



1.

The first thing that Hans – a Krull himself, but a pure one, a German Krull – saw of the Krull house, the Krull family, even before he got out of the taxi, was a transparent paper sign stuck to the glass door of the shop.

It was odd: with all the details calling for his attention, he had eyes only for that sign, two words he managed to read backwards. ‘Remy Starch.’

The background was blue, a beautiful ultramarine blue, and the middle of the image was occupied by a peaceable white lion.

At that moment, the rest existed only in relation to that lion, its mane as spotless as linen: another sign, also transparent, with the words ‘Reckitt’s Laundry Blue’, although this one, for no clear reason, played only a minor role; another word, ‘Drinks’, painted in yellow, some of the letters on the left-hand pane of the door, the others on the right; a window cluttered with ropes, lanterns, horsewhips and harnesses; finally, somewhere in the sun, there was a canal, trees, motionless barges and a yellow tram advancing along the quayside, ringing its bell.

‘*Remy Starch!*’ Hans spelled as he got out of the taxi.

The words seemed all the more emblematic in that Hans didn’t understand French very well and had no idea what they meant.

‘Let’s see what these French Krulls are like!’ he thought as he stuffed the change in his pocket and looked up at the house.

Above the shop, a window was open, and through it he glimpsed the top half of a young man in shirtsleeves sitting at a table covered in exercise books. From another part of the house, heavy piano chords emerged.

And now, beyond the window display of nautical items, in a half-light that seemed a long way away, Hans made out a woman's forehead, grey hair, eyes. At the same moment, the young man in shirtsleeves was framed in the first-floor window, looking down curiously at the taxi; another window, to the right, opened to reveal a young girl's sharp face . . .

There were only three metres of pavement to cross, and a glass door to open. In his left hand, Hans carried a yellow leather suitcase – imitation leather, to be precise, but it was a decent imitation, the kind the Germans were good at producing. Being tall, he took long strides. One. Two. He was reaching out his hand to turn the door handle when the door swung open and an extraordinary voice, a woman's voice, but hoarse and with a cacophonous mixture of highs and lows, screamed out over all the other sounds:

'You're a pervert and you know it! You're all perverts in this house! Not just thieves, dirty little thieves, but perverts!'

Hans, his suitcase in his hand, had to mark time while the two women jostled in the doorway, one shaking the other and trying to push her out, the second determined to finish her monologue.

One word had struck Hans, the word 'pervert' – he thought he knew the meaning, but he didn't see how it could apply to a family with the name Krull. Then another word, uttered by the grey-haired shopkeeper, who was probably his aunt:

'Come on, Pipi, let's not have a scene!'

And that word – Pipi – lodged itself in his memory alongside Remy Starch.

All this had lasted the time it took him to get out of the taxi, pay the driver and cross the pavement. The young man from

the first floor was already emerging from the shop, grabbing the drunk woman by one arm and shoving her violently enough to make her stagger several metres.

‘Hans Krull?’ he asked, taking the traveller’s suitcase.

‘That’s me, yes,’ Hans replied in German.

In spite of everything, it took a while to get used to the situation: his aunt was looking him up and down, but it was clear that what most struck her was the suitcase with its dazzling nickel-plating.

‘Come in,’ the young man said, throwing a last threatening look at the woman they had called Pipi.

Then there was the smell. Not immediately, though: before anything else, there was the bell. Whenever the door opened and closed, a bell would ring, a sound that made you feel you had never heard anything like it before.

Only then, once you were in the shop, came the smell, a mixture of Norwegian tar – used to coat the barges – rope and spices, but predominantly the hard liquor sold on a corner of the counter that had been covered in zinc.

‘Come into the lounge, cousin. We didn’t think you’d take a taxi. Anna! Élisabeth! Cousin Hans is here!’

Behind the shop, Hans glimpsed a kitchen, which he sensed was the real centre of the house, but he was made to turn right and walk down a chilly corridor paved with large blue tiles and into the lounge, where a young girl hurriedly got up from the piano stool.

‘Hello, cousin.’

‘Hello.’

‘This is Élisabeth, my father calls her Liesbeth . . . This is Anna . . . And I’m Joseph.’

‘Don’t you speak any French?’ Élisabeth asked while her mother, her hands over her belly, remained motionless in the doorway.

‘Not much, and very badly. You’ll teach me.’

All initiations are unpleasant, yet Hans kept his good humour, a characteristic good humour that they were unfamiliar with in the house. It was a lightness of both body and mind. He moved with ease, as graceful as a dancer, while his eyes, which were small, twinkled with delight and, perhaps, mischief.

‘Would you like me to show you your room, cousin?’ Joseph said. He was about the same age as Hans – twenty-five – but his movements were stiff and heavy.

The stairs, which were polished, creaked. The whole house exuded the same smell as the shop, though less strong; it mingled with more domestic odours upstairs. The window on the landing looked out on a yard and a garden with a single tree.

‘This way, cousin. It’s an attic room, but it has a view of the canal . . . Wouldn’t you like to have a quick wash?’

Hans looked at his hands, which were perfectly clean. He smiled and almost explained why. Should he say it?

Not yet! he decided. Later, he might tell him that, on the train from Cologne, he had made the acquaintance of a pretty woman and had helped her to smuggle some objects across the border. On getting off at the station, he had taken her to the railway hotel.

It was the kind of adventure that constantly happened to him, almost without his doing it deliberately. She hadn’t even undressed. She had said:

‘My sister-in-law is expecting me at half past four, and my husband will be back at six . . .’

That was why he had washed before coming to the Krulls’. He hadn’t even asked her what her name was. She had got on a yellow tram.

‘You’ve seen almost the whole family,’ Joseph explained conscientiously as his cousin opened his suitcase and took out a few small objects. ‘Mother takes care of the shop . . .’

‘Why did she call that woman Pipi? Is that her name?’

‘No, it’s a nickname! That woman’s the bane of my mother’s life. She lives with her daughter and a tramp on an abandoned barge that’s half sunk into the canal. She runs errands for the bargees, especially those that are passing through and only spend a few minutes in the lock. She’s drunk all day long and when she feels the urge, she just crouches down by the edge of the water or in the street and relieves herself.’

‘I get the idea.’

‘My sister Anna, who’s the oldest—’

‘How old?’

‘Thirty! She’s the one who looks after the house. When you arrived, she was ironing in the kitchen . . . Élisabeth is seventeen. She’s studying piano. She wants to be a teacher.’

‘And you?’

‘I’m studying to be a doctor. In two weeks’ time, I’ll be presenting my thesis on bilateral pneumothorax.’

‘What about your father?’

‘He spends all day in the workshop with his assistant . . . Shall we go and see him?’

The workshop was a room at the end of the ground-floor corridor, with a door that led out to the garden. Two men, sitting on chairs so low they might have been sitting on the floor, were weaving wicker into baskets.

One of them – with his fine white beard, he looked like a statue of Saint Joseph – was Old Krull, Cornelius Krull, the one who, after travelling first around Germany, then around France as a basket-maker, had settled in this town, for no reason, like a man automatically stopping when he’s reached the end of his journey.

Instead of kissing Hans on the forehead, he traced a little cross there with his thumb, in a gesture that was typical of him, then asked:

‘How’s my brother?’

‘He’s well,’ Hans replied brightly, ‘quite well.’

‘Does he still live in our house in Emden? In the last letter I had from him, thirty years ago, he told me he’d set up as a cobbler.’

Cornelius Krull, with his impassive face and solid beard, continued to manipulate the flexible wicker stems, while a quid of chewing tobacco swelled now the left cheek, now the right cheek of his assistant, his only employee, who was as much of a fixture in the house as Old Krull himself.

‘Would you like to see my room now, cousin?’

It smelled musty. It was the most disagreeable of the smells in the house, and Joseph was boring, with his long, insubstantial body, his pale, constantly serious face, his close-cropped hair, between fair and ginger, and his dull blue eyes.

‘Are you studying, too?’

‘I was studying law. I was forced to leave university for political reasons.’

‘What do you do in Germany?’

‘Nothing. I’m never going back to Germany.’

He sensed Joseph’s gaze turning cold and mistrustful.

‘When I’ve become familiar with French, I’ll go to Paris and fend for myself. Maybe I’ll become naturalized. Are you all naturalized?’

‘Father was already French before the war. I did my military service in France.’

Hans didn’t linger in Joseph’s room but left him alone with his thesis on bilateral pneumothorax . . . *Thanks to fluoroscopy, it will be possible from the onset of bilateral pneumothorax to register the degree of pulmonary collapse and . . .*

These were the last words in the exercise book. Piano chords echoed through the house. Hans went and sat down behind his cousin Liesbeth, who had a long, sharp nose.

‘Not much of a laugh, your brother, is he?’

She smiled but said nothing.

‘Or your sister Anna for that matter!’

The wallpaper had a pattern of small flowers. Summer entered through the open window, along with the noises of the street and especially the bell of the yellow tram sounding triumphantly every three minutes. The stop was only fifty metres away, and every time a tram came to a halt, you heard the screech of the brakes, which caused a little sand to fall on the rails.

‘Talking to your father earlier,’ Hans said, looking at the back of his cousin’s neck, ‘I was quite embarrassed.’

‘Why? Because Father almost never speaks?’

‘No. Because he asked after my father.’

‘And that was embarrassing?’

‘Yes, it was. My father died fifteen years ago.’

He said this quite cheerfully, and Liesbeth, who turned abruptly to look at him, couldn’t help smiling, too.

‘What about his letter? The one he just wrote to my parents?’

‘I wrote it!’

‘Why?’

He scratched his head comically. Although he was the German Krull, as they called him here, he was almost dark, almost southern in appearance, while the French Krulls still had complexions like Danish porcelain.

‘I’m not really sure. I thought a letter from my father would make more impression than a letter from me. I’m pretty good at imitating handwriting. So I wrote that my son Hans needed to spend two or three months in France to improve his French.’

He was looking her in the eyes, and she was the one forced to turn her head away.

‘Are you angry?’

‘It’s none of my business. But what if my father . . .?’



‘Will you tell him?’

‘What do you take me for?’

‘You understand, I absolutely had to leave Germany and I was down to my last few marks. I thought of my father’s brother, though I wasn’t sure if he was still living in the same town after all these years. It seems odd to me, people staying so long in one place.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’ve lived all over Germany – Berlin, Munich – Austria, too, then in Hamburg and on a ship of the Hamburg America Line.’

‘What did you do?’

‘A bit of everything. On the ship, I was a musician. In Berlin, I was in the film business.’

‘Best not to talk about that here,’ she said, turning to her piano.

‘I know!’

‘So why have you told me on your first day?’

‘No reason!’ he replied, heading for the door and stopping for a moment to look her up and down.

Immediately afterwards, strings of notes emerged from the lounge.

It had been barely twenty-four hours, and Hans was moving about the house with as much ease as if he had spent his whole childhood there; he even, from wherever he was, recognized the voice of Pipi, who came ten times a day on errands for the barges and each time had her little drink.

He had familiarized himself not only with the house, but with the surroundings. First of all, the town didn’t count. They were right on the edge of it, barely part of it.

Proof of that was that less than fifty metres away the tram stopped, performed a manoeuvre and went back the way it had come.

Facing the house was the broad quayside, with three or four rows of trees, benches and beams, timber and bricks unloaded from the barges . . .

Beyond the canal, a kind of waste area or parade ground on which stood a long red building which was the army firing range; and there, from morning to evening, rifle shots could be heard like the cracking of whips. But that was on the other side of the water. It wasn't part of Quai Saint-Léonard and so didn't count.

On Quai Saint-Léonard, the only building after the Krull grocery was a house with an adjoining workshop: Guérin Carpenters.

Then, on the edge of the water, a large yard with dried-out barges and unfinished boats: Rideau Boat Builders.

'Don't you ever take a stroll along the canal?' Hans asked Liesbeth.

'They don't let me go out on my own.'

'So when do you ever go for a walk?'

'On Sundays, when the whole family goes to church.'

The French Krulls, like those in Emden, had remained staunch Protestants.

'Don't you ever get bored?'

'I'm always bored!'

He, on the other hand, wasn't. He nosed about the house, sniffing in every nook and cranny, finding everything amusing, even Anna and the seriousness with which she played her role.

'Will you take some cheese, cousin?'

'Why "take"? Why don't you say "eat"?''

'Because in French we say "take cheese". I take cheese, you take cheese . . .'

He never forgot anything she said and a few hours later, with a gleam in his eye, would kindly point out that she was contradicting herself. And from time to time, for no apparent

reason, he would wink at Liesbeth, who would turn her head away.

Cornelius Krull, even after spending four-fifths of his life in France, still hadn't learned French. But he had almost forgotten his German, so that he spoke in a curious mixture that only his family could understand.

'Has Pipi been in again, Aunt Maria?'

Imposing as she was, he often teased his aunt.

'Why do you always keep both your hands on your belly?' he would ask her innocently.

Two days? Not even that! He had been there a day and a half, idle and nonchalant.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, an hour he loved because of the light, the kitchen smells, the constant ringing of the shop bell.

He had just gone upstairs to his room, without knowing quite why, after taking a piece of sausage from the cold store. He had stretched out fully clothed on his bed, listening. From the next room, he heard the recognizable sounds of Liesbeth turning over her mattress and putting the blanket back on.

Looking up at the ceiling, where the flies had left stippled marks, he seemed to be asking himself:

'How about it? Should I try? Or should I leave it?'

He chewed the last mouthful of sausage, stood up, wiped his lips and smiled at himself in the mirror. Then he very gently turned the door knob, stood listening on the landing, then grabbed the knob of another door and opened this one without the slightest noise.

Proof that he had not been mistaken was that Liesbeth turned abruptly, gave a start and couldn't help casting a frightened look about her.

What was she afraid of, if not that?

The bed hadn't been completely tucked in . . .

And she didn't have a dress on under her smock!

'What are you . . .?'

He smiled, winked and closed the door.

When he tiptoed out a quarter of an hour later, he had a long scratch on his face, but even more of a gleam in his eye. He didn't turn round, because he didn't want to be too horrible. He turned the door knob, gently, noiselessly, as only he could. And saw . . .

He saw Joseph standing there, not completely level with him, because he had walked down a few steps, and only the top part of his body was visible.

Joseph was pale, paler than usual, his features contracted in an unsettling way. He looked as if he were about to run away, as if he had been caught with his eye to the keyhole.

Hans didn't wonder for very long what he had to do. It was automatic. He simply winked and went back into his room, where he looked out of the window at a passing train, the green mass of the trees, light shimmering on the water between the trunks, and sniffed a little at the lingering smell of Liesbeth on his body.

At lunch, Joseph didn't say anything. He was just as boring as usual, just as imbued with the solemn nature of life.

Old Cornelius, who alone was entitled to a wicker armchair, never spoke. Hans had already wondered if it was because he was stupid.

It was Anna who dealt with Hans.

'What do you call this?' she asked, pointing to the dish.

'Carrots.'

'And this?'

'Meat!'

'Mutton chops. Repeat. Mutton . . .'

He would have liked to laugh and nudge Liesbeth, who was sitting next to him, with his elbow, even – why not? – ask her out loud:

‘What do you call what we did earlier?’

He held back, keeping it all to himself. Strictly speaking, he wasn’t smiling, but his whole being exuded cheerfulness.

‘Aren’t you eating, Liesbeth?’ Aunt Maria scolded.

‘I’m not hungry.’

He nevertheless amused himself by decreeing in a tone that would have suited the solemn Joseph:

‘Young people your age should always be hungry!’

She threw him a sad glance. Seeing that her eyes had misted over, he gave her knee a joyful squeeze.

‘Isn’t that so, Joseph? You, being a doctor . . .’

There was no way the others could understand. They thought it was an ordinary day, filled with peace and sunshine. They had no idea that it had taken only a few minutes to . . .

Suddenly, Liesbeth stood up, her face buried in her table napkin, and walked out. They could hear her sobbing hoarsely.

‘What’s the matter with her?’

Joseph was looking his cousin in the eyes, Old Cornelius was chewing slowly, not thinking of anything else, while in the workshop, his assistant was gnawing at the packed lunch he brought every morning . . .

‘How about going for a little walk, cousin?’

‘Call him Joseph, Hans!’ Aunt Maria cut in.

It was evening. The family were all sitting out on the pavement, their backs to the house, the uncle in his wicker armchair, the others on straw-bottomed chairs.

The sun had only just set. Moist, cool air rose from the canal, and thin strands of fog were starting to form between the trees.

Twenty metres further along the street, outside the carpenter’s doorway, there were other chairs, other people, but these people had nothing to do with the Krulls and weren’t looking their way.

Cornelius was smoking a long porcelain pipe, his eyes half-closed, his beard as stiff as that of a carved saint. Aunt Maria was sewing red cotton on the corners of a pile of check table napkins. Anna had brought out a book but wasn't reading it, and Liesbeth, claiming she wasn't feeling well, had gone to bed.

The world was almost empty. The barges were asleep. A thin jet of water filtered through a lock gate that hadn't been properly closed, making a sound like a fountain, interspersed every ten minutes by the din of the tram, although this grew less frequent as darkness wore on.

'Good idea. Go for a little walk. But don't come back too late.'

Hans never wore a hat, which accentuated his casual demeanour. He wore soft shirts with open collars, and his clothes had a particular looseness that underlined Joseph's stiffness.

Why did little circles endlessly appear on the smooth surface of the canal, as if bearing witness to an inner life?

The two young men strode slowly along.

They weren't just the same age, but the same height, and they both had long legs and large feet.

'You're not saying anything, Cousin Joseph!'

Turning, they could see the family, motionless on the threshold of the house, and the other family, the carpenter's, grouped a little further along the pavement. On one of the barges, washing was drying on lines.

'I'm wondering what you're planning to do with my sister.'

'I'm not planning to do anything!'

The edge of the town was behind them, and what lay ahead was already the country, or rather an in-between zone, with hedges, nettles and patches of waste ground, but no meadows or cows yet.

'Were you looking through the keyhole?' Hans asked casually.

He didn't turn to look at his cousin. It wasn't necessary to do so to know that Joseph was blushing.

‘If you were, you must have noticed that she wanted it as much as I did.’

What he saw was Joseph’s hand, a long hand, paler in the twilight, a strangely shaped hand that suddenly started shaking.

‘Why did you come to our house?’ Joseph asked in a hesitant voice.

‘Because I didn’t know where to go!’

‘Why not somewhere else?’

‘I’ve already told you. My father had just one brother and one sister. The sister’s in a convent in Lübeck. I could hardly go there.’

And in a lighter tone:

‘Did you do any work today?’

‘No!’

‘Because of that?’

‘Because of everything.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘Meaning everything!’

His hands were still shaking. He had stopped less than twenty metres from a streetlamp, the last one before the definitive darkness of the countryside. Following the direction of his gaze, Hans made out a vague mass, a couple standing in the shadows, a man and a woman embracing, the woman up on tiptoe the better to glue her lips to her companion’s.

‘Who’s that?’ he asked, without attaching any importance to the question.

‘Sidonie.’

‘Who’s Sidonie?’

‘Pipi’s daughter . . . It doesn’t matter . . .’

‘Tell me, Joseph!’

‘What?’

‘Aren’t you all a little bit . . . a little bit strange in your family?’