

# Tabula Rasa

Von MORITZ

## Kapitel 2: A Generous Thing To Do

Yet this wave of optimism that had gotten hold of Daniel only solved so many of his problems. He knew he could not hide the child from the outside world forever. The last thing he needed right now were baseless rumours about him. Those would be hard to avoid in any case, as he had been away for more than two weeks without much of an explanation. And, as Mrs Dinges, his housekeeper, remarked with displeasure, had left his apartment in quite the dreadful condition.

He recalled the time before Brennenburg, these last days before his departure. But somehow, it was hard to remember how he had felt back then. Surely, he must have been frightened, yet there was no echo of it in his mind. Daniel reclined in his chair, looked up at the ceiling and furrowed his brow.

It was in the evening. The days had been getting noticeably shorter recently.

Daniel sat in the study when Alexander was sleeping, leaned back in his chair, and dabbed the pen against his chin. He really had to do something about Mrs Dinges. If anyone was likely to suspecting something, it was her. She was a good and hardworking woman, but also very curious. He had practically felt like a smuggler, getting the cradle past her, up the stairs and into his bedroom. He could not go on like this.

As if on cue, she knocked on the door and asked him to join her in the dining room for supper. Daniel had not yet come to a definite conclusion how to address this issue when he followed her downstairs and he was very inclined to just postpone it for now.

Once he had sat down at the table and she brought his supper, Mrs Dinges took the decision from him.

"Quite a darling child you have there", she remarked, pointedly, as she busied herself with setting the table. Daniel almost jumped at this, though he was very aware that she had to have noticed the noises at some point and that she easily could have had discovered the baby when she did the cleaning.

"Yes, uhm, I", he cleared his throat. "I brought him with me from my travels." As truthful as this answer was, it was also very unsatisfying, and he knew it would hardly suffice.

"Oh", she said, and her hands stopped arranging the dishes as she looked up, doing little to veil her curiosity. "I thought he did look rather outlandish."

"Yes", Daniel was quick to concede. "Yes, he is quite strange, isn't he?" He considered himself an honest man, and thus he was not a good liar, but he had thought this through in his waking nights already and decided his version of the story would be acceptably close to the truth, considering the circumstances.

"Well, it is a long story", he scrambled a bit for the sentences he had already well-laid out in his head but that somehow would not come over his lips as effortlessly.

"On the expedition in Algeria I joined this summer, I became involved in dangerous events", he swallowed, hesitating to dig up the memories. Due to Mrs Dinges giving an alarmed gasp he hastily continued, "I do not want to go into the horrible details too much and cause you distress. So let me just say that when we were exploring the tomb, the doorway of a chamber collapsed and I was trapped."

With slight confusion, Daniel noticed that he did not see the darkness of the tomb before his inner eye as usual when he recalled the incident. No remaining, lingering fear of suffocating. In fact, he did not feel any emotion at all when referring to the tomb. It was as if he had read about it somewhere and was now reciting it. Puzzled, he lightly shook his head and continued. "In any case, I could have died in there, and it was the child's father who saved me. But shortly after, he became fatally ill. With his dying breath, he had begged me to take care of his son. I owed him my life, so how could I not respect his wish?"

There was conviction in his tone, as he steeled himself by thinking that there was truth in the core of it, namely that he unquestionably did a righteous thing here by honouring such a debt. Still, he could not look up to her and see whether she was eyeing him more skeptically, so he distracted himself by rearranging his napkin.

"The child had no family left to care for it", he added almost defensively, "So I took it with me." Daniel faltered as he looked up and saw that her knitted brow confirm his worries. But he had practiced this, he knew what he was saying, and most importantly he felt that any doubt she had for him was highly unfair. She really was not in any position to question his choices, was she?

"As someone interested in anthropology, this could prove to be thrilling, to see this boy grow up in our civilised society. I am sure", he closed, defiantly this time, "I could make a fine gentleman out of him."

For a moment, she simply looked at him and he realized how this all must have sounded, shocking and adventurous, and maybe even too far-fetched to her. But then, she nodded as she picked up the teapot.

"What a generous thing to do!", she announced finally, and there was admiration in her tone. "Unheard of, really! But very generous, to take pity with this little thing."

Daniel made a noncommittal noise and did his best to appear rather preoccupied with stirring his tea. As flattered as he was by her praise, now he felt a bit uncomfortable about it. But it was good that she believed him, definitely better than the talk that might arise if people would suspect he had a child with some foreign woman. A ridiculous notion, especially since no respectable man would have taken such a bastard child home with him.

He would probably do better and introduce Alexander to his colleagues soon, so there would be less room for suspicion, even if he was not exactly keen on telling his tale again and again. Still he felt more confident, now that it had been brought to the test.

But Mrs Dinges interrupted his train of thought. "Has the boy been christened yet?", she asked. Her voice sounded oddly cheerful and nonchalant as she added, "I would not want to have an unchristened child under my roof, you know!"

Daniel almost choked over his food. He hadn't even thought about that yet.

"There is no need to worry about that, Mrs Dinges", he said as he tried to appear as relaxed as possible.

"Of course not, Mr Mayfair." She gave him a brief smile before she turned away to busy herself with the plates, but Daniel knew they would come back to this.

After supper, Daniel went back upstairs and immediately went to look after Alexander. The child was awake, greeted him with a little cry and eagerly wiggled in the cradle, waiting for Daniel to finally release him from his confinement. Daniel sighed, lifted him out of the little bed and on the ground of his bedroom, where Alexander promptly started scrambling about on all fours.

Watching over him, Daniel pondered. Did Alexander have to be christened? Of course, he was a child, but what if he had been christened before, the last time that he... had been a baby? Had the man even been religious? With a twinge to his stomach, Daniel noticed that they had never talked about it. Now that he thought about it, he realized he barely knew anything about the man Alexander had once been.

In an attempt to distract himself from these ruminations, he got up and walked over to the baby boy who thoroughly investigated his bedside cabinet while babbling to himself nonsensical strings of noises.

"Alexander, come here", he said and picked up the baby. "Look at me!", he instructed, and Alexander did, as if he understood. "Now, you will have to learn how to talk!", Daniel announced. "My name is Daniel", he explained very slowly and gestured towards himself.

Alexander kept gabbling excitedly.

"Daniel", Daniel repeated, with more emphasis.

"Gah!", Alexander responded.

Daniel tried it a couple of times, even with other words like "bottle" or "bed", and Alexander seemed to be very enthusiastic about their little exercise, his eyes wide when Daniel gestured at the things he was naming. But so far, the boy did not seem to be able to replicate his words. Even though he did answer with incoherent noises, the sounds were not even close to what Daniel tried to teach him.

Eventually, Alexander lost interest and wriggled about on Daniel's lap until he gave up and put him back down on the floor so he could keep exploring the vast and exciting realm of the bedroom under Daniel's watchful eyes.

Anyway, Daniel thought to himself, if I want to introduce him as my adoptee, he will have to be christened. He decided he would send for a cleric as soon as he found the time.

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First and foremost, however, Daniel felt he could not postpone the inevitable any longer. It had almost been a month since his return and he had to get in contact with the British Museum. The letter he wrote to announce he was back in London was rather vague. He did not want to disclose many details of his whereabouts, although he dreaded the questions that would arise.

When he finally prepared himself to visit to the museum, he realized that he could hardly leave Alexander alone and unsupervised. For this one day, it might be alright, once Mrs Dinges did agree to give the boy his bottle around noon. Yet Daniel had to plan for the days to come.

Some of his work could be done at home, and he usually would write and take notes in his study, but he also had to consult specialists at the museum and the university from time to time, categorize artifacts that he could not possibly take home, and most importantly, he had to present and discuss his work and listen to the talks of others. His presence was required and he could not hole himself up at home completely.

There was no way around it - he had to employ a nursemaid for the times that he left the house. It made him a bit uneasy to think about leaving Alexander behind, yet he could not take care of him properly if he did not work. And really, it was silly to be this worried, he told himself, as Alexander was quite capable of spending a few hours alone already while napping in his cradle, so he would surely not feel abandoned.

Back at the Museum, he was more at ease. The familiar cool wide halls had a soothing effect, and with mild surprise he noticed that he was not too nervous about meeting up with Professor Samuel Hyndman, who had announced great interest in everything Daniel could report. After all, Daniel could not refuse him, nor did he want to - he owed the man a whole lot.

Hyndman was a straightforward and earnest man, who possessed a great passion for

the ancient cultures that was nothing but admirable. He had been Daniel's mentor and supporter at the Museum ever since Daniel had assisted him with the study and translation of stone carvings in ancient temples. It was largely thanks to his influence that Daniel had been introduced to Herbert and could accompany him on his expedition.

"Daniel", the man greeted him as Daniel had entered the room. He instantly rose from the chair at the table, where he had been contemplating some letters over a cup of tea, to shake Daniel's hand with a genuine smile on his broad face. "Good to see you again. Take a seat."

Daniel sat down on a chair on the opposing side of the table and Hyndman poured him some tea. The study was spacious, framed with massive bookcases filled to the brim with a substantial amount of books, some of them already very familiar to Daniel and others he would love to read whenever the opportunity might arise.

They exchanged some pleasantries, and Hyndman readily told him how the restructuring of the exhibits in the course of the moving from Bloomsbury was coming along, until he eventually put his cup down and regarded Daniel over the table.

"But enough of this, what about your endeavours?", he asked. His full beard, blond like his hair, covered most of his face and sometimes made it difficult to fathom his expression. It were those shining small, blue eyes surrounded by faint wrinkles, that revealed his interest. "You seem to have been busy ever since you came back from Algeria."

Daniel found it hard not to shift under his bright gaze.

"We are all very curious about this expedition. Little has been found out about the tombs, and we know even less about the whereabouts of Herbert!" He glanced down with a sigh for a moment. "Some even say it was all for nothing. That would be a catastrophe, Daniel." The last sentence, he uttered with emphasis, his piercing eyes right back on Daniel.

"Hasn't Herbert's journal been examined yet?", Daniel asked, a lump building in his throat.

Another sigh. "It has. But there are still so many gaps! If only we had someone who could help us understand better...!" Hyndman furrowed his brow at his table and seemed to get lost in thoughts.

The lump in Daniel's throat had started aching, and Daniel feared his voice might fail him if he spoke up right now. He took a few deep breaths. Better. "I... could help", he said eventually.

"Daniel, my boy. I knew I could rely on you!", Hyndman exclaimed. "Yes, I had hoped you would suggest that. You were there, you can tell us what you have seen and what Herbert means by his accounts!" Hyndman stroked his beard with an accounting

glance at Daniel. "Maybe you can even give us some new information!"

"Well", Daniel raised both hands. He suddenly felt very tired. "Well, I read through Herbert's journal and I don't think... I am of the opinion that he described all we saw very well." At Hyndman's disappointed face, he quickly added "But I have been into one chamber I suspect Herbert has never seen. I will give that a better look."

Hyndman nodded, apparently satisfied. He folded his hands on the table and shook his head. "Too strange, this whole ordeal. And a tragic story as well."

"So you believe Herbert is dead?"

"Let me be honest with you, Daniel. A lot of people try to delude themselves and others. I can not agree with this kind of thinking. We are doing nobody a favour with it. Neither ourselves, nor Herbert. No, I do not think Herbert is coming back."

Daniel swallowed. He of all people knew Hyndman was right. But hearing it from somebody else like this still made his stomach turn.

"We can only thank God that you made it back here safely before these strange occurrences started happening." He gave Daniel a smile that probably was supposed to be encouraging, but Daniel could not even meet his eyes.

"I will look through Herbert's journal and add annotations and explanations to the best of my ability", Daniel said to the clenched fists in his lap.

Hyndman must have noticed his unease, as he changed the subject immediately. "Very well. And what have you been up to these last weeks? We haven't heard a thing from you!"

More excuses, Daniel groaned internally. "I researched something I thought would shed some light on the expedition", he said. "It turned out to be... a waste of time though", he hastily added as he saw Hyndman's eyes light up with curiosity once more.

"A shame", Hyndman noted.

A short moment of silence, and Daniel realized he would have to come up with a change of subject this time. Before he could reconsider it, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind: "I have adopted a child!"

Hyndman looked at him in bewilderment for a second, then he laughed. "Good for you, Daniel. I am glad that you are keeping your chin up in these hard times." With a raised eyebrow, he asked, "But what about its mother?"

"She's gone", Daniel answered quick as a shot. Then, after another awkward pause, he elaborated once more about the Algerian man and his debt.

"For an unmarried man to raise a child, that is quite uncommon", Hyndman mused when Daniel had finished. Then he leaned forward on the desk, lowering his voice as if

to tell Daniel a secret, and so Daniel did the same. "You see, Daniel, my own wife is expecting. Our children are our legacy. So we must put all our means into their education." Proudly, Hyndman raised his head. "You have my support, Daniel."

Strangely, this simple expression of acceptance made Daniel feel like a heavy weight had been lifted off his heart.

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As it turned out, getting back to work had been the right decision. Alexander seemed to thrive well under the part-time care of the nursemaid Daniel had employed, even though the boy was always happy to see him, which dissolved any of Daniel's worries. Daniel was sure Alexander loved spending time with him most, so he indulged him as often as he could.

Frequenting the museum again helped a great deal to make him feel like he had truly arrived home. Even with Alexander preoccupying most of his time in the evenings, he was more than able to engage himself into his researches in the hours he dedicated to working in his study.

Finally it seemed that his mind had gotten rid of the misguided assumption that he was still wandering the dark corridors and cells of Brennenburg, and with a sip of laudanum against the shivering and sweating, he would even sleep soundly.

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Now that he had settled into this new routine, there was something rummaging about in his head, as if he had forgotten something important. It was about mid-September when he eventually got reminded.

"And how do you plan on spending your birthday, Mr Mayfair? With your family?", Mrs Dinges asked casually as she brought him his freshly washed laundry. At his surprised face, she laughed. "You would not forget about your own birthday, would you?"

"No, of course not", Daniel responded a bit more brusquely than what would have been necessary. In truth, all this stress and change in his life had kept him so busy that he had indeed forgotten all about his upcoming birthday. First, he was shocked just how preoccupied he must have been. Then again, he mused, maybe having a surprising birthday to celebrate would do him good. Apart from Alexander, there had been no person in his life which he could interact with on a personal level. He recalled memories of his birthdays when he had been a child. Some were happy, some not so much. But one thing always brightened up his mood whenever it crossed his mind: The face of his dear little sister.

Oh, how he had missed her! He had hidden these thoughts from himself, not wanting to mix the gruesome deeds he had committed in Brennenburg to ensure his own sheer survival with memories of her. It was not until he remembered her laugh and her little hands in his that he realized just how much he ached to see her once more, how much he had been afraid never to hold her in his arms again.

When the nursemaid arrived, he informed her that he would be away for a day due to important family issues, and instructed her to stay until he was back.

Immediately he called for a coach to Canterbury. If he would have some time left, he thought, maybe he could pay his parents a visit as well. But more importantly, he would go to Canterbury Hospice. He knew Hazel was not allowed to eat sweets, so he had gotten her flowers. Cornflowers, her favourite.

The ride from London to Canterbury was not all that long, yet it seemed unbearable to Daniel. What a funny thing, Daniel thought. He had actively erased her from his memory for weeks, and now he sat in the back of the coach, fidgeting about like an impatient schoolboy. The day was windy and chilly, but the sun shone through the windows on Daniel's legs and warmed them. The trees on the roadside swayed in the breeze. As he regarded all this, once more struck by its clarity, a smile spread on Daniel's lips. Who would have thought he would indeed manage to leave all this darkness behind him, to see the sunlight again, to live and to reunite with his Hazel?

As the coach halted, he all but jumped out of the door, hastily paid the driver and had to contain himself not to run towards the building. He greeted a nurse who assisted an older woman with her stroll near the fence door, maybe a bit too gushingly, as the nurse raised both eyebrows and enjoined him to silence. He apologized, though he could hardly feel sorry, before asking her where to find the ward sister.

He did not even have to look for her in her office, as he spotted her just down the ground floor. He knew the elderly woman. She had been present when Hazel had arrived. She turned and gave him a courteous smile that quickly vanished from her face again and made room for her usual stern expression. "Young man, how can I help you?", she asked.

"Oh, I'm Daniel Mayfair", Daniel answered, feeling almost a bit offended that she did not remember him.

She gave a deep sigh. "Yes, Mr Mayfair." Another nurse quickly walked by and whispered something to her, awaited a nod and then hurried away.

"I am here to see my sister, Hazel!" He put a bit more emphasis to his words, seeing how the ward sister seemed to be distracted.

"You have been away for quite some time, is that right?", she asked, eyes now back on him, but making no move to lead him to Hazel's room. Daniel, getting more and more fretful by the minute, nodded and added "I went on a journey, I suppose it has been a few months."

She still did not move.

And as he understood, it started happening.

In all probability it took only a blink of an eye, but for Daniel, the moment seemed to



stretch on forever. He saw her hands clenching around her clipboard, how the tendons in her fingers protruded, how she slightly turned her body towards him to face him better. The world started turning at the assumption that he did not want to make.

She opened her mouth, but Daniel noted that he did not want to know what she had to say. Her lips moved, but he could not hear a thing. Her eyes went wide. Suddenly, there was nothing but the white ceiling and the rustle of flowers scattering on wooden panels.

How have I gotten to the floor?, Daniel asked himself before the ground gave in beneath him and he fell into the nothingness.