Vienna Blood

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Extract

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THE LONG, DESCENDING STREET was almost empty, and as Liebermann drew closer to the Danube Canal a dense frozen fog seemed to be building up. It curled around his legs, with feline curiosity. The ninth district, a bastion of respectable middle-class values, was strangely transformed, as if an old dowager had exchanged her wardrobe for that of a Circassian dancer. In her new garb of twisting diaphanous veils, she seemed suddenly equipped to deliver illicit pleasures. And perhaps — on this particular evening — she would . . .

Professor Freud had invited Liebermann to become a member of his Wednesday-evening Psychological Society long before its inaugural meeting. But so far a combination of factors — Clara, hospital work, Salieri — had stopped Liebermann from attending. Subsequently the society had been convening in his absence for over a month. When the first opportunity to attend finally presented itself, Liebermann dispatched a note to the professor expressing his earnest hope that the invitation was still standing. Freud's response was friendly and included a request that — if at all possible — Liebermann should bring with him some case material for discussion. So it was that Liebermann came to be clutching in his hand a manuscript provisionally titled *Herr B: Notes on a case of paranoia erotica.*

It occurred to Liebermann that Sigmund Freud's Psychological Society was, in many ways, similar to the numerous secret societies that congregated in Vienna. Once again, a charismatic leader had

gathered a small group of followers around him — a cabal who would spread the tenets of his doctrine and challenge the settled order of things. There was something about this city — *his* city — that attracted intrigue, conspiracy and sedition. Visionaries and prophets found it irresistible.

Liebermann suddenly remembered the lamp-posts outside the Opera House, the feet of which were cast in the form of four winged sphinxes. Then he recalled the sphinxes in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the sphinxes in the Belvedere gardens, and the sphinxes on Professor Freud's desk. The city was full of sphinxes . . .

Secrets, secrets, secrets.

Conscious of a mounting, almost childish, excitement Liebermann quickened his step.

The large doors of Berggasse 19 were open. He crossed the threshold and walked down the long cobbled entryway, his footsteps echoing in the enclosed space. At the other end of the passage were panels of black glass, which ordinarily would have afforded the prospect of a pretty little courtyard and a chestnut tree. But this evening they reflected back the semi-transparent image of a young doctor wearing a long astrakhan coat.

Liebermann turned right, ascended a small curved staircase and walked past a single spherical gas lamp that was mounted on a floridly ornate iron banister. It was surrounded by a foggy halo, the muted light of which barely illuminated a black lacquered door at the centre of which was a simple name-plate: PROF. Dr FREUD.

Liebermann rang the bell and was admitted by a maid who took his coat. He was ushered into Freud's waiting room, the decor of which conveyed an impression of shadowy opulence: red drapes and dark wood; a cabinet displaying a small collection of statuettes; and, on a pedestal, a large plaster copy of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*. The walls were covered with pictures that reflected Freud's preoccupation with

antiquities: Roman ruins, some eighteenth-century prints of classical scenes, and, inevitably, a sphinx, brooding in front of a pyramid. Around an oblong table sat Freud and three others.

'Ah, there you are,' cried the professor, rising energetically. 'I am delighted you could make it! And, if I am not mistaken, I observe that you have brought us some case material. *Paranoia erotica*, you say? Well, that will be a rare delight.'

Freud introduced his three companions, using only their surnames: Stekel, Reitler, and Kahane. Liebermann recognised the first two from Freud's Saturday lectures at the university. The third man was not familiar, but it transpired that he was the director of the Institute for Physical Therapeutic Methods. As they made polite conversation, Liebermann was surprised to discover that in spite of Kahane's professed interest in psychoanalysis he was still treating (or more accurately tormenting) his patients with electrotherapy.

A few minutes later Freud's final guest arrived. He was a man in his early thirties: a stocky individual whose facial features contracted disdainfully around a large nose. He wore round glasses, sported a small moustache, and his prominent chin was divided by a deep vertical cleft. Liebermann knew him to be Alfred Adler, a doctor to whom he had been introduced by a mutual friend the previous year. Liebermann had once been asked to accompany Adler at a party, and had been truly amazed by the power and sweetness of the singing voice that had issued from his crooked mouth. It was as if — by divine intercession — the man's deficiencies of appearance had been compensated for by an extraordinary musical gift.

Eventually, all the company were seated and Freud passed around a large box of cigars. As an incentive to partake, each place at the table was furnished with an attractive jade ashtray. No one refused, and as matches flared and dimmed the room became filled with clouds of billowing smoke.

The professor indicated that he was ready to begin. He announced that there would be two presentations: the first delivered by Doctor Stekel and the second by Doctor Liebermann (whom he also welcomed to the society). Proceedings would then be suspended for fifteen minutes before they resumed with a group discussion.

Stekel, a good-natured general practitioner, gave a lively description of a twenty-two-year-old female patient suffering from hysterical *hyperalgesia* — a disorder characterised by excessive physical sensitivity. It was not, however, a remarkable case study, and Liebermann found his attention wandering. He was feeling somewhat apprehensive and had begun — almost unconsciously — to rehearse his talk.

Herr B.

Thirty-eight-year-old accountancy clerk.

Employed by a reputable firm with offices in the city centre.

No previous history of psychiatric illness . . .

When Stekel brought his presentation to a close there was some restrained applause and a grumbled vote of thanks. Freud then turned his gaze on Liebermann. The old man's eyes were dark brown and peculiarly lustrous.

'Herr Doctor?'

'Thank you, Herr Professor.'

Liebermann put on his spectacles and straightened his papers. 'Gentlemen,' he began, 'this evening I shall be describing the case of Herr B. — a thirty-eight-year-old accountancy clerk who was admitted onto a psychiatric ward at the General Hospital in early November. The circumstances surrounding his admission were somewhat dramatic. It seems that Herr B. had attempted to force his way into the Schönbrunn palace in order to rescue Archduchess Marie-Valerie — who, he claimed, was being held there against her will. The police were called after an unfortunate incident involving the palace guard . . .'

As Liebermann became more confident, he spoke more freely and consulted his papers less. His audience appeared to be extremely interested, most notably the professor, whose attentive figure had become hazy behind an increasingly murky accumulation of cigar smoke.

When Liebermann began to describe Herr Beiber's dream Freud's eyes widened, and he adopted a melodramatic pose. Like a hammy actor at the Court Theatre, he pressed his right hand against his temple. Liebermann paused, expecting to be interrupted, but the old man remained silent. Adler too had raised a hand but only to obscure Freud's view of his mouth, which had twisted into a mocking smile.

Liebermann was relieved when he reached the conclusion of his presentation. The task had proved more demanding than he had anticipated and the close scrutiny of Freud's inner circle had been unnerving. He was acutely aware that any minor slip of the tongue would be subject to psychoanalytic interpretation. In such company, all mistakes — however minor — would be revealing. Fortunately, his delivery had been steady and he had not even allowed himself to be distracted by Adler's irreverence.

When the applause had died down, the professor thanked Liebermann for a fascinating presentation and rang for the maid. She appeared carrying a large tray of coffee and cakes. Once the plates, napkins and forks had been laid out, the atmosphere in the room immediately changed. The group relaxed and even engaged in some light-hearted banter. Stekel told an amusing story that hinged on a confusion of identities, and the professor was quick to respond with a joke of his own.

'Prague. Moscovitz the tailor is praying in the Old New Synagogue. Suddenly, there is a flash of light — the walls shake and a horrible figure with horns and a tail appears. The air smells of sulphur . . .' The professor drew on his cigar and paused for effect.

'Moscovitz looks up, but continues with his prayers. The terrible figure shakes his fist and the ark tumbles to the ground. But Moscovitz is indifferent, and continues praying. *Hey, you*, the terrifying figure shouts. *Are you not frightened?* Moscovitz shrugs and shakes his head. Enraged, the terrifying figure lashes his tail — bricks fall. *Little Jew*, says the terrifying figure, *do you know who I am? Yes*, Moscovitz replies, *I know exactly who you are — I've been married to your sister for the last thirty years!*'

As the gentle ripples of laughter subsided the company stood up and stretched their legs. They milled around the table and in due course Liebermann found himself standing next to Freud, who was enjoying his second slice of *gugelhupf*. The sponge was thick and moist, and exuded a sharp lemony fragrance. Before Freud could regale him with another one of his jokes — of which he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply — Liebermann seized the moment to ask a question that had occupied his mind for several days.

'Professor,' he said tentatively, 'I was wondering whether I could trouble you for an opinion . . . on a theoretical matter.'

Freud fixed him with his penetrating stare.

'Have you tasted this cake?'

'Yes, I have.'

'Good, isn't it?'

'Extremely.'

'I have a particular weakness for *gugelhupf*.' Freud harpooned a bright yellow segment of sponge on the tines of his fork. 'But you were saying . . . a theoretical matter?'

'Yes,' said Liebermann. 'Do you think that the principles of dream interpretation can be applied to works of art?'

The segment of sponge did not reach Freud's mouth. Its journey came to an abrupt halt somewhere in the vicinity of his collarbone.

'That is a very interesting question.' The professor paused,

swallowed, and placed his plate down on the edge of the table. He had suddenly lost interest in his *gugelhupf*.

'In dreams,' the young doctor continued, 'the contents of the unconscious — traumatic memories, desires, and so forth — are transformed. They appear in a disguised form. And, of course, by employing your techniques it is possible to establish their true meaning. Might we not consider a painting or sculpture as a kind of . . . creative dream?'

'Have you heard of Lermolieff — the Russian art connoisseur?' asked the professor.

'No.'

'Lermolieff was a pen name — he was really an Italian physician called Morelli. He caused a furore in the art galleries of Europe by questioning the authorship of many famous pictures after he had devised a method for establishing authenticity . . .' The professor pulled at his neatly trimmed beard. 'Lermolieff insisted that attention should be diverted from the general impression of a picture, laying stress instead on the significance of minor details: like the drawing of fingernails, of the lobe of an ear, of halos and such unconsidered trifles which the negligent copyist is bound to overlook, but which every genuine artist executes in his own very distinctive style. Now, it seems to me that Lermolieff's method of inquiry is closely related to the technique of psychoanalysis. The psychoanalyst is accustomed to divining secrets from unnoticed features — from the rubbish heap, as it were, of our observations.' The professor reached for a cigar, lit it, and cleared his throat. 'I can see no reason why the principles of our discipline cannot be applied to the interpretation of art. One might look for evidence of unconscious material that has — so to speak — broken through . . . anomalies, perhaps? Distortions and symbolisation . . . Indeed, a painting might be likened to a window through which an analyst might steal glimpses of the artist's unconscious mind.'

It was the answer that Liebermann had been hoping for.

The table clock chimed.

'Good heavens,' said Freud. 'How time flies.'

The maid was called again and when she had finished clearing the table the company returned to their seats in order to discuss the case presentations. This final part of the evening was largely dedicated to a collective analysis of Herr Beiber's dream. Freud insisted that Liebermann should reiterate the main points, occasionally stopping him to ask seemingly obscure questions. 'Are you sure Herr B. was five years old?' 'How big were the wolves, exactly?' 'Did one of the wolves have a tail?' And so on.

When Liebermann had finished describing the dream again, Freud invited those present to comment.

'It reminds me of a fairy story . . .' Stekel began. 'Something from the Brothers Grimm: like *Little Red Riding Hood*. I believe that the appearance of wolves in children's stories is inextricably bound with the fear of being devoured.'

'It might be that the wolves — issuing from a cavernous space — are a substitution for a more fundamental fear — that of the *vagina dentate*,' added Reitler.

'Thus,' Adler cut in, 'Herr B, fearing the loss of his manhood, has eschewed sexual experience altogether.'

'And,' said Stekel, raising his finger, 'has subsequently become obsessed with Archduchess Marie-Valerie — with whom he can never form a relationship.'

'Obviating the conjugal requirement of consummation,' concluded Freud.

Liebermann was astonished at the speed of debate. How ideas sparked across the table.

When the initial flurry had exhausted itself, Freud continued to speculate:

'Gentlemen, there can be no question that Herr B's *paranoia erotica* is a defence — an unhappy compromise between the need to find love and the fear of sexual congress. However, it is my belief that the wolf dream does not represent a primal, mythic fear but an early memory of a very real traumatic event. Herr B. was a sick child who was taken into his parents' bedroom. It was his misfortune to wake one night whereupon he witnessed his parents engaging in coitus *a tergo* — hence the transfiguration of his mother and father into beasts. The panting, however, survived the dream work, breaking through without distortion. Herr B. had violated the most significant taboo of all human societies. What child — indeed, what adult — can contemplate the circumstances of his own conception in the absence of guilt and anxiety? Herr B. expected to be punished for his transgression. A punishment appropriated from the traditional folk tale — that of being eaten alive!'

Remarkably, Freud reached for another cigar. In the ensuing silence he finally faded behind a roiling nimbus. Only a rasping cough reminded those present that he was still there.

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Andreas Olbricht had spent the evening in several coffee houses, examining his reviews. He did not return to his apartment. Instead, he walked across the city to his studio where he lit a single candle and poured himself a large glass of vodka.

Various words and sentences kept bobbing up in his mind — breaking the surface tension of consciousness, splashing vitriol. It felt as though the interior of his head was sizzling, as though it was being eaten away by corrosive droplets of malice.

An artist bereft of talent.

A poor technician.

Crude, unimaginative, and without merit.

Lacking in originality . . .

Olbricht drained his glass.

How could they say such things?

Through the fog of his own condensed breath he could just make out an unfinished canvas. He had hoped to include it in his exhibition, but he had run out of time. It showed Loge — the god of fire and cunning: an impish silhouette against a holocaust of leaping flames. The air smelled of turpentine and linseed oil.

Deficient brushwork.

A poor colourist.

Tired themes . . .

Olbricht drained his glass.

There had been one good review. It had appeared in a small pan-German publication. The writer had praised Olbricht's noble aspirations: his vision, his sensibility, his *weltanschauung*. But what good was that? He needed the support of the *Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Die Fackel*, the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, the *Neue Freie Presse*. He needed so much more.

Suddenly, desolation was replaced by anger. Rage electrified his body and for a moment all he could see was a sheet of brilliant white light. He threw his glass and watched as it shattered against the opposite wall. Curiously, he found himself transported across the room. He was standing by the image of Loge, penknife in hand. The blade glinted as it descended — ripping, tearing, rending. He did not stop. He slashed wildly, breathlessly, until nothing of his work was left but tattered ribbons.

Olbricht allowed himself to slump against the wall. Exhausted, he closed his eyes and whispered into the darkness: 'The Last Judgement.'

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At first, Liebermann had been uncertain about the legitimacy of the professor's interpretation. Freud's growing tendency to postulate a sexual origin for all forms of psychopathology had not gone unnoticed. Indeed, Liebermann had once overheard a visiting professor describing Freud as suffering from an incipient sexual monomania. Still, the more Liebermann considered Freud's interpretation, the more he found it easier to entertain. Did it require such a leap of imagination to connect a disturbance in the faculty of love with a repressed sexual trauma?

'Do you think dreams have meaning, Herr Beiber?'

'I'm sure they do. Particularly when they are associated with strong feelings . . .'

'Like your wolf dream.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'In which case, what do you think your wolf dream means?'

'I don't know. But, as I have already suggested, it may have been influenced by a supernatural presence.'

'You say that because you heard the breathing, the *panting* on other occasions?'

'Yes.'

Liebermann leaned forward and scrutinised his supine patient.

'What if this dream was a memory?'

Herr Beiber frowned.

'There are mechanisms in the mind,' Liebermann continued, 'that

function to keep distressing memories out of awareness. Subsequently, these memories are pushed down, or repressed. But they do not thereby become inactive — they are merely dormant. When we sleep, the repressive mechanism weakens and they can rise up again. It is supposed that there is a censor in the mind, which struggles to distort these memories in order to make them less distressing so that sleep may continue. Sometimes the censor works, sometimes it is partially successful, and sometimes it fails. The fact that you were awakened by your dream suggests that it represents a particularly traumatic memory. The kind of memory that would overwhelm the mind of a young child.'

Liebermann paused, allowing Herr Beiber to consider his account. He could see that his patient was thinking. The clerk's bushy ginger-yellow eyebrows were still knotted together.

'Go on . . .' said Herr Beiber.

'You were a sickly child. Consequently, you slept in your parents' bedroom beyond infancy. It is possible that you saw things . . .'

With great care and sensitivity, Liebermann presented Freud's interpretation of the wolf dream to his patient. When he had finished, a long silence prevailed. Herr Beiber's index finger tapped the gelatinous mass of his stomach, producing a continuous ripple of flesh beneath the cotton gown.

'A memory, you say . . . a traumatic memory.' Herr Beiber spoke the words softly.

'To a child, much of the behaviour of adults must appear strange and disconcerting . . . but what *you* witnessed must have been terrifying. Nevertheless, you have made the transition to adulthood yourself now — you have nothing to fear any more.'

Beiber's finger stopped tapping.

'If you were to form a relationship,' Liebermann continued, 'with a woman — an *ordinary* woman: a typist in your office, a shopgirl, a

seamstress, who knows? — but a woman whom you might one day realistically marry, then I suspect that your feelings for Archduchesss Marie-Valerie would soon diminish.'

Herr Beiber bit his lip.

'The process of psychoanalysis is one of reclamation,' Liebermann continued. 'Once we have insight, we can recover the life that we have lost. What was previously jealously guarded by the unconscious mind becomes conscious — the irrational is superseded by the rational. Should you choose, one day, to enter the conjugal bedroom, remember that you will do so as a man — not as a confused, frightened child.'

For the first time since the beginning of Herr Beiber's analysis, the accountancy clerk was subdued. There were no chirpy retorts or flights of fancy. No florid proclamations of undying, transcendent love. It was as though Liebermann had planted a seed that had already begun to take root. He was reminded of the common sight of a sapling emerging from a cracked paving stone. It was remarkable how something so fragile, so delicate, could eventually prise heavy slabs apart. Yet this was exactly how psychoanalysis worked: the small seed of insight growing, developing, acquiring strength and, in due course, shattering the rigid carapace of psychopathology.

Outside, a church bell struck the hour.

'Herr Beiber . . .' Their time together had expired, but Liebermann could not let his patient leave before asking him one more question: 'In a previous session, you mentioned an incident involving a cellist. You tried to get him to play an aubade outside the Schönbrunn palace. Do you remember?'

'Yes. What of it?' Beiber's response was rather tetchy, as if he resented having his thoughts disturbed.

'You said,' continued Liebermann, 'that he was an odd fellow. You said that there was . . . *something about him.*'

'Did I?'

'Yes. What did you mean?'

Herr Beiber was still distracted.

'A traumatic memory . . .' he whispered.

'Herr Beiber?' Liebermann raised his voice. 'The cellist. You said he was odd — there was *something about him*. What did you mean?'

The accountancy clerk disengaged from his thoughts and his brow relaxed.

'His face, I suppose.'

'What about it?'

'Well . . . This may seem uncharitable, and I recognise that I am far from perfect myself, but this poor chap — why, he looked like a frog!'

At that precise moment someone rapped on the door.

'Come in,' Liebermann called out.

Kanner's head appeared round the door frame.

'Max?'

Liebermann rose and went over to his friend.

'What is it?'

Kanner lowered his voice: 'A young man from the security office has just arrived — by the name of Haussmann? He says it's a matter of some urgency. Something about having found *Salieri*? One of your Italian patients, perhaps?'

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In the centre of the room was a small circular table — around which three chairs were arranged. One of them was occupied by Lieutenant Ruprecht Hefner. His legs were wide apart and his head was thrown back. His right hand looked as though it had been thrust into his mouth. On closer inspection it was possible to detect the dull metallic barrel of a small pistol, as well as burn marks and blisters. A large pool of blood had collected behind the chair, its still surface broken by lumpy grey nuggets of brain tissue. Remarkably, Hefner's uniform was in pristine condition: the blue was unstained and the brass buttons were as bright as marigolds.

Liebermann stepped closer and squatted down. A ragged hole had been blasted through the back of Hefner's skull, out of which droplets of fluid were still falling at irregular intervals.

'He was discovered earlier this morning by his batman,' said Rheinhardt. 'He lost an American duel.'

'How do you know that?'

Rheinhardt offered Liebermann a sheet of paper.

'His suicide note.'

Liebermann took the paper and began to read:

I, Lieutenant Ruprecht Georg Hefner, being of sound mind, depart from this life a man of honour . . .

Liebermann scanned the introductory paragraphs.

My sabre I leave to Lieutenant Trapp and my pistols to Lieutenant Renz . . .

My horse Geronimo I leave to the regimental doctor — who has been of considerable assistance on many occasions . . .

Further on, there were references to some outstanding gambling debts which Hefner regretted he would not be able to pay.

Rheinhardt pointed to a passage lower down on the page:

'Look at this.'

Liebermann continued reading:

It is all over. The sun is setting on our people and there are too few good men willing to speak out. A lone voice here, a lone voice there: but it is not enough. The cowards in the parliament building and the Town Hall do nothing. Our glorious city has become infested. I did what I could. But Vienna cannot be saved . . .

A malicious diatribe followed, denouncing the enemies of the German people: the Jews, the Slavs, the Catholic Church — the southern races.

'There you are!' exclaimed Rheinhardt. 'It must be him. It's as good as a confession!'

Liebermann turned the paper over. Nothing was written on the other side.

'We know that he frequented Madam Borek's brothel,' Rheinhardt continued, excitement widening his eyes. 'He was a member of the Eddic Literary Association and a member of the Richard Wagner Association. He carried a sabre and wished to save Vienna from all those peoples and institutions despised by Guido List. It must be him. He *must* be Salieri!'

'No, Oskar,' said Liebermann. 'I'm afraid you're mistaken.'

Rheinhardt snatched Hefner's note from Liebermann's hand and read out aloud: '*Our glorious city has become infested. I did what I could . . .*'

The sentence hung in the air between them.

'He means duelling Oskar — that is all. He obviously took great pleasure in provoking those whom he counted as enemies: Jews, Czechs, Hungarians . . . People like Freddi Lemberg.'

Rheinhardt sighed, suddenly deflated.

'But the evidence, Max . . . Madam Borek's, the sabre . . .'

'Salieri would not have been able to resist mentioning *The Magic Flute*.'

'He is a member of the Richard Wagner Association . . .'

'And then there are Miss Lydgate's findings.'

'She must have made a mistake.'

'As I have said before — I very much doubt it.'

Rheinhardt suddenly turned on his friend. He could not keep the irritation from his voice.

'Max, how can you be so sure!'

Liebermann smiled and clapped his hands on Rheinhardt's shoulders.

'I can be sure, Oskar . . . because tonight you and I will be paying Salieri a house call.'