

THE JÜGENDSTIL

BUILDING

A TALE.



When I was nineteen or twenty years old, I was even more of a Romantic than I am now. I used to adore Gothic and Romanesque cathedrals, and, sometimes, I'd just sit in front of the old palaces and estates, imagining all of the fat noblemen who had eaten their slabs of pork or drunk their goblets-full of wine inside those buildings' walls, discussing the rise of price in silks, or the Protestant Revolution, perhaps.

Such Romanticism naturally caused me to travel throughout most of the Western Europe: I had spent several months in Ravenna, later passed into the country of France, and then, almost into Germany before abruptly finishing my Grand Tour somewhere in Alsace.

To be more specific, I decided to stop, and actually ended up settling, in the city of Strasbourg. It had some of the strangest and most enchanting architectural masterpieces on the Continent: It had the Maison Kammerzell and, of course, the Cathédrale de Notre-Dame—which housed a magnificent Silbermann organ and an intricate, but strange, astrological clock as well. There was also the modest St. Thomas Church, which contained the tombs of some long-dead noblemen. But the building that struck me most of all was not one of those ancient and lofty structures, but rather, a squat and almost unnoticeable little building in the Jugendstil, or *art nouveau*, style.

I don't remember much about the building, however (or perhaps, I have chosen to forget). All that I remember clearly is that its *façade* was covered in some grim and snot-colored mosaic and, of course, that it generally disgusted me.

I passed the Jugendstil building each morning as I went to the market to buy some pumpkin soup and wine. And, each time that I passed it, I saw the same fat and slightly effeminate man standing in front of it and waving to me, wriggling his chubby fingers. "*Bonjour, monsieur!*" he'd always say, sometimes twirling the corners of his anachronistic moustache as well. "*Guten tag!*" he'd then repeat in German.

"*Salut,*" I'd usually reply, nodding.

The man would always follow me with his eyes as I walked off. He might not have noticed that I saw him, but I did—I saw him out of my peripheral vision. I never learned his name, but I called him "Gaveston," probably as homage to Marlowe, whom I was reading a lot of at the time.

During the first week or so that I was in Strasbourg, I didn't pay too much attention to the Jugendstil building and just passed it without much concern, as most of the Strasbourgeois themselves do. It originally didn't haunt me in the slightest, but soon, it struck me as something

horrible. I couldn't explain it. —Whenever I stared up at the building, it appeared as a Leviathan or some great monster, arching its neck before me. Its sad, sputum-colored mosaic, its gilded balconies, and its small windows all tore me at the heart and made me sick. I could actually feel my organs all sinking into the pit of my stomach and sitting there, like stones.

Why did the building produce such a sensation in me? What was the reason? I first believed that the structure was just hideous and I couldn't bear to see something so hideous on the streets of Strasbourg. But since I'd seen a great deal of modern architecture—imitations of Le Corbusier and the like—, I knew that ugliness couldn't have produced so deep an effect. I then started to think that, although it was an insignificant and completely unimpressive building, it actually marked the end of Western civilization. Yes! I reasoned that, for centuries, Western civilization had produced architectural masterpieces in the Gothic and Romanesque styles and then, all of a sudden, the Jügendstil came around, gleaning all of the ornamentation from those periods and then just clumping them together in a single mass of architectural excrement. It was a building of utter excess. It was decadence incarnate. Indeed, it was the *final breath of Western civilization!* That monstrosity embodied it all!

I believed such things for weeks and weeks, and then started to question that conclusion. I stopped believing it soon enough. I was no longer convinced.

As the days and weeks went on, I could feel my burning hatred for the building rapidly increasing. Yes, I could feel the smoldering revilement poisoning my heart—running through my every ventricle and vein. Constantly, I returned to the building, just to understand the reasons for its having produced so profound an effect on me, but I could never actually discover the answer.

—The fat man was always standing outside, winking and waving at me. “*Bonjour, monsieur! Guten tag!*”

“Ah!” I said, waving my hand dismissively, “Enough!”

But the man just smiled and winked again. “*Guten tag!*”

One month later, I actually started to pace back and forth in front of the building, obsessing over its hideous beauties, and occasionally, looking up at it to understand better. I'd sometimes sit at the adjacent café, drinking cup after cup of coffee and just soaking in the beautiful ugliness of that building. I couldn't quite figure out the reasons that it moved me as it did, but I soon started to believe that it was the perfect admixture of horror and beauty. Yes! It was horrible in its excess of ornamentation and in its beauties, I thought.

As I sat there, I observed the reactions of all the people who passed it, but not a single one looked, or even stole a momentary glance, at the Jügendstil building. No one noticed it but me, and I alone had to live with the burning hatred of that monstrous structure.

As the madness in me increased, I started to pull some people aside and ask them their opinions on the building. But all of them either shrugged or thought me insane. One of them just pulled his head back and said, “*Tu es fou? Ou très seule?*”

I'd sometimes encircle the entire city, throwing my hands up in the air and gesticulating to myself, wondering what it was that haunted me about that building. And, when I had finished encircling and gesticulating, I always returned to the old Jügendstil building, just to see her again and see if it'd inspire me to come to some conclusion.

As it loomed slowly into my view, I could feel the pangs in my heart returning; I could feel myself becoming more and more sick. My vision started to get clouded and the madness in me

returned again. I stood in the center of the street, clenching the lapels of my coat and staring up at the building, as if it were some creature from Hell. And, as I stood there, completely enraptured in the hideousness of the monstrosity, some blonde Alsatian girls giggled and pointed. I shouldered them aside, accidentally knocking one of her feet. “There it is!” I said to her, as she lie on the floor. “There it is!” I repeated, grabbing her by the arm and picking her up. “Just look at how hideous it is! *Look!*”

She and her friends ran off, frightened. And, as they scurried away, the fat man with the moustache was standing in front the building, holding his stomach and laughing. “*Bonjour! Bonjour!*”

I scowled and threw my hands up at him again. “Enough!” I said, starting to revile that man almost as intensely as the building itself.

I went back to my tenement building that night and thought deeply about what to do. I considered leaving Strasbourg once and for all, but I imagined that the visions of the building might continue to return. I needed some sort of satisfaction, and I needed to have it soon. I needed to close the book and find out the reasons for my hatred of the Jugendstil building—it became an obsession.

Sometimes, as I lay awake in bed, I thought about the epoch when the building was constructed. I even listened to audio recordings and read books from that period to enliven my imaginings of the early-20th century. I constantly envisioned the people of that era, sauntering around the streets and admiring the hideous building, perhaps thinking it a marvel of its time—a true indication of the future. But I also found it ironic that none of those people knew the *true future* that awaited them—the Great War and the Spanish flu! All of them would soon be victims of mass murder and mustard gas attacks. Yes! That was the *true future!* Death and horror was the future!

God! The presence of that building was starting to afflict me like a disease. It was muddling all of my thoughts and I couldn’t do much at all, except brood. I concluded that I had to stop looking at it—had to stop obsessing—, but I simply couldn’t. It’d be completely impossible for me. The obsession was far too deep in my heart.

For the next month, however, I did take an alternate route to the market and did my best not pass the building. For I knew that, if I were to pass it, I’d probably vomit right there in the street. I therefore stayed as far away as I could, picked up my pumpkin soup and wine, and went back home, eventually feeling more calm.

The disease in my mind soon lessened, and things went back to normal. I continued with my *flânerie* and admired the architecture in the other parts of town.

—Allow me to confess, as an aside, that I was no amateur *flâneur*, but a professional and highly-skilled one. Each morning, I’d iron a button-up shirt and a pair of trousers, put on a sweater and an overcoat, and then, observe all of the buildings in Strasbourg with absolute exactness. I’d raise my finger in the air and comment on the minutest detail of each building—the carving of a gargoyle’s fingernail, or the girth and length of a buttress. Indeed, I analyzed all of those buildings as a doctor does his patient, looking for the passion, the inspiration and the symmetry in all of them. I knew the histories behind each one and the materials that were used to construct them. The only one that I didn’t know too well, and didn’t care to know, was, of course, the Jugendstil building. That one alone, I never cared to know and didn’t care to see... Or so I thought.

As I was standing inside of the Church of Saint-Étienne one morning, remarking on the craftsmanship of its heavy oak doors and the peacefulness of its cloisters, I heard a voice. “—*Oh!*” it moaned. But no one was around. I therefore shrugged and continued to saunter around.

Near the altar of the church, I noticed a terracotta statue of an archangel. Its face was so life-like and human that I couldn’t remove my eyes from it. I stared at it closely, observed the artistry behind it and nodded, completely satisfied. I even went so far as to speak to the statue, imagining that it would actually respond to me. But, of course, it didn’t. “If there is a Heaven, speak! If there is a Devil, move!” I continued, tempting the thing into action. But nothing happened. So I just smiled, turned around and started to walk away.

And then, a finger tapped me on the shoulder. “—*Don’t tempt the Lord!*”

I jumped up and screamed. “God!” I said, falling to my knees, throwing my hands over my eyes and weeping. “God! Please! I didn’t mean to tempt thee!” But when I actually looked the statue again, I saw the fat man standing over me, laughing and rubbing his round belly. The candlelight was falling on his face. The archangel was still.

I rose from my genuflection and angrily said, “What do you want?! Spit it out!”

The fat man bellowed with laughter, still holding his stomach. “*I vant na’z’bing!*” he said in a thick Alsatian accent. “*I just vant to say z’at ve ‘av been missing you! Ve ‘av not seen you in a long time!*”

Pursing my brow, I looked the man dead in the face and said, “What obligation do I have to you? Or to that building? Tell me about it!”

“Oh! None!” he muttered, raising his hand in the air for a moment and then resting his elbow on the shoulder of the archangel. “No obligation! *But I vill see you again!*” the man said, taking his hand off the statue and walking peacefully out of the Church of Saint-Étienne.

I stared at him, frightened, but also confused. The Church was silent for a moment, but, when the man left, he slammed the heavy oak doors behind himself, making a crashing noise that resonated throughout the building. “*Sl-oom!*”

I didn’t sleep much that night. I started to obsess over the Jugendstil building again and much more than I ever had before. After I’d encountered the fat man, the feelings returned to me and assaulted me a hundredfold. I saw the visions of the people from before the Great War again, sauntering through the streets in their fur coats and jewels, smiling and laughing with one another. Some of them were applauding the construction of the building in the new and progressive Jugendstil style, while others were smoking their pipes and nodding at it, calling it “*dégoûtant!*” I saw children playing in front of the building, leaping up and tumbling around with one another. One of them was wresting a ball from another boy’s hands and then—the visions left me and I was once again staring up at the white ceiling in my bedroom, feeling my heart pounding in my chest. I was completely incapable of sleeping. I didn’t know what to do.

I was done lingering and ruminating. I knew then that I needed to act: I therefore got up in the middle of the night, turned on the faucet in the bathtub and submerged myself in a tub of ice-cold water. For I’d once read, in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, that the word bath comes from the Latin, “*balneum,*” because it purges sadness from the mind.

But when I arose from the tub of icy water, I just felt cold—no better than before. Feverishly, I brushed my teeth and threw on a pair of trousers, a shirt and a jacket, not ironing a single thing. The shirt was incorrectly buttoned.

—I stormed out of my apartment, slamming the door behind me and rushing down the stairs and thence, into the street. I stumbled around the cobblestone paths and ran through the meandering *ruelles*, feeling insane from the constant visions of that building.

The entire city was empty and dead that night. Everyone was asleep. Some rats were swimming in the River Ill, bobbing their heads in and out of the waters, like little otters. The *hommes sans-abris* were sleeping on benches or beneath the bridges, snoring and dribbling out some alcohol from their mouths. As my footfalls crashed above their bridge, one of them moaned, “*Ey!*”, and attempted to follow me, but instead, he just tripped and fell into the water—with the rats. “*Bab!*”

Eventually, I reached my destination and was standing before the object of all my hatred—that horrid monstrosity—the Jugendstil building. The cold wind was blowing outside, so I held the lapels of my coat close to my neck. I was panting from the long run and feeling a burning in my lungs. I wiped my mouth, looked up at the building and spat in front of it, despising its green mosaic and its dilapidated balconies. I then approached the cheap doors and slammed on them, “Open up!” I said. “Open!”

No one answered, but the door did actually creak open, slowly. It was completely dark inside. I peaked in my head, looking from right to left. Everything seemed safe, so I inched my right foot beyond the threshold and then, my entire body.

Upon entering, I looked around cautiously. “Hallo!” I said.

No one answered. It seemed that no one had stepped foot in that building since sometime after the Great War.

I then shut the door behind me and said again, “Hallo!” But still, no one answered, and I concluded that it was only me in there.

All of the furniture inside of the Jugendstil building was covered in shrouds and the shrouds themselves were covered in dust. It was indeed a derelict old place that no one had visited in more than a century. The floors were covered in debris and reams of old papers; candelabra and other choice items were scattered everywhere, toppled over and forgotten.

I then noticed, through the darkness, that there was a single staircase leading to the top of the building. I placed my foot cautiously on the first step to test the staircase’s strength. I then grabbed tightly onto the balustrade and put my other foot on the second step. The stairs creaked as I ascended upwards. Old papers and moth-eaten fabrics were strewn beneath my feet.

“—Hallo!” I called again, still wondering if someone were there. Nothing.

When I reached the top of the staircase, there was nothing but a single door. I knocked on it delicately at first, and then pounded. “Hallo!”

Again, no one answered.

So I opened it and looked around the room. An antique desk and an old wooden chair, covered in dust, were sitting inside. On the walls, there were three framed portraits or mirrors—but I couldn’t tell what they were precisely, since all of them were covered in a thick layer of grime. I brought my forearm up to one of them and wiped the dust off with the elbow of my jacket. I flicked a lighter and then saw my reflection in a small mirror: My cheeks were sunken and my eyes, bloodshot and wide from madness and a desperate lack of sleep. My hair was disheveled and my clothes, wrinkled. I knew that if someone had found me in that state, he surely would’ve had a difficult time defending my reason for having gone into that building in the first place.

I then brought my elbow up to the second frame and wiped off the dust: It was another mirror. I beheld my own face again. But just as I went to wipe the dust off the third, someone grabbed me by the wrist, causing my heart to nearly leap out of my chest. “*Bon-jour!*” the man said.

Incapable of speaking, I just stared at the man, twitching a bit, and holding my chest. He smiled and then brought his hand up to mine, mockingly pinching my hand off my chest and placing my arm at my side. “*Do not be startled!*” he said, smiling again and twirling his mustachio in a questionable manner. “*It has been so long, Marquis!*”

“Marquis?” I said, pulling my head back confusedly and taking a few steps back. “Who is the Marquis?”

The fat man didn’t speak, but instead, just brought his elbow up to the third mirror and wiped the dust off the glass. “*Look!*” he said, pointing in the direction of the frame. “*The Marquis!*” I looked into the mirror and saw yet another reflection of myself. “Yes. A looking-glass,” I said, pushing the man aside and preparing to rush out. “I don’t see the point.”

“*No, no! Look closer!*” the fat man said, putting his arm over my shoulder. “Don’t you see?” As I squinted, looking more closely at the mirror, I realized that it was not a mirror at all, but rather the portrait of a man called “the Marquis.” The man was identical in appearance to me—so much so that even I had mistaken the man for myself. He had the same sunken eyes, the same pointed nose and pallid skin. He had a much more aristocratic manner than I, however, but looked identical to me in appearance “Who is he?” I asked the fat man.

“The *Marquis!*” he said again.

“But clearly, he cannot still be alive!” I remarked, pulling the fat man closer to me and speaking an inch from his face. “He cannot be!”

“Why you! You, sir, are the *Marquis!*” he remarked, widening his eyes.

Angrily, I grabbed the fat man by the scruff of the neck and shouted in his ear. “Stop the games! Tell me who he is, now!”

“The *Marquis!*” he whined one last time, almost choking from the pressure I was applying to his neck. So I just threw the fat man to the wall and hurried out of the room and down the stairs, but eventually tripped on one of the papers and tumbled—crashed down—to the bottom.

As I moaned and attempted to recover from the fall, I pulled off the paper that was attached to my shoe. It was newspaper article from 1917. An obituary, in fact. “—The MARQUIS of CHÂTEAUNEUF. Died this morning from the Spanish flu this morning. The mayor sent his regards to the family.”

“This Marquis!” I shouted, looking up the staircase and back at the man, who standing at the top.

“*Oui! —Tu es la Marquis! You are the Marquis!*” he announced, “*And, I, Monsieur, have been your servant all these years! Now let’s go!*” the fat man said, politely picking me up off the ground, placing his arm over my shoulder and then walking me outside. “*Let’s go!*”

Outside, I noticed that the Strasbourgeois were looking much livelier and more well-dressed than usual. The women were wearing long, but loose-fitting, dresses and the men, caps on their heads.