

Debut

'It's a taupe,' announced the doctor, poking at the lump with a scratchy yellow finger, 'a French tumour they call it, though couldn't rightly tell you why. Most unusual – got a bit of hair growing on it too, see here?'

Several thin strands grew, wet-wisped, from a lump the size and shape of a duck's egg at the bottom of the baby's head.

'Might kill him,' the doctor carried on with scientific stoicism. 'But probably not, most likely grow a-pace with the rest of him.'

My goodness though, he does rather resemble the back end of a baboon, don't you think?' He winked at Frau Kranz, who had never seen a baboon let alone its back end, but understood well enough what he meant.

'*Schweigen Sie!*' she hissed, 'be quiet, sir,' and nodded her head at Shminiak, who had slumped into a stupor by the empty fire, bowing his head, wondering how much more brandy it would take to make everything go away. He'd already clapped his hands about his ears to shut out the baby's awful squalling, moaning quietly: 'For God's sake, make it stop, make it stop, for God's sake . . .'

Frau Kranz, who was the most patient of women, could put it off no longer and chivvied the child up carefully from the bassinet and carried him over to the bed, clamping him onto his mother's sweaty breast. Nelke, exhausted as she was, woke abruptly at the application and tried to swat the intruder weakly away. She refused to believe this monstrosity was of her flesh, that she had given birth at all, the pain of labour nothing more than a terrible nightmare, a twilight dream. But it was no dream, not for Nelke, Shminiak, nor the child who was oblivious of the outside world – a world that seemed peaceful on the surface, there in Staßburg as elsewhere, but the jigsaw puzzle of Europe was beginning to crack along its edges, breaking up from within, harried from without, each piece tugging itself away from the other, the Holy Roman Empire snuffed out years before by Napoleon, a shaky German Confederation created to fill the void. There was civil war in Iberia, and every Italian state

clawed at the throats of its neighbours, and soon the entire continent would be utterly fragmented, Metternich packing the prison fortress at Spielberg in Bohemia, its stones reverberating with the cries of the spies and subversives he'd locked inside its walls; but no matter how many he crammed in there seemed an inexhaustible supply, and the secret operatives of princes, kings and Junkers were soon running the country up and down as freely and frequently as the tides run up and down the sands of coastlines the world over. Conspiracy and subterfuge would become bywords for those coming years through which that child of Nelke and Shminiak would grow up, and the slump of 1844 a few years later would scuttle ships and rip the Guilds from nape to knee; potato blight and famine would squeeze the stomachs of labourers and peasants across the land; there would be riots in Aachen and Bavaria, Berlin and Saxony; the Silesian silk workers would break their looms and tools; the Slavs and Poles and Magyars rise up against their masters; the railways would crash and the rivers stutter to a stop with the piling up of the dead.

But all that was yet to come and, as Philbert bullied his way out of Nelke's womb, there was no inkling of the terrible and significant part he would play in these events, no thoughts at all thrumming around inside his monstrous head. Later in his life he would meet people who claimed to understand the language of the wind as it whispered through the trees, who saw omens in the entrails pulled from still-warm lambs, interpreted the future by studying the mufles and mottlements that grew upon men's skin. Perhaps if they'd been there at the very start, attendant at Philbert's birth, they might have foreseen what would happen, maybe had the nous to stop it before it all kicked off. But only Frau Kranz was there with a screaming mother, a drink-sodden father, and the doctor scratching his yellow fingernail on Philbert's taupe.