

CHAPTER ONE

OSBERT BRINKHOFF was born on a Tuesday to a respectable family in an obscure corner of the city of Schwartzgarten. Mr and Mrs Brinkhoff, who had dreamed of rearing a genius, welcomed little Osbert's considerable breadth of skull and elevated forehead with undisguised glee.

'He has the head of an intellectual colossus,' observed Mr Brinkhoff.

'Indeed,' replied Doctor Zimmermann, eyeing the child with some suspicion as he packed away his forceps and stethoscope. 'I shouldn't be surprised if your little boy grows up to be the most intelligent citizen in the whole of this great city.'

And so it was that Osbert Brinkhoff's story began.

The Brinkhoff family lived in a comfortable apartment on Marshal Podovsky Street, close to the library and overlooking the greasy brown river that coiled like a serpent through the heart of Schwartzgarten.

Mr Brinkhoff worked as a middle-ranking clerk at the Bank of Muller, Baum and Spink and had far more ambition for his son than he had ever had for himself. Even so, his own prospects were excellent, and it had been decided that when the ancient Mr Spink finally expired, the bank's name would be changed to Muller, Baum and Brinkhoff.

Mrs Brinkhoff was very proud of her husband, whom she adored. She would lie in bed at night and pray that Mr Muller and Mr Baum would die in a terrible accident, so that when Osbert was old enough he and Mr Brinkhoff could run the bank all by themselves.

But as the years passed and Osbert grew into a little boy, he showed no inclination towards banking. He was always small for his age, with pale skin and intense blue eyes. He had inherited his father's poor eyesight, and wore spectacles from his earliest years. He did not want to play with other children, but would instead sit for hours in his bedroom, reading books on physics and algebra that he had taken from his father's study, pushing a chair under the doorknob so that he would not be disturbed.

This was not quite the boy the Brinkhoffs had dreamt of. Finally, in desperation, they decided they had no choice but to engage the services of a nanny to look after Osbert, in the hope that she could prevent the boy from becoming irredeemably peculiar. Turning to the 'Home Help' section of *The Schwartzgarten Daily Examiner* on the eve of Osbert's sixth birthday, they found a small advertisement that seemed to answer their prayers: *Boys taken care of, no questions asked. Over thirty years' experience.*

On the day Nanny arrived, the sky turned a curious shade of mauve. The weather was warm and suffocating, and as Nanny hauled herself up the steps to the Brinkhoff apartment, Osbert watched her suspiciously from his bedroom window. Nanny was a large woman, almost spherical. She was dressed in black from head to toe: black boots, black skirt, black coat and black feathers sticking upright from her large black hat.

'Like an overfed raven,' thought Osbert, grimly.