



**Thomas Hürlimann**

**The Red Diamond**

**320 pages**

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**A masterly tale about a boarding school and a parable for our time.**

'Fit in and you'll survive,' is what eleven-year-old Arthur Goldau is told when his mother drops him off at a monastic boarding school high up in the Swiss mountains in the autumn of 1963. Here, where the snow starts falling in September, and where the former Austrian Empress Zita visits every year, he becomes 'Pupil 230' and learns what generations before him learned. But the enormous old monastery, in which times doesn't seem to pass, harbours a secret: an enormous, valuable diamond from the crown of the Habsburg monarchy has allegedly been hidden when the Austrian monarchy fell in 1918. While Arthur and his friends search for the diamond deep within the catacombs of the monastery and history, the old world collapses around them. Rose, the village girl with a missing tooth, introduces him to love as Bob Dylan's 'The Times They Are a-Changin' wafts through the corridors.

**This author overwhelms. -- Jochen Hieber - FAZ**

**Hürlimann's latest book is a masterpiece. -- Martin Ebel - Basler Zeitung**

**[a] book you won't forget any time soon: " The Red Diamond" is an almost breathtakingly good, highly intelligent novel -- Christoph Schröder - Deutschlandfunk Kultur**

**a cultural-history-saturated, a rich, a clever, an also enigmatic "novel of doom". -- Katharina Borchardt - SWR2**

**With his novel 'The Red Diamond', the Swiss writer has created a masterpiece. -- Jochen Hieber - Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung**

**Thomas Hürlimann turns his memories of the Einsiedeln boarding school into a fascinating monastery thriller à la Umberto Eco. -- Charles Linsmayer - Bieler Tagblatt**

Sample translation by Simon Pare

Most of the passengers on the ferry across the lake stayed in their cars, but I and a few others stood at the railing like bloodless shadows, and as the shore from which we had put out receded, I realised that this crossing was not like previous ones. The lake lay there in a muggy afternoon glare between pale, distant shores, and to me it felt as if we were steaming across the Acheron. *The Greek Myths* was my favourite book – I'd put it in my suitcase along with Captain Scott's diaries. And as gulls flocked overhead, I wondered anxiously whether what I was experiencing on this crossing was how the dead felt they lost all memories of their lives on their voyage from shore to shore.

It was already getting dark as we drove through shadowy valleys into the mountains. Mimi suggested having a bite to eat in one of the villages along our route, meaning more time lost, and as we left the restaurant we were greeted by an eerie silence. No cars on the road, no chirping birds. The snowfields at the end of the valley were lit up by the evening sun, and the first stars were already glittering above the black valley walls. The road steepened, and Mimi should have double-declutched and changed down from second into first in the bends and then back from first into second, but as she rightly remarked, high-heeled shoes were unsuited to these manoeuvres. She wrestled the Ford up the mountainside in first gear, engine straining, elbows out, chest nearly touching the steering wheel, and it doesn't take a prophet to predict that the red-hot radiator, the plummeting outside temperature and the sudden disappearance of the snow-reflected glow inexorably combined to disastrous effect.

When the bang came, it was surprisingly gentle.

The Ford drifted off the road while rounding a hairpin bend and slid into the ditch, whereupon the engine wheezed its last as a thick cloud of smoke rose from

the bonnet. Was my time at monastery school over before it had even begun? I forced the door open against the resistance of a frozen bush and crawled up to the road on all fours. It was there that I realised what had caused the birds to fall silent and brought the traffic to a standstill: it was winter. Winter had come. The wind came whining out of the silence, a mountain wind bearing tumbling flakes. In those central Swiss mountains, in late summer, the first snow was falling. The monastery seemed to be floating somewhere farther up in the dark clouds and as I checked the damage, bells started to toll in the distance. The engine coolant had stopped hissing now in the cold air, and one sniff was enough to tell me that the oil sump wasn't leaking. The rear of the car jutted up diagonally into the air like the sinking *Titanic*, and with chilled fingers I opened the boot. It came as no surprise that the warning triangle was missing.

'Didn't you want to stop a car, Arthi darling?'

Mimi had unpacked her cosmetics case and was in the process of transforming the inside of the car, warmed by the overheating engine, into a beauty salon. She touched up her lipstick and dabbed powder on her cheeks, then added a little saliva to a tin of black mascara and applied it to her long, curving lashes.

'We're going to be late,' I said.

'With me everyone's always late,' Mimi said, concentrating on the rear-view mirror. 'Did you put up the warning triangle?'

'You left it somewhere.'

'How silly of me! I really should buy a dozen of those things when I get the chance.'

I knew why Mimi was so unruffled. Her real name was Maria, after the Mother of God, and whenever a Maria got into trouble, some nice young man would usually turn up and offer his assistance. At Golgotha it was St John, and the Mother of God

probably reacted under the cross much the same as Mimi did now when a sportscar driver tapped on her side window.

‘Oh, would you have a little time for me?’ she trilled. ‘That would be so kind.’

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The Our Lady of the Snows monastery looked like a dream made reality with its broad, grey façade holding back the sky. Built for all eternity. A mountain, but with hundreds of windows, many of them lit. Even Mimi was speechless. In the centre, flanked by the two towers, the cathedral welcomed pilgrims in through its three gates. Singing issued forth, accompanied by the organ, but as if from very far away, from the depths of the sky. Mimi felt cold even in summer, but standing there in front of this lofty, gloomy mass of stone, she seemed to have forgotten that it was winter. Flakes settled on her summer hat. The singing ceased, started up again and now, high up where the cupolas on the towers melted into the wintry night, four quarter chimes rang out before the monastery square was subjected to a series of precise thunderclaps marking the hour. Eight o’clock.

‘Arthi darling,’ Mimi said with a bewitching smile, ‘I fear we may be a tiny bit late.’

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Crafted from close-fitting black marble blocks, the chapel looked out of place and gothic in these sugary baroque surroundings at the back of the nave and was open to the congregation like a black-box theatre. Suspended over the narrow altar amid a flat gold-leaf thunderstorm was the Black Madonna, a coronet on her head, a sceptre in her right hand and Baby Jesus cradled in her left arm, he too dark and wearing a crown.

'Holy Mary, Mother of God,' Mimi and I prayed and for a moment, facing the Queen of Heaven, we were for the last time one heart, one soul, one tongue. 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, you are so beautiful, please return some of our love for you. Stand by us when we are alone. Take us by the hand when darkness falls. And please, beloved holiest Mother of God, make sure we do not cry (or only a little bit) when the time comes to say goodbye. Amen.'

She stared out of wooden eyes over Mimi and me at a distant point that may have been the land of my disappearing childhood. Mimi's perfume already gave me a slight high, like the scent of times past.

'Her dresses and capes were fashionable with the leading courtiers at Philip II's Escorial palace,' she whispered to me. 'That's a flared skirt.'

'Reminds me of a warning triangle.'

'Everyone has a style of their own,' she said, offended. 'I, as you know, take my inspiration from Coco Chanel. Come on now, we need to hurry.'

. . . but at the exit we stopped again, turned around and gazed up into the fuzzy twilight of a room of a kind we had never seen before, spacious and high and full of adornment; altogether, a stunning chaos, here solid, there soft soaring carrying falling flowing fleeting . . .

'Baroque,' Mimi declared to the high, darkening dome, 'tipping into Rococo.'

'Every shape there is,' I whispered, tilting my head back like hers, 'and too much of everything.'

'Arthi darling,' she said spikily, 'please do not speak such drivel ever again.'

We stood there as if at an air show and, I pointed to a coat of arms at the zenith of the highest arch to avoid completely losing myself in all the symbols. The coat of arms featured a black two-headed bird looking left and right and wearing a crown with a small cross on it. It was the double eagle, Mimi explained: the arms of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

‘Didn’t your father tell you? Our Lady of the Snows is a Habsburg foundation. You pupils are the last subjects of the Empress,’ she whispered in awe. ‘Just imagine: the Habsburgs used to own half the world – the whole of Mexico and half the East, stretching far into Russia. Our ancient ancestor Sender Katz travelled for months to get from Drohobych, where he bought a fur hat and the suitcase at Svatopluk & Kohn, to Switzerland.’

‘Months?’ I asked in disbelief.

‘Years,’ Mimi answered. ‘Sender crossed the continent on foot. All he had in his suitcase were tefillin, a few stolen potatoes and his tailoring scissors.’

Mimi took off her driving gloves and dipped two fingers in the stoup. A twitch of her freshly painted lips suggested the water was ice-cold, close to freezing.

‘Look after yourself, Arthi darling, and please,’—here Mimi’s eyes grew moist—‘don’t forget me.’

As she went down on bended knee, I saw glittering snow crystals melting on her wide-brimmed summer hat, and suddenly I understood that crossing the Acheron had had the established consequences. The wasp in the glass had fallen silent. The canopy swing no longer stood on the lawn. And Mimi? I would lose her at the Our Lady of the Snows monastery, as we both sensed.

‘I think you’ll meet the Empress soon,’ Mimi said, switching to the tone of a tourist guide and casting off her gloom. ‘Every year on the anniversary of the Emperor’s death she attends the requiem mass the fathers read for him.’ Now she even sketched a smile. ‘But she may have a different reason for coming. So I’ve heard, in any case.’

The door slammed thunderously shut behind us and once again the cathedral façade, surely as long as the *Titanic*, threatened to crush us.

‘The fathers,’ Mimi continued, ‘will tell you more about the Empress. Maybe you will let me know *par occasion* – by letter – or when we see each other again next summer. I would so love to know if it really exists – the famous diamond.’

'What kind of diamond?' I asked irritably.

'Red, apparently. A red crystal. And they say it sparkles even in the dark like a star. It used to belong to the Habsburgs, but when it went missing the monarchy collapsed.'

'Huh?'

'The Red Diamond is deemed to be lost,' Mimi said dreamily. 'Apparently it is kept here in the monastery. Just look at this façade! Or the towers! Hiding-places everywhere.'

'We're hopelessly late Mama,' I replied. 'And I think I'll have other things to do than look for a diamond!'

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Mimi pulled the rod on the school door a second, a third and then a fourth time. A bell rang somewhere inside, but nothing happened. The high monastery building remained silent and the door remained shut. It was snowing more heavily now. Pilgrims hunched under umbrellas padded gingerly down towards the village across the slightly sloping and already white monastery square, pursued by their black footprints.

'Making a lady wait like this!' Mimi ranted. 'The liberties these monks take!'

The door opened a crack and from a pair of pouted lips with a curly moustache above them came a close imitation of a bird's twittering.

'Are you the porter?'

Barely taller than me, the male bird was wearing a little hat with long feathers on it and glasses with thick, fluted lens. He reminded me of the ragged double eagle.

'Yes, Mama,' I said, translating the twittering, 'he's the porter.'

'Ask him to fetch the suitcase from the car and he will receive a small donation.'



She rummaged in her handbag for the cigar my father had given us for the porter, and I led him across the square to our Ford as he nodded to the clock tower to indicate that the school year had started that afternoon. The suitcase contained the recommended clothing for a whole term: two dozen black woollen socks, cotton underpants, terrycloth towels, flannels, my wash bag, the serviette and the tin containing my cutlery with the number 230 engraved on it. I showed the birdman the cloth tag sewed into the collar of my winter coat, to which he gave a trilled response that 230 was a pretty good number.

The whistling birdman hoisted the suitcase onto his left shoulder. Walking along behind him, it occurred to me that this suitcase had accompanied Mimi not only to the conservatoire in Berne but also, like a talisman, to hospital when she gave birth. It had indeed brought me luck. After two stillbirths I was the first to make it through, and I could only hope that this talisman would help me survive at the monastery too.

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We went up a flight of wide sandstone stairs and then down a long, damp, wintry cold corridor into soft darkness. Mimi's high heels struck up a clicking from the stone slabs that echoed off the walls like a castanet dance, and with cowering heads we passed a marble-sandalled statue on a marble plinth, its right hand raised as if minded to sock Mimi one. *Ego sum via, veritas et vita* read the engraving on the base.

To our left was a long row of high windows, to our right gleaming black doors, each marked with a Roman numeral: presumably these were the classrooms. A string of dim lamps made the corridor appear endless. And it was cold. Icy cold. This is how Captain Scott must have felt when he set off with his caravan of

helpless, plodding ponies and overloaded sleds into the polar night that would eventually kill him.

The corridor turned a corner. The birdman set down the suitcase and, approaching his beak to my ear, whispered, 'I'll wait here.'

'Is it true that the saint went to war?'

Mimi rolled her eyes. 'Arthur, please! I have to drive back all the way we came in the dead of night.'

'And snow,' the bird whistled, 'and more snow. Lots of snow. It's the third door on the left.'

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No furniture, no pictures, nothing at all. Nothing but emptiness. Emptiness and a murky light from white sphere lamps. The only options were to stand on the shiny linoleum floor – or kneel. Kneel and pray. Or scrub the linoleum floor on your knees. And what in heaven's name was hidden behind the locked cupboard doors running all around the lower walls? Was this where they stored files containing the names and details of every pupil? Goldau Arthur, son of Hans and Maria, known as Mimi, née Katz?

Inside one of the countless cupboards a clock was ticking. Maybe it had been locked in there because the saint would only tolerate eternity. But then it chimed. Quarter past. Clearly even a saint could not abolish time. We looked out through a high window into the night where the snow showed no sign of relenting, and suddenly I felt quiet breaths on the back of my neck. I turned around slowly and, by God, there he was, as if from thin air: the saint!

Gigantic, bare white toes peeked out of worn-out sandals under the hem of the black habit. The nails had black edges, clumps of black hair sprouted from the phalanxes, and incredibly . . . there were gaps. Some toes were missing. My vision

went blurry, somewhere a door slammed, the locked-in time ticked louder and louder. It was so embarrassing to stare at those toes! The feet were at least as large as the feet of the Jesus statue's marble feet from which we had recoiled earlier in passing, but the saint's toes – the ones that weren't missing – looked awfully naked; I had never seen such naked toes before. I could only hope that Mama had decided to look the saint in the face, otherwise she would feel sick.

Cowering, I slowly raised my gaze and noticed that a giant had planted himself in front of me. Taller than my father, heavy broad strong, this giant had long, silky eyelashes – like Mimi, though his were blond while hers were black. And his smell. His *smell!* The saint stank so fantastically of billy goat and incense that Mimi and I tried our best to inhale only the bare minimum of air. Unfortunately, this degenerated into slapstick. Mimi and I reached for our handkerchiefs, but at the same moment we realised that the saint might take offence if we simultaneously held cloths to our noses, like synchronised swimmers. So we made them disappear – hers into the sleeve of her blouse, mine into my coat pocket. Or not quite. Since Mimi was also putting hers away, I could afford to pull mine out again and since Mimi thought the same thing in the same second, at the end of all these efforts we both pressed our noses into our handkerchiefs.

'Most reverend Father,' Mimi's muffled voice said, 'I am Madame Goldau. We were unfortunately a little late.'

. . . and all of a sudden this otherwise so confident lady made one mistake after another. 'The roads,' she continued, 'are clearly better maintained in Protestant cantons than in Catholic ones. Luckily a young gentleman came to our assistance or else we would have been snowed under in a ditch. We don't expect such weather conditions at lower altitudes.' This was followed by a sigh and a batting of her black crescents. 'And then that *birdman!*' Mimi upped the ante, still clutching the handkerchief to her face. 'Wow, that was quite a number! Completely barmy. Twittering and whistling the whole time like a thrush.'

'That alleged thrush,' the saint said gently, 'is a poor soul who has found shelter and daily bread in the monastery of Our Beloved Lady.'

All Mimi could do was smile. The saint smiled too and I was painfully aware that she was capable of completely ruining my start here.

'Anyway,' she said sheepishly, 'this is our son Arthi, most reverend Father.'

'Brother,' he corrected her in an even gentler voice. 'God Our Father did not wish me to be accepted into holy orders. I am Brother Frieder.'

'Brother Frieder,' Mimi repeated, 'your bird-- sorry, I mean, your *porter* man was unfortunately unable to guarantee that Arthi will be assigned a fridge. You should know that Arthi is not a particularly good eater, so I have taken the liberty of packing a few of his favourite foods, including some game pâté.'

She had been waiting for this man – fridge favourite food game pâté! *Madonna*, I begged, *please don't let Mama open her bag . . .* but she was already rummaging around frantically inside it.

'In my husband's opinion,' she prattled on, 'the most reverend gentlemen like to make an incense offering to the heavens. I imagine that the fragrance of this Havana will please our dear Lord too.'

The saint raised his hand defensively, but then he accepted the gift with a mischievous smile playing on his lips. 'Please send my greetings to your husband. Is he in the field?'

'On manoeuvres in the mountains.'

Mama and the saint had a smiling contest, both of them batting their eyelashes, hers black, his blond, but all of a sudden the saint leaned forward and examined the little sparkling silver jewel on the lapel of Mimi's blue coat. 'Oh,' he purred, 'what a pretty little beetle you have there!'

Mimi shot me a meaningful look over his inclined head and said in a bittersweet tone, 'A ladybird, but I'm afraid, Brother Frieder, that I really ought to go

now. It's snowing and just imagine, I don't have a single warning triangle in the car! Is that the exit, or does it lead into a broom cupboard?

She flung open one of the many doors to find a young priest staring out at her. He was sitting at a desk in his cell, illuminated by a green-shaded lamp and holding a quill pen in his right hand. Mimi's attempt to escape through the next door made her burst out laughing, for this cupboard too contained a priest! He was kneeling on a prayer stool, wearing headphones with fat, round earpieces. Suddenly the truth dawned on me. My father the colonel had decided against his wife's protestations that the saintly world war veteran was the right person to educate me, but Mimi's gaffe-prone nature had created a mess that was now turning to her advantage.

'Arthi darling,' she trilled with a ravishing smile, 'would you be so kind as to escort me home? I do not think this monastery is for us.'

I let her go. I wanted them to make a man of me here, just as my father required, and maybe, who knows, Mama was not entirely blameless in my decision. 'Red, apparently,' she had said. 'A red crystal. Apparently it sparkles even in the dark like a star ...'