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Moons Before the Landing

Novel

With illustrations

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pp. 11 – 30

LOOKING THROUGH LENSES

A person who lives in Worms lives on planet Earth. The latter is located in the middle of space and revolves there, as every child learns, in the shape of a huge ball around an even larger ball of fire. In the year 1920, however, there lived among the roughly fifty thousand citizens of Worms a man to whom not even this applied. It's true that he too lived, as they all did, in Worms, but beyond that not *on*, but *in* a huge Earth ball, and indeed in full consciousness and without protest.

It's not that he was moving along underground in mirror-inverted relation to his fellow creatures, no, he existed in their immediate vicinity, made his living and ate his meals beside them, even came toward them actually in clothes and hat on the street. At the same time, he was surrounded by a gigantic and closed round Earth: the hollow globe. Where others saw sky and stars, he saw only bluish filling gas and at best apple-sized luminous bodies; where many suspected the next galaxy, he knew to be Australia. With

stories about North or South Pole expeditions he could be driven to frenzy. This man was the former Prussian Royal Air Force lieutenant Peter Bender, wounded world war veteran and recipient of the Iron Cross, a writer by trade.

Even during his first reconnaissance flights over the patchy marshlands around the Vistula, he had noticed the optical illusion: *the curvature of the Earth*. That's what they called it. And it looked, one had to admit, completely convincing. As if out of a textbook. A beautiful, wide arc, floating there under him. The idea that under the right conditions steel could become so light that it began to fly was in itself quite alarming. At such moments it was also possible for him to comprehend why people became anxious or wistful when they were plucked or blown away from their homes in dreams.

It had happened to him himself a few times as a child. The dreams, if indeed that's what they were, always resembled each other a little, the mood was the same and also the colors – everything looked labored and artificial, as on hand-colored photographs. Color where there should be none. Strangely round and blurred corners and edges. In some places the color even flickered, like the borders of a pool of oil. All the people were scantily clad and their contours unclear. Some wore gray-white radio noise instead of their face. And he himself moved as if in seven-league leaps through this frozen world. Then, every time, came the moment in the dream when for some reason he looked up into the sky. But immediately he regretted this decision, because the radiant blue magnetized his gaze, drawing him upward. He had the feeling of going blind, and a tunnel-shaped wind seized him, a rough, voracious connecting corridor between him and the ether. He glided away, the buildings below him grew smaller, the market square with the obelisk was now only a solemn, indistinct little image as on a cigar box. In later dreams he understood that the eerie

wind corridor had been a hint. It was his dawning realization of the true nature of the universe.

In front of the Ludwig Monument everything was black with people. There was music, there were stalls with warm potatoes, and a tiny zeppelin, filled like its big brothers with light hovering gas, was displayed by a man in a top hat. The dainty airship hung on a short rope, and the man was taking it, so to speak, for a walk, as one does a dog, earning applause. The people of Worms were enjoying the warm autumn day. The leaves on the street were fried to a crisp by the sun; when one walked over them, one had the feeling of chewing them. In front of the fountain struggled a brass band. Bender had trouble keeping his nerves calm as he moved through the tumult. With each step he felt as if the ground always came half a second too early to his soles. If only these people knew. If only it penetrated their heads, no matter how. What would they do then? Would they still roam freely, without a care and at the same time as booked up as bees? The rushing of the plumes of water brought him some relief. Also the wind that blew across the square. It supplies mankind with air and ensures that we don't suffocate.

In the Lichtspielhaus cinema on Kämmererstrasse there were new films, and to mark this occasion a cart drawn by a live ostrich moved along the street. On the cart was a white banner that read "Lichtsspielhaus," they had made a mistake. Bender stared at the extra *s*, the letter appearing to him like a little stray curl of smoke. Next to the advertising wagon strode a man who seemed to consist almost entirely of forehead, whistling a tune with a folksong-like catchiness, now and then also shouting something about the films that would soon be shown. Yes, the beautiful Lichtspielhaus. After his return from the East,

Charlotte and he had often been there. In the summer months, the cinematograph, run by the oddball druggist Busch, was sparsely attended, the newsreels flickered across the screen more or less unnoticed by the couples sitting side by side, and the sympathetic projectionist occasionally even had the stage shifted so that, in the darkness, pairs of patrons could enjoy somewhat more secretive, cramped spatial conditions.

Bender contemplated the large stalking bird, which, harnessed to its bizarre vehicle, walked slowly onward in the sunny dust of the Neumarkt. As ridiculous and unserious as its role here seemed, it was completely at one with the world, even if such nonsense was all the world had planned for it. For it was a creature hatched from an *egg*, and as such part of the original and noblest races that settled the Earth: the scaled, the feathered, and finally the winged beings. They had all once come out of a smaller moon, which must have crashed down and broken open somewhere near that area of the Earth's shell – insanely enough, still called the equatorial zone – about three thousand years ago. The splendidly colorful, obstinate specimens, they were called birds of paradise, had remained there ever since, looking after the jungle trees, while the others had set out to conquer the rest of the world. Of all creatures they had been here on Earth the longest, and this could be seen from one simple fact: They had learned to fly. Something like that takes a very long time. Man had first managed it only a handful of years ago, and even then only in exchange for his inner peace. Bender almost raised his hat to the ostrich.

At the intersection the bird stopped. The owner scolded and tugged at it. In response the ostrich began to sway back and forth in a peculiar way, rolling its head as if it were dizzy. This reminded Bender of a trick they had taught young pilots back in the squadron: tossing one's head violently back and forth when one couldn't stand certain accelerations.

It was a way to restore balance. Some also stuck wax-soaked cotton in their ears, like Odysseus. The North American Indians, it was said, would push small pebbles into their ear canals and then, undeterred by the sucking power of the depths lying in wait all around them, would climb up to a hundred stories in the air, on the steel scaffolding of the burgeoning cities of Chicago, New York, or San Francisco. The ostrich was now wobbling wildly back and forth. Its owner pulled impatiently on the small cart.

What a land this America must be! From there the truth had come into the world. Bender looked up into the blue sky and located the approximate direction of the east coast of America. At first he had struggled with this exercise, but by now he knew quite well how to look. It was advisable to practice during the day, because at night there was the distraction of the starry sky. Strange how comforting it can be for a person to at least know that one is facing the correct direction, even if what one is aiming one's gaze at itself remains invisible and unreachable. Sending out sight rays, in this by itself there was a certain satisfaction, a kind of prayer. Who knows, perhaps his sight rays directly struck the curious Coney Island Luna Park, that amusement island apparently kept in operation year-round on the other side of the Earth's shell, that is, up there, a little to the left, in the western sky, at an angle of about thirty-four degrees. If this Luna Park were now to detach and come floating to him, it would be only a short flight. An amusement park descending on a city! Little Worms, overshadowed by a floating island full of Ferris wheels waving like windmills!

Bender was in possession of an American magazine that contained a report on a museum in Coney Island where one could view babies who had been thrown into the world too early in glass cases, so-called "infant incubators." This was an astonishing technical

device, because the actually nonviable babies, some of whom looked as if they had been kneaded out of fish material into a tiny human figure, thrived quite splendidly in these cases, making up for the weeks and months of which they had been cheated by their overhasty birth, in warmly irradiated glass-enclosed sleep. Tears had come to his eyes when, in his imagination, for under the French occupation there was no other way to travel, he had stopped in front of one of these mummy-like creatures and placed his hand against the glass of the softly humming newborn incubator. The fact that the little beings weren't constantly deprived of air to breathe surprised and moved him. Perhaps they didn't need so much. Like animals in hibernation. Or young moons. Out of a similar concern for breathing air he had always preferred open planes during the war. Those in which one had to sit and steer under a new type of glass covering were abhorrent to him. Oh, if only there were more such articles, more such magazines! Only after a while did he realize that he had strayed from the route that best suited today's horoscope. He quickly turned around, corrected the deviation, and took the right path.

The interior of the Trumpet Inn gave the impression that it would do the room good to clear its throat vigorously. Hoarse light. On the wood-paneled wall hung postcards showing all sorts of things: dancers, carnival figures, actors, Wagner's Siegfried, the comedian Kabausche. On one of them was a picture of the moon. It was a crescent, sharply illuminated, but in the dark area the rest of the moon was faintly discernible. Below it the caption *Clair de Terre – Earthshine*. Bender laughed nervously, then shook his head at this nonsense and looked out for the innkeeper. The more of the prepared text he recited to himself, the darker and more substantial the "lunar craters" became next to him.

In the dining room it smelled deliciously of roast meat and potatoes tossed in butter. A man sat gloomily hunched over a newspaper, wearing a lightly stained bandage around his nose and mouth. At knee level buzzed flies. A small family was making strong facial expressions as they shared a piece of game. And in the corner sat a child and a very old man, probably grandson and grandfather, at a tiny table. The child demonstrated how far he could bend his thumb back against his wrist. And then the old man tried it too – and he could do it! Bender let out an appreciative breath.

Since the innkeeper still hadn't appeared, Bender sat down at the table next to the newspaper reader. He spread out the leaflet for his lecture in front of him and, just to tempt fate a little, placed the key to Else's apartment next to it. Else, his lover, had wept once again when he had left her this morning. The key had an interesting casting mold; it looked like a tiny knight, or perhaps also like a mummy, viewed in profile. Bender fell into a reverie. Egypt, geometry, trade unions. After a while he returned from his thoughts to the dining room, which was beset by ever-changing smells. He said, "Yes indeed," though in connection with something inward, the precise content of which had already dissipated the next moment. At last the innkeeper appeared and asked what he wanted.

"It suits me," Bender began, "that is, I am impromptu, I mean, I'm –"

The innkeeper bent down, one hand behind his ear. The man's alcoholic smell brought back a sudden memory of the wine press in Bender's childhood cellar.

"I am a lecturer." Bender spoke somewhat louder. "And it would suit me very well if I could rent a hall... Yes, it is in the matter of the hall rental that I wished to inquire."

What had happened to his German? It had become entangled in older layers of language. No wonder the man understood nothing.

“Ah, you want to give a lecture? What kind, may I ask?”

Bender saw it all before him. Universe, round Earth, the truth about life and death. The erotic revolution in Worms. The congregation of mankind, the holy priestly couple Peter and Charlotte. He shook his head, made a gesture.

The innkeeper didn't seem fazed by this.

“All I really need to know,” he said to Bender, “is whether you will be speaking to a private circle.”

“No, public,” said Bender.

“Public, then.”

“And the hall rental. How much...”

The innkeeper had to reflect. His gaze wandered upward. His left thumb, which he put to his lower lip to underscore intense rumination, seemed to puff up as he did so. He named an amount. Bender stood up, seized the innkeeper's hand, and shook it. Deal, he thought. *Deal, seal, peal.*

“Political?” asked the innkeeper.

“What?”

“Will your lecture be political?”

“Only in the broadest possible sense.”

Again the thumb returned to the lower lip. Well, in that case, it might be necessary to obtain permission, remarked the innkeeper. From the Rhineland Commission. Because that was required for political –

“But really only in the broadest possible sense,” Bender repeated. “Sort of like our conversation here.”

“Aha, aha.” The innkeeper nodded, leaning back a little, though there was nothing behind him to offer resistance, and placing a heavy hand on his beard. He seemed to be having difficulty interpreting the comparison Bender had presented. Like our conversation here. Yes, well, was this conversation here political or not? Certainly, the Allied occupation authority had just been mentioned in it. But was that alone enough to make the conversation political? Was a conversation about the question of whether the conversation was political itself already political? Did it automatically include the war, the threat of inflation, socialism? Lectures about the war were, of course, clearly political and as such forbidden. But couldn’t one also commemorate the catastrophe quite innocently, simply according to its meaning? But what was the meaning of a term? Now even Bender himself felt the interpretive mill that had sprung up in the room.

“I understand,” the innkeeper finally said.

“Among other things, it will be about the globe of the Earth,” Bender said softly.

“About the...?”

“How the universe of the Earth is constituted. But also about the revolution in private life.”

“Revolution?”

Oh, why had he had to use that word!

From the next table came a murmur of voices.

Bender looked around. Did people already recognize him?

“Pardon me?”

“They’ll keel over,” said the man bent over the newspaper.

“Are you talking to me?”

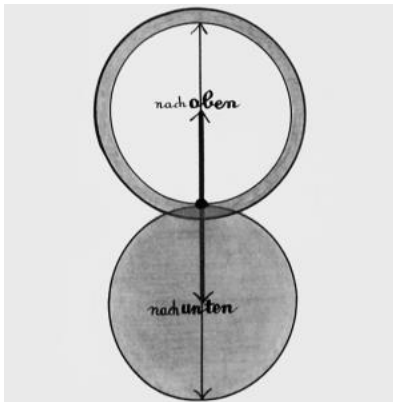
“You want to invite this fellow here for lectures?” the man said through his bandaging. “Then you’d better provide cold towels, for the ladies.”

The innkeeper gave no reply.

“I don’t think we know each other,” Bender said to the stranger.

The man raised his hands dismissively and continued to leaf through his newspaper, shaking his head.

So, then, revolution, well, then, he really must ask for more precise details, the innkeeper insisted. Bender complied, turned over the leaflet lying in front of him, and quickly drew a small *orientation* on the sheet:



The innkeeper looked, ruminated, let time pass. Then it turned out that this kind of clarification meant nothing to him at all. In any case, he warmly welcomed the gentleman, he assured him (here the patched-up newspaper reader laughed briefly), but for the proper report to the Rhineland Commission a little more information really was needed. Not about the literal content, of course, no, no, that would not have to be determined in advance, just the degree of politicization.

Bender liked this concept. He praised the innkeeper and pointed again to the orientation drawing. There. At the table with the family, someone dropped their cutlery. Several heads ducked and scrambled to find it.

“Left,” said the innkeeper.

Bender looked up questioningly.

“No, no, not you – down there.” He pointed under the neighboring table. The fork had in the meantime been discovered. It had, however, become two forks. They were compared and examined to discern which had been the original.

“The one on the left,” said the innkeeper.

He might think of a camera, Bender suggested.

“A camera,” repeated the innkeeper. “What?”

“It has a lens in front, yes?” said Bender, tapping his orientation drawing. What trouble people always had perceiving the abstract general laws behind the physical phenomena of everyday life! One always had to spell everything out to a hair. “And then another lens behind that one. And perhaps another one.”

Was he sure that he wasn’t gradually describing a telescope instead of a camera? So be it. It was just about the picture, after all.

“So, and then on top – what is on top?”

The innkeeper looked questioningly.

Meanwhile, at the next table, a third fork had been discovered on the floor. It was passed around in astonishment.

“On top is the shutter release, of course.”

“Right,” said the innkeeper. “That’s where you release.”

“That’s where the picture is taken.” Bender made the characteristic gesture. The innkeeper pointed his index finger at the invisible camera.

“So the camera contains lenses. Good. But now what does the lens contain?”

The innkeeper’s hand let go of the end of his beard.

“Lens.”

“The lens,” Bender repeated. “What does it contain?”

“Well, it’s made of glass.”

“Not only,” said Bender. “It’s also made of work. Someone ground it. Lens grinders put a lot of work into it.”

The innkeeper evidently liked the idea, because he pointed, though this time with satisfaction and a confirming palm gesture, to the ghost camera hovering silently before them in the room.

“Who grinds the lenses? What goes into the work of lens grinders?”

“Ah, yes, yes,” uttered the innkeeper.

He was now beginning to suspect what would come next.

“You’re just bringing the police into your house,” said the bandaged skull with the newspaper.

“And now what goes into the work of the grinders?” Bender went on, undeterred.

“There we find the whole military industry, war, the desire of mankind to survive. Or even to see alien worlds.”

“My goodness,” said the innkeeper.

But he was already being called away. That is, pairs of eyes were searching for him, the waitress was standing next to him, wanting something. People had to pay, or order, or ask something, but everything was still up in the air here, in mid-explanation.

Bender felt he had to jump to the endpoint of his explanation. In the end, he said, there is *always war in everything*. And he put, q. e. d., the pen on the table: Yes indeed, in everything there's war, the state, and perhaps also, more generally, man with his silly desire to get far away, beyond himself, to the moon, what do I know. In the end, in a certain way, the moon is simply in everything. Even in war. Even in the work of lens grinders. And in the camera. And so just as much in every kind of human lecture.

The innkeeper's promise did Bender good. Now, enjoying his just triumph, he was allowed to dawdle a little before going home. Besides, it was definitely best to let Else's smell (a stimulatingly goat-scented makeup from a golden box), which certainly still clung to him, radiate off a little. How quickly this Trumpet innkeeper, dreaming and shuffling through life, had been woken up by him! A drawing had sufficed, and the essence had passed over into his consciousness! But despite such small successes, Bender generally felt quite alone in his knowledge. Christian missionaries in corners of the Earth remote from civilization must have experienced something very similar. There were allies and enlightened people, of course, but they all lived far away. The great Karl Neupert in Augsburg and Johannes Lang in Frankfurt. The two German discoverers of the shape of the world. One awake mind per city was apparently the most Germany could muster. But still: progress. At that moment, a boy on the street tripped, as if to underscore the progress, over his own umbrella.

The very first to discover the truth, however, had not been a German, but the American John Cleves Symmes Jr., a merchant from New Jersey, who, in the short time granted him on Earth (he died at forty-eight), had gained surprisingly deep insights into its nature. While the trading business he ran was going bankrupt before his eyes, he immersed himself, since not much else remained to him, more and more in the riddle of Saturn's rings. Their study offered him comfort and diversion. Gradually, he realized that a very similar structure must exist for the Earth too. How was it possible that for the distant Saturn such a stabilizing dowry had been intended, but for the Earth, which, due to the misfortune uninterruptedly occurring on it, needed all the more support and cheering up, nothing comparable at all? Certainly there was something there. Yes, it had to be there, in the nights one felt it, didn't one? But why wasn't it visible? Symmes's solution: The Saturn rings of the Earth were *inside it*. Through openings in the poles one could get there and look at them. This was also the first solution to the old problem that the geographic poles did not seem to be in the same location as the magnetic ones, even seemed to shift independently of them. This, according to Symmes, was the effect of the rings inside, the concentric inner spheres. Symmes planned an investigation of the interior of the Earth, but shortly before the expedition began, he died suddenly under mysterious circumstances – this, of course, being further evidence.

Admittedly, this first theory remained incomplete. It was upside down. Its perfecter, in the end, was Dr. Cyrus Teed, who from a certain point on, to make it easier for his later disciples, renamed himself *Koresh*, the Hebrew form of Cyrus. Dr. Teed was an extraordinarily gifted man. Even at the age of thirty, in 1869, he was fully aware that he was destined for greater things. One evening in his laboratory in Utica, New York, he

achieved the transmutation of the elements. As he later recorded in *The Illumination of Koresh*, he had converted matter into energy by means of “polaric influence.” But since it was not yet all too late, he set out on the same evening of that extraordinary day to extend his experiments to the field of immortality. In the process his body was inadvertently caught in an electric circuit that, while not strong enough to kill him, left him momentarily unconscious.

When Dr. Teed awoke, the universe was transformed. “Suddenly,” he writes, “I experienced a relaxation at the occiput or back part of the brain, and a peculiar buzzing tension at the forehead or sinciput; succeeding this was a sensation as of a Faradic battery of the softest tension, about the organs of the brain called the lyrs, crura pinealis, and the conarium. There gradually spread from the center of my brain to the extremities of my body, and, apparently to me, into the auric sphere of my being, miles outside of my body, a vibration so gentle, soft, and dulciferous that I was impressed to lay myself upon the bosom of this gently oscillating ocean of magnetic and spiritual ecstasy. All at once I had at my disposal preconscious, vague memories of natural consciousness and desire.” Moreover, as he now noticed, a ball of luminous gas was hovering in the room. It transformed, little by little, into a female figure, in which Teed suspected God. His conclusion: “I had formulated the axiom that matter and energy are two qualities or states of the same substance and that they are each transposable to the other. In this I knew was held the key that would unlock all mysteries, even the mystery of Life itself.” His final insight that day was that the universe is a cell, a hollow globe. All life exists on its inner concave surface.

In Naples, Florida, this visionary conjecture of the shape of the universe was finally scientifically proven. Dr. Morrow, with the help of the *rectilineator* he had developed, had demonstrated that the Earth curves concavely upward. And why do ships disappear at the sea horizon? Yes, this effect can be observed with the naked eye. In his *Cellular Cosmogony*, Dr. Teed gives a simple analogy: the seeming convergence of railroad tracks in the distance. All things in the distance optically merge together. Even two balloons flying side by side, he writes in the chapter on lines of vision, which float away just far enough into the firmament, seem to turn there into *one* balloon. But this doesn't mean that the balloonists physically merge together, that is, so to speak – to stick with the image of the ship on the horizon – “sink into each other,” no, it is, of course, an illusion created by the internal conditions of our visual organs. One could go so far as to take the trouble of thoroughly examining afterward the garments and even the bodies of the balloonists. Nowhere will one find traces of interpenetration! (Was there someone walking behind him? Bender looked around, almost stumbled...) And even if one sprinkled one of the two groups of balloonists with a “detectable powdery substance, such as flour,” then after the return of the flight vehicles not a speck of it would be found on the other group. The same experiment could then be repeated with any number of balloons, basket passengers, and multicolored measuring substances and – yes, Bender realized that someone was indeed following him. It was the man with the bandaged face. He was swinging a cane as he walked.

Bender strode along for a while, the inner voices now completely extinguished, listening only to the pursuer behind him. Was the fellow coming closer? Or was he going the same way only by chance? Bender turned into Andreasstrasse, then walked slowly

toward the Jewish cemetery, past the district office, that gloomy building full of demons. Far away, a revving engine could be heard, and for a moment he was startled, thinking the sound was coming from him as he exhaled. He pretended to head for the main entrance of the cemetery, but then, as if by a sudden inner decision, veered to the right and crossed a meadow. If someone follows you across a meadow, then he wants something from you, thought Bender. And indeed the figure with the bandaged head seemed to be considering whether to follow him. It did so. Bender turned away and hurried on. With each step he felt, through the carpet of grass, the reliable hardness of the planet.

Now he remembered that he wasn't carrying any identification papers. Where was the best place to strike with one's fist to defend oneself? Some said that the Adam's apple was the most sensitive spot. But the pursuer had an obviously injured head, and so this presented itself as the ideal target. Why was the fellow seeking a confrontation in the first place, while his head still had to heal from injuries? Did he feel – did he *know* himself to be so indestructible? That wasn't good. Beyond the meadow was Herr Lind's kiosk. Perfect, that was where he would position himself, not much could happen to him there. Herr Lind would be a witness to the abduction. Abduction? Why am I thinking such a thing? How is someone with an injured skull supposed to abduct me, thought Bender, pretending he couldn't help laughing. From the kiosk window glowed the reddened, shiny face of Herr Lind, who, since his wife's death from influenza almost a year ago now, had grown increasingly feral. Sometimes, at the end of the day, he could be seen standing next to his kiosk, as if backlit in red, kicking at pigeons.

Bender greeted Herr Lind and bought an evening paper. In one spot on the asphalt bulged the roots of a mighty tree, which, although right next to the meadow, had for years

lived surrounded by a concrete ring and a metal fence. Bender stood directly on one of the cracked concrete humps and let himself be borne by the tree, so to speak, while he, squinting sideways and leafing through his newspaper, awaited the attacker striding toward him. Best to let him come very close first. Then simply aim the knuckles of the right hand directly at the darkest spot on the bandage, on the side of the jaw. Besides, Herr Lind would see everything. “Lieutenant,” he heard, “you sure do hustle one around. And with my leg.”

When the figure thus announcing himself had taken up position right next to him, Herr Lind suddenly pulled down the shutters of his kiosk. Taken aback, Bender turned around toward the noise.

“Lieutenant?” repeated the stranger.

Bender pretended to notice him only now.

“Pardon me?”

“Nice of you to wait for me. I’m not quite so good on my feet, as you can see.”

“I don’t think we know each other,” said Bender, thinking: *Look how calm I can remain*. On his opponent’s neck he couldn’t make out an Adam’s apple.

“No, no,” the man said, and, bringing the flame dangerously close to his bandaging, lit a spindly cigarette, “and I hope you don’t take my little intervention earlier amiss. I wanted to apologize for that.”

The stranger’s cane had an impudent black rubber nub on one end, pointing directly at Bender.

The man handed him his card. *Florian Abt, trader in wares*. Shaking his head, Bender put it in his pocket.

“You are a very gifted speaker,” said the man.

“Thank you.”

“Only,” a brief smoke-cough-pause, “only your theory of the square shape of erotic relations, Lieutenant, well...”

“I haven’t been a lieutenant for a long time.”

“I know, I know. You’ve been all sorts of things since then. It’s your right, too. So, squaring the...well, in any case, the polygamy thing, or the love between father and daughter. It’s all beyond me. But your talent as a speaker! Extraordinary. If at some point you want to use your words to stand up for a good cause – ”

A leaflet was shown. *The Rhineland for the Rhinelanders!* Underlined twice.

“Now, now,” said Bender. “Put that away.”

He noticed that, out of sheer tension, he had rolled up his newspaper into a small, bent horn bell.

“Our community is primarily concerned with spiritual...” he began.

Abt raised a hand, three fingers splayed.

“Three,” he said. “At the last lecture alone. Three ladies, in the back rows. All of them keeled over. Do you perhaps no longer even notice?”

Bender felt: I’m turning red. And an itch traveled through his body, like a spotlight slowly passing over him. He directed his gaze to the ground and said: “I have nothing to do with that.”

Abt seemed amused.

“All right,” he said. “In any case, you’re a talent. People keel over when you talk. You belong in big beer halls. After all, I was there too, back then, eighteen. On the

Workers' and Soldiers' Council. So, Lieutenant, if you should ever have the need to stand up for the right side, on the back of the card you'll find our assembly—"

"Yes, yes, I see, thank you," said Bender.

Abt laughed and patted Bender on the shoulder.

"Good luck to your community," he said, and took his leave.

"Get well soon," muttered Bender.

Still clasping his newspaper, by now almost kneaded to a pulp, with both hands, Bender waited another moment to see whether the kiosk's shutter would now be pulled back up. No, it stayed down. Bender cursed the cowardly Herr Lind. Sheep, all sheep! And in the sky, yes, of course, what else – there now floated the moon. Fantastic. Everything perfectly organized. Bender berated the moon. Today the thing possessed the form of a human ear. "Waning," then, this ridiculous game of optical confusion. On the way back to the Trumpet Inn, Bender encountered the black rubber tip of Abt's cane again, this time it was a postage-stamp-sized mustache on the face of a fruit merchant, and later, upon entering the establishment, he clearly felt it inside him, just below his breastbone, as a sort of cockchafer waiting there, ready to buzz, for the appropriate magic spell: the devil.

After a thorough examination of the local clientele, Bender explained, he unfortunately found himself forced to withdraw his just-promised lecturing activity from this establishment. The innkeeper took note of this with astonishment. The sheepfolk dining all around hardly lifted their sluggish eyes from their plates. Very regrettable, said the innkeeper, and wanted to know whether there was anything else he could do for the gentleman. Bender looked into the face of this lost person with a mixture of disgust and

sympathy, and then, slipping into neutral language in the face of utterly contradictory feelings, said: “Do your research.”

[...]

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