



## I

A Turkish heavyweight boxing champion sauntering down a Hamburg street with his mother on his arm can scarcely be blamed for failing to notice that he is being shadowed by a skinny boy in a black coat.

Big Melik, as he was known to his admiring neighbourhood, was a giant of a fellow, shaggy, unkempt and genial, with a broad natural grin and black hair bound back in a ponytail and a rolling, free-and-easy gait that, even without his mother, took up half the pavement. At the age of twenty he was in his own small world a celebrity, and not only for his prowess in the boxing ring: elected youth representative of his Islamic sports club, three times runner-up in the North German Championship hundred-metre butterfly stroke and, as if all that weren't enough, star goalkeeper of his Saturday soccer team.

Like most very large people, he was also more accustomed to being looked at than looking, which is another reason why the skinny boy got away with shadowing him for three successive days and nights.

The two men first made eye contact as Melik and his mother Leyla emerged from the al-Umma Travel Shop, fresh from buying air tickets for Melik's sister's wedding in their home village outside Ankara. Melik felt someone's gaze fixed on him,

glanced round, and came face to face with a tall, desperately thin boy of his own height with a straggly beard, eyes reddened and deep-set, and a long black coat that could have held three magicians. He had a black-and-white *keffiyeh* round his neck and a tourist's camelskin saddlebag slung over his shoulder. He stared at Melik, then at Leyla. Then he came back to Melik, never blinking, but appealing to him with his fiery, sunken eyes.

Yet the boy's air of desperation need not have troubled Melik all that much since the travel shop was situated at the edge of the main railway station concourse, where every variety of lost soul – German vagrants, Asians, Arabs, Africans, or Turkish like himself but less fortunate – hung around all day long, not to mention legless men on electric carts, drug-sellers and their customers, beggars and their dogs, and a seventy-year-old cowboy in a Stetson and silver-studded leather riding breeches. Few had work, and a sprinkling had no business standing on German soil at all, but were at best tolerated under a deliberate policy of destitution, pending their summary deportation, usually at dawn. Only new arrivals or the wilfully foolhardy took the risk. Cannier illegals gave the station a wide berth.

A further good reason to ignore the boy was the classical music which the station authorities boom at full blast over this section of the concourse from a battery of well-aimed loudspeakers. Its purpose, far from spreading feelings of peace and wellbeing among its listeners, is to send them packing.

Despite these impediments the skinny boy's face imprinted itself on Melik's consciousness and for a fleeting moment he felt embarrassed by his own happiness. Why on earth should he? Something splendid had just occurred, and he couldn't wait to phone his sister and tell her that their mother Leyla,

after six months of tending her dying husband, and a year of mourning her heart out for him, was bubbling over with pleasure at the prospect of attending her daughter's wedding, and fussing about what to wear, and whether the dowry was big enough, and the groom as handsome as everybody, including Melik's sister, said he was.

So why shouldn't Melik chatter along with his own mother? – which he did, enthusiastically, all the way home. It was the skinny boy's stillness, he decided later. Those lines of age in a face as young as mine. His look of winter on a lovely spring day.

That was the Thursday.

And on the Friday evening, when Melik and Leyla came out of mosque together, there he was again, the same boy, the same *keffiyeh* and oversized overcoat, huddled in the shadow of a grimy doorway. This time Melik noticed that there was a sideways list to his skinny body, as if he'd been knocked off-true and had remained at that angle until somebody told him he could straighten up. And the fiery stare burning even more brightly than on the previous day. Melik met his gaze head-on, wished he hadn't, and looked away.

And this second encounter was all the less probable because Leyla and Melik scarcely ever went to mosque, not even a moderate Turkish-language one. Since 9/11, Hamburg's mosques had become dangerous places. Go to the wrong one, or the right one and get the wrong imam, and you could find yourself and your family on a police watch list for the rest of your life. Nobody doubted that practically every prayer-row contained an informant who was earning his way with the authorities. Nobody was likely to forget, be he Muslim, police spy or both, that the city-state of Hamburg had been

unwitting host to three of the 9/11 hijackers not to mention their fellow cell-members and plotters, or that Mohammed Atta, who steered the first plane into the Twin Towers, had worshipped his wrathful god in a humble Hamburg mosque.

It was also a fact that since her husband's death Leyla and her son had become less observant of their faith. Yes, of course the old man had been a Muslim, and a laic too. But he was a militant supporter of workers' rights, which was why he had been driven out of his homeland. The only reason they had gone to mosque at all was that Leyla in her impulsive way had felt a sudden need. She was happy. The weight of her grief was lifting. Yet the first anniversary of her husband's death was approaching. She needed to have a dialogue with him and share the good news. They had already missed the main Friday prayer, and could just as well have prayed at home. But Leyla's whim was law. Arguing correctly that personal invocations stand a better chance of being heard if they are offered in the evening, she had insisted on attending the last prayer hour of the day, which incidentally meant that the mosque was as good as empty.

So clearly Melik's second encounter with the skinny boy, like the first, was mere chance. For what else could it be? Or so, in his plain way, the good-hearted Melik reasoned.

The next day being a Saturday, Melik took a bus across town to visit his affluent paternal uncle at the family candle factory. Relationships between his uncle and his father had at times been strained, but since his father's death he had learned to respect his uncle's friendship. Jumping aboard the bus, whom should he see but the skinny boy sitting below him in the glass shelter, watching him depart? And six hours later, when he returned to the same bus stop, the boy was still there, wrapped in his

*keffiyeh* and magician's overcoat, crouched in the same corner of the shelter, waiting.

At the sight of him Melik, who as a rule of life was pledged to love all mankind equally, was seized by an uncharitable aversion. He felt that the skinny boy was accusing him of something and he resented it. Worse, there was an air of superiority about him, despite his miserable condition. What did he think he was achieving with that ridiculous black coat, anyway? That it made him invisible or something? Or was he trying to imply that he was so unfamiliar with our Western ways that he had no idea of the image he created?

Either way, Melik determined to shake him off. So instead of going up to him and asking him whether he needed help, or was ill, which in other circumstances he might have done, he struck out for home at full stride, confident that the skinny boy stood no chance of keeping up with him.

The day was unseasonably hot for spring, and the sun was beating off the crowded pavement. Yet the skinny boy contrived by some kind of miracle to keep pace with Melik, limping and panting, wheezing and sweating, and now and then jumping in the air as if in pain, but still managing to draw up alongside him at pedestrian crossings.

And when Melik let himself into the tiny brick house that, after decades of family scrimping, his mother now owned almost free of debt, he had only to wait a few breaths before the front doorbell chimed its carillon. And when he returned downstairs, there stood the skinny boy on the doorstep with his saddlebag over his shoulder and his eyes blazing from the effort of the walk, and sweat pouring down his face like summer rain, and in his trembling hand he held a piece of brown cardboard on which was written in Turkish: *I am a Muslim medical student. I am tired and I wish to stay in your house. Issa.* And as

if to ram the message home, round his wrist a bracelet of fine gold, and dangling from it, a tiny golden replica of the Koran.

But Melik by now had a full head of outrage. All right, he wasn't the greatest intellect his school had ever seen but he objected to feeling guilty and inferior, and being followed, and preyed upon by a beggar with attitude. When his father died Melik had proudly assumed the rôle of master of the house and his mother's protector and, as a further assertion of his authority, done what his father had not succeeded in doing before his death: as a second-generation Turkish resident, he had launched himself and his mother on the long, stony road to German citizenship, where every aspect of a family's lifestyle was taken under the microscope, and eight years of unblemished behaviour were the first prerequisite. The last thing he or his mother needed was some deranged vagrant claiming to be a medical student and begging on their doorstep.

'Get the hell out of here,' he ordered the skinny boy roughly in Turkish, squaring to him in the doorway. 'Get out of here. Stop following us, and don't come back.'

Meeting no reaction from the haggard face except a wince as if it had been struck, Melik repeated his instruction in German. But when he made to slam the door, he discovered Leyla standing on the stair behind him, looking over his shoulder at the boy and at the cardboard notice shaking uncontrollably in his hand.

And he saw that she already had tears of pity in her eyes.

Sunday passed and on the Monday morning Melik found excuses not to show up at his cousin's greengrocery business in Wellingsbüttel. He must stay home and train for the Amateur Open Boxing Championship, he told his mother. He must work out in the gym and in the Olympic pool. But in

reality he had decided she was not safe to be left alone with an elongated psycho with delusions of grandeur who, when he wasn't praying or staring at the wall, prowled about the house, fondly touching everything as if he remembered it from long ago. Leyla was a peerless woman in her son's judgment, but since her husband's death volatile and guided solely by her feelings. Those whom she chose to love could do no wrong. Issa's softness of manner, his timidity and sudden rushes of dawning happiness, made him an instant member of that select company.

On the Monday and again on the Tuesday, Issa did little except sleep, pray and bathe himself. To communicate he spoke broken Turkish with a peculiar, guttural accent, furtively, in bursts, as though talking were forbidden, yet still in some unfathomable way, to Melik's ear, didactic. Otherwise he ate. Where on earth did he put all that food? At any hour of the day, Melik would walk into the kitchen and there he was, head bowed over a bowl of lamb and rice and vegetable, spoon never still, eyes slipping from side to side lest somebody snatch his food away. When he'd finished, he'd wipe the bowl clean with a piece of bread, eat the bread and, with a muttered 'Thanks be to God', and a faint smirk on his face as if he had a secret that was too good for them to share, take the bowl to the sink and wash it under the tap, a thing Leyla would never in a month of Sundays have allowed her own son or husband to do. The kitchen was her domain. Men keep out.

'So when are you reckoning to start your medical studies, Issa?' Melik asked him casually, in his mother's hearing.

'God willing, it will be soon. I must be strong. I must not be beggar.'

'You'll need a residence permit, you know. *And* a student's ID. Not to mention like a hundred thousand euros for board



and lodging. And a neat little two-seater to take your girlfriends out.'

'God is all-merciful. When I am not beggar, He will provide.'

Such self-assurance went beyond mere piety in Melik's view.

'He's costing us real money, Mother,' he declared, barging into the kitchen while Issa was safely in the attic. 'The way he eats. All those baths.'

'No more than you, Melik.'

'No, but he's not me, is he? We don't know who he is.'

'Issa is our guest. When he is restored to health, with Allah's help we shall consider his future,' his mother replied loftily.

Issa's implausible efforts at self-effacement only made him more conspicuous in Melik's eyes. Sidling his way down the cramped corridor, or preparing to climb the stepladder to the attic where Leyla had made up a bed for him, he employed what Melik regarded as exaggerated circumspection, seeking permission with his doe-eyes, and flattening himself against the wall when Melik or Leyla needed to pass.

'Issa has been in prison,' Leyla announced complacently one morning.

Melik was appalled. 'Do you know that for a fact? We're harbouring a gaolbird? Do the police know that for a fact? Did he *tell* you?'

'He said that in prison in Istanbul they give only one piece of bread and a bowl of rice a day,' said Leyla, and before Melik could protest any more, added one of her late husband's favourite nostrums: 'We honour the guest and go to the assistance of those in distress. No work of charity will go unrewarded in Paradise,' she intoned. 'Wasn't your own father in prison in Turkey, Melik? Not everyone who goes to prison

is a criminal. For people like Issa and your father, prison is a badge of honour.'

But Melik knew she had other thoughts up her sleeve that she was less inclined to reveal. Allah had answered her prayers. He had sent her a second son to make up for the husband she had lost. The fact that he was an illegal half-crazed gaolbird with delusions about himself was of no apparent interest to her.

He was from Chechnya.

That much they established on the third evening when Leyla astonished them both by trilling out a couple of sentences of Chechen, a thing Melik never in his life had heard her do. Issa's haggard face lit up with a sudden amazed smile which vanished equally quickly, and thereafter he seemed to be struck mute. Yet Leyla's explanation of her linguistic skills turned out to be simple. As a young girl in Turkey she had played with Chechen children in her village and picked up snippets of their language. She guessed Issa was Chechen from the moment she set eyes on him but kept her counsel because with Chechens you never knew.

He was from Chechnya, and his mother was dead, and all he had to remember her by was the golden bracelet with the Koran attached to it that she had placed round his wrist before she died. But when and how she died, and how old he was when he inherited her bracelet were questions he either failed to understand or didn't wish to.

'Chechens are hated everywhere,' Leyla explained to Melik, while Issa kept his head down and went on eating. 'But not by us. Do you hear me, Melik?'

'Of course I hear you, Mother.'

'Everyone persecutes Chechens except us,' she continued. 'It is normal all over Russia and the world. Not only Chechens,

but Russian Muslims everywhere. Putin persecutes them and Mr Bush encourages him. As long as Putin calls it his war on terror, he can do with the Chechens whatever he wishes, and nobody will stop him. Is that not so, Issa?’

But Issa’s brief moment of pleasure had long passed. The shadows had returned to his wracked face, the spark of suffering to his doe-eyes, and a haggard hand closed protectively over the bracelet. *Speak*, damn you, Melik urged him indignantly but not aloud. If somebody surprises me by talking Turkish at me, I speak Turkish back, it’s only polite! So why don’t you answer my mother with a few obliging words of Chechen, or are you too busy knocking back her free food?

He had other worries. Carrying out a security inspection of the attic that Issa now treated as his sovereign territory – stealthily, Issa was in the kitchen, talking as usual to his mother – he had made certain revealing discoveries: hoarded scraps of food as though Issa were planning his escape; a gilt-framed miniature head-and-shoulder photograph of Melik’s betrothed sister at eighteen, purloined from his mother’s treasured collection of family portraits in the living room; and his father’s magnifying glass, lying across a copy of the Hamburg Yellow Pages, open at the section devoted to the city’s many banks.

‘God gave your sister a tender smile,’ Leyla pronounced contentedly, in answer to Melik’s outraged protests that they were harbouring a sexual deviant as well as an illegal. ‘Her smile will lighten Issa’s heart.’

Issa was from Chechnya then, whether or not he spoke the language. Both his parents were dead, but when asked about them he was as puzzled as his hosts were, gazing sweetly into a corner of the room with his eyebrows raised. He was stateless, homeless,

an ex-prisoner and illegal, but Allah would provide the means for him to study medicine once he was no longer a beggar.

Well, Melik too had once dreamed of becoming a doctor and had even extracted from his father and uncles a shared undertaking to finance his training, a thing that would have entailed the family in real sacrifice. And if he'd been a bit better at exams and maybe played fewer games, that's where he'd be today: at medical school, a first-year student working his heart out for the honour of his family. It was therefore understandable that Issa's airy assumption that Allah would somehow enable him to do what Melik had conspicuously failed to do should have prompted him to throw aside Leyla's warnings and, as best his generous heart allowed, launch himself on a searching examination of his unwanted guest.

The house was his. Leyla had gone shopping and would not be back until mid-afternoon.

'You've studied medicine then, have you?' he suggested, sitting himself down beside Issa for greater intimacy, and fancying himself the wiliest interrogator in the world. 'Nice.'

'I was in hospitals, sir.'

'As a student?'

'I was sick, sir.'

Why all these sirs? Were they from prison too?

'Being a patient's not like being a doctor, though, is it? A doctor has to know what's wrong with people. A patient sits there and waits for the doctor to put it right.'

Issa considered this statement in the complicated way that he considered all statements of whatever size, now smirking into space, now scratching at his beard with his spidery fingers, and finally smiling brilliantly without answering.

'How old are you?' Melik demanded, becoming more

blunt than he had planned. 'If you don't mind my asking' – sarcastically.

'Twenty-three, sir.' But again only after prolonged consideration.

'That's quite old then, isn't it? Even if you got your residence tomorrow, you wouldn't be a qualified doctor till you were thirty-five or something. Plus learning German. You'd have to pay for that too.'

'Also God willing I shall marry good wife and have many children, two boys, two girls.'

'Not my sister, though. She's getting married next month, I'm afraid.'

'God willing she will have many sons, sir.'

Melik considered his next line of attack and plunged: 'How did you get to Hamburg in the first place?' he asked.

'It is immaterial.'

*Immaterial?* Where did he get *that* word from? And in Turkish?

'Didn't you know that they treat refugees worse in this town than anywhere in Germany?'

'Hamburg will be my home, sir. It is where they bring me. It is Allah's divine command.'

'Who brought you? Who's *they*?'

'It was combination, sir.'

'Combination of what?'

'Maybe Turkish people. Maybe Chechen people. We pay them. They take us to boat. Put us in container. Container had little air.'

Issa was beginning to sweat, but Melik had gone too far to pull back now.

'We? Who's we?'

'Was group, sir. From Istanbul. Bad group. Bad men. I do

not respect these men.’ The superior tone again, even in faltering Turkish.

‘How many of you?’

‘Maybe twenty. Container was cold. After few hours, very cold. This ship would go to Denmark. I was happy.’

‘You mean Copenhagen, right? Copenhagen in Denmark. The capital.’

‘Yes’ – brightening as if Copenhagen was a good idea – ‘to *Copenhagen*. In Copenhagen, I would be arranged. I would be free from bad men. But this ship did not go immediately Copenhagen. This ship must go first Sweden. To *Gothenburg*. Yes?’

‘There’s a Swedish port called Gothenburg, I believe,’ Melik conceded.

‘In Gothenburg, ship will dock, ship will take cargo, then go Copenhagen. When ship arrive in Gothenburg we are very sick, very hungry. On ship they tell to us: “Make no noise. Swedes hard. Swedes kill you.” We make no noise. But Swedes do not like our container. Swedes have dog.’ He reflects a while. ““What is your name, please?”” he intones, loud enough to make Melik sit up. ““What papers, please? You are from prison? What crimes, please? You escape from prison? How, please?” Doctors are efficient. I admire these doctors. They let us sleep. I am grateful to these doctors. One day I will be such a doctor. But God willing I must escape. To escape to Sweden is no chance. There is NATO wire. Many guards. But there is also toilet. From toilet is window. After window is gate to harbour. My friend can open this gate. My friend is from boat. I go back to boat. Boat takes me to Copenhagen. At last, I say. In Copenhagen was lorry for Hamburg. Sir, I love God. But the West I also love. In West I shall be free to worship Him.’

‘A lorry brought you to Hamburg?’

‘Was arranged.’

'A Chechen lorry?'

'My friend must first take me to road.'

'Your friend from the crew? That friend? The same guy?'

'No, sir. Was different friend. To reach road was difficult. Before lorry, we must sleep one night in field.' He looked up, and an expression of pure joy momentarily suffused his haggard features. 'Was stars. God is merciful. Praise be to Him.'

Wrestling with the improbabilities of this story, humbled by its fervour yet infuriated as much by its omissions as his own incapacity to overcome them, Melik felt his frustration spread to his arms and fists, and his fighter's nerves tighten in his stomach.

'Where did it drop you off then, this magic lorry that showed up out of nowhere? Where did it drop you?'

But Issa was no longer listening, if he had been listening at all. Suddenly – or suddenly to the honest if uncomprehending eyes of Melik – whatever had been building up in him erupted. He rose drunkenly to his feet and with a hand cupped to his mouth hobbled stooping to the door, wrestled it open although it wasn't locked, and lurched down the corridor to the bathroom. Moments later, the house was filled with a howling and retching, the like of which Melik hadn't heard since his father's death. Gradually it ceased, to be followed by a slopping of water, an opening and closing of the bathroom door, and a creaking of the attic steps as Issa scaled the ladder. After which a deep, troubling silence descended, broken each quarter-hour by the chirping of Leyla's electronic bird-clock.

At four the same afternoon, Leyla returned laden with shopping and, interpreting the atmosphere for what it was, berated Melik for transgressing his duties as host and dishonouring his father's name. She too then withdrew to her room, where she remained

in rampant isolation until it was time for her to prepare the evening meal. Soon smells of cooking pervaded the house, but Melik remained on his bed. At eight-thirty she banged the brass dinner-gong, a precious wedding gift that to Melik always sounded like a reproach. Knowing she brooked no delay at such moments, he slunk to the kitchen, avoiding her eye.

'Issa, dear, come down, please!' Leyla shouted and, receiving no response, grabbed hold of her late husband's walking stick and thumped the ceiling with its rubber ferrule, her eyes accusingly on Melik who, under her frosty gaze, braved the climb to the attic.

Issa was lying on his mattress in his underpants, drenched in sweat and hunched on his side. He had taken his mother's bracelet from his wrist and was clutching it in his sweated hand. Round his neck he wore a grimy leather purse tied with a thong. His eyes were wide open, yet he seemed unaware of Melik's presence. Reaching out to touch his shoulder, Melik drew back in dismay. Issa's upper body was a slough of criss-cross blue-and-orange bruises. Some appeared to be whiplashes, others bludgeon-marks. On the soles of his feet – the same feet that had pounded the Hamburg pavements – Melik made out suppurating holes the size of cigarette burns. Locking his arms round Issa, and binding a blanket round his waist for propriety, Melik lifted him tenderly and lowered the passive Issa through the attic trap and into Leyla's waiting arms.

'Put him in my bed,' Melik whispered through his tears. 'I'll sleep on the floor. I don't care. I'll even give him my sister to smile at him,' he added, remembering the purloined miniature in the attic, and went back up the ladder to fetch it.

Issa's beaten body lay wrapped in Melik's bathrobe, his bruised legs jutting out of the end of Melik's bed, the gold chain still



clutched in his hand, his unflinching gaze fixed resolutely on Melik's wall of fame: press photographs of the champ triumphant, his boxing belts and winning gloves. On the floor beside him squatted Melik himself. He had wanted to call a doctor at his own expense, but Leyla had forbidden him to summon anyone. Too dangerous. For Issa, but for us too. What about our citizenship application? By morning, his temperature will come down and he'll start to recover.

But his temperature didn't come down.

Muffled in a full scarf and travelling partway by cab to discourage her imagined pursuers, Leyla paid an unannounced visit to a mosque on the other side of town where a new Turkish doctor was said to worship. Three hours later she returned home in a rage. The new young doctor was a fool and a fraud. He knew nothing. He lacked the most elementary qualifications. He had no sense of his religious responsibilities. Very likely, he was not a doctor at all.

Meanwhile, in her absence, Issa's temperature had after all come down a little, and she was able to draw upon the rudimentary nursing skills she had acquired in the days before the family could afford a doctor or dared to visit one. If Issa had suffered internal injuries, she pronounced, he would never have been able to gulp down all that food, so she was not afraid to give him aspirin for his subsiding fever, or run up one of her broths made from rice water laced with Turkish herbal potions.

Knowing that Issa in health or death would never permit her to touch his bare body, she provided Melik with towels, a poultice for his brow, and a bowl of cool water to sponge him every hour. To achieve this, the remorse-stricken Melik felt obliged to unfasten the leather purse at Issa's neck.

Only after long hesitation, and strictly in the interests of

his sick guest – or so he assured himself – and not until Issa had turned his face to the other wall and fallen into a half-sleep broken by mutterings in Russian, did he untie the thong, and loosen the throat of the purse.

His first find was a bunch of faded Russian newspaper clippings, rolled up and held together with an elastic band. Removing the band, he spread them out on the floor. Common to each was a photograph of a Red Army officer in uniform. He was brutish, broad-browed, thick-jowled and looked to be in his mid-sixties. Two cuttings were memorial announcements, decked with Orthodox crosses and regimental insignia.

Melik's second find was a wad of US fifty-dollar bills, brand new, ten of them, held together by a money clip. At the sight of them, all his old suspicions came flooding back. A starving, homeless, penniless, beaten fugitive has *five hundred untouched dollars* in his purse? Did he steal them? Forge them? Was this why he had been in prison? Was this what was left over after he had paid off the people-smugglers of Istanbul, the obliging crew member who had hidden him, and the lorry driver who had spirited him from Copenhagen to Hamburg? If he's got five hundred left now, how ever much did he set out with? Maybe his medical fantasies aren't so ill-placed after all.

His third find was a grimy white envelope squeezed into a ball as if somebody had meant to throw it away, then changed his mind: no stamp, no address, and the flap ripped open. Flattening the envelope, he fished out a crumpled one-page typed letter in Cyrillic script. It had a printed address, a date, and the name of the sender – or so he assumed – in large black print along the top. Below the unreadable text was an unreadable signature in blue ink, followed by a handwritten six-figure number, but written very carefully, each figure inked over several times, as if to say *remember this*.

His last find was a key, a small pipestem key, no larger than one knuckle joint of his boxer's hand. It was machine-turned and had complex teeth on three sides: too small for a prison door, he reckoned, too small for the gate in Gothenburg leading back to the ship. But just right for handcuffs.

Replacing Issa's belongings in the purse, Melik slipped it under the sweat-soaked pillow for him to discover when he woke. But by next morning, the guilty feelings that had taken hold of him wouldn't let him go. All through his night's vigil, stretched on the floor with Issa one step above him on the bed, he had been tormented by images of his guest's martyred limbs, and the realisation of his own inadequacy.

As a fighter he knew pain, or thought he did. As a Turkish street kid he had taken beatings as well as handing them out. In a recent championship bout, a hail of punches had sent him reeling into the red dark from which boxers fear not to return. Swimming against native Germans, he had tested the extreme limits of his endurance, or thought he had.

Yet compared with Issa he was untried.

Issa is a man and I am still a boy. I always wanted a brother and here he is delivered to my doorstep, and I rejected him. He suffered like a true defender of his beliefs while I courted cheap glory in the boxing ring.

By the early hours of dawn, the erratic breathing that had kept Melik on tenterhooks all night settled to a steady rasp. Replacing the poultice, he was relieved to establish that Issa's fever had subsided. By mid-morning, he was propped semi-upright like a pasha amid a golden pile of Leyla's tasselled velvet cushions from the drawing room, and she was feeding him a life-giving mash of her own concoction and his mother's gold chain was back on his wrist.

Sick with shame, Melik waited for Leyla to close the door behind her. Kneeling at Issa's side, he hung his head.

'I looked in your purse,' he said. 'I am deeply ashamed of what I have done. May merciful Allah forgive me.'

Issa entered one of his eternal silences, then laid an emaciated hand on Melik's shoulder.

'Never confess, my friend,' he advised drowsily, clasping Melik's hand. 'If you confess, they will keep you there for ever.'

It was six o'clock in the evening of the following Friday as the private banking house of Brue Frères plc, formerly of Glasgow, Rio de Janeiro and Vienna, and presently of Hamburg, put itself to bed for the weekend.

On the dot of five-thirty, a muscular janitor had closed the front doors of the pretty terraced villa beside the Binnen Alster lake. Within minutes, the chief cashier had locked the strongroom and alarmed it, the senior secretary had waved off the last of her girls and checked their computers and waste-paper baskets, and the bank's longest-serving member, Frau Ellenberger, had switched over the telephones, jammed on her beret, unchained her bicycle from its iron hoop in the courtyard, and pedalled away to collect her great-niece from dancing class.

But not before pausing to administer a playful rebuke to her employer, Mr Tommy Brue, the bank's sole surviving partner and bearer of its famous name: 'Mr Tommy, you are worse than us Germans,' she protested in her perfectly learned English, popping her head round the door of his sanctum. 'Why do you torture yourself with work? Springtime is upon us! Have you not seen the crocuses and magnolia? You are sixty now, remember. You should go home and drink a glass of wine with Mrs Brue in your beautiful garden! If you don't, you will

be worn to a ravelling,' she cautioned, more to parade her love of Beatrix Potter than out of any expectation of mending her employer's ways.

Brue raised his right hand and rotated it in genial parody of a papal blessing.

'Go well, Frau Elli,' he urged, in sardonic resignation. 'If my employees refuse to work for me during the week, I have no choice but to work for them at weekends. *Tschüss*,' he added, blowing her a kiss.

'And *Tschüss* to you, Mr Tommy, and my regards to your good wife.'

'I shall pass them on.'

The reality, as both knew, was different. With the phones and corridors silent, and no clients clamouring for his attention, and his wife Mitzi out on her bridge night with her friends the von Essens, Brue's kingdom was his own. He could survey the outgoing week, he could usher in the new. He could consult, if the mood was on him, his immortal soul.

In deference to the unseasonably hot weather, Brue was in shirt-sleeves and braces. The jacket of his tailor-made suit was neatly draped over an elderly wooden clothes-horse beside the door: *Randall's of Glasgow*, tailors to the Brues for four generations. The desk at which he laboured was the same one that Duncan Brue, the bank's founder, had taken on board with him when, in 1908, he set sail from Scotland with nothing but hope in his heart and fifty gold sovereigns in his pocket.

The outsized mahogany bookcase that filled the whole of one wall was similarly the stuff of family legend. Behind its ornate glass front reposed row upon row of leather-bound masterpieces of world culture: Dante, Goethe, Plato, Socrates, Tolstoy, Dickens, Shakespeare and, somewhat mysteriously,

Jack London. The bookcase had been accepted by Brue's grandfather in part repayment of a bad debt, so too the books. Had he felt obliged to read them? Legend said not. He had banked them.

And on the wall directly opposite Brue, like a traffic warning permanently in his path, hung the original, hand-painted, gilt-framed family tree. The roots of its ancient oak struck deep into the shores of the silvery river Tay. The branches spread eastward into Old Europe and westward into the New World. Golden acorns marked the cities where foreign marriages had enriched the Brue bloodline, not to mention its disposable reserves.

And Brue himself was a worthy descendant of this noble lineage, even if he was its last. In his heart of hearts he might know that Frères, as the family alone referred to it, was an oasis of discarded practices. Frères would see him out, but Frères had run its natural course. True, there was daughter Georgie by his first wife Sue, but Georgie's most recent known address was an ashram outside San Francisco. Banking had never loomed large on her agenda.

Yet in appearance Brue was anything but obsolete. He was well built and cautiously good-looking, with a broad freckled brow and a Scotsman's mop of wiry red-brown hair which he had somehow tamed and parted. He had the assurance of wealth but none of its arrogance. His facial features, when not battened down for professional inscrutability, were affable and, despite a lifetime in banking or because of it, refreshingly unlined. When Germans called him typically English he would let out a hearty laugh and promise to bear the insult with Scottish fortitude. If he was a dying species, he was also secretly rather pleased with himself on account of it: Tommy Brue, salt of the earth, good man on a dark night, no high flyer but

all the better for it, first-rate wife, marvellous value at the dinner table, and plays a decent game of golf. Or so the word went, he believed, and so it should.

Having taken a last look at the closing markets and calculated their impact on the bank's holdings – the usual Friday-night sag, nothing to get hot under the collar about – Brue shut down his computer and ran an eye over the stack of folders that Frau Ellenberger had earmarked for his attention.

All week long he had wrestled with the night-incomprehensible complexities of the modern banker's world, where knowing who you were actually lending money to was about as likely as knowing the man who had printed it. His priorities for these Friday séances, by contrast, were determined as much by mood as necessity. If Brue was feeling benign, he might spend the evening reorganising a client's charitable trust at no charge; if skittish, a stud farm, a health spa or a chain of casinos. Or if it was the season for number-crunching, a skill he had acquired by hard industry rather than family genes, he would likely play himself Mahler while he pondered the prospectuses of brokers, venture capital houses and competing pension funds.

Tonight however he enjoyed no such freedom of choice. A valued client had become the target of an investigation by the Hamburg Stock Exchange and, although Brue had been assured by Haug von Westerheim, the committee's chairman, that no summons would materialise, he felt obliged to immerse himself in the latest twists of the affair. But first, sitting back in his chair, he relived the improbable moment when old Haug had breached his own iron rules of confidentiality:

In the marbled splendour of the Anglo-German Club a sumptuous black-tie dinner is at its height. The best and brightest of



Hamburg's financial community are celebrating one of their own. Tommy Brue is sixty tonight, and he'd better believe it, for as his father Edward Amadeus liked to say: *Tommy, my son, arithmetic is the one part of our business that doesn't lie.* The mood is euphoric, the food good, the wine better, the rich are happy, and Haug von Westerheim, septuagenarian fleet owner, power broker, Anglophile and wit, is proposing Brue's health.

'Tommy, dear boy, we have decided you have been reading too much Oscar Wilde,' he pipes in English, champagne flute in hand as he stands before a portrait of the Queen when young. 'You heard of Dorian Gray perhaps? We think so. We think you have taken a leaf out of Dorian Gray's book. We think that in the vaults of your bank is the hideous portrait of Tommy at his true age today. Meanwhile, unlike your dear Queen, you decline to age graciously, but sit smiling at us like a twenty-five-year-old elf, exactly as you smiled at us when you arrived here from Vienna seven years ago in order to deprive us of our hard-earned riches.'

The applause continues as Westerheim takes the elegant hand of Brue's wife Mitzi and, with additional gallantry because she is Viennese, kisses it, and informs the gathering that her beauty, unlike Brue's, is indeed eternal. Swept up with honest emotion, Brue rises from his seat with the intention of grasping Westerheim's hand in return, but the old man, intoxicated as much by his triumph as the wine, enfolds him in a bearhug, and whispers huskily into his ear: *'Tommy dear boy . . . that enquiry about a certain client of yours . . . it shall be attended to . . . first we postpone for technical reasons . . . then we drop it in the Elbe . . . happy birthday, Tommy, my friend . . . you are a decent fellow . . .'*

Pulling on his half-frame spectacles, Brue studied anew the charges against his client. Another banker, he supposed, would by now have called Westerheim and thanked him for his quiet

word, thereby holding him to it. But Brue hadn't done that. He couldn't bring himself to saddle the old boy with a rash promise made in the heat of his sixtieth birthday.

Taking up a pen, he scribbled a note to Frau Ellenberger: 'First thing Monday, kindly call Ethics Committee Secretariat and ask whether a date has been set. Thanks! TB.'

Done, he thought. Now the old boy can choose in peace whether to push ahead with the hearing or kill it.

The second of the evening's must-do's was Mad Marianne, as Brue called her, but only to Frau Ellenberger. The surviving widow of a prosperous Hamburg timber merchant, Marianne was Brue Frères' longest-running soap opera, the client who makes all the clichés of private banking come true. In tonight's episode, she has recently undergone a religious conversion at the hands of a thirty-year-old Danish Lutheran pastor, and is on the brink of renouncing her worldly goods – more pertinently, one thirtieth of the bank's reserves – in favour of a mysterious not-for-profit foundation under his pastoral control.

The results of a private enquiry commissioned by Brue on his own initiative lie before him and are not encouraging. The pastor was recently charged with fraud but acquitted when witnesses failed to come forward. He has fathered love-children by several women. But how is poor Brue the banker to break this to his besotted client without losing her account? Mad Marianne has a low tolerance of bad news at the best of times, as he has more than once discovered to his cost. It has taken all his charm – short of the ultimate, he would assure you! – to stop her moving her account to some sweet-tongued child at Goldman Sachs. There is a son who stands to lose a fortune and Marianne has moments of adoring him, but – another twist! – he is presently in rehab in the Taunus hills. A discreet trip to Frankfurt may prove to be the answer . . .

Brue scribbles a second note to his ever-loyal Frau Ellenberger: 'Please contact director of clinic, and establish whether boy is in a fit state to receive visitor (me!)'

Distracted by the mutterings of the telephone system beside his desk, Brue glanced at the pinlights. If the incoming call was on his unlisted hotline, he'd take it. It wasn't, so he turned to the Frères' draft six-monthly report which, though healthy, needed sparkle. He had not engaged with it long before the telephone system again distracted him.

Was this a new message, or had the earlier mutterings somehow insinuated themselves into his memory? At seven on a Friday evening? The open line? Must be a wrong number. Giving in to curiosity, he touched the replay button. First came an electronic beep, cut off by Frau Ellenberger courteously advising the caller in German, then English, to leave a message or call again during business hours.

Then a woman's voice, young, German, and pure as a choirboy's.

The staple of your private banker's life, Brue liked to pontificate after a Scotch or two in amiable company, was not, as one might reasonably expect, cash. It wasn't bull markets, bear markets, hedge funds or derivatives. It was cock-up. It was the persistent, he would go so far as to say the *permanent* sound, not to put too fine an edge on it, of excrement hitting your proverbial fan. So if you didn't happen to like living in a state of unremitting siege, the odds were that private banking wasn't for you. He had made the same point with some success in his prepared speech in reply to old Westerheim.

And as a veteran of such cock-ups, Brue over the years had developed two distinct responses to the moment of impact. If he was in a board meeting with the eyes of the world on him,

he would rise to his feet, shove his thumbs into his waistband and meander round the room wearing an expression of exemplary calm.

Unobserved, he was more likely to favour his second option, which was to freeze in the position in which the news had hit him, flicking at his lower lip with his forefinger, which was what he did now, while he played the message a second time and then a third, starting with the initial beep.

‘Good evening. My name is Annabel Richter, I am a lawyer, and I wish to speak personally to Mr Tommy Brue as soon as possible on behalf of a client I represent.’

Represent but do not name, Brue methodically notes for the third time. A crisp, but southerly German tone, educated and impatient of circumlocution.

‘My client has instructed me to pass his best wishes to a Mr’ – she pauses, as if consulting a script – ‘to a Mr *Lipizzaner*. I repeat that. The name is *Lipizzaner*. Like the horses, yes, Mr Brue? Those famous white horses of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, where your bank was formerly situated? I think your bank knows *Lipizzaners* very well.’

Her tone lifts. A factual message about white horses becomes a choirboy in distress.

‘Mr Brue, my client has *very* little time at his disposal. I naturally do not wish to say more on the telephone. It is also possible you are more familiar with his position than I am, which will expedite matters. I would therefore be grateful if you would call me back on my cellphone on receipt of this message so that we can make an appointment to meet.’

She could have stopped there, but she doesn’t. The choirboy’s song takes on a sharper edge:

‘If it’s late at night, that’s acceptable, Mr Brue. Even *very* late. I saw a light just now as I went past your office. Maybe

you personally are no longer at work, but someone else is. If so, please will that person kindly pass this message to Mr Tommy Brue as a matter of urgency, because nobody but Mr Tommy Brue is empowered to act in the matter. Thank you for your time.'

And thank you for *your* time, Frau Annabel Richter, thought Brue, rising to his feet and, with thumb and finger still fastened on his lower lip, heading for the bay window as if it were the nearest means of escape.

Yes indeed, my bank knows Lipizzaners *very* well, madam, if by *bank* you mean myself and my one confidante Frau Elli, and not another living soul. My *bank* would pay top dollar to see the last of its surviving Lipizzaners gallop over the horizon, back to Vienna where they came from, never to return. Perhaps you know that too.

A sickening thought came at him. Or perhaps it had been with him these seven years, and only now decided to step out of the shadows. Would *top dollar* actually be what you're after, Frau Annabel Richter? – you and your sainted client who is so short of time?

Is this a blackmail job you're pulling, by any remote chance?

And are you perhaps, with your choirboy purity, and your air of professional high purpose, dropping a hint to me – you and your accomplice, sorry, client – that Lipizzaner horses possess the curious property of being born jet black and only turning white with age? – which was how they came to lend their name to a certain type of exotic bank account inspired by the eminent Edward Amadeus Brue OBE, my beloved late father whom in all other respects I continue to revere as the very pillar of banking probity, during his final salad days in Vienna when black money from the collapsing Evil Empire