

“Observe, Stiffeniis. Here at the base of the cranium. There was no resistance. It went in like a hot knife cutting butter,” said Immanuel Kant.

Like Logic cutting through a fog of Ignorance, thought I, fully conscious of the illustrious company I was keeping. Even so, I had to force myself to look at the glass jar the aged philosopher was inviting me to inspect, and might have turned away had duty not obliged me to examine the evidence with all the zeal of which I was capable.

Inside the jar, the severed head of Jan Konnen lolled in a swirling sea of cloudy formalin. His large grey eyes rolled upwards in their sockets in that out-dated model of ecstasy so much in vogue with painters of the Counter-Reformation, his mouth twisted in a cry which seemed to signify surprise rather than pain. I could not help but ask myself whether the immediacy of death had stopped the thoughts in his head as quickly as it had blocked the animal reactions. I ached to know what his final thoughts might have been, put out by the fact that there was no way of getting at them, no known method of filtering formalin for the precious ideas that might be suspended there to help me in my investigation.

As the jar was turned, the head rolled like a large shell in the swelling sea and Kant stretched forth his spindly finger to indicate the spot.

“What caused the wound, sir?” I asked cautiously.

“The Devil’s claw,” he replied with penetrating calm. He might have been demonstrating an elementary principle to the class of university students which I had attended once myself only seven years before...

Three years have flown since that conversation took place and I determined to set quill to paper and report the invaluable help Professor Immanuel Kant had lent to the investigation of a series of crimes which had disrupted the peace in Koenigsberg. Can it really be three years since Kant died? My hope was to supply

a practical working method which might be of use to any magistrate called upon to solve a case of murder. In short, I set out to write a treatise for which the greatest son of East Prussian had already supplied a tentative, if ironic, title. *A Critique of Criminal Reason...*

But this plan - begun with such pride and enthusiasm - was terminated after those few opening lines had been written. In a trice, my mind and soul were pitched down into a bottomless black pit from which I can find no way out. Indeed, the simpleton who wrote those lines and the man writing these pages now, are two such different creatures - despite the claims of common sense and the evidence I see in my shaving-mirror - that I am called to question whether they are in actual fact the self-same person.

That case in Koenigsberg will haunt me for the rest of my days. All else is lost: the trust of my wife, the love of my little ones, the humdrum life of a small-town magistrate which had been so happily mine. The day Kant's mortal remains were buried, I took the decision to abandon the Court House in Lotingen and the noble profession that I had exercised for no great length of time, to seek refuge in some isolated spot where I should know no-one, and where no-one would know me. Helena followed faithfully with the children. She knows nothing of the secret which torments me. How could she know what I was unprepared to tell her?

But there is no hiding from the Truth. No escaping from the world. A man can be deaf, dumb and blind, yet still feel the buffets of fate. At this very moment, Napoleon Bonaparte is rampaging victoriously through Europe, leaving a trail of shattered lives and razed cities in his wake. A bloated corpse in a French uniform was found floating in the river near our village this morning. The invaders have turned in our direction - Prussia will soon be overrun. There is no hope now, but to seek refuge in the East.

Preparations for departure turned the house upside down. I withdrew to my study to destroy all that could not be carried away. There, among my professional papers I came across the account I had begun to write in Koenigsberg three years ago. I might have burnt that document too, but something prompted me to resume the writing. No longer a triumphant account of my attempt to solve the case, it narrates the horror of a discovery which has driven me to the brink of distraction.

For the sake of clarity, I no longer begin my tale from that conversation with Immanuel Kant concerning the severed head of Jan Konnen preserved in the jar, but from the moment I was first called to Koenigsberg to investigate the terror which held the city in its grip.

Jena, 14th October, 1806.
