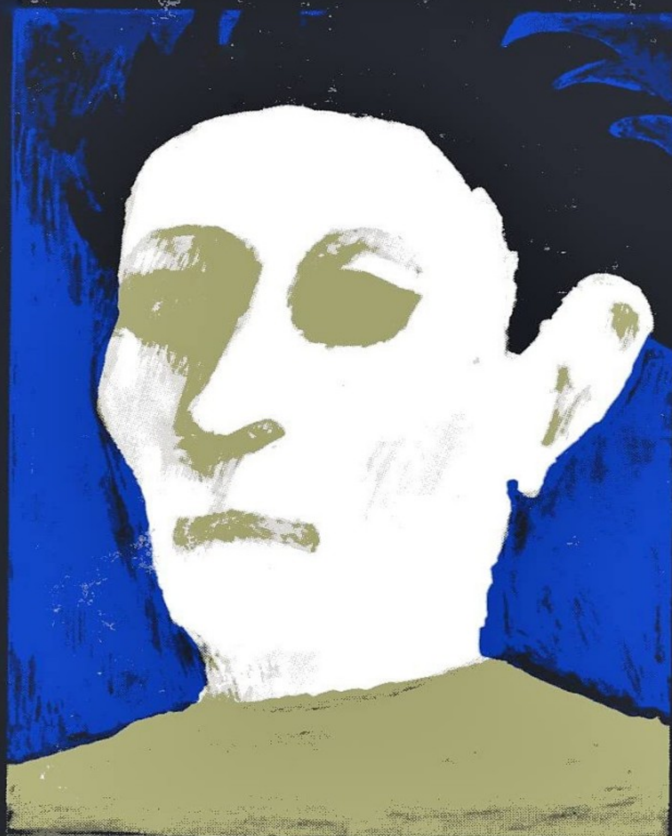
THE CLOWN



A NOVEL BY

HEINRICH BÖLL

AUTHOR OF **BILLIARDS AT HALF-PAST NINE**

HEINRICH BÖLL

In 1972, **Heinrich Böll** became the first German to win the Nobel Prize for literature since Thomas Mann in 1929. Born in Cologne, in 1917, Böll was reared in a liberal Catholic, pacifist family. Drafted into the Wehrmacht, he served on the Russian and French fronts and was wounded four times before he found himself in an American prison camp. After the war he enrolled at the University of Cologne, but dropped out to write about his shattering experiences as a soldier. His first novel, *The Train Was on Time*, was published in 1949, and he went on to become one of the most prolific and important of post-war German writers. His best-known novels include *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* (1959), *The Clown* (1963), *Group Portrait with Lady* (1971), and *The Safety Net* (1979). In 1981 he published a memoir, *What's to Become of the Boy? or: Something to Do with Books*. Böll served for several years as the president of International P.E.N. and was a leading defender of the intellectual freedom of writers throughout the world. He died in June 1985.

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The Essential
HEINRICH BÖLL

The Clown

The Safety Net

Billiards at Half-Past Nine

The Train Was on Time

Irish Journal

Group Portrait with Lady

What's to Become of the Boy? Or:
Something to Do with Books—A Memoir

The Collected Stories of Heinrich Böll

The Clown

HEINRICH BÖLL

Translated by Leila Vennewitz
Afterword by Scott Esposito

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and advice given me in this translation by
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Leila Vennewitz
Vancouver, Canada

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for Annemarie

To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see:
and they that have not heard shall understand.

Romans XV, 21

1

It was dark by the time I reached Bonn, and I forced myself not to succumb to the series of mechanical actions which had taken hold of me in five years of traveling back and forth: down the station steps, up the station steps, put down my suitcase, take my ticket out of my coat pocket, pick up my suitcase, hand in my ticket, cross over to the newsstand, buy the evening papers, go outside, and signal for a taxi. Almost every day for five years I had left for somewhere and arrived somwhere; in the morning I had gone up station steps and down again, in the afternoon down the steps and up again, signaled for a taxi, felt in my pockets for money to pay for my ticket, bought evening papers at kiosks, and savored in a corner of my mind the studied casualness of these mechanical actions. Ever since Marie left me to marry Züpfner, that Catholic, these actions have become more mechanical than ever, but without losing any of their casualness. There is a way of calculating the distance from station to hotel, from hotel to station—by the taxi meter. Two marks, three marks, four marks fifty from the station. Since Marie has been gone I have sometimes slipped out of the rhythm and confused the hotel with the station, I would start looking for my ticket as I approached the hotel porter or ask the ticket collector at the station for my room number, something—fate perhaps—must have made me remember my profession and my situation. I am a clown, official description: comedian, no church affiliation, twenty-seven years old, and one of my turns is called: Arrival and Departure, a long (almost too long) pantomime during which the audience confuses arrival and departure all the way through. Since I usually go over this number once more in the train (it consists of over six hundred gestures, and I have to know their sequence by heart, of course), it is not unnatural that now and again I fall victim to my own imagination: rush into a hotel, look round for the departure board, find it, run up or down a flight of steps so as not to miss my train, while all I have to do is go to my room and get ready for the performance. Luckily they know me in most of the hotels. Over a period of five years a rhythm develops with fewer possibilities of variation than one might suppose—besides, my agent, who is familiar with my idiosyncrasies, sees to it that there is a minimum of friction. What he calls “the sensitive soul of the artist” is fully respected, and an “aura of well-being” surrounds me as soon as I get to my room: flowers in an attractive vase, and, almost before I have thrown off my coat and tossed my shoes (I hate shoes) into a corner, a pretty chambermaid comes in with coffee and cognac and runs my bath, and the green bath salts she pours into it make it relaxing and fragrant. While I lie in the bathtub I read the papers, popular ones all of them, sometimes as many as six but at least three, and in a moderately loud voice I sing nothing but sacred songs: chorales, hymns, musical passages I recall from my school days. My parents, devout Protestants, subscribed to the postwar fashion of denominational tolerance and sent me to a Catholic school. I am not religious myself, I don’t even go to church, and I make use of the sacred texts and songs for therapeutic purposes: they help me more than anything else to overcome the two afflictions Nature has saddled me with: depression and headaches. Since Marie went over to the Catholics (although Marie is a Catholic herself I feel this phrase is appropriate), the intensity of these two complaints has increased, and even the *Tantum Ergo* or the Litany of Loreto—till now my favorite remedies for pain—are not much use any more. There is one temporarily effective remedy: alcohol; there could be a permanent cure: Marie. Marie has left me. A clown who takes to drink falls faster than a drunk tile-layer topples off a roof.

When I am drunk my gestures during a performance become confused—their only justification in the first place is their precision—and I fall into the most embarrassing trap to which a clown is ever exposed—I laugh at my own tricks. A ghastly humiliation. As long as I am sober my stage fright increases till the moment I walk on (I generally had to be pushed), and what some critics have called “that reflective, critical gaiety hiding a beating heart” was nothing but the desperate icy control with which I turned myself into a puppet; it was terrible, incidentally, when the thread broke and I fell back on myself. I imagine monks go through a similar experience when they are in a state of contemplation. Marie always carried around a lot of mystical literature, and I remember the words “empty” and “nothing” occurred very often.

For the past three weeks I had been drunk most of the time and had gone on stage with a deceptive air of confidence, the consequences showed up faster than with a slacker in school who still retains illusions about himself right up until he gets his report; six months is a long time to dream. After three weeks there were already no more flowers in my room, by the middle of the second month I no longer had a room with bath, and by the beginning of the third month the distance from the station was already seven marks, while my fee had shrunk to a third. Instead of cognac, gin, instead of vaudeville theaters, curious clubs which met in gloomy halls where I went on stage with wretched lighting, where my performance no longer even consisted of confused gestures but was reduced to outright clowning for the benefit of the postal and railway employees celebrating twenty-five years of service, or of Catholic housewives and Protestant nurses, and where the beer-drinking army officers whose promotion celebrations I enlivened hardly knew whether they ought to laugh or not when I did what was left of my "Defense Council" act; and yesterday, in Bochum, before an audience of young people, I slipped in the middle of a Chaplin imitation and couldn't get up. There weren't even any catcalls—just a sympathetic murmuring, and when at last the curtain fell I quickly hobbled off, gathered up my belongings and, without removing my make-up, took a cab to my boarding-house where there was a terrible row because my landlady refused to let me have any money for the taxi. The only way I could placate the disgruntled taxi driver was to hand over my electric razor—not as security but as payment. He was decent enough to give me change in the form of a nearly full pack of cigarettes and two marks in cash. I lay down fully dressed on the unmade bed, drank the rest of my bottle, and for the first time in months felt completely rid of depression and headache. I lay on my bed in a state which I sometimes hope will be mine when I end my days: drunk and as if in the gutter. I would have given my shirt for a drink, and only the thought of the complicated negotiations involved in such an exchange discouraged me from undertaking this transaction. I slept marvelously—long and deep, and dreamed that the heavy stage curtain fell over me like a soft thick shroud, yet through sleep and dreams I was aware of my fear of waking up: the make-up still on my face, my right knee swollen, a lousy breakfast on a plastic tray and next to the coffee pot a wire from my agent: "Coblenz and Mainz have canceled stop phoning tonight Bonn. Zohnerer." Then a call from the organizer of last night's show who, I discovered, was head of the Christian Education Society. "Kostert speaking," came his voice over the phone, a mixture of coldness and servility, "we have to clear up the matter of your fee, Mr. Schnier." "By all means," I said, "there's nothing to stop you."

"Oh?" he replied. I said nothing, and when he went on his petty hostility had turned to downright sadism. "We agreed on a fee of a hundred marks for a clown who used to be worth two hundred"—he paused, presumably to give me a chance to be angry, but I was silent and, true to type, he became insulting again and said: "I am the chairman of a welfare organization, and my conscience won't allow me to pay a hundred marks for a clown for whom twenty is a more than adequate—one might even say, a generous fee." I saw no reason to break my silence. I lit a cigarette, poured out some more of the lousy coffee, and listened to his heavy breathing. He said, "Are you listening?" And I said: "I'm listening," and waited. Silence is a good weapon. When I was at school and got called up before the principal or the teachers I always kept silent. I let the Christian Mr. Kostert sweat it out back there at the other end of the line; he was too small to feel sorry for me, but not too small to feel sorry for himself, and finally he muttered: "Well, what would you suggest, Mr. Schnier?"

"Now listen carefully, Kostert," I said, "I'll make you a deal—take a taxi, drive to the station, get me a first-class ticket to Bonn, buy me a bottle of schnapps, come to the hotel, pay my bill—including tips—and leave an envelope here containing enough money for me to pay for a taxi to the station. Furthermore, undertake on your Christian conscience to pay for sending my luggage to Bonn. O.K.?"

He did some mental arithmetic, cleared his throat, and said: "But my idea was to give you fifty marks."

"All right," I said, "take the streetcar then—that way the whole thing will cost you less than fifty marks. How about that?"

He did some more mental arithmetic and said: "Couldn't you take your luggage with you in the taxi?"

"No I couldn't," I said, "I've hurt my knee and can't be bothered." Evidently his Christian conscience began to make itself felt. "Mr. Schnier," he said in a mild voice, "I'm sorry I—" "Never mind, Kostert," I said, "I am ever so glad I can save the Christian cause between fifty-four and fifty-six marks." I pressed down the hook and put the receiver down by the phone. He was the type who would have called back and spent half an hour relieving his conscience—it was much better to leave him to pick around in it by himself. I felt sick. I forgot to say that not only do I suffer from depression and headaches but I also have another, almost mystical peculiarity: I can detect smells through the telephone, and Kostert gave off a sickly odor of violet cachous. I had to get up and clean my teeth. Then I gargled with some of the cognac that was left, laboriously removed my makeup, got into bed again, and thought of Marie, of Christians, of Catholics, and contemplated the future. I thought of the gutters I would lie in one day. For a clown approaching fifty there are only two alternatives: gutter or palace. I had no faith in the palace, and before reaching fifty I had somehow to get through another twenty-two years. The fact that Coblenz and Mainz had canceled was what Zohnerer would call the "Early Warning Stage," but there was another quality to be taken into account which I forgot to mention: my laziness. There were gutters in Bonn too, and who said I was to wait till I was fifty?

I thought of Marie: of her voice and her breast, her hands and her hair, her movements and everything we had done with each other. Also of Züpfner, whom she wanted to marry. We had known each other quite well as boys—so well that when we met again as grown men we didn't quite know whether to use first names or not—either way we felt embarrassed, and we never got over this embarrassment no matter how often we met. I couldn't understand how Marie could have gone over to him of all people, but perhaps I never "understood" Marie.

I was furious when it was Kostert who aroused me from my thoughts. He scratched at the door like a dog and said: "Mr. Schnier, you must listen to me. Do you need a doctor?" "Leave me alone," I called out, "shove the envelope under the door and go home."

He pushed the envelope under the door, I got out of bed, picked it up, and opened it: it contained a second-class ticket from Bochum to Bonn, and the taxi fare had been calculated exactly: six marks fifty. I had hoped he would make it a round figure of ten marks, and I had already worked out how much I would get out of it if I turned in the first-class ticket and bought a second-class one. It would have been about five marks. "Everything all right?" he called from outside. "Yes," I said, "and now get out, you lousy little Christian worm." "Now wait a minute! You can't—" he said, and I shouted, "Get out!" There was silence for a moment, then I heard him go downstairs. The children of this world are not only smarter, they are also more humane and more generous than the children of light. I took the streetcar to the station so as to save a bit for a drink and some cigarettes. The landlady charged me for a telegram I had sent the evening before to Monika Silvs in Bonn and which Kostert had refused to pay for, so anyway I wouldn't have had enough money for a taxi to the station; I had sent the telegram before discovering that Coblenz had canceled: they had got in ahead of me, and that annoyed me a bit. It would have been better for me if I could have canceled and sent a wire saying "Unable to appear on account of serious knee injury." Well, at least the telegram had gone off to Monika: "Please prepare flat for tomorrow. Regards. Hans."

2

In Bonn the routine was always different from anywhere else; I have never performed there, it is my home, and the taxi I called never took me to a hotel but to my apartment. I should say: us, Marie and me. There was no doorman in the building whom I could mistake for a station official, and yet this apartment, where I spend only three or four weeks a year, is more unfamiliar to me than any hotel. I had to stop myself from hailing a taxi outside the station in Bonn: this gesture was so well rehearsed that it almost led me to make a fool of myself. I had one solitary mark left in my pocket. I stood for a moment on the steps and made sure I had my keys to the building, to my apartment, to my desk; in my desk I would find: my bicycle keys. For some time now I have been considering a pantomime of keys: I have a vision of a whole bunch of keys made of ice which melt away during the performance.

No money for a taxi, and for the first time in my life I could have really used one: my knee was swollen, and I hobbled painfully across the station square to the Poststrasse; it was only two minutes from the station to our apartment, they seemed endless. I leaned against a cigarette vending machine and glanced across to the building in which my grandfather had presented me with an apartment; tasteful units dovetailed nicely into one another, the balconies painted in discreet colors; five floors, five different colors for the balconies; on the fifth floor, where the balconies are all painted terra cotta, is my apartment.

Was I acting out one of my numbers? Inserting the key in the front door, noticing without surprise that it did not melt, opening the elevator door, pressing number five: a gentle hum bore me aloft; looking through the narrow pane of glass in the elevator onto the sections dividing each floor, and, beyond each section, out through the window on each floor: the back of a monument, the square, the church, floodlit; then a black section, a concrete ceiling, and again, in slightly altered perspective: the back of the monument, the square, the church, floodlit: three times, the fourth time only the square and the church. Inserting my key in the lock of my own front door, noticing without surprise that this one opened too.

Everything painted terra cotta in my apartment: doors, woodwork, built-in cupboards, a woman in a terra cotta housecoat on the black sofa would have matched nicely; no doubt it would be possible to get one, the only trouble is: I suffer not only from depression, headaches, laziness, and the mystical ability to detect smells through the telephone, the most terrible affliction of all is my disposition to monogamy; there is only one woman with whom I can do everything that men do with women: Marie, and since she left me I live as a monk is supposed to live; only—I am not a monk. I had wondered whether I ought to drive out to the country and ask one of the priests in my old school for advice, but all these jokers regard human beings as polygamous creatures (that's why they defend monogamy so strenuously), I would be bound to seem like a freak to them, and their advice would be confined to a veiled reference to the domain in which, so they believe, love is for sale. I am still prepared to be surprised by Protestants, as in the case of Kostert, for instance, who actually managed to astound me, but with Catholics nothing surprises me any more. I have always felt a great deal of sympathy and understanding for Catholicism, even when four years ago Marie took me for the first time to this "Group of Progressive Catholics"; she was anxious to produce some intelligent Catholics for my benefit, and of course she secretly hoped I would be converted one day (all Catholics have this ulterior motive). The very first moments in the group were terrible. I was then at a very difficult stage of learning to be a clown, I was not yet twenty-two and I rehearsed the whole day long. I had been looking forward very much to this evening, I was dead tired and was expecting some kind of cheerful get-together, with plenty of good wine, good food, perhaps dancing (we were very badly off and couldn't afford either wine or good food); instead the wine was bad, and the whole evening was rather as I imagine a seminar on sociology under a boring professor. Not only was it exhausting, it was exhausting in an unnecessary and unnatural way. They started off by praying together, and all through this I didn't know what to do with my hands and face; I feel one shouldn't expose an unbeliever to a situation like that. Besides, they didn't merely recite an Our Father or an Ave Marie (that would have been embarrassing enough, with my Protestant upbringing I have had more than enough of all kinds of private prayer), no, it was some text or other composed by Kinkel, very programmatic "and we beseech Thee to give us the power to do as much justice to the traditional as to the progressive," and so on, and only then did they proceed to the "Subject for the Evening," on "Poverty in the Society in which we live." It was one of the most embarrassing evenings of my life. I simply cannot believe that religious discussions have to be that exhausting. I know: it is hard to believe in this religion. Resurrection of the body and eternal life. Marie often used to read me from the Bible. It must be difficult to believe all that. Later on I even read Kierkegaard (useful reading for an aspiring clown), it was difficult, but not exhausting. I don't know whether there are people who use designs by Picasso or Klee for embroidering tablecloths. It seemed to me that evening as if these progressive Catholics were busy crocheting themselves loincloths out of Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure and Pope Leo XIII, loincloths which of course failed to cover their nakedness, for—apart from me—there was no one there who wasn't earning at least fifteen hundred marks a month. They were so embarrassed themselves that later on they became cynical and snobbish, except for Züpfner, who found the whole affair so ghastly that he asked me for a cigarette. It was the first cigarette he had ever smoked, and he puffed away at it unskillfully, I could see he was glad the smoke hid his face. I felt dreadful, for Marie's sake, who sat there, pale and trembling, while Kinkel told the story of the man who earned five hundred marks a month, got along very well on it, then earned a thousand and found it got more difficult, then got into real trouble when he was earning two thousand, and finally, when he reached three thousand, he found that once again he could manage quite well, and from his experience devised the profound formula: "Up to five hundred a month one can manage quite well, but between five hundred and three thousand is utter misery." Kinkel wasn't even aware of the embarrassment he was causing: he rattled on in a kind of Olympian cheerfulness, smoking his fat cigar, raising his glass of wine to his lips, gobbling cheese sticks, until even Prelate Sommerwild, the group's spiritual adviser, began to get fidgety and changed the subject. I believe he introduced the word "reaction" and Kinkel immediately swallowed the bait. He lost his temper and stopped in the middle of his discourse on the subject of a twelve-thousand-mark car being cheaper than one for four thousand five hundred, and even his wife, who embarrasses everyone with her mindless adoration of him, breathed a sigh of relief.