

Mirko Beetschen

Bel Veder

Novel

Sample translation
by Laura Tennyson

Z Y T G L O G G E

Für Stéphane

Editor's Foreword

The following document records events so far beyond belief that I have decided to publish it and make it accessible to a wider readership. The story has haunted me ever since I first read it. The manuscript – quite literally, as it is written by hand – originates from the estate of a certain Dr Arthur Hoffmann, residing in Thun, Switzerland at the time of his death on 11 December 1963 and must have lain untouched and unread for decades in the old filing cabinet. The latter was inherited by Anna de Nerval-Hoffmann, the eldest daughter of the deceased, and stored at her villa in Cologny, near Geneva, apparently without ever having been opened. I discovered the small, moss green metal cabinet during my visit to the *Fête de la Brocante*, which is held in the medieval lakeside village of Le Landeron each September. For many a year, a visit to this flea market has been one of the highlights of early autumn for me; those days marked by the sweet melancholy of the end of summer.

I had moved into my new office in Bern's Old City just a few days beforehand and I was wandering around in the vague hope of stumbling across an old globe or something similarly decorative among the overflowing display of objects. I looked around this one stall particularly attentively; otherwise I probably would not have noticed the little cabinet in the far corner, behind a whole jumble of furniture and curiosities. I had known the dealer for years and had purchased one or two pieces from him in the past. When he saw me crouching down in front of the filing cabinet he came over and told me what he knew about it.

He said he had just recently cleared out Anna de Nerval-Hoffmann's property on Lake Geneva on behalf of a nephew and had salvaged several items of value in the process. The old filing cabinet was particularly special – of course – as it wasn't merely a charming old relic from office days gone by, he assured me, but still contained the papers belonging to a certain Dr Arthur Hoffmann, who had worked as a notary in Thun during the first half of the twentieth century. He had verified the authenticity of some of the documents at random, but not examined them in detail as they were simply too numerous. They were, however, certainly more than sixty years old, and he wanted to sell the cabinet together with its contents – as a treasure chest, so to speak.

With this story, the sly old fox at the market stall had not only lent historical depth to the object of my liking but also piqued a writer's inherent curiosity and love of research. Even before I had seen them, these old documents from the past began to stir my imagination. In short, I purchased the cabinet, heaved it into a wheelbarrow with the antique dealer's help and carried it to my car at the edge of the market. That same evening I sat down in my office in front of the green cabinet, opened the top drawer and began to inspect the paperwork.

The majority proved to be disappointingly dull. The scrupulous Dr Hoffmann had obviously not left behind any papers with sensitive or salacious content – those would have ended up with a partner or successor in his law firm, or else they had been shredded. All I found instead was boring old bills, receipts, instructions for obsolete office equipment and the dry correspondence between the notary and various public departments.

It was only in the bottom drawer that I came across the document, tucked inside a yellowing cardboard folder and tied together with string, which I then proceeded to transcribe and edit. It was a substantial bundle of loose, handwritten pages – needless to say that, as a writer, I hoped that I had stumbled upon an undiscovered manuscript, especially as it bore the promising title of *Bel Veder*.

On top of the pile there was a folded sheet of paper with a brief note from the person who had apparently written these pages (although she does not reveal her name, the identity of the author appears clear to me, upon reading – but I do not wish to pre-empt anything and will let you judge for yourselves):

Should these lines ever find a reader, I want to offer an assurance that the events described here truly occurred, so help me God. I may have embellished the odd sentence here and there but this does not alter the events to which they pertain. The written testimonies I was fortunate enough to acquire should contribute to the authentication of my account. Whether referring directly or indirectly to events, I have written down everything in full. The originals are enclosed.

In the same drawer I then in fact discovered a second folder, which contained an old diary and a small bundle of letters. I was now thoroughly curious and began to read, slowly at first, then more swiftly after two or three pages, as I became accustomed to the archaic handwriting.

That evening I sat in my office for several hours and read. At first I sat on the floor in front of the open metal cabinet, then on the only chair in the room, and when the

church bells struck two in the morning, I gathered together the piles of paper, rushed home and read until five, before the story released me, utterly exhausted, from its spell.

The contents of the document were so abstruse and the author so adamant that it be regarded as a record of true events, that I spent the next day, a Sunday, checking the letters and the diary – to me they seemed genuine – and re-reading the manuscript. This time I wrote out the names and places I wanted to check for their veracity.

I cannot explain what devil possessed me (the assurance of a writer, or the narrator, that his words are an account of real events rather than fiction, is a well-known ruse in the history of literature) but I felt a pressing need to either verify the location of the incidents or consign them forever to the realms of fiction.

I already had a hunch about it and my research over the following days corroborated all the facts I had been able to extract from the report. Everything indicated that it did, indeed, refer to real events. Whether these occurred exactly as described could not be confirmed but there was no doubt that the people mentioned had once existed and that the places were real. It was only the old hotel *Bel Veder*, up in the Bernese Alps, that was no longer standing. It had burnt down in 1970 and the last owner had been killed in the fire. Her remains were discovered during the excavation, along with the unidentified skeletons of four other people, which had apparently been lying in a cellar for decades.

How these events of 1946 actually came to pass, and whether you wish to believe the report, is up to you to decide. I have, for my part, found sufficient evidence and believe that things really did play out as described. I have hesitated for some time but have come to the conclusion that I should

also mention at this point an incident that both unsettled me and confirmed my convictions.

It occurred a few days ago. I was up late working on the latest revised version of this report, when my gaze drifted to the garden window and I thought my heart was about to stop. Behind the glass, an old, bearded man was staring at me. In the light of my desk lamp his face was gaunt and pale; his eyes were piercing. I was paralysed, unsure of how long he had been standing there. We looked at each other in silence. Then he turned away and disappeared. When I was finally able to move again and run over to the window, the garden lay deserted.

Was he a tramp who had accidentally wandered into the garden? A confused old man who had escaped from a home? Maybe – this town is full of odd characters – though I personally think it was a visitor of a different kind. But I will also leave that for you to decide.

Oh, and one more thing. This is no bedtime story.

The Editor, Bern, 26 October 2017

Part 1: Return

1. Finster Alp

The old pane broke under her knuckles with a loud crack and the crash of the shattering glass cut through the silence like a knife. Eleanor pulled her hand back, startled. She looked at her fingers, where blood was pooling in several white cuts, before quickly stepping away from the door. She was hit by a draft of stale air from the hole like an inaudible sigh; the old hotel appeared to be reluctantly awakening. She had desecrated the deathly stillness of this place, thought Eleanor, taking another step backwards. The atmosphere had shifted with the sudden noise and the settling silence now felt hostile, threatening.

Even from a distance, the building had looked cold and abandoned. There was a forbidding quiet about the place. Dusk was falling. With a pounding heart, Eleanor felt her way down the wide, stone steps, overgrown with weeds, without taking her eyes off the hole, guarded by jagged spears of glass. When she finally felt gravel beneath her feet, she had to resist the urge to run. Instead she turned slowly away and was about to quicken her step when she heard a noise behind her. Eleanor froze and held her breath. It was silent for a moment then from inside the hotel came the sound of grating metal and a bolt being slid open. The door creaked on its hinges. Eleanor spun round and felt her hair stand on end.

The second of the double doors, its glass intact, had swung open. She was overcome by the urge to run, to put as much distance between herself and the hotel as possible. It had been a mistake to come here, she now admitted to herself. But she stood still and forced herself to brave the moment. She blinked into the semi-darkness inside the

building and thought she could make out a silhouette. A figure emerged from the shadows into the grey light of the fading day. Eleanor drew a sharp intake of breath and her hand flew to her mouth.

‘Daddy?’ she whispered, as her dead father stepped towards her.

Until that moment, the hotel had appeared to Eleanor as deserted as the forest where she presumed Violet was still wandering. It must have been almost an hour since they had got off the train that had brought them up from the valley, the only passengers. ‘End of the line,’ the driver had announced in his distinctive local accent, as he unlocked the doors of the carriage. Violet had climbed straight out of the train and started to look around. As Eleanor cautiously followed her and stepped down onto the railway tracks she was hit by a sudden blast of cold air. She took a few tentative steps towards the tiny station building and let out a shriek as the driver dumped her luggage, a large carpet bag, on the ground beside her. By the time she had recovered her manners, the man had already disappeared around the end of the train and her murmured ‘thank you,’ was carried away on a gust of wind.

She turned round and saw Violet inspecting the station inquisitively. A wooden sign with weatherworn lettering pointed in the direction of the only discernible path, which led behind the stationhouse and across a gently climbing field, disappearing into the dark fir trees beyond. The sky was overcast, the late afternoon light grey, and the path into the forest a black hole. They could still turn back and take

the train down to the village halfway up the mountain where all the other passengers had got off, casting suspicious and even hostile glances in their direction. They could come back tomorrow morning in daylight and undoubtedly more clement weather, thought Eleanor. But just as she had decided to persuade Violet that they should head back, she heard the train starting up and when she looked round it had already left the station.

‘No,’ whispered Eleanor and a sudden fear gripped her like a cold hand around the throat. She felt tears welling in her eyes, brushed them impatiently away with her sleeve and turned round. Violet was sauntering about the station, seemingly without a care in the world, and then disappeared around a corner. Eleanor quickly grabbed her bag and followed her.

When she reached the field, she saw Violet already standing at the top of the path, exactly at the point where it disappeared into the shadow of the forest. Eleanor swallowed, pursed her lips and started after her.

‘Wait!’ she called after Violet, who responded by looking over her shoulder and telling her to hurry up.

At least we’ve got each other, thought Eleanor.

The forest interior was not as dark as she had anticipated, nor as dark as it had appeared from the outside. The trees were not too dense, leaving space for little glades. Eleanor noticed there were none of the deciduous trees she knew from home. The majority of the woodland was made up of firs, familiar to her, but dotted amongst them was another species whose needles had turned yellow. In spite of the grey weather, they lent a golden shimmer to their surroundings.

After a few dozen metres, a narrow path branched off the main track and disappeared between the bushes. Violet walked past it and Eleanor followed her, looking around in vain for a signpost. She hoped that they were heading in the right direction and would not get lost. They were not used to being surrounded by so much nature.

They reached a steep bank, where the path led diagonally uphill with a wooden handrail alongside it. Halfway up, the path bent sharply and led off in the opposite direction. Violet seemed to manage the climb effortlessly, while Eleanor wheezed along behind. Here, the elevation of the ground gave her a view down over the trees and shrubs below, deeper into the forest. In the distance, somewhere near where the side path had forked off, there was something looming between the bushes. At first Eleanor thought it was an animal but it turned out to be a solid, stone structure. A sculpture? She squinted so she could see better, but could still only make out the vague form of a body. What was it doing in the middle of the forest?

Violet had already reached the top and Eleanor hurried to catch up. At the top of the slope the ground abruptly opened out onto a level area. There was a cluster of the pretty yellow trees and as she brushed a branch with her free hand, Eleanor discovered they dropped their needles. Beyond the trees, the path meandered away into the bushes and the fact that several side paths opened up gave Eleanor the impression that they were in a sort of pleasure garden; a place that had once beckoned the hotel guests to come and explore.

As Eleanor turned away from the tree she saw Violet a few metres ahead, heading off the main track and down one of the gravel side paths. That part of the forest looked more

welcoming, as if illuminated by the sun. There were green bushes and more of the yellow needle trees, as Eleanor had christened them, and she suddenly felt the urge to take a short detour and explore these curious woodland paths. She put down the heavy bag and followed her twin sister.

A quarter of an hour later and her mood had darkened like the forest around her. Furious, she decided to turn back onto the main path. Violet would have to take care of herself!

Eleanor had been gazing into the lifeless stone eyes of the ghastly elephant monstrosity and suddenly lost sight of her. When she had finally been able to tear herself away and turn round, Violet had disappeared between the trees. Eleanor called after her nervously, ran around the stone monster and peered into the bewildering forest but could not see the familiar figure of her sister. Violet did not respond to her calls and Eleanor could not see her on any of the overgrown gravel pathways, which petered out between more ominous stone statues, clusters of pines and yellow needle trees.

As she approached the spot where she had left her bag, her heart leapt when she saw someone walking behind the silhouetted trees. She wanted to call out her sister's name but realised it couldn't possibly be her – Violet was wearing a pale, floral dress but this person was dressed in dark clothing. Eleanor stood and watched the figure – a woman, judging by the attire – hurry along the path and disappear down the slope in the direction of the train station.

The sight of another person in the woods both unsettled and reassured Eleanor in equal measure and she waited a few minutes before moving again.

How typical of Violet to abandon her at a moment like this, thought Eleanor. Whenever it really mattered, she was on her own. Violet was always very persuasive when it came to making plans, no matter how harebrained they were. *She* was the one behind this little expedition of course. Eleanor would never have initiated this odyssey, let alone set off all by herself. Her sister was as independent as she was stubborn – the very opposite of Eleanor, as others were always keen to point out.

A sudden blast of wind blew through the copse and she shivered. She pulled her grey wool jacket more tightly around her and felt small and lost in this isolated forest in the mountains. She quickened her pace defiantly and vigorously wiped her eyes, where fresh tears were forming. Her bag swung back and forth as she followed the path, ducking under the mighty conifer branches hanging melancholically overhead. She was seized by the feeling of fear that had accompanied her ever since she had left home; a feeling she had never had occasion to experience in her life previously. At times it was just a flutter in her stomach, almost pleasant; at others it was a pain clawing at her chest. Homesickness. The images that flashed before her eyes could not be simply wiped away with her slender, pale knuckles.

She thought back to Baltimore, saw the streets, lined with sooty red-brick buildings and shiny new glass and steel façades, filled with more and more automobiles in recent years. She saw the smartly dressed businessmen hurrying along the broad sidewalks from one important meeting to another, the buzzing hustle and bustle in the alleyways, the splendidly illuminated department stores and the dizzyingly high office blocks – a flickering panopticon of a city on the move.

Since she had been living in her own city centre apartment, having finally escaped the suffocating suburban life of her parents' house (my God, she was thirty-four and yet, yes, she still missed her family home, her mother, the kitchen that smelt of floor soap, her cosy bedroom under the roof, in which she had slept and dreamt, suffered and lived, for thirty-three years), she had done the same as her sister and become part of this glamorous city life. She saw herself as a small, finely tuned cog that carried out its tasks with utmost efficiency; a secretary in service to a greater whole, prettily dressed, knowledgeable and highly motivated to help steer her great country towards an ever brighter future. Things were on the up: you could feel it everywhere. The war was over and it had been won thanks to her country, which had played such a heroic part in the whole dreadful business. And those earlier years, when her country's economy had survived its darkest days, were now over, swept away in those tumultuous times that had re-shaped the world, through the sheer hard work and ingenuity of her people.

And here she was, far from her familiar, benevolent homeland, in the heart of Europe, in her father's country: impressive in the depths of its history, but lagging miles behind the progress of America, she thought. She and Violet had retraced their father's journey, crossing the Atlantic in five days, black and white images of ill-fated voyages and the burnt-out hulls of ships flashing steadily before her eyes like a warning. While Violet was off having fun who knows where, how or with whom – because for first class passengers, sailing aboard the *Queen Elizabeth* was a luxurious pleasure trip and Eleanor couldn't help but feel that a piece of New York City had broken away, floating, glit-

tering and dancing, towards the Old World – Eleanor clung to the railing as if it were the very last piece of reality, glancing back and forth, towards the bow and stern of the ship, for any sign of land. When members of the crew asked if she needed help, she blushed and shook her head. Even the ship's doctor sought her out, in a vain attempt to allay her fears, extolling the merits of the warm lounges and the many opportunities for distraction. It was only when the captain himself came and led her to the Captain's Table for dinner that she gave in, drank a couple of glasses of wine with the illustrious men and women of American and European high society, and even struck up a conversation with an older lady from New York who was travelling to see her son in London. She was familiar with Baltimore, as her late husband had worked there for a long time and she had lived with him in the city. For Eleanor, the conversation became a thread that bound her to the homeland she had left behind, which now seemed so trifling and distant. If only for a brief moment, it brought the reality of her real life to the unreal world of the ship that seemed frozen in no man's land, somewhere between home and afar.

During the banquet she glanced around surreptitiously for Violet but could not see her anywhere. It was only late at night that her twin sister reappeared, raving about her day – most exciting in every respect – and admonishing Eleanor for her reserve at the Captain's Table. One should not let such an opportunity pass one by without making a couple of interesting contacts, especially when there were unmarried men at the table or those whose wives were waiting for them back in the port, said Violet. When Eleanor gaped at her, scandalised, she laughed and said this was *Terra Franca*, or more accurately, *Aqua Franca*, where different

rules apply. ‘You don’t know what you’re missing,’ she taunted as Eleanor turned to switch off the light, the sheet wrapped tightly around her as if to protect herself from her sister’s arguments.

The forest came to an abrupt end, and because Eleanor’s fury with her sister had caused her to speed up and because she had to keep her eyes fixed on the treacherous path in the twilight, she came to a sudden halt as she looked up. She let her bag drop to the ground and stared, open-mouthed. There was a field, gently sloping up to a steeper area scattered with boulders and on the far side stood the hotel, enthroned.

A castle! That was her first thought, as her gaze climbed the building’s façade. Above the entrance, which was only partially visible from where she was standing at the other end of the slope, towered row upon row of countless windows, a few slightly ajar, the majority hidden behind wooden shutters. Between them were deep recesses, protruding columns and balustrades, balconies with mysterious doors leading off them, and above it all a steep roof set with more windows, which curved on one side to a round tower that appeared whittled by the wind. At first glance the building seemed, to Eleanor, a fairy-tale palace straight out of an old book, sitting so majestically in the landscape, but on closer inspection it evoked memories of the once-grand mansions of Baltimore, many of which now lay derelict behind high iron railings and old trees. The hotel had shingled walls with unsightly gaps; in between were shattered windowpanes and shutters hanging crooked or missing entirely. One of the balconies appeared to no longer have a floor at all; another had no railing. Beside this grandiose structure

stood a second, somewhat inconspicuous building, also devoid of any sign of human life. No light was burning. The whole place had a sad and abandoned air.

Eleanor looked anxiously back at the forest. If only Violet would hurry up so that she did not have to approach this enormous and forbidding building all by herself. She was tempted to call out her sister's name again, but in such close proximity to the hotel she did not dare. She waited a few minutes, the light fading rapidly, before she grabbed her bag with a sigh and set off on the last stretch of the path that led across the field in a wide arc. She paused repeatedly, looking up at the hotel in the hope that somewhere a light might come on.