



Robertson Davies

The Manticore

“Davies’ trilogy is one of the splendid literary enterprises of this decade.”
Peter Prescott—Newsweek



THE MANTICORE

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PENGUIN BOOKS

THE MANTICORE

The son of a journalist, Robertson Davies was born in 1913 in Thamesville, Ontario, and educated at Queen's University and at Oxford. He became a journalist himself, and his first book, *The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks*, had its origin in an editorial column. Davies was also, for a while, a professional actor, studying at the Old Vic Drama School, where he met his wife, and serving as Sir Tyrone Guthrie's literary assistant. His own plays, characterized by superb epigrammatic wit, are widely performed in Canada. It is as a fiction writer, however, that Davies, now Master of Massey College in Toronto, has achieved international recognition with such novels as *A Mixture of Frailties*, *Leaven of Malice*, and especially his major work, the trilogy composed of *Fifth Business*, *The Manticore*, and *World of Wonders*.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

Tempest-Tost

Leaven of Malice

A Mixture of Frailties

Fifth Business

World of Wonders

CRITICISM

A Voice from the Attic

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THE MANTICORE

·I·

Why I Went to Zürich

(1)

WHEN DID YOU decide you should come to Zürich, Mr. Staunton?

"When I heard myself shouting in the theatre."

"You decided at that moment?"

"I think so. Of course I put myself through the usual examination afterward to be quite sure. But I could say that the decision was made as soon as I heard my own voice shouting."

"The usual examination? Could you tell me a little more about that, please."

"Certainly. I mean the sort of examination one always makes to determine the nature of anyone's conduct, his degree of responsibility, and all that. It was perfectly clear. I was no longer in command of my actions. Something had to be done, and I must do it before others had to do it on my behalf."

"Please tell me again about this incident when you shouted. With a little more detail, please."

"It was the day before yesterday, that is to say November ninth, at about ten forty-five p.m. in the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, which is my home. I was sitting in a bad

seat in the top gallery. That in itself was unusual. The performance was something rather grandiosely called *The Soirée of Illusions*—a magic show, given by a conjuror called Magnus Eisengrim. He is well known, I understand, to people who like that kind of thing. He had an act which he called *The Brazen Head of Friar Bacon*. A large head that looked like brass, but was made of some almost transparent material, seemed to float in the middle of the stage; you couldn't see how it was done—wires of some sort, I suppose. The Head gave what purported to be advice to people in the audience. That was what infuriated me. It was imprudent, silly stuff hinting at scandal—adulteries, little bits of gossip, silly, spicy rubbish—and I felt irritation growing in me that people should be concerned about such trash. It was an unwarranted invasion of privacy, you understand, by this conjuror fellow whose confident assumption of superiority—just a charlatan, you know, seeming to patronize serious people! I knew I was fidgeting in my seat, but it wasn't until I heard my own voice that I realized I was standing up, shouting at the stage."

"And you shouted—?"

"Well, what would you expect me to shout? I shouted, as loud as I could—and that's very loud, because I have some experience of shouting—I shouted, 'Who killed Boy Staunton?' And then all hell broke loose!"

"There was a furore in the theatre?"

"Yes. A man standing in a box gave a cry and fell down. A lot of people were murmuring and some stood up to see who had shouted. But they quieted down immediately the Brazen Head began to speak."

"What did it say?"

"There are several opinions. The broadcast news reported that the Head suggested he had been killed by a gang. All I heard was something about 'the woman he knew—the woman

he did not know,' which, of course, could only mean my step-mother. But I was getting away as fast as I could. It is a very steep climb up to the doors in that balcony, and I was in a state of excitement and shame at what I had done, so I didn't really hear well. I wanted to get out before I was recognized."

"Because you are Boy Staunton?"

"No, no, no; Boy Staunton was my father."

"And was he killed?"

"Of course he was killed! Didn't you read about it? It wasn't just some local murder where a miser in a slum is killed for a few hundred dollars. My father was a very important man. It's no exaggeration to say it was international news."

"I see. I am very sorry not to have known. Now, shall we go over some of your story again?"

And we did. It was long, and often painful for me, but he was an intelligent examiner, and at times I was conscious of being an unsatisfactory witness, assuming he knew things I hadn't told him, or that he couldn't know. I was ashamed of saying "of course" so often, as if I were offering direct evidence instead of stuff that was at best presumptive—something I would never tolerate in a witness myself. I was embarrassed to be such a fool in a situation that I had told myself and other people countless times I would never submit to—talking to a psychiatrist, ostensibly seeking help, but without any confidence that he could give it. I have never believed these people can do anything for an intelligent man he can't do for himself. I have known many people who leaned on psychiatrists, and every one of them was a leaner by nature, who would have leaned on a priest if he had lived in an age of faith, or leaned on a teacup-reader or an astrologer if he had not had enough money to afford the higher hokum. But here I was, and there was nothing to do now but go through with it.

It had its amusing side. I had not known what to expect,

but I rather thought I would be put on a couch and asked about sex, which would have been a waste of time, as I have no sex to tell about. But here, in the office of the Director of the Jung Institute, 27 Gemeindestrasse, Zürich, there was no couch—nothing but a desk and two chairs and a lamp or two and some pictures of a generally Oriental appearance. And Dr. Tschudi. And Dr. Tschudi's big Alsatian, whose stare of polite, watchful curiosity was uncannily like the doctor's own.

"Your bodyguard?" I had said when I entered the room.

"Ha ha," laughed Dr. Tschudi in a manner I came to be well acquainted with in Switzerland; it is the manner which acknowledges politely that a joke has been made, without in any way encouraging further jokiness. But I received the impression—I am rather good at receiving impressions—that the doctor met some queer customers in that very Swiss little room, and the dog might be useful as more than a companion.

The atmosphere of the whole Jung Institute, so far as I saw it, puzzled me. It was one of those tall Zürich houses with a look that is neither domestic nor professional, but has a smack of both. I had had to ring the bell several times to be admitted through the door, the leaded glass of which made it impossible to see if anyone was coming; the secretary who let me in looked like a doctor herself, and had no eager public-relations grin; to reach Dr. Tschudi I had to climb a tall flight of stairs, which echoed and suggested my sister's old school. I was not prepared for any of this; I think I expected something that would combine the feeling of a clinic with the spookiness of a madhouse in a bad film. But this was—well, it was Swiss. Very Swiss, for though there was nothing of the cuckoo-clock, or the bank, or milk chocolate about it, it had a sort of domesticity shorn of coziness, a matter-of-factness within which one could not be quite sure of its facts, that put me at a disadvantage. And though when visiting a psychiatrist

I had expected to lose something of my professional privilege of always being at an advantage, I could not be expected to like it when I encountered it.

I was an hour with the Director, and a few important things emerged. First, that he thought I might benefit by some exploratory sessions with an analyst. Second, that the analyst would not be himself, but someone he would recommend who was free to accept another patient at this time and to whom he would send a report; third, that before that I must undergo a thorough physical examination to make sure that analysis, rather than some physical treatment, was appropriate for me. Dr. Tschudi rose and shook me by the hand. I offered also to shake the paw of the Alsatian, but it scorned my jocosity, and the Director's smile was wintry.

I found myself once again in Gemeindestrasse, feeling a fool. Next morning, at my hotel, I received a note giving directions as to where my medical examination would take place. I was also instructed to call at ten o'clock in the morning, three days hence, on Dr. J. von Haller, who would be expecting me.

(2)

The clinic was thorough beyond anything I had ever experienced. As well as the familiar humiliations—hanging about half-naked in the company of half-naked strangers, urinating in bottles and handing them warm and steamy to very young nurses, coughing at the behest of a physician who was prodding at the back of my scrotum, answering intimate questions while the same physician thrust a long finger up my rectum and tried to catch my prostate in some irregularity, trudging up and down a set of steps while the physician counted; gasp-

ing, puffing, gagging, sticking out my tongue, rolling my eyes, and doing all the other silly tricks which reveal so much to the doctor while making the patient feel a fool—I underwent a few things that were new to me. Quite a lot of blood was taken from me at various points—much more than the usual tiny bit removed from the ear lobe. I drank a glass of a chocolate-flavoured mixture and was then, every hour for six hours, stood on my head on a movable X-ray table to which I had been strapped, as pictures were taken to see how the mess was getting through my tripes. A variety of wires was attached to me whose purpose I could only guess, but as my chair was whirled and tilted I suppose it had something to do with my nervous system, sense of balance, hearing, and all that. Countless questions, too, about how long my grandparents and parents had lived, and of what they had died. When I gave the cause of my father's death as "Murder" the clinician blinked slightly, and I was glad to have disturbed his Swiss phlegm, even for an instant. I had not been feeling well when I came to Zürich, and after two days of medical rough-house I was tired and dispirited and in a mood to go—not home, most certainly not—somewhere else. But I thought I ought to see Dr. J. von Haller at least once, if only for the pleasure of a good row with him.

Why was I so hostile toward a course of action I had undertaken of my own will? There was no single answer to that. As I told the Director, I made the decision on a basis of reason, and I would stick with it. Netty had always told me that when something unpleasant must be done—medicine taken, an apology made for bad behaviour, owning up to something that would bring a beating from my father—I had to be "a little soldier." Little soldiers, I understood, never hesitated; they did what was right without question. So I must be a little soldier and visit Dr. J. von Haller at least once.

Ah, but did little soldiers ever have to go to the psychiatrist? They visited the dentist often, and many a time I had shouldered my little invisible musket and marched off in that direction. Was this so very different? Yes, it was.

I could understand the use of a dentist. He could grind and dig and refill, and now and then he could yank. But what could psychiatrists do? Those I had seen in court contradicted each other, threw up clouds of dust, talked a jargon which, in cross-examination, I could usually discredit. I never used them as witnesses if I could avoid it. Still, there was a widespread belief in their usefulness in cases like mine. I had to do whatever seemed best, whether I personally approved or not. To stay in Toronto and go mad simply would not do.

Why had I come to Zürich? The Director accepted it as perfectly in order for me to do so, but what did he know about my situation? Nothing would have got me to a psychiatrist in Toronto; such treatment is always supposed to be confidential, but everybody seems to know who is going regularly to certain doctors, and everybody is ready to give a guess at the reason. It is generally assumed to be homosexuality. I could have gone to New York, but everyone who did so seemed to be with a Freudian, and I was not impressed by what happened to them. Of course, it need not have been the Freudians' fault, for as I said, these people were leaners, and I don't suppose Freud himself could have done much with them. Nothing will make an empty bag stand up, as my grandfather often said. Of the Jungians I knew nothing, except that the Freudians disliked them, and one of my acquaintances who was in a Freudian analysis had once said something snide about people who went to Zürich to—

hear sermons
From mystical Germans
Who preach from ten till four.

But with a perversity that often overtakes me when I have a personal decision to make, I had decided to give it a try. The Jungians had two negative recommendations: the Freudians hated them, and Zürich was a long way from Toronto.

(3)

It was a sharp jolt to find that Dr. J. von Haller was a woman. I have nothing against women; it had simply never occurred to me that I might talk about the very intimate things that had brought me to Zürich with one of them. During the physical examination two of the physicians I encountered were women and I felt no qualm. They were as welcome to peep into my inside as any man that ever lived. My mind, however, was a different matter. Would a woman—could a woman—understand what was wrong? There used to be a widespread idea that women are very sensitive. My experience of them as clients, witnesses, and professional opponents had dispelled any illusions I might have had of that kind. Some women are sensitive, doubtless, but I have met with nothing to persuade me that they are, on the whole, more likely to be sensitive than men. I thought I needed delicate handling. Was Dr. J. von Haller up to the work? I had never heard of a woman psychiatrist except as someone dealing with children. My troubles were decidedly not those of a child.

Here I was, however, and there was she in a situation that seemed more social than professional. I was in what appeared to be her sitting-room, and the arrangement of chairs was so unprofessional that it was I who sat in the shadow, while the full light from the window fell on her face. There was no couch.

Dr. von Haller looked younger than I; about thirty-eight,

I judged, for though her expression was youthful there was a little gray in her hair. Fine face; rather big features but not coarse. Excellent nose, aquiline if one wished to be complimentary but verging on the hooky if not. Large mouth and nice teeth, white but not American-white. Beautiful eyes, brown to go with her hair. Pleasant, low voice and a not quite perfect command of colloquial English. Slight accent. Clothes unremarkable, neither fashionable nor dowdy, in the manner Caroline calls "classic." Altogether a person to inspire confidence. But then, so am I, and I know all the professional tricks of how that is done. Keep quiet and let the client do all the talking; don't make suggestions—let the client unburden himself; watch him for revealing fidgets. She was doing all these things, but so was I. The result was a very stilted conversation, for a while.

"And it was the murder of your father that decided you to come here for treatment?"

"Doesn't it seem enough?"

"The death of his father is always a critical moment in a man's life, but usually he has time to make psychological preparation for it. The father grows old, relinquishes his claims on life, is manifestly preparing for death. A violent death is certainly a severe shock. But then, you knew your father must die sometime, didn't you?"

"I suppose so. I don't remember ever thinking about it."

"How old was he?"

"Seventy."

"Hardly a premature death. The psalmist's span."

"But this was murder."

"Who murdered him?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. He was driven, or drove himself, off a dock in Toronto harbour. When his car was raised he was found clutching the steering-wheel so tightly