

ROBERT MUSIL

THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES

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PICADOR CLASSIC

A HOT FLASH AND CHILLED WALLS

After Ulrich had escorted Bonadea out and was alone again, he no longer had any desire to go on working. He went out to the street with the intention of sending a message to Walter and Clarisse that he would come to see them this evening. As he was crossing the small foyer, he noticed a pair of antlers on the wall; somehow they reminded him of Bonadea's movements when she had tied her veil before the mirror, except that here there was no resigned smile. He looked around, contemplating his environment. All these circular lines, intersecting lines, straight lines, curves and wreaths of which a domestic interior is composed and that had piled up around him were neither nature nor inner necessity but bristled, to the last detail, with baroque overabundance. The current and heartbeat that constantly flows through all the things in our surroundings had stopped for a moment. "I'm only fortuitous," Necessity leered. "Observed without prejudice, my face doesn't look much different from a leper's," Beauty confessed. Actually, it did not take much to produce this effect: a varnish had come off, a power of suggestion had lost its hold, a chain of habit, expectation, and tension had snapped; a fluid, mysterious equilibrium between feeling and world was upset for the space of a second. Everything we feel and do is somehow oriented "lifeward," and the least deviation away from this direction toward something beyond is difficult or alarming. This is true even of the simple act of walking: one lifts one's center of gravity, pushes it forward, and lets it drop again—and the slightest change, the merest hint of shrinking from this letting-oneself-drop-into-the-future, or even of stopping to wonder at it—and one can no longer stand upright! Stopping to think is dangerous. It occurred to Ulrich that every decisive point in his life had left behind a similar feeling.

He found a messenger and sent him off with his note. It was about four in the afternoon, and he decided to walk there, taking his time. It was a deliciously late-spring kind of fall day. There was a ferment in the air. People's faces were like spindrift. After the monotonous tension of his

thoughts in the last few days he felt as if he were exchanging a prison for a warm bath. He made a point of walking in an amiable, relaxed manner. A gymnastically well trained body holds so much readiness to move and fight that today it gave him an unpleasant feeling, like the face of an old clown, full of oft-repeated false passions. In the same way, his truth-seeking had filled his being with capacities for mental agility, divided into troops of thoughts exercising each other, and given him that—strictly speaking—false clown expression that everything, even sincerity itself, assumes when it becomes a habit. So Ulrich thought. He flowed like a wave among its fellow waves, if one may say so, and why not, when a man who has been wearing himself out with lonely work at last rejoins the community and delights in flowing along with it?

At such a moment nothing may seem so remote as the thought that people are not much concerned, inwardly, with the life they lead and are led by. And yet we all know this as long as we are young. Ulrich remembered how such a day had looked to him in these same streets ten or fifteen years ago. It had all been twice as glorious then, and yet there had quite definitely been in all that seething desire an aching sense of being taken captive; an uneasy feeling that “Everything I think I am attaining is attaining me,” a gnawing surmise that in this world the untrue, uncaring, personally indifferent statements will echo more strongly than the most personal and authentic ones. “This beauty,” one thought, “is all well and good, but is it mine? And is the truth I am learning *my* truth? The goals, the voices, the reality, all this seductiveness that lures and leads us on, that we pursue and plunge into—is this reality itself or is it no more than a breath of the real, resting intangibly on the surface of the reality the world offers us? What sharpens our suspicions are all those prefabricated compartments and forms of life, semblances of reality, the molds set by earlier generations, the ready-made language not only of the tongue but also of sensations and feelings.”

Ulrich had stopped in front of a church. Good heavens, if a gigantic matron were to have been sitting here in the shade, with a huge belly terraced like a flight of steps, her back resting against the houses behind her, and above, in thousands of wrinkles, warts, and pimples, the sunset in her face, couldn't he have found *that* beautiful too? Lord, yes, it was beautiful! He didn't want to weasel out of this by claiming he was put on earth with the obligation to admire this sort of thing; however, there was nothing to

prevent him from finding these broad, serenely drooping forms and the filigree of wrinkles on a venerable matron beautiful—it is merely simpler to say that she is old. And this transition from finding the world old to finding it beautiful is about the same as that from a young person's outlook to the higher moral viewpoint of the mature adult, which remains absurdly didactic until one suddenly espouses it oneself. It was only seconds that Ulrich stood outside the church, but they rooted in him and compressed his heart with all the resistance of primal instinct against this world petrified into millions of tons of stone, against this frozen moonscape of feeling where, involuntarily, he had been set down.

It may be a convenience and a comfort for most people to find the world ready-made, apart from a few minor personal details, and there is no disputing that whatever endures is not only conservative but also the foundation of all advances and revolutions; but it must be said that this casts a feeling of deep, shadowy unease on those who live according to their own lights. It flashed on Ulrich with surprising suddenness, as he appreciated the architectural fine points of the sacred edifice, that one could just as easily devour people as build such monuments or allow them to stand. The houses beside it, the firmament above, the indescribable harmony of all the lines and spaces that caught and guided the eye, the look and expression of the people passing below, their books, their morals, the trees along the street . . . it all seems at times as stiff as folding screens, as hard as a printer's die stamp, complete—there is no other way of putting it—so complete and finished that one is mere superfluous mist beside it, a small, exhaled breath God has no time for anymore.

At this moment he wished he were a man without qualities. But it is probably not so very different for anyone. Few people in mid-life really know how they got to be what they are, how they came by their pastimes, their outlook, their wife, their character, profession, and successes, but they have the feeling that from this point on nothing much can change. It might even be fair to say that they were tricked, since nowhere is a sufficient reason to be found why everything should have turned out the way it did; it could just as well have turned out differently; whatever happened was least of all their own doing but depended mostly on all sorts of circumstances, on moods, the life and death of quite different people; these events converged on one, so to speak, only at a given point in time. In their youth, life lay ahead of them like an inexhaustible morning, full of possibilities and

emptiness on all sides, but already by noon something is suddenly there that may claim to be their own life yet whose appearing is as surprising, all in all, as if a person had suddenly materialized with whom one had been corresponding for some twenty years without meeting and whom one had imagined quite differently. What is even more peculiar is that most people do not even notice it; they adopt the man who has come to them, whose life has merged with their own, whose experiences now seem to be the expression of their own qualities, and whose fate is their own reward or misfortune. Something has done to them what flypaper does to a fly, catching it now by a tiny hair, now hampering a movement, gradually enveloping it until it is covered by a thick coating that only remotely suggests its original shape. They then have only vague recollections of their youth, when there was still an opposing power in them. This opposing power tugs and spins, will not settle anywhere and blows up a storm of aimless struggles to escape; the mockery of the young, their revolt against institutions, their readiness for everything that is heroic, for martyrdom or crime, their fiery earnestness, their instability—all this means nothing more than their struggles to escape. Basically, these struggles merely indicate that nothing a young person does is done from an unequivocal inner necessity, even though they behave as if whatever they are intent upon at the moment must be done, and without delay. Someone comes up with a splendid new gesture, an outward or inward—how shall we translate it?—vital pose? A form into which inner meaning streams like helium into a balloon? An expression of impression? A technique of being? It can be a new mustache or a new idea. It is playacting, but like all playacting it tries to say something, of course—and like the sparrows off the rooftops when someone scatters crumbs on the ground, young souls instantly pounce on it. Imagine, if you will, what it is to have a heavy world weighing on tongue, hands, and eyes, a chilled moon of earth, houses, mores, pictures, and books, and inside nothing but an unstable, shifting mist; what a joy it must be whenever someone brings out a slogan in which one thinks one can recognize oneself. What is more natural than that every person of intense feeling get hold of this new form before the common run of people does? It offers that moment of self-realization, of balance between inner and outer, between being crushed and exploding.

There is no other basis, Ulrich thought—and all this, of course, touched him personally as well—as he stood with his hands in his pockets, his face

looking as peaceful and contentedly asleep as if he were dying in the sun's rays that whirled about him, a gentle death in snow—no other basis, he thought, for that everlasting phenomenon variously called the new generation, fathers and sons, intellectual revolution, change of style, evolution, fashion, and revival. What makes this craving for the renovation of life into a *perpetuum mobile* is nothing but the discomfort at the intrusion, between one's own misty self and the alien and already petrified carapace of the self of one's predecessors, of a pseudoself, a loosely fitting group soul. With a little attention, one can probably always detect in the latest Future signs of the coming Old Times. The new ideas will then be a mere thirty years older but contented and with a little extra fat on their bones or past their prime, much as one glimpses alongside a girl's shining features the extinguished face of the mother; or they have had no success, and are down to skin and bones, shrunken to a reform proposed by some old fool who is called the Great So-and-so by his fifty admirers.

He came to a halt again, this time in a square where he recognized some of the houses and remembered the public controversies and intellectual ferment that had accompanied their construction. He thought of the friends of his youth; they had all been the friends of his youth, whether he knew them personally or only by name, whether they were the same age as he or older, all the rebels who wanted to bring new things and new people into the world, whether here or scattered over all the places he had ever known. Now these houses stood in the late, already fading afternoon light, like kindly aunts in outmoded hats, quite proper and irrelevant and anything but exciting. He was tempted to a little smile. But the people who had left these unassuming relics behind had meanwhile become professors, celebrities, names, recognized participants in the recognized development of progress; they had made it by a more or less direct path from the mist to the petrifact, and for that reason history may report of them someday, in giving its account of the century: "Among those present were. . ."