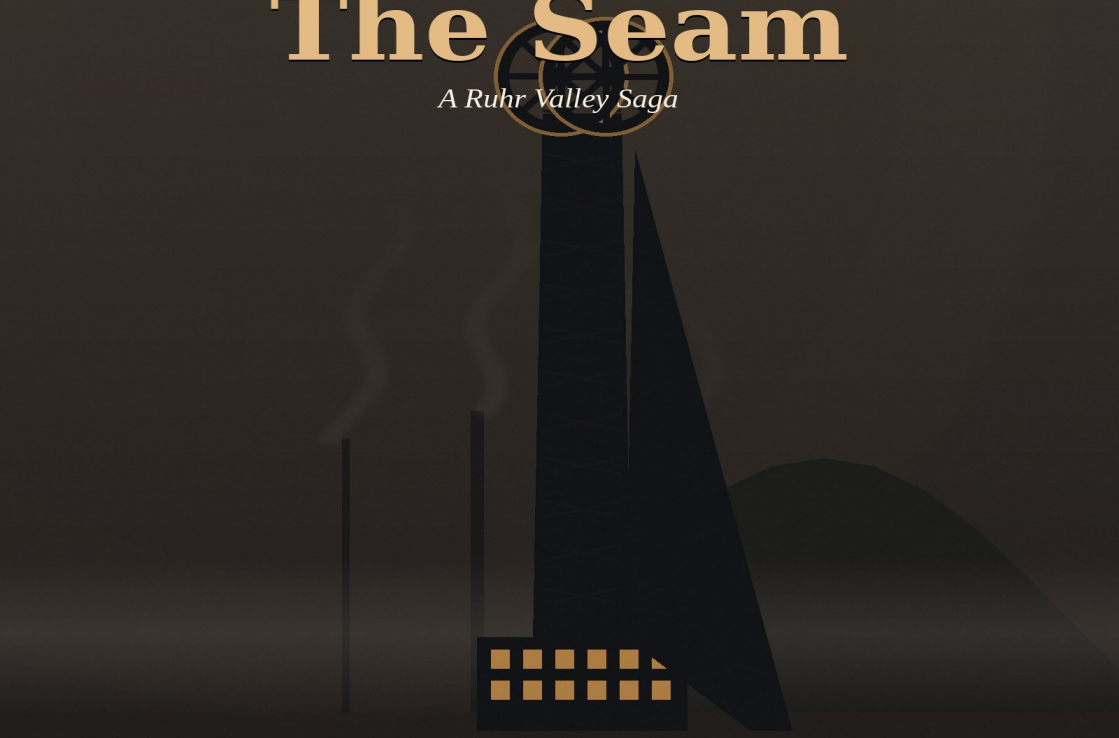
VOLUME ONE

Going Down

Voßlohe, 1905–1923

The Seam

A Ruhr Valley Saga



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The Seam - Going Down

Drama / Family and Social Novel

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Chapter 1 - Glück auf

The cage dropped, and with it Wilhelm dropped into the mountain, the way he dropped into the mountain every morning, six days a week, and he had never grown used to it and would never have admitted it. Above him the square of sky that the shaft still let through disappeared, first grey, then greyer, then nothing at all, and his stomach stayed up there while the rest of him sank. Beside him in the cage they stood eight men, shoulder to shoulder, lamp to lamp, and no one said a word, for what was there to say at four in the morning when you were riding down into the earth.

It smelled of oil and wet iron and of the men themselves, of sweat that never quite washed out of the clothes. Wilhelm held the cold guide-rail and counted the bell signals, the way he had counted them as a boy when his father first took him along, the way he would count them until the mountain kept him or spat him out. At the third level the cage slowed, a jolt, a stop you felt in your knees, and then they stood on solid ground that was none, eight hundred metres beneath Voßlohe, beneath the houses and the gardens and the Emscher, beneath everything that was called living.

"Glück auf," said the banksman, and it was not a greeting but an incantation, the one word that counted down here. It meant: come back up. It meant: may the mountain let you go today.

"Glück auf," said Wilhelm, and went into the roadway.

The way to the face was long, half-stooped, through galleries where the heat grew with every step, and the water dripped from above and stood under your boots. The pit lamp threw its small circle

ahead of him, and outside the circle was a darkness older than everything, a darkness the light did not drive off but only pushed briefly aside. Wilhelm knew the way blind. He knew every prop, every place where the roof bore down, every crack in the rock you had to hear in order to live. You learned the mountain with your body, not your head, and Wilhelm's body was twenty-nine years old and already not quite his own.

At the face Heinrich was waiting. Of course Heinrich was waiting. He sat on a stone, his lamp beside him, chewing on a piece of bread, and when Wilhelm came he pushed him half of it without a word. They had done it this way for years. One brought the bread, the other the next day, and neither kept count, for whoever kept count down here had already lost.

"Late," said Heinrich.

"The cage," said Wilhelm.

"Always the cage." Heinrich grinned, the white of his teeth in the sooty face. He was four years older than Wilhelm and a head broader, a man who laughed where others cursed, who opened his mouth where others kept silent. He had stood surety for Wilhelm, back when Wilhelm had started, a thin boy without a father, and ever since they had shared the contract, the face, the bread. A butty was not a friend. A butty was more. A friend could leave. A butty held the prop for you when the roof came.

They cut the face. It was hard labour, the hardest Wilhelm knew, the pick into the seam, again and again, in the heat, in the dust that settled on the lung and never quite went out again. They worked side by side, without much talk, in the rhythm only two men find who know each other, and filled the tubs, one after another, for they were paid by the tub, by the coal hewn, and every tub was a few pfennigs

closer to the end of the month.

Around noon, in the short break, Wilhelm leaned against the wet face and thought of Bertha. She was in her seventh month now, the first child, and she carried it the way she carried everything, with clenched teeth and a gaze that saw more than he liked. That morning, in the dark, she had set out his bread and said the garden needed manure, and the stall leaked, and he should speak to the overman about the tubs they had docked last week. Three tubs. Three shifts' work, for nothing, because there had been too much stone in them, they said, too much waste rock among the coal. Whoever decided that was a man up top with clean hands, who had never seen the tubs.

"You're brooding," said Heinrich.

"The docking."

Heinrich spat black spittle onto the black floor. "They dock everyone now. Two off me last week. Four off Schäfer. That's no accident, Wilhelm. That's a system. They squeeze the wage without touching the wage, you understand? They don't say, we pay you less. They say, your work was worth nothing." He stood, took up the pick. "But it won't go well for long. The men are already talking."

"Talk helps no one."

"Talk is the beginning of everything." Heinrich looked at him, and in his look was something Wilhelm could not quite grasp, a conviction Wilhelm lacked and envied him for. "There are many of us, Wilhelm. That's the only thing we are. Many. If the many once hold still, all at once, then the headframe stops, and a stopped headframe costs the gentlemen more money in one day than they can dock out of us in a year."

Wilhelm said nothing. He raised the pick and struck the seam, and the mountain gave way, piece by piece, as it had waited for no one

for millions of years and now waited for them, who hauled it out into the tubs, into the cage, up to the light they themselves barely saw.

In the evening, when the cage brought them up again and the square of sky grew above them, first nothing, then grey, then nearly day, Wilhelm breathed the upper air as if he had earned it. In the washhouse they scrubbed the mountain from their skin as best they could, and the black ring around the eyes stayed, as it always stayed, the mark by which you knew a miner, on Sundays too, in the coffin too.

The way into the colony led past the headframe, which stood over everything, over the terraced houses of the pit, over the gardens, over the kiosk on the corner where the first light was already burning. The houses belonged to the pit. The garden belonged to the pit. The stall that leaked belonged to the pit. Whoever worked for the pit lived in what belonged to the pit, and whoever no longer worked for the pit lived nowhere any more. It was that simple, and so unspoken that no one spoke it any more.

Bertha stood in the doorway when he came, one hand at the small of her back, the other on the doorframe, and watched him come up the path with the black ring around his eyes and the weary gait. She did not say she was glad he was up top again. She said: "Did you speak to the overman?"

"Tomorrow," said Wilhelm.

She looked at him, and he knew that she knew he would not speak tomorrow either, not the way Heinrich would, not loud, not demanding, but at most pleading, and that pleading brought nothing. But she did not say it. She stepped aside and let him in, into the house that belonged to the pit, into the warmth he had paid for with his lung, and inside the soup was hot, and the child in her kicked

against her hand, and for one evening that was enough.

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Chapter 2 - The Butty

There was a story Bertha did not like to hear, because she appeared in it without having been there, and which Wilhelm never told, because a man did not tell such a thing, and which nonetheless stood between him and Heinrich like a third man at the face. It was three years old, the story, and it went like this.

They had been working in a seam with a bad name, because the roof there was treacherous, the rock above them that did not keep what it promised. They had set props, the way you set props, timber against the pressure of the mountain, but the mountain pressed when it wanted to, and on that day it wanted to. Wilhelm had heard the cracking, that particular cracking that every hewer knew in his sleep, and he had frozen, half a second, a second that would have been enough to kill him. Heinrich did not freeze. Heinrich had taken him by the collar and torn him backward, and in the same instant the roof came, tons of rock where Wilhelm had stood, a thundering, a dust that choked the lamps, and then silence and Heinrich's hand still at his collar.

They had not spoken of it afterward. Heinrich had said: "You owe me a bread," and Wilhelm had brought the bread the next day, and with that it was settled, by the rules that held here. But Wilhelm knew you did not settle such a thing with bread. He knew he owed Heinrich his life, and that this debt did not grow smaller but larger the longer he lived, because every day he lived was a day Heinrich had given him.

That was comradeship underground. It was not friendship the way people up top meant it, with sympathy and shared interests and favours done. It was something older, harder. It was the pact that one would not let the other die as long as he could prevent it, without question, without reckoning, without condition. You did not have to like your butty to die for him. You only had to know him, know him with your body, have hewn at his side, in the same dust, the same heat, the same darkness. Wilhelm liked Heinrich. That came on top, but was not the core. The core was that without him he would be dead.

That day they worked in a better seam, one that drew well, many tubs, and they were in good spirits, as far as one could be in good spirits down here. Heinrich talked, the way he always talked, of the world up top, of things too big for Wilhelm. He read. That was the special thing about Heinrich, that he read, newspapers, leaflets, even books that he borrowed from a teacher in town, and that he carried what he read further, at the face, in the kiosk, everywhere.

"There's a union now," said Heinrich. "A real one. The Old Union. They fight for us, for all miners, across the whole district. Not pray, Wilhelm. Fight. For the eight-hour day. Against the docking. Against the fines they slap on us for nothing."

"And what does that pay?" said Wilhelm. "The union. What does it cost, and what does it bring?"

"It costs a groschen a month. And it brings that you're not alone when they dock you. That a thousand others stand up for you when they kick you." Heinrich paused, pick in hand. "You know what the gentlemen fear most? Not the single man who grumbles. They throw him out, and tomorrow another stands at the face. They fear the many who grumble at once. Solidarity, Wilhelm. That's the word. The only

thing we have against their money."

Wilhelm knew the word. He had heard it often, from Heinrich, in the kiosk, at the meeting Heinrich had once dragged him to. Solidarity. It sounded good. It sounded like something larger than a single man with a pregnant wife and a leaking stall and three docked tubs. But Wilhelm mistrusted things that were larger than himself. He had learned that you had to rely on what you held in your hands, and you could not hold solidarity in your hands. Bread you could hold. A wage. A child. Solidarity was a word, and words filled no pot.

"You don't believe in it," said Heinrich. It was not a question.

"I believe in what I see."

"Then come along once and see." Heinrich drove the pick back into the face, and the mountain gave way. "Something's coming, Wilhelm. I can feel it. They dock and dock, and one day the measure is full, and then they'll see what the many are. And then you'll have to choose which side you stand on."

"I stand at the face," said Wilhelm. "As always."

Heinrich laughed, the loud laugh that fit so badly into the darkness and for that very reason made it bearable. "We all stand at the face. The question is whether you stand up top too, when it comes to it."

They hewed on, and the tubs filled, and above them, eight hundred metres above them, Bertha walked through the colony and bought half a loaf on tick at the kiosk, because the wage did not stretch to the end of the month, and the kiosk owner chalked it up, with a look that said his chalking too had an end. And in town, in a counting house with clean windows, a man sat over the output figures and worked out how to get more coal and less wage out of the same mountain, and found that it could be done if one only handled

the docking consistently, and wrote an instruction that reached the overman the next day and the day after that the face where Wilhelm and Heinrich stood, not knowing that their next shift had already been decided before they worked it.

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Chapter 3 - Docked Tubs

The overman was called Bröker, and he was no bad man, which made it worse. A bad man you could have hated, cleanly and without remainder. But Bröker had been one of them, a hewer, risen by diligence and a good word at the right moment, and he carried the instructions from above further as if they pained him himself, with a shrug that said: me neither, lads, but what am I to do.

Wilhelm caught him in the morning, before the descent, at the pit bottom where Bröker stood with his list and divided up the gangs.

"Herr Steiger." Wilhelm did not take off his cap, but he lowered his voice, the way you lowered it when you begged. "The tubs last week. Three docked. There was no stone in them, no more than usual. That was clean coal."

Bröker looked at him, wearily, over the list. "Kortmann. I don't write what gets docked. I get the list, and on the list it says what the washery reports. Too much stone in the tub, tub docked. That's what it says."

"The washery didn't weigh the tubs, it guessed. Three tubs, Herr Steiger. That's half a week."

"I know what three tubs are." Bröker said it quietly, almost kindly, and it was the kindness that took the hope from Wilhelm. "I hewed myself, fifteen years. I know exactly what three tubs are. But I can't change it. It comes from above, Kortmann. They want the production costs down, and they take it through the docking, because no one can forbid that. They're not allowed to touch the wage, the union stands in front of that. The tubs they can. Understand?"

Wilhelm understood. That was the bad part. He understood it exactly, and the understanding helped him nothing.

"I have a wife," he said, and it disgusted him to say it, because it sounded like begging. "A child's coming."

"We all have those." Bröker looked back at the list. "Go to your face, Wilhelm. Hew good coal, then fewer tubs get docked. That's all I can tell you."

It was a lie, and both knew it. You could hew as clean as you liked; whether a tub got docked was decided not by the coal in the tub but by a figure needed up top, a production-cost figure that had to come right, and they made it come right by docking as many tubs as it took. It was no quarrel about coal. It was a quarrel about money, and one side had the money and the list, and the other had the pick and the lung.

Wilhelm went to his face. He said nothing to Heinrich, but Heinrich saw it on him.

"Bröker?"

Wilhelm nodded.

"What did he say?"

"That it comes from above."

Heinrich laughed the laugh that this time was no laugh. "Of course it comes from above. Everything comes from above. The pressure comes from above, the rock, the docking, the whole weight. And below we stand and catch it, with our backs." He hewed into the face, harder than necessary. "But they're making a mistake, Wilhelm. They dock everyone now. Not just the lazy, not just the troublemaker they want rid of. Everyone. The diligent like the lazy, the old like the young. And you know what happens when you treat everyone equally badly?" He turned, the lamplight on his sooty face. "Then

everyone becomes one. Then you've driven them together, the ones you'd never have got together otherwise. That's their mistake, and it's a big one."

In the weeks that followed Wilhelm saw that Heinrich was right. In the kiosk, where they usually talked of football and pigeons and women, they now talked of the docking. Everyone had his story, everyone his docked tubs, and out of the many small stories grew slowly a big one, a story of men being cheated, all in the same way, by the same counting house, by the same clean hand. Heinrich stood in the middle of it, talking, explaining, reading aloud from the union paper. The eight-hour day. The end of the docking. A wage that was a wage and not a mercy. The men listened, and in their faces was something that worried Wilhelm and that he could not name, a readiness, a gathering, like the mountain before the roof came.

At home it grew tighter. Bertha reckoned every evening, and her reckonings did not add up. The tick at the kiosk grew. The stall stayed leaky. She sold the rabbits she had meant to fatten for winter, and said nothing while she did it, but Wilhelm saw how she looked at the empty hutches, and knew what it cost her.

"They say they want to strike," she said one evening, without looking up, while darning.

"Who says that?"

"The women. The whole colony's talking about it." She drew the thread through. "Heinrich Brass is talking about it."

"Heinrich always talks."

"And you?" Now she looked up, and her gaze was so clear it hurt him. "You never talk. What do you think, Wilhelm? If they strike. Will you join?"

Wilhelm was silent. He thought of the docked tubs and Bröker's weary face and Heinrich's word about the many who become one. And he thought of the child in Bertha's body, that would come in winter, into a household that already did not stretch, and of what a strike meant: no wage. For weeks perhaps. No wage and a child and a house that belonged to the pit.

"I don't know," he said.

It was the most honest answer he had, and Bertha took it, the way she took everything, without a word, and darned on, and outside the wind moved through the colony and carried over from the kiosk the murmur of many men slowly becoming one.

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Chapter 4 - The Great Strike

It did not begin with a bang. It began with a silence.

On a Monday morning in January the early shift did not ride down. They came to the shaft, the way they came every morning, in the dark, with the lamps, and they gathered at the pit bottom, and then they did not ride down. They just stood there. The banksman waited, the overman waited, the cage hung empty, and the men stood and did not stir, and it was this silence Wilhelm never forgot, the silence of three hundred men who had decided not to obey.

Heinrich stood at the front, of course Heinrich stood at the front. He had climbed onto an overturned tub and was speaking, and his voice carried through the hall, through the ringing of the iron.

"No one rides down," he cried. "Not today and not tomorrow. Not until they abolish the docking. Not until a wage is a wage again. Across the whole district they stand still, comrades, from Hamborn to Dortmund, a hundred thousand, and we stand with them. Today the pit belongs to us!"

They cheered. Wilhelm did not cheer, but he felt it, the cheering, how it ran through the men, through him, a feeling he did not know and that frightened him and swept him along at once. Power. For the first time in his life Wilhelm felt something like power, not his own, but that of the many of whom he was a part, and it was an intoxication, and he mistrusted it in the same instant that he felt it.

The headframe stood still. That was the monstrous thing. The wheel that had turned as long as Wilhelm could remember, every day, day and night, the wheel stood still. It was as if time had halted.

The whole town heard it, this silence of the wheel, and the whole town knew what it meant.

In the first days it was almost a festival. The men who were usually under the earth stood in daylight, in the gardens, on the street corners, and talked and planned. The union organised: a strike committee, a strike fund, soup kitchens for those who ran short first. Discipline was kept, strict discipline, for Heinrich and the others knew that the gentlemen were only waiting for trouble, a pretext for the police, for the lockout. "No violence," Heinrich preached. "Not a hair on anyone's head. Our weapon is that we do not work. Nothing else. That is enough. That is more than enough."

Bertha bore it. She went to the soup kitchen and helped ladle, the belly already heavy before her, and brought home in the evening what there was, a thin soup, a piece of bread from the strike fund. She did not complain. But Wilhelm saw how she lay awake at night and stared at the ceiling, and he knew she was reckoning the same reckoning as he: how long this could go on. How long the fund would last. How long a person lived without a wage, with a child in the belly.

"They can't hold out forever," Bertha said once in the dark. "The gentlemen. A stopped pit costs them a fortune. Every day."

"Heinrich says that too."

"Heinrich." She was silent a moment. "Heinrich has no children, Wilhelm."

It was the first time she had said anything against Heinrich, and it was not against Heinrich, Wilhelm knew that. It was for the child. Heinrich could carry the risk because he had only himself to lose, and his wife Käthe, who was as convinced as he was. Wilhelm had more to lose, and the longer the strike lasted, the more he felt the weight of

that more.

In the second week the first threats came. Notices on the houses: whoever did not resume work within a deadline would be dismissed, and with the dismissal the house. The pit owned the houses. That was the trump it always held in its hand. A locked-out miner lost not only the wage, he lost the roof, and in January, with a child on the way, a lost roof was a death sentence by instalments.

"They're bluffing," said Heinrich when they sat together in the kiosk in the evening, crowded, many men, little beer. "They can't put three thousand families on the street. Where would they get new men? It's a bluff, comrades. Whoever caves now has lost before we've won. One more week. Maybe two. Then they cave, not us."

The men nodded. They believed him, because they had to believe him, because to believe the opposite meant to have done it all for nothing. And Wilhelm sat with them and nodded along and believed half and feared whole, and on the way home, in the cold January night, he stopped a moment under the stationary headframe and looked up at the wheel that did not turn, and thought: it has to turn again. Sometime it has to turn again. And when it does, I want to be the one turning it, and not the one standing outside.

He was frightened by the thought. He pushed it away. But it was there, once thought, and thoughts once thought do not go quite away. Wilhelm went home to Bertha and the unborn child, and over the town stood the still wheel like a halted heart, and no one knew how long it would stand still, and each reckoned in the dark his own reckoning.

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Chapter 5 - Hunger in the Strike

In the fourth week the festival turned into a siege, and hunger moved in like a third inhabitant in every house of the colony.

The strike fund was almost empty. It had never been meant for so long; no one had reckoned with so many weeks. The soup kitchen cooked thinner and thinner, more water than groats, and the queue in front of it grew longer, because more and more families had nothing else left. Bertha now stood in the queue herself, no longer only behind the pot, and that was for Wilhelm the worst sign, worse than any notice on the wall.

They sold what could be sold. Bertha's good apron, which she had got for the wedding. Wilhelm's Sunday boots. The grandfather clock that Bertha's father had left, the only thing in the house that looked like anything. The rag-and-bone man in town paid a derisory price, for the rag-and-bone man knew that half the colony was selling and no one buying, and a price only one man offers is no price but an alms with a receipt.

And then a child fell ill. Not the unborn one; that still kicked strongly against Bertha's hand. It was the neighbour's child, little Franz of the Schäfers, three years old, who fell ill first, fever and cough, and then died, in a single night, and in the morning they carried the small coffin through the colony, and everyone stood in the doorways and watched and knew it could have been their own child and at the next might be. The doctor did not come into the colony without being paid, and no one could pay any more. But the illness did not ask about the strike fund.

That evening, after Schäfer's burial, Wilhelm sat in the kiosk with Heinrich, and for the first time they did not talk of the victory to come but of the death already here.

"Four weeks," said Wilhelm. "Heinrich. Four weeks, and they hold out, and we starve."

"They won't hold forever." But Heinrich's voice had lost something, a trace of the certainty that usually carried him. "I was in town today, at the union office. They say the first men in Hamborn are going back in. Single ones. Traitors." He said the word hard. "But if the front once breaks, in one place, then it breaks everywhere. That's why we have to hold, Wilhelm. Just now. Whoever caves now robs not only himself of the victory, he robs everyone who held out. Do you understand that? The strikebreaker is worse than the gentleman in the counting house. The gentleman is the enemy, he belongs there. The strikebreaker is the brother who stabs you in the back."

Wilhelm said nothing. He drank the little beer and listened and thought of Bertha in the queue and of Schäfer's coffin and of the child that would come in winter, into this winter, into this house without a wage.

Two days later the messenger came.

It was no one from the counting house, that would have been too open. It was a man Wilhelm knew by sight, a foreman named Linde, who waylaid him on the way back from the soup kitchen, casually, as if they had met by chance.

"Kortmann," said Linde. "Hard times."

"Hard times," said Wilhelm.

"Your wife's having a child, I hear. In winter." Linde let it hang in the air. "Bad time for a child. No wage, no doctor, no bread. A man

might well start to wonder whether the holding still is worth it."

Wilhelm gave no answer, but neither did he walk on, and Linde knew that was answer enough.

"The directorate isn't unreasonable, you know," said Linde quietly, very quietly. "It knows not everyone's the same. There are the agitators, the bawlers, who started the whole thing. And there are the decent men, who only went along because they were swept up. With the decent men who come to their senses, the directorate talks. They keep their houses. They keep their shifts. And whoever shows himself especially sensible may even have a future. Overmen will be needed after the strike, Kortmann. Reliable men. You wouldn't be the first to come out of such a winter with a better shirt."

He left it lying there, the offer, vague, without ever a clear word that could be repeated. Then he touched his hat and went, and Wilhelm stood there with the thin soup in his hand that he was bringing to Bertha, and in his head all was still, as still as the headframe.

At home Bertha ate of the soup, slowly, savouring every spoonful, and pushed him the last two spoonfuls, as she did every evening now, because he was the man and needed strength, she said, and he did not take them, pushed them back, because she carried the child, and so they pushed the soup back and forth between them, two half-starved people who each wanted to give the other the last, and it was the most tender and the most bitter thing at once.

In the night Wilhelm lay awake. The child kicked. Bertha slept, at last, exhausted, one hand on her belly, and her breath went calm in the cold chamber. Wilhelm looked at her in the half-dark, and he thought of Linde's words, of the house, the shift, the better shirt, and he thought of Heinrich's words, of the strikebreaker worse than the

enemy. And he thought: I cannot save them both. The many and the child. I must choose one.

He did not say it to himself so clearly. He would never have dared to think it so clearly. But deep beneath the words, there where a man decides before he knows that he has decided, the choice was already made, that night, at the bed of the sleeping woman, under the still wheel, and everything that came after was only its carrying out.

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Chapter 6 - The Names

He went in the dark. That was the first thing he did, without admitting to himself what he was doing: he waited until Bertha slept, until the colony slept, until only the wind moved and the dogs, and then he pulled on his boots and went out, over to the town, to the house of the foreman Linde, whose address he did not have and yet found, because a man who means to do such a thing finds everything.

Bertha heard him go. She did not sleep as deeply as he believed; she had not slept deeply for weeks. She heard the door, the soft steps in the yard, and she lay still, eyes open in the darkness, and did not ask where to. She never asked him where to. Perhaps because she sensed it. Perhaps because she did not want to know, in order to bear it. A woman who had asked her husband that night, where to, would have got an answer that would have stood between them forever. So it stayed unasked, and the unasked was easier to carry than the truth, and Bertha had already learned that in life one chooses the lighter when the heavier would kill you.

In the counting house it was warm. That was the first thing Wilhelm noticed when they let him in, by the back door, without fuss: the warmth. It was heated, properly heated, a tiled stove, and the man who received him was not Linde but one from above, a gentleman in a dark suit whose name Wilhelm never learned and never wanted to know. The gentleman offered him a chair and even a coffee, a real one, and Wilhelm did not drink it, because he knew this coffee was part of the matter, a piece of the bargain, and that if he drank it he would already have begun to take.

"You're a sensible man, Kortmann," said the gentleman. "So one hears. A good hewer, diligent, no bawler. The pit can use such a man, now and later."

Wilhelm was silent.

"The thing is this." The gentleman folded his hands on the clean desk. "We know most of your comrades are good men. Followers. They'll come back as soon as the hunger is great enough, it's only a question of time. But there are a few who prevent it. The agitators. The ringleaders. As long as they have the say, the strike holds, and as long as the strike holds, your wife goes hungry. Understand? It is not we who let your child starve. It is the agitators. And they must go, so that reason returns."

"What do you want from me," said Wilhelm, and his voice sounded foreign in his own ears.

"Names." The gentleman said it without any sharpness, almost kindly, as if he were asking after the weather. "We know some. But we want to be sure we hit the right ones and not the wrong. Tell us who the ringleaders are. Who talks, who organises, who holds the others together. Those we let go, only those. And the strike collapses, and all the others, all the sensible ones, keep house and shift. You do your comrades no harm, Kortmann. You do them a service. You end their hunger."

It was so cleanly put, so reasonable, that for a moment Wilhelm believed it was true. That was the gentleman's art, and it was no small art: to make a betrayal into a service, the knife in the back into a helping hand. Wilhelm sat in the warmth that was his due if only he talked, and outside the colony lay in the frost, and in the colony lay Bertha with the child, and somewhere little Franz Schäfer lay in the frozen earth.

He named the names.

He told himself later, in the years that followed, that he had hesitated, hesitated long, but that was not true. It went quickly. It went frighteningly quickly, as if the names had only been waiting to be said. He named the fat Polak, who led the meetings. He named Schmidt of the strike fund. He named two or three others. And then, because the gentleman looked at him and waited, and because without this name it would not have been credible, because everyone knew this one was the loudest, the first, the ringleader of ringleaders, he named Heinrich Brass.

It came easily, that was the dreadful thing. Heinrich's name came easier than the others, because Heinrich really was the loudest, really the ringleader, because it was the truth that Heinrich held the strike together. One could speak the betrayal as truth, and that was precisely what made it perfect.

The gentleman wrote it down without moving a muscle, nodded, pushed Wilhelm a paper that Wilhelm did not read and signed, and said the house was safe, the shift was safe, and when the operation ran again they would think of him, of a reliable man with a future. Then he gave him his hand, and the handshake was dry and warm and firm, and Wilhelm returned it, and in that handshake lay the whole matter, sealed, irrevocable.

On the way home, in the first grey light, Wilhelm passed the still headframe and had to be sick. He braced himself against the wall and retched up the thin soup, the last that Bertha had pushed him, and stayed bent over, long, and above him stood the wheel that would soon turn again, that would turn again because of him, and that was no comfort.

When he came home Bertha was awake. She had already made the fire, the small fire from the last wood, and she watched him come in, grey in the face, with the smell of vomit and strange warmth, and she asked nothing. She ladled him a cup of hot water with a few grains floating in it and set it before him and laid her hand a moment on his shoulder, and Wilhelm knew in that moment that she knew, not the names, not the details, but the essential: that he had done something that could not be undone, and that she would carry it with him, in silence, all her life, because she was his wife and the child was coming and because in life one chooses the lighter when the heavier would kill you.

That was the first stone. They laid it together, without a word, that morning, and on it all the others came to rest.

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Chapter 7 - The Blacklist

The strike broke in the sixth week, and it broke the way Heinrich had foretold, only the other way round: not the gentlemen caved, but the front of the men, in many places at once, quietly, ashamed, at first light.

It began with the ringleaders disappearing. One morning Polak was gone, the next Schmidt. They had not fled; they had been fetched, by the works police, in the early hours, and dismissed, and with the dismissal came the eviction. Without their leaders the strike committee was like a body without a head. The meetings lost themselves in quarrel. The strike fund was empty. And the hunger, which had been waiting all along, now stepped fully out of the shadow and took command.

Men rode down again. Singly at first, then in small groups, with bowed heads, past the doors of the steadfast, and no one greeted them, and they greeted no one. The wheel of the headframe began to turn, hesitantly, then more steadily, and with every man who rode down again it turned faster, until it ran as before, as if it had never stood still, as if the six weeks had never been.

Heinrich held out longest. Of course Heinrich held out longest. He went from door to door, beseeching the men to hold on, one more day, one more, but his voice, which had once moved hundreds, found no men any more, only doors that closed, and eyes that looked at the ground. And then, on a grey February morning, the works police came to him too.

Wilhelm saw it. He stood at the window of his house, the saved house, and looked across the yard to where they were fetching Heinrich. They did not fetch him roughly; that was not necessary. They handed him the dismissal and the eviction notice, and Heinrich read the paper, and Wilhelm saw how Heinrich read the paper and did not understand, not the paper, which he understood at once, but what lay behind it: how they had come to him. Heinrich had never let himself be caught at anything punishable. He had been allowed to talk; talk was permitted. They could only have blacklisted him if someone had named him. Someone from inside. Someone who knew he was the ringleader.

They carried Käthe Brass's things out of the house. The table, the chairs, the beds, all onto a cart, in the middle of February, before the eyes of the whole colony, which stood in the doorways and watched and was silent. Käthe walked alongside, upright, a bundle in her arms, and looked at no one. Heinrich carried the grandfather clock, their only one, which they had not had to sell, because Heinrich had said better to go hungry than give up the clock, a clock was the last thing that set you apart from the animal. Now he carried it out himself, onto the cart, and set it carefully between the beds, as if it might break.

And then, before they went, Heinrich looked across. He did not search; his gaze found Wilhelm at the window, as if he had known Wilhelm stood there. It was not an accusing look. That was the worst of it. Heinrich knew someone had betrayed him, but he did not know who, and in his look there was still the old trust, the expectation that Wilhelm would come out, that Wilhelm would step over to him, that the butty would stand by the butty in this hour, as one always stood by one another. Heinrich even raised his hand, a small movement,

half a greeting, a summons: come. Stand by me.

Wilhelm did not stir. He stood at the window, behind the glass, in the saved warm house, and did not stir, and after a moment that was an eternity, Heinrich let his hand sink again. Something in his face changed, not to anger, not yet, but to a confusion, a first, distant comprehension that was not yet thought to its end. Then he turned away, took the shaft of the cart and pulled it out of the colony, Käthe beside him, the grandfather clock between the beds, out of the pit's land into the nothing that began beyond it.

Bertha had stepped beside Wilhelm. She had said nothing. She watched the cart pull down the street, grow smaller, disappear, and then she looked at Wilhelm, and in her look there was no accusation, but something heavier: the knowledge that they now belonged together, more firmly than by any marriage certificate, welded together by what he had done and she had not prevented. She laid her hand at the back of his neck, the way you calm an animal or hold a dying man, and said: "The water's boiling. Come and eat."

There was something to eat that morning, the first time in weeks, because the house was saved and the shift and with it the wage that would soon come again. Wilhelm sat at the table and ate, and the food tasted of nothing, of ash, and he ate it all the same, every bite, because a man who has done such a thing has no right to scorn the food he has bought with it. Outside the wheel turned. From now on it would always turn, every day, all his life, and every time he saw it he would think of Heinrich's raised, then sinking hand, and the wheel would turn on, indifferent, for the wheel did not ask who turned it and at what price.

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Chapter 8 - The Overman

In summer the child came, a boy, and they named him August, after Bertha's father, and in the same summer they made Wilhelm a deputy overman.

It went the way such things go: without a word ever falling about the reason. Bröker, the old overman, was transferred, and a new one was needed, a reliable one, and they found him in Wilhelm Kortmann, a good hewer, diligent, no bawler. So it stood in the justification, and it was true, every word, and it was a lie, because it kept silent about the essential. Wilhelm got a different shirt, a white shirt for work that set him apart from the hewers, and a few marks more a month, and the task of dividing up the gangs and checking the tubs and carrying the instructions from above down below.

He stood now where Bröker had stood, at the pit bottom, with the list, and divided up the men who yesterday had still been his comrades. They said "Herr Steiger" to him, and there was something in that "Herr" that drove the blood to his head each time, a tiny pause before it, a barely audible mockery — or was he imagining it? Some did not imagine it. Some knew or sensed, and their politeness was colder than any insult. And when he checked the tubs and had to dock one, because the list from above demanded it, he saw in the hewer's eyes what he had himself seen in Bröker's, and he said the same sentence Bröker had said: "I don't write what gets docked. It comes from above." And it was the same lie and the same truth, and now he stood on the other side of it.

Wilhelm began to help. That was his way of living with what he had done, and he did not himself quite understand what he was doing, only that he had to do it. Where he could, he turned a blind eye. He docked less than the list demanded and carried the difference himself, by doctoring the figures, a dangerous game that could cost him the post. He gave money, secretly, where there was need, to widows, to the sick, to the families of the blacklisted who had stayed. He slipped a hungry apprentice a bread. He did it furtively, almost ashamed, and he did it more and more, and Bertha saw it and did not understand.

"We don't have enough ourselves," she said one evening, when she noticed money missing again. "You give away what we don't have. Who are you atoning for, Wilhelm?"

It was the first time she used the word. Atoning. She looked at him across the cradle of little August, and in her look there was no accusation, only a weary clarity. Wilhelm gave no answer. There was no answer he could have given without speaking aloud what lay between them and was bearable precisely because it stayed unspoken. He bent over the cradle and looked at the boy, who slept, his small fists beside his head, and thought: for him. For him I atone. So that one day he need not go down. So that he has a different life than mine.

It was a lie he comforted himself with, and it was so transparent it barely comforted. For the money he gave away did not undo the betrayal. It only made it more bearable for the one who had committed it, and that was a different thing from making amends, a much smaller thing, a self-serving thing in the garb of generosity.

Käthe Brass stayed in Voßlohe, on the margin, in a damp room in the old town, because Heinrich found no work anywhere in the

district and they could go no further than the money reached, and the money reached for nothing. Wilhelm tried once to help her. He sent, through a go-between, an envelope of money, anonymous, he thought. Käthe sent it back. She did not only send it back; she came herself, stood at Bertha's door, in her threadbare clothes, and laid the envelope on the threshold, and when Bertha opened, Käthe looked at her, long, and spat on the floor before her, on the clean floor, and went, without a word. She had needed no word. She knew. Perhaps she had always known, with the certainty of women who know each other; perhaps Heinrich, who was slowly comprehending, had told her. The envelope lay on the threshold, and Bertha picked it up and closed the door and said nothing, and from that day the friendship of the two women, who had once been neighbours and shared their bread, was dead, and with it a piece of the old colony, in which people had stood up for one another.

At night, when little August slept and Bertha slept, Wilhelm lay awake and listened to the wheel. You could hear it, on still nights, the distant hum of the winding that never quite stopped, and Wilhelm lay and listened and sometimes laid his hand on Bertha's back, in the dark, a plea for something he could not name, and Bertha, half asleep, let the hand stay, and both knew that something lay between them, a third in the bed, that never left, and both had learned to sleep with it.

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Chapter 9 - Essential to the War

When the war came, in August fourteen, they marched through Voßlohe with music and flags, and the young men, who had never got out of the district, signed up as if going on an outing. Wilhelm watched them go and did not sign up. Miners were exempted, it was soon said, essential to the war, for without coal no steel, without steel no shells, and so most of the hewers stayed underground, where the war needed them, alive. It was a bitter mercy. While the farmers' sons bled to death in Flanders, the miners' sons bled more slowly, in the depths, at the lung, at the driven-up quota.

For the production had to rise, always rise. The directorate took orders from the War Office, and the orders meant more coal, and more coal meant more shifts, less safety, more pressure on every man who had stayed. Wilhelm as overman stood in the middle of it. He was to drive the gangs, who were already working at the limit, older men, half-children, for the strongest were gone after all, voluntarily or fetched. He saw the accidents coming before they came, because one hurried, because one set props where one should not hurry and should build the roof properly, and sometimes he could prevent it and sometimes not, and when not, he carried them, one after another, in his already loaded reckoning.

Otto Brass went to war in the second year. He need not have; he had become a miner, somewhere at the edge of the district, where they would still take a Brass who bore the name of his blacklisted father. But he went, half out of defiance, half out of the hunger for some other life than the one the district had left him. Wilhelm heard

of it and thought of Heinrich, who now saw his only son go off to war, the war of the gentlemen, for whom he was nothing, and Wilhelm thought that the poor always bled for other men's causes, underground as above ground, and that no war changed that, but only made it clearer.

At home the hunger became habit. There was bread made of anything that could be milled, and ration cards for everything, and the cards counted for more than the money, because there was nothing to buy for the money. Bertha ran the economy of scarcity the way she ran everything, with iron exactness. She knew where there were secretly eggs, by barter, where a farmwife at the town's edge gave potatoes for a length of cloth. She sent little August, now eleven, foraging through the countryside, with a sack and a face that stirred pity, and August came back with turnips and pride, because he was contributing to the family's survival, and Wilhelm watched with worry, for the boy was growing into the scarcity as though it were normal, and for him it was.

"He's tough," said Bertha one evening, almost in praise, when August slept. "He'll get through."

"He shouldn't have to be tough," said Wilhelm.

Bertha looked at him. "Here everyone gets tough. Or they go under. What do you want him to be?"

To that Wilhelm had no answer. He wanted August not to have to go down, neither into the mountain nor into the war, to get out of the district that wore people away. But he saw no way there, no honest one, and the dishonest ways he knew, one of them he knew very well, and he had sworn his son would not have to walk them. That was his atonement and his hope at once: that out of the betrayal at least this might come, a boy who would never have to betray,

because he would never stand so deep down that betrayal was the only way out.

It was a hope as thin as the war bread, and Wilhelm held on to it because he had nothing else to hold on to, and outside the winding ran day and night, coal for the steel, steel for the front, and the district gave what it had, coal and men, and got back what it always got: cards, scarcity, and the names of the fallen, which the pastor read from the pulpit on Sundays, ever longer, a second blacklist, the one the war kept.

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Chapter 10 - The Turnip Winter

The winter of sixteen into seventeen was hunger itself, made flesh, or rather made the lack of flesh. The potatoes were frozen or requisitioned, and what remained was the turnip, the swede, the cattle fodder, which people now ate, morning, noon, and night, boiled, baked, mashed to pulp, cooked down to a kind of jam that tasted of nothing but turnip and hunger.

In the colony the old and the small died. They did not die of hunger alone; they died of what the hunger let in, of pneumonia, of dysentery, of the cough that would not stop. Little August survived, because he was tough, as Bertha had said, and because Bertha gave him the best, the little best, and ate the turnip herself. Wilhelm watched her grow thinner, week by week, saw the bones come out in her face that had once been round, and he, the overman, had a little more than the others, a special allocation as was due to the supervisors, and he brought it home, and Bertha shared it out among them all, as if there were nothing special in it.

But Wilhelm also gave outward. He had never quite stopped since the strike, and in this winter he did it more than ever. He took from the special allocation and carried it away, secretly, to the widows, to the sick, to the families of the blacklisted who still hovered in the town. He did it in the dark, the way he did everything that had to do with his guilt, and he imagined no one noticed, least of all Bertha.

But Bertha noticed everything. One evening, when he came home again with a half-empty sack, she confronted him. She did not do it loudly. She stood at the stove, stirring the turnip, and said, without

turning round: "Where was the fat, Wilhelm? The special allocation. There was fat with it. Where is it?"

"Given away," he said, because he was too tired to lie.

"To whom?"

"To those who have nothing."

"We have almost nothing too." Now she turned, the wooden spoon in her hand, and her gaunt face was hard in the light of the small fire. "Your son is skin and bone. So am I. And you carry the fat to strangers. The third time this week, Wilhelm. Who are you atoning for?"

There it was again, the word, and this time it did not hang in the air but fell between them like a stone. Wilhelm was silent. He could have told her, in that moment, everything, the names, the counting house, the handshake; she would have borne it, she already bore the half, the unsaid. But he did not say it. He said: "It can't be otherwise," and that was no answer, and Bertha knew it was none.

"Yes it could," she said quietly. "You could stop atoning and start living. But you can't, because then you'd have to look at what for. Rather you give the fat away than look." She turned back to the stove. "Give it away if you must. But don't tell me it can't be otherwise. It can. You just don't want it to."

It was the hardest and truest thing she had ever said to him, and Wilhelm carried it off like everything else.

Once that winter he tried it with Käthe Brass. He knew she and Heinrich were at the end, in the damp room in the old town, Heinrich ill, without work, without hope. He sent August, the boy, with a pot of soup and a piece of bacon, because he thought the child would be taken in more easily than his own hand. August came back, the pot still full.

"The woman said," August reported, confused, "she eats nothing from the house of Kortmann. She said she'd rather starve. What does that mean, Father?"

"Nothing," said Wilhelm. "Eat the soup yourself."

And August ate it, hungry, asking no more, and Wilhelm watched him eat the soup that Käthe Brass had turned away, rather starving than taking his bread, and he understood that there was a dignity poorer than any poverty and richer than his whole rise: the dignity of the one who refuses the traitor's bread. That dignity Käthe had, and she had bought it dearly, with hunger, and Wilhelm had sold it, cheaply, for a warm house and a white shirt, and between the two lay the whole difference, which no money in the world made good again.

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Chapter 11 - The Councils

In November eighteen everything collapsed, the war, the Kaiser, the old order, and for a few weeks it looked as if the world belonged to those who had carried it until then. In Voßlohe a workers' and soldiers' council formed, as everywhere in the district, and the council took over what there was to take over, and on the Morgenstern pit a man suddenly stood on a tub and spoke, the way Heinrich Brass had once spoken, and the man was Heinrich's son Otto.

Otto had come back from the war, leaner, harder, with eyes that had seen too much and feared nothing any more. He had survived four years of trenches and come back another man, one who believed he had nothing left to lose and was dangerous precisely for that, to those who had something. He had joined the party that stood furthest left, and he spoke of councils and of socialisation and of the mines belonging to those who toiled in them and not to the gentlemen in the clean counting houses, and the men listened to him, hungry, war-weary, ready for something new.

Wilhelm stood at the edge and listened, and it was to him as if he heard Heinrich, the same words, the same fire, only without the warmth Heinrich had had; Otto was colder, more honed, more embittered. And Wilhelm understood with a fright that he now stood on the other side. He was overman, he was one of the supervisors, one who carried out the directorate's instructions, and to the council he was what he had never wanted to be to himself: a man of the gentlemen. The council drew up lists of who belonged to the

workforce and who to the management, and Wilhelm Kortmann, who had once been a hewer, stood on the wrong list, the list of those to be watched.

They let him work; they needed the overmen, for the winding had to go on, council or no council, the people needed coal in this hunger winter. But the tone had turned. Where the men had once said "Herr Steiger" with their cold politeness, some now said "Comrade Kortmann" with a mockery that cut sharper, because it came from the other direction.

One day Otto confronted him. It was at the pit bottom, after the shift, the others already in the cage, and Otto stepped into his way, not threatening, only firm, and looked at him with the eyes that feared nothing.

"Kortmann," he said. "Steiger." A pause. "My father stood surety for you. Did you know that? When you started. A thin boy without a father, and no one would stand surety, and my father did. Said, Kortmann, he's all right, I'll vouch for him."

"I know," said Wilhelm.

"And then, nineteen-five, in the strike." Otto looked at him without blinking. "Then my father was blacklisted. Betrayed from within. Someone gave his name, someone who knew he was the ringleader. And shortly after, of all people a certain Wilhelm Kortmann becomes overman. A thin boy without a father, for whom no one would vouch, suddenly wearing the white shirt." He let it stand. "Funny, isn't it?"

Wilhelm held his gaze, because to look away would have been a confession. "You have no proof," he said, and it was the most wretched thing he had ever said, because it was not innocence but only the absence of proof, and both heard the difference.

"No," said Otto slowly. "I have no proof. If I had, you wouldn't be standing here any more." He took a step back. "But I need no proof to know what I know. And you need none to know what you did. That's enough for us both, I think. Glück auf, Steiger."

He went to the cage, and Wilhelm stood at the pit bottom, alone, and the word Glück auf echoed in him like a mockery, because from Otto's mouth it was no wish but a verdict. Bertha, when he hinted at it that evening, without the details, looked at him long and said: "Now the next generation knows. It moves on, Wilhelm. What you did doesn't die with you. It is inherited, like a farm, like an illness. The Brasses will tell it to their children, and our children will feel it, without knowing what it is." She laid her hand on the sleeping August. "This one will carry it, and he doesn't even know yet that he exists."

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Chapter 12 - The Red Ruhr Army

In March twenty the putsch came from above, and the district answered from below. In Berlin the military had grabbed for power, against the young republic, and across the land a general strike was called, and nowhere was the call heard as it was in the Ruhr. But it did not stop at the strike. Out of the strikers grew an army, the Red Ruhr Army, tens of thousands, miners with rifles from the war, who defended the district against the putschists and, when the putsch in Berlin had already collapsed, marched on, because they had grasped that they would now be relieved of their weapons again, and with the weapons of the only power they had ever possessed.

Otto Brass was in the thick of it. Of course Otto was in the thick of it. He led no great troop, but he was one of those who went ahead, and for a few weeks the district really belonged to the men who toiled in it, the first and last time in its history. Wilhelm kept out of it. He was overman, he was too old for an army, he had a wife and a son, and above all he had learned that the many always lost in the end, that the power of the many was an intoxication that wore off, and that afterward the reckoning came.

The reckoning came with the Reichswehr and the Freikorps. They came from outside, well armed, well led, and they put down the rising, with a hardness the district did not forget. It was no battle, it was a punishment. Drumhead courts, shootings, men stood against the wall because they had been found with a weapon or because a neighbour had denounced them. The district, which had just belonged to itself, was occupied by its own republic, and the victors

hunted the vanquished through the colonies.

On one of those nights Wilhelm heard a sound in the stall. He went out, lamp in hand, and in the straw, between the empty rabbit hutches, lay a man, wounded in the shoulder, exhausted, and the man was Otto Brass.

They looked at each other in the lamplight, the traitor's son and the betrayed man's son, and neither said a word. Otto was too weak to speak and too proud to beg. Wilhelm could hand him over; one call to the works police, and he was a reliable man who had caught an insurgent, that would have served him. Wilhelm could drive him off; then he would not be guilty of what happened to him outside. Or Wilhelm could keep him, hide him, one night, against all reason, against his own advantage.

He said no word. He went back into the house, fetched a jug of water and a clean cloth and brought them out and set them beside Otto in the straw. He laid a loaf beside them, the half they had. Then he put out the lamp and left Otto in the darkness, and the dark was now protection, not threat, the first time in Wilhelm's life that the dark helped. He went in and lay down beside Bertha, who was awake and had heard everything and said nothing, and they both lay awake until morning, and in the stall lay the son of the man Wilhelm had betrayed, and ate his bread.

Before sunrise Otto was gone. He had taken the cloth and emptied the jug and taken the bread, and in the straw there was only the imprint of his body and a dark stain where the shoulder had bled. He had left no word, no thanks, nothing. And that was right. For what Wilhelm had done was no making-good. One did not make good a betrayed father by giving the son a night of straw. It was not even half an atonement. It was only a single moment in which Wilhelm

had not done the wrong thing, and a single moment did not outweigh a life.

But between the two men something remained from that night that was neither thanks nor forgiveness and stronger than both: a knowledge. Otto now knew that Wilhelm could have handed him over and had not. And Wilhelm knew that Otto knew. It changed nothing about the old betrayal, did not erase it, but it laid itself beside it, a second truth beside the first, and the two truths would from now on exist together, indissoluble, through the years, through the generations, until one distant day someone would bring them both to light and not know how to reckon the one against the other.

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Chapter 13 - The Boy Wants to Go Down

August was twelve when Wilhelm grasped that he would not be able to hold him. The boy hung about the headframe the way other boys hung about the football pitch. He knew the shift times better than the wages clerk, knew which hewer managed how many tubs, imitated the gait of the miners, the bow-legged, heavy gait of those who had worked too long stooped. He wanted to go down. He wanted nothing in the world so much as to want to go down, and Wilhelm wanted nothing in the world so much as to prevent it.

"You're not going into the mountain," said Wilhelm. "You'll learn a trade. Something up top. Fitter, joiner, anything. You're not going down."

"Why not? You go down too."

"That's exactly why."

But that was no reason for a twelve-year-old, that was a riddle. For August the mountain was not what it was for Wilhelm, not wear and fear and darkness, but the real thing, the manly thing, what the father did and the grandfather had done and everyone who counted for anything. To work up top, to learn a trade, that seemed to August almost a disgrace, something for the weak, for those who did not dare go down. He saw the hewers come out of the washhouse, with the black ring around their eyes, exhausted and proud, and he wanted to be one of them, one whom you knew by the black ring.

Wilhelm saw himself in the boy and was afraid. He saw the same ambition, the same hunger for recognition, the same readiness to give everything for a place in this world, and he knew where that hunger

could lead, because he himself had been led there. He wanted to keep August out of the mountain, not only out of worry for the lung, but out of a deeper fear: that the boy, once as deep down as he, would one day stand before the same choice Wilhelm had stood before, and give the same answer.

It came on top of this that August played with the Brass children. Otto had children of his own now, and there were other Brasses in the wider sense, relatives of the blacklisted Heinrich, and the children did not care about the feud of the old. To them Voßlohe was one single great colony, and you played with whoever was there, and August was often there, and one of the Brass boys became almost something like his friend. Wilhelm saw it and was silent, because he could not forbid it without explaining, and explain he could not.

Bertha mediated, as she always mediated. "Leave the boy," she said. "You won't get him out of the mountain by forbidding him the mountain. That only makes him greedier. And you won't get the old story out of the world by forbidding him to play with the Brasses. Perhaps it's good that the children play. Perhaps it heals, what we broke, by itself, a generation on, if only we let it."

"And if it doesn't heal? If it only sleeps and wakes later?"

Bertha had no answer to that, and neither did Wilhelm, and so they let August play and grow and strive for the mountain, and Wilhelm pushed the decision ahead of him, year by year, in the hope that some other way would open, an apprenticeship up top, anything that would lure the boy from the shaft. But the district offered no other ways. It offered the mountain, and again the mountain, and for those who did not want the mountain, the unknown, the foreign, which frightened more than the depths.

So August grew up, between his father's prohibition and the pull of the shaft, and the nearer he came to the age at which one could begin, the clearer it was to both of them how it would end. The mountain always won. The mountain had won all of them, the fathers and the grandfathers, and it would win August too, and the only thing Wilhelm had to set against it was a prohibition he could not justify, and an atonement no one knew of, and both were too little against the hum of the wheel, which August heard every day and which sang to him that he belonged there, down below, where the men were.

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Chapter 14 - The Occupation

In January twenty-three French and Belgian troops moved into the district, because the Reich was not paying the reparations, and overnight Voßlohe was occupied land. They came with soldiers and officers and the intention of fetching the coal themselves that the Reich owed them, and the Reich answered with what it called passive resistance: it called on the workers not to mine for the occupiers, and paid for it a support, printed money, ever more printed money.

So the headframe stood still again, but this time differently from the strike. This time directorate and workforce stood on the same side, against the occupiers, and that was a strange, almost uncanny unity. Wilhelm, the overman, and the hewers who did not greet him were all at once allies, Germans against Frenchmen, and for a few weeks the old division between above and below seemed overlaid by a new one between inside and outside.

Wilhelm mistrusted this unity. He had learned that unities stirred up from above pursued a purpose that was not his. The directorate was against the occupiers because the occupiers took its coal, not because it had suddenly come to love the fatherland. And when the occupation was over, the unity would be over too, and everything would be as before, above and below, list and pick.

But he kept it to himself. One kept much to oneself in those weeks, for the occupiers were nervous and harsh. There were raids, arrests, expulsions. Whoever was caught sabotaging came before a French court. There were dead. In a neighbouring town soldiers shot workers who tried to stop a train of seized coal, and the shot men

became heroes, and their burial became a demonstration, tens of thousands, and among the tens of thousands walked Wilhelm too, because one walked, because now one was a German above all else, and beside him, a few rows off, walked Otto Brass, and for this one day they were on the same side, without greeting each other.

August, now fifteen, experienced the occupation with the burning eyes of youth. He saw the foreign soldiers in the streets, the patrols, the humiliation, and in him something grew, an anger, a national feeling he did not see through and that was dangerous because it was so easy to steer. He once threw stones at a French lorry with other boys and came home with a split lip and a pride that frightened Wilhelm.

"Are you mad," said Wilhelm. "They could have shot you. Over a stone."

"They have no right to be here," said August, the lip swollen, the eyes shining.

"Right." Wilhelm laughed bitterly. "Who has ever had a right here. The gentlemen have no right to dock us, and do it. The French have no right to be here, and are. Right belongs to whoever has the power, August. Mark that. And throw no stones at those who have rifles."

But August did not listen. He was at the age when one takes the truth of the fathers for cowardice, and in Wilhelm's caution he saw only weakness, a man who ducked, who had always ducked. Had he known how deep his father had ducked and what it had cost him, he might have judged otherwise. But he did not know it, and so in him grew contempt for caution and admiration for the grand gesture, for the stone against the lorry, for the big, the loud, the brave, and Wilhelm saw it grow and could say nothing against it, because the

only thing he could have said was the one thing he would never say.

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Chapter 15 - Inflation

The money died that year, and it died fast. In spring a bread cost a few hundred marks, in summer a few thousand, in autumn millions, then billions. The wage Wilhelm got in the morning was worth nothing by evening; one ran from the wages office to the baker to buy at least something before the price rose again. The women queued with washing baskets full of banknotes to buy a few potatoes, and the money was cheaper than the paper it was printed on, and one heated with it, because coal, which one mined, was scarcer than money, which one printed.

For Wilhelm it was more than a catastrophe. It was a verdict.

For Wilhelm had saved. In the years as overman, with the better shirt and the few marks more, he had put aside what he could, secretly, alongside what he gave away, a small cushion, a beginning of security. It was the money of the rise, the money grown out of the betrayal, for without the betrayal he would never have become overman, never have earned more, never have saved. It was, right at the bottom, Heinrich's money, the money Wilhelm had got for Heinrich's name.

And it evaporated. Overnight, in weeks, it was nothing. The sum that could once have been a small house, a dowry for August, a cushion for old age, was in the end not even a bread. Wilhelm held the worthless notes in his hand, millions, billions, and it was as if he held the wage of his betrayal in all its nullity, and he grasped that he had robbed Heinrich of a life for something that was now worthless paper, that he had sold solidarity for a promise the history redeemed

with nothing.

Bertha saw him sitting at the table with the notes, and she understood, without his saying a word, what was going on in him. She said the sentence Wilhelm did not forget all his life, soberly, almost gently, while she prepared the supper that consisted of almost nothing: "Some things you buy dear and do not keep."

She meant the money, and she did not mean the money, and both knew it.

That winter Heinrich Brass died.

He died poor, in the damp room in the old town, of the lung, of poverty, of the years without work, without hope, without the standing the blacklist had taken from him. He had been a blacklisted man for eighteen years, one who got no shift anywhere in the district, and those eighteen years had eaten him up, slowly, from within, the way the dust eats the lung. He was fifty when he died, and he looked seventy.

Wilhelm went to the burial. He could have stayed away; no one expected the overman Kortmann at the grave of the man the pit had cast out. But he went, because he could not do otherwise, because something in him had to stand at this grave, even if he did not know whether it was remorse or only the need to torment himself. He stood at the back, at the edge of the small mourning party, the few who still held to Heinrich, the old union men, the Brass relatives. Käthe stood at the grave, upright, in black, and did not look over. But Otto looked over.

Otto stood at his father's grave and looked across the heads to where Wilhelm stood, and their eyes met, and Otto said no word. He said the loudest word one can say, by saying no word. In his look lay everything: the knowledge, the accusation, the renunciation of the

accusation, because an accusation without proof would have been only a cry, and above all a bitter, terrible satisfaction that Wilhelm had come, that Wilhelm needed to come, that the traitor stood at the grave of the betrayed and could not bear it and yet did not stay away. That was Otto's revenge, the only one he had: to let Wilhelm watch how he saw the earth fall on his father's coffin, and to let him know that he, Otto, was watching him do it.

Wilhelm did not bear it long. He left before the grave was closed, through the cold streets toward home, and the worthless money rustled in his pocket, and over the town the wheel turned, his wheel, that turned because of him, and Heinrich, who had never ridden down again since nineteen-five, lay now forever under the earth, without shaft, without cage, without Glück auf, and that was the end Wilhelm had prepared for him, eighteen years before, on a warm night in the counting house, for money that was now nothing.

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Chapter 16 - The Old Man

In the same year that the money died and Heinrich died, a roadway was abandoned in the mountain. It was worked out, the seam exhausted, no longer worth keeping open, and so they sealed it, walled up the entrance, gave it over to the rock pressure and the rising water. The old man, the miners said of such a roadway, that was the word for it, ancient, no one knew where it came from: the old man, the worked-out, abandoned district that one gave back to the mountain.

Wilhelm stood before it, on the day they walled it up. It was his task as overman to oversee the sealing, and he watched the men set stone on stone, watched the opening close, slowly, until only a dark hole remained and then that too vanished, and before him stood a wall, behind which lay the darkness, a darkness that no one would now enter, in which there was nothing but hollowed rock and the water that slowly rose.

He stood before it as before his own conscience. Behind this wall lay what was closed off, what one had given back to the mountain because one no longer needed it and could no longer change it. So Wilhelm wanted his betrayal: walled up, given over to the dark, forgotten. But he knew it was not so. The old man in the mountain was truly dead, truly closed off. His own old man was not. That one lived, behind its wall, and pressed, the way the rock presses, and the water rose, slowly, year by year, and one day it would find a wall that did not hold.

Then came the Rentenmark, in November, and overnight the money had value again, a new money, made out of nothing, a new beginning as undeserved as the downfall before it. People settled in again. One could reckon again, save again, hope again. Voßlohe breathed out, and the winding ran, and life went on, as it always went on, above all catastrophes, indifferent and tough.

That autumn August started.

He was fifteen, old enough, and Wilhelm had found no apprenticeship up top, no other way, and the boy wanted it with all his strength, and in the end Wilhelm gave way, because giving way was easier than a fight he lost anyway, and because secretly he knew it had to come, that the mountain always won. August put on the pit clothes that were too big for his boy's body and stood in the morning at the shaft, lamp in hand, his face bright with excitement, and Wilhelm stood beside him, and they waited for the cage.

It was Wilhelm's last chance. He felt it, there at the shaft, in the grey morning light: if he ever wanted to say it, to the son, before the son rode down into the same depths, into the same world in which he, Wilhelm, had chosen what he had chosen, then now. He wanted to say: August, before you go down, you must know something about your father, about this house, about the money that brought us up. You must know what we stand on. So that, when one day you stand before a choice, as I stood before a choice, you know what it costs to choose the wrong thing.

He opened his mouth. August looked at him, expectant, believing his father would give him some good advice on the way down, a miner's counsel, something about the face, about the roof, about the art of coming up alive again.

"Glück auf," said Wilhelm.

He got out no more. It was the one word that contained everything and betrayed nothing, the wish and the silence in one, and it was cowardly, and it was all Wilhelm could manage. August smiled, proud, and said "Glück auf, Father," and then the cage came, and August stepped in with the others, and the cage dropped, and with it August dropped into the mountain, the way Wilhelm had dropped into the mountain every morning of his life, and the square of sky disappeared above the boy, first grey, then greyer, then nothing at all.

Wilhelm stood at the shaft a long time after the cage had gone. Above him turned the wheel, his wheel, and now it carried his son too down, into the same depths, the same darkness, the same world in which a man had to choose between his children's bread and his loyalty to his own kind, and could always choose wrong. The fault Wilhelm had laid now rode down with August, unseen, unnamed, inherited like a farm, like an illness, and somewhere behind a walled-up roadway the water rose slowly, and Wilhelm turned away and went to the washhouse and began his shift, because the wheel turned and the wheel did not ask who turned it and at what price.

Über dieses Buch

The Seam - Going Down
Ein Schreib-Experiment von aban news, Kapitel für Kapitel mit Claude Opus verfasst und redigiert.
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