom instruction in the grammar schools was entrusted, should occupy the university chairs also; then genuine, creative research workers would be able to devote themselves exclusively to their own work. As it was there was no shortage of mediocre intelligences. Should he give lectures, the high demands which he would necessarily make upon an audience would naturally very much reduce its numbers. As for examinations, not a single candidate, as far as he could see, would be able to pass them. He would make it a point of honour to fail these young immature students at least until their thirtieth year, by which time, either through very boredom or through a dawning of real seriousness, they must have learnt something, if only a very little. He regarded the acceptance of candidates whose memories had not been most carefully tested in the lecture halls of the faculty as a totally useless, if not indeed a questionable, practice. Ten students, selected by the most strenuous preliminary tests, would, provided they remained together, achieve far more than they could do when permitted to mingle with a hundred beer-swilling dullards, the general run of university students. His doubts were therefore of the most serious and fundamental nature. He could only request the faculty to withdraw an offer which, although intended no doubt to show the high esteem in which they held him, was not one which he could accept in that spirit.

At scholastic conferences, where there is usually a great deal of talk, Kien was a much-discussed personality. The learned gentlemen, who for the greater part of their lives were silent, timid and myopic mice, on these occasions, every two years or so, came right out of themselves; they

welcomed each other, stuck the most inapposite heads together, whispered nonsense in corners and toasted each other clumsily at the dinner table. Deeply moved and profoundly gratified, they raised aloft the banner of learning and upheld the integrity of their aims. Over and over again in all languages they repeated their vows. They would have kept them even without taking them. In the intervals they made bets. Would Kien really come this time? He was more spoken of than a merely famous colleague; his behaviour excited curiosity. But he would not trade on his fame; for the last ten years he had stubbornly refused invitations to banquets and congresses where, in spite of his youth, he would have been warmly acclaimed; he announced for every conference an important paper, which was then read for him from his own manuscript by another scholar: all this his colleagues regarded as mere postponement. The time would come – perhaps this was the time – when he would suddenly make his appearance, would graciously accept the applause which his long retirement had made only the more vociferous, and would permit himself to be acclaimed president of the assembly, an office which was only his due, and which indeed he arrogated to himself after his own fashion even by his absence. But his learned colleagues were mistaken. Kien did not appear. The more credulous of them lost their bets.

At the last minute he refused. Sending the paper he had written to a privileged person, he would add some ironical expressions of regret. In the event of his colleagues finding time for serious study in the intervals of a programme so rich in entertainment – an eventuality which in the interests of their general satisfaction he could hardly desire – he asked leave to lay before the conference this small contribution to knowledge, the result of two years' work. He would carefully save up any new and surprising conclusions to which his researches might have brought him for moments such as these. Their effects and the discussions to

which they gave rise, he would follow from a distance, suspiciously and in detail, as though probing their textual accuracy. The gatherings were ready enough to accept his contempt. Eighty out of every hundred present relied entirely on his judgment. His services to science were inestimable. Long might he live. To most of them indeed his death would have been a severe shock.

Those few who had known him in his earlier years had forgotten what his face was like. Repeatedly he received letters asking for his photograph. He had none, he would answer, nor did he intend to have one taken. Both statements were true. But he had willingly agreed to a different sort of concession. As a young man of thirty he had, without however making any other testamentary dispositions, bequeathed his skull with all its contents to an institute for cranial research. He justified this step by considering the advantage to be gained if it could be scientifically proved that his truly phenomenal memory was the result of a particular structure, or perhaps even a heavier weight, of brain. Not indeed that he considered – so he wrote to the head of the institute – that memory and genius were the same thing, a theory all too widely accepted of recent years. He himself was no genius. Yet it would be unscholarly to deny that the almost terrifying memory at his disposal had been remarkably useful in his learned researches. He did indeed carry in his head a library as well-provided and as reliable as his actual library, which he understood was so much discussed. He could sit at his writing desk and sketch out a treatise down to the minutest detail without turning over a single page, except in his head. Naturally he would check quotations and sources later out of the books themselves; but only because he was a man of conscience. He could not remember any single occasion on which his memory had been found at fault. His very dreams were more precisely defined than those of most people. Blurred images without form or colour were unknown in any

of the dreams which he had hitherto recollected. In his case night had no power to turn things topsy turvy; the noises he heard could be exactly referred to their cause of origin; conversations into which he entered were entirely reasonable; everything retained its normal meaning. It was outside his sphere to examine the probable connection between the accuracy of his memory and the lucidity of his dreams. In all humility he drew attention to the facts alone, and hoped that the personal data which he had taken the liberty of recording would be regarded as a sign neither of pretentiousness nor garrulity.

Kien called to mind one or two more facts from his daily life, which showed his retiring, untalkative and wholly unpresumptuous nature in its true light. But his irritation at the insolent and insufferable fellow who had first asked him the way and then abused him, grew greater with every step. There is nothing else I can do, he said at last; he stepped aside into the porch of a house, looked round – nobody was watching him – and drew a long narrow notebook from his pocket. On the title page, in tall, angular letters was written the word: STUPIDITIES. His eyes rested at first on this. Then he turned over the pages; more than half the note-book was full. Everything he would have preferred to forget he put down in this book. Date, time and place came first. Then followed the incident which was supposed to illustrate the stupidity of mankind. An apt quotation, a new one for each occasion, formed the conclusion. He never read these collected examples of stupidity; a glance at the title page sufficed. Later on he thought of publishing them under the title ‘Morning Walks of a Sinologist’.

He drew out a sharply pointed pencil and wrote down on the first empty page: ‘September 23rd, 7.45 a.m. In Mut Strasse a person crossed my path and asked me the way to Mut Strasse. In order not to put him to shame, I made no answer. He was not to be put off and asked again, several times; his bearing was courteous. Suddenly his eye fell upon

the street sign. He became aware of his stupidity. Instead of withdrawing as fast as he could – as I should have done in his place – he gave way to the most unmeasured rage and abused me in the vulgarest fashion. Had I not spared him in the first place, I would have spared myself this painful scene. Which of us was the stupider?'

With that last sentence he proved that he did not draw the line even at his *own* failings. He was pitiless towards everyone. Gratified, he put away his notebook and forgot the man in the Mut Strasse. While he was writing, his books had slipped into an uncomfortable position. He shifted them into their right place. At the next street corner he was startled by an Alsatian. Swift and sure-footed the dog cleared itself a path through the crowd. At the extremity of a tautened lead it tugged a blind man. His infirmity – for anyone who failed to notice the dog – was further emphasized by the white stick which he carried in his right hand. Even those passers-by who were in too much of a hurry to stare at the blind man, cast an admiring glance at the dog. He pushed them gently to one side with his patient muzzle. As he was a fine, handsome dog they bore with him gladly. Suddenly the blind man pulled his cap off his head and, clutching it in the same hand as his white stick, held it out towards the crowd. 'To buy my dog bones!' he begged. Coins showered into it. In the middle of the street a crowd gathered round the two of them. The traffic was held up: luckily there was no policeman at this corner to direct it. Kien observed the beggar from close at hand. He was dressed with studied poverty and his face seemed educated. The muscles round his eyes twitched continually – he winked, raised his eyebrows and wrinkled his forehead – so that Kien mistrusted him and decided to regard him as a fraud. At that moment a boy of about twelve came up, hurriedly pushed the dog to one side and threw into the cap a large heavy button. The blind man stared in front of him and thanked him, perhaps in the slightest degree more

warmly than before. The clink of the button as it fell into the cap had sounded like the ring of gold. Kien felt a pang in his heart. He caught the boy by the scruff of the neck and cuffed him over the head with his brief-case. ‘For shame,’ he said, ‘deceiving a blind man!’ Only after he had done it did he recollect what was in the brief-case: books. He was horrified. Never before had he taken so great a risk. The boy ran off howling. To restore his normal and far less exalted level of compassion, Kien emptied his entire stock of small change into the blind man’s cap. The bystanders approved aloud; to himself the action seemed more petty and cautious than the preceding one. The dog set off again. Immediately after, just as a policeman appeared on the scene, both leader and led had resumed their brisk progress.

Kien took a private vow that if he should ever be threatened by blindness, he would die of his own free will. Whenever he met a blind man this same cruel fear clutched at him. Mutes he loved: the deaf, the lame and other kinds of cripples meant nothing to him; the blind disturbed him. He could not understand why they did not make an end of themselves. Even if they could read braille, their opportunities for reading were limited. Eratosthenes, the great librarian of Alexandria, a scholar of universal significance who flourished in the third century of the pre-Christian era and held sway over more than half a million manuscript scrolls, made in his eightieth year a terrible discovery. His eyes began to refuse their office. He could still see but he could not read. Another man might have waited until he was completely blind. He felt that to take leave of his books was blindness enough. Friends and pupils implored him to stay with them. He smiled wisely, thanked them, and in a few days starved himself to death.

Should the time come this great example could easily be followed even by the lesser Kien, whose library comprised a mere twenty-five thousand volumes.

The remaining distance to his own house he completed at a quickened pace. It must be past eight o’clock. At eight o’clock his work began; unpunctuality caused him acute irritation. Now and again, surreptitiously he felt his eyes. They focused correctly; they felt comfortable and unthreatened.

His library was situated on the fourth and topmost floor of No. 24 Ehrlich Strasse. The door of the flat was secured by three highly complicated locks. He unlocked them, strode across the hall, which contained nothing except an umbrella and coat-stand, and entered his study. Carefully he set down the brief-case on an armchair. Then once and again he paced the entire length of the four lofty, spacious communicating rooms which formed his library. The entire wall-space up to the ceiling was clothed with books. Slowly he lifted his eyes towards them. Skylights had been let into the ceiling. He was proud of his roof-lighting. The windows had been walled up several years before after a determined struggle with his landlord. In this way he had gained in every room a fourth wall-space: accommodation for more books. Moreover illumination from above, which lit up all the shelves equally, seemed to him more just and more suited to his relations with his books. The temptation to watch what went on in the street – an immoral and time-wasting habit – disappeared with the side windows. Daily, before he sat down to his writing desk, he blessed both the idea and its results, since he owed to them the fulfilment of his dearest wish: the possession of a well-stocked library, in perfect order and enclosed on all sides, in which no single superfluous article of furniture, no single superfluous person could lure him from his serious thoughts.

The first of the four rooms served for his study. A huge old writing desk, an armchair in front of it, a second armchair in the opposite corner were its only furniture. There crouched besides an unobtrusive divan, willingly overlooked by its master: he only slept on it. A movable pair of steps was

propped against the wall. It was more important than the divan, and travelled in the course of a day from room to room. The emptiness of the three remaining rooms was not disturbed by so much as a chair. Nowhere did a table, a cupboard, a fireplace interrupt the multi-coloured monotony of the bookshelves. Handsome deep-pile carpets, the uniform covering of the floor, softened the harsh twilight which, mingling through wide-open communicating doors, made of the four separate rooms one single lofty hall.

Kien walked with a stiff and deliberate step. He set his feet down with particular firmness on the carpets; it pleased him that even a footfall such as his waked not the faintest echo. In his library it would have been beyond the power even of an elephant to pound the slightest noise out of that floor. For this reason he set great store by his carpets. He satisfied himself that the books were still in the order in which he had been forced to leave them an hour before. Then he began to relieve his brief-case of its contents. When he came in, it was his habit to lay it down on the chair in front of the writing desk. Otherwise he might perhaps have forgotten it and have sat down to his work before he had tidied away its contents; for at eight o'clock he felt a very strong compulsion to begin his work. With the help of the ladder he distributed the volumes to their appointed places. In spite of all his care – since it was already late, he was hurrying rather more than usual – the last of the books fell from the third bookshelf, a shelf for which he did not even have to use the ladder. It was no other than Mencius beloved above all the rest. 'Idiot!' he shrieked at himself. 'Barbarian! Illiterate!' tenderly lifted the book and went quickly to the door. Before he had reached it an important thought struck him. He turned back and pushed the ladder as softly as he could to the site of the accident. Mencius he laid gently down with both hands on the carpet at the foot of the ladder. Now he could go to the door. He opened it and called into the hall:

‘Your best duster, please!’

Almost at once the housekeeper knocked at the door which he had lightly pushed to. He made no answer. She inserted her head modestly through the crack and asked:

‘Has something happened?’

‘No, give it to me.’

She thought she could detect a complaint in this answer. He had not intended her to. She was too curious to leave the matter where it was. ‘Excuse me, Professor!’ she said reproachfully, stepped into the room and saw at once what had happened. She glided over to the book. Below her blue starched skirt, which reached to the floor, her feet were invisible. Her head was askew. Her ears were large, flabby and prominent. Since her right ear touched her shoulder and was partly concealed by it, the left looked all the bigger. When she talked or walked her head waggled to and fro. Her shoulders waggled too, in accompaniment. She stooped, lifted up the book and passed the duster over it carefully at least a dozen times. Kien did not attempt to forestall her. Courtesy was abhorrent to him. He stood by and observed whether she performed her work seriously.

‘Excuse me, a thing like that can happen, standing up on a ladder.’

Then she handed the book to him, like a plate newly polished. She would very gladly have begun a conversation with him. But she did not succeed. He said briefly, ‘Thank you’ and turned his back on her. She understood and went. She had already placed her hand on the door knob when he turned round suddenly and asked with simulated friendliness:

‘Then this has often happened to you?’

She saw through him and was genuinely indignant: ‘Excuse me, Professor.’ Her ‘Excuse me’ struck through her unctuous tones, sharp as a thorn. She will give notice, he thought; and to appease her explained himself:

‘I only meant to impress on you what these books represent in terms of money.’

She had not been prepared for so affable a speech. She did not know how to reply and left the room pacified. As soon as she had gone, he reproached himself. He had spoken about books like the vilest tradesman. Yet in what other way could he enforce the respectful handling of books on a person of her kind? Their real value would have no meaning for her. She must believe that the library was a speculation of his. What people! What people!

He bowed involuntarily in the direction of the Japanese manuscripts, and, at last, sat down at his writing desk.

CHAPTER II

THE SECRET

EIGHT years earlier Kien had put the following advertisement in the paper:

> A man of learning who owns an exceptionally large library wants a responsibly-minded housekeeper. Only applicants of the highest character need apply. Unsuitable persons will be shown the door. Money no object.

Therese Krumbholz was at that time in a good position in which she had hitherto been satisfied. She read exhaustively every morning, before getting breakfast for her employers, the advertisement columns of the daily paper, to know what went on in the world. She had no intention of ending her life in the service of a vulgar family. She was still a young person, the right side of fifty, and hoped for a place with a single gentleman. Then she could have things just so; with women in the house it's not the same. But you couldn't expect her to give up her good place for nothing. She'd know who she had to do with before she gave in her notice. You didn't catch her with putting things in the papers, promising the earth to respectable women. You hardly get inside the door and they start taking liberties. Alone in the world now for thirty-three years and such a thing had never happened to her yet. She'd take care it never did, what's more.

This time the advertisement hit her right in the eye. The phrase 'Money no object' made her pause; then she read the sentences, all of which stood out in heavy type, several times backwards and forwards. The tone impressed her: here was a man. It flattered her to think of herself as an applicant of the highest character. She saw the unsuitable