What's in a Name

Bibliomysteries

by Thomas H. Cook, 1947–

Published: 2013

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

* * *

ALTMAN HAD NEVER SEEN New York dressed so gaily. Bunting hung from every window, and Broadway was decked out in various elaborations of red, white and blue. There'd been an enormous parade earlier in the day, and it had left a festive atmosphere in its wake, people laughing and talking and in a thousand different ways expressing the joy they felt at what this day—November 11, 1968, the 50th Anniversary of Armistice Day—had commemorated.

Altman, himself, could hardly believe the day had actually come. Fifty years since the Great War had ended, and the unlikely predictions of a few cock-eyed optimists had proven true. It really had been “the war to end all wars.”

As he walked toward the little bookstore where he was to give his talk, it struck him that he’d never have thought it possible that the world would remain at peace for five decades after that odious treaty his native Germany had been forced to sign in that humiliating little railway car near Compiegne on what had been fatefully recorded as “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” of 1918.

At the time, Altman could not have imagined that this treaty, with its many dreadful provisions, would actually put an end to war in Europe. Nor had he been alone in his doubts. The great economist, John Maynard Keynes, no less, had predicted that a second world war would inevitably result from this sorry peace, one that had saddled Germany with an impossible burden of reparations. In fact, it had been the resulting inflation, with its consequent social chaos, that had urged Altman to leave Germany and come to America, abandon impoverished, defeated Berlin for bountiful, victorious New York. To leave that world behind had been his goal in coming to America, and now, on this splendid anniversary of fifty years of world peace, he felt certain that he’d truly escaped it.

For that reason, it was with complete confidence that his life had been the result of his own wise decisions that Altman entered the bookstore where he was to speak, and after a few pleasantries to the audience, began his talk.

He’d finished it only a few minutes later, exactly as planned, and just in time to conclude with his customary summation.

“Therefore, despite the magisterial splendor of the language Thomas Carlyle employed in his great book, *The Hero in History*,” Altman said, “his theory that the course of history can be changed by a single human being simply isn’t true.” He felt quite satisfied with the thoroughly convincing argument he’d made against Carlyle. Not bad, he thought, for a man who was simply a rare book dealer who specialized in books and manuscripts in his native tongue, particularly those written just after the Great War, when Germany had seemed on the brink of economic and social collapse, a dangerously spinning maelstrom from which anything might have emerged.

Even better, the attendance was greater than he’d expected given the 50th Anniversary Armistice Day parties that were no doubt planned for this particular evening. In light of those festivities, Altman had hardly expected anyone to show up for his talk, despite the fact that the History Bookstore catered to a well-educated audience.

“Roman history would have followed the same course without Caesar,” Altman added now, “and France would have followed the same course without Napoleon.”

He thought of his vast collection of books and manuscripts, a bibliophile’s dream, shelves and shelves of works from the most famous to the most obscure writers. How thoroughly he’d searched through them, not in order to disprove Carlyle, but to support his theory that a great man could change the world. But in the end he’d come to the opposite conclusion.

"A nation may look for a hero who can restore its optimism and revitalize its faith in itself," Altman said. "But history is made by great forces, not great men." He smiled. "This is the conclusion to which I have come after many, many years of study." He paused, then said, "Any questions?"

There were a few, all of them intelligent, and Altman answered them graciously, and even with a bit of humor.

"All right, well, thank you for coming," Altman said after the last of them had been addressed.

With that the members of his audience began to pick up their belongings.

He'd expected them all to have trundled off into the evening by the time he'd returned his notes to his briefcase, but as he glanced up, he saw that one of them remained, an old man, quite pale, with white hair, who sat staring at him fixedly and a little quizzically.

Perhaps, Altman thought, there'll be one final question.

He was right.

"Mr. Altman," the old man said. "It was very interesting, your talk."

The old man remained where Altman had first seen him, seated third chair from the aisle in the second row. He was dressed in dark blue trousers, with a shirt that was a lighter shade of blue. There was something disheveled about him, a sense of buttons in the wrong holes, of trouser legs with uneven cuffs, but it was the slight tremor Altman now noticed more than anything else about the poor fellow. It was in his head and in his hands, and it made him look quite frail, as if precariously holding on to life, like an autumn leaf.

"I'm glad you found my remarks interesting," Altman said.

The old man smiled shyly. "I would like to have a great many books, as you do," he said, "but I am on a pension."

"I understand," Altman said, then made his way up the aisle, his mind on the chicken salad sandwich waiting for him at the diner on 83rd and Broadway, a treat he allowed himself despite his doctor's warnings about mayonnaise.

"Do you remember the *Realschule?* In Linz?"

Altman stopped dead, astonished by the question. "The *Realschule* in Linz?"

The old man struggled to his feet. "You were a student there before the Great War."

"Yes, I was," Altman told him.

He had not thought of the *Realschule* in a great many years. Why should he? He'd come to America a few years after the war, a journey funded by his wealthy Berlin parents despite their objections to his "go West young man" argument for leaving Germany and moving to the New World. It was a position Altman had found ridiculous in its patriotism, his father's feeling that despite the horrible times being endured by Germany in the wake of the Great War, its "noble sons" should remain and rebuild the homeland.

"I was there also," the old man said in a voice that was little above a whisper. "At the Realschule."

"Really?" Altman said. "After the Great War, there can't be many of us left now, can there?" He shook his head. "Such a slaughterer of young men, that war."

The old man nodded, and the wave of straight white hair that lay across his brow drooped slightly. "Slaughter," he murmured, "yes."

There was something disturbing about this old man, and for that reason, Altman felt a curious urge to get away from him. In addition, that chicken salad sandwich was calling to him powerfully. And yet, he also felt called to engage this poor fellow a little longer. Evidently they'd been in school together, and clearly this unfortunate and apparently infirm old gentleman had not had an easy life, a fact that seemed to waft up from him, like an odor.

"Did you like the *Realschule?*" Altman asked.

The old man shook his head.

"Why not?" Altman asked, since he'd loved his time at the *Realschule,* even fell in love there, this girl of his dreams now rising to his consciousness after so many years, blond, with radiant blue eyes, still a vision to him.

"I was not treated well," the old man said.

Altman could find no way to respond to this, and so merely stared silently at the luckless fellow whose conversation was still keeping him from his sandwich, this spectral figure, pale as a ghost, a phantom so frail he appeared insubstantial, his hat trembling in his oddly shaped fingers.

"There was a bully," the old man added.

And indeed this unfortunate fellow did look like one of life's perennial victims, bullied not just in the schoolyard, but no doubt forever after that, bullied on the factory floor, or in the lumberyard, bullied, as it were, by the stars above, always the one at the back of the line, the one who gets the cold soup, and even that, spilled upon him. What was the word those awful Polish Jews who'd worked in his father's factory had had for such a creature? Ah, yes, Altman thought: *schlemazel.*

"I'm sorry to hear it," Altman said, "My own experience at the Realschule was quite pleasant."

"You were smart," the old man said.

Altman waved his hand as if to bat away such flattery despite the fact that he quite enjoyed being remembered in such a way. But then, he had been smart, hadn't he? In fact, he still was.

"I was not smart," the old man said.

And so even nature had proved a bully to this poor fellow, Altman thought, proved a bully by shortchanging him in the critical matter of intelligence. He'd been shortchanged in height as well, and from the look of him, the crumpled gray hat, the threadbare jacket, he'd never known success in any venture. What an unfortunate wretch, Altman thought, and for the first time in a long time, calculated his own good fortune, born into a wealthy family, able to pursue his intellectual interests without fear of want, a man now living contentedly among his many books and manuscripts. His life, he decided, had been good.

"I did not distinguish myself in my studies," the old man said. He smiled sadly. "I have never distinguished myself." He shrugged. "Well, maybe a little during the Great War."

The old man's brown eyes were somewhat milky and the whites were faintly yellow. This is not a well man, Altman told himself. Even in health, shortchanged.

"Were you in the Great War, Ziggy?" the old man asked.

Ziggy!

Altman had not been called Ziggy since his school days in, yes, the Realschule in Linz. His father and all his relatives had called him Ziegfried then, but after coming to America, he'd switched first to Franz, then to Franklin, and it was by this name, Franklin Altman, that he'd been known ever since: Franklin Altman on his marriage license, on his business cards, on… everything. Ziegfried, and most certainly Ziggy, had, like so many things from his past, simply disappeared.

"Yes, I was in the war," Altman said proudly, despite the fact that he'd never actually seen combat. His superior intelligence had served him well in that department, too, so that he'd worked in Berlin throughout the conflict, a pampered member of the Intelligence Service who'd never so much as seen a trench or fired a rifle.

"You fought on the side of the Fatherland, of course," the old man said.

What an odd remark, Altman thought. Of course he'd fought—well, at least in a matter of speaking—but certainly on the German side. He looked at the old man sternly, wondered if he'd just been insulted.

"Of course on the side of the Fatherland," Altman answered with only a slight hint of offence at the question.

"I was wounded twice," the old man said, "and gassed at Ypres."

Altman thought of the many dead, the dreadful way they'd died: shot to ribbons, blown to bits, buried alive in the muddy expanse of No Man's Land. "In Flanders Field the poppies grow," he recited by way of giving homage to these fallen comrades. "Between the crosses row on row."

It was obvious that this poor fellow had never heard this well-known verse, and yet he seemed deeply moved by it.

"So many died," he said. Then, after a pause, he added, "You were in the Intelligence Service."

"Yes, I was," Altman said. "How did you know?"

"There was a picture after the war," the old man answered. "All of you got medals. You were in the picture. I remembered you from the *Realschule*. You were standing next to the Kaiser."

Altman vividly recalled that proud moment, all of the members of the Intelligence Service High Command on the steps of the Reichstag, proud even in defeat. It was the last time the old aristocracy had seemed intact, and he suddenly felt an unmistakable nostalgia for the ease and elegance of his former life, the great houses and the balls, a Germany not yet burdened with reparations or afflicted with runaway inflation, not yet the suffering object of French and British revenge.

"We needed to believe in ourselves, we Germans," the old man said in the melancholy way, as Altman observed, of the vanquished.

"Indeed, we did," Altman agreed, and suddenly felt a powerful kinship with this former countryman. As if urged toward him by the pull of their shared blood, he offered his hand. "So, we are old soldiers then, you and I."

The old man did not take the offered hand.

"In Ypres we were trying to get behind the British lines," he said. "It was a secret plan, through a tunnel. When we came out, we were supposed to be behind the lines." He stopped suddenly, as if by machine gun fire. "But they were waiting there, the British."

"Waiting?" Altman asked hesitantly.

“They knew we were coming,” the old man explained. “They shot at us on all sides.” His eyes grew tense. “They shot Max. Gerhardt, too. Good boys, those two. Bavarian farm boys.”

Altman watched him with a sudden wariness, as if, step by step, he were being led down a dark corridor. “War is terrible,” he said after a moment.

“Betrayal is terrible,” the old man said. “To be stabbed in the back by one of your own.”

“One of your own?” Altman asked, now lowering his hand since it appeared the old man either had not seen him offer it or had declined the offer. “Why do you say that?”

“Because someone in the Intelligence Service sent us into the tunnel,” the old man answered.

“How do you know that?”

“They were the only ones who knew about the mission,” the old man answered. “It was a secret to everyone but them.”

“So you think one of my colleagues betrayed you,” Altman said tensely. “That is a terrible accusation.”

“No one else knew,” the old man said. He shook his head and lowered his voice slightly. “Good Bavarian boys,” he said, almost to himself. “Poor boys.” His melancholy lay like a black veil across his face. “So much time has passed since those dark days,” he said.

“And we have both grown old.” Altman said and again offered his hand. “Old comrades in arms.”

This time, the old man took Altman’s hand and shook it weakly.

“Fifty years now,” Altman added as he started to withdraw his hand from the old man’s grip. “Fifty years and…”

“You went to England,” the old man interrupted, squeezing his fingers more tightly around Altman’s hand as he did so. “After the war.”

Cautiously, Altman nodded. Why did talking to this poor fellow make him feel as if he were walking across a minefield? He was small and sick. What could he do to a man of Altman’s robust health and mountainous build? And yet, there was something fearsome about him, some dark energy. Inside this old man, he thought, there is a fiery core.

“And you started to collect rare books,” the old man added as he finally released Altman’s hand.

“Yes,” Altman said.

The old man smiled. “You became a bibliophile. That is the word, yes? You were always good with words. Back at the *Realschule,* you were always reading.”

“Was I?”

“English, always reading English,” the old man said. “You are also maybe an Anglophile?”

Before Altman could answer, the old man laughed. “So many big words I have now.” He chuckled softly, though it seemed to Altman that it was less a laugh than a disguised rebuke.

“At the *Realschule,* I was always good with speaking,” the old man said. “I wanted to be a debater, but the bully stopped me.”

"Who was this bully?" Altman asked. "I don't remember a bully. I never saw anyone physically attack a..."

The old man stepped back slightly. "Oh, it was not physical," he said. "It was all with words. You would understand this, since you are a bibliophile. You would understand the power of words, yes? You collect words, isn't that so? You collect words in books."

"I do," Altman said cautiously, as if he were being accused of having such an interest, one he'd never thought it necessary to defend. And yet this old man did make him feel defensive. Suddenly, he thought he knew why.

"Am I the bully?" he asked. "Did I bully you in some way?"

"No, never," the old man said softly, then with a curious darkening of his tone. "I was invisible to you."

There it was again, Altman thought, a vague accusation. "I'm sorry if I... never noticed you."

And it was clear that Altman hadn't noticed this poor fellow. In fact, even now he found that other than those of his closest friends, he couldn't recall any of his fellow students at the *Realschule.* He remembered the faces of certain boys and girls, but that was all. Save for Magda, of course. He would always remember Magda.

"I would not have expected you to notice me," the old man said softly. "You were from a fine family. For you, the *Realschule* in Linz was just..." He looked at Altman to finish his sentence.

"Temporary," Altman said. "I was only sent there for a year while my father arranged our family's move to Vienna."

"Where you stayed until the war?"

"Yes, and where my father stayed even after the war," Altman said. "At least for a few years."

"Your family moved to Vienna, yes," the old man said. "This was mentioned at the time." He smiled. "And so, of course, the *Realschule* was for you something—as you say—temporary."

"Still, I'm sorry," Altman told him. "So do forgive me for not recalling you."

"Of course," the old man replied.

"Good night, then," Altman said.

With that, he started to move on down the aisle, but in a movement far quicker than Altman would have expected from such a pale and sickly old gentleman, the man again grabbed his hand.

"We both still have our German accents, Ziggy," he said.

"Time cannot obliterate everything," Altman told him as he gently pulled his hand free.

"And never the things of youth," the old man agreed. "The things that made us. Particularly our crimes, yes?"

"Our crimes?" Altman asked, then added, "Yes, I suppose so."

The man suddenly appeared embarrassed. "Forgive me for troubling you, Zig..." he stopped, straightened himself like a low ranking soldier before an officer, then said, "Herr Altman."

"No trouble at all," Altman said, then moved on down the aisle, empty seats on both sides. At the end of it, and for a reason he could not fathom, he stopped and turned back toward the front of the room, where the old man now sat, facing forward, peering at the lectern, his shoulders drooping beneath a jacket that was not only threadbare, as Altman had previously observed, but perhaps a size too big, something purchased at a thrift store, no doubt, so that he abruptly felt a seizure of pity for this old fellow, so lonely, as it seemed, at the end of an unfortunate life. Might he have known some modest glory, Altman asked himself, had history turned his way? Might he have loved beautiful women, had accomplished children, felt the reverence of the few, if not the adulation of the multitude?

He glanced at the clock that hung on the opposite wall and suddenly considered the passage of his own life. He was a widower, with children in distant cities, a man with a solitary evening before him. Normally he would have gone back to his apartment to work on his catalogue, a large collection of books and manuscripts written after the Great War, the works of those who'd known the fire and thunder of battle, along with the great unrest that had followed the Peace of Versailles, some of which he'd cited this very night during his talk on Carlyle. As a way of spending the remainder of his evening, he did not find this in the least off-putting. Still, would it be so bad to indulge this other old man, this compatriot—though admittedly at a distance—of those ancient, sanguinary fields, for a little while, perhaps find a way to suggest to the poor fellow that he was not so lacking in distinction as he so clearly thought himself? Earlier, he'd had a vaguely unsettling sense that the old man was accusing him of something, but none of that remained. Now all he felt was pity.

"Have you had dinner?" he blurted with a suddenness that surprised him.

The old man had resumed his seat, his head deeply bowed. He did not move or in any other way respond to Altman's questions. Could it be that this unfortunate old gentleman had simply been unable to imagine himself being asked to dinner by the distinguished "Herr Altman?" If so, how very, very sad, Altman thought.

And so he strode back to where the old man sat, his hands folded over his lap as if in stern guardianship of the package in his lap. A rectangular package, as Altman observed, wrapped in cheap brown paper and tied with a string.

A manuscript!

Ah, so that was what had brought this unfortunate man out into the rain, Altman thought, he has a manuscript he no doubt thinks valuable. It would have no value at all, of course. As a collector, he'd been approached untold times by people clutching books and manuscripts they felt valuable, then untied this same gray string and drawn back this same brown paper only to find… a tattered, forty-year-old edition of *Doctor Faustus,* or the nearest thing imaginable to a book club edition of Heinrich Heine. And yet these poor, ignorant souls had held on to their "precious" treasures either lovingly or avariciously. It was often hard to tell which.

But not now, not with this fellow. It was clear that in his case, it was love. Altman could see it in the gentle way his gnarled fingers curled around the corners of the manuscript, his index fingers moving softly back and forth, as if he were comforting an infant. In fact, he had never seen anyone touch a book with such tenderness. It was as if, through his fingers, the old man were singing it a lullaby.

"Excuse me?" Altman said softly.

The old man looked up.

"I was thinking we might have dinner together," Altman said.

"Dinner… together?"

"Yes," Altman said. "I've a favorite place a few blocks from here. They make a wonderful chicken salad sandwich."

The old man peered at him hesitantly. "I am a pensioner," he reminded him.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Altman said expansively. "Dinner will be on me. Think of it as payment for the effort you made in coming out into the rain, coming to a bookstore and sitting through my poor remarks."

"Oh, no," the old man protested. "I found your remarks quite persuasive."

"Please, let's have dinner," Altman said cheerfully, then added an unexpectedly poignant truth, "Sometimes I grow tired of eating alone."

"I wouldn't want to impose upon your time," the old man said hesitantly.

"Oh, no, not at all," Altman said.

"Well, if you're sure," the old man said, then pressed the package to his chest and began to rise. "If you're sure I'm not imposing."

"Not at all, I assure you."

Altman saw that the poor fellow was having trouble getting to his feet, and so he reached over and tucked his hand under his shoulder.

"Easy does it," he said with a quick laugh. "Old bones are not easily commanded, are they?" He reached for the package, thinking that it might be easier for the old man to get to his feet without it, but rather than release it, he clung to it all the more tightly.

"It's all right," the old man said, "I'm used to carrying it."

"Really?" Altman asked. "You carry it everywhere?"

"It is the only thing I ever… created," the old man said.

Ah, so I was right, Altman thought, it *was* a lullaby.

Altman watched as the man drew on the black raincoat he'd earlier hung over the back of his chair. It was frayed at the sleeves and worn in the shoulders, proof once again that the poor fellow was of little means, so that Altman suddenly felt quite proud of himself for asking this old schoolmate to dinner, whoever he was. They were different certainly, he thought, and yet they'd both fled the ravages of postwar Germany, then helplessly watched as misfortune after misfortune had fallen upon their native land.

"To the right," he said to one who now seemed truly his fellow countryman, "the restaurant is only a couple of blocks away."

The rain had briefly fallen during Altman's talk, and the sidewalk was still wet and slippery. As they walked, Altman noticed that the old man had a slight limp.

"From the war?" he asked.

"No," the old man answered. "My job. My legs were broken on my job."

"Where did you work?"

"The shipyards," the old man answered. "The Brooklyn shipyards."

"What was your job?"

"I loaded cargo."

"And something fell on you?" Altman asked.

"A big crate," the old man said. "Of guns. It was marked *Steel Rods*, but the crate was full of guns. Hundreds of guns. Cartons of ammunition, too."

"Going where?"

"Palestine."

"Ah, yes," Altman said. "So much trouble there."

They reached the corner, where they were stopped by the traffic signal.

"I told the shipyard master," the old man continued, "and some people came and they took the guns away." He shrugged. "I'm sure they just sent them in another crate."

"Have you found other guns?"

The old man looked up and smiled softly. "They are always going there," he added. "To the Jews."

Altman nodded. He was well versed in the region's current troubles. After all, they'd been going on for over fifty years, and there was no solution in sight. Each year brought more conflict, a struggle that he suspected would never find resolution.

The light turned and the two of them moved forward, Altman at a pace far slower that he would normally have taken, the man limping along beside him. He could not imagine living such a life, and this made it all the more important for him to give this poor chap a decent dinner and some kindly conversation.

They reached the restaurant a few minutes later. Everyone knew Altman and made a great fuss over him, something that clearly impressed the old man.

"I'm a regular," Altman explained demurely.

"It's nice to be noticed," the old man said.

To live so unheralded a life seemed infinitely sad to Altman, never to be appreciated, never to be spoken to with respect or honored in any way. There is a sorrow in smallness, he decided, a pain that goes with being just another bit of microscopic plankton in a sea of green. He knew better than to give any hint of his pity, however, and so he cheerfully opened the menu though he, as well as the entire staff, knew exactly what he'd order.

Once he'd ordered it, he handed the waiter the menu.

"And what about you?" he said to his guest.

The enormous menu lowered to reveal a face veiled in perplexity.

"I don't know," the old man said, then looked again, and after a moment ordered what Altman recognized was the single cheapest item available.

"Only a split pea soup?" he asked. "That's all you want?"

The old man nodded.

"All right, then," Altman said to the waiter, "A split pea soup for my good friend here."

When the soup came it was clear to Altman that the old fellow was hungry. Perhaps he should have guessed as much from the slightness of his frame, the loose hang of his skin. He had seen hunger before and so he found it odd, and perhaps even a bit disturbing, that the plenty of his years in America had caused him to forget the ghostly look of it, the sallow cheeks, the hollow eyes, the way the old man couldn't keep from taking two bites at a time of the bread that came with the soup, quickly wiping his mouth, then taking two more. Fressen was the German word for it: to eat like an animal.

"You were right," the old man said. "The food here is good."

Altman nodded. "They have great wiener schnitzel, too," he said, "and I sometimes have a Reuben sandwich. My doctor tells me that I shouldn't have pastrami, but I like it, and at a certain age, what's the point of being strict with oneself? We all end up dead in the end, isn't that so?"

"Yes, we all end up dead," the old man agreed. He sipped from his spoon, a loud slurp after which he seemed to see himself in Altman's eyes, see himself as hungry, and because of his hunger, pathetic. Slowly, he returned the spoon to the bowl and with a slow, sad movement, drew an errant wave of white hair back and away from his forehead. "We all end up dead in the end, yes," he repeated, "and after that, we cannot make amends."

"Amends for what?" Altman asked.

"As I said before, for our crimes," the old man answered.

Altman glanced at the package that now rested beside him in the booth they'd taken by the window and wondered if it was confessional. There had been such want after the Great War that he'd heard tales of murder, even of cannibalism. Could it be that this poor soul had…?

No, Altman told himself, you are being melodramatic. Still, the very presence of the man's manuscript worked like a question mark in his soul, a door he could not stop himself from cautiously prying open.

"It's a manuscript, isn't it?" he asked with a nod toward the package.

The old man nodded.

"Is it… about you?"

The old man nodded again, clearly disinclined to discuss it further, so that Altman decided to go in a different direction.

"It was hard to make your way after the war, yes?" he asked.

"Very hard," the old man said. He looked at Altman with a curious passion, one laced with what seemed a host of old angers. "It was terrible, what was done to us."

"Yes, terrible," Altman said. "Truly terrible. We were treated as monsters, a people who could commit any atrocity. They had made up these stories of the Hun. The British mostly, but the Americans, too. And the French. Terrible, terrible lies."

"All of them lies," the old man said in a kind of snarl that both surprised and alarmed Altman with its barely contained fury. "The land of Beethoven. The land of Goethe." He seemed overwhelmed with ire. "Killing babies. That's what they said in their lies. Killing women and old people. That is what they said we did."

"Exactly," Altman said. "Things no civilized people would do."

The old man looked away, his attention once again drawn to the world beyond the window. He seemed to be working very hard not to explode. Then, after a moment, his gaze drifted back to Altman. "Your uncle was an English teacher," he said. "At the *Realschule.* I was in his class."

"Really?"

"He was a very good teacher," the old man said.

Altman sat back slightly. "I'm quite sorry to say so, but I still can't quite recall you from those days."

"You were younger," the old man said. "I had to leave the *Realschule* the same year that you came to it."

"So, we were never actually classmates?"

The old man shook his head. “My name would mean nothing to you,” he said. “I saw you at school. That is all. In the playground or the hallway. Sometimes walking with your uncle.” His smile was thin, but not without warmth. “I admired you. Everyone said you were very smart. In math. In English.” With a trembling hand he reached for the spoon, then drew back, as if afraid of humiliating himself again. “In everything.” He glanced again toward the window, lingered a moment, then returned his attention to Altman. “I am seventy-nine,” he said.

“I’m seventy-five,” Altman said. “But there really isn’t much difference at our age, is there? We’re just two old men, you and I.”

The old man smiled but something in his eyes remained mirthless, so that he seemed to drift in a sea of bad memories, perhaps nightmarish ones. He had no doubt sought refuge in America as so many had done through the decades, Altman thought. But clearly, he’d found something considerably less than the Promised Land. Life was unfair, that was the long and the short of it, Altman decided. He remembered a Latin phrase his father had taught him, something written by Horace: *Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur: You need but change the name and this story is about you.* How true, he thought now as he briefly recalled his own journey out of the whirlwind.

The old man seemed almost to read Altman’s thoughts, or at least divine the direction of them.

“I could not make my way after the war,” he said. “It was chaos, and everywhere a new trouble. I am sure you recall those times.”

“Vividly, I’m afraid.”

The old man’s eyes grew cold. “It is dangerous to humiliate a people. A people can be like a cornered animal.”

Altman nodded. “That is true. And so they look for a hero, which is what I was speaking about tonight. A great leader. But a hero can’t change the history of a nation.”

The old man nodded. “We were looking for such a person,” he said. “It is true that we were looking. But you are right as you said in your talk. It would not have mattered. It is the great forces that matter, not one person.” He smiled. “So smart, Herr Altman, to know such things.”

Altman tried not to react to such flattery.

“I’m not a Marxist,” he said, “but Marx was right about one thing. It is great forces that determine great events. A man is carried on the stream of history. He cannot direct that stream or change its course.”

“This is true,” the old man said. He smiled, but it was a dark smile, laced with something that seemed to teeter on the edge of bitterness. “As a young man, I had great hopes for myself,” he said in the sad tone of a small, insignificant man admitting to having once had some great dream for himself.

It was a tone that touched Altman’s heart with such force that he reached out and patted the old man’s hand.

“Of course,” he said. “We all have such hopes in our youth.”

“But from your talk I have learned that nothing—not a man or a book or anything else—can change history,” the old man said. “Little things change little things, that is all. Like those Bavarian boys. Someone whispered into someone’s ear, or maybe sent a cable, and it was over for them." He looked at Altman tensely. "They were small, and a small thing took them away."

Altman again felt uncomfortably in the old man's sites.

"And a bully at school can only change the one he bullies," the old man added.

"History is nothing but the accumulation of such things," Altman said with complete confidence. "It is made by millions of small actions by small people who are themselves responding to great forces."

The old man was clearly not inclined to dispute the point with which he'd already expressed agreement, and so, as a matter of simple politeness, Altman changed the subject.

"So, after you left the *Realschule* in Linz, what did you do?" he asked.

The old man shrugged. "Nothing until I got older. And then I only changed my name."

Altman was relieved that the old man had now drawn his fingers away from the package and seemed quite abruptly to be a different track entirely. "Why did you do that?" he asked.

"Because I hated my father," the old man answered. "I had always hated him, but I was like other boys, I felt I should respect him, obey him. You know how we Germans are. We obey. It is what we do best."

"So it must have been hard for you, changing your name," Altman said. "I mean, to be so disrespectful of one's father."

"Very hard," the old man said. "It is not easy to deny your father, even when your father is a cruel man."

"So, you took a different name?" Altman asked.

"Yes," the old man said. "I took my grandmother's name. She was very kind, very warm. I wanted the name of someone kind and warm." He seemed to drift back to that distant time. "I wanted this name to comfort me because things had not gone well for me. I had no home. Living on scraps. Living in rags. It is terrible not to know when you will eat again, when you will wash again. It is terrible and you can go mad. Perhaps I went a little mad."

"After the war we all felt as if we no longer had a home," Altman said. "Everything was shattered."

"Did you go mad?" the old man asked bluntly.

"No," Altman said.

"Were you poor?"

"No, not poor."

"Your father helped you?"

"Yes," Altman answered, and felt weakened by that answer, pampered by that answer. Not just luckier than this old man, but unfairly, and thus grotesquely so. "Yes, he helped me."

"How did he help you?"

"He helped me get to America," Altman answered.

"How did he do that?"

"Well, there was something left after the war," Altman told him cautiously. "Some… money."

"But German money was worthless after the war."

Even more cautiously, Altman said, "There was other money."

"Other money?"

"Pounds," Altman said. "Francs. Dollars."

"The victor's money," the old man said. "Your father had a lot of that?"

"Some," Altman admitted. "Enough."

"Enough for you to leave Germany and come here, to America?"

Altman nodded.

The old man peered at him for a long time before he spoke again. "I could not leave Germany," he said. "Except for a little while, in Austria."

"Well, we thought of Austria as Germany, didn't we?" Altman asked. "The Pan-Germanic peoples. At least that was what the slogans said."

The old man nodded. "I remember the slogans."

"Austria," Altman whispered softly, now caught up in the history of his own life. "My father had business there. I was thinking of being in this business, but I wasn't cut out for it." He felt a tense chuckle break from him. "I was always more the scholarly type. I wanted to teach at the university, to write books." He shrugged. "But more than anything, I wanted to collect them. Especially German books."

"The call of the Fatherland," the old man whispered.

He was staring into the empty bowl of his soup, his gaze curiously intense, as if he were reading a lost future there.

"The call of the Fatherland," Altman repeated. "That's quite well put." He smiled. "Perhaps you should have been a writer."

The old man's fingers crawled over to the package, then spread over it like the legs of a spider. "I have only this."

"And you say that you have had it for a long time?" Altman asked.

"I wrote it after the war," the old man said. "It reminds me of what I was."

Altman suddenly felt a spike of dread move through him, sharp and tingling, like an electric charge. Once again, he thought of the old man's mention of crime, and once again he wondered if the book was a confession of some unspeakable act.

"It is about the way things were in our country," the old man said. A dark sparkle came into his eyes. "You remember how they were, I'm sure."

Altman did indeed remember how things had been in Germany after the war, the rise of extreme parties, the street fighting, a country coming apart at the seams.

"Germany was headed for an abyss," Altman said. "Communists and fascists attacking each other. The twin plagues. At the time, the direction seemed clear, and it was a very scary one."

"Is that why you left?" the old man asked. "Because you were afraid of what might happen?"

"Yes," Altman admitted.

"I left because of Elsa," the old man said.

"Elsa?"

"She was so sweet," the old man added. "So kind to me. She worked in the hotel." He looked at Altman knowingly. "You know what that means?"

"I do, yes," Altman answered.

"She was murdered."

"Murdered?" Altman asked.

"They said it was a rich man," the old man said. "A rich man who lived in Vienna."

"I see."

"It made me very angry that so sweet a girl should be murdered."

"No doubt," Altman said cautiously, now once again unaccountably tense in the old man's presence, like a man who suddenly sees a snake in the tall grass.

"A Jew," the old man added. "The rich man from Vienna."

Altman felt a wave of relief. He'd wondered if the old man had somehow thought his father the murderer. But luckily, he thought Elsa's murderer a Jew, which certainly removed his father from the list of suspects.

The old man nodded toward the package. "It's all in there. How I felt in those days."

"So your book is a memoir?" Altman asked, now hoping to get away from the disturbing subject of a poor, heart-of-gold prostitute murdered by a sinister and stereotypically wealthy Jew.

"It is, yes," the old man answered. "No one wanted to publish it. They said I had a silly name. Which is true. It held me back in those days after the war. You can't rise in the world if you have a silly name."

Altman felt the normal urge to ask what this name was, but he could see that it still embarrassed the old man. "Well, at least things got better," he said. "Germany came out of the darkness… unscathed." He looked at the manuscript, the way the old man's hand was now stroking it gently. "So," he said, "your book."

The old man said nothing, his sadness so deep, his disappointment so fathomless, Altman once again felt a wave of pity sweep over him.

"I'd like to read it," he said as he nodded toward the package. "Would you mind? You've said that has to do with Germany after the Great War, and I collect that sort of material. I plan to place my collection in an archive at some point. The collection of these… documents will be my legacy." He sat back and smiled broadly at being able to offer the old man a little sliver of immortality. "Your manuscript would have a permanent place in history."

The old man looked at the manuscript as if offering a long goodbye before his hand suddenly swept out dismissively, a gesture that suggest that at long last he had decided it had no value. "Take it then," he said. He picked up the manuscript and handed it to Altman. "I have no use for it."

"I shall treasure it," Altman said. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome," the old man said. He began to put on his raincoat. "Well, good night," he said and with those words, struggled to his feet, then reached into his pocket.

"No, please," Altman told him quickly. "It's my pleasure." He patted the manuscript softly. "Payment for this gift you have made to history."

The old man appeared quite touched by Altman's remark. "Perhaps my life might have some use, after all," he said softly as he got to his feet.

"By the way, what's your name?" Altman asked.

Rather than answer, the old man simply waved his hand as if to dismiss himself from Altman's interest, or the world's.

"It is a silly name," he said.

With that he drew on his coat with trembling hands, then with a soft nod, bid Altman good night.

Altman watched as the old fellow moved shakily down the aisle, then out into the night, the chill, the suddenly returning rain, all of which bestowed a deeper fragility upon his figure so that he seemed to Altman much like man himself, weak against the great forces that are arrayed against him, the ravages of time no less strong and ultimately overwhelming than vast social and economic forces no "hero"—Carlyle's magisterial language not withstanding—could alter or affect. Even so, one thing remained clear, this old man, along with millions of others, could have had it much worse. He'd fully expected it to get much worse on the day he left Germany. Most everyone had felt the same. The predictions had been terrible. That Germany would fall under the hand of dictatorship, that there would be yet another great war, one that, like the first, would engulf all of Europe, the whole world. He offered the forces of history a soft, appreciative smile, for they'd been kinder to the world than anyone had expected all those years go.

Still captured in the warm glow of that smile, Altman glanced down at the manuscript, then, on an impulse, untied the string and read the title page: *Mein Kampf* by *Adolph Schicklgruber.*

He smiled again.

Schicklgruber?

It was true what the old man said, Altman thought, it was indeed a silly name. But it wouldn't have mattered if he'd had a different one. The old man had hoped to change the world, but no single man could shape history. Only great forces could do that.

He glanced down at the manuscript again, smiled at the name. The old man had clearly blamed it for all his failure. He shook his head at so absurd an idea, for after all, he asked himself as he reached for his coat, what's in a name?