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Princesses

A Novella

by E[duard] von Keyserling

[Translated by John B. Rutledge]

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## Chapter 1.

Around noon on a hot summer day the widowed Princess<sup>1</sup> Adelheid of Neustatt-Birkenstein went over to the office of retired Major Bützow, who managed her property, to talk about her finances. Prince Ernst of Birkenstein had died in his prime. An insidious lung disease had carried him off quickly. Since the prince left no male heir, his younger brother, Prince Konrad, succeeded him in governing the principality. The widowed Princess, for her part, chose to retire with her three daughters to Gutheiden, a property she owned in the east of the empire.

The late Prince was a high-spirited man, and at his death the family's fortune was in a fairly depleted condition. Her widow's state pension itself was meager enough, so the noble lady decided to educate their daughters in rustic tranquility. But even so, much prudence was required to secure an income commensurate with their position in society.

These visits to the Major Bützow's office and the long talks about money always made the Princess tired and sad. She sat in the wicker chair in front of his large desk, which was covered with account books. Opposite her sat the Major in a gray linen suit, very overheated; his little round face was flushed, and his scalp shone red through the threads of thin, gray hair; the ends of his gray mustache hung limply over the corner of his mouth. He quietly rattled off his report. Sometimes he stopped and directed his protruding blue eyes towards the Princess, to see what kind of impression his report was making. The Princess, however, sat motionless in her chair and looked out through the open window into the courtyard, which during the break in the workday lay quite still in the sunshine. The only activity was over in the stables where a groom wearing a be-ribboned cap washed a large shiny automobile.

There could be nothing more discouraging than the Major's voice, the Princess thought. And how hostile it sounds with its series of numbers, all those debits and credits and balances! A large buzzing fly had strayed into the room and began to hum loudly and angrily, as if to drown out the mournful ratcheting of the Major's voice. The Princess was still a beautiful woman; she sat there motionless in a white piqué dress, her hair very dark beneath the black lace veil. The brownish pallor of her narrow face had something like a matte bronzing; the features of her face were of wonderful quiet regularity, and her large brown eyes suggested the languid pathos of Byzantine Madonnas. Her petite hands, heavy with rings, rested in her lap. Finally the report was finished. The Major paused,

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<sup>1</sup> Princess Adelheid of Neustatt-Birkenstein is the widow of a deceased head of state, a *Fürst*. Her title in German is *Fürstin*, the feminine form of *Fürst*. In this translation she is referred to as the Princess or Princess Adelheid. Other princesses are referred to by name when necessary to distinguish them from Adelheid.

pushed up the white tufts of his eyebrows, and looked at his client expectantly. The Princess was still looking out at the courtyard, as if in her thoughts she was far away, but she began to speak, spoke slowly and somewhat plaintively: "None of this is encouraging, but nothing can be done about the large expenses that we have recently had, nor about the ones yet to come. During the winter I had to travel with the princesses to Birkenstein to participate in social events; and then we had the betrothal of Princess Roxane. The furniture in the great hall and in the green and blue rooms had to be re-upholstered before the young Grand Prince came to visit. And then we have her dowry, and even if the wedding takes place at my brother's, the Grand Duke's, estate, there will still be significant expenses. There cannot be the slightest change in any of this. When it is over, so we can try again to rest for a while and try to save a bit."

There was a knock on the door, and the door opened without anyone's saying "Come in." Count Donalt Streith entered the room, tall and thin, in a white flannel suit. "You're just in time, my dear Count," said the Princess, without looking round, and stretched out her hand, "we had just gotten to our deficits."

The Count kissed the proffered hand and said: "Well, well! Our Major once again has a pocketful of worries."

The Major shrugged his shoulders, and the Princess complained. "Oh, it's that terrible brick factory again."

The Count seated himself in an armchair away from the desk, stretched out his legs and gently rubbed his fingertips together, his small, oblong head covered with curly, slightly graying hair. His gray-blue eyes lay strangely close together on his tanned face. But what completely dominated the face was the powerful, bold aquiline nose. The beard "commas" on his upper lip and chin were black as coal. His whole appearance had something of an elegant Don Quixote about it. The Count had been chamberlain to Prince Ernst Birkenstein while the Prince lived. Now he had a forested property near Gutheiden and lived alone in his hunting lodge. His main job was to advise the Princess in the management of her estate. At any time of day one could see his small automobile or his dun<sup>2</sup> horse standing in courtyard of Gutheiden castle courtyard, and everyone on the estate knew that the real master of the estate, the one who made the decisions, was Count Streith.

"Well," the Count began, "if the brick factory can't support us, then the forest will have to."

"Do you think it can?" said the Princess and looked hopefully at the Count. "I knew you would come up with something."

The Major had closed his account books, and now rose: "May I return to my work now?" he murmured.

"Certainly," replied the Princess, "Thank you, my dear Major," and she extended her hand to him and he kissed it. "You see, some kind of solution can always be found." But the Major's face retained its expression of concern as he bowed to the Count and left the room.

The Princess stared pensively out the window again, and the Count rubbed his fingertips together. Both were silent for a while as they listened to a quiet sound that wafted through the mid-day air. Finally, the Princess said, as if she were talking to herself, "When the Major starts speaking about all those unpleasant things, I hear a tone of reproach in his voice. But it's not my fault that the brick factory isn't earning any money and I certainly don't intend to hide my daughters out here in the country. We have to go to social events in Birkenstein and in Karlstadt, for, after all, they do need to get married. An unmarried princess is at home nowhere. They remind me of those bead-work pieces that

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2 Dun: bark-colored; red- or yellow-brown.

governesses give as birthday presents, or doilies, or feather dusters—you just don't know where to put things like that.”

The Count's sonorous laughter startled the Princess and she looked at him with surprise for a moment, then she too began to laugh. Quickly, though, she turned serious again and sighed, “No, no, I'm not in the mood for laughter.”

“Our princesses will get married,” the Count offered as consolation. “We're already off to a good start.”

“Well, yes,” the Princess said with some hesitation, “I am happy enough with Roxane's engagement. I do like the young man, but those people from over there, you know how strange it all is. And to send one's child off to a distant place is difficult. But Russia, my God! It's as dark and unknown—as the hereafter. But, Roxane is level-headed and reasonable, she'll land on her feet. But poor Eleonore will have more difficulty because she is so fragile and easily hurt, and you know that for one of our kind, you can't be that way. And then my youngest daughter, she's my biggest worry. She's almost sixteen and still so childish. She's a lot like her father, so impatient, so unpredictable. And worse, she's growing up out here in the countryside.”

“Princess Marie will get it done,” the Princess thought, “she has her own ideas and will follow her own path.”

“But Streith!” cried the Princess, clasping her hands together in a manner that caused her rings to rattle against each other like armor plate. “Follow her own path? How can a princess follow her own path? The path is prescribed for her. Princesses run as if on rails, and if they get off track, then they're lost.”

“All right, princesses are little locomotives then,” the Count suggested and smiled.

“Locomotives,” the Princess complained, “how am I supposed to bring up locomotives here in the country? In my youth, when I wanted to be lively and amusing, Countess Breckdorff used to say, 'Don't do that, Princess Adelheid; it's fine for the other girls to do that, but it's inappropriate for you.' How are girls out in the country supposed to learn what 'inappropriate' means? How am I supposed to do it? Who's going to help me?”

The Count bowed slightly and said with all seriousness, “I, perhaps?”

“Yes, you, Streith,” the Princess replied, “of course it's you. Even when we were in Birkenstein, whenever there was any unpleasantness, I always used to say, 'Streith will come up with something.' And I still have this habit.” Saying this, she looked at him in a friendly manner and the gaze of her eyes weighed heavily on him.

The Count leaned back comfortably in his chair and said, “Well, I certainly hope so.” Then he stood up. “I want to go into the woods,” he said, “and see what can be done.”

“Will you be coming over to dinner?” the Princess asked.

“Yes, if I may,” the Count replied.

“Yes, do come,” replied the Princess, “we can have some conversation, and we won't have to think about money. Perhaps we can even laugh a bit together.”

The Count kissed her hand and the Princess departed.

The Princess sat motionless and still for a moment, even though this room, with its smell of ink and dusty account books and the buzzing of the big flies, was repulsive to her. Finally, she resolved to leave the room. She walked through the suite of rooms and out the door. Everything was quiet because at this time of day the inhabitants of the house all withdrew for the midday pause in work.

But over in the large hall Böttinger, the old valet with his white hair and wrinkled, white face, went back and forth making sure that the curtains were closed against the noonday sun. The Princess

stopped for a moment and stared pensively at the bronze-colored coverings on the chairs. "Böttinger," she said, "I think we should leave the new furniture covered until afternoon, I'm afraid the sun will fade it."

"As you wish, Madam," murmured Böttinger.

The Princess went into her boudoir. Here she could relax. Here in this small space with the lowered, yellow silk curtains, with the sweet fragrance of wilting roses in a crystal bowl—this, this was the atmosphere she was accustomed to; here the repulsive sensations of the office melted away. She stretched out on the chaise longue, reached for an English novel, didn't open the book immediately, but rather closed her eyes in order to enjoy the benefits of a comfortable existence. You have to know how to slip away from day-to-day cares in order to enjoy a pleasant moment, she thought.

## Chapter 2.

Over in the orchard, the princesses were sitting together. They loved to get together there while their teachers took their siesta. A concentration of gooseberry, currant, and raspberry bushes and a few fruit trees grew in a slight hollow. The noon-day sun shone down brightly on them. There was the smell of hot leaves and hot fruits, and from the more elevated vegetable garden a breeze carried the more stringent odors of celery and leek.

On the slope under an old plum tree, the three girls had made their camp. All three wore white and red striped batiste dresses and little white straw hats. Roxane was sitting up with her back against the trunk of the tree, her hands folded in her lap, looking straight ahead into the flickering light. She had the solemn beauty of her mother with her large brown eyes, but the strict purity of those traits in a youthful face gave the impression of an almost expressionless calm awareness. Eleanor lay in the shade of the tree and stared up at the sky. Hers was a blossoming, round face, in which her mother's Sphinx eyes became the friendly, brown eyes of a girl.

Marie, the youngest, had completely stretched out in the sun. She lay on her stomach and rested her head in her hand. With the toes of her yellow shoes she was pounding holes in the lawn and was eating some unripe plums that had fallen from the tree. And though she was already sixteen years old, her figure was strangely undeveloped, thin and angular, and she had the broad face of a child with red cheeks and wide-open blue eyes. Her curly, honey-colored hair fell over her short forehead.

All three had been silent for a while. The bright light and the strong scents made their heads heavy and gave their thoughts that tired consistency that we perceive just before falling asleep, when thoughts are preparing themselves to be dreams. Suddenly Marie looked up at Roxane, spat out a plum pit and asked, "Were you thinking of your Grand Duke?"

Roxane raised her eyebrows a bit and replied negatively, "You ask the silliest questions."

"Well, it's only . . ." Marie continued, "I just mean that you, at least, have something to think about. We don't."

Roxane ignored this remark and said, "Stop spitting out those pits. It's rude."

"Rude?" said Marie, looking at her sister in surprise, "you used to do it all time. If I were engaged to a Grand Duke, I wouldn't do it anymore either. And besides, the real question is what they

think about it in Russia.” As Roxane gave no reply, Marie chattered on: “I do find your Dimitri attractive. He has beautiful eyes with long lashes, his mustache is like bronze colored silk, and he's cute when he speaks so clearly, almost as if he wanted to sing. He does wear a bit too much perfume, but it's good perfume, Peau d'Espagne<sup>3</sup> and something that smells sweet, maybe heliotrope.”

“His eyes are sad,” Eleonore ventured. “Even when he laughs his eyes are sad.”

“Yes, they are said,” Roxane said solemnly. “Dimitri is cheerful and amusing, but at a fundamental level there is something sad in his nature. Even his voice. When he talks about his native land, the flowering steppes and the Tatars with their slanted eyes, I always hear a bit of melancholy.”

“Naturally,” opined Eleonore. “when I hear the word Russia I think of a large, flat plain in twilight. I can't imagine that the sun ever shines there: it's always twilight. And in the distance there is a large city with lights in the windows, and somewhere in this twilight someone is singing or someone is crying.”

“Mademoiselle Laure says,” Marie reported, “the Court in St. Petersburg is the loosest in all of Europe.”

Roxane shrugged her shoulders contemptuously, “Oh, her.”

From the slope Marie could see the garden gate. The road ran along the garden before it became the main street of the village with its small houses and garden. It lay there quietly and sunny; only a few dogs and chickens bestirred themselves and occasionally women carrying buckets went to the spring. Behind the village, on a hill, stood Castle Tuiirnow, white with gleaming windows, the home of Count Dühnen. Marie did not take her eyes off the road because just at this time every day the three Dühnen boys walked by on their return from the river where they had been swimming. “There they are!” Marie yelled.

All three wore blue linen suits, their wet towels tossed over their shoulders. Their faces were so tanned that their blond hair looked almost white. There was Felix, the sixteen-year-old who went to military academy, who had grown up tall and thin, then Bruno, with his cute, girlish face, and Coco, an ill-mannered seven-year-old dwarf.

The two oldest boys waved at the ladies. But Coco stopped, pressed his face against the garden gate and counted, “Three cabbages, three lettuces, three princesses.” Then he ran away. Marie followed the boys attentively with her eyes as they followed the uphill course of the road, until their figures got smaller and smaller and finally disappeared. Then she experienced something that made her heart heavy, as if a free and happy life had just passed her by.

Countess von Dühnen had once come to Gutheiden, but Felix had worn his uniform and was stiff and formal, while the other two, with neatly combed hair and white collars, were silent and embarrassed. And all three seemed quite different from those boys in those linen suits who had walked by the garden gate still hot and moist from swimming. Sadly she returned to her plums. Casting a glance towards Roxane, she called, “But, Roxane, you look like you're about to cry, no, you're crying.”

And, truly, Roxane's cheeks were wet with tears. She smiled. “It's nothing,” she said, “just suddenly it seemed so strange that in just a few days I won't see all this any more. It will be just a sunny spot that's far, far away that I yearn for.”

Marie shrugged her shoulders. “These old gooseberry bushes are the last thing I would miss,” she said.

Just then a small car drove down the highway past the gate and Marie piped up again, “Oh, God! Here he comes again.” Indeed it was Professor Wirth from the local academic high school. Twice a week he came to the castle to deliver a lecture on history to the princesses. Marie stretched a bit in anticipation of the boredom ahead. “That is a blessing, a blessing of my engagement,” she said,

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3 A perfume made of flower and spice oils.

“that I can finally escape from the misery of these history lessons. Listen, Lore, Roxane has it good: she can stay here and think about her Dimitri.” With sighs the two girls got up and headed slowly and lethargically towards the castle.

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Around four o'clock a carriage with four horses stood in front of the castle. This was the time of day that the Princess was accustomed to taking a leisurely ride with her daughters. Marie was not particularly fond of these outings, and they usually rode in silence since the route was only too well known to them. Nevertheless, it was a chance for them to get a bit of air of the world outside and to catch a glimpse of the lives of others. First there was the village high street. As the carriage drove along, the women of the village stuck their heads out of the narrow windows; children sat on garden fences and made noise, men greeted them, dogs barked; there was an air of merry and noisy excitement. Next to the church was the parsonage. The parson's wife stood in the garden with her two daughters. They carried large bowls and were picking currants. Their brown-haired heads gleamed in the sunlight. When the carriage came into view, they clasped their bowls with both hands and curtsied. Next came Tirnow. All the windows were open and inside someone was playing a waltz on the piano. The boys were sitting in the cherry trees along the garden wall—blue figures among the green and red. Coco waved his straw hat and shouted something as the carriage rolled by.

The sun shone starkly on the avenue and a cloud of dust accompanied the carriage, so the area could only be seen through a dreary yellowish veil. Large-leaf plants along the way were as dusty gray as blotting paper. Large, repulsive flies buzzed around the noses of the travelers. Marie's eyelids began to feel heavy and once again she started to doubt the value of these outings. But there still was something to see. They drove by Schlochтин, the country home of Baron Üchtlitz. Indeed, that was actually the high point of the whole trip. Two mighty linden trees gave shade to the red house. In the garden and on the tennis court you could see young women with colorful caps and young men in bright suits moving around and could hear their voices all the way up to the road. On the green yard a girl sat in a swing being pushed by an officer. The buttons on his dark tunic glistened like little fires. And when the girl swung up into the branches, she let out a shrill little cry, and the officer tilted his head back and laughed. That's just perfect, thought Marie with a sigh.

Just then the carriage turned into the forest and there was no longer anything that they could happily watch. Just a stiff and motionless row of pines, a forest of giant pencils with the afternoon sun shining through the topmost branches. “Just smell that!” said Eleonore as she said every time, and Marie knew it was coming. Then a few deer showed themselves among the trees and Roxane said, “Oh look—deer!”

All of this happened with the regularity of the appearance of the cuckoo on the old clock, which Fräulein von Dachsberg, the governess, had inherited from her mother. The clock clanks along, the cuckoo appears and says “Cuckoo.” The clock rattles and Eleonore says “Just smell that!” The clock rattles and Roxane says “Oh look—deer!” They were out of the forest now and onto the long road lined with poplars at the end of which they would see the castle, large and gray with curved gables, thin pillars, and a green copper roof. On the stairs outside stood Böttinger, a little blue and silver shape, waiting for them.

Before dinner they gathered in the green room and that was always a pleasant moment with something festive about it. The three girls appeared in white dresses with roses on their belts. Mlle. Laure de Bouttancourt, the dark-haired French woman, liked to dress herself in brightly-colored silks.

As she was conversing with Count Streith, she leaned her head back and looked up at him coquettishly with her glaring black eyes. Fräulein von Dachsberg, the governess with her blond head of hair and her pale, patient face, and the Major stood off somewhat away from the others and were speaking quietly with each other. Baron Fürwit was joking with the princesses. He had been major-domo to the Prince and Princess and thought that he enjoyed a position of significance here too, but he had only been taken in so that he could enjoy a comfortable old age. “Upon my word,” he said, “I dreamed that three women in white came up to me. I thought that they were angels. But at the same time, if they go into the castle, how do I introduce them? How do you introduce angels?” He laughed, shuffled off on his small feet, stroking his beautiful brown burnsides.

Finally, the Princess arrived with her friend and lady companion Baroness Dönhof, a small asthmatic woman with a large red and white face and a snow-white wig. Dinner was now announced. The Princess took Count Streith's arm, the three princesses followed, Baron Fürwit escorted Baroness Dönhof, the Major accompanied Fräulein v. Dachsberg, and Mlle. Laure walked by herself. When we head for the dining room—so Marie had once said to Mlle. Laure—“everyone is nicely dressed, the table set in white and silver looks like an altar. You sit down feeling a bit chilly and wait for good things and you feel quite happy to be a princess. *“Ah, ma pauvre petite!”* Mlle. Laure had replied.

At the table the Count was guiding the conversation. The Princess listened to him, and one could see that she felt well cared for and entertained when he spoke. Occasionally Baroness Dönhof and Baron Fürwit made a few comments; Fräulein von Dachsberg spoke quietly with the Major; the princesses sat on their chairs and said nothing.

“Well,” the Count said, “yesterday Baron Üchtlitz came to see me. The old gentlemen seemed quite beside himself. 'Just imagine,' he said, 'our Hilda wants to leave and do something productive. Does she want to take care of the sick? Does she want to go to college or want to become a letter carrier? She can't 'develop herself' at home, she says. Did you ever hear of ladies in our day wanting to 'develop themselves'? No. But Hilda wants to get away. She says she doesn't want to sit at home like a princess waiting for a crown.” Everyone at table was amused by the story. “I never liked her very much,” observed the Princess, and Baroness Dönhof's opinion was, “Finally, after these ladies have developed themselves, then society won't know what to do with them.” “And typically it ends with a foolish marriage,” interjected Baron Fürwit. The Baroness nodded approval and declared with certainty that women belong in the home.

Marie became pensive. Had it been Hilda she saw on the swing with the officer? She had always admired Hilda and her darting gray eyes, her ash-blond pigtailed; then too, Hilda had a way of speaking about parents in general, about God, or about love in a way that made a chill run down your spine—terrible, but at the same time pleasantly stimulating. The Princess signaled that it was time to leave the table.

The dinner party took to the garden room. Lacy green shades covered the lamps, and the glass doors stood wide open; the summer night filled the room with a cool, sweet smell. The Princess had two large chairs pushed up against the doors and there she sat with the Count next to her. As they conversed, the Count softened his voice giving it a softer singing quality; occasionally one heard them laugh together; or they were silent, looking into the night. Then the Princess laid her hand on the Count's sleeve and said, “Streith, just look at the stars.”

“Hm, yes, the stars,” the Count said and tried to think of something special to say.

“Actually they ought to make us nervous, these planetary homes so close to us, and we'll never know whether there might be someone living on them.”

Countess Dönhof was playing Halma<sup>4</sup> with the Baron Fürwit, and the Major looked over in their

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4 Halma is a strategic board game similar to Chinese checkers, invented in 1883 or 1884.



direction. The others went out into the garden. Eleonore placed her arm around Roxane's waist and both wandered down the broad pebbled path. Now that they were soon to be separated, they had much to talk about between themselves and did not need to involve any others. Fräulein v. Dachsberg and Mlle. Laure followed the princesses at some distance. Marie felt excluded and abandoned. What was she supposed to do? She took hold of Mademoiselle's arm and led her to a side path.

"Come along," she said, "and tell me again about the boarding school and how you climbed out of the window to go for a walk with the college students.

*"Ce n'est rien pour les petites princesses,"* replied Mlle. Laure stiffly.

Marie knew all about that. When the French woman was in a good mood, she only told stories that were not appropriate for young princesses; but if she was sad and missed the viscount to whom she had been secretly engaged and who had abandoned her, then anything and everything was unsuitable.

"Well, fine," Marie thought and left the woman there, taking another path. "Princess Marie!" she heard from behind her, but she didn't let it disturb her because she was in a mood now to be alone and unhappy. It wasn't pleasant to wander around alone in the darkness, but she wanted to suffer. Night surrounded her like black velvet. If she looked up, the stars seemed to flicker so unsteadily that it made her dizzy. From the village high street she could hear singing and laughing; a vehicle drove down the road, and through the nocturnal quiet she could hear its progress for a long time. It gave her the feeling of dark, endless plain. Indeed, when others desert you, then you are alone on an endless, dark plain.

Across the way from the forest of trees in the park she heard a rustling and she began to feel uneasy. Even the flowers that she passed, the roses and gillyflowers with their familiar smell, seemed strange to her, and when she bent down and touched them, they felt cold and wet and unpleasant.

Then she remembered the phrase "princesses sit at home and wait for a crown" and said it aloud in the darkness. It actually sounded tragic, really eerie. She didn't know why, but it sounded eerie, so she headed for home, walking a bit faster than before.

In the garden room people were getting ready to leave. Count Streith said goodbye, and the others also wanted to retire, so they wished each other a good night. Only Mlle. Laure was missing—she was still wandering around the dark garden thinking about her viscount.

The princesses all slept in one large, white room. Everything there was white: the walls, the beds, the vanities, and the muslin curtains. Marie allowed herself to be silently and motionlessly undressed by Alwine, the old chambermaid, like a doll. She wanted to sleep, she **yearned** for sleep to bring this joyless day to an end.

When she had gotten into bed and the maid was dismissed, Eleonore and Roxane sat a while with each other and whispered. One could tell from the character of the voices that the conversation was private and about feelings. Marie was touched by it. Suddenly she joined the conversation: "I simply can't understand why I can't go along to the wedding."

"Because you are too young," responded Roxane gently.

"Too young to go," Marie repeated angrily, "that's not what it's about. You can attend a wedding even if you're not an adult. It's because of the cost of new dresses, and I find that unbelievably petty." But since there was no response, she closed her eyes but could not fall asleep because of her bitterness. The room got quiet. Eleonore had gone to bed and Roxane sat in front of her mirror, brushing her beautiful black hair, looking into the light of the candles. She did this every evening, and since the time she became engaged, it sometimes lasted until late at night. But tonight the figure of Roxane constantly brushing her long, black hair and staring into the distance seemed heartrendingly sad to Marie. She began to cry.

"What are you crying about, sweetie?" Roxane asked. She got up and went over to Marie's bed: "Why are you crying?"

“Because you're leaving,” Marie sobbed, “and because everything is so sad.”

Roxane kissed her on the forehead. “Just go to sleep,” she said. “That's how it seems right now, but everything will work out all right.” And with that she went back to the mirror, and Marie pressed her face into the pillow and cried until she fell asleep.

### Chapter 3.

The day for the departure to Karlstadt<sup>5</sup> had come. For Marie the days leading up to it had been joyless enough. The others had been very busy; they talked of outfits, suitcases, and the departure time of trains. But Marie had nothing to do, except go for walks with the tutors and listen to the history lectures of Professor Wirth.

When it finally came time to leave, Marie threw her arms around Roxane and cried passionately, but in her sorrow and pain she was pretty much alone. Even Roxane, who was resigned to leaving, didn't feel deeply moved. And so she left. Marie went to her room, threw herself onto her bed and sobbed. Occasionally Alwine came to see about her. She stood beside her and tried to talk to her: “What's all this crying about. How long is it going to last? Until our little princess gets married herself?”

But that did little to console her. She appeared at breakfast with reddened eyes, sat there without uttering a word. It annoyed her that Fräulein v. Dachsberg, the Major, Mlle. Laure, all of them, who were usually silent or quiet at table, today carried on a loud conversation.

After breakfast she went out into the garden and stretched out flat on the grass under an old plum tree. She lay quite still. She could hear the deep, calming sounds of bumblebees nearby. Dragonflies landed on her chest, but she didn't move; she lay there as if dead. If would serve them right, all of those people in the castle, if she really were dead, died from isolation and disappointment.

Suddenly she startled: it was time for the Dühnen boys to walk down the road. She resolved to wait for the boys at the gate today. It wasn't polite—that she knew—but that's exactly what she wanted. She got up and went to position herself at the gate. And sure enough the boys were just turning onto the road, Coco at the lead, his hands full of pebbles that he was tossing at the posts of the garden fence. When he saw Marie he suddenly stopped in surprise.

“Hello,” he cried. “There's only one of them today.” The two other boys also stopped and said hello.

“You're alone today?” Felix asked and blushed.

Marie blushed too. “Yes,” she replied, “my mother and my sisters are out of town.”

Felix couldn't think of anything to say, so Marie continued the conversation: “Have you been swimming?”

Yes, they had all been swimming.

“Don't princesses go swimming?” Coco asked.

Marie didn't answer the question, but rather turned to Felix: “Is where you go swimming far from here?”

“No,” he replied, “it's just around the turn in the road in a small field at the edge of the forest.”

“Is it pretty there?” she said, pursuing the matter a bit.

“You don't know the spot?” Felix asked with astonishment. “If you just follow the path it'll take you there.” And suddenly a boyish smile brightened his otherwise serious face, “We'll take you there,” he suggested.

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5 Presumably, Karlstadt is the locaiton of Princess Adelheid's brothers' estate, the proposed site of the wedding.

“How could I?” Marie stuttered, her heart beating faster.

“Well,” Felix thought, “we can just run down the road quickly and cross over the field. No one will see us in the forest.”

Marie felt a bit faint as people do when a sudden decision flings them blindly into a dangerous situation. “Wait a minute,” she said, and ran to the small portal of the garden, and suddenly she was on the road.

“She's coming, she's coming!” Coco beamed.

“Let's get going,” Felix commanded, and they began to run. They turned off the road onto a small mown field. The ground there was moist, and with every step there was a sucking sound and a bit of black water squirted over their shoes. But there lay the little river shining in the mid-day sun, surrounded by tall, green reeds. It smelled of water here, of reeds and moist earth. The air was adventurously exciting, Marie thought. Finally they reached the edge of the forest; Marie stopped, laid her hand on her breast and struggled for breath.

“That was a good run,” Felix observed.

Marie tried to smile: “It's nothing,” she said, but she was close to tears.

“Now we can go slowly,” Felix said. Bruno and Coco took the lead; they collected pine cones and threw them at a squirrel that looked down at them mockingly. Felix walked beside Marie and played the role of guide to the forest. Ancient fir trees stood with majestically bent branches and gray moss; further along there was thick underbrush, and mighty roots snaked over earth covered with green and red moss. The sun sprayed over the pine needles and the air was heavy with the smell of resin. “You **do** have to be careful about the roots here,” said Felix, “you don't see them, then you fall. There's a lizard. Should I catch it? It has a yellow belly.”

“No, don't do it,” Marie begged.

“Oh, it won't hurt you,” said Felix. “There are berries here too, but we're coming to a spot where there are more, and we can eat all we want.”

Marie stopped and listened to a sound coming from the woods. “What is that?” she asked.

“Those are doves,” Felix reported. “In the morning if you stand under a dead tree and call them, they'll come.” And Felix began to imitate the call of a forest dove.

“You do that rather well,” said Marie admiringly.

Felix shrugged his shoulders: “I can do lots of bird calls,” he said. But anyway, this forest was interesting in a different way from the one that Marie had ridden through in the carriage<sup>6</sup> or the one where she and Fräulein v. Dachsberg, a footman in tow, went walking.

The boys seemed so much at home here. Bruno and Coco jumped around as if in a giant playroom, and Felix talked about fir trees and lizards as if they were friends of his. It was humiliating for her not to feel attached to all this herself, but rather to wander through it as a stranger. Just then they came to a little brook that worked its way through the black forest soil and even its water was black, except in a few spots where it was covered by plant leaves. A rotten plank served as a bridge. Coco and Bruno ran over the bridge, leaving it shaking.

“Can you get over?” Felix asked politely.

“Oh, yes,” she answered confidently, but her pulse was racing because the board was slippery and shook and she was afraid of falling. And she did fall, landing upright in the middle of the black, tepid water. From the shore loud came laughter from Bruno and Coco. She looked to Felix for help, but that once polite face had turned into the broad mocking face of a boy. A fat frog sat on a big leaf and stared at her as if annoyed. Even the doves in the trees laughed.

This is like a really, really bad dream, Marie thought, and she began to cry.

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6 *Kalesche*, a barouche. A four-wheeled carriage with a convertible top.

Finally Felix sprang to her rescue, reached out his hands to her and said, "Come on." With some effort Marie was pulled onto shore. And there she stood, her dress black and wet, her feet heavy with mud. She was still crying, and Coco still laughed his wild way, but Felix grew more serious.

"That was dumb. Now what are we going to do?" he said. He thought for a while and came up with a plan. "Princess Marie, please come this way," he said, turning politely towards her again. And he led her through the thicket to a clearing covered with moss and surrounded by young firs. "Please make yourself comfortable here," Felix continued. "No one can see you here. Our towels are here. I'll run home quickly and look for some dry clothes for you. I'll be right back. Don't worry."

And with that he was gone. Marie sat down on the moss and collapsed inwardly. She was truly miserable and felt guilty. What would she tell them at home? Her courage and spirit of adventure had fled, leaving only a little girl fearful of being scolded. Mechanically, she began to remove her socks and shoes, took off her wet skirts and wrapped herself in the towels.

When all the excitement was over, she felt distinctly tired and had a sense of resignation. From a distance she heard the voices of the two boys. Coco sang: "I saw the princess's legs!" She stretched out on the moss and above her she could see the tops of the fir trees swaying gently against the clear blue sky, and in the branches tiny spiders swung on clear webs, and titmice flew silently about like little bunches of feathers. Everything was so calm and carefree that it was almost humiliating to lie here with a guilty conscience.

The forest sang its own song to her, and somewhere a sparrow worked tirelessly, and a jay voiced an alert from time to time. Marie stretched out, the sun shining warmly on her naked feet. If things weren't so terrible, it really could have been comfortable, she thought, and reached for some berries growing next to her, and ate some of them. Overhead a big blue bird landed on a branch of a Scots pine and sat there quietly peering down at her. She took it as a kind of honor to be regarded by the bird as something familiar that belonged to the spot. She closed her eyes, tried not to think of the castle and of Fräulein v. Dachsberg—all of that seemed endlessly far away. She thought of nothing at all. A sense of contentment warmed her body, and it seemed that she too swayed like the sun-lit tops of the fir trees or as if she were gently rocking on a thread like the silver threads of little spiders.

Suddenly something fell on her and she startled. She sat up feeling grumpy at being disturbed. In her lap lay a package wrapped in newspaper and when she opened it, she found a pair of boys' socks and a recently washed pair of blue linen pants. She stared at these curious objects, then lay back down and began to laugh, to laugh so hard that her whole body shook and began to feel warm. That renewed her spirits. She pulled on the socks, slipped into the linen pants, pulled her wet clothes on over that, and stepped out of the thicket. The three boys greeted her with serious miens trying hard to keep their faces and lips under control. "Really, Princess," Felix said ceremoniously, "that will work out, and I couldn't find anything else."

"Oh, thank you," replied Marie, now the perfect princess again, "this is just fine."

They led her carefully back across the dangerous bridge, and on the way home through the forest Felix gave her instructions on how she could get back home without being seen. He did so with a knowledge of the topic belonging to someone who has a lot of experience in forbidden activities. When they got to the field they began to run again, dashed down the road, and stopped at the lattice gate to the castle garden.

"Thank you," said Marie self-consciously, "that was a lot of fun."

"Let's do it more often then," suggested Felix, then they parted.

Marie slipped carefully through the berry bushes along the boxwood hedge towards the castle, which still sat silent in the noon-day siesta. If it weren't for her wet dress and the maltreated shoes, then all of what she had experienced would have seemed like a dream—such an improbable thing here in the midst of the accustomed tranquility. She reached the back door of the castle and went into her

room without being seen. She rang for Alwine, who would scold her but not betray her. Before that, however, she took off the linen pants and hid them.

Alwine came, and when she heard what had happened, she gave her a strict reprimand: “A princess running around the in the forest with strange young boys—whoever heard of such a thing! It's a scandal and a fine queen you'll make. I'd like to see a people that wants a queen like that.” Marie had to go to bed and lie quietly and Alwine would tell the others that she had a headache and could not be disturbed.

When the old servant was gone, Marie closed her eyes: no, she didn't regret a thing, she was just very tired and fell asleep with a smile on her face.

She awoke in a good mood and rejuvenated. She had to focus her thoughts on figuring out what was special about what had happened, but then she knew: a secret, something delightfully portentous had crept into the ordinary life of a princess and it giggled at her every time she thought of it. And she thought about it a lot. She thought about it when Baron Fürwit led her to the dining room; she thought about it during dinner, there in the formality of the dining room, seated in front of the white and silver altar-like dining table. And she could actually smell the fragrance of the soil of the moor and the rosin of the fir trees. In the evening when she walked back and forth with Mlle. Laure in the dark garden, while Mlle. Laure told stories about life in the boarding school and the students. And when she went to sleep, she begged Alwine to stay with her for a while because she was afraid of being alone in the large, white room. It was comforting to lie in bed and have Alwine's peaceful, lamp-lit face in front of her with her large glasses bent over a sock she was knitting.

“Alwine,” Marie asked, “were you pretty when you were young?”

“That I don't know,” replied Alwine in an annoyed tone, “Princesses should go to sleep.”

But Marie keep asking: “Alwine, did you occasionally go into the forest with boys you didn't know?”

“Little princesses don't ask questions like that,” the old woman answered.

Marie looked up at the ceiling. It must be that each person's real life has its own secrets—that was how it was, of course. Everyone has his own secrets, everyone: the whole castle was full of secrets. Mlle. Laure once said that during the mid-day break she went to her room, closed the door, and danced by herself for a whole hour sometimes, for, she said, life here in the castle was no life at all: “*on étouffe*.” So that was how it was, everyone did it, the whole castle with its formalities was full of closed doors like that with people secretly dancing behind them. They all did it, old Baron Fürwit and poor, sad Fräulein v. Dachsberg, the Major, little Baroness Dönhof, and Mama, yes, even Mama. This thought was so stimulating that her whole body twitched like a trout in water.

“Little princesses these days are naughty,” muttered Alwine.

## Chapter 4.

Next day around noon Marie was sitting and waiting in her accustomed place under the plum tree, beside her the linen pants wrapped in paper.

Coco and Bruno came first. Coco pressed his nose against the lats of the gate and cried, “He's on his way.” Then he ran off warbling “He's fallen in love with a princess!”

Marie took her package and positioned herself at the gate.

And sure enough Felix came ambling along, his towel over his shoulder. He stopped and laughed: “Did everything work out all right?” he asked.

“Yes, thanks,” Marie replied, “I wanted to return this to you.” She opened the fence gate and blushed as she said politely, “Would you like to come in for a bit?”

"Here?" Felix asked in astonishment.

"Oh, no one will see us here," she reassured him, "we just have to go among the currant bushes."

"Well, that's different," Felix agreed, and stepped into the garden.

Marie walked ahead of him to show him the way into the middle of the thicket of gooseberries and currants. She stopped in front of a big currant bush and said, "Here, please." Felix was supposed to sit down there, and Marie sat down beside him. The two sat there as if in a reception room. All around them were branches full of shiny red berries, hot in the midday sun, and in the bushes there was a gentle humming and buzzing as if the ripe fruit were being cooked in the heat. The air twinkled with myriad white wings and glistening bodies.

"Do you like red currants?" Marie asked.

"Yes, I do," Felix replied, and with his brown boy's hand with its many scrapes and mosquito bites he reached for the fruit.

"Was the water cold today?" Marie asked, continuing the conversation.

No, it wasn't cold, at this time of year it was never cold.

"Can you swim?" she pressed.

Yes, Felix could swim, they had to learn how at military school. Then Felix returned the question: "Can you swim?"

"No," she replied, "I wanted to learn, but the doctor forbade it."

"Are you sickly?" Felix asked politely.

Marie blushed. "Oh, no," she said, "it's just that I had a cough during the winter."

Felix shrugged his shoulders: "Doctors are always so cautious," he said with obvious disregard.

Then for a while no one could think of anything to say; Felix ate the currants, and Marie observed her guest carefully, his boy's body stretched comfortably and loosely under the loose-fitting smock, his brown face, his blue eyes, his bright-white teeth. His mouth was remarkable with its short, curved upper lip. If he closed his mouth tightly, he looked very serious, but when he opened his mouth and laughed, then his whole face laughed with him, an uninhibited and hugely carefree laugh.

Suddenly Felix slapped Marie's hand, "Excuse me," he said, "it was a mosquito."

"You can really hit hard," Marie noted.

"Is it turning red?" Felix asked and reached for her hand, holding it for a moment in his warm boy's hand. "I don't see anything," he said and let go of her hand. Then both children smiled at each other without knowing why.

"Well, I should probably be going," Felix said, and since Marie did not object, he crept through the bushes back to the garden gate as skillfully as a weasel. But Marie sat for a long time under the currant bush, picked some currants deliberately, and relived the strange feelings from this significant moment in her life.

From this point on, only this golden hour of the day existed for Marie. With the wastefulness of youth she blotted out all other experiences for the sake of this daily meeting. So it did not matter whether she had to listen to Professor Wirth or had to take a walk with Fräulein v. Dachsberg. The only thing that mattered now was that this boyish form, hot from walking, lay beside her under the current bush, his hair still wet and on his clothes the odor of water and reeds, with the fragrance of red currants in the simmering heat of the afternoon. And conversation now went without a hitch.

"Is it true that you are wild?" she asked.

"Who said that?" Felix quickly responded.

"Count Streith says as much," Marie replied, "he says you have trouble with following orders."

Felix laughed with a sense of relief. "Oh well," he said, "you can't let yourself be bossed around by those men all the time." Now came the stories about his smoking and drinking in secret and

about how he climbed out of windows, all of it interrupted by sarcastic laughter.

Marie listened attentively and laughed in the same mocking way. Felix's laugh was quite contagious, she had to laugh, it was as if someone were tickling her face with a feather. It was also good when they had nothing to say and Felix let berries disappear one by one between his handsome lips, and now and then killed a gnat on Marie's hand.

Then a sweet trepidation came over Marie, her breath was a bit labored, and her palms felt on fire. Once they came close to real danger: suddenly, in the quiet of mid-day, they heard the voice of Fräulein v. Dachsberg calling with her plaintive treble, "Princess Marie!" Felix made himself look small, curling up under a berry bush like a hedgehog. Marie was shocked. "You go ahead, I'll stay here," he whispered.

Then Marie surfaced, much overheated, little leaves in her tangled hair. Over by the raspberry bushes stood ladies in bright dresses, and Fräulein v. Dachsberg called and motioned. Marie recognized Baroness von Üchtlitz with her daughter Hilda.

"Why, Princess," said Fräulein v. Dachsberg sadly, "now is not the time to be outside."

But the Baroness smiled and said, "At this time of day the berries taste the best, that I know. Princess Marie, I brought my daughter Hilda over to keep you company."

The Baroness was a large, beautiful woman who carried herself properly and moved her still youthful head cautiously as if her high-piled hair was a crown that could fall off. Next to her stood Hilda, also large and upright. Count Streith once said, "The Üchtlitz ladies have a way of carrying themselves as if they were concealing a sword under their dresses." Hilda had splendid, ash-blond hair, good coloration, and a broad, red mouth.

Marie was so excited that she hardly knew what she was saying, but one thing was clear to her: she had to get out of here. She took Hilda by the arm and said, "Why don't we go for a walk along the avenue in the shade." The two girls led the way, and the two older ladies followed slowly behind.

Marie talked excitedly and fast, as if in a fever, and thanked Hilda profusely for coming. "I am so lonely. They wouldn't take me along to the wedding—that's just criminal, don't you think?"

Hilda listened with her superior smile and looked at Marie attentively. "You have changed, Princess," she said. "You're so full of life and animated."

"Really?" replied Marie, "Perhaps I have developed?"

Hilda's shoulder twitched bit: "Oh, no, princesses don't develop."

That annoyed Marie and she turned red all over: "Why shouldn't we develop? Of course, I don't want to be a nurse or to work at the post office, but I can still develop."

Hilda laughed her loud, good-natured laugh. "I've heard that business about the post office—that's what my father said. No, I don't want to work at the post office either, but there are so many other professions. Actually, all the professions are open to us, we just have to master them. Our brothers don't stay at home, and they can become whatever they want. Why should we remain daughters forever? Daughter is such a terrible word. A daughter is a being whose only function is to be sent home in the evening to fetch her mother a shawl because it's beginning to get chilly."

Marie wasn't really listening any longer, but rather was wondering whether that blue form lay amidst the berries bushes in the clearing. And since Hilda noticed that her companion was distracted, she stopped talking. So the two girls walked through the leafy shadows and the sunshine of the tree-lined avenue, each alone in her thoughts. Finally, Marie asked, completely without context: "Were you the girl in red in the swing being pushed by the officer when we walked by?"

"Yes," confirmed Hilda, "the officer was my cousin Barnitz, he has a crush on me."

"Really? Tell me about it," Marie pressed, "Do you like him too?"

"Yes, I guess so," Hilda replied, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, "it's a poetic

kind of love. He sends me roses, secretly holds my hand and declares his love for me. Every evening when we go for a walk in the garden he declares his love. He always starts when we get to a certain bed of gillyflowers.”

“What does he say?” asked Marie, digging a bit deeper.

“Oh, I don't know. When you tell someone you love them, the most important thing is a warm, singing tone of voice that can speak right to the heart. Heavens! As long as they're in love with us, they're all nice. But as soon as they notice that we're beginning to give in, then they become ridiculous. Then they pretend they're the kings of the jungle, shaking their manes, and we should be little naked lionesses. Men and women will never be equal until men can kiss us without having to appear to be our protectors.”

Marie was a bit embarrassed, “Well, how do you know that...?”

But Hilda laughed: “Oh, these little princesses and the questions they ask!”

They had reached the castle now and climbed up the steps to the garden room where they were to take tea. Marie held tight to Hilda's arm and said softly, “How pretty and clever you are.” At this moment she began to love Hilda dearly. Hilda smiled sympathetically.

The Princess was expected back the next day. Marie had to tell her berry-bush companion that today was the last time that they could meet together there.

Felix raised his eyebrows and made a strange face, a face that was supposed to show indifference: “Well, if that's how it is,” he indicated, “I have to leave pretty soon anyway, my damned school is starting again.”

Marie asked how the water had been. He swatted another gnat on her hand, but otherwise the day was just a matter of sitting together hardly saying a word. Everything seemed sad to her today, the sunshine, the berries, the monotonous humming of the bees. Someone needed to say something nice, but nothing could be expected from Felix, and she herself could think of nothing. “Well, I have to be going,” Felix said simply, reached to shake her hand, and was about to slip away. But suddenly he turned around, grasped Marie's head from behind, bent it back and pressed his hot lips firmly on her mouth. Then he was gone.

Marie sat there upset, motionless; she hadn't expected that. It was hurtful; he really was too wild, and he didn't play by the rules. And yet she was deeply moved. Tears came to her eyes and she began to cry tears that the sun warmed on her cheeks. She cried because he had offended her and because her experience had just ended, and because she painfully missed the tall, wild boy here under the currant bushes.

## Chapter 5.

With the Princess now back at home, life resumed its familiar path. After dinner they gathered in the garden room as usual. Baroness Dönhof played Halma with Baron Fürwit, the Princess sat near the opened door to the garden, and next to her was Count Streith, talking to her.

“My dear Count,” the Princess said slowly as if it felt good just to let the words die away languidly, “how good it is to be back in the peace and tranquility of home again. I am no longer suited for life at the court. That world where trivial things assume so much importance exhausts me and no longer interests me.”

“Of course,” the Count said reassuringly, and looked down, giving the impression that he was sitting there with his eyes closed, “life there is all *staccato prestissimo*. Here we have pedal points on the organ.” “Very cleverly put,” the Princess asserted, “but perhaps it's not to be. My sister-in-law, the



Duchess, asked me if it wasn't difficult to maintain the propriety necessary for the girls' education. Good heavens! Dönhof does what she can, but I fear that our kind of propriety would not satisfy the Duchess. Say what you will, but out here in the country you get a little too comfortable and a bit cowardly.”

The Count laughed gently. “Yes, I too have often admired those heroes of the life at court, and to think that I once was one of those heroes.”

“You see,” the Princess continued thoughtfully, “all those people seemed like expensive objects to me, things that always stay in a jewel box. I too was once such a creature that never came out of my case. But now I have, perhaps unjustly, but it feels good.”

The Count leaned over a bit and said with a softer voice, “There is perhaps a moment when we have a right to our own lives.”

The Princess looked at him in a friendly manner. “Now we have a few peaceful weeks ahead of us,” she thought, “so let's enjoy them, these pedal points—as you said earlier—these pedal points on the organ. In a short while we will have disorder, my nephew, the engagement, the hunt. Tomorrow, I think, I shall ride again.” She leaned back in her chair and stared into the dark stillness of the night, gently rubbing one hand with the other as if the hands were grateful to each other. “My, my, Count, how strong the gillyflowers smell tonight.”

Marie went into the garden with Eleonore.

Marie now wanted to be the one who had confidential conversations with her sister, and she knew that Eleonore had something important to tell her. Mlle. Laure, heaven knows why, always was the first to hear everything, had told Marie that Eleonore's engagement to her cousin Joachim from Neustatt-Birkenstein was already sealed. The heir to the throne was supposed to come to Gutheiden in October to make it official.

That was what Marie was expecting to hear from Eleonore, but the latter was very closed-mouthed and seemed sad. Of course Marie, too, was sad because they missed Roxane, but that was no reason not to have a conversation. So she spoke first of herself, about her loneliness, and how Fräulein v. Dachsberg and the Major had seemed at dinner, and how Fräulein v. Dachsberg had comported herself during the carriage ride almost as if she were the Princess. But when Eleonore still said nothing, Marie began to be annoyed. “I can't understand you, Lore,” she said, “why haven't you told me that you've gotten engaged to Cousin Joachim.”

“You'll hear about it soon enough, sweetie,” Eleonore replied calmly.

“So, it's true then?” Marie translated. “In any case it's hurtful that I have to find out things like this from Mlle. Laure. And then, both you and Roxane have a way of acting as if an engagement were something to be sorry about.”

“It is something of a serious nature,” Eleonore confirmed. Marie thought for a while. Yes, she had to admit, there was perhaps something serious about an engagement.

Whether or not an engagement was something serious, for the present at least nothing much changed to ease the monotony of life during those late summer days with their eternally blue skies and bright sunshine. Mornings the Princess went riding. Marie was not allowed to ride because the doctor had forbidden it. She stood downcast on the steps outside and watched as the two handsome figures rode out in their dark blue riding clothes and light-colored riding caps, their veils billowing in the wind on such sunny mornings.

She followed them with her eyes until the last traces of the groom's blue and silver back disappeared behind the trees in the park. The Princess loved to ride the path at full gallop down to the gate, then they turned into the area where young trees were protected. The air was still full of glittering moisture that gently stroked one's face. Along both sides of the road stood little trees like green candelabra and the forest meadows were still gray from spider webs wet with dew. On such morning

rides the Princess was as excited as a girl.

“Child,” she cried, “isn't this wonderful? There couldn't be anything better. Why don't you answer?” Her cheeks turned a bit red and her eyes watered. Eleonore was a nature lover, but above all she admired her mother. But as a person who was quiet and still by nature, she could not understand how anyone could get so excited.

At a curve in the path Count Streith was waiting for her. He sat upright on his big dun horse and waved with his black velvet riding cap. “Oh, Count,” cried the Princess, “isn't this just a wonderful morning? The air and the light are simply intoxicating.”

The Count joined the ladies. He had an attractive, ceremonious way of riding beside the Princess, and the dun horse also trotted carefully and observantly. The path became wider here and the Princess ordered them to gallop. It was a short run to the tall fir trees and the morning wind blew little droplets of water down on the riders. The Princess gave herself over completely to the motion, smiled at the breeze and the light with a dreamy smile. Finally, she drew the reins tight and the horses fell into a comfortable pace. “That was great,” she said and breathed deeply, “that's the best way to take in all this beauty.”

“Yes, well,” the Count said, “the forest a morning pint—a good idea!” They rode side by side for a while, then the Princess began to converse with the Count: “You weren't at dinner yesterday. What did you do all evening?”

“I celebrated a festival of solitude,” replied the Count.

“How do you mean?” the Princess asked.

“First, I have them light all the lamps in my drawing room,” the Count explained, “then I go out into the garden. Yesterday night there were no stars out, and the night was so dark that I could only find my way by the smell of the flowers along the paths. It's really quite nice. You can hear the first ripe pears falling onto the grass, and all around there is the rustling feet of hedgehogs hunting for mice. And when I look back at the house, the windows are gleaming, and I imagine that someone is sitting inside waiting for me. Such are the phantasies of a lonely person.”

The Princess said nothing, bent over a little and gently patted her horse's neck. Eleonore listened to the conversation, but said nothing and she had the feeling that the two of them had forgotten her completely.

During this same time Marie was permitted to take a walk in the forest with Fräulein v. Dachsberg. To her the forest appeared infinitely monotonous and uninteresting. The mushrooms along the paths had no sense of humor, and the squirrels in the trees seemed as lifeless as those depicted in books about natural science which she had looked at sleepily when she was a child on boring Sunday afternoons. Fräulein v. Dachsberg carried the conversation: “When my mother,” she related, “took me for a walk in the forest, it was a true joy, and I felt so lively, almost as if freed, and I peppered my mother with all sorts of questions, I wanted to know everything, I wanted to be taught everything.”

Marie arched her eyebrows. No, she resolved, she would not direct even a single question to Fräulein v. Dachsberg. She felt more in sympathy with Friedrich the footman, who trotted beside them with sleepy indifference. There seemed to be no source of pleasure for this part of the day. Around noon the princesses sat under the plum tree, but just the smell of the air here and the sounds reminded Marie painfully of Felix. She waited tensely for the Dühnen boys to walk by the gate, and when they did come, and Felix smiled and said hello, she felt a warmth in her heart.

That evening over dinner the Princess reported that on the previous night a watchman had heard a dove cooing in the big lime tree in front of the house. When he looked closer, he found someone sitting in the tree, and it was none other than Felix Dühnen. The Countess had come over during the day in person to apologize for her son. The poor woman had her hands full with those unmanageable young people.

“And she will have a lot more to go through with that young man,” Count Streith asserted, “and the father's exaggerated strictness won't help either.”

Marie bent low over her plate. She felt the blood shoot into her cheeks and she had the urge to laugh, but a strange emotion kept her soundless.

## Chapter 6.

Every year on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August they received an invitation from Schlochtin to come and celebrate Baroness Üchtlitz's birthday. The Princess was not fond of these invitations. “The Baroness, she opined, “is a clever and refreshingly lively woman, but the things that go on in her household are far too broad-minded for me and my daughters.” This year the invitation was particularly unwanted because in the last few weeks the Princess had asserted that she was fanatically passionate about her peace and quiet. She thought the Üchtlitz family would not be insulted if only the two princesses attended, accompanied by Baroness Dönhof and Baron Fürwit.

“Finally we're beginning to show signs of life,” Marie said to Alwine as she dressed. The landau was already waiting at the door and Baron Fürwit scurried around on the front steps constantly looking at his watch. The princesses too were ready for the departure in their blue summer dresses with coral necklaces.

“Please, Your Excellency,” Marie said, “is it really proper form to keep princesses waiting?”

The Baron chuckled: “It's a benefit of country living.”

“Fine,” said Marie, “I'll make use of that principle myself sometime.” The Baron laughed so hard that his whole face was distorted; he found Princess Marie really very witty. Finally Baroness Dönhof arrived and so they could leave.

During the trip the Baron and the Baroness discussed what measures they could take to protect the princesses from the ever-present dangers of the Dühnen household. It sounded like a well thought out plan. Marie listened to all of it, bored. All of these security measures themselves could spoil the pleasure of the excursion.

The carriage did not drive up to the castle, but rather turned onto a meadow in the middle of which was a grove of linden trees for it was there that they were to take tea. The meadow and the grove were full of people, full of bright clothing, colorful ribbons, colorful hats. And amidst the forest greenery in the golden light of the afternoon sun all the colors took on a jewel-like glow. Just in front of the grove sat the Üchtlitzes, the Baroness with her daughters Henriette, Marga, and Hilda—imposing bright figures, blond and rosy—and behind them the sons of the family, the assistant judge, the barrister, and the lieutenant, all powerful, broad figures with large mustaches and muttonchops. And in the midst of the robust family sat Baron Üchtlitz himself, gray-haired, somewhat bent, strangely old and frail.

When the carriage stopped, all their faces displayed friendly, but somewhat rigid smiles, and Marie felt that same fixed smile was on her face as well. But she didn't mind it because she knew that she would be able to play the princess today with little effort. During the greetings she thought of something to say, she admired the meadow and the stand of linden trees, and thought that all the colors were well displayed against the forest green. One thing did bother her, however: next to her she heard Eleonore's quiet, pleasant voice saying almost exactly the same things she had said.

“I think we should do a little tour,” Baroness Üchtlitz suggested, “the view here is really quite nice.”

So slowly they walked across the meadow and around the grove, the Baroness in the lead with

Eleonore, followed by Marie with Henriette Üchtlitz, then Baroness Dönhof with Marga Üchtlitz. They seemed intent on discussing the weather. They had feared that a storm might ruin the festivities, but now the skies were completely clear, and this summer the weather was so constant, and that would lead to a beautiful fall—of that they were all certain.

On the meadow gentlemen and ladies were standing in separate groups; one heard loud voices and occasionally sudden laughter. As the princesses passed, the conversations ceased and deep obeisances were made, a few ladies came forward to greet the princesses. There was Countess Dühren, with a pale and sickly face but with Felix's attractive mouth, and the pretty wife of the state prosecutor von Böse bowed deeply, a slender figure in a red silk dress, her face opaquely white, but with unnaturally large and dark eyes, a bright red and malicious mouth.

Mlle. Laure had said that the prosecutor's wife had a bad reputation, and Marie looked at her full of curiosity. In the middle of the meadow stood the pastor's daughters in pink muslin dresses, large shepherd's hats on their heads, round, laughing faces and it made her happy to see such colorful spots in this natural setting. Count Krüden, the district administrator, had joined Marie and Henriette. He sported a golden pince-nez, and his beard—as reddish-brown as a nasturtium—billowed in the wind. He talked about how hot it was in Berlin, and did so with much humor, and he laughed constantly so that Henriette and Marie had to laugh along with him so that passers-by thought that the conversation must really have been interesting. When they got to the edge of the meadows they stopped to admire the view. The land lay broad and flat before them, fields of stubble, new-mown meadows, here and there a field of oats, and on low knolls a few windmills stood out in the sunshine, gray monsters with enormous dragonfly wings. Far away in the golden haze they could see the church tower in the town.

“How pretty,” the ladies said, “and how far one can see!”

The district administrator declared solemnly, “Yes, ladies, it truly is beautiful country, this part of the fatherland. And there's not one square inch of it that hasn't been touched by the hard work of its inhabitants.”

“A sublime view,” opined Baroness Dönhof.

But now it was time to return to the grove to take tea. Pillows and blankets had been laid out on the linden-shaded lawn. For the older ladies and the princesses, chairs and little tables had been furnished. Under the cover of leaves the air was a little heavy and sunbeams fell at an angle among the tree trunks. A little breeze was stirring and white blossoms rained down on the company and stuck to the ladies' hair and the beards of the gentlemen, and a sultry sweet fragrance settled on them.

Servants distributed tea and sandwiches, and those seated on pillows and blankets seemed to be in good spirits and everywhere one could hear quiet laughter; at times one of the pastor's daughters let out a little cry because Lieutenant von Üchtlitz uttered such interesting things. The daughters of the house devoted themselves to the princesses. Marga replaced Henriette at keeping Marie company and talked about their dogs, and when Marga too had to take care of some business, Henriette wanted to bring Hilda over to keep her company, but Hilda refused. Marie saw it all clearly: it was a definite rejection. Of course, Marie thought, we are like boring sick people that people don't want to spend any time with.

The district administrator next suggested that they should do some singing, “because,” he said, “a party in the country without singing is like a woman without a soul.”

“I know of no woman without a soul,” said von Bärensberg, an attorney who looked as handsome and dark as Hans Heiling.<sup>7</sup>

“Bravo!” said a woman. The prosecutor's wife was asked to present something. She leaned against a beech tree, dangling her arms and locking her fingers together. She stood there for a moment

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7 Hans Heiling, a mythological figure.

looking like a shy little girl her eyes cast down. Suddenly she opened her eyes—large and dark as fate itself—and begin to sing in a beautiful alto: “*Vorrei morir nella stagion' del anno.*”<sup>8</sup> She threw herself into this complaint so completely that the faces of the listeners began to look serious and touched by the emotion.

What's making her sing something like that, Marie wondered. Is it because she has a bad reputation? In any case it's unbearably sad. Marie was afraid that she was about to cry. When the song was over, the three Üchtlitz boys called out “Bravo!” Countess Dühnen confided to Baroness Dühnhof, “It's the theater.”

“That was marvelous,” cried the county commissioner, “but, ladies and gentlemen, after so much sorrow let's enliven ourselves a bit with a patriotic song,” and he led them in singing “*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.*” The choir joined in enthusiastically and the song resounded so loudly across the meadow that the dogs over at the castle started barking.

After the song the party took to diversions in the woods. Some sort of games were being played because one could hear laughter and voices, and then Johanna, the pastor's daughter, slipped into the bushes followed by Lieutenant Üchtlitz who wanted to catch her.

“Ah, youth having a good time,” said Countess Dühnen.

“Yes,” replied Marie, who tried to smile as indulgently as the Countess, but she was rather bitter about it.

Finally Hilda came, her hair full of those linden blossoms. She sat down with Marie, laughed, and said, “I'm back, Princess.”

Marie had to smile back at her beautiful, lively face, and then said melancholically, “I'm sure you'd rather be with the others instead of sitting here.”

“Oh, no,” replied Hilda. “So far it has been boring, I know, but after dinner things will go better, there will be fireworks, and then we can slip away.”

“Slip away?” Marie questioned.

“Certainly,” Hilda confirmed, “we'll wander around the park a bit, there'll be lots to see and do.”

“If it's allowed,” Marie ventured timidly.

“It has to be,” Hilda said firmly. “We can't stop to think what other people will say about it later. We do what we want to.”

“You do what you want to?” Marie repeated and looked at Hilda in admiration.

The sun went down and Baroness von Üchtlitz invited her guests to come inside. A purple light spread over the meadow providing a sudden festiveness. Johanna, the pastor's daughter, spread her arms and turned a somersault, which she called “taking a twilight bath.” The prosecutor's wife had the urge to run, a little red figure in a red light, and the lawyer followed her enthusiastically with his eyes. “Üchtlitz, old man,” he said to the barrister, “doesn't she look like a small flame that is the source of all this light?”

Üchtlitz smiled mockingly, “That's rather fanciful, isn't it, old friend? But yes, there is something of the flibbertigibbet about her.” The castle was brightly lit and the evening meal was ready. These dinners in Schlochtin were dreaded because there was always too much to eat. Count Streith used to say, “My constitution can't take the dinners with the Üchtlitzes, as far as food goes I just can't compete with that bunch of gourmands.”

Marie sat at table next to assistant judge von Üchtlitz, who talked about the small automobile that he owned. Marie was actually interested in the topic, the kind that one couldn't let pass quickly. Meanwhile huge meat-pies and steaming roasts were being served. The count commissioner made a speech, and then Baron Üchtlitz spoke as well. Marie was tired and out of sorts—so far the whole day

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8 One of Paolo Francesco Tosti's best known and most performed pieces (1878), performed on all sorts of occasions.

had been a disappointment.

After the meal the guests all streamed out into the garden. The night was warm and the stars were out; paper lanterns had been hung from trees and bushes and all around these matte colors illuminated the dark. Occasionally, above the tops of the trees, a rocket went off, a golden streak against the darkness, followed by a the colorful fall of the balls of light. Marie felt someone's hand touch her and pull her away. "Nobody will find us here," Hilda whispered. Marie took hold of Hilda's arm and a pleasant sense of nervous tension made her heart beat faster. They walked down a dark allee and from the crunching of the gravel, they knew they weren't alone. From somewhere a voice said, "No, Herr Roth, you can't say that."

"It's the pastor's daughter Johanna with their secretary," Hilda whispered.

"Are they engaged?" Marie asked.

Hilda shrugged her shoulders: "Daughters of pastors are always engaged. But here come two people. Let's let them pass by." They must have been hiding among the hollyhocks because a large cool tassel brushed Marie's face. A couple walked past them, arm in arm, close together, and a whining voice said, "Parties are always so sad, Bärensprung, even when you talk to me like this, it's still sad, but please keep on talking, that's the best thing in life."

"The wife of the prosecutor and her lawyer," Hilda explained quietly.

"Why is she so sad?" Marie asked.

"I don't know," Hilda replied, "maybe she thinks it's the fault of her tragic eyes. But now we need to get over to the side path quickly because I hear someone coming, probably my cousin Barnitz who will be looking for us." They turned down a narrow path which led between thick hazelnut bushes. It was dark here and full of chirping grasshoppers. Gradually the brush thinned out and it got brighter. Soon they were standing by a small black pond which reflected the starlight. From the water you could hear gurgling and splashing occasionally and wet coolness arose from the pond. Suddenly another rocket blasted off high above the trees and a golden flash crossed the water, then all the light balls too were reflected as if there was a glow in its depths. Marie pressed Hilda's hand. "How beautiful," she said breathlessly, "and I like you so much. Please let's be friends."

"Yes, do let us be friends," Hilda replied solemnly.

"And let's use our first names with each other," continued Marie.

"As long as no one hears it," Hilda added.

"Yes, as long as no one hears it," Marie repeated, and the two girls embraced and kissed each other.

"You're trembling," Hilda said, "how your heart is beating, your poor princess's heart." They walked on hand in hand.

"Listen," said Hilda in her emphatic way, "when you really want something, something that your stupid little princess heart forbids you, you can count on me."

Marie pressed Hilda's hand firmly, she was very touched, this truly was real life, walking hand in hand through the darkness with the footfalls of couples on all the paths whispering secrets in the bushes. "There's one more thing I'd like," she said.

"What would that be?" asked Hilda.

"I'd like to sit in the swing just once," Marie continued.

Hilda laughed: "To swing? That's all? Oh, you poor silly chicken! Let's go do it right now."

## Chapter 7.

They had made their way back to the garden, but when they heard footfalls on the path, they

stopped. Hilda listened, then quietly exclaimed: "It's Cousin Egon!"

The footfalls approached rapidly and the friendly voice of Lieutenant von Barnitz said, "There you are, ladies. I've been searching high and low for you."

"Yes, we know," replied Hilda, "but now there's something we have to do. The Princess wants to ride in the swing, and of course it's got to be secret."

"At your service," blurted the lieutenant.

The swing hung between big trees, entirely in the dark. They sat Marie expertly in the swing and then it began. Marie flew high up into the dark wet branches of the trees, and below her the dark garden with its tiny points of light began to swing and shake with her, as did the sky above. She began to feel relieved of all reality, totally dream-like, and her heart pounded faster and faster, robbing her of her breath. At the same time it was totally peaceful to swing like that outdoors in the dark, and when the swinging suddenly stopped, Marie awoke as if from sleep: "The major-domo is looking for you," whispered Hilda, "here he comes."

Baron Fürwit was absolutely flustered. He had looked everywhere for the Princess, and Baroness Dönhof was so upset that she had had chest pains, and the carriage was waiting at the door. Marie listened to all of it dispassionately, she had only gone for a bit of a walk, she explained. The Baron's concerns and the Baroness's chest pains seemed of trivial to her.

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Prince Joachim von Neustatt-Birkenstein, heir to the throne, had come to make a short visit to Gutheiden, along with his adjutant, Captain von Keck. The tall, narrow-shouldered young man with his neatly parted hair and somewhat sickly face brought life to the quiet castle. His myopic blue eyes blinked nervously with their blond lashes, and his moist red lips were strangely agitated. The Prince sat in the garden room the first evening, talked a lot in a hasty, desultory fashion, told about himself and laughed his boisterous, bright laugh; he did a few card tricks, played the flute for them while the rest of the party sat there silently as if at a performance. But when he was alone with his adjutant, Captain von Keck, in his chambers, he said, "The ladies really are charming, but the atmosphere here in the castle is a bit stuffy, don't you think, Keck?"

"I didn't notice anything," replied the Captain with obvious correctness.

Early the next day the Prince asked to be shown the business features of the estate. Guided by the Major, the Prince, the princesses, Fräulein v. Dachsberg and Captain von Keck went to look at the stalls. In the cow stalls the Prince was mostly interested in the names of the cows—and the milkmaids. He was quite satisfied with the horse stalls: "Fabulous!" he exclaimed, "a veritable Sanssouci for horses. And how pious they look, like ladies of the court," he whispered to Eleonore and laughed aloud, "true, they do look a bit tired, as if they hadn't slept well or had lain too long abed." Then they inspected the dogs, and finally they went to see little Lake Mühlen from an angler's perspective. Later the Prince walked along the garden paths amid the colorful rows of dahlias with Eleonore.

Countess von Dönhof, who initially had accompanied the two, now maintained a discreet distance. The Prince made a serious face, raised his eyebrows as if thinking carefully: "I never told you," he began, "how happy I am with the arrangement our parents made, you were always my favorite cousin. I told my aunt in Karlstadt, 'Cousin Eleonore is splendid, she's like—fishing.'" He laughed aloud. "I know that sounds dumb, but for me fishing means peace and quiet. You'll have to watch me fish sometime, only those who have seen me fish really know me. One lady who saw me fishing told me, 'Now I understand that one day you will be a good ruler.'"

Eleonore took all this in with her quiet, friendly smile in place, but then the Prince's face began

to look troubled. "I'm not sure," he said, "that your mother likes me. I don't like the way she looks at me, I'm probably too active for her, I understand that, sometimes I'm too active even for myself. I think it would be a relief if one day I could be Captain von Keck. Oh, well, you are the way you are. Let's go play tennis," he concluded, without waiting for Eleonore to answer, "and after breakfast I'll go fishing and all of you can watch me."

After breakfast the princesses, accompanied by Fräulein v. Dachsberg and Mlle. Laure, betook themselves to Lake Mühlen. Garden chairs had been brought up for the ladies, while the Prince sat on the bank and fished, attended by a hunter's boy, and Captain von Keck retreated to the alder bushes with his fishing gear. "This is not the right time of day," said the Prince, "but let's give it a try. Please observe now how I cast the line, that's the art of it, and keep watching the bob, and of course we have to remain absolutely quiet."

With a graceful swing the Prince landed the hook in the water, the ladies leaned forward a bit, focussing on the bob, and it wasn't long before it began to twitch, and then went under water. The Prince drew in the line and pulled out a beautiful perch that shimmered like a jewel. "Perfect, perfect!" he shouted and laughed.

"No, I'll do it myself," he said, shooing the hunter's boy away. With nervous, white fingers he grasped the fish and pulled out the hook, grimacing as if he felt the pain himself. But then he laughed again in triumph: "Isn't it beautiful? *N'est-ce pas, il est beau, Mademoiselle?*"

"*Oh, Altesse, superbe,*" said Mlle. Laure reverently.

"That's it. I'm going to cast the line again, so please be quiet!" commanded the Prince. The hook flew into the water and everyone remained quiet, but no fish took the bait. The motionless air was oppressively hot, there was a glare on the water and on the rushes; all around it was quiet occasionally interrupted by the clucking of a duck or the joyless cry of a coot. Eleonore looked at the Prince's face, formerly so lively, but now slack, all expression wiped away: it was the face of a tired, cranky boy.

This was not something Eleonore wanted to see, so she shut her eyes. How good it felt to be at rest, and how good it was that thoughts gradually become unclear and jumbled. Fräulein v. Dachsberg had been sitting in her chair with her eyes closed for a long time and Marie was squinting in the glare of the sun. She had imagined engagements as somehow different—this was more like day-to-day reality. Did anyone here resemble a bride? Perhaps Mlle. Laure with her protruding black eyes that stared at the Prince. No, the best thing to do would be to nod off to sleep like the others.

"Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't!" cried the Prince. The dozing ladies startled to wakefulness, the Prince stood on the bank and had thrown away his fishing rod, his face red with anger. Soon thereafter, however, he was smiling and laughing again: "You ladies were sleeping, I understand completely. But not it's time to get back to the castle, Baron Fürwit has organized a ride. Keck, where are you?" And von Keck, overheated and sleepy, crawled out from under the alder bushes.

"Well!" the Prince deduced: "I really don't have much of a retinue here, do I?"

Back at the castle Baron Fürwit had been busy organizing an outing to the forest. The Princess and Princess Eleonore were to ride with the gentlemen, the other ladies would follow in a coach. At the forester's house they would stop and take tea. Count Streith had arranged everything and would be the host.

"That's simply marvelous, dear Count," said the Prince, "all of our splendid dining halls are nothing compared to a spot in the forest. Such décor, such smells, and that light from above."

But during the tea the Prince was restless nevertheless. A walk to a forest meadow was planned and he feared that it was getting too late. "The deer don't follow Fürwit's instructions, you know, they won't follow his plan."

Thus the tea ended rather quickly, the Princess remained behind with Count Streith. When



everyone had gone, they leaned back in their chairs and closed their eyelids halfway, leaving only narrow slits through which to gaze at the world. The Count said nothing, he saw that the Princess needed some quiet moments. The sun shone through the tree trunks at an angle and beneath the motionless firs reigned a wonderful green and golden stillness.

Finally the Princess began to speak her mind: "He is so restless, it seems that he's always worrying that he's going to miss something. How well I know that condition. He's a painful reminder of the past."

The Count knitted his brow for a moment, but when the Princess said nothing further, he said gently and with some hesitation, "Isn't it perhaps somewhat wasteful to keep allowing the past to penetrate into the present? The present could be a happy time. I think that we need to make our present so strong that it suppresses the past. One thing I'd like to do is—when I find something in the present that I admire—would be to be allowed to push the past aside." And with the palm of his hand he grazed the top of the table as if he were brushing away something invisible. "And in its place I would substitute something good about the present, which would dominate the past."

And with the pointed fingers of his other hand he carefully laid something invisible on the table. The Princess watched thoughtfully what the two large, white hands were doing on the table: "I know, Streith, I know, but today it seems like I am passing my misery on to my child." She leaned her head back against the chair and closed her eyes. "When Eleonore gets married," she continued, "then the greater part of my responsibility will have been completed. But my youngest, oh God, that poor child with her health problems, for her the best thing to hope for would be a still and quiet life somewhere."

The Princess was silent for a while, and when she began to speak again, her thoughts had taken a different path: "It's the way we are brought up that's at fault, the way rulers are educated that makes it so difficult for us to find the courage to be who we really are."

"A plant that can't find the courage to blossom?" the Count suggested.

The Princess opened her eyes and smiled faintly, "Oh, Streith, you're always so gallant."

The Count bowed slightly. From the forest one could hear the voices of the returning party; the undertaking had been quite a success. "It was," said the Prince, "as if all the deer of the forest had been brought together for me."

Because the sun was going down, Baron Fürwit advised a return to the castle. Dinner was more formal than usual; the ladies appeared in all their finery and the princely heir to the throne made a speech. He expressed his gratitude for the beautiful day he had spent there. "In this castle," he said, "not only does happiness abide, but the stranger who enters here can also find happiness." Baroness Dönhof smiled and her eyes teared up a bit.

After dinner the Prince wanted to have a walk in the moonlight because the full moon hung over the garden. "We have a right to a bit of sentimentality," he explained. So he went out into the garden with the young ladies and they walked slowly over the moon-lit paths. "Let's go find the first pears," he suggested. The pear tree stood in the middle of a grassy yard and its boughs drooped with the weight of small, yellow pears. "Please, ladies, stand under the pear tree," he cried, "Fräulein v. Dachsberg, Fräulein Bouttancourt, if I may ask. Eleonore, Marie, over here please. Keck, you stand over there." The Prince began to shake the tree vigorously and pears fell to the ground with a thud and lay there in the moonlight. Marie and Mlle. Laure shrieked a bit, but the Prince only laughed and called it a "pear shower," but Fräulein v. Dachsberg didn't like it at all.

"I must ask you to stop, Your Majesty," she said, "that's enough, I beg you."

"All right, that's enough then," the Prince decided, "now everyone has to eat a pear. Would you care for one?" And he took a healthy bite of a pear wet with dew and exclaimed, "Sweet, sweet, sweet as cousins. Now it's time for the moonlight walk."

Now the party passed through rows of moon-lit dahlias and roses; the Prince walked beside

Eleonore and became emotional. "This good it is," he thought, "just for one day, even for only an hour, to give in to our emotions. Most of the time we have to conceal how we feel, and things just build up inside us. Doesn't it smell just wonderful in this bower? No? All right, now if the ladies would take a seat on the bench here, I will recite something."

The ladies had to sit while the Prince remained standing and recited part of a poem:

*Füllest wieder Busch und Tal  
Still mit Nebelglanz,  
Lösest endlich auch einmal  
Meine Seele ganz.*<sup>9</sup>

He spoke with much expression; indeed, it was as if he were overpowered by deep emotion, for his voice trembled. Brightly illuminated by the moon, his body, dressed in an evening coat, appeared taller and narrower, his face paler than usual.

What's wrong with him, Eleonore thought. Could that be real pain in his voice? And for the first time she felt something like kind-hearted sympathy for this pale young man.

But Marie thought: he looks like a ghost.

When the recitation was over, no one said anything, only Mlle. Laure, who murmured gently, "Sublime." The Prince took a few embarrassed steps, looked up at the moon, and turned his face away as if blinded by the light. Fräulein v. Dachsberg suggested that they return to the castle.

When the princesses were alone in their bedroom and Marie already in bed, she felt compelled to make some sort of summary of the day: "I think he's nice," she said, "and I believe that after spending a whole day with him, you'll sleep well."

Eleonore had pulled back the curtains and stood at the window looking out into the garden. Suddenly she heard someone say "Oh," but quietly. This "Oh" sounded so strange that Marie pricked up her ears, got out of bed and ran to the window. In the brightly-lit garden they could at first see nothing unusual, but then they noticed something moving amidst the quiet shadows of the rose bushes on the path. And now two figures came into the light, Mlle. Laure and the Prince. They walked slowly to the boxwood hedge and then disappeared into the darkness of the linden-lined allee. Eleonore had perched herself on a chair; she had turned pale, and stared vacantly ahead. Marie too was shocked. What she had just seen seemed uncanny and a chill ran down her spine. She was amazed at the sound of her own voice, which sounded dry and pedantic as she said, "Yes, dear Lore, you'll have to get used to that sort of thing now."

"Get used to it?" Eleonore repeated and looked at her sister uncomprehendingly. Marie went quietly back to bed and lay down, "Certainly," she added, "history is full of that kind of thing."

In the room it was suddenly still; then suddenly Eleonore stood beside Marie's bed, her eyes, usually so gentle, glowered: "I forbid you to speak like that," she blurted out, "and I forbid you from telling anyone what you have seen. I would die of mortification if anyone knew about it."

Marie was shocked and said not a word, but Eleonore turned away and went over to the mirror. Well now she's going to brush her hair like Roxane, Marie thought, and that seemed very sad to her.

On the following day the Prince said goodbye. He was visibly moved when he kissed the Princess's hand. "Here, with you," he said, "one becomes not only happier, but also better."

## Chapter 8.

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9 First verse of Goethe's poem "An den Mond." You fill bush and valley again quietly with a splendid mist and finally set loose my soul entirely.

After the departure of the Prince they immediately planned a trip to the ducal court in Karlstadt. There was no thought of taking Marie along, she and was so outraged that she found the courage to express her feeling about the matter to her mother.

“I gather that you aren't including me in the trip to Karlstadt,” she began.

“No, my child,” the Princess responded and looked at her daughter absent-mindedly, but your time will come, just try to get your health back.”

“But I am healthy,” said Marie, knitting her eyebrows together, “I was just thinking that I don't have anything fun to do.”

The Princess did not respond to that, but she must have thought about it, because one day she announced that the princesses, accompanied by Baroness Dönhof, would go in to town to see a performance of Schiller's “The Robbers.”

On that particular day it rained continuously until the skies cleared around twilight. The trip in the large automobile was refreshing. Marie stared out the window of the car, her round eyes alert to the countryside they were passing through, this world beyond, in which life seemed to run such a natural course.

The clouds now looked like a jagged mountain range on the horizon; sheep were being driven home, their coats looking pink in the late afternoon sun, they moved across the yellow fields of stubble; children shepherding the sheep sang a throaty song, and shaggy village dogs excitedly called out the news that a vehicle was approaching. In the gardens of the village women stood with aprons full of lettuce leaves; they stared down the street and grimaced as if the rapid motion of the car was painful to them. The sun went down; the forest turned black; the land went gray. It was already getting dark in town and gas flames stood out pale and glassy against the encroaching darkness. The streets were full of people walking on the sidewalks in the cool of the evening; occasionally some of them stopped on the street to talk to each other. Lights could already be seen in some of the windows and the passers-by peered into rooms with big sofas and round tables. In one house children were doing their homework; in another people were eating dinner. A woman in a large white bonnet bit into a roll. You could hear the thin, shrill sound of doorbells in the small stores. How close together these people live, Marie thought, and how busy they seem. The automobile stopped in front of the Little Theater. People had gathered to watch the princesses get out of the car. Baroness Dönhof and Baron Fürwit seemed excited and they quietly gave orders to the footman, whispered in French to each other, and went into the lobby beside the princesses as if they needed to protect them from something. Not until they had ascended the stairs and were safely ensconced in their loge was the danger past, for then the Baroness murmured “Thank God!”

The theater was already filled; from the orchestra seats faces looked up at the princesses, and from other loges opera glasses were trained on them; add to that the smell of old velvet, of curtains and gas—all that seemed strange and thrilling to Marie. Now the lights went down and the curtain rose. Marie paid careful attention to what was happening on the stage, but she wasn't impressed by the frail old man who believed everything he was told, nor by little red-haired Franz and his pranks. She was actually glad when the lights came back on for the intermezzo so that she could look around the room again.

It was entertaining to eavesdrop on the muddle of voices on the floor below, to watch people as they greeted each other and talked, and to see how they wore their evening clothes. There was the confectioner's wife with a yellow bird on her hat; there was Professor Wirth and the lady standing next to him must be his spouse—she wasn't pretty and she looked like she might be having a migraine. The princesses would gladly have laughed at the people below, but they had to maintain their dignity.

Meanwhile, there were visitors to the loge. The county commissioner came around and spoke about Schiller as a young man: "What power there was in that young man, he was like a volcano."

Countess Dühnen came and chatted with Baroness Dühnhof. In the loge just across from the princesses sat a lady in a black dress, her black hair, parted in the middle and combed back behind her ears, framed a pale, angular face. Next to her sat a sixteen-year-old girl in a poorly tailored green dress, her vibrant black hair curling a bit wildly; her round face and large black eyes and her thick red lips had the glow of smiling youthful life, so much so that Marie looked at it in astonishment and felt how her heart beat faster from an admiration that was almost painful.

"Who is that sitting across from us?" she heard Baroness Dühnhof ask.

"She's nobody, really," replied Countess Dühnen, "a Frau von Syrman, she rented the old forester's house in our forest for the summer, and I think maybe for the winter too. They says she's a divorcee, under less than pleasant circumstances; people don't associate with her."

"The girl seems pretty," said the Baroness.

"She's a ruffian!" said the Countess, "and there's no question about the kind of upbringing she's had. They grow like mushrooms after a rain."

The theater lights were dimmed again and the play resumed. The scene with the students didn't interest Marie very much, even Armin Biber playing Karl Moor, about whom Hilda Üchtlitz had talked so much for a while, was a disappointment. She kept thinking about the black-haired girl in the opposite loge. The Countess's words had been hurtful: the poor girl, she thought, growing like a mushroom, and Marie saw in her mind a small, bright red mushroom growing in a patch of moss, its head wet with dew, glistening like a jewel.

Yes, that pretty girl **was** like a mushroom, and Marie knew now that she liked the girl and she could hardly wait for the moment when she could see her again. During the intermezzo she could hardly keep her eyes off the loge opposite them. She liked everything about the black-haired girl. She liked the way she propped herself on the railing with both arms like a tired schoolgirl at a desk; she liked the carefree way she moved her body any way she wanted to, and the way she opened her mouth and showed her teeth when she laughed, and the way she ate ice cream by putting whole spoonfuls in her mouth as if eating soup.

In all of that there was something that Marie could have both laughed and cried about. The action on the stage was getting more interesting now. Karl Moor had turned robber and wore a little black mustache, a broad-brimmed hat and a red cape. When the sun went down he camped with his robber band in the forest; it was sad and beautiful and his high-sounding, painful words filled Marie with endless sympathy—she would have done anything to comfort the poor, handsome man. Tears ran down her cheeks without her even knowing.

When the act was over Marie stared over at Frau von Syrman's loge, she saw that the black-haired girl also had tear-dimmed eyes and cheeks wet with tears. Their gazes met and involuntarily they smiled at each other. This made Marie happy and it seemed as if she had formed a bond with the girl and with the handsome Armin Biber, who suffered so dreadfully, and with her who cried for him. From this moment her whole being trembled in a pleasant ecstasy. She declined a glass of lemonade that was offered her—how could she think of lemonade now? During the play she cried about Karl Moor and between the acts she smiled at Miss Syrman; when the play was over and everyone was getting ready to leave and Baroness Dühnhof and Baron Fürwit were planning their exit, she awakened as if from a portentous dream.

Marie tried to hide herself in one corner of the automobile, out of sorts and teary-eyed she sat there musing. The city streets were quieter now, the curtains in the windows were drawn. There was a girl leaning in an open window talking to a man down in the street. A biergarten was brightly lighted and music poured out of the hall. Life goes on, Marie thought, the life that Armin Biber and the

beautiful girl are part of, as they drove out in to the silent, nocturnal countryside. But now she had to share Karl Moor's misery, had to feel sympathetic towards that pretty girl about whom others had criticized and disliked. But now she belonged to Marie, who took her along in her loneliness.

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Marie's life was actually enriched by this dream, against which ordinary events paled in comparison. The Princess went to Karlstadt with Eleonore to celebrate Eleonore's engagement. Marie accepted the fact that she had to stay home. On walks with Fräulein v. Dachsberg or Mlle. Laure she didn't have much to say now, and during history lessons with Prof. Wirth her mind drifted afar. She felt a great need to be alone. The doctor had said that the autumnal air would do her good, so now she walked continually around the garden and rejected every offer of companionship. "If you want to check on me," she said to Fräulein v. Dachsberg, "you can do it from the window, all I'm doing is walking back and forth in front of the house."

Fräulein v. Dachsberg raised her eyebrows in resignation, and later said to Baron Fürwit, "Princess Marie gets more difficult every day."

The Baron nodded, "Yes," he said, "what's lacking is the atmosphere of the court. It's hard to grow camellias in a bed of asparagus."

The fall days were bright and chilly. Frost burned the heads of the dahlias, and the tops of the trees in the park turned red and yellow, and leaves rained down on the paths in the allee. Over in the orchard you could hear apples falling constantly and the sour smell of apples filled the whole garden. The currant bushes in the pit at the old plum tree lost their leaves, the berries shrank and tasted very sweet. Here it was that Marie walked back and forth wrapped in a large overcoat, her hands tucked into a muff, taking small, hurried steps. Her face had a strange tense look, her eyes seemed to be staring into the distance. Marie was thinking about Armin Biber, she could see him coming down the allee towards her in his wide-brimmed hat, his handsome face very pale. She stopped in front of him, her heart burning to say something that would bring her instantly closer to him.

But he only smiled with a heavy heart and said, "Little princess, little princess, I know you understand me and that you cried for me."

Marie also thought about the beautiful black-haired girl and gave her the name "Armelia" because it was related to Armin. She put her arm around Armelia's waist and was her friend.

Countess Dühnen said terrible things about Armelia, and Marie defended her, she found splendid words of outrage, then she led her new friend away to a quiet place in the forest. And there they sat in an embrace until the branches of the trees parted and Armin Biber's handsome face looked down upon them, smiled and said, "What true friends I have!"

At other times fantasies such as these could not be conjured, and in such cases it was a strong and precious feeling that made Marie's heart beat faster. She could have cried from yearning for Armin Biber, for Armelia, for love, for noble words and deep pain. This feeling filled her with pride and elevated her above the others. She despised the tea hour in the afternoons when Baron Fürwit would talk about engagements made by earlier princesses. Or evenings in the garden room when Baron Fürwit read aloud from the *Kreuzzeitung*<sup>10</sup> while Fräulein v. Dachsberg and Mlle. Laure crocheted and the Major sat upright in his chair and listened attentively. When there was a pause in the reading he turned to Marie with a polite observation: "I believe we're going to see a lot more from the Balkan peoples."

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10 A conservative Prussian newspaper.

“Oh, really, do you think so, Major?” replied Marie, jolted out of her own thoughts.

One afternoon Hilda Üchtlitz came to visit. She was pretty and vivacious, with cool pink cheeks and clear observant eyes.

Marie had tea served in her study because she had so much to tell Hilda. She began by talking about Armelia, but Hilda wasn't very interested in that. “I know her,” she said, “and of course I don't pay any attention to the idea that you can't associate with those people in the forester's house. That's exactly why I went over to see her. Perhaps she will turn out all right after all, she does have a lot of spirit, but she's still a small wild animal. Her name is not Armelia, by the way. It's Britta.”

Marie was offended and peeved that Armelia's real name was Britta. So she dropped the topic and talked about Armin Biber.

Hilda listened very carefully. “I know about that,” then, turning serious, “I went through something like that myself. It's something that comes over you, and there's nothing for it except to see him and talk to him.”

“See him and talk to him?” cried Marie and turned red in terror, “that's just not possible!”

Hilda stopped for moment to think: “It is possible,” she explained, “you're a princess and if you write to him, he will come.”

“I would never do that,” Marie reassured her with a trembling voice.

“Oh, but you must,” continued Hilda, “you can write to him, express your appreciation for his talent, and so forth, and ask him to drive down the road past your garden gate on such and such a day, and you'll be waiting for him under your old plum tree, and you can talk through the gate. That's all that can be hoped for just now.”

Marie felt her hands turn cold in excitement and she felt the need to cry. “I would just die if he came,” she said quietly.

“No, you won't die from that, and even though you are a princess you could still make an effort to act like a modern girl. No modern girl pines away from a distance any more. If we fall in love with a man—and that can't be avoided—then we act accordingly. Just stop wasting your emotional energy.”

“I'll never be able to do it,” moaned Marie.

Hilda shrugged her shoulders. “Sit down at your desk,” she commanded, “I'll take the letter with me and take care of it. It'll be done and you'll feel calmer about the whole thing.”

And it was done. Hilda went home carrying Marie's letter in her pocket.

## Chapter 9.

Now Marie spent a tortured hour every day waiting beside the old plum tree. Pale, her eyes excited, she walked back and forth between the leafless currant bushes, occasionally casting an anxious glance towards the garden gate. Frequently she was just about to run away and hide in the park, no matter whether Armin Biber came or not, but she couldn't because she feared the Hilda would think less of her for it, and she too wanted to be a modern girl. And finally the experience which she had been so anxiously awaiting pulled her irresistibly along.

It was three days after Hilda's visit that Marie saw a man at the garden gate. He jumped off his bicycle, leaned the bike against he fence and greeted her. He wore a brown cycling outfit and a small, black felt hat. Marie stood motionless and looked at the strange man, then slowly and mechanically she walked to the fence. The stranger tipped his hat widely and bowed. Was that really Armin Biber, this little man with a reddened face, a closely-shaved bluish chin and a wide, pale mouth? He stepped closer to the fence, and smiled, showing a row of white teeth with one shiny gold filling. Marie

observed everything carefully. Now he began to speak, and, yes indeed, it was Biber's beautiful deep voice.

“Your Majesty commanded,” he said, “so here I am.”

“Very kind of you,” she heard herself say, and she saw her hand reaching between the fence posts for Armin Biber. He took her hand and kissed it.

“I so much wanted to thank you,” Marie continued, “for the great pleasure we had in the theater that time.”

Armin Biber turned serious and Marie once again saw something of Karl Moor in his eyes. He took off his hat and brushed his forehead with his hand. “Oh, Your Majesty,” his voice choked, “the real reward we who follow the thorny path of this profession get is when our art finds resonance in a noble heart.”

What should I say now, Marie thought, but then she said, “It must be difficult to play a role like that.”

“Well, yes it is,” Biber replied, “but the main thing is to feel the role, and for that you need a certain amount of audacity and passion.”

“I can imagine so,” Marie remarked. But then there was a pause and Marie thought, 'Where is this going?'

But Armin Biber began to speak again: “As a souvenir of this important moment I would gladly have brought Your Majesty a picture of myself, but I just didn't dare do it.”

“That's really too bad,” Marie said, “but perhaps as a remembrance you could give me one of those little yellow flowers from the road there.”

“Those over there?” asked Biber, knitting his eyebrows together, “*bon*, my pleasure.” And he sprang towards the yellow flower, picked it and handed it to her through the fence with a smile.

Marie attempted a smile as she accepted the flower. “Thank you,” she said, “but now I think I should be going.”

Once again she stuck her hand through the fence and again Armin Biber kissed it. “I will always remember this,” he said softly and with true feeling. “Adieu, Your Majesty, adieu.” He made a broad sweeping gesture with his hat, jumped on his bicycle and rode down the road quickly and elegantly.

Marie watched him go and was filled with the pleasant feeling of great relief. Hurriedly she headed towards the castle, proud that it was all over and that she had experienced it. When she got back to her room she realized that she had dropped the little yellow flower along the way somewhere.

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Winter began early that year with a heavy snowfall. Only occasionally did the sun pierce through the low-hanging bright-gray clouds. And it just kept on snowing. Every morning the park with its trees, the garden, the castle were as if veiled in white muslin. Baron Fürwit shuffled around the castle adjusting the temperature in all the rooms. Count Streith rode up in a sled to the sound of bright sleigh bells. Marie's cough had returned, and after Christmas her illness became serious. She lay in bed with a high fever and, delirious, she re-experienced the rare events of her young life. Armin Biber came, but he floated a distance above the ground and his legs swung back and forth like the pendulum of a clock. Britta stood beside him, laughed and said, “Tick-tock, tick-tock.” Felix Dühren was there too, his mouth twisted in sarcastic juvenile laughter, and he slapped Marie's hand. There was something ghostly and threatening about all of them. Marie anxiously tried to avoid them, tried to escape from dream to wakefulness. She opened her eyes and her mother sat smiling beside her on the bed.

“Did you sleep, my child?” she asked.

“Yes,” Marie replied. Her mother's clear brown eyes were comforting: it was as if something pleasant and soothing streamed from those eyes, as if they had the capacity to still a thirst.

“Go back to sleep, child,” the Princess continued, “and when we're strong, we'll go where the sun is warm, a place near blue water, there you can get your health back.”

Marie attempted to smile, sighed deeply, and closed her eyes again. These were comforting words and she could see the yellow sun, the warm, blue water, a vast blue and gold stillness. Then the visions began again, but this time they were peaceful: half remembrance, half dream. She saw a room in Castle Birkenstein and she must have been very young then because the room appeared gigantic to her, the furniture huge. She sat on her mother's lap, dressed in violet-blue silk playing with a large golden heart that hung from a chain around her mother's neck. In front of them in that room a man walked back and forth speaking loudly and rapidly. Marie was surprised to see that from time to time warm droplets fell on the golden heart that she was playing with. And then she lay in her little bed again, and it was dark all around, but the room next door where her sisters were sleeping was filled with bright moonlight. And suddenly in that pale brightness there appeared two figures in long, white smocks, they held each other and danced. Marie stared at the restlessly dancing feet on the brightly-lit floor. Gradually the images faded away and Marie sank into a deep sleep.

The Princess stared thoughtfully at the blond head of her child, the features of her face betrayed dispirited exhaustion, the kind of look that people get when they collapse from overwork. What a struggle this little creature is putting up, the Princess thought. She could hear Marie's voice saying that she had no prospect of fun at the moment, and that touched her so deeply that it was painful. She turned away and looked out the window. In spite of the pale winter sun a few large snowflakes drifted through the air. In the distance she could hear the sound of sleigh bells. In her thoughts the Princess was looking for something that wasn't painful, something comforting; she thought about the hunting lodge, about the way Streith went out into the dark garden and looked back to the brightly-lit garden room. She knew this room, the many oil paintings on its wall, the smell of the varnish mixing with that of Egyptian cigarettes, the furniture with the strange raspberry-red and green striped upholstery and the gilt decorations on the back-rest, the black marble table with curved gilt feet and the tiger skin in front of the hearth. How good it would feel, she thought, to sit there in the evening without any cares because outside in the garden there was someone who relieved her of all of life's problems and even of the painful past. And then she stands up, walks to the open door, looks out into the night, and is greeted by the sweet smell of roses and dame's-rocket. Now he can see her standing in the doorway and wants to call to her. A slight groan caused the Princess to startle, she looked towards Marie in her bed, Marie was asleep, but her face twitched as if in torment, and one hand that lay on bed covering was agitated. The Princess bent over and looked anxiously at her child. She had been so far away from her in her thoughts, and it seemed as if she had done her an injustice. She leaned over and kissed the feverish hand of her sick child. Then she got up and left the chamber.

She walked slowly and burdened past the long suite of rooms, went into her boudoir and sat down, leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She was sick herself, sick with sympathy for her child, and with sympathy for herself. Somewhere in the house a door was opened and the parquet floor creaked beneath a familiar step. The Princess sat up straight and smiled, yes, of course, it's Streith, she thought.

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Two years had now passed and on one beautiful day in May the three sisters once again sat under the old plum tree, which now was in full bloom. Roxane, now a duchess, and Eleonore had married an heir to the throne, had come back to Gutheiden to spend a few days together as they did in



the days of their girlhood. Now they started remembering things. Carpets had been spread out on the grass and the ladies sat down. Roxane sat straight up, as ever, under her red parasol; she had become very formal and her regular features had gotten somewhat sharper, her eyes with their quiet glow looked straight in front of her and she looked like a pensive goddess under her red baldachino.

Eleonore had stretched out comfortably. She had gotten stronger. Her face, when she laughed, was the friendly girl's face of before, and it was still pale, and when it concentrated on something, one could see a certain fatigue borne of disgruntlement. Marie lay flat on her back and looked at the sky. Over the years she had gotten thinner and more girlish. Her blond hair still curled over her forehead with a mind of its own and her round eyes still stared curiously and critically at the world around her. The sisters had been quiet for a spell, then Marie began to speak: "Well, are the memories coming back?"

"That's why we're here, little sister," replied Roxane.

"It's just remarkable," continued Marie, "that we have no memories. Back then nothing ever happened."

"That's the beauty of it," Eleonore thought, "it was a time when nothing happened. I just remember the light and the smells."

"That's right," Marie chattered on, "but you can have too much of those things. When we come back home from San Remo I'm always glad to be home. I always think things will be better at home. Actually it's very boring to be a sick princess in San Remo<sup>11</sup>, Mama sitting on your right, Baroness Dönhof on your left, and all they talk about is whether I've gotten overheated or caught a cold. Fine, we come back home and find the same sunshine at the same time in the same places as before. When we go for a walk, the same women are looking out their windows, the same dogs barking, and Baron Fürwit always tells the same old jokes, and over dinner Baron Streith talks about the psychology of the French and the English. And it's still glum around here. By the way, a few things have changed. Mlle. Laure isn't here any more; the Dühnen boys don't walk past the house any more, they've found another place to swim. Felix has become a lieutenant. He was here yesterday and looked ridiculous with his hair parted in the middle. Today he'll be here with the Üchtlitzes to play tennis because Dr. Ruck prescribed tennis for me. Oh yes, and old Malwine has been put out to pasture, and little Emilie waits on me now, and Prof. Wirth has stopped coming."

"Poor old Wirth," said Eleonore.

"Yes, poor old Wirth. He probably never had three less attentive students than we. And how polite he always was, especially with Roxane, 'Might I be permitted to ask the name of the peoples' tribunal that we spoke about last time?' And Roxane was always very charming, 'Certainly, Herr Professor, gladly. I think the name stated with an R.' And Lore always so remorseful when she didn't know an answer, 'I'm terribly sorry, Herr Professor, but I've forgotten.'"

They laughed a bit, then the conversation ebbed, and they listened to the sounds of the bees in the plum trees.

Finally, Marie announced solemnly, "Only those people who want to experience something will actually do so, that's what Hilda says."

"Oh, her," interjected Eleonore. Marie was annoyed, "Please," she said, "Hilda is a friend of mine."

From the castle they could now hear voices, and Marie sat up, "They're already here to play tennis," she said, "you're going to stay, aren't you?"

"Yes, we'll stay for a while yet," Roxane replied.

Marie got up slowly and was not much inclined to play tennis, she cast a final glance at her

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11 San Remo is a tourist destination on the Italian Riviera.

sisters and said, "Roxane is splendid, like a Russian icon. Lore hasn't gotten that far yet." And then she left.

## Chapter 10.

There were a number of people on the tennis court. Hilda, her brother the barrister, and Felix had come, and the ladies and gentlemen employed at the castle were there as well. There was the exuberant Princess Kusmin with her beautiful eyes, an impure complexion and a large soft mouth; Fräulein v. Dietheim, blond and dainty and so pale that even her lips were white; Captain von Keck and finally the majestic Count Minsky with his classic profile and high, thin voice. Marie greeted the guests, kissed Hilda, and said, "I think we should get started."

"You're in a bad mood," Hilda whispered to her.

Marie shrugged her shoulders and the game began. Marie played without concentration and badly today.

"If Count Dühren is going to serve so outrageously," she said, quite put out, "then I can't return serve."

"Not like a gentleman, Count Dühren is not serving like a gentleman!" cried Count Minsky in his high, singing voice.

Felix laughed. I recognize that laugh, Marie thought. She didn't enjoy the game at all, so she pretended to be tired, and they stopped. The party then stood around on the sunny courts and talked. Marie took Hilda's arm and talked to Felix about the park at Tirnow and spring in Berlin. They began to walk slowly along the garden path as they spoke.

Princess Kusmin watched them as they walked away and said, "The Princess is going for a little walk."

"Yes," replied Fräulein v. Dachsberg softly, "the Princess does whatever occurs to her at the moment. They always say, 'The poor child, just leave her alone,' and we ladies of the court are just there to be ignored."

"That's how it goes out here in the country," said the Princess, with obvious sympathy.

Hilda had listened to the conversation between Felix and Marie silently, but now she said, "Aren't you angry about how he was serving?"

Marie laughed, "No, not really. I forgave him for it."

Felix excused himself saying he had forgotten how one was supposed to play tennis at court.

Marie bowed and looked at him mischievously: "And how is it going with playing by the rules?"

"Thanks," replied Felix, "as well as could be expected."

"It must be hard for you," Hilda remarked. As children growing up in the same neighborhood they had some sympathy for one another.

"I get these strange ideas sometimes," Felix admitted, "when I stand at attention before my commanding officer and he bawls me out. What would happen if I said 'cock-a-doodle-do' instead of 'At your command, sir!'"? That would cause a scandal throughout the army and be reported in German and foreign newspapers as if it were an event of worldwide significance."

"Oh, but you wouldn't do that," cried Marie, horrified.

Felix assured her, "No, I wouldn't do it, I have become a normal human being, a lieutenant. A lieutenant does what all lieutenants do. In the service they all do the same thing, and in a casino or when they're talking to ladies, they all say the same thing; and when they dress in their civilian clothes, they all wear the same blue suits and yellow boots. And when I go to bed at night, I know that a

thousand other men such as I are going to bed too. It's like tin soldiers, who know when they're being put back in the box that there are a dozen others just like them already in the box.”

“My brother had a set of tin soldiers and I liked to play with them,” Hilda went on, “and there was one where they didn't have enough metal and he had a leg that was too short, but I liked that one especially because he was different from the others.”

Felix sighed: “I think that in my case there wasn't enough metal either, at least that's my father's opinion.”

“And here at home?” Marie asked.

“Here at home I try to do only the things that I can do. Yesterday I stood on my head out on the yard. My father thought it was undignified.”

“And it probably was.”

Felix shrugged his shoulders: “Well, maybe, but you still have to maintain your own personality.”

“You could climb a tree and coo like a dove,” Hilda suggested.

“Why do that?” Felix replied, “Only the old garden-keeper would hear it.”

Now they walked past the currant bushes. Their eyes met in a moment of understanding and their lips twitched.

Then Felix said, “I think I remember that there is a gate in the fence here. I'll take this opportunity to say goodbye to the ladies at this point.”

“Yes, the gate is still there,” Marie said, blushing.

Felix took his leave and departed. The two girls watched him go as he hurried down the village street, thin and boyish in his bright tennis togs.

“He doesn't walk like a lieutenant,” Hilda observed. Then they began the walk back. After a while Hilda said, “I think it's likely that he will fall in love with you. What will you do then?”

“What should I do?” replied Marie testily.

But Hilda continued: “Men are such children, they think a princess....”

“Don't talk like that,” Marie said, interrupting her.

Then both were silent for a while and Marie thought about that moment when their eyes met in understanding. Never before had she looked in someone else's eyes like that and this made her happy.

Count Streith had come to dinner. At table he spoke with Roxane about the bright nights in Russia. He had once been in St. Petersburg. Roxane didn't like those Russian nights when the sun is still up, “I'm afraid of them and I keep the curtains as tightly drawn as possible. I have such a need for darkness.”

“Darkness,” the Princess observed, “is often pleasant if it removes everything around us.”

“Our nights,” said Count Minsky, “are not intended for sleeping, they are meant for singing, for dreaming and flirting.”

“That may well be,” remarked Count Streith, “but on such nights one must be with people, for otherwise they just make you melancholy.”

“They make me nervous,” whispered Princess Kusmin, knitting her eyebrows together as if the very thought of those nights gave her a headache.

Fräulein v. Dietheim wished to be instructed by Captain von Keck as to just why the nights in Russia were so bright. She liked being instructed by Captain von Keck.

“It probably has something to do with the sun,” muttered von Keck grumpily.

Then Baron Fürwit undertook to explain it to the lady.

At the other end of the table the topic of conversation had changed. They were now talking about the health of the Archduke of Mecklenburg, about which there was some concern.

After dinner they called for their coats, the princesses wanted to go for a walk in the garden, they wanted to do all those things that they used to do as girls. And so the three sisters walked the broad gravel path arm in arm, the ladies of the court followed them two by two.

The Princess walked down the steps to the garden with Count Streith. A half-moon hung in the sky, a tepid breeze rustled in the boxwood hedges.

“How warm it is,” said the Princess.

Streith leaned his head back and breathed in the night air. “Unusually warm,” he replied, “and on the horizon there's a bit of heat lightning.”

Bright laughter drifted over to them from the garden.

“Just listen to how they laugh, those dear children,” said the Princess and laid her hand gently on Streith's arm. “Roxane is exactly as I expected her to be, walking her path quietly and with dignity, a bit stiffly, too, but that's what happens to us when we're hurting on the inside, and the death of her child was a blast of cold air in her life. But my poor Eleonore, so full of love and so loveable—what's there for her?” The Princess's voice turned plaintive and finally ceased altogether. Streith said nothing in reply, but stood there motionless so as not to frighten away the hand that rested on his arm.

“I am happy to have you by my side,” began the Princess again, “but you can see that occasionally I have thoughts that I am ashamed of. I catch myself thinking that I no longer live in that world. But that's not fair. I cannot be so far removed from the world in which my children live, I do have to help them, after all.

Since the Princess then said nothing further and expected an answer, Streith spoke, looking for the right thing to say: “Certainly, but I just think that if we want to help, then we have to be strong, and we are strongest when we are somewhat happy.”

“I know, Streith, I know,” countered the Princess, her voice becoming quite soft, and she gently stroked the sleeve of Streith's coat.

Streith was silent, but this gentle caress touched him greatly. Nothing further was said, both stared out into the night, the wind freshened and the trees began to rustle, on the horizon there was heat lightning, as if doors to bright halls were being opened and closed. Streith made a decision: he took the hand that lay on his arm, brought it to his lips. The small, cool hand followed without resistance.

Those who had been out walking now returned because they feared the approaching storm. Streith looked pale and the Princess had moist, gleaming eyes. For a moment Roxane's eyes rested inquisitively on the two, and the Princess avoided her gaze. Then the gentlemen came out of the smoking room and Princess Kusmin was asked to play some music. She sat down at the piano and played Liszt's second rhapsody with much bravado and brilliant technique. Everyone listened reverently. The cascades of notes that fell upon the audience made them strangely motionless as if they were standing in a shower. Fräulein v. Dachsberg sat upright with a fixed smile on her lips. Count Minsky's face was distorted, as if he were sucking on something sweet. The Princess had leaned her head back and her eyes were half closed; on her face there was an expression of slight excitement. Eleonore was simply sleepy and she wrinkled her brow as if the music were painful, while Roxane, eyes wide open, stared ahead as if looking into a great distance. Marie lay comfortably in her chair—these spring days made her limbs feel heavy—and thought about Hilda's words: 'He will probably fall in love with you.' And she kept on repeating these words and she even tried to fit them into the rhythm of the music, which caused her to be a bit feverish, and pleasantly tired. Halfway behind the curtain in the bay window stood Count Streith; he was watching the approach of the spring storm, and his strong profile and imposing nose stood out against the moon-lit windowpane.

Then Princess Kusmin struck the final chords of the piece, stood up, and put on the bracelets that she had taken off earlier. There was some activity among the listeners as if they were just waking up. The Princess stood up to thank Princess Kusmin and the others came up to her as well and they all

stood around talking about music until the Princess signaled that it was time to go.

The princesses had wanted to sleep once again in their shared bedroom. Marie allowed Emilie to put her to bed quickly; she wanted to lie there once again half asleep listening to her sisters talk. The chambermaids were sent away and the princesses sat in front of the vanity in their long night clothes and talked quietly. Marie could see their shadows on the wall moving towards each other then separating again. She heard Roxane's deep voice say slowly and monotonously: "The night my child died was terrible. There was dense fog outside, the town was deadly quiet, all you could hear was the footsteps of the soldiers going back and forth in front of the palace. But if you opened the window, it seemed that you could hear some calling or crying from a great distance. I don't know what it was, but it sounded like something terrible was happening. My child had a high fever and I sat down on his bed and held him in my arms. Everyone who came into the room had the same pale face and anxious eyes, and when they walked by the window they stopped and listened. The old attendant Eudoxia and the wet nurse kept prostrating themselves before the icon, praying quietly. The doctors came and I think a cleric as well. Dimitri wasn't there. I held my baby in my arms and listened to his breathing, it was so fast, as if he had been running, and in his chest you could hear something that sounded like a clock with a gear loose. And it seemed to me that I, too, had been breathing heavily, as if I, too, had to run with him, and we were both so tired. Then suddenly the baby just got very still in my arms and it seemed that I too had fallen somewhere. Then there was nothing but quiet, large and dark. Roxane said nothing further.

That's just too sad, Marie thought, and turned on her other side.

After a while Eleonore said something and Roxane answered: "Yes, it's a huge and beautiful country and the people are friendly and kind. If only I didn't have a sense of unease that comes over me sometimes. It's the kind of unease that we knew in Birkenstein when you'd wake up at night and think about the tower in the park, and its dungeon, and the old gardener who used to tell us that a skeleton had been found there."

"Yes, I know what you mean," Eleonore said.

Marie knew too, but she didn't want to think about the old tower in Birkenstein. Then she must have nodded off because when she heard her sisters' voices again they were talking about something else.

Eleonore laughed gently and Roxane said: "What's going on there? A mother acting like a young bride? A mother in love? It's impossible."

Marie was too tired to understand, and she thought once again: 'he'll probably fall in love with you.' Then she went to sleep.

## Chapter 11.

Count Streith had not slept well, and now he sat at the breakfast table, drank his tea and stared reflectively at the branch of a chestnut tree full of green leaves outside the window in the May sunlight. Roller, the reddish-brown Irish setter, had found a sunny spot on the parquet and was sleeping. Oskar Pose, the old servant with the classically hewn face, came in and out, serving his master.

The worst thing about bad nights, like the previous one, was that unwanted thoughts could press upon one and spread themselves—thoughts that Streith normally could keep in check. When he had retired from service at court and had withdrawn to his estate, it seemed like a great relief to him. Serving at court had been a false step for him, as had many things in his life. Now, even though he was

past forty, his real life was supposed to start. He had certainly acquired a lot of experience and had learned the basics of getting along in life, so that if nothing worthy of him finally developed, it must be the devil's handiwork. So he began to make himself comfortable, he extended his little castle, bought beautiful furnishings, planted a garden, and had his forest surveyed. A few years passed and he was still organizing his house, everything still lay in preparation, and the kind of life he was looking for had not begun. Worse yet, time was running out. After a night like that he could actually hear life passing him by like a team of horses, and he felt like a schoolboy whose summer vacation is about over and is still waiting for the fun to begin.

The door opened and Frau Buche, the housekeeper, appeared. She was elderly and quite strong, and from her large, pale face two peaceful, mouse-gray eyes peered out. She bowed, and Streith responded very politely to her greeting. Then Frau Buche leaned on the door and began, as she did every day: "I've come to talk about the food, Count. For breakfast I can give you pike cutlets with morel sauce, and I thought . . . ."

But Streith waved her aside, "All I want is a cup of bouillon and an omelette, that will be enough. And by the way, dinner tonight will be a bit delayed, I have to check on the snipes one more time."

Frau Buche nodded, then continued: "For dinner I have made crab soup, and we also have hazel grouse, and then I thought...."

Streith interrupted her again: "That's fine, Frau Buche, you'll take care of things, I know."

A slight change in the corner of her mouth indicated a repressed smile, and she said, "The Count must have a lot to think about since he doesn't want to think about the food."

Streith leaned back in his chair, exhaled cigarette smoke, and observed the face of the housekeeper carefully, then said: "Thinking about food is a good thing, but good things require the right mood. Are you always in the right mood to think about food?"

Frau Buche became quite serious: "With me, Count Streith, it's my duty, if I didn't want to think about food, it would be a sin."

Streith shrugged his shoulders, "Sin is a big word, Frau Buche, but say, have you always been so calm and satisfied, or have you had passions in your life as well?"

The old lady blushed. "I don't know anything about passions," she replied defensively.

"But there was a Mr. Buche," Streith interjected.

"Mr. Buche was a strong man," she related, "and hot-tempered, I was young and stupid, but that's all over now, I have my work and no worries, except for concern for the well-being of my eternal soul."

"Dear Frau Buche," cried Streith, "if you are trying to get yourself ready for eternity, you'll never be finished."

The old woman bit her lips together, not wanting to talk about it. She waited a moment longer, then asked if there was anything else the Count required, which he declined, and so she left the room.

Streith got up and went over to his study. Some new books had come in and he wanted to have a look at them. But when he sat down in his chair, bone folder in hand ready to open pages, he fell once again into rumination. He found the evening at the castle yesterday troubling. A union with the princely woman would make his life as splendidly exceptional as it was supposed to be. Since he had first known her, back at court, when she was the unhappy spouse of a high-spirited prince, he had admired her as one of the finest beings in all creation. She knew that he loved her, knew that he was waiting for her, and she had let it happen, indeed, she had wanted it. It was just that yesterday she was in the grip of maternal feelings and concerns, and that had threatened his hopes. A slight noise quickly brought him out of his reverie—the tortoiseshell paper folder in his hands had broken in two. He tossed it away impatiently, got up and walked over to the wing of the castle. Over there were three

rooms that had not yet been completely decorated. The walls of the first one were covered with a pretty Japanese silk paper, cherry blossoms and a flight of silver gray cranes against a medium blue background. There was also a Chippendale desk, a vitrine with little porcelain figures, and small matt-blue furniture. The other rooms were almost empty, although they did have a mirror in a silver frame and a lilac chaise longue and bearskin rug. Streith walked back and forth, shifting the furniture around, and pondered. He had been composing these rooms for years now, but now it was time to get serious about it. Roller had followed his master, stood there and looked at him with his patient dog's eyes and was pleasantly surprised when Streith addressed him: "Here, Roller, boy," he said, "Come on, we're in a hurry." And with that he left the chamber, took his hat and went out into the courtyard.

On the other side of the smaller castle they were planting a winter garden; the walls were already up and the workers had just started hoisting up the girders. Streith stopped for a moment to watch the process.

The contractor came up to him, a crusty old character with a Van Dyke beard, and began to give the Count an update. Streith wasn't listening to him, however. He was interested in the tall, blond fellows who were struggling with large, yellow beams. The sun pressed down on them and they had pushed their caps back, their faces were reddened, and there were wet spots of the backs of their work coats. But it was pleasant to see how they used their heavy, hot arms and legs as tools to lift, push, and brace and how their muscles tensed and the youthful vitality of their bodies surged. This view made him feel quite warm, but suddenly he turned away, leaving the master builder standing there in the middle of his report, and went over to his garden. There he walked slowly beside the rose bushes, but he paid no attention to them, he was in a bad mood, for today he felt like an elderly gentleman walking around slowly in the sun to warm up.

After breakfast Streith went for a ride. The air in the forest lanes between the thick walls of fir trees was warm and moist, making both rider and horse lethargic. Streith gave his horse free rein, letting it go where it wanted, he himself sank into his thoughts, but today too the flow was not right. Again and again they got caught in unpleasant little obstacles and couldn't escape. When he looked around again, he was already at the edge of the forest, and just across the way lay the Tirnow Forest, and there was the gray-timbered forester's house.

In the small vegetable garden in front of the house a slim lady in a dark dress was walking along the beds sprinkling water on the cabbage plants. When she heard the horse's hooves, she turned her head a bit, but then continued her work as if there were nothing to see. Ah, a disgraced lady, Streith thought, the wife of a banker with a novel, who has sought seclusion here. On the other side of the house was a fenced-in meadow where two brown calves were grazing. A child was watching over them, a small, bent creature with a red kerchief on its head. Next to the child sat a young girl in a blue linen dress, her curly black hair blown by the wind. Both of them, the child and the girl, sang at the top of their lungs. When Streith rode by, the girl jumped up, ran to the gate, and propped herself on the fence with her elbows covered by sleeves that were too short. She watched the rider. Streith found it painful to be stared at with such obvious curiosity by the large, dark eyes as if he were some kind of object. He urged his horse on, and from the house a voice called, "Britta! Britta!"

How full of life it all was, he thought. At a fast trot he rode down the road and then past Gutheiden manor. Through the garden gate he saw the Princess and Roxane walking slowly on the broad gravel path, stopping now and then by one of the beds to smell the spring flowers. It seemed to Streith that a fine, gentle air was coming out of the garden towards him, a fragrance that he was used to breathing in, and this cheered him up.

And the good mood lasted until he got back to his study and stretched out on the divan to rest a bit. Half asleep he dreamed of the figure of the Princess, the gentle motion of her dark violet veil on the yellow gravel, the amicable way she bent over to smell the hyacinths and crocuses in the beds.

Around sundown Streith went to check on the snipes. Not far from the house was a small, wet meadow in the middle of the forest. There he took up a position. The sun was going down, gold and reddish bits of clouds hung on the blue horizon, birds were chirping excitedly in the underbrush, flocks of crows flew hurried around the tops of trees and called out messages to one another, while in the puddles of water below the frogs croaked.

All this burgeoning life was painful to Streith and he was happy when the sun finally went down, glad to have the quiet of evening. Now he heard the snipes coming; they seemed to fly directly out of the golden western sky, slowly approaching, as if they delighted in floating in the air, which was heavy with fragrances and bright with colors. When they were close enough, Streith fired. They fell and Roller dashed to retrieve them for his master. Unfortunate for them, he thought, as he held the dead birds in his hand, to be ripped out of such a pleasant place. Then he reloaded his rifle and waited. The colors in the sky began to pale, the birds got quieter, and the croaking of frogs now seemed quiet and monotonous. Then he heard footsteps in the wet ground near him and when he looked up, he became aware of a girl in the alder bushes. That's the girl from the forester's house, he said to himself, it's Britta. Britta greeted him, placing her hand on her little green felt hat.

"Is it all right if I stand here?" she asked.

"Yes, it's fine," replied Streith coolly and turned away. Britta then stood there, her hands stuck in the pockets of her gray loden jacket, her head bent back, listening attentively. Her face was overheated from running, her lips half open and she was breathing heavily. When the snipes could be heard in the distance, Roller and Britta turned their heads in that direction, and Britta said, "They're coming now." Flying high and fast the snipes came towards them, Streith shot, the snipes made a zig-zag motion and kept on flying. Streith heard Britta laughing quietly. "Too high," he murmured and was annoyed that he had apologized in her presence for missing the birds. But that happens when you have an unexpected audience. He stood there for a while yet, the sky became colorless, and a bit of fog rose from the meadow. "They won't be back," Streith said, and slung his rifle over his shoulder.

"They won't be back," Britta repeated. Streith looked at her in disbelief, she touched the edge of her felt hat again and said, "Thanks. Good night now," and turned to leave.

"Miss," he called to her, "the path that way is marshy. You would do better to take the forest lane."

Obediently Britta turned around, stopped next to Streith and looked at him as if awaiting further instructions. "That's the path I'm taking too," Streith said. So they walked along together across the meadow. Britta, with her hands still in her pockets, stamped on the puddles of water and she seemed to enjoy it when it splashed up around her.

"Are you interested in hunting," said Streith, opening the conversation.

"Yes, because there's nothing else here to see," Britta responded. Her voice had a muffled warm tone mixed with a bit of savory as girls from the common folk often have because they expose their throats to the elements.

"It probably gets lonesome in the forester's house," suggested Streith.

"In winter," Britta reported, "when it gets dark early and we hear footsteps passing by the house that stop in front of our windows and then continue, then we are a bit afraid."

"Are you ladies all alone?"

No, she said, Red Andree lived with them and took care of the white horse. But often he was not there at night. Streith laughed: "Probably because he's out poaching."

"Yes, but he's never gotten caught," Britta said in his defense. "I wish he would let me go along with him just once, but he won't do it."

"That wouldn't be appropriate for a young lady," Streith instructed.

"For a young lady, no, it wouldn't be appropriate," Britta observed, "but who cares what we do?"



In any case, I go into town once a week for a music lesson. I have some girlfriends there, the daughter of the railroad inspector and the daughter of the postmaster. They wanted to have a party, but I'm such a bad dancer, Mama has tried to show me, but then there's no one there to play the piano."

"Hm, well, no, that's not good," Streith remarked.

Conversation lagged for a while and they walked along silently beside one another. It was already getting dark under the tall fir trees, and in water holes the frogs began to sing their songs of courtship; out in the forest the tawny owls called passionately to each other; little footsteps could be heard on the moss—probably a badger on a nocturnal prowl. As Streith listened in to all this tempting, sneaking, and wooing he began to feel strange, and next to him was a child for whom this night in May had the effect of strong wine in the blood.

## Chapter 12.

Britta stopped: "Listen," she said, "there it is again." From the distance came the sound of a black cock gobbling. "He's still coming out," she continued, "yesterday I saw him up close and just had to laugh at him. Why does he dance around all by himself out there? The hens stopped coming a long time ago."

"Perhaps it's because he is so all alone," Streith said, just to say something, and began to walk on.

"That's true," Britta confirmed enthusiastically, "if you're all alone, sometimes you just want to whirl and whirl until you fall down." And she laughed out loud.

"What are you laughing about?" Streith asked.

"I was just thinking," Britta said hesitantly, "how it would look if you were to whirl around the meadow by yourself. But excuse me, that was stupid."

Streith made an effort to laugh. "That would indeed be remarkable," he said.

They had now reached the spot where their paths parted. "You have to go that way," Streith said. "Aren't you afraid to walk alone?"

"No, I'm not afraid," Britta replied confidently. "Good night."

And with that she started down the path and disappeared into the whispering night as if she belonged to it. Streith heard her footsteps on the moist ground for a while. As he headed slowly for home, it seemed to him occasionally that he could still hear the girl breathing in the darkness of the forest.

Back at home he changed clothes. He liked to be formally dressed for the midday meal, even if he was alone. In the dining hall a very pleasant table awaited him; the flames of the candles were reflected in the crystal and silver. Oskar stood there in his white shirt-front. Streith was hungry, so things might go well. During the meal, however, he noticed that it did not convey as much pleasure as he had believed it would. He was actually glad when it was over. He remained seated at the table, lit a cigar and poured some more burgundy into his glass. Most other times when he returned from the hunt he enjoyed stretching out in his comfortable chair, enjoying a healthy exhaustion while thinking about scenes in the green forest. But today that pleasant tranquility escaped him. There was something that needed to be washed down with burgundy, an inexplicable melancholy, really quite inexplicable.

In Gutheiden it was the custom in May to go for an outing to see the nightingales on Webbra, a hill thickly covered with alder on one of the outlying estates. The two princesses wanted to do this again, so servants were sent ahead of the party with folding chairs, blankets, woodruff punch and tortes. Countess Dühnen and Felix, the Üchtlitz ladies, and the pastor's daughters had been invited.

When Streith joined the party the red sun was going down rayless.

“Sundown today isn't exactly what you'd want,” Count Minsky said.

But Fräulein v. Dietheim said, “I think it's dramatic.”

The ladies sat on the folding chairs, the gentlemen made themselves comfortable on the blankets. Marie sat a bit apart among the young girls, among whom the loud and clear voices of the pastor's daughters ruled the conversations. Johanna flirted with Felix Dühnen, who drank his punch silently and in a bad mood.

“It's really a great shame that Count Dühnen is once again *le beau ténébreux*. I would so have liked to hear about all the charming lieutenants in Berlin.”

“I'm on vacation,” Felix countered.

The pastor's daughters all laughed at once and Wilhelmine said, “Of course for us poor girls out in the country such charm means nothing—they're saving it for ladies in the capitol.”

“He was like this at the crab outing yesterday too,” Henriette von Üchtlitz reported, “he just drank punch and didn't say a word, and as soon as it got dark, he disappeared.”

“How mysterious,” Johanna said.

Among the older folks there was talk of nightingales. “Why do nightingales sing at night?” Fräulein v. Dietheim inquired of Captain von Keck.

“Probably because she doesn't have time to sing during the day,” he muttered grumpily.

But that did not satisfy her. “Oh, Keck, the answers you give people sometimes,” she said, somewhat annoyed.

Then Baroness Dünhof stepped in, one could hear in her voice that the evening was making her emotional: “Captain von Keck is completely correct, noises in the daytime distract them, and only when it's dark are they able to think their favorite thoughts again.”

“Yes, it is remarkable,” Fräulein v. Dachsberg said, “when everything around us is still and quiet, then thoughts come to us that we like to think again and again.”

“For example, our debts,” Count Minsky whispered to Baron Fürwit. Fräulein v. Dietheim overheard this and said, “You should be ashamed of yourself, Count.”

“The nightingale has got it right,” the Princess said. “If we have a feeling that makes us happy, or a happy thought, why shouldn't we want to have that feeling or that thought recur again and again?”

Everyone agreed with that, and Baron Fürwit murmured, “Very nice.”

“My uncle, General Bagration<sup>12</sup>,” Count Minsky reported, “hated nightingales. If one of them strayed into his park, he would have it shot. He always said, “A nightingale's song sounds like a guilty conscience.”

“Quite possible,” the Count confirmed, “if you've spent time in the Caucasus as a general you will have seen quite a lot.”

“She's starting to sing now,” the Princess said.

“Yes, quiet please,” Baron Fürwit whispered and turned to the young people to ask for silence.

The alder thicket stood dark and motionless in the growing twilight. Then from its midst came the first sounds of the nightingale, hesitatingly and tentative at first, but then the excited little voice gained confidence and got louder until finally it sang its song passionately and hastily into the evening air. The listeners adopted relaxed, pensive stances, their eyes seemed dreamy. Princess Kusmin

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12 Possibly an actual historic personage. It could be Pyotr Bagration (†1835) or his brother Revaz (Roman, †1835). Both were generals.

shielded her eyes with her hand; Fräulein v. Dachsberg's lips betrayed a sympathetic smile, while Count Minsky sat there with his head inclined on his shoulder. Then a second nightingale started up and it seemed as if she wanted to drown out her companion; then from another side a whole chorus rose up, and fluting and trilling could be heard coming from all the bushes, but each individual voice retained its loneliness, and told its own emotional story. For a moment the whole party was quite moved by it all, and Baron Fürwit whispered to Princess Kusmin, "Princess Adelheid is crying." Princess Kusmin relayed the news to Fräulein Von Dietheim, who got up and went over the Princess to offer her some cologne. There was a commotion among the young women as well; the pastor's daughters could not sit still, they needed to walk a bit, and Henriette von Üchtlitz joined them. Hilda touched Marie's shoulder and said, "Shouldn't we go for a walk too?"

"Yes, let's do," Marie replied happily and took Hilda's arm. Felix jumped up to accompany the two friends. Since the day of the tennis party at the castle he had regarded that as his right.

Narrow paths ran through the stand of alders. It was murky here and smelled strongly of young leaves, and from the edge of the hill one could look down on the land, which lay flat and colorless except for a white band of luminous fog rising from the brook. In the outlying parts of the estate matte red lights shone in the windows, and in front of the houses the children were lined up holding hands singing a repetitive children's song and their thin, hoarse voices mixed with the fluttering of the nightingales.

"I know very well why you're feeling like your wings are clipped today," Hilda said to Felix, with an edge to her voice, "you probably had a disagreement with your father."

"What if?" replied Felix, "Things like that don't put you in a good mood, but do we have to talk about it?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I want to talk about," Hilda continued, "I think it's unmanly to let yourself be so put upon. When you got into debt, you knew very well that it would lead to a scene between you and your father. And if you can't bear confrontations like that, then you should avoid creating debts. But if you do stupid things, then you bear the consequences, you don't make a face like a naughty boy made to sit in a corner."

"You're the pot calling the kettle black," Felix countered, getting worked up by her remark. "If they treated you like you were the dregs of humanity, as if you weren't worthy of belonging to the family, and all of that for the sake of a few hundred marks. All right, I admit it, I'm dependent on my father, but it's not good for him to pull me on a leash all the time."

"Right, that's very humiliating," Hilda replied, "so just don't have any debts. But I find it ridiculous that a man can't take responsibility for his mistakes."

Then Marie joined in: "I completely understand. I would just die in an instant."

"No you wouldn't," cried Felix, happy to have someone on his side, "but Hilda doesn't understand because she has an idealistic notion of a hero, and if you're not exactly like the hero of some novel, then she doesn't respect you."

"We're not talking about heroes here," Hilda mocked, her voice trembling and close to crying, "I just don't like weakness. And anyway, you two get along so swimmingly, there's nothing for me to do here."

She let go of Marie's arm, turned back and disappeared behind some bushes, leaving the others in a state of shock. Felix shrugged his shoulders and said, "She's always like that, a good girl, but too full of passion. She always wants you to be whatever it is she wants, but I just don't have this noble manly quality that she dreams about. Where would I get it?"

"It must be terrible to have debts," Marie said.

"Oh, it's not so bad, really," Felix laughed. They were both silent for a while and Marie stared

down at the ground self-consciously. Finally, Felix said quietly: "Isn't it shocking for Hilda to leave us here alone?"

Marie laughed: "I've done a few shocking things in my time."

"All right, let's just keep walking for a bit." And they walked for a while among the bushes.

"Yesterday at noon," Felix reported, "I was in the park at Gutheiden."

"At our place?" Marie asked.

"Yes. Of course it's not appropriate to walk onto some else's property without permission, but things that are fun usually aren't appropriate. There's a little pond with black water and lilacs and a stone bench where I sat. From there I could see the various allees, I could see all the way to the castle, I saw part of the steps leading to the garden, and at one point I saw some small blue and pink figures walking back and forth."

Marie stopped and said with some concern, "I think we should be getting back to the others. I fear that Fräulein v. Dachsberg will already have started looking for me."

"Fine," replied Felix, "but let's stay here just to share this moment together."

They were closely surrounded by alder bushes and dew rustled in the foliage, and not too far away a nightingale began her song. Marie looked at Felix: his face had a handsome reverent expression, and he was looking at her. If I weren't a princess, she thought, he would kiss me, and she began to feel quite emotional and felt her eyes welling with tears. She wiped her eyes with her hand.

"Are you crying?" Felix asked.

"No, no," she said uneasily. "let's hurry on back to the others."

In silence they quickly began walking the path back.

Only once did Felix say: "If we go along this way we can get back to the others unnoticed."

Their reappearance at the party went unnoticed because there had been a bit of excitement: Fräulein v. Dietheim had fainted and was surrounded by ladies trying to help.

"She's allergic to nightingales," Streith said to Roxane.

"She's a bit too sensitive," replied Roxane.

Streith had tried all evening to start up a conversation with Roxane, but had received only frosty or dismissive answers.

When it began to get dark and the air turned moist, the Princess said it was time to finish up. Streith accompanied her down the hill.

"It was quite nice," she said, "in our quiet corner of the world we become just simple human beings. Those people who come from the world outside with their complicated natures, they can be quite upset by a simple nightingale party."

"Simple human beings? I'm not so sure. It makes us strong, I'd say," Streith countered.

At the bottom of the hill the carriages were ready. The pastor's daughters wanted to walk, and those in the cars could hear the clear voices of the two girls singing into the May night:

*In einem kühlen Grunde,  
da geht ein Mühlenrad.  
Mein Liebchen ist verschwunden,  
das dort gewohnt hat.*

## Chapter 13.

Count Dühren had taken breakfast with Count Streith and now they both sat in the garden room drinking coffee. Streith did not like this old man with his jaundiced face, pale angry-looking eyes and his too white false teeth. Count Dühren was displeased with everything, with the empire, with the administration that did nothing for agriculture, even with His Majesty the King; and he treated these topics with an acidic loquacity that tired one out. Now he had been sitting in the garden room for quite a while and had taken up a new topic and it threatened to become quite expansive, and that was the imprudence of his son Felix.

“Youth today just has no sense of dignity,” he said, pounding his index finger hard on the top of the table. “I was young once too. I was a cavalry lieutenant in the Seventies War.<sup>13</sup> We were high-spirited then too, even a bit wild, and did crazy things, but we never forgot what it meant to wear the King's uniform. Of course we had debts then too, little amounts, I mean. But I would never have come to my father and said as casually, as if speaking to a banker, that I had a thousand marks in gambling debts. No, never! I'd sooner have put a bullet through my head. So, I said to Felix: “Fine. I'll pay your debts this time, and because I'm a good father, I will also raise your allowance. But let there never be any more talk between us about debts that you've incurred. If you have obligations, then take care of them yourself as best you can because you can't count on me. I do not intend to privilege one son over the others, especially since they might have more going for them. So now you know how things stand between us.”

“You're very strict,” said Streith, thinking of nothing better.

“I am indeed strict,” the Count continued, “I have three sons and I'm a good father. I love my children, but I want them to be respectable people, members of the nobility, and worthy of the Dühren name. If any of them are not in agreement with those goals, then I will withdraw my hand from him, painful as that might be. That's the only way, old man, that in these difficult democratic times to maintain the nobility. Making difficult choices without a lot of emotional nonsense. Imprudence! I don't know how anyone in my family could be guilty of that.”

“Inheritance comes from various ancestors,” Streith observed, suppressing a yawn, “the Dühren family is very old—they even took part in the crusades. In Palestine things might have gotten a bit out of hand. That whole business with the crusades was a bit imprudent and that sort of thing is passed down the line.”

“No, I can't accept that, old man,” Count Dühren said in an ill-tempered manner and made a motion with his hand as if chasing away a fly, “the only people who blame things on heredity are those who haven't been brought up properly. I'll make sure my boys don't think they can rely on some notion of 'heredity'.”

“Quite the right thing to do, I'm sure,” Streith agreed. With that the topic seemed to be exhausted, and the Count stood up to say goodbye.

Streith breathed a sigh of relief when the guest had left. A visit like that leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, he thought. He whistled for Roller and hurried out to the forest. It was a chilly day and balls of clouds moved rapidly across the bright blue sky. A fresh breeze blew through the fir trees causing them to sway and groan. This profound, eventful voice of the forest refreshed him. He removed his hat and headed directly into the wind and he could feel an elasticity in his arms and legs. He walked quickly as if he had a goal to reach. Soon he was at the edge of his woods and stood in front of the forester's house. The brown cows grazed as usual, once again Britta and the child sat on a

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red cloth on the grass and sang. They sang loudly so as to overpower the accompaniment provided by the natural sounds of the forest. Streith greeted them.

When Britta saw him she jumped up, ran to the fence, and held out her hand to him. Her whole face broke into a smile. She covered her head with her other hand and said, "The wind will really blow you to bits today."

"Well, yes," Streith said leaning on the fence, "the wind really is strong today. Those are good looking calves over there."

"They are heifers," Britta explained, "we're trying to raise them, but sometimes they act really wild."

"And that's why you're singing to them?" Streith asked.

"No, that's not it. What else is there to do around here?"

Then Frau von Syrman appeared in the window of the house and called out "Margusch! Drive the calves back toward the house." When she saw Britta conversing with Streith, she waved and stepped back.

"Now you have a treat in store," cried Britta, and opened the gate. With a wild "Huh-ya! Huh-ya!" Margusch drove the unruly calves forward. Once they were through the gate they caught sight of Roller and ran off towards the woods, with Margusch and Britta close behind them. "Head them off, Count," Britta cried and Streith ran over and used his walking stick to prevent them from getting through the opening. Now an old woman came out of the house, she was as big as a man, with streaking gray wisps of hair and started yelling "Hoo-ya" to help herd the calves. Finally the calves were encircled and gotten into the stall.

Streith stood at the door of the stall, a bit out of breath, his heart pounding.

Then Frau von Syrman came out of the house. She was wearing a feather boa over her shoulders and trod carefully across the dirty courtyard like a fine lady on a promenade. She smiled. "Child, child," she said, "you've caused the Count a lot of trouble."

"Oh, it was very interesting," Streith reassured her, "but your calves really do have a mind of their own."

"That was the evening's excitement," said Frau von Syrman.

"More like the evening's round of exercise," said Streith.

Frau von Syrman shrugged her shoulders a bit, "I'm afraid that out here in the hinterlands we all go a bit wild. But won't you sit down for a while, Count; we have a so-called veranda here, very primitive, of course." Frau von Syrman walked toward the door of the house at the front of which there was a small canopy with two benches underneath it.

Streith followed hesitatingly, the invitation seemed a bit ill-timed.

"Please have a seat," Frau von Syrman said, "Britta, come over and sit with us. You've gotten quite overheated."

Streith sat down, with Frau von Syrman leaning in the doorway with that same melancholy smile on her lips.

"It's a tranquil little place," she said, "and even in summer it's cool here. This is where we spend our long, quiet summer evenings.

"The view is wonderful," Streith observed.

"Please excuse me for a moment," Frau von Syrman said and went back into the house.

Britta sat across from Streith, with the sun shining on her face and in this light the blackness of her large eyes took on a reddish glow with tiny golden points of light in them.

Streith smiled, but he didn't know why, perhaps only because the face opposite him was so young and pretty. "Do you think the calves have gone to sleep already?" he said just to have something to say.

Britta remained solemn. “Those poor calves,” she replied. “When we're finished with the calves, then there's nothing to do around here at all.” Her hands were folded in her lap, large hands of a child, but red and rough looking.

Streith looked at her hands and felt sorry for her.

Britta noticed that he was looking at her hands and said, “Yes, my hands are red. During the winter my skin gets cracked, but I don't like to wear gloves.”

“But it gets better in warm weather,” said Streith trying to comfort her.

But Britta shook her head, “Oh, no. Fräulein Wolwer, my piano teacher in town, wants me to put salve on them at night and then put on gloves, but I can't sleep with gloves on.”

“Yes, that's probably uncomfortable,” agreed Streith.

“Mama's hands are always white,” Britta continued, “no matter what she does, her hands stay white. The princesses over there, they have white hands too, don't they?”

“Hmm. Yes,” replied Streith, “I'm pretty sure their hands are quite white.”

“Of course, they're princesses,” Britta added, by way of explanation.

Frau von Syrman appeared in the doorway again, “Count, can I offer you a cup of coffee? I just made it.”

Streith jumped with a start: “Oh, thank you, how kind,” he managed, “but I don't think I can abuse your hospitality any further, I've already stayed too long.”

“No, there's no getting out of it now,” said Frau von Syrman, somewhat coquettishly, “now you **have** to have a cup of coffee with us.” She walked down the hall and Streith followed, sombre-faced.

The living room was wide and unpretentious with blue wallpaper; it held lots of furniture, but none of it seemed to go together; there was a large horse-hair sofa, some chairs, a round yellow table, and next to it a small sewing chest inlaid with ivory, a piano, and a chest of drawers with metal-work upon which sat a bronze clock, and in front of that a volume of Tasso<sup>14</sup> sat on a book-stand. On the wall hung photographs and a pastel portrait of Frau von Syrman, her pretty bust with a Botticelli hair-do, dreamy eyes, and well-sculpted mouth.

“Please do take a seat,” said Frau von Syrman. She herself sat down on the sofa, poured coffee from a blue coffee pot into a large blue cup, and pushed the sugar and the plate with yellow cake closer to Streith. “Do you take sugar? Please help yourself to the cake.” And with that she began to converse with the casual confidence of a well-practiced hostess at high tea. “We're having a remarkably beautiful spring this year. I hear from friends in Cannes that it's so hot there that everyone is leaving.” Streith said he could well believe it. “Weren't the princesses going to take a trip this year?”

Streith hadn't heard a thing about it.

Britta also sat at the table; she drank milk from a big glass, dipping her big, broad lips into the whiteness, blinking her lashes and looking easily at Streith over the rim of the glass.

Frau von Syrman leaned back in the corner of the sofa, drew the feather boa closer around her neck and lit a cigarette. “After a while,” she said, “you get used to living out here in the hinterlands. If fate drives you to solitude like this, eventually you get to like it.”

“The city really isn't all that far away,” Streith objected.

Frau von Syrman shrugged her shoulders, “That little provincial town doesn't have that much to offer. No, I always loved nature, or Nordic nature, and yet.... You see, my dear Count, it's strange, I was born in Germany, my father was German, but our family comes from Italy, my maiden name was Arci, so from the time that I was child there have been moments when my surroundings, that is, my

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14 Torquato Tasso was an Italian poet of the 16th century, best known for his poem *La Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered, 1580).

northern surroundings seemed alien to me, as if it didn't really belong to me. In Italy, Nice, Mentone<sup>15</sup>—that's where my heart yearned to be. Strange. It must be that bit of foreign blood in me.”

“I see,” murmured Streith.

“And the fact that I have both northern and southern blood in me,” she continued perceptively, “explains a lot of things, I think. I see it in her too,” she said, pointing towards Britta with a nod of her head, “she has a lot of foreign blood, and that explains why a lot of things are not as they should be.”

Britta made a face, stood up and went to the window.

Her mother laughed understandingly. “She doesn't like for people to talk about her,” she said, then she sighed: “But there is very much of the Germanic in her from her father.”

The evening sun shone into the room at a steep angle, grazed the golden volume of Tasso, struck the table, the yellow cake, the big blue cups with the thin coffee and was also caught in her cigarette smoke. Frau von Syrman continued to speak in a complaining voice, Britta stood at the window and looked out drearily.

Streith thought, this is sad, unbearably sad. What am I doing sitting here?

“My husband was a genuine Teuton,” Frau von Syrman continued, “tall, blond, blue eyes, very musical, a good businessman, but....” she sighed, “he was a naïve egotist. If he didn't like someone, he had a way of pushing the person aside the way someone pushes away a plate when he is full. And, you know, that is hurtful, people get upset about it.”

Streith concentrated on his coffee cup, feeling annoyed at being so initiated into the circumstances of the Syrman family. He feared that next he would have to hear about that American novel about the insurance agent<sup>16</sup> that he had heard rumors about. Trying to summarize, he said: “Mixing of blood lines like that, dear lady, can be very beneficial. But I have detained the ladies for far too long.”

Frau von Syrman smiled her melancholy smile: “Detain us, Count, how could you? We have nothing planned.” Streith got up to take his leave.

## Chapter 14.

Frau von Syrman shook his hand with casual friendliness and said, “I hope that your walks in the woods will soon bring you back to our little cabin.”

Streith turned to Britta, who was holding her felt hat in her hands as if ready to go. “I'll accompany you, Count.”

Frau von Syrman shook her head disapprovingly, “Only if he permits it, silly thing,” she said. “With pleasure,” Streith muttered. And so they left together.

Britta said nothing. She had a look of seriousness and ill humor on her face, and when a new twig of a fir tree brushed her face, she bit it in two.

Streith tried to think of some topic of conversation, he wanted to say something that would encourage her and cheer her up, but nothing better occurred to him than “Why do you look so angry?”

“It annoys me that every time we have a visitor, she has to tell the same old stories about destiny, blood, and loneliness. It's almost as if we wanted to apologize for ourselves or be explained to people like some animal from a fable. We are what we are.”

“Yes, of course,” Streith assured her and looked in astonishment at her pretty face which now looked so angry and passionate. “But I wouldn't let a thing like that spoil a beautiful evening.”

Britta smiled again, shrugged her shoulders and said, “Oh, I was just being stupid. Did you

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<sup>15</sup> A coastal resort town.

<sup>16</sup> Possibly *The Job* by Sinclair Lewis, published in 1917, the same year as Keyserling's *Fürstinnen*.



know that yesterday when you had gone out, I was at your house? I looked at the garden through the fence, then I stood on the bench in front of the house and peered inside through the window. I know very well that you're not supposed to do that, and that it's bad manners, but I was so curious. I saw a beautiful room, lots of pictures in gold frames and a beautiful tiger skin. Then an angry-looking old man came into the room and I ran away."

Streith laughed good-naturedly. "Well then, you shall see the room from the inside."

Britta said nothing in reply, and Streith immediately regretted his words. Why had he invited the girl in? What did these people have to do with him? He had been trapped today. At the same time he felt a nagging sympathy for the child, he would have liked to do something for the child, he wished he were as young as she so that he could be a merry playmate for her. But all of this didn't suit him, it had no place in his life. Britta stopped: "Now I'm going back home," she said.

Streith offered her his hand, "Thank you for accompanying me."

"I was delighted that I could walk with you," replied Britta, "I couldn't possibly have stayed at home." Then she walked with long, gliding steps along the forest path towards home and disappeared into the thicket.

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Roxane and Eleonore sat in the veranda and looked down into the garden, which lay still in the afternoon sunshine. Finally Eleonore said, "Where are they? Mama has been gone for a while, and Marie is on a different path. Both of them have a remarkable need to be alone. What's going on here?"

"Evidently they don't have much of a need to be with us," Roxane suggested.

Eleonore sighed: "Oh, how I longed to be back here at home."

"And now?" Roxane asked.

"Well, now," Eleonore continued thoughtfully, "it's not what I thought it would be. Everything has remained the same, and yet it is different. I'm only a visitor from the outside, even the dogs walk past me as if I were a stranger."

"My first year over there in St. Petersburg," Roxane said, "I couldn't sleep at night because of homesickness, so in my thoughts I would wander through this house: I could hear the creaking of the parquet, the familiar sound of the doors and locks; I remembered the smell of each room, I could see the wrinkled brows of the old people; I saw Fräulein v. Dachsberg's raised eyebrows when she is annoyed. It comforted me, it felt like home, and now it's all still here, but—I don't know—it's all smaller and paler. Fräulein v. Dachsberg seems shrunken and old-fashioned. In my dreams it was all stronger and livelier. And another thing that seems strange, I seem to be older than all of them, older than Dachsberg and Countess Dönhof with her painted cheeks, older than Mama and a hundred years older than Marie."

"Yes, that's exactly how it is," agreed Eleonore, "just think, yesterday I went to the old chest of drawers in the bedroom and found my doll, Eva, that I loved so much, with her blond curls, bright blue eyes and little red mouth. But the curls were stiff and dusty, the mouth had turned pale, the face looked stupid and lifeless, and I don't understand what I liked about her. It's a little bit like that with everything here. But, after all, you and I have kept our life stories going, the people here are living the same old lives as before."

Roxane shrugged her shoulders. "The story that's being lived out here seems to have no purpose," she said harshly.

Eleonore laughed: "Yes, the thing with the Count," and after brief pause she added, "only the old garden is the same as it was and even it is looking a bit sad. In Birkenstein when I dreamed of the garden, then I always saw a quiet, pale light over it, which made it appear lonely, and now, you see,

that's exactly how it looks.”

“It's time to leave,” Roxane thought, and they looked once more in silence down the yellow garden path.

Meanwhile the Princess was walking along all the paths in the park collecting violets. The spring day was so comforting to her that she wanted to be alone so that no one could disturb her joy in it. In a bright gray suit, with a gray felt hat on her head, she felt pretty and youthful, her cheeks and lips heated by the mild spring breeze. Just at that moment she encountered Streith, who had come through the back door of the park on his way to talk to the Major in the business office. “Oh, Streith,” cried the Princess, “you're here again. You haven't been around much lately.” She extended her hand to him and Streith could see that she was glad to see him.

“I didn't want to disturb you,” he replied and kissed her proffered hand. The Princess's face turned serious for a moment.

“Well, of course, because the children are here,” she said. But soon she smiled again. “Such a day this has been! I don't think I've ever been so delighted by spring as this year.”

“Our spring this time has been somewhat turbulent,” Streith replied. They walked slowly down the allee together.

“What have you been doing?” asked the Princess.

“I've been inspecting my forest,” Streith reported, “I've been working, and I've worked on the house.”

“Worked on the house?! Streith, Streith, you'll never be finished with it.”

“Yes, I will, eventually,” he murmured.

“Did Frau Buche fix you something good to eat?” the Princess inquired further.

“Oh, Frau Buche is great with her mushroom sauce and crab soup,” Streith replied.

The Princess inquired as to why Roller hadn't come along. Roller had killed a rabbit that morning and as punishment had to stay at home.

There was a bench at the end of the allee. “Let's sit for a while,” said the Princess. And so they sat, young maple leaves forming an arch of green over them. The leaves cast an agitated shadow on the grass, and opposite them the sun shone down the allee, a flood of of red-golden splendor, in which many tiny wings filled the air silently.

“On a day like this,” the Princess said, and took a deep breath, “on such a day one forgets that one is an old woman.”

Streith knew that he had to contradict this statement, but it took a while until he found the right thing to say, and even then it came out a bit to complicated and didactic. “The concept of youth,” he began, “is very much abused. Youth certainly has its advantages, but in certain ways it's overrated. When I look at today's youth and think back on my own, then it seems to me that we are like piano students practicing a difficult piece, they throw all their enthusiasm and passion into it, but it's full of missed notes and wrong chords.

“Youth is youth,” said the Princess tenderly.

“I'm not saying anything against youth,” Streith continued, “I just mean that this so-called period of youth isn't everything, it's not what life is all about; rather, it's a time when we understand life and get to know it so that we can make something of it. Life is too difficult an instrument to be kept in the school room.”

The Princess looked at Streith in a friendly manner. “Perhaps you can do that, Streith,” she said, then she looked down at her basket and toyed with the violets. During the intervening silence Streith clearly felt that the moment had come for him to say something important, something that concerned him and the Princess, that the Princess was waiting to hear it. Lots of ideas went through his mind, but he rejected them all, all of them seemed contrived and ridiculous. The Princess looked up

and there was something like astonishment in her eyes: "You've told me nothing of your roses," she said to keep the conversation going.

"The roses," Streith repeated, feeling self-conscious, which was rare for him. "Well, the roses got through the winter pretty well; I've gotten two new ones, a large red one with violet undertones, called Miss Vanderbilt."

"How democratic," interjected the Princess.

Streith shrugged his shoulders: "Roses, too, are going democratic. The other one is a small, sulfur-yellow rose that smells very sweet, it's called—don't ask me why—"Diane vaincue'."

"That's cute," said the Princess, "I'll have to see them all. You'll have to arrange a tea party for Baroness Dönhof and me."

Streith made a bow: "It would be an honor," he said.

The Princess looked at the hour and stood up. "It's time to go home," she said, "today is Thursday, so it's my tea circle, are you going to attend?"

No, Streith wanted to go home and work.

"In that case, then, goodbye," the Princess concluded. "And let poor Roller out." And as she was about to start walking, she turned around again and said with a coquettish smile, "Would you like a couple of violets?" Streith stretched out his hand as if accepting alms and the Princess filled it with violets.

While Streith was walking back through the park, he stuck his nose into the violets he was holding in his hand. He was annoyed with himself. At all other times, when he was together with a beautiful woman, he always recognized—with infallible certainty—that moment when the woman expected him to say something that would bring them closer together, that moment when she wanted to be overpowered and conquered. But today he had behaved like a young teacher applying for a job. And on top of that his stilted talk about youth. Unbelievable. And suddenly he thought of Britta, thought about her as if she were youth itself which he had just maligned.

## Chapter 15.

The Roxane and Eleonore were supposed to leave Gutheiden on the morning train. They had all gotten up early, and the prospect of a departure created an unexpected air of excitement in the house. The maids and the footmen scurried about, suitcases were carried around, and the ladies and gentlemen in the retinue stood around looking a bit sleepy and carried on desultory conversations. The family sat together in the Princess's boudoir, Eleonore and the Princess were crying, and even on Roxane's calm face tears could be seen. Marie was saddened, the separation from her sisters was painful for her, but she could not cry, and that was awkward.

With sad voices they talked about things of no consequence, about departure times and arrival times, about train stations and the weather. Baron Fürwit, who suffered from gout and was therefore a good prognosticator of weather conditions, had predicted a storm today. Finally the moment of parting arrived, and as the carriages rolled away, a great quiet came over the house and at noon things were as still as at midnight. Everyone had retreated to try to catch up on lost sleep.

Marie, too, was supposed to try to sleep, but she could find no rest. All Spring she had had the feeling that she had to be on her guard so as not to miss anything. She went out into the empty suite of rooms. Behind drawn curtains the gilded wooden furniture was dozing gently; in the adjoining gallery a bee had strayed in through an open window and buzzed unhappily at the noses on the ancestral portraits. Finally, in the smoking room, Baron Fürwit lay in an armchair, his head leaning back, asleep.

From his open mouth came a hoarse sleepy tone like that of a rusty old clock. So she tip-toed back the way she had come. Even when she was a child, when she found herself in these empty, sunny rooms she had always felt a spirit of adventure, that something had to be done, that the coast was clear. Today this feeling that something was waiting for her was especially strong; she had something to do that she would be happy about and that she would do with a guilty conscience. And now she also knew what it was and that she had to go to the park.

The gardens were as quiet and sunny as the house. Tulips and narcissus stood motionless in their beds, and when Marie went to pick narcissus, the blossoms were as warm as human lips. She hurried to the park, and could not remember being there at this time of day, and everything had an unaccustomed look. There was the pond, dark and still; little fish floated in groups at the surface and sunned themselves. Some ducks had taken refuge in the shade of the rushes and quacked quietly to themselves. Even the smell of the sun-warmed water and leaves seemed new to Marie.

A bit further on two gardener's boys were asleep under a huge elm; they lay with arms and legs stretched out, their caps pulled down over their eyes, and both were snoring so that it sounded like a crude conversation. Marie stopped for a moment, the two large men's bodies rendered helpless and flaccid by deep sleep seemed remarkable to her. As she walked on further she saw a figure in red and white stripes at the end of the allee hurrying quickly, with her arms swinging in regular motion. That's Emilie the lady's maid, Marie thought, where could she be running to?

Then the maid turned off from the main path and disappeared behind some lilac bushes and there she stopped, her red and white striped dress still visible through the brush. A green hat popped up—that would have to be the young gardener. Amazing what all happens during the quiet of midday. Marie climbed a small knoll where there was a small pond with ink-black water. On the shore was a bower of buckthorn with a stone table and a stone bench. Felix was sitting on the bench. He had taken his hat off and was asleep, his head sunk into his chest. Marie stopped in her tracks and observed him. The light piercing through the bower made his face seem pale, and sleep gave his face a childish expression, and yet his features revealed that something was not right. The poor thing, Marie thought, it's the fault of those terrible debts.

Felix opened his eyes, stared at Marie sleepily for a second, then jumped up. "Please pardon me," he said, "I think I must have been asleep."

"You were fast asleep," Marie replied, "I just happened to be walking by and I saw you."

Felix's lips quivered, and Marie knew that when his lips quivered and his eyes got dark that he was angry and that he looked fearsome, and she asked herself what could be bothering him.

"Of course," he began, "I didn't think that you walked over here on my account. Princesses are always just walking by."

Marie's eyes opened wide in fright. "Why do you say that?" she asked. "Why are you speaking like that with me?"

Felix knitted his eyebrows together and chewed on his upper lip. "I beg your forgiveness," he said formally, "I've gotten off track, I know I'm not behaving properly, and I beg your forgiveness. I hope that Your Highness will not leave because of it. I promise to behave perfectly correctly, perfectly correctly."

Now Marie was short-tempered, she threw the narcissus down on the stone table and her voice sounded as if she were near tears. "I don't want people always speaking properly to me, and I know that it was Hilda who gave you the idea that you always have to be stuffy and proper when speaking to princesses. Hilda despises princesses because they don't 'develop,' because they're not modern women."

Then Felix smiled again: he liked this agitated blond girl with her round, moist eyes so much, and he felt some joy in the fact that he had some power over such a pretty girl: "Would Her Highness

care to sit down?" he said.

Marie went over to the bench and sat down, her knees trembling; standing up had become difficult. "I hear enough about always being a princess from Fräulein v. Dachsberg. Being a princess is like having a lock on all the doors that lead to any fun. Please speak to me as you speak to other girls, as you speak to Hilda, say what you want to. You don't always have to call me 'Your Highness' either—that only gets in the way."

"How should I address you, then?" Felix asked.

"However you want to," she said with some annoyance. "You should know that better than I."

Felix looked at Marie with a look of musing superiority. "A princess," he said, "is something beautiful, she's like one of those little madonnas on wayside shrines with pink cheeks and golden tresses and when you pass by one, you bow."

"But I don't want to stand by myself in a wayside shrine," cried Marie, "what do I have to do? What do other girls do? What do modern girls do?"

Felix shook his head thoughtfully. "A modern girl, when she goes to a park to meet someone, doesn't say that she only happened to be passing by."

Marie turned scarlet red. "Well, they must be lying sometimes," she said. "Well, all right, I did come here because I knew that you would be here."

Felix laughed wholeheartedly and slapped his knee: "That's wonderful. How much I adore you. And I may say anything I want to."

Marie nodded, "So, go ahead and speak."

"Back when we used to spend time together under the currant bushes," Felix began, "that's when it started, and since then it hasn't let go of me. When you were traveling last summer and when you were in Italy during the winter, my vacation time at home meant nothing to me, it was as lonesome as the barracks. Hilda was in a fury, she said, it was stupid to fall in love with a princess because nothing could come of it. Well, perhaps that's right: you wouldn't be appointed to a high position where you would be worked to death, thank God. Sometimes the best things in life don't lead anywhere, there's no future to them. But you came here today, and we can sit here together, and I can tell you everything that's on my mind—that's a lot in itself, isn't it? I think it's a heck of a lot."

Marie kept her hands folded on her lap, her face looked serious as if she were listening to a homily, but a curiously exciting homily.

"There's one thing that we could do," said Felix pensively.

Marie smiled wanly as she let her arms drop to her sides, and asked: "What else do I have to do?"

This lack of volition made her woozy and felt good at the same time. "Why don't we go through the gate," Felix suggested, "there is a patch of heather over there and a small gravel quarry and in the quarry it's probably very nice."

Marie shook her head, no, that's too dangerous.

"It is dangerous," Felix admitted, "but being in danger together builds a friendship."

But Marie just didn't want to risk it, there was no way.

"Oh, all right, we can't do it then," Felix muttered. For a moment both were silent. Over on the allee the little red and white striped figure appeared again running and swinging her arms heading towards the castle. "I see that little maid every time I'm here," Felix said, "she goes into the thicket to meet her boyfriend."

Marie got up from the bench. "All right, let's go to the gravel quarry," she said with determination.

Carefully they crept among the lilacs and buckthorn until they got to the gate to the park. The main road ran in front of the park. Just across the road lay the patch of heather and the gravel pit.

Going down was steep and Marie had to hold fast to Felix for support. There was sunshine down in the quarry and heather from the previous year covered the walls, here and there was a large leaf of a vine and the golden tuft of a dandelion blossom, and the place smelled of warm sand.

“Please sit down, here on the heather,” said Felix, rubbing his hands together in pleasure, “It rustles like silk, doesn't it? This is a wonderful private room. In one way we're completely separated from the world, nothing else exists. Can't you feel the princess part of you disappearing?”

“Yes,” said Marie, “I think can feel something like that.”

Then Felix put his arm around her waist. She thought it was a bit strange, but then thought that's just how things are. Then he bent over and kissed her.

Marie felt his hot lips, his little mustache on her lips. Then she thought: so that's what it is that Hilda's been talking about, and now I know something about it too. Perhaps I should put my arms around his neck, and she did put her arms around his neck. It probably was the right thing to do, for it made her warm at heart.

Satisfied with this, Felix leaned back in the heather and closed his eyes, “Oh, your Majesty,” he said, “how pretty it is here; if I close my eyes, I hear sounds like grasshoppers chirping—but it's my own blood.”

“I can't close my eyes,” Marie explained feebly, “if I close my eyes, I get scared, it scares me that I am here and that you are here, and I can see the castle and Fräulein v. Dachsberg looking for me.”

“Just don't get a guilty conscience,” Felix flared, “pangs of conscience are quite usual and they ruin everything. It's going to be quite a while before we see each other again,” he said tenderly, “this afternoon my father and I are going to visit a boring old uncle and we'll stay there two days and then get back home late, and the next day I have to report back to duty. I'm only here for one more night, and I certainly will be sitting here in the park on the bench then.”

“In the park?” Marie asked with astonishment. “There's no way that I can go into the park at night.”

“No, you probably can't,” Felix continued, “Nevertheless, I will be sitting here on the bench all night thinking of you and hoping for something impossible to occur, for a miracle.”

“I can't even get out of my room,” she moaned, “without Emilie noticing.”

“Well, our little lady's maid Emilie,” Felix asserted, “**she** would know how to get out here. But I'm not saying that it's possible, I'm just saying that I'll be sitting here.”

Marie twisted around impatiently in the heather. “I would never do such a thing,” she whimpered. She felt now that a foreign power had control over her like something painful. Felix didn't respond.

Little blue and golden-brown butterflies fluttered around her, and bees buzzed around the dandelions, while high up in the blue sky swallows flew about swift as arrows emitting shrill little cries that seemed enormously carefree to Marie.

“We probably should be going now,” Felix said.

They got up and climbed the steep wall of the gravel quarry. They didn't talk, Marie had pangs of guilt and that made her wretched. When they successfully made it back to the park gate, Felix kissed her hand seriously and said, “Farewell. I'll be thinking of you when I'm sitting on that bench.” Marie didn't know what to say to that, and thus they parted.

Now Marie was in a hurry to get back home, so she ran and involuntarily her arms swung just as she had seen Emilie's do. Back in the castle Fräulein v. Dachsberg was going from room to room looking for the Princess; she was quite displeased that Marie had gotten so overheated—didn't she know that the doctor had expressly forbidden strenuous activity? Sitting in the garden at noon was unbearable, there could be no thought of a walk. The Princess was supposed to sit in her boudoir and have Fräulein v. Dachsberg read to her. She selected Vilmar's history of literature and read aloud about

the meistersingers in Nuremberg. Her voice trembled with dissatisfaction. Marie lay in a big chair and wasn't listening. She had palpitations of the heart and was exhausted. What she had experienced with Felix now seemed so far away and so improbable. What did the sickly princess who lay here listening to Fräulein v. Dachsberg have to do with that girl in the gravel quarry who allowed Felix to kiss her? And you could expect from such a girl that that she would voluntarily sneak into the park at night. But she knew that she could have a serious conversation with Emilie, she could give her money, she could threaten to reveal that she had seen her slip into the lilac bushes with the young gardener. Of course that would be ignoble, but of such was life.

## Chapter 16.

In the afternoon the Princess and Baroness Dönhof went to the hunting lodge, Count Streith had invited them to tea. The Princess wore a light, raspberry-colored dress and a hat covered all over with mayflowers. She was cheerful, laughed about small, unimportant things, and teased Baroness Dönhof about Count Minsky: "When he sits down next to you, he has such sweet eyes." The Baroness exaggerated her indignation at this behavior in order to amuse the Princess. "Such a terrible person, he reminds me of a cup of coffee with too many sugar cubes in it." The Count received the ladies at the foot of the stairs and escorted the Princess into the garden room. "First let's go for a walk in the garden," he suggested to the Princess.

The paths in the garden had been recently strewn with pretty reddish sand and were lined with rows of fiery red tulips, and behind them were rose bushes each bearing a tag identifying it by name. On the lawn there were round islands of red tulips and hyacinths. The little fountain, with its triton pouring a thin stream of water out of a shell, was surrounded by a thick wreath of narcissus. In the bright spring sun the colors were cheerful, as if everything had been freshly washed in anticipation of a festival day.

"Oh, Streith, how beautiful," said the Princess, and Baroness Dönhof added enthusiastically, "Like a painting!"

Streith explained his roses for them: this one was called the "Sultan of Zanzibar," that one the "Baroness Rothschild," this one the "Madame de Récamier." Streith said he hoped they would all bloom at the same time this year, and if they did, he would show them to Her Excellency. "Yes, I'll certainly come see them," said the Princess, "I don't know, I have tulips and narcissus and roses, but they seem foreigners on our soil, the gardener puts them in vases, but we only walk past them, maybe smell them once, and that's it. But yours here are so so essential, they're standing next to each other like an exclusive club which one would be honored to be invited to join."

"It isn't easy at all," Streith thought, "flowers are very selective creatures, it's impossible to get close to them because they keep us at a distance. Sometimes I sneak up on the tulips in the evening and touch them, but their closed, moist chalice is dismissive of us. I could easily break them, that would just be a raw exercise of power. Tulips wait patiently like aristocrats about to be taken to the guillotine."

"No, no," objected the Princess, "You and your flowers are friends."

The small flower garden, flat as a chess board, was bordered by a wall of flowering lilacs; behind them was the fruit and vegetable garden.

"Of course I want to see the vegetable garden as well," said the Princess, "I want to see it all. Where are your hedgehogs?"

"They sleep during the day," replied Streith, "they're nocturnal."

The fruit trees were in bloom, and the air was full of white petals falling slowly and softly to the ground.

Streith introduced his fruit trees: “These are the russets, those are gravensteins over there, that's a cinnamon pear tree—they have a peculiar Rococo taste, and this one's a creeping pear.”

“How well cared-for it all seems,” the Princess said, “look at the vegetable beds, Dönhof—they could have been drawn with a ruler. It never occurred to me that vegetable beds could be so pretty.” The Princess released Streith's arm so that she could walk beside the vegetable beds. “These are cabbages and those are peas and those are probably carrots—do you like carrots? I don't like them.”

“Oh, yes, I do like them,” Streith replied, “if you pick them when they're young and cook them until they're soft, then they taste slightly like apricots.”

The Princess put her lorgnon to her eyes and bent deeply over the bed of vegetables, “Really?” she said, “perhaps only your carrots.”

“Here is a new type of white strawberries,” Streith explained, “and over there is the asparagus, to which the gardener and I devote very careful attention.”

“And over there are the hotbeds,” cried the Princess, “I have to see them too. How pretty the little paths between the beds are, you could just dance on them.” The Princess made a few gliding dance steps and laughed. The hotbeds were on a hill, the glass windows were open, and inside the radishes, cucumber and melon plants were sunning themselves. The Princess sat down on the wooden border of one of the hotbeds and breathed in, savoring the piquant air that rose up around the plants. “How warm it is and how pleasant,” she said, “when I'm worried about something, I'd like to sit here, it's so peaceful, it's like sitting with good people. Do give me one of your radishes to try.”

Streith carefully pulled a few little radishes out of the ground, went to the well to wash them off and offered them to the ladies.

“Delicious, simply delicious,” cried the Princess, “I think they also taste a little bit like apricots, don't you think so, dear Dönhof?”

Now it was time to go back to the house. Tea was served in the garden room. The Princess leaned back in the corner of a sofa, she had gotten warm in the sun, her eyes sparkled, and her face bore the expression of youthful expectancy which made it more beautiful. “On a previous occasion, dear Count,” she began intentionally, “you spoke of how we make friends with life. You, of course, are able to do that. When I was young, I saw life as a kind of governess and later as a kind of master of ceremonies.”

Streith laughed. “Well, no matter how deep the friendship with life is,” he countered, “we should hold on to a bit of distrust. When I was a boy, I was very distrustful. If my brother and I had something nice to look forward to, a hike or a festive meal, then my brother was always delighted. I, on the other hand, began to have dark presentiments: it probably would rain, the adults would probably be unfriendly, or our boots would hurt our feet, or the torte would be so heavy that we would only get a tiny sliver. I know that sort of thinking drove my brother to distraction, he would complain to my mother that I was spoiling the fun. I would be punished, wouldn't be allowed to go on the hike or wouldn't get any torte.

“Poor little Donalt,” said the Princess sympathetically.

But Streith found it completely justified, children have to learn how to be happy.

“There's nothing sadder,” the Baroness said, “than a disappointed child.”

“And children are always disappointed,” countered the Princess vigorously, “strange, isn't it, all of us were children, and yet we understand children no better than flowers. But each one of us remembers being misunderstood by the adults.”

“Yes, it is strange,” Streith confirmed, and he reached for a plate of sandwiches and offered it to



the Princess. “Perhaps Your Excellency would like to try these sandwiches, they're a special creation of Frau Buche.”

The Princess took one of the rolls and looked at it attentively. “Does Frau Buche never disappoint you?” she asked, “With pike cutlets and sandwiches?”

“Never,” Streith answered. “As the years go by we find one thing and another in life that we rely on, like a few loyal allies.”

“Allies is a well-chosen word,” said the Princess, with a hint of emotion in her voice. “At Birkenstein I once had a loyal ally.”

Baroness Dönhof stared down at the floor and pushed herself deeper into the armchair as if trying to allow them to forget that she was present.

Streith smiled solemnly and looked at the Princess's mouth with its narrow, red lips and at the little lines at the corner of her mouth, which pulled upwards and gave her mouth something touching and pathetic. No one spoke for a while, it was as if the significance of those last words could not be erased. The Princess began to eat the sandwich slowly, holding it in her hand. Finally, she said, “Count, you must play something for us. That would be fitting for the occasion.”

Obediently Streith stood up and went over to the piano. He began to play. Schumann's “*Glückes genug*.”<sup>17</sup> He played softly and tenderly and in the restrained jubilation of its melody the passionate chirping of a starling blended in from its perch in a tree outside the window.

Then a slight noise at the open window caused Streith to look up from the keyboard.

Britta stood in front of the window, her felt hat pushed back, her dark hair hanging over her forehead. She laughed and Streith saw clearly the brilliant whiteness of her teeth. Then she threw something into the room and disappeared.

“Who was that,” cried both ladies at once and raised their lorgnons to their eyes.

Streith went to the window, he felt he was blushing like a schoolboy.

“Children passing by,” he said, “what a nuisance, I'll have to have the bench in front of the window removed.”

“But those are violets they threw in to you,” cried the Princess, “it's an ovation.”

Streith had composed himself and turned to the ladies again, “It's violets this time,” he said, “but next time it may be something less welcome.”

“Wasn't that the daughter of that woman who lives out in the woods, that Frau von Syrman?” the Baroness asked.

“I don't know those people,” Streith answered, drily and decisively. He sat down at his place again, and acted as if the incident was not worth any further attention, even though he was so agitated that he had goose bumps. They talked about things of little consequence, about Princess Kusmin's piano playing, about the Russian court, and then the ladies announced their departure.

“Thank you so very much, Streith,” said the Princess, “I'll come again soon.”

On the way back the Princess was silent and deep in thought. Not until they had almost gotten to the castle did she lay her hand on the Baroness's hand and say, “Gertrude,”—in intimate moments she called her Gertrude, “I think I have found peace with myself.”

“Thank God,” whispered the Baroness.

Meanwhile Streith paced back and forth in the garden room and gave free rein to his annoyance. No, this was simply not possible, these people who had attached themselves to him, they're becoming a threat. It could not go on like this. He would have to have a serious talk with that girl. He called Oskar

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17 From Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, “*Glückes genug*” (Happiness or Happy Enough) captures the child in a gleeful spirit, full of joyous wonder and innocent hopes.

and asked him to bring him his hat and walking stick, and pointing to the violets he said, "Get rid of that stuff."

He took the most direct way to the forester's house. As he marched forward at a rapid pace, he began scolding Britta in his mind: it was a serious prank she had played on him. Just when the mood had become harmonious and solemn she had to come along with her damned violets. From a thicket of firs close to the forester's house he saw something blue, it was Britta's dress. Bent over to the ground, she was collecting something in her apron. Streith went up to her: "Good afternoon," he snarled. Britta straightened up quickly, she blushed, and on her face you could see the image of terror and fright as clearly as on a child's face. She stood there motionless looking at Streith.

## Chapter 17.

Streith leaned against a tree trunk, he had walked fast and his heart was pounding. "It's good that I've found you here, Miss," he began, "I wanted to ask you to spare me any further surprises of that nature; in general I am not fond of surprises and I certainly don't like them coming through my windows. What were my visitors supposed to think? So, either come to my front door, or don't come at all. This tossing things through windows just won't work, it's not our way of doing things. I needed to tell you that."

Britta kept standing there without moving and looking at Streith as her eyes slowly filled with tears, then tears ran down her cheeks. She dropped the edges of her apron so that her arms could hang down limply and all the early spring mushrooms she had been gathering fell to the ground. "But it's also for your own good, Miss," Streith continued, becoming gentler and more fatherly, "for your own good behavior like that can hardly be recommendable. Young ladies who have been well brought up do not go around throwing violets at men. I must strongly advise you against it, and I know your mother would not approve of it either. I also needed to tell you that."

Streith seldom felt his anger disappear so quickly, and now he didn't know what to say, but was repulsed by the idea of standing there like a scolding old man making a weeping young creature so uncomfortable.

Britta waited for a moment to see if Streith had anything more to say, and when he said nothing further, she said: "So it's all over then?"

"What's all over," Streith said with a start, "what is it that's supposed to be over?"

"I knew all along that it would all be over," Britta repeated.

"What are you talking about, child," he interrupted her, "Why should it all be over? I did get a bit agitated, please excuse me, but it was such a surprise. If I had been alone, we would have laughed about it, ha ha. But let's not talk about it any more, please don't cry. Look, you've dropped all your pretty mushrooms."

"Oh, them," Britta said and kicked at the mushrooms with her foot.

"In any case," Streith continued, "wipe the tears from your eyes and let's go for a little walk. You can't go home like that, your mother would be upset."

Obediently Britta wiped away her tears, and they walked slowly along a narrow path among the fir trees. For a while the forest held its bright golden color, then it became dusky and chill, and a white moon rose above the horizon.

"Were you afraid of me?" Streith asked softly.

"When you first came up," Britta replied, "I was very afraid. You can be so mean, your eyes had turned all yellow and I thought you were going to hit me."

"That must have been terrible."

“No, not really, it was beautiful,” Britta said, “you looked like a knight, and I was almost sorry that you did not hit me because I thought that everything really was over.”

“Is it really so painful for you to think that it's all over?” Streith asked.

“Yes,” Britta answered, “because since you visited us, ever since I've been able to walk with you and talk to you, there is now something in the day that I can look forward to. You're always dressed so nicely and smell of cologne, and your rings shine so prettily, and when you say something, it sounds as if it were coming from a different and better world. When I'm with you I feel like I'm wearing my Sunday best.”

“I see,” Streith said, “but I think you should rejoice every morning when you get up.”

“Why?”

“Just because you exist, because you're young.”

Britta shrugged her shoulders, “I know that already.”

“You should sit quietly in the sunshine,” Streith continued, “and feel how life and youth are burning within you.”

Britta shook her head: “No, that's boring. If everything around me were pretty and elegant then I could sit there too like the princesses in their garden and stare off the way they do, or like you do in your room with all those pictures. I'll bet it's like a church in there, you have to walk slowly and can only take small steps, and a chill runs up and down your spine and it smells like Sunday.

“Can't you do that here in the forest?” Streith asked, hoping that Britta would continue talking.

“No,” Britta replied, “for that you would have to be a properly brought up young lady, as you say, and that's not what I am. My mother is a sophisticated lady and when she goes to the pigsty, it looks like she's making a formal visit, but me—perhaps it's because of the mixture of bloods that Mama is always talking about.”

“Now, now,” Streith comforted, “it takes a while. To be a sophisticated lady you have to know a bit about the world.”

Britta sat thinking for a while, then burst into laughter, “I'll bet those ladies who were with you got quite a fright when a black-haired character like me appeared at your window and threw some violets into the room.”

Streith tried to laugh too: “Yes, er... it was a bit of a surprise.”

Gradually they had arrived at the forester's house and through the open window they saw a lighted lamp sitting on a big table and Frau von Syrman sitting on the sofa with a book.

“Good night,” Streith said, “Promise you won't be angry with me any more?”

“But you were mean,” Britta replied.

Streith laughed. “I guess I was, all the same, good night.”

“Aren't you going to come inside for a minute?” Britta asked.

Streith declined, Frau Buche had his dinner waiting for him.

“Oh, dinner,” Britta said respectfully, then added, “if I didn't have to, then I wouldn't for all the world go back into that blue room. Good night.”

On the way back home Streith felt that the evening had become cold and damp, he turned up the collar of his coat because in his haste he had left without his overcoat. I might get a cold, he thought, and he had a pain in one leg. Once at home he had Oscar undress him and rub him down with cologne, then he put on comfortable, warm clothes and sat down to dinner. He was hungry and the food tasted good.

Frau Buche had sautéed some fresh vegetables and the result was splendid. Immediately after eating he went to bed, Frau Buche had made some hot tea and brought him a thermos. She was quite put out with him. If the master insists on wandering around in the fog without an overcoat, well, it's no wonder that he has a touch of rheumatism.

Streith stretched out comfortably in bed and lit a cigarette. Oskar reported about the visit of the veterinarian and kept talking about the horses until Streith dismissed him. Streith closed his eyes, he didn't want to read, he wanted to think, to think about the Princess. Instead, however, images of Britta kept popping up: her form, Britta standing at the window, Britta under the fir trees, her face covered with tears. There was something about these images that tormented him. The things around him—his room, his bed, the tea, the thermos, all these signs of an old man's idea of comfort—these seemed to separate him from Britta, and that was painful. To make it stop, he called Oskar and had him bring him a sleeping powder.

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The Princess folded the letter she had just read, leaned back in her chair and looked over to Baroness Dönhof with a cautious smile: "My sister-in-law, Princess Agnes, is coming," she said, "it seems that the family is upset about something and my sister-in-law is coming to set things right." Then she shrugged her shoulders slightly as if shaking something off her back: "How wonderful it is to live one's whole life under the supervision of others."

"How true," said Baroness Dönhof.

That very afternoon Princess Agnes arrived, along with her lady's maid and her young lady-in-waiting, Fräulein von Reckhausen. Princess Agnes always kept very young ladies in waiting. "I want to be surrounded by youth," she used to say. But the work was so upsetting that the ladies quickly became nervous and had to be replaced frequently. Princess Agnes was a small, rotund old lady with a clear, brownish face with gray hairpins under her blonde cap. She liked to wear skirts that didn't cover her feet, gray silk dresses, and squeaky leather shoes.

"Here I am," she announced as she sat on the sofa in the green room, "I just had to look in on you again. You, dear Adelheid, you're so withdrawn, you've almost disappeared."

"Once we find a place of beauty that's quiet," the Princess replied, "then we don't like to leave it."

"It may very well be nice," Princess Agnes said, "to play the shepherdess out in the country, but the family has standards that must be met. Oh, there you are, sweetie," she said, turning to Marie who had just entered the room, "you're all grown up and are really pretty. But a complexion of white and rose like a porcelain cup won't help you very much. What you need is healthy cheeks. Come sit beside me, dear. Fräulein von Reckhausen, bring me my bag."

Reckhausen brought over a large bag made of lavender colored silk, which was filled with little scraps of silk, and Princess Agnes spent much of her time pulling these things apart. "Here's a nice red piece for you," she said to Marie, "and it's a good way to keep busy. I have the silk threads mixed with wool, and they can make very durable cloth out of it, which is given to poor girls. That flimsy stuff that poor girls dress in nowadays is simply scandalous."

Princess Agnes worked industriously on her piece of silk and talked about the archduchess of Oldenburg, who was not in good health, but bore it graciously, and of the Princess of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen, who was a really magnificent woman. The afternoon sun shone into the room and made the air hot and oppressive. Marie, with her impatient nature and her strange feverish thoughts which in the last few days had never left her, felt very unhappy. The silk got caught in her fingernails and made her nervous, and Princess Agnes's unending accounts of splendid noble-women seemed like an affront to everything in life that was beautiful and cheerful. She could have cried.

The next morning Princess Agnes got up very early and went through the house with Fräulein von Reckhausen, went through the barnyard and all the stall, and even walked a ways down the main

road to inspect the fields; she talked to people and patted their dogs. When she appeared at second breakfast she was well informed about everything. After eating she sat with the Princess in her boudoir and plucked at her silk scrap. "Things seem to be going pretty well here," she said, "the Major seems to be a capable man. On the other hand, I don't see a lot of work going on. The coachman and the chauffeur were sitting in the grain room chatting; the inspector was just standing in front of the house carrying on with a chambermaid who was leaning out the window. But this is how it seems to me: all of you here act a bit as if you were in a dream. Your youngest was out on the verandah holding a book in her hands and staring blankly. Fräulein v. Dachsberg was just standing in the salon looking out the window. On the grand staircase old Fürwit was shifting his weight from one foot to the other."

The Princess laughed: "Yes, out here in the country life is a bit more placid."

"Placid is well and good," Princess Agnes said, "as long as you don't get stupid ideas from it. We ought to look for some suitable activity for your youngest child."

"She is so delicate," replied the Princess, "I'm happy for her just to be somewhat healthy."

"Well, precisely because she is so delicate," countered Princess Agnes. "We can come back to that topic later. There is something I wanted to ask you, dear Adelheid. In Birkenstein and in Karlstadt too rumors are circulating that you have certain intentions, that you've made some decisions."

"Rumors are always circulating in Birkenstein," said the Princess.

"That's quite right," Princess Agnes admitted, "but this time there seems to be something to them."

The Princess remained silent for a bit, except that her hands, which she kept on her lap, began to stroke one another nervously. "I don't know what intentions and decisions you're talking about," she said.

Princess Agnes plucked vigorously at her silk. "I see," she said, "well, nowadays so many strange things are happening among our sort that one never knows—all of these marriages. In my day it would never have occurred to anyone that we could marry just any old lieutenant because he was a good dancer. Or a valet because he was well built. If no prince was available, then one remained single as I did. What can possibly be the result of such marriages? At court the wife enters through one door while the husband has to enter through a different door. What must a man like that think?"

"He probably thinks," the Princess replied, raising her eyebrows, "he probably thinks that one door is as good as another."

Princess Agnes peered at her sharply over the rim of her glasses, and a bit of color rose in her brown cheeks. "But one door is not as good as another; otherwise one person would be just as good as another. Fine, in God's eyes we're all equal, but God intended for there to be ruling princes, and since there are such, people have to respect them, and so one door is not as good as another. Otherwise they wouldn't believe the whole story we tell them. If today a Frau Schulze or a Frau Müller can be Princess Soandso or even an heir to the throne, then tomorrow a princess can become a Frau Schulze or Müller. And men particularly are given to irregularities, so we women must stick firmly to order. People don't always have to get married."

"I don't know, dear Agnes, what you're getting so worked up about," the Princess answered with a more focussed gleam in her eyes, "there are no plans. But you can be sure that when I make decisions the family will hear about it from me first. And it is just as certain that I will have no cause to apologize for my decisions. I have served this family long enough, and when I became a widow, at least I didn't have to give my life back to the family as I did with the crown jewels."

"Well, good, now I know for sure," said Princess Agnes and plucked so hard on her scrap of silk that it bunched up, "nobody today wants to bear the burden of the social class into which God has put him. Do you think it has been a great joy to be 'old Princess Agnes' who lives in the summer house with her lady's companion? Today women just talk about what their heart says to them. We had hearts

when I was young, too, but we didn't talk about them. Today people talk about their hearts as if the heart was a commanding officer that must be obeyed.”

Since the Princess made no response to that, a pause ensued until Princess Agnes threw aside her bag and said that she had gotten overheated and needed to go out into the garden. Out on the verandah she found Fräulein v. Dachsberg and Fräulein v. Reckhausen whispering to each other. Fräulein v. Reckhausen was talking about the peculiarities of the Princess.

“Where is Princess Marie?” asked Princess Agnes.

“She's probably in the lilac bower,” Fräulein v. Dachsberg knew to report, “at this time of day she likes to be alone.”

“Alone? Why?” asked Princess Agnes, digging deeper.

Fräulein v. Dachsberg shrugged her shoulders slightly, “We have instructions not to interfere with her inclinations.”

“Utter nonsense,” growled Princess Agnes and kept going.

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## Chapter 18.

Marie sat in the lilac bower, a book on her knees, her head leaned back, staring at the sky through the blue-violet blossoms as if through a fence. This was for her an important period. For the first time in her life, she felt alive, felt her body and blood, she felt like a miraculous living creature; for the first time she could see herself living and waiting anxiously to what her love and her pain would have her do. Would she sit here in the lilac bower and think about Felix or go out into the park and sit on the stone bench where he would be sitting the whole night? Would she look up at the moon tonight or wake up in the middle of the night and feel like crying? Or allow herself to be shaken by the coursing of her blood. Everything was new and exciting.

“There you are, sweetie,” said Princess Agnes, waking Marie up out of her dreams, “it's quite cold out here, but I want to sit with you for a while.” She sat down on the bench, perspiring and out of breath, she was silent for a moment, then her eyes, narrowed by fat eyelids, looked at Marie sharply: “Well, my daughter,” she began finally, “how are you living? What do you do all the time?”

“Nothing, Aunt Agnes,” replied Marie rather embarrassed.

“So I see,” continued the old lady, “None of you does very much around here, but that's not good for you. You need something to do, some sort of activity.”

“But why me?” Marie asked.

“Because there is concern about your health,” replied Princess Agnes, “and if you want to lead a quiet life, you have to have something to live for. There's always charity. You could found a cooking school for the girls of the village or a sewing school and give them presents at Christmas.”

“But I don't know how to cook and my sewing is very bad,” Marie said, beginning to reveal a streak of stubbornness.

“That doesn't matter,” said Princess Agnes, “you would be their patron, you just go there, ask questions, taste things, have them show you their work. That's all it takes.”

Marie shook her head and knitted her eyebrows together, “But I don't want to found a cooking school or a sewing school.”

“So, you just don't want to then?” countered the Princess, and her voice turned strict and scolding, “What do you want to do? Just sit quietly and wait until happiness shows up on your doorstep? It's not going to do that. There's many a girl that has just sat and waited until she turned old and bitter. Look, child, I've been healthy all my life, I have strong lungs and a healthy heart, and yet I

never married. That's what sometimes happens to princesses, so it's a good idea to look for something that will give meaning to your life, just so that you don't become lonely and ridiculous. And charity work is still the best thing, and I don't mean going into the shacks where the poor live—you'll just get diseases and fleas. But a cooking school or a sewing school, something like that. Charity work isn't all that exciting either and you won't get a word of thanks for it, but there isn't much else for our sort to do.”

Now Princess Agnes was smiling and looked directly into Marie's angry face. “I know you don't want to hear this kind of thing, but you'll see that old Aunt Agnes was right. And marriage is not a direct route to happiness either. Just look at your sister Lore. No, life is not one grand party. Now I still have time to take a walk.” With two fingers she brushed Marie's hot cheek, stood up and left. Marie watched her go, that short round figure in a gray silk dress with a large summer hat on her head, watched her take small but firm-footed steps along the path, and Aunt Agnes seemed to her the very incarnation of loneliness and joylessness. How happy Marie had been before. A mysterious and holy aura had lain over her and over the world, then this old woman had come and woven spider webs over it all, and now life seemed gray and solemn. No, Marie would rather have died than live a life like that of Aunt Agnes or to be a sickly princess who knits wool bonnets for the village children. She wanted to go to the park tonight to meet Felix, as impossible as it seemed; she wanted to do everything that Aunt Agnes would disapprove of. She wanted to embrace the sweet, wild and forbidden side of life.

Streith did come to dinner. Princess Agnes greeted him like an old friend. “Happy to see you, dear Count; you're looking good. A bit older, of course. We all get old, you can't avoid that, not even out here in the solitude.”

The Count laughed. “True, except that out here in the solitude there aren't so many people to tell you that you're getting older.”

“That may well be,” said Princess Agnes, “but you're really not so old that you couldn't use your land instead of growing cabbages.”

“I think,” the Count replied, “the country needs cabbages too.”

“Don't be silly, there's enough cabbage in the world,” countered Princess Agnes with annoyance, “that's a kind of arrogance. People think they're too good for the world and withdraw into solitude. And when you're in solitude, you get useless ideas.”

The Count bowed. “I'm delighted that Your Highness deigns to berate me once again.”

Princess Agnes nodded: “Old Princess Agnes won't stand for any nonsense.”

During the meal there was talk of the courts in Birkenstein, Karlstadt and elsewhere. Marie wasn't listening, but when the name Dühnen reached her, she pricked up her ears. “The oldest boy is giving them a lot of trouble,” said the Count, “he has incurred debts, he gambles, and seems to lack discipline. Dühnen was at my house and spoke very pessimistically about the young man.”

Baroness Dönhof sighed, “What a shame. A handsome young man, but he will come to no good.”

“Dühnen isn't very upset,” the Count continued, “he says, he has three sons, and if one of them doesn't work out, he still has two in reserve.”

“Quite right,” said Princess Agnes, “if he's not good for anything, then away with him.”

Marie looked at them all, angry as a hornet. What did these horrible old people know about Felix. She was close to tears.

After dinner Princess Agnes and the Princess played whist with Fürwit and Streith; Baroness Dönhof played Halma with the Major, while von Dachsberg and von Reckhausen sat together whispering. Fräulein v. Reckhausen talked about the difficulties of her position. Marie sat down at the table where they were playing Halma as if she wanted to watch, but instead she stared at the dark panes

in the glass door and thought of one thing only: tonight I still have to go out into this dark night.

When the castle had gotten quiet and dark, two figures sneaked out the backdoor into the garden and hurried to the park—Marie and her maid Emilie. The sky was overcast, the night dark. The two huddled as they walked, everything scared them, the rustling of leaves, the creaking of a branch, the flap of a wing on the branch of a tree. Frightened and out of breath they climbed the little knoll to the pond and stopped at the stone bench. It was so dark that they couldn't see a thing.

“Felix!” Marie whispered, then she suddenly felt herself being embraced by two arms and pulled down onto the bench. Felix giggled a bit, and she clung to him, and for the first time she felt a wonderful sense of security against a dark and threatening world and from the disquiet of her own heart; she felt reassured in these two arms that held her; she felt the intoxication of her own blood pounding in her veins. “Miss,” Felix said to Emilie, “over there near the lake is a tree stump, you can sit over there for a while.” Emilie disappeared. Marie cried, the tension had been too much for her to bear.

“Why are you crying,” Felix asked.

“Oh, please use the familiar 'you' with me,” Marie said, “you're all that I have. I was so afraid, everything is terrible and sad when you're not there. If you forget me, if you don't love me, then I'll just become an old princess who knits woolen hats and starts a cooking school. You've got to swear you'll never leave me.”

“Yes, of course,” replied Felix with something like impatience in his voice, “we've got a lot to talk about, we didn't come here to whine and cry.”

Suddenly Emilie, back at the stone bench, could be heard to say, “Count, I can't stay over there, something came up out of the water and went 'Boo! Boo!’”

“Nonsense,” said Felix grumpily, “it's just your imagination. Go sit on that stump for a while. We're not far away at all.”

“I'll try to, Count,” Emilie replied and disappeared.

“They all say such terrible things about you,” Marie began in a whiny voice. “Why can't you be good, be good for my sake?”

“Be good?” said Felix with intensity, “what does that mean? Are you complaining about me? I didn't come here tonight to hear that. No, thank you, I hear enough of that kind of talk during the day.”

“Oh, no, I'm not reproaching you,” Marie sobbed, “but if you don't behave yourself, what will become of me? You are all I have. Then there are your . . . embarrassments—I would so like to help you, but I don't have any money, but I do have some jewelry.”

“Shut up!” Felix ordered, “I forbid you to speak of these unpleasant things—that's just what I need. I thought I would be coming here to spend another happy hour, then I have to hear talk like that.”

“Now you're angry with me,” she complained, “but what can I do, you're all I've got, and if you don't behave, I won't have anything. I'd rather die than always be the sickly princess.”

“More of the same,” murmured Felix.

They said nothing for a while, Marie stared out into the darkness, and near the rushes on the shore a bird sung out a single sound, stubbornly and plaintively into the night. Marie thought everything was so sad.

“That's because,” Felix began again, “you all sit around in your castles and have no idea what life really is like. If we always had to think about what will happen, we couldn't live at all. No. Stop thinking, forget about all the unpleasantness because it will always be there for us, waiting. That's the only way to live. See, this is life.” He leaned over Marie and planted his lips firmly on hers. She sighed deeply. “Yes, that is real life,” she whispered.

Then Emilie was back again, standing by the stone bench, “Count, I just can't stand it any



longer. Something keeps coming up out of the water going 'Boo! Boo!' If Your Majesty won't go home now, then I'm going alone. You could die of fright out here."

"Wait, Emilie, I'm coming," cried Marie in a panic.

"Oh, these women," Felix sighed.

Once more Marie pressed her wet face against Felix's cheek. "Don't forget me!" she whispered, then they separated.

Felix stayed on the stone bench and listened as the girls' hurried footsteps faded into the distance. He stretched himself and yawned. No, not quite the love scene he had been hoping for. How wonderful it would be, he thought, to be loved by a princess, but all these tears and complaints, these reproaches and sadness—this was not what he wanted. He began to feel oppressed and a bit anxious there in the dark forest, in the cool fragrance of the lilacs, and add to that that damned bird with its miserable call. It was enough to make you scream. Felix jumped up and hurried out of the park.

Outside the air was a bit freer. Felix took a deep breath and began to whistle a march tune as he sauntered along the village street past sleeping cats. He turned onto a small side street where there was a house in the middle of a garden. Light still shone from one window. Felix stopped in front of the garden gate, which was covered with bean vines, and continued to whistle the tune. From the other side of the house he could hear footsteps. It was as if bare feet were running over the gravel and across the vegetable beds, a girl wrapped in a dark cloth, stepped up to the garden fence and rested her arms in the bean vines.

"Well?" said Felix, and laid his hand on her arm, which was wet with dew.

"He'll put the light out soon and go to bed," the girl whispered, "then I'll come back, wait here."

And with that she turned and off into the darkness again. Felix waited, he stuck his hands into the bean vines just to feel them. A cool, herbal fragrance came from the beds of vegetables, and there were frogs among the lettuces, somewhere within the house a baby cried, and among the young stalks of grain quails were cooing. It felt good to stand out in a springtime night and wait for a girl; here there was life, and one could forget about the suffering of princesses, Felix thought.

## Chapter 19.

It rained all day long. In the morning Streith occupied himself with his business and account books, later he had a conversation with the inspector, then with the master builder and the supervisor of the maids. He took a genuine interest in conversations about fertilizers, cows and calves. That lasted until breakfast.

After breakfast he sat down with his books. On the table was a thick volume about forestry and a thick pamphlet about the regeneration of the conservative party. First he picked up the thick volume, read a bit in that, then put it down again, picked up the pamphlet, took a look inside, then put it down as well. It seemed that nothing in these pages was of interest to him today. He leaned his head back against the back of the chair. Without any direct cause, he had a memory of his boyhood. He was in high school in that small town and loved Emma, the blond daughter of senior teacher Müller. He thought about Emma all day, he walked past her house just to see her standing at her window, walked along a certain street just to meet her. During this period particularly he bitterly hated his schoolbooks. There was nothing of Emma in Caesar's commentaries, nor in Xenophon's *Anabasis*. The only purpose they served was to separate him further from Emma and to prevent him from even thinking about her. Funny, he thought, when we have lived for a certain number of years, then we're old, that's the natural order of things.

But our inner selves don't make such calculations. No matter what sort of wisdom and experience life adds to our nature, within us there remains that which we always have been. The boy

and his pranks are still hidden within us, and if he reappears later in life, that may bring about some of life's greatest surprises. It was simply ridiculous, thought Streith, that he, a detached and worldly-wise man, should today be unable to find peace only because it was raining and he would have no possibility of seeing an 18-year-old girl, who didn't concern him and didn't belong to him.

Recently he had gotten used to meeting Britta on his daily walks, to see her, to hear her talk, to feel like her friend. She had an effect on him like an elixir of youth, and today, when he could not see her, he yearned for it like a morphine addict for a shot of morphine. It was absurd. His sense of order suffered from the confusion that all of this brought into his life; he was ashamed, for after all, the superior, ironic critic in him was still awake; he was ashamed of himself; his very walls, furniture, and paintings, which solemnly surrounded him as the milieu of a wise man of excellent taste, were embarrassed for him.

He was ashamed of lots of other things as well, and he found it exhausting always to have to re-direct his thoughts away from a track that led only to painful memories. But he also knew full well that nothing could be done about this situation, he would just have to live through it. There simply are times when our lives seem to run along beside us like an alien and separate thing over which we have no control. Streith got up from his chair nervously, walked back and forth in the room for a while, stood at the window and drummed with his fingers on the windowpane. It had stopped raining, the sun was just beginning to peek from behind the clouds, huge droplets fell from the edge of the roof and a waterfall poured out from the eave.

A sudden feeling of joy ran through him so strongly that he blushed. Opposite the window on the path was Britta, wearing a gray raincoat with the hood pulled up over her head, she nodded and laughed whole-heartedly. Streith opened the window. "Why are you standing out in the rain?" he called, "Come on in."

Britta shook her head: "No, it's not raining any more, you come out here."

"Good, I'll come out." Streith didn't take the time to summon Oskar, but rather quickly fetched his coat, his hat and his cane and hurried out.

"Now the weather's turning nice," Britta said.

Streith took a deep breath of the moist air and all his perturbations were gone.

Britta looked at him sympathetically and asked, "It feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yes, er... pleasant," Streith replied, "let's walk."

They headed down a narrow path in the forest. The fir trees were dripping rainwater, and the sun, piercing through the branches, illuminated the droplets. A wet glow lay upon the moss, the plants, the leaves of the blueberry bushes, and the ferns. And in the midst of it was this girl in a gray raincoat with a hood over her head, wet with rain. She seemed to Streith like part of the forest, as if engendered by the forest and belonging to it. "You couldn't stand it at home," he said, beginning a conversation. "Of course you had to get out into the woods."

"No, I couldn't stand it in our living room," Britta replied, "a room can be a terrible thing, perhaps because it knows so much about us."

"Quite possible," Streith confirmed, "the forest is more discreet."

"Oh, in the forest," Britta said, "no one knows anything about his neighbor, and it's always more pleasant when you don't know a lot of stuff about people."

"Hm. I hadn't thought of that," countered Streith, "so what did you do all day?"

"In the morning I practiced piano," Britta reported, "but I pounded the keys and made so many mistakes that Mama, who's of course nervous today, whimpered. But I was mean and only played louder with more wrong notes. Later Mama reproached me for all my mistakes."

"Do you make many mistakes?" Streith asked.

Britta shrugged her shoulders, “Yes, I do make a lot of mistakes. Sometimes I think that if other people only knew what was going on with me, their eyes would roll. But the problems that Mama accuses me of, I usually don't have. But, there's no harm done, she's the mother and believes that she has to educate me.”

Streith laughed: “Poor mothers! They're expected to raise their children, so they have to act as if they understood the little puzzles that their children are.”

Britta looked at Streith attentively, she didn't completely understand what he had said. Suddenly she raised her arm and grabbed a branch just over their heads, and shook it. A shower of droplets fell on both of them, Britta laughed and blinked her eyelashes, which were wet with rain. “That's a good thing to do,” she said, “and it helps cure the strongest sadness.”

“Well, it certainly is refreshing,” said Streith, wiping the drops off his beard. The path now led them out of the fir trees and to a little meadow which was a pale lilac from myriad little flowers.

“Pretty,” Streith remarked.

But Britta turned up her nose at them, she didn't like that kind of flower. “They look like old Trine's Sunday dress. But I like those over there,” and she pointed to a slightly elevated part of the meadow that was full of globeflowers. She quit the path and went into the meadow, paying no attention to the tall, wet grass.

Streith followed her, carefully lifting his legs.

Britta set to work picking flowers. “Go ahead and pick some,” she called, “let's make a wreath.”

Streith obeyed, although he was unaccustomed to the task; constantly bending over, and breaking the hard wet stems seemed difficult to him. How easily she controls me, he thought.

Britta soon had an armful of flowers and said that it was enough. They left the meadow, and Britta sat down on a tree stump and began to weave a wreath.

Streith sat opposite her on another stump and smoked a cigarette. It was very peaceful here amidst the quiet sound of droplets falling from the branches.

“You were probably beautiful as a small child,” Streith began.

“Yes,” Britta replied, “I was a beautiful child. We lived in town then and every day I would go walking in the park with my nanny. People would stop in their tracks and say, 'Oh, what a beautiful child!' I must have been very well behaved then because all that walking in the park certainly wasn't any fun. If we had stayed in town, perhaps I would have become a sophisticated lady like Mama.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Streith remarked.

Britta looked up with astonishment, “But you love sophisticated ladies, don't you? All the women in your life have been ladies of quality, right?”

Streith smiled, “You don't really know how many ladies I have loved,” he said, “and if you are in love with a sophisticated lady, then it's not the sophistication in her that you love, but whatever else she is besides being sophisticated.”

“Oh, of course,” Britta said with some embarrassment, “she has to have a good heart too.”

Streith didn't reply to that, but watched silently as her fingers dug among the golden flowers to weave the wreath.

Then it was finished. She pushed the hood back, took off her hat and put the wreath on her head. Drops of rain from the wet flowers streamed into her hair and onto her forehead. Britta looked at Streith and laughed self-consciously.

“Beautiful,” Streith said. And truly his admiration for this girl with a crown of gold made his blood run warm like southern wine. He wanted to genuflect before these colors, this smile, this youth; he wanted to take her to himself so that no one could rob him of her. But he did none of that. Donalt

von Streith was unable to do any of that, it wouldn't have been proper. So he only said one word: "Melusine."

"Who was Melusine<sup>18</sup>?" Britta asked.

"I'll tell you about it some other time," Streith replied.

Britta sat quietly for a while, then she turned solemn and serious as girls do who feel pretty.

The sun began to be hidden by clouds, and the grass and the leaves began to rustle as a rain shower crossed over.

"We have to get home," Britta cried, jumped up and pulled the hood over the wreath. They did not talk much on the way home, that moment of beauty and admiration had shaken them and made them taciturn. But when they reached the crossroads and were about to separate, Britta said: "There's one thing I still want."

"What would that be?" Streith asked.

"Just for once to sit on a big dun<sup>19</sup> horse."

Streith laughed: "If that's all it is, we can easily arrange that."

## Chapter 20.

Princess Agnes had departed, and since then the inhabitants of the castle felt freer and younger. The Princess went riding every afternoon. She trotted through the park into the woods; the day was sunny, a gentle stir in the breeze, the huge fir trees rustled gently and regularly as if a deep voice within them were telling a long, calm story. The Princess was glad that—in spite of her sister-in-law Agnes—spring was still bursting out, that life was still full of promise rather than dignified resignation.

At the end of the forest aisle was a small clearing in the forest and there Streith, on his dun horse, would be expecting her. She drove her horse onward and turned a sharp corner. There before her lay the clearing, yellow with sunlight. In the middle of the clearing stood the dun horse and on it sat a girl with dark hair, a round, rosy face and large, black eyes. Streith stood in front of the horse, one hand on the reins, the other on the saddle. He looked up at the girl's dark eyes and laughed a laugh so profoundly youthful the likes of which the Princess had never seen him do before. She turned her head away and rode away. Nor did she moderate the pace of her horse even when the clearing was far behind her. She felt there was nothing to do but to flee the scene, which she could see before her with horrible clarity: the large, bark-colored horse, the dark girl sitting on it, and in front of them, Streith, laughing loudly, and all of it bathed in yellow sunshine.

By the time she got back to the castle, her horse was in a lather. The Princess went to her room quickly and rang for her chambermaid, she wanted to change clothes. Today was the Thursday social tea for the neighbors, so she would have to pay more attention to dress. More importantly though, she did not want to be alone, so she got dressed slowly and carefully talking to the maid all the while. She was asking about a seamstress who was supposed to come from town to the castle, and the Princess wanted to know a bit about the background of the woman.

Finally she got herself ready and the maid had nothing more to do and had to be dismissed. The Princess went to the window and looked out into the garden. As she stood there, her anger began to grow until it was white hot. It felt good to have the flame of rage within. That wretched man, how she despised him, how repulsive she found him! Never again would he enter her door; she wanted revenge, wanted to humiliate him, to make him the laughing stock of the whole neighborhood. She thought of strategies and circumstances to destroy Streith.

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18 Melusine (or Melusina) is a figure of European legends and folklore, a feminine spirit of fresh waters in sacred springs and rivers.

19 dun: bark-colored; red- or yellow-brown.

But the energizing power of her anger did not last. Once again she felt dispirited and weak. She sat down on an armchair, clasped her hands together, and her strong and beautiful features took on an expression of helplessness such as children's faces have when they are about to cry. So it was all over. Streith had been the poetry of life for her. Even in the sad days back in Birkenstein, when she was to all appearances the poor, saintly princess for whom one had sympathy, even then it had been a comfort occasionally to think about her young major-domo, with his somewhat impractical sense of chivalry and the admiring glances that he cast her way.

He was one to whom she had been more than the poor, saintly princess. And later, when she was widowed and he saw her more frequently, she knew that he was waiting. She needed only to say the word, and a quiet, strange happiness would be hers. In quiet hours she had often dreamed about it, she didn't have to renounce everything yet. As long as Streith was there she could think about life the way a child in school thinks about the week ahead that has a day of vacation in it. And now, to think that she had been played the fool and deceived like a girl from the village; she was nothing more than a ridiculous, old woman who had imagined that she could still find love. Other women could cry and complain, they could take revenge or die, but she would have to remain silent. The thought that anyone could suspect what had been done to her seemed unbearable. She was once again the unapproachable, kindhearted princess. Life was passing her by and nothing was left but her dignity.

She heard carriages rolling outside, her guests were arriving. She got up and stood before the looking glass; she brushed her eyelids with a powder puff, adjusted her posture, and went out.

In the green salon the guests had already assembled, the Princess greeted them with her benevolent smile, the district administrator asked a question that made the Princess laugh, the Princess said something else and everyone laughed.

Tea was served, the Princess sat next to Countess Dühren, who spoke about Franzensbad; the district administrator spoke about His Majesty. The Kaiser had passed through here and the district administrator had greeted him at the station. His Majesty looked splendid and that gaze of his, truly a sovereign's gaze.

"Whatever has happened to Count Streith," Countess Dühren asked, "you hardly ever see him any more."

"He's probably busy managing his agricultural interests," the Princess replied quietly.

"It seems," Countess Dühren continued, "that in recent days he's taken an interest in our neighbors in the forester's house, that Frau von Syrman and her daughter. He has been seen there."

The Princess put the teacup that she was holding in her hand back down on the table, she was afraid that her hand would tremble. Then she smiled circumspectly and said, "Yes, old men always need something to look after."

The next morning at breakfast Streith found a letter from Frau von Syrman. She requested that when Streith took his usual walk that he would stop by her house to have a word, Britta would be in town taking her music and dance lessons. Of course, Streith thought, as he slowly re-folded the letter and stuck it into the envelope, this is what was bound to happen. So the morning would be devoted to unpleasant affairs, because he had planned to go to the business office in the castle to return some papers, and to inform the Major that he was planning to be away for a while. A departure had now become necessary. And now he was in the right frame of mind and was filled with an iron determination. In addition, he now felt something like mocking cruelty towards himself. As he was about to take steps to destroy the very thing which for so long he had thought to be the most valuable and sacred parts of his life, he looked at himself ironically, looked down his nose at the wise man who knew how to live. Now he stood at the apogee of his folly and was determined to pursue it to the end. So he set out on his path. As he walked he did not think about himself and his own affairs, but critically observed the fields of rye that he passed by, tested the ditches with his cane to see if they had

been carefully dug out. At the garden gate he didn't stop to look at the garden, but went straightway through the courtyard to the business office.

The Major sat at his desk pouring over his account books.

“Good morning, Major,” Streith said as he entered, giving his voice a cheerful tone.

The Major looked up, reached out to shake hands with Streith and echoed Streith's “Good morning.”

From the look on his face, however, and the way he offered his hand, Streith could tell that the Major was embarrassed. It was clear that he knew something. The head groom, who customarily accompanied the Princess on her rides, had probably told the whole castle about the event yesterday. “I'm bringing some papers back,” Streith explained, “please take a look at them, that's all I have. I'm about to leave on a trip.”

“Oh, really,” murmured the Major, “a long trip?”

“Just a summer vacation,” Streith replied and sat down on the chair he usually sat on here. “A change of climate is good for your health, always sitting around in the same spot runs us down. From time to time we have to reassure ourselves that we haven't taken root in these fields. You should get away a bit yourself, Major.”

“I feel perfectly fine,” the Major answered without looking up from his papers, “I don't like to abandon my work.”

“But a man needs some recreation from time to time,” Streith said. “Even a snake sheds its old skin now and again, and if it can't do that, then it's sick.”

“Thank you,” the Major replied with some annoyance, “but I'm perfectly happy with my skin. It has served me well all these years.”

Streith laughed, “I'm not saying anything against your skin, but not everyone is quite so happy in his own skin.”

The Major did not reply.

Streith lit a cigarette and stretched out his legs. This room with its smell of ink and paper, with its samples of seeds and grain and the bumble bees that flew in and out of the open window, conferred the same inertia to him that usually is seen in very familiar things. It must be peaceful and cozy to sit here on this spot like the Major, he thought.

A slight noise was heard in front of the door, the door opened and the Princess stood in the threshold. The two gentlemen rose from their seats and bowed. The Princess stood there in her white morning dress without moving, her arms at her sides; she peered into the office as if she were looking into a distance. Then she turned around and gently closed the door behind her.

The Major shot a cautious glance at Streith.

Streith had turned pale, slowly he sat back down in his chair and continued to smoke. In his mind he kept hearing the gentle, dry sound of the door being closed, it had made an impression on him. That sound seemed to say something to him that never in his life had been said to him before.

Finally he stood up to take his leave. “Farewell, Major,” he said. The Major shook his hand firmly and his protruding blue eyes teared up. As he walked out Streith turned around again and said, “Once we have decided to shed our old skin, we can never put it back on, not even for a second.” Happy with the way things had gone, he left the room.

It was noonday and there was no one in the courtyard. The castle and the garden lay silent and abandoned in the bright sunshine. It's like they're dead, Streith kept thinking, for me they're dead. And, really, when he compared the castle to all the houses that he had ever known and that we all see in our dreams or in memory, over them too lay this melancholy stillness. It's as if they were sad about that fact that they had to live in the past. This is just the moment in which to get sentimental, Streith thought, but he determined, with some satisfaction, that he was not a sentimental person. He walked

with determination and bent his head back to watch a lark singing in the sky above him. He pursed his lips and tried to imitate the song.

At the forester's house Frau von Syrman received Streith at the front door. She was wearing a bright yellow morning dress and a white bonnet. "How sweet of you to be so punctual, Count," she greeted him, "I hope I haven't inconvenienced you."

"I'm entirely at your disposal, gracious lady," Streith answered formally.

"Well, then, I think we should sit down outdoors," Frau von Syrman suggested, "there's a pleasant little breeze." And they sat down on benches opposite each other in front of the door. Streith rested both hands on the crook of his cane and waited. His face took on a rigid expression. Frau von Syrman looked at him for a moment, and when she began speaking, her voice trembled: "What I have to say isn't easy to say, but you are so knowledgeable about the world and about people that you'll understand. It's about Britta, and that really excuses everything. I'm grateful to you for having shown an interest in her; your contact with her has been uplifting and educational, very educational, and the child has been so thrilled by it. But you and I know the world, we know that people can't see things that are beautiful and noble without distorting and vilifying them. In town yesterday I heard rumors, from which I gather that people have nothing better to do than sit around and gossip about us. Of course I don't want our relationship to you to be ruined by this; but on the other hand, there's my child to think about, so the matter can't be completely ignored. So, I said to myself, you just have to screw up your courage and talk to the Count, he will know what to do."

She leaned her head to one side and looked at Streith with a worried mien. Streith had listened carefully, and now he straightened himself and posed a question slowly as if reading from an important document: "I herewith take this opportunity, gracious lady, to sue for your daughter's, Miss Britta's, hand in marriage."

Frau von Syrman blushed. She was so surprised that she could not immediately find the words to respond, she held out both hands to Streith and said, "Oh, Count, you are so noble and magnanimous, to whom could I entrust my child with greater confidence than to you, and under your protection I would think her more secure than under my own apron strings. You have my blessing, and Britta thinks only of you, she talks of nothing but you, you are her ideal. Of course she hadn't thought of something like this, she is still a child, an empty page. But if anything is written on that page, dear Count, it is your name."

Streith bowed: "I thank you, gracious lady, for your confidence, it is an honor. What you have said gives me cause to hope that Miss Britta will consent; there is one kind favor I would ask, however. I would prefer for this matter to remain secret. We can travel abroad and there the matter can find its natural conclusion."

"As you propose, dear Count," said Frau von Syrman, "that will be the best way of handling it."

"And as far as what people will say goes..." Streith continued in the dry, objective tone. Frau von Syrman interrupted him energetically: "Let them say whatever they want to, I know all about that. I used to be easily hurt by loose talk and suffered from it, but as time went by I learned to despise malicious gossip. Don't worry about it at all, but you'll come tonight and ask Britta for her consent, won't you?"

Streith bowed again. "I thank you, gracious lady," he said, "for all your kindness, and now I can no longer detain you." He stood up, kissed Frau von Syrman's hand, and left.

Frau von Syrman remained in the doorway, she held her handkerchief in her hand, she wanted to wave if Streith looked back, but he did not look back.

In the afternoon after the sun had gone down Streith went back to the forester's house. He had considered bringing a bouquet of flowers, but decided not to: the thought of appearing at the von Syrman's as a suitor, bouquet in hand, was abhorrent to him. At the forester's house the living room was brightly lit. When Streith entered, Frau von Syrman greeted him, very pretty in a red silk dress, and in her hand she held a large red fan made of feathers. "Welcome, Count Streith," she said. Britta stood behind her dressed in a white dress with wine-red bows. Frau von Syrman grasped her daughter by her shoulders and pushed her towards Streith. "Take her, Count, take her," she said.

Streith kissed Britta's hand, but Frau von Syrman laid one of her hands on her daughter's head, the other hand on Streith's shoulder and said with evident emotion, "God bless you, my children. But now I have to see how my roast is doing, and I'm sure you have lots to say to each other." And with that she straightened the train of her dress and hurried in tiny steps out to the kitchen.

"Why don't we sit down?" Streith said and placed his arm around Britta's waist just as she was straightening herself up. They sat down on the sofa. In front of them, in the middle of the room, there was a festively decorated table with a bouquet of globeflowers. Streith was embarrassed and that surprised him. When he began to speak, his words seemed too formal to him: "I haven't heard you say in your own words that you ... that you are willing to be mine."

"Yes, if that's what you want," Britta said seriously, "I like being with you so much. Around you it feels comfortable and festive."

"Comfortable and festive," Streith repeated enthusiastically, "that's how it will have to be. Shouldn't we really be using our first names with each other?"

Britta shook her head, she didn't think that it would work this early, it was so unaccustomed.

"Fine, that can come later," Streith said trying to comfort her.

"I had never thought," Britta said pensively, "that you wanted to marry me. People said you would marry the Princess."

"That's just nonsense," Streith murmured, annoyed.

"Also, I never thought that I could become a countess. Mama kept talking the whole afternoon about the countess business so I don't even want to think about it any more."

"Well, then we don't have to think about it," said Streith cheerfully.

Britta sighed: "Things were easier before."

"Before?" Streith asked.

"Yes, before the engagement."

Streith laughed: "We're going to arrange things so that the engagement doesn't bother us."

Frau von Syrman came back into the room, followed by Trine, who was carrying a platter. Trine had dressed in her matte lilac-colored Sunday dress and tried to put a friendly look on her face, which looked like the face of an angry old man.

"Please come to dinner," she said by way of invitation, "the couple can sit together opposite me." Trine set the platter on the table, it was slices of egg in a piquant sauce, with fresh lettuce. "A little appetizer," Frau von Syrman said, "please help yourselves. A dinner here is country-style and simple—how could it be otherwise."

"That's the best kind of dinner," Streith remarked tactfully.

"That's what Countess Erdödi always used to say," Frau von Syrman related. "I used to meet the Countess almost every year, either in Kissingen or in Franzensbad.<sup>20</sup> I can truthfully say that she and I were friends. She liked to tell the story of the time that she was out riding in Hungary and lost

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20 Bad Kissingen is a spa town in the Bavarian region of Lower Franconia.



her way, she came upon a little peasant cottage, dismounted, and, since she was hungry, asked for something to eat. She sat down at a crude wooden table and was presented with a pottery plate that held a piece of dark bread and some cheese and a glass of dreggy wine. That meal, she said, was the best she had ever eaten in all her life. And the next winter when she was miserable and had no appetite, she remembered it. **Surely** a blue pottery platter could be found somewhere in the city. She went into the kitchen, sat at the kitchen table and asked to be served dark bread and cheese, 'but it wasn't the same,' she used to say.”

“We never experience anything the same way twice,” Streith remarked.

“Quite true,” said Frau von Syrman.

Trine appeared again carrying a leg of veal strewn with baby vegetables.

“The fruit of the land,” Frau von Syrman explained, and when everyone had been served, she started the conversation again: “The Countess told me a lot about the court in Vienna, all of that strict protocol must be burdensome.”

“Once you know it, then it's as pleasant as any other set of rules,” countered Streith with a slight edge in his voice.

“I'm sure that is true,” Frau von Syrman hastened to admit. “You know life at court so well. It must really be interesting.”

But Streith did not seem to like that either, and his voice sounded a little put out as he answered: “A lot happens at court, but 'interesting' is probably not the right word to describe it.”

“Of course,” said Frau von Syrman, “it's not enough to satisfy your spiritual needs.”

Streith made no response to that, so a little break in the conversation arose. Trine came in and took the leg of veal away and served a small torte, and pulled a bottle of champagne from a wine cooler, popped the cork and poured the wine into tall, narrow flutes.

“It's not chilled,” Frau von Syrman said, apologizing, “and it's probably a bit too sweet. I used to like to drink champagne, but it had to be very dry. Now, well, *à la guerre comme à la guerre*,<sup>21</sup> let's drink to that. To your happiness, my dear children.”

The glasses clinked together, Frau von Syrman was moved, she leaned back in her chair and fanned herself with her fan, and said plaintively, “I wouldn't have believed that I would live to see such a happy hour as this.”

Britta sipped at the wine and laughed, claiming that the wine tickled her throat. “Our child is rather quiet today,” Frau von Syrman went on, “great good fortune makes one quiet.”

“But you liked it, didn't you?” Streith asked and placed his hand on Britta's. He immediately regretted having asked the question because it sounded like the kind of well-intentioned question that an uncle would ask of a niece. Frau von Syrman answered for her daughter: “She didn't eat very much, happiness also satisfies your hunger. Tell us about your afternoon in town, my child.”

“First I played the piano badly,” Britta reported, “then later at the dance lesson Herr Hilte said that I have no grace.”

“It would be difficult to know exactly what Herr Hilte means by 'grace',” Streith remarked.

“No, I really do dance badly, it just doesn't work. But you, Count, I'm sure you're a good dancer.”

“Dancing used to be part of my profession,” Streith responded, “but I haven't had any practice at the art in a long time.”

“No, no,” Britta cried, “I'm sure you're a wonderful dancer, I would be able to dance with you.” And she jumped up, called for Trine to come and push the table aside so that she could dance with

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21 French, roughly, “When at war then as at war.” In time of crisis, all means are good for achieving one's goals.

Streith.

“She's a live one, that child,” said Frau von Syrman with a smile, straightening the bows on Britta's dress. “So, go my little countess.” She herself sat down at the piano and played a waltz. Streith and Britta danced. Through the open windows the roar of the wind in the fir trees accompanied the waltz tune like a double bass. In front of the windows stood Trine, Andree, Annlise, Andree's mother and Margusch, Andree's daughter, and they watched the dance. Britta couldn't get enough of it, but Streith got a bit dizzy and had to sit down. Britta sat down next to him, breathing heavily, her lips half opened, her eyes bright. “That was wonderful,” she said and pressed her hot face against Streith's shoulder, “That must be how they dance in heaven.”

Then Frau von Syrman played a gentle, sweet tune. Streith looked down at Britta, “You're crying?” he asked with amazement.

“Yes, it's stupid, I know,” she replied and wiped the tears from her eyes, “I don't know why, but suddenly everything seemed so sad.”

Frau von Syrman hurried over. “The child is just nervous,” she said, “too much happiness in one day makes one nervous. Why don't we get some sleep now, and tomorrow we can show our friend a happier face.”

Streith said goodbye and left. Once outside he looked back once and saw Britta's dark figure against the bright background of the room, the wind was blowing her dangling curls like darting shadows on her head.

## Chapter 22.

Britta asked Streith to go to the brook with her to catch crabs. “Fine,” Streith said, “Oskar can fix a little snack and carry it for us.”

“No,” Britta begged, “not that stuffy old fellow, we couldn't have a good time then, let's let Margusch carry the picnic basket.”

And so, Margusch carried the picnic basket and Andree carried the little round nets that were fastened to long poles. When they got to the meadow it was still governed by a quiet brightness which often lies on the countryside on summer evenings just after sundown. Britta helped Andree and Margusch to put the bait in the nets and then put the nets into the water. Streith had sat down on a clump of grass. The air was heavy and thick, the only coolness came from the brook. In the distance Streith could see wide open country, fields, a road, poplar-lined allees, here and there a farmstead with a pale light already visible, all of it a bit colorless and apparitional in the enveloping twilight.

On the horizon stood a band of dark purple clouds that were sometimes illuminated by a bolt of lightning. “Really unbelievable,” Streith thought. This was the feeling that often grabbed him, that whatever he experienced and was the way he wanted it to be was nevertheless unreal and unbelievable. It seemed to him at times that he was living the life of someone else, as we often do in dreams.

Britta came over and sat down beside him. “Andree says,” she reported, “there's going to be a storm. And it's gotten so still and spooky here, it's as if everything was waiting for something.”

“They're waiting to wake up,” Streith replied distractedly.

“How do you mean?” Britta said, confused.

“Oh, I didn't mean anything,” Streith said, “shouldn't we go and take a look at the nets?”

As Britta stood on the edge of the stream and bent over to pull the net out, Streith stood behind her grabbing onto her belt to hold her steady. Margusch stood next to them with a basket to hold the crabs. Andree smirked. “When the weather gets still like this the little blighters bite like crazy.” And indeed, the nets were full. As Britta carefully plucked the little creatures out of the net with two fingers to throw them into the basket, she laughed and whooped. In the basket the crabs rubbed their shells

against each other and it sounded like whispering. A faint odor of marsh rose up from the water and mixed with the fragrance of reeds and the blossoms of water-plantains.

'Nice,' Streith thought once more, 'but improbable.'

When all the nets had been attended to, Britta felt exhausted; the air made her limbs feel heavy. "Why don't we eat now?" she suggested. They sat down on the grass, Margusch brought over the snack. Britta ate slowly and with pleasure, and drank a light, sweet wine, and when she was finished, she leaned back with an air of satisfaction, and said, "Go ahead and light a cigarette, they smell so elegant."

Twilight had settled on the meadow, and the band of clouds and lightning on the horizon had risen higher.

"If you weren't here," Britta uttered, "I would be afraid of the storm."

"And now?" Streith asked.

"Now things are all right," Britta continued. "That's how it always is. One person can turn everything around. When I was a child lying in bed in the late twilight of summer, I used to be afraid that there was something in every corner of the room that I needed to be afraid of. But when the nanny came in, then it all went away and the nursery turned back into the familiar of room. That's how it is. Were you afraid as a child too? Tell me about the time before you were a splendid gentleman, but just a little child. Were you happy?"

"I didn't have any reason not be happy," Streith replied upon reflection, "my parents were kind, I had an older brother that I used to get into tussles with, but that didn't sour me on life. We lived in town in a beautiful house with a large yard, no, I wasn't unhappy, but I was, I think, a lonely child, probably my own fault. Children always have their own world that they don't talk about with adults because they wouldn't understand. My little world must have been especially convoluted because I was more than usually quiet. I liked to be alone and played by myself. The most important experience of my childhood was Deborah."

"Deborah?" Britta asked, straightening herself up, "Tell me more."

"My room as a child lay on the narrow side of the house," Streith continued. "Across from it, separated by a narrow street, lay the narrow side of another nice house that belonged to a rich Jewish family. These people had only one daughter, Deborah, who was just my age. The window of Deborah's room was just across from the window of our children's bedroom and she used to like to sit on the window sill for hours and look over at me, while I sat at our window and looked over at her. It was exciting and enjoyable for me to watch her, and she seemed to take pleasure in being admired by me. I thought she was very pretty. She had dark, lustrous curls, a small, yellowish face, and large, dark eyes. I always thought that she was splendidly dressed, I remember in particular a red dress with some gold lace and a yellow dress with white lace. At times, I guess it was when her mother wasn't at home, she used to bring out a gold chain with green jewels on it and wrap it around her head. Then she would sit there motionless like some kind of idol and let me admire her. And in other ways she had a big influence on my fantasy life.

"You were in love with her," Britta interjected.

"Perhaps," Streith said, "although love in one's younger years is quite different from love later in life. I can't remember wanting to get closer to Deborah, or to talk to her or to hug and kiss her. What I really wanted was to be Deborah, to be as pretty as her, to have long curls and big eyes like hers, to wear pretty clothing and to wind a gold chain around my head. That was what I wanted. I would dream up situations in which I was Deborah, I hardly figured into them at all, and I suffered from the feeling of being an ugly little boy."

"Strange," Britta said, "And what became of her?"

"Deborah stopped appearing at her window for a while," Streith continued, "I heard that she

was sick, and then they told me that she had died. I was very upset, I ran out into the yard, threw myself down on the grass and thought about Deborah. I remember quite well that late summer afternoon with the many colorful dahlias, the asters, and the spider webs that floated through the air. I can't say that I mourned for Deborah; rather, her death seemed like the greatest honor that so pretty a little girl could experience, it ennobled her in my eyes, raised her way above me, because ugly little boys like me didn't die. One thing I did still want to do, and that was to see Deborah. I went out onto the street, walked around in front of the Jews' house for a while until I finally dared enter the hallway. There stood an old man with a long, white beard. 'You probably want to see our little girl,' he said kindly, took me by the hand and led me to a hall. There were many people there, ladies in black dresses and black veils, gentlemen in dark frock coats. Candles burned in large silver candelabras and there were lots of flowers that filled the air in the room with a sweet and heavy fragrance. Deborah lay in a white casket in the midst of the candles and flowers, her eyes were closed, her face seemed narrower and yellower than usual, framed by long, dark curls. She wore a white silk dress, and they had put a lily in her little yellow hands. What charmed me most particularly, however, were her stiff little feet with golden slippers. I looked at Deborah breathless with amazement, I thought I had never seen anything more beautiful. After a bit the old gentleman led me back out. I went to our yard, threw myself down on the grass, and now I cried, I cried because I could not lie there amidst candles and flowers in a white silk dress and golden slippers with crying women and solemn old men around me."

"Poor Deborah," Britta said and rested her head on Streith's shoulder. "But tell me, do you sometimes wish that you were me?"

Streith smiled: "Now it's different, but it's possible that there is something of that boy's feelings in my love for you."

"And what do you think it would be like if you really were me?"

"All right," Streith replied, "I think it must be wonderful to have hot blood in your veins."

"Oh, you poor thing—you're chilly," Britta cried and wrapped her arms around him, pulling herself close to him, generous with her young body, and proud that she was able to make someone else feel better.

The sky clouded over, the moving wall of dark clouds swallowed one star after another, with frequent bolts of lightning, and rumbling thunder in the distance. "We need to head back home pretty quickly," Andree warned, "it's come up faster than I thought it would."

"Let's go," Streith said, and took Britta by the arm.

Large warm raindrops began to fall. In the woods it was quite dark, as the rain rustled and ran through the branches, occasionally large bolts of lightning lit up the land, and the fir trees stood tall and dark in the blue light. Then Streith looked at Britta's face: blue sparks flew from her eyes, she threw her head back and smiled up at the lightning.

## Chapter 23.

"I think," the Princess said to Baroness Dönhof, looking pensively at her daughter as she spoke, "I think that we have to find something like an area of activity for my youngest daughter. She could go to Sunday school with the parson's daughters, perhaps she would take to that. I'm also planning a monthly get-together of the ladies in the neighborhood at my place. We will do needlework and make things that can be sold to benefit missionary work, and the pastor could read us reports about the missions."

"How nice," said the Baroness.

Marie knitted her eyebrows together and made a stubborn face. She didn't think these plans were necessary at all. Even her daily occupations, reading, going for walks with Fräulein v. Dachsberg, the outings with her mother, she felt to be intrusions. Her love was occupation enough for her. Sometimes she was amazed herself that love could take up so much of her time. Sometimes just lying quietly in the sunshine, looking up at the sky was all it took to make the heart beat fonder and faster.

Just those simple things seemed much more important to Marie than Sunday school and missionary work. Still, the most important thing was the letters to Felix. She sat up until late at night writing long letters into which she poured her whole soul. When she would read them through again, she would be amazed at the richness of emotion that she discovered in herself. These letters were never mailed, however; rather, they were carefully locked in her desk, and still they gave her a thrilling sense of happiness.

Soon, though, that was no longer sufficient for Marie, she wanted to receive answers, so she wrote answers in Felix's name, letters full of tender passion, and that was even more moving than writing one's own letters. When she finished writing such a letter, she stuck it in her bosom and went into the park, sat down on the bench where she had sat with Felix, and read the letter. Or she sneaked out to the gravel quarry, and lay there where she had lain with Felix, her cheeks reddened, her eyes wide open and shining, and in the feverish fantasy of a young woman, Felix, she herself, and her love all took on a strangely unrealistic mythical life that lay beyond the day-to-day bustle at Gutheiden.

One evening the ladies and gentlemen were taking dinner at the usual time. Now that Streith was no longer present these dinners were boring. The Princess said but little, and Baron Fürwit did try to direct the conversation, but he didn't have much to talk about. Today though there was a bit of excitement in his face—a sign that there was some news to report, and as soon as they sat down at table he began: “The poor Dühnens!”

“Why 'poor'?” Baroness Dühnhof asked, “Is Felix causing trouble again?”

“Yes,” the Baron reported, with a discouraged look on his face, “the young man is back at home, and this time he's out of the army. He just simply quit. A gambling deal went wrong, a truly terrible story.”

“His poor mother!” the Princess said.

“And the father too!” Baron Fürwit continued, “we all know Dühnen, he's always talks such a hard line: the boy is good for nothing, he says, and that he's going to send him to America; that he has two others sons, perhaps things will go better with them.”

“How awful,” said Fräulein v. Dachsberg, and the Major added sourly: “Nowadays you can get away with something like that for the price of a ticket to American, but in my day an officer rarely survived such an affair.”

No one responded to that, and Baron Fürwit looked at the Major disapprovingly, he found it tactless to say something like that in the presence of ladies.

Marie's heart began to pound, but she straightened herself up, looked down at her plate and folded her hands tightly on top of her napkin. Just don't cry now, she thought, don't let anyone notice.

The conversation took a different turn as the Princess next spoke about a missionary who was going to preach in the village.

“Yes,” said Baron Fürwit, “he comes from Birk-kir-kra.”

He liked the sound of the word and repeated it: “Birk-kir-kra.”

Fräulein v. Dachsberg laughed and contended there was no such place. The servants moved around the table without making a sound, they poured wine and served dessert.

Marie could not sit still, but no one noticed that the young woman who sat among them with such good manners stood watch to prevent anyone suspecting the threat to her soul.

After dinner the company remained in the garden room. Baroness Dühnhof and Baron Fürwit

played Halma, Fräulein v. Dachsberg read out loud from the *Revue des deux mondes*, and the Princess busied herself with embroidery.

Marie sat apart from the others in a dark corner. She drew up her knees and huddled shivering in the big chair, and sat very still. But she was tortured: What should I do? What should I do? Felix is in trouble, Felix has been abandoned and rejected by everyone, Felix has to leave for good, what should I do? And while this terrible thing is happening, they sit here as if they knew nothing about it. Fräulein v. Dachsberg reads aloud with her deep, pedantic voice, Baron Fürwit bleats like a goat when he laughs and you hear him every time he wins a game. Such heartless people, she hated them all.

During the sleepless night that followed, Marie made a decision. She would have to talk to Hilda and she had to see Felix.

The next morning Marie expressed the wish to drive to Schlochtin.

The Princess was not pleased with the idea. "Why do you want to have anything to do with that troubled family?" she asked. But when she saw how anxious her daughter looked, she added, "Well, fine, go ahead. Baroness Dönhof will accompany you."

That afternoon Marie and Baroness Dönhof drove to Schlochtin. The visit did not seem to come at a good time. Baroness Üchtlitz was nowhere to be seen, and the daughters greeted their visitors with pale, distorted faces. And when they were seated together on the garden terrace, it seemed to take a lot of effort to keep an easy conversation going. Hilda sat off to the side and said nothing.

Marie could not help looking at her in amazement because her face was made more beautiful by an expression of arrogant resoluteness.

Finally Baroness Üchtlitz appeared and sat down with her guests, she seemed distracted when she tried to participate in the conversation, and finally asked Baroness Dönhof to come with her into the living room.

"Let's go for a walk in the garden," Marie said to Hilda.

Hilda stood up and offered Marie her arm.

As soon as the two girls were alone in the garden, Marie began, "What's the story with Felix?"

"Felix," Hilda replied calmly, "Felix did something really stupid. I just knew something like this was going to happen. He has ruined his life here, but what does that mean? The world and life are far away."

"Does he have to leave?" Marie said, pursuing the matter.

Hilda looked up at the chestnut branches under which they were walking and said solemnly, "Felix will have to leave, and I'm going with him."

"You?" said Marie, her eyes wide and clear with astonishment.

"Yes, I'm going with him," Hilda continued, "otherwise he would just be lost. He is so weak and frivolous. I'm going to help him start a new life and become a man. We are engaged to be married."

"What about your parents?" Marie inquired.

Hilda shrugged her shoulders: "I'm sorry that my parents don't approve of the plan, but I've reached the age where I can decide things for myself. I don't belong to my parents, but rather to myself and to Felix."

Marie said nothing for a moment, but then blurted out: "Do you really love him?"

Hilda smiled: "What a question, silly. Of course I love him."

"And he?" Marie asked, "Does he love you?"

"Well, of course," Hilda replied pensively, "certainly he loves me, but the way that all men love, that is, unsteadily and waveringly, until we create order."

"I just understand it," Marie cried, her eyes ablaze, "it's just not possible!"

"Why isn't it possible?" Hilda said. "Oh, I see, you're thinking about what happened this spring. My God, something like that is forgotten as soon as life turns serious. I do understand that you spent

time together in the lilac bower. But that was nothing more than something to do on vacation, a kind of game that men need to play. Could you really help him, could you save him? Could you be something important to him? You sit there in your castle and you don't have any idea what life is all about. If just once you go the park without permission, you think that you've done something for him. But this is no time for childishness, now it's a matter of life and death.

Marie's face was red all over and she was near tears. "You've always talked like that, I know," she said, "you've always acted as if it were ridiculous that anyone could love me, as if that were a stupid childish game. But when someone loves you, then that's serious. You were always jealous and wanted him for yourself."

Hilda smiled sympathetically, "Poor little chicken, don't get yourself upset. It wasn't right of Felix, but that's just how men are. It hurts a bit now, but you'll get over it soon. You'll find someone else to sit with you in the lilac bower."

Marie's response to this insult was to bow her head and say nothing. She felt totally weak and helpless against the self-confident, proud young woman, and when she finally spoke, it sounded like a whimper: "I want to see Felix."

"What for?" Hilda said, "What do you two have left to say to each other?"

They had wandered the length of the chestnut-lined allee and had reached a pond. There was Felix wearing a bright summer suit, a straw hat on his head, skipping flat stones across the water.

"There he is!" cried Marie.

Felix had seen the two girls coming and sauntered up to meet them. He said hello and smiled a bit embarrassedly.

"The privilege is all mine, ladies."

"What are you doing here?" Hilda asked severely.

Felix laughed. "Why shouldn't I be here? You see, Princess," he said, turning to Marie, "how well I am treated here. May I ask how you are doing?" he added politely.

"Well, thanks," Marie replied and her lips turned pale.

"It's so humid again today," Felix continued. "A remarkable year. The dog days of summer have already begun in May."

"Yes, it is very hot," Marie agreed. She felt weak in the knees and it was difficult for her just to stand up. The leaves of the trees and the rays of the sun began to sway and turn, everything went dark and she fell to the ground without uttering a sound.

When she came to again, she felt a cold compress on her forehead. She was still too listless to move or even open her eyes, but she could hear Hilda and Felix talking quietly with each other.

"She's coming to," said Hilda.

"Poor little thing," Felix was heard to say sympathetically.

"Sympathy comes cheap now," Hilda said reproachfully. "Why do you do such things?"

"I didn't know that she would take it so hard," Felix said. "I just hope she gets over it."

Hilda laughed quietly, "That's your vanity speaking, you'd probably prefer to see her die of a broken heart over you. You can rest easy, her little princess life will unfold calmly without any help from you."

Marie opened her eyes, Hilda bent over her and asked, "Feeling better, sweetie?"

Indeed, it was over and she tried to sit up. Felix and Hilda helped her. "Let's get back to the house," she said and supported herself on Hilda's arm.

"It's probably due to the heat," Felix said, "I hope you'll feel better soon."

Marie inclined her head a bit, then the two girls walked back to the house in silence.

Baroness Dönhof was waiting for her there and the carriage stood ready to depart.

The sunset was splendid, red clouds blazed in the sky like flames, the village street was full of children who were intoxicated by the red light and danced and noised about.

Marie looked at the commotion with indifference, inside she was empty and dead. What should she think? What should she feel?

At the castle Baroness Dönhof went to the Princess immediately to inform her of what had happened at Schlochtin, and when Marie entered the room, the Princess called to her plaintively, "My poor child, to think that you had to hear all of that business, you're so pale." She took Marie by her hands, "I think she has a fever," she said, "The best thing would be for her to go to bed."

That was fine with Marie, and so they put her to bed, and she lay there in the summer twilight; later they brought a lamp, Malwine came and sat by the lamp and knitted, and cast a large gray shadow on the wall. When Marie saw the shadow with half-opened eyes, the shadow seemed to grow and grow. There was nothing else in the room, only a huge gray shadow that swallowed everything.

## Chapter 24.

"Well, it seems that I am sick," Streith said to himself as he lay in bed exhausted after a night of tormenting pains. It couldn't have been predicted. There were always these unwanted surprises. Now he was waiting impatiently for the doctor. Finally Dr. Ruck's energetic, loud voice could be heard. "What?! The Count is in pain? What have you people been up to? Just imagine!" Then he went in to see Streith, whose cheeks were red, and his round skull covered with short blond hair, his myopic brown eyes clear behind his large eyeglasses.

"You, Count, in pain? Hard to believe," he said at the threshold, "Where did you get it?"

"I don't know," Streith replied grimly, "and it wouldn't affect the treatment in any case."

"I see that we are not the best humor today," the doctor observed.

"If you felt as if dogs were ripping your flesh apart, dear doctor," Streith said, "and at the same time you were so tired that your own skin felt like it was weighing you down like a heavy winter coat, then you wouldn't be in the best humor either."

"Quite possible," the doctor admitted, "so let's have a look."

He bent over his patient to examine him. "Not a happy set of circumstances," he muttered. "You have rheumatic fever, and I don't doubt that that is painful. And our heart has a role to play in that as well, that's certainly part of it. I'll write up something for you."

He went to write the prescription, spoke with Oskar about what needed to be done, spoke with Frau Buche about what food to prepare, and when he returned to Streith's bedside, he stood there rubbing his hands together, and looked at Streith portentously, "We're going to take care of this, the powder will take care of the pain, and we'll get your heart back in order."

"Tell me, doctor," Streith began in a pensive mood, "everywhere you hear the complaint that people today have no heart, and the thing that gets worn down quickest is always the heart."

"True," said the doctor, "but I fear that it is not brotherly love that wears it down."

"Really, is that what you think?" Streith asked. "Possible. Sit down with me for a bit, doctor. It's stimulating to talk to you."

The doctor sat down and smiled at the compliment. "Stimulating?" he replied. "It is my profession, after all."

"A good profession, too," Streith said, "Is there any news to report?"

The doctor thought for a moment, "Not that I know of: oh yes, over at the castle His Excellency is also sick, it's a lung problem. At his advanced age it's rather serious."

"So the old man has it too," Streith murmured, "Look, doctor, when you think about all the



people that are dying, you can lose all respect for death.”

“Death is not exactly a privilege,” replied the doctor, a bit piqued.

Streith sighed. “I see, doctor, that you are democratically minded.”

The doctor laughed: “Good, good. I see that you are still able to philosophize. I’ll look back in on you this evening. Good day.” And with that he was gone.

Streith closed his eyes and began again to observe the manifestations of sickness on his body. After the powders had been brought and he had taken some, he was able to sleep a bit.

He was awakened by a slight noise near his bed. He opened his eyes and there was Britta, sitting in a chair beside his bed, sitting up straight, her dark, beaming eyes were full of anxiety and directed at him. ‘I must look terrible,’ Streith thought to himself, ‘for her to look at me that way.’ He tried to smile, “Is that you, my dear?”

“Dr. Ruck said that you were sick,” Britta began, “that’s why we came. How are you feeling?”

“Not very well,” Streith replied.

Britta’s eyes opened wider and looked anxious: “I’m really sorry.”

“What have you been doing?” Streith asked.

“Me? Oh, nothing. I don’t know.” She blushed and felt that she had to talk about something to keep the patient entertained, but she couldn’t think of anything. The door opened slowly and Frau von Syrman entered the room. She approached the sickbed in small steps, her bracelets jangling slightly. She stood beside the bed and threatened with an index finger: “Son-in-law, we’ve been so worried about you. As soon as we heard you were sick, I just couldn’t hold Britta back. You’ve got to let her stay with you. Is there anything I can do for you? Shall I adjust your pillows for you? Other sick people have told me I’m quite good at that?”

“Thanks anyway,” Streith declined. “Oskar does a very good job of it.”

“That’s nice,” Frau von Syrman replied and looked about the room. “Perhaps I should close the window, there’s some wind outside.”

“Please leave the window open,” Streith countered emphatically.

“Well, all right.” She wasn’t sure what to do next. “You’re going to stay here, my child? I think that two people in the sickroom would be too many. I hope you get well soon, dear son-in-law.” And with that, she left.

Streith and Britta remained silent for a while. Streith’s face was distorted with pain, but finally he said, “They say that a rosebud has blossomed in the garden, the one called ‘Baroness Rothschild.’ Don’t you want to go out and have a look at it?”

“Yes, I will,” Britta replied obediently, stood up and went out.

Now Streith listened to the voices and steps in the adjoining room; he heard Frau von Syrman’s high heels clicking back and forth. She’s going around touching my things, he thought angrily. He could hear Roller barking loudly out in the garden. Streith rang for Oskar, and when he came, Streith asked impatiently, “What’s Roller barking about?”

“The young mistress is running around the yard with him,” Oskar reported.

“Please bring Roller in to me,” Streith ordered, “and don’t let anyone else come in my room, I’m going to sleep.” And he turned towards the wall.

Streith had a bad night. Next morning he lay dozing or was awakened by pain. He observed how the pain started, then increased, then ceased, then started up with new strength. Studying this enemy was a painful and exhausting task. In the mind of the sufferer the pain took on a physical identify, he saw pain as the gray face of a dog with white eyes and yellow teeth that bit him in his limbs with a vengeance.

That afternoon, as Streith lay half asleep, he felt that someone was sitting beside his bed. He knew that it was Britta; he knew that she was looking at him with her large, worried eyes; the chair she

was sitting in creaked a bit. For a while he couldn't decide to open his eyes, he was too tired to smile or speak. Finally he did open his eyes, Britta was sitting beside his bed wearing her red Sunday dress. She must have been running because her face was rosy and her black hair was a mess. On her knees rested a bouquet of globeflowers giving off a faint fragrance of honey and wet leaves.

"Hello, my child," Streith said quietly.

"Hello," Britta replied, "how are you?"

"Not well," Streith said. "Beautiful flowers."

"Yes, I brought you some globeflowers."

"Are they still blooming?"

"Yes, they're still blooming."

Streith became restless, the power of the colors on the girl, the gleam of her eyes, the strong flowering of this youth, this life oppressed him and caused him pain. He looked up at the ceiling, his thin face with the sharply outlined pale nose looked severe and dissatisfied. "Dear child, there's something I wanted to say to you," he began.

Britta leaned towards him, ready to do something for him.

"It is very sweet of you and your mother to come over," he continued, "very kind, and I'm extremely grateful to you for it. But you see, when someone is sick, he's a different person. He's only half a man and a boring, undesirable creature. I'm used to being alone when I am sick. Sickness really is a lonely business, all I need is peace and quiet, that's all. And you? You don't belong in a sickroom. You belong in a forest and in the sunshine. When I'm feeling better, I'll send for you, but until then..."

Britta covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

Streith knitted his eyebrows together impatiently: "Why are you crying?" he asked. "There's nothing to cry about."

But she slid down from her chair and knelt beside the bed, bent over his hand and moaned: "You don't like me any more."

"Oh, child," Streith said tiredly, "how much I adored your youth, your beauty. All I want now is a bit of quiet. Perhaps later we can walk in the woods again or we'll dance again in the blue room. Perhaps, but no one really knows."

Britta raised her head, her face was covered with tears, and with a voice hoarse from crying she angrily demanded, "Why do you have to be sick anyway?"

"I don't know the answer to that," Streith replied, "just go now, child."

Britta stood up and left the room, her head bowed like a child who has been scolded. She went straight into the woods and as she walked tears flowed over her face, she cried about Streith, about his pale, troubled face that now looked so old and strange; but she was also crying out of anger and could easily have vented her frustration aloud to the forest: "Why! Why! Sickness and death—that ruins everything, destroys everything. Why does it have to be?" She walked until she was tired, then she threw herself down on the moss, lay there motionless and listened to her inner voice that spoke with the strength of her whole being.

She may have lain there for quite a while, for her hair and clothing were wet with dew. She quickly got up, darkening twilight reigned under the trees and the forest was very quiet and fog began to creep over the marsh. Britta was afraid, for the first time she was afraid of being in the forest and began to walk quickly, she didn't know where to, but she didn't want to go home. She felt she just could not go back and sit beside the lamp in the blue room and listen to her mother. In a small clearing she looked about and could make out the outline of the little cottage that belonged to old Annlise, that's where she would go. Britta knew Annlise well, she was Andree's mother and Margusch's grandmother. In times past, when Frau von Syrman was away, Annlise would have to come and take care of her.

Britta stepped inside the cottage. The plain room was dark, the only light coming from glowing coals in the fireplace that cast a reddish light into the darkness. It smelled like smoke and the herbs that Annlise gathered. Britta could hear someone lightly snoring in one corner, it was Margusch sleeping there; Annlise sat idly in front of the hearth. "Why is it that my little lady is coming so late?" she asked.

"It's true, Annlise," Britta replied, "I'm coming to you because I don't want to go home, I want to stay with you."

"All right," the old woman muttered, "just come over here."

Britta sat down on a stool near Annlise. In the gentle warmth of the fireplace, she could tell that she was cold and tired.

"You're all wet, my little lady," Annlise said and stroked Britta's hair, "what happened? Your master is sick I heard, is it really so serious? And he's not so young any more."

Britta bridled a bit: "Why are you saying things like that, Annlise? I thought it would be quiet and cozy here with you, but now you've started talking about unpleasant things."

"I didn't mean to, don't get upset," said the old woman.

Britta was silent for a moment and stared at the coals, then she asked, "Are you afraid of death?"

"Why should I be afraid," the old woman grumbled, "I've had enough troubles in life, what could death do to me?"

That sounded too calming, it almost made her feel comfortable. "I'm hungry," Britta said.

"We baked bread today," replied Annlise, and stood up to get a glass of milk and a piece of bread.

"Eat, my child, eat," she said.

Britta ate and drank, then she felt secure and well taken care of, and when she had had enough, she became more cheerful. "Now, Annlise," she said, "tell me some stories, but nothing sad. Tell me about love. What was it like when Andree's father loved you?"

"That's not a very happy story," replied Annlise, but Britta insisted, "Tell me about it, I want to hear."

"Well, he worked here taking care of the Count's horses, Peter did," the old woman began, "I worked in the laundry room. In those days the work horses were put to clover at night in summer. He had a little wooden hut on wheels, something like a dog house that he would push out to the fields and he could get into that when it rained. Well, as girls will do, I often went out to the fields at night to meet Peter."

"That's nice," Britta interjected.

"On bright nights it was fine," the old woman continued, "but later as the nights started to get darker, we had plenty of problems. Peter had to keep a careful eye on the horses because there were lots of Gypsies around here then, and one of them could have easily stolen a horse without Peter or the dog being aware of it. And when Peter was away taking care of the horses, I had to sit alone in front of the little hut, and sometimes I was afraid, especially in one field that was really close to the water where old Tall Jacob drowned. He got drunk and wandered off into the night. All they found was his hat and cane, they never found his body, the water is so black and deep there. So, I was left sitting in front of the little hut, the night as black as pitch, and I got a strange feeling. Suddenly I noticed that someone was standing in front of me, and I thought it must be Peter. 'Is that you, Peter?' I asked. He didn't answer, but I could feel a chill run over me as if a breeze were blowing fog from the water onto me, and there was a strong smell of mud and marsh. Then I knew it was old Tall Jacob. I was so scared I couldn't say a word and my whole body was shaking. Then I heard him breathe a deep sigh, then nothing more. When Peter came, I asked him, 'Were you just here?' 'No,' he said. 'Then it was old

Tall Jacob,' I said. 'Nonsense,' Peter said, 'come on, let's slip into the hut,' and so we crept into the hut.”

“Well, it was safe in there,” Britta observed, “when you're together with someone, it's safe, even if there are spirits running about outside.”

“True,” said Annlise, “but from then on I never went back to the house before daylight again. Yes, that's how things were back then. But it was no use. Peter went off to the army and I sat at home.”

“No, no, don't say that!” Britta objected. “Why do things always have to end so sadly?”

The old woman sighed, “It can't be helped, child. We weren't put on this earth to have a good time.”

They both sat silently for a while. Britta propped her elbows on her knees and with her face in her hands she stared at the embers as they died in a whisper.

## Chapter 25.

There were times when Streith enjoyed the happiness that a sick person enjoys when his pain leaves him for a while. Then he would lie there as if exhausted from hard work, and think: A life without pain is so easy. Then he would have the door to the room left open so that that he could look into the suite of rooms and see the light and shadows of the leaves on the parquet floor, and see Roller sleeping in his sunspot, and the furniture solemnly arranged along the walls, the paintings in their gold frames. The windows were open and a warm breeze streamed in from the garden, and occasionally a bee erred into the room and reported with its buzzing about the sunlit roses in the garden. If sleep overcame him in such hours, it brought with it unpleasant dreams, images of travels from years ago. He was sitting in a gondola, harsh sunlight fell on the canal and the reflected light shimmered like little waves of gold on the red walls of the palaces. Or he would be standing in the greenish light of the Netherlands in front of a field of blue hyacinths, deep, saturated blue everywhere he looked. From time to time Frau Buche in her white apron and peaceful gray eyes came and brought him a cup of bouillon. “It's freshly made chicken soup,” she said, “and I threw in a few stalks of asparagus, the little dark ones. The big ones are probably sweeter, but the little bitter ones have the strength of the earth in them.”

“You may very well be right,” Streith said and shoved the head of an asparagus stalk into his mouth and looked at Frau Buche with the helpless gaze of a sick person. “You may be right, it certainly tastes of strength.” And then he asked her, as he frequently had in the last few days, “Hasn't anyone come?”

“No one, Count,” was the reply.

“Who does he expect to come,” said Frau Buche to Oskar. “The people from the forester's house?”

“No, not **them**,” Oskar replied mysteriously.

The sounds of carriage wheels in front of the house made Streith sit up and take notice. The carriage stopped, a door opened, voices became louder, and Oskar hurried into Streith's room to announce: “Her Majesty the Princess has arrived and asks if she might be permitted to see the Count.”

“Please have her come in,” Streith replied and tried to tidy up his hair and beard with his hand.

The Princess came into the room, walked up to the bed, and said: “I did want to come see you, my dear Count.”

“Very gracious of you,” Streith replied and tried to effect a bit of ceremony by nodding his head.

“Then I'll sit with you for a bit,” the Princess continued and sat down on the chair next to

Streith's bed. Once seated, however, she couldn't immediately think of something to say. She looked at Streith with her clear, calm eyes, her cheeks a bit reddened from the air, a self-conscious smile on her lips.

Streith recognized her small bright summer coat, and the soft silk of her dress had an unobtrusive heliotrope color, and on her straw hat was a white seagull feather. In the face of the formality of this image Streith felt once again that reverential tenderness which he always found so comforting.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" the Princess asked, with a trace of excitement in her voice.

"Yes, I'm quite happy," Streith said seriously, "it's only that I wish I had more strength to be properly happy about it."

"That will come in time," said the Princess, comfortingly. "You'll see, you'll soon be on the mend."

"Soon," Streith repeated, "it will have to be soon, otherwise I'm going to lose the courage to improve. Sometimes I think, perhaps it's enough as it is," his voice becoming soft and quiet, "but how much time was wasted in trying to cut a good figure."

"I'm not quite sure what you mean," the Princess said, leaning forward a bit.

"I mean," Streith said, speaking a bit louder, "our lives cannot be exactly as we would have them, life always does what it wants to do."

"Oh, Streith, that's what happens to all of us," the Princess said, so stirred up that her eyes gleamed. "We all think that if we could live life over, we would do a better job of it. If only there were galley proofs of life. That's what they're called, isn't it? Galley proofs."

Streith smiled: "Galley proofs, that's it exactly. If only we were given big sheets of paper on which we could cross out everything we didn't like with big black lines."

"And yet," the Princess said, upon reflection, "in our better moments, when we are inclined to be forgiving, then we forgive life for what it has done to us."

"That's probably all we **can** do," Streith answered, "especially now that I have begun to suspect that we're not the real reason that we're here. My grandmother used to tell us the fairy tale about an arrogant girl named Rosine who thought that people baked cakes only so that she could have a soft, warm bed." Streith laughed, and the Princess laughed too; it felt good to be able to laugh with Streith as they used to do. But a sudden weakness made Streith's face turn pale and he closed his eyes.

"All this talking is too much for you," the Princess said, genuinely concerned. "You need to lie still and try to sleep. I'll sit here with you for a while, if you think it would help."

"Yes, I'm sure it would," Streith said quietly.

The Princess sat there in silence, her hands folded in her lap; she looked out the window and her eyes became fixed as eyes do when they are not looking at their surroundings, but rather are looking dreamingly at an image in memory. Since Streith now seemed to be sleeping peacefully, the Princess stood up and left his chamber quietly.

The red light of evening was already crossing the wall when Streith awakened. Dr. Ruck stood beside the bed rubbing his hands together, "We've been sleeping, I see. Happy to see that," he said and began to take the patient's pulse. "I'm not at all happy with our pulse, however. I think a little injection would be in order." He went over to the table to prepare the hypodermic. Streith sat up a bit higher on his pillows. The fever which came every evening stimulated him and made him want to talk and to hear people talk. "How are your children doing, Dr. Ruck?" he asked.

"Very well, thank you," the doctor answered. "All of them model children."

"How many do you have?" Streith asked.

"Up til now we have four."

"Up til now?" Streith repeated, "Are you counting on having more?"

“Yes, I think so,” the doctor replied, “children are the best thing we can contribute to the world, in a way, they are our immortality.”

“I see, I see, they're your immortality,” Streith said. “I don't know that I would be particularly attracted to that kind of immortality, but that probably has more to do with my situation just now, and right now I am probably in no condition to speak competently about the matter.”

The doctor strode over to Streith's bed: “Nonsense,” he said, “once I've given you this shot you'll be in shape to talk about anything you want to.” He bent over the patient to give him the injection, and when he had finished, he sat on Streith's bed and said with an air of satisfaction, “Done. Now we're going to start feeling better right away.”

“Well, perhaps,” Streith admitted with some hesitation. “But tell me, doctor, you've been talking about immortality, I take it that you think that there's nothing beyond this life.”

“I don't know,” the doctor said and seemed a bit struck by the question, “it almost looks that way.”

“Either way,” Streith continued, “what matters is whether 'nothing beyond this life' really has any meaning or is just something to say when something comes to an end.”

“As I said ...,” the doctor stuttered.

“You don't know,” interrupted Streith, “and why should you anyway. I only meant that if there were something beyond this life here, wouldn't we have some sense of it as we get closer to it? When things here start to fade away, wouldn't we have to see colors not so far in the distance? Well, whatever, listen, doctor, did you ever travel from the interior out to the ocean?”

“No, not that I remember,” the doctor answered.

“One time I was in Pomerania and I rode through the forest to the coast. It was the hottest day I can ever remember. The tree trunks that I passed by glowed like overheated ovens, the air hung on me like a woolen blanket. Breathing the air under those circumstances was no pleasure, so I simply allowed myself to be dragged along without thought across the hot sand. Then suddenly I felt as though the pressure that lay on me had become lighter, it became easier to breathe, a breeze came up and caressed my lips and it felt better than anything had in a long time, and the further we went, the more pleasant it became to breathe, and the little breezes became more frequent and stronger. It began to rustle the needles of the evergreens and grew to become something of a roar, and I opened my mouth and nostrils and drank in the wind, because it tasted of spaciousness, it had the delicious taste of unending space. Then I heard a sound, far away, very quiet, but in it there was something huge, something liberating, cooling, in that sound there was the thunder of the voice of eternity. You see, doctor, that was the ocean.”

Streith stopped talking and closed his eyes, and the doctor too spoke nothing for a while, and when he began to speak again, he had to clear his throat for fear that his voice would sound hesitant, “Now you can sleep, dear Count,” he said, “and I wish you pleasant dreams, perhaps you'll dream about that voice.”

“Yes, perhaps I will dream of that great voice,” answered Streith, half asleep, “Good night, doctor.”

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Count Donalt Streith died. At the castle it was said that the Count's brother had come to convey his body to the ancestral estate of the Streiths and that the carriage and the coffin were to drive down the road past the castle in the morning. To see this, Baron Fürwit, still convalescing and weak, had an armchair set up on the front steps, there he sat and waited. Beside him stood the Major, his protruding blue eyes stared sadly in front of him. “He was fine and noble, our Streith, it's really a great pity,” he

said.

“Of course he was fine and noble,” said the Baron, with a touch of grouchiness in his voice, “I would certainly be the last one to say a bad word about a deceased friend, but he didn't know what he wanted. First he wanted this, then he would want something completely different. He had a restless heart and, as you see, Major, a restless heart is good for nothing, they're not healthy, and don't hold up.”

“That may very well be,” replied the Major. “We all make mistakes. I for one admired dear old Streith.”

That seemed to annoy the Baron: “Yes, yes, no one is saying anything different. But what can't be denied, you see, Major, there are people who know how to get along and people who don't. Streith was one of those who never was able to get everything well arranged.”

On the other side of the castle on the garden terrace Princess Marie lay in a basket chair, her round, blue eyes looked into the mid-day sunshine, quietly and a bit sadly—eyes that no longer expected that something beautiful and exciting might happen. Fräulein v. Dachsberg sat beside her with plans for a white wool bonnet that Princess Marie was supposed to knit for a poor woman in the village.

Meanwhile the Princess had gone down to the garden, as far as the fence, and there she stood for a while, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand and looking down the road. On the other side of the street, at the edge of the forest stood two women in mourning—Frau v. Syrman and her daughter. Britta was holding a large wreath of wildflowers, alive with the colors of globeflowers, nonesuch and marsh orchids. Soon the hoofbeats of the horses could be heard and the hearse bearing the coffin, pulled by four horses. The coffin was covered with a black and silver pall on top of which lay palm branches and large wreaths of white roses. As the carriage slowly proceeded to the edge of the forest, both women stepped forward and Britta laid her wreath on the casket. Then she sat down on the curbstone and wept. The Princess stood there without moving and watched the hearse as it made its way down the allee surrounded by a little dust cloud; it became smaller and smaller with its black-covered casket and its white wreaths, in the midst of which lay Britta's wreath, as merry in the splendor of its colors as youthful laughter.