

Birth and Fate

'Everything is normal,' the doctor was saying. 'Just lie back and relax.' His voice was far away in the distance and he seemed to be shouting at her. 'You have a son.'

'What?'

'You have a fine son. You understand that, don't you? A fine son. Did you hear him crying?'

'Is he all right, Doctor?'

'Of course he is all right.'

'Please let me see him.'

'You'll see him in a moment.'

'You are certain he is all right?'

'I am quite certain.'

'Is he still crying?'

'Try to rest. There is nothing to worry about.'

'Why has he stopped crying, Doctor? What has happened?'

'Don't excite yourself, please. Everything is normal.'

'I want to see him. Please let me see him.'

'Dear lady,' the doctor said, touching her hand. 'You have a fine, strong, healthy child. Don't you believe me when I tell you that?'

'What is the woman over there doing to him?'

'Your baby is being made to look pretty for you,' the doctor said. 'We are giving him a wash, that is all. You must allow us a moment for that.'

'You swear he is all right?'

'I swear it. Now lie back and relax. Close your eyes. Go on, close your eyes. That's right. That's better. Good girl . . .'

'I have prayed and prayed that he will live, Doctor.'

'Of course he will live. What are you talking about?'

'The others didn't.'

'What?'

'None of my other ones lived, Doctor.'

The doctor stood beside the bed looking down at the pale, tired face of the young woman. He had never seen her before today. She and her husband were new people in the town. The barman's wife, who had come to help, had told him that the husband worked at the local customs-house on the border, and that the two of them had arrived quite suddenly at the small hotel about three months before. The husband was always drunk, the barman's wife had said, but the young woman was gentle and religious. And she was very sad. She never smiled. In the few weeks that she had been there, the barman's wife had never once seen her smile. Also it was said that this was the husband's third marriage, that one wife had died and that the other had left him for rather unpleasant reasons. So it was said.

The doctor bent down and pulled the sheet up a little higher over the patient's chest. 'You have nothing to worry about,' he said gently. 'This is a perfectly normal baby.'

'That's exactly what they told me about the others. But I lost them all, Doctor. In the last eighteen months I have lost all three of my children, so you mustn't blame me for being anxious.'

'Three?'

'This is my fourth . . . in four years. I don't think you know what it means, Doctor, to lose them all, all three of them, slowly, separately, one by one. I can see Gustav's face now as clearly as if he were lying there beside me in the bed. Gustav was a lovely boy, Doctor. But he was always ill. It is terrible when they are always ill and there is nothing you can do to help them.'

'I know.'

The woman opened her eyes, looked up at the doctor for a few seconds, then closed them again.

'My little girl was called Ida. She died a few days before

Christmas. That is only four months ago. I just wish you could have seen Ida, Doctor?

'You have a new one now.'

'But Ida was so beautiful.'

'Yes,' said the doctor. 'I know.'

'How can you know?' she cried.

'I am sure that she was a lovely child. But this new one is also like that.' The doctor turned away from the bed and walked over to the window and stood there looking out. It was a wet grey April afternoon, and across the street he could see large raindrops falling on the red roofs of the houses.

'Ida was two years old, Doctor . . . and she was so beautiful that I was never able to take my eyes off her from the time I dressed her in the morning until she was safe in bed again at night. I used to live in fear of something happening to that child. Gustav had gone and my little Otto had also gone and she was all I had left. Sometimes I used to get up in the night and walk quietly over to her and put my ear close to her mouth just to make sure that she was breathing.'

'Try to rest,' the doctor said, going back to the bed. 'Please try to rest.' The woman's face was white and bloodless, and there was a slight blue-grey colour around the nose and the mouth.

'When she died . . . I was already expecting another baby when that happened, Doctor. This new one was four months on its way when Ida died. "I don't want it!" I shouted after the funeral. "I won't have it! I have buried enough children!" And my husband . . . he was walking among the guests with a big glass of beer in his hand . . . he turned around quickly and said, "I have news for you, Klara, I have good news." Can you imagine that, Doctor? We have just buried our third child and he stands there with a glass of beer in his hand and tells me that he has good news. "Today I have been given a new post in Braunau," he says, "so you can start packing immediately. This will be a new start for you, Klara," he

says. "It will be a new place and you can have a new doctor . . ."

'Please don't talk any more.'

'You *are* the new doctor, aren't you, Doctor?'

'That's right.'

'And here we are in Braunau?'

'Yes.'

'I'm frightened, Doctor.'

'Try not to be frightened.'

'What chance can the fourth one have now?'

'You must stop thinking like that.'

'I can't help it. I am certain that there is something in our blood that causes our children to die in this way. There must be.'

'That is nonsense.'

'Do you know what my husband said to me when Otto was born, Doctor? He came into the room and looked into the bed where Otto was lying and he said, "Why do *all* my children have to be so small and weak?"'

'I'm sure he didn't say that.'

'He put his head right up to Otto's as if he were examining an insect and he said, "All I'm saying is, why can't they be better examples of human beings? That's all I am saying." And three days after that, Otto was dead. And then Gustav died. And then Ida died. All of them died, Doctor . . . and suddenly the whole house was empty . . .'

'Don't think about it now.'

'Is this one so very small?'

'He is a normal child.'

'But small?'

'He is a little small, perhaps. But the small ones are often a lot stronger than the big ones. Just imagine, Mrs Hitler, this time next year he'll be almost learning how to walk. Isn't that a lovely thought?'

She didn't answer this.

'And two years from now he will probably be talking all the time and driving you crazy with his questions. Have you settled on a name for him yet?'

'A name?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know. I'm not sure. I think my husband said that if it was a boy, we were going to call him Adolfus.'

'That means that he would be called Adolf.'

'Yes. My husband likes Adolf because it has a certain similarity to Alois. My husband is called Alois.'

'Excellent.'

'Oh, no!' she cried, raising her head suddenly from the bed. 'That's the same question they asked me when Otto was born! He needs a name immediately. That means he's going to die!'

'Now, now,' the doctor said, taking her gently by the shoulders. 'You are quite wrong. I promise you that you are wrong. I was simply asking a question, that is all. I love talking about names. I think Adolfus is a particularly fine name. It is one of my favourites. And look — here he comes now.'

The barman's wife, carrying the baby, came across the room towards the bed. 'Here is the little beauty!' she cried, smiling. 'Would you like to hold him? Shall I put him beside you?'

'Is he well wrapped?' the doctor asked. 'It is extremely cold in here.'

'Certainly he is well wrapped.'

The baby was tightly wrapped in a white woollen cloth and only his little pink head stuck out. The barman's wife placed him gently on the bed beside the mother. 'There you are,' she said. 'Now you can lie there and look at him as much as you like.'

'I think you will like him,' the doctor said, smiling. 'He is a fine little baby.'

'He has the most lovely hands!' the barman's wife cried. 'Such long delicate fingers!'

The mother didn't move. She didn't even turn her head to look.

'Go on!' cried the barman's wife. 'He won't bite you!'

'I am frightened to look. I don't dare to believe that I have another baby and that he is all right.'

'Don't be so stupid.'

Slowly, the mother turned her head and looked at the small peaceful face that lay beside her.

'Is this my baby?'

'Of course.'

'Oh . . . oh . . . but he is beautiful.'

The doctor turned away and went over to the table and began putting his things into his bag. The mother lay on the bed, watching the child and smiling and touching him and making little noises of pleasure. 'Hello, Adolfus,' she whispered. 'Hello, my little Adolf . . .'

'Sssh!' said the barman's wife. 'Listen! I think your husband is coming.'

The doctor walked over to the door and opened it and looked out into the passage.

'Mr Hitler!'

'Yes.'

'Come in, please.'

A small man in a dark green uniform stepped softly into the room and looked around him.

'Let me shake your hand,' the doctor said. 'You have a son.'

The man smelled strongly of beer. 'A son?'

'Yes.'

'How is he?'

'He is fine. So is your wife.'

'Good.' The father turned and walked over to the bed where his wife was lying. 'Well, Klara,' he said, smiling. 'How did it go?' He bent down to take a look at the baby. Then he bent lower and

lower until his face was very close to the baby's head. The wife lay sideways, looking up at him with a frightened look.

'He has the most wonderful pair of lungs,' the barman's wife announced. 'You should have heard him screaming just after he came into this world.'

'But my God, Klara . . . ?'

'What is it, dear?'

'This one is even smaller than Otto was!'

The doctor stepped forward. 'There is nothing wrong with that child,' he said.

Slowly, the husband straightened up and turned away from the bed and looked at the doctor. He seemed confused and frightened. 'It's no good lying, Doctor,' he said. 'I know what it means. It's going to be the same all over again.'

'Now you listen to me,' the doctor said.

'But do you *know* what happened to the others, Doctor?'

'You must forget about the others, Mr Hitler. Give this one a chance.'

'But so small and weak!'

'My dear sir, he has only just been born.'

'Even so . . .'

'That's enough!' the doctor said sharply.

The mother was crying now. Her body was shaking.

The doctor walked over to the husband and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Be good to her,' he whispered. 'Please. It is very important.' Then he pressed the husband's shoulder hard and began pushing him forward to the edge of the bed. At last, the husband bent down and kissed his wife lightly on the cheek.

'All right, Klara,' he said. 'Now stop crying.'

'I have prayed so hard that he will live, Alois.'

'Yes.'

'Every day for months I have gone to the church and begged on my knees that this one will be allowed to live.'

'Yes, Klara, I know.'

'Three dead children is all that I can stand, don't you realize that?'

'Of course.'

'He *must* live, Alois. He *must*, he *must* . . . Oh God, protect him now . . .'