

Tabula Rasa

Von MORITZ

Kapitel 6: A Voice From The Night

For the special occasion of Alexander's birthday, the Hyndmans had invited Daniel and their godchild over for tea. Usually, they had visited Daniel to give the boy his presents whenever they were not too busy and felt Alexander needed a new reading book or a nice new toy. Yet this year, they had decided it would be an excellent occasion to have Daniel and Alexander over at their place. After all, their little daughter was about Alexander's age, and all agreed it would be nice if the children made each other's acquaintance.

As the coach came to halt, Daniel made sure for what must have been the fifth time that Alexander's collar was not askew.

"Be a good boy", Daniel reminded him. "I want you to be at your best behaviour this evening, Alexander."

Alexander nodded sincerely.

It had been a while since Alexander had last met his godparents, and Daniel wanted him to leave only the best impression.

After the servant had taken their coats and led them inside, Alexander had taken hold of Daniel's hand, yet when Samuel came across the hallway to greet them, Daniel let go.

"There you are!", Samuel said jovially. "And look at little Alexander, quite a gentleman already."

"Nice to meet you, sir", Alexander said very politely, even though he was not looking up at the man's face, but at his vest buttons.

Samuel smiled at this. "He even talks like one." With that, he took Daniel by the shoulder to lead him down the corridor. "Now come, we will sit down for some tea."

Harriette awaited them in the drawing room, seated in one of the chairs in front of the richly embellished mantelpiece. No fire was burning as it was the middle of August, and the room was filled with bright sunlight shining through the drawn back curtains. Daniel had always considered it pleasant, as it was beautifully furnished and

not cluttered like the salons of those who were desperately trying to impress. Instead, it was both tasteful and inviting.

Harriette rose from her chair. "So nice to meet you, Daniel", she said with her usual curt smile. Daniel wondered briefly whether Samuel had talked to her about the letters.

As they sat down around the table, Samuel urged them to have some biscuits with their tea, yet interrupted himself when the door opened.

"Ah, there's our little Mercy."

A nanny came in and brought their daughter with her, a girl with chubby cheeks and her father's blue eyes. Daniel had rarely seen her in the last years, as he had usually simply been over for tea or to drink a glass or two with Samuel.

"Isn't she gorgeous?", Samuel said with pride in his voice.

Little Mercy with her blue dress and ash blond locks was indeed adorable. Of course, Daniel hurried to say so.

"Well then, Mercy, say hello to Mr Mayfair here", Samuel told her.

Mercy smiled a bit shyly as she dutifully repeated, "Hullo, Mr Mayfair."

Samuel had already turned to Daniel again. "She is such a well-behaved child. And a bright little girl, too", Samuel said, and then added, as if the idea had just come to him, "How about the children delight us with a poem or two?"

"What a lovely idea", Harriette agreed and looked expectantly at Daniel. "I am sure Alexander knows a few nice ones, doesn't he? My little Mercy just loves them."

Of course Alexander knew a few poems and Daniel had actually hoped he would be asked to recite one, as Daniel had spent quite a few evenings on teaching them to him. Alexander was not as eager about poems as he could have been, yet once he had noticed that it pleased Daniel, he had developed some ambition in learning his verses.

Still, Daniel could not help but feel a bit apprehensive as Alexander stood there next to Mercy, all eyes on them, for he feared Alexander might be inhibited and self-conscious with others present. Now that they were standing side by side, it was rather obvious that Alexander was quite a bit shorter than her, which made him appear even younger and smaller. It did not help ease Daniel's anxiousness.

Mercy said a short silly poem in a clear voice, half-singing the words while she rocked slightly on her feet.

"Little Miss Waver
Sings with a quaver,
A musical maid is she;

Her voice is as clear
As any you see —
Let little Miss Waver be.”

Daniel was sure she had mixed something up in the end, but he did not say anything but clapped his hands.

“Well done, Mercy”, Harriette said with a small yet genuine smile and her daughter beamed at her.

“Yes, that was very good”, Daniel added, and Samuel looked pleased.

Alexander did not sing. Instead, he spoke rather fast and had to take deep breaths at the end of each stanza. He had his hands put together in front of his tunic and was fidgeting with his fingers while reciting, yet even though he seemed rather tense, he did not stumble over the words.

“Ah, the moon is watching me!
Red, and round as round can be,
Over the house and the top of the tree
Rising slowly. We shall see
Something happen very soon; —
Hide me from the dreadful moon!

Slowly, surely, rising higher,
Soon she will be as high as the spire!
It seems as if something must happen then
To all the world, and all the men!
Oh, I dare not think, for I am not wise —
I must look away, I must shut my eyes!”

Alexander closed and then stood there, twisting his fingers and waiting.

Daniel was a bit disappointed, for he felt the poem would have made a bigger impression if Alexander had not rushed it so.

The Hyndmans gave a few claps of applause and Samuel said with emphasis, “That was lovely.”

“And quite a long one, wasn’t it?”, Harriette noted, her eyes on Alexander.

It was then that Daniel realized that the poem had indeed been noticeably longer than Mercy’s and his chest swelled with pride. He had not been wrong – Alexander was indeed very gifted.

“It goes to show Daniel has taken my advice and is teaching him well”, Samuel was quick to reply at his wife’s remark. “And see how a good early education pays off! To be quite honest, the boy reminds me a bit of our Rufus.” This was high praise since the Hyndmans’ only son was attending a renowned boarding school. As Samuel never

tired of pointing out, he was doing very well in all of his classes and was thus destined for a promising future.

"Now, how about a reward for such a smart and studious boy?" Samuel rose from the couch and waved the boy over. As Alexander followed his gesture, he finally looked up to Samuel's face, curiosity in his eyes.

"Do you know what day it is?", Samuel asked him.

Alexander nodded, and Daniel was about to tell him to answer the question properly, yet Samuel was faster. "Then tell me how old you are now."

"I am five", Alexander answered and Daniel was thankful he was not clamming up. After all, he should be familiar enough with the Hyndmans by now.

"Which means you will soon be a young man", Samuel said solemnly, but Daniel thought Alexander still looked very much like a small child and not much like a man, however young. "And a boy at your age cannot only play with small tin soldiers."

That was not fully true, as Alexander had some wooden toys - Daniel had bought Alexander a nice spinning top just recently – but Daniel did not object, for Samuel was now opening the door to the adjacent room and went out.

When he appeared again, he and the servant were carrying a rocking horse. It was a beautiful thing with a painted saddle and reins. Alexander's face lit up as they put it down and Samuel announced, "This is your present."

Alexander approached it and touched the wooden mane carefully, then he looked up at Samuel again, who was waiting expectantly.

"Don't you want to say thank you, Alexander?", Daniel prompted as he could not bear it any longer.

The boy looked at him, then back at the man in front of him, and after a few painful seconds, he finally said, "Thank you very much." And to Daniel's relief, he smiled at the horse.

Still, Daniel made sure Samuel would know how much his generous gift was appreciated by thanking him abundantly and reassuring him that Alexander was very excited and grateful.

"Only the best for my godchild", Samuel said benevolently. "And there is nothing a young boy loves more than a fancy rocking horse."

"It still is Rufus's most prized possession", Harriette agreed.

"I think he is quite too old by now to find such delight in playing with toys", Samuel corrected her with an amused tone as if he thought this notion rather sentimental and silly.

However, Harriette did not respond or indicate she had heard him at all, instead she announced, "Dear me, it is almost time for dinner. I will have a word with the butler to see whether the preparations are being made."

Mercy and Alexander joined them for the meal, and Samuel stressed that dining together was very important for a family, because it would give the child structure. "Also, it is a good opportunity for the family to spend some time together", he added and Daniel nodded at this.

While they were eating, Daniel had the distinct feeling that Harriette's eyes were on him now and then, yet he did not dare to look at her too often to verify his suspicions.

After dinner the adults settled down in the armchairs in front of the fireplace, while Alexander was trying out his new present and Mercy sat on the couch with a doll in her arm, watching him intently.

Samuel was leading the conversation as they discussed the theories presented in the talk he and Daniel had attended last week. He readily provided Daniel with what he had missed or rather, his own views on what had been said.

Harriette was listening in silence, until she remarked, "Dear, how about something to drink? Your throat must be quite dry after all this lecturing."

Samuel got up to make sure they would be served some exquisite liquor, and as soon as he had left the room, Harriette turned to Daniel.

"A pity you could not respond to my letters", she said, her tone serious yet no less polite. "You must be terribly busy, I am sure."

Daniel, who had been watching Alexander rocking on his horse with honest joy, almost jerked at her remark.

"Well, yes", he hurried to answer, "I am."

"Then I suppose you are still tasked with researching any new findings about the tomb in Algeria?", she inquired, not even attempting to veil her open interest in this subject.

Daniel could not believe the audacity of her! Had Samuel not reassured him that he would tell her to leave him be?

"Yes, that too", he admitted, rather annoyed but trying to stay civil. "It is mostly difficult archaeological research and analysis." He hoped she would see that those things were well beyond her understanding, as she could hardly claim to be any sort of professional.

Harriette nodded. "Of course. I already feared there would be little concern about the demise of my dear cousin", she said matter-of-factly.

Daniel did not know what to reply to this. It was oddly surreal to him to hear her talking about such gruesome things in this homely room. The light of the setting sun was still warming the air and he could hear Mercy humming softly, accompanied by the creaking back and forth of the rocking horse. The memories about his days shortly after his return from Algeria, when he had received the letter disclosing the fate of Herbert's expedition, were distant now, far away, and trying to recall them was like wading through deep water. It almost felt like a strange fever dream.

"But I would still love to hear about what you make of these events, Daniel", she insisted. "We must sit down for a chat some time." Her dark brown eyes were once again a bit too knowing for his comfort.

Daniel made a noncommittal noise. If only Samuel would be back soon, he thought as he pretended to be distracted by the children to evade both her gaze and further inquiries.

Mercy had slipped down from the couch and was now standing by the rocking horse, apparently very keen on riding it, too. At first, Alexander's eyes shot over to Daniel, and the boy stared at him helplessly. Daniel gave him a reassuring nod, to which Alexander got off the wooden horse and stepped aside, allowing Mercy to try it. Delighted, she smiled at him and climbed on it without much hesitation.

To Daniel's relief, Harriette did not press any further now but contented herself with watching her daughter tentatively rocking the horse, until Samuel returned with a bottle of fine brandy.

After his second glass, Daniel's attention to their conversation started drifting slightly.

He could not help but to be worried about Alexander, as the boy had never met a child of his age before, but it turned out that there was little to worry about.

Alexander did seem awkward and not sure what to do with Mercy, and he kept throwing Daniel nervous glances, but the girl had pretty clear ideas how they were supposed to converse and play. Once he had sat down on the couch beside her, she made him talk to her doll. When she noticed that he was unsure what to say, she did not get tired of providing the questions for him. Daniel was a bit surprised to see that Alexander did readily comply with whatever she asked him to do, even though this pretend play with her doll had to be rather boring. Yet Alexander indulged her until the nursemaid came in and Mercy was sent to bed.

It was getting quite late when Harriette decided it was high time for her to retire, but Daniel still had to finish his third glass and was enwrapped by Samuel's wide gestures which accompanied his now very passionate speech about politics.

It was already dark outside when Samuel announced he was getting tired and he told his footman to call a coach.

Over the course of their long conversation, Alexander had fallen asleep on the couch, so Daniel gently woke him up and told him to get ready.

The footman of the Hyndmans's had already carried the rocking horse over to the carriage. So all that was left for Alexander and Daniel to do was bid their host farewell and climb into their seats. Alexander sat beside Daniel.

"So, did you have a nice time?", Daniel asked once the carriage had started moving.

Alexander nodded vehemently. "Yes, I had a lot of fun!", he said. "The horse is very pretty!"

"And you played with Mercy, didn't you?", Daniel prompted.

Alexander smiled as he nodded again. "Yes! She is nice!"

"So you were not afraid of her?" Daniel remembered how timid Alexander had been around her at first.

"A bit, maybe", Alexander answered.

"I know this was all new for you. You did very well, Alexander." With that, he petted Alexander's head and gave him a smile.

The boy, whose cheery mood seemed to have faltered at the thought of being afraid of interacting with Mercy, made a little joyful hop in his seat and beamed right back.

But the eventful day had exhausted Alexander. Only a few minutes later he had already dozed off again. He slipped to the side, his small body weighed against Daniel's arm. It had been a few hours since the sun had settled, and the cold was creeping into the inside of the carriage. Daniel could feel Alexander trembling, so he took off his coat and draped it over the child. He put an arm around the small bundle by his side that moved ever so slightly with every breath.

There it was again, this comforting warmth and the peculiar feeling of safety that overcame him and almost had made him fall asleep as well.

-

Daniel had picked up the old whim of preserving his memories in form of journals again. It helped him calm down in the evening, reminiscing about the day and especially about his progress. Sometimes it was hard for him to grasp whether he was moving forward at all, the days passing by and merging into each other. It was helpful outlining achievements he had made, so that they would not be swept along with the current as well.

And progress he made! Due to his own commitment and Samuel's support, and despite his recurring difficulties to concentrate, he was facing few troubles at work. It had taken him some time to read through Herbert's log once more while making

annotations, giving explanations and additional descriptions. Some squeezes of the ancient walls had been found where originally the camp had been, and Daniel had been charged with analysing them. For that purpose, Herbert's journal had been officially committed to him. To his own surprise, Daniel found himself relieved over this turn of events. Maybe it was because he could be sure that it was safe here.

His musings were interrupted by the door opening and Alexander hesitantly poking in his head.

"What is it", Daniel asked, shooting the clock a quick look. It was past ten o'clock. "Can't you sleep?" And with a gesture, he invited Alexander to come in and close the door behind him. He lifted the boy up and sat him down on his lap. The two of them were sleeping in the same room, and Daniel was used to Alexander having bad dreams. If they were only half as frightening as his own, Daniel could hardly scold him for seeking comfort.

First, Alexander did not answer. His little hands were reaching for his mouth again, but Daniel gently pushed them down. He gave Alexander time to collect himself a bit. His sleeping problems had not been getting better. The dark was a dread to him, and he preferred falling asleep with his little lamp on. Every now and then, he even crawled into Daniel's bed in the middle of the night. All this Daniel could understand, even honestly relate to. What worried him was that Alexander was still wetting his bed on a regular basis. Though by now the child usually changed his blankets all by himself in the morning.

Eventually, Alexander looked up. "I can hear a voice", he said.

"A voice...? What kind of voice?", Daniel asked, eyebrows furrowed.

"It is in my head", Alexander answered and pointed at his temple.

"Is the voice in your dream?"

"No, it wakes me up. It calls me. And it won't let me sleep."

Daniel tried his best to appear not too unsettled. "Does it say anything?", he asked, and then realized it might not be the best question.

Alexander frowned at the floor again. Then he murmured "I know you are there."

"What?"

Alexander raised his head again. "I think... that's what the voice says." He had started fidgeting with his nightgown and there was that fear written in his eyes again.

Daniel pulled himself together. He could not lose his self-control. Not now, not in front of Alexander, not when the boy was this frightened. "I am certain it was just a dream", he said firmly, giving Alexander's right hand, which was still in his own, a light squeeze. "Sometimes a dream haunts us even when we are awake."

"Why?", Alexander asked.

"Because our mind is still convinced that it was reality", said Daniel, rose from his seat, Alexander in his arms, and made for the bedroom.

The boy contemplated on that for a moment, then he asked again "Why?"

Daniel laughed as he put Alexander to bed and pulled a chair closer to sit down. "Our mind is a complex thing, and sometimes it plays tricks on us."

Alexander did not seem to be satisfied with that answer, but Daniel quickly suggested reading out another story to him, lest their conversation turned into one of the sometimes hour-long lessons the topic of which only Alexander decided. The boy did have an astounding attention span.

Yet today it did not take more than two pages before Alexander had fallen fast asleep. Daniel let his fingertips brush over his fair hair one last time before returning into the study, leaving one light lit by the boy's bedside.

His eyes were getting tired from all the reading. Nonetheless, trying to pick up his train of thought, he skimmed through his journal once more. The day before he had written about the evening with the Hyndmans, and how much Harriette's comment had upset him. He gritted his teeth just thinking about it. He had always esteemed her for her contribution to the Hyndmans's household. This kind of disrespect though, he did not appreciate at all!

However, the worst part was that she was right. As much as Daniel would have liked to be as dismissive towards that woman's theories as Samuel was, he knew better.

With an aggravated sigh, Daniel got up and opened the drawer that contained Herbert's log. Harriette had read it, that much was for certain. And the later entries made it pretty clear for the inclined reader that unearthly forces must have been at play. It was getting harder and harder to focus. The words were starting to curl into each other, as if the ink was liquefying on the paper.

Out of the dark it appeared, the faint, blueish light. But it was different. Those were not the chambers in Algeria Daniel knew, but the glow still seemed so familiar. And the light was reaching for him, almost like the orb had done, but he could not move. He could not raise his hands to grasp for it, nor take a step towards it. Suddenly, it was like a sudden surge of anger pulsed through the light. It flared up in a white so dazzling that even as Daniel closed his eyes, he feared it would blind him.

Daniel woke. The sun was shining through the half-opened curtains and right on his face, glaringly bright. While his head still rested on the desk, he shielded his eyes and looked over at the clock. It was about six o'clock in the morning. Daniel rose from his uncomfortable sleeping position and felt his back hurt. With a grunt, he stretched a little. He hated falling asleep in the study.

The first thing Daniel did was check on Alexander. Fortunately, the boy was still deep in sleep. Smiling, Daniel closed the door.

Time for a cup of tea, he decided, straightened his rumpled collar a bit and went downstairs to ask Mrs Dinges for a pot of tea. She offered him breakfast, but he said he would wait for that until Alexander was up. After all, he explained, it was considered quite important for children to eat together with their family.

She had not received any letters for him yet, but the newspaper had arrived already. So Daniel was planning on reading up on the latest developments in the drawing room, but not before he had cleaned up the mess he had left in his study last night. The sun had climbed up a bit and its light was lingering on his desk. Now Daniel could see that dark blotches were splattered over the floor. It seemed like the ink jar had been knocked down. Furrowing his brow, he stepped forward and picked it up, then took a closer look at the desk to make sure Herbert's log was unstained.

His grip tightened around the newspaper in his one and the ink jar in his other hand.

All across the last page, the very same Daniel had studied yesterday, a single sentence was written with scrawly, smeared strokes.

"I know what you have done, Daniel."