



Stephan Ludwig

Kind and Lovely Mr Heinlein and the Skeletons in His

Closet

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An amiable delicatessen owner becomes a murderer against his will – the new novel by Stephan Ludwig, the author of the cult bestselling series *Zorn*

Norbert Heinlein, a third generation delicatessen owner, places great value on quality and tradition. His customers mean everything to him. He serves them with extreme politeness.

This also applies to his new regular customer Adam Morlok, a charismatic businessman. Until one day Morlok drops dead on account of a mistake that Heinlein makes. In a panic, Heinlein stores Morlok's body unceremoniously in the old cold store in the cellar. But instead of finding a way out of his dilemma, Heinlein gets in deeper and deeper. And it doesn't stop at one body in the cold store – soon Morlok has company ...

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One

It was the beginning of March when the man with the birthmark came into Heinlein's Delicatessen & Spirits shop for the first time.

At this time, we can still picture Norbert Heinlein as a happy person. The winter had been long, long and dark; now, finally, the first delicate hints of green could be seen in the small park diagonally opposite, and people had swapped their lined winter jackets, scarves, hats and gloves for lighter clothing. The sun shone in diagonally through the two shop windows, reflected off the old display cases and on the bottles of choice wines, fine fruit brandies and rare olive oils lined up on the high shelves, gleamed on the Italian espresso machine behind the counter, the tins of caviar, jam and spice jars, and bathed the displays in shimmering golden light.

Yes, Norbert Heinlein was happy here. He was the third generation of his family to run the shop and was doing what he loved, surrounded by singular delicacies and the familiar scent of exotic coffees and teas, fresh pâté and Iberian ham, which merged with the smell of the age-blackened wood panelling to form a unique blend.

Heinlein greeted the man with the birthmark with studied politeness. He did that with all his customers - after all, they were not just entering a shop; the jingling of the old doorbell also signified their entry into another world away from the supermarkets and discounters, a world in which hand-picked quality was offered in place of cheap bargains. Everyone who came in here shared these values and deserved to be treated respectfully - regardless of whether they were purchasing a jar of French cognac mustard or eating something from the list of daily specials.

The man with the birthmark belonged to the latter group. He ordered an espresso, a glass of still water and, to Heinlein's delight, a slice of venison pâté. He clearly didn't want to make small talk; he sat down at one of the two coffee tables, the one on the right, gave Heinlein a nod of thanks when he served him, and ate in silence as he gazed out of the window. Later, when he ordered another espresso, he asked for the Jamaican

variety instead of the Brazilian beans, praised the pâté and ordered a second helping. Heinlein, who constantly varied his ingredients in search of the perfect recipe, was not surprised. That morning he had replaced the almonds with ground walnuts and was more than happy with the result, but refrained from explaining.

Over the years, he had developed a fine sense for his clientele: the man with the birthmark was clearly a connoisseur, but he did not seem interested in an exchange of views with another expert.

Heinlein asked Marvin, his employee, to keep an eye on the cash register and went upstairs to the flat to check in on his father. When he came back down, the man with the birthmark had gone.

But he came back the next day – a Tuesday – as well as the following week. By the Wednesday, Heinlein asked if he should bring the usual, and by the Friday, after a short greeting, he served the desired items as if by a silent agreement.

And so Norbert Heinlein had a new regular. The man with the birthmark did not really look like a sophisticated gourmet – in his slightly rumpled suit he looked more like a cross between an ageing bookkeeper and a former boxer who had come apart at the seams. Like Heinlein, he was approaching sixty; his hair was unusually long and fell on his shoulders in reddish-blond strands that were increasingly turning grey. He made no attempt to hide the birthmark on his forehead; on the contrary, his thin hair was combed back severely, so that the raspberry-coloured half-moon that stretched from his left brow over his temple to his earlobe was clearly visible. He drove a sky-blue Mercedes that he parked right in front of the shop, a flashy S-Class with a chrome rear spoiler, built around the turn of the millennium but looking as if it were fresh out of the factory. He spoke in a refined, somewhat awkward, way; his tone was guttural, with rolling Rs and a slight lisp. The fact that he was staying at Keferberg's guesthouse directly opposite was another sign of good taste. The rooms were small, but stylishly furnished. Johann Keferberg offered an excellent breakfast buffet to which Heinlein regularly contributed provisions.

The man with the birthmark kept his personal items in a rather silly wrist bag made of brown leather. He gave a decent tip and after drinking his second espresso, placed three accurately smoothed ten euro notes on the table, which he weighed down with the polished silver salt shaker before leaving the shop with a curt nod.

As far as Heinlein was concerned, things could have stayed that way. On the one hand, of course, this was because of the man's custom, which in these somewhat difficult times added up to quite a tidy sum. On the other hand, he enjoyed the albeit silent appreciation of his work.

Unfortunately, the man with the birthmark would not enjoy the lovingly prepared dishes for long. Barely three months later, he would enter the shop, eat his last slice of pâté and die, even before Norbert Heinlein could serve him his first espresso.

Two

'The bottles of red need dusting,' Heinlein said to Marvin.

A week had gone by and, as usual, they were sitting on the wooden bench in front of the shop window in the morning sun, in order to spend the last few minutes outdoors before the shop opened.

'Don't you think?'

Marvin didn't reply. Heinlein supported many social projects, including sponsoring a child in Africa with whom he was in regular contact. When he was asked for help by the management of a support centre for people with disabilities two years ago, he had immediately agreed. He had set up the cold buffet at a charity event and Marvin, who repaired electrical appliances in a workshop there, had been assigned to him as a helper; when the director asked if Heinlein might employ the boy on a trial basis, he had agreed. This was not only because Marvin's wages were subsidised - which was not entirely unimportant because Heinlein couldn't afford an employee. The main reason was a different one: he had liked the boy from the start.

'And the car could do with a vacuum.' Heinlein pointed to the old Renault Rapid, which was parked with its rear facing the road on the narrow open space to the right of the house. 'But there's no rush.'

Marvin didn't reply this time either. He had turned twenty-one just before Christmas, but he seemed much younger, a pale, white-blond boy who only needed to shave once a week at most. Most people thought he had learning difficulties, but he didn't. He lived alone and looked after himself in a small studio flat near the market. Marvin barely spoke because he was embarrassed by his stutter. He didn't need to either, because he carried out every task conscientiously and meticulously.

'We'll have to raise the price of the pâté a bit,' Heinlein reflected. 'The price of duck breast has gone up again. Six fifty per hundred grams, what do you think?'

'Six fifty,' Marvin nodded. He liked numbers. 'A hundred g-grams.'

'Father always used a pinch of coriander. I tried nutmeg today, and what can I say?' Heinlein made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. 'A delight, Marvin. An absolute delight!'

He took a puff of his cigarillo and blew the tangy smoke into the fresh morning air. His daily routine was strictly regulated: he had got up at five as usual, had taken care of his father and then gone down to the shop, where he spent the next three and half hours alone in the kitchen, in his refugium (as he secretly called it), to devote himself to his pâtés. This was the best time of the day. He tried ingredients and spices, varied the quantities, tested new cooking times and noted down the results in the leather-bound notebook in which his grandfather had written his recipes.

At nine thirty sharp, Marvin had appeared and changed his clothes. Above the cheese counter there was a framed black and white photograph of Heinlein's father in white coat and cap behind the counter shortly after he had taken over the business. Marvin liked the outfit; he too had pens in his breast pocket and, after checking in the mirror that the cap was positioned correctly - a bit crooked and too far left towards his ear - he had swept the pavement outside and raked the soil around the young chestnut tree, while Heinlein had tidied up his refugium and put out the fresh pâtés in their earthenware dishes in the glass cabinet.

Now they were sitting outside as usual, Marvin with a glass of cider, Heinlein with his Cuban cigarillo – which of course was not good for his finely honed sense of taste, but it was the only vice he indulged in.

‘Spring at last,’ Heinlein smiled. ‘About time too.’

‘Fourteen,’ Marvin said, pushing the cap back off his forehead.

He always seemed to be counting something. It was anyone’s guess what it was this time. Perhaps the prongs on the rake, which was leaning against the dustbin, or the stacked boxes over by the snack bar. Possibly the pigeons, which were crowding the gutter of the bank diagonally across the street. It was hard to say what exactly Marvin’s gaze was focused on behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

Heinlein’s Delicatessen & Spirits was located in an old corner building at a busy crossing. Traffic was heavy on this ring road near the market square; there were hardly any pedestrians around. The time on the clock at the snack bar opposite was just before ten. In four minutes, when the big hand moved to the full hour, Heinlein would open the shop.

‘It’s almost a hundred years old,’ he said, pointing to the old dial. ‘And it’s still dead on time ever since grandfather opened the shop.’

The snack bar was located in the front, semi-circular part of a low brick Bauhaus-style building, which had been built as an electricity substation in the 1920s. During Heinlein’s grandfather’s time, it had been turned into a public toilet, and during his father’s time, it became a newspaper kiosk; now after years of vacancy, a pink neon sign with the words SAUSAGE & MORE flashed above the front window.

‘Back then, grandfather was barely older than you are now,’ Heinlein said. ‘But he knew exactly what mattered. Quality, Marvin. Father also always stuck to that, and I do too. It sounds old-fashioned today, but we are still here.’ He nodded to Marvin. ‘Just like the clock.’

A tram approached from the north, dipped into the shadow of the mighty Art Nouveau building and disappeared towards the city centre. The sunshades in front of the kiosk fluttered in the breeze; scraps of paper whirled around.

‘Look,’ Heinlein pointed to the young chestnut tree. ‘The first leaves are sprouting.’

Marvin's pale face brightened; he loved the tree. Last year, the council had renovated the pavement and planted a chestnut tree directly in front of the shop, which, to Heinlein's annoyance, had been crushed under the wheels of a rubbish truck shortly afterwards. After several futile appeals to the council, he had finally been given permission and had planted a new tree with Marvin.

Barking came from the hallway behind them. The door next to the shop window was wrenched open and a stocky, muscular dog dragged a young man in baggy tracksuit bottoms, flip-flops and a Camp David t-shirt out onto the pavement by its lead.

'Good morning,' Heinlein said in a friendly manner.

Niklas Rottmann ignored the greeting. There were four flats in the two floors above the shop. One had been empty for years, Heinlein had let another to quiet Mr Umbach, and in the third, directly above his own, lived Rottmann and his mother. As did the dog - an indefinable mixture of terrier, bulldog and (possibly) wire-haired dachshund - who was now panting purposefully towards the young chestnut tree where he raised his hind leg and peed on the trunk. Heinlein sensed Marvin stiffen beside him. Rottmann noticed it too.

'You got a problem?' he snapped blearily.

Norbert Heinlein didn't even try to hold the piercing gaze from the man's close-set eyes, and concentrated on the polished tips of his patent leather shoes, while the dog's urine splashed in a steaming stream against the thin trunk of the chestnut tree. At least it was better than him doing his business in the hallway - something that had happened several times before.

He sent his best regards to Rottmann's mother, looked over to the clock above the kiosk, pulled up the iron shutters in front of the shop windows and opened the shop two minutes early for the first time in his life.

Three

The rest of the day was also precisely regulated. Heinlein looked after the shop, phoned suppliers and served customers, sold Sardinian sheep's cheese, preserved

chanterelles and truffle chocolates, while Marvin sorted the goods on the shelves, swept the floor and occasionally went upstairs to the flat to check on old Mr Heinlein. Shortly before noon, business picked up; old Mrs Dahlmeyer appeared to partake in her second breakfast (as she called it) and Johann Keferberg came over from his guest house across the street for a brief chat and handed them the list for the weekly order for his breakfast buffet.

The man with the birthmark also appeared in the early afternoon, ate his pâté at the right-hand table by the window and asked the astonished Heinlein to take a seat for a moment when he served him his second espresso.

'The pâté was excellent as always,' the guest praised after dabbing his full lips with the napkin. 'Very tasty.'

Marvin was standing in front of the fruit brandy cabinet, polishing the ornate brass handles. The blue S-Class glittered in the afternoon sun outside the shop; traffic toiled through the traffic lights.

'I travel a lot on business,' the man with the birthmark continued in his guttural tone, 'and I have seen quite a bit of the world. But you rarely find something ...' he spread his arms, his jacket strained across his broad chest, 'like this any more.'

Heinlein refrained from asking what exactly was meant by business. A polite yet somewhat superficial tone had prevailed at Heinlein's Delicatessen & Spirits for a century. Privacy was sacred; customers were served courteously and not badgered with indiscreet questions.

'One has to set priorities,' Heinlein said. 'In my case, it is ...'

'Quality!'

'Exactly.'

'That is crucial,' the man with the birthmark said, rolling the R as his tongue bumped against his teeth, increasing his lisp. 'Those sorts of things get forgotten far too quickly nowadays. All that matters is a quick profit ...'

'Forty-nine!'

Marvin had straightened up in front of the display case. It was impossible to tell whether his gaze was focused on the jam jars, caviar tins or the little bags of truffle chocolates.

Heinlein's customer pushed back his chair, crossed his legs and looked over at Marvin while circling his thumbs in front of his massive belly. A gold-plated signet ring with a blue agate gleamed from the ring finger of his left hand.

'Sixty-two,' Marvin mumbled, kneading the cloth in his hands.

Embarrassed, Heinlein toyed with the salt shaker.

'Very well, I don't want to keep you any longer.' The man with the birthmark unzipped his leather bag, placed three banknotes on the table and weighed them down with the salt shaker as usual. 'You have a lot to do ...'

'Thirty,' Marvin said.

'That's right,' Heinlein smiled at him. 'Thirty Euros.'

Marvin looked over at them. The rays of the low sun flitted across the thick lenses of his glasses. He turned away and returned to the brass handles.

'He likes to count,' Heinlein explained to his customer.

'I had noticed,' the man grinned and brushed an ash-blond strand of hair from his forehead. He wore his strictly combed back hair too long at the back of his neck for Heinlein's taste; his hairstyle reminded him of the composer whose name had been given to the cute little Liszt monkeys. 'Your son?'

'Unfortunately not. At least not biological.'

'But you treat him as such. He seems to be an exceptional boy.'

'Yes, he is.'

'He's unlikely to be able to take over your shop.'

'No. Marvin has ...' Heinlein cleared his throat, 'other talents. We will see what happens.'

He lowered his gaze, feeling emotional, and focused on the lines in the marble on the table. Not only were customers in Heinlein's Delicatessen & Spirits traditionally never pestered with personal questions, but it was also not usual for the owner to be asked any either.

'I don't want to get too personal,' the man with the birthmark then apologised, 'but might I ask if you have a successor?'

'No. Or rather, yes.' Heinlein was a bit flustered. 'Of course you may ask, but the answer is no. To your actual question, the question as to whether I have ...'

'So you are the last.'

'It's looking that way.'

'That is a great pity,' the man with the birthmark sighed and got up. 'A great pity.'

He walked over to the door, but Heinlein got there first and opened it. The bell tinkled above their heads and tangy spring air wafted towards them. Heinlein's regular blinked into the sunlight, straightened his tie beneath his fleshy chin and went down the three steps to the pavement.

'I still have a few years,' Heinlein said behind him. 'Everyone retires sometime.'

'Indeed.' The man with the birthmark returned Heinlein's smile, took the car keys out of his jacket pocket and walked over to the blue Mercedes. 'The only question is,' he muttered as he walked, 'whether you last that long.'